

The Platformized Classroom: Communicative Identity Labor, Staged Presence, and Platform Capitalism in HyFlex Learning

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Abstract

The proliferation of HyFlex (Hybrid Flexible) modalities in higher education has transformed educational communication into a site of complex identity performance, algorithmic mediation, and platform-driven governance. This paper argues that HyFlex environments constitute a “platformized classroom”—a communicative space in which instructors and students are compelled to perform, commodify, and continuously calibrate their pedagogical identities across simultaneous in-person, synchronous, and asynchronous channels. To analyze these dynamics, the paper introduces the fetishized learning economy (FLE) framework, adapted from critical political economy and platform studies, centering three interrelated concepts: pedagogical persona capital (the strategic construction and performance of teaching and learning identities across modalities), staged presence (the dramatization of engagement and participation as symbolic markers within HyFlex environments), and educational platform capitalism (the institutional and commercial shaping of pedagogical communication through learning management systems, videoconferencing platforms, and datafication). Through a theoretical analysis of communication dynamics in HyFlex settings, this paper argues that educational identity under the FLE is engineered rather than expressed, shaped by institutional-platform synergies that reward particular performances of presence, engagement, and learning. By doing so, this study critiques assumptions embedded in dominant HyFlex discourse—particularly the myth of modality-neutral equity—and, through dialogue with participatory communication and Universal Design for Learning framework, offers a path toward more equitable and human-centered HyFlex pedagogy. This paper positions HyFlex not as a neutral modality of access, but as a platformized communicative economy that reshapes the conditions of teaching and learning.

Keywords: HyFlex modality, communicative identity labor, platformized classroom, educational platform capitalism, staged presence, pedagogical persona capital, higher education, Universal Design for Learning, participatory communication

1. Introduction

The emergence of HyFlex learning environments has introduced a fundamental paradox into educational communication: the same classroom now hosts multiple, simultaneously competing versions of *presence*. Students may occupy physical seats, join via synchronous videoconference, or engage asynchronously through recorded lectures and discussion boards—all within the frame of a single course. This layered modality, celebrated in post-pandemic higher education literature as the apex of learner-centered flexibility (Beatty, 2019; Mahrishi et al., 2025), has also produced new and undertheorized forms of identity performance, communicative labor, and platform-mediated governance.

Where existing scholarship on HyFlex has largely focused on questions of technology adoption (Beatty, 2019), student satisfaction (Lakhal et al., 2013), and pedagogical design (Bower et al., 2015), it has remained conspicuously silent on a more fundamental shift: the transformation of educational communication into a performance economy. Instructors curate *teaching personas* optimized for simultaneous audiences with divergent needs. Students perform *learner identities* calibrated to the affordances and surveillance logics of the platforms they inhabit. Institutional mandates and commercial platform infrastructures shape what counts as valid participation, authentic engagement, and measurable learning. Educational identity in HyFlex environments is not simply expressed—it is engineered, staged, and increasingly commodified by the very systems through which it is mediated.

This paper introduces the *fetishized learning economy* (FLE) as a theoretical framework for analyzing these dynamics.

Drawing on critical political economy, platform studies, and educational communication theory, the FLE develops three interrelated concepts—pedagogical persona capital, staged presence, and educational platform capitalism—to examine how HyFlex modality reshapes the communicative labor of teaching and learning. The result is a critical vocabulary for understanding how HyFlex does not simply expand access to education, but transforms educational communication into a site of identity performance, symbolic exchange, and platform governance.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on HyFlex learning, much of the existing literature remains technocentric and pedagogically instrumental, focusing primarily on issues of access, flexibility, student satisfaction, and instructional design. While these contributions are valuable, they largely overlook the communicative and identity-based consequences of HyFlex environments—particularly the ways in which teaching and learning are reshaped as forms of performance, labor, and platform-mediated participation. As a result, current HyFlex research offers limited theoretical tools for understanding how identity, presence, and engagement are reconfigured within increasingly datafied and platform-governed educational spaces.

Addressing this gap, this paper adopts a conceptual and critical-theoretical approach, drawing on insights from political economy, platform studies, and educational communication to develop a new analytical framework for examining HyFlex environments. Rather than evaluating HyFlex in terms of effectiveness or implementation, this study seeks to interrogate the underlying communicative structures that shape how teaching and learning are experienced, performed, and valued.

The FLE framework centers on three interrelated concepts: (1) *pedagogical persona capital*, the algorithmically mediated and institutionally optimized performance of teaching and learning identities; (2) *staged presence*, the strategic dramatization of engagement and participation as symbolic capital across HyFlex modalities; and (3) *educational platform capitalism*, the commercial and ideological shaping of pedagogical communication through learning management systems (LMS), videoconferencing tools, and data analytics. Together, these concepts illuminate how HyFlex environments, rather than neutralizing communicative inequalities, may reproduce and amplify them through new regimes of identity performance and platform control.

1.1 A Note on Conceptual Methodology

This paper follows a conceptual-article methodology, a recognized mode of theory-building contribution in which new analytical constructs are developed through the systematic synthesis of existing theoretical literatures rather than through the collection or analysis of empirical data (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Specifically, the FLE framework was developed through an iterative three-stage process. First, three literatures that have rarely been read together in HyFlex scholarship critical political economy and platform studies (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2023), dramaturgical and performative theories of identity (Goffman, 1959; Marwick, 2013; Duffy, 2017), and educational communication theories of presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Short et al., 1976)—were reviewed for constructs applicable to HyFlex communication. Second, recurring but undertheorized patterns documented in the empirical HyFlex literature split-attention instruction, camera-on norms, and analytics-driven behavioral adaptation were mapped against these constructs to identify points of theoretical convergence, following the theory-synthesis and theory-adaptation approaches to conceptual-article design (Jaakkola, 2020). Third, the resulting constructs were refined through comparison against Kamaruzaman and Hasan's (2026) participatory communication model, which served as a normative counterpoint that helped clarify the FLE's diagnostic, rather than prescriptive, theoretical purpose. As a conceptual paper, the FLE framework is offered as a set of theoretically derived and empirically testable propositions rather than as empirically validated findings; Section 5.2 outlines directions for its future empirical validation.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 From Classroom to HyFlex: The Evolution of Pedagogical Presence

The following review is organized critically rather than descriptively: each subsection identifies not only what existing scholarship has established but what its predominant framings presuppose or leave unexamined. Read together, the literatures on teaching presence, self-commodification, and platform capitalism converge on an assumption this paper contests that the communicative demands of HyFlex modality are a matter of individual adaptation or institutional implementation, rather than a structural feature of the platformized classroom itself. The concept of *teaching presence* has long been central to theories of educational communication. Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework identified three interdependent elements of effective online learning—cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence—framing each as a form of communicative performance that shapes the quality of educational experience. In online and blended learning contexts, these presences must be actively constructed and sustained in the absence of co-located embodiment (Richardson et al., 2017). Recent experimental research further complicates this construction. Even the modality through which presence is mediated whether through human or AI-generated voice and avatar significantly affects learners' cognitive load and perceived social presence, suggesting that the performance of educational presence is inseparable from the technical conditions of its delivery (Zhang et al., 2025).

The HyFlex model, first formalized by Beatty (2019), extended this challenge by introducing *simultaneous modality*—requiring instructors to sustain meaningful presence across in-person, synchronous online, and asynchronous channels at the same time. This architectural feature of HyFlex fundamentally complicates the communication dynamics described in CoI research. The instructor is no longer managing a single communicative context but orchestrating multiple, partially overlapping presence-regimes, each with its own norms of visibility, participation, and engagement. This orchestration challenge has been recently theorized through the Pedagogy-Space-Technology (PST) framework, which identifies the interdependence of teaching methods, spatial configurations, and technological architecture in synchronous hybrid environments — arguing that without deliberate redesign of all three dimensions simultaneously, HyFlex amplifies rather than resolves the communicative fragmentation instructors experience (Kee et al., 2025).

Recent scholarship has begun to document the communicative burden this places on instructors. Castañeda and Selwyn (2018) have critiqued the broader tendency of educational technology discourse to frame platform affordances as neutral or beneficial, obscuring the labor and identity work they require. Similarly, Raes et al. (2020) found that HyFlex instructors report heightened cognitive load, fragmented attention, and difficulty establishing equitable communicative relationships with students across modalities. More recently, Xiao et al. (2025) found that HyFlex's flexibility places significant emotional and cognitive demands on instructors in AI training contexts, with emotional engagement emerging as a key mediator between the structural conditions of HyFlex delivery and teacher satisfaction — further underscoring that the labor of HyFlex teaching is affective and identity-laden, not merely technical. Yet neither line of scholarship has theorized the *identity economy* that HyFlex communication produces—the ways in which both instructors and students come to inhabit fetishized performances of pedagogical selfhood.

2.2 Self-Commodification in Educational Contexts

The commodification of educational identity is not a new phenomenon. Giroux (1983) critiqued the ways in which schooling reproduces class ideologies through hidden curricula, while Ball (2012) analyzed how neoliberal education reform transforms teachers into performance-managed subjects of audit culture. More recently, Lupton (2020) has documented how digital platforms in education—from LMS analytics to proctoring software—construct students as datafied subjects whose learning is continuously monitored, measured, and optimized.

What is distinctive about the HyFlex context is the way in which these dynamics intersect with what Goffman (1959) called the *presentation of self*. In HyFlex environments, the multiplicity of modalities creates an unusually complex dramaturgical situation: the same pedagogical performance is received differently by audiences occupying different communicative positions. The student attending in person experiences the instructor's embodied presence; the synchronous online student receives a mediated, screen-bounded version; the asynchronous student encounters a further-edited recording, stripped of the spontaneous social cues that characterized the live event. Each modality produces a different version of the instructor's identity, and each version is subject to different norms of evaluation and engagement.

This multiplicity has given rise to what we might call *modality-specific self-commodification*—the conscious or unconscious adaptation of communicative self-presentation to suit the perceived demands and surveillance architectures of each channel. Drawing on Marwick (2013) and Duffy (2017), we can observe how instructors and students alike engage in visibility labor, strategically curating their communicative performances to maximize perceived engagement, reliability, and compliance with platform logics.

2.3 Platform Capitalism in Higher Education

The material infrastructure of HyFlex education is constituted by a small number of dominant commercial platforms: Zoom, Canvas, Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom, among others. Srnicek's (2017) analysis of platform capitalism provides a productive framework for understanding how these platforms extract value from educational communication. Rather than simply facilitating learning, these platforms function as *data intermediaries*, capturing detailed behavioral data from both instructors and students—participation patterns, attention metrics, response latencies, and content engagement—which is then processed, aggregated, and potentially monetized. More recently, qualitative research across European universities confirms that these platforms generate distinct institutional pressures: instructors are expected to rapidly adapt their pedagogical practice to platform affordances while simultaneously managing student motivation in environments where the platform interface mediates all relational and communicative dynamics (Mohammadi et al., 2025).

van Dijck et al. (2018) have analyzed how platform logics increasingly govern institutional practices across social domains, including education. In the HyFlex context, this governance operates through algorithmic architectures that reward certain communicative behaviors (posting on discussion boards, completing quizzes, maintaining camera-on status during synchronous sessions) and render others invisible or penalized. These architectures are not pedagogically neutral: they encode particular assumptions about what legitimate learning looks like, privileging behaviors that are easily quantifiable and surveilled over those that resist datafication. Empirical research confirms that students and instructors

alike perceive platform-defined factors — course structure, instructor responsiveness, and interaction metrics — as the primary drivers of online classroom quality, suggesting that platform-encoded norms are not merely technical defaults but actively shape expectations of what "good" participation looks like (Sarker et al., 2025).

Importantly, the economic stakes of this platform governance extend beyond individual institutions. The higher education technology market has witnessed rapid consolidation and investment, with companies like Instructure (Canvas) and Anthology (Blackboard) operating as major commercial actors in the educational technology ecosystem (Williamson, 2019). The platforms that mediate HyFlex communication are products of this economy, designed to generate data, demonstrate ROI to institutional clients, and expand market share—goals that may or may not align with the pedagogical aims of individual courses. Critically, this expansion of platform infrastructure also raises pressing socio-ethical questions about energy use, digital equity, and institutional responsibility that remain largely invisible within dominant HyFlex discourse (Daniela, 2026).

3. The Platformized Classroom: The FLE Framework

The FLE framework (see Figure 1) draws on three intersecting theoretical traditions to analyze the communicative dynamics of HyFlex education: Marx's (1867/2024) theory of commodity fetishism, which illuminates how the social relations underlying pedagogical labor are obscured and commodified; Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital, which explains how communicative performances accumulate value within institutional fields; and Baudrillard's (1994) theory of hyperreality and simulation, which captures how digitally mediated educational presence becomes a self-referential performance detached from the authentic exchanges it purports to represent.

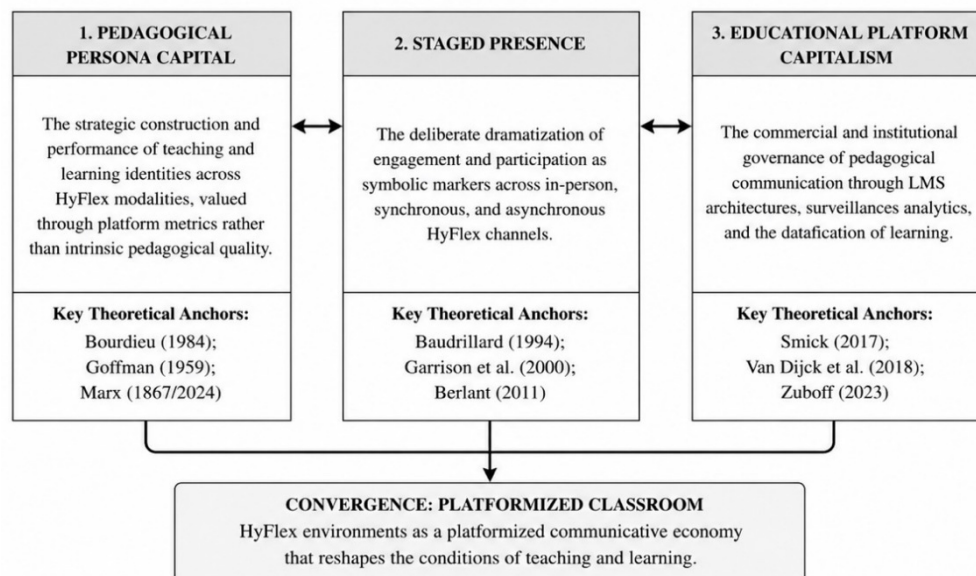


Figure 1. The Fetishized Learning Economy (FLE) Framework, illustrating the three interrelated concepts and their convergence on a single diagnostic construct.

Table 1 maps these theoretical anchors onto the FLE's three core concepts. While Table 2 makes this comparison explicit, situating each FLE concept against the predominant existing literature and the specific critical gap it addresses.

Table 1. The Fetishized Learning Economy (FLE): Core Concepts, Definitions, and Theoretical Anchors

FLE Concept	Definition	Key Theoretical Anchors
Pedagogical Persona Capital	The strategic construction and performance of teaching and learning identities across HyFlex modalities, valued through platform metrics rather than intrinsic pedagogical quality.	Bourdieu (1984); Goffman (1959); Marx (1867/2024)
Staged Presence	The deliberate dramatization of engagement and participation as symbolic markers across in-person, synchronous, and asynchronous HyFlex channels.	Baudrillard (1994); Garrison et al. (2000); Berlant (2011)
Educational Platform Capitalism	The commercial and institutional governance of pedagogical communication through LMS architectures, surveillance analytics, and the datafication of learning.	Smicek (2017); van Dijck et al. (2018); Zuboff (2023)

Table 2. Critical Positioning of the FLE Framework Relative to Predominant HyFlex Literature

FLE Concept	Predominant Existing HyFlex Literature	Critical Gap Addressed by the FLE
Pedagogical Persona Capital	Technology adoption and instructional design research (Beatty, 2019; Bower et al., 2015)	Treats identity performance as an implementation detail rather than a structural feature of HyFlex communication
Staged Presence	Student satisfaction and engagement research (Lakhal et al., 2013; Raes et al., 2020)	Measures presence as an outcome rather than analyzing it as a produced, unequally costly performance
Educational Platform Capitalism	Platform adoption and usability research (Mohammadi et al., 2025; Sarker et al., 2025)	Treats platforms as neutral tools rather than commercial actors that govern communicative norms

3.1 Pedagogical Persona Capital

Within the FLE, *pedagogical persona capital* refers to the value embedded in an individual's performed educational identity across the multiple modalities of a HyFlex environment. It is a form of social currency constituted through the performance, cultivation, and strategic management of online and in-person self-presentation. Pedagogical persona capital is the credibility, relatability, and communicative authority that instructors and students accumulate by calibrating their identities to the demands of each channel they simultaneously occupy.

For instructors, pedagogical persona capital involves the simultaneous management of multiple communicative registers. The HyFlex instructor must project warmth and intellectual authority to in-person students while maintaining sufficient eye contact with the camera to avoid alienating synchronous online participants, while also structuring content in ways that will remain comprehensible to asynchronous viewers who lack access to spontaneous contextual cues. This is not simply multitasking; it is a form of identity labor (Hochschild, 1983) that requires continuous calibration of self-presentation to the perceived demands of each audience.

Students, too, accumulate pedagogical persona capital through their performances of engagement. In HyFlex environments, the visual economy of participation is restructured: the in-person student's attentive gaze, the synchronous online student's camera-on presence, and the asynchronous student's discussion board contributions all function as visible markers of pedagogical identity. Lupton (2020) has documented how educational data systems construct students as *learning subjects*—individuals whose engagement is continuously quantified through interaction analytics—and in HyFlex settings, this datafication of participation creates new pressures to perform visible learning.

Importantly, pedagogical persona capital, like its influencer analog, is *platform-native*: its value is determined not by the intrinsic quality of one's learning or teaching but by the metrics through which platforms measure engagement. A student whose most substantive intellectual contributions occur through in-person discussion may be rendered statistically invisible on an LMS dashboard that weights discussion board posts and quiz completion rates. Conversely, an instructor whose communicative warmth and pedagogical effectiveness are most palpable in embodied co-presence may find their pedagogical persona capital diminished when evaluated through the cold optics of Zoom attendance data and asynchronous survey scores.

3.2 Staged Presence

If pedagogical persona capital is the currency of the FLE, then *staged presence* is its primary mode of production. Staged presence refers to the deliberate dramatization of engagement, participation, and affective investment within HyFlex educational environments—the communicative performances through which instructors and students signal their presence, attention, and belonging across modalities whose surveillance architectures make such signaling both necessary and unequally costly.

The concept of presence in educational communication has a rich theoretical lineage. Short et al.'s (1976) notion of *social presence* described the degree to which a medium conveys the sense of physical co-location with another person. Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI framework extended this to include cognitive and teaching presences, while subsequent scholarship on online and blended learning has documented the significant labor involved in *constructing* presence in digitally mediated educational contexts (Richardson et al., 2017). The FLE builds on this foundation by foregrounding the performative and strategic dimensions of presence construction—arguing that in HyFlex environments, presence is not simply a quality of the communicative relationship but a commodity that is actively produced, circulated, and evaluated within a platform-mediated economy.

Staged presence in the HyFlex context operates through several overlapping mechanisms. First, instructors engage in what we might call *presence arbitrage*—the strategic allocation of communicative attention across modalities to create

the impression of equitable engagement. An instructor who physically moves toward the camera while discussing a concept may appear to synchronous online students as if they are being addressed directly, while in-person students read the same gesture as a theatrical aside. This orchestrated ambiguity, common in HyFlex pedagogy guides, is itself a form of staged presence: a performance of ubiquitous engagement that depends on each modality's audience not fully perceiving the performance's condition of possibility.

Second, students perform staged presence through what might be called *participatory theater*—the strategic deployment of visible engagement signals calibrated to the expectations of each channel. The synchronous online student who keeps their camera on, positions themselves against a tidy background, and nods visibly during the instructor's explanations is engaging in a performance of attentiveness whose communicative function is as much social as intellectual. Baudrillard's (1994) concept of the simulacrum is instructive here: the camera-on student's displayed attentiveness may bear no necessary relationship to their actual cognitive engagement; what matters, in the economy of HyFlex presence, is the circulation of its sign.

Third, institutional and platform architectures actively shape what forms of presence are staged and rewarded. LMS participation dashboards, Zoom attendance reports, and AI-driven engagement analytics create *surveillance infrastructures* that produce normative expectations about what appropriate presence looks like. These architectures do not simply record presence; they *constitute* it, creating feedback loops in which instructors and students adjust their communicative performances to satisfy algorithmic metrics that may have little to do with the quality of learning occurring. In this sense, staged presence in HyFlex environments operates analogously to the 'compassionate consumption' dynamic that Berlant (2011) identifies in popular culture: audiences invest affectively in performances of presence not because those performances reflect authentic engagement, but because the performance economy rewards their investment.

3.3 Educational Platform Capitalism

The third element of the FLE, *educational platform capitalism*, describes how commercial and institutional platform logics actively govern the communicative behaviors of instructors and students in HyFlex settings, shaping what counts as pedagogically valuable presence and participation. Within this framework, the platforms that mediate HyFlex communication are not neutral conduits but active architects of educational norms—embedding particular assumptions about learning, attention, and engagement into the interface designs and data architectures through which all HyFlex interaction is routed.

The HyFlex modality is, at its infrastructural core, a platform product. Institutions that adopt HyFlex must invest in integrated ecosystems of videoconferencing software, lecture capture systems, LMS platforms, and potentially AI-driven engagement tools. Each of these platforms has its own data architecture, its own model of what educational interaction looks like, and its own commercial interests in demonstrating value to institutional clients. As Williamson (2019) has argued, the major educational technology companies are not neutral vendors of tools but active participants in shaping educational practice—embedding their assumptions about learning into the platform affordances that educators and students are constrained to work within.

Within the FLE, educational platform capitalism operates through three overlapping mechanisms. First, *datafication of pedagogical labor*: the commercial platforms that mediate HyFlex communication continuously generate data about instructor and student behavior, which is aggregated into analytics dashboards, sold to institutional clients, and potentially used to train machine learning models. This extraction of value from pedagogical communication mirrors Zuboff's (2023) analysis of surveillance capitalism, in which behavioral data becomes the primary raw material for profit generation. Instructors and students, in this framework, are not merely users of platforms but *producers* of data commodities.

Second, *algorithmic governance of participation*: LMS platforms and videoconferencing tools do not simply record participation—they actively incentivize and penalize particular communicative behaviors through their interface designs, notification systems, and analytics reporting. An LMS that prominently displays discussion board post counts incentivizes a particular form of textual participation; a Zoom platform that flags participants as 'inactive' after a period of non-interaction creates pressure to perform visible engagement regardless of actual cognitive investment. These architectural nudges constitute a form of algorithmic governance that shapes the communicative norms of HyFlex environments without ever being explicitly articulated as pedagogical policy. This governance dynamic extends to AI-mediated learning tools, where students increasingly negotiate between their own intellectual agency and the affordances of AI-driven platform environments (Mo et al., 2026).

Third, *the commodification of educational authenticity*: the transformation of genuine intellectual exchange into a series of trackable behavioral proxies. HyFlex education involves the fetishization of *genuine engagement* as a pedagogical ideal that is simultaneously constructed and undermined by platform logics. Institutional marketing materials celebrate HyFlex as enabling 'authentic' flexible learning, yet the surveillance architectures of the platforms that mediate this learning reward performed engagement over genuine intellectual risk-taking. Students who maintain camera-on presence,

contribute to discussion boards, and complete engagement surveys are rewarded with participation grades and positive analytics profiles—regardless of whether these behaviors reflect authentic intellectual engagement or merely its simulation.

4. FLE Dynamics in HyFlex Communication: Theoretical Illustrations

To ground the FLE framework in recognizable educational realities, the following discussion examines three communicative scenarios characteristic of HyFlex environments, each illuminating a different dimension of the framework. These illustrations are theoretical rather than empirical, derived from documented patterns in the HyFlex literature and organized around the FLE's three core concepts.

4.1 *The Split-Attention Instructor: Pedagogical Persona Capital in Action*

Consider the communicative situation of a HyFlex instructor teaching a seminar on qualitative research methods. Seated at a desk equipped with a camera aimed at the physical classroom, the instructor must simultaneously: direct eye contact toward the in-person students (requiring them to look away from the camera); look directly at the camera lens to simulate eye contact with synchronous online participants (requiring them to look away from in-person students); monitor the chat panel for online contributions; and structure their speech for the anticipated asynchronous audience who will later view the recording without access to the room's ambient social context.

This communicative situation illustrates the production of pedagogical persona capital in its most demanding form. The instructor must construct and maintain distinct, partially incompatible performances of presence for each audience—performances that are not simply technical adaptations but *identity performances* in Goffman's (1959) sense. The instructor who succeeds in this environment develops what we might call a *modality-flexible pedagogical persona*: a communicative identity whose value lies precisely in its capacity to be simultaneously intelligible to multiple audience positions. This pedagogical persona capital is constituted *through* the HyFlex platform architecture, not prior to it.

The communicative labor involved in sustaining this persona is substantial and, crucially, largely invisible. Raes et al. (2020) found that HyFlex instructors report this split-attention dynamic as among the most significant sources of cognitive and affective exhaustion in HyFlex teaching. Yet this labor is rarely acknowledged in institutional support structures or workload calculations, which tend to treat HyFlex courses as equivalent in effort to either purely in-person or purely online courses. This invisibilization echoes the broader pattern that Duffy (2017) identifies in platform-mediated labor more generally, where the aspirational framing of flexible participation conceals the structural demands and precarity it produces.

4.2 *The Camera-On Norm: Staged Presence and Its Discontents*

The contested norm of camera-on participation in synchronous online learning provides a particularly illuminating example of staged presence in HyFlex environments. Institutions and instructors frequently encourage or require synchronous online students to keep their cameras on during class sessions, citing the importance of visual engagement for community-building, instructor feedback, and the simulation of in-person presence. This norm operates within the FLE as a mechanism for producing and circulating the *signs* of engagement—the visible indicators of participatory presence that LMS analytics and instructor perception can register and evaluate.

The camera-on norm is, in Baudrillard's (1994) terms, a hyperreal construct: it demands the performance of physical co-presence in a context that has already rendered physical co-presence impossible. The synchronous online student who complies with this norm is not simply being present; they are producing a *simulation* of in-person presence for an audience whose own spatial situation makes genuine physical co-presence unavailable. This simulation becomes, in the economy of HyFlex presence, more real than the absent reality it replaces—a dynamic Baudrillard might recognize as the precession of the simulacrum applied to educational communication.

Yet the camera-on norm also produces meaningful inequalities in the distribution of communicative labor and symbolic capital. Students who comply face asymmetric visibility—their facial expressions, home environments, and physical states are made available for instructor and peer observation in ways not reciprocated for students attending in person. Research by Castelli and Sarvary (2021) and Nguyen et al. (2021) has documented the disproportionate burden this visibility places on students from marginalized backgrounds, including those managing caregiving responsibilities, those in crowded or unstable home environments, and those with disabilities or mental health conditions that make continuous visual self-presentation cognitively or emotionally costly. In the FLE framework, these inequalities are not incidental to the HyFlex model but *structurally produced* by the staged presence economy that the model requires.

4.3 *The Analytics Dashboard: Educational Platform Capitalism and the Datafied Learner*

A third dimension of FLE dynamics in HyFlex communication concerns the institutional use of learning analytics dashboards to monitor and intervene in student engagement. Most major LMS platforms offer instructors and

administrators access to detailed behavioral data: login frequencies, content access patterns, discussion board contributions, quiz completion rates, and assignment submission timelines. In HyFlex environments, these data streams are supplemented by videoconferencing attendance logs and, in some cases, AI-driven attention-detection systems that claim to measure students' engagement during synchronous sessions. Emerging research indicates that AI-designed content and analytics tools can measurably influence engagement patterns across diverse learner types, though the pedagogical implications of such algorithmic shaping remain undertheorized (Hossain et al., 2026).

Within the FLE framework, this analytics infrastructure constitutes a form of educational platform capitalism that shapes communicative behavior through what might be called *anticipatory surveillance*—the modification of behavior in response to the known or anticipated existence of monitoring systems (Andrejevic, 2013). Students who know that their LMS login frequency is tracked may increase their platform interactions without meaningfully deepening their intellectual engagement; instructors who know that their asynchronous content-access metrics are reviewed in institutional teaching evaluations may prioritize the production of frequently-accessed recording artifacts over the cultivation of synchronous dialogic depth.

This dynamic illustrates what the FLE identifies as the *commodification of authentic pedagogical engagement*: the transformation of genuine intellectual exchange—which is inherently difficult to quantify, frequently unpredictable in form, and often most valuable in its resistance to datafication—into a series of trackable behavioral proxies whose primary function is to produce data assets for institutional evaluation and commercial platform development. The result is a communicative economy in which what *counts* as learning and teaching is progressively redefined by what platforms can measure—a redefinition whose implications for the quality of educational communication are, at minimum, deserving of sustained critical attention.

5. Discussion: Provincializing HyFlex

The FLE framework's application to HyFlex educational communication makes three principal contributions to the field. First, the FLE offers a *critical vocabulary* for analyzing the identity labor that HyFlex modality demands of both instructors and students—a labor that existing scholarship has begun to document empirically but has lacked theoretical tools to analyze structurally. By framing this labor through the lens of commodity fetishism and symbolic capital, the FLE connects HyFlex communication to broader political economic critiques of platform capitalism, enriching the predominantly functionalist discourse of HyFlex pedagogy with a critical theoretical perspective.

Second, the FLE challenges the equity narrative that dominates HyFlex discourse. Proponents of HyFlex frequently argue that the model promotes equity by allowing students to choose the modality best suited to their circumstances (Beatty, 2019; Mahrishi et al., 2025). The FLE reframes this argument by suggesting that modality choice does not occur in a vacuum but within a communicative economy that distributes the costs and benefits of different forms of staged presence unequally. Students who lack the technological infrastructure, the domestic privacy, or the communicative capital to perform effective camera-on presence are not simply exercising a different modal preference—they are occupying a structurally disadvantaged position within the pedagogical persona capital economy that HyFlex produces.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the FLE offers a framework for *provincializing* dominant assumptions about educational communication in digital environments—assumptions that tend to be US-centric, neoliberal in their valorization of individual flexibility and choice, and insufficiently attentive to the institutional, commercial, and ideological infrastructures that shape what pedagogical communication can be and mean. Different institutional contexts, funding structures, cultural communication norms, and platform ecosystems will produce different configurations of the FLE's dynamics—and a comparative, cross-cultural research agenda attentive to these variations is urgently needed.

The FLE is not intended as a condemnation of HyFlex modality as such. HyFlex environments can and do support meaningful educational communication, genuine intellectual community, and expanded access to higher education for students whose circumstances make full in-person participation impossible. The framework's critical edge is directed not at the modality itself but at the conditions under which it is currently implemented—conditions characterized by institutional underinvestment in instructor support, commercial platform architectures that prioritize data extraction over pedagogical quality, and discursive framings that naturalize the performance demands of HyFlex as neutral expressions of learner-centered flexibility.

5.1 Toward Participatory Alternatives

The FLE's critique of platform-driven performativity in HyFlex education finds a productive, if partial, corrective interlocutor in Kamaruzaman and Hasan's (2026) work. Developed within a Malaysian university context and grounded in participatory development communication theory (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2020; Tufte, 2017) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Meyer et al., 2014), the paper proposes a communication-centered model for inclusive HyFlex delivery. This model explicitly targets under-resourced institutional contexts and marginalized learner populations, including

students with disabilities and student-athletes. In doing so, it occupies a complementary but importantly divergent theoretical position relative to the FLE: where the FLE diagnoses the communicative pathologies of platform-mediated HyFlex environments, Kamaruzaman and Hasan (2026) identify communication itself—repositioned as participatory and human-centered rather than platform-optimized—as the generative site of equitable educational transformation.

The two frameworks converge on several critical points. Both reject the technology-centric discourse that dominates HyFlex literature—the assumption that platform adoption is itself synonymous with pedagogical improvement or inclusivity. Kamaruzaman and Hasan (2026) make this critique explicit by recentring the analytical frame on communication rather than infrastructure, arguing that the equitable potential of HyFlex depends not on the sophistication of the technologies deployed but, on the quality, intentionality, and cultural attunement of the communicative relationships they mediate. This aligns with the FLE’s insistence that the communicative demands of HyFlex are structural in nature and cannot be resolved through platform upgrades or interface redesigns. Both frameworks also foreground the differential experiences of marginalized students. Where the FLE theorizes the distributional inequities of staged presence norms—particularly the camera-on norm—Kamaruzaman and Hasan (2026) extend this concern to populations whose marginalization is explicitly disability-related and institutionally defined, demonstrating through the Malaysian context that the infrastructural assumptions embedded in dominant HyFlex models (stable internet connectivity, personal devices, quiet domestic study environments) systematically disadvantage students in under-resourced settings before any communicative performance is required of them.

There is, however, a significant tension between the two frameworks that is theoretically productive rather than merely contradictory. The FLE, drawing on Marxian and Baudrillardian theoretical resources, is primarily a critical-diagnostic framework: it identifies and analyzes the mechanisms through which HyFlex educational communication is commodified, fetishized, and governed by platform capitalism. Kamaruzaman and Hasan’s (2026) framework, rooted in the participatory communication tradition associated with Freire (1970) and developed through Servaes’s (2020) communication-for-development paradigm, is explicitly normative and generative: it proposes a model of communication-centered HyFlex design oriented toward equity, agency, and belonging. In Freirean terms, it moves from conscientization toward praxis—from naming the problem to constructing an alternative. The FLE, by contrast, deliberately resists prescriptive conclusions, prioritizing structural critique over design recommendations. This asymmetry reflects a genuine methodological difference in how the two frameworks understand the relationship between theory and institutional practice in higher education research.

The UDL framework underpinning Kamaruzaman and Hasan’s (2026) model offers a particularly productive lens through which to revisit the FLE’s concept of staged presence. UDL’s core principles—multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement (Meyer et al., 2014)—can be read, from within an FLE perspective, as a systematic attempt to dismantle the staged presence economy by legitimizing a wider range of communicative behaviors as valid expressions of participation and learning. This interpretation finds recent empirical support in digital education research where Adler and Kletenik (2025) demonstrate that UDL-informed multimodal engagement design in digital classroom contexts significantly expands students’ sense of access and belonging—precisely by refusing to privilege any single mode of participation as the default form of legitimate engagement. By institutionally validating asynchronous discussion posts, written reflections, and alternative forms of engagement alongside camera-on synchronous participation, UDL-informed HyFlex design challenges the currency hierarchy through which pedagogical persona capital is accumulated and exchanged. In FLE terms, UDL operates as a counter-fetishization strategy: it refuses to privilege any single modality of engagement as the most authentic or valuable form of learning presence, instead redistributing symbolic capital more equitably across diverse communicative performances.

Kamaruzaman and Hasan’s (2026) emphasis on early engagement, co-created communication guidelines, and culturally attuned messaging also maps productively onto the FLE’s concern with educational platform capitalism. Their model’s insistence on participatory co-creation—involving students in establishing the communicative norms of HyFlex courses from the outset—represents a direct challenge to the algorithmic governance dynamic that the FLE identifies as a defining feature of platform-mediated HyFlex environments. Where educational platform capitalism imposes communicative norms top-down through LMS architectures and institutional analytics reporting, participatory co-creation redistributes normative authority downward, toward learners whose specific communicative needs and constraints have historically been rendered invisible by platform design. Additionally, empirical research on participatory approaches to digital learning further corroborates this argument, demonstrating that students who co-design course communication frameworks report stronger senses of agency, ownership, and authentic engagement with digital learning environments (Jarkiewicz et al., 2026). This is particularly significant in the Malaysian context that Kamaruzaman and Hasan (2026) analyze, where digital divides (Subramaniam et al., 2024; van de Werfhorst et al., 2022), diverse disability profiles, and the specific communicative demands of student-athlete populations compound the inequities that the FLE identifies as structurally produced by HyFlex’s performance economy.

Taken together, the FLE and Kamaruzaman and Hasan's (2026) framework suggest a complementary research agenda for educational communication scholarship: the FLE provides the critical-diagnostic vocabulary for identifying when and how HyFlex environments reproduce communicative inequalities through fetishized performance demands and platform governance, while participatory communication and UDL frameworks provide the normative and practical vocabulary for designing alternatives. This pairing also has significant geographical implications for the field. Kamaruzaman and Hasan's (2026) Malaysian context challenges the US-centric assumptions embedded in dominant HyFlex discourse by demonstrating that "inclusive HyFlex" means something substantially different when enacted under conditions of infrastructural constraint, cultural communication diversity, and state-mediated educational governance. A global scholarship of HyFlex modality must account for these variations: the communicative labor of HyFlex, and the pedagogical persona capital it demands, are shaped by the economic, technological, and cultural conditions of their institutional environments.

Beyond its analytical function, the FLE framework offers a foundation for future research and practice in HyFlex education. Empirically, it provides a lens for examining how instructors and students experience identity labor, staged presence, and platform governance across different institutional and cultural contexts. Pedagogically, it invites educators to critically reflect on classroom design choices that may inadvertently reinforce performative engagement and to explore alternative practices that reduce communicative burden while supporting meaningful participation. Research on technology-enhanced learning design demonstrates that systematic requirements analysis attending to learners' existing skills, institutional contexts, and curricular complexity can produce platform-mediated instructional environments that align more closely with genuine pedagogical goals rather than the commercial priorities of platform vendors (Kulaksız et al., 2026). At the policy level, the framework enables a more critical interrogation of platform adoption in higher education, encouraging institutions to question how datafication, analytics, and commercial infrastructures shape definitions of learning, engagement, and success. In this sense, the FLE is not only diagnostic but also generative—opening space for rethinking HyFlex beyond its current platform-centric paradigm.

5.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Empirical Validation

As a conceptual paper, the FLE framework carries the limitations characteristic of theory-synthesis contributions: its three constructs and the theoretical illustrations offered in Section 4 are analytically derived rather than empirically observed, and several of the claims advanced above are stated more categorically than the framework's conceptual status warrants. The account of pedagogical persona capital, staged presence, and educational platform capitalism should therefore be read as a set of theoretical propositions requiring empirical testing, not as established findings about how instructors and students actually experience HyFlex communication.

Future research should prioritize at least three lines of empirical validation. First, qualitative interview or ethnographic studies with HyFlex instructors and students could test whether the split-attention, camera-on, and analytics-dashboard dynamics theorized in Section 4 are recognizable to those who live them, and whether the FLE's vocabulary meaningfully captures their experience. Second, comparative studies across institutional and national contexts—particularly outside the US-centric settings that dominate existing HyFlex literature—are needed to test whether pedagogical persona capital and staged presence operate differently under different infrastructural, cultural, and regulatory conditions. Third, studies attentive to the differential experience of FLE dynamics across disability, gender, class, and other axes of marginalization would help specify where the inequities this paper theorizes are most acute, and where UDL-informed or participatory alternatives such as Kamaruzaman and Hasan's (2026) model are most likely to mitigate them. Pending this empirical work, the FLE is offered as a diagnostic vocabulary for HyFlex communication research, not as a settled account of it.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the HyFlex classroom is fundamentally a platformized communicative space—an environment in which educational identity is not simply expressed but continuously performed, commodified, and governed by intersecting institutional and commercial platform logics. Using the fetishized learning economy (FLE) as its analytical framework, the paper identifies three core mechanisms through which HyFlex modality transforms educational communication: pedagogical persona capital, staged presence, and educational platform capitalism.

The theoretical illustrations developed in this paper suggest that HyFlex communication involves forms of communicative labor—split-attention identity performance, the orchestration of staged presence across modalities, and the behavioral adaptation to analytics surveillance—that are structurally undervalued and inequitably distributed. These dynamics are not incidental to HyFlex design but are produced by its fundamental communicative architecture: the simultaneous multiplication of audience positions, platform logics, and presence-regimes that defines the HyFlex modality.

Future empirical work is needed to test and refine the FLE framework across diverse institutional, cultural, and disciplinary contexts. Particularly important is research that attends to the *differential experience* of FLE dynamics across dimensions of race, class, gender, disability, and institutional position—recognizing that the communicative burdens and

rewards of pedagogical persona capital, staged presence, and educational platform capitalism are not uniformly distributed but are shaped by the same structural inequalities that characterize educational communication more broadly.

If left unexamined, HyFlex risks normalizing a model of education in which presence is measured through visibility, engagement is reduced to trackable activity, and learning is increasingly defined by platform-generated metrics. In such a context, the expansion of flexibility may come at the cost of deeper forms of pedagogical meaning, reinforcing rather than resolving existing inequalities. The growing dominance of educational platforms further intensifies this risk, as institutional decisions about teaching and learning become entangled with commercial logics of data extraction and performance optimization. What is required, therefore, is not simply better implementation of HyFlex, but a fundamental rethinking of educational communication itself. This involves moving beyond platform-defined notions of participation toward more inclusive, context-sensitive, and human-centered communicative practices. By foregrounding the conditions under which educational identity is performed, valued, and governed, the FLE framework contributes to an ongoing effort to reclaim the classroom—whether physical, digital, or hybrid—as a space for meaningful, equitable, and authentic engagement in an increasingly platformized educational landscape.

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