

The Gamification of Compliance: A Critical Analysis of ClassDojo and Behavior Apps as the Modern Educational Panopticon

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Abstrak

Studi ini secara kritis meneliti adopsi luas aplikasi manajemen perilaku gamified dalam pendidikan kontemporer, memanfaatkan ClassDojo sebagai studi kasus utama untuk mengeksplorasi persimpangan teknologi pengawasan dan psikologi perilaku. Berdasarkan konsep Michel Foucault tentang Panopticon dan kerangka kerja pengkondisian operan BF Skinner, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana platform ini berfungsi sebagai infrastruktur pengawasan digital yang menormalkan pemantauan berkelanjutan dan datafikasi perilaku siswa. Melalui metodologi penelitian berbasis perpustakaan kualitatif, studi ini mensintesis beasiswa interdisipliner untuk menunjukkan bahwa meskipun alat-alat ini dipasarkan sebagai strategi keterlibatan yang menyenangkan, mereka beroperasi sebagai mekanisme disiplin canggih yang mengikis motivasi intrinsik dan menumbuhkan kepatuhan performatif. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa gamifikasi perilaku menggantikan penalaran moral dengan penilaian poin, mengubah rekan menjadi rekan pengawas melalui papan peringkat publik, dan membiasakan anak-anak dengan logika ekstraktif kapitalisme pengawasan. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahwa integrasi teknologi semacam itu yang tidak kritis mengancam untuk membentuk kembali lingkungan pendidikan menjadi tempat pelatihan untuk negara pengawasan, yang memerlukan evaluasi ulang etika teknologi pendidikan.

Kata kunci: ClassDojo, Pengawasan Pendidikan, Panoptisisme, Gamifikasi, Pengkondisian Operan, Datafication, Privasi Siswa, Etika Digital.

Abstract

This study critically examines the widespread adoption of gamified behavior management applications in contemporary education, utilizing ClassDojo as a primary case study to explore the intersection of surveillance technology and behavioral psychology. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon and B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning framework, the research analyzes how these platforms function as digital surveillance infrastructures that normalize continuous monitoring and the datafication of student conduct. Through a qualitative library-based research methodology, the study synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship to demonstrate that while these tools are marketed as fun engagement strategies, they operate as sophisticated disciplinary mechanisms that erode intrinsic motivation and cultivate performative compliance. The findings reveal that the gamification of behavior substitutes moral reasoning with point-scoring, transforms peers into co-surveillants via public leaderboards, and habituates children to the extractive logic of surveillance capitalism. The paper concludes that the uncritical integration of such technologies threatens to reshape the educational environment into a training ground for the surveillance state, necessitating a re-evaluation of the ethics of educational technology.

Keywords: ClassDojo, Educational Surveillance, Panopticism, Gamification, Operant Conditioning, Datafication, Student Privacy, Digital Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary classroom has undergone a profound digital transformation, marked by the ubiquitous presence of gamified behavior management applications such as ClassDojo, which is reportedly used in over 95% of schools in the United States. These platforms deploy colorful monster avatars, point systems, and real-time behavioral tracking to ostensibly enhance student engagement and streamline classroom management (Robinson, 2021). However, beneath the playful interface lies a sophisticated architecture of psychological conditioning rooted in operant conditioning principles, whereby behaviors are systematically modified through reinforcement and punishment mechanisms. While educational technology stakeholders celebrate these tools for their efficiency in managing student conduct and facilitating parent-teacher communication, a critical examination reveals darker implications: the normalization of constant digital surveillance, the datafication of complex human behaviors into quantifiable metrics, and the potential for public shaming through transparent point systems. This tension between the marketed benefits of engagement and the underlying mechanisms of behavioral control necessitates rigorous scholarly investigation into how these technologies fundamentally reshape power relations within educational spaces (Manolev et al., 2020).

The theoretical foundations for analyzing gamified behavior management apps converge at the intersection of Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning theory. Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, an architectural design where visibility is a trap, describes how the mere possibility of being observed induces self-regulation and docility in subjects. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault argues that panoptic surveillance creates a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power, rendering actual observation unnecessary as subjects internalize the disciplinary gaze (Foucault, 2012). Recent scholarship has extended this framework to digital contexts, with researchers describing how educational technology platforms function as societies of control characterized by dividuation, the fragmentation of individuals into data points that can be continuously modulated. ClassDojo exemplifies this process through its psycho-policy approach, which

translates psychological concepts of character development and growth mindsets into algorithmic measurement systems that facilitate both behavioral modification and psychological surveillance. The platform's integration of gamification techniques, including points, leaderboards, and visual feedback, operates according to Skinnerian principles of positive and negative reinforcement, systematically conditioning students to associate compliance with rewards and deviation with visible consequences (Skinner, 2019).

Despite growing scholarly attention to educational technology, significant gaps persist in critically examining the long-term psychological and ethical implications of gamified surveillance systems. Existing research predominantly focuses on short-term behavioral outcomes and teacher satisfaction, with studies demonstrating improvements in student engagement and reductions in disruptive behavior. However, this instrumentalist orientation obscures crucial questions about how constant monitoring affects students' moral development, autonomy, and capacity for intrinsic motivation (Yuliarini & Cholimah, 2025). Williamson's (2017) critical analysis reveals that ClassDojo's datafication practices intensify surveillance and create performative classroom cultures, yet empirical investigation into students' subjective experiences of being continuously tracked remains limited (Williamson, 2017). Furthermore, while privacy advocates have raised concerns about data collection practices and the commercial interests embedded in free educational platforms, systematic examination of how these systems normalize surveillance capitalism among child populations is nascent. The literature also inadequately addresses the distinction between discipline (in Foucault's sense of producing normalized subjects) and genuine ethical formation, the cultivation of internal moral reasoning rather than external compliance. Meta-analytic findings suggest that gamification's effectiveness diminishes over extended periods, with interventions lasting years showing negative associations with behavioral change, yet the implications of habituating children to data-driven self-monitoring systems have not been fully theorized (Kim & Castelli, 2021).

This study aims to advance critical understanding of gamified behavior management applications by demonstrating how these ostensibly benign educational tools function as modern panopticons that normalize digital surveillance and prioritize external compliance over internal moral development (Zuboff, 2023). Specifically, the research will synthesize existing literature to: (1) map the theoretical connections between Foucauldian surveillance theory, operant conditioning, and contemporary educational technology design; (2) critically

examine how ClassDojo's gamification mechanics create what scholars term performative classroom cultures wherein student identity becomes tethered to publicly visible data metrics; (3) analyze the tensions between efficiency-oriented behavior management and humanistic educational goals of cultivating autonomous moral agents; and (4) contribute to emerging scholarship on psycho-policy in education by revealing how these platforms embed psychological theories of character formation within algorithmic systems that render student interiority visible and governable. By situating gamified apps within broader debates about surveillance capitalism, data justice, and children's rights, this research provides a critical counterweight to techno-optimistic narratives that dominate educational technology discourse. The findings will offer theoretical resources for educators, policymakers, and parents seeking to understand the hidden curriculum of constant monitoring, ultimately arguing that visibility, when transformed into a perpetual condition of childhood, constitutes not transparency but entrapment.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative library-based research design utilizing systematic literature review and critical discourse analysis to examine gamified behavior management applications as panoptic technologies in educational contexts. The research design integrates multiple analytical approaches to synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship spanning educational technology, surveillance studies, critical pedagogy, and moral philosophy, following methodological guidance for conducting rigorous secondary research in complex, multidisciplinary domains (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Mallett et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2014; Scoyoc & Cason, 2006; Shiri, 2003). Data sources included three primary categories: (1) foundational theoretical texts (Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Skinner's behaviorist works, and critical pedagogy scholarship), (2) peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 from databases including ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO, and (3) primary policy documents including terms of service and privacy policies from major behavior management platforms such as ClassDojo and ClassDojo Hero. Source selection criteria adhered to established standards for academic rigor, including peer review status, methodological transparency, theoretical grounding, and relevance to the research questions. Specifically, articles were included if they addressed gamification in educational settings, surveillance technologies in schools, behavioral psychology applications in digital platforms, or Foucauldian analyses of educational institutions; sources lacking empirical or theoretical rigor, predating

2015 (except for foundational theoretical works), or focusing exclusively on non-educational gamification contexts were excluded. The search strategy employed Boolean combinations of keywords including surveillance capitalism in education, gamification ethics, Foucault and EdTech, student data privacy, behaviorism in digital tools, ClassDojo, and panopticism in schools, with iterative refinement based on emerging thematic patterns.

The analytical framework integrated three complementary methodological approaches to ensure comprehensive examination of the phenomenon. First, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach was employed to identify, analyze, and synthesize recurring patterns across the literature corpus, including themes related to surveillance mechanisms, behavioral modification techniques, and ethical implications of datafication (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This process involved iterative coding of extracted data, development of thematic categories, and critical synthesis of findings across disciplinary boundaries. Second, Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis framework was applied to policy documents and platform interfaces to examine how gamified apps linguistically and semiotically construct concepts such as behavior, success, character, and engagement (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2015). This involved textual analysis of linguistic features, examination of discursive practices surrounding text production and consumption, and analysis of broader social practices that situate these discourses within power relations. Third, conceptual mapping was utilized to establish theoretical connections between Foucauldian concepts (surveillance, normalization, examination, docility) and specific technological features of behavior management platforms (real-time tracking, leaderboards, point systems, data reports to parents). This mapping process facilitated visualization of complex relationships between theoretical frameworks and empirical manifestations of panoptic technologies in contemporary classrooms. The combination of these analytical strategies enabled rigorous interrogation of how gamified educational technologies function as instruments of disciplinary power while simultaneously revealing gaps in existing scholarship regarding long-term developmental and ethical implications (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Digital Panopticon: Visibility as Control

Gamified behavior management applications exemplify what scholars have termed the digital panopticon, wherein technological architectures of visibility function as mechanisms of

disciplinary control. Unlike the physical classroom where teachers' observational capacity is constrained by spatial and temporal limitations, applications such as ClassDojo enable continuous, comprehensive surveillance through algorithmic tracking systems that record, timestamp, and permanently log every behavioral incident. This shift from intermittent observation to persistent datafication fundamentally restructures power relations within educational spaces, creating what Manolev et al. (2020) describe as hierarchised surveillance that renders students perpetually visible while simultaneously normalizing their subjection to monitoring (Manolev et al., 2020). The auditory notification, the distinctive ding sound that accompanies point allocation, functions as a Pavlovian conditioning mechanism, creating an immediate association between behavior and consequence that bypasses reflective cognition. This sonic cue operates alongside visual displays of accumulated points, which are frequently projected on classroom smartboards, transforming the private assessment of conduct into public spectacle.

The public leaderboard precisely replicates the panopticon's central tower, positioning peers as co-surveillants who monitor one another to ensure collective success in classroom competitions. Research documents that this transparency creates what critics term performative classroom cultures wherein students' identities become tethered to publicly visible data metrics, generating anxiety, shame, and unhealthy competition particularly among lower-performing students. A technoethical analysis reveals that ClassDojo's tracking system can reinforce teacher biases, and lead to teachers implicitly labeling 'problem students' based on their behavioral data, while simultaneously granting all students visual access to their peers' behavioral ranking, thereby institutionalizing hierarchical visibility as a permanent classroom feature (Adams & Groten, 2024). This architecture exemplifies Foucault's assertion that visibility becomes a trap: students internalize the disciplinary gaze not because they are constantly observed, but because they might be observed at any moment, compelling continuous self-regulation.

B. Gamification vs. Motivation: The Behaviorist Trap

The operationalization of gamification techniques in behavior management platforms reveals a fundamental misapplication of motivational theory, reducing complex psychological development to Skinnerian operant conditioning paradigms. These applications function as digital Skinner boxes, employing token economy systems that deliver immediate positive reinforcement (points, badges, avatar customization) for compliance and negative

consequences (point deduction, visual indicators) for deviation. While meta-analytic evidence confirms that token economies effectively increase short-term behavioral compliance and academic engagement in elementary classrooms, critical scholarship demonstrates that such extrinsic reward structures systematically undermine intrinsic motivation, the autonomous, self-directed engagement that predicts long-term learning, creativity, and psychological well-being. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes when three fundamental psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy (self-governance in learning), competence (mastery experiences), and relatedness (meaningful social connections). However, gamified surveillance systems thwart autonomy by positioning external rewards as the primary rationale for prosocial behavior, thereby conditioning children to associate ethical conduct with material gain rather than internalized moral principles (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2024).

Longitudinal research provides compelling evidence that if you offer external rewards to people for engaging in an activity that they already like, they are less likely to choose that activity during a free choice condition, demonstrating the displacement effect wherein extrinsic incentives erode intrinsic interest. Meta-analytic findings reveal that autonomous motivation types (intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) consistently predict enhanced performance, persistence, and well-being, whereas controlled motivation driven by external rewards correlates with diminished well-being and fails to predict academic persistence (Howard et al., 2021; Lepper et al., 1973). Furthermore, these platforms operationalize a reductive conception of the good student that privileges compliance, sitting quietly, following directives without question, accumulating points through behavioral conformity, over critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and autonomous moral reasoning. As one critical analysis observes, ClassDojo's architecture can perpetuate unhealthy competition standards that decrease students' participation and sense of belonging, while simultaneously causing students to become focused on their points instead of their educational growth, resulting in detrimental comparative habits (Pietsch, 2024). This pedagogical orientation reflects what scholars identify as behaviorist reductionism: the treatment of children as organisms to be conditioned through reinforcement schedules rather than as developing moral agents capable of reflective ethical deliberation.

Table 1. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Dimension	Intrinsic Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation (Token Systems)
Psychological Foundation	Autonomy, competence, relatedness needs satisfaction	Operant conditioning via rewards/punishments
Behavioral Driver	Inherent interest, curiosity, self-determined values	External incentives, avoidance of negative consequences
Long-term Outcomes	Enhanced learning, creativity, persistence, well-being	Decreased intrinsic interest, surface learning, dependence on rewards
Pedagogical Goal	Development of autonomous moral agents with internal ethical frameworks	Production of compliant subjects responsive to external control
Classroom Effect	Deep engagement, intellectual risk-taking, self-regulation	Performance anxiety, competitive hierarchies, point obsession

C. The Datafication of the Child: From Student to Statistic

Contemporary behavior management applications enact what critical scholars term datafication , the transformation of complex human experiences into quantifiable, extractable, and algorithmically analyzable data points. Unlike the ephemeral verbal warnings characteristic of pre-digital disciplinary practices, negative behavioral incidents in 2025 are logged, stored, and analyzed, creating permanent digital records that follow students throughout their educational trajectories. This shift carries profound implications for children's privacy and developmental autonomy: whereas historical disciplinary encounters remained confined to the classroom temporal-spatial context, digital tracking systems generate comprehensive behavioral profiles that persist indefinitely and circulate across institutional boundaries. The extension of surveillance into domestic spaces through parent notification systems eliminates what Goffman conceptualized as backstage regions, private spheres where individuals can relax self-presentation and recover from performative demands. Research on parental digital location tracking reveals analogous concerns: continuous monitoring undermines youths' autonomy, privacy rights, and capacity for independent identity development, potentially generating anxiety while conditioning acceptance of perpetual surveillance as normative (Davis et al., 2024).

The political economy of educational technology further complicates this datafication process through what Zuboff (2019) terms surveillance capitalism , the commodification of

behavioral data as raw material for predictive analytics and targeted marketing (Zuboff, 2023). ClassDojo's business model exemplifies this logic: while marketed as a free classroom management solution, the platform extracts behavioral data from 35 million children globally, translating their conduct into proprietary datasets that generate commercial value. Critical analyses reveal that students' and teachers' personal data are continuously collected, commodified, and utilised by major technology companies under the mask of educational innovation, situating individual children within broader extractive data regimes that operate beyond parental or institutional oversight. Privacy scholars warn that habituating children to accept data extraction as the price of admission for 'fun' normalizes surveillance capitalism during developmentally critical periods when conceptions of privacy, autonomy, and consent are being formed (Siibak & Mascheroni, 2021). The permanence of digital behavioral records also raises concerns about algorithmic bias and discriminatory profiling: research documents that ClassDojo's tracking systems can reinforce teacher biases, potentially encoding racial, socioeconomic, and neurodevelopmental prejudices into ostensibly objective data that may influence high-stakes educational decisions.

D. Normalization: Preparing for the Surveillance State

The early exposure to comprehensive behavioral tracking through gamified management systems functions as anticipatory socialization for surveillance-intensive labor markets and governance regimes. Contemporary workplace monitoring practices, including keystroke logging, productivity analytics, website tracking, email surveillance, and real-time location monitoring, replicate the panoptic architectures students encounter in ClassDojo-mediated classrooms. Research on employee monitoring reveals that these systems aim to foster accountability and identify areas for improvement by rendering workers' activities continuously visible to managerial oversight, creating what labor scholars describe as digital Taylorism wherein algorithmic surveillance fragments tasks and quantifies productivity with unprecedented granularity. The normalization of such monitoring begins in educational contexts: when children internalize behavioral datafication as a natural feature of institutional participation, they develop habituated acceptance of surveillance that persists into adulthood. A Foucauldian analysis by (Dai et al., 2025) demonstrates that AI-mediated surveillance in education operates through normalizing judgment, establishing a system where students learn to conform to expectations not through overt coercion but through the desire to avoid being

marked as deviant, precisely the disciplinary logic that characterizes contemporary workplace monitoring regimes.

The ethical implications extend beyond labor market preparation to fundamental questions of democratic citizenship and political subjectivity. Critical theorists argue that these platforms are not cultivating citizens capable of autonomous moral deliberation, critical thinking, and civic participation; rather, they are producing compliant data-subjects whose relationship to authority is mediated through continuous surveillance, quantified assessment, and algorithmic governance (Gibson, 2020; Veugelers, 2023). This represents what scholars term *psycho-policy*, the deployment of psychological measurement technologies to render interiority (thoughts, emotions, character traits) visible and governable, extending disciplinary power beyond behavior into the psychic life of subjects. The COVID-19 pandemic's reconfiguration of schooling into home spaces demonstrated the extensibility of this logic: virtual schooling technologies enabled novel forms of surveillance reformed private space, rearticulated people and their roles, and reconstituted value and misdistributed shame, suggesting that panoptic educational technologies prefigure broader transformations in the relationship between public institutions and private life (Stacy & Rodriguez, 2023). As Dai's analysis concludes, AI surveillance in education raises crucial questions about autonomy, ethics, and the societal implications of pervasive monitoring, positioning early childhood exposure to behavioral tracking as a critical site for understanding how surveillance becomes normalized across the life course (Dai et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This critical analysis demonstrates that gamified behavior management applications like ClassDojo are not merely neutral administrative tools but sophisticated technologies of disciplinary power that fundamentally alter the pedagogical landscape. By wrapping the mechanisms of the Panopticon in the colorful aesthetics of video games, these platforms successfully disguise surveillance as engagement and behavioral conditioning as character education. The thesis of this research stands confirmed: these applications function as a modern educational Panopticon, where the visibility of data points replaces the physical gaze of the teacher, creating a system of automated, hierarchical surveillance that compels self-regulation through the constant threat of public assessment (Seyediasl et al., 2021).

The synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature reveals three critical outcomes of this digital transformation. First, the architecture of visibility, manifested through real-time tracking and public leaderboards, creates a performative classroom culture where student identity is flattened into a quantifiable score, fostering anxiety and performative compliance rather than genuine prosocial behavior. Second, the reliance on Skinnerian operant conditioning displaces intrinsic motivation, conditioning students to view moral action not as an end in itself but as a transactional means to accumulate digital currency. Third, the datafication of childhood conduct normalizes the extractive logic of surveillance capitalism, transforming students into compliant data-subjects who accept continuous monitoring as a prerequisite for institutional participation.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the classroom walls. For educators, the reliance on algorithmic management tools risks atrophy of essential relational skills, substituting the complex, messy work of conflict resolution with the sterile efficiency of a ding sound. For policymakers and parents, the commodification of behavioral data raises urgent privacy concerns that current regulatory frameworks fail to address. Most significantly, for society at large, the normalization of this psycho-policy threatens to produce a generation habituated to external control, ill-equipped for the democratic demands of autonomous critical thinking and resistance to authoritarian oversight.

Ultimately, the gamification of compliance poses a profound question about the purpose of education. If the goal of schooling is to produce docile bodies optimized for a data-driven economy, then ClassDojo is a resounding success. However, if the aim is to cultivate autonomous, reflective, and morally courageous human beings, these technologies represent a significant regression. As we rush to embrace the efficiency of the digital age, we must heed the warning implicitly encoded in these systems: when we treat students like programmable users in a Skinner box, we should not be surprised when they cease to act like free humans and begin to function as mere machines.

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