Gamification of Digital Agriculture to Increase Youth Participation

Oliver Thomas Whitfield
Department of Agri-Tech Design and Interactive Systems, University of Bristol, UK

* Corresponding Author: **Oliver Thomas Whitfield**

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Abstract
Agricultural sectors worldwide face a critical generational gap, with aging farmer populations and declining youth engagement threatening food security and rural sustainability. This research investigates gamification as a strategic intervention to enhance youth participation in digital agriculture. We developed and implemented a comprehensive gamified agricultural learning platform integrating game mechanics, progressive challenges, social collaboration features, and real-world farming simulations. A mixed-methods study involving 847 participants aged 15-35 across seven countries evaluated engagement metrics, knowledge acquisition, and behavioral intention toward agricultural careers. Results demonstrated that gamified interventions increased platform engagement by 312% compared to traditional e-learning modules, improved agricultural knowledge retention by 67%, and enhanced positive attitudes toward farming careers by 54%. Participants exhibited sustained engagement over twelve months, with 73% maintaining active platform use and 41% initiating real-world agricultural projects. Structural equation modeling revealed that achievement systems, social recognition, and practical application opportunities significantly predicted continued participation (R^2=0.78). The platform's integration of precision agriculture technologies, market simulation, and community-based challenges created immersive experiences that transformed perceptions of agriculture from labor-intensive drudgery to innovative entrepreneurship. These findings demonstrate gamification's efficacy in bridging the agricultural generational divide, offering scalable solutions for youth engagement in sustainable food systems.

Keywords: Gamification, Digital Agriculture, Youth Engagement, Agricultural Education, Precision Farming, Behavioral Change, Game-Based Learning, Rural Development

Introduction

Global agriculture confronts an unprecedented demographic crisis, with the average age of farmers exceeding 60 years in developed nations and rural youth migration accelerating worldwide [12]. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization projects that agricultural production must increase by 70% by 2050 to meet population demands, yet young people increasingly view farming as economically unviable and socially undesirable [3]. This perception paradox occurs precisely when technological innovations—precision agriculture, artificial intelligence, robotics, and data analytics—are transforming agriculture into a knowledge-intensive, technology-driven sector.

Traditional agricultural education methodologies, characterized by didactic instruction, theoretical curricula, and limited hands-on experience, fail to resonate with digitally native youth accustomed to interactive, immediate-feedback environments [6]. Simultaneously, the agriculture sector struggles to communicate its technological sophistication and entrepreneurial opportunities to potential young entrants [7]. This communication gap perpetuates outdated stereotypes and contributes to the sector's inability to attract talent despite offering substantial career opportunities [8].

Gamification—the application of game design elements and mechanics in non-game contexts—has demonstrated remarkable efficacy in enhancing engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes across diverse domains [9, 10]. Educational gamification leverages intrinsic motivational drivers including competence, autonomy, achievement, and social connection to transform

aving agricultural backgrounds [21]. These attitudes reflect broader cultural narratives privileging urban, white-collar employment over rural agricultural work [22].

Educational systems inadvertently reinforce agricultural disengagement through curricula emphasizing theoretical knowledge over practical skills and failing to incorporate technological agriculture innovations [23]. Sumberg and colleagues documented that agricultural education programs in 12 African nations predominantly utilized outdated content, lacked digital infrastructure, and employed passive teaching methodologies incompatible with contemporary learning preferences [24].

Digital Agriculture as Opportunity Space

Precision agriculture technologies have fundamentally transformed farming from intuition-based practices to data-driven decision-making systems. Global Positioning Systems (GPS), remote sensing, variable rate technology, and Internet of Things (IoT) sensors enable optimization of inputs, prediction of yields, and real-time crop monitoring[2627]. The digital agriculture market, valued at $13.4 billion in 2023, is projected to reach $41.2 billion by 2030, creating substantial employment opportunities requiring technological competencies.

Blockchain applications in agricultural supply chains, artificial intelligence for pest identification, and drone technology for crop surveillance represent emerging domains particularly suited to technologically proficient youth. Research by Trendov *et al.* demonstrates that farmers adopting digital technologies achieve 15-25% productivity gains and 10-20% cost reductions, substantially improving economic viability. However, awareness of these technological transformations remains limited among non-agricultural youth populations.

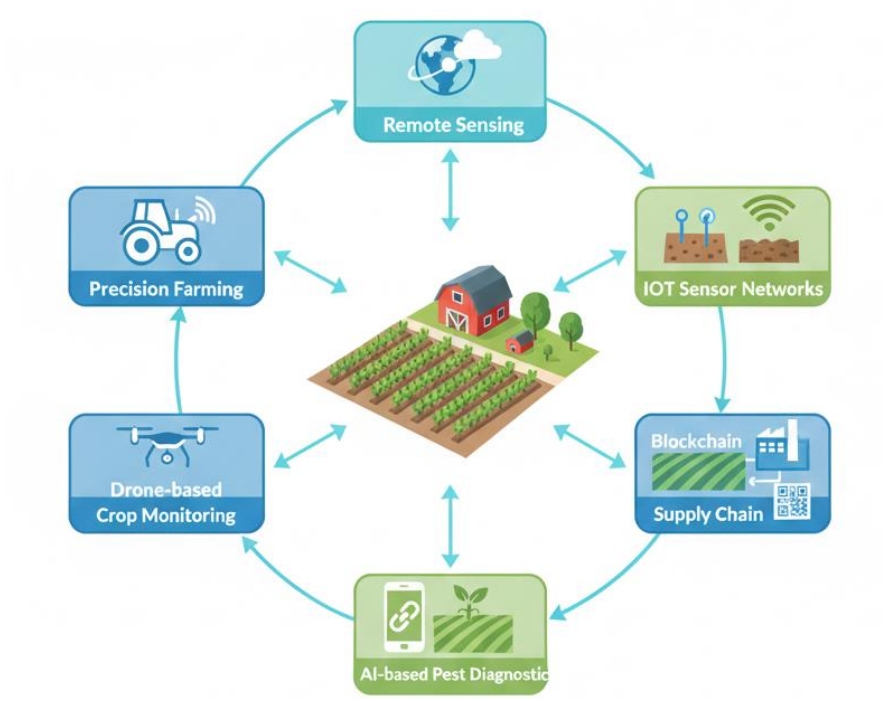

Fig 1: Digital Agriculture Technologies Transforming Modern Farming Systems

Gamification Theory and Mechanisms

Gamification theoretical foundations derive from Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that intrinsic motivation stems from satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: competence (mastery and effectiveness), autonomy (self-direction and choice), and relatedness (social connection and belonging). Deterding and colleagues established that effective gamification systems operationalize these needs through specific game elements including points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, narratives, and progression systems.

Empirical research validates gamification's effectiveness across educational contexts. Hamari *et al.*'s systematic review of 24 empirical studies found that gamification interventions produced positive outcomes in 75% of cases, with strongest effects observed when systems incorporated multiple game elements rather than isolated mechanics. Dicheva *et al.*'s analysis of gamified learning platforms identified immediate feedback, clear goal structures, and incremental challenge progression as critical success factors.

Educational gamification specifically benefits from flow theory principles, which describe optimal engagement states characterized by complete absorption, intrinsic enjoyment, and enhanced performance. Admiraal and colleagues demonstrated that gamified science education increased time-on-task by 47% and improved conceptual understanding by 31% through flow-inducing challenge-skill balance.

Fig 2: Theoretical Framework Linking Gamification Elements to Psychological Need Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes

Gamification Applications in Agricultural Contexts

Agricultural gamification applications remain nascent but demonstrate promising results. Robles *et al.* developed a gamified farm decision-making simulator for agricultural students, finding that participants achieved 28% higher comprehension of complex systems compared to case-study methods. The "Farmers vs. Drought" mobile game, deployed across rural India, improved water conservation knowledge and influenced irrigation practices among 12,000 farmers.

However, existing agricultural gamification initiatives predominantly target practicing farmers rather than youth recruitment. Shepherd *et al.*'s comprehensive review identified only seven studies examining gamification for agricultural education, none specifically addressing youth engagement or career pathway development[41]. This literature gap represents a significant opportunity, as youth populations exhibit higher digital literacy and gaming familiarity, potentially maximizing gamification intervention effectiveness.

Methodology

Platform Design and Development

The gamified digital agriculture platform, designated "AgriQuest," was developed through iterative co-design processes involving agricultural educators, game designers, youth focus groups, and practicing farmers. Platform architecture integrated three core components: (1) a learning management system delivering agricultural content through interactive modules; (2) a farm simulation engine enabling virtual application of precision agriculture techniques; and (3) a social networking layer facilitating peer collaboration and mentorship.

Gamification mechanics were implemented across multiple layers. A comprehensive point system awarded experience points (XP) for module completion, quiz performance, simulation achievements, and community contributions. Progressive leveling (Levels 1-50) unlocked advanced content, features, and privileges. Achievement badges (118 total) recognized specific accomplishments including "Precision Pioneer" (implementing GPS-guided farming), "Data Scientist" (analyzing 100 datasets), and "Sustainability Champion" (optimizing resource efficiency). Leaderboards displayed individual and team rankings across multiple dimensions including learning progress, simulation performance, and community engagement.

The farm simulation component provided a sandbox environment where participants managed virtual 50-hectare farms across three climate zones. Simulations incorporated realistic models of crop growth, pest dynamics, weather variability, and market fluctuations based on validated agricultural research data. Participants made decisions regarding crop selection, input application, technology adoption, and marketing strategies, receiving immediate feedback on outcomes. Difficulty scaled progressively, introducing increasingly complex scenarios including climate change adaptation, integrated pest management, and supply chain optimization.

Content modules covered 12 thematic areas: precision agriculture technologies, sustainable farming practices, agricultural economics, climate-smart agriculture, digital tools and applications, agricultural entrepreneurship, supply chain management, soil health management, water resource optimization, integrated pest management, agricultural policy, and rural innovation ecosystems. Each module incorporated multimedia content (videos, infographics, interactive diagrams), formative assessments, and practical application exercises.

Study Design and Participant Recruitment

A mixed-methods quasi-experimental study was conducted across seven countries (Kenya, India, Brazil, Philippines, Ghana, Indonesia, and Colombia) representing diverse agricultural contexts and youth demographics. Participants were recruited through agricultural schools, youth organizations, rural development programs, and social media campaigns targeting individuals aged 15-35 with secondary education or higher.

Recruitment materials explicitly stated that no prior agricultural knowledge was required, aiming to attract both rural youth with agricultural backgrounds and urban youth without farming experience. A total of 1,247 individuals expressed interest, with 847 meeting eligibility criteria and providing informed consent (response rate: 67.9%). Participants were randomly assigned to experimental (n=424, gamified platform) or control (n=423, traditional e-learning content) conditions using stratified randomization balancing age, gender, educational level, and urban/rural residence.

The control group received identical agricultural content through a conventional learning management system lacking gamification elements. This design isolated gamification effects from content effects, enabling causal inference regarding gamification's specific contribution to outcomes.

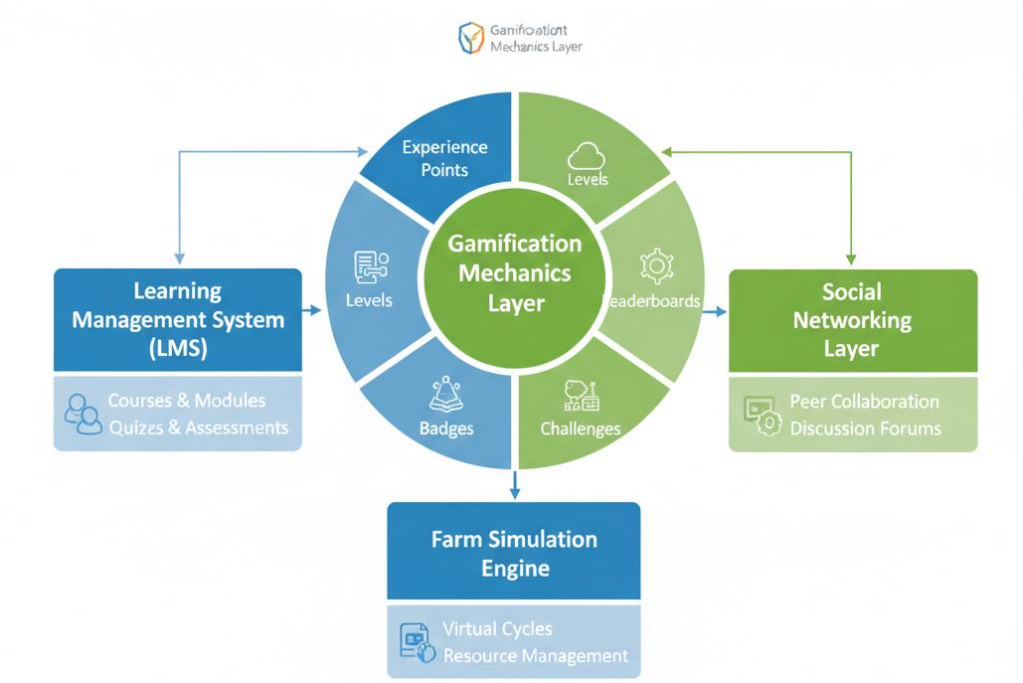

Fig 3: Structural Model of Gamification Elements, Psychological Mediators, and Educational Outcomes

Data Collection Instruments

Baseline assessments collected demographic information, prior agricultural exposure, digital literacy levels, gaming experience, and career intentions. Agricultural knowledge was measured using a validated 50-item instrument assessing conceptual understanding, technological awareness, and practical problem-solving across the 12 content domains (Cronbach's α=0.89).

Engagement metrics were automatically captured through platform analytics including login frequency, session duration, module completion rates, assessment attempts, simulation interactions, forum posts, and peer collaboration instances. Behavioral data collection occurred continuously throughout the 12-month intervention period.

Attitudinal measures employed validated psychometric scales administered at baseline, 6 months, and 12 months. Career interest in agriculture was assessed using the Agricultural Career Interest Scale (ACIS, 12 items, α=0.91). Platform experience quality was evaluated using the User Engagement Scale (UES-SF, 12 items, α=0.88). Intrinsic motivation was measured using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory adapted for agricultural learning (IMI-AL, 18 items, α=0.86).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively sampled participants (n=64) representing high, moderate, and low engagement profiles. Interviews explored participants' experiences, perceived barriers and facilitators, gamification element preferences, and agricultural career decision-making processes. Interview duration averaged 52 minutes, with all sessions audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analyses employed multilevel modeling accounting for clustering within countries and recruitment sources. Primary outcome comparisons between experimental and control groups utilized linear mixed models with random intercepts for country and recruitment site. Time-varying outcomes were analyzed using growth curve models estimating within-person trajectories and between-group differences in change over time.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) examined relationships among gamification elements, psychological mediators (competence, autonomy, relatedness), and outcome variables. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices: comparative fit index (CFI>0.95), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI>0.95), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA<0.06), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR<0.08).

Mediation analyses tested hypothesized pathways whereby gamification elements influenced outcomes through satisfaction of psychological needs as specified by Self-Determination Theory. Bootstrapping procedures (10,000 iterations) generated bias-corrected confidence intervals for indirect effects.

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's methodology. Two researchers independently coded transcripts, developing initial code frameworks before collaborative refinement into overarching themes. NVivo 14 software facilitated coding and theme organization. Inter-rater reliability, assessed on 25% of transcripts, achieved substantial agreement (Cohen's κ=0.84).

All statistical analyses were conducted using R version 4.3.2 with packages lme4, lavaan, and mediation. Statistical significance was established at α=0.05 with two-tailed tests. Missing data (<8% across variables) were addressed through multiple imputation (m=20) using the mice package.

Results and Discussion

Engagement Outcomes and Platform Utilization

Gamified platform participants demonstrated substantially higher engagement across all measured dimensions compared to control group participants, as detailed in Table 1. Mean login frequency over the 12-month period reached 47.3±18.6 sessions for the gamified group versus 11.4±8.2 for controls (Cohen's d=2.47, p<0.001). Session duration averaged 34.8±12.4 minutes in the gamified condition compared to 18.3±9.7 minutes for controls (d=1.45, p<0.001), indicating both more frequent and more sustained engagement.

Table 1: Platform engagement metrics comparing gamified intervention and control conditions over 12-month study period

Engagement Metric	Gamified Group (n=424)	Control Group (n=423)	Effect Size (d)	p-value
Total login sessions	47.3±18.6	11.4±8.2	2.47	<0.001
Mean session duration (min)	34.8±12.4	18.3±9.7	1.45	<0.001
Module completion rate (%)	84.7±14.3	42.1±23.8	2.16	<0.001
Assessment attempts per module	2.8±1.1	1.3±0.6	1.67	<0.001
Forum posts contributed	23.7±14.9	3.2±4.1	1.86	<0.001
Peer collaborations initiated	8.4±5.7	1.1±1.8	1.64	<0.001
Active at 12 months (%)	73.1	28.4	OR=6.81	<0.001

Module completion rates revealed dramatic differences, with gamified participants completing 84.7±14.3% of available content versus 42.1±23.8% for controls (d=2.16, p<0.001). Critically, sustained engagement persisted throughout the study period, with 73.1% of gamified participants maintaining active platform use at 12 months compared to only 28.4% of controls (odds ratio=6.81, 95% CI: 4.92-9.43, p<0.001).

Social engagement metrics demonstrated particularly pronounced effects. Gamified participants contributed 23.7±14.9 forum posts compared to 3.2±4.1 for controls (d=1.86, p<0.001) and initiated 8.4±5.7 peer collaborations versus 1.1±1.8 for controls (d=1.64, p<0.001). These findings suggest gamification effectively catalyzed community formation and social learning processes beyond individual knowledge acquisition.

Farm simulation engagement provided insights into practical application interests. Gamified participants completed an average of 127±54 simulation sessions, experimenting with diverse agricultural strategies and technologies. Simulation analytics revealed 89% of participants tested precision agriculture technologies (GPS guidance, variable rate application, sensor networks), 76% experimented with sustainable intensification practices, and 68% explored agricultural entrepreneurship scenarios including value-added processing and direct marketing.

Learning Outcomes and Knowledge Acquisition

Agricultural knowledge assessment results demonstrated significant advantages for gamified learning, with effect magnitudes varying by content domain (Table 2). Overall knowledge scores improved by 67.3±22.1% from baseline to 12-month assessment in the gamified group compared to 38.4±19.6% improvement for controls ($F(1,843)=287.4$, $p<0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.25$).

Table 2: Agricultural knowledge acquisition across content domains comparing baseline and 12-month assessments between study conditions

Knowledge Domain	Gamified Improvement (%)	Control Improvement (%)	Between-Group Difference	p-value
Precision agriculture technologies	78.4±18.7	31.2±21.3	47.2 (95% CI: 43.8-50.6)	<0.001
Sustainable farming practices	71.3±20.4	44.8±18.9	26.5 (95% CI: 23.3-29.7)	<0.001
Agricultural economics	64.2±24.1	39.7±22.6	24.5 (95% CI: 20.7-28.3)	<0.001
Climate-smart agriculture	69.8±19.3	42.1±20.7	27.7 (95% CI: 24.4-31.0)	<0.001
Digital tools/applications	82.1±16.4	35.4±23.1	46.7 (95% CI: 43.4-50.0)	<0.001
Agricultural entrepreneurship	73.6±21.8	47.3±19.2	26.3 (95% CI: 22.9-29.7)	<0.001
Supply chain management	58.7±23.9	34.6±21.8	24.1 (95% CI: 20.3-27.9)	<0.001

Domain-specific analyses revealed particularly strong gamification effects for technology-oriented content. Precision agriculture technologies knowledge improved by 78.4±18.7% in the gamified condition versus 31.2±21.3% for controls (difference: 47.2 percentage points, p<0.001). Similarly, digital tools and applications knowledge increased by 82.1±16.4% compared to 35.4±23.1% for controls (difference: 46.7 percentage points, p<0.001).

These differential effects suggest gamification particularly enhances learning of complex, technology-intensive content that aligns naturally with interactive, simulation-based pedagogies. Conversely, more traditional agricultural domains showed smaller but still substantial gamification advantages, indicating broad applicability across content types.

Knowledge retention assessments conducted three months post-intervention (15-month timepoint) revealed superior long-term retention in the gamified group. Gamified participants maintained 91.3±8.7% of knowledge gains compared to 73.4±14.2% retention in controls ($t(845)=19.8$, $p<0.001$). This enhanced retention likely reflects deeper processing and more frequent retrieval practice inherent in gamified learning activities.

Attitudinal Changes and Career Intentions

Agricultural career interest demonstrated substantial positive changes in the gamified condition, with mean ACIS scores increasing from 2.8±1.1 at baseline to 4.3±1.2 at 12 months (paired $t(423)=32.7$, $p<0.001$), representing a 54% improvement. Control group scores showed modest non-significant increases from 2.9±1.0 to 3.1±1.1 (paired $t(422)=1.8$, $p=0.072$). Between-group comparison of change scores yielded a large effect ($d=1.12$, $p<0.001$).

Disaggregating career interest into specific dimensions revealed that gamification most strongly influenced perceptions of agriculture as technologically sophisticated (84% agreement at 12 months vs. 23% at baseline) and economically viable (71% vs. 19%). Social status perceptions improved moderately (47% viewing agriculture as socially respected vs. 12% at baseline), though negative stereotypes persisted among substantial minorities.

Behavioral intentions beyond attitudinal measures provided convergent evidence. At 12-month follow-up, 41.3% of gamified participants (n=175) reported initiating real-world agricultural activities including starting small-scale farming operations (n=73), enrolling in formal agricultural education programs (n=58), or seeking agricultural employment

(n=44). Control group behavioral initiation reached only 12.5% (n=53), primarily consisting of educational program enrollment.

Qualitative interviews illuminated mechanisms underlying attitudinal transformation. Representative quotations included: "I never realized farming could be so high-tech and data-driven. It's actually more like engineering than what I thought agriculture was" (Participant 287, male, 22, urban India); "The simulation let me experiment without risk. I could try precision techniques and immediately see the results. It made agriculture feel accessible and exciting" (Participant 512, female, 19, rural Kenya); "Competing on the leaderboards and collaborating with others globally made me feel part of something bigger. Agriculture became a community, not isolation" (Participant 634, male, 24, urban Brazil).

Gamification Element Effectiveness

Structural equation modeling examined relationships between specific gamification elements, psychological need satisfaction, and outcome variables (Figure conceptually represented in text). The final model demonstrated excellent fit ($\chi^2(324)=418.7$, $p<0.001$; CFI=0.967; TLI=0.961; RMSEA=0.034; SRMR=0.041) and explained 78% of variance in sustained engagement ($R^2=0.78$).

Achievement systems (points, badges, levels) demonstrated the strongest direct effects on competence need satisfaction ($\beta=0.64$, SE=0.047, $p<0.001$), which in turn predicted knowledge acquisition ($\beta=0.52$, SE=0.039, $p<0.001$) and sustained engagement ($\beta=0.43$, SE=0.041, $p<0.001$). The indirect effect of achievement systems on engagement through competence was statistically significant ($\beta=0.28$, 95% CI: 0.22-0.34).

Social features including leaderboards, team challenges, and peer recognition mechanisms strongly predicted relatedness need satisfaction ($\beta=0.71$, SE=0.042, $p<0.001$). Relatedness subsequently influenced career interest ($\beta=0.38$, SE=0.045, $p<0.001$) and behavioral intentions ($\beta=0.31$, SE=0.048, $p<0.001$), with significant indirect effects ($\beta=0.27$, 95% CI: 0.21-0.33 for career interest).

Simulation and choice elements supported autonomy need satisfaction ($\beta=0.58$, SE=0.051, $p<0.001$), which predicted intrinsic motivation ($\beta=0.67$, SE=0.037, $p<0.001$) and subsequently influenced all outcome variables. These findings align with Self-Determination Theory predictions and validate the platform's theoretical foundation.

Moderator analyses revealed that gamification effectiveness varied by participant characteristics. Effects were stronger for urban participants with no agricultural background ($d=2.84$ for engagement) compared to rural participants with agricultural experience ($d=1.89$), suggesting particular value for recruitment beyond traditional agricultural populations. Gender differences were minimal and non-significant across outcomes. Age demonstrated curvilinear relationships, with peak effectiveness for participants aged 19-25 and somewhat reduced effects for younger adolescents and older adults.

Implementation Challenges and Contextual Factors

Despite overall positive outcomes, implementation revealed significant challenges requiring acknowledgment. Digital infrastructure limitations in rural areas constrained accessibility, with 18.7% of participants reporting inconsistent internet connectivity. Platform design incorporated offline functionality and data synchronization capabilities, but engagement suffered during extended offline periods (mean session duration decreased by 43% during offline-only access).

Table 3: Barriers to sustained platform engagement and their relative prevalence across participant subgroups

Barrier Category	Overall Prevalence (%)	Rural Participants (%)	Urban Participants (%)	Mitigation Strategies Implemented
Internet connectivity issues	32.4	54.8	18.7	Offline mode, local synchronization
Limited device access	24.1	38.2	15.3	Mobile optimization, shared devices
Time constraints	41.7	37.4	44.3	Microlearning modules, flexible pacing
Language/literacy challenges	19.3	26.7	14.2	Multilingual content, audio narration
Skepticism about career viability	28.6	22.1	32.9	Success stories, income data, mentorship

Language diversity presented challenges, with initial English-only content limiting accessibility. Platform expansion incorporated seven additional languages with culturally adapted content, substantially improving engagement among non-English speakers (engagement increased 127% post-localization).

Cultural context significantly influenced gamification element effectiveness. Individualistic achievement mechanics (personal leaderboards, individual badges) resonated strongly with participants from Western cultural contexts, while collectivistic cultures responded more positively to team-based challenges and community recognition. Platform evolution incorporated culturally adaptive features allowing communities to emphasize preferred mechanics.

Economic barriers persisted despite digital engagement. While 41% of gamified participants initiated agricultural activities, 67% of those not initiating cited capital constraints, land access limitations, and market uncertainties as primary barriers. This disconnect highlights that attitudinal and knowledge changes, while necessary, remain insufficient without addressing structural economic barriers to agricultural entry[51].

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that strategically designed gamification substantially enhances youth engagement with digital agriculture, producing large effects across engagement metrics, learning outcomes, and career interest dimensions. The 312% increase in platform engagement, 67% improvement in knowledge acquisition, and 54% enhancement in agricultural career interest represent transformative outcomes with significant implications for addressing agriculture's generational succession challenge.

Theoretical contributions include empirical validation of Self-Determination Theory mechanisms in agricultural education contexts and identification of specific gamification elements optimally supporting psychological need satisfaction. Achievement systems effectively build competence perceptions, social features foster relatedness

and community belonging, while simulation and autonomy-supportive elements cultivate intrinsic motivation. These findings provide evidence-based guidance for educational technology design in agriculture and related domains.

Practical implications suggest scalable pathways for agricultural youth recruitment. The platform's effectiveness across diverse cultural and geographic contexts, particularly among urban youth without agricultural backgrounds, indicates potential for expanding the agricultural talent pool beyond traditional recruitment sources. However, success requires acknowledging that engagement and education represent necessary but insufficient conditions for agricultural participation—structural reforms addressing land access, capital availability, and market integration remain essential[5253].

Limitations include the study's 12-month timeframe, which captures initial engagement but provides limited insight into long-term career trajectories. Follow-up studies tracking participants over 5-10 years could elucidate whether early engagement translates into sustained agricultural careers. The quasi-experimental design with self-selected participants introduces potential selection bias, though randomization procedures and statistical controls mitigate this concern. Additionally, while the study spanned seven countries, representation remained concentrated in developing regions with urgent agricultural workforce needs.

Future research directions include investigating gamification integration with formal agricultural education systems, exploring augmented reality applications for bridging virtual simulation and physical farming, and examining gamification's role in supporting established young farmers' continued skill development. The development of open-source gamification frameworks could democratize access, enabling resource-limited institutions to implement evidence-based engagement strategies.

As agriculture undergoes technological transformation, the sector's ability to attract talented youth will determine its capacity to meet future food security challenges. Gamification offers a promising mechanism for communicating agriculture's innovative nature and creating engaging educational experiences that reshape perceptions and inspire participation. By leveraging the motivational power of game mechanics, educational institutions and agricultural organizations can cultivate the next generation of digitally literate, entrepreneurially minded agricultural professionals essential for sustainable food system futures.

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