

A Critique of John Frow's Popular Culture Through the Lens of Gamification

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Introduction

In this argumentative paper, Khoi Le analyzes John Frow's "The Concept of the Popular" in order to illustrate how technologies mediate people's experiences and how popular culture, which is closely intertwined with technologies, changes over time because of its close connection to technology.

Keywords: popular culture, Frow, power structure, technology,



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In the contemporary context, technology reshapes power structures by determining who gains advantages and who falls behind in adapting to market demands (Qureshi). For instance, businesses that quickly adopt digital marketing strategies or leverage data analytics often outperform other competitors that are slower in integrating technologies and innovations (Qureshi). Digital platforms, such as TikTok or Spotify, utilize machine learning algorithms that privilege certain creators and forms of content over others, shaping what becomes culturally visible by embedding game-like elements, including rankings and likes, into their digital systems. This gamification approach creates new hierarchies of success for businesses by driving and structuring user participation. Thus, this dynamic reflects “a top-down model of social domination” as noted by John Frow (60), highlighting that popular culture is tied to power structures of a society in terms of both social and cultural capital.

Frow argues that popular culture is a representation of common interests and activities of “the people,” suggesting that culture emerges as the collective work of individuals within a community (72). This can be further extended to what a community knows and does, connecting with cultural capital in shaping a community’s identity through the shared preferences or tastes of individuals. For popular culture to endure, it must strongly align with these tastes to remain viable in the market, implying a relationship between cultural capital and the people who consume it. For instance, individuals create culture through their everyday practices, which later extends to a societal level via connecting those practices with others through communal spaces. These practices, as the products of the people, illustrate Frow’s idea of “the connections between production and culture” (80). Production, however, is always subject to market pressures of catering to mass audiences. Hence, this dynamic reflects the logic of wins and losses in reality, where more favored products that resonate with people’s tastes gain greater visibility. Viewing through the lens of gamification, this dynamic resembles a game in which cultural products must continuously engage and interact with audiences in order to survive the market, structuring an association between power structures and gamification strategies.

With the rapid evolution of technology, the relationship between cultural production and consumption has changed due to technological mediation. While Frow emphasizes that popular culture is a reflection of people’s interests, technological algorithms may challenge Frow’s definition due to the fact that technologies mediate people’s experiences based on trending trends or what is popular to audiences. Digital platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and others use recommendation algorithms to prioritize content that is widely consumed by users, revealing a shift in the focus from cultural expression toward maximizing user engagement and corporate profits. This shift illustrates how technology with gamified strategies can both mediate and constrain the cultural practices that Frow considers the representation of “the people” (72).

The rise of technology gamifies the power structure. Media platforms use algorithms to capture the most-consumed content, and then place those at the top of the trending or on the first page of a user's screen. For example, TikTok takes advantage of the for-you-page (fyp) to spread the content and make it more popular and accessible in the market to mass audiences with the help of mass media. This challenges the concept of "the people" brought up by Frow. Since many contemporary audiences do not necessarily have to possess an interest in the topic being shown to them, they still engage with the medium either directly or indirectly. In a gamified technological environment, culture is prosecuted, distributed, and consumed based on the influence of programmed algorithms, reflecting the truth of commercialization involved in selling the content to "the people." Consequently, this is a call for acknowledging the involvement of technology in challenging the original definition of culture, especially popular culture.

On the other hand, Frow suggests that the order of power is internalized through the "pleasures of conformity," experiencing that the fit of the model reinforces disciplinary structures which align one with their "social allegiances" (61-64). This also implies that an individual can belong to more than one community. However, conflicts arise in the contradiction of the structure of feeling. Thus, Frow proposes to "[distinguish] between a populism of the dominant classes and a populism of the dominated classes" to solve the ambivalence (79). While his concept implies a collective expression of individuals in either a winning or losing side of one group, the other group may face the marginalization of their voices. As a result, Frow employs "plebiscitary strategies" to unify the category of popular culture based on common sense as well as a derivative of a singular entity that is the people (82, 85), welding together diverse communities in order to synthesize various social and cultural contexts.

Popular culture is now intertwined with the technologies that shape its production, distribution, and consumption. Gamification introduces the concept of competition through rewards and penalties, which is key to capturing the taste of "the people" in order to survive the market. While Frow's critique of popular culture remains valuable for understanding these dynamics, his model requires ongoing research and adaptation to fully account for the ways new technologies contribute to transforming cultural participation and power structure.

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