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An Investigation Into English Language Tutors' Pedagogical Content Knowledge for Teaching Grammar at Some Selected Colleges of Education

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate English language tutors' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in teaching grammar at selected Colleges of Education (CoEs) in Ghana. This exploratory sequential mixed methods study employed multi-staged sampling techniques to select 6 tutors and 155 English language major students from CoEs in Eastern and Greater Accra zone (EAGAR). With Shulman's PCK model and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's contextual theory as the theoretical lens, data were analysed and interpreted. The tutors were observed and interviewed while the students responded to questionnaires and were tested on their comprehension of grammatical concepts. The deductive thematic analysis found that the tutors demonstrated outstanding PCK expertise in teaching grammar. However, the correlation results of tutors' PCK and students' understanding of grammatical concepts revealed that there was no significant relationship between the tutors' PCK and the students' understanding of grammatical concepts. These results demonstrated that PCK might not be the sole determinant of students' understanding of grammatical concepts. Other factors, such as students' prior knowledge, classroom dynamics, and teaching methodologies beyond PCK, could also influence students' comprehension of grammar. Therefore, other factors that promote students' understanding of grammar should be explored by the English language tutors. Further studies could broaden the study to include other CoEs zones to offer a comprehensive understanding of tutors' PCK in teaching other aspects of the English language.

Keywords: CoEs, cross-cutting issues, differential learning, PCK, grammar

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Introduction

English has become the dominant global language, used for communication across cultures and countries (Jenkins, 2013; Macedo et al., 2015). In Ghana, English serves as the official language and is central to education, governance, and media (Agyekum, 2015; Crystal, 2003). It also functions as a unifying medium among Ghana's diverse ethnic groups, making proficiency in English essential for academic and professional advancement (Boadi, 2007; National Teaching Council, 2017a). The national curriculum emphasises equipping students with skills in English for effective communication and comprehension (Crystal, 2003).

Given the language's significance, understanding how teachers teach English, particularly their Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), is crucial. PCK, introduced by Shulman (1986), refers to the integration of content knowledge and teaching strategies. It is seen as a core element of effective instruction and is embedded in Ghana's National Teachers' Standards (National Teaching Council, 2017b). Scholars like Magnusson et al. (1999) and Shulman (1987) have shown how PCK involves balancing general pedagogy, student knowledge, and subject-specific approaches. However, there is ongoing debate about whether PCK should be generic or tailored to specific subjects, especially in second-language instruction.

In English education, grammar forms a foundation for effective communication. Mastery of grammar is vital for developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Corder, 1988; Widodo, 2004), yet it presents challenges for second-language learners (Abdulkareem, 2013; Thornbury, 2005).

Although research on PCK has gained traction, most studies focus on science and mathematics or in-service teachers. There is limited focus on grammar instruction in English language education, especially within Ghana's colleges of education. This study addresses that gap by investigating how tutors' PCK informs grammar teaching, with attention to how cross-cutting themes like equity and inclusion are incorporated.

Literature Review

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) refers to a specialized body of knowledge that blends subject matter understanding with teaching strategies, distinguishing teachers from other professionals (Kind, 2009; Shulman, 1986). In various fields such as Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, and English, PCK is recognized as essential to effective teaching because it supports meaningful learning by merging content expertise with appropriate instructional approaches (Magnusson et al., 1999; Shulman, 1987). Successful teaching relies not only on having these elements but also on how effectively they are integrated and used within specific classroom situations.

Research in Science and Chemistry education provides insight into how PCK functions in subject-specific settings. Ozden (2008) and Sri et al. (2021), using mixed methods, studied pre-service teachers and found that linking pedagogical and content knowledge enhances instructional quality. Sri et al. (2021) highlighted significant gaps in pre-service teachers' mastery of PCK components, while Ozden emphasized how strong content knowledge supports better pedagogical integration. In Ghana, Wilmot (2020) applied Magnusson et al.'s (1999) model to Biology teachers, identifying consistent PCK constructs across diverse

demographics. His findings confirmed that even experienced teachers need structured support integrate PCK to fully.

In Mathematics education, studies such as Mishiwo et al. (2017) revealed challenges among pre-service teachers in diagnosing students' misconceptions, especially in topics like fractions. This underscores the need for teacher education programs to embed PCK more explicitly in their curricula. Similarly, Nadas (2019), using Ball et al.'s (2008) framework, found that knowledge of content, curriculum, teaching, and students significantly shapes pedagogical decisions. These findings demonstrate that PCK develops over time, shaped by classroom experience, subject mastery, and reflective practice (Park & Oliver, 2008).

Several scholars have adapted Shulman's original PCK framework to include learner-specific and contextual factors. For example, Ijeh and Nkopodi (2013) integrated learner characteristics into their study of PCK, highlighting the importance of aligning instruction with students' needs. Theoretical expansions like these reflect the evolving understanding of how PCK operates in diverse educational environments.

In Africa, research has explored how PCK interacts with contextual realities such as resource limitations, cultural diversity, and varying teacher training standards. Toerien's (2013) longitudinal study in South Africa found that even experienced teachers may lack depth in subject knowledge or understanding of student learning processes, despite strong classroom management skills. These gaps point to the need for continuous professional development and reflective teaching practices to strengthen PCK.

Troyan et al. (2017) further expanded the field by introducing the Integration-PCK (I-PCK) model for Content-Based Instruction (CBI). This model emphasises interdisciplinary approaches that blend academic content with language learning. It suggests that language teachers benefit from drawing on content from other subjects while using PCK-informed strategies to enhance comprehension and engagement.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), first conceptualized by Shulman (1986, 1987), arose from his dissatisfaction with the limited focus on teachers' subject-matter expertise in teaching-related research. Inspired by studies in medical diagnosis, Shulman highlighted the parallels between specialised knowledge in medical practice and teaching. He criticised the process-product research of the 1970s and 1980s for prioritizing general pedagogical practices, such as classroom management, over subject-specific approaches. Shulman argued for a content-centered perspective, emphasising the need for research into effective teaching "subject by subject" to account for the unique requirements of different disciplines.

PCK represents the fusion of content and pedagogy, equipping teachers with the ability to adapt and present subject matter in ways that are accessible, relevant, and engaging for students with diverse abilities and interests (Park & Oliver, 2008; Shulman, 1987). This concept extends beyond simply understanding a subject to include strategies for effectively organizing and delivering content. Shulman and Richert (1987) further refined the components of PCK, incorporating subject-matter knowledge, instructional strategies, learner understanding, curriculum organization, and the identification of common misconceptions. These elements emphasize the teacher's role in addressing subject-specific learning challenges and tailoring content to students' needs.

Two core elements of Shulman's (1987) PCK model are instructional strategies and representations, which focus on transforming subject-matter knowledge for effective teaching, and knowledge of students' understanding, which considers learning processes and content-related difficulties. These elements are foundational for creating inclusive and effective learning environments that support students' diverse needs. The significance of PCK has since been explored across disciplines, affirming its critical role in fostering meaningful learning experiences and prompting further research into its application in various fields.

Research Aims and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to address context, content, analytical, and methodological gaps in the study of grammar instruction in selected Colleges of Education (CoEs) in the EGA zone, Ghana. Specifically, the study expands the understanding of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) by integrating cross-cutting issues to foster holistic learning, connecting grammar instruction with broader topics and real-world problem-solving. The specific research questions are outlined as follows:

1. What pedagogical content knowledge do English language tutors show in teaching grammar in the selected CoEs in Ghana?
2. How are cross-cutting issues introduced through PCK in grammar teaching by English language tutors in the selected CoEs in Ghana?
3. How does incorporating cross-cutting issues through PCK in teaching grammar promote differential learning among students in the selected CoEs in Ghana?
4. How does integrating the practical aspects of PCK enhance teacher trainees' understanding of grammatical concepts in the selected CoEs in Ghana?

Research Design

The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, beginning with qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by quantitative data collection to explore how English language tutors in Colleges of Education (CoEs) integrate Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) components into grammar instruction. In the qualitative phase, observations and semi-structured questionnaires were used to gather insights on how tutors incorporate PCK and cross-cutting issues into grammar teaching to promote differential learning among students. In the quantitative phase, a test was administered to assess teacher trainees' understanding of grammatical concepts. The findings from both phases were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the EGA zone, which includes nine Colleges of Education (CoEs). The target population consisted of English language tutors and third-year teacher trainees majoring in English at these colleges. Third-year trainees were chosen as they had substantial exposure to grammar content, methodology courses, and were nearing their practicum phase. The accessible population comprised 19 English language tutors and 1,150 third-year students from three selected colleges: Kibi Presbyterian College of Education (KPCE), Seventh Day Adventist College of Education (SDACE), and Accra College of Education (ACE). At KPCE, the student population was 380, with a male majority (227 males and 153 females). SDACE had 420 students, predominantly female (266 females and 154 males). At ACE, the student population totalled 350, with a male majority (240 males and 110 females). The total number of English language tutors across these colleges was 19, with

ACE employing seven tutors (four males and three females), and KPCE and SDACE each employing six tutors, evenly distributed between genders. These participants provided a robust representation of English language instruction in the region.

The actual sample for the study included 155 third-year English major teacher trainees from the three selected Colleges of Education (KPCE, SDACE, and ACE) for the quantitative phase. These students were selected using a census method, as each college had a single-stream English elective class, making it feasible to include all students. They were chosen because they had completed sufficient grammar content and methodology courses and were assessed through questionnaires and test items to evaluate the integration of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and cross-cutting issues in grammar teaching. For the qualitative phase, six English language tutors (two from each college) were purposively selected based on their teaching experience (minimum of five years in grammar instruction) and gender equality considerations, ensuring representation of both male (three tutors) and female (three tutors) perspectives. This sampling approach aimed to provide a balanced and comprehensive understanding of PCK integration in grammar instruction across the selected colleges.

Instruments and Procedure

The data collection for this study employed multiple instruments to gather comprehensive insights into the integration of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in grammar teaching. Four instruments were utilized: an observation guide to examine PCK components during grammar lessons, an interview guide to explore tutors' perspectives on PCK integration, a questionnaire assessing students' understanding of grammatical concepts and tutors' PCK, and a test to verify students' grasp of grammatical concepts.

The process began with an initial visit to the three selected colleges (KPCE, ACE, and SDACE) in March 2023 to familiarise the researcher with the environment and key stakeholders, including principals, Heads of Departments (HoDs), tutors, and students. Meetings were held to explain the study's purpose and schedule data collection. In April and May 2023, classroom observations and interviews with the six selected tutors were conducted. Observations, lasting 45–60 minutes, captured first-hand information on PCK integration, followed by 30–60 minute interviews held in conducive, professional environments. Both were audio- and video-recorded to ensure accurate data capture.

The second phase involved administering questionnaires and tests to 155 third-year English major teacher trainees. The questionnaires were completed within 30 minutes, while the tests were administered three weeks later in the same timeframe. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the data collection process, ensuring participant confidentiality and intellectual property protection. This approach provided a robust dataset for analysing PCK integration in grammar instruction.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was guided by four research questions and one hypothesis, each focusing on different aspects of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) integration in grammar teaching. For the qualitative data related to Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, thematic analysis was employed. Data from observations and semi-structured interviews were recorded using digital video and audio devices, transcribed, coded by the researcher with the help of trained assistants, and imported into NVivo 12 for organisation and thematic

exploration. This process highlighted similarities and differences in how tutors incorporated PCK and cross-cutting issues in grammar instruction to promote differential learning.

For Research Question 4, which investigated how the practical aspects of PCK enhanced teacher trainees' understanding of grammatical concepts, data from questionnaires and test items were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarise the data, while Pearson Correlation tests were employed for inferential analysis to explore relationships between variables. SPSS software was utilised for these quantitative analyses, providing detailed insights into the relationship between PCK integration and students' grammatical understanding.

The hypothesis tested whether there was a significant relationship between tutors' PCK and students' understanding of grammatical concepts. Correlation analysis in SPSS version 25 was conducted to assess the strength and direction of the relationship, identifying whether it was positive or negative. This combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis ensured a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives.

Results

This section is organised into two subsections, covering the observation and interviews as well as the questionnaire and test items, to thoroughly examine each instrument and systematically address the research questions.

Observation and Interviews

The purpose of the interview and observation was to explore how English language tutors in selected colleges of education in Ghana demonstrate their Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in teaching grammar, introduce cross-cutting issues through PCK in grammar instruction, and incorporate these issues to promote differential learning among students, aligning with research questions 1, 2 and 3, respectively. These methods provided in-depth and first-hand insights into the tutors' instructional practices and strategies for integrating PCK and cross-cutting issues to enhance grammar teaching and learning. The English language tutors observed in the selected CoEs demonstrated strong Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in grammar teaching. From the observations, in teaching Nouns, ET1, ET2, and ET6 used the same representations and activities. Therefore, it could be concluded that the topic-specific strategies for teaching Nouns/Noun Phrases were verbal exposition and discussion methods. However, ET1 made the lesson interactive. ET3 used group work, discussion, verbal exposition, and presentation methods in teaching Relative Clauses. ET4 also used presentation, group work, verbal exposition, and discussion methods to teach the topic Types of Sentences. From ET3 and ET4, there is a sign that in teaching grammar at the clausal/sentence level, tutors employed these strategies. ET5 used demonstration, discussion, and verbal exposition methods in teaching the topic, Subject-verb agreement. Overall, these tutors integrated the approaches, inductive and deductive to teach grammar content.

Also, individual differences were skilfully accommodated by the tutors through differentiated instruction, contextual grammar instructions, and a variety of assessment methods. Their excellent classroom management and integration of cross-cutting issues, such as communication skills and gender inclusivity, helped to create a respectful and inclusive

learning environment. Overall, the tutors demonstrated broad pedagogical knowledge and a dedication to providing meaningful and engaging learning experiences for their students.

In the interviews with English language tutors, it was evident that their understanding of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) was aligned with Shulman's (1986, 1987) definition. By leveraging PCK, English language tutors design lessons that actively involve students, fostering higher levels of engagement and participation (Kidwell & Triyoko, 2012). The tutors revealed that they employed various methods in teaching grammatical concepts, including introducing lessons in engaging ways, utilising question-and-answer techniques, drawing linkages between topics, and incorporating group work and presentations. These strategies demonstrate the tutors' effective integration of PCK constructs, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge in teaching grammar, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive educational experience for all students. The deliberate consideration of learners' Relevant Prior Knowledge (RPK) was another significant theme from the interviews. Addressing these gaps early promoted deeper conceptual understanding and prevented cognitive conflicts that could hinder learning progress (Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, the tutors displayed a commitment to differential learning by catering to individual differences through multiple assessments and multimodal teaching approaches (Hall et al., 2013; Kurzweil, 2001). They promoted equity, gender inclusivity, and sometimes professional values and attitudes (Lee & Park, 2021; National Teaching Council, 2017a). Various methods were employed in teaching grammatical concepts, including introducing lessons in engaging ways, utilising question-and-answer techniques, drawing linkages between topics, and incorporating group work and presentations. These strategies demonstrate the tutors' effective integration of PCK constructs, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge in teaching grammar, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive educational experience for all students.

Questionnaire and Test Items

The purpose of the questionnaire and test was to assess how integrating the practical aspects of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) enhances teacher trainees' understanding of grammatical concepts and to examine the relationship between English tutors' PCK and trainees' grammatical understanding, aligning with research question 4. The questionnaire gathered data on trainees' perceptions of PCK integration, while the test validated their understanding of specific grammatical concepts. The results were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and Pearson correlation to determine the strength and significance of the relationship between tutors' PCK and trainees' learning outcomes. Table 1 and 2 depicts the descriptive statistics and normality test of variables.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PCK of Tutors	155	1.00	5.00	4.1463	**.62268**
Word Class Test	155	2.00	10.00	7.0387	**1.77239**
Functions Test	155	2.00	10.00	8.9355	**1.52331**
Concord Test	155	2.00	5.00	4.4194	**.79667**
Understanding of Grammatical Concepts (Test & Explanation)	155	2.60	5.40	4.3523	**.53213**
Valid N (listwise)	155				

Table 2
Normality Test of Variables

	N	Mean	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
PCK Tutors	155	4.1463	-1.694	.195	5.647	.387
Test Word Class	155	7.0387	-.726	.195	-.006	.387
Test Functions	155	8.9355	-2.011	.195	4.341	.387
Test Concord	155	4.4194	-1.137	.195	.287	.387
Understanding of grammatical concepts	155	4.3523	-.982	.195	1.063	.387
Valid N (listwise)	155					

The mean for tutors' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) was 4.15 with a standard deviation of 0.62, indicating that tutors demonstrated a generally high level of PCK with relatively low variability among them. For the student tests, the mean scores for the Word Class Test (7.04, SD = 1.77) and Functions Test (8.94, SD = 1.52) suggest that students performed well overall, with the Functions Test showing slightly higher mean scores and lower variability, indicating a better understanding of functions compared to word classes. The Concord Test had a mean of 4.42 with a standard deviation of 0.80, reflecting moderate performance with low variability. The mean for the overall understanding of grammatical concepts (4.35, SD = 0.53) indicates a high level of comprehension among the trainees, with minimal variability across participants. These results suggest that tutors' strong PCK positively aligns with trainees' high levels of grammatical understanding. The low standard deviations across most variables imply consistency in performance among participants. The relatively higher variability in the Word Class Test indicates potential differences in student comprehension, suggesting areas where teaching strategies may need refinement to ensure uniform understanding.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is a strong relationship between English educators PCK and teacher trainees understanding of grammatical concepts.

The hypothesis of this study relates to the statistical relationship between English tutors PCK and teacher trainees understanding of grammatical concept. As a result, the Pearson Correlation was resorted to in testing this statistical relationship. The factor analysis from the 25 items that sought to measure PCK revealed that four main factors that affect understanding of grammatical concepts include effective teaching practices, student-centred teaching practices, adaptive teaching practices, and varied instructional teaching strategies. These four variables were then computed into a composite variable by taking their average. This new variable was then correlated with students' understanding of grammatical concepts. Students' understanding of grammatical concept is also a composite variable which was obtained by calculating the average of the test scores obtained by students as well as their ability to explain some of their answers. The results of the correlation is captured in Table 3.

Table 3
Correlation Analysis Between English Language Tutors PCK and Students' Understanding of Grammatical Concepts

Statistic	*Variable*	*Correlation Coefficient(r)*	*p-Value*
Pearson	Tutor PCK vs. student understanding of Grammatical concept	0.070	0.390

Source: Field data (2023)

The results recorded in Table 3 shows that the correlation coefficient between the tutors' PCK and the students' understanding of grammatical concepts as obtained from the test is 0.070. This indicates that there is a weak positive correlation between the two variables. Also, the probability value (p-value) for this correlation obtained is 0.390, which is more than 0.05 significant level; hence, the null hypothesis is not rejected. It can, therefore, be concluded that, there is no significant relationship between English language tutors' PCK and teacher trainees' total understanding of grammatical concepts.

Discussion

The findings from Research Question 1 revealed that English language tutors in the selected Colleges of Education (CoEs) in Ghana exhibit a strong command of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in teaching grammar. Through observations and interviews, it was evident that the tutors had a thorough understanding of curriculum requirements, aligning their instruction with prescribed learning objectives. This is a fundamental aspect of PCK, as outlined by Shulman (1986). The tutors utilised diverse teaching strategies, incorporating verbal exposition, group work, and problem-solving activities to cater to students' varied learning preferences. They effectively combined inductive and deductive methods, an essential practice in language education that enables students to comprehend grammar rules explicitly while also learning through practical application (Ellis, 1993; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Thornbury, 2005). These approaches ensured meaningful engagement and facilitated deeper understanding of grammar concepts.

The findings from the second research question emphasise the integration of cross-cutting issues in grammar teaching by English language tutors in Ghanaian classrooms through their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). A significant aspect of the findings was the tutors' commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment by addressing gender inclusivity, individual learning differences, and diverse preferences. Inclusive education, as noted by Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), ensures equitable participation and success for all students. Tutors avoided perpetuating stereotypes, valued diversity, and tailored their teaching to accommodate varying student needs, leading to a more personalized and engaging learning experience (Dunn & Dunn, 1992). Furthermore, the tutors demonstrated effective communication skills, creating supportive classroom environments that encouraged active participation and critical thinking, enabling students to express their ideas and enhance their understanding of grammar concepts (Grossman & McDonald, 2008).

The findings from the third research question highlight how integrating cross-cutting issues through pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in teaching grammar fosters differential learning among students. By creating an inclusive classroom environment, tutors acknowledged and addressed individual differences and diverse learning needs, ensuring that each student felt valued and supported. This inclusive approach aligns with Darling-Hammond and Bransford's (2005) assertion that recognising students' strengths and backgrounds enhances both academic outcomes and well-being. Tutors employed differentiation and individualisation strategies to tailor their teaching to students' unique learning styles, fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating academic success. Additionally, the tutors used various teaching strategies to engage students, enabling them to connect theoretical knowledge with practical applications, thereby deepening their understanding of grammar concepts (Grossman & McDonald, 2008).

The study also revealed that the use of inductive and deductive teaching techniques was instrumental in promoting differential learning. Inductive methods encouraged students to discover grammar patterns through exploration, while deductive approaches provided explicit explanations, catering to diverse cognitive styles (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Furthermore, incorporating technology empowered students to access learning materials at their own pace, fostering autonomy and self-direction (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Finally, the tutors' student-centred approach, which encouraged active participation, discussions, and reflection, enabled students to tailor their learning experiences to their individual needs. These findings align with Coffield et al. (2004), who found that matching instruction to learning styles improves educational outcomes. Ultimately, the tutors' practices demonstrated how integrating cross-cutting issues through PCK can enhance student engagement, foster deeper comprehension of grammar concepts, and create a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

The fourth research question examined how integrating pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) constructs enhances teacher trainees' understanding of grammatical concepts in the classroom. Using a 25-item scale, factor analysis identified four main dimensions of PCK: effective teaching practices, adaptive teaching practices, student-centred teaching practices, and varied instructional strategies. Among these, effective teaching practices emerged as the most influential, explaining 47.067% of the variance. This factor includes teaching techniques such as welcoming diverse ideas, handling students' questions professionally, providing timely feedback, and reflecting on teaching practices. These strategies create an engaging and supportive learning environment, promoting students' comprehension of

complex grammatical concepts. While varied instructional strategies had the least impact, they still contributed to a dynamic and diverse learning experience.

However, hypothesis testing using Pearson correlation revealed a weak positive correlation ($r = 0.070$) between educators' PCK and students' understanding of grammatical concepts, with a p-value of 0.390, indicating no statistically significant relationship. This suggests that while PCK is critical, it is not the sole determinant of students' grammar comprehension. Other factors, such as prior knowledge, motivation, and teaching methods, may also play a significant role. Studies by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) and Larsen-Freeman (2000) emphasise the importance of contextualised grammar instruction using authentic materials, multimedia, and real-world examples to enhance student learning. These findings suggest that integrating alternative instructional strategies and contextualised approaches, alongside PCK, could foster deeper understanding and improve outcomes in grammar instruction.

The results highlight English language tutors' dynamic approach to grammar instruction, rooted in pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) constructs. Observations revealed that tutors effectively applied the four PCK dimensions identified through factor analysis: effective teaching practices, student-centred approaches, adaptive teaching methods, and varied instructional strategies. Tutors demonstrated strong curriculum knowledge, employing diverse teaching strategies such as discussions, group work, and problem-solving activities. They prioritised differentiation, individualisation, and formative assessments, fostering inclusive and engaging classrooms. Student-centred methods encouraged active participation, autonomy, and critical thinking, while the use of ICT and inductive/deductive techniques supported personalised and practical grammar learning. Adaptive teaching practices included flexible lesson delivery, scaffolding, and the integration of relatable examples to address diverse learning needs and challenges.

Moreover, varied instructional strategies, including lectures, hands-on activities, and interactive sessions, created dynamic and inclusive environments. Tutors skilfully integrated technology, promoting self-directed exploration and enhancing engagement. These approaches not only accommodated different learning styles but also enriched students' understanding and application of grammar concepts. Overall, the tutors' practices reflect a commitment to fostering inclusive and supportive classrooms, enabling students to actively participate, comprehend, and apply grammatical concepts effectively. This integration of qualitative insights and quantitative findings underscores the importance of holistic and adaptable instructional approaches in English grammar teaching.

Conclusion, Implication and Recommendations

The study concludes that English language tutors in the selected colleges of education in Ghana demonstrate a strong understanding of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) constructs and their integration into grammar instruction. Their expertise in incorporating effective teaching practices, student-centred approaches, adaptive teaching strategies, and varied instructional methods into grammar lessons highlights their commitment to high-quality teacher preparation. The integration of cross-cutting issues, such as inclusivity, ICT, and transferable skills, further enriches their approach, promoting a holistic learning environment. However, the weak correlation between tutors' PCK and teacher trainees' grammatical understanding suggests that while PCK is critical, it may not be the sole determinant of students' comprehension, with other factors such as prior knowledge,

motivation, and classroom dynamics playing significant roles. These findings underscore the importance of continuous professional development for English language tutors to refine their teaching methods and expand their pedagogical repertoire. The incorporation of cross-cutting issues into grammar instruction not only prepares trainees to address diverse learning needs but also equips them to solve real-world problems. However, the lack of a significant correlation between PCK and grammatical comprehension implies that additional efforts are needed to bridge this gap. This includes exploring innovative teaching approaches like Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and addressing unmeasured factors such as student engagement and motivation. Furthermore, raising awareness among teacher trainees about the relevance of PCK constructs and cross-cutting issues will help them better understand their application in teaching and learning. To enhance grammar instruction, it is recommended that tutors actively expose teacher trainees to the importance and integration of PCK constructs through reflective practices and explicit discussions. Professional development sessions should be organised by the Ministry of Education and relevant agencies to introduce tutors to alternative grammar teaching methods, such as TBLT, and to strengthen their capacity to incorporate additional cross-cutting issues into PCK. Training sessions should include needs assessments, workshops, and follow-up evaluations to ensure effective implementation. Tutors should also help teacher trainees understand diverse learning styles and demonstrate adaptive teaching strategies to cater to individual differences. Finally, tutors are encouraged to explore and address other factors influencing grammatical comprehension, such as classroom dynamics, student motivation, and engagement, to create a more comprehensive and effective approach to grammar instruction.

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Traditional Japanese Arts in a Social and Political Context: Overview and Practical Application

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Abstract

Is traditional always a synonym for "conservative" or does it have the potential to challenge and react to social and political problems? This research explores how contemporality and social activism, particularly, have developed inside a group of traditional Japanese arts – woodblock prints *ukiyo-e*, calligraphy *shodo*, Japanese painting *nihonga*, and *ikebana*. For this purpose, I analyzed the contemporary art scene through publications in the media and exhibition catalogs both online and offline, from the period of the Japanese economic miracle till nowadays. By comparing the visual forms of traditional arts and problematics reflected in their topics then and now, I attempted to understand better traditional arts' role and power in participating in social, political, and environmental discourse. Besides traditionally socially oriented woodblock prints, that from their very beginning in the Edo period were critical and satirical – free-spirited depictions of social life with all its goods and flaws, this research unveiled an emerging movement of so-called neo-arts in *nihonga*, *shodo*, and *ikebana*, that raise questions about women's rights (Fuyuko Matsui), tragedies of war (Ilya Baibikov) and many others. At the same time, as an art practitioner, I created *Nihonga* artworks that carry a social message to support the ongoing change toward deeper social and political engagement. Doing so I am starting an important but still absent in a public field conversation on how traditional Japanese arts stop being a spectator and become an actor in the social and political life of the country.

Keywords: Japanese, *nihonga*, traditional, social

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Introduction

Born as a tool for depicting reality, recording daily life, and communicating, through the centuries and cultures art has changed its definition and reasons multiple times. It is like a big living organism that keeps transforming and evolving.

The etymology of the word “art” going back to the 10th century and has its roots in the Latin “ars” – “work of art; practical skill; a business, craft" (Art - etymology, origin & meaning, n.d.). The first usage of this term was found in 13th-century texts, but plausibly its variants have existed since ancient days. For example, already as early as in the 4th century BC Greek philosopher Plato determined art as a “mimesis” – a copy or an imitation of reality. Defining and describing art is an ongoing process, it always has and always will have a place in our life, as well as, quoting an author of “The History of Art” H.W. Janson, it can’t be isolated from “the context of time and circumstance, whether past or present. How could it be otherwise, so long as the art is still being created all around us, opening our eyes almost daily to new experiences and like that forcing us to readjust our understanding?” (Janson & Janson, 1977).

By being inseparable from “time and circumstance” art can’t avoid participating in political, social, and, not to mention, cultural discourse. Also being diversified and heterogeneous, it consists of numerous independent elements and exists in various shapes. Depending on those factors, art can be a passive or an active actor of social discourse, specifically serving a purpose of external power or, on the contrary, initiating changes driven by internal powers.

It is impossible to overestimate the role of art, whether active or passive, in confronting contemporary global issues, but it constantly needs to question the borders of acceptable and conventional. The bigger the contrast – the more powerful the message can be. From this perspective, the potential of traditional art to spread a message is enormous. And what if those arts are coming from a country that has always been considered very traditional, yet culturally rich, like Japan? What is the place of traditional arts in Japan nowadays and is it capable of changing and reacting to modern agenda? I’ve tried to explore these questions as a researcher diving into the history of selected Japanese traditional arts and as an art practitioner by creating artworks carrying a social message.

Japanese Traditional Arts and Crafts

Before talking about Japanese traditional arts, it is important to understand what we will understand under “traditional arts”. According to National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), “the folk and traditional arts are rooted in and reflective of the cultural life of a community” (FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS 2016). This means that the arts I’ll be covering today were established a long time ago enough to become an integral part and be shared by Japanese society. As a whole Japanese traditional culture is a complicated formation, the shaping of which was almost completed in the second half of the 19th century when the traditionalist movement mingei’s (folkcraft) effort helped to establish the system of Living National Treasures (Mason & Dinwiddie, 2005). It was then that traditional techniques and arts were redefined and gained its recognition. Among those arts were Japanese painting *nihonga*, woodblock prints *ukiyo-e*, calligraphy *shodo*, cultivation of small trees bonsai, the tea ceremony sado, flower arrangement *ikebana*, and many others. In addition to aesthetic qualities, they also had ethical ones. The formation of a single nationwide complex of traditional culture was carried out by the efforts of different social groups, and different

classes. Each of them made a personal contribution to its formation in accordance with ideas about the surrounding world and its place in it. Despite the difference in temporal and social characteristics of various types of Japanese traditional culture, all sectors of society participated in its creation in one way or another: some as customers and consumers, others as inspirers and scholars, and some as creators and performers. The complex of Japanese traditional culture is a treasury of the collective creative experience of the entire population, a kind of spiritual arsenal of the nation, which could be used for both - defense and advancement (Grisheleva, 1986).

Traditional culture throughout the history of Japan performed the most important function of consolidating the nation and distinguishing it from others, not only at the initial stage of the formation of the nation and its identity but also at critical moments for the nation's fate and its historical existence. Traditional culture can be a living source for creative activities. And traditional arts, as a part of it, can be a drive or a tool for social and political changes. At the same time, turning to traditional culture can also be counterproductive, because often "traditional" is taken as a synonym for "conservative", which excludes or slows down progress.

Woodblock Print – *Ukiyo-e*

Starting a conversation about Japanese traditional arts which actively and almost directly were and still engaged in social and political life, the most obvious one to mention is *ukiyo-e* or woodblock prints.

Ukiyo-e prints, "pictures of the changing world", became a very outstanding phenomenon of the urban culture of the 17th - 19th centuries. Thanks to their existence in this urban environment prints were diversified and unique in features of their artistic language.

The most famous genres of printed graphics in Japan are images of beauties bijin-ga, portraits of kabuki theater actors and images of scenes from *yakusha-e* performances, the heroic genre of *musya-e*, landscapes *fukei-ga*, greeting sheets *surimono* and erotic prints *shunga*. These prints served as advertisements, placards, and posters and were produced to entertain, and sometimes enlighten.

However, it has never been considered high art and, on the contrary, aroused the fears of the Japanese military government as a product that promotes moral decay and freethinking. In the early and middle decades of 18th century Japan, a socially and politically unsettled time, *ukiyo-e* prints were a way of provoking and challenging comfortable ideas and ways of thinking, which resulted in strengthening and consolidating opposition to the government. Political issues were subtly addressed through the use of remote warriors, scenes that portrayed popular satirical fiction, and the supernatural as a means of interpretation among the townspeople. Since the artists who expressed social and political concerns belonged to the same community that possessed such concerns, a new language of signs and symbols emerged, which was called a "public discourse" (Lillehoj, 2007). Like any printed matter, *ukiyo-e* was censored and many topics were banned.

Japanese graphics of the post-war period differ from those before. Whereas in those years there was an atmosphere of grief-stricken pessimism in painting, the *ukiyo-e* prints of the sixties show people coming forward, demanding and defending themselves. Ikeda Shuzo's woodblock print, Gathering (1966), shows demonstrators with simple and rough features,

who are dancing with colorful flags. Another example of social activism was artist Koguchi Ichiro, who made a series of prints highlighting the Ashio Copper Mine Pollution Incident. Kawamata Incident (part 2) by Koguchi Ichiro represents a wave of demonstrators fighting police. Tense in color, Koguchi Ichiro's dynamic print combines publicism with high symbolic generalization. And this quality has defined all Japanese progressive graphic art in those years.

Calligraphy – *Shodo*

The history of Japanese calligraphy is rich in masterpieces and can be traced back to around the 5th century. It was then when the first samples of writing from the continent, namely from China, started to appeared on the Japanese islands. This was due to the fact that in China by that time all the basic principles of calligraphy, the types of hieroglyphic inscriptions and their features, and most importantly, the traditions of use, had already developed.

A calligrapher creates a calligraphic work, not just to depict the meaning, but to express and embody the idea of a single word, as well as a whole poetic or prosaic piece. At the same time, as a rule, it is associated with established forms of written characters: the basis of calligraphy is a system of handwriting, each of which has semantic nuances and corresponds to the author's intention. So, although it might look like the art, which operates with artist's self-expression and dealing with hieroglyphs, which carrying multiply meaning should be a fat land for political and social statements, its tight connection with Zen Buddhism redirected the power of *shodo* from external development to development internal. It used to be widely practiced by Buddhist monks and can be compared to a meditation, where one's mind should be absolutely clear, as called by the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro – *mushin* or "no mind state" (Kitaro, 1965).

Japanese Painting – *Nihonga*

Nihonga is a style of painting that utilizes traditional Japanese materials and techniques. It is characterized by the use of mineral and organic pigments bound with Japanese glue, as well as traditional Japanese painting techniques such as ink wash painting sumi-e, Japanese narrative painting yamato-e and gold leaf application. It was established in Japan as a separate class of painting apart from oil painting in the late Meiji era, around 1880s when the Japanese government began to support Japanese-style painting calling it like this. From its very beginning *Nihonga* was always tied to politics. It served the functions of visualizing the nation-state and guaranteed the stability of Japanese cultural identity and ethnic particularity.

There were several painting schools that in some way dealt with social issues in Japan. For instance, the "Mito School" of painting, which began to develop in the latter half of the 18th century and was closely linked to the Mito branch of the Tokugawa shogunate, aimed to advance neo-Confucian principles through its works of art. Or the "Shij School" of painting, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was influenced by Western realism and naturalism and frequently addressed social issues like urbanization and poverty.

Certain changes were taking place in painting in after war period. It should be noted that before the Second World War the traditional *nihonga* painting was the leading trend in Japan. The relevance and demand for this artistic movement in Japan after the Second World War was declining. *Nihonga* painting began to occupy a modest place in contemporary art, but it

was an important art for the training of craftsmen. *Nihonga* panels and screens were still mostly connected to medieval themes or were illustrations of classical Japanese literature. Consequently, there was not a complete break with traditional art culture in Japan after the war. In addition to adherence to tradition, a certain innovation in the painting also can be noted, which was manifested in the use of new materials - foil, ground stone and others. But the combination of traditional form and modern content, as in the series "Hiroshima" by Iri and Toshi Maruki, has so far been a rarity and an exception. In the post-war period, the theme of grief and national distress occupies a central place in the canvasses of artists. The Japanese were portrayed as lonely, destitute and passive. The canvases are imbued with a tragic despair. Pessimistic worldview is reflected in the landscape. The alarming voice of protest and warning against the scourge of the atomic bomb is raised most loudly in the works of artists. Maruka Iri and Maruka Toshiko depict the horror and sorrow of an atomic explosion. The artists were awarded the International Peace Prize for their work Hiroshima (1950–1955). This series is unique in the grandeur of its conception and solution. The viewers observing these works feel as if they are in the middle of a terrible event, surrounded by a mountain of disfigured corpses, mutilated people and wounded soldiers. Some fragments of the panels are rather hard to look at, so naturalistic that they cause shock and rejection rather than pity. Japanese artists often crossed the line into art when describing the subject of the atomic bombing. In this way they achieve their goal. Looking at the ugliness and horror of these paintings, viewers wish it had never happened again.

But in comparison with *ukiyo-e* prints, which very often were actively political, *Nihonga* painting was usually a tool in hands of the ruling regime. Unlike prints, creation and exhibiting of paintings required more resources and all major sponsors and customers were affiliated with the government. As a result, there are no many examples of internal influence of traditional, in particularly *nihonga*, artists on social or political discourse in the country. And in the times, when we hear about Japanese painting being used to criticize or comment on political topics, it is usually done by not *nihonga* artists, but others, who "appropriates" its style for arousing critical awareness of ideological workings.

Flower Arrangement – *Ikebana*

Ikebana is a traditional Japanese art form that involves the arrangement of flowers in vases or other containers. It is also known as *kado*, or "the way of flowers." The practice of *ikebana* dates back to the 7th century, and it has evolved over time to become a highly respected art form in Japan.

Ikebana is more than just the arrangement of flowers – in a certain way it is similar to calligraphy a mean of expressing one's feelings and emotions through the use of, originally, plant and other materials. It is a meditative and contemplative practice that requires skill, patience, and attention to detail. *Ikebana* arrangements often use a limited number of flowers, branches, and leaves, and they are carefully placed in a container to create a sense of balance and harmony.

Ikebana has played an important role in Japanese culture and society for centuries. It is often used in religious ceremonies and rituals, and it is also used to decorate homes and public spaces. In Japan, *ikebana* is often given as a gift to express gratitude or to celebrate special occasions such as weddings and birthdays.

Substantially *ikebana* has been serving decorative and ritual functions and there is no specific record of *ikebana* being used to address political or social issues in Japan. Although it is a highly expressive art form that can be used to communicate a wide range of emotions, so it is possible that it has been used to convey certain messages or ideas in the past.

Contemporality: Tradition-Based and Neo-Arts

Contemporality in traditional Japanese arts refers to the ways in which traditional Japanese art forms are being practiced and interpreted in the contemporary world. While many traditional Japanese arts, such as calligraphy, painting, flower arrangement, and *ukiyo-e*, have a long history and are deeply rooted in Japanese culture, they are also constantly evolving and being adapted to suit the needs and interests of contemporary practitioners. In every art field, there are many of those who are exploring new approaches to these traditional art forms, such as incorporating elements of other cultures or using modern materials. Although the degree and speed of evolving is varying depending on various social, historical, and cultural factors.

One of the problems which traditional arts faced since the end of 19th century is a rapid development of political, industrial and, alongside, artistic life. That put a lot of pressure on an urgent necessity to adopt to new circumstances, what wasn't received equally well by all participants. That's when new movements began to grow from old formations. Those new movement originated from traditional arts also often being called "tradition-based" or as I'd like to address it - "neo" arts. The term "neo-arts" does not have a widely recognized or standardized definition in art historical discourse. However, the prefix "neo-" (meaning "new") is commonly used to denote movements that revisit, reinterpret, or reactivate earlier artistic styles or philosophies. These "neo-" movements often emerge as responses to preceding art forms, aiming to adapt traditional aesthetics to contemporary contexts or to challenge established conventions. The usage of the term is varies between different genres, and if in some of them, like neo-*nihonga* – it has been defined and widely used, then in others it doesn't exist as an established term and is being suggested by me as a unifying definition, that reflects the differences between the traditional and contemporary forms of the arts.

Neo-*Ikebana*

Neo-*ikebana*, which more often being called the avant-garde *ikebana*, is a contemporary interpretation of the ancient Japanese art of *ikebana*, which entails arranging flowers in a visually appealing manner. Neo-*ikebana* is more open to individual expression and creativity than traditional ikebana, which follows strict guidelines and conventions. It deviates from the traditional triangular composition used in *ikebana* arrangements and frequently uses unconventional materials.

Neo-*ikebana*, which has grown in popularity in Japan and across the globe since Sogetsu school, aims to introduce a modern and contemporary perspective to the art of flower arrangement. It is frequently linked to the idea of *wabi-sabi*, which emphasizes the value of natural, organic forms and the beauty of imperfection.

One notable artist associated with the avant-garde *ikebana* movement is Tetsumi Kudō. Kudō's *ikebana* arrangements often incorporate industrial materials and everyday objects, and are known for his using his art to "communicate" about the issues of present – ecology and sexuality. Also as a leader of an Anti-Art movement, he corresponded to the need of the

youth and engaged in political and social life, what found it's reflection in is art. Another notable artist who focus his art around ecology is Tetsunori Kawana, who creates large-scale, sculptural *ikebana* arrangements that incorporate elements of abstract expressionism and minimalism.

A notable example of avant-garde *Ikebana* art is "Flower Sculpture" by Tetsunori Kawana, where the sculptor used a lot of technology and materials to create an interactive flower installation that responds to the viewer and the environment around it.

Another interesting example, is a Japanese artist Watanabe Yoshiko, who in her artworks often addresses ecological themes, just as in her work titled "141.3".

Being a traditional Japanese art, *ikebana* is not practiced exclusively by Japanese only, especially in a context of neo-formations. Ilya Baibikov, flower arrangement artist from Russia, who recently lives in Kobe, has been a Sogetsu *Ikebana* instructor for many years. In his artworks he uses unconventional materials and addressing non-typical for *ikebana* topics, dragging it from arts decorative into arts conceptual.

One of his recent works was introduced in an anti-war exhibition "Home. Smoke. Home," which took place in Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. The *ikebana* work on display included burnt bamboo and flowers in blue and yellow, the colors of the Ukrainian flag. As artist commented himself "it represents independence and unity with the Ukrainian people who are fighting for their survival" (Hasebe, 2022).

Neo-Calligraphy

Contemporary Japanese calligraphy began to form in the early 20th century. The term "neo-calligraphy" mostly has been used in the context of Islamic calligraphy. Applied to Japanese calligraphy, it is characterized by a looser, more informal writing style that combines elements of conventional Japanese calligraphy with a more contemporary, artistic approach.

One notable example of contemporary *shodo*'s practitioners is Japanese artist Rie Takeda, who describes her work as multi-layered, both literally and metaphorically. "A harmonious marriage of beautiful calligraphy and imagery with a Western contemporary flair" (Moor, 2019). Her most distinguishable works are prints and body art performances.

Another important name which should be mentioned is Shigeko Kubota, a Japanese video artist, who's most infamous work, nevertheless, was a performative calligraphy writing called "Vagina Painting" (1965). It was presented at Cinematheque in New York on July 4, 1965 (Hawley, n.d.). By tying a paintbrush to her underwear and dipping it in red, so that it appeared to come from inside her, she moved her hips to drag the brush across canvas that was lying on the ground, what created menstrual-like smears. Numerous feminist art historians have praised this work in the years since for fundamentally shifting traditional, patriarchal roles: man as artist, woman as nude muse. It could have also been a nod to the custom of lower-class geishas who occasionally entertained their clients by writing calligraphy with brushes inserted in their vaginas. The dichotomies of high and low art, masculine and feminine elements, and Eastern and Western cultures were combined in Kubota's performance.

Neo-*Nihonga*

As an alternative to contemporary Western-style painting, Tenmyouya Hisashi, a contemporary Japanese artist, developed the art concept of neo-*nihonga* in 2001. He thought that modern Japanese painting has lost its substance by sticking to traditional mediums like mineral pigments, glue, and ink. Neo *Nihonga* is a novel art form that incorporates contemporary mediums like acrylic paint while also making reference to traditional elements of Japanese art like traditional line drawings, decorative, playful and symbolic elements (Tenmyouya, n.d.).

Among other artists, who are challenging *nihonga* borders is, not a *nihonga* artist, but "appropriator" Aida Makoto and Mise Natsunosuke, who believes that *nihonga* will develop in the same way that languages do as society changes over time. As he says, *nihonga* can create "new traditions" because *nihonga* was created as a "new" tradition in the late nineteenth century through the blending of numerous different and frequently conflicting traditions, and has since been reformulated numerous times by painters up to the present.

Another notable figure is Fuyuko Matsui, the first woman to receive a PhD in Japanese painting from Tokyo University of the Arts. Deeply rooted in traditional Japanese techniques and themes, her works often confront issues of pain, madness, gender, and mortality. Drawing influence from classical Japanese painters as well as Renaissance masters, Matsui uses the *nihonga* format to explore contemporary anxieties, particularly through motifs like the "Nine Stages of Decay" (kusōzu), which she reinterprets with unsettling clarity.

Even with development of neo-*nihonga*, discourse on coverage of social, political and environmental topics in Japanese painting is almost missing, or just occasionally being mentioned as a part of bigger conversation about contemporary scene or socially engaged arts in Japan.

Personal Practice

My personal interest is laying in an area of socially engaged art in correlation to traditional, particularly Japanese, arts, where I like to explore the borders of acceptable in terms of shape, materials and topics, as well as bringing interdisciplinarity into the process and exhibiting - performance and installation. As a Japanese painting researcher, I tried to expand borders of my own art practice by covering social issues, such as agism, alcoholism, environmental pollution and human rights in my *nihonga* paintings and by bringing traditional Japanese culture to contemporary performative shape. And if to define main directions in which I am developing my own *nihonga* practice, those will be: directly addressing social and political issues by visual matters, following the traditional technical process and using traditional materials; indirect references hidden behind a traditional shape; fusion of contemporary conceptual and performative approach with traditional *Nihonga*, specifically transforming the process of making a painting into an art itself, where it became as important as the final product, if not more. And thus, I'd like to describe three works, each of which represents a certain approach of me redefining borders of the Japanese painting.

Crucifixion

The first artwork was created intentionally to spread a political message and as a reaction on a certain situation in Belarus, when in the year 2020, after falsified elections people went on

streets to speak out their disagreement. Those protests were brutally suppressed by riot police, participants alongside with random passersby were detained, what lead to numerous injuries and some deaths.

The work titled “Crucifixion” (2021) was created prior an exhibition dedicated to Belarusian protest art – “Expired. Belarus Art of Resistance” which took place in Tokyo in January 2021 and was organized and curated by me together with another Belarusian activist. This painting combines the aesthetics of European Christian icon with technical traditionalism of *Nihonga*. We can see a figure of a man who is being detained by police. Light captured by darkness. Metal leaf, a signature material for Japanese painting, represents a strong and clear spirit, the inner shining of a pure soul. At the same time a dark and coarse mineral pigment – a symbol of harshness, injustice and callous heart. This is a motif of ongoing confrontation of opposites - Chinese yin and yang, biblical good and evil. But same as Lucifer has a divine nature or yin has yang, In the painting there is also a hope that the darkness conceals light and a change is possible.

What make this work different from typical *nihonga* is the theme which addresses a political situation and speaking independently, not serving a purpose of political regime’s support.

Re-main

The next artwork, which is at the same time my Master degree’s final project, named “re-main” (2023) and at the first glance it is not raising any socially significant topics. Same as in previous example, this painting was created in traditional technique, with a usage of metal leaf and various types of mineral pigments. The most eye-catching element of this work is an irregular panel’s shape, what puts this artwork aside from the majority of other *Nihonga*. But this panel’s modification is not only a visual transformation, but a reference to another issue of contemporality.

This artwork is about time, memory and people in our life. For its creation I used garden soil. Soil is a source of life; in soil we turn after death and soil contains remains of our past. It quotes traditions of both Christian icon and Buddhist sculpture. Central figure is very contrast, covered by metal leaf and symbolizes spirit or memory of a person. We can recognize a shape of a man, even see contour lines, but it is mostly flat. Those lines are imprinted in the paper, because human's spirit is about deepness, not about tangible textures. Metal leaf, which is bright now, will darken and fade away, just like people's lives do. At the same time background is very rough and dark. We can see and touch much more here. But it is still dark and monochromatic, because the light is hidden in a person who looks or who is being looked at. In overall the panel with the person is slightly sticking out, showing triumph of spiritual over physical.

Another variation of this artwork is an artwork without central figure. When person is taken out, we can see the same textures and scenery as on the rest of the panel. Although we still can see and feel the missing part. Memories are deeply engraved in our life, and it will always remain imprints of people, even if they won't be there anymore. At the same time this version of the artwork is also referring to Buddhist sculpture. First of all, empty space in the artwork is just like an empty chair, which was a well-known representation of Buddha in the first century B.C. And for the second, it is a reference to Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas, which were blasted by Taliban on March 2001.

In this case behind the traditional shape is hidden an indirect reference to problematic of neglecting or abusing humanistic and cultural values, whether it is a place of an individuum in the world or religious radicalism.

Under My Skin

And finally, the third work was created as a part of anti-war performance, which took a place this year as a reaction to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Titled "Under my skin" (2022) it combines contemporary performative approach, transforming the process of making a painting, with traditional *Nihonga* materials and a final product, which by itself can be classified as *Nihonga*.

> One death is a tragedy. Thousands are mathematics. It's easier to emphasize a single instance of grief, but when the numbers of grief are countless - it becomes a new normal. We will never be able to pass through ourselves all the pain war brings to people's lives. But it is important to remember what stands behind those numbers. Under my skin there are millions of nerve endings. If I can't imagine the pain of every single human in the war, I might feel how overwhelming it's number. Thousand of hairs, pulled in a silent prayer, as a symbol of thousands of war casualties. Lives, which were pulled off from the skin of the Earth. Rested in between blue silk and gold, heaven and wheat fields. Each is precious.

This performance, just like Shigeko Kubota's calligraphy or painting by Aida Makoto, making an artist a literal part of the artwork, not only the creator, but also a material. Demonstrating, that artistic world and culture are inseparable from us and capable of affecting not only our mental, but also physical shape.

Conclusion

The definition and purpose of art have evolved over time and cultures and continue to change and adapt to the context of time and circumstance. It is an inseparable part of our lives, and it is impossible to overestimate its role in social, political, and cultural discourse. Depending on the factors involved, art can be a passive or an active participant in this discourse, which we could see through the comparison of *ikebana* and *ukiyo-e*. Nevertheless, its potential to spread a message is significant.

Japanese traditional arts and crafts form a complex and rich cultural heritage that played an important role in the formation of the national identity and the spiritual arsenal of the nation. They were shaped by various social groups and classes and can be seen as a reflection of the collective creative experience of the entire population. Such traditional arts as calligraphy, painting, flower arrangement, and *ukiyo-e*, have a long history and are deeply rooted in Japanese culture. However, traditional art forms are also constantly evolving and adapting to the needs and interests of contemporary practitioners.

Tradition-based art or neo-art movements have emerged as a result of this evolution, and are characterized by incorporating elements of other cultures or using modern materials in traditional art forms. This shows that traditional art in Japan has the capability of changing and reacting to modern agendas, and the process is ongoing.

Additionally, traditional art can be a powerful tool for addressing contemporary global issues. It holds a powerful potential to address and react to modern global issues, as it can generate strong contrasts which in turn makes the message more powerful. The potential, that yet wasn't fully developed. Traditional art can be a drive or a tool for social and political changes, yet turning to traditional culture can also be counterproductive as it is often associated with conservatism. Hence, generating a positive impact requires to keep questioning and challenging the borders of what is considered conventional.

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Interactive E-Module as a Future Classical Guitar Learning Solution

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Abstract

This study focuses on developing an interactive e-module for the Guitar M. Carcassi course in the Music Education Study Program at the State University of Jakarta. The course poses challenges for many students, particularly those without a classical guitar background, as it relies heavily on in-person instruction. To address this issue, the research employed the ASSURE instructional design model developed by Smaldino, aiming to create a self-directed, multimedia-based digital module. The development process followed six stages: analyzing student characteristics, stating learning objectives aligned with the curriculum, selecting strategies and materials, utilizing media and technology, engaging learners, and evaluating outcomes. Learner analysis revealed that 78.21% of students had auditory-visual learning styles, reinforcing the need for multimedia integration. The resulting e-module includes interactive features such as instructional videos, audio samples, metronome tools, and guided tasks, making it accessible across various devices. Expert validation results showed excellent scores, with media experts rating it at 98.4% and content experts at 97.6%. Meanwhile, student responses were overwhelmingly positive, reaching 92.29%, indicating high satisfaction and usability. This interactive module proved effective in supporting independent learning and reducing the gap for students with limited classical guitar experience. It represents an innovative learning solution that enhances student engagement and comprehension in music education. Furthermore, the module holds potential as a scalable model for digital learning in other instrumental and theoretical music subjects. By aligning with learner needs and utilizing technology effectively, this e-module contributes significantly to the modernization of music instruction in higher education.

Keywords: e-learning, classical guitar, e-module, ASSURE model, music education

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Introduction

In recent years, education has undergone a transformative shift driven by technological advancement and the digitalization of learning environments. Teaching, as a structured process originating from the act of learning, involves the interaction between educators and learners to enhance the educational experience and achieve specific goals (Dwiyogo, 2016; Rukajat, 2018). Effective teaching is not limited to the mere delivery of course content, but also involves the thoughtful selection of materials, media, tools, and evaluation methods to ensure holistic, visionary, and meaningful learning (Sudjana & Rivai, 2011).

In this context, the educator plays a pivotal role in designing learning systems that are both engaging and conducive to reaching learning objectives. The learning process must combine planning and creativity to generate an impactful and lasting educational experience (Sani, 2013). Educators are thus responsible for carefully curating learning materials, organizing classroom environments, and incorporating instructional models that align with both national curriculum standards and student needs (Kustandi & Darmawan, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a significant catalyst for the integration of digital tools in education. The sudden shift from traditional classroom settings to online learning prompted the widespread use of platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Meet. Additionally, digital resources like e-books, e-modules, and collaborative tools became essential in supporting distance learning (Smaldino et al., 2019; Yaumi, 2018). While face-to-face learning resumed in mid-2022, the use of digital media has persisted and evolved as a staple of modern educational practice. According to Sani (2013), effective learning is inseparable from the educator's creativity, student participation, and innovative use of educational media. Learning media consist of both physical and non-physical tools that facilitate information exchange and create interactive learning environments (Yaumi, 2018). These media support independent learning by providing access to content that may otherwise be challenging to understand through conventional methods.

Among the most popular tools today are e-books and e-modules. E-modules, in particular, have gained widespread popularity as they offer step-by-step, systematic, and interactive learning experiences. According to Partono (2019), e-modules are enhancements of traditional modules that integrate digital multimedia such as videos, audio, animations, and assessments allowing learners to study independently in an engaging and dynamic environment. Moreover, e-modules align with the concept of environmentally conscious education by minimizing paper usage (Anwar, 2022).

Digital tools like e-modules are now employed across a wide range of disciplines from science and literature to mathematics and the arts. In music education, the use of e-modules is especially pertinent due to the dual necessity of audio and visual components for theoretical and practical instruction (Pambudi & Riskiono, 2021). Music educators have found that e-modules enhance both in-class instruction and independent learning in subjects such as music theory and instrumental practice, including vocal, piano, violin, and guitar instruction.

Among these instruments, the classical guitar holds a significant place in global and Indonesian music education. Classical guitar, which uses nylon strings and does not require amplification, is widely recognized and often featured in national and international music events (Tampubolon, 2020). At the State University of Jakarta, classical guitar instruction is part of the core curriculum for students in the Music Education Study Program. Students are

required to take two sequential semesters of guitar courses: Guitar M. Carcassi in the first semester and Guitar Carulli in the second (Carcassi, n.d.).

Following the easing of pandemic restrictions, these courses returned to in-person instruction. However, all students are expected to progress through the material at the same pace, regardless of their prior experience with classical guitar. This has led to a pronounced learning gap between students who have formal training and those who are encountering the instrument for the first time. Students with no classical guitar background often find the Guitar M. Carcassi course particularly challenging, given the fast pace of the curriculum and the expectation to master complex etudes within a single semester.

Interviews with students and instructors revealed that one weekly session is insufficient for beginners to acquire the necessary technical skills. As a result, students frequently turn to external sources such as YouTube and Google for supplemental instruction. However, these platforms present their own challenges, including inconsistent quality and unreliable content. According to Simalango (2019), unverified digital sources can hinder rather than support learning, particularly when students lack the foundational knowledge to critically assess the information presented.

Furthermore, interviews with a faculty member, Johan Yudha Brata Sahertian, confirmed that the Guitar M. Carcassi course follows a rigid Semester Learning Plan (RPS), leaving little room to accommodate students who fall behind. This results in increased stress, reduced motivation, and in some cases, withdrawal from the course. To address these issues, the researcher proposed the development of an interactive, multimedia-rich e-module specifically tailored for the Guitar M. Carcassi course. This digital learning tool integrates instructional videos, visual aids, audio samples, faculty notes, metronome features, and self-assessment tasks. Designed to be accessible anytime and anywhere, the e-module supports independent practice and bridges the gap between in-class instruction and students' individual learning needs.

The aim of this research is to develop and validate an e-module that can serve as an effective learning medium for classical guitar students, especially those with limited prior experience. Through this innovation, the study contributes to the modernization of music education and the promotion of self-directed learning in the digital age (Andri, 2019; Isman et al., 2005).

Methodology

This study adopted a Research and Development (R&D) approach to develop a digital learning medium an interactive e-module for the Guitar M. Carcassi course offered by the Music Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Jakarta. The primary objective was to assess the feasibility and long-term applicability of this instructional tool within the classical guitar curriculum. This section elaborates the detailed methodology employed to design, implement, and evaluate the e-module.

Research Participants and Setting

The study involved 21 students enrolled in the Guitar M. Carcassi course during the 2022/2023 academic year at Universitas Negeri Jakarta. Data collection and implementation were carried out from June to December 2022.

Data Collection Methods

- **Observation**: Classroom observations focused on teaching strategies, student engagement, and use of existing learning materials.
- **Questionnaires**: Pre- and post-module questionnaires assessed student learning styles, needs, and reactions to the e-module.
- **Interviews**: Conducted with the course instructor and selected students to gain qualitative insights.

Research Objective

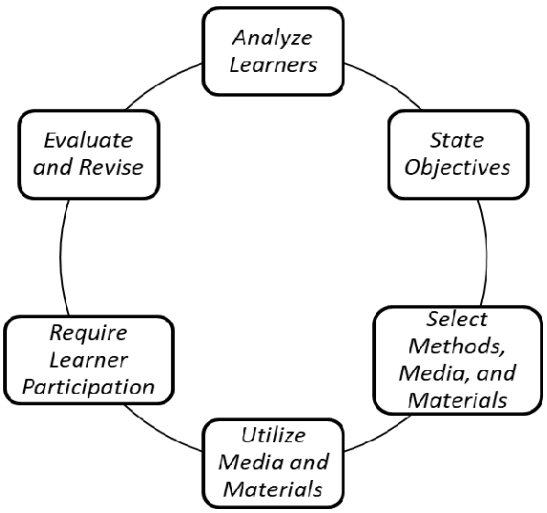
The research aimed to develop a multimedia-based e-module tailored for classical guitar instruction, specifically targeting first-year university students with varying degrees of prior experience. The e-module was intended to support self-directed learning and supplement traditional classroom teaching. Evaluation focused on usability, effectiveness, and alignment with curricular goals.

Research Design and Model

This study implemented the ASSURE instructional design model proposed by Smaldino et al. (2019), which is particularly effective for integrating technology into learning environments. The acronym ASSURE stands for:

- Analyze Learners
- State Objectives
- Select Methods, Media, and Materials
- Utilize Media and Materials
- Require Learner Participation
- Evaluate and Revise

Figure 1
Stages of the ASSURE Instructional Design Model Adapted from Smaldino et al. (2019)

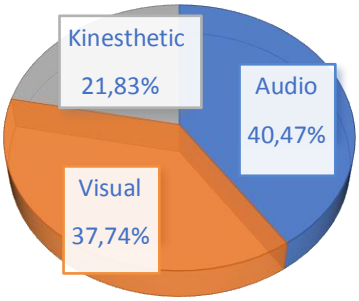


Each of these steps was adapted and applied in the context of the Guitar M. Carcassi course, as detailed below.

Analyze Learners

A learner analysis was conducted through surveys and interviews involving 21 students. The survey measured general characteristics (interest and motivation), prior competence, and learning styles. Results indicated that most students exhibited auditory-visual preferences (audio: 40.47%, visual: 37.74%, kinesthetic: 21.83%), supporting the integration of multimedia content in the module.

Figure 2
Questionnaire Results on Learning Styles of Guitar M. Carcassi Students



State Objectives

Learning objectives were derived from the official Semester Learning Plan (RPS) and formulated using the ABCD format:

- **Audience (A)**: First-year students in the Music Education Study Program
- **Behavior (B)**: Ability to perform specific classical guitar techniques and pieces
- **Condition (C)**: Learning supported by a digital e-module
- **Degree (D)**: Mastery reflected by minimum grades as per RPS (e.g., A = 86–100%, B = 71–75%)

Competency areas included knowledge of music theory, classical guitar playing skills, and proper technique for posture, finger placement, and interpretation of musical symbols.

Select Methods, Media, and Materials

After determining the learning objectives, the next step in the ASSURE instructional design model is selecting the appropriate methods, media, and materials. This research focused on developing a digital e-module that aligns with the students' general characteristics specifically their learning styles as identified in the earlier analysis. The selection of media was also based on interviews with the course instructor of Guitar M. Carcassi and a needs assessment questionnaire distributed to 21 students in the Music Education Study Program. On August 31, 2022, the researcher conducted an in-person interview with Johan Yudha Brata Sahertian, the instructor for the Guitar M. Carcassi course at Universitas Negeri Jakarta. During the interview, the instructor explained that the primary learning media used in the course were the Carcassi Method Book, YouTube, and PowerPoint. Subsequently, on November 2, 2022, a questionnaire was distributed to students to identify their needs for supplementary learning media. The responses indicated that students required modern learning tools that were accessible anytime and anywhere, and that could enhance motivation and independent learning.

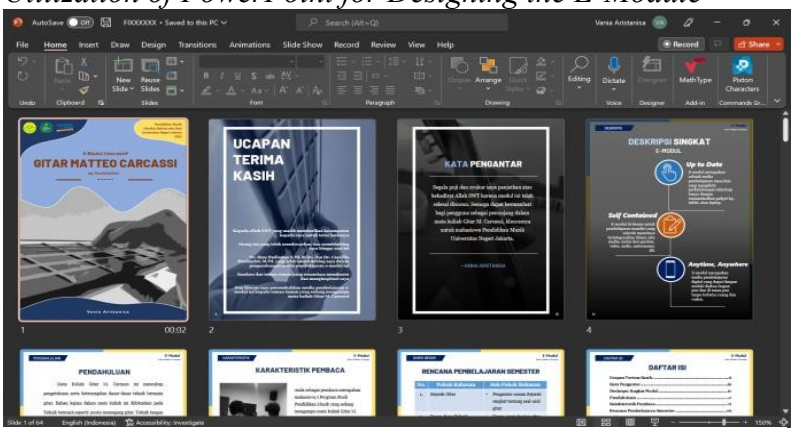
When asked about their familiarity with e-modules, 81% of respondents indicated they were aware of such media, while 19% were not. Furthermore, 90.5% of the students agreed with the integration of e-modules into the Guitar M. Carcassi course as a valuable complementary learning tool.

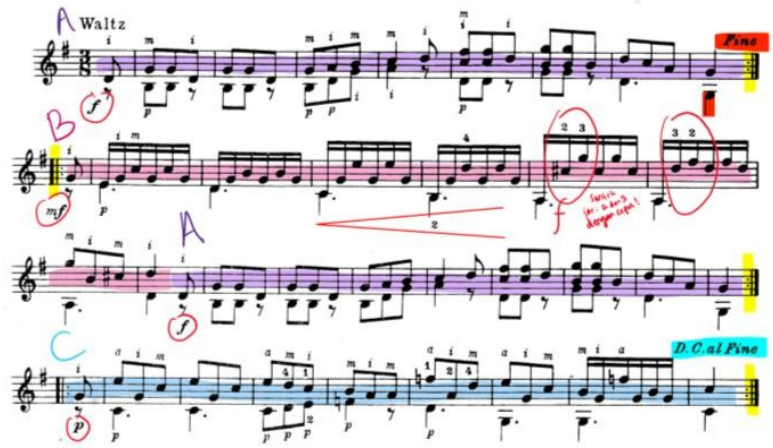
The e-module developed for this study includes a comprehensive range of materials aligned with the Semester Learning Plan (RPS). Topics include the history of the guitar, fundamental techniques (posture, finger placement, technical signs), right-hand techniques (tirando and apoyando), scales and prelude exercises in C, G, and D major, as well as chord cadences and arpeggio etudes.

In the development process, Microsoft PowerPoint was used to design the e-module, incorporating tools such as shapes, color schemes, font styles, and visual annotations. Analytical features allow students to view highlighted performance notes and techniques via virtual pens and embedded videos.

Figure 3 & 4

Utilization of PowerPoint for Designing the E-Module





These features are paired with synchronized audio and visual elements to support student understanding. Assets such as instructional images and videos were carefully produced with attention to lighting, angles, and background clarity. Audio was recorded with attention to clarity and reduced noise interference.

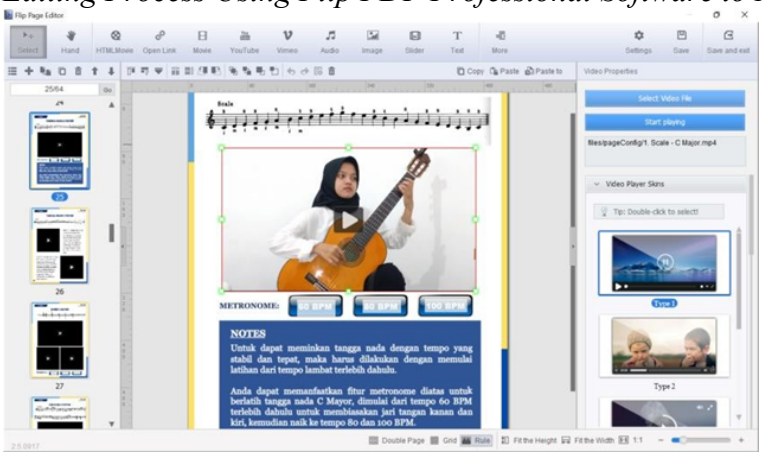
Figure 5
Stages of the Audio Recording Process

Additional audio processing was conducted using FL Studio Mobile, utilizing reverb effects to simulate authentic performance spaces.

Video recordings were made using neutral backgrounds and proper lighting to enhance clarity. These videos were edited and embedded in the module using Flip PDF Professional, which enabled the integration of multimedia elements such as videos, audio, interactive navigation, and hyperlinks. A metronome audio feature was added directly into the module to support independent practice without requiring external apps.

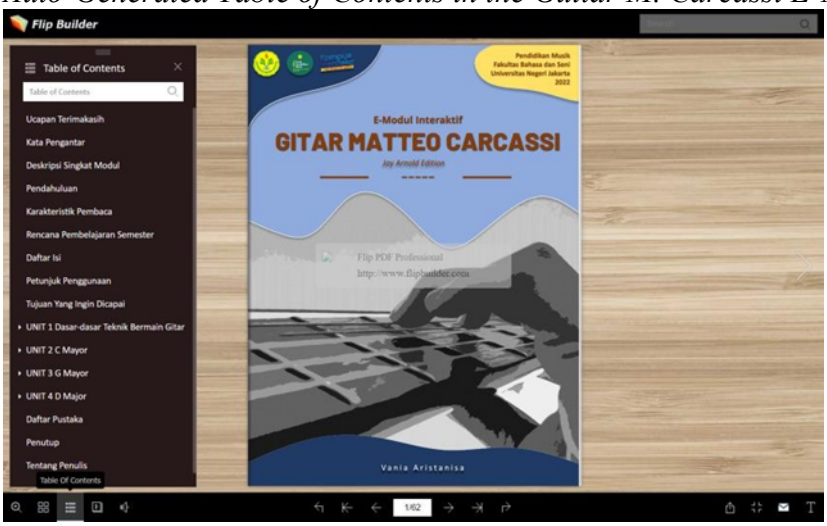
Furthermore, a navigation system was created via a table of contents to enable learners to easily jump between topics.

Figure 6
Editing Process Using Flip PDF Professional Software to Make It Interactive



Once all content was finalized, the module was published online under the title "UNJ E-Module Gitar Matteo Carcassi," making it accessible to students on various digital devices.

Figure 7
Auto-Generated Table of Contents in the Guitar M. Carcassi E-Module



Lastly, expert validation was conducted to evaluate the quality of the module. Dr. Dian Herdiati, M.Pd., a specialist in music and guitar education at Universitas Negeri Jakarta, reviewed the content and provided structured feedback using a rubric-based questionnaire. Her evaluation served as a critical component in ensuring the module's academic rigor and instructional effectiveness.

Utilize Media and Materials

Development was conducted using Microsoft PowerPoint and Flip PDF Professional. Multimedia assets were created by the researcher, including.

- High-resolution images of guitar techniques
- Audio recordings edited with FL Studio Mobile, using reverb features to simulate acoustic performance settings
- Instructional videos recorded with proper lighting and background settings to enhance clarity

All assets were embedded into the e-module and structured with an interactive table of contents. The module was made accessible across devices, including smartphones, tablets, and computers.

Require Learner Participation

To foster student engagement, the e-module encouraged:

- Independent study using self-paced content
- Practice using built-in metronome and play-along tracks
- Reflective learning through embedded questions and feedback forms

Instructors introduced the module in class and guided students on its usage. Students then accessed and used the module outside of classroom hours to reinforce in-class learning.

Evaluate and Revise

The module underwent multiple levels of evaluation:

- **Expert Validation**: Two experts one in media design and one in classical guitar pedagogy evaluated the module.
  - Media expert score: **98.4%**

$$100\ \%\ \text{x}\ \frac{\Sigma SP}{\Sigma SM} = \text{SA}$$

Therefore, the calculation is:

$$100\%\ \text{x}\ \frac{123}{125} = \mathbf{98{,}4\%}$$

Description:
ΣSP : Score Obtained
ΣSM : Maximum Possible Score
SA (in Bahasa) : Final Score (%)

  - Subject expert score: 97.6%

$$100\ \%\ \text{x}\ \frac{\Sigma SP}{\Sigma SM} = \text{SA}$$

Therefore, the calculation is:

$$100\%\ \text{x}\ \frac{122}{125} = \mathbf{97{,}6\%}$$

Description:
ΣSP : Score Obtained
ΣSM : Maximum Possible Score
SA (in Bahasa) : Final Score (%)

  - Both evaluations classified the module as "Excellent," requiring no major revisions
- **Student Feedback**: A Likert-scale questionnaire was distributed to 21 students post-implementation. The module received a positive response with an average score of 92.29%, indicating strong acceptance and satisfaction.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches:

- **Qualitative**: Thematic coding of interview transcripts and open-ended responses identified recurring themes and areas for improvement.
- **Quantitative**: Likert-scale responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The following criteria were used to interpret results:

Table 1
Score Range and Classification Statistics

Score Range (%)	Classification
85–100	Very Positive
70–84.9	Positive
55–69.9	Fairly Positive
40–54.9	Less Positive
25–39.9	Not Positive

Results indicated that both expert and student responses fell into the "Very Positive" category, supporting the conclusion that the module was pedagogically sound and ready for broader implementation.

Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent, and their anonymity was protected. The study adhered to ethical standards for educational research set by the university.

Limitations

The sample was limited to one cohort and one university, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Further research with diverse populations is recommended.

Conclusion

This study developed and validated an interactive e-module for the Guitar M. Carcassi course using the ASSURE instructional design model. The module was tailored to students' auditory-visual learning preferences and aimed to support independent practice, bridging the gap caused by limited classroom time. The instructional objectives followed the ABCD format and aligned with the university's curriculum. Development included multimedia content such as annotated scores, audio, video, and metronome tools, designed using accessible platforms like Microsoft PowerPoint and Flip PDF Professional. Content was structured for ease of use across various devices.

Expert reviews yielded high validation scores (98.4% for media and 97.6% for subject content), and post-implementation surveys indicated 92.29% student satisfaction. Students reported improved learning flexibility and engagement, confirming the e-module's effectiveness in enhancing classical guitar instruction. The study adhered to ethical standards, with informed consent from all participants. While the sample was limited, results suggest strong potential for broader application. The success of this e-module highlights how well-designed digital tools can modernize music education by making it more accessible, student-centered, and adaptable to various learner needs.

Further research is recommended to explore its use across diverse educational settings and musical disciplines.

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The Social and Discursive Context of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri's Mantra/Sufi Poetry

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Abstract

Sutardji Calzoum Bachri's poetry, considered groundbreaking in 1970s Indonesia, emerged from a complex interplay of social repression and discursive dynamics. This study explores how Sutardji's unique mantra-Sufi poetics functioned as a strategic response to the authoritarian control of language during the New Order era. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in Terry Eagleton's materialist criticism, this research analyzes the segregation and desegregation of mantra and Sufi discourses within Indonesian poetry. The findings reveal a dual strategy: first, Sutardji's mantra form, with its emphasis on phonetic sensation over semantic meaning, allowed him to subvert the state-imposed monopoly on language and evade censorship. Second, by aligning his work with the popular and politically safe Sufi literary trend, he skillfully navigated the constraints of the literary production system. This study concludes that Sutardji's linguistic innovation was not merely an aesthetic choice but a sophisticated act of discursive resistance, reclaiming the essence of language from institutional control.

Keywords: Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, literary, poetry, mantra

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Introduction

The proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945 marked the end of the control and repression by several colonial powers that had once conquered the Indonesian nation. This situation automatically fostered hope among the entire populace to become self-reliant and build their own country. The nation's foundation, with principles aimed at liberation from colonialism on Indonesian soil, was regulated by the 1945 Constitution. At the same time, the state system formulated the ideology of Pancasila, a foundation that guides the people to respect differences, encapsulated in the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity in Diversity).

However, in 1965, the first governmental system, the Old Order under President Soekarno, collapsed and was subsequently replaced by the next, the New Order, under President Soeharto. The Old Order was deemed a failure in bringing prosperity to Indonesia, leading to high inflation and a situation the public could no longer tolerate. President Soekarno resigned following the massacre of seven generals and all those associated with the Indonesian Communist Party.

The New Order emerged offering a vision to develop the nation and improve the people's welfare. However, this system ran its government with authority and repression. The freedom experienced by the people could not be enjoyed as it should have been—a freedom that liberates public expression. The spaces for public expression, such as the press, books, and literary works, did not escape the control of the New Order regime (Yusuf, 2010). Many press outlets were forbidden from operating. A number of literary works were banned. Moreover, writers who were indicated to be critical of the government were detained.

Under such control, writers who refused to be silent and compliant chose other avenues for expression. One of the most radical expressions was that of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (SCB) through his Sufi/mantra poetry. Through his poetic credo, he claimed that the poetry he wrote was unbound by the definition of word meanings. Furthermore, in his essay titled "Puisi Besar" (Bachri, 2000), he argued that poetry has its own world, and in an extreme view, poetry is an imagination disconnected from reality. However, it is the readers themselves who sometimes connect poetry to reality. With this perspective, SCB produced three poetry collections published under the title *O Amuk Kapak* (Bachri, 1981). This collection presented a novel form to the Indonesian literary world at that time. The linguistic structure and typography seemed to deconstruct long-established poetic forms with their disciplined rules. Additionally, the use of words in SCB's poems appeared inverted, fragmented, or reversed in mood.

Indeed, before the existence of modern literary works, Indonesian society had a long-standing oral tradition, one form of which is the mantra. In Indonesian society, the mantra was already an integral part of life. Indonesian society is an oral-tradition society. Therefore, the mantra was familiar and had become second nature to the people. With a poetic credo that frees words from meaning, the mantra poetry form emerged with an emphasis on the experience of sound. The mantra itself does not adhere to linguistic structure; for this reason, its language is formulaic and resistant to changes in form and meaning. Therefore, with this method, Sutardji seemingly attempted to restore the purpose of literature as expression while simultaneously trying to destabilize the stability of the existing power, which controlled all aspects of the Indonesian state.

Given SCB's position, a paradox emerged within the New Order situation. Freedom of expression was restricted, yet Sutardji's work, which seemingly undermined the established tradition of modern Indonesian literature and the institutionalization of language, was allowed to circulate. In fact, due to his phenomenal work, SCB was dubbed the "president of Indonesian poetry."

To understand how SCB's phenomenal work could be born and circulate amidst this paradox, this research requires a theoretical tool for analysis. Therefore, the materialist criticism framework proposed by Terry Eagleton (1976, 1978) is used to analyze the socio-historical situation when SCB wrote his poetry. Eagleton states that literary works do not emerge from a vacuum but are influenced by external factors, which Eagleton calls external constituents.

These constituents consist of the General Mode of Production (GMP), Literary Mode of Production (LMP), General Ideology (GI), Authorial Ideology (AI), and Aesthetic Ideology (AuI). The relationship among all these constituents ultimately determines the kind of work that is born. For Eagleton, to understand a literary work, one must analyze the socio-historical context in which it was produced and consumed. Eagleton (1976) writes:

> To understand how culture is produced, we need to look at it through the idea of historical materialism. This means that the way a society produces its material needs (its economy, or 'base') fundamentally shapes its social, political, and cultural institutions (the 'superstructure'), including literature. From this process, the characteristics of cultural products are formed. (p. 5)

Therefore, it is crucial to examine the specific social conditions that shaped SCB's phenomenal poetry. Furthermore, at the same time, Indonesian literary discourse was dominated by Sufistic poetry. This trend is also visible in several of SCB's poems. The hypothesis of this research is that, with his novel poetic aesthetic, SCB sought to challenge the dominant poetic discourse in Indonesia and the institutionalization of language through the segregation and desegregation of word meaning.

Thawing the Discursive Freeze: How Mantra Poetry Subverted Indonesian Poetic Discourse

During the New Order era, language was not merely a tool for communication, but a vital instrument of power. The regime systematically used language to instill ideologies deemed favorable by the state. Through the slogan of "National Development" (Pembangunan Nasional), the government asserted a dominant narrative that had to be adhered to, where words were chosen to support values such as patriotism and loyalty to the national ideology. This practice, within Eagleton's theoretical framework, was a method for the dominant power (General Mode of Production) to maintain its authority. They established a system where the meaning of words was controlled and sourced from a single authority, such as a dictionary or official state language institution. Consequently, what can be termed as "discursive freezing" or a monopoly on meaning occurred, wherein language lost its free and fluid nature.

Confronting this hegemony of meaning, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri (SCB) emerged with a radical poetic resistance movement. He declared through his poetic credo that "words are not tools for delivering understanding... the word is understanding itself, it is free" (Bachri, 1981; Bahasa, 2006). The complete poetic credo written by SCB is presented below:

Kredo Puisi

> Kata-kata bukanlah alat mengantarkan pengertian. Dia bukan seperti pipa yang menyalurkan air. Kata adalah pengertian itu sendiri. Dia bebas.
>
> Kalau diumpamakan dengan kursi, kata adalah kursi itu sendiri dan bukan alat untuk duduk. Kala diumpamakan dengan pisau, dia adalah pisau itu sendiri dan bukan alat untuk memotong atau menikam.
>
> Dalam kesehari-harian kata cenderung dipergunakan sebagai alat untuk menyampaikan pengertian. Dianggap sebagai pesuruh untuk menyampaikan pengertian. Dan dilupakan kedudukannya yang merdeka sebagai pengertian.
>
> Kata-kata harus bebas dari penjajahan pengertian, dari beban idea. Kata-kata harus bebas menentukan dirinya sendiri.
>
> Dalam puisi saya, saya bebaskan kata-kata dan tradisi lapuk yang membelenggunya seperti kamus dan penjajahan-penjajahan lain seperti moral kata yang dibebankan masyarakat pada kata tertentu dengan dianggap kotor (obscene) serta penjajahan gramatika.
>
> Bila kata telah dibebaskan, kreativitas pun dimungkinkan. Karena kata-kata bisa menciptakan dirinya sendiri, bermain dengan dirinya sendiri. dan menentukan kemauannya sendiri. Pendadakan yang kreatif bisa timbul, karena kata yang biasanya dianggap berfungsi sebagai penyalur pengertian, tiba-tiba, karena kebebasannya bisa menyungsang terhadap fungsinya. Maka timbullah hal-hal yang tak terduga sebelumnya, yang kreatif.
>
> Dalam (penciptaan) puisi saya, kata-kata saya biarkan bebas. Dalam gairahnya karena telah menemukan kebebasan, kata-kata meloncat-loncat dan menari di atas kertas, mabuk dan menelanjangi dirinya sendiri, mundar-mandir dan berkali-kali menunjukkan muka dan belakangnya yang mungkin sama atau tidak sarna, membelah dirinya dengan bebas, menyatukan dirinya sendiri dengan yang lain untuk memperkuat dirinya, membalik atau menyungsangkan sendiri dirinya dengan bebas, saling bertentangan sendiri satu sama lainnya karena mereka bebas berbuat semuanya atau bila perlu membunuh dirinya sendiri untuk menunjukkan dirinya bisa menolak dan berontak terhadap pengertian yang ingin dibebankan kepadanya.
>
> Sebagai penyair saya hanya menjaga sepanjang tidak mengganggu kebebasannya-agar kehadirannya yang bebas sebagai pembentuk pengertiannya sendiri, bisa mendapatkan aksentuasi yang maksimal.
>
> Menulis puisi bagi saya adalah membebaskan kata-kata, yang berarti mengembalikan kata pada awal mulanya. Pada mulanya adalah Kata.
>
> Dan kata pertama adalah mantera. Maka penulis puisi bagi saya adalah mengembalikan kata kepada mantera. (Bandung, 30 Maret 1973)

This statement posed a direct challenge to the state's project of language institutionalization. While the state sought to patent meaning in dictionaries and grammar, SCB, in contrast,

sought to free words from the decaying traditions that shackled them, such as the dictionary. His goal was to return the word to its true essence: the mantra.

SCB's radical strategy to liquefy this frozen meaning was to return poetry to the essence of the mantra. In Indonesian oral tradition, the mantra did not operate through semantic understanding; rather, it aimed to generate an effect through sound and sensory experience. The mantra became a link between humans and the world of mystery and ancestral beliefs, not between humans and the dictionary. By adopting this form, SCB's poetry cleverly operated outside the jurisdiction of state-controlled meaning. When the government censored based on content and meaning deemed subversive, SCB's mantra poetry offered a form that emphasized the phonetic dimension, making it difficult to interpret singularly and thus allowing it to escape the grip of censorship.

Therefore, SCB's actions produced works that were ambiguous and opened up a vast space for interpretation for the reader. The poems collected in *O Amuk Kapak* could not be interpreted merely by referring to dictionary definitions. Readers were enabled to experience the vibration of sound, the rhythm, and the visuality of the typography. In this way, SCB succeeded in decentralizing interpretive authority. He transferred the power of meaning-making from state institutions back to the personal experience of each reader. This act of liquefying the monopoly on meaning was the most fundamental step of discursive resistance, which became the foundation for his entire poetic strategy amidst the New Order regime.

A Phonetic Strategy: Evading New Order Censorship

The New Order regime's tight control over expression forced writers to be extremely cautious in their choice of diction. In this situation, where any word could be interpreted as a threat, literature often remained within the government's ideological circle. Many writers chose to use symbolic or neutral language to avoid direct confrontation. However, SCB took a more fundamental and radical path. Instead of disguising meaning, he sought to empty his poetry of the semantic meaning that could be ensnared by censorship, and instead fill it with the power of sound.

This phonetic strategy was manifested vividly in his poem titled "O," which is presented below:

O

dukaku dukakau dukarisau dukakalian dukangiau
resahku resahkau resahrisau resahbalau resahkalian
raguku ragukau raguguru ragutabau ragukalian
mauku maukau mautahu mausampai maukalian maukenai mauapai
siasiaku siasiakau siasia siabalu siarisau siakalian siasia
waswasku waswaskau waswasrisau waswaswaswaswaswaswas
duhaiku duhaikau duhairindu duhaingilu duhaikalian duhaisangsai
oku okau okosong orindu okalian oblong orisau Okau O....

On the surface, the poem "O" appeared like a random play on words and did not seem to pose a direct threat to the authorities. Herein lay the cleverness of SCB's strategy. Unlike the poems of W.S. Rendra, such as *Kenalan Lamamu* (Your Old Acquaintance) written in 1977, which was banned because its symbolic criticism could still be translated into political language, SCB's poetry was intentionally designed to resist such a translation process. A line

such as "...resahku resahkau resahrisau..." emphasizes alliteration and assonance over lexical meaning. This poem does not speak about restlessness; it becomes the very sound of restlessness itself. The logic of censorship, which operates by searching for forbidden meanings, was paralyzed when faced with a work that made sound its main feature.

A similar pattern dominated his poetry collection, O Amuk Kapak, in works such as "Pot," "Tragedi Winka & Sihkha," "Q," "Amuk," and "Shang Hai." By consistently emphasizing this phonetic aspect, SCB's works successfully passed censorship and were permitted for publication, as they were not considered a significant threat. This artistic choice, however, created a new complexity. By sacrificing semantic clarity, he opened up a much richer and more personal space for interpretation. Readers were no longer spoon-fed meaning but were instead invited to feel and interpret the poetic sensation arising from the vibration of the words' sounds. Ultimately, the phonetic strategy employed by SCB was more than just a tactic to deceive the censors. It was a conscious effort to soften the rigidity of institutionalized language. By prioritizing the phonetic dimension, SCB not only succeeded in publishing his work but also managed to build an autonomous space for interpretation—a poetic space immune to the intervention and control of the regime's censorship apparatus.

The Sufi Trend: A Strategy for the New Order's Publishing Market

If the phonetic strategy was Sutardji's way to evade censorship, he also applied an equally clever thematic adaptation strategy: blending his work into the mainstream of Sufistic literature that was popular at the time. This was a pragmatic step to ensure his work could penetrate the gates of the publishing industry, which was tightly controlled by the New Order regime. This choice was not merely about "playing it safe," but rather a tactic to obtain an "entry permit" into the public sphere.

To understand why this strategy was necessary, we need to look at how the publishing industry operated under the power of the New Order, which can be analyzed through the framework of the LMP (Literary Mode of Production) from Terry Eagleton's materialist literary criticism. During that era, the government (GMP) used state apparatuses like the Department of Information to control the LMP, namely publishers such as Balai Pustaka, Pustaka Jaya, and Sinar Harapan. These publishers functioned as ideological filters, screening manuscripts to ensure their content was aligned with the GI (General Ideology) adhered to by the regime and with market tastes that were considered non-subversive. Consequently, works that were critical or challenging were difficult to publish, while those aligned with the government's narrative or considered apolitical could circulate more easily.

It is in this context that Sufi literature became an ideal "safe space." Sufistic themes—such as the annihilation of the self before God (fana), spiritual quests, and introspection—were considered non-resistant to the state's ideology. During this period, many writers suddenly began to write works with a religious nuance (Sobary, 2016). Its focus on the vertical relationship (human-to-God) made it appear apolitical in the eyes of a regime that was more focused on monitoring criticism of the horizontal relationship (society-to-government). Moreover, because the majority of Indonesia's population is Muslim, these themes resonated deeply and were well-received.

This adaptation strategy by Sutardji was reflected strongly in his poem titled "Q" and several other poems:

Figure 1
Sutardji's Poetry Titled "Q"

Q

! !
! ! !
! ! ! ! ! !
!
! a
lif ! !
l
l a
l a m
! !

mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
iiiiiiiiiiiii
mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm

In the poem "Q" presented above, it can be seen that its content consists of scrambled exclamation marks (!) and separated letters which, when arranged, form the words "alif lam mim," a phrase sourced from the Qur'an. Another example, in the poem Orang Yang Tuhan (The Person Who is God) written in 1981, also uses the words "tuhan" (God) and "assalamualaikum" (peace be upon you). Furthermore, in other poems, Sutardji frequently uses the suffix "-Mu" (Thy/Your), which indicates its reference to God.

From these examples, in terms of form, Sutardji's poetry carried an Islamic nuance, or what was known as Sufistic poetry in his era. By writing poems like these, Sutardji placed himself in the midst of a wave of other poets such as Emha Ainun Najib, Mustofa Bisri, and Kuntowijoyo who were also exploring similar themes. For publishers and the government, this kind of poetry was not only acceptable but also supported the image of a religious and obedient society. Sufistic poetry was freely published because it was considered non-resistant to the prevailing ideology. Sufism was seen as a life motivation to be more accepting of one's circumstances, a stream that was especially suitable given that the majority of Indonesian society is Muslim. Seeing this condition, Sufi-themed poetry circulated freely, including Sutardji's collected works. As a writer, Sutardji took a safe path. He utilized the space opened up by the authorities to continue producing work. This situation is what is referred to as the LMP, where the aesthetics of a literary work are determined by the consensus of cultural apparatuses, which are themselves an extension of the GMP.

Thus, Sutardji's brilliant dual strategy is revealed. If the mantra poetry was the radical "engine" of his resistance, then the Sufi theme was the "passport" that allowed him to cross the borders of censorship. He used the widely accepted theme as a Trojan horse to bring his experimental and subversive poetic forms to the public. This shows that Sutardji was not merely a poet who "played it safe," but rather a cunning cultural strategist, one who was able to dance between the constraints of power without losing the essence of his artistic resistance.

Sutardji's Aesthetic Ideology: Textual Resistance and Contextual Empowerment

A literary work is the product of an author's specific position within their society, or what Eagleton calls Authorial Ideology (AI). Sutardji, who lived in and internalized the social reality of the New Order, was certainly not sterile from the General Ideology (GI) of his time. However, as an artist, he possessed the creative power to respond to these conditions. This response was then represented through his artistic choices, referred to as Aesthetic Ideology (AuI). Sutardji's conscious choice to adopt the oral tradition form of the mantra was the ultimate manifestation of his aesthetic ideology, a brilliant strategy that operated on two levels: textual and contextual.

On the textual level, this aesthetic ideology functioned as a clever defense mechanism. The "text" here refers to the work on paper that would be faced by the state's censorship apparatus. As has been discussed, mantra poetry, with its experimental linguistic structure and emphasis on sound, created a work that was difficult to interpret singularly. To the censors tasked with finding subversive literal meaning, SCB's work would have appeared as harmless nonsense. In this textual dimension, the mantra became a "shield" that protected the poetry from the threat of censorship and banning.

On the contextual level, however, the mantra's function shifted dramatically from defensive to generative. The "context" here was when the poem met its reader or was heard by an audience. For Indonesian society, familiar with oral traditions, the mantra was not judged by its denotative meaning but by the magical power and effect it generated when chanted. By using this form, Sutardji indirectly invited readers to interpret his poetry through the experience of reading, creating a special effect that transcended mere intellectual understanding. This approach actively rejected the hegemony of meaning imposed by institutionalized language structure.

This view was affirmed by Sutardji himself in his essay titled "Puisi, Bunyi, dan Nurani" (Poetry, Sound, and Conscience)(in Bahasa, 2006). He argued that if poetry often appears absurd or nonsensical, it is because it is presenting the hidden parts of daily life. That which is raw and naked. For him, such poetry, despite seeming disconnected from reality, "always presents the meaning of life, as the other side of the coin of life."

Sutardji's statement becomes the key to understanding the dual function of his poetry. The mantra form was a perfect aesthetic ideology for its era. Textually, it deceived the authorities with an "emptiness" of meaning. Contextually, however, that "emptiness" became fertile ground for the birth of diverse personal interpretations, empowering the reader and reclaiming the right of interpretation from the state's monopoly. This was Sutardji's success: he maintained a balance between radical artistic innovation and its relevance to the social reality of his community, proving that even the most experimental work can be a profound form of political resistance.

Sutardji's Poetry and Resisting the Authority of the State's Language Apparatus

Language possesses a component that is intrinsically tied to the state; its meaning is produced and constructed in a specific manner by state power. As Halim (1976, p. 15) notes, the issue of language is a national problem requiring planned, directed, and meticulous management, primarily due to the multitude of regional languages in Indonesia. To manage this, a state-regulated system is necessary to instill ideologies and control social dynamics. In the literary

sphere during the New Order, this control was institutionalized through publishers like Balai Pustaka, which functioned as a machine to regulate public reading material. According to Damono (in Faruk, 2007), Balai Pustaka enforced strict criteria, ensuring that published works would not "damage the government's authority and domestic tranquility." This was achieved through two strategies identified by Faruk (2007, p. 41): ideological filtering of content and the symbolic enforcement of a standardized "high Malay," which effectively censored any work that did not conform (Pradopo, 2013, p. 97; Teeuw, 1955, p. 60).

In direct opposition to this rigid institutional control, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri launched his poetic manifesto, the Kredo Puisi (Poetic Credo) on March 30, 1973. In it, he declared: "words are not tools for delivering understanding, they are not like pipes that channel water, the word is understanding itself, it is free." He saw definition as a form of colonization over words and ideas as a burden. Through his poetry, Sutardji stated that he had liberated words from the decaying traditions that shackled them, "such as the dictionary, grammar, and morality that had been instilled by the state from childhood to adulthood." This liberation, he argued, is what makes creativity possible, allowing words to create and define themselves.

This philosophy was not merely theoretical; it manifested as a clear poetic method. Sutardji's resistance against the "discursive freezing" of language was executed by creatively and innovatively manipulating linguistic structure and spelling. His work is characterized by three main features. First, he often used unconventional words, drawing from regional languages, foreign languages, or even his own coinages. Second, he frequently manipulated structure and spelling, for instance, by using all capital letters, merging words together, or employing extensive repetition. Third, and most importantly, the meaning of his poems is often ambiguous and open to interpretation. This ambiguity is not a flaw but a central feature of his resistance, as it dismantles the possibility of a single, state-sanctioned interpretation and instead creates a challenge for the reader to think creatively. It transfers the authority of meaning-making from the state to the subjective experience of the individual reader, whose interpretation is shaped by their own unique background and knowledge.

As a poet, Sutardji allowed words to form their own meaning and achieve maximum accentuation. He powerfully summarized his entire artistic and philosophical project in his Kredo: "For me, to write poetry is to free words, which means returning the word to its beginning. In the beginning was the Word. And the first word is a mantra. Thus, for me, to write is to return the word to the mantra."

Conclusion

Sutardji Calzoum Bachri's poetry offers a new dimension to Indonesian literature, representing a sophisticated strategy of artistic navigation and discursive resistance within the restrictive climate of the New Order. This study concludes that his mantra-Sufi form was a dual-pronged approach. The emphasis on phonetics, characteristic of mantras, served as a clever tactic to evade state censorship by obscuring semantic meaning. Simultaneously, the poem's Sufistic content allowed his work to align with a popular and politically palatable literary current, ensuring its publication and circulation.

Furthermore, Sutardji waged a direct resistance against the "discursive freezing" of language institutionalized by the state. By deconstructing and rearranging words, as exemplified in his poem "Pot," he liberated language from its fixed definitions, opening it up to a multiplicity of interpretations dependent on the reader. Ultimately, Sutardji's poetry demonstrates that

literary innovation can be a powerful tool not for escaping reality, but for profoundly engaging with it, thereby reclaiming linguistic and intellectual freedom from an authoritarian regime.

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Cross-Media Communication of Chinese Mythical Animals in the *Fantastic Beasts* Series Films

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Abstract

Compared to *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998), *Kung Fu Panda* (Osborne & Stevenson, 2008), and other Hollywood films featuring Chinese elements that still largely follow Western narrative structures, *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (Yates, 2018) marked a notable shift by introducing the Chinese mythical creature Zouyu into the cinematic universe. Later, in *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (Yates, 2022), the third installment in the series, another Chinese mythical animal, Kylin, appeared—further continuing the Western magical narrative style while incorporating Eastern cultural symbolism. The appearance of Chinese mythical animals in Hollywood films reflects not only a process of deconstruction and reconstruction within the framework of globalized cinematic language, but also demonstrates how Chinese cultural symbols are disseminated worldwide through audiovisual media. Taking the *Fantastic Beasts* series as a case study, this paper explores the cross-media communication of Chinese mythical animals, offering insight into the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture in a transnational context.

Keywords: Chinese mythical animals, Hollywood film, cross-media communication

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Introduction

Under the background of globalization, cultural soft power has become one of the important fields of competition in comprehensive national strength, besides enhancing cultural soft power and promoting culture to go global has become an important part of the cultural development strategy. Chinese mythical animals, as cultural elements, appearing in Fantastic Beasts series film, not only spreads the cultural implication and cultural aesthetics of Chinese traditional culture to the world, but also promotes the realization of cross-cultural identity of Chinese traditional culture.

The Cultural Implication of Chinese Mythical Animals and the Embodiment of Traditional Aesthetics

The image of mythical animals appeared along with the folk beliefs, which was born and formed since the primitive times, it plays an extremely important role in various periods. In the thousands of years, during world cultural development, many artistic images with unique cultural connotations and traditional aesthetics have emerged. Such as the ancient Egyptian Shinx, Anubis; Pegasus, water monster Hyella and Lion Griffin in Greek mythology. These images are widely used in architecture, literature, art and other fields. Most of them have a common feature: compound. Most of these mythical animals reflect a slightly grotesque traditional aesthetic. The law of aesthetics is not the same, in the harsh living environment, the ancestors' cognition of beauty was very savage and extensive. With a desire to survive, they want to have soaring wings and solid claws, so they combined these animal traits together. With the awakening of self-cognition, human beings also integrated their own images into the shaping process of them, which appeared the image of half man and half beast, such as the Greek mythical animals Kentaulos. In the early stage, because they cannot resist natural disasters, people hoped to gain the power to conquer nature through these mythical animals. Therefore, most of these mythical animals reflect the characteristics of tall, strong and divine power, and have the traditional aesthetic characteristics of grotesque.

With the collapse of the primitive society and the progress of social culture, the primitive thinking began to die out, and the ancient myth also began to change. These mythical animals gradually changed from survival sustenance to belief culture and began to integrate into the moral thought of ren, yi, li, zhi, xin. With the establishment of the feudal rites and music system and the spread of Confucianism, the mythical animals also began to acquire their own specific cultural meanings. It can be seen that Chinese mythical animals are inseparable with traditional culture. From them, we can see the evolution of Chinese civilization and the turn of traditional aesthetics for thousands of years.

Cross-Media Communication of Chinese Mythical Animals in Film and Television

At the beginning of the 21st century, Henry Jenkins put forward the concept of cross-media, which refers to the transformation of one media to another or more media, emphasizing the characteristics of different media to promote the cross-border presentation of a story in different fields.

> A cross-media story unfolds across different media platforms, and each platform has new texts that make different and valuable contributions to the whole story. Every kind of media is outstanding in doing its job and responsibilities. (Jenkins, 2006/2021, p. 157)

Chinese mythical animals, due to its unique external image and cultural implication, widely appears in the film and television works. The cross-media communication phenomenon of them has also attracted the attention of the academic circles.

In the field of animation, the mythical animals is an indispensable existence. In the first full-length color animation, *The Monkey King* (Wan & Tang, 1964), the mythical animal dragon had appeared. China's first large-scale color wide screen animated feature film *Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King* (Yan et al., 1979), we could see the same identity of the dragon. Guofeng animation film *Big Fish and Begonia* (Liang & Zhang, 2016) is introduced Kun and other mythical animals. In *Green Snake* (Huang, 2021), there were not only appearing some mythical animals, but also combining traditional watercolor and realistic oil painting in the scene shaping, creating a unique cultural atmosphere.

In the field of live-action movies and TV series, there are also many mythical animals. The release of the live-action film *Monster Hunt* (Xu, 2015) has brought the cute little monster Huba, whose original shape is the mythical animals recorded in *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Different from the fierce beast Dijiang described in the book, in the film, Huba is similar to white radish, with a simple and honest manner and kind-hearted heart.

Since the launch of *Pokemon go* in the United States, monster games have become popular. Many games ,on the role setting, introduced mythical animals from the *Classic of Mountains and Rivers* as elements, In 2016, the game *Onmyoji* developed by Net Ease was released and launched. The game is based on the Japanese story ひゃっきやこう(Hundred Ghosts Night Journey) according to investigation, monsters recorded by the story were mostly introduced from China to Japan during the Tang Dynasty, such as the monster jade algae, its original form is nine tail fox, original form of the てんぐ is the dog monster from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas,* kappa is same as water tiger.

The Spread and Transformation of Chinese Mythical Animals in the *Fantastic Beasts* Series Films

Fantastic Beasts is the branch of the universe of *Harry Potter* created by JK Rowling. The story mainly described the early magical world from the perspective of Newt, the author of the film. Chinese mythical animals Zouyu and Kylin appeared in the film.

Traceability: Tracing the Historical Materials of Zouyu and Kylin

Zouyu first appeared in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, its records:

> Lin country, there are precious animals, as big as a tiger, with five sets of tools and a tail longer than its body. (Wang, 2004)

Through the record, we can clearly understand that Zouyu's body shape is like a tiger, with a variety of colors on his body and a tail that is longer than his body length. He can travel thousands of miles a day. There were many historical books records about Zouyu, such as *Huainan Zi, Zen Wen, New Five Dynasties History and Taizong Records.* Some referred to its prototype as the snow leopard, which is very similar to the snow leopard based on its recorded characteristics such as white tiger black stripes and tail longer than body.

Kylin, a kind of auspicious beast in ancient Chinese mythology, was generated by the spread of the stars, along with Dragon, Feng, Turtle and Pixiu, they are known as the five great auspicious beasts. from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas · Overseas west longitude* and *The Legend of Gongyang*, we could know that Kylin is benevolent beast. Without wise king, it won't appear. If there is a king, it will arrive; if there is no king, it will not arrive. Male is Qi, and female is Lin. Kylin is the auspicious god pet, masters Taiping and Longevity. The images of the Kylin are many different in the recording. The appearance of the Kylin was recorded in the "Ruiying Tu" as follows: Zouyu first appeared in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, its records:

> A sheep's head, wolf's hooves, a dome, with a body of five colors, and a height of one zhang and two feet. (The Kylin has a sheep's head, wolf's hooves, a round head, and a colorful body, about 2 meters high.) (Xiao, 1987)

A Song Dynasty stone tablet in the Confucius Temple in Qufu, Shandong Province, engraved the Kylin as: deer head, cow hoof, and ponytail. Juye County, Heze City, Shandong Province, is known as the hometown of Kylin.

Appearance: Chinese Mythical Animals Appear in Hollywood Movies

Fantastic Beasts I mainly told the story of two factions of wizards who analyzed and struggled with each other on how to survive in the Muggle world. *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (Yates, 2018), continued the story, which was noted that the Chinese mythical animal Zouyu appeared in this film. Its setting was a scarred ornamental animal trapped in a circus. This is the first time that Chinese elements clearly appear in the work of JK Rowling. The image setting of Zouyu in the film was very similar to that recorded in ancient books. In terms of facial shaping, Zouyu's cat eyes, fangs, claws, and colorful long tail movie image is very distinctive of China. Zouyu was trapped in the circus, in the scene where the protagonist rescued Zouyu, the environmental background presented a classic Chinese landscape style. After being rescued, this big cat led the protagonist to leave the archives, Grindelwald's assistant released magic small black cat to block them. During the fight, Zouyu shuttled between the pillars, the movements here were inspired by the traditional lion dance technique of stepping on plum blossom stakes. In the confrontation with black cats, Zouyu only threw the magical black cat with his paws, instead of killing them, which was very consistent with the characteristic of benevolent beasts.

In 2022, *Where are Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (Yates，2022) once again introduced the Chinese beast as a film element, this time, a highly representative Chinese mythical animal was appearing, Kylin. In the film, the sorcerers were divided into two groups, one was the Dumbledore group who insisted on peaceful coexistence with Muggle, one was the Grindelwald group who wanted to rule the Muggle world. These two groups were looking for the unicorn who could make a fair trial. The protagonist Newt found the Kylin, with a bamboo raft, in Guilin, Guangxi. Grindelwald used witchcraft to create a fake one for the trial, but Dumbledore rushed to the court with the real beast. The creative team has filmed in places such as Detian Waterfall, Lijiang River, Yangshuo and other places in Guangxi. In the film, the scene of Newt riding a bamboo raft looking for Kylin was very similar to the artistic conception of Li Jiang Yu Huo. When Newt was chased, the winged bird, carrying him, flew over a beautiful mountain peak, which was the mountain called Moon in Yangshuo, Guangxi. The image of Kylin in the film was set to look like a deer with scales, different from the traditional portrayal of a mighty figure, it presents an image of thin and weak. The movie

depicted that Kylin had the ability to see through people's hearts and make judgments, representing fairness and justice, which coincided with the Chinese record that Kylin was a benevolent beast that governed good and evil. Although Kylin did not appear in the movie for a long time, it played an extremely important role in driving the plot.

There Are Still Deficiencies in the Image Transformation and Reconstruction of Chinese Mythical Animals

The appearance of Chinese mythical animals in Hollywood movies is undoubtedly a powerful proof of Chinese culture going global, however, there are still urgent issues that need to be addressed during the conversion process.

Fantastic Beasts film team was asked in an interview how to understand Zouyu, they said, they thought Zouyu as a big cat. This is not difficult to see, as the movie has subjected Zouyu to the so-called cat like, cute, and non-beastly treatments. Therefore, in the film, the main character used a funny cat stick to comfort the violent Zouyu and put it into the box just like a Cat Aviation Box, besides when seeing the funny cat stick, Zouyu began to act like a cat. When making the plot, although the creative team tried their best to set a beast as close as possible to the historical records of Zouyu's image, due to differences in cultural background and cultural cognition, they did not fully understand this Chinese mythical beast, just simply overlay the cultural elements they examined, and confined to narrative expression under Western thinking. This is the same as the Chinese dragon that appeared earlier in *Harry Potter*, where they seem to see it only as a cloak for a character who should appear in the film. As a part of Chinese culture, Chinese mythical animals have a very profound cultural connotation and historical origin, to further introduce mythical animal elements and achieve their cross-cultural dissemination in movies, the issue of crossing cultural barriers is worth paying attention to. This is also an important reason for the problem of one-sided dissemination.

Most of the Chinese mythical animals exist in folk tales or fairy tales, and these folk stories were mainly through oral communication in the early stage. With the increasing maturity of traditional techniques, folk stories began to be preserved in the form of text, and these mythical animals also began to spread through paper media. With the maturity of modern technology, the Chinese mythical animals began to jump out from the flat text description, to obtain a more three-dimensional, more intuitive image. Advanced modern media processing technology has led to various appearances and images of them. At the same time, the problem of media adaptability has also appeared. Mythical animals image was first recorded in literature and then produced and presented to the public through modern media technology. However, the formation of appearance in the human brain through viewing literature records is subjectively influenced. As the saying goes, there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people. In addition, all characters and images appearing in the movie need to follow the plot arrangement. This may explain why the thin and frail Kylin and the cute Zouyu appeared. As mentioned earlier, unlike written records, imagination has the result of thousands of people and faces, and those divine beast images that are more in line with the arrangement of the work are easier to shape and spread.

This kind of film and television image created through imagination will affect people's cultural cognition and the original image of mythical beasts in the process of repeated dissemination. Subsequent films will also use this as a reference in production, which leads to the problem of homogenization. This situation further affects the audience and leads to

misunderstandings. On the other hand, this situation can also lead to a reduction in the audience's imagination space. People no longer shape the image in their minds through reading words, but instead use mechanical memory to record the animal images created for them in movies. Although from the *Fantastic Beasts* series films, the adaptation of Zouyu and Kylin, while maintaining ancient book records and trying to fit the movie as much as possible, is commendable. However, whether this adaptation completely avoids the problem of cross media adaptability is still a question worth discussing.

To some extent, the cross-media communication of mythical animals appears with the pace of commercialization. The reason is that a certain commercial product needs the cultural elements of mythical animals to serve it. At the same time, this utilization also promotes the process of cross-media communication of mythical animals. However, as a cultural symbol, the modernization process of them under the torrent of commercialization inevitably need to faces the problem of proportional coordination between culture and commerce. First of all, it is worth affirming that, as a cultural resource, the mythical animals have a strong commercial potential. This potential is not only reflected in the images shaping and dissemination in the film and television, but also reflected in the mythical animals effect produced by its own traffic and popularity. In the context of multicultural integration, they may become a trend or even a brand. The mythical animals effect can be seen in the successful marketing of the movies. The introduction of Zouyu may only be an attempt by the main creative team to observe the heat of Chinese mythical animals, but this attempt allowed them to see the unique charm and powerful commercial power generated by the integration of Chinese culture and western magic movies. Therefore, it added the mythical animal Kylin, which is more familiar to Chinese people, to the third film. On the basis of the original traffic of *Harry Potter*, the movies added Chinese mythical animals as a promotional hot spot, successfully arousing the interest of audiences from all over the world and further expanding the audience range. Many Chinese audiences had walked into the cinema to witness the appearance of Chinese mythical creatures in Hollywood movies.

Cultural products are often screened and filtered in the process of commercialization. The element of mythical animals can become a selling point for movie marketing and promotion, which proves that the traffic and popularity of themselves have the ability to be commercially monetized. This also supports that the cross-media communication of the animals under commercialization is a win-win result of culture and business. Culture spreads and inherits through the power of commerce, while commerce creates assets through the blessing of culture. However, the balance between culture and business is not easy to achieve, and the creative team needs to deeply explore the cultural connotation of itself, and reasonably transform it into commercial elements into commercial products. This kind of conversion may not necessarily achieve bidirectional success.

The Strategy of Chinese Mythical Animals to Realize Cross-Media Communication in Film and Television

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, the transformation of Chinese mythical animals culture under the background of modern media communication has a profound meaning for the development of Chinese traditional culture in modern times. We should think deeply about what we can do to achieve this. Well, in my opinion, we may try these.

Chinese elements are increasingly appearing in Hollywood movies, which is the trend and opportunity for Chinese culture to spread around the world. As a cultural element, Chinese

mythical animals appear in Hollywood films, which make the film add an exotic color. These excellent cases undoubtedly create good opportunities for the global spread of it. Therefore, in order to further promote the transformation and development of them in film and television, and realize the global dissemination of Chinese mythical animals culture. We need to actively introduce relevant films, learn film and television language and film and television structure, and reasonably integrate film and television culture with Chinese mythical animals culture. In the process of integration, we should learn the world's excellent cultural expression forms, inherit the unique cultural implication and traditional aesthetics of the culture, and create the image of the Chinese mythical animals with the core of Chinese culture and in line with the world aesthetic. At the same time, cultural creation should be encouraged. The spread and transformation of Chinese culture cannot only rely on foreign films created by foreigners, but also need more Chinese works to provide strength for them. This requires the introduction of relevant cultural policies to encourage cultural creation. In addition, a perfect incentive platform and reward system should also be established to jointly promote the creation and development of relevant high-quality film and television works. The elimination of cultural cognitive barriers under the same language background makes the cultural creation can better excavate the core of the culture and transfer the value of it. To sum up, drawing on excellent international works and encouraging the creation of local mythical animals culture will better promote the global dissemination of Chinese mythical animals.

Under the tide of globalization, many Chinese cultural elements have been transformed into film language to achieve cross-text interpretation development in the Hollywood film universe. As a major branch of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese mythical animals culture’s magical color is highly in line with the aesthetic orientation of Hollywood surreal films. This magic color also creates opportunities for the global spread of it. At the same time, in the era of globalization, the concept of postmodernism pursuing the rejection of truth has begun to rise. Under the influence of postmodernism, modern aesthetic began to turn to postmodern aesthetic, and grotesque has also begun to become the artistic orientation of postmodern aesthetic, while the artistic image of mythical animals itself has the characteristics of grotesque. In this context, the artistic image building of Chinese mythical animals should grasp the global aesthetic characteristics, and realize the global communication through the modern artistic expression forms.

Most of the global communication of Chinese mythical animals takes cultural products as the carrier. For cultural exchanges, the output of cultural products has more public significance. Copyright runs through every link of the creation and dissemination of cultural products. With the development of Internet technology, piracy is rampant, and the lack of copyright protection seriously restricts the author's enthusiasm for creation. It is urgent to establish a relevant legal mechanism to deal with related infringement disputes and piracy limited. First of all, a protection structure with copyright law as the core should be built. Without core laws, the treatment of legal issues may lead to different results. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a one core copyright protection model. Secondly, make clear the referee rules. Strictly define infringement behavior, timely update and improve existing laws and regulations, supplement loopholes in rules, and eliminate the behavior of wiping the ball all over. Finally, strengthen the enforcement of punishment. Increasing the production and circulation cost of pirated works can effectively reduce the emergence of piracy. This requires the relevant departments to set up a professional team, timely supervise and punish piracy activities. Only by strengthening the copyright protection of cultural products and shaping a good environment for cultural creation can more artistic and cultural workers be attracted to participate in the field of cultural creation, and cultural creation can have a stronger

endogenous power. The global communication of Chinese mythical animals cannot be separated from excellent cultural products, and the enhancement of endogenous power can improve the quality of cultural products.

Hollywood, which spreads American values as its core, keeps introducing Chinese elements to keep them fresh while also preventing the emergence of cultural invasion. As one of the most common symbols of Chinese culture, the appearance of Chinese mythical animals in Hollywood films inevitably shows the characteristics of westernization. This phenomenon provides support for the above viewpoint. This westernization feature based on cultural cognitive barriers and cultural protection also gradually changes the image of mythical animals in people's cognition through communication. As we cheer for the spread of Chinese culture in the world, how to preserve the national exclusivity and iconic issues of culture requires us to calm down and rethink. To regard Chinese mythical animals culture as pioneers in the global dissemination of traditional Chinese culture, it is necessary to be vigilant about the maintenance of cultural connotation. This requires the joint efforts of all sectors of society. First, strengthen the publicity and guidance of the international cultural core and enhance the export of Chinese values. With a solid cultural orientation and high-level cultural policy command, the loss of the cultural core of Chinese mythical animals in the spread of globalization will be alleviated. Secondly, the academic circle should strengthen the cultural and academic research. We should actively build the field of Chinese mythical animals culture, submit relevant academic papers to high-quality international journals, and hold academic seminars on transnational cultural exchanges. Finally, make good use of the translation language in the process of film introduction. When movies convey values, they are not only through image language, but also through text language such as lines. This requires translators to know more about the characteristics of Chinese culture in the process of language transformation, and better transform the values conveyed in the lines and narration into content more in line with the Chinese cultural context, so as to prevent the risk of cultural invasion to a certain extent.

Conclusion

Under the background of cross-cultural exchanges, Chinese elements repeatedly appeared in Hollywood movies, the spread of the Chinese elements development through several stages, from the initial one-way dissemination of western style culture to the revitalization and vitality, the main body consciousness of Chinese traditional culture began to awaken and gradually take the initiative in the process of globalization. As an important part of traditional culture, Chinese mythical animals culture have appeared in Hollywood films for many times because of their grotesque characteristics in line with the postmodern aesthetic and their high artistic value. Judging from the *Fantastic Beasts* series, The Hollywood journey of Chinese mythical animals is highly anticipated and anticipated. Although the modern spread of it shows a trend of promising future, the difficulties and risks they will face still need us to be vigilant. Globalization not only provides opportunities for the exchange and integration of various cultures and challenges for mutual confrontation, but also provides fertile ground for the invasion of language and culture. The research and excavation of cultural core and the adaptation to changes in textual media are issues that need long-term attention for the global dissemination of Chinese mythical animals. In a word, Chinese mythical animals culture has great potential for development. The evolution and transformation of it from *the Classic of Mountains and seas* to Hollywood is undoubtedly a strong proof of the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional culture.

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Proposing Indonesian Comic Ecosystem-Making Through Systemic Design: Social Innovation by Co-design

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Abstract

After many unsuccessful national plans, steps towards systemic thinking and new leadership to improve the Indonesian comic ecosystem have emerged. The research investigates comic artists' leadership capability in improving the ecosystem by understanding it as a systemic problem. Artists are regarded as creative agents capable of designing ("designers") their ecosystems in addition to excelling in their material culture. The research aims to shift away from government reliance and put artists and the community of practice who were previously unrecognized to lead the effort. It will reveal creative communities' inventive skills and become theoretical prototypes of community-led ecosystem transformation. The proposal will be investigated through systemic design methodology, operating through participatory design in social innovation to empower all inhabitants as "designers" in defining and achieving goals and devising enabling systems. In conclusion, this new understanding presents political and ethical power shifts, the intriguing possibility of system transformation through social innovation, and creative methodologies.

Keywords: Indonesian comic, design for sustainability, systemic design, ecosystem-making

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Introduction

Before the 2000s, Indonesian comics were predominantly seen as cultural practices and informal labor. As such, design research on comics as industrial artifacts has been limited. When the Indonesian government later attempted to incorporate comics into the national creative economy agenda, it became evident that the resulting plans lacked references to academic literature and design scholarship. Bonneff (1998) argued that comics are not merely cultural products, but foundational elements of culture itself. However, academic inquiry into Indonesian comics remains sparse, particularly with their role as commodified design artifacts shaped by policy, distribution systems, and shifting audience behaviors (Rhoede & Lent, 2023).

This research positions itself within design studies by centering on the lived experiences and situated knowledge of comic practitioners. As a former artist-turned-academic, I approach this work through a practice-led inquiry that combines creative reflection with the systemic framework. My Ph.D. project, conducted in Australia, critically investigates how comics in Indonesia operate as both cultural and design-driven commodities. It is both an intellectual and personal inquiry which born from years of creative practice, professional relationships, and a yearning to contribute more to Indonesian comics.

Problem Space

There is a growing dissatisfaction with the knowledge foundations that underpin Indonesia's *creative economy national plan*, particularly within the comics publishing sector. Since its formal conception in 2008, the plan has failed to meaningfully improve the comics ecosystem or enable its transformation into a robust cultural industry. Indonesian comics, as a medium within the broader publishing sub-sector, have long existed and evolved largely as an *unregulated domain*. Seventeen years since the creative economy plan was introduced, and with its vision set on transforming the national economy by 2030, there has been little structural support for comics to evolve into a sustainable cultural industry. More importantly, the sector has not yielded equitable economic incentives for practitioners, producers, and stakeholders. Instead, the comic ecosystem remains precarious, trapped within a *marginalized economy*.

At the macro level, this neglect manifests as a persistent *spiral-down effect* that undermines the growth of creative sub-sectors such as comics. Indonesia's creative economy planning continues to exhibit characteristics of a *wicked problem*: it is multi-dimensional, spans across sectors, endures through time, and resists resolution due to the absence of enabling structural systems (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, 2022; Prayudi et al., 2022; Suhendra, 2017). Despite numerous policies and programmatic interventions, systemic transformation remains elusive due to the state's inadequate support.

The meso level, particularly policy formulation and institutional interaction, mirrors these macro-structural flaws. Government-led mapping of the comic ecosystem remains government-centric and top-down, characterized by uniform publishing policies and a lack of participation from the very practitioners most affected: the comic artists themselves (Kurniawan Subagja, 2017; Kusuma Nur Ichsan et al., 2020). Engagement with universities and research institutions is minimal, and what little interaction exists often suffers from the *Ivory Tower Syndrome*, a disconnect where academic research prioritizes disciplinary depth over real-world relevance. This results in a limited understanding of the socio-cultural

practices, institutional dynamics, and livelihood needs of comic practitioners, thereby weakening interventions aimed at building resilient creative ecosystems (Lakitan, 2013).

At the micro level, the lived realities of comic artists reveal the structural neglect with stark clarity. Most artists rely on secondary employment to support their creative practice, face unstable incomes, and endure slow or unpredictable revenue flows. Studies and reports consistently highlight a range of structural barriers: small market size (Imanda, 2002), lack of access to major publishers (Kurnia, 2022; Kuslum, 2007; Sinaga, 2023), absence of dedicated distribution channels (Jatmiko et al., 2022; Zul Fahmi, 2015), perceived low product value (Astuti, 2025), dependency on self-publishing (Hutapea, 2019; Imanda, 2002), and non-standardized talent pipelines (The Straits Times (Singapore), 1995). Other systemic issues include a colonized market orientation (Giftanina, 2012; I. Gunawan, 2012; Imanda, 2002), limited financial access (Hutapea, 2020), low readership (Astuti, 2025; Berman, 1998), and exploitative compensation models (A. Gunawan, 2023; Sinaga, 2023).

Research Aims, Methods, Scope, and Significance of the Study

This research aims to investigate the potential of systemic design for sustainability through the lens of social innovation, with the specific goal of stimulating transformation within the Indonesian comic ecosystem.

The study is delimited to two primary methodological components:

- Desk research, including literature review, policy analysis. It investigates the promise of social innovation, systemic thinking, and challenges to implementing the methods in the Indonesian context.
- Holistic diagnosis and gigamap. These two tools are the default analytical tools of systemic design.

Desk Research

The Promise of Social Innovation for Ecosystem Transformation to Sustainability

The urgency of integrating public participation, especially from ecosystem inhabitants, into policymaking processes has become increasingly evident. Such innovation is not merely an add-on but a necessity for navigating and transforming complex ecosystems. It demands a paradigm shift: one that repositions community members not as passive recipients but as active agents capable of inventing, enhancing, and managing viable solutions for sustainable living (Meroni, 2007). This transformation aligns with the reality that many communities emerge from systemic failures, where prevailing economic structures fail to respond to their lived challenges, giving these communities unparalleled value as sources of deep, context-sensitive insight.

Echoing this, Visser et al. (2005) posit that end-users can serve as experts of their own experiences, contributing crucial knowledge to the design process. Sanders and Stappers (2008) extend this notion by arguing for a systemic shift where users become co-producers through new relational models, *ways of doing together*, that foster not just novel economic configurations, but broader social outcomes such as cohesion, democratization, and equality (Evers & Ewert, 2015).

Creative community-based social innovation does not merely deliver economic benefits; it fosters emotional investment and shared goals. This aligns with Ackoff's (1994) concept of *dissolution*, where rather than solve a problem within the existing system, the goal is to redesign the system itself to eliminate the problem altogether, pushing the boundaries of what the system can achieve. This method embraces both the uniqueness and generality of wicked problems, leveraging any suitable tools, scientific or otherwise, in a comprehensive design response.

In this research, *social innovation* is thus positioned as a systemic response to both market and state failures. It is not merely about plugging gaps in welfare provision or service delivery. As Jenson (2016) argues, social innovation responds to failures in providing work, income, inclusion, and access to services, offering instead pathways to new forms of participation, employment, and social integration. These innovations have underpinned the rise of social entrepreneurship and the social economy, fields celebrated for their capacity to generate employment and foster inclusion.

Social Innovation

This chapter explores the concept of *Social Innovation (SI)* and its relevance to design-led interventions within complex, creative ecosystems, specifically in the Indonesian comics industry. It reviews definitions, typologies, and mechanisms of SI, situating it within broader debates around participatory policy-making, grassroots transformation, and the evolving role of design in society.

Contemporary societal challenges, marked by chronicity, complexity, and structural entrenchment, have outgrown the capacity of conventional policy and economic models to address them effectively. In such contexts, innovation must be reimagined not solely as a market or technological driver, but as a process of altering entrenched social structures, dissolving binaries between public-private, local-global, and consumer-producer.

Heiskala (Sutriadi et al., 2022) defines innovation as a process that (1) introduces a new idea or pattern, (2) alters social practices, and (3) improves social and/or economic performance. Combining typologies from Bekkers and Heiskala, Sutriadi categorized innovations into:

- Technological-business innovation
- Organizational-institutional innovation
- Social innovation

Social innovation, in this context, is understood as systemic change at the societal level, grounded in creativity and aimed at restructuring how communities relate, work, and solve problems.

The Systemic Design in a Social Innovation

This chapter reviews the theoretical and conceptual foundations relevant to this study, with a particular focus on systemic design (SD), and social innovation. These intersecting fields form the basis for exploring how design can operate within complex social ecosystems, such as the Indonesian comic industry.

This research positions SD as an alternative to conventional design thinking, especially within complex and "wicked" problem spaces that cannot be addressed through linear or

siloed strategies. Drawing from the work of Latour (1996), SD emphasizes the inclusion of not only multiple human perspectives but also non-human actors, in shaping system dynamics. This pluralistic view of systems allows designers to mediate between stakeholders, support systemic understanding, and foster shared ownership of change.

In contexts like Indonesia, where government support is fragmented, policy is often top-down, and communities are historically excluded, design for social innovation provides a powerful, adaptable framework for ecosystem transformation. The systemic principles reviewed here will inform the design methods, tools, and facilitation strategies deployed in this research, particularly in its use of Holistic Diagnosis and Giga map as platforms for collaborative intervention.

Systemic Design Tools: Holistic Diagnosis and Giga Map

The research method is structured around two main tools: Holistic Diagnosis (HD) and Giga map. HD is used to perform an extensive, cross-sectoral diagnosis of the Indonesian comics ecosystem, mapping key actors, subsystems, relationships, and flows of value, attention, and influence (Sevaldson, 2018). It helps reveal the underlying structures and systemic barriers that hinder transformation.

Giga map, as a collaborative systems visualization tool, facilitates stakeholder dialogue, knowledge sharing, and design synthesis. It functions simultaneously as an analytical tool, a planning mechanism, and a communication medium, making it ideal for engaging interdisciplinary groups in making sense of complex problems and imagining alternatives.

Social Innovation in the Indonesian Context

There are three core reasons SI is an appropriate lens through which to explore transformation in Indonesia's creative sectors:

1. Sectoral Interconnectedness: The comics industry sits at the intersection of animation, literature, games, and film. Social innovation can seed cross-sector transformation, forming soft infrastructure for broader cultural development.
2. Policy Limitations: Indonesia's hybrid of state-led and market-driven development fails to deliver equitable cultural policies. SI offers an alternative to extractive, centralized planning, enabling grassroots actors to define and implement their own agendas.
3. Governance Constraints: As Grimm et al. (2013) observe, SI can bypass bureaucratic bottlenecks, operating outside formal systems until those systems are ready to adopt or scale successful models. This is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where government interventions are often top-down, ceremonial, and disruptive.

Grimm et al. (2013) and Howaldt and Schwartz (2016) highlight that the success of SI depends heavily on the macro-meso-micro policy landscape:

- Macro: National policy, institutional frameworks, and economic orientation (e.g., extractive vs. creative).
- Meso: Sector-level infrastructure, including financing mechanisms, distribution networks, and organizational partnerships.
- Micro: Community values, entrepreneurial culture, and local capacity for change.

In Indonesia, the environment for SI remains underdeveloped. The "Ivory Tower Syndrome" in universities (Lakitan, 2013) reflects a broader disconnect between academic institutions and real-world challenges. Limited R&D budgets, weak infrastructure, and siloed research agendas further isolate potential contributors from the innovation process.

Barriers to Social Innovation in Indonesia

Four main barriers to SI are particularly relevant in the Indonesian context:

1. Funding Constraints: SI often lacks sustainable financing. In Indonesia, it is frequently bundled into CSR initiatives, which are short-term, market-oriented, and fail to produce systemic change (Prabawani et al., 2023).
2. Resistance to Change: Centralized governance structures and risk-averse bureaucracies are hesitant to support distributed decision-making. Participatory policymaking is viewed as threatening to hierarchical control (Blomkamp et al., 2017).
3. Conflicts of Interest: Cross-sector collaboration can result in unequal goal alignment. Tensions may arise when stakeholders have competing priorities or when benefits are unequally distributed (Rahmawati, 2011).
4. Poor Knowledge Sharing: The absence of institutional mechanisms to catalogue and circulate SI best practices impedes replication and learning. Most community outreach or university-led programs remain undocumented, informal, or under-publicized (Ghazali & Martini, 2012; Tjakaraatmadja et al., 2008; Zul Fahmi, 2015).

Phase 1, Step 1. Literature Review, Policy Analysis

Structural Weaknesses in Indonesian Policy-Making

Public policy in Indonesia, particularly across cultural and creative sectors, has been widely critiqued as complex, unpredictable, and structurally weak. As Court and Young (Datta et al., 2011) and Blomkamp et al. (2017) observe, key stages of the policy cycle, such as stakeholder consultation and evidence-based decision-making, are frequently overlooked. Consequently, Indonesian policies are often top-down in nature and disconnected from the communities they claim to serve.

Zhang (2015) further critiques the lack of evaluation mechanisms in Indonesia's policy cycle. Decisions to continue or terminate programs are rarely grounded in systematic assessment, weakening institutional accountability and limiting opportunities for adaptive learning. In creative economy policymaking, these gaps are especially visible.

Indonesia's creative economy master plan, for instance, was largely modeled after the UK's DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) framework. However, as Sutmuller and Setiono (2011, as cited in Blomkamp et al., 2017) argue, this imported model lacks cultural and institutional translation into local Indonesian contexts. Its implementation demonstrates a persistent reliance on copy-paste strategies, with little regard for grassroots realities or stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder Exclusion and the Ivory Tower Syndrome

As Blomkamp (2017) and Datta et al. (2011) highlight, there is no established culture of participatory policymaking in Indonesia. Practitioners, researchers, universities, and civil

society actors are rarely consulted in policy formulation, and as a result, their knowledge is excluded from public governance.

This disconnect is further exacerbated by what Lakitan (2013) terms the "Ivory Tower Syndrome", wherein academic institutions operate in isolation from community needs. Universities, though theoretically part of the national "pentahelix" development model, often fail to engage meaningfully with societal challenges, thereby missing opportunities to influence policy through research-based evidence and community-rooted insight.

Incentive Structures and Political Economy of Policy

Datta (2011) points out that Indonesian formal policy processes are shaped by presidential mandates, bureaucratic competition, and coalition politics, rather than community-centered priorities or developmental logic. Often, economic or political incentives drive whether a policy is pursued or not. Policymakers are generally more responsive when policies align with executive interests or offer potential financial gain.

This dynamic in Indonesia is popularly reflected in the saying: "The government will come to you only if you are a *mata air* (spring), not *air mata* (tears)."

This metaphor underscores a profit-oriented governance paradigm, one that prioritizes economic value extraction over social care or long-term sustainability. In such a policy environment, artistic and cultural sectors, especially informal or decentralized ones like comics, are rarely viewed as strategic, and thus remain under-supported.

Systemic Blockages and the Need for Social Innovation

The symptoms of dysfunctional policymaking are mirrored in what Meroni (2007) refers to as the "blocked system" of contemporary society. Corporations and politicians deflect responsibility, claiming that systemic change is impossible because "people do not want to change." In contrast, citizens argue that they lack alternative models and structural support for transformation. This mutual deferral of responsibility perpetuates stasis and disenfranchisement.

In response, Meroni suggests using social innovation as a starting point for unlocking systemic transformation. Rather than responding to technological innovation, designers must leverage their situated knowledge, relational skills, and creative intuition to co-create solutions that are socially embedded and collectively owned. In doing so, design becomes a tool not for market expansion, but for rebalancing power and enabling inclusive change.

In sum, the literature on Indonesian political openness for a participatory process found a disconnect between policy, society, and innovation in Indonesia, particularly in the creative sectors. Imported frameworks, elite-centric governance, and a lack of participatory mechanisms have resulted in a creative economy strategy that is neither inclusive nor adaptive.

Phase 2, Step 1. Holistic Diagnosis

This phase of HD is conducted amid a lack of data and information that has become a chronic problem in Indonesia. The absence of actual, up-to-date, and detailed data is one of the

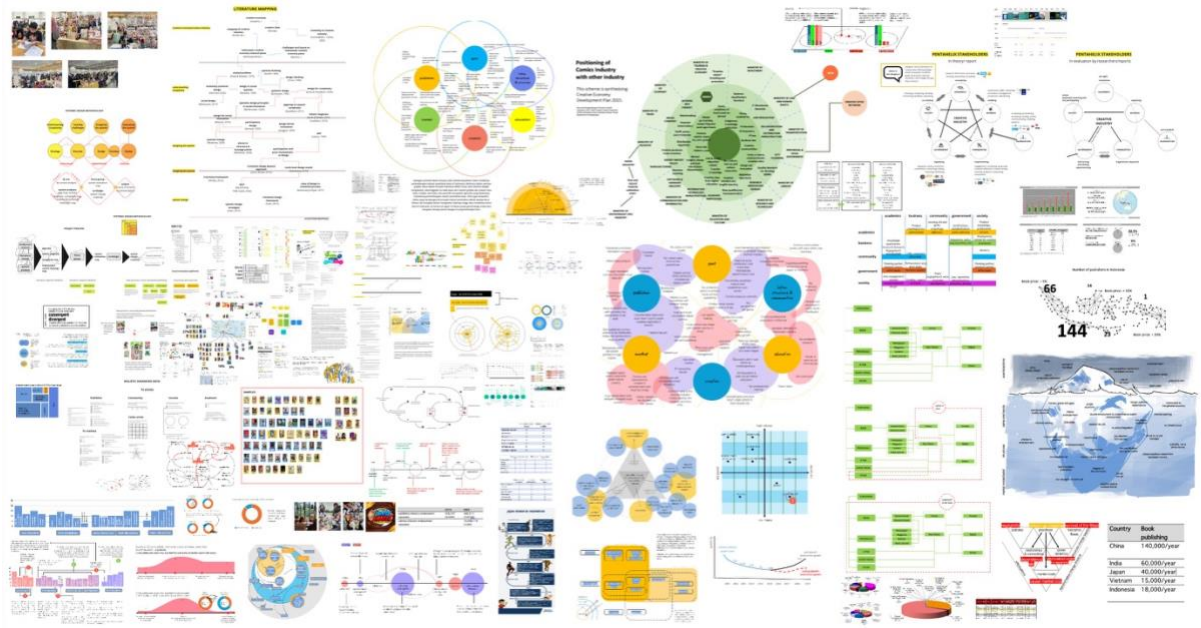
biggest challenges for the government to manage the publishing sector. As Peter Drucker said, “you can't manage what you can't measure,” sums up the government's hesitation.

HD is conducted in two phases: Phase 1: Analysis of Energy and Matter Flows, and Phase 2: Analysis of Contexts and Territories. HD's primary data come from the Indonesian Creative Economy National Reports for the last two periods of 2023 and 2024, the Central Statistics Bureau for 2024, and various academic manuscripts cited in the literature review.

According to Grimm et al. (2013), HD can be conducted using flexible tools and methods, depending on data availability and context. A territorial development case study conducted in a newly formed province in Indonesia by Hidayat et al. (2024) also demonstrates how data can be extrapolated creatively and how secondary data can be used to create a more accurate picture. Among the tools used by HD (figure 5) are multi-level perspectives, causal loop analyses, iceberg models, comparisons, radar diagrams, historiography analyses, stakeholder mapping, access mapping, action map, knowledge maps, participation involvement maps, power-interest matrices, connection map, and ecosystem maps (Figure 6-8).

There are also limitations to HD during this phase, such as distorted understanding, biased diagnosis (diagnosis based on a researcher's assumptions), and blind spots. Hence, this HD phase is not used as a final diagnosis, but as a hypothesis.

Figure 1
Holistic Diagnosis Phase 1 + 2



HD 1: Analysis of Energy and Matter Flows

This first phase of HD analyses every matter used by the ecosystem's production, distribution, and consumption cycle of goods and services. HD is rooted in many methods borrowed from other disciplines to see what energy and matter enter and leave (input and output) the system. Some of the analyses used in this HD are: input-output analysis, causal loop analysis, skill maps, titles published per year, labor growth data, cost-income comparison, innovation index, work hour to income comparison, supply-demand analysis, and many others.

Result of HD 1

The result captures the movement of intangible energy (attention, skills, labor, production cost, capital, motivations, etc) and tangible matter (comics published, merchandise, events, funds, revenues, etc.) through various actors within the ecosystem.

Table 1
Result Consolidation of HD 1

Flow type	input	in-system process	output
Creative energy (human capital)	artist, communities, passion, artistic skills, knowledge (formal & tacit), storytelling ability, communication. Through academia: design knowledge and research.	comics production, collaboration, innovation, transmedia.	comics (in many types), intellectual property. Transmedia products, and spinoffs that circulate in niche market.
Cultural ideas	local myths, folklore, identity, religious narratives, values, and traditions.	narrative adaptation, IP development. Informal teaching, mentoring, reviewing, and collaboration transform individual practices into *communities of practice*. This sustains talent pipelines and builds morale, but often lacks formal structure or reward systems.	narratives, counter narratives, social commentary, values, cultural representation, national identity. This output is often unacknowledged or undervalued within the national plans or public discourse. Cross-platform monetization. IP development is promising and observable, but fragile due to legal, financial, and policy gaps.
(Financial) capital	Self-funding, crowdfunding, fan patronage.	comic IP, event organizing, education tools, activism. This adds adaptive versatility, but often emerges out of necessity (survival) rather than institutional planning.	revenue, products, livelihood, and social welness bonds that provide resilience).
Policy Input	University-injected programs (fair, comic weeks), and community-based initiatives (conventions, festivals,	publishing and distribution. Conventions, festivals, and pop-up markets transform cultural energy into public presence and	market exposure, data, audience feedback

	cooperatives, association)	monetization. These events are entry points for lay audiences and moments of feedback, market testing, and cultural visibility.	
Infrastructure	Social media, platforms, publishers, bookstore.	intervention, programs	(often misaligned) impact and (low) sustainability

HD 2: Analysis of Context and Territories

To discover the relationships between the activities and the contexts around them, HD's second phase examines all the relationships generated directly or indirectly, including the environment where the system is located. Both territorial considerations and stakeholder involvement are addressed in depth in this analysis. Besides its morphological features, the context is influenced by its economic, social, and cultural characteristics. The focus shifts from natural resources to relevant industrial activities, typical products, folklore, and demographics. Some analyses used in this phase are demographic data, purchase parity, ecosystem map, geo-economic data, ecosystem interrelatedness scheme, market value, publisher mapping, and many more.

Result of HD 2

Table 2
Result Consolidation of HD 2

Territory	Territory Type	Core Dynamics	Systemic Opportunity
Cultural	symbolic-cultural	identity, satire, heritage, hybridity	reconnect comics to cultural policy
Economic	precarious economic	informalized survival economy	build IP-based value chains
Institutional	instituional vacuum, state-centric intervention	policy mismatch, top-down control	co-design policy with practitioners
Educational	knowledge assymetry	disconnected from the industries reality	bridge informal-formal education
Platform	platform-dominated digital infrastructure	reliance on global tech infrastructure	develop sovereign digital platform/tools
Community	grassroots cultural infrastructure	peer mentoring, production, distribution	recognize and fund community work
Societal Perception	perception & social legitimacy space	low status of comics as a career	shift narratives through strategic campaigns

Comics in Indonesia are a complex constellation of overlapping territories: cultural, economic, institutional, educational, digital, communal, and perceptual; each shaped by systemic asymmetries and historical neglect. While formal structures such as government policy, education, and publishing remain fragmented or misaligned, informal networks and community-driven practices fill the gaps. Despite institutional support, comics thrive through

community solidarity, platform improvisation, and hybrid cultural narratives. The resilience of the public sector hides deeper systemic fragilities, including reliance on foreign platforms and policy irrelevance. To achieve sustainable transformation, these grassroots territories must be recognized and empowered, their logic integrated into formal systems through participatory design, and comics must be reframed as dynamic elements of Indonesia's identity and creative economy.

The result of phases 1 and 2 holistic diagnosis reveal five systemic failure symptoms, escalating the Indonesian comic ecosystem issue into wicked problem territory. The five symptoms are cobra effect, doom loop, tragedy of the commons, fixes that fail and lesser of evils.

Phase 2, Step 2. Giga Map

Giga Map of Indonesian Comic Ecosystem Complexities

Giga maps were developed to map cross-sectoral issues and unpack their nuances. The giga map was visualized using multi-model and layered data in the form of infographics, cartoons, news articles, photos, and data visualization. During Melbourne Design Week 2024, it was also exhibited with the “Work in Progress” RMIT Ph.D student collective under the event “Distabling: Acts of Emergent Design Research.”

Figure 2
Giga Map of Indonesian Comics Ecosystem

Consolidation of Analysis From the Giga Map

Each of stakeholder in the ecosystem is a silo, they're disconnected in sharing similar understanding of the system's goals. They don't have the means to pursue betterment because each believes the issue is not systemic, and tends to generate reactive correction of a system failure. A SWOT analysis was then used to reveal strategic patterns encapsulating hidden strengths and future potentials, as well as barriers and bottlenecks for change.

Table 3
SWOT Analysis of the Giga Map

Strength	Weakness
• Comic artists in Indonesia are highly versatile and adaptable, working across disciplines like animation, design, and filmmaking. • A strong community of practice exists, offering mutual learning, creative support, and distribution alternatives. • Communities fix and offering alternative to the failing system; becomes crucial for the practice. These are grassroot innovation traits. • Artists demonstrate creative cross-pollination, combining skills from various fields to produce unique outcomes. • Artists are not only creators but also ecosystem builders, initiating communities, events, cooperatives, and educational hubs.	• There is no structured career path, leading to job insecurity and inconsistent income. • Comics are often perceived as cultural practices (similar to hobbies), not legitimate professions, resulting in low societal and market valuation. • The industry lacks artist representation, and most publishing models offer minimal financial return. • Distrust in government support is widespread due to disconnected, ceremonial, or ineffective programs. • Distribution systems are fragmented, and there is limited collaboration with academia or formal institutions. • Artists' versatility is often a survival strategy, not a sign of healthy industry support. • Education sector is an "ivory tower," unable to give answer to the problems.
Opportunity	Threat
• Cross-sector collaboration is possible, especially with education, and digital content sectors. • Digital platforms and self-publishing enable artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach audiences directly. • Campus communities and alternative publishers are emerging as hubs of experimentation and support. • There is growing momentum for multi-stakeholder collaboration, including bridging between sub-systems within the ecosystem. • Cultural identity and local storytelling are gaining value as assets in the broader creative economy. • Social innovation readiness is observable in many community initiatives. • Some Indonesian comic artists have achieved international recognition, showing potential for global market reach. • There are sufficient fan conventions throughout the year to provide a collaboration platform, market access point, talent discovery, and economic-cultural legitimation.	• Deep reliance to community making the ecosystem is fragile and hard to grow. • Community-reliance might gatekeep innovation and block outlier. • Regions without communities are virtually deadlocked. • The market is dominated by foreign comics (manga, manhwa), making it harder for local content to thrive. • Ongoing financial precarity discourages long-term commitment to the comic profession. • Government programs remain symbolic, bureaucratic, and disconnected from real artist needs. • Publishers prioritize short-term sales over ecosystem development or talent growth. • Creative burnout and dropout risks are high due to over-reliance on informal support and under-compensated labor. • Low commitment towards sector regulation since no data backs up the importance of doing so.

• The existing ecosystem has the key foundations for social innovation: self-organized actors (groups) with shared goals and behaviours. • Comics in Indonesia are deeply rooted in local culture and social commentary—making them ideal vehicles for cultural transmission and civic engagement.	• With a skewed policy-making process, the government's role in any effort is a deadweight. • Government tends to hold the status quo, making change efforts seen as a challenge to authority. • Indonesian chronic socio-cultural mindsets of readership. • Macro-meso-micro landscape are not ready to justify the ecosystem transformation to industry.

Conclusion

1. Toward an artist-led transformation
   There is a pressing need to reposition comic artists as active agents of ecosystem design rather than merely content producers. Since these artists have historically been marginalized and institutionally unsupported, they operate in an environment marked by informal economies, fragmented infrastructures, and the absence of policy scaffolding. Artist-led system interventions are proposed to replace ineffective top-down government strategies by focusing on their situated knowledge and leadership potential.
2. The Systemic Design Framework for Change
   The research unearths the multilayered complexity of the comic ecosystem through holistic diagnosis and Giga mapping, highlighting systemic symptoms such as policy dysfunction, economic precarity, and institutional fragmentation. The tools provide a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem's actors, flows, and failures, positioning the comic field as a “wicked problem.” This approach reframes comic artists and their communities as “designers” able to articulate new futures through collaborative, reflective, and relational practices.
3. The Role of Social Innovation as an Enabling Mechanism
   As a process rather than a product, social innovation links participatory design with systemic change. Peer mentorship, hybrid platforms, and adaptive cultural practices already exist in grassroots initiatives, but remain underrecognized and underfunded. These informal efforts are legitimized and replicated as sustainable, replicable systems of value creation by framing them as prototypical forms of innovation.
4. A Need for Institutional and Policy Alignment
   The research cautions against romanticizing grassroots resilience despite the vibrant, self-organized energy of comic communities. Bottom-up innovations risk being co-opted, gatekept, or exhausted without institutional realignment, particularly in policy, education, and digital infrastructure. By bridging the gaps between government, market, and community, co-design becomes a design method and a political strategy. Power must be redistributed ethically so that multiple stakeholders can shape the future collectively and fairly.
5. Building a Regenerative Ecosystem
   Ultimately, this study contributes to a theory of change that reframes comics in Indonesia not only as cultural commodities but also as vehicles of civic imagination and socioeconomic change. The paper promotes distributed leadership, participatory governance, and contextual intelligence as the building blocks of a regenerative ecosystem. In this vision, comics will catalyze broader dialogues on identity, agency, and the creative

economy's role in shaping equitable futures, rather than conventional economic and policy frameworks.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In the process of writing this paper, I utilized AI-assisted language and writing software, namely Google Translate, Grammarly, and Wordtune. Google Translate was used to translate the initial manuscripts written in the Indonesian language to English. Grammarly was used to check and correct the texts, and Wordtune was used to fine-tune the sentences into a formal and shorter form. Software is not used for any other than what is declared.

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The Whip Is Jerked, the Audience Is Jerked: The Hegemony of the Whip in Abdul Muluk's Theater

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Abstract

The whip is an important element in Abdul Muluk's Traditional Theater performance. The whip is made of rattan whose length is adjusted as desired. *Abdul Muluk* is a traditional theater that developed around the 1930s in Jambi Province, Indonesia. The story of Abdul Muluk comes from the poem Sultan Abdul Muluk written by King Ali Haji during the Malay Kingdom. This study aims to analyze how the whip plays a role in the performance and identify its influence so that it becomes hegemonic in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performance. Using a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach to understand the perspectives of actors and audiences regarding *pecut*, and using a theoretical anthropological approach. Data were obtained through observation of video documentation of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances, through in-depth interviews with actors, art observers, audiences, and theater artists in Jambi. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman Model, through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results is the whip shows the meaning of control, masculinity and patriarchy. These findings provide a deep understanding of how *pecut* can reflect the culture of Jambi society. Abdul Muluk's existence is not only important as a local heritage, but also as evidence of the history and identity of Malay culture that once triumphed in Jambi Province. Through a deep understanding of the whip, it can help artists, culturalists, tradition actors, and the government to maintain and preserve the whip in its originality and integrity of values.

Keywords: hegemony, whip, Abdul Muluk's traditional theater

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Introduction

The whip is an important part of the performance. The whip is one of the properties used in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances. The whip not only functions as a property, but has a significant role in controlling the storyline during the performance. The storyline refers to the relationship between elements in a narrative that can be found in oral productions or dialog that consists of a front plot and a back plot (Sánchez & Sunesson, 2023, p. 56). The whip is always present from the beginning to the last part of the performance. The presence of the whip is able to captivate the audience's attention to stay focused on the storytelling. The ability to captivate, immerse and engage the audience is a natural power of storytelling (Vanin et al., 2024, p. 3). Thus, *Pecut* is inseparable in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances.

Abdul Muluk is one of the traditional theaters that developed in *Muaro Jambi* Regency, Jambi Province. It is called traditional theater because it has the style and cultural elements of a particular region, and performances are formed by the habits of the community that are carried out continuously so that they are embedded in local culture (Juliastuty, 2014, p. 38). Local culture in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater gives it a free character, without being bound by rigid performance rules, spontaneous and improvisational (Sahrul N, 2015, p. 3). Improvisation is an important factor in the creation of theatre, part of experimentation and exploration; formally, improvisation as an acting technique; acting is understood as being oneself, not pretending to be someone else on stage with the aim of discovering and expressing emotions from within, which is often achieved through improvisation. (Szuster, 2019, pp. 376-378). This condition allows actors to act freely in response to dialog by other characters, taking into account the context of the dialog and the conditions of the audience. In this case, the actor expresses themselves and develops an awareness of themselves and others based on the situation at hand (Romanelli et al., 2017, p. 19).

Abdul Muluk is not just traditional theater, but a legacy that lives and dies over and over again. As a traditional theater it cannot be separated from its audience (Huang et al., 2022, p. 200). The audience is an essential element in theater. Abdul Muluk's dissemination process was done orally in the 1930s-1931 in *Muaro Jambi* Regency (Mulyani et al., 2020). A tradition in Greek times was theater used as a way to honor their gods (Asante, 2016, p. 14). The activity was passed down from generation to generation by the ancestors and is preserved by the community (Kora & Daryusti, 2024, p. 64). It had its heyday in 1968-1970, but was then swayed by the times, so it went into suspended animation in 1971-1982.

The whip is not just a prop; it is the driver of destiny in the performance. Every time the whip hits the table and makes a sound, it's not just the actors who are in action, but the entire story seems to be subject to the whip. The whip has complete authority in controlling the storyline, the actors on stage, and organizing each scene. Its presence encourages the audience to stay awake and wait for the next scene. The whip invites a deeper meaning, driving the destiny of all the elements involved in the performance, with the magical power carried in every beat. In every beat, the whip seems to be the voice of destiny that controls the fate of the characters on stage.

The stomping sound that echoes on stage is not just a sound, but it seems to control all elements in Abdul Muluk's theater performances and even the audience. This analysis is important to answer the problem of how the whip forms a hegemony that affects the structure and dynamics of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances. The purpose of the research

is to analyze how the whip plays a role in the performance and identify its influence so that it becomes hegemony in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performance. This research will also present a new contribution by approaching Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. This research also seeks to reveal how audiences receive and interpret the symbolization of power contained therein. Thus, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of hegemony in the context of performing arts.

Literature Review

There are various literatures that discuss the historical aspects, performance structure, and revitalization efforts of Abdul Muluk theatre. Extensively examines the relationship between Abdul Muluk's theater and the theater of the Malay aristocracy in Southeast Asia (Suboh, 2023). Examines the history and spread of Abdul Muluk theater in *Muaro Jambi* Regency, explaining how the influence of aristocratic theater from Malaysia helped shape the characteristics of the performance. Examines the development of Abdul Muluk theater in *Sembubuk* Village, one of the villages in *Muaro Jambi* Regency (Mulyani et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the context of revitalization, Lubis discusses how the *Pancarona* Theater group attempts to revive Abdul Muluk's traditional theater through more modern performances (Lubis, 2023). Then, Bahar highlighting how performing arts around the *Muaro Jambi* Temple National Cultural Heritage area can be developed as a tourism attraction (Bahar, 2022). Then, Notosutanto and Ilham examined the function of Abdul Muluk or Dul Muluk Theater in Palembang (Ilham et al., 2023; Notosutanto et al., 2023). The results of his research state that Abdul Muluk Theater or commonly called *Dul Muluk* functions as a means of entertainment, education, and a medium of cultural expression.

Furthermore, a number of studies discuss whips in various performance contexts. Zacek, explores the role and perception of female slave owners in history and popular culture. The author explains the whip in this context as a symbol of the power of female slave owners in controlling and oppressing their slaves (Zacek, 2021). Duin discusses the history and meaning of the whip dance in the culture of the *Wayana* people in the East Guiana Highlands. In his writing, the whip is not only a legal tool but it also has ritual meaning. The whip in the ritual is used in performance to imitate *Tamok* (an evil spirit in *Wayana* mythology), where the loud sound of the whip creates a dramatic effect in the ritual (Duin, 2014). Edmonds & Maxwell-Stewart, highlighting the whip in the history of colonial theater, showing how it was used as a symbol of power and oppression (Edmonds & Maxwell-Stewart, 2016). Dutta et al., examines the use of whips in social contexts highlighting the role of whips in rituals and as a tool of punishment and control across cultures (Dutta et al., 2021). Heldman et al., discuss the image of the whip in popular culture and the media, which is often associated with domination and control (Heldman et al., 2016).

Then researchers who discuss hegemony include Fariyah, examining the history and development of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Fariyah, 2013). Then, Lears explores the concept of cultural hegemony and discusses its problems and possible applications in analysis. According to Lears, hegemony is often regarded as people's spontaneous consent to the leadership of the dominant group, which is gained through their prestige and position in the world of production (Lears, 1985). Siswati, further analyzes hegemony theory as a critique of reductionist thinking in Marxism and non-Marxism. Based on the literature review above, over all there is no study that specifically discusses the hegemony of whips in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances (Siswati, 2018).

Methodology

The method used in this research is qualitative method. Through qualitative methods, researchers are able to see phenomena more broadly and deeply according to what happens and develops in society (Sugiyono, 2013, p. 206). The research uses primary data and secondary data. Primary data are videos of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances, interviews with the community, theater artists, traditional actors of sources related to Abdul Muluk's theater. While secondary data is data obtained from, writings, and previous research results. Data collection techniques are done through literature study, observation, interviews and documentation (Creswell, 2019).

This research process began with observation of the Art in Revolt Jambi theater community which initiated the *Dul Muluk* Festival. This festival was the starting point for the rediscovery of two Abdul Muluk traditional theater groups that still survive in Muaro Jambi Regency, namely the *Mekar Kembali* group from *Sembubuk* Village and *Sereh Serai Serumpun* in *Muaro Jambi* Village. After analyzing performance recordings and compiling interview questions, researchers met directly with the head of Art in Revolt Jambi theatre and the head of the Dul Muluk Festival to understand the dynamics of the performance and the challenges in revitalizing this theatre. Then direct observation was carried out in *Muaro Jambi* Village, by interviewing the oldest generation of theater actors.

This research uses the Miles and Huberman Model data analysis technique. Miles and Huberman said that qualitative data analysis is carried out continuously until the data is complete and saturated (Sugiyono, 2013, p. 246). The data analysis technique is data reduction, all data obtained from observations, interviews, literature studies are sorted based on their relevance to the research focus. After being reduced is the presentation of data in descriptive narrative form. Data is presented by linking empirical findings in the field. Then present the data by interpreting and analyzing the data based on empirical and data findings. The data was further analyzed by approaching Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

Result and Discussion

The results and discussion are based on data analysis and their relevance to the theoretical references used. The theory used by researchers is hegemony proposed by Antonio Gramsci. The concept of hegemony was first introduced by Russian Marxist Plekhanov as a strategy to overthrow Tsarism in Russia in 1883-1884 (Fariyah, 2013, p. 99). Antonio Gramsci later developed this concept to analyze how modern capitalist societies are organized, both in the past and present (Fariyah, 2013, p. 100). Gramsci explained that class supremacy occurs through two mechanisms, namely domination and intellectual and moral leadership (Gramsci, 1976, p. 57 in Fariyah, 2013, p. 102). In achieving hegemony, the ruling class does not only rely on violence, but also builds leadership that allows them to gain the approval of the people they control (Fariyah, 2013, p. 103).

Hegemony is not just coercive domination, but a consensus mechanism built through dominant ideology (Siswati, 2018, p. 21). Thus, hegemonized people tend to accept and imitate the dominant group's way of thinking and worldview without questioning it critically (Siswati, 2018, p. 26). Furthermore, cultural hegemony also reflects how a dominant group gains spontaneous approval from society through the prestige and legitimacy they build in the social structure (Lears, 1985, p. 568). Approaching Gramsci's theory of hegemony, helps to understand ideology works invisibly. Hence, hegemony is not just a process of domination,

but an ongoing process of consciousness creation through the interaction between hegemonic ideology and resistance to it (Lears, 1985, p. 571).

Abdul Muluk's Tradition Theater Journey

The Abdul Muluk theater tradition originated from a literary work known as Syair Abdul Muluk. It was written by Raja Saleha and Raja Ali Haji, who hailed from *Penyengat* Island, Riau Islands, Indonesia. However, people mostly recognize Syair Abdul Muluk as the work of Raja Ali Haji, because he was a famous Malay writer, scholar, and scientist in the 19th century The spread of Syair Abdul Muluk is in various Malay regions, known to include South Sumatra and Jambi (Azhar et al., 2011, p. 1). In South Sumatra, it is referred to as *Dulmuluk* Theater, which at that time was still in the form of a poem recitation performed by a trader of Arab descent named Sheikh Achmad Bakar or Wan Bakar (Nandang Sunandar & Bustomi, 2023, p. 40). While in Jambi, the spread of Abdul Muluk traditional theater has various versions. According to Mulyani et al., the spread in Jambi was carried out orally in 1930-1931 in Muaro Jambi Regency. In line with Wati's opinion, the spread of a culture through oral media is a function of tradition itself (Wati, 2023). From 1968 to 1970 was the heyday of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater. However, it experienced a state of suspended animation in 1971-1982. Then, it was resurrected by one of the Abdul Muluk Tradition Theater groups in *Muaro Jambi Regency*, but still could not last long so that it experienced suspended animation again, until it rose again at the time of the Art in Theater Community.

In 2021, Abdul Muluk's traditional theater group performed a special performance at the Dul Muluk Festival entitled *"Kecik sakti Gedang Betuah"* which was also initiated by Art in Revolt theatre. The festival was organized to showcase and regenerate the awareness of the local community to maintain and preserve the Dul Muluk traditional theater. On this occasion, Teater Art in Revolt also made a recording to immortalize Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances, which have long been missed by theater artists and the community. The Dul Muluk Festival is the beginning of the revival of the Abdul Muluk traditional theater group that developed in *Muaro Jambi* Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia. According to the head of Teater Art in Revolt Jambi, this event was held to minimize mistakes in the performance of Abdul Muluk's traditional theatre so far or in the form of creations by the younger generation in the future.

Then, another version of the spread of Abdul Muluk traditional theater in Jambi according to Darius, the development of Abdul Muluk traditional theater in *Muaro Jambi* Regency, Jambi, Indonesia, was influenced by theater expeditions that developed in Penang and Johor, Malaysia. The spread of Abdul Muluk's theater is believed to have originated from the *Wayang* Parsi Pushi Indera Bangsawan of Penang theater group founded by Mamak Pushi and his son-in-law Bai Kassim in Penang. *Wayang Parsi* was a theater performance for the upper class or aristocrats at that time who were then often called *Indera Bangsawan.* The success of Indera Bangsawan in the Malay regions led to the emergence of other theater groups, namely the Bangsawan Theater from Johor called *Abdoel Moeloek.* Later, *Abdoel Moeloek's* theater from Johor spread to Batavia, attracting audiences in Sumatra and Malaysia. Jambi Province is part of the Sumatra region. Jambi Province, which at that time was also a trade route through the Batanghari River, did not rule out the possibility that the *Abdoel Moeloek* theater group from Johor also spread there.

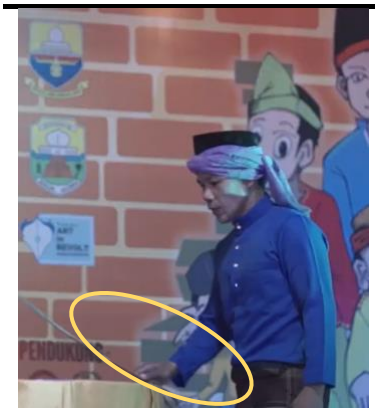
Their presence in Jambi inspired similar theater groups, including the Abdul Muluk theater that developed in Muaro Jambi Regency. This is in line with the opinion of Suboh, that the

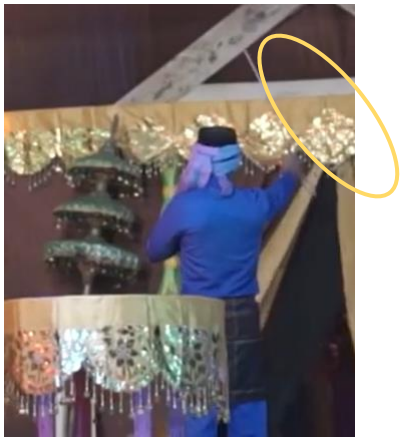
term noble theater comes from the Parsi puppet show. Then, the Dul Muluk or Abdul Muluk theater is one form of noble theater. Thus, the story of Dul Muluk or Abdul Muluk is one part of the Wayang Parsi performance. Meanwhile, according to the local community, especially the old people, they knew Abdul Muluk's poem through the radio, then they adapted it into a performance. Abdul Muluk at that time was passed down from generation to generation and orally, such as one of the traditional theater actors Abdul Muluk Sambawi who learned from his uncle and Budiman from his father.

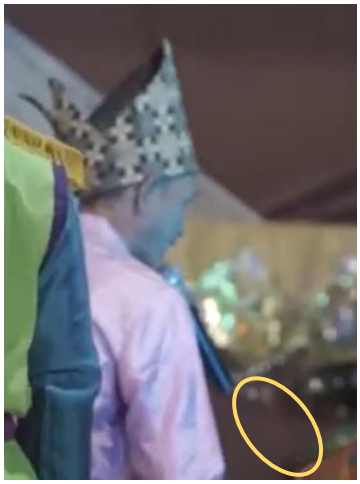
Through various versions about the spread of Abdul Muluk in Jambi, Indonesia, it can be concluded that the spread of Abdul Muluk's play in Jambi, shows how dynamic and rich the process of cultural transmission in the Malay region at that time. Starting from oral transmission since the 1930s, the influence of Bangsawan theater expeditions from Penang and Johor that strengthened cross-country cultural networks, to the role of modern media such as radio in the 1960s, Abdul Muluk's traditional theater journey reflects the dynamics of Malay culture that spread and developed in various regions in Malaysia-Indonesia. This shows that Abdul Muluk's traditional theater is not just an ordinary performance used as entertainment, but is part of the Malay cultural heritage in Indonesia which has historical value and identity representation for the Malay community. This cultural art continues to develop and adapt throughout its history.

Whip in the Narrative Structure of Performance

Table 1
Analysis of the Function of the Whip in Abdul Muluk's Traditional Theater Performance

Visual	Verbal	Function
 **Narrator 1** Moving the whip and hitting it against the table	*Adindo, apo pemikiran adindo*	Start a conversation

 **Narrator 1** Raising the Whip and Pointing it at the Back of the Stage while Singing (*Bekisah*)	-	Accompanying the singing (*bekisaj*) and giving codes and commands to the actors and actresses backstage
 Narrator 1 Moving the whip and hitting it against the table	*Mengapo berani memanggil sanak sodaro yang ado di relung sari?*	Start a conversation
 Narrator 1 Singing *(Beladon)* is punctuated by beating the table after each verse. The number of beatings is up to 23 times	-	Accompany singing and emphasize lyrics



Narrator 2
Whipping the table before dialoguing

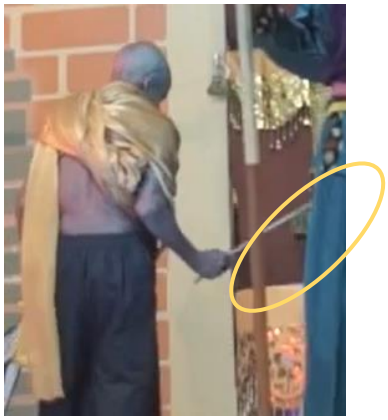
kakando lebih baik kito pulang ke balairung sari

Start a conversation while emphasizing the invitation

Harapan 2
Whipping the table before dialoguing

Adindo apo pemikiran adindo kito di dalam negeri

Starting the question



Mamando
Whipping the table before dialoguing

Menjadi Mamando di Negeri Bari-Bari, lebih baik Mamando menanyokan duo Harapan, Harapan yang pertama yang kedua, Mamando diperintah Anando untuk menanyakan duo Harapan tentang tahta siding Kerajaan sudah siap atau bagaimana?

Initiate questions and confirm orders from the King

Sultan Abdul Hamisyah
Whipping the table before dialoguing

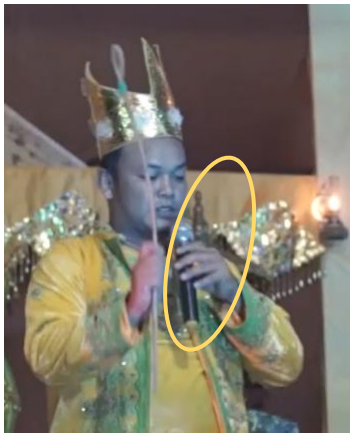
Mamandoku tuan apo pemikiran Mamando? Starting the question

Mael/Tuan Kobi
Whipping the table before mentioning the character being played

Tersebut siaponyo namo Mael Self-introduction

Asisten Tuan Kobi/Resat
Whipping the table before mentioning the character being played

Tersebut namo Resat Self-introduction

 **Abdul Muluk** Whipping the table before mentioning the character being played	*Mentri Hulubalang Harapan sekalian, bolehkan beta bersebut nama dalam kita punya Negeri?* *Sebut saya punya nama Abdul Muluk*	Initiate questions and introduce yourself
 Abdul Muluk Whipping before giving orders to Harapan 1 and Haparan 2 to pick up his future wife, the daughter of Saudagar Sulaiman.	*Harapan pertama dan yang kedua, jangan sampai tidak tahu, beta utus untuk menjemput Saudagar di ujung Negeri*	Giving Orders
 Saudagar Sulaiman Saudagar Sulaiman whips the table before asking his assistant Karani a question, also when mentioning his character, besides that, the whip is also often used by the character to point to his son when talking to him.	*-Kerani apo pemikiran di tengah musibah?* *-Sebut sayo punyo namo Saudagar Sulaiman* *-Cubo tengok dalam tas tu, optimalkan pemasukan kito tu jangan macam ko miskin terus*	Asking for opinions Introducing yourself Giving an order

Based on the analysis of the video of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performance in Muaro Jambi Village, which lasts two hours eleven minutes and twenty seconds, the whip scene when whipping the table is counted 68 times. It can be seen that the pattern of using the whip in the performance is done consistently before verbal actions such as asking questions, giving orders, and introducing themselves. In general, the first function of the whip is to mark the beginning of the dialog. The movement of whipping the table before speaking becomes a visual marker for the audience that the conversation will begin. Secondly, *pecut* is predominantly used in performance when singing (*beladon* or *bekisah*). Beladon is intended to invite other players to play on stage such as doing a movement around while singing together.

While *bekisah* is about introducing characters and storylines like a prologue that is sung or chanted, the character who directs the story is called the narrator. *Bekisah* is performed before the performance begins, is narrative and informative, while *beladon* is performed after *bekisah* before the character in *ladon* kan enters or plays on stage. In this case, the *pecut* serves to emphasize the verses of the song and provide emotional pressure.

Not only that, but the whip also serves as a self-introduction or character transition. Some characters, such as *Mael* and *Resat*, whip before saying the name of the character they are playing. Indirectly, this becomes a theatrical technique to quickly establish the character's identity to the audience. Sometimes, the whip is used by powerful characters like the merchant Sulaiman who actively plays with the whip as he talks to his co-stars. This reinforces the character as having power or a higher status that must be obeyed in the scene.

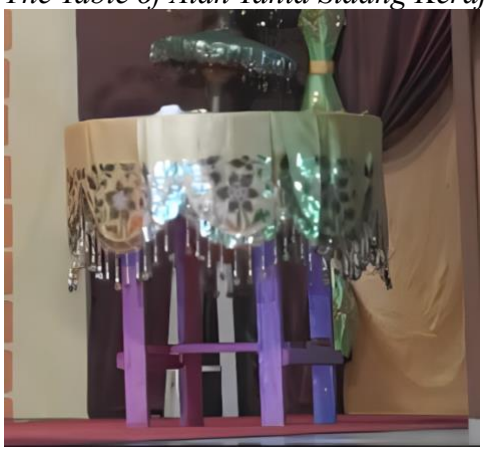
Thus, the use of the whip in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performance is not only as a property or artistic element, but as a symbol with multiple meanings and interpretations. The combination of visual (whip movement) and verbal (dialog or singing) actions indicates a harmonious interaction between the narrative and performative dimensions. Its existence has a significant role in strengthening dialogue, emphasizing roles, and being integrated in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances.

Whips in Gramsci's Hegemony Perspective

The concept of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci is one theory that understands how conditions are not always run violently or coercively, but can be instilled through cultural approval mechanisms. In this case, domination becomes hegemonic when the ruling class succeeds in making its values, norms and views voluntarily accepted by other groups in society, so that the power structure no longer appears as coercion, but rather as something natural and voluntarily accepted (Gramsci in Fariyah, 2013, p. 104).

In the context of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performances, the whip not only functions as a dramatic property, but acts as a tool of cultural hegemony that regulates, directs, and disciplines the structure of the performance as well as the actors and audience. The whip becomes a symbol of institutionalized power in the narrative, where the highest status character, the King, uses the whip as a representation of authority. The whip becomes an important element that creates an agreement between the actors and the audience about “who is in charge” and “when the story begins and ends”.

Figure 1
The Table of Alah Tahta Sidang Kerajaan



Source: https://www.youtube.com/@TeaterAiRJambi

Then, the whip does not stand alone but there is a table that the whip strikes which is referred to as the Table of *Alah Tahta Sidang Kerajaan.* There is no special table shape or color, which is used in the performance. It is just an ordinary wooden table covered with yellow cloth. Hadi mentioned that the whip always hits the table, which symbolizes the royal throne in the performance. This means that the whip does not stand alone as a symbol, but is part of the royal system represented on the theater stage.

Based on interviews with several interviewees, it shows that the whip occupies a central position as a symbol of authority in the performance. Akbar and Hadi stated that the whip is used as a marker of the King's decision and a tool for affirming orders in dialog. Gramsci's perspective, this shows that power is not only political, but also symbolic and ideological, instilled through cultural performances. The whip becomes a representation of “power” not only as symbolic in the story, but as a cultural power structure that is accepted without resistance by the audience. Audiences no longer question the authority of the whip. The stomping of the whip that starts a dialog or marks the King's order is accepted as normal. This shows how the dominance of the whip in the performance is accepted voluntarily through artistic symbolics that are structured over generations and passed down as tradition. This domination is a tangible form of cultural hegemony.

In Gramsci's perspective, the structure of hegemony is also seen in everyday practices, including forms of cultural expression such as theater performances. The whip in Abdul Muluk has a very strong structural function in determining the rhythm and flow of the story. It marks the beginning of the scene, the transition between scenes, the whip becomes a timer, which regulates the tempo and course of a narrative. In line with what Budiman said, the whip also functions as a tone marker in *beladon.* This confirms that the whip also regulates the relationship between narrative, actors and music. In other words, the whip not only organizes the story, but directs how the story is received and interpreted.

Figure 2
Part of the Scene Actors Using Whips

Source: Wulandari (2025)

Another important aspect of Gramsci's perspective is the consent of the dominated. In this study, the audience accepted the function of the whip not with resistance, but with enthusiasm and curiosity. Iswari, an audience member of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater, mentioned that when the whip hits the table, her focus is immediately drawn and she is curious about what happens next. In this case, the performing arts become a tool for spreading the dominant ideology that has been successfully shaped by the whip. Another statement from Rani Iswari emphasized that the whip is even the main character in the performance, not just a property, and without the whip the story would not continue. This statement clearly illustrates how the whip becomes an accepted symbol of domination, even positioned superiorly in the storytelling structure. This is a concrete form of hegemony, a domination that is accepted as inevitable, not forced.

Figure 3
Abdul Muluk's Traditional Theater Performance

Source: https://www.youtube.com/@TeaterAiRJambi

Moreover, the whip also works as an “organic intellectual” in Gramsci's sense, that is, an entity (whip) that mediates the ideology of the dominant class to society through performing arts (Gramsci in Fariyah, 2013, p. 104). Thus, the whip also reinforces the value structure of society regarding hierarchy, authority and command. At the symbolic level, the whip symbolizes control, masculinity and patriarchy. Control, because others must respect the character who holds and uses the whip. For example, the lower classes must accept power as

something that cannot be denied. Meanwhile, masculinity and patriarchy because all of Abdul Muluk's traditional theater performers are male. In this case, the idea that only men can hold power and control social structures is reinforced by the idea of patriarchy which links the male gender to a dominating role. This myth states that the leading role in conventional society belongs to men.

Conclusion

This research shows that the whip in Abdul Muluk's traditional theater is not just a performance property, but a symbol of strong cultural hegemony. Dramaturgically, the whip functions to control the flow of the performance, to mark the beginning of dialog, and to mark orders. More than that, the whip is a symbol of power that is voluntarily accepted by the audience and the theater actors themselves. In Gramsci's perspective of hegemony, the whip is a representation of power that is not coercive, but accepted as a natural part of the tradition inherent in the performance.

More broadly, Abdul Muluk's traditional theater is also a manifestation of Malay culture that comes to life through performance and is passed down orally. Abdul Muluk's existence is not only important as a local heritage, but also as evidence of the history and identity of Malay culture that once triumphed in Jambi Province. strong. Dramaturgically, the whip functions to control the flow of the performance, to mark the beginning of dialog, and to mark orders. More than that, the whip is a symbol of power that is voluntarily accepted by the audience and the theater actors themselves. In Gramsci's perspective of hegemony, the whip is a representation of power that is not coercive, but accepted as a natural part of the tradition inherent in the performance.

The implications of this study are very important for the preservation of traditional theater. Through a deep understanding of the whip, it can help artists, culturalists, traditional actors, and the government to maintain and preserve the whip in its originality and integrity of values. It is also a new discourse in performative studies and cultural studies, especially connecting local symbols with critical theories such as hegemony.

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Correlating Human Traits and Cyber Security Practices of Individuals in the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper re-examines how personality influences secure computing practices. Unlike previous studies, we focus on secure computing behavior in a Southeast Asian market, offering insights into the relationship between personality and security behavior in emerging economies. Additionally, we incorporate multifactor authentication as a key component of modern secure computing practices. To conduct our study, we used a snowball sampling technique to recruit residents of the Philippines aged 18 and above to complete an online questionnaire. The survey assessed the Big Five personality traits alongside secure computing behaviors, including software updates, device security, proactive awareness, password creation, and multifactor authentication. The questionnaire was available online for 51 days, from August 14 to October 3, 2023, and yielded 620 complete responses. Data analysis was conducted using the "seminr" package in R. Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that our survey instruments demonstrated satisfactory reliability, discriminant validity, and convergent validity. We used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the impact of personality on secure computing practices. To assess common method bias, we applied Harman's single-factor test and the smallest positive correlation test, both of which indicated negligible bias. Our findings align with existing literature, showing that conscientiousness and agreeableness are positively associated with secure computing practices, while neuroticism is negatively correlated. These results suggest that personality continues to shape secure computing behaviors across different cultural contexts. Organizations could enhance cybersecurity by offering tailored security training and implementing streamlined procedures that accommodate diverse personality traits, ultimately improving the protection of information systems.

Keywords: personality traits, cybersecurity behavior, human factors in cybersecurity

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Introduction

Human factors play a crucial role in cybersecurity. As Oroszi (2021) highlights, people are not only potential targets of cyberattacks but also essential defenders against them. According to the 2022 Data Breach Investigations Report by Verizon, 82% of breaches involve some form of human element, including social engineering, human error, and misuse. This high percentage underscores the importance of addressing human factors in cybersecurity.

NIST SP 800-137 defines risk as the potential threat an organization faces based on the likelihood and impact of adverse events (NIST, 2011). Human risk, specifically, refers to the losses an organization may suffer due to the actions or decisions of its people. These may include actions with negative consequences or failures to act in ways that could prevent harm. Spitzner (2022) notes that approximately 80% of global breaches involve people—often through phishing and smishing attacks, misconfigured cloud accounts, or the accidental sharing of sensitive data by IT administrators. A typical response to such incidents is to add more tools or solutions. However, this approach can increase complexity, leading to confusion and overwhelming users. For example, while stringent password policies and multi-factor authentication enhance security, they can also hinder users' ability to perform their tasks efficiently.

Given the critical role of the human element in cybersecurity, two key questions arise: (1) "How do we identify and classify individuals with strong cybersecurity behavior?" and (2) "How can we measure strong or weak cybersecurity behavior?" To address the first question, some researchers have turned to personality traits, which have profound implications for how individuals perceive and respond to cybersecurity risk situations (McCormac et al., 2017; Shappie et al., 2020). To answer the second question, a wide range of computing practices is typically considered, including password management, email use, internet use, social media use, mobile device use, information handling, and incident reporting (Egelman & Peer, 2015; Parsons et al., 2017).

Various studies have established correlations between personality and cybersecurity practices. However, security best practices evolve over time, as evidenced by the recent shift in emphasis from password use to multifactor authentication (Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, 2023). In this study, we revisit the relationship between personality and cybersecurity practices, incorporating multifactor authentication given its growing importance in the field. Importantly, we provide empirical support for the role of personality in cybersecurity using data collected from the Philippines, thereby adding a Southeast Asian context to the existing literature.

In the remainder of this paper, we will review the relevant literature, describe our research methodology, analyze our data, and discuss the implications of our findings. Finally, we will summarize the paper and outline potential directions for future research.

Literature Review

The Big Five Personality Traits model encompasses extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience, as described in Table 1. The model has been extensively researched across various domains. Studies have demonstrated its predictive power in academic performance, with conscientiousness emerging as a strong indicator of success (Nießen et al., 2020). In the realm of finance, research by Meman and

Chouhan (2021) found that extraversion and openness positively influence risk-taking in investment decisions, while neuroticism is associated with risk aversion.

Table 1
Description of the Big Five Personality Traits

Trait	Description
Extraversion	An individual's tendency to be outgoing, energetic, and sociable.
Agreeableness	An individual's tendency to be tendency to be compassionate, cooperative, and friendly towards others.
Conscientiousness	An individual's tendency to be organized, responsible, and reliable.
Neuroticism	An individual's tendency to experience negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, and vulnerability.
Openness	An individual's willingness to engage with new ideas, experiences, and unconventional values.

Source. John & Srivastava (1999)

Security education, training, and awareness (SETA) programs are often cited as the most effective way to encourage secure computing practices among employees. However, most SETA programs are found to be ineffective in changing users' behaviors due to a lack of motivation (Noonan, n.d.). A study conducted in Norway shows that motivation to participate in online security training is influenced by personality (Vestad, 2022), suggesting that personality may be an important factor to consider when designing SETA programs.

Despite the potential significance of personality in shaping an organization's cybersecurity, relatively few studies have investigated the role of personality in cybersecurity practices. Some exceptions include Halevi et al. (2013), Riquelme and Roman (2014), Shropshire et al. (2015), McCormac et al. (2017), Shappie et al. (2020), and Kennison and Chan-Tin (2020). Key findings related to personality and cybersecurity are summarized in Table 2.

Existing empirical studies generally suggest that conscientious and agreeable individuals tend to adopt more secure computing behaviors, whereas neurotic individuals are more likely to engage in risky computing behaviors. However, the effects of extraversion and openness are mixed. These results align with our understanding of personality traits and the requirements of cybersecurity best practices. For example, highly conscientious individuals are likely to exhibit compliance behaviors (Hogan et al., 1997), including adherence to cybersecurity guidelines. Agreeable individuals tend to be more cooperative when joint action is needed (Mount et al., 1998), which is often the case in information security. Individuals with high neuroticism tend to exhibit lower levels of self-control (McCrae & Löckenhoff, 2010), which may result in risky computing behaviors. Curiosity, a core facet of openness to experience (Silvia & Christensen, 2020), may motivate individuals to pay more attention to the latest developments in cybersecurity but may also cause them to explore information beyond their access rights. Extraverts are typically communicative (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1968) and may therefore report security incidents promptly and collaborate effectively with IT and security teams, but they may be more susceptible to social engineering techniques due to their tendency to disclose personal information (Wang et al., 2021).

Different cybersecurity best practices require varying levels of effort and affect individuals differently. However, most existing studies correlate personality with a summary measure of computing practices (Kennison & Chan-Tin, 2020; McCormac et al., 2017; Shappie et al., 2020) without examining specific computing practices. Some studies focus solely on a single

computing practice, such as privacy settings (Halevi et al., 2013) or the use of specific security tools (Shropshire et al., 2015). An exception is Gratian et al. (2018), which provides a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the effects of personality traits by investigating their correlations with a variety of computing practices. However, Gratian et al. (2018) was conducted more than five years ago. In recent years, there has been a shift in emphasis from the use of passwords to multifactor authentication for access control. An update to the study is required to include this commonly adopted security measure. Furthermore, many existing empirical studies are based mostly on data collected from the US, as indicated in Table 2. There is a lack of research in a Southeast Asian context. We aim to fill this gap by collecting data on personality and cybersecurity practices from the Philippines.

Table 2
Relationships Between Big Five Personality Traits and Cyber Security

Study	Description	Country
Halevi et al. (2013)	• Openness is positively associated with weak privacy settings.	U.S.A.
Riquelme and Roman (2014)	• Extraversion is correlated with reduced perception of security risks.	Switzerland
Shropshire et al. (2015)	• Conscientiousness and agreeableness moderate the relationship between behavioral intent and extent of use of a web-based security tool.	U.S.A.
McCormac et al. (2017)	• Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness are positively associated with information security behavior. • Neuroticism (opposite of emotional stability) was negatively associated with information security behavior.	Australia
Gratian et al. (2018)	• Extraversion is positive associated with device securement. • Conscientiousness is positively associated with password generation and updating.	Online (87% U.S. Citizen)
Shappie et al. (2020)	• Conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness are positively associated with cyber security practices. • Neuroticism positively associated with cyber security practices.	U.S.A.
Kennison and Chan-Tin (2020)	• Neuroticism is positively associated with risk cyber security behaviors.	U.S.A.

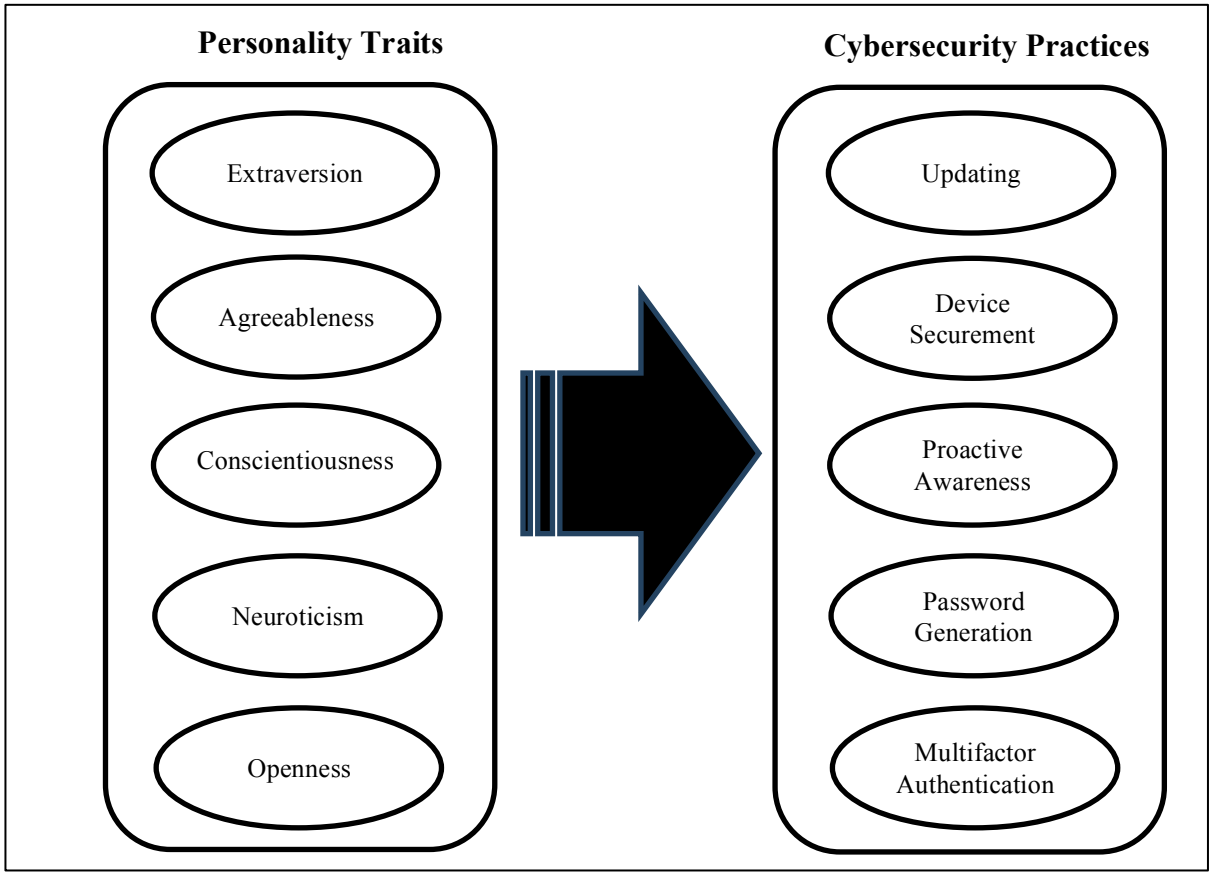
Our research model is presented in Figure 1. Specifically, we hypothesize that personality impacts cybersecurity practices. We will regress individual personality traits on each of the security practices, following Gratian et al. (2018). To avoid overwhelming the figure with too many arrows, not all hypothesized causal relationships are depicted.

Methodology

Survey Instrument

To measure personality, we use a short version of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) scale (Goldberg et al., 2006), which reflectively measures the five personality traits: extraversion (Ex), agreeableness (Ag), conscientiousness (Con), neuroticism (N), and openness (Op). Individuals' cybersecurity practices are measured using the Security Behavior Intentions Scale (SeBIS) developed by Egelman and Peer (2015). These practices include updating (Updating), device securement (DevSecure), proactive awareness (ProAware), and password generation (Password). We model these cybersecurity practices as constructs formatively measured by their respective indicators.

Figure 1
Research Model



In addition to the SeBIS practices, we include the use of multifactor authentication (MFA) in our survey instrument because MFA has become an essential component of Zero Trust security architecture and can significantly reduce access threats (Okta, 2021). We developed a scale that formatively measures MFA using the following items:

- "I use two-factor authentication for social media applications."
- "I use two-step verification for my email accounts."
- "I make sure that I am prompted via email or SMS when there is a login for my social media accounts from a new device."

The complete list of question items for measuring the constructs can be found in the Appendix.

Data Collection

To maximize potential survey participation across various demographics, snowball sampling was used to collect data from the researchers' contacts in the Philippines from August to October 2023. Additionally, we conducted an onsite MFA discussion in Victorias City, Negros Occidental, Philippines, and administered the online survey to 115 participants from Victorias City. All respondents were encouraged to invite their family and friends to participate in the survey. Our data collection efforts resulted in a diverse sample totaling 620 respondents, as shown in Table 1.

Data were collected using a Google Form. Only individuals with valid email addresses were able to access the survey link; however, email addresses were neither included in the data analysis nor retained for archiving. The survey link was sent to over 1,000 individuals. Respondents were required to provide consent before proceeding to the survey questions. The link remained active for 51 days, from August 14 to October 3, 2023, resulting in 620 complete responses.

Analysis

We regressed the Big Five personality traits onto each cybersecurity practice to evaluate the research model presented in Figure 1. The "seminr" package in R was used to assess both the measurement and structural models. The R script used to generate our results is available upon request.

Demographic Characteristics

We summarize some demographic characteristics of our participants in Table 3. The majority of respondents were young working adults under 35 years old. Thirty-six percent of the respondents were male, and 64% were female. Typical sectors represented by the respondents include education, information and communications technology, government, finance and insurance, healthcare, and professional business services.

Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis was performed, and items that did not load well on their corresponding constructs were dropped. The reliability of our survey instrument was then assessed by examining the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha of each reflective construct. As shown in Table 4, each construct had a composite reliability greater than 0.7, a common threshold indicating satisfactory reliability (Nunnally, 1967). Although the Cronbach's alphas are below 0.7, we administered a short version of the Big Five personality test; with fewer items, lower Cronbach's alpha values are expected. Overall, our results indicate that the instrument possesses appropriate reliability.

The numbered columns in Table 4 represent the correlation matrix between the Big Five personality constructs, with the diagonal showing the square root of each construct's AVE values. All AVE values exceed 0.5, suggesting satisfactory convergent validity. Furthermore, the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlations between that

construct and any other constructs in the model, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

In Table 5, we list the cross-loadings of the question items for the reflective constructs. All items included in our analysis load substantially higher on their corresponding factors than on other factors, providing further support for discriminant validity (Gefen et al., 2000).

Table 3
Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	Description	Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	226	36.45%
	Female	391	63.06%
	Decline to respond	3	0.48%
Age	18 - 24 years old	156	25.16%
	25 -34 years old	201	32.42%
	35 - 44 years old	142	22.90%
	45 - 54 years old	71	11.45%
	55 - 64 years old	48	7.74%
	65+ years old	2	0.32%
Education	Elementary school graduate	3	0.48%
	High school graduate	78	12.58%
	College graduate	330	53.23%
	Graduate degree or professional program completed	168	27.10%
	Other	41	6.61%
Employment Status	Student	104	16.77%
	Employed	426	68.71%
	Self-employed	39	6.29%
	Unemployed/ Unable to work/ Out of Work	33	5.32%
	Other	13	2.10%
	Retired	5	0.81%
Industry	Education	172	27.74%
	Information and Communications Technology	82	13.23%
	Government	51	8.23%
	Finance and Insurance	34	5.48%
	Healthcare	34	5.48%
	Professional and Business Services	33	5.32%
	Manufacturing	24	3.87%
	Retail and Wholesale	23	3.71%
	Transportation	6	0.97%
	Energy	4	0.65%
	Media	2	0.32%
	N/A	67	10.81%
	Other	88	14.19%

Table 4
Construct Reliability, Discriminant Validity, and Convergent Validity

	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha	1	2	3	4	5
1. Extraversion	0.838	0.625	**0.850**				
2. Agreeableness	0.878	0.728	0.152	**0.885**			
3. Conscientiousness	0.801	0.506	-0.035	0.005	**0.817**		
4. Neuroticism	0.882	0.733	0.032	0.011	-0.364	**0.889**	
5. Openness	0.795	0.504	0.040	0.047	0.298	-0.225	**0.814**

Table 5
Cross Loadings

	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness
Ex-1	**0.793**	0.082	-0.044	0.015	0.035
Ex-2	**0.903**	0.164	-0.02	0.037	0.034
Ag-1	0.152	**0.919**	0.026	-0.013	0.052
Ag-2	0.113	**0.85**	-0.024	0.04	0.028
Con-1	-0.093	-0.078	**0.787**	-0.237	0.254
Con-2	0.026	0.075	**0.847**	-0.351	0.236
N-1	0.064	0.055	-0.358	**0.885**	-0.215
N-2	-0.005	-0.034	-0.29	**0.892**	-0.185
Op-1	0.058	0.041	0.169	-0.101	**0.732**
Op-2	0.017	0.038	0.298	-0.242	**0.888**

Path Analysis

Following the recommendation of Hair et al. (2021), bootstrapping with 10,000 subsamples was used to estimate the standard errors and evaluate the significance of the path coefficients. The path analysis results are shown in Table 6, with significant paths highlighted.

Table 6
Summary of Path Coefficients and Statistical Significance

Big Five (Antecedents)	Cyber Security Practices (Consequents)	Path Coefficient	*p*-value
Extraversion	Updating	0.049	0.2294
	Device Securement	0.029	0.4758
	Proactive Awareness	-0.121***	0.0029
	Password Generation	-0.000	0.9984
	Multifactor Authentication	-0.001	0.9769
Agreeableness	Updating	0.118**	0.0068
	Device Securement	0.161**	0.0023
	Proactive Awareness	0.028	0.4952
	Password Generation	0.014	0.7535
	Multifactor Authentication	0.117*	0.0250
Conscientiousness	Updating	0.063	0.2037
	Device Securement	0.087	0.0766
	Proactive Awareness	0.007	0.8910
	Password Generation	0.101*	0.0251
	Multifactor Authentication	0.011	0.8305
Neuroticism	Updating	0.033	0.4959
	Device Securement	-0.009	0.8438
	Proactive Awareness	-0.206***	0.0000
	Password Generation	-0.097*	0.0351
	Multifactor Authentication	0.012	0.7764
Openness	Updating	-0.004	0.9291
	Device Securement	0.057	0.1912
	Proactive Awareness	0.145**	0.0011
	Password Generation	0.081	0.0682
	Multifactor Authentication	0.072	0.1116

Evaluation of Common Method Bias

We used two different methods to assess the magnitude of common method bias. First, we performed Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), which uses exploratory factor analysis to determine whether all items load on a single factor; if so, common method bias is present. Our analysis showed that the total variance explained by one factor is 12.3%, suggesting that common method bias is not a serious concern. Second, to further test for potential common method bias, we used the smallest positive correlation among items as a conservative estimate (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). In our data, items Ex-2 and N-2 had the smallest positive correlation, equal to 0.000654. Following Lindell and Whitney's (2001) recommendation, we performed Fisher's r-to-z transformation on this correlation as follows:

$$z_r = \frac{1}{2}\ln\frac{1+r}{1-r} = \frac{1}{2}\ln\frac{1+0.000654}{1-0.000654} = 0.000654 \quad (1)$$

and then computed the 95% confidence interval as:

$$z_r \pm \frac{z_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}}}{\sqrt{N-3}} = 0.000654 \pm 1.96/\sqrt{620-3} = 0.000654 \pm 0.0789 \quad (2)$$

Common method bias thus is not significant statistically, because the confidence interval includes 0.

Discussion

As expected, conscientiousness and agreeableness were found to be positively related to secure practices, whereas neuroticism showed an opposite correlation. Specifically, conscientious individuals were more likely to demonstrate better password hygiene (p = 0.0251). Agreeable individuals tended to be more diligent in updating (p = 0.0068), device securement (p = 0.0023), and multifactor authentication (p = 0.0250). Neurotic individuals tended to demonstrate lower proactive awareness (p < 0.0001) and poorer password hygiene (p = 0.0351). As expected, individuals high in openness showed a high level of proactive awareness (p = 0.0011). However, extraverts exhibited the opposite tendency (p = 0.0029).

Overall, our results show that personality continues to influence individuals' computing practices today. This finding has important HR and operational implications. Firstly, personalized training may be necessary (Rashid, n.d.). For example, training could be tailored for neurotic and extraverted individuals to improve their awareness of security threats. Wang et al. (2021) suggest that different personality traits make individuals susceptible to different social engineering exploits. For instance, individuals high in extraversion may be prone to self-disclosure; those with high conscientiousness may be vulnerable to informational influence and social responsibility norms; agreeable individuals may be susceptible to group influence and reciprocity norms; individuals scoring high in openness may fall prey to emotion-arousing techniques; and those high in neuroticism may be vulnerable to fear-arousing techniques and deindividuation. Personalized training materials could help employees defend against the social engineering attacks to which they are most vulnerable. Secondly, organizations should assign jobs requiring the handling of sensitive and critical information to individuals who are high in conscientiousness and agreeableness, as these individuals tend to exhibit organizational citizenship behavior and contribute beyond what is required by their job (Mahdiuon et al., 2010).

Finally, an organization typically consists of employees with diverse personalities. Secure computing practices should not cause excessive inconvenience or require too much effort from employees. For example, maintaining good password hygiene is often quite demanding for users (Stobert & Biddle, 2018) and can be challenging for certain personality types. A recent emphasis on the use of multifactor authentication reduces reliance on passwords, ensuring that employees who are less diligent in managing their passwords do not pose a significant risk to the organization.

Conclusion

This paper revisits the effects of personality on secure computing practices. We conducted a survey of 620 individuals in the Philippines to measure their Big Five personality traits alongside secure computing behaviors, including updating, device securement, proactive awareness, password generation, and multifactor authentication. Consistent with the literature, we found that conscientiousness and agreeableness tend to correlate positively with secure computing practices, whereas neuroticism is negatively correlated. Our results suggest that personalized security training and simplified cybersecurity processes may help organizations better safeguard their information systems.

In future research, to further highlight the significance of personality in cybersecurity, researchers may distinguish between compulsory and voluntary cybersecurity practices. Additionally, data from other regions should be collected to provide a more global perspective to the existing literature.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

ChatGPT (GPT-4o model) was used to review the grammar of this paper.

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Appendix: Question Items Used in the Analysis

Reflective Constructs

Extraversion	Ex-1	I am the life of the party.
	Ex-2	I talk to a lot of different people at parties.
Agreeableness	Ag-1	I sympathize with others' feelings.
	Ag-2	I feel others' emotions.
Conscientiousness	Con-1	I often forget to put things back in their proper place. (Reversed)
	Con-2	I make a mess of things. (Reversed)
Neuroticism	N-1	I have frequent mood swings.
	N-2	I get upset easily.
Openness	Op-1	I am not interested in abstract ideas. (Reversed)
	Op-2	I have difficulty understanding abstract ideas. (Reversed)

Formative Constructs

Updating	Updating-1	When I am prompted about a software update, I install it immediately.
	Updating-2	I make sure that the programs or software I use are up to date.
	Updating-3	I make sure that my anti-virus or anti-malware softwares have been regularly updating themselves.
Device Securement	DevSecure-1	I manually lock my device (laptop/desktop) screen whenever I walk away from it.
	DevSecure-2	I set my device (laptop/desktop) screen to automatically lock if I don't use it for a prolonged period of time.
	DevSecure-3	I use a PIN or a passcode or pattern to unlock my mobile phone.
	DevSecure-4	I use a password or a passcode to unlock my device (laptop/desktop).
Proactive Awareness	ProAware-1	When someone sends me a link, I immediately open it without verifying where it goes.
	ProAware-2	Whenever I encounter a security problem, I continue what I was doing because I assume someone else will fix it.
	ProAware-3	I know what website I am visiting based on its look and feel, rather than by looking at the URL bar.
	ProAware-4	When browsing website, I mouse over links to see where they go, before clicking it.
	ProAware-5	I submit information to websites without first verifying that it will be sent securely (e.g., https://, a lock icon, SSL)
Password Generation	Password-1	I don't change my passwords, unless I am prompted to.
	Password-2	I use different passwords for different accounts that I have.
	Password-3	I do not include special characters in my password if it's not required.
	Password-4	When I create a new online account, I try to create a strong password beyond the site's minimum requirements.
Multifactor Authentication	MFA-1	I use two-factor authentication for social media applications.
	MFA-2	I use two-step verification for my email accounts.
	MFA-3	I make sure that I am prompted via email or SMS when there is a login for my social media accounts from a new device.

Exploring the Contemporary Significance of Yamaoka Tesshu's Thought

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Abstract

Since the Meiji Restoration in Japan, modern society, which adopted the Western perspective of modernization, has been materially fulfilled and has made long-lasting progress in a variety of fields. And now, people who are materially fulfilled seek spiritual fulfillment, and Eastern perspectives such as "*Zen*" and "mindfulness" are attracting attention. these fields, it is said that one can approach the fundamental spirit of Buddhism by thinking not only of one's own self-interest but also of the interests of others, or "altruism," even though desire is the source of power. Western and Eastern perspectives can be considered complementary to each other, and rather than making a distinction between which is superior and which is inferior, it will be important to look at oneself from an Eastern perspective and coexist within oneself, even though we live in a western global society. This study focuses on pre-modern Japanese thought and spirituality, with a particular emphasis on the views of *Bushido* of Tesshu Yamaoka, who was called the embodiment of *Bushido*, and the philosophy of *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo* (The Sword and *Zen* are one), and examines the significance for modern society of studying Eastern thought and culture based on co-prosperity for self and others.

Keywords: ken-zen-ichinyo (the sword and *zen* are one), *bushido*, *shoyoku-chisoku* (don't want too much you can feel comfortable in life), *onko-chishin* (leaning new from the past)

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Introduction: Tesshu Yamaoka's *Bushido*

This chapter discusses Tesshu Yamaoka, a samurai at the end of the Edo period who later served as the emperor's chamberlain to the imperial court and strove to attain the status of *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo*. Tesshu Yamaoka (1836-1888) was a samurai in the Tokugawa government during the Edo period (1603-1868) and a chamberlain to the Emperor during the Meiji period (1868-1912). He had a great influence on society by practicing the spirit of *bushido* as Japan stepped out of the feudal era into modernization. Tesshu's path to mastery of *bushido* began with swordsmanship training in his childhood, and in the process of pursuing it, he entered *Zen* training, and after many years of rigorous training, he reached the state of Selflessness called "*Satori*". Abe states that Tesshu wrote about his sword training at the age of 23 in his book "*Shushin Yoho*," which reads as follow:

> My attitude toward swordsmanship today is very different from others. People learn to use swords because they want to slay their enemies, but my sword training is different. I want to realize the truth of the Mysticism in the breath of the sword. Once I reach that point, my mind will be like a clear mirror. The secrets of heaven and earth will dwell in my heart as they are, and I will naturally realize that I and heaven and earth are one and the same. People say that I am like a ferocious tiger. But I have never killed, nor have I harmed a single person. (Abe, 1942, p. 160)

In fact, Tesshu never strayed from this path for the rest of his life and never killed any human beings. It can be said that the swordsmanship of simply competing to win or lose did not exist in Tesshu from the beginning. Also, on one occasion a monk asked Tesshu, "What is the secret of the sword?" Tesshu replied that the word "*Semui*" written on the temple plaque was the essence of swordsmanship. This word "*Semui*" is a sutra from the Buddhist Kannon Sutra, which says,

> What we do all our lives is to give fearlessness, in other words, to grasp the place where there is no fear. No fear of sickness, no fear of dying, no fear of being poor. Fear nothing. (Abe, 1942, pp. 28-29)

And it can be said that Tesshu had reached this ultimate state of mind. Furthermore, Tesshu described this situation as the origin of *Bushido*, which he described in his 1887 lecture on *Bushido* to his students at the Yamaoka Residence as follows:

> The *Bushido* of Japan is a path that all Japanese should firmly bear in mind. If you wish to know the origin of the Way, enter into a state of selflessness, understand the truth, and realize it. You will surely see the dark clouds of error dissipate and the sun and moon of Truth, which will immediately make the heavens and the earth clear, and you will realize for the first time that you are the Self of the Selfless. If we are prepared for this, then perhaps we will not hesitate to offer thanks for the virtues of the four blessings. This, in other words, is the ground of *Bushido*. (Katsube, 1971, pp. 29-30)

The way of man as *Bushido*, as described by Tesshu, is not to practice each of the existing virtues of "righteousness," "courage," "benevolence," "courtesy," "sincerity," "honor," and "loyalty," which are widely known in Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido*, but to understand and practice the more fundamental principles that make these virtues possible. The fundamental principle is "no-self." Thus, it can be said that Tesshu's *Bushido* was taught and practiced from the state

of enlightenment that he attained through the severe and intense training he imposed on himself, but it is also true that not everyone can reach this state of enlightenment. Tesshu's connection to Buddhism and *Zen* is that his father, Takatomi Ono Tyouemon, taught him to "study the martial arts and practice *Zen*." Originally, the battlefield was the place where warriors were active, and death always accompanied them on the battlefield. With death comes fear. The most direct way to deal with this fear was to train the mind, and it was through *Zen*, the training of the mind, that the warriors tried to overcome their fear of death. According to Uozumi was a Japanese warrior and the German archer and philosopher Eugen Herrigel is said to have written:

> Like the beginner, the master of the sword is fearless. Unlike the novice, however, the master is indifferent to the things that cause fear. Through years of tireless meditation, the master has realized that life and death are fundamentally the same and belong to the same horizon of destiny. Therefore, he no longer knows what the anxiety of life or the fear of death is. In other words, he is ready at any moment to part from this world without being distracted by the thought of death. (Herrigel, 1981, as cited in Uozumi, 2016, p. 157)

He is said to have stated. The *Zen* monk Souhou Takuan called the state of not being mindful of things "*Shikka no ki*" (Takuan, 1970, p. 57), where one gains freedom from the fear of death and lives a joyful and vigorous life. It is likely that *Zen* captured the spirit of the samurai because it contained a complete religious system for training the mind and spirit based on this view of life and death. To be free from the fear of death, in other words, is to be separated from life and death by realizing that life and death are one and the same. "Such is the state of mind of the master of the sword" (Herrigel, 1981, p. 158).

And that this is also the goal of *Zen*, indicating the state of sword/*Zen* unity. It is said that the truth of swordsmanship is not to cut down one's opponent but to intervene in enlightenment until one becomes one with heaven, earth, and space. Also, Tesshu notes that:

> The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, heavenly deities, benevolent deities, the emperor, and the other eight million deities must understand this truth correctly, do their best for us, take various forms to show us the way, speak various languages, and remember the truth of selflessness, loyalty, filial piety, and humanity, excluding the three poisons and five desires. (Katsube, 1971, p. 39)

The honorific titles we honor as "God" and "Buddha" are only in form, but when it comes to the substance, it is a path of "*shin-butsu ittai*" (unity of God and Buddha), which seems to encourage us to view God and Buddha as one from a macro perspective rather than as separate entities. To summarize, Tesshu's *Bushido* was to treat all affairs with sincerity, never forgetting the virtues of the four blessings, and to kill one's own greed (Katsube, 1971, pp. 29-30). Tesshu Yamaoka was invited by Takamori Saigo to serve at the court as the emperor's chamberlain from 1872, but from the beginning he intended to serve for a period of 10 years, and submitted his resignation in May of 1882. Although he was related to the emperor by court order under the title of "Imperial Household Minister," he officially served the court for only ten full years. However, it clear that Tesshu's thought underwent a unique change and deepening during these 10 years that could only have come from being in the emperor's inner circle. Perhaps it is not unrelated to the fact that Tesshu's enlightenment was triggered by his deep knowledge of the existence of the emperor and the imperial family. During his eight years of courtly life until 1881, Tesshu's contemplation and seeking

coincided with his reflection on the state of the imperial family among the people of Japan. This is what differentiates Tesshu from Kaishu Katsu, who was active as a shogunate official at the same time. While Kaishu Katsu always critiqued the shogunate from the outside in a transcendental way and still retained some of the shogunate's vassal-like aspects, Tesshu was immersed in the court, and his thoughts about the country and the sovereign were all the same, and he had reached a point where he considered all of them to be "children of the emperor" and had reached an awareness of the national polity, where the emperor, at the center, was the realization of enlightenment. He had reached an awareness of the national polity, in which the emperor, who was the center of the nation, was the realization of enlightenment. Furthermore, while Tesshu's thinking was centered on the imperial family, it was characterized by his attempt to support it with Buddhism rather than Shintoism. He was a thinker who followed the trends of the times, but was not influenced by them. According to Katsube, in Tesshu's thought, truth was the realization of enlightenment in Buddhism, the realization of which was often demonstrated in Japan's history as the loyalty of the people to the Emperor and the Imperial Household, and the realization of that enlightenment was the very essence of *Bushido* in Japan, and was conceived as being in harmony with the essence of the sword and *Zen* Buddhism (Katsube, 1971, p. 175). This realization of enlightenment was the very essence of Japanese *bushido* and was considered to the ultimate essence of swordsmanship and Similar to the state of *Zen*. Buddhism with *Zen* as its core, the Way of the Sword, and the Imperial Family were the three elements that formed the prototype of Tesshu's thought. It is quite natural and understandable that *Bushido* is understood as mediated by Buddhism and the sword, but the interpretation that *Bushido* has developed along with loyalty to the emperor since ancient times is highly questionable from the standpoint of historical analysis of thought. A common understanding of bushido would be that it developed with the emergence of samurai groups around the time of the establishment of the Kamakura government in Japan. However, Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido*, Tetsujiro Inoue's *Bushido*, and Yaichi Haga's interpretation of *Bushido*, all published in the mid-Meiji period, do not take *Bushido* in a narrow sense as simply the way of life of the samurai in ancient society, but as a general Japanese way of life. In a speech to the Japan Society of London in 1917, Yaichi Haga said:

> You have probably heard that *Bushido* is the highest morality in Japan, and that it owes its origin and development to the feudal system of the Middle Ages. However, it would be inaccurate to assert that *Bushido* is a new morality that arose among the people of the feudal age. The basic conception of loyalty is nothing more than a continuation of the old loyalty to the emperor. In fact, it is merely a variant of something that already exists. The essence of the Japanese warrior, brave and humble, fearing nothing but the gods of the Emperor and the Imperial Family, has been handed down from generation to generation since the distant Kamigami period, and did not first appear in the Kamakura period. If it were not for such ancestral precedents, the development of *Bushido* would have been impossible. And there would have been no ardent loyalty to the lords of later generations. Those who happened to read only epics and plays of later times and had no knowledge of ancient literature misrepresented the origins of *bushido* as if it were the spirit of the Middle Ages. (Haga, 1939, p. 197)

He stated. Thus, today's scholarly common sense has been to assume that *bushido* is a way of life or an ideology that developed among the warrior class in ancient society that originated in the "practices of the samurai of the Kanto region." However, such an academic view was formed by the Japanese after the disappearance of the samurai class from the Taisho period to the present day. *Bushido* was a daily, subjective, and practical concern. Unlike today's

modern preachers, who are only interested in the characters of "samurai style" and "samurai posture," those who preached *bushido* in the Meiji era overcame the external aspects of posture, style, and strength and turned them into something internal, so that it could be conveyed to the General public as an independent and practical "way of life of the Japanese." It was an attempt to treat *bushido* not as an antique of the past, but as the positive moral backbone of the nation, where there is no longer a preoccupation with "being a samurai," but rather a townsman, woman, or whatever. As long we are concerned with appearances, we will eventually fall into formalism and lose sight of what is important internally.

The Connection Between *Zen* and *Bushido*

In this chapter, we will examine how the sword, once a fighting technique, came to be associated with Buddhism and *Zen*. *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo* (The Sword and *Zen* are one) is a phrase that is fraught with complications. Buddhism originally had the idea of non-violence precept called Anhisa, and in Mahayana Buddhism, the fundamental idea is to use the mercy of Buddha to help sentient beings and to help them live. How can *Zen*, a branch of Buddhism, or *Zen*, a form of Buddhist practice, be unified with the "sword," a killing technique? It is believed that the way Buddhism was received in Japan has something to do with this. For example, there is a belief in *Fudo Myoo*, a widely established belief in Japan. According to Nakamura Tadashi's "How Japanese People Think," *Fudo Myoo* holding a sword in his right hand and a snare in his left, is a figure of surrender and surrender, and in India he first appeared at the end of the Buddhist period, when esoteric Buddhism was established, and he rarely appears in existing Sanskrit Buddhist texts (Nakamura, 1989, p. 295). However, and this *Fudo Myoo* was accepted and worshipped in Japan. There is a phrase called "Midano Riken" which means "the sword of the *Fudo Myoo*." The fact that the Japanese people believed that Amida Buddha, the Buddha of mercy, actually used the sword to punish the wicked, may have something to do with the fact that the national character of the samurai class influenced the way Buddhism was accepted by the Japanese people. In this light, it can be inferred that the spiritual influence of Buddhism, especially *Zen*, on the Way of the Sword, and the deep connection between the two, which is called "*Ken-Zen-Ichinyo*," was made possible by the national character of the Japanese people, who valued the martial arts. Regarding *Ken-Zen-Ichinyo*, Nakamura quotes a passage from Souhou Takuan's The Unfettered Mind:

> Here the act of killing in battle is grounded in Buddhism, which is probably found only in Japanese Buddhism. It is probably only in Japanese Buddhism that Buddhism aimed at being alive in battle. (Nakamura, 1989, p. 298)

Also, Yamaoka Tesshu was a master of *Zen*, and through *Zen* he perfected the concept of *Ken-Zen-Ichinyō*, or the unity of sword and *Zen*. Tesshu's *Zen* was so intense that Sougen Omori later declared it to be the "*Niou Zen*" of Syouzan Suzuki (Omori, 1983, p. 122). In addition, at *Shunpukan*, the dojo under Tesshu's guidance, in order seek "genuine victory," the first thing they did was to take a vow to work for a thousand days, and after that, they conducted a unique practice called "*tachikiri-geiko*." This practice was conducted over three periods the first period started early in the morning and lasted all day with 200 matches the second period lasted three days with 600 matches and the third period lasted seven days with 1,400 matches, a rough practice that squeezed out blood. To attain the Muto-style sword, one must go beyond the limits of the body and mind, dissolve one's ability to think, and attain the state of no-self-dreaming (Abe, 1942, pp. 191-192). This is the same boundless, undivided boundary between heaven and earth that is reached after rigorous practice, although various

religions have different names for it. Tesshu's *Zen* is the highest form of *Rinzai Zen*, of which everyone recognizes him as a master. Although he was not ordained and did not teach *Zen* at a temple, he personally taught *Zen* to those who believed in it, and contributed greatly to the development of today's *Rinzai Zen* in his capacity as an attendant. Tesshu's sword is a sword of the living person, which aimed at the formation of the character of *bushido* and its perfection. In his later years, he opened his own dojo and called it "Muto-style," which means "swordsmanship that does not rely on the sword." When facing an enemy, he would strike with his heart and mind, not with his sword. It was an attempt to apply the *Zen* teaching of not fighting to win, but to clear one's mind and develop one's courage is order to achieve natural victory.

The Japanese Way of Life in the Future

In this chapter, the author examines the message that Tesshu Yamaoka left behind for future generations of Japanese people, and discusses it is light of contemporary issues. The Meiji Restoration brought Western culture to Japan, and science and technology improved by leaps and bounds. Tesshu pointed out that humans, with their selfishness and keen sense of self-love, were so focused on discovering a scientific or technological breakthrough that they had no time to think about anything else, and that human affairs became complicated, as in the fields of law, science, and medicine, and that they had no time to think deeply about morality. In particular, he stated, "Although it is unavoidable for people to gather together in order to save their lives, we should not meddle with the spiritual principles of humankind" (Katsube, 1971, p. 102).

The ideas of loyalty, filial piety, loyalty to one's father, father's relatives, and all other sentient beings are the ideals that emanate from the higher spiritual nature of humankind, and they are the manifestation of moral principles. These moral principles cannot be regulated by man-made laws. In other words, the unique Japanese *Bushido* must cover the areas beyond the reach of the law. However, this unique Japanese *Bushido* began to decline when the Japanese people began to interact with other countries and to come and go amongst themselves, and according to Katsube, Tesshu means this by stating the following:

> It is good to seek knowledge from the world, but to take it in this way and that, without distinguishing between right and wrong, is like putting a poisonous insect into your body. In general, there are things in religious education that are suitable for the other person but not for oneself, and there are things that is not the same in terms of human feelings and customs. To try to immediately transfer them from the other person to oneself is as different as trying to transfer it from the other person to yourself immediately is like trying to stick bamboo to a tree. How ridiculous! In retrospect, the same is true of Chinese Confucianism, which our ancestors adopted, and which, after its arrival in our country, was adapted to the Japanese national character and became a source of nourishment for the Japanese people. (Katsube, 1971, p. 46)

He stated, "The rapid westernization and science overemphasis after the opening of civilization has alarmed the world." The progress of science is due to the Western idea of freedom, and that freedom develops without limit along with the study of abstract science. As a result, everyone felt that the right to freedom was a self-fulfilling interest, and this led to a knowledge competition, which in turn gave rise to scientific research and materialistic bias. And materialism leads to the creation of more and more differences between the rich and the

poor. Tesshu also referred to the way of life of the Japanese people in later generations, which was to have *Bushido*, which had been handed down in Japan from ancient times, as the brain, and the ideas of material and abstract science as the limbs, who must contribute to future society (Katsube, 1971, p. 106). This pecking order is absolute, and if science and technology, which are the limbs, grow in strength and advocate individualism without regard for morality, *Bushido*, which is the brain, must seize it under a single decree and carry out its dignity to the utmost. The encouragement of material science, which induces human greed and increases the degree of subsistence, clashes with *Bushido*, which encourages oligopoly, and it is conceivable that one or the other will decline in the future. However, the advancement of science and technology is by no means forbidden by *Bushido*, and it is good to observe the pecking order of *Bushido* and science and technology, and to study and operate science within the limits of this pecking order. What is important is that there are not two kinds of science and *bushido*, but that they are all *bushido*, and that no matter how greedy one may be, *bushido* includes the great path of honor and integrity. In the past, the samurai, or those of the warrior class and above, were allowed the privilege of life and death over commoners and below. However, it is a gift and the essence of *bushido* that we do not hear much about killing people unlawfully. Tesshu's theory of *bushido* is that only by combining mind and technique can the great principles of knowledge, virtue, and virtue be fulfilled. Furthermore, according to Katsube, Tesshu also taught the following as the great principles of education:

> If we preach that the first priority of all people is religious faith, and if we glorify the new and denigrate the old, if we ignore the gods and Buddha, and if we deviate from the path of the Great Way and engage in unrestrained behavior due to our growing individualism, it is clear from the very beginning that we will be leading our nation astray. Furthermore, looking at society today, there is a world of animals that, with their money and power in everything, overwhelm others and do not consider human morality from the very beginning. In reality, they are unforgivable scoundrels who are unjust and frugal, using food, clothing, and shelter as their only means of livelihood. Looking at this trend, I am concerned about the future of our society. Not only am I concerned, but I also feel pity for future generations. I hope that all of you will keep this in mind and not stray from the path and make mistakes. (Katsube, 1971, p. 160)

In this respect, many of the problems we see in the today's Society in its excessive pursuit of convenience, rationality, and desire may be applicable. In particular, the desire for money and honor makes us want more when we want more. Tesshu called this “bestial desire,” and said that it is unworthy of humanity, which possesses a higher spirituality and spirit (Abe, 1942, p. 159). However, desires are sometimes the driving force behind actions, and desires themselves are not necessarily bad, but we must change this tendency by taking the initiative to control ourselves. Those who seek endlessly, saying, “I don't have enough of this or I want more of that,” will never be able to satisfy their desires. So, as the Buddhist saying goes, “*Shoyoku-chisoku* (Don't want too much You can feel comfortable in life)”, If we can know that we are already full, we will be able to live a life of abundance. It is not to extinguish all desires, but to honestly accept the reality given to us as much as we need without being greedy, and Tesshu called this “human desire”. In his later years, Tesshu told his disciples, “If you want to reach the state of selflessness, you must be sincere, never forget the four virtues of gratitude, and treat all things with unselfishness” (Katsube, 1971, pp. 29–30).

Urging restraint from excessive desire. This “less greed and more knowledge” was not an acceptable concept in a society in a period of rapid economic growth, and it did not fit the

times because it conjured up images of a very lofty and stoic way of life. However, now that society has passed a period of maturity, and further economic development is no longer possible, there is a trend to seek a "way of life that is true to oneself," without being driven by greed. This is a sign that the times are catching up with the way of thinking *Shoyoku-chisoku*.

Conclusion and Discussion

The tendency of modern thought says that there is a tendency to look at things from a single criterion, or to try to complete the whole story (NHK Educational TV, 2015). The "winner" and "loser" mentality that we often hear about today, which completely distinguishes between the top and the bottom of a subject, can be said to be creating its own enemies by separating itself from others. In today's internationally competitive society, it is no longer possible to live without making distinctions, but there may be more than a few harmful effects that result from such distinctions. In order achieve balance, it is important to learn and incorporate into our daily lives such ideas as Tesshu Yamaoka's "*Satori*" (enlightenment), in which the self, the world, and nature are one and the same, and in which we can separate ourselves from distinctions, I think it is very important. In addition, in contemporary Japanese society, the "decline in self-esteem" is seen as a major problem, and articles and writings on how to increase self-esteem can be found on the Internet and in books, but this idea itself is probably due to fact that is attached to the notion that "self-esteem must be increased," that "we must do This is probably because they are clinging to the notion that they "must" do so, that they "must" raise their self-esteem. By not getting caught up in distinctions and attachments, but by distancing oneself even a little from such ideas and looking at the world from a different position, new discoveries may be made. Before the development of information technology as we know it today, people in the past thought and refined and penetrated various problems, producing many wonderful discoveries, medical knowledge, and ideas that are still talked about today. However, in today's information society, the skill to manipulate information widely and quickly seems to be more valued, and the importance and weight of deep thinking about problems seems to be neglected. The scientific and technological advances that have flourished to date have begun to show negative aspects, and those who cannot keep up with the speed of the information society are being left behind without mercy, and differences in skills in handling information equipment are leading directly to social and economic disparities. This is true not only for individual disparities, but also for the disparities between developed and middle-income countries, where computers and other information equipment and the Internet are generally widespread, and developing countries, where they cannot take advantage of them. Any classic or famous book, after 100 years, will naturally have parts that do not fit into today's society and lifestyle. However, there are always eternal truths hidden within them that are clearly applicable to the modern age. It would not be surprising if we believe that there are "universal truths" hidden in the *Bushido* theory left behind by Tesshu Yamaoka that are applicable to the modern human society. This is not to say that we should revive knowledge, ideas, and *bushido* theories accumulated in the past as they are, which are different from those of today, but rather to "cherish what is still relevant today. As the old Japanese saying "*Onko-Chishin*" (Leaning new from the past) suggests, delving into the wisdom of our predecessors and the ideas of Tesshu Yamaoka and other philosophers can evoke what has been lost of today's society, which is burdened with internal and external troubles, and can be a guidepost to solving the "crisis of human nature" that the world is currently facing.

Author's Note

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Culinary Narratives and Emotional Landscapes: Food as a Metaphor for Human Relationships in Tran Anh Hung's Cinema

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between culinary narratives and emotional landscapes in the films of Tran Anh Hung, focusing on how food serves as a powerful metaphor for human relationships. By analyzing six of his films—*The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran, 1993), *Cyclo* (Tran, 1995), *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* (Tran, 2000), *Norwegian Wood* (Tran, 2010), *Eternity* (Tran, 2016), and *The Taste of Things* (Tran, 2023)—this study examines the multifaceted ways in which Tran employs food preparation, presentation, and consumption to reflect and deepen the emotional and relational dynamics of his characters. The first research question investigates how Tran uses the act of food preparation and presentation to symbolize the development and dynamics of human relationships. The second question delves into the use of specific culinary traditions to highlight cultural clashes and emotional complexities, revealing how these traditions serve as a backdrop for the characters' interactions and conflicts. The third question explores how the consumption of food is used to metaphorically express characters' desires, frustrations, and societal constraints, providing insight into their internal and external struggles. Through a detailed analysis of these films, this paper argues that Tran Anh Hung's cinematic use of food transcends mere sustenance, becoming a rich, symbolic language that communicates the subtleties of human connection, cultural identity, and emotional depth. This study contributes to the broader understanding of how culinary elements in cinema can be employed to articulate complex human experiences and relationships, offering a unique lens through which to view Tran Anh Hung's oeuvre.

Keywords: Tran Anh Hung, culinary narratives, emotional landscapes, human relationships, symbolism

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Introduction

Tran Anh Hung, a Vietnamese-born director, has received international acclaim for his style of unique and poetic filmmaking. Taste, smell, and sight are three sensory details that get meticulous attention from the viewers to his films. These details are used for aesthetic purposes and generate emotional and evocative experience for his audience (Nguyen, 2023). Hung's films explore how food functions as a powerful metaphor for discovering human relationships, human experience, cultural attraction, and human desires.

Food plays a transcending role in cinema, making itself a powerful metaphorical signifier. Filmmakers can weave narratives by leveraging the universal act of preparing, serving, and consuming food (Zimmerman, 2010). Cultural identities, social hierarchies, and unspoken emotions among characters can be depicted on screen via food choices, traditions, and rituals (Shames & Bobby, 2016). For example, a lavish banquet may represent wealth while a simple meal can symbolize intimacy and connection. The research can gain insight into characters' expectations, frustrations, and societal constraints with the analysis of the food role within a film's narrative.

This research focuses on the works of Tran Anh Hung, known for using food as a metaphor for human relationships. The study will examine how he uses the preparation, presentation, and consumption of food for conveying sensory details and evocative storytelling. This also aims to make a deeper contribution to how food functions as a narrative way to illuminate the complexities of individual emotions in contemporary cinema.

Tran Anh Hung's films are rich in sensory experiences and human connections (Robert, 2012). They are full of lyrical beauty, narrative depth, and food as a potent metaphor. This research aims to answer the following three questions:

> RQ1: How does Tran Anh Hung use food as a metaphor for the development of human relationships in his films?
> RQ2: How does Tran Anh Hung utilize culinary traditions to express cultural clashes and complexities in films?
> RQ3: How does Tran Anh Hung employ food consumption as a metaphor for characters' desires, frustrations, and societal constraints?

Literature Review

Food in Cinema: A Multifaceted Lens

Many movie filmmakers have applied food to cinematic storytelling and used it as a strong and versatile narrative tool. They have used food to symbolize sustenance-transcending themes (Carson et al., 2013). Food reminds the viewers of memories, evoking nostalgia for significant moments in the past (Lupton, 1994; Mannur, 2007; Negra, 2002). In the movie *Swann in Love* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1984), adapted from Marcel Proust's Swann's Way, the evocative madeleine cookies trigger the taste that brought the protagonist back to his childhood. Food can also be seen as a marker of social status (Wills et al., 2011). In *The Great Gatsby* (Clayton, 1974) and *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), the lavish meals in films transport a hierarchy and expose the social order of characters. Besides, food can also function as a factor connected to cultural identity (Messer, 2004; Montanari, 2006). In *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Lee, 1994), traditions and rituals relating to food exposed the complex ways to connect the people to their heritage and cultural milieu. This research examines food in Tran

Anh Hung's films to achieve better understanding of it is utilized in his films and how it shapes character relationships, cross-cultural tensions and emotional tapestries.

Food Metaphors in Asian Cinema

Many scholars have shown their interests in the intersection of food in films in Asian cinema contexts, particularly culinary practices that are embraced with cultural identity and emotional interaction (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016). Food metaphors in film have been a subject of scholarly interest, being a strong narrative tool to express complex character experiences and human relationships (Bower, 2004; Song, 2019). For example, in Indian cinema and literature, food imagery and metaphor has been utilized to symbolize cultural identity and character narratives. Likewise, the use of food in storytelling has been emphasized within culinary cinema, where food becomes a narrator, showing human emotions and soul of the story (Keller, 2006; Martin, 2005; Parasecoli, 2008).

Through Tran Anh Hung's Vietnam trilogy, including *The Scene of Green Papaya* (Tran, 1993), *Cyclo* (Tran, 1995), and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* (Tran, 2000), food and cuisine practices have been represented to express nostalgia and loss (Robert, 2012). Food metaphors in his films depict the complexities of characters' emotions and the lasting impact of intergenerational trauma (Winston, 2001). Traditional Vietnamese food is prepared, presented and consumed with the purpose of reflecting the human's emotional landscape and social environment the characters live in. Food stories in Tran Anh Hung films, such as in his Vietnam trilogy, have been aesthetically portrayed via the themes of nostalgia, cravings, air of unease among the characters. His films express layered narrative for using the multi-pronged role of food as a metaphor in film narrative to highlight the human's inner worlds, cross-cultural friction and psychological tapestry.

Food for Thought: Culinary Metaphors in Cinema

Film scholars have stated that food is a widespread and multifaceted storytelling device in cinema (Bower, 2009). Food is portrayed as a strong metaphor for many purposes in films. Food or shared meals can trigger memory or reminiscences (Bower, 2004; Ferry, 2014). In *Like Water for Chocolate* (Arau, 1992), food options can signify socioeconomic status or social disparity. In *Tampopo* (Itami, 1985), the film utilized food to depict cultural identity, including traditional cuisines as cultural legacy.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of research in exploring food metaphors as character relationships in Tran Anh Hung's films. In *Cyclo* (Tran, 1995), there is no research mentioning human relationships connected with food that are used to tell the film story though there is a lot of analysis of esthetic appeal and social critique. This study focuses on closing this gap by looking at food as a metaphor in his films. The research can achieve better understanding of the way food metaphors reflect intricacies of character relationships, cross-cultural friction, and inner worlds in Tran Anh Hung's films.

Research Methodology

The project will apply a qualitative method to examine the six films directed by Tran Anh Hung, including *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran, 1993), *Cyclo* (Tran, 1995), *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* (Tran, 2000), *Norwegian Wood* (Tran, 2010), *Eternity* (Tran, 2016), and *The Taste of Things* (Tran, 2023) via food storytelling and its link to character interactions. The

analysis is done using footage and scenes portraying food narratives or the depiction of traditional dishes. To pinpoint the food metaphors and representations connected to meals and to the progress of human relationships in films. This qualitative study will help to understand better the ways the director uses food elements to express the characters' expectations, cross-cultural frictions, inner worlds, and character relationships under social pressures. The key themes are food and traditional dishes presented in the films, showing his film aesthetics and the multi-dimensional role of culinary narratives.

The qualitative method Is appropriate to examine the emotional aspects of culinary narratives in Tran Anh Hung's films because of the personal and explanatory characteristics of traditional cuisines and film viewed as cultural contexts. The choice of discourse analysis and storytelling research for exploring the underlying significance linked to both traditional food and cuisines and sensory perceptions the characters experience during the preparation, presentation and consumption of their meals. By employing this method, the analysis can seize the inner worlds, cultural interpretations and characters' emotions and their relationships through the portrayal of food. This approach is suited to reveal the spectrum of emotions and cultural connotations through the close textual analysis of footage, conversations, and visual styles in Hung's works to see his visual narratives via food imagery. Repetitive patterns and recuring themes of food in his films will be classified and determined by thematic coding. This way will help to specify how character interactions, emotional landscapes, and cultural clashes are set up via culinary narratives. Then, by applying semiotic analysis, signifiers will be decoded to explore cooking techniques and their storytelling framework.

Findings and Conclusions

The Language of Food Preparation and Presentation

In Tran Anh Hung's films, food is prepared and presented for the purpose of not only serving meals but also a way to depict the relationships between the characters and their interactions. In *The Scent of Green Papaya*, the lady, the mother in the family, makes tea for her husband, the father in the family and he stops playing music to drink tea, illustrating an emotional relationship and shared concern. The scene that the old maid Ty guides the young maid, the main female character Mui, how to fry vegetables with beef, demonstrating the long-serving maid and the new one and reflecting the transfer of inter-generational knowledge and skills. However, Ty and Mui enjoy their meal together but separately in the kitchen, expressing that they come from different social classes; despite being well-treated by the family they work for, they cannot be included in the family meals. The grandmother, the oldest in the family, has the meal alone, excluding the whole family. Though she is taken good care of by her daughter-in-law, who manages everything from family finances to childcare, the grandmother scolds at her, indicating a conflict between her and her daughter-in-law without understanding for the latter's current sorrow.

The consciousness of details in preparing food, from mincing to presenting dishes, demonstrates meticulousness in cooking but also shows emotional engagement of characters into the food they prepare. In the scene where Mui shreds green papaya and presents each meal, and her joy upon observing the unripe papaya seeds. Her actions are not only about preparing a meal but are devoted attention. Another evidence is the old maid Ty's happiness with purchasing rice, pouring rice into a jar and using a milk can to scoop it into a basket. Food is also a means to entertain the guests when they come to the family.

Food preparation is depicted in terms of incoherence and collaboration. In *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, three sisters, Suong, Khanh, and Lien work on food preparation for commemoration, expressing their happiness and connection in working side by side. In *The Scent of Green Papaya*, Mui stops working at the first landlord and moves to another one where she has emotional intimacy with the young gentlemen she attends to. What she learned about cooking from the previous family has been applied to serve her young master. She prepares each meal with great care, presents it beautifully on a tray, and serves it to her young lord, who she forms an emotional connection with.

Food metaphors in films is utilized to help the viewers understand more about the relationships among the characters. In *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, the food table in front of the altar is offered to the beloved one who passed away and this event is regarded as a religious ceremony and a chance for family members and close relatives to assemble and bond. After the offering ritual, chicken is shredded and served to everyone attending the commemoration. After the memorial service, the three sisters wash glasses together, creating a cheerful chat and homely atmosphere that the viewers can think are inseparable. At the end of the feast, they and other family members drink tea together, singing one Trinh Cong Son's song. Their connections seem close-knit, and the family looks very cozy; nevertheless, the story behind is different as each female character has her own sad story.

The viewers can deeply understand the characters' connections and emotions via visually gorgeous scenes of food preparation, presentation, and consumption. With the close-up shots, vegetables or meat is chopped up, cooked and presented on plates in detailed attention, painting an exquisite picture of characters' cooperation, conflicts and dramatic lives. This forms a distinctive language of emotional lives and characters' connections from cooking to characters' inter-communication during the food preparation process. In *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, Lien wakes up from her bed, opens the door, and orders food from the alley food stall where she often has breakfast with the man sharing the room with her. Vietnamese people are accustomed to having breakfast outside rather than self-preparing it. The scene where Khanh picks vegetables, singing Trinh Cong Son's song then Kien, her husband approaches express the couple relationship and her happiness increases when she informs him that she is pregnant. She helps him wash his hands and they lean into each other happily.

Culinary Traditions and Cultural Negotiations

Cuisine in Hung's films portrays the intricacies of character relationships, cultural conflicts and the inner world. The food preparation and meal enjoyment play a role of a metaphor for the energy of gatherings, conveying the obligations, stress, and silent bonds that highlight their communication. In *Cyclo*, food preparation scenes describe a diverse terrain about the socio-economic gaps in Vietnam. The Southern Vietnamese like to have a lunch with rice and drink iced tea and this is reflected in the opening scene with Cyclo and his friend, providing the importance of food as a sign of nutrition and friendship. Nevertheless, the following scene establishes the striking difference between the rich and the poor when there is footage of poor children shining shoes.

The cooking scenes within Cyclo's family depict the energy of their connections. The old grandfather involves himself in food preparation while his older sister takes care of the family money and cooks' food. This task assignment reveals the stereotypical gender roles in Vietnam and the significance of family harmony despite adversity. Food enjoyment shapes a metaphor for human expectations, annoyances, and social restrictions. Cyclo expecting to

have a good life, forces him to be involved in criminal acts and interwoven with this scene is a lavish party highlighting the impossible dreams of the unprivileged. So, having a meal symbolizes holistic well-being and hope for a better life. Hung masters in utilization of traditional food and culinary practices to discover the intense emotions and hardships of his character's life. From there, he develops visual language that surpasses cultural borders and rebounds the global viewers.

Tran Anh Hung ingeniously uses cuisine traditions to highlight the cultural conflicts and the complexities of emotion in *Cyclo*. The exploration of food preparation, presentation and consumption serves as a strong metaphor for the development and motivation of human relationships. The beginning scenes of the family having a meal together or the bustling market express the significance of meals in Vietnamese society. Hung also applies food metaphors to convey inner turmoil and unspoken expectations. Cyclo eating noodles alone reflects his isolation and vulnerability while the girls indulging in fruits portray an escape from their unpleasant truth.

The film's climax, party chaos, collides with the tragic death of the Lady Boss' son, emphasizing more the separation between the rich and the poor. While the guests are fascinated with a lavish party, not knowing an unfolding tragedy, the characters' struggle for survival and their entanglement in the city underworld are exposed. Food, in many forms and contexts, becomes a strong metaphor for the gap between the rich and the abandoned and cultural conflicts shaping their life in *Cyclo*.

Food plays a role as a metaphor for cultural negotiation, resistance, and assimilation. The act of preparing and consuming food reflects the characters' struggle and adaptation in their socio-cultural environment. Vietnamese traditional food is shared by the family members, symbolizing unity and endurance among the poverty while the characters preparing for and eating meals in different contexts show their effort to maintain cultural identity and family relationship.

Furthermore, consuming food in moments of tension or conflict, for example Cyclo's interrupted meal, demonstrates the internal and external struggle of characters, revealing the desires, disappointment and limits they have to face. Through the cuisine stories, Tran Anh Hung expresses effectively the complex interaction between cultural heritage and emotional landscape of characters.

The film has another scene with Cyclo, the main character, who shares a simple meal with rice and iced tea with his friend in a street vendor. This simple act has a deeper meaning as it emphasizes the mutual experience in food as a thread connecting people, enhancing friendship and the sense of community. In the limited space of Cyclo's house, preparing a fish dish becomes a testament to resilience and unswerving support of the family for each other. Currently, the bustling atmosphere of a restaurant across the street, where families have dinner among the sounds of life, emphasizes the vibrancy of Vietnamese culture. The contrast between the joy and difficulties highlights the multifaceted nature of life in Ho Chi Minh city.

Cyclo's interrupted meal, caused by Poet and his accomplices, symbolizes the infiltration of violence and threats to his life. The overturned noodle bowl portrays the destruction of his peaceful life, forewarning a coming dispute surrounding him. Cyclo's disorientation points out his despair and feeling of powerlessness when he consumes mysterious liquid. In another life, Poet drinking wine shows escape and self-destruction, describing his downfall into a

darker world. These two characters' consuming something impure and unclean represents the inner chaotic mood and their mental degeneration.

The lavish party, set in a chaotic street, plays the role of a mask for hidden tension and conflict. Children imitating the adult's act, such as fireworks, suggest violent imitation and disregard for consequences. This foreshadows tragic events, resulting in the death of Lady Boss' son. During the tragedy, Lady Boss' grief-suffering embrace toward her son completely opposites self-inflicted torture of Poet in the burning room. These contradictory scenes emphasize the deep impact of loss and destructive power of uncontrollable emotion.

By interweaving cuisine elements into the story structure, Hung invites the audience to watch a profound exploration of the human condition set in bustling context of Ho Chi Minh city.

Through Tran Anh Hung's lens of cinema, particularly the films depicting culinary etiquette, the viewers enter a world of food traditions, not simply about eating. They are subtle symbols of deep layers of thought about human culture and psychology. In *Norwegian Wood*, simple meals between Watanabe and Naoko are not only about food sharing but also silent conversations, where deep feelings are conveyed through each piece of cake or each spoon of yoghurt. These moments are mirrors reflecting desires, characters' feelings and cultural exchanges, where inner conflicts are subtly exposed. The choice of specific dishes and specific culinary etiquette becomes a unique cinema language, helping Tran Anh Hung to explore hidden corners of the human soul and complex cultural sharing.

In *Norwegian Wood*, the shared meals, from lively parties to simple family meals, are more meaningful than nutrition. Sharing food becomes social etiquette, bonding people together and reflecting deep cultural values. Meals are carefully prepared, like the birthday cake offered to Naoko, showing an act of caring and a symbol of social norms of love and kindness. Reciprocally, solitary meals and moments of eating hastily depict loneliness, sorrow and deep wounds in every character. By analyzing the details of cuisine, viewers can recognize food is a physiological need and an important factor in contributing to cultural identity and individual psychology.

In Tran Anh Hung's works, cuisine etiquette plays a central role as a deep metaphor for desires, conflicts, and complex social relationships. The scenes of eating, from the private dinner between Watanabe and Naoko to collective meals in the hospital, contain metaphorical messages. The choices of food, the way to enjoy it and culinary space become an important factor in discovering the characters' inner world. For instance, the dinner between Watanabe and Naoko evokes secret desires and painful memories while the meals in the hospital reflect the loneliness and expectation to connect. Moreover, Tran Anh Hung uses cuisine to compare cultures. The difference in eating habits among the characters creates funny situations and mediates deeper cultural conflicts. From then on, the director skillfully exploits cuisine as a prism to explore broader social issues. In addition, food consumption is utilized as a metaphor for human emotional experience.

In *Norwegian Wood*, details of eating and gathering describe Japanese culinary customs and explore the characters' complex psychology. With meetings, Tran Anh Hung skillfully portrays the characters' inner struggles when they face cultural pressures, individual longings, and deep heart wounds. The scene of Watanabe and Naoko eating together becomes a metaphor for a fragile relationship between two people with unspoken words and existing painful memories. Similarly, in the scene of Naoko sharing about her love with Kizuki,

breakfast becomes a tense conversation, exposing the difference between two characters and conflicting social expectations. Food etiquette, though in a hospital or friends' gathering, becomes a communication ritual, and there are chances for characters to determine their identity and social positions. In the scene of Watanabe talking about his emotional relationship, Hatsumi and Nagasawa's reactions show the power of the story. Stories about cuisine are not only about food, but also the way the characters express emotions, thoughts and hidden corners of the soul. Tran Anh Hung discovers characters' deep motives and weaknesses and emphasizes the significance of listening and understanding other stories.

Food Consumption and the Psychology of Characters

Eating Habits

In *Eternity*, food plays a key role in conveying characters' emotional states and expectations, particularly in the scenes depicting family meals. The scene where Valentine and her children gather around a cozy meal depicts a lively picture of family love. Though her husband, Jules, is absent, the warm and close atmosphere covers the space, emphasizing the strength of family connections. In this context, a meal is not only a daily activity but also a means of peace and a source of comfort and emotion, helping the members to feel more stable. It becomes a symbol of the enduring nature of family love, where shared nurturing is a solid support amidst life's upheavals, and symbolizes continuity despite loss.

However, food consumption in *Eternity* highlights complex emotions such as sorrow and reflection. The scene where Valentine has a meal with fewer family members and dim light from candles reflects the dark mood. The private and quiet meal points out her awareness of the passage of time and the loss of loved ones, especially the reduction of family members at the dining table. The act of sharing meals, though simpler and calmer, makes a contrast with previously lively family gatherings and demonstrates a change in Valentine's life. In this circumstance, food consumption becomes a subtle hint of loneliness and inevitable changes of time while reinforcing the theme of impermanence and family bonds despite life's ups and downs.

Food Preferences and Their Connection to Characters' Inner Desires or Anxieties

In *Eternity*, the use of cuisine images is a tool of delicate art to explore the characters' psychological depth. Mathilde and Gabrielle sip the cup of tea, exposing the crack of sister relationships. Drinking tea, a symbol of coziness and closeness, becomes a shell hiding the true emotional distance. By focusing on body language, eyes and surrounding space, Tran Anh Hung draws a lively picture of distance and inner conflict in every character.

Similarly, the scene of a party table full of cakes where nobody enjoys becomes a deep metaphor for emptiness inside Mathilde and Gabrielle. The richness in material is opposite to the poorness in emotions, showing an unsteady and insecure feeling. Though food is beautifully arranged, characters decline it, reflecting that they experience a deep spiritual crisis and cannot find happiness in life's simple things.

The director cleverly utilizes the cuisine footage to discover the theme of loneliness, sorrow and disconnection in relationships. Food, a basic psychological need, is raised to a new level of cultural symbol, illustrating human desires, fear and secret thirst.

The Emotional Context Surrounding Shared Meals or Solitary Consumption

In *The Taste of Things*, eating behavior is not merely a physiological need but also a deep cultural symbol, reflecting characters' social relationships and complex emotions. The scene of meal between Dodin and his friends skillfully portrays the role of cuisine in community building. The act of food consumption meets one's needs and creates a space of communication where individuals connect and share joy. The meal becomes social etiquette, enhancing friendship and creating a sense of belonging. Eugénie's table setting and the meticulousness of food arrangement emphasize the meaning of food symbolism in building relationships.

On the contrast to this scene, another scene in the kitchen shows Paulin enjoys her meal alone with sorrow. The absence of social interaction in the meal highlights her emotional isolation. The contrast of food abundance and Paulin's emotional emptiness depicts a haunting image. Eugénie's act continues to prepare food for others while she is in a very hard time, describing her sacrifice, altruism but loneliness and tiresome. Tran Anh Hung uses culinary imagery to explore complex aspects of human psychology.

Food Consumption Reflects Characters' Relationships With Societal Norms and Expectations

In *The Taste of Things,* food consumption reflects characters' relationships with their social expectations, roles, and interests. When Dodin enjoys food with his friends, it is the time for them to relax and enhance their friendships, showing that food can make social connections. Conversations about politics and food emphasize the role of food in improving social standards, positions and power. The meal represents community cohesion and the center for community and private life.

At the same time, Eugénie has a special interest in cuisine with her cooking skills though she is not fully recognized. When she prepares food for Pauline, praising from others highlights the role of Eugénie in society as a woman responsible for housekeeping. Though receiving compliments, she seems to be boosted by the social expectations rather than her individual ambitions, depicting the pressure that a woman must complete the traditional role. Therefore, food consumption describes characters' relationships with social standards while food can both identify and challenge their roles in social structures.

Food Becomes a Source of Comfort, Control, or Rebellion for the Characters

Besides being a source of nourishment, food can reflect intimacy and care among the characters. Preparing and sharing food is a strong means for Dodin and Eugénie to communicate and show emotion. Dodin prepares carefully every food, devoting himself to the meal that he expects her to enjoy when she is not well. He pays attention to details of everything from broth to good food garnishes, showing his devotion to the food that nourishes his love and admiration for Eugénie. Through every footage that he prepares a special soup dish; food is truly a metaphor for a character expressing his care for the other's health and happiness.

Eugénie, in contrast, finds comfort in carefully prepared food. For her, food brings not only physical contentment but also emotional relief. Every time she enjoys food made by Dodin, she feels his love infused into the food. Her enjoyment for food, particularly in the moment of

weakness, reflects that food can bring her a secure feeling and emotional connection with Dodin. Through the meal, food is a reminder of their deep relationship.

For Dodin, food represents control. He feels he is controlling everything in the kitchen while preparing meals and setting up the kitchen. Food preparation and arrangement are the way he maintains order and controls emotions in his life. The kitchen is a creative space and labor for him and a place where he can manage not only nourishment but also the emotional atmosphere around him. The meticulousness in preparing depicts stability and purpose he finds in the cuisine process, especially in the time of emotional instability.

Nevertheless, food also becomes a form of powerlessness when the story takes place. Eugénie's health impairments and Dodin's control over the meals does not work. Though he prepares food carefully, the act of taking care of her with meals cannot save her from worsening health. Eugénie's death makes food as a reminder of suffering from the loss while the kitchen, a symbol of warmth and control, is now a reflection of Dodin's helplessness before unchanged things.

Finally, when Pauline appears in the story, food continues to play an important role in maintaining traditions and controlling the next generations. Dodin tries to teach Pauline to cook but there is tension in this action. Though Pauline has potential, she cannot replace Eugénie, and her inexperience creates a gap between the old and new. Food Dodin prepares Paulin has the aim to instruct her and describes the expectation for maintaining cuisine heritage, even when a special connection that Dodin used to share with Eugénie cannot be replaced.

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Narrative Strategies of China South Korea and Japan in Arctic and Antarctic Governance

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Abstract

This paper examines the medial and political narrative strategies of China, South Korea, and Japan in relation to the Arctic and Antarctic, focusing on how each country frames its activities to enhance its influence in these regions. Motivated by opportunities in scientific research, resource access, and geopolitical influence, China, South Korea, and Japan have increasingly pursued interests in both polar areas. As "Near Arctic" countries, they aim to assert a role in Arctic governance despite lacking direct access to the North Pole. Japan's narrative emphasizes energy security, shipping, and environmental protection, positioning the Arctic as vital for economic stability and global status. South Korea highlights scientific diplomacy, business and sustainable development, presenting itself as a leader of a "green change." China's approach frames the Arctic as a "common good," prioritizing security, resource acquisition, and strategic science, including its Beidou navigation system. The hypothesis of this study is that these countries' narrative strategies are diversified, however they share an aim of creating a positive image in low-conflict areas such as environmental protection, scientific research, and raw material diversification, to foster international influence and domestic support. The research questions focus on understanding these countries' narrative strategies, identifying key areas of Arctic interest, and analyzing how these strategies shape the international environment. The methodology involves comparative analysis of policy documents, media representations, and official communications to assess how these strategies influence international relations and public perception. Findings suggest that each country's narrative serves as a diplomatic tool and means of soft power.

Keywords: Antarctic, Arctic, East Asia, narrative, polar engagement

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Introduction

The Arctic and Antarctic regions are no longer perceived as remote peripheries of international politics; instead, they have become central to a range of global discourses concerning climate change, resource governance, and emerging geopolitical realignments. While traditionally dominated by circumpolar states, the governance of the polar regions is increasingly influenced by non-littoral actors who seek to redefine their roles through scientific cooperation, economic initiatives, and normative engagement (Brady, 2017; Stephens, 2018). Among these, China, South Korea, and Japan stand out for their strategic and carefully calibrated approaches, which blend scientific legitimacy with geopolitical interest in both the Arctic and Antarctic.

This article examines the narrative strategies employed by these three East Asian states as they attempt to shape their image and role in polar governance frameworks. Rather than relying solely on material presence, these countries invest in constructing discourses around sustainability, peaceful cooperation, and scientific diplomacy to gain legitimacy in regions where sovereignty and governance remain contested. By analyzing policy documents, diplomatic statements, and media representations, the paper identifies the commonalities and divergences in their approaches, shedding light on how narrative framing functions as a tool of influence in contemporary international relations.

Research Scope and Objectives

The Arctic and Antarctic regions, though polar opposites in geography and governance regimes, are increasingly intertwined within shared discourses on climate change, scientific diplomacy, and strategic competition. The Arctic is an ocean surrounded by sovereign states, where melting ice is opening new shipping routes and economic opportunities (Solli et al., 2013), while the Antarctic remains governed by a treaty-based system focused primarily on scientific cooperation (Tonami, 2014). Despite their physical remoteness, both regions have become focal points for states aiming to craft international influence through normative engagement.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of narrative strategies employed by China, South Korea, and Japan in shaping their presence in both polar regions. While the Arctic is prioritized due to its more accessible institutional frameworks (evident through observer status in the Arctic Council) and economic potential (China and Korea's investment in Northern Sea Route development) (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2020; Solli et al., 2013), the Antarctic is examined where narrative legitimacy via the Antarctic Treaty System is salient—particularly in Japan's case (Tonami, 2014). These states, lacking formal sovereignty in either region, lean on narrative tools to assert soft power and legitimacy.

The central research question reads: How do Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese state narratives function as instruments of soft power and international legitimacy in polar governance? Specifically, it investigates the mechanisms through which these countries frame their polar engagements to resonate with global environmental norms, scientific credibility, and domestic policy aims.

To address this question, the study sets out to:

1. Map the principal narrative devices—such as metaphorical framing, issue-linkage, and value appeals—present in official documents, diplomatic communications, and media discourse.
2. Compare how each state aligns Arctic and Antarctic activities with strategic goals such as energy security, climate leadership, environmental responsibilities, or maritime connectivity.
3. Examine the consistency between the rhetorical positioning and actual institutional or material investment in polar affairs, such as research infrastructure or participation in multilateral forums.
4. Evaluate the implications of these narrative strategies for the evolution of international norms, multilateral cooperation, and potential geopolitical contestation in polar regions.

This inquiry is both timely and essential, as China, South Korea, and Japan navigate spaces of limited sovereignty by leveraging discourse to secure normative footholds and global credibility—thereby transforming narrative into a potent diplomatic and strategic resource.

Methodology and Source Base

This research employs a qualitative, comparative methodology focused on narrative analysis. Rather than examining material capabilities or policy implementation, the study analyzes how China, Japan, and South Korea construct and communicate their polar engagement through language. The emphasis lies on the performative and symbolic dimensions of statecraft—how Arctic and Antarctic regions are framed in official discourse to signal intentions, values, and strategic positioning (Everett & Halašková, 2022; Tonami, 2014).

The source base includes polar strategy white papers, government policy documents, official speeches, national media coverage, and public-facing institutional outputs from 2013 to 2024. Particular attention is given to recurring narrative devices such as metaphors, value appeals (e.g., peace, science, sustainability), and issue linkage with broader foreign policy goals, including energy security, environmental stewardship, and regional connectivity. To assess coherence and divergence, the analysis triangulates state rhetoric with national media and expert commentary, revealing both common themes and country-specific narrative architectures.

Stability Through Science and Trade in Japan's Polar Narrative

Japan's approach to polar governance is grounded in a narrative that emphasizes economic pragmatism, scientific responsibility, and legal multilateralism. The Arctic, in particular, is framed as a strategic corridor essential to Japan's long-term economic security. As a resource-scarce nation with significant dependence on energy imports, Japan portrays Arctic stability as directly linked to uninterrupted access to energy resources and the development of new maritime trade routes (Kim & Stenport, 2021). The Northern Sea Route (NSR), frequently referenced in Japanese policy discourse, is seen as a promising alternative to traditional shipping lanes, with potential to reduce shipping times to Europe by up to 40% (Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017). This economic rationale underpins Japan's participation in ventures such as the Yamal LNG project in Russia, where companies like Mitsui and Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation (JOGMEC) played instrumental roles in supporting Arctic natural gas development (Gao & Erokhin, 2020).

Simultaneously, Japan's polar narrative strongly emphasizes adherence to international norms and peaceful cooperation. As a consistent advocate of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and a non-Arctic state observer in the Arctic Council since 2013, Japan actively supports multilateralism and rule-based order in polar affairs (Everett & Halašková, 2022). This posture mirrors Tokyo's broader foreign policy identity, which underscores legalism and institutional engagement in maritime governance (Lomaeva & Saunavaara, 2022). Statements by officials such as former Foreign Minister Taro Kono, who publicly framed Japan's Arctic involvement as promoting peace, sustainability, and scientific cooperation, reflect this diplomatic branding (Arctic Institute, 2020).

Scientific diplomacy remains central to Japan's narrative strategy. Through institutions such as the National Institute of Polar Research and the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability (ArCS II), Japan maintains a continuous research presence in both polar regions (ArCS II, 2022; NIPR, 2023). Its long-term operation of Syowa Station in Antarctica and its regular Arctic research expeditions generate high-quality climate data while also projecting soft power. Japan's emphasis on science as a tool of legitimacy reinforces its image as a non-threatening, environmentally conscious actor (Le Mière, 2014). This narrative resonates especially with European and Nordic stakeholders, for whom climate responsibility is a prerequisite for Arctic legitimacy (Everett & Halašková, 2022).

Japan's recognition of Indigenous rights, although less foregrounded, complements its image as a socially aware stakeholder. By referencing Indigenous inclusion in Arctic dialogues, Japan seeks to align itself with liberal-democratic norms without challenging regional power dynamics (Storey, 2016). In contrast, the Antarctic plays a peripheral role in Japan's political narrative. Its engagement remains anchored in the Antarctic Treaty System, with a narrow focus on scientific cooperation and logistical contributions. Politically sensitive issues such as commercial whaling—especially after Japan's 2019 withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission—are now largely absent from official polar rhetoric, further diminishing the Antarctic's narrative salience (Stephens, 2018).

Sustainable Innovation and Middle-Power Responsibility in South Korea's Polar Narrative

South Korea frames its engagement in the Arctic and Antarctic through a narrative of sustainable innovation, scientific diplomacy, and responsible middle-power leadership. Unlike countries that emphasize territorial claims or security logics, South Korea constructs its legitimacy through environmental stewardship, high-tech expertise, and alignment with global climate governance frameworks. Central to this narrative is the country's positioning as a technologically advanced, eco-conscious actor capable of contributing to the "green growth" of polar regions (Kim & Stenport, 2021).

The 2018 *Basic Plan for Arctic Policy*, issued by the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, marked a significant step in articulating South Korea's polar vision. It linked sustainable development with scientific advancement, stating that Korea would "contribute to the international community through Arctic research and eco-friendly shipping development" (MOF, 2018). The policy emphasized the economic potential of the Northern Sea Route and stressed the role of green technology in Arctic logistics. This rhetoric dovetailed with broader domestic climate initiatives, such as the 2020 Green New Deal, which embedded Arctic engagement within South Korea's low-carbon economic strategy (Chowdhury, 2021).

Scientific diplomacy forms the backbone of South Korea's narrative legitimacy. Through the Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI), South Korea operates two Antarctic research stations—King Sejong and Jang Bogo—and continues to expand its Arctic research programs (KOPRI, 2023). These scientific efforts are strategically framed not only as contributions to global climate knowledge but also as instruments of soft power. For example, then–Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha publicly described Korea as a "responsible middle power" and emphasized its commitment to transparent, collaborative polar governance during international fora (Mo, 2016). In this context, South Korea presents science as both a diplomatic language and a geopolitical equalizer.

Importantly, South Korea's polar discourse includes a strong economic-technological dimension. Its globally competitive shipbuilding industry—centered around companies like Hyundai Heavy Industries—plays a key role in developing Arctic-class vessels, including icebreakers and LNG carriers (Lee, 2024). South Korean media outlets such as *The Korea Herald* and *The Korea Times* often celebrate these achievements as evidence of Korea's rising leadership in Arctic logistics and green shipping infrastructure. The state leverages this narrative not only to justify economic engagement but also to strengthen its presence in multilateral polar governance bodies.

In the Antarctic, South Korea maintains a lower media profile but a steady policy presence. Activities remain rooted in scientific contributions and treaty compliance under the Antarctic Treaty System. However, recent publications from South Korean government and academic sources have pointed to growing interest in Antarctic mineral resources and potential energy exploration—framed carefully within environmental norms (Kim & Stenport, 2021). This dual framing—economic opportunity within environmental responsibility—reflects South Korea's balancing act between strategic ambition and normative alignment.

China's Narrative Strategy Centered on Global Commons and Technological Leadership

China frames the Arctic as a "shared space" or global commons, a narrative explicitly articulated in its 2018 Arctic Policy, which emphasizes peaceful cooperation, multilateralism, and equal access to polar resources (Beeson & Xu, 2019). This framing aligns with China's self-positioning as a "near-Arctic state" that supports inclusive Arctic development without asserting sovereignty claims (Lanteigne, 2018). Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated these themes at the Arctic Circle Assembly, underscoring China's commitment to dialogue, scientific cooperation, and stable governance of the polar regions (Wang, 2024).

At the same time, China's narrative integrates strategic ambitions focused on resource access, shipping route development, and the concept of military-civil fusion. The expansion of the Xuelong (Snow Dragon) icebreaker fleet is emblematic of this approach, facilitating China's dual use of polar spaces for scientific research and resource exploration, while hinting at possible security applications (Kopra & Puranen, 2023). The Arctic dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative, dubbed the Polar Silk Road, was emphasized by President Xi Jinping during the 2019 Belt and Road Forum, illustrating Beijing's intent to embed polar infrastructure within its broader geopolitical strategy (Zreik & Derendiaeva, 2025).

In the Antarctic, China similarly projects a narrative of responsible stewardship and treaty compliance, as highlighted in its 2018 White Paper on Antarctica. This document reiterates China's support for the Antarctic Treaty System and underscores environmental protection as

a key pillar of its Antarctic governance (Kobzeva, 2019). During his 2018 United Nations address, President Xi Jinping stressed global cooperation on climate change, framing China as a proactive actor in polar environmental governance (UN, 2018).

Technological innovation is a core pillar of China's polar narrative. The China National Arctic and Antarctic Administration regularly promotes advances in polar icebreaking capabilities and navigation, such as the deployment of the Xuelong 2 icebreaker and the Beidou satellite navigation system, which enhances China's operational autonomy in the high latitudes (Lanteigne, 2018). Official reports, including the 2017 China Arctic and Antarctic Research Report, emphasize these technological achievements to bolster China's image as a scientific leader and legitimate stakeholder in polar affairs (Cui & Chen, 2019). This narrative serves to normalize China's expanding presence while advancing its geopolitical, economic, and scientific interests in the polar regions.

Shared Narratives and Divergent Strategies in Polar Governance

China, Japan, and South Korea converge on several narrative strategies that emphasize scientific research and environmental stewardship to mitigate perceptions of geopolitical competition in the Arctic and Antarctic. All three states foreground sustainability and global cooperation, aligning their polar policies with dominant international discourses on responsible environmental governance (Keskitalo et al., 2016; Østerud & Hønneland, 2014). Japan uniquely incorporates Indigenous peoples' rights into its narrative, highlighting a socially conscious dimension alongside ecological concerns (Nakashima et al., 2018). These shared thematic pillars serve to frame their polar ambitions within a broadly acceptable diplomatic language of peace and collective responsibility.

Nevertheless, notable strategic divergences emerge in how each country communicates its polar priorities. China's narrative centers on strategic infrastructure development, such as expanding its icebreaker fleet and promoting the Polar Silk Road, with state-owned enterprises actively pursuing resource access (Emmerson, 2019; Kopra & Puranen, 2023). This reflects a more assertive vision of Arctic engagement, aimed at securing economic interests and enhancing China's global influence. Japan's discourse, by contrast, stresses adherence to international law and multilateral governance frameworks like the Arctic Council and Antarctic Treaty System, positioning itself as a custodian of a rules-based order (Kaneko, 2021; McCreath, 2017). South Korea situates itself as a "responsible middle power," emphasizing green growth, scientific diplomacy, and technological innovation, especially in maritime logistics and icebreaking capabilities (Kim & Stenport, 2021). While all three countries increasingly engage with Antarctica, their narratives for the southern polar region remain less elaborated than those for the Arctic, though evolving alongside their growing scientific and diplomatic footprints (Brady, 2017).

From a linguistic and semantic perspective, official strategic documents and scholarly discourses reveal utopian visions of the polar regions as exceptional spaces—almost ideal arenas for technological progress, scientific advancement, and peaceful coexistence among diverse geopolitical actors (Dodds & Nuttall, 2016; Weber, 2020). The Arctic and Antarctic are portrayed as conflict-free zones whose neutrality and international status foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and responsible management of global challenges such as climate change (German Arctic Office & AWI, n.d.). This rhetorical framing is characterized by recurring metaphors and evocative language: phrases like "common heritage," "laboratories of the future," "bridges of cooperation," and "global corridors of

innovation" underscore the regions' symbolic roles as catalysts for humanity's shared progress (Exner-Pirot & Murray, 2017).

Such narrative strategies function as legitimizing tools, particularly for states geographically distant from the poles, allowing them to justify their presence on moral and global-benefit grounds (Huebert, 2013; Østerud & Hønneland, 2014). Yet, beneath these harmonious depictions lie subtle tensions: the language also contains latent motifs of competition and strategic positioning, evident in nuanced shifts toward discourses on technological rivalry, resource security, and influence projection (Emmerson, 2019; Heininen, 2018). Consequently, the documents often embody a dual discourse—one promoting cooperation and harmony, the other more covertly signaling ambitions to consolidate power and strategic advantage under the guise of collective good (Brady, 2017). This interplay of utopian and pragmatic language reflects the complex dynamics shaping polar governance narratives, revealing how states negotiate their interests in sensitive global commons through carefully calibrated diplomatic rhetoric (Weber, 2020).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The narrative strategies employed by China, South Korea, and Japan in the polar regions serve critical functions in legitimizing their engagement, justifying their presence, and enhancing their international status. By framing the Arctic and Antarctic as arenas of scientific cooperation, environmental stewardship, and peaceful diplomacy, these countries effectively utilize the polar spaces as low-conflict platforms for soft power projection. This approach enables them to assert influence in global governance without provoking direct confrontation with established Arctic powers. Moreover, their polar narratives intersect with broader Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics, suggesting that polar engagement is an extension of wider regional strategic positioning. While the Arctic remains the primary focus of strategic narratives, the Antarctic discourse among these Asia-Pacific actors is less developed but evolving, particularly through scientific cooperation and treaty participation. This nascent narrative dimension warrants greater scholarly attention to understand how emerging polar stakeholders negotiate their roles in the southern polar governance framework.

Importantly, these narrative strategies are not mere communication tools but are embedded within diplomatic and policy frameworks that shape international perceptions and legitimacy. By foregrounding themes of science, environmental responsibility, and multilateral cooperation, China, South Korea, and Japan cultivate a positive image that facilitates their participation in polar governance and creates low-risk avenues for expanding influence. Future research should critically examine the extent to which these narratives translate into concrete policy outcomes within polar institutions. Tracking shifts in official discourse may reveal strategic recalibrations in response to changing geopolitical or environmental conditions. Such analyses are essential to assess whether narrative legitimacy leads to substantive engagement and collaborative governance, or if it remains primarily symbolic.

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Bridging Local Wisdom and Global Science: Policy Insights for Integrating Ethno-STEM Into Indonesian Science Education

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Abstract

Despite Indonesia's rich cultural heritage, its students continue to struggle with science literacy, as reflected in consistently low PISA scores. This study investigates whether integrating ethnoscience bridging scientific concepts with local knowledge can enhance science education by making it more culturally relevant and engaging. Using a qualitative-exploratory approach, the research analyzes literature, case studies, and policies to assess the viability of Ethno-STEM learning modules in Indonesia's national curriculum. Results indicate that embedding local wisdom into science education boosts student engagement, critical thinking, and real-world application of knowledge. However, successful implementation requires structured teacher training and policy alignment, guided by Patton and Sawicki's alternative policy criteria theory. The study also highlights socio-economic and cultural benefits tied to SDGs, particularly quality education (SDG 4) and cultural preservation (SDG 11), while addressing challenges like standardization and resource gaps. Practical recommendations are provided to support classroom integration, offering a roadmap for transforming science education through Ethno-STEM in Indonesia.

Keywords: scientific literacy, ethnoscience, Ethno-STEM, sustainable education, local wisdom preservation

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Introduction

Scientific literacy is a strategic objective in science education, equipping future generations to navigate local and global challenges (Istyadji & Sauqina, 2023). In Indonesia, science literacy is crucial for fostering scientific thinking applicable to everyday decision-making. However, the 2022 PISA results revealed that Indonesian students' average science literacy scores remain below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, reflecting significant gaps in connecting scientific concepts to real-world applications (OECD, 2023).

One contributing factor to this issue is the lack of culturally relevant teaching approaches that link science to students' daily lives. Traditional teaching methods often fail to contextualize scientific concepts within the realities and experiences of students, leaving many unable to see the relevance of science in their communities (Jones & Burrell, 2022). Data from the 2018 PISA report shows that fewer than 50% of Indonesian students can effectively apply scientific knowledge to practical situations in their lives, underscoring the need for innovative teaching strategies (Wang et al., 2023).

Ethnoscience, an innovative approach integrating traditional local knowledge with science education can address these challenges. This approach incorporates values, knowledge, and skills from local communities into science curricula, enhancing relevance and engagement (Morris et al., 2021). For instance, students could explore scientific principles embedded in traditional agricultural practices or local biodiversity management, making learning more meaningful and accessible.

The urgency of this issue is further heightened by findings that link low science literacy to broader developmental challenges. Students with poor scientific understanding struggle to make informed decisions on environmental, health, and technological issues, which are vital in today's globalized world. This highlights the critical need for educational reforms that emphasize culturally relevant and context-driven learning (Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development, 2019).

Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ethnoscience supports global citizenship and cultural literacy. Integrating Ethno-STEM into education, as proposed by Sudarmin et al. (2022), allows students to apply scientific knowledge through culturally relevant projects. This fosters active, independent learning and appreciation for local heritage while promoting global diversity values. Moreover, by embedding Ethno-STEM in science curricula, Indonesia can address the dual goals of improving science literacy and preserving its rich cultural heritage.

Method

This study was conducted following a systematic framework to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the role of Ethno-STEM in enhancing science literacy. The steps followed are outlined below:

Protocol Development

The study employed a qualitative-exploratory approach combined with case study methods through literature reviews to evaluate the feasibility of implementing Ethno-STEM-based

learning modules. Patton et al. (2012) alternative policy criteria theory provided the conceptual framework for assessing feasibility, effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of Ethno-STEM integration.

To maintain a structured and critical review, the PROMPT mnemonic was applied (Santos-Hermosa & Sánchez, 2010):

- Presentation: Findings were organized clearly, providing actionable recommendations.
- Relevance: Focused on Indonesian contexts, aligning with national and global educational goals.
- Objectivity: Both opportunities and challenges of Ethno-STEM integration were considered.
- Method: Rigorous qualitative methods and case studies ensured validity.
- Provenance: Only peer-reviewed and validated sources were included.
- Timeliness: The review incorporated studies published between 2015 and 2024.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies included in this review met the following PICOS criteria by Thapa et al. (2024):

- Population: Focused on school and university students in Indonesia.
- Intervention: Integrated Ethno-STEM and local wisdom into science education.
- Comparison: Evaluated against traditional methods, such as textbook-based instruction.
- Outcomes: Reported measurable impacts on students' science literacy, critical thinking, or cultural appreciation.
- Scope: Included peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2024.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was applied using databases such as Scopus and PubMed. Search terms included "Ethno-STEM," "ethnoscience," and "local wisdom education." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search results. The initial search was conducted in November 2024, followed by a secondary search in December 2024 to include recently published studies. Relevant studies were imported into Mendeley for reference management. Duplicate records were removed, and titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. A manual review of references from selected articles was also conducted to identify additional sources (Jamarani et al., 2024).

Data Extraction and Charting

Data were extracted using a standardized charting form to ensure consistency. Key information collected included:

- Study design (e.g., exploratory or quasi-experimental).
- Sample size and characteristics of participants.
- Intervention details, such as Ethno-STEM modules and cultural practices integrated.
- Outcomes, including impacts on science literacy, critical thinking, and alignment with SDGs.

Data were synthesized qualitatively to identify themes, patterns, and gaps, linking findings to the criteria outlined by Patton et al. (2012).

Synthesis of Results

The extracted data were analyzed qualitatively to:

1. Highlight the effectiveness of Ethno-STEM in improving science literacy and fostering cultural preservation.
2. Evaluate the feasibility of embedding these modules into Indonesia's "*Kurikulum Merdeka*."
3. Identify challenges, such as resource constraints, and propose actionable solutions.

Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations were derived using Patton et al. (2012) alternative policy criteria theory. The criteria included:

- Feasibility: Examining how Ethno-STEM modules align with the curriculum structure and local content mandates.
- Effectiveness: Assessing measurable improvements in student engagement, critical thinking, and cultural appreciation.
- Efficiency: Evaluating resource allocation and teacher preparedness.
- Equity: Ensuring accessibility of Ethno-STEM resources across diverse regions.

This systematic and structured methodology ensured a robust evaluation of the integration of Ethno-STEM into science education in Indonesia, producing actionable insights for curriculum reform and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Results and Discussion

Synthesis of Findings on Ethno-STEM Integration in Indonesian Science Education

a. Screening Details

- Number of Titles and Abstracts Reviewed: A total of 30 studies were screened based on relevance to Ethno-STEM integration in Indonesian science education. For example, the study by Zidny and Eilks (2022) on integrating green chemistry with local wisdom was selected for its focus on culturally relevant science education, while Wahyudi et al. (2023) provided insights into the impact of Ethno-STEM on junior high school students.
- Year of Publications: The studies range from 2018 to 2024, reflecting a growing interest in Ethno-STEM during this period. Early works, such as Melyasari et al. (2018), laid the groundwork by validating Ethno-STEM frameworks, whereas more recent studies like Misbah et al. (2024) addressed bibliometric trends.
- Country of Publication: Most studies were conducted in Indonesia or focused on Indonesian educational contexts, such as Kusumah et al. (2022) and Tresnawati et al. (2021), which explored science learning aligned with local cultural contexts. A significant limitation is the scarcity of Ethno-STEM studies conducted exclusively in Indonesia. To compensate, this review incorporates findings from Malaysia and other regions where cultural and pedagogical conditions share similarities with Indonesia (e.g., emphasis on local wisdom in STEM, collectivist educational approaches). However, differences in national curricula and cultural specifics (e.g., distinct indigenous knowledge systems) suggest caution when generalizing results.

- Article Types: The collection includes journal articles, conference proceedings, and case studies, emphasizing empirical and theoretical research. For instance, Tresnawati et al. (2021) focused on pre-service teacher training through conference proceedings, while Sudarmin, Zahro, et al. (2019) provided empirical findings in journal articles.

b. Study Design and Methodology

- Sampling Methods: Studies used purposive and cluster random sampling to select participants, often targeting specific groups such as teachers, students, or pre-service educators. For instance, Prayogi et al. (2023) employed purposive sampling to assess the impact of digital Ethno-STEM inquiry projects, while Tresnawati et al. (2021) used cluster sampling for PGSD (primary school teacher education) students.
- Study Designs: Mixed-methods, quasi-experimental, and qualitative descriptive designs were predominant, providing both quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights. Zidny and Eilks (2022) used mixed-methods to integrate green chemistry and local wisdom, while Kusumah et al. (2022) employed a quasi-experimental design to validate e-modules.
- Data Collection Tools: Tools included interviews, questionnaires, pre-and post-tests, observation sheets, and content validity assessments to ensure comprehensive data collection. For example, Wahyudi et al. (2023) utilized pre- and post-tests to measure student outcomes, and Sudarmin, Sumarni, et al. (2019) relied on observation sheets to evaluate essential oil production activities.
- Participant Profile: Participants were diverse, including elementary, junior high, and high school students, as well as teachers and pre-service educators. Tresnawati et al. (2021) focused on pre-service PGSD students, whereas Dewi et al. (2019) studied chemistry students across multiple levels.

Table 1
Summary of Included Publications

Author(s), Year	Country	Article Type	Sampling Methods	Study Design	Participant Profile
(Anggaryani et al., 2024)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Mixed-method	Survey and Interviews	Indonesian students in Taiwan
(Melyasari et al., 2018)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Purposive	4D Model Validation	Junior High School students in Tulungagung
(Abdurrahman et al., 2020)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Purposive	Mixed-method	Science teachers in Indonesia
(Kusumah et al., 2022)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	R&D	Experimental (Validation Phases)	Elementary School students in Seluma
(Sudarmin, Sumarni, et al., 2022)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Descriptive	Ethno-STEM Project-Based	Chemistry students in UNNES
(Yuliana et al., 2021)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Quasi-experimental	Context-based Learning	Elementary School students in Indonesia
(Prayogi et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Experimental	Digital Inquiry-Based Ethnoscience	Pre-service science teachers

Author(s), Year	Country	Article Type	Sampling Methods	Study Design	Participant Profile
(Irfandi et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Journal Article	R&D	Blended Learning Implementation	Physics students in East Coast Malay
(Bisono et al., 2022)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	R&D	E-module Development	Junior High School students near Merapi
(Dewi et al., 2019)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Descriptive	Ethnoscience Pedagogy	Chemistry students at multiple levels
(Kurniawan et al., 2019)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Quantitative	Contextual Learning Design	Primary school students
(Wati et al., 2021)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Mixed-method	Literature Research	Research articles from 2015–2020
(Lightner et al., 2021)	Multiple	Journal Article	Ethnographic Text Analysis	Qualitative Analysis	55 Cultures Worldwide
(Sudarmin, Zahro, et al., 2019)	Indonesia	Journal Article	R&D	PBL with Green Chemistry	High school chemistry students
(Nadzirin et al., 2024)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Qualitative	Ethnophysics Study	High school physics students in East Java
(Rinto et al., 2020)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Descriptive	Pharmacognosy Learning	Vocational Pharmacy students
(Tresnawati et al., 2021)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	R&D	Ethno-STEM PjBL	Pre-service PGSD students
(Zidny & Eilks, 2022)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Mixed-method	Green Chemistry Integration	Chemistry students at multiple levels
(Wahyudi et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Experimental	Hybrid Ethno-Project Based	Physics students at Lombok University
(Atmojo et al., 2019)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Quasi-experimental	Ethnoscience Integrated Learning	Primary education pre-service teachers
(Sudarmin et al., 2019)	Indonesia	Journal Article	R&D	Essential Oil Learning Models	Chemistry education students
(Tresnawati et al., 2021)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Mixed-method	Ethno-STEM in Biotechnology	PGSD Students
(Ardianti et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Journal Article	R&D	Ethnoscience-Based Smart Modules	Primary school students
(Misbah et al., 2024)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Bibliometric Analysis	Literature Trends Analysis	Research articles
(Putra, 2021)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Theoretical or conceptual	Theoretical Literature Review	Research articles
(Khusniati et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Qualitative approach	Ethnoecological	Students and Villagers

Author(s), Year	Country	Article Type	Sampling Methods	Study Design	Participant Profile
(Mulyono et al., 2024)	Indonesia	Journal Article	literature study with in-depth analysis	Ethnoscience with Inquiry	All students level
(Ardianti et al., 2019)	Indonesia	Journal Article	R&D	Edutainment Modules	Elementary school students
(Hariyono et al., 2023)	Indonesia	Journal Article	Non-equivalent control group	4D model (Define, Design, Develop, Dissemination)	29 high school students in grade XI
(Risdianto et al., 2021)	Indonesia	Conference Proceedings	Observation and surveys	Direct instruction-based ethnoscience	Physics students in Bengkulu

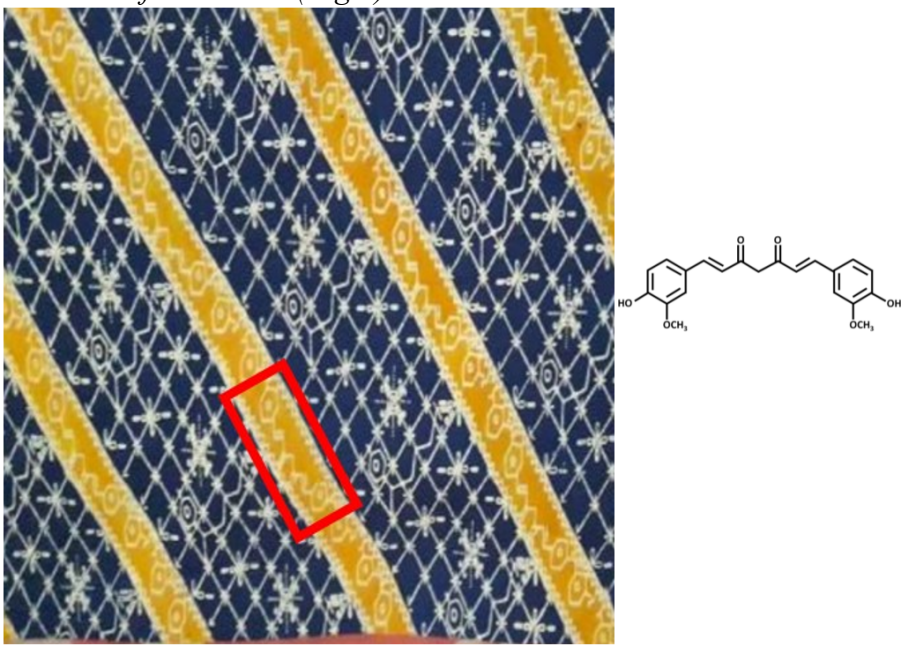
Findings and Implications

a. Integration of Ethnoscience Into Science Education

The integration of ethnoscience into Indonesian science education has been shown to enhance culturally relevant science literacy. By embedding local wisdom within science learning frameworks, students gain a deeper appreciation of their cultural heritage while developing critical scientific skills. For example, Sudarmin et al. (2020) demonstrated that incorporating traditional practices, such as "*Batik chemistry*," into science classes improved both cultural understanding and the application of scientific concepts. This approach aligns with global efforts to create contextually relevant education and has proven to be a feasible strategy for the Indonesian educational context.

Figure 1

Chemical Striated Batik Products With Curcumin/Turmeric Patterns (Left) and Chemical Structure of Curcumin (Right)



Source. Sudarmin et al. (2020); Zhai et al. (2020)

b. Feasibility of Ethno-STEM-Based Learning Modules

The feasibility of incorporating Ethno-STEM-based modules into the national curriculum has been demonstrated in multiple studies. For instance, Dewi et al. (2019) developed an ethnoscience based chemistry learning module by using local traditions like "*Terasi*" (traditional shrimp paste), revealing improved student science literacy. Additionally, Khusniati et al. (2023) found that Ethno-STEM-based worksheets on production of *Troso* woven fabric activities around Jepara increased students' understanding of science concepts while fostering environmental awareness. These outcomes strongly support the scalability of these modules across schools in Indonesia.

Figure 2
The Process of Binding Troso Woven Fabric

Source. Khusniati et al. (2023)

c. Student Engagement and Critical Thinking

Ethno-STEM approaches have led to significant improvements in student engagement. Activities like traditional Batik-making, exploring essential oils in Sudarmin, Sumarni, et al. (2019) research, and analyzing local agricultural practices by Dewi et al. (2019) have increased student motivation by linking science to everyday cultural experiences. These culturally relevant activities also stimulate critical thinking by encouraging students to solve problems and innovate within their own contexts. For instance, Prayogi et al. (2023) reported that digital Ethno-STEM inquiry projects significantly enhanced students' problem-solving skills.

d. Teacher Training and Policy Support

Teacher training has emerged as a cornerstone for the successful implementation of Ethno-STEM in classrooms. Tresnawati et al. (2021) highlighted the effectiveness of pre-service training programs that focus on creating Ethno-STEM-based lesson plans. Additionally, Wahyudi et al. (2023) emphasized that consistent policy support is critical for institutionalizing these practices. The alignment of Ethno-STEM initiatives

with Indonesia's educational goals, such as the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*," has further enabled teachers to implement these methods effectively.

e. Alignment With Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The integration of Ethno-STEM in Indonesian education contributes directly to SDG 4 (Quality Education) by improving the quality and relevance of science instruction. For example, Zidny and Eilks (2022) found that integrating green chemistry principles with local wisdom supported SDG 15 (Life on Land) by promoting environmental sustainability. Similarly, Putra (2021) highlighted how people interpret and relate to nature through cultural knowledge, thereby preserving intangible cultural heritage particularly ecological wisdom and local classification systems which aligns with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and demonstrates the socio-environmental relevance of Ethno-STEM.

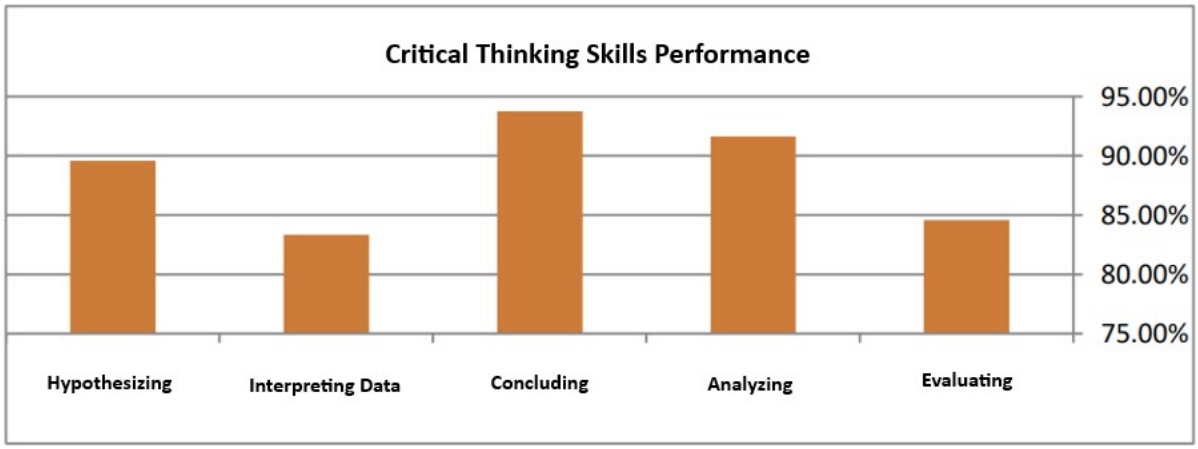
f. Socio-Cultural and Economic Benefits

Ethno-STEM practices offer socio-cultural benefits by preserving local traditions and promoting cultural pride. Economically, these practices can inspire innovation in local industries. For instance, Dewi et al. (2019) explored how students could apply chemical principles to traditional food preservation techniques, fostering entrepreneurial opportunities. Similarly, Sudarmin, Sumarni, et al. (2019) showed how essential oil production linked chemistry concepts with sustainable economic practices. This dual impact strengthens community resilience and fosters a sense of ownership among students and educators.

Figure 3

Students' Conservation Character Outcomes and Improvements in Critical Thinking Through Ethno-STEM Interventions

No	Soft skill in conservation	Pretest Score	Postest Score	N-Gain Score	Category
1	Environmental loving	78	89	0,50	Average
2	Environmental caring	75	93	0,72	High
3	Responsibility	79	93	0,67	Average



Source. Sudarmin et al. (2022); Zakiyah et al. (2022)

g. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its promise, the integration of Ethno-STEM faces challenges, including:

- Standardization Issues: Creating uniform modules that are adaptable to diverse local contexts is difficult, as noted by Lightner et al. (2021).
- Resource Constraints: Schools in rural areas may lack access to the necessary resources and teacher training programs (Wahyudi et al., 2023).
- Sustainability: Ensuring long-term support for these programs requires consistent funding and policy commitment, as highlighted by Misbah et al. (2024).

Policy Recommendations

Based on the qualitative-exploratory approach and literature case studies, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

a. Feasibility and Effectiveness

- Developing Guidelines for Ethno-STEM Implementation: Create comprehensive national guidelines to standardize the integration of Ethno-STEM modules across Indonesia. The guidelines should outline practical steps for embedding cultural wisdom, such as Batik-making or herbal medicine, into science curricula.
- Pilot Programs: Implement pilot programs in diverse regions to test the effectiveness of Ethno-STEM modules in improving science literacy and student engagement. For instance, Kusumah et al. (2022) demonstrated how e-modules based on local tools like "*Robyong*" enhanced learning outcomes in physics.

b. Efficiency and Resource Allocation

- Equitable Resource Distribution: Allocate resources, including funding for teacher training and development of Ethno-STEM teaching materials, to underserved regions. Sudarmin, Sumarni, et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of providing essential tools for practical science education, such as materials for essential oil experiments.
- Digital Integration: Develop digital platforms for Ethno-STEM modules, making them accessible for remote and underserved schools. Prayogi et al. (2023) highlighted the success of digital Ethno-STEM inquiry projects in improving engagement and problem-solving skills.

c. Equity and Inclusivity

- Localized Content Development: Collaborate with local communities to ensure that Ethno-STEM modules are inclusive and reflective of regional cultural practices. Bisono et al. (2022) illustrated how collaboration with local experts enriched the development of worksheets on volcanic activities around Merapi.
- Teacher Capacity Building: Expand professional development programs to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement Ethno-STEM effectively. Tresnawati et al. (2021) showed that targeted training improved the ability of pre-service teachers to design culturally relevant lesson plans.

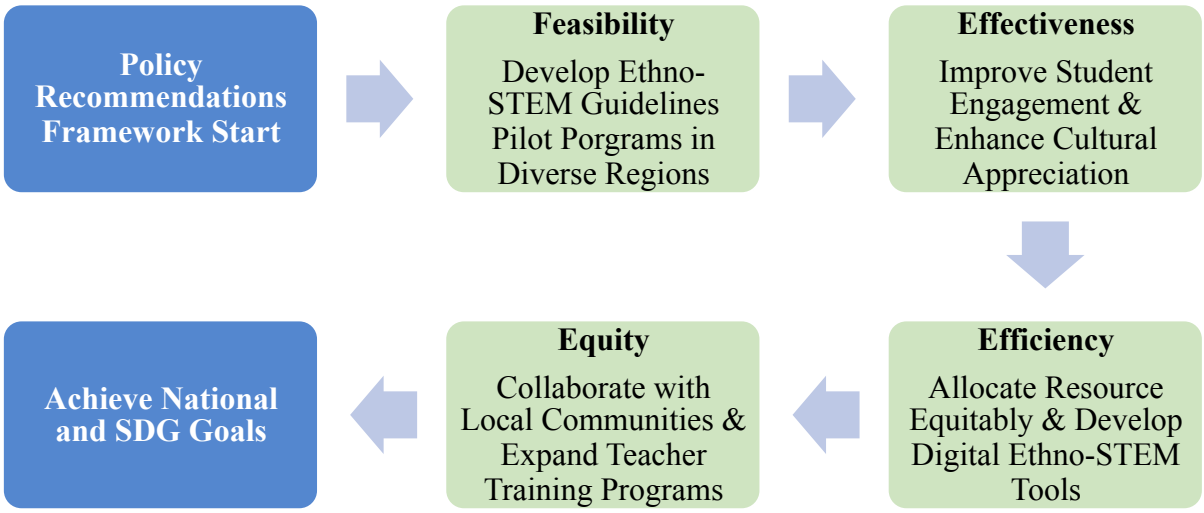
d. Alignment With National and Global Goals

- Integration with "*Kurikulum Merdeka*": Embed Ethno-STEM within the "*Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila*" (Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects) to align with the goals of contextual, competency-based learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2024).
- Sustainability Goals: Use Ethno-STEM to support Indonesia's commitments to SDGs, such as promoting sustainable land use and biodiversity conservation through culturally relevant science education (Zidny & Eilks, 2022).

e. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Long-Term Impact Studies: Conduct longitudinal research to evaluate the sustained impacts of Ethno-STEM modules on students' competencies and communities.
- Feedback Mechanisms: Establish feedback loops involving teachers, students, and policymakers to continually refine the Ethno-STEM framework based on implementation outcomes.

Figure 4
The Progression From Feasibility to Achieving National and SDG Goals



Conclusion

The integration of Ethno-STEM into Indonesian science education shows strong potential to improve students' scientific literacy, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. This review affirms the feasibility of Ethno-STEM approaches and their alignment with national priorities such as the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and global targets like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the benefits are clear, successful implementation requires overcoming key challenges, particularly in resource allocation, teacher training, and content standardization. With supportive policies and strategic investment, Ethno-STEM can serve as a transformative framework for delivering culturally relevant and sustainable science education across Indonesia.

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AI-Driven Research Tools: A Catalyst for Innovation in Higher Education Project-Based Courses

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Abstract

The integration of AI-driven research tools in education offers transformative potential, particularly in fostering innovation within project-based courses in higher education. This study examines the efficacy of these tools in improving student performance and happiness, while also analyzing their contribution to innovative learning processes. A mixed-methods strategy was utilized, integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Surveys and pre/post-tests assessed enhancements in academic achievement, project quality, and student happiness. Interviews and focus groups with students and educators concurrently yielded insights into their experiences, issues, and perspectives regarding the use of NVIVO tool and thematic analysis. The results indicate substantial enhancements in student grades, superior project outcomes, and elevated satisfaction levels, highlighting the tools' efficacy in fostering academic and practical excellence. The findings theoretically enhance the comprehension of AI's role in educational innovation, emphasizing its capacity to revolutionize teaching and learning paradigms. The study offers practical insights for educators and administrators to effectively integrate and enhance AI-driven technologies in curriculum design. Nonetheless, constraints encompass dependence on certain instruments and a sample limited to certain institutions, thereby hindering the generalisability of the results. Subsequent research may broaden its focus to various educational environments and investigate the enduring effects on learning dynamics. This study highlights the crucial importance of AI in influencing the future of education, illustrating its ability to foster innovation and enhance results in project-based learning settings.

Keywords: AI-driven research tools, project based courses, curriculum design

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Introduction

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into higher education is rapidly transforming teaching and learning landscapes, particularly within project-based learning (PBL) environments. In recent years, a growing number of studies have explored the adoption of AI-driven tools to enhance educational practices (Holmes et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). These tools offer powerful support for data collection, analysis, literature review, idea generation, and collaboration—core elements of PBL.

Several studies highlight AI's role in improving learning efficiency, creativity, and autonomy in higher education (Luckin et al., 2016; Roll & Wylie, 2016). For example, Wang et al. (2021) demonstrated how AI-supported formative assessment tools can enhance student feedback loops. Similarly, Chen et al. (2020) emphasized the ability of natural language processing (NLP) applications like GPT-3 to assist students in drafting and refining research content. Meanwhile, McArthur et al. (2021) discussed AI's influence on student engagement and personalized learning pathways, while Xu et al. (2022) found that AI-integrated platforms encouraged more meaningful collaboration in group-based projects.

Despite these advancements, current research tends to focus on AI in general pedagogy or personalized learning systems rather than in the specific context of PBL (Mou et al., 2023). Furthermore, most studies assess tool performance in isolation, neglecting the broader ecosystem in which students apply AI-driven tools for ideation, research design, and peer interaction (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020; Smutny & Schreiberova, 2020). While existing literature establishes the efficacy of AI in improving learning outcomes, there remains a lack of empirical studies that investigate how AI-driven research tools—such as ChatGPT, Scite.ai, Elicit.org, or Research Rabbit—act as catalysts in supporting innovation within the iterative and collaborative processes central to PBL in higher education. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how AI-driven research tools influence student innovation, creativity, and knowledge construction within project-based courses at the university level. The contribution lies in offering a practical framework that educators and curriculum designers can use to effectively integrate these tools, thereby fostering higher-order thinking and research capabilities among students.

Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education

AI in higher education is widely applied in areas like learning analytics, assessment, adaptive learning, and content generation. Holmes et al. (2019) classify AI use into intelligent tutoring systems, learner modeling, automated feedback, and data-driven curriculum design. However, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) note that many studies remain conceptual, lacking empirical depth and contextual focus—particularly in project-based or interdisciplinary courses. The growing presence of AI also raises ethical and pedagogical concerns, including data privacy, algorithmic bias, and over-reliance on AI outputs (Selwyn, 2019). As universities adopt AI more extensively, the emphasis is shifting from novelty to evaluating its effectiveness and long-term impact on learning. Despite AI's success in structured adaptive learning, its role in unstructured, inquiry-based formats like project-based learning (PBL) remains unclear. In such settings, students require adaptable, context-aware tools that aid in comprehension, exploration, and innovation. While AI has significant potential to support these needs, research into its application in PBL contexts is still limited.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) in Higher Education

Project-Based Learning (PBL) emphasizes problem-solving, collaboration, and real-world relevance (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Thomas, 2000). It encourages students to take ownership of the learning process by engaging in authentic, complex tasks. However, PBL's success often hinges on students' access to adequate research, time management, and support systems—areas where AI tools can intervene effectively (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).

The PBL environment fosters autonomy and creativity but also introduces challenges, especially for students unfamiliar with navigating open-ended research problems. These challenges include identifying relevant scholarly sources, constructing coherent arguments, managing feedback loops, and working collaboratively across different stages of the project lifecycle. Given these complexities, students often require support that is timely, adaptive, and non-intrusive—traits that AI systems can potentially embody.

Instructors, too, face difficulties in guiding diverse student groups through PBL activities, particularly in large classrooms where personalized mentoring is impractical. AI tools could bridge this gap by offering scalable, context-aware assistance, enabling instructors to focus on higher-order facilitation rather than basic troubleshooting or content delivery. However, such integration must be grounded in an understanding of how students use these tools and perceive their contributions to the learning experience—an area still lacking in research.

AI-Driven Research Tools

AI-driven research tools such as ResearchRabbit, Connected Papers, Elicit, and ChatGPT have transformed how students conduct literature reviews, map citations, and receive feedback. Park et al. (2023) found that tools like Elicit improve efficiency in identifying research gaps, while Wu et al. (2022) highlight AI's role in reducing cognitive load during complex tasks. Natural language processing tools—such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot—further support students in paraphrasing, summarizing, and refining their writing, enhancing the iterative and creative aspects of project-based learning (PBL). These tools promote rapid idea development and immediate feedback, fostering innovation. However, existing studies often examine single-tool usage, offering little insight into how students integrate multiple AI tools across research stages. The impact of multi-tool engagement on inquiry depth, creativity, and collaboration in group settings remains underexplored.

Moreover, the pedagogical and cognitive effects of AI use in interdisciplinary, student-centered environments like PBL are not well understood. There is also a growing need to examine students' perceptions and ethical considerations: Do they see AI as a shortcut or a legitimate academic aid? As AI becomes more embedded in education, understanding its influence on critical thinking and academic integrity is increasingly vital.

AI and Innovation in Learning

Innovation in learning involves generating new ideas or approaches to solve academic or real-world problems (Sawyer, 2012). AI supports this process by enabling divergent thinking, pattern recognition, and rapid prototyping (Luckin et al., 2016; Shibani et al., 2020). McArthur et al. (2021) highlight that AI fosters creativity by automating routine tasks, allowing students to focus on ideation. However, scholars warn that overreliance on AI may lead to deskilling and diminished critical thinking (Selwyn, 2019; Sinha et al., 2022). Thus,

effective AI use in project-based learning (PBL) must balance automation with student agency.

While much research has explored AI's role in personalized learning and research support, few studies examine how multiple AI tools collectively influence innovation in collaborative PBL settings. There is limited empirical evidence on how students use these tools throughout semester-long academic projects. Most existing work overlooks how students adopt, combine, and adapt various tools to support the iterative and creative processes central to PBL. Additionally, little is known about how students perceive the strengths and limitations of AI tools in enhancing creativity, problem-solving, and innovation. This study addresses these gaps by examining how university students engage with AI-driven research tools in a semester-long PBL course. It explores how these tools are integrated across research stages, how students assess their impact on innovation, and what pedagogical strategies can support more meaningful AI integration into higher education curricula.

Research Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the integration of AI-driven research tools in project-based learning (PBL) within higher education. This design enables an in-depth understanding of student experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in their natural academic context (Merriam, 2009). The case study allows detailed analysis of how AI tools shape innovation and collaboration within a specific PBL course.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a public university in Indonesia known for interdisciplinary PBL. One semester-long undergraduate course with 30 students from education, engineering, and business was selected due to its collaborative structure and focus on real-world problem-solving. Purposive sampling identified students who actively engaged with AI tools, including ChatGPT (ideation, writing), Elicit (literature synthesis), ResearchRabbit (citation mapping), Scite.ai (citation analysis), Julius.ai (data analysis), and Grammarly or Quillbot (writing refinement). Thirty students participated in semi-structured interviews and submitted weekly reflection journals (three from each project group). Additionally, two faculty members were interviewed to provide instructional and pedagogical insights into AI integration. The collected data offered a comprehensive view of both learner experiences and educator strategies, enabling a deeper understanding of how AI tools influenced collaboration, critical thinking, and project outcomes within the course.

Data Collection Methods

Three data collection techniques were used: interviews, document analysis, and reflection journals. Interviews with students and faculty explored tool usage, perceived benefits, challenges, and ethical concerns. All were recorded and transcribed. Document analysis of student reports and research logs examined the role of AI in shaping project outcomes. Reflection journals offered longitudinal insights into evolving tool usage and attitudes throughout the course.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with both deductive and inductive coding. NVivo supported coding, and themes were cross-validated among researchers to ensure reliability. Data saturation confirmed analytical completeness. All participants gave informed consent, with confidentiality maintained via pseudonyms. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics board.

Results

This study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to interpret qualitative data drawn from interview transcripts, journals, and documents related to AI tool usage in academic contexts. A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding was used. Deductive codes were informed by predefined categories aligned with the research objectives and existing literature on AI-enhanced learning tools. Concurrently, inductive coding allowed for the emergence of unanticipated yet relevant themes from the data. Deductive coding categories included:

1. **Tool Functionality & Use Cases** – How students employed AI tools (e.g., ideation, writing).
2. **Perceived Benefits** – Reported advantages (e.g., speed, clarity).
3. **Perceived Challenges** – Issues experienced (e.g., over-reliance).
4. **Ethical Considerations** – Dilemmas around use (e.g., plagiarism).
5. **Learning Impact** – Influence on academic learning (e.g., deeper understanding).
6. **Collaboration & Communication** – Impact on group work and peer dynamics.

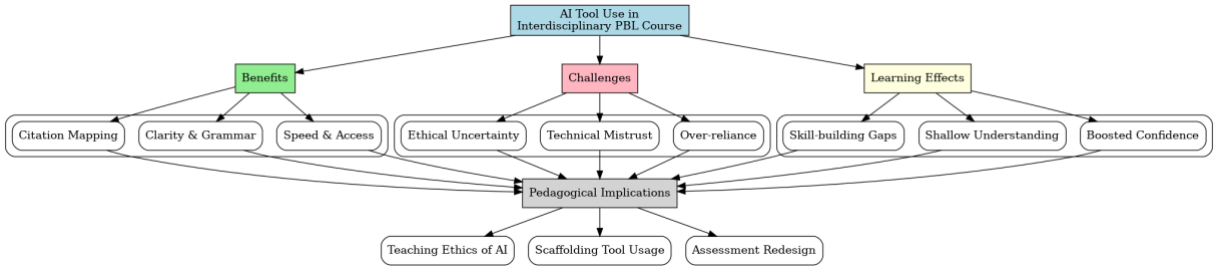
Themes were refined through iterative coding cycles, ensuring both the integrity of the data and alignment with the research questions.

Table 1
Thematic Analysis Results

Theme Category	Code	Sample Extract	Interpretation / Insight
Tool Functionality & Use Cases	Ideation	"I used ChatGPT at the start of every phase—just to brainstorm ideas."	AI tools support early-stage idea generation in project-based learning.
	Data Analysis	"Julius.ai helped me make graphs…"	Tools are used for visualizing and processing data.
	Literature Search	"The literature review… covers 17 sources within two weeks."	AI supports fast and comprehensive source retrieval.

			Citation Evaluation	"Scite.ai showed me which articles were supported or disputed."	AI enhances evaluation of source credibility.
Perceived Benefits			Efficiency	"The literature review… within two weeks."	AI accelerates traditionally time-consuming academic tasks.
			Enhanced Critical Thinking	"It changed how I evaluated my sources."	Use of citation evaluation tools fosters evaluative judgment.
Perceived Challenges			Over-Reliance	"Sometimes I felt like I was relying on it too much."	Some students develop dependency on AI tools.
			Shallow Learning	"…but I didn't fully understand the analysis."	Use of AI tools may bypass deep conceptual engagement.
Ethical Considerations			Dependency	"Sometimes I felt like I was relying on it too much."	Ethical questions arise around authorship and originality.
Learning Impact	Early Stage Support	"I used ChatGPT… to brainstorm ideas."	AI is often used during the ideation phase, shaping initial project design.		
	Critical Thinking	"At first, I just used the AI to summarize articles. But then I realized I could ask it to show me opposing viewpoints or check if something was outdated. That made me rethink which sources to include and how to present the arguments. It's like it pushed me to read more carefully and critically."	AI tools, when used critically, enhance deeper analytical engagement.		

Figure 1
Thematic Visualization of AI Usage in Research



The study's mean scores reveal a nuanced understanding of how students perceive AI tools across various aspects of their academic learning. *Efficiency* received the highest average score (3.63), showing that students value AI for saving time and streamlining tasks—highlighting its strong role in boosting productivity. *Ideation* (3.37) and *Early Stage Learning Support* (3.13) also scored well, suggesting that students find AI particularly helpful during brainstorming and planning stages. These findings indicate that AI is most embraced as a supportive partner in initiating academic work. However, perceptions shift when deeper learning is considered. *Enhanced Critical Thinking* had the lowest mean score (2.40), pointing to concerns that AI may not foster—or could even hinder—analytical depth. Scores in *Dependency* (2.73) and *Over-Reliance* (2.87) further suggest unease about excessive reliance on AI tools, potentially limiting students' development of independent problem-solving skills. Dimensions such as *Citation Evaluation***,** *Shallow Learning*, and *Critical Thinking* hovered around 2.67, reflecting mixed views. Some students appreciated AI for organizing sources and simplifying understanding, while others worried it encouraged superficial engagement or careless citation practices. Specific tool use revealed further insights. *ChatGPT* was frequently used for ideation and drafting outlines, while *Elicit* and *ResearchRabbit* sped up literature discovery. *Grammarly* and *Quillbot* helped refine academic writing, particularly for non-native speakers. *Scite.ai* aided more informed citation decisions. A business student noted, "I could find relevant papers in minutes, something that used to take hours."

Despite these benefits, challenges emerged. Over-reliance was a recurring theme, with some students too readily accepting AI-generated content without question. Users of *Julius.ai* voiced doubts about interpreting data outputs, revealing reduced critical engagement. Ethical concerns, such as unclear authorship and temptation to plagiarize AI-generated content, were also raised. An education student shared, "It was too easy to just accept what AI gave me without questioning it."

The learning impact of AI tools was described as both empowering and problematic. Many students reported increased confidence and autonomy, especially in tasks like literature reviews and data analysis. AI enabled self-paced, exploratory learning. Yet, this autonomy sometimes resulted in shallow understanding when students used outputs without grasping the underlying processes. As one noted, "Julius.ai gave me the graphs, but I didn't know if I was interpreting them right." Faculty interviews revealed evolving instructional responses. Educators recognized AI's potential but emphasized the need for ethical, reflective use. They recommended scaffolded AI tool training and redesigned assessments focused on learning processes rather than just final outputs. As one faculty member put it, "We want students to use these tools, but with reflection, not substitution." While AI tools enhance productivity, ideation, and learner confidence, they also raise critical concerns around over-reliance, ethics,

and deep engagement. These findings underscore the importance of thoughtful AI into educational practice.

Discussion

This study examined how students and instructors engaged with AI-driven research tools within an interdisciplinary project-based learning (PBL) environment. Four major themes emerged: enhanced ideation and topic refinement, accelerated literature discovery, improved academic writing and synthesis, and concerns around dependency and critical thinking. In the early stages of projects, students frequently used *ChatGPT* to shape research ideas, brainstorm topics, and simulate problem-solving. It acted as a 24/7 tutor, helping students refine vague ideas into actionable questions. Faculty also observed clearer, more focused project proposals from students who used AI during this phase.

During the research stage, *Elicit* and *ResearchRabbit* allowed students to explore literature more efficiently by identifying semantically related studies. Students described these tools as "smart Google Scholars" that helped uncover relevant and novel research directions. *Scite.ai* added a critical layer, enabling users to assess the reliability of citations by showing whether claims were supported or disputed in the literature. In the writing phase, *Grammarly*, *Quillbot*, and *ChatGPT* were widely used to improve clarity, tone, and structure. These tools were especially helpful for students with limited academic English skills. Students who used AI reflectively—not just for content generation—showed stronger analytical and synthesis skills. Faculty confirmed improvements in writing quality and organization in work submitted by students who regularly used these tools.

Despite the benefits, over-reliance on AI emerged as a concern. Some students admitted to accepting AI-generated content without verification. This passive use often led to superficial engagement with key concepts. One student noted, "It was so easy to just paste my research question into ChatGPT and copy the response—I realized I wasn't learning anything." Faculty echoed these concerns, particularly regarding citation evaluation and conceptual understanding, which are critical to academic development. The findings reflect AI's dual role in higher education—as both enabler and potential crutch. On one hand, AI supported student autonomy, reduced cognitive overload, and promoted efficiency and innovation, aligning with prior research (Luckin et al., 2016; McArthur et al., 2021). Students reported feeling more confident and independent in tackling complex academic tasks. NLP tools like Grammarly and Quillbot offered writing feedback that extended beyond proofreading, enhancing tone, coherence, and structure (Morrison et al., 2023). Tools like Scite.ai fostered more informed citation practices. On the other hand, risks of shallow learning and overdependence emerged, especially when students failed to critically evaluate AI outputs. These findings align with previous warnings from Selwyn (2019) and Sinha et al. (2022) about the erosion of critical thinking due to AI overuse.

To address these issues, the study recommends structured pedagogical interventions. These include workshops on ethical AI use, clear guidelines on acceptable tool usage, and assessments that emphasize learning processes over final outcomes. Students could also maintain research logs documenting how AI influenced their thinking and decisions—encouraging transparency and critical reflection. These strategies echo calls for digital literacy integration in higher education (Ifenthaler & Yau, 2020). AI tools were also found to support creativity, idea generation, and data visualization—core elements of innovation in PBL. Students used *ChatGPT*, *Elicit*, and *ResearchRabbit* to explore novel angles and trace

citation networks. *Julius.ai* helped interpret data and generate visualizations, extending students' problem-solving capacity. Reflection journals revealed that many students gained confidence and a sense of ownership over their work—indicators of an emerging innovative mindset.

The study's findings align with the 21st-Century Skills Framework, particularly in creativity, collaboration, and communication. However, while AI facilitated tasks related to understanding, applying, and analyzing—aligned with Bloom's mid-level cognitive skills—there was limited evidence of consistent engagement at the highest levels of evaluating and creating. Without proper scaffolding, AI may inadvertently promote surface-level learning. In conclusion, AI tools offer meaningful support for ideation, research, writing, and innovation in project-based learning. Yet, their benefits are maximized only when paired with ethical guidance, reflective practices, and thoughtful integration into the curriculum. Institutions must focus not just on adopting AI, but on cultivating critical, responsible users who can collaborate effectively with these tools in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Learning Depth and Experiential Engagement

When evaluated through the lens of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), students were clearly engaging in the stages of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation by testing the capabilities of various AI tools within their projects. However, the data also indicated that many learners neglected the reflective observation phase—arguably the most critical for deep learning and meaning-making. Several students reported accepting AI-generated outputs at face value without questioning their validity or considering alternative perspectives, thereby limiting the development of their metacognitive skills. That said, some students showed signs of adaptive learning. Their journals revealed a progression in their thinking over time, as they learned to question the information generated by AI and adjusted their strategies accordingly. These students demonstrated a growing awareness of the limitations of AI, coupled with a willingness to engage more critically with its suggestions. Such behavior suggests the presence of nascent self-regulation—an essential feature of experiential and transformative learning (Bransford et al., 2000). Conversely, students who relied too heavily on tools like ChatGPT and Quillbot often exhibited passive consumption, indicating a need for more intentional instructional support to foster deeper cognitive engagement.

Instructional Gaps and Areas for Improvement

Insights from faculty interviews revealed important instructional gaps that must be addressed to maximize the educational value of AI in PBL environments. While many instructors acknowledged the enhanced quality of student output, they also voiced concern that students were shortcutting critical parts of the learning process. The convenience of AI often led students to skip important phases of research, such as evaluating the credibility of sources or articulating their rationale for specific methodological choices.

To address these gaps, instructors emphasized the need for early integration of AI ethics and critical use workshops. They also advocated for the redesign of assessments to focus not only on final outputs but also on the process behind them—how students used AI, what decisions they made, and what reflections they drew from those experiences. Furthermore, collaborative critiques of AI-generated content were proposed to foster dialogue about tool limitations and cognitive bias, allowing students to develop a more nuanced understanding of

AI as a fallible, context-dependent tool rather than an infallible authority. This approach is consistent with constructivist pedagogy, which posits that meaningful learning occurs when learners actively construct knowledge through experience, inquiry, and reflection—not automation. For AI to truly contribute to innovation and deep learning, it must be embedded in pedagogical designs that challenge students to think critically and independently.

Innovation Skill Development: Level and Trajectory

The data suggest that students' innovation skills developed along a continuum, primarily within foundational and intermediate levels. At the foundational stage, students used AI tools to brainstorm ideas, summarize readings, and organize their thoughts. These activities reflect basic creative engagement and information management. Intermediate-level skill development was evident in students' ability to synthesize diverse sources, identify thematic patterns, and use data visualization tools such as Julius.ai or Elicit to generate novel insights.

However, instances of advanced innovation skill—such as challenging the outputs of AI, reframing problems from multiple disciplinary angles, or co-creating with AI—were rare. These higher-order skills were mostly observed among students who consciously reflected on their research processes and recognized the limitations of their tools. To help more students reach this advanced stage, educators must provide deliberate opportunities for critical reflection, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and algorithmic literacy. Encouraging students to examine the assumptions behind AI-generated content and to engage in iterative dialogue about its strengths and flaws will be essential for deepening their innovative capacity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the role of AI research tools in supporting innovation skill development within an interdisciplinary PBL course at a public university in Indonesia. Drawing on multiple data sources—including interviews, project documentation, and student reflection journals—the findings reveal that AI significantly contributed to students' ability to generate ideas, explore literature, and articulate academic arguments. These tools enhanced students' confidence, autonomy, and efficiency, laying the groundwork for foundational and intermediate innovation skills.

At the same time, the study uncovered important limitations. Many students exhibited a tendency to rely too heavily on AI outputs, often without adequate critical engagement. This behavior limited their depth of understanding, impeded the development of metacognitive skills, and risked creating a superficial learning experience. Faculty members observed that while student work had improved in terms of clarity and polish, it frequently lacked depth, originality, or evidence of critical inquiry.

Therefore, the educational promise of AI in PBL contexts will only be fulfilled if accompanied by purposeful scaffolding, ethics training, and assessments that prioritize learning processes over finished products. AI tools, when used reflectively and responsibly, can act as catalysts for innovation. But without guided instruction, they can also become crutches that hinder deeper cognitive growth.

Recommendations

To advance both student learning and responsible AI integration, this study recommends a multi-pronged approach:

Andragogical Redesign

AI ethics and literacy should be introduced early in the course to cultivate responsible usage habits. Project assessments must evolve to include documentation of decision-making processes, critical reflections on AI outputs, and ethical considerations. Regular reflective practices—through journals or debriefs—can help foster deeper metacognitive engagement.

Instructional Scaffolding

Faculty should develop curated AI toolkits and example workflows that demonstrate effective use of platforms like Elicit, ResearchRabbit, and Julius.ai. Instructors can scaffold cognitive development by using questioning frameworks to push students beyond surface-level tasks. Collaborative challenges, where students critique and revise AI-generated content, can further develop critical and creative skills.

Policy and Institutional Support

Universities must establish clear policies on acceptable AI use and provide professional development opportunities for instructors. Training faculty to integrate and assess AI meaningfully will ensure that PBL remains a space for authentic learning and innovation.

Future Research

Further longitudinal studies are needed to explore how sustained AI use shapes innovation skills over time. Cross-cultural and cross-institutional comparisons can uncover contextual differences in adoption. Finally, deeper investigation into how students perceive AI credibility—and the strategies they use to validate AI-generated knowledge—will be key in shaping future pedagogical frameworks.

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Authorship and Rights Allocation in Algorithm-Driven Art: A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract

This research investigates the complex intersection of algorithmic intervention in artistic creation through a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western cultural cognitive frameworks, specifically examining the determination of creative subjectivity and rights distribution mechanisms. As artificial intelligence increasingly becomes an integral part of the creative process, traditional paradigms of artistic authorship and rights allocation face unprecedented challenges that manifest distinctively across cultural boundaries. Drawing upon empirical data from major AI art platforms and analyzing legal precedents across different jurisdictions, this study reveals fundamental differences between Eastern and Western approaches. While Western legal frameworks, rooted in Enlightenment individualism, typically emphasize singular authorship and binary rights allocation, Eastern philosophical traditions, influenced by concepts like "wu-wei" and collective harmony, demonstrate greater flexibility in recognizing distributed creative agency. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of AI-generated artworks with qualitative examination of cultural narratives and legal frameworks from key art markets including China, Japan, the United States, and the European Union. This investigation uncovers how cultural cognitive differences significantly impact the conceptualization of algorithmic creativity and subsequent rights distribution models. The study proposes a novel hybrid framework that synthesizes Eastern and Western perspectives, suggesting a more nuanced approach to creative rights allocation that acknowledges both individual contribution and collective technological influence. These findings contribute to both theoretical discourse and practical policy development, offering insights for crafting culturally sensitive legal frameworks in an increasingly globalized digital art ecosystem.

Keywords: algorithmic creativity, cultural cognition, digital rights, comparative law, Eastern-Western perspectives, artistic subjectivity

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Introduction

The explosive growth of generative AI in artistic production has precipitated what might be termed a "civilizational crisis of authorshi" - a fundamental confrontation between competing cultural conceptions of creativity and ownership. Where Western legal systems, still bound to Woodmansee's (1994) "romantic author construct," struggle to reconcile algorithmic art with anthropocentric copyright traditions, Eastern jurisdictions are evolving more flexible frameworks that acknowledge the hybrid nature of machine-human creativity (Wu Handong, 2016). This study interrogates three core dimensions of this global controversy: (1) the metaphysical foundations of originality across cultural traditions, from Christian ex nihilo creation to Daoist ziran (自然, spontaneous emergence); (2) the jurisprudential manifestations of these differences in contemporary copyright disputes; and (3) the potential for developing transcultural legal solutions that respect civilizational diversity while ensuring equitable rights allocation.

This research makes three seminal contributions: First, it establishes the first comprehensive cultural-cognitive mapping of algorithmic authorship disputes across Eastern and Western jurisdictions. Second, it traces current legal divergences to their profound philosophical roots through art historical and theological analysis. Third, it proposes concrete mechanisms for international harmonization that move beyond Western-centric models. By exposing the unexamined cultural substrates of copyright law, the study provides essential tools for navigating what promises to be one of the most consequential intellectual property challenges of the digital age.

The Modern Predicament of Western Copyright Systems in Comparative Perspective

Under the impact of AI-generated art, Western copyright systems rooted in individualist philosophy are facing an unprecedented crisis of interpretation. The approaches taken by the United States and the European Union in addressing AI-created artworks reveal profound tensions within the Western copyright paradigm.

The American Doctrine of Originality: A Case Study in Dogmatism

The U.S. Copyright Office's (USCO) administrative rulings demonstrate remarkable doctrinal rigidity. In 2022, artist Kristina Kashtanova sought copyright registration for her graphic novel *Zarya of the Dawn*, which incorporated AI-generated illustrations created using Midjourney. When USCO discovered Kashtanova's undisclosed use of AI, it initiated proceedings to revoke the registration. Although Kashtanova's legal team argued that her creative contributions - including textual content, image selection, and overall arrangement - merited protection, USCO's 2023 final determination held that the Midjourney-generated images failed to meet the "human authorship" requirement under U.S. copyright law. The Office maintained this position despite Kashtanova's sophisticated prompt engineering and curation, effectively reducing Locke's labor theory to what might be termed a ritualistic fetish.

This jurisprudence was further cemented in *Thaler v. Perlmutter* (2025), where the D.C. Circuit Court affirmed that the Copyright Act categorically requires human authorship. The court's reliance on the 1976 Copyright Act and precedent demonstrates what Ginsburg (2018) identifies as the "originality paradox" - the simultaneous demand for human creative input and the lack of adequate tools to evaluate novel forms of human-AI collaboration. This legal

stance emerges from a specific historical trajectory: the fusion of Lockean labor theory with Romantic-era genius ideology, filtered through what Woodmansee (1994) terms the "authorial personality imperative."

The European Dilemma: Kantian Personhood in the Digital Age

EU jurisprudence, while more nuanced, remains constrained by Kantian personality theory. The Court of Justice's *Levola Hengelo* (2018) decision established that copyright protects works reflecting the "author's own intellectual creation" - a standard that German courts subsequently struggled to apply in *FRT v. DeepMind* (2022). There, judges invented the nebulous "determinative artistic choices" test to accommodate AI-assisted works, revealing civil law's characteristic bifurcation between economic rights and droit moral. This creates what might be called a jurisprudential schizophrenia: recognizing human contributions while remaining conceptually unequipped to address non-human creative inputs.

The French Contradiction: Moral Rights in Algorithmic Creation

A more profound contradiction is manifested in France's approach to AI art. In 2022, artist Jason M. Allen created a digital artwork titled *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial* using the AI platform Midjourney, which won first place in the digital art category at the Colorado State Fair. Allen attempted to secure copyright protection for this work, but his application was rejected on the grounds that the piece contained substantial AI-generated content and lacked the requisite creativity inherent to human authorship. When adjudicating the exhibition dispute concerning *Théâtre D'opéra Spatial*, the Paris Court, while acknowledging the creator's moral rights, refused to grant full copyright protection to the AI-generated portions. This bifurcated approach essentially represents a rigid interpretation of the principle of "inalienability of moral rights" as stipulated in Article 6bis of the Berne Convention, disregarding the hybrid characteristics of contemporary artistic creation.

Institutional Innovation From Eastern Wisdom

When facing the same technological challenges, East Asian legal systems have demonstrated greater adaptability. In 2023, Li used AI to generate an image titled "Spring Breeze Brings Tenderness" and published it on the Rednote platform. The defendant Liu used this image without permission as an illustration for an article published on *Baijiahao*, removing the signature watermark. Li claimed that Liu's actions infringed upon the right of attribution and the right of communication through information networks, and subsequently filed a lawsuit against Liu in the Beijing Internet Court.

The Beijing Internet Court's decision in *Li v. Baidu* established a three-pronged test, developing a "contribution assessment" method that creatively transformed the traditional "brush and ink standard" from calligraphy and painting authentication into modern legal rules. The judgment elaborately reasoned: (1) the degree of creativity embodied in prompt design; (2) the unpredictability of output results; (3) the artistic value of manual post-production adjustments. The court determined that the AI-generated image in question possessed the elements of "intellectual achievement" and "originality," qualifying it as a copyrightable work. The court noted that although the creative process of AI-generated content differs from traditional human creation, the plaintiff demonstrated original intellectual input through designing prompts and selecting parameters. The court explicitly stated that the AI model itself cannot be recognized as an "author" under copyright law;

rather, the user who configured the AI model (the plaintiff) is the author of the image and enjoys copyright ownership. The defendant's unauthorized use of the image as an illustration and removal of the signature watermark infringed upon the plaintiff's right of attribution and right of communication through information networks. As China's first copyright infringement case involving "AI text-to-image" generation, this ruling holds significant judicial importance and demonstrative effect.

This framework implemented the Confucian concept of "merit" in contemporary copyright law. This holistic thinking clearly benefits from the rich experience accumulated through creative conventions such as "ghost-writing" and "collaboration" in Chinese art history, reflecting what Wu Handong (2016) identified as China's "collective innovation paradigm." The analytical structure of this decision consciously mirrors traditional Chinese painting authentication methods, wherein masterpieces are evaluated according to brushwork technique (biFA) and conceptual composition.

In Japan, a manga artist or copyright holder claimed that their work was used by an unauthorized AI system to generate manga content similar to the original. When adjudicating this case, the Tokyo District Court focused on: (1) copyright ownership of AI-generated content: the court confirmed that AI-generated works cannot obtain copyright protection because copyright law requires works to be created by humans; (2) the degree of human author participation: the court emphasized that even with AI involvement in the creative process, the creative contribution of human authors remains the key factor for copyright protection; (3) the boundaries of fair use: the court indicated that if an AI's use of copyrighted works during learning and generation exceeds the scope of fair use, it constitutes infringement. The judge cited the Japanese classical literary tradition of "honkadori" (allusive variation), asserting that as long as the use of AI tools demonstrates the author's "dominant creative intent," it should be protected just as innovative referencing in waka poetry composition. This argumentative approach of directly comparing modern technology with traditional culture is almost unimaginable in Western rulings. The Supreme Court's "dominant creative intent" standard integrates elements from both traditional and modern creative practices: the master-apprentice dynamics of ukiyo-e workshop systems coexist with contemporary concepts of algorithmic transparency. This hybrid approach reflects Japan's unique capacity for technological assimilation while maintaining traditional aesthetic values, a phenomenon that art historian Tsuji Nobuo (2005) described as "Japan's aesthetics of adaptation."

Notably, both China and Japan have independently developed some form of "process value" assessment method when handling copyright issues related to AI art. Chinese courts focus on the "labor density" of creative input, while Japanese tribunals emphasize the "intentional continuity" of the creative process. Although these two approaches emphasize different aspects, both break through the Western copyright law's "all-or-nothing" rights determination model, providing valuable experience for constructing a gradient protection system.

Comparative Analysis of Philosophical Foundations

The fundamental divergences between Eastern and Western approaches to AI-generated artworks ultimately reflect two distinct epistemologies of creativity. Within the Western metaphysical tradition - spanning from Plato's theory of Forms to Christian creation theology - there persists an emphasis on the disruptive and transcendent nature of creative acts. This cognitive framework, when projected onto legal domains, manifests as an absolutist demand

for “originality.” The Western legal tradition's struggle with algorithmic creativity becomes comprehensible when traced to these theological roots.

In contrast, Eastern legal systems draw upon radically different philosophical resources. The Daoist parable of “Chef Ding Dissecting an Ox” (庖丁解牛) from the Zhuangzi (庄子) reveals the Chinese cultural conception of “Craft as Dao” (技艺即道) - where technical mastery embodies cosmic principles. Similarly, Zeami Motokiyo’s “Kaaden” (花传书) systematically articulates the progressive nature of artistic cultivation in Japanese tradition. The Daoist concept of “ziran” (自然, spontaneous emergence) and Confucian “wen” (文, cultural patterning) tradition undergird what Saussy (2016) terms “pattern recognition creativity.” This explains Chinese law's relative comfort with algorithmic art: where Western systems perceive threatening automatism, Eastern traditions discern “li” (理) - the natural ordering principles - in machine learning outputs. Japanese jurisprudence similarly benefits from aesthetic concepts like “mitate” (見立て) that legitimate reinterpretation as creative act. These intellectual resources enable East Asian legal systems to naturally accommodate creativity as distributed across human-machine collaborative processes, rather than requiring its concentration in decisive moments of individual inspiration.

This philosophical divergence manifests concretely in institutional design: Western copyright law establishes originality thresholds as gatekeeping mechanisms, while East Asian systems tend to construct contribution-based benefit allocation frameworks. The former emphasizes qualitative transformation in creative outcomes, the latter values quantitative accumulation in creative processes. The Western model’s fixation on the “eureka moment” of creation contrasts sharply with Eastern appreciation for incremental creative labor - a distinction traceable to their respective metaphysical foundations. Where Kantian aesthetics demands the imprint of individual genius, Confucian thought values the refinement of cultural patterns through collective practice. This fundamental difference in conceptualizing creative temporality - as punctual versus processual - generates the observable variance in how legal systems approach AI authorship.

Toward Culturally Inclusive Global Governance

Based on the above analysis, future international coordination should strive to build a multi-tiered protection framework. Meaningful international coordination must transcend technical legal adjustments to address fundamental cultural differences.

Substantive Rules

The protection system must incorporate gradated rather than binary thresholds. China’s “contribution-weighted” model provides a template but needs to be supplemented with Western-style attribution certainty and Japanese-style procedural transparency. For instance, AI art creation could be broken down into quantifiable contribution units such as conceptualization (30%), tool selection (20%), parameter adjustment (25%), and post-processing (25%).

Procedural Mechanisms

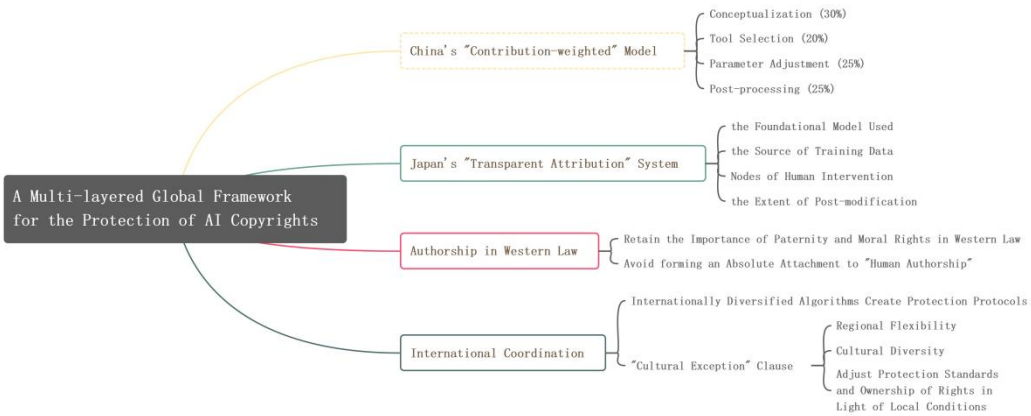
Attribution frameworks need cultural customization, with Japan’s “transparent attribution” system offering a good example. It could be required that AI-generated content must be labeled with: (1) the foundational model used; (2) the source of training data; (3) nodes of

human intervention; (4) the extent of post-modification. This disclosure obligation not only safeguards the public's right to know but also preserves the creator's reputation.

International Coordination

Retaining the importance of paternity and moral rights in Western law should emphasize the individual's authorship, originality and human intent, but it should not form an absolute attachment to "human authorship". Furthermore, there is a need to break through the rigid framework of the Berne Convention and adopt "international pluralism" (Sunder, 2012), establishing a dedicated "Algorithmic Creation Protection Protocol." This protocol could introduce a "cultural exception" clause, allowing different countries and regions to adapt protection standards and rights attribution for AI art based on local creative traditions, with regional implementation flexibility and UNESCO-inspired cultural diversity mechanisms.

Figure 1
A Multi-layered Global Framework for the Protection of AI Copyrights



Conclusion

The global rise of AI-generated art has triggered a constitutional crisis in global copyright regimes, revealing fundamental rifts in how different legal traditions conceptualize creative agency. Comparative analysis shows that the current disputes over algorithmic authorship are not merely technical legal challenges - they reflect profound civilizational differences in the ontology of creativity itself. Western systems remain bound by the "author-god" model, rooted in Christian creation theology and romantic worship of genius, increasingly at odds with the distributed reality of digital creativity. In contrast, Eastern traditions demonstrate the "juridical plasticity" identified by Tsai (2021) through frameworks such as China's proportional contribution analysis and Japan's transparent attribution principles. Eastern wisdom reminds us that creativity is never the product of an isolated moment but always exists in the dynamic interaction between humans and their tools. Future legal regimes should strive to capture this dynamic relationship rather than futilely seeking the imagined "decisive moment."

The challenges we face represent what Kuhn would consider a paradigm crisis in intellectual property law. Solutions require transcending the sterile debates over human versus machine creativity and addressing more fundamental questions: What constitutes artistic labor in the algorithmic age? How should the law recognize distributed creative systems? What balance between cultural specificity and global interactivity best fosters artistic innovation? As case

studies demonstrate, answers will not come from any single legal tradition but from what Liu Chuntian (2021) calls “civilizational legal dialogue.” Our task is neither to abandon the core purposes of copyright nor to cling to its contingent historical forms but to reimagine the protection of creativity for an era in which art arises both from iterative human-AI collaboration and from solitary genius. In this endeavor, the world's legal traditions offer a rich reservoir of conceptual resources - if we have the wisdom to synthesize them.

In this sense, the rise of AI art may provide us with a precious opportunity: to break the “author myth” that has persisted for two centuries and return to an essential understanding of creation as a social practice. What the law needs to develop is not more precise tools for rights definition but more open frameworks for understanding creativity - which may be the most valuable fruit of East-West cultural dialogue.

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The Intersection of Artificial Intelligence and Contemporary Aesthetics: An Exploration of Human Aesthetic Perception and Cultural Ecology

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Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly impacted creative communities such as illustration, manga, and painting, particularly driving a surge in AI-driven image generation. However, the application of AI technology has also sparked debates regarding creators' rights, aesthetic standards, and its influence on creative community culture, leading to both supportive and opposing perspectives. This study collects and analyzes information and trends from selected Asian illustration communities on platforms such as Facebook groups in Taiwan, Pixiv in Japan, and X (Twitter) to explore how AI-generated art affects creators' work processes and aesthetic values. It also examines the acceptance and controversy surrounding AI-generated art within these creative circles. The key research focuses include: (1) discussing the supportive and opposing viewpoints on AI within creative communities, (2) examining the challenges AI-generated art poses to aesthetic standards and creative expression, and (3) exploring how creators adapt to or resist AI technology. This paper aims to investigate how AI-generated technology influences the adaptation and transformation of these creative communities, its potential long-term impact, and possible approaches to achieving a balanced perspective.

Keywords: generative AI art, illustrators community, creator

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When AI Meets Aesthetics: Opportunities and Contradictions

Since 2022, generative artificial intelligence (Generative AI) has rapidly proliferated in the field of image generation. Technologies such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and DALL·E have significantly lowered the barriers to image creation, making a substantial impact on fields like illustration, manga, and commercial design. AI not only learns and mimics human creators' styles but is also capable of producing near-professional visual outcomes in an extremely short amount of time. These technological breakthroughs have opened up new possibilities for artistic creation, bringing about an unprecedented transformation for practices traditionally rooted in hand-drawing and visual training.

However, this rapid technological advancement has also sparked considerable controversy. The training data for AI-generated works often include vast amounts of content from creators without authorization, leading to strong backlash from original artists over issues of "plagiarism" and "infringement." Moreover, the competitive edge AI provides in the market poses tangible pressure on professional illustrators. Social media has become a central arena for these debates: from Taiwan's Facebook illustration groups, to Japan's Pixiv platform, and the global stage of X (formerly Twitter), intense discussions have emerged over the acceptance of AI-generated images, labeling standards, ethical concerns, and the definition of authorship.

This study focuses on a central question: As AI becomes deeply integrated into the realm of image creation, how are Asian illustration communities responding to this technological shift, and how are they redefining their creative identity in cultural and aesthetic terms?

Responses and Transformations Within Illustration Communities

Discussions and Shifts in Public Opinion on Social Platforms

The rapid proliferation of AI-generated art—particularly in the field of illustration—has sparked a series of cultural frictions and value debates within Asian illustration communities. Social media platforms such as Taiwan's Facebook illustration groups, Japan's Pixiv, and the global platform X (formerly Twitter) have become crucial arenas for creative exchange, showcasing works, and ideological clashes. These spaces reveal the polarized public discourse surrounding AI technologies.

The integration of generative AI is not merely an individual technical choice—it is deeply embedded in the dynamics of online discourse and participatory cultures on these platforms. As Henry Jenkins has articulated in his concept of "Participatory Culture," contemporary creative communities are no longer passive content recipients but are active producers, critics, and norm-setters. Within such platform ecosystems, the legitimacy and aesthetic value of AI-generated images are not determined solely by the technology itself, but are shaped through ongoing negotiation, debate, and collective interpretation among users.

On platforms such as Taiwan's Facebook and Plurk communities, as well as X, discussion threads on AI-generated works have emerged. Users are not only concerned with whether a work is labeled as AI-generated but also whether it infringes on the rights of human creators. Debates have even arisen over whether AI works should be eligible to compete or be exhibited alongside human-created works. These discursive actions reveal the platforms' role in what might be called "cultural governance."

Some creators have adopted hybrid workflows—using AI tools to generate initial sketches, then refining them through hand-drawn techniques—and have shared these processes publicly, gaining partial recognition from audiences for their "half-human, half-AI" creative approach. Meanwhile, subcultural groups within these communities have begun to form, such as "pure hand-drawn circles" or "AI research sharing circles," creating their own cultural filters through tagging, reposting, and recommendation behaviors. These practices help shape the direction of discourse and include protest actions, such as organized tag campaigns to boycott certain AI tools—exemplified by the global campaign on ArtStation labeled "No to AI-Generated Images." Such actions express opposition to copyright infringement, aesthetic homogenization, and the reduced visibility of human illustrators. These are not only declarations of stance but also the ethical boundaries being established by community members through mediated action.

Creators' Adaptation Strategies and Shifting Roles

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (Generative AI) has significantly impacted illustrators' perceptions of their roles and creative strategies. AI tools such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, DALL·E, and NovelAI not only have the capability to rapidly generate images but are also increasingly able to simulate stylized brushstrokes and visual vocabularies. As a result, the creative threshold—once grounded in technical mastery—has been dramatically lowered. In response to these shifts, creators on several Asian illustration platforms, such as Taiwan's Facebook groups and Japan's Pixiv, have demonstrated a range of attitudes:

(1) Integrating AI as an assistive tool for creation
(2) Strongly opposing and resisting AI-generated art
(3) Emphasizing personal style and humanistic narratives as a form of artistic expression
(4) Withholding comment or choosing not to respond
(5) Fully embracing AI as the primary mode of creation

The first group of creators regards AI as a tool to enhance productivity—using it for sketch composition, conceptual references, or mass-generating materials for selection and refinement. In this strategy, AI does not replace the agency of the artist but is incorporated as part of the creative workflow, allowing creators to dedicate more energy to refining style, shaping details, and deepening narrative dimensions.

The second group approaches the rise of AI with caution or resistance, particularly in light of concerns that AI training often involves large-scale, unauthorized use of existing artists' works. This raises feelings of "being infringed upon" and market anxiety. Some illustrators respond by articulating their creative philosophy and emphasizing the irreplaceable value in their works—qualities that AI cannot replicate.

The third and fourth groups may choose not to comment on AI at all. Instead, they focus on strengthening the output and expressive content of their work, often because they already enjoy a degree of recognition in the field.

The final group consists of creators who treat AI as a new medium for artistic production, generating a substantial volume of AI-based works.

This study is also interested in a broader question: Does the advent of AI actively prompt creators to redefine their own roles? Are they becoming more conscious of their transition

from image-makers to contextual designers, emotional communicators, or even cultural interpreters? In this process of transformation, illustration ceases to be merely about image generation—it becomes a cultural practice where aesthetics and authorship are continuously renegotiated in dialogue with technology.

Cultural Ecology and the Spiritual Turn: Rediscovering the "Human" Beyond Technological Limits

Shifts in the Interaction Between AI and Cultural Ecology

In Taiwan's creative communities, the initial appearance of AI-generated illustrations was often mistaken for human-made works, sparking concerns and questions among some artists about the "authenticity of creation" and "authorship." In response, original creators began explicitly labeling their works with phrases such as "hand-drawn" or "non-AI" to distinguish them from AI-generated content. In certain discussion threads, AI-generated images were even referred to as "cheap imitations," revealing a deep-rooted anxiety within parts of the community regarding AI's intrusion into creative ethics.

By contrast, Japan's Pixiv platform has demonstrated a more nuanced approach to categorization and moderation. In October 2022, it introduced a dedicated tagging system for AI-generated works, and users were given the option to hide AI images from their feed—an attempt to balance platform openness with creators' concerns about copyright and visibility. Nevertheless, despite these technical adjustments, there remains no consensus within the community on whether AI-generated works should be allowed to "compete fairly" with human-made creations.

These shifting currents within creative communities not only reflect the tensions between artistic ethics and technological application, but also reveal that contemporary illustration circles are undergoing a reorganization of aesthetic standards and cultural practices. As the boundaries between AI and creative authorship become increasingly blurred, communities are transforming from mere spaces of opinion exchange into testing grounds for the reconstruction of value systems and the future trajectory of cultural ecologies.

The rise of generative AI has significantly impacted how illustrators understand their roles and develop creative strategies. Once these technologies entered creative communities, they began reshaping not only production processes but also the legitimacy and position of artists within the artistic field. According to Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) theory, every cultural field involves the contestation of symbolic capital—the style, technique, manual training, and aesthetic judgment that illustrators possess serve as cultural capital, forming the basis of their influence within the field. The advent of AI technologies has destabilized the effectiveness of this capital. As visual outcomes can now be simulated or replicated through machine computation, creators are compelled to reposition their roles and values.

Some illustrators have chosen to incorporate AI into their creative process, emphasizing their irreplaceable aesthetic judgment, post-production skills, and narrative ability. This can be understood as a strategy of "rearticulating cultural capital," shifting the focus of creation from mere image production to creative intent and human discernment. Others emphasize their "non-AI" methods, deliberately turning their distance from technology into a symbolic advantage of style. Such resistance can be seen as a form of "boundary-making" within the field, aimed at preserving the status of handmade creation within the cultural hierarchy.

Whether they choose to adopt or reject AI, creators are engaged in a process of renegotiating their cultural position and redistributing capital within a new technological context.

How Technological Innovation Reshapes the Cultural Creative Environment

The rapid penetration of AI into the realm of illustration, coupled with its technological advancement, enables users to quickly absorb and build upon the work of predecessors—an intrinsic characteristic of AI-generated content (AICG). While this accelerates the creative process, it also destabilizes the identity of the creator and exerts pressure on the rhythm of creation, aesthetic standards, and the psychological states within contemporary cultural ecologies. In The Burnout Society, Byung-Chul Han (2015) argues that modern society is no longer governed by external, repressive structures of power, but by an internalized, self-accelerating "violence of positivity," where individuals are locked in perpetual competition with themselves, striving for continuous production and self-optimization.

When AI can generate hundreds of stylized illustrations within seconds and instantly satisfy market demand, human creators are inevitably drawn into a hyper-efficient field of acceleration. They begin to ask: If AI can produce "visually perfect" works, what value remains in human-made creations? This echoes Han's diagnosis of cultural exhaustion and creative nihilism born from "excessive transparency" and "performance pressure."

As generative AI gains mastery over image style, visual language, and even the creative process itself, the position of human creators within the image production system becomes increasingly unstable. In AI-Aesthetics and the Anthropocentric Myth of Creativity, Arielli and Manovich (2022) argue that AI continually challenges the boundaries of human art and creativity—concepts already difficult to define. As AI encroaches upon what was once considered uniquely human territory, it forces a reexamination of creativity itself. This disruption is not merely a market challenge; it raises a fundamental question: Why does creation exist? This shift may reflect a deeper yearning among creators for irreplaceability. Rather than compete with AI on efficiency or output, some creators are returning to the original intention of creation—as a condensation of personal life experience, and as a vessel for emotion, memory, and belief.

Michel Foucault, in The Order of Things, suggested that the concept of "man" only emerged in the modern era and is inherently fluid, constantly being redefined. Likewise, our understanding of creativity and aesthetics is also in continuous flux. While AI increasingly accomplishes what was once believed to be possible only through human effort—creating unease about the authenticity of human creativity—it also pushes humans to reevaluate their own definitions and values. In this context, creators emphasize the importance of personal life narratives in their work. Creation becomes a ritualistic act of dialogue with the world and the self. Here, the artwork is no longer merely a vehicle for technical display but becomes a representation of the soul's condition.

Henry Jenkins' theory reminds us that although AI has sparked controversy among illustration artists, the power of communities lies not merely in emotional reactions. The acceptance or rejection of AI-generated art often hinges not on the image itself, but on the cultural identity, ethical participation, and sense of belonging that it represents. Technology compels people to constantly redefine and rethink, while public discourse continues to evolve. Within this shifting landscape, some illustrators are moving toward a spiritualization

of creation—seeing artistic practice not just as the production of visual commodities but as a pathway to inner self and transcendental realms.

Conclusion and Future Outlook: Reconstructing the Meaning of Creation at the Edge of Technology

Conclusion

As AI capabilities grow increasingly powerful and its generated outputs become ever more realistic, we are witnessing a surprising response from creators: a renewed search for what is uniquely human and irreplaceable. This search is not only expressed through tactile techniques or personal visual styles but also manifests in the framing of creation as a spiritual practice, an emotional offering, and a transcendental dialogue. While AI expands the possibilities of image production through efficiency and mimicry, it also inadvertently opens up a fundamental reflection on why creation exists at all. Generative AI art has, perhaps unintentionally, catalyzed a shift—from creators being visual producers to becoming seekers of meaning. Their work is no longer simply about responding to markets or gaining social exposure, but about deeper internal exploration and cultural interpretation.

In the face of AI-induced hyper-efficiency and overproduction, creators confront more than just industrial competition or anxieties over stylistic imitation. They also encounter the existential fatigue described by Byung-Chul Han in The Burnout Society, in which creation loses its spirit and presence, becoming infinitely replaceable.

Thus, rather than rendering human creation obsolete, AI-generated art has revealed the essential, unquantifiable aspects of artistic labor: pain, belief, a sense of history, ethical choice, and the sensitivity to the "unknown" or even the "transcendental." The future of artistic practice and cultural thought may very well emerge from these very gaps. The creative culture ahead is unlikely to revert to the pre-AI paradigm; nor can we simply categorize AI as either a "threat" or a "tool." What truly warrants attention is how AI compels us to rethink the human-machine boundary—and how, within the language, practices, and institutions of creation, we might reassert a distinctively human aesthetic experience and spiritual depth.

In summary, AI has not ended art; rather, it has returned creation to its most fundamental questions—for humans, what does it mean to create, to be a subject, to be irreplaceable? As this dialogue continues, this paper argues that the very moment technology pushes humanity to its limits is also the moment we are called back to our human essence. The discussions unfolding among artists, illustrators, and creative communities affirm this: people will not cease to explore, and will persist in their efforts to discover new definitions and new paths forward.

Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

This study focuses on Asian illustration communities, examining the impact of generative AI on creative practices and cultural ecology. Due to limitations in research duration and data sources, most of the sample is concentrated on specific platforms between 2022 and 2024, and does not yet encompass a broader range of creator experiences and cultural contexts. Additionally, individual differences in attitudes and approaches toward AI among creators

are significant, suggesting the need for further empirical research to supplement these findings.

This study hopes to serve as a foundation for future exploration, and proposes the following directions for further research:

(1) Investigate how spiritual aesthetics are redefined and practiced within AI-dominated creative environments.
(2) Analyze how AI-generated works interact with creators' narratives, embodied experiences, and cultural memories—while further exploring the possibility of establishing a creative paradigm that transcends productivity-driven logic and affirms the notion of creation as existence. Such inquiry could provide a spiritual and philosophical foundation for imagining a future in which AI and human creativity coexist.

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Media Capitalism: News Content Dynamics and Ethical Challenges for Local Journalists in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This research aims to examine how local journalists perceive media capitalism and its connection to the content produced by the media, as well as the challenges it poses to journalistic ethics. Capitalism is closely intertwined with mass media in Indonesia, including in the Yogyakarta Province. This study utilizes a case study method with a qualitative approach. Data collection techniques involve in-depth interviews with local journalists in Yogyakarta. This study utilizes the theory of media political economy from the perspective of critical communication studies. The research findings indicate that capitalism is inevitable in the mass media ecosystem. Capitalism impacts the content produced by journalists, prioritizing the ideologies and interests of capital owners, including advertisers, with the goal of making a profit. It also presents ethical challenges to journalists in maintaining their independence while practicing their profession.

Keywords: media, capitalism, content, journalistic ethics, Yogyakarta journalist

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Introduction

Mass media plays a central role in disseminating information and shaping public opinion. The media landscape has undergone significant developments in recent decades driven by technological advances and capitalism. This raises questions about the relationship between media content and journalistic ethics. Media capitalism is present in many parts of the world, including Indonesia. In relation to mass media ownership, the Indonesian media industry is currently inseparable from the capitalist system.

The concentration of media ownership in Indonesia, for example, can be seen from various broadcasting media, *online* media, and print media centered in Jakarta. For example, in broadcasting media, where activities located in small towns can be broadcast directly by Jakarta-based national television for commercialization. According to Hasan and Satria (2009), with the power of large capital to invest in communication technology, Jakarta-based media entrepreneurs tend to overpower media entrepreneurs from other cities who may have small capital. Thus, all activities in a country will be covered by the same journalists.

In fact, an event in the region, for example, if covered by journalists in the region may produce different coverage due to varying perspectives. This difference in perspective is because the ideology and philosophy of the journalists are not the same. Live coverage by Jakarta media results in the structuring or uniformity of ideology, which in this case is the ideology adopted by media entrepreneurs in Jakarta. This also results in structural uniformity, namely the uniformity of ideology in a structured manner. For example, regional media are controlled by a group of media entrepreneurs based in Jakarta, such as Kompas, which also leads Kompas' subsidiary publishing businesses (Hasan & Satria, 2009). In this media ownership structure, media with the same owner will also have the same ideology.

It is not uncommon for the ideology of the media to be influenced by the capitalist system, which is also based on the interests of the media owners. This can even affect the content and ethics of journalists in the media with the same owner. As McQuails (as cited in Hasan & Satria, 2009) said, media content always reflects the interests of those who finance them. The industry then becomes an economic entity that violates the interests of the wider community (Rahayu, 2023).

Journalists in the Special Province of Yogyakarta, Indonesia are also inseparable from the influence of this media capitalism. Bogaerts said that the strong Javanese cultural background in Yogyakarta influences television broadcasting practices, allowing local content to appear in its programs (Rahayu, 2023) including in print, *online*, and radio. Even so, local journalists in Yogyakarta are still faced with media decentralization systems and policies that are concentrated in Jakarta. The content produced by Yogyakarta journalists “inevitably” represents the interests of the capital owners of their own media.

In broadcasting media, Broadcasting Law No. 32/2002 Article 18 has regulated the limitation of capital ownership in the decentralization of broadcasting in Indonesia. Rahayu (2023) argues that preventing concentrated ownership and control by a single individual or legal entity will give local communities the opportunity to invest and own shares in local broadcasters in local broadcasting operations. However, the regulation fails to address concentrated capital ownership and control of television stations by a few legal entities owned by media conglomerates that also own other media such as newspapers magazines, radio and telecommunications (Rahayu, 2023).

Here, I focus on exploring media capitalism as it relates to media content in print and *online* media. In addition, I also examine the ethical challenges faced by journalists in print and *online* media in maintaining journalistic values amidst the demands of media owners' interests. I focus on Yogyakarta journalists because much of the coverage and presentation of content produced by local journalists in Yogyakarta is still based on the interests and ideologies of media owners concentrated in Jakarta.

This research uses a critical paradigm with a case study research method. The approach used in this research is qualitative, in-depth interviews as the data collection technique. This research aims to provide insights into how to maintain journalism integrity in news reporting, as well as ensuring that the media continues to function as a responsible and credible source of information.

There have been several studies conducted related to media capitalism, for example Hasan and Satria (2009) research that links capitalism with media organizations and journalists. There is also research conducted by Hesmondhalgh (2017) on media and culture in capitalism. These studies have not discussed the views of local journalists on media capitalism's impact on content and journalistic ethics, and this discussion is a novelty in the research that I conduct.

This warrants further study because the content produced by local journalists inevitably must be based on the ideology of the media owners based in Jakarta. Here, the locus of research is local journalists in Yogyakarta. I examine how local journalists in Yogyakarta view media capitalism and its relation to media content and the ethical challenges faced by journalists in a media environment dominated by capitalism, and at the same time examine media capitalism from a critical communication perspective.

Methodology

The research method used is the case study method. Hancock et al. (2006) say that a case study is a type of qualitative research with intensive analysis and description of a case limited by time and space. That way, this case study method is very descriptive to gain in-depth understanding from diverse sources of information (Hancock et al., 2006).

A qualitative approach is used in this study to investigate, discover, describe, and explain the qualities or features of social influence that cannot be explained, measured or described through quantitative approaches (Sugiyono, 2009). Qualitative research is very appropriate when used to examine problems that require in-depth study (Bungin, 2007). Meanwhile, the paradigm used is the critical paradigm in communication studies, especially mass media.

I conducted in-depth interviews with informants as a primary data collection technique. The interviews were conducted with the aim of examining how journalists see media capitalism in Indonesia on media content and its relation to journalistic ethics.

The first step was identifying appropriate data sources through interviews with local journalists in Yogyakarta Special Region Province. There are three local journalists in Yogyakarta that I used as informants in this research. The first informant is a journalist who works for a local media outlet in Yogyakarta, Harian Jogja, named Alfi Annisa Karim. The second informant, called Intan (a pseudonym), is also a journalist working in a local media in Yogyakarta, but did not wish to be named. The third informant is named Idealisa Masyrafina

and is a journalist who works in a national media, namely Republika, but her area of assignment or coverage is in Yogyakarta.

The three informants were chosen because they are active journalists covering Yogyakarta. In my opinion, these three informants are relevant and can represent the expected research results of this study. I conducted interviews with the three informants by means of questions and answers as a process to obtain information in accordance with the research objectives (Bungin, 2007). The data from these interviews were analyzed qualitatively. To enrich the research data, literature study related to media capitalism was also added.

In analyzing the data, first, transcription was done by transcribing the interview recordings into written text. Next, the transcription data was divided into smaller units such as sentences or paragraphs. Next, the main themes were identified or categories in the data which involved coding by labeling or coding the parts of the text that related to the research theme. After that, I build a narrative which involves organizing and combining the research findings. I will also validate and finally provide an interpretation of the research findings and relate them to the research questions.

Results and Discussion

Media Capitalism in Relation to Media Content Dynamics

Media capitalism reflects the commodification of information, communication and culture within a capitalist framework. In this capitalist system, media entities operate as profit-oriented companies, often prioritizing revenue over journalistic integrity or the public interest. This aligns with McChesney's (1999) assertion that media capitalism emphasizes profit maximization which often makes media companies prioritize revenue over journalistic integrity.

Furthermore, Postman (1985) also said that in a competitive media landscape driven by the profit motive, there is a tendency for news content to be sensationalized and aimed at providing entertainment value to attract viewers. In fact, media capitalism can contribute to ideological polarization as media *outlets* cater to specific demographic groups and reinforce existing beliefs to attract viewers (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

According to McManus (1994), the profit-driven nature of media capitalism has led to the decline of investigative journalism. This is because it is costly and time-consuming and may not yield a quick return on profits. The profit-oriented model of media capitalism can have a detrimental impact on democracy, as it may prioritize the interests of advertisers and powerful elites over the public's right to be informed (Curran & Seaton, 2010).

Media capitalism also encourages media consolidation, resulting in the hegemonization of content, with a few media conglomerates controlling various *outlets*, reducing diversity and the number of voices (Bagdikian, 2004). This causes media capitalism to impact democracy to the extent of producing alternative media and citizen journalism, as Bruns and Highfield (2010) argue. In response to the limitations of media capitalism, alternative media and citizen journalism emerged as diverse and independent channels of voice, challenging mainstream media narratives (Bruns & Highfield, 2010).

In this section, we explain how media capitalism has influenced the content produced by the media today. One of the biggest impacts of media capitalism is its strong commercialization. Media companies often focus on making profits rather than providing public services or committing to the principles of journalism, which can lead to a shift in the main purpose of the media from providing accurate and balanced information to the public.

The first informant stated that capitalism greatly influences news content or production. According to the first informant, there is pressure on the media, in this case its journalists, to produce content that is financially profitable, even attracting the attention of the audience quickly. This is said to influence the focus on news content that "sells" more than content that may be more relevant or important to the wider community.

The first informant also did not deny that media capitalism also allows pressure on journalists to prioritize the presentation of content in accordance with the interests of media owners. In fact, the content is also often in accordance with advertisers with the aim of profit or maximizing profits rather than the public interest.

"The principle is that when advertisers are willing to pay, journalists as a reflection of the company must provide the best *service* to them" (Karim, 2023).

The second informant also said that media capitalism also affects the news content produced. Although, the second informant emphasized that the content produced certainly depends on the interests of the capital owner. Of the many news content produced by journalists, not all of the news content is based on the interests of capital owners, nor based on the wishes of advertisers with the aim of profit.

> It depends on the interest, but what I have experienced is that most of the time if it is an advertisement or a client, we inevitably have to follow orders from the editor who has agreed with the client's request. (Intan, 2023)

According to the second informant, journalists are also under pressure to work within the structure constructed by media owners and advertisers. In this regard, the second informant admitted that journalists only have the option of reporting positive things or not reporting at all, if the issues raised intersect with the interests of capital owners and advertisers.

"Even so, it goes back to each media policy as to what the execution of content production is like" (Intan, 2023).

From the interview with the third informant, it was found that news content is also "driven" by capital owners, including advertisers. This is because the mass media is still dependent on advertising, so journalistic products are also driven by advertisers and sometimes not in accordance with the public interest.

"This is a necessity for media companies to keep moving. However, this kind of product must of course be adjusted to its portion, because readers are increasingly intelligent in assessing the essence of news" (Masyrafina, 2023).

For news content in the region, the media where this third informant works presents diverse content, although there is still content that represents the interests of capital owners and

advertisers. Especially for content produced by local journalists in Yogyakarta, the content is also more focused on issues and events in the area.

The third informant also did not deny that there is sensational content that is presented to the audience to attract attention. She cited the example of the content related to the story of Yogyakarta High School of Music (SMM) student Putri Ariani, which is always *trending* in various mass media.

"So, content like this must be reported because many are looking for this news, including in Republika" (Masyrafina, 2023).

Additionally, journalists are sometimes treated as news-producing "machines". This can be seen from the target number of news that journalists must produce per day, which puts pressure on journalists in carrying out their profession. Not all media target the same amount of news to their journalists. However, *online* media tend to target more news to fulfill the daily quota.

The first informant also admitted that she was targeted by the company to produce at least four to five news stories per day. Each news story often covers different topics, sometimes it is about a different issue.

"In fact, I myself sometimes feel overwhelmed because I have to do a lot of advertising coverage. And that's quite draining, because on the other hand, regular news still has to be done" (Karim, 2023).

The second informant also mentioned that his company targets the number of news that journalists must produce. Per day, at least she is targeted for more news, namely five news to six news.

Regarding the dynamics of news content produced by the media, the first informant admitted that it was quite diverse. Starting from content raised from social issues, education issues, economic issues, health issues, political issues, health issues, legal issues including criminal issues, religious issues, and other issues. From these diverse issues, sometimes journalists are asked to produce sensational or *"viral"* content to attract more readers.

Even so, the first informant admitted that not too much sensational content is raised when compared to issues of education, economy, health, politics, health, law, crime, and religion. It is said that there are still many grassroots issues raised by local media, especially in Yogyakarta.

"In fact, it is more emphasized to raise grassroots issues, because basically the media is voicing the voice of the people, not just being a mouthpiece for the government. Sensational news can only be said once or twice" (Karim, 2023).

In relation to content dynamics, the second informant also admitted that the news content produced was quite diverse in his media. In fact, journalists who work in their own media are given the freedom of issues they want to raise, so they are not limited to just one or two issues. Even so, the second informant said that there are some less interesting issues that are still limited to be reported. This indicates that issues that attract more readers are more

considered to be raised, beyond how important it is for the wider community that an issue is raised.

> What are the considerations? For me personally, I usually see that there are other issues that I think are more interesting and urgent to be reported to the public, and last but not least, there are sources of information that can be accounted for. (Intan, 2023)

The third informant also said that she works for a media that promotes Islamic ideology. Thus, there is a special segmentation that influences the products and journalistic content related to this ideology. Even so, the third informant admitted that overall, the news content presented was very diverse, and in accordance with the rules of journalism.

Working in the national media with Yogyakarta as his coverage area, the third informant admitted that the news content in the regions is even more diverse. This is because journalists in the regions have a very wide coverage area. Due to the wide coverage area, the company targets a considerable amount of news to be produced by one journalist.

> One *reporter* (in the region) has a very wide coverage of the work area. This is one of the challenges, because with a very wide coverage of the work area, reporters at Republika are required to create content for at least eight news stories per day. (Masyrafina, 2023)

From the interviews conducted with the three informants, the research results show that media capitalism affects the news content produced by local journalists, in this case journalists in Yogyakarta. The content is influenced by the interests of capital owners, including profit-oriented advertisers. This is inevitable considering that media operations also depend on advertisers. In fact, journalists are also given a certain number of targets to produce news content per day.

Even so, the three informants admitted that not all news content produced was based on the interests of capital owners and advertisers. Much of the content produced is still oriented towards the public interest, considering that the mass media must still maintain its function according to the role of the media itself, where one of its functions is to disseminate information to the wider community.

Ethical Challenges Faced by Journalists in Relation to Media Capitalism

Ward (2011) mentions that media capitalism's focus on profitability can put significant commercial pressures on journalists, resulting in sensationalism and prioritization of stories that generate more viewers or readers. Profit-driven media capitalism results in a market-driven news agenda, where stories that accommodate certain demographics or consumer interests are prioritized over those that have broader significance to society (Curran & Seaton, 2010).

McChesney (1999) also says that media that rely heavily on advertising revenue may face conflicts of interest when reporting on advertisers or sponsors, which can compromise journalistic integrity. Moreover, media owned by corporations driven by the profit motive may experience a loss of editorial independence, as the ownership group may intervene in editorial decision-making to protect financial interests (Picard, 2005).

As a result of the drive of media capitalism, there may also be pressure on journalists to prioritize the presentation of entertainment content as it often attracts a larger readership and can generate advertising revenue. Cushion (2012) argues that media capitalism can conflict with journalists' objectivity, as they may feel pressured to conform to editorial narratives that align with the interests of media owners and advertisers.

Here, ethical challenges arise in the work system of journalists, including journalists in Yogyakarta. The journalistic code of ethics is stipulated through Press Council Regulation Number 6 Year 2008 on the Ratification of Press Council Decree Number 3 Year 2006 on the Journalistic Code of Ethics as a Press Council Regulation. Journalists' knowledge and understanding of the journalistic code of ethics are mentioned in articles 3, 4, 5 and 8, which can illustrate whether knowledge and understanding of this code of ethics underlie the work process of journalists (Winora et al., 2021). The journalistic code of ethics is not only the basis of work for journalists, but also a signpost, including protection for journalists in carrying out their profession.

Article 3 of the Press Council decree states that “Indonesian journalists always test information, report in a balanced manner, do not mix facts and judgmental opinions, and apply the presumption of innocence”. Article 4 states that “Indonesian journalists do not make false, slanderous, sadistic and obscene news”. Article 5 states that “Indonesian journalists do not mention and broadcast the identity of victims of immoral crimes and do not mention the identity of children who are perpetrators of crimes”. Meanwhile, Article 8 states that:

> Indonesian journalists do not write or broadcast news based on prejudice or discrimination against a person on the basis of differences in ethnicity, race, skin color, religion, gender and language, and do not dehumanize the weak, poor, sick, disabled, mental, or physical.

The question is, does the work of journalists amid the system of media capitalism still make the code of ethics the basis for journalists in carrying out their profession? The first informant admitted that there are several challenges faced by journalists, especially local journalists in Yogyakarta, in relation to media capitalism. Such as challenges in maintaining the integrity and independence of journalists in reporting the news. According to him, financial pressure and corporate interests, in this case the owners of capital, can influence editorial choices. In fact, it also sometimes hinders the freedom of journalists to express the truth objectively.

“For this reason, journalists are expected to continue to prioritize the public interest over financial gain or corporate interests” (Karim, 2023).

Likewise, the second informant admitted that there are journalistic ethical challenges she faces in carrying out his profession as a journalist in the circle of media capitalism. According to the second informant, sometimes she is faced with conditions where she is not free to write news that is counterproductive to the interests of capital owners, including advertisers.

“In this case, I think the critical reasoning power of journalists is also slowly being dulled by the interests of the owners of capital or clients” (Intan, 2023).

The second informant admitted that the relationship created between capital owners and journalists sometimes does not provide an opening for journalists themselves to attack the ruling party. Another challenge is the limited opportunity for journalists to express their freedom in reporting an issue or event that intersects with the interests of capital owners and advertisers.

This undoubtedly undermines the professionalism and function of both media institutions and journalists. For this reason, it is expected that the journalistic code of ethics must always be upheld by journalists despite being in the circle of media capitalism.

"The challenge is that we cannot refuse the advertiser's request, but we still have to be in a neutral or positive position when reporting" (Intan, 2023).

The third informant also admitted that the biggest challenge as a local journalist in relation to media capitalism is how to uphold the independence of journalists in accordance with one of the journalistic codes of ethics. According to him, the income of local journalists is still minimal, even far from decent. However, journalists are still required to have a wide scope of work, even with uncertain working hours. This sometimes makes it difficult for journalists in the regions to maintain their independence.

"This is proof that the profession of a journalist, although considered prestigious, especially when working in the capital city, does not always provide welfare, and this is what I felt when I was in the regions" (Masyrafina, 2023).

Based on the interviews that I conducted with the three informants, all of them answered that there are ethical challenges faced by journalists in a media environment dominated by capitalism. Journalists are often under pressure from capital owners and advertisers to carry out their profession according to journalistic ethics, to the point of contradicting journalistic principles such as objectivity, accuracy, and the obligation to report facts accurately.

Media Capitalism Viewed From Critical Communication Theory

Littlejohn and Foss (2011) say that the media are not just simple mechanisms for disseminating information: they are complex organizations that form important social institutions of society. Clearly, the media are major players in ideological struggles. Most critical communication theories deal with the media primarily because of the power of the media to spread dominant ideologies and its power to reveal alternative and conflicting ideologies. For some critical theorists, the media is part of a cultural industry that literally creates symbols and images that can suppress smaller groups.

Media capitalism in the context of critical communication studies is a theoretical framework that explores the complex relationship between media, economics and power dynamics. In contrast to the traditional view of the media as a neutral conveyor of information, this perspective recognizes that the media is linked to capitalist economic structures, which have a significant influence on content production and media operations.

According to Littlejohn and Foss (2011), critical theories are so broad that they are always difficult to place and categorize within the overall theory of communication. Even so, McQuail (in Littlejohn & Foss, 2011) says there are five main branches of critical media

theory. Starting from classical Marxism, political economic media theory, Frankfurt School, hegemonic theory, and cultural research.

In this study, I looked at media capitalism from a critical communication perspective using political economic media theory. This theory aims to understand how media structures, ownership, and operations are influenced by economic forces and political interests, and how this ultimately affects the content produced by the media. The theory explains that media content is a commodity to be sold in the market, and the information disseminated is governed by what the market will take. This system refers to a conservative and harmless operation, making certain types of programs and certain media channels dominant and others marginalized (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

Based on the interviews conducted, the first informant said that this media capitalism system can provide resources for media development and provide livelihoods for the media itself. For example, in the form of advertising news. Media companies can get income for the sustainability of the company itself from the advertising news. However, on the other hand, media capitalism also has a negative influence, especially on the independence of journalists and the presentation of content that should be objective.

“For this reason, it is important that journalists maintain journalistic integrity amid the dynamics of media capitalism” (Karim, 2023).

Meanwhile, the second informant said that the media system cannot be separated from capitalism. In fact, this is not only in the media industry, but also other industries outside the media. The second informant argues that, as a journalist, she views media capitalism will mostly have an impact on injustice in its implementation. This is because journalists who are “laborers of the capital owners” will automatically be involved in carrying out economic activities that provide benefits to the company, in this case including the capital owners.

“So, sometimes neutrality in a news report is difficult to find, more aligned with the client's request. But this does not always happen, sometimes” (Intan, 2023).

Even so, the second informant believes that the average media including journalists in Yogyakarta have a high standard in carrying out their profession. In addition, she also sees that journalists in Yogyakarta still adhere to the laws governing the press for content publication, although some content still must align with the interests of capital owners and advertiser requests.

The third informant also acknowledged that in general, capitalism in the mass media is inevitable, given that most capital owners are interested parties in the content presented. Based on the experience of the third informant as a journalist, it is undeniable that the interests of capital owners can influence the running of media companies.

“Propaganda carried by the media usually depends on the direction of the interests of the owners of capital” (Masyrafina, 2023).

The results of the study show that the mass media today is closely tied to the capitalism system. Analyzed from the context of critical communication studies, there is a complicated relationship between media, economy, and power dynamics. The capitalism system has an influence on the sustainability of the media, but on the other hand it is a “scourge” in the

media industry which is sometimes more profit oriented. This also affects the independence of journalists who are eroded by the capitalist system if they do not adhere to journalistic ethics and principles.

Conclusion

This research shows that media capitalism affects the news content produced by local journalists, in this case journalists working in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The content produced is influenced by the interests of capital owners, including advertisers with a profit orientation. This influence is inevitable considering that media operations also depend on advertisers.

Furthermore, it was found that not all media content produced by local journalists in Yogyakarta is based on the interests of capital owners and advertisers in the media capitalism system. Much of the content produced is still oriented towards the public interest, considering that the mass media must maintain its function in accordance with the role of the media itself, where one of its functions is to disseminate information to the wider community.

This study also found that there are ethical challenges faced by local journalists in Yogyakarta in a media environment dominated by capitalism. Journalists are often under pressure from capital owners when carrying out their profession according to journalistic ethics, sometimes contrary to journalistic principles such as objectivity, accuracy, and the obligation to report facts accurately.

It is concluded that local media in Indonesia is still very much embedded in the capitalist system. When analyzed through the lens of critical communication studies, there is a complex relationship between the media, economy, and power dynamics. The capitalist system influences the sustainability of the media, but on the other hand this system is contrary to the function of the media which is sometimes more oriented towards profit and the interests of capital owners. This also affects the independence of journalists who are eroded by the capitalist system. Hence, journalists must be encouraged to adhere to journalistic ethics and principles.

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Philosopher and Writer: Iris Murdoch's Long Journey From Existentialism to Neo-Platonism

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Abstract

Investigating the interconnection between literature and philosophy is significant in twentieth-century literary studies. The current research focuses on the philosophical and moral aspects in *Under the Net* (1954), *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956), *The Sandcastle* (1957), and *The Unicorn* (1963) by Booker Prize–winning English novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch. Murdoch wrote extensively on philosophy, addressing topics such as existential egoism in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (Murdoch, 1953), morality and art in *The Sublime and the Good* (Murdoch, 1959), problems of contemporary literature in *Existentialists and Mystics* (Murdoch, 1997), and the importance of Platonic love in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Murdoch, 1970). In addition, scholars such as Maria Antonaccio (2000, 2012) and Peter Conradi (2010) have significantly contributed to Murdoch scholarship through their published works. These works have an essential role in interpreting her novels. The forms of love toward self and others, illusion and reality, human nature, and morality are her fiction's basis. In her novels, a reaction to Sartre's philosophy of the lonely and free individual is distinguished. By creating certain prototypes of pseudo-characters like artist, saint, philosopher, and enchanter, Murdoch prefers saint figure as her ideal, which can challenge Sartre's existential and outsider character in ethical questions. By typological character analysis of the above-mentioned novels, Murdoch's philosophical concepts can be revealed. The research question investigates the transition from Existentialism to Neo-Platonism through the inseparable interconnection between literature and philosophy. Murdoch employs a range of philosophical perspectives that can help analyze contemporary literature semantically.

Keywords: existentialism, Neo-Platonism, philosophy, literature

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Introduction

Dame Iris Murdoch is an English writer and philosopher, Booker Prize winner in 1978 for the novel *The Sea the Sea* (1999), receiver of Golden Pen Award in 1997, created many prominent novels that contain crucial philosophical debates. The purpose of this work is to reveal the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch with the help of typological method of literary analysis. In her novels, we encounter definite characters with special traits that embody existentialists, including artists and enchanters, and also mystics who are saint types or philosophers.

Murdoch is known to be a researcher who introduced very fashionable French existentialist and writer of her time, Jean Paul-Sartre, to the British audience. Her first philosophical work is named *Sartre Romantic Rationalist* (Murdoch, 1999). The role of the philosophical movement Existentialism was phenomenal for her; thus, Murdoch (1999) stated, "existentialism was the new religion, the new salvation" (p. 9). Her early novels like *Under the Net*, *The Flight from the Enchanter* and many others were written under the influence of the latter. Her works of fiction functioned as a reaction to Sartre's philosophy of the free individual. Murdoch's position for the philosophy of existence overreached many views and ideas of philosophers and writers including Soren Kierkegaard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Simone Weil, stopping at Plato and creating new or Neo-Platonic idea of Love. Murdoch (1997) later wrote, "when I was young I thought, as all young people do, that freedom was the thing. Later on I felt that virtue was the thing" (p. 190).

Literature Review

French existentialism, particularly the philosophy of Sartre, had a profound influence on Murdoch's thought, shaping the foundations of her ideological framework. Existentialists captured the atmosphere of postwar Europe and searched for treatment of nihilistic disease. That was the age of collapsed traditional values and beliefs, the first step into the godless, thus absurd world. Existentialism is generally categorized into two main branches: atheistic existentialism—represented by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus—and religious existentialism, associated with figures like Søren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, and Karl Jaspers (Charlesworth, 1975, p. 5).

The next source of Murdoch's inspiration, Platonic ideas in Neo-Platonism, progressed by the successor of Plato, Plotinus. The main Neoplatonic idea that impacted existential concepts is the depiction of *love* and its forms that are discussed in dialogues within *The Phaedrus* (Plato, 1995). The English writers who were inspired by French existentialism adopted the new form of Platonism, or the idea of *love,* to conquer the egocentric nature of the existential individual. Murdoch, in the same case, interpreted God as Good for goodness is the key concept to overcome the meaninglessness of life. Her final developed philosophy was formulated by Platonic concepts and Simone Weil's theory of *just and loving gaze*. Plato himself associates the philosophy of love with Eros, the ancient Greek god of love. Socrates depicts Eros not precisely as a god, but more as *a daimon*.[1] Thus, his nature is very close to the human one. In contemporary literature, it is associated with *desire*. Humanity always possesses desire, and human nature that is similar to Eros pushes him/her toward it. Murdoch says in her book that Eros connects human desire with the highest morality. "He is a child of

[1] See also: Listener. (2023, October 28). The Role of Daimons in Greek Spirituality: Ancient Guides for Modern Times - Are We Listening. Are We Listening. Retrieved from https://arewelistening.net/spirituality-consciousness/the-role-of-daimons-in-greek-spirituality-ancient-guides-for-modern-times/

both poverty and plenty" (Murdoch, 1977, p. 33). Spiritual power represented by Eros tends to transform; hence, it can hunt for beauty, or it can be a source of wishes such as love of fame, love of wisdom, or intimacy. Low Eros can also be associated with ego-satisfaction that tractates *to love is to own.* That is why the soul is often in a sick state and can be healed by transforming the low Eros into the high Eros by the means of reality. From Murdoch's (1977) perspective, Plato's answer is that "the soul must be saved entire by the redirection of its energy away from selfish fantasy toward reality" (p. 38). Murdoch suggests transforming desire into high Eros by some secondary means, like appreciating beauty, learning languages, or by primary means, such as creating art and being in touch with people. The last one is highlighted by Murdoch as a treatment for existential neurosis. Its moral idea contradicts the doctrine of French existentialists, particularly Sartre's. French existentialism is about marching toward self; Neo-Platonism is about retreating from self toward reality, society, people, faith, or values. In Plato's *The Phaedrus*, it is said that Eros, or Love, is the search for an individual's authentic half (Blumenthal & Markus, 1981, p. 14). Hence, it is found not by the love of self but by the love of others.

Novels of Murdoch are written in a traditional form that follows linear narrating, though the modern spirit of her era takes a greater place in them. In interviews, she stated that the functions of literature and philosophy are distinct; that is, literature is a mystification with an aesthetic role, and philosophy is a scientific field, a small-scale science that seeks answers to difficult questions in life and strives for spatial truth (Berezko, 2019). The literary and philosophical language of the writer also differs significantly from each other in this respect. Her purely philosophical works are monotonous, dry, clear, and fluent, while her artistic works are attractive, poetically detailed, rich in stylistic techniques, and artistic truth is often hidden and ambiguous. Murdoch in her novels used philosophical views only in the background, making them as complex and obscure as possible. The writer, refusing to call herself a philosophical novelist, insists that she is a realist writer and portrays life in a tragicomic way. Despite this, her novels are based on the philosophical idea of moral elevation and the achievement of perfection.

The main characters in Murdoch's novels are often images of people in a state of existential crisis. As the events unfold, these characters experience a state of asceticism (askesis) with the help of intermediary images and achieve moral perfection. Sometimes it is vice versa; more in a moral way, a character may transfigure from a saint into a criminal. The main theme in Murdoch's novels is the connection of art and truth that embodies illusion and reality, and often the entire novel depicts the adventure in search of the philosophical truth of life.

Murdoch creates both static and dynamic personages. Dynamic characters undergo a process of spiritual metamorphosis. This process can be both positive, in the form of the aforementioned state of *askesis*, and negative, in which the personage falls into an existential crisis and, unable to find a solution, ends tragically. Typically, the author's novels combine two general types of a modern person:

1. An Existential character;
2. A Mystic character.

The existential hero is an image created directly upon the prototype of an existentialist; thus, he is a neurotic and a narcissistic individual who is alienated from the values of society, unable to adapt to a traditional way of life, and trapped in a cycle of fear and terror caused by the weight of responsibility for his actions and complete freedom. Such personages are

characterized by deceit and egotism. They are often indifferent to the existence of others, and they judge people for their own benefit. In this regard, they surround themselves with illusions, estranged from real life. The narrators in Murdoch's novels are mainly existential characters. This type also can be divided into two categories: *the artist* and *the magician*.

In other words, the basis of Murdoch's novels revolves around the conflict between characters embodying the images of the artist and the saint (Rowe & Horner, 2010, p. 3), as well as the relationship between the type of artist and magician. Consequently, the opposition of these images appears, both directly and indirectly, as key elements in revealing the core ideas.

The main conflict of the author's debut novel, *Under the Net* (Murdoch, 1954), is also formulated precisely between the artist character—Jake—and the saint—Hugo. Jake Donahue is, in the language of existentialists, a stranger to the environment surrounding him. "It is true that I am always giving Finn orders, but this is because Finn seems not to have many ideas of his own about how to employ his time" (Murdoch, 1954, p. 8). The psychological portrait of Jake is characterized by egotism and indifference to others.

In *The Unicorn* (Murdoch, 1963) the conflict is way more internal and embraces the relationship of an artist and a magician. Hedonistic and narcissistic features can cleanly be detected through the portrayal of Effingham Cooper, an existential artist type.

> He's not a lonely man. God keeps him company through the winter. … He looked at himself with an amused ironical affection. He looked like a man; and he certainly passed, in the society which he frequented, as a clever successful enviable one. … Damn, thought Effingham, now I shall get her cold. He kissed Alice on the lips. (Murdoch, 1963, pp. 35, 67, 78)

With the third-person narration, the author evaluates the story from the existential characters' point of views, Marian and Effingham, the outsiders who intruded into the compelling fairy-tale-like story. "By wrestling with Scottow she would make her way into the story" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 65). Marian, who is eager to experience some sort of adventure, desperately wants to be a part of this tale, and if possible, both of them wish to be the main character.

Furthermore, Annette, depicted in the novel *The Flight from the Enchanter* (Murdoch, 2010), which is also based on the conflict between artist and magician, wields quite similar characteristics. She aspires to an existential artist nature, a freedom-hungry, self-reliant, curious girl eager to acquire knowledge at the "school of life," about to turn nineteen, and under the influence of her brother Nicholas, who studies at Sorbonne. "She was admiring the extraordinary slimness of her ankles. …She must be like a princess for whom all over her realm people toiled day and night to make her trousseau" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 70). Murdoch blends Alice's curiosity, the innocence of youth, the sensitivity of a young heart, and the confusion of a young soul in one character. The idea of love that Annette has is one of self-centeredness.

By analyzing the existential character based on Murdoch's discussions of *Plato's Allegory of the Cave*, we can penetrate into the core of her philosophical views. According to it, the existential character is one of the inhabitants of the cave presented by Plato. The fire in the cave and the reflection of the shadow in it are his ideas about the world that arose in his

imagination. As an existential artist figure, he cannot see the real world outside the cave, the reality that comes as a symbol of the sun. The existentialist is by nature withdrawn into his image of self, living under his own judgment, whether true or false.

For instance, the experienced, middle-aged Rosa from *The Flight from the Enchanter* is a character who is spiritually close to Jake and Marian. Her fairy-tale visions of people and dramatization of life prevent her from reality and create the sense of alienation from those who are really close to her. "She felt like the princess whose strong faith releases the prince from an enchanted sleep, or from the transfigured form of a beast" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 47). In the passage, Rosa likens herself to a pious princess who saves princes from a curse. In fact, Rosa's later relationship with Lusicwicz siblings leads to a gross violation of moral boundaries. Rosa's illusions ultimately cause the death of the innocent Nina.

The same nature of distorting reality is possessed by Marian from *The Unicorn*, and the center of all her fantasies is a mysterious lady in prison. "With a golden chain about her neck she looked, thought Marian, like some brave beleaguered lady in a legend or like some painter's dream of 'ages far agone'" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 50). Also, being non-directly rejected by attractive Gerald, Marian starts to liken him to a demon, formulating an antagonist for the story. "His slightly bloodshot brown eyes glowed reddish in the hazy light. … It was the defeat of a man by a beast" (Murdoch, 1963, pp. 135, 225). However, at the end, Gerald becomes a tragic victim of Hannah.

The next feature of an existential artist that needs to be highlighted is isolation. Jake and Annette are spiritually lonely individuals, and their lack of a permanent home indicates their existential nature. "To the young women at Ringenhall Annette had said, 'I have no homeland and no mother tongue'" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 54). The alienation of these characters leads them to exploration of their inner selves. According to existentialism, retreating into the self leads to existential awakening; on the contrary, Murdoch claims that this process creates egoism and permissiveness.

An existential character, despite being a typical egoist, is skillfully portrayed in bright colors. He/She is not devoid of courage, kindness, and courtesy; for example, Peter Crean-Smith in *The Unicorn*, who is believed to be cruel, also has *a charming* feature, as Denis points out, or Gerald is portrayed as being *polite, dignified, charming, and totally unapproachable* by Marian. Even the total egoist of the novel, Effingham, is loved by everyone. "She now turned her gaze upon Effingham. Dear Effingham. Dear, dear Effingham. Dear, dear dear Effingham" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 135). By a repetition of the word *dear*, Murdoch shows the magnetism and attractiveness of the hero. Parallelly, Marian, who surrounded herself with illusions, is also praised by Effingham for "being of his own kind: a clever girl, a junior version of Elizabeth" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 84).

The image of an artist is further enhanced by Murdoch's pathos in the novel *Under the Net*:

> I looked down on Anna. She lay amid the coloured debris like a fairytale princess tumbled from her throne … I could see Sadie's face focused now into a look of intelligent venom. She looked like a beautiful snake; and the curious fantasy came to me that if I were to look under the drier at the real face and not at the reflexion I should see there some terrible old witch. (Murdoch, 1954, p. 47, 59)

Jake creates his own microcosm in his mind, in which Anna is a beautiful princess and a captive queen, and Sadie is an evil witch. Because of the boundless imagination, Jake avoids reality and is unable to understand people's true feelings. The same characteristic is relevant to the personages of *The Unicorn*. "Hannah had been for them an image of God; He thought of her now as a doomed figure, a Lilith, a pale death-dealing enchantress: anything but a human being" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 268). Hannah is described as a divine creature at first, but after killing Gerald and committing suicide, she appears to be devilish to Effingham. Effingham remains as an existentialist artist who is a rational romantic, egocentric, and faithless. Positive metamorphosis, which is Murdoch's early ideology, is mainly shown in her early novels, but in *The Unicorn* the character's transformation has never succeeded. Even the awareness of death that Effingham experienced in the bog cannot help him to reach askesis but temporarily turns him into the mystic saint.

The enchanting side of art is consolation, with the exception of rare works, says Murdoch. Considering existentialism to be a descendant of Romanticism, she thinks that only rare literature depicts real life and eliminates fantasies, protecting from the lies of Romanticism. Murdoch writes in her article that a human is not an isolated, free-willed being or master of his destiny, but rather immersed in the darkness away from reality, eager to deform their nature relentlessly and grossly with fantasies (Murdoch, 1961, pp. 16-20). Escapism mentioned above is relevant to both existential artist and magician – enchanter-type heroes.

Mischa Fox in the novel *The Flight from the Enchanter* and Hannah Crean-Smith in *The Unicorn* are perfect existential enchanter characters. In a philosophical novel, the main task of an enchanter is to lead people towards escapism, away from reality. They are like Mephistopheles in *Faust* or John Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, who, under the pretext of permissiveness and freedom, cover the soul tired of the ugliness of life with illusions. Their lives are full of mystery, abstraction, and drama; moreover, they wield power to attract by beauty. They are always shown alongside wealth and authority. In *The Sandcastle* (Murdoch, 1957), Rain Carter's dark green Riley makes her more attractive to Bill Mor; in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, John Rainborough only begins to see Agnes Casement as worthy of him and even comes along with a marriage proposal after she becomes the owner of a red M.G. A comical incident in the novel is that Marcia's black Mercedes makes John break his vow. Characters like John Rainborough and Bill Mor are ordinary personages who are thirsty for existential freedom but cannot escape Victorian values; in them, the trait of individuality is not noticeable.

In contrast, the portrayal of Mischa Fox, who is a mysterious and powerful king of the printing press, stands at the center of attention, revealing his enchanter nature. "He bore with him the signs of a great authority and carried in his indefinable foreignness a kind of oriental magic" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 127). Despite his popularity among Londoners and his magnetic attraction, the people know very little about him. "Who knows? said Rainborough. No one knows Mischa's age. … No one knows where he came from either. Where was he born? What blood is in his veins?" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 33). These characteristics force existential heroes to weave all sorts of tales about them, and they become a source of fantasy for others (Woo, 1974, pp. 10-12).

In *The Unicorn* this theory is proven by Hannah's existential crisis. "A dream. Do you know what part I have been playing? That of God. And do you know what I have been really? Nothing, a legend" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 218). In the story, no one regards Hannah as real including herself (she refuses to step into the real world, rejecting Marian, Effingham, and

Pip's help), except Gerald, who is several times mentioned as having a close bond with her. And maybe that unbearable reality forces her to kill Gerald and herself afterwards. Hannah, is also depicted by other side characters, such as Denis Nolan (the saint who transfigures into an enchanter at the end of the novel): "She is a legend in this part of the country" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 64), Max Lejour (the philosopher who becomes illusioned and mysterious magician): "She may be just a sort of enchantress, a Circe, a spiritual Penelope keeping her suitors spellbound and enslaved" (Murdoch, 1963, p. 99), proving that Hannah's influence on them is immense and she wields the abilities of an enchanter. The enchanter character often ignites the illusions, drawing people into the hollow escapism. The heroes, tired of their boring reality, see some sort of adventure in enchanter figures that can fill their lives with meaning. Their falling into the enchanter's trap results in blindness, creating irresponsibility towards real life. This is the unbearable lightness of freedom, the place where permissiveness and morality collide. An enchanter possesses a sense of superiority and the ability to manipulate. The fragile and captivated passive Hannah says, "I think he would let me kill him slowly" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 43) regarding Nolan, one of her admirers. These heroes do not consciously realize, or refuse to realize, the sins they commit. Hannah can be interpreted not as a princess in a dungeon but as an evil sorceress who manipulates people by inducing pity and suffering.

Conversely, the mystic character prototypes in Iris Murdoch's novels reveal the author's approach to existential crisis. They are images of individuals who experienced an existential awakening in response to the nihilistic atmosphere of the twentieth century, yet were not satisfied with the idea of complete withdrawal into the self. Instead, they were able to rediscover the meaning of life by retreating from the ego-I while remaining open to others and the miracles that life offers. Wilson suggests that contingencies of life are the peak experiences by contrasting Sartre to a poet; hence, a poet faces the accidentality and the sublime with shock of delight, while Sartre with nausea (Wilson, 1966, p. 27). A mystic finds contingency as not only beautiful but even sublime. These character types divided into two typical groups: the saint and the philosopher.

Heroes who do not fall into the spell of enchanters and do not distort reality are mystic saints. "Mischa shook his head. 'Everybody has been going mad as usual!' he said. 'You make them mad,' said Peter. Mischa considered this. 'I don't make you mad,' he said" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 185). Faith is the primary attribute of mystic heroes. This faith could be philosophical rather than religious. This philosophy is one that Murdoch essentially appropriated from Neo-Platonism; it is a philosophy of virtue, self-denial, and compassion for others.

Peter Saward, who appears in her second novel, is a vivid example of the saint type based on the following characteristics. Saward lives a simple life without luxuries, and excellent features such as tolerance, enthusiasm, and loyalty are inherent in him. He accepts contingency as life's attribute and acknowledges death because of the tuberculosis he faced. In the novel he remarks, "When it is so cold I think often of those who sleep out of doors, …" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 27). In Neoplatonism death is accepted not as ugly and evil, but rather glorious. Comprehending death as nothingness stimulates an individual to appreciate the present and to overthrow ego-nature. Moreover, Peter doesn't notice bad qualities in others. He is the only character in the novel who speaks positively about Calvin, and the most important thing is that he is appreciated by his friends and loved ones, and sometimes they look to him as a beacon of salvation. "It was some time now since he had ceased to think of Peter Saward as a master from whom he might learn important truths" (Murdoch, 2010, p. 26).

The image of the saint in Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net* is Hugo Belfounder, who is the embodiment of truth and perfection. Hugo is presented to the reader mainly through Jake's internal monologues and memories. Jake encounters the saint only twice in the story which helps him to go through a mystical stage of existential awakening. The first proof that Hugo is a saint is his indifference to wealth. Just like Peter Saward, he lives a modest life and stands out for being truthful and unbiased. "He was the most purely objective and detached person I had ever met - only in him detachment showed less like a virtue and more like a sheer gift of nature, a thing of which he was quite unaware" (Murdoch, 1954, p. 64). Some critics describe Hugo's character as a saintly madman like Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin. (Conradi, 2010, p. 30). In parallel, Peter Saward is also compared to a clown who never leaves his smile instead of being immersed in grief after being diagnosed with the disease.

In *Under the Net*, by contrasting the artist and the saint, Murdoch creates a rational existential hero who generalizes and a mystic character who scrutinizes (Rowe & Horner, 2010, p. 3). Jake is very rational and wants everything in his life to have a clear reason. Hugo, on the other hand, is skeptical of the validity of theories arguing that truth is achieved by understanding the details of life: "All theorizing is flight… God is detail. It all lies close to your hand" (Murdoch, 1954, p. 91). Murdoch's philosophy is reflected in Hugo's approach to truth; his personality represents the theory of *just and loving gaze* adopted by Simone Weil. Real people dispel mystification, and the contingency of life dispels fantasy that opens the door to imagination, argues Murdoch (Murdoch, 1961, p. 20). Jake's final conversation with Hugo encourages him to look at life from a different angle, to live in touch with reality in the present rather than chasing theories.

The next categorical type—the embodiment of the philosopher— is a more passive personage. Murdoch's philosophical voice is expressed through Elizabeth, the character who isn't involved in the storyline but only portrayed by letters and Effingham's thoughts in *The Unicorn.* In the letter, Elizabeth writes,

> Art and psychoanalysis give shape and meaning to life and that is why we adore them, but life as it is lived has no shape and meaning, and that is what I am experiencing just now. … The fairy tales never tell us, but it has always proved a mistake. (Murdoch, 1963, pp. 102-103)

Highlighting the existential absurdity, she gives the truthful objection of life and separates reality from fairy-tale illusion, calling Effingham back to the real life.

A philosopher figure is present in nearly all of Murdoch's novels. One of them is Dave Gelman in *Under the Net.* It is made openly clear throughout the work that Dave assumes the role of a philosopher. Jake portrays him as a genuine philosopher akin to Plato and Kant. Murdoch uses this type as an allegorical device for her scholarly work, *Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artist* (1977). In the passage, where Jake claims that "he blazes upon them (Dave's students) with the destructive fury of the sun" (Murdoch, 1954, p. 27), Dave embodies the sun as the one who speaks the truth. Throughout the story, he offers Jake counsel but fails in his attempt to alter his nature. Dave is a practical philosopher, but he doesn't wield a power of influence as a saint figure does. The saint's image carries greater moral guidance and impact; therefore, this type represents perfection in Murdoch's fictional world.

The following figure of a philosopher is Bledyard; he is shown as an art teacher in the novel *The Sandcastle*. "That is not true, Mr. Mor, said Bledyard. … There is such a thing as respect for reality. You are living on dreams now, dreams of happiness, dreams of freedom. But in all this you consider only yourself" (Murdoch, 1957, p. 228). Bledyard's words have a warning tone that puts forward the author's philosophical idea of retreating from the self and breaking down illusions of an existentialist.

The philosopher images often appear in the positive view; however, in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Calvin Blick is described as being the wicked and dark half of human nature. John Rainborough defines him as the evil side of Mischa. The characters openly see the devil in him, but in fact he is a philosopher who bitterly offers the truth. He is wise on the one hand and cruel on the other. He constantly appears in a negative image, though he cites the famous philosophers and psychologists like Freud and Wittgenstein. Sometimes, Murdoch portrays an enchanted philosopher like Max Lejour in *The Unicorn* who is a Platonist and a theory-based man, another captive soul of Hannah. Murdoch always plays with a reader's psychology by creating complex characters. Though we can understand her novels more clearly with the help of typological analysis by framing characters according to her philosophy.

Conclusion

Murdoch's contribution to English philosophy and literature cannot be ignored. The author of both literary and philosophical works has a strict criterion for creating them, as philosophy must be clear and direct while fiction is poetic and mysterious. Yet, in her novels, we can detect the philosophical views through the typological analysis of the characters. Murdoch divides the contemporary writers into two categories: existentialists and mystics. Hence, we can distinguish four types of major characters who represent the people of her era, mainly the layer of intelligentsia in the novels *Under the Net*, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, *The Sandcastle* and *The Unicorn.* They are an existential artist, an existential enchanter, a mystic saint, and a mystic philosopher. All of them have their unique characteristics detailed by the author, though Murdoch's chosen one is a mystic saint type who represents an ego-free soul shown in the novels *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter.* Nevertheless, the signs of saintly figures are obscurely transformed in the novel *The Unicorn* and the characteristics of perfection transit to one who is real and not corrupted with illusions. A mystic saint figure is portrayed as an influential static character that can be an inspiration for an existential character's metamorphosis toward askesis. Murdoch's philosophically coated novels offer very modern character interpretation that can help to analyze the contemporary outsider character from different angles.

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Uncovering Issues on "Pink Pound" Queer Representations on (Thai) Media Platforms: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This study investigated the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in Thai media, focusing on how presentations reflected – or failed to reflect – the diversity of identities and experiences within the community. Utilizing queer theory and a framework centered on gender marginalization within the Asian context, specifically Thailand, the research delved into the complex interplay between media representations, societal perceptions, and the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Cultural and religious factors were examined for their influence on shaping public attitudes. A comprehensive, systematic literature review, conducted using the Bangkok University database and employing keywords such as "queer media representation" and "Thailand," provided a foundation for the analysis. Five articles met the criteria of showcasing queer representations on Thai media platforms, while those unrelated to media representation were excluded. Additionally, several case studies were included to support the findings from the systematic literature review. Utilizing queer theory, the research aims to offer actionable insights for media organizations. This will help them to promote more inclusive and nuanced portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and accepting society. In essence, addressing gender stigmatization involves embracing a diversity of sexual preferences, orientations, and identities.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, queer representation, media portrayal, stigmatization, stereotyping

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Introduction

Although LGBTQ+ individuals are increasingly accepted and visible worldwide, they still face both predictable and unpredictable challenges that can pressure them and lead to marginalization in various aspects of life. Several studies highlight the specific lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in various contexts. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2019), there is a general trend of positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Thailand. However, many LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face resistance from their families and communities regarding their identities. This resistance often results in stigma, discrimination, and violence, which can lead to significant mental health and wellness consequences for LGBTQ+ individuals. This is further confirmed by the study of Maji et al. (2024), which found that when LGBTQ+ employees are not treated well, it negatively impacts their job satisfaction, career advancement, and family life. Wittaya Luangsaipong, founder of Siam Pride, an LGBTQ-focused travel agency and subsidiary of Oriental Escape, also stated that many Thai operators and business owners in the tourism industry lack knowledge and understanding of gender diversity and how to treat LGBTQ+ individuals appropriately (Shoowong, 2023).

Across the continent, the study by Phillips et al. (2020) conducted in Australia revealed that participants often concealed their sexual identities in their home countries, particularly from family members, due to fears of judgment and discrimination linked to stigma surrounding sexual identity and HIV. While some participants were open with friends, they still faced considerable challenges. Although they experienced greater sexual freedom and acceptance in Australia, many remained reluctant to disclose their identities because of internalized stigma and shame. The stigma faced in their home countries contributed to anxiety surrounding HIV testing in Australia, driven by fears of receiving a positive result. Additionally, some participants reported experiencing racism and a lack of acceptance within Australia's gay community, particularly on dating apps. Concerns about discrimination and judgment regarding their sexual identities significantly impact social connections for Asian-born gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) living in Australia, while HIV-related stigma further heightens their anxiety about testing. The situation in New Zealand is similar, for many individuals, their understanding of gay and bisexual identities aligns with Western definitions; however, for others, these terms are shaped by Filipino cultural and contextual meanings. This includes the use of "gay" as a broad category that may encompass those who identify as transgender. Participants reported actively and carefully managing their diverse identities. Although disclosing their identities to family members was relatively common, it was often framed as a matter of tolerance rather than full acceptance. Disclosing one's identity was generally easier, although some participants still exercised control over when and how they disclosed their identities in certain work and medical contexts (Adams et al., 2022).

Although LGBTQ+ individuals face marginalization and discrimination, they actively work to establish their personal identities and boundaries. In Malaysia, they employ "destiny" and "rights" to challenge the arguments presented by heterosexuals, which often include "legal," "religious," and "traditional values." Additionally, LGBTQ+ participants differentiate themselves from others through the use of referents and personal pronouns that convey their perspectives. Specifically, they refer to themselves as "us" and categorize heterosexuals as "them." When interacting with fellow LGBTQ+ individuals, they use "I," while they refer to those of different sexual orientations as "they" or "you" (Ting et al., 2023).

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes how LGBTQ+ individuals are depicted by media outlets. The researchers appreciate the insights shared by Janamnuaysook et al. (2024) regarding the summary statement made by Jamie Clayton in the documentary "Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen," which addresses the position of transgender individuals. Clayton stated, "The more positive representation there is, the more confidence the community gains, which then puts us in more danger." While positive representation can help raise public awareness about the existence of transgender communities, in other words, it may also lead to feelings of threat, prompting some individuals to defend against this existence due to a lack of knowledge and understanding. Therefore, media outlets have a crucial role in presenting and reporting various LGBTQ+ issues, experiences, and stories to enhance public understanding of this group. In simple terms, media agencies are vital in shaping public attitudes.

Several previous studies have examined this portrayal, especially in Asia. For instance, Ng et al. (2024) conducted a study in Singapore that analyzed narratives in newspapers, highlighting their role as a powerful medium in shaping public perceptions of society as a whole. It was found that news agencies focus significantly on reporting LGBTQ+ issues, with a much higher emphasis on gay identities compared to bisexual, lesbian, and transgender identities. A local pride event enjoys a high level of acceptance. While lesbian, gay, LGBTQ+, and transgender identities are generally perceived neutrally, sentiments towards bisexual identities tend to be more negative. Furthermore, the framing of LGBTQ+ identities in connection with various topics is notably interesting. Specifically, "lesbian" is often associated with sensationalized cinema, while "gay" is linked to concerns about hate crimes. In contrast, "bisexual" relates to population surveys, and "transgender" is associated with challenges such as transitioning, alienation, and suicide (Ng et al., 2024).

Marginalization and discrimination are evident in both Vietnam, China, and Malaysia. In Vietnam, Nguyen (2019) discusses how homosexual individuals are defending themselves against the heteronormativity. At certain points, the study highlights challenges to this prevailing culture. In China, likewise, the conflict originated between Xixi, a college student, and Jinan University Press, a publisher, when Xixi legally challenged the classification of homosexuality as a psychosexual disorder. Unfortunately, that claim was withdrawn from court. In this context, it has been found that Chinese netizens on Sina Weibo perceive homosexual individuals as "unhealthy, infertile, disruptive, and corrosive." This study also highlights the significant role that social and cultural determinants play in shaping public attitudes toward homosexuality (Zhang & Zhuang, 2023).

Furthermore, Boys' Love series are popular among Malaysians for several reasons, including escapism, self-identification, and entertainment. These motivations for media consumption can be understood through the fact that homosexual individuals are not widely accepted and seek opportunities to express their identities while being perceived as legal (Jerome et al., 2022). Bias and stigmatization are still reflected in Malaysian media outlets. A recent study conducted by Roslani and Jamal (2024), likewise, revealed that an analysis of news reports from The Star regarding Nur Sajat, a local transgender woman, demonstrates misrepresentation through the use of names that Nur Sajat has not chosen and incorrect gender identification. Such practices undermine her true transgender identity. Although The Star has reported positively on her success in her business career, it also presents negative portrayals of Nur Sajat, framing her with a criminal profile. It is recommended that media outlets exercise caution in their language use and show respect for LGBTQ+ individuals and their identities.

In Thailand, there is a significantly low level of news coverage about LGBTQ+ individuals, and misrepresentation often portrays them negatively, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and discriminatory language. This can be attributed to a lack of understanding of sexual orientations, gender, and sexuality (Fongkaew et al., 2019). Additionally, Nal (2020) highlights that social and cultural factors, such as social norms, influence how people respond to LGBTQ+ portrayals in TV series. The study reveals that those who are less likely to adhere to and respect social norms in Thailand engage less in discussions about media representation of LGBTQ+ individuals. In contrast, individuals are more inclined to follow Thai social norms tend to criticize LGBTQ+ portrayals in TV series to a greater extent. However, it is encouraging to see that the visibility of homosexuality, particularly in Boys' Love series, has increased in mainstream media platforms compared to previous years. Additionally, representations of sexuality now extend beyond just the stereotype of the third sex (Supawantanakul, 2023).

A review of literature published on Human Resource Management over the past six decades shows increased attention to diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. While gender and racial demographics have been of significant interest, previous studies have insufficiently addressed the understanding and analysis of religious factors (Triana et al., 2021). Cultural expectations and marginalization, likewise, pose significant challenges for LGBTQ+ students pursuing degrees internationally. A review of existing literature indicates that these students, who navigate life both as international students and as LGBTQ+ individuals, encounter difficulties living abroad, even while they seek out more accepting environments (Campbell & Dezago, 2024). Rich et al. (2021) also emphasized that religious beliefs and personal relationships are the two primary factors shaping attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals among Koreans. In Spain, additionally, both positive and negative attitudes towards transgender individuals are influenced by the psychological factor of empathy. Specifically, a lower level of empathy is likely to lead to negative attitudes and increase transphobia among university students towards transgender people (Esteban-Mora, 2022). In the research market, understanding consumer behavior related to LGBTQ+ individuals should not be underestimated, given the growing size and significance of this market (Coombes & Singh, 2022).

The issue of LGBTQ+ identity, therefore, has become increasingly complex in today's society. Its scope and terminology have expanded in both breadth and depth, influenced by a variety of perspectives and viewpoints. This study aims to analyze the representation of queer individuals in (Thai) media and explore the various cultural and religious contexts that shape people's views on LGBTQ+ individuals. It conducts a systematic literature review with a particular focus on Thai media platforms.

Literature Review

It is essential to provide an overview of queer theory, as a foundation of analysis in this paper, which was initiated by Michel Foucault, acknowledging that gender and sexual identities are shaped by social and power dynamics. This perspective influences how people in various cultures perceive gender and sexual identities, moving beyond biological and physical factors. In other words, queer theory encourages individuals to think outside conventional frameworks, recognizing that not only traditional heterosexuality and cisgender identities exist, but also a diverse range of other genders and sexualities (Pollak Library, 2025). The term “queer” is also complex, encompassing non-heterosexual identities and resistance to heteronormative structures like marriage and capitalism. Queer theory, rooted in

political activism, emphasizes the subjective experiences of queer individuals. Originating from movements like ACT UP and Queer Nation during the AIDS epidemic, it critiques mainstream LGBT organizations that prioritize assimilation. A key concept that arose is "homonormativity," which highlights how certain advances in LGBT rights benefit primarily white, middle-class individuals while marginalizing others, such as people of color and transgender individuals. This concept illustrates how progress can inadvertently reinforce inequality, visible in areas like gentrification and advertising (Grzanka, 2019). As a result of the extensive use of queer theory, particularly among activists, conflicts have emerged between its original concepts—challenging heteronormativity and advocating for social change—and contemporary interpretations. Therefore, it is essential to honor the theory's originality by analyzing concrete lived queer experiences rather than engaging in unclear and abstract theorizing (Halperin, 2021).

According to Broto (2021), as previously mentioned, LGBTQ+ individuals face obstacles related to violence and discrimination. From the perspective of queer theory, to promote gender and sexual binaries and diversity, it is recommended to incorporate LGBTQ+ viewpoints in the participatory planning process of community development projects. However, the integration of LGBTQ+ issues into participatory planning processes is hindered by three main factors. Firstly, their exclusion from broader community matters results in significant gaps. Additionally, heteronormativity is often regarded as the social norm within development and urban planning contexts. Finally, discussions about sexuality and identity are restricted due to concerns about safety and communication.

In psychology, queer theory has been widely applied. However, there are three notable circumstances that should be acknowledged. First, "coercive queering" refers to the practice of labeling individuals as "queer" even if they do not identify as such, which often affects transgender and gender-diverse people. This distinction underscores the difference between queer theory, which is oppositional, and queer studies, which may sometimes adopt queer theory in ways that can be exclusionary. Second, the impact of racial privilege within queer theory and its application in psychology is examined. This encompasses acknowledging the contributions of Black feminist perspectives, analyzing how racial hierarchies influence psychological interpretations of subjectivity, investigating racialized desire, and steering clear of Western-centric criticisms that overlook indigenous ways of knowing. Additionally, class privilege should be taken into account. Third, the lasting influence of psychoanalytic theory, especially the work of Lacan, on queer theory is acknowledged. While this relationship can be beneficial, it may also impede the acceptance of queer theory within psychology's more cognition-focused mainstream. Nonetheless, Lacan's idea of the "sexual non-relationship"—which stresses that a subject is formed through absence and desire—resonates with queer theory's rejection of straightforward body-identity connections and provides a useful framework for understanding sex and gender (Riggs & Treharne, 2017).

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to address the two research objectives. The SLR methodology was chosen for its rigorous, replicable, and transparent approach to data collection and analysis, minimizing bias (Mengist et al., 2020). This involved establishing clear research questions, developing a comprehensive search strategy, applying strict inclusion criteria, and utilizing appropriate quality assessment tools (Shaheen et al., 2023). Using the keywords "queer media representation" and "Thailand," a search of the Bangkok University database yielded 212 initial results; however, only nine met the

inclusion criteria. It was vital to note at this point that the term "media representation" referred to any media platforms.

Unfortunately, upon reviewing and analyzing each article, only five were selected for inclusion in this study. The remaining four articles were excluded for various reasons, i.e. one article primarily reviewed various previous studies conducted in the US, Germany, Thailand, and China. Additionally, this study utilized to explain the LGBTQ situation in Thailand was based on research conducted by Chao, S. (2022). Signifying tomboy and the Thai TV Series Club Friday to be continued: She changed. *Communication, Culture & Critique, 15*(3), 433-439. doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcab060 for the study of Zhao and Ng (2022); one paper primarily addressed issues related to the career paths of transgender individuals and did not adequately cover media representation for the study of Fontana and Siriwichai (2022); no additional data were collected; instead, only existing literature was reviewed (Fontana & Siriwichai, 2022). Furthermore, this paper included studies from other countries in the Asia-Pacific region for the study of Janamnuaysook et al. (2024); and one paper was excluded because it did not address media representation. Instead, it focused on comparing the health risks faced by cisgender and transgender individuals by the study of Wichaidit et al. (2021).

Below was a list of the five articles that meet the requirements.

- Shimauchi, S. (2023). Thai boys love drama fandom as a transnational and trans-subcultural contact zone in Japan. *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 37*(3), 381-394. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2023.2237709
- Chao, S. (2022). Signifying tomboy and the Thai TV Series Club Friday to be continued: She changed. *Communication, Culture & Critique, 15*(30), 433-439. doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcab060
- Kijratanakoson, N. (2023). Journalistic role performance of the Thai press on the issue of transgender rights. *International Journal of Communication, 17,* 1232-1254.
- Amaki, Y. (2024). Acceptance of sexual and gender minorities through romance TV drama series with LGBT characters: The voices of college students in Thailand. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, 16*(2), 1-20. doi: https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n2.20g
- Ocha, W. (2023). Buddhism, gender, and sexualities: Queer spiritualties in Thailand. *Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, 42*(5), 685-705. doi: https://doi.org/10.1108/EDU-01-2020-0025

Results and Discussion

In the findings section, the results were divided into two parts based on the research objectives. The first part addressed current media representations of LGBTQ+ individuals, followed by an examination of how cultural and religious factors influenced public awareness and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities.

Current Media Representations of LGBTQ+ Individuals

In this part of the findings, although it was difficult to identify a specific number, the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in Thai media representation corresponded with a greater number of risks and challenges faced by these individuals. Thanks to accessible social media platforms like YouTube, Boys' Love or "tai-numa" fans had created communities that promoted diversity, equality, and combat marginalization and stereotypes. These gatherings fostered a shared culture and sense of belonging, enhancing understanding and awareness of

LGBTQ+ issues beyond simple media consumption. This also helped women and LGBTQ+ individuals gain more confidence and appreciation, as access to LGBTQ+ content, particularly from Thailand, had been limited in Japan (Shimauchi, 2023). Thai content, in general, had also gained widespread acceptance and distribution among Chinese youth (Jirattikorn, 2021).

According to Kijratanakoson's (2023) study, a journalistic analysis of the popular English newspaper *Bangkok Post* revealed that trans women were the primary focus, while other genders and sexualities were given less attention. Referring to the study by Fongkaew et al. (2019), media representation and portrayal, as well as the genres of stories narrated—such as journalistic styles in newspapers and television dramas, films, and series—had differentiated and distinguished transgender individuals from other genders and sexualities, such as lesbians and gays. This portrayal often presented and marginalized transgender individuals as jokes or sources of amusement stereotypes (Kijratanakoson, 2023). While Boys' Love series featuring male-male relationships had been widely produced and embraced, a qualitative study from paper argued that the increase in these romance dramas had not made Thai society more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals. It suggested that these dramas were often viewed as fantasies and that their disconnect from reality did not lead to genuine support for LGBTQ+ communities. The self-promotion of actors was seen as more significant than education about LGBTQ+ issues, and the series may not provide accurate information about the LGBTQ+ community, potentially leading to misunderstandings. Additionally, while these series were popular among youth, they might not be well accepted by Thai society as a whole. Furthermore, although the dramas could enhance the visibility of LGBTQ+ culture, they might simultaneously promote discrimination. Critics also pointed out that these series merely depicted romantic relationships without genuinely supporting the LGBTQ+ community, and the sexualized portrayals within the dramas may be misleading (Amaki, 2024).

Gender and sexuality in Thai media representation had also evolved beyond traditional and existing sexual identities. Although this study referenced Chao's (2022) research on lesbianism in the Thai series “Club Friday To Be Continued: She Changed,” it also discovered some noteworthy shifts in representations of lesbianism. It was noted that in the past, the term “tomboy” or “tomboyism” was used to describe stereotypes of masculine-identified lesbians. In this series, a tomboy protagonist embodies a tom identity but subsequently falls in love with a man, prompting changes in her appearance. This scenario could lead to an internal conflict regarding the character's identity and attractions. The boundary of gender and sexuality associated with “tomboy” had been broadly expanded from an identity to a style, influenced by pan-Asian popular culture (Chao, 2022) and arguing non-homosexuality, given by the queer theory.

The researchers observed that the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals across various media platforms often lacked depth regarding their sexual preferences, orientations, and identities, with limitations particularly apparent for certain orientations. Additionally, media portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals seemed to be primarily geared toward monetization. In Thailand, for instance, the production of Boy's Love and Girl's Love series had been prolific; however, other sexual preferences, orientations, and identities often received less attention. Despite the conclusion of these series, monetization efforts persisted. The actors in these series often become idealized couples who resonated with fandoms and communities, evolving into idols, influencers, presenters, brand ambassadors, business owners, and more.

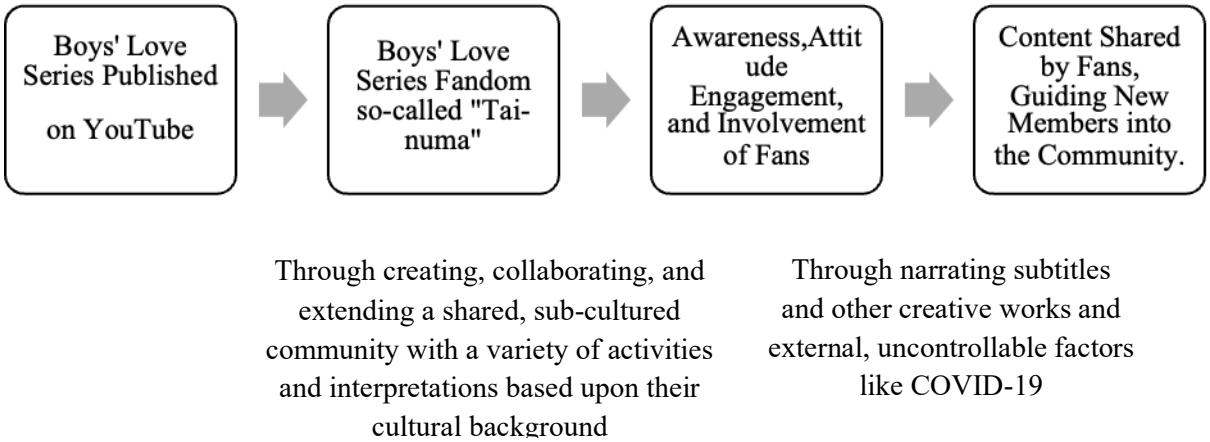
Some of these series had even been sold internationally, expanding their influence beyond local borders.

Cultural and Religious Influences on Public Awareness and Attitudes Towards LGBTQ+ Communities

While various factors, such as the internet and geography (as discussed in Chao, 2022), were used to explain these changing circumstances, this study focuses exclusively on cultural and religious determinants, specifically fandom culture (Shimauchi, 2023), consumption culture and consumer culture (Amaki, 2024; Chao, 2022; Kijratanakoson, 2023), and religious background (Ocha, 2023). Cultural and religious factors can serve as determinants that both encourage and discourage various genders and sexual identities in Thailand.

In this study, references to cultural phenomena and cultural dynamics specifically pertained to a certain subculture of fandom (Shimauchi, 2023) and its associated consumption culture and consumer culture (Amaki, 2024; Chao, 2022; Kijratanokoson, 2023). The study by Shimauchi (2023) provided a comprehensive and insightful understanding of how LGBTQ+ communities could enhance their collective power through fandom subculture, presented in a clear and engaging way. The researchers would now like to present and summarize the key points in the following figure.

Figure 1
Media Representations of LGBTQ+ Individuals on YouTube, Along With the Influences of Fandom Subculture, Encourage Understanding and Foster Rapport With LGBTQ+ People



Source. Concluded from Shimauchi (2023)

By understanding and applying the framework of Shimauchi (2023), this study identified four main stages for empowering LGBTQ+ communities through fandom as a subculture. In detail, Thai Boys' Love series were not only broadcasted on mainstream media but also widely shared on social media platforms like YouTube, ensuring extensive outreach both nationally and globally. This accessibility allowed individuals from around the world to easily access this type of content. Consequently, fan communities known as “Tai-numa” emerged and actively developed across the globe. These “Tai-numa” fans could be viewed as a centralized, shared, and subcultural community dedicated to creating, collaborating, exchanging, and expanding knowledge and understanding through diverse practices and interpretations, based on their personal cultural backgrounds.

This two-way interaction fostered a sense of belonging while simultaneously raising awareness, shaping attitudes, and increasing engagement and involvement in LGBTQ+ activities and initiatives as well as rights. Additionally, community members shared content related to Boys' Love series by providing subtitles and other creative works, which further enriched and encouraged new members to join the community. Beyond the power of fandom culture in amplifying LGBTQ+ voices, external uncontrollable factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also played a significant role in influencing community development and outreach (Shimauchi, 2023).

The study by Amaki (2024) effectively utilized Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to explain and interpret the phenomena observed. According to EBSCO (2017), it was noted that not all cultures qualify as consumer cultures; specifically, the term referred to societies driven by capitalism and a pervasive desire to purchase goods and commodities. The United States was frequently cited as a quintessential example of a consumer culture. In such societies, most individuals felt compelled to engage in consumption, regardless of gender, age, or socioeconomic background. Media—through advertising and commercials—continuously reinforces this impulse by portraying consumption as a pathway to social status, happiness, and well-being. Additionally, consumption was often seen as a social obligation that boosts self-esteem; those who refrained from participating may feel unsuccessful, marginalized, or excluded. Conversely, people outside the dominant consumer culture—whether by personal preference or lack of resources—highlight that consumerism is not purely based on free choice. For many low-income individuals, consumption is mainly utilitarian and restricted to immediate needs, with their options limited by socio-economic constraints. This challenges the notion that consumer culture is solely about freedom of choice, demonstrating that participation is often inaccessible or unsustainable for many, which can lead to feelings of deprivation and social exclusion.

As demonstrated in Ocha's (2023) study grounded in Theravada Buddhism, this religious tradition could serve as both an empowering and a limiting influence on LGBTQ+ identities, gender roles, and equality. An effective approach would be to adopt a flexible religious framework that fully embraces cultural diversity and promotes modernization, thereby respecting social equality, diversity, and human rights. This could be successfully achieved when individuals—whether laypeople or monks—deeply understand the core principles of Theravada Buddhism, particularly two of its essential concepts: anicca (impermanence), which signified that all things were transient and nothing is permanent, and anatta (non-self), which indicated that the body and mind were not inherently separate or owned by an individual. Recognizing these principles suggested that it was unnecessary to perceive LGBTQ+ identities as fixed or unchangeable. Even if someone identifies as LGBTQ+, their body, mind, and soul could evolve or transform over time (Ocha, 2023).

This understanding also helped explain phenomena observed in studies such as Chao's (2022), where a main actress shifted her style and identity from tomboyism to femininity. It reinforced the idea that the attributed of existence were not always static, contrary to common stereotypes. In particular, societal stereotypes—such as those targeting transgender sex workers, known as katoey—often categorized as phi kanun—have historically undermined religious credibility and beliefs by portraying these individuals as disrupting religious norms and moral standards (Ocha, 2023).

The objectives of this study were to analyze the representation of queer individuals in Thai media and to explore the cultural and religious contexts influencing societal views on

LGBTQ+ individuals. The findings indicated that LGBTQ+ individuals received greater acceptance on Thai media platforms, especially on popular social media outlets like YouTube (Shimauchi, 2023). However, in mainstream media, particularly concerning trans women, the issue remained marginalized and often treated as a subject of ridicule (Kiratanakoson, 2023). This circumstance can be described that, when considering the characteristics of media platforms, traditional and mainstream media are typically one-way communication, where information flows from journalists to the general audience. Compared to international online news headlines, Thai online news headlines tend to reflect more negative attitudes toward transgender people. Additionally, transgender individuals are often collectivized and homogenized—treated as the same in news reports. In other words, transgender people are portrayed through a one-sided perspective, which is accepted as an accurate and real depiction of the truth (Ninpanit, 2020).

In contrast, social media platforms facilitate two-way dialogue, enabling individuals and users to connect, interact, and engage with each other physically and emotionally around a common subject. By applying the social media maturity model, which includes four stages—pre-social, connection, engagement, and social advantage—social media evolves to effectively influence and resonate within people's minds (Chen, 2010). Social media platforms like YouTube serve as a foundation for fans to share and express their sense of belonging and identity, fostering the development of communities where members can communicate and interact with one another (Shimauchi, 2023).

Similarly, Anurak et al. (2021) explained that the perception of trans women as a joke stems from media portrayals, such as Thai films and movies, which often depict this group as humorous characters who are sexy, carefree, promiscuous, unsuccessful in love, lacking dignity, and not accepted by society. Sirote Klampaiboon, as cited in Itthipongmaetee (2017), emphasized that “Some reporters don’t really understand the issue… They need to realize that they’re telling someone’s story and they don’t need to make a joke of someone.” It is crucial for journalists to focus on two main aspects: developing a deep understanding of specific issues, such as those concerning LGBTQ+ people in this study, and adhering to legal and ethical standards. The researchers believe that communicators and journalists should adopt an egalitarian perspective, meaning that they should respect diversity and differences regardless of individuals’ identities, sexual preferences, or orientations, as suggested by Keeler (2023).

Despite the increase in media content depicting Boys' Love relationships, these are often viewed more as commercial and promotional tools rather than educational resources. This approach does not necessarily contribute to a correct understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals and can distance participants from the realities they face (Amaki, 2024). Additional spaces should be allocated to support LGBTQ+ identities and preferences (Guest editorial, 2023).

While some may argue that the focus on sexual preferences, orientations, and identities is limited due to the lack of specific emphasis in this study, the researchers acknowledge such perspectives. This is because sexual preferences, orientations, and identities encompass more than what individuals typically perceive or understand about themselves. As communicators, the researchers view this study as a preliminary, representative effort aimed at supporting queer theory and promoting the fundamental human rights that affirm the equality of all individuals.

Conclusion

By utilizing queer theory, this research aims to provide practical recommendations for media organizations, which play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals. It seeks to encourage more inclusive and nuanced representations of the community. Accepting LGBTQ+ individuals as fellow humans necessitates fostering openness to diversity and differences at all societal levels and respecting the changes that vary across different contexts. Addressing gender stigmatization requires embracing a broad spectrum of sexual preferences, orientations, and identities. These strategies ultimately contribute to a more equitable and accepting society. This study has certain limitations that need to be addressed. Future research should focus on a comparative cultural study, as cultural and religious factors significantly influence perceptions and opinions regarding LGBTQ+ issues. It would be insightful to explore the perspectives of individuals from various countries. To achieve this, inclusive qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, participant and non-participant observations, focus groups, and other innovative approaches like workshops, simulations, role-plays, and events should be utilized. Additionally, developing and testing educational and persuasive campaigns can effectively promote diversity and equality.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The researchers acknowledge the use of various AI-assisted tools for paraphrasing, summarizing, extending, and revising the content presented here to enhance the language's clarity, readability, coherence, completeness, and academic professionalism. However, all content has been sought, developed, structured, organized, and verified by the researchers themselves.

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Fatherhood in Focus: A Semiotic and Representational Analysis of TV Commercials in the Asian Context (2003-2019)

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of fatherhood in 20 Asian TV commercials aired between 2003 and 2019, employing Semiotic Theory as analytical frameworks. Through qualitative content analysis, the research decodes the visual, textual, and symbolic elements used to construct fatherhood and investigates how these representations reflect or challenge cultural norms and societal expectations in Asia. At the denotative level, commercials often depict fathers as providers, protectors, or mentors. However, connotative analysis reveals a deeper narrative of evolving masculinity, where fathers increasingly embody emotional expressiveness, caregiving roles, and modern values. This duality signifies a shift from traditional patriarchal archetypes toward more nuanced portrayals aligned with socio-economic transformations in the region. Representation theory is further applied to explore power dynamics, cultural ideologies, and the reframing of fatherhood in response to audience expectations and marketing strategies. Findings highlight recurring themes such as sacrifice, authority, and family harmony, underscored by visual symbols like household settings, tools, and family rituals. The analysis also identifies patterns of inclusivity and exclusion, pointing to persistent stereotypes and emerging counter-narratives. This study contributes to the fields of advertising, cultural studies, and gender representation by offering insights into how fatherhood is constructed in media and how these representations influence and are influenced by societal trends. It provides practical implications for advertisers aiming to resonate with diverse Asian audiences while addressing broader academic discussions on gender and cultural identity in media.

Keywords: fatherhood, advertising, TV commercial, semiotic analysis, gender roles in media

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Introduction

In the rapidly evolving media landscape of the 21st century, advertising serves as both a mirror and a mold of cultural values. It reflects societal norms while simultaneously shaping perceptions of identity, gender, and familial roles. This dual function is particularly salient in the portrayal of fatherhood, a role deeply rooted in tradition yet increasingly redefined by shifting sociocultural currents. In Asia, where rapid urbanization, economic growth, and generational clashes over values have transformed family structures, TV commercials provide a compelling lens through which to examine the tensions between enduring cultural archetypes and emerging ideals of masculinity.

This study investigates the semiotic and representational construction of fatherhood in 20 Asian TV commercials aired between 2003 and 2019. Anchored in Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory (Barthes et al., 1967) and Stuart Hall's Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), the research interrogates how visual, textual, and symbolic elements encode meanings of fatherhood. It further explores how these portrayals negotiate cultural ideologies across diverse Asian societies. The chosen timeframe spans nearly two decades, coinciding with pivotal shifts in Asia's socioeconomic fabric, including rising discourse on gender equity, the normalization of dual-income family models, and the globalized reimagining of paternal roles.

While existing scholarship has extensively explored motherhood and female representation in media, fatherhood remains understudied, particularly in non-Western contexts. Asian fatherhood, often framed through Confucian ideals of authority and stoicism (Chua & Fujino, 1999), presents a unique case study. Advertisers increasingly balance tradition with modern narratives of emotional vulnerability and caregiving, reflecting broader societal transitions. By dissecting commercials from industries such as consumer goods, automotive, and technology, this study unpacks how media producers encode messages of sacrifice, authority, and familial harmony while subtly challenging patriarchal norms.

This research contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues in media studies, cultural sociology, and gender theory by mapping the semiotic evolution of fatherhood in Asia's advertising landscape. Practically, it offers actionable insights for advertisers navigating the region's complex cultural terrain, where nostalgia for tradition often coexists with aspirational modernity. The following sections detail the methodology, theoretical frameworks, and findings, ultimately arguing that Asian TV commercials serve as contested sites where fatherhood is both nostalgically memorialized and dynamically reimagined.

Literature Review

Advertising functions as a cultural text that both reflects and constructs societal norms (Goldman, 2005). The portrayal of fatherhood in media and advertising has been examined through multiple theoretical lenses, with semiotics and representation theory offering critical frameworks to decode the cultural and ideological underpinnings of these depictions. Semiotic analysis, rooted in Roland Barthes' distinction between denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes et al., 1967), has been widely applied to dissect gender roles in advertising. Studies of Indian print media (Revathy & Hemmige, 2022) and Indonesian TV commercials (Putri & Undiana, 2022) reveal how visual and textual elements encode patriarchal norms, such as associating femininity with domesticity and masculinity with authority. Similarly, Bell and Milic's (2002) re-examination of Goffman's gender display theory through semiotic analysis underscores how advertisements naturalize gendered behaviors, positioning men as

active agents and women as passive recipients. These findings resonate with critiques of Greek TV commercials, where women's identities are often reduced to decorative or caregiving roles, reinforcing hegemonic gender hierarchies (Nina-Pazarzi & Tsangaris, 2008). Such analyses highlight the universal tendency of media to mythologize social roles, a process Barthes et al. (1967) attribute to the transformation of cultural constructs into seemingly natural truths.

However, Barthes' semiotic framework has faced critiques for its perceived rigidity. Scholars argue that interpretations of signs are inherently contextual, shaped by the audience's cultural and historical background (Safavi & Gümüş, 2019). This challenges Barthes' assumption of static, universally legible semiotic systems. Monticelli (2016) further contrasts Barthes' model with Lotman's cultural semiotics, emphasizing the latter's recognition of heterogeneous cultural systems capable of generating new meanings. This critique is particularly salient in Asian contexts, where diverse cultural codes, from Confucian paternalism to neoliberal individualism, intersect in advertising. Stuart Hall's representation theory, which integrates structural linguistics, semiotics, and Foucauldian power dynamics (Cheng, 2016), offers a more flexible lens to analyze these complexities. Hall's work acknowledges the interplay between media producers and audiences, where representations of fatherhood are neither wholly imposed nor passively consumed but negotiated within sociocultural power structures. Yet, as Bennett (2016) notes, Hall's reliance on Continental philosophical traditions risks obscuring non-Western epistemologies, a gap this study addresses by centering Asian cultural specificities.

Fatherhood in Media and Advertising

Globally, advertising has increasingly grappled with evolving notions of masculinity and fatherhood. The rise of "dadvertising" in Western media reflects a shift from fathers as distant providers to emotionally engaged caregivers (Mueller et al., 2023). Marshall et al. (2014) trace this transition in Good Housekeeping advertisements, where fathers evolved from overt breadwinners in the 1950s to peripheral figures by 2010, signaling a tension between nostalgic paternalism and modern egalitarianism. Similarly, Stevens (2015) identifies discursive barriers to involved fatherhood in Australia, where stay-at-home fathers are stigmatized as deviating from traditional norms. These trends mirror broader cultural anxieties about masculinity in neoliberal economies, where advertising both challenges and reinforces gendered ideals (Gentry & Harrison, 2010; Zayer et al., 2019). For instance, campaigns promoting "real men" as assertive yet nurturing (Islentyeva et al., 2024) reflect a dual appeal to progressive values and entrenched stereotypes. However, such portrayals often remain aspirational, masking persistent structural inequities (Hamad, 2010).

In Asia, the interplay of tradition and modernity in fatherhood representations is particularly pronounced. Confucian ideals, which prioritize paternal authority and filial piety (Lim, 2019), clash with neoliberal narratives of involved, emotionally expressive fatherhood. Hong Kong's stay-at-home fathers, for example, face societal skepticism despite their caregiving roles, as their identities conflict with entrenched notions of masculine productivity (Liong, 2017). Advertising in the region often negotiates these tensions by depicting fathers as symbolic figures, silent providers or leisure companions, whose presence signifies familial completeness rather than active participation (Yang et al., 2014). This aligns with broader media strategies that commodify "The Happy Home" (Chen, 2011), idealizing harmony while obscuring the pressures of urbanization and overwork (Labour Party, 2012). The emotional demands of familial relationships, as Goldman (2005) observes, are frequently

reduced to material exchanges in advertisements, where gift-giving substitutes for genuine intimacy. Yet, as Chang (2006) argues, cultural dimensions of masculinity and femininity shape advertising appeals: in collectivist societies like China and Japan, familial harmony is prioritized, whereas individualist contexts emphasize personal achievement.

Despite these insights, critical gaps persist. While Western studies dominate discussions of fatherhood in advertising (e.g., Marshall et al., 2014; Stevens, 2015), Asian contexts remain underexplored, particularly in terms of semiotic mechanisms and longitudinal shifts. Existing research often isolates cultural or economic factors, neglecting their interplay in shaping representations. For example, Doi and Bester's (1973) analysis of Japan's "fatherless society" underscores the psychological impact of absent paternal figures yet fails to address how contemporary advertising reconciles this legacy with modern expectations of involved fatherhood. By applying Barthes' and Hall's frameworks to Asian commercials, this study bridges these gaps, interrogating how visual and narrative codes, such as household settings or paternal gestures, reflect and reshape cultural ideologies amid socioeconomic transformations. Furthermore, it challenges Eurocentric theoretical assumptions by contextualizing semiotic analysis within Asia's diverse cultural landscapes, where Confucian legacies, postcolonial identities, and globalized consumerism converge.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the construction of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials aired between 2003 and 2019. Grounded in Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory and Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, the methodology integrates systematic coding of audiovisual content with interpretative analysis to decode cultural meanings and power dynamics. The design prioritizes understanding how visual, textual, and symbolic elements collectively shape representations of fatherhood, while tracing shifts in these portrayals over time.

The theoretical framework combines Barthes' semiotic model, which distinguishes between denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings, and Hall's emphasis on representation as a site of cultural negotiation. Barthes' framework guides the identification of surface-level imagery, such as fathers engaging in caregiving activities, and the interpretation of deeper symbolic associations, such as nurturing gestures signifying a departure from traditional masculinity. Hall's theory complements this by interrogating how these representations reinforce or subvert societal stereotypes, positioning fatherhood as a contested cultural symbol shaped by power dynamics and audience reception.

Data Collection and Analysis

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 20 TV commercials featuring father figures, sourced from diverse Asian countries, including Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea, and spanning industries such as consumer goods, automotive, and technology. The commercials were identified through YouTube using keywords "Father Advertisement" and "Family Advertisement," with selection criteria prioritizing high view counts and engagement metrics to reflect narratives resonant with popular audiences. Each advertisement was cataloged by product category, air date (year), geographic region, and duration, showing in Table 1.

Table 1
List of the Selected 20 TV Commercials

	Region	Category	Brand	Year	Duration	Tone & Manner
1	South Korea	Insurance	KB Financial Group	2017	4:38	Emotional, warmth
2	Thailand	Insurance	MetLife	2017	3:20	Emotional, warmth
3	Taiwan	Insurance	TCB Life	2012	6:19	Emotional
4	Japan	Car	Toyota	2015	3:26	Warmth
5	Thailand	Branding	ICC	2017	4:32	Emotional, warmth
6	Taiwan	Household product	Andante Tissues	2016	5:05	Emotional, warmth
7	Malaysia	Branding	Bernas	2013	3:09	Emotional
8	Taiwan	Insurance	Cardif	2015	4:29	Emotional, warmth
9	Japan	Musical Instruments	Tosando Music	2014	3:30	Emotional, warmth
10	Japan	Gaming	Final Fantasy 14	2017	1:10	Funny
11	Taiwan	Electrical appliances	E-life Mall Corporation	2019	10:00	Emotional, Funny, warmth
12	Taiwan	Electrical appliances	E-life Mall Corporation	2018	10:00	Emotional, warmth
13	Taiwan	Car	Toyota	2016	7:43	Emotional, warmth
14	Japan	Household product	Tokyo Gas	2016	1:30	Warmth
15	Thailand	Communication	LINE	2017	1:30	Emotional, warmth
16	Hong Kong	Insurance	HSBC	2019	1:10	Relax, warmth
17	Hong Kong	Electrical appliances	Phillips Hue	2016	1:44	Funny, relax
18	Hong Kong	Healthcare	Mannings	2003	0:30	Funny
19	Hong Kong	Communication	Wilson	2012	0:30	Problem-solving
20	Hong Kong	Healthcare	GNC	2014	0:46	Preaching

Note. Sorted and cataloged according to the data collection process.

Data analysis unfolded in two interconnected phases to decode the construction of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials. Representational analysis focused on the recurring visual elements were cataloged and themed, while semiotic analysis investigated the narrative and symbols implied in the TV ads. MAXQDA software facilitated systematic coding and visualization of patterns, enabling cross-comparison of themes and narratives. Intercoder reliability was ensured through iterative discussions with a second researcher, resolving discrepancies via consensus to maintain analytical rigor. By adhering to this methodology, the study provides a

nuanced exploration of how Asian TV commercials negotiate tradition and modernity in constructing fatherhood, offering insights into cultural delivery and continuity.

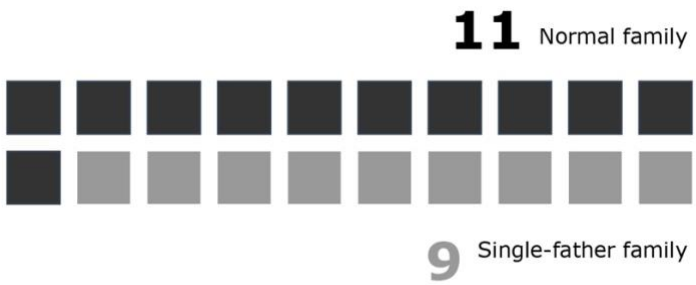
Results and Findings

The data analysis process yielded critical insights into the representation of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials, structured around three core findings that emerged from the repetitive patterns through thematic analysis.

Single-Father Prevalence

Figure 1 concluded that nearly half of the sampled TV commercials (9 out of 20) prominently featured single fathers, indicating a notable narrative focus on solo paternal caregiving. These advertisements frequently depicted single fathers fulfilling dual roles as both providers and nurturers. Common scenarios included fathers working late hours, carrying heavy objects, preparing meals alone or bring children to school, often juxtaposed with visual cues of exhaustion, such as disheveled clothing or weary expressions. Notably, all nine commercials framed single fatherhood through themes of silent endurance, portraying paternal sacrifice as a heroic ideal. For example, a 2017 Thai insurance advertisement depicted a father who conceals his financial struggles by falsely assuring his daughter he holds a well-paid and comfortable job. He works multiple part-time jobs to sustain their livelihood, from construction labor to late-night delivery shifts. Despite his grueling schedule, the father meticulously maintains appearances, wearing his best clothes during daily school pickups and drop-offs, even as his worn-out work uniforms and exhausted demeanor subtly reveal the toll of his labor. This narrative of performative dignity, where the father prioritizes his child's sense of security over his own hardships, symbolizes unwavering dedication. The recurring motif of fathers masking their struggles to project stability underscores the cultural valorization of paternal responsibility. However, it also reinforces stereotypes of emotional restraint and self-reliance, perpetuating the expectation that fathers should endure suffering silently rather than seek communal support or emotional expression.

Figure 1
Family Type Prevalence in 20 TV Commercials

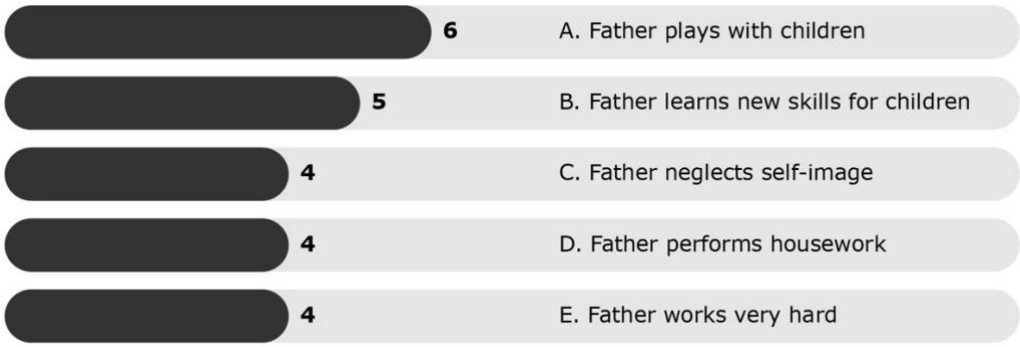


Five Attributes of Father Images

Figure 2 shows five recurring attributes emerged as central to the portrayal of fathers in the analyzed commercials. First, fathers engaging in play with children appeared in 6 out of 20 advertisements, often through scenes of outdoor activities or shared laughter. Second, fathers learning new skills for their children's benefit, such as dancing, playing piano or using new technology, were depicted in 5 commercials, highlighting adaptability as a modern paternal

trait. Third, 4 commercials showcased fathers disregarding their personal dignity, such as wearing mismatched clothing or dancing awkwardly to entertain their children, framing such acts as gestures of selfless love. Fourth, fathers performing household chores were present in 4 advertisements, though these portrayals often framed domestic labor as occasional assistance rather than routine responsibility. Finally, 4 commercials emphasized fathers laboring tirelessly, frequently through visuals of office settings or manual work, linking paternal identity to economic provision. These attributes collectively construct a multifaceted image of fatherhood, balancing traditional expectations of authority with evolving ideals of emotional engagement.

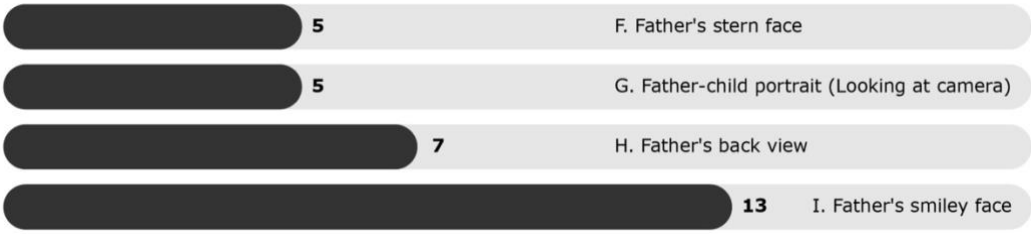
Figure 2
Frequency Count of Father Images in 20 TV Commercials



Symbols of Fatherhood

The symbolic construction of fatherhood in the analyzed commercials is visually summarized in Figure 3, which quantifies the frequency of four recurring motifs, and Figure 4, which maps these symbols to their cultural and emotional significations. Figure 3 reveals that the father's smiley face (13 instances) was the most prevalent symbol, followed by the father's back view (7 instances), while the father's stern face and father-child portrait each appeared 5 times. Figure 4 further decodes these symbols, illustrating how visual elements signify deeper cultural ideologies.

Figure 3
Frequency Count of Fatherhood Symbols in 20 TV Commercials



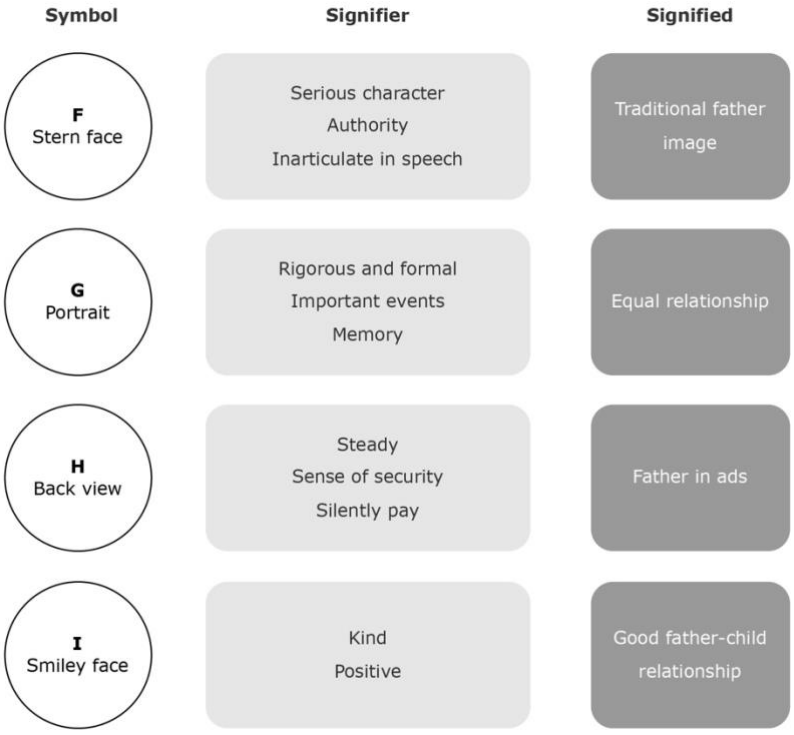
The father's smiley face, prominent in over half of the commercials, functioned as a key signifier of kindness, positivity, and an idealized father-child relationship. These smiles often framed paternal warmth within climactic scenes of familial harmony, such as reunions or celebrations, reinforcing the myth of the "happy home." In contrast, the father's back view, depicted in contexts like leaving for work or holding up an adult child, signified silent sacrifice and steadfast reliability. This symbol connoted emotional distance alongside

unwavering security, reflecting cultural expectations of paternal stoicism prevalent in East Asian contexts.

The father's stern face, appearing in disciplinary or decision-making scenarios, symbolized traditional authority and emotional inarticulacy. This symbol with seriousness and hierarchical family dynamics, aligning with Confucian ideals of paternal discipline. Conversely, the father-child portrait, featuring formal poses and direct gazes at the camera, signified egalitarian relationships and shared milestones. These compositions, often staged during graduations or holidays, subtly challenged rigid hierarchies by emphasizing collaboration and collective memory. Together, all these four symbols encapsulate a cultural tension between nostalgia for patriarchal authority and aspirational narratives of modern, emotionally engaged fatherhood.

Figure 4

Semiotic Mapping of Fatherhood Symbols in Asian TV Commercials



Discussion and Conclusion

The portrayal of fatherhood in Asian TV commercials between 2003 and 2019 reveals a complex interplay of cultural preservation and adaptation, shaped by the dual forces of tradition and modernity. The prevalence of single-father narratives in nearly half of the analyzed commercials underscores a semiotic negotiation between Confucian ideals of paternal duty and emerging expectations of involved, emotionally expressive fatherhood. Drawing on Barthes' semiotic theory, these advertisements mythologize single fatherhood as a heroic sacrifice, naturalizing silent endurance and self-reliance as inherent paternal virtues. For instance, scenes of fathers working late or neglecting their self-image (e.g., disheveled appearances) encode martyrdom as a cultural truth, resonating with Doi and Bester's (1973) notion of Japan's "fatherless society," where fathers are physically present but emotionally distant. Yet, Hall's representation theory illuminates how these narratives also subtly challenge

traditional norms by framing single fathers as adaptive caregivers, capable of bridging provider and nurturer roles. This duality reflects a broader societal ambivalence, where progressive ideals are grafted onto enduring frameworks of paternal responsibility.

The five recurring attributes of fatherhood further illustrate this tension. Denotatively, these acts signify evolving masculinities, such as fathers engaging in childcare or housework. Connotatively, however, they perpetuate ideological contradictions. For example, fathers performing domestic chores are often portrayed as "helpers" rather than equal partners, exceptionalizing rather than normalizing their contributions. This aligns with Lim's (2019) analysis of Confucian masculinity in Singapore, where paternal adaptability is celebrated but circumscribed by traditional authority. Similarly, depictions of fathers laboring tirelessly reinforce the Confucian ethic of economic provision, even as they obscure the psychological toll of overwork, a phenomenon well-documented in Hong Kong's 2012 survey (Labour Party, 2012). These portrayals reflect Hall's (1997) concept of negotiated representations, where advertisers balance audience nostalgia for patriarchal stability with aspirational modernity.

Symbolic analysis further elucidates this cultural negotiation. The father's stern face, a recurring motif, embodies traditional authority and emotional restraint, echoing Confucian norms of paternal discipline (Luo et al., 2013). Conversely, the father's smiley face, the most frequent symbol, commodifies paternal warmth within idealized "happy home" narratives (Chen, 2011), masking socioeconomic pressures like overwork. Such contradictions mirror Goldman's (2005) critique of advertisements reducing familial bonds to material exchanges. The father paternal sacrifice caregiving in ads is often beautified rather than grounded in the material realities of unpaid domestic work, mirroring the Arlie Hochschild's (2015) theory of emotional labor. Meanwhile, the father's back view, symbolizing silent reliability, reflects a cultural reverence for stoic perseverance, even as it perpetuates emotional distance. These symbols collectively position Asian fatherhood as a site of ideological contestation, where advertisers mediate between reverence for tradition and the allure of modernity.

Theoretical implications extend to the role of media in shaping cultural identity. Barthes' framework clarifies how commercials mythologize fatherhood, transforming contingent social norms (e.g., paternal sacrifice) into naturalized truths. Hall's theory, however, tempers this by emphasizing representation as an active process of cultural negotiation. Unlike Western "dadvertising" trends, which often prioritize emotional engagement and egalitarianism (Mueller et al., 2023), Asian commercials remain anchored in Confucian paternalism, even as they tentatively embrace modern tropes. This divergence underscores the importance of culturally grounded media analysis.

Practically, these findings urge advertisers to reconcile nostalgic appeals with inclusive narratives. While symbols like the smiley face cater to modern aspirations, the exclusion of non-heteronormative or working-class fatherhood perpetuates symbolic violence against marginalized groups. Policymakers, too, must address the structural inequities obscured by these portrayals, such as the lack of support for single fathers in neoliberal economies. This study is limited by its focus on East and Southeast Asia, excluding South Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, and its pre-2019 timeframe, which predates pandemic-era shifts in family dynamics. Future research should explore post-2019 media landscapes and regional diversities, particularly the impact of digital platforms on paternal representation.

In conclusion, Asian TV commercials serve as cultural battlegrounds where fatherhood is both nostalgically memorialized and dynamically reimagined. By decoding these representations

through semiotic and representational lenses, this study contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues on gender, media, and cultural identity, while challenging advertisers and scholars alike to envision more inclusive narratives for the future.

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Trends in Shifting Online Media Coverage: A Big Data Analysis of the National Data Center Hacking Issue in Indonesia

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Abstract

Online media coverage of national cybersecurity issues demonstrates complex dynamics in shaping public perception and influencing crisis management. This study aims to analyze the shifting patterns of online media coverage regarding the 2024 National Data Center breach case and identify factors influencing these narrative changes. Using Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Media Influences Model as a theoretical framework, this research applies big data analysis to 1,247 articles from national online media outlets during June 20 - July 20, 2024. Text mining and sentiment analysis methods were employed to identify patterns of narrative shifts and news tone. The findings reveal three distinct phases in coverage evolution: a panic phase dominated by negative tone (83%), an investigative phase with more balanced tone distribution, and a constructive phase dominated by positive tone (55%). These shifts were influenced by complex interactions between investigation developments, government response, and public pressure. This study contributes to the development of data-driven crisis communication strategies and better understanding of online media dynamics in covering national security issues.

Keywords: online media, big cybersecurity, digital journalism, crisis communication

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Introduction

Mass media has long been recognized as a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and influencing socio-political agendas (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). In the digital era, this influence has grown with the emergence of online media, which can disseminate information more rapidly and widely than traditional print media. Online media has transformed the media landscape and the way information is distributed in Indonesia. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024*, 79% of news sources in Indonesia are accessed through online media, followed by social media (60%), television (48%), and print media (9%) (Javier, 2024). This marks a significant shift in how the public consumes information. With its speed and wide reach, online media has become the primary source of information for the majority of the population. Data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) shows that internet penetration in Indonesia has reached 79.5% (Santika, 2024). This development has made public information consumption heavily dependent on online news coverage.

During the hacking incident involving the National Data Center (PDN), which began on June 20, 2024, online media became a key reference point for the public as several digital-based public services were disrupted (CNN Indonesia, 2024). The Ministry of Communication and Information (Kominfo) reported that 210 government institutions, both at the central and regional levels, were affected by the attack (Jinan, 2024). This incident quickly became a major issue covered by various types of media, especially online platforms. The cyberattack, which left numerous essential services paralyzed for more than thirteen days, attracted attention from both national and international media. Foreign outlets such as *Reuters*, *CNA*, *ABC News*, *The Washington Post*, *Asia News Network*, *Asia Today*, *The Daily Guardian*, *AP News*, and *VnExpress* highlighted the recurring issue of data breaches in Indonesia (Setyowati, 2024).

In this case, online media demonstrated unique characteristics in the way narratives and tones shifted over time. This dynamic becomes more complex when addressing issues with wide-ranging implications, such as attacks on national data infrastructure. Initially, coverage focused on the hackers' actions and the disruption of public services. However, this narrative gradually shifted as the government's response was perceived as slow and lacking transparency, raising concerns about fundamental weaknesses in public data protection management (Heychael, 2024). Shifts in media coverage can be influenced by various factors. Reese and Shoemaker (2016) identify five levels of influence that may shape media content: individual (journalist values and backgrounds), media routines, organizational structures, institutional pressures, and broader social systems. In the context of a national crisis, political pressure, economic interests, and social dynamics can significantly shape media narratives.

The impact of such narrative shifts can be observed on multiple levels. At the micro level, changes in media tone and framing can influence public perceptions and attitudes toward the issue (Entman, 2014). At the macro level, these shifts can affect the effectiveness of crisis management and the legitimacy of public policies. This is evident in how media coverage of cybersecurity incidents may influence public trust in the government's ability to secure national data.

Given this complexity, the present study seeks to explore critical issues in the online media coverage of the National Data Center hacking incident. First, it examines the pattern of

narrative shifts in online media during the period from June 20 to July 20, 2024, considering the fast-paced changes in reporting as the situation evolved. Second, the study aims to identify the factors influencing changes in tone and narrative, acknowledging the intricate interplay of political, economic, and social interests in national security reporting.

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of online media narrative shifts concerning the National Data Center hacking incident using a big data analysis approach. By examining the factors influencing changes in tone and framing, the research seeks to evaluate how these shifts affect crisis communication management and public trust. Furthermore, the study aims to provide recommendations for developing more effective crisis communication strategies in future cybersecurity incidents.

The significance of this research lies in its multidimensional contributions to the field of communication studies and digital journalism practice. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on media agenda-setting and framing in the context of cybersecurity crisis reporting while also advancing big data analysis models applicable to similar research. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers in crafting more effective crisis communication strategies and help media practitioners understand the implications of news framing on public perception and crisis management. More broadly, this research contributes to public awareness of the complexities surrounding cybersecurity issues, promotes digital literacy, and facilitates a more constructive dialogue between the government, media, and the public on matters of national security.

Conceptual Framework

Agenda Setting

The Agenda Setting theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that mass media has the power to influence which topics the public perceives as important. This theory suggests that the media not only tells people what to think about, but also how to think about it (Weaver, 2007). In the context of the National Data Center (PDN) hacking incident, this theory is useful for explaining how the intensity and framing of online news coverage positioned cybersecurity and data governance as prominent issues on the public and political agenda.

Recent studies indicate that agenda setting has become more complex in the digital era, involving interaction between traditional media, social media, and other actors—a phenomenon referred to as “network agenda setting” (Vargo et al., 2017). The theory has evolved alongside digital media, now extending its influence to social media platforms. For instance, exposure to specific political news on Facebook has been shown to affect individuals' perceptions of issue importance (Feezell, 2017).

Hierarchical Model of Media Influence

The Hierarchical Model of Media Influence, developed by Reese and Shoemaker (2016), provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the various factors that shape media content. This model identifies five interrelated levels of influence, ranging from micro to macro, that together form a complex system in the production and distribution of media content.

At the most basic level, which is the individual level, the personal characteristics of journalists or content creators play a crucial role. Factors such as professional background, education, personal values, and work ethics directly influence how news is produced. In cybersecurity reporting, a journalist's technical understanding of data protection and information systems is critical in determining the depth and accuracy of their coverage. Those with greater technical literacy tend to produce more thorough and precise reporting.

The second level, media routines, refers to the established daily practices within news organizations. These include tight deadlines, news verification processes, writing standards, and fact-checking mechanisms. In the fast-paced digital news environment, these routines often have to balance speed with accuracy, particularly in technical and sensitive issues like data breaches and national security.

At the organizational level, internal structures and policies within media organizations significantly influence news content. Ownership structure, editorial guidelines, resource availability, and target audiences shape how topics are prioritized, how quickly stories are published, and from which perspectives the news is presented.

The institutional or extra-media level includes external influences such as relationships with news sources (e.g., government or experts), advertisers, sponsors, interest groups, media regulations, and intermedia competition. These external pressures can have a substantial impact on how media reports on national security issues and may influence the tone and direction of coverage.

At the macro level, the social system encompasses the broader political, economic, cultural, and ideological context in which the media operates. For example, media in more open political systems may be more critical of government cybersecurity policies, while in more closed systems, the coverage tends to be more conservative and less confrontational.

These five levels of influence do not function in isolation; rather, they interact and influence one another, forming a dynamic system that shapes media content. Understanding these interactions is essential for analysing how news coverage is produced, especially in the context of sensitive issues such as national cybersecurity.

In the case of the PDN hacking incident, this model provides a valuable framework for identifying the factors behind shifts in news narratives over time and for explaining why different media outlets may report the same issue from different perspectives. This understanding is critical for developing effective crisis communication strategies and fostering constructive dialogue among the media, government, and the public.

Research Methods

This study employs a big data approach to analyse online media coverage of the National Data Center (PDN) hacking incident. Big data analysis is especially suitable for media content research, as it allows researchers to efficiently examine large volumes of data (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). The selection of this method is based on several considerations: the large volume of data (1,247 online news articles) and the variety or structural diversity of unstructured news content, both of which require a method capable of processing and analyzing heterogeneous data effectively.

Data for this study were collected using web scraping techniques, which allow for the automated extraction of structured data from web pages (Munzert et al., 2014). This process employed Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) provided by online news platforms and scraping tools developed using Python libraries (Lotfi et al., 2021). The scraping was conducted by NoLimit, a locally developed media monitoring service based in Indonesia.

The data collection spanned a one-month period, from June 20 to July 20, 2024, beginning with the initial report of the PDN cyberattack. A set of diverse keywords—"PDN Hacking," "National Data Center," "PDN Cyberattack," "PDN Ransomware," and "Brain Cipher"—was used to ensure comprehensive coverage and improve the relevance of the retrieved content (Stieglitz et al., 2018).

Result and Discussion

A big data analysis of 1,247 articles from national online media outlets between June 20 and July 20, 2024, reveals a systematic shift in news coverage related to the National Data Center (PDN) hacking incident. The analysis identified three distinct phases of reporting, each characterized by unique narrative patterns and journalistic tones.

The first phase was marked by a predominance of panic-driven narratives. Sentiment analysis shows that 83% of the articles published during this period had a negative tone, with a strong emphasis on the impact and potential losses resulting from the attack. Topic modeling identified frequent use of terms such as *"breach," "data leak,"* and *"threat,"* indicating that media outlets framed the incident as an acute national crisis. Sensational headlines were prevalent in 72% of the articles, reflecting a tendency to amplify the urgency and severity of the situation.

The second phase saw a significant shift toward more investigative journalism with a focus on accountability. Content analysis indicates a notable rise in fact-based reporting, which constituted 65% of articles during this period. The tone also became more balanced: 45% of articles were negative, 40% neutral, and 15% positive. Dominant themes shifted toward *"investigation," "audit,"* and *"accountability,"* reflecting a growing media focus on uncovering facts and identifying responsible parties.

The third phase marked a transition toward constructive journalism centered on solutions. Network analysis of citation patterns shows increased involvement of cybersecurity experts and policymakers in media narratives, adding greater weight to discussions on prevention and system improvement. Sentiment analysis revealed a positive tone in 55% of articles, with 58% focusing on solutions and measures to strengthen cybersecurity systems.

The evolving media coverage was shaped by a complex interplay of several factors. Developments in official investigations significantly influenced the direction of news narratives. Gradual disclosures by investigative teams prompted a transition from speculative coverage to more evidence-based reporting. The involvement of law enforcement and cybersecurity agencies also lent greater legitimacy to media reports in the second phase.

The government's crisis communication strategy played a critical role in shaping media narratives. Although initially reactive, the government's response improved over time in terms of transparency and effectiveness. The implementation of technical solutions and more coordinated inter-agency efforts provided media outlets with more constructive material in

the third phase. Data analysis shows a positive correlation between structured government communications and the increase in positive media tone.

Public demands, especially those voiced via social media also contributed to shifts in media narratives. Social media sentiment analysis indicates a peak in public calls for transparency and accountability during the second phase, coinciding with increased media focus on investigations. Civil society groups advocating for stronger cybersecurity policies provided new perspectives that were reflected in the solution-oriented reporting of the third phase.

The shift in news coverage had a significant impact on public perception. Initial panic gave way to a more nuanced understanding of cybersecurity issues. Parallel surveys conducted during the study period show a gradual increase in public trust in the government's ability to handle cyber threats, aligning with improvements in crisis management and communication.

The evolving media narratives contributed to growing momentum for regulatory reform in cybersecurity. Online media played a critical role in framing the discourse around the need for regulatory updates and increased funding for digital infrastructure. Narrative pattern analysis indicates that policy recommendations in media reports became increasingly specific and technical over time, reflecting a deeper understanding of the issue's complexity.

The transition from reactive to analytical reporting underscores the importance of enhancing journalistic capacity in covering technical issues such as cybersecurity. The case highlights the need for improved verification standards and higher levels of digital literacy among journalists. These findings offer valuable insights for strengthening journalistic practice in the digital era.

Conclusion

This study has revealed a systematic pattern in the shifting narratives of online media coverage related to the National Data Center (PDN) hacking incident. Through big data analysis of 1,247 articles from national media outlets over a one-month period, the research identified a consistent evolution in reporting, moving from an initial phase of panic to a solution-oriented approach. This shift reflects the complex dynamics of digital journalism, where interactions among investigative developments, government responses, and public pressure significantly shape the trajectory of news coverage.

The main findings of the study demonstrate that online media reporting underwent a transformation through three distinct phases. The initial phase, dominated by panic-driven narratives and 83% negative sentiment, illustrated the media's tendency to amplify crisis perception. The second phase marked a transition toward a more investigative approach, with a more balanced tone distribution, indicating a growing maturity in reporting. The third, solution-oriented phase, featured a predominance of positive tone (55%), signaling a more constructive and informed engagement with cybersecurity issues.

The analysis also highlighted the relevance of the Hierarchical Model of Media Influence in explaining the factors behind these narrative shifts. The interaction among individual-level factors (e.g., journalist competence), media routines, organizational policies, institutional pressures, and broader social contexts contributes to the complexity of digital news production. Understanding these interrelated influences is essential for developing more effective crisis communication strategies in the digital age.

Despite the significance of these findings, the study acknowledges several limitations. The analysis focused exclusively on mainstream online media, excluding alternative media and social media platforms, which also play critical roles in shaping public discourse. This limitation may result in an incomplete picture of the broader media landscape. The one-month observation period, while capturing the critical phase of the incident, may not fully account for the long-term impacts of the cyberattack on policy changes and journalistic practices. This temporal constraint limits insights into the sustainability of the observed narrative shifts. Although big data analysis enables the processing of large datasets, it has limitations in capturing contextual nuance and deep interpretive insights often derived from qualitative approaches. Automated sentiment analysis, for instance, may not fully recognize linguistic subtleties or local cultural contexts.

In light of the findings and limitations, several directions for future research are proposed. Future studies should incorporate data from social media platforms and alternative digital media to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the digital news ecosystem. A multi-platform approach can better capture the full scope of public discourse. Studies with longer observation periods are needed to assess the long-term effects of cybersecurity incidents on journalistic practices and national security policies. Longitudinal analysis can reveal whether and how observed changes are sustained or evolve over time.

Combining big data analysis with qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and framing analysis can offer a more nuanced understanding of newsroom decision-making processes and the factors influencing narrative shifts. Future research should explore the development of analytical models that better integrate quantitative and qualitative aspects of digital media studies. Such methodological advancements are crucial for enhancing the depth and accuracy of our understanding of contemporary media dynamics.

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From Margins to Platforms: Overcoming Discrimination Through Social Media in Chinese Indonesian Communities

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Abstract

The rise of social media usage has created new opportunities for individuals and groups to express their cultural identities in digital spaces. This study focuses on the experiences of the Pecinan community in Semarang in expressing their Chinese ethnic identity through social media. While previous research has highlighted the discrimination faced by Chinese Indonesians, their approaches to navigating identity in the digital world remain underexplored. Most prior studies have also overlooked the role of online communities and the impact of social media technologies on identity expression. This research employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, analyzing in-depth interviews with three participants to understand their strategies, motivations, and experiences. The analysis reveals that the increasing willingness to disclose identity on social media is influenced by factors such as community support, technological advancements, and the evolution of social acceptance. The findings demonstrate that identity expression serves not only as a tool to combat discrimination but also as a means to build social connections and enhance self-confidence. This study contributes to understanding how social media facilitates cultural identity negotiation in a multicultural society. The findings offer valuable insights into the dynamics of intercultural relationships and the potential of social media to support identity communication in the digital age.

Keywords: discrimination, Chinese ethnicity, social media

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Introduction

The case of ethnic discrimination against a married couple, Zealous Siput Lokasari and Veronica Lindayati Lokasari are ethnic Chinese individuals living in Yogyakarta, demonstrates that anti-Chinese ethnic discrimination persists. The case began in 2016 when the couple purchased land in Wates, Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta and attempted to transfer land ownership at the Kulon Progo Land Office. However, the transfer process submitted by Veronica Lindayati Lokasari was rejected by the office's service staff on the grounds that the couple were considered “non-indigenous” or non-native Indonesians (Junianto, 2023).

Labeling them as “non-indigenous” discriminated against the couple by implying that they were not truly part of the Indonesian nation. Siput Lokasari stated that both he and his wife are Indonesian citizens (Ma'arif, 2023). They questioned the use of the term “non-indigenous” for Indonesian citizens, which was directed at Veronica Lindayati Lokasari by the Kulon Progo Land Office, considering it a form of discrimination against the Chinese ethnic group.

This case highlights that ethnic or racial discrimination remains a controversial issue for many. Ethnic discrimination is rooted in the belief, held by individuals or groups that others are inferior or unequal due to racial differences (Pinovelius & Lobodally, 2022). Juditha, cited in Kamilia and Putra (2020), also notes that discriminatory treatment often targets minority ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese.

A 2017 survey by the Wahid Foundation revealed that the Chinese ethnic group is among those least liked and perceived as different. This antipathy toward Chinese Indonesians is comparable to the aversion toward non-Muslim groups, communist organizations, LGBT individuals, and even Jewish communities (Aziz, 2018). However, anti-Chinese discrimination extends beyond more dislike, it permeates both conventional and digital domains.

In conventional areas such as structural and administrative sectors, past policies requiring Chinese Indonesians to adopt Indonesian-sounding names continue to influence behavior today, despite the official revocation of such rules. Fear of complications in obtaining ID cards or other documents discourages the use of Chinese names (Iswara, 2023). In politics, discrimination obstructs Chinese Indonesians' participation, with suspicions that they may oppose those in power (Susanto, 2023). In the economic sphere, restrictions on business rights exist (Siregar, 2018), while in education, Chinese students often avoid public schools for fear of discrimination (Hidayat et al., 2023).

In the digital realm, discrimination manifests in negative stigma, stereotypes, and imbalanced representation of Chinese Indonesians in news coverage, leading to public misperception and harm (Harsono & Mazi, 2024). Dhani (2016) cites an example from Tempo magazine, which once published a news story about Bank Central Asia (BCA), founded by Liem Sioe Liong, under the headline *“Bye Bye, Bank Cina Asli Bye?”* in its 25 February – 03 March 2002 edition. This framing was unbalanced, suggesting that BCA existed solely to serve Chinese interests. Such framing harms both the bank and the ethnic Chinese community by reinforcing stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians as financial elites.

Digital content has also become a tool for discrimination, such as in investigative videos and negative discursive platforms used to propagate discriminatory views. One such example is

the investigative content Bondo Wani (MLI), Episode 2, titled "Java vs. Chinese in Surabaya." The video contains discriminatory narratives, portraying interethnic marriages as taboo and using the term "Cina" which carries negative connotations, suggesting inferiority and a lack of nationalism. Similar forms of discrimination occur on social media, where hate speech, mockery, and derogatory remarks about physical features such as "slanted eyes" a stereotypical Chinese trait are common (Yip, 2022). Even memes such as angpao envelopes containing face masks have emerged on platforms like Instagram (Muhamad, 2024).

Both conventional and digital forms of ethnic discrimination cause significant harm to individuals, communities, and the broader social environment. Sudiana et al. (2020) highlights how attacks on Chinese places of worship are one environmental consequence. For individuals, discrimination can lead to feelings of inferiority, social exclusion, depression, and trauma (Syarifuddin & Zakia, 2022). Hatred from individuals or groups can escalate into verbal and physical violence (Agustina & Osmawati, 2021). Anggraeni (2022) adds that the most common impact is violence amid ongoing conflict and even identity crises.

Given this context, this research is grounded in phenomenology and ethnic identity communication to enrich understanding in the field of ethnic identity studies, particularly in the digital communication era. Aqila et al. (2024) found that in Pematang Siantar, Chinese Indonesians express their ethnic identity through cultural festivals such as Imlek Fair and Cap Go Meh, which serve to promote and preserve Chinese culture, and through social organizations dedicated to cultural preservation. However, Aqila et al.'s (2024) study does not explore the expression of Chinese identity on social media, nor does it apply a phenomenological approach to uncover the meaning and essence of identity expression based on lived experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to provide new insights into the personal experiences of expressing Chinese ethnic identity in the digital age through social media. It focuses on how residents of Semarang's Chinatown reveal and interpret their ethnic identity via social platforms. This research contributes to the broader field of intercultural communication and Chinese Indonesian ethnic studies by analyzing how individuals experience, understand, and communicate their cultural identity online. While several studies (Atrianingsi, 2024, Murfia, 2023, Pratiwi et al., Safriandi et al., 2022) affirm that identity communication is vital in maintaining ethnic identity and building harmonious interethnic relations in Indonesia, few have focused specifically on the phenomenological experiences of Chinese Indonesians expressing their identity via social media.

Accordingly, this research seeks to fill that gap and contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese Indonesians as they represent their ethnic identity through social media. Furthermore, it examines the essence and meaning of such identity expression within Indonesia's uniquely multicultural context from a phenomenological perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) by Ting-Toomey (2015) as its main framework to examine how ethnic Chinese individuals disclose their identity on social media. INT views identity as a dynamic and ongoing negotiation between individuals and their social environments, especially complex for cultural minorities who must balance uniqueness and social acceptance. INT highlights the importance of identity communication for self-assertion and social connection in multicultural societies. Globalization, digitalization, and

shifting social conditions such as the post-truth era, social polarization, and declining trust in traditional institutions have intensified the need for individuals to express and defend their identities, particularly in online spaces.

In this context, social media functions as a stage (Goffman, 1956) where users manage impressions and construct identity through visuals, narratives, and interactions (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Zhao et al., 2008). It allows flexible self-representation and becomes a crucial platform for identity negotiation. While identity communication on social media can foster self-awareness and community-building (Papacharissi, 2010), it may also lead to social anxiety and fragmented identities (Fox & Vendemia, 2016). Thus, INT provides a relevant lens to analyze how ethnic Chinese individuals strategically use social media to challenge stereotypes, negotiate cultural identity, and create meaningful connections within a fragmented society.

Methodology

This study applies a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach to explore how members of the Chinese Indonesian community in Chinatown, Semarang, disclose and negotiate their ethnic identity through social media platforms. The phenomenological approach is selected because it emphasizes the participants lived experiences and aims to uncover the underlying meanings and essence of their identity expression in digital spaces (Colaizzi, 1978).

Three informants were involved in this research. They were selected purposively based on specific criteria like being of Chinese Indonesian ethnicity, residing in Chinatown Semarang, actively using social media, and openly expressing elements of their cultural identity online. Data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted in November 2024. The interviews focused on how participants experienced ethnic discrimination, what strategies they employed for self-expression, and how social media influenced their perceptions and sense of identity.

The analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's method, which includes seven steps of data reduction and theme construction. Initially, the researcher read and familiarized herself with the entire dataset to gain a general sense of the participants' narratives. Significant statements were then extracted and grouped according to their thematic similarities. From these groupings, meanings were formulated and clustered into broader themes that reflected the participants shared experiences. Finally, a comprehensive description of the phenomenon was developed and returned to the participants for validation, thus ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation was employed by multiple data sources, comparison with existing literature, and peer debriefing. The use of phenomenology in this study enables a deeper understanding of how social media not only functions as a communicative platform but also as a space where ethnic identity can be negotiated, validated, and transformed, particularly for marginalized groups such as the Chinese Indonesian community.

Results and Discussion

This study aims to explore the experience of ethnic Chinese identity disclosure through social media, particularly among the ethnic Chinese community in the Chinatown area of Semarang. The research yielded several findings related to the theme of strategies for

disclosing ethnic Chinese identity on social media by the residents of Chinatown, Semarang. In presenting the research results, the researcher begins by providing brief profiles of each informant, which are presented in Table 1, followed by the main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 1
Informant Profile

Informant	Gender	Age	Background		
			Ethnicity	Occupation	Education Level
AN	Female	24	Chinese	Teacher	Bachelor's Degree
DE	Female	21	Chinese	Students	undergraduate
HW	Male	27	Chinese	Private Sector Worker	Bachelor's Degree

Source. Processed by Researcher (2024)

Themes of Chinese Ethnic Identity Disclosure on Social Media

Data analysis revealed common themes among the three participants regarding their experiences of disclosing Chinese ethnic identity on social media. These include the dynamics of Chinese ethnic discrimination on social media, identity disclosure strategies, support from social media communities, motivations for disclosure and the evolution of social acceptance, and attitudinal transformation in identity disclosure.

The Dynamics of Chinese Ethnic Discrimination on Social Media

The study showed that discrimination against Chinese ethnicity on social media has different characteristics compared to conventional forms of discrimination. DE, a student, expressed serious concerns about such dynamics, pointing out how the viral nature of social media allows discriminatory content to spread rapidly and reach a wider audience in a short amount of time.

This issue becomes even more complex when perpetrators of discrimination exploit anonymity in the digital space, which provides them with a sense of security. The impact of this can be just as severe, if not more so, than conventional discrimination because of its permanent nature. The digital footprint of discrimination can resurface even after deletion. Discrimination on social media is often directed at groups rather than individuals, indicating a pattern of systemic discrimination:

> Discrimination on social media is concerning, it goes viral so fast and is difficult to erase, it will resurface again and the discrimination continues. It’s a digital footprint and it's hard to punish the perpetrators because most of them use fake accounts. And in the digital world, I see it more often targeting groups rather than individuals. (Interview with informant DE, November 20, 2024)

According to the informant, discrimination against Chinese ethnicity on social media manifests through various digital channels such as comment sections, Direct Messages (DMs), memes, and video content containing negative stereotypes, insults, mockery, sarcastic

remarks, and phrases like "you damn Chinese." Comments with hateful tones often appear under posts related to Chinese ethnicity. Discrimination also occurs through Instagram DMs targeting individuals with negative stereotypes based on their ethnic identity.

> Once I made an Instagram story during COVID, I was just going out to buy food. I was wearing a full mask according to the rules. Someone DM'd me saying, 'Chinese people shouldn't go out or they'll spread the virus.' I was really hurt, I felt directly discriminated against through a DM. (Interview with informant HW, November 22, 2024)

HW's statement shows a form of individual-targeted discrimination on social media. Additionally, the circulation of discriminatory memes containing negative stereotypes about physical traits, behavior, or cultural aspects of Chinese people is another form of group-directed discrimination. TikTok videos degrading Chinese individuals have received considerable support through likes and comments, as noted by AN:

> There's a lot of discrimination… on social media apps like TikTok or memes. They get lots of support, likes, reposts, and comments asking the creators to make more similar content. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

These contents are widely shared through features such as share, repost, or forward, enabling discriminatory messages to spread quickly and widely.

Strategies of Ethnic Identity Disclosure on Social Media

Strategies for disclosing Chinese ethnic identity on social media were carried out using various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Threads, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and LinkedIn. Participants employed diverse strategies, which can be categorized into two main types are visual-audiovisual strategies and textual-linguistic strategies.

In the visual-audiovisual context, participants shared photos (visual) and videos (audiovisual) to express their Chinese identity on social media. AN described posting culturally symbolic items such as red lanterns, rice cakes, zongzi, mooncakes, and Chinese calligraphy:

> …What I upload on social media includes ornaments that show I'm Chinese, like lanterns, rice cakes, zongzi, mooncakes, and calligraphy. Usually, I post these during Chinese New Year, whether on Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

The visual content also includes major celebration moments such as Chinese New Year, family prayers, and events involving Chinese cultural elements. Another informant, HW, noted the use of Instagram filters themed around Chinese New Year:

> …On big holidays, Instagram usually has themed frames or filters. Last year I also used a Chinese New Year celebration filter. (Interview with informant HW, November 22, 2024)

In addition to visual content, all participants actively disclosed their identity through audiovisual means by uploading videos related to Chinese culture on TikTok or Instagram Reels, often using Mandarin songs. DE mentioned:

> …Sometimes I make aesthetic videos using Mandarin songs to post on Instagram Reels or TikTok. (Interview with informant DE, November 20, 2024)

Textual-linguistic disclosure also played a role. All participants noted using Mandarin in captions on Instagram or other platforms, incorporating Chinese names in usernames, and including Mandarin words or proverbs in their bios.

> In my Instagram stories or feed, I often use Mandarin captions without translation since Instagram has a translate feature. My username also includes a Chinese name alongside my Indonesian name, and my bio uses Mandarin phrases or just a title. (Interview with informant DE, November 20, 2024)

On professional platforms like LinkedIn, Mandarin is used to describe skills, aiming not only to express cultural identity but also professionalism. Participants also disclosed identity through X and Threads by tweeting or retweeting Mandarin-language content to build a digital network reinforcing their ethnic identity. AN explained:

> On X, I use it to vent, like tweeting in Mandarin and sharing or retweeting others' tweets. Threads are similar, but you can also use voice notes. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

These strategies reflect a purposeful use of various social media technologies to disclose identity, especially for minority ethnic groups.

Support from Social Media Communities

Online communities play a significant role in supporting ethnic identity disclosure. These digital societies, especially on Facebook, provide emotional and informational support through likes, shares, and positive comments. Informants expressed feelings, supported and encouraged each other to help each other through these communities:

> On Facebook, there are online communities. They support each other with likes and positive comments, sometimes sharing useful links and our posts to raise awareness about Chinese ethnicity. (Interview with informant HW, November 22, 2024)

> I joined a Facebook community because not all social media users support us when we show our Chinese identity. In Facebook communities with fellow Chinese, they support each other, so I feel more confident to disclose my identity. (Interview with informant DE, November 20, 2024)

> Facebook has the most ethnic-specific communities across Indonesia. They're supportive, if we ask something, they help. If we post an event, they'll help share it. Likes and comments are a form of community support too. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

Such support was meaningful for the participants. HW noted it made her feel less alone, DE felt it boosted his confidence, and AN found it helped expand information reach. TikTok's duet and stitch features were also seen as tools to build supportive networks and collective narratives about the Chinese minority experience:

> …TikTok has duet and stitch features that connect us with others of the same ethnicity for mutual support, though I rarely use them. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

Motivations for Disclosure and Evolution of Social Acceptance

The main motivation for disclosing Chinese identity was the need for recognition and affirmation of social status as an integral part of Indonesia. All participants echoed this motivation:

> We're also Indonesians. The Chinese ethnicity today is not the same as before. We've changed, and we want to live peacefully side by side, just want to be seen and accepted as part of Indonesia. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

> Peaceful and harmonious living—that's the motivation. In society, we want to be seen as Indonesians too, without complications in public services, contributing to Indonesia together. Just live together, right? We all stand on the same Indonesian soil. (Interview with informant DE, November 20, 2024)

> Everyone wants to be treated fairly and recognized in the country they live in. We follow the rules, so why be treated differently? I just want to be seen and accepted as part of Indonesia. (Interview with informant HW, November 22, 2024)

According to Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory (INT), this process reflects the basic human need for identity security, involvement, predictability in interactions, and connection with others. Participants negotiated their Chinese identity on social media through strategic communication and cultural awareness. The study found that social acceptance has improved. Negative stereotypes have shifted toward support and praise from people of various ethnicities:

> Yes, things have changed. Disclosing our identity carries risks, especially considering the sad history of Chinese people in Indonesia. But with social media, our identity is no longer hidden. Now, many people are literate and understand tolerance, so stereotypes are shifting to support and even praise. (Interview with informant HW, November 22, 2024)

This change in acceptance positively impacted participants' well-being, driven by growing tolerance and multicultural literacy in Indonesian society.

Attitudinal Transformation in Identity Disclosure

Participants' attitudes toward disclosing their identity have evolved. The study found a shift from reluctance to courage, and from fear to pride.

> Not everything we strive for works out. Honestly, I'm proud now, but I used to feel it was dangerous. I didn't want to post anything related to ethnicity out of fear of problems or rejection. Now I don't feel that way anymore. (Interview with informant HW, November 22, 2024)

> I wouldn't even post anything during Chinese New Year before, even though I really wanted to celebrate. I just lacked confidence. But that was in the past. Now I feel it must be done, and I have the right to do it, so I enjoy uploading things like that now. (Interview with informant DE, November 20, 2024)

> Personally, I feel more confident now because I know it won't cause problems. What I upload is positive. I also feel safer because today's social media is more advanced, so I'm not afraid to express my Chinese identity anymore. (Interview with informant AN, November 23, 2024)

Social media has become a safer space for expressing cultural identity, closely tied to increasing confidence. This transformation did not happen instantly but gradually, influenced by past trauma and discrimination that had previously led many to hide their ethnic identity in public, including online. The evolution of digital platforms has contributed to making the world more welcoming

Discussion

Social media provides a space for individuals, particularly those of Chinese ethnicity, to participate in constructing and distributing their cultural identity. This participatory activity is referred to as identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 2015). According to Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019), identity negotiation can serve as an infrastructure that facilitates intercultural understanding and may transform into social acceptance. The researcher agrees that such transformation is possible; however, based on the informants' experiences, this process is neither simple nor easy. As will be elaborated further, successful identity negotiation requires a positive narrative, adaptation to prevailing social norms, strong motivation, and solid support from a virtual community.

Based on data analysis regarding the disclosure of Chinese ethnic identity on social media by residents of Semarang Chinatown, five important themes emerged as part of the identity disclosure process on social media. These themes include (1) the dynamics of Chinese ethnic discrimination on social media, (2) identity disclosure strategies on social media, (3) support from social media communities, (4) the motivation behind disclosure and the evolution of social acceptance, and (5) the transformation of attitudes in identity disclosure.

The dynamics of Chinese ethnic discrimination on social media are increasingly complex. Unlike conventional forms of discrimination, social media discrimination is more concerning due to the speed and broad reach enabled by advanced technology and algorithms. The research findings show that discrimination on social media takes various forms. Informants HW, DE, and AN revealed that discrimination against Chinese ethnicity occurs in the comment sections, direct messages, video content, or visual content that targets individuals or groups with negative stereotypes, slurs, and insults. This is consistent with Pramesty's (2021) study, which found that digital discrimination is often expressed through verbal abuse in textual form.

This study also highlights the difficulty in eliminating discrimination on social media due to the permanence of digital footprints. Additionally, DE noted that perpetrators often disguise their identities, making them less accountable for their discriminatory actions. This finding aligns with research by Algamar (2022) and Manalu (2023), which asserts that digital actions

leave permanent traces, and perpetrators using anonymity are more difficult to track, thereby feeling secure from punishment.

Identity disclosure strategies on social media aim to communicate identity in pursuit of visibility and recognition. This aligns with the goals of Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) proposed by Ting-Toomey (2015). In practice, identity disclosure strategies on social media are presented through visual and audiovisual means, consistent with Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical perspective on self-presentation. Visual and audiovisual elements are integral to social media, complemented by textual and linguistic expressions that enhance content.

The findings show that informants use visual-audiovisual strategies to present their Chinese ethnic identity on social media. AN and HW reported uploading ornaments and photos with Chinese New Year nuances to express their ethnic identity. This aligns with Zhao et al.'s (2008) study, which states that identity communication on social media can be achieved through photos, videos, and interactions such as likes, comments, and engagement within communities. Additionally, informants also employed textual-linguistic strategies in their identity disclosure using Mandarin in captions, usernames, and Instagram bios, as described by DE.

Support from social media communities plays a crucial role in the process of Chinese ethnic identity disclosure. In this context, online communities serve as safe spaces for individuals to express and discuss their cultural identities. These communities also act as sources of affirmation and encouragement, providing support through likes, comments, content sharing, and reinforcement of displayed identity expressions.

The study shows that joining online communities contributes significantly to identity disclosure on social media. HW, AN, and DE mentioned that they each joined online communities, which offered support through interactions via social media features such as likes, comments, and shares on content related to Chinese ethnic identity. This collaborative dynamic helps extend their reach to a broader audience. These findings align with Pramudya et al.'s (2022) research, which indicates that community closeness fosters intimacy and openness among members, enabling mutual support.

The motivation to disclose identity and the evolution of social acceptance underlie the desire to express Chinese ethnic identity on social media. The main motivation identified is the pursuit of recognition and visibility in the digital social environment. All informants stated that their motivation to disclose identity on social media stems from the desire for recognition and acknowledgment. AN, DE, and HW also observed that social acceptance evolved positively, indicated by interactive features such as likes, comments, and shares.

High motivation encourages continued identity disclosure, which contributes to increasing social acceptance. The findings show that motivations to disclose previously stigmatized ethnic identities have shifted, now driven by confidence and growing openness, supported by improved public acknowledgment. This transformation reflects the essence of successful identity negotiation, as proposed in Ting-Toomey's (2015) INT, and aligns with Clarissa and Tamburian (2020) study, which states that motivation fosters openness in expressing self-identity.

The transformation of attitudes in identity disclosure shows significant change, closely related to individuals as actors in the disclosure process of Chinese ethnic identity on social

media. The findings indicate that HW, AN, and DE were initially hesitant and cautious due to concerns over negative responses. However, this changed as they received positive responses, such as affirming comments and praise for expressing their Chinese identity online. This is consistent with Papacharissi's (2010) study, which suggests that identity communication can increase self-awareness, foster community solidarity, and strengthen social capital. These results illustrate that the transformation of attitudes in disclosing Chinese ethnic identity on social media exemplifies the success of identity negotiation, as articulated in Ting-Toomey's (2015) Identity Negotiation Theory.

This study does not fully capture the dynamics of Chinese ethnic identity disclosure through social media across all regions of Indonesia. The limitation lies in the focus on Chinese ethnic communities in Semarang's Chinatown. Nonetheless, the findings offer valuable insights into the personal experiences of Chinese Indonesians negotiating their identity in digital spaces. The richness of data collected through in-depth interviews provides a deeper understanding of how this ethnic minority navigates the tensions between ethnic pride and potential risk in the digital context. These insights can serve as a foundation for future research on similar topics with broader geographical and demographic scopes.

Conclusion

The findings from data analysis and interpretation are summarized in this section to answer the research question regarding how ethnic Chinese identity is disclosed on social media by residents of Chinatown Semarang. The disclosure of ethnic Chinese identity through social media is a form of negotiation in response to the discrimination experienced by the Chinese ethnic group. Various forms of discrimination, whether visual (such as memes), audiovisual content, fake news, hate speech, or negative stereotypes are directed at both individuals and groups.

Social media serves as a medium for asserting the existence and gaining recognition of Chinese ethnicity in society, with several key components being identified: First, the dynamics of discrimination against the Chinese ethnic group on social media reveal a complex pattern that disadvantages ethnic minorities such as the Chinese. However, these experiences also emphasize the importance of identity disclosure on social media to pursue equality and societal recognition. Second, strategies for identity disclosure on social media provide a framework for achieving recognition by utilizing the affordances of digital technology. Third, community support on social media creates a space where individuals feel encouraged and empowered to express their identities. This support fosters a sense of safety and affirmation, enabling individuals to persist in confronting discrimination through collective action. Fourth, motivation for disclosure and the evolution of social acceptance act as emotional drivers that fuel the effort to achieve identity-related goals and bring about societal change in acceptance. Fifth, the transformation of attitudes in identity disclosure is a crucial marker of individual success in expressing identity on social media, reflected in increased self-confidence.

Based on the above findings, the researcher concludes that the experience of identity disclosure by Chinese ethnic residents in Chinatown, Semarang, demonstrates their ability to successfully achieve the goals of identity negotiation and expression in digital spaces. Thus, identity communication of the Chinese ethnic group on social media becomes a strategic effort to confront stereotypes and misrepresentation, while also actively fostering cultural understanding in a multicultural society.

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Collaborative and Sustainable Practices in Fashion Design Education

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Abstract

The fashion industry is under increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices, creating an urgent need to reimagine how we educate the next generation of designers. This study investigates how the integration of collaborative methods and sustainability-focused strategies within fashion design education can address these pressing challenges. Through interdisciplinary projects embedded in the undergraduate curriculum—including partnerships with a local department store and hands-on sustainability workshops—students engaged in collaborative problem-solving using upcycled materials from The Mall Group's promotional displays. By applying creative design thinking and innovative production techniques, they transformed discarded materials into trend-conscious, market-ready fashion pieces. The outcomes demonstrated not only a heightened awareness of sustainability but also improvements in teamwork, individual creativity, and design capability. The findings underscore the transformative potential of sustainability-driven, collaborative education in fostering ethical awareness, adaptability, and innovation among future fashion professionals.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, design education, collaboration, experiential learning, Thailand

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Introduction

The fashion industry is a major contributor to environmental degradation, largely due to overproduction, textile waste, and unsustainable consumption patterns. With fast fashion compounding these challenges, design education must evolve to equip students with both creative competencies and an ethical understanding of sustainability.

At Bangkok University, the fashion design program has taken steps to embed sustainable and collaborative practices into its curriculum. This case study outlines a series of semester-based projects developed through industry collaboration, designed to help students develop practical skills while addressing real-world environmental concerns.

Background and Literature Review

Sustainability in fashion education increasingly emphasizes experiential learning. Gwilt (2014) argues that understanding material lifecycle and ethical practices is essential for responsible design. Fletcher and Tham (2019) encourage the integration of "Earth Logic" principles, calling for a shift from growth-oriented models toward sustainable thinking.

Collaboration with industry partners enhances learning by mimicking real-world conditions and requiring creative negotiation and problem-solving (McQuillan, 2021). Niinimäki (2020) highlights the importance of circular economy thinking, where designers must coordinate with stakeholders to implement sustainable solutions.

In Southeast Asia, research on integrating collaboration and sustainability in design education remains limited. This study offers insights from the Thai context, showing how local partnerships can enrich sustainable fashion education.

Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative case study** approach to examine how collaborative and sustainable practices were implemented and experienced within the undergraduate fashion design program at Bangkok University. The purpose of the study was to understand how experiential, industry-linked projects influenced student learning, engagement, and sustainability awareness, and how these collaborations could serve as a replicable model in design education.

The case study focused on two academic years of project-based learning activities involving second- and third-year fashion students. These students participated in a series of sustainability-themed assignments that were integrated into core design modules. The main initiatives included the *Reborn Bag Project*—a design challenge in which students repurposed waste materials—and a collaborative workshop co-hosted with The Mall Group, where students were mentored by professionals and worked with post-consumer waste, including promotional banners, defective textiles, and leftover merchandising materials.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative data sources were used to capture a comprehensive picture of the teaching and learning process:

1. ***Student reflective journals and presentations*** – After completing the projects, students submitted individual reflection reports describing their learning process, design decisions, challenges faced, and takeaways about sustainability and teamwork.
2. ***Design process documentation*** – Students were required to maintain sketchbooks and visual process boards, capturing the development of their ideas from concept to final prototype.
3. ***Project outcomes*** – Physical outputs such as fashion prototypes (e.g., bags, garments, accessories) were documented and analyzed for creativity, feasibility, sustainability, and alignment with industry themes.
4. ***Industry partner feedback*** – Feedback sessions and interviews were conducted with mentors and managers from The Mall Group and participating textile companies. These sessions evaluated student performance, innovation, and practical readiness from an industry perspective.
5. ***Instructor observations and peer evaluations*** – Teachers recorded classroom engagement, group dynamics, and student performance throughout the project phases, while peer reviews provided insight into team collaboration and communication.

Analytical Approach

All qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically. NVivo software was used to assist in categorizing responses across five key dimensions: (1) sustainability awareness, (2) creativity and innovation, (3) collaboration and teamwork, (4) industry engagement, and (5) perceived skill development. This allowed for triangulation of data and identification of recurring patterns and insights.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained through the university's internal review process. Informed consent was secured from all student participants and industry collaborators. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in reporting, and images of student work were used only with explicit permission.

Limitations

While the case study provides in-depth insight, the findings are context-specific and not intended to be generalized across all design programs. However, the model presented offers transferable principles for similar institutions seeking to embed sustainability and collaboration into their curricula.

Project Implementation and Key Results

Collaborative projects provided students with practical, sustainability-oriented experience in fashion design. Three core initiatives formed the basis of this case study:

The Reborn Bag Project

Students repurposed materials such as discarded banners and textile scraps to design and produce bags. The goal was to challenge students to creatively problem-solve under material constraints. Techniques such as natural dyeing and mixed-media embellishments were

introduced. Selected works were exhibited at Bangkok Design Week and at The Mall Department Store.

Industry Workshops and Mentoring

Outstanding student designs were further developed in collaboration with professionals from The Mall Group. These sessions focused on refining prototypes and preparing designs for public display or potential market entry. Students gained insight into production feasibility and consumer expectations.

Surface Design and Sustainability Sessions

Students explored surface techniques such as botanical dyeing and upcycling methods, connecting classroom theory with practice. These sessions emphasized sustainability and expanded students' technical repertoire.

Student reflections consistently showed increased engagement and motivation. Many expressed a greater awareness of fashion's environmental impact and valued the chance to collaborate with real industry professionals. Industry feedback highlighted student creativity and the effective use of limited resources, reinforcing the value of continuing the partnership.

Model Highlights

The Bangkok University model for sustainable fashion education includes:

- Repeatable semester projects with evolving themes and materials
- Collaborative structure involving students and industry partners
- Scalable and adaptable for various class sizes and levels
- Evolving content based on feedback from both students and professionals

This dynamic structure supports ongoing innovation and the meaningful integration of sustainability into design education.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that collaborative, sustainability-focused fashion education can effectively prepare students for the ethical and environmental challenges of the modern industry. The projects not only enhanced creativity but also gave students practical experience in working with repurposed materials, developing market-ready designs, and engaging with professional mentors.

The model developed at Bangkok University is adaptable, collaborative, and grounded in real-world learning. It strengthens academia-industry relationships and provides students with tools to become responsible designers. As sustainability continues to reshape the global fashion landscape, this approach serves as a promising framework for other institutions.

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Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: Analyzing the Implementation of the International Teaching Assistance Program for Indonesian Migrant Workers' Children

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program, specifically the "International Teaching Assistance" initiative held in Malaysia by the Council of Indonesian State University Rectors. This program is designed to provide educational access to children of Indonesian Migrant Workers who have not received formal education. The research hypothesizes that the MBKM program, particularly its "International Teaching Assistance" initiative, significantly contributes to improving the educational access and quality for PMI children, which in turn has the potential to break the cycle of poverty. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. Neo Framing Analysis and Neo Critical Discourse Analysis are applied to examine the representation and discourse surrounding the program's implementation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 17 university students from Universitas Negeri Surabaya who participated as teaching assistants in the program, complemented by an online survey distributed to a broader group of participants to gather quantitative insights into the program's perceived impact. The findings reveal that approximately 2 million PMI children are unable to access formal education either in Indonesia or Malaysia, with most only receiving informal education through Community Learning Centres (CLC) that lack adequate facilities and teaching resources. This situation renders many PMI children vulnerable to illiteracy and lacking the skills required to improve their standard of living, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted educational policies and initiatives to address these systemic issues and create more inclusive, quality education. This article contributes a hybrid analytical framework integrating Neo-Framing and Neo-Critical Discourse Analysis to reveal how bottom-up pedagogical agency reconfigures transnational education beyond humanitarianism—thus offering a novel lens for postcolonial policy critique in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: MBKM, PMI children, cycle of poverty, international teaching assistance

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Introduction

The education of Indonesian Migrant Workers' (PMI) children in Malaysia constitutes a transnational human rights crisis that violates Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UN, 2015). Over 2 million PMI children remain trapped in cycles of educational exclusion (Sekolah Indonesia Luar Negeri, 2023a)—95% lack legal residency status and only 0.1% access Indonesian overseas schools (Sekolah Indonesia Luar Negeri, 2023b). This institutionalizes intergenerational poverty through systematized illiteracy (Bourdieu, 1986) and credential dispossession (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2018).

A CLC graduate stated: "Our certificates are unrecognized..." (Field Interview, 2023). This statement reflects what Bourdieu (1986) termed symbolic violence—the internalized belief in one's own educational inferiority as a result of structural dispossession. The devaluation of CLC certificates operates not merely as a bureaucratic omission but as a mechanism of credential denial that reproduces poverty habitus across generations. It signals the failure of the state to validate alternative forms of schooling, thus reinforcing the social position of migrant families as laboring underclass.

The International Teaching Assistance (ITA) initiative under the Freedom to Learn-Independent Campus (MBKM) program—deploying 617 university students to Malaysian CLCs—emerges as a critical intervention. Yet prior research neglects to examine:

1. Power asymmetries in Indonesia-Malaysia educational governance (Fairclough, 2013).
2. Neocolonial dynamics within "temporary humanitarian education" (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018).
3. Transformative potential of student-led pedagogical resistance.

This study bridges critical research gaps through three integrated methodological innovations: (1) Neo-Framing Analysis (Entman, 1993; Jacky, 2024) decodes competing narratives of "soft diplomacy" versus "state neglect" in transnational educational governance, capturing discursive power dynamics; (2) Neo Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) interrogates contradictions between ASEAN's rights-based rhetoric —such as the commitment to ensure "access to basic social services including education" (Article 10, ASEAN Secretariat, 2021)—and the material erasure of CLC credentials; and (3) dialectical triangulation synthesizes ethnographic insights from 17 UNESA teaching assistants, policy archaeology of Indonesia-Malaysia MOUs, and quantifiable impact metrics—most notably Penang CLCs' 40% attendance surge—to expose policy-praxis ruptures.

The research addresses three pivotal questions:

1. How does ITA navigate the triple exclusion (legal, infrastructural, curricular) of PMI children?
2. To what extent does ITA disrupt or reinforce Bourdieusian cycles of cultural capital deprivation?
3. What policy mechanisms can transform ITA from symbolic gesture into sustainable educational justice?

Its significance lies in reframing migrant education as a litmus test of ASEAN's commitment to SDG 4—not as charity but as restorative justice.

The educational exclusion of PMI children stems from Indonesia-Malaysia migration policy's colonial legacy that positions workers as disposable labor. Since the 1964 Memorandum of Understanding, both nations systematically neglected migrant children's education—a form of epistemological impoverishment (Spivak, 1988) transforming education rights into privileges. Ironically, 89% of CLCs operate in former colonial plantations (Sekolah Indonesia Luar Negeri, 2023a), replicating colonial-era educational hierarchies.

The non-recognition of CLC certificates reflects symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1986) wherein states sanction "second-class" education systems for migrant communities. This practice destroys three pillars of cultural capital:

1. Institutional Capital: Absence of credential recognition.
2. Objectified Capital: Non-contextual curricula.
3. Embodied Capital: Restricted mastery of Malaysia's national language.

Consequently, PMI children remain trapped in a poverty habitus that normalizes child labor. Data from the Majelis Rektor Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Indonesia (MRPTNI, 2023b) show that 72% of adolescents in Community Learning Centers (CLCs) work more than four hours per day.

The ITA initiative risks entrapping itself in the humanitarian education paradox: short-term interventions legitimize absent structural solutions. As criticized by Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, et al. (2018), "teaching assistance" models without legal frameworks perpetuate dependency cycles while ignoring root causes: statelessness (95% of PMI children) and non-portable curricula. UNESCO (2022) confirms each year of delayed permanent solutions increases dropout risk by 17%.

Amidst limitations, ITA students demonstrate radical pedagogical agency through:

- Tactical Recontextualization: Plantation-context curriculum adaptations (*Star of Kindness*).
- Counter-Hegemonic Literacy: Critical teaching of ASEAN migrant rights.
- Communal Resource Mobilization: Crowdfunding projectors/printers
  These practices constitute epistemic resistance (Santos, 2018) against marginalizing education systems.

This study employs dialectical triangulation across (Table 1):

Table 1
Dialectical Triangulation Across

Analytical Level	Method	Data Sources
Macro (Policy)	Neo-CDA	ASEAN Secretariat. (2021)
Meso (Institutional)	Neo-Framing	MRPTNI documents, KBRI official interviews
Micro (Practice)	Ethnography	17 students' reflective journals, CLC observations
This approach deconstructs the paradox: why ITA is framed as "diplomatic success" while 91% of CLCs remain unaccredited.		

Transforming ITA into educational justice requires three-axis policy reconfiguration:

1. Legal Axis: Ratify binding *ASEAN Framework on CLC Accreditation*.
2. Economic Axis: Dedicate perpetual funds from Malaysian CPO export levies to PMI education.
3. Pedagogical Axis: Implement dual-certification curricula recognized by Indonesia and Malaysia.

Without these breakthroughs, ITA risks becoming educational theatre that romanticizes poverty.

By interrogating how bottom-up pedagogical agency disrupts top-down humanitarian frameworks, this study contributes to a critical rethinking of education justice under postcolonial and platform-mediated regimes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two interrelated analytical paradigms that aim to critically interrogate the narratives and power relations embedded in transnational educational programs for *Anak Pekerja Migran Indonesia* (PMI), particularly in the context of the *Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) initiative implemented in Malaysia.

Neo-Framing Analysis

Neo-Framing Analysis builds upon Entman's (1993) classic model by extending its applicability to digital diplomacy and state narratives in cross-border policy interventions. This study applies Neo-Framing to uncover how the Indonesian government and partner institutions selectively amplify frames of empowerment, innovation, and nation-branding to legitimize the MBKM as a dual-function policy: one that serves both domestic accountability and transnational soft power projection (Jacky, 2024; Reese, 2007). The reframing of migrant education as a site of policy success obscures the lived precarity of PMI families, and thus

this analysis contributes to recent calls in global education policy research to examine the *symbolic governance* of marginalized populations (Ball, 2012; Verger, 2019).

Neo-Critical Discourse Analysis (Neo-CDA)

Adapting Fairclough's (2013) dialectical-relational approach, Neo-CDA situates discourse within the political economy of educational governance under platform capitalism and postcolonial statehood. It problematizes how inclusionary rhetoric such as "education for all" (pendidikan untuk semua) coexists with systemic exclusions embedded in administrative, legal, and digital infrastructures. The use of this lens reveals not only the surface-level contradictions in Indonesia's migrant education policy but also its deeper ideological roots in maintaining state image and national cohesion (Jacky, 2024; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Neo-CDA, therefore, enables a layered understanding of how language performs hegemony in development discourse while simultaneously creating zones of exception for certain populations.

Theoretical Anchoring: Structural Poverty and Transnational Educational Equity

Both approaches are embedded in a theoretical framework combining Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic violence and social reproduction with emerging scholarship on transnational equity (Suárez-Orozco, Abo-Zena, et al., 2018; Tikly, 2011). Migrant children's access to education is not only shaped by their socioeconomic background but also by the global hierarchies of mobility, legality, and labor that position them as peripheral citizens (Glick Schiller & Faist, 2009). This framework helps explain the reproduction of structural poverty through legal invisibility, pedagogical neglect, and algorithmic exclusion—issues often underexplored in mainstream educational development literature.

By synthesizing these critical lenses, this study offers a nuanced and context-sensitive methodology that addresses both the micro-dynamics of discourse and macro-structures of exclusion. It advances an analytical model suitable for comparative studies of marginalized learners in Global South migration contexts and offers theoretical insights for rethinking transnational education justice under postcolonial and platform-mediated regimes.

Research Method

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to integrate qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, thereby enhancing the credibility, triangulation, and explanatory power of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This approach was chosen to capture the complex sociocultural dynamics of t*he International Teaching Assistance Program for children of Pekerja Migran Indonesia* (PMI) in Malaysia, where institutional barriers, personal agency, and pedagogical innovation converge.

Qualitative Component

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 university students from Universitas Negeri Surabaya who participated as teaching assistants at Indonesian Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in Malaysia. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia with attention to relational ethics and positionality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interview questions were designed to explore (1)

teaching and technological challenges in transnational learning environments, (2) student motivations and aspirations, and (3) perceived systemic constraints related to curriculum, language, and digital infrastructure.

Interview transcripts and reflective journals from all 17 participants were analyzed through integrated thematic analysis and Neo-Critical Discourse Analysis (Neo-CDA) using NVivo 12. The Neo-CDA approach (Fairclough, 2013; Jacky, 2024; Wodak & Meyer, 2016) examined linguistic manifestations of power in educational policy narratives, while thematic coding identified patterns in experiential learning outcomes. Journals documented weekly skill development, with codes validated through intercoder reliability testing ($\kappa = 0.81$). This revealed tensions between state development rhetoric and structural exclusion, as well as participant strategies of resistance.

Quantitative Component

The quantitative strand involved an online survey distributed to 85 MBKM program participants, yielding a high response rate of 92%. The survey instrument measured perceived impacts across three dimensions: (1) student retention and engagement, (2) technological adoption in teaching and learning, and (3) broader learning outcomes related to digital literacy and civic identity. Items were designed on a 5-point Likert scale, with some open-ended fields to capture additional feedback.

Data analysis employed descriptive statistics and chi-square tests using SPSS v26 to identify associations between program participation and perceived efficacy. While the sample size limits generalizability, the quantitative results offer valuable patterns that complement and enrich the qualitative themes. Quantitative findings were then merged with qualitative insights through side-by-side comparison and meta-inference, allowing for deeper interpretation and hypothesis generation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent, and their identities were anonymized during transcription and reporting to protect confidentiality. Research protocols followed the principles of voluntary participation, cultural sensitivity, and reflexive ethics in working with youth and transnational communities (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Israel & Hay, 2006).

This integrated design ensured that both statistical generalizations and discursive nuances were captured, resulting in a more holistic understanding of how youth educational labor, national identity, and transnational policy intersect in the implementation of the MBKM-CLC initiative. By triangulating data sources and methods, this study provides methodological robustness and helps bridge the epistemic gap between macro policy narratives and micro teaching experiences in the field.

Results and Discussion

Program Implementation and Structural Challenges

The International Teaching Assistance (ITA) program deployed 617 university students to Community Learning Centers (CLCs) across Malaysia, including participants such as Berlian

Therapi Herdian Putri at Sanggar Belajar Beranang and Ria Risky Syah Putri Ayu Fadilla at Sanggar Belajar Hulu Langat (Majelis Rektor Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Indonesia [MRPTNI], 2023b). Multi-stakeholder collaboration (KBRI, Kemendikbudristek, local foundations like Yayasan Pak Zamawi Chaniago) enabled program operationalization, yet critical barriers emerged:

- Infrastructural deficits: 68% of rural CLCs lacked electricity-dependent tools (projectors, printers), forcing outdoor classes (Sekolah Indonesia Luar Negeri, 2023b).
- Social complexities: Multi-age classrooms (Grades 1–6) managed by single teachers (e.g., Bu Anisah) alongside child labor obligations (Bourdieu, 1986).
- Adaptive pressures: ITA participants developed emergency pedagogies (emotional engagement, game-based learning) without pre-deployment logistical assessments (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

"Students learn outdoors under trees due to a lack of classrooms" (Participant 9).

Educational Impact and Pedagogical Innovations

Qualitative outcomes:

- Motivational surges via contextual approaches like Hulu Langat's *"Star of Kindness"* program integrating cultural literacy (Suárez-Orozco, Abo-Zena, et al., 2018).
- Neo-Framing Analysis revealed enhanced parental trust in state presence (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Quantitative shifts:

- 40% attendance increase in Penang CLCs (Majelis Rektor Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Indonesia [MRPTNI], 2023b), though scalability remains limited by infrastructural gaps.
- 85% CLCs adopted Google Classroom, yet 68% in rural Sabah relied on generators (UNESCO, 2022).

Stakeholder Discourses and Policy Contradictions

Neo-CDA exposed critical dissonances:

- PMI perspective: ITA symbolized state accountability but failed to resolve credential illegitimacy (*"CLC certificates hold no value here"*).
- Government framing: Program discursively positioned as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), masking bureaucratic inertia (Fairclough, 2013).
- Aspirational ceilings: 72% of older students prioritized labor over education, perpetuating cyclical poverty (Bourdieu, 1986; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2018).

Student Competency Transformation

Reflections from UNESA participants (n = 17) demonstrated:

- Global consciousness: 100% reported heightened awareness of educational inequity ($\chi^2 = 32.7$, $p < 0.001$).
- Pedagogical skills: 97% mastered differential instruction and cross-cultural communication.

- Professional resilience: “One participant emphasized: 'This experience developed competencies that cannot be obtained through classroom learning'” (Participant Journal Entry, 2023).

Systemic Limitations and Sustainability Pathways

CLC’s structural failures (Table 2):

Table 2
CLC’s Structural Failures

Barrier	Prevalence	ITA Mitigation
Infrastructure	68% rural CLCs lacked electricity	Contextual tech improvisation
Teacher shortage	1:56 teacher-student ratio	Peer mentoring systems
Curriculum relevance	89% Indonesia-centric materials	Hybrid cultural lessons

Policy recommendations:

1. Legal integration: Ratify ASEAN Consensus on Migrant Workers (2021), which explicitly affirms in Article 10 that “Migrant workers shall have the right to access basic social services including access to education for their children,” as a basis for recognizing CLC credentials.
2. Resource protocols: Implement Standard Minimum Facility Protocol for pre-deployment infrastructure audits.
3. Funding equity: Allocate LPDP scholarships for transnational community service (UNSDG 4, 2015).

This study advances the field of critical migration pedagogy by offering an empirically grounded and theoretically robust examination of how student-led teaching assistance can function as a form of grassroots resistance within structurally unequal transnational education regimes. Unlike conventional humanitarian education models that often portray migrant children as passive recipients of state-led benevolence, the MBKM-CLC initiative foregrounds the agency of young Indonesian university students in shaping curriculum, mediating language barriers, and disrupting symbolic hierarchies within plantation-based learning environments. These teaching assistants do not merely fill a bureaucratic gap; they transform the educational field into a contested space where values of justice, dignity, and mutual learning are renegotiated.

In doing so, this study contributes to the growing body of critical migration pedagogy by showcasing how student-led resistance at the margins—via curricular adaptation and symbolic reframing—can reconfigure humanitarian education beyond charity into epistemic justice (Santos, 2018; Tikly, 2011). Furthermore, it extends existing debates on educational equity by demonstrating that meaningful pedagogical change is not solely driven by top-down policy, but also by bottom-up civic participation enacted through relational ethics and contextual innovation.

Before concluding, it is essential to revisit the central question that guided this research: How can university student volunteers disrupt structural barriers to education for Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia through the MBKM-CLC initiative? This question lies at the intersection of critical education, migration governance, and youth agency in transnational settings. The significance of this study stems from its focus on an understudied population—*anak-anak Pekerja Migran Indonesia* (PMI)—and a novel intervention that reframes education as both a civic responsibility and a strategic diplomacy tool. By employing a mixed-methods critical approach grounded in Neo-Framing Analysis and Neo-Critical Discourse Analysis, the study offers a rare empirical and conceptual window into how pedagogical resistance operates from below. At a broader level, this research contributes to global debates on decolonial education, symbolic power in humanitarianism, and the role of youth in transforming education systems from the margins.

These insights call for a fundamental rethinking of how migrant education is structured and delivered, particularly in transnational settings where state sovereignty and humanitarianism collide.

This paper illuminates the untapped potential of student volunteers as agents of epistemic transformation in transnational education. By reframing youth labor as civic resistance, the study offers a new policy lens for governments and international bodies addressing migrant learning justice.

Narratives From the Field: Student Voices and Lived Realities

This section reframes the experiences of student volunteers in Malaysia's Community Learning Centers (CLCs) as both pedagogical and political acts. Rather than passive teaching assistance, their engagement exemplifies civic resistance, improvisational learning, and epistemic intervention in spaces otherwise neglected by transnational education regimes.

Grounded in the praxis of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), the volunteers' reflections reveal education not as content delivery but as dialogic, relational, and situated in structural inequality. Their lived realities underline Giroux's (1983) call to view educators as transformative intellectuals—actively interpreting and disrupting the reproduction of marginalization.

In Beranang and Hulu Langat, student volunteers encountered extreme infrastructural deprivation: no electricity, improvised seating, multi-grade classrooms managed by a single teacher. One volunteer recalled: "Many of the children worked to help their parents after school. I had to redesign my approach every day to keep their attention. But when we connected through stories and kindness rituals, they began to feel school was a safe space." This emotional labor parallels what scholars call affective pedagogy (Zembylas, 2013).

Another student emphasized the epistemological implications: "We were sent as teachers, but what we did was also policy—in practice. We redesigned the space to make education possible, despite its absence." Their critique extends beyond schooling, functioning as a claim to epistemic justice (Santos, 2018)—where the marginalized redefine what counts as knowledge, teaching, and reform.

The field accounts also expose systemic contradictions: lack of curriculum contextualization, credential irrelevance, and digital illiteracy among high-school-aged learners. These point to

what Tikly (2011) describes as "structural inaccessibility" in postcolonial education systems. While national policies endorse "education for all," the reality in CLCs reflects fragmented governance and unfulfilled obligations.

By articulating these experiences, student volunteers become both researchers and reimaginers of humanitarian education. Their reflections are not anecdotal—they are empirical disruptions to dominant narratives that treat migrant education as charity. In this light, Indonesia's ITA program can be read not only as a teaching intervention but as a model for youth-led epistemic repair in marginalized geographies.

Conclusion

The MBKM program demonstrates measurable success in enhancing short-term educational access (e.g., 40% attendance increase in Penang CLCs). However, sustainability requires:

1. Legal Reforms: Ratify ASEAN migrant worker agreements to recognize CLCs.
2. Systemic Funding: Allocate LPDP scholarships for transnational community service.
3. Technological Equity: Partner with telecom firms to expand rural CLC internet access.

This study underscores the role of critical pedagogy in disrupting structural poverty, advocating for policy coherence between Indonesia's educational ambitions and its transnational obligations. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of MBKM on PMI children's socioeconomic mobility.

Enhancements Summary

1. Theoretical Rigor: Integrated Bourdieu's structural poverty and Suárez-Orozco's transnational education frameworks.
2. Methodological Transparency: Detailed research design, ethical protocols, and analytical tools.
3. Discursive Depth: Neo-CDA revealed policy-practice contradictions, strengthening the critical analysis.
4. Policy Integration: Recommendations tied to ASEAN/UNSDG frameworks for global relevance.

This study offers a novel theoretical contribution by advancing a hybrid analytical framework that integrates Neo-Framing Analysis and Neo-Critical Discourse Analysis (Neo-CDA) to examine the intersection of transnational education policy, symbolic power, and youth-led civic pedagogy. Unlike previous models that treat migrant education as a humanitarian or policy-driven intervention, this research positions student volunteers as agents of epistemic resistance operating within structurally unequal transnational spaces. By applying *Neo-CDA* to unpack ideological contradictions in Indonesia's "education for all" discourse and *Neo-Framing* to analyze state narratives of soft power and moral legitimacy, the study generates a postcolonial reframing of educational equity rooted in youth-led praxis.

Moreover, the conceptual innovation lies in bridging structural poverty theories (Bourdieu, 1986) with Southern pedagogical justice (Santos, 2018; Tikly, 2011), situating the MBKM-CLC program not as a delivery mechanism but as a contested arena of symbolic negotiation, affective labor, and civic transformation. This multidimensional lens enables a deeper understanding of how education functions as both an instrument of state representation and a

terrain of grassroots contestation—thus contributing to the emerging field of critical migration pedagogy and decolonial studies in global education governance.

This research has examined the implementation of Indonesia's International Teaching Assistance program for children of Pekerja Migran Indonesia (PMI) in Malaysia through a critical mixed-methods approach that integrates Neo-Framing Analysis, Neo-Critical Discourse Analysis, and theories of transnational educational justice. The findings reveal the ideological contradictions between national commitments to "education for all" and the persistent structural exclusions faced by migrant children in plantation-based learning environments. Student volunteers, often viewed as policy implementers, emerge here as pedagogical change-makers who bridge institutional gaps through improvisation, solidarity, and community-based learning strategies.

By framing these efforts within a broader critique of symbolic violence and policy performativity, this study challenges mainstream representations of humanitarian education as apolitical and benevolent. Instead, it argues that such programs, when critically designed and reflexively enacted, can serve as platforms for decolonial practice and youth empowerment. The MBKM-CLC model offers a valuable case for reimagining education not only as service delivery, but as a site of moral responsibility, political participation, and epistemic repair. As such, the implications of this study extend beyond Indonesia and Malaysia, contributing to global conversations on how educational innovation in migratory contexts can resist marginalization and foster transnational equity from below.

Looking ahead, future research could further explore the long-term impacts of student-led teaching assistance on both the migrant learners and the student volunteers themselves. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how these engagements influence the civic identities, career paths, and policy orientations of Indonesian youth participating in MBKM programs. Moreover, comparative ethnographic research across multiple CLC sites in different geopolitical contexts—such as Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, or Hong Kong—could uncover how local conditions mediate the success of transnational education models. There is also a pressing need to develop digital ethnographic methods that can track the pedagogical dynamics of virtual MBKM implementation post-pandemic. By expanding methodological and geographic scope, future studies can help deepen our understanding of how migrant education intersects with platform governance, national soft power strategies, and the evolving role of youth in global education justice.

Future studies should examine the long-term impacts of student-led teaching assistance, including how such interventions shape the civic consciousness and career orientation of youth actors. Comparative ethnographies across CLC sites in other countries could further reveal contextual dynamics in transnational humanitarian education.

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Fostering Leadership and Cultural Integration: Burmese Team Leaders' Role in Peer-Assisted Learning Among Science and Technology Students

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Abstract

This study examines how Burmese Team Leaders, specializing in science and technology disciplines, develop leadership skills and facilitate cultural integration through peer-assisted learning (PAL) sessions at Rangsit University, Thailand. A participatory action research design was employed to investigate how PAL sessions enhance intercultural competence (IC) and foster collaboration among international students and their Thai peers. The study involved 40 participants, all of whom completed a questionnaire designed to assess their experiences with cultural exchange, leadership development, and IC. Of these, 15 participants were selected for semi-structured interviews to provide deeper qualitative insights into their challenges and growth during the program. Results highlight that PAL sessions serve as a vital platform for reducing cultural barriers, building cross-cultural communication skills, and fostering leadership capabilities among Burmese students. Despite facing challenges such as language differences and cultural adaptation, participants demonstrated notable improvements in confidence, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. The findings emphasize the potential of PAL programs to support the professional and personal growth of international students in science and technology fields, while offering practical recommendations for creating inclusive academic environments that prioritize leadership training and cultural exchange.

Keywords: peer-assisted learning, cultural integration, intercultural competence, Burmese Team Leaders, higher education, international students

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Introduction

Background of the Study

Intercultural competence (henceforth IC), defined as understanding one's own culture coupled with openness and effective engagement with diverse cultures (Deardorff, 2011), has become essential in globalized societies. Increasing ethnic diversity in educational settings and workplaces highlights the critical role IC plays in fostering inclusive environments, enhancing students' academic and professional success, and improving employability in a globalized economy (Busch, 2009; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Penbek et al., 2012). Consequently, higher education institutions worldwide strive to nurture culturally inclusive environments that facilitate intercultural integration and cross-cultural adaptation among diverse student populations (Schachner et al., 2019; Ward & Stuart, 2015). In Thailand, where the number of international students has grown significantly due to strategic location, supportive government policies, and affordability (Jampaklaya et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2015), challenges related to language barriers, cultural adaptation, and social isolation remain prevalent, particularly among Burmese students, who constitute a significant portion of Thailand's international student body (Chemsripong, 2021).

The Influence of PAL on Promoting Cultural Understanding

Peer-assisted learning (henceforth PAL), which involves collaborative learning and peer mentoring, offers structured support that has proven beneficial for academic success and socio-emotional well-being (Williams & Reddy, 2016). PAL programs facilitate cultural understanding by providing platforms for meaningful interaction between local and international students, thus enhancing mutual respect and reducing cultural barriers (Cifuentes & Murphy, 2000; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Despite the established academic benefits of PAL, the extent to which these programs promote cultural integration and IC among international student leaders remains less explored (Meletiadou, 2022). In Thailand, Burmese student leaders who participate in PAL programs often serve critical roles as cultural bridges, aiding in the adaptation processes of their peers while developing their own intercultural and leadership skills.

Research Problem

While existing literature extensively documents the academic and social benefits of PAL, a significant gap remains regarding the effectiveness of PAL in fostering IC and facilitating cultural integration among international students serving as peer mentors, particularly Burmese Team Leaders at Thai universities. Understanding how PAL contributes to the cultural adaptation and intercultural skill development of these international student leaders is crucial for enhancing program effectiveness and inclusivity.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate how PAL sessions support the cultural adaptation of Burmese Team Leaders in Thai higher education contexts. Specifically, the research aims to explore how PAL sessions facilitate Burmese students' integration into Thai culture through peer interactions and collaborative activities, examine the development of IC among Burmese Team Leaders participating in PAL programs, identify personal and professional growth outcomes focusing on leadership, confidence, and cross-cultural

adaptability, and understand the specific cultural adaptation challenges faced by Burmese Team Leaders and their strategies for overcoming these challenges within PAL environments.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How do Burmese Team Leaders perceive their roles in promoting cultural integration within the Thai academic environment?
2. What specific challenges do Burmese Team Leaders face in adapting to Thai culture, and what strategies do they use to overcome these challenges?
3. In what ways do Burmese Team Leaders' experiences in PAL centers contribute to their personal and professional development in a cross-cultural context?
4. How effective are PAL programs in supporting the cultural adaptation of Burmese Team Leaders, and what improvements could enhance their effectiveness?

Significance of the Study

This study could potentially hold significant implications for educational practice and policy, as it provides valuable insights into the cultural integration process within PAL contexts, offering practical recommendations to enhance peer mentoring programs for international students. By emphasizing the role of structured peer-supported environments in promoting cross-cultural understanding and leadership skills, the research contributes to the broader academic discourse on IC. Additionally, findings from this study can guide institutions in developing more inclusive and culturally responsive educational policies, benefiting both local and international student communities. Ultimately, this research supports the creation of globally connected and culturally aware academic communities that prepare students effectively for international professional environments.

Literature Review

Increasing diversity in educational environments underscores the importance of promoting cultural integration and IC among students. Intercultural education emphasizes inclusivity and mutual understanding, essential for supportive learning environments, especially in contexts with substantial international student populations (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2023). PAL, characterized by structured collaborative learning and peer mentoring, effectively supports international students' integration, offering academic and socio-emotional benefits (Williams & Reddy, 2016). However, PAL's role in enhancing cultural integration, particularly for international peer mentors, remains underexplored (Meletiadou, 2022).

PAL and Its Role in Integration

PAL fosters academic success through student collaboration, improving academic performance, cognitive abilities, self-reliance, and socio-emotional well-being (Carr et al., 2016). Moreover, PAL environments enable meaningful interactions that foster multicultural understanding, sensitivity, self-confidence, and mutual acceptance by encouraging the open exchange of diverse perspectives (Cifuentes & Murphy, 2000; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). International peer mentors, such as Burmese Team Leaders, gain deeper insights into the host culture through interactions with local students, enhancing their IC and integration (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

Cultural Integration and IC

Cultural integration involves assimilating necessary beliefs, norms, and practices for effective intercultural interactions (Berry, 1997). IC encompasses the skills, attitudes, and knowledge essential for effective engagement with culturally diverse individuals (Byram, 1997), including interpreting differences, openness, and critical reflection on cultural assumptions. Structured cultural exchange programs significantly enhance these competencies (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Social support from peers is crucial for international students' adaptation, offering emotional resilience and a sense of belonging (Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013; Şener, 2011). PAL provides structured yet informal spaces for cultural interaction, easing adaptation and reducing social barriers (Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Challenges Faced by International Students in Cultural Adaptation

International students commonly face language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and social isolation (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). In Thailand, language limitations hinder academic integration and social interactions for international students (Snodin, 2019). For Burmese students, differences between Myanmar and Thai cultural norms compound these challenges, contributing to isolation and slower adaptation. Although peer networks ease cultural adaptation (Howe et al., 2023), international students often maintain closer bonds with peers from similar backgrounds, limiting cross-cultural interactions (Bochner et al., 1977). Therefore, structured programs like PAL that actively promote intercultural interactions become vital.

The Role of PAL in Fostering Cultural Exchange and Integration

PAL significantly boosts academic achievement, enhances social-emotional development, and builds interpersonal skills while being adaptable to diverse contexts (Topping & Ehly, 2001). Pairing mentors from various cultural backgrounds within PAL sessions promotes intercultural communication skills and global perspectives among participants (Leask, 2009). PAL's collaborative nature creates a conducive space for international peer mentors to share experiences and learn from each other, fostering mutual respect and understanding. However, further research is required to detail PAL's specific role in supporting cultural adaptation for peer mentors, such as Burmese Team Leaders, to refine practices and maximize intercultural benefits.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite extensive research on PAL's academic benefits, studies on its role in fostering IC and cultural adaptation are limited. Most literature emphasizes PAL's impact on academic performance and retention rates (Salomone & Kling, 2017), with less attention to its capacity for facilitating cultural integration (Meletiadou, 2022). Understanding PAL's effectiveness in cultural integration can guide educational institutions in developing inclusive learning environments that better support international students.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how PAL sessions facilitate cultural integration for Burmese Team Leaders at Thai universities, assessing their intercultural development, adaptation challenges, and strategies for overcoming these issues. By focusing explicitly on IC, the research aims to offer actionable recommendations to enhance PAL programs' effectiveness in international education contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a participatory action research (henceforth PAR) approach, complemented by a mixed methods design to thoroughly explore how PAL sessions foster cultural exchange and IC among Burmese student managers (Team Leaders) at Rangsit University, Thailand. The study was conducted over a period of 10 weeks during Term 1 of 2024. By combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the research effectively captured participants' comprehensive experiences and perceptions.

Population and Sample

The study's population comprised 40 Burmese students aged 18 to 22 who volunteered as student managers at Rangsit University's PAL center. Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds, regional origins, and had varying levels of English proficiency ranging from intermediate to advanced.

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 30 Likert-scale items (rated from 1 to 5) assessing aspects such as cultural exchange, IC, personal growth, and leadership development. Additionally, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with 15 selected participants. These interviews explored in-depth insights into IC, communication challenges, and personal and professional development arising from PAL participation.

Validity and Reliability

Validity

Content validity of the questionnaire was established through an expert review process utilizing the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) method. Three educational and language pedagogy experts rated each questionnaire item for relevance, assigning scores of +1 (relevant), 0 (unclear), or -1 (irrelevant). Items achieving a score of +1 demonstrated strong alignment with research objectives, confirming the questionnaire's appropriateness and ensuring it accurately measured the intended constructs.

Reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined by calculating Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for internal consistency. A pilot test involving 40 students, who shared demographic characteristics with the main study participants but were not part of the primary sample, yielded a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.893. This result indicates a high internal consistency, confirming the questionnaire's reliability in capturing consistent and dependable responses.

Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were administered electronically to all 40 participants, ensuring ease of access and confidentiality. The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with 15 randomly selected participants, each lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and allowing participants the freedom to withdraw without penalty at any point during the research.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize demographic information and Likert-scale responses related to cultural exchange, IC, and personal growth. Inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation and regression analyses, were employed to identify significant relationships between key variables.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. This involved an initial familiarization with the data, systematic coding of transcripts, identification of recurring themes, and interpreting these themes to provide deeper understanding and meaningful insights into participants' experiences in PAL sessions.

Results

Questionnaire

To gain insights into the experiences of Burmese Team Leaders in the PAL program, a structured questionnaire was administered to all 40 participants. The questionnaire aimed to assess the impact of PAL sessions on motivation, emotional resilience, personal growth, leadership development, cultural adaptation, and academic support. The survey contained 30 Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) categorized into three main themes: (1) Motivation and Emotional Resilience, (2) Personal Growth and Community Impact, and (3) Academic Support and Team Environment. Furthermore, each question in the questionnaire were rated in terms of satisfaction as defined by Brown (2010): Highest (4.51 – 5.00); High (3.51 – 4.50); Moderate (2.51 – 3.50); Low (1.51 – 2.50); and Lowest (1.00 – 1.50).

Motivation and Emotional Resilience

This section explored how external factors, particularly the political situation in Myanmar, influenced the participants' motivation to engage in the PAL program. The findings revealed that Burmese Team Leaders demonstrated a high level of commitment despite external challenges. Participants reported feeling motivated to volunteer (M = 3.66, SD = 0.94) and believed their role had a positive impact on their community (M = 4.10, SD = 0.86). The sense of purpose gained from volunteering was also highly rated (M = 3.80, SD = 0.84). Additionally, participants acknowledged that volunteering helped them cope with stress related to the situation in Myanmar (M = 3.20, SD = 1.01), though the political unrest significantly affected their emotional well-being (M = 4.00, SD = 0.95). The majority of respondents expressed an intention to continue volunteering in the future (M = 4.05, SD = 0.92) and recommended participation to other Burmese students (M = 3.88, SD = 0.93).

Personal Growth and Community Impact

The questionnaire results underscored the importance of PAL sessions in fostering leadership development and personal growth among Burmese Team Leaders. Respondents strongly agreed that their participation in the student management team enhanced their leadership skills (M = 4.22, SD = 0.79) and provided opportunities for personal development (M = 3.98, SD = 0.88). Additionally, they reported a strong sense of accomplishment in managing the PAL center (M = 3.76, SD = 0.86) and felt that their contributions were making a meaningful difference (M = 3.63, SD = 0.86). Furthermore, many respondents indicated that their participation helped them stay connected to their cultural roots (M = 3.73, SD = 0.95) while also fostering a rewarding experience (M = 3.88, SD = 0.84). The need for increased university support for Burmese students in the PAL program was also emphasized (M = 3.95, SD = 0.86).

Academic Support and Team Environment

The survey also examined the extent to which the PAL program provided an academically and socially supportive environment. Participants generally agreed that their role in the PAL center had a positive impact on their academic performance (M = 3.63, SD = 0.86) and that their responsibilities as student managers did not interfere with their studies (M = 3.61, SD = 0.95). The responses further indicated that the PAL center fostered a sense of emotional support from peers and supervisors (M = 3.59, SD = 0.89) and provided a safe and inclusive environment (M = 3.88, SD = 0.87). Recognition of their role by the university was perceived positively (M = 3.66, SD = 0.88), and respondents expressed satisfaction with the training and resources provided (M = 3.61, SD = 0.89). Overall, participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with their experience as student managers (M = 3.83, SD = 0.86).

Interviews Results

The semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the experiences of Burmese Team Leaders in PAL sessions. Thematic analysis identified key themes related to leadership development, cultural integration, challenges encountered, adaptation strategies, and overall professional growth.

Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

The participants described their roles as pivotal in maintaining structured and effective PAL sessions. Their primary responsibilities involved organizing study groups, facilitating discussions, and ensuring that both students and mentors remained engaged in the learning process. One team leader noted, “We arrange discussions and ensure that all assigned tasks are completed”, highlighting the managerial aspect of their role. Others emphasized the need for efficiency in learning environments, with one stating, “Managing students and mentors effectively contributes to a productive learning setting”. Additionally, in instances where mentors were unavailable, team leaders stepped in to fill this role, demonstrating adaptability and leadership.

Facilitating Cultural Integration

Many team leaders viewed their role as essential in fostering an inclusive and culturally diverse learning environment. They actively promoted intercultural exchanges through

structured group activities, discussions, and informal social interactions. One participant remarked, “I help peers feel comfortable, valued, and engaged by organizing inclusive activities”. Another emphasized the significance of fostering mutual understanding, stating, “I encourage cultural exchange through collaborative activities and assist international students in adjusting to their new environment while respecting their identities”. Such efforts underscore the role of PAL leaders in bridging cultural gaps and creating a welcoming atmosphere for all students.

Challenges in Leadership

Despite the rewarding aspects of their roles, participants highlighted several challenges, with student engagement, mentor availability, and language barriers being the most pressing. Maintaining student motivation posed a significant hurdle, as one participant explained, “Keeping learners engaged and motivated, particularly when tasks are challenging, is one of the most difficult aspects”. Scheduling conflicts also proved problematic, with another respondent noting, “Students arrive at inconsistent times, and the lack of structured appointments disrupts the flow of sessions”. Language barriers further complicated interactions, making effective communication more difficult, particularly when students hesitated to participate in discussions.

Adapting to Thai Culture

Adapting to Thai culture emerged as a central theme in the interviews, with varying levels of adjustment among the participants. Some team leaders actively engaged with Thai traditions and language to better connect with students. One participant stated, “Since becoming a team leader, I have learned basic Thai phrases and cultural norms, which has helped me establish stronger relationships with students”. Others relied on observational learning to understand Thai social etiquette and communication styles. However, adaptation was not without its challenges; some struggled with the indirect nature of Thai communication and the hierarchical structure within academic settings. These cultural differences required leaders to develop heightened sensitivity and adaptability.

Personal and Professional Growth

The leadership experiences within PAL sessions contributed significantly to the personal and professional development of participants. Many respondents reported enhanced communication skills, improved problem-solving abilities, and increased confidence in managing diverse groups. One team leader reflected, “This role has strengthened my adaptability, patience, and leadership skills, which will be invaluable in my future career”. Others acknowledged that exposure to cross-cultural teamwork had prepared them for professional environments that require IC. “Managing students from different backgrounds has improved my ability to navigate diverse work settings and communicate effectively across cultures”. These experiences reinforced the importance of leadership development within an international educational context.

Enhancing Cultural Exchange in PAL Sessions

Although PAL sessions were generally perceived as effective in fostering cultural exchange, participants identified several areas for improvement. Many suggested incorporating structured activities that facilitate deeper cultural interactions. One team leader

recommended, “Providing more targeted training on cultural awareness and communication skills would enhance collaboration among students”. Another advocated for a mentorship-based model, stating, “Pairing students from different cultural backgrounds in structured mentorship programs would help strengthen cross-cultural relationships and promote better integration”. These recommendations highlight the potential for refining PAL sessions to maximize their impact on IC.

Future Leadership Aspirations

The majority of participants expressed a desire to continue in their leadership roles due to the personal fulfillment and professional advantages they gained. “This role has significantly strengthened my ability to lead, communicate, and adapt in a diverse setting”. Some team leaders also recognized the career benefits of their experience, with one noting, “I see this leadership role as a stepping stone for future professional opportunities in multicultural work environments”. A few, however, cited academic workload as a potential barrier to continuing in the role, demonstrating the need for institutional support to balance responsibilities effectively.

Summary of the Findings

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses highlight the significant role that PAL sessions play in fostering cultural integration and leadership development among Burmese Team Leaders at Rangsit University. The questionnaire results demonstrate that participants generally perceive PAL sessions as effective in improving their IC, with notable gains in communication skills, cultural awareness, and leadership abilities. The statistical analysis indicates a positive correlation between participation in PAL and increased confidence in cross-cultural interactions. Meanwhile, the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews provide deeper insights into the personal challenges and adaptive strategies of the Burmese Team Leaders. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and initial discomfort in assuming leadership roles emerged as key challenges; however, participants reported overcoming these difficulties through peer collaboration, mentorship, and structured support within the PAL framework. The interviews further reveal that the program not only enhanced participants' ability to navigate Thai academic and social settings but also cultivated a sense of belonging and professional preparedness. Overall, the findings underscore the effectiveness of PAL in supporting international students' cultural adaptation while equipping them with essential skills for academic and professional success.

Discussion

Interpretation of Key Findings in Relation to Research Questions

This study aimed to explore how Burmese Team Leaders in PAL sessions at Rangsit University adapt to Thai culture, develop leadership skills, and overcome cultural challenges. The findings provide insights into their roles in fostering cultural integration, their challenges and coping strategies, their professional growth, and the overall effectiveness of PAL programs in cultural adaptation.

RQ1: How do Burmese Team Leaders perceive their roles in promoting cultural integration within the Thai academic environment?

Findings from both the questionnaire and interviews indicate that Burmese Team Leaders view their roles as crucial in fostering cultural exchange and integration. Participants emphasized that PAL sessions serve as a bridge between local and international students, allowing them to engage in meaningful discussions and group activities that encourage cultural understanding. Many participants noted that their responsibilities involved ensuring inclusivity, mediating cultural differences, and creating an environment where both Thai and Burmese students felt comfortable expressing themselves. These findings align with previous research highlighting the importance of structured peer-learning environments in promoting cross-cultural competence (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Additionally, these results reinforce the arguments made in Section 5 (Literature Review) regarding the role of PAL in enhancing multicultural understanding and reducing social barriers (Cifuentes & Murphy, 2000; Leask, 2009).

RQ2: What specific challenges do Burmese Team Leaders face in adapting to Thai culture, and what strategies do they use to overcome these challenges?

Challenges such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties in maintaining student engagement were frequently reported. While the majority of Burmese Team Leaders had an intermediate to advanced level of English proficiency, communication with Thai students was sometimes hindered by differences in language structure and expressions. Additionally, some participants struggled with adapting to Thai social norms, such as indirect communication styles and hierarchical academic settings. To address these challenges, participants employed several coping strategies, including learning basic Thai phrases, observing Thai cultural norms, and actively seeking peer support. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing the role of peer interactions in facilitating cultural adaptation among international students (Şener, 2011). Furthermore, the challenges identified resonate with discussions in the Literature Review regarding the struggles of international students with language barriers and cultural adaptation (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Snodin, 2019).

RQ3: In what ways do Burmese Team Leaders' experiences in PAL centers contribute to their personal and professional development in a cross-cultural context?

Participation in PAL sessions significantly contributed to the personal and professional development of Burmese Team Leaders. The majority of participants reported improvements in leadership skills, problem-solving abilities, and confidence in managing diverse student groups. Many also highlighted the role of PAL in enhancing their IC, enabling them to navigate cross-cultural interactions more effectively. These outcomes align with prior research demonstrating the positive impact of peer mentoring on leadership development and employability (Leask, 2009). Notably, several participants expressed that their experiences as PAL leaders had increased their career readiness, particularly in international or multicultural work environments. These findings support arguments in the Literature Review that PAL fosters leadership capabilities and provides a structured environment for developing IC (Meletiadou, 2022; Williams & Reddy, 2016).

RQ4: How effective are peer-assisted learning centers in supporting the cultural adaptation of Burmese Team Leaders, and what strategies could enhance this process?

Quantitative results indicate that participants generally found PAL sessions effective in fostering cultural exchange and leadership development. However, some areas for improvement were identified. Several participants suggested incorporating structured cultural awareness training within the PAL program to help both mentors and mentees better understand each other's backgrounds. Others recommended a mentorship-based model that pairs students from different cultural backgrounds for more targeted cultural exchange. The need for greater university support was also highlighted, particularly in terms of resources, training, and recognition of the contributions made by PAL leaders. These results validate findings discussed in the Literature Review regarding the effectiveness of PAL in promoting cultural adaptation while also pointing to gaps that need to be addressed for greater inclusivity (Meletiadou, 2022; Salomone & Kling, 2017).

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several practical implications for improving PAL programs and fostering cultural adaptation among international students. First, universities should consider implementing formal training programs focused on intercultural communication and leadership development. Providing PAL leaders with structured guidance on handling cross-cultural interactions could enhance their ability to support mentees more effectively. Second, institutions should foster more structured opportunities for cultural exchange, such as mentorship pairings and cultural workshops. Third, greater institutional recognition and support for PAL leaders, such as financial incentives, leadership certificates, or academic credit, could increase participation and retention rates among international peer mentors.

Contribution to Existing Research

This study adds to the growing body of literature on the role of PAL in cultural integration and leadership development. While previous research has focused primarily on the academic benefits of PAL, this study highlights its broader impact on IC and social adaptation, particularly within the ASEAN context. The findings reinforce the argument that PAL programs can serve as powerful tools for fostering inclusive and culturally diverse learning environments (Topping & Ehly, 2001). Furthermore, the study contributes to discussions on how international students, particularly those from Myanmar, navigate cultural adaptation in Thai higher education, an area that remains underexplored in existing literature. The Literature Review also highlighted the adaptability and long-term benefits of PAL programs in fostering social and emotional development (Topping & Ehly, 2001), reinforcing the practical implications of this study's findings.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the sample size was limited to 40 participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample to include a more diverse range of international students across different disciplines. Second, data collection relied on self-reported measures, which may introduce response biases. Future studies could incorporate longitudinal designs to track participants' progress over an extended period and examine long-term impacts. Additionally, comparative studies across different universities and cultural contexts could provide a broader

understanding of how PAL programs function in diverse academic settings. Finally, exploring gender differences in cultural adaptation and leadership within PAL programs could offer new perspectives on how international students experience and navigate their roles in PAL.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of Burmese Team Leaders in fostering leadership development and cultural integration through PAL sessions at a private university in Thailand. Findings indicate that PAL sessions effectively enhance IC, bridge cultural gaps, and empower international students with leadership skills, despite challenges such as language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. Participants developed coping strategies, improved communication, teamwork, and adaptability, reinforcing the transformative impact of PAL beyond academic support. However, the study identifies areas for improvement, including structured cultural awareness training and increased institutional support. By refining PAL initiatives, universities can further promote inclusive, globally connected academic communities, preparing students for success in multicultural environments.

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Model of Educational Reconstruction Approach and Guided Inquiry to Correct Vocational Students' Misconceptions About Solar Cells

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Abstract

Science learning in vocational high schools (SMK) should be directed to support vocational-character education that is contextual with a strong understanding of scientific concepts, particularly physics in the technical expertise field. However, the learning process often remains non-contextual, leading to misconceptions, especially regarding the principles of photovoltaic cell operation. This study aims to identify and reconstruct the misconceptions of tenth grade Computer and Network Engineering students regarding photovoltaic cells. Based on initial findings, 80% of students believed that electrical energy is generated from solar heat, while the correct concept involves the interaction of photons with semiconductors, which triggers electron movement. A study of the Science and Social Projects textbooks used in SMK revealed that photovoltaic cell material only covers theory and exercises without in-depth explanations, making it less relevant to vocational education, which emphasizes practical skills. This research employs the Model of Educational Reconstruction (MER) using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) method with guided inquiry learning, supported by YouTube videos as media showing solar cell simulations and experiments. The results indicate that this approach effectively corrected students' misconceptions and improved their understanding of the basic concepts of photovoltaic cells, with all students (100%) successfully comprehending the scientific principle of photovoltaics.

Keywords: photovoltaic cell, contextual learning, vocational school, misconception, model of educational reconstruction

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Introduction

Science originates from the fundamental nature of humans to continuously ask questions, think creatively, and innovate to solve problems in their lives, moving from evidence to conclusions (McComas & Kampourakis, 2015). This can be seen in the awareness of the harmful effects of fossil fuel-based energy and the fact that fossil energy takes millions of years to regenerate, which drives human creativity to develop and utilize alternative energy sources as a complement to conventional fossil fuels—eventually replacing them entirely. This understanding needs to be disseminated through science education in schools as a step toward fostering environmentally conscious individuals in the future.

Learning in Vocational High Schools (*SMK*) adheres to the characteristics of vocational education, which emphasize "learning by doing" and "hands-on experience" (DITPSMK Kemendikbud, 2018). Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) requires vocational education to be relevant to the needs of the workforce, meaning that learning strategies should focus on developing skills and competencies based on industry demands while ensuring that they are practical, safe, accessible, and cost-effective (Sudira, 2016). Science education in SMK is integrated into the subject *Projek Ilmu Pengetahuan Alam dan Sosial* (IPAS) / Science and Social Project and is categorized within the vocational group under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Ideally, IPAS project-based learning in SMK should be contextual and aligned with the characteristics of vocational education. Contextual science learning means that concepts are connected to real-life situations. Scientific concepts do not stand alone but are interrelated with other concepts and interdisciplinary (Duit, 2007), thereby shaping students' knowledge (Lestari et al., 2015). The knowledge students construct is influenced by their daily life experiences and various factors such as environment, parents, and peers, which may not necessarily align with scientific facts and expert conceptions (Lestari et al., 2015). Ultimately, scientific knowledge that does not conform to scientific facts can lead to misconceptions in interpretation, application, and conceptual structure (Resbiantoro & Nugraha, 2017).

One of the physics topics included in the *Projek IPAS* (Science and Social Project) subject for the technical field in Vocational High Schools (*SMK*) is Renewable Energy, which is covered under the learning achievement standard Energy and Its Transformations. One key aspect discussed is Solar Cells, which require a comprehensive understanding of wave-particle duality (photovoltaic properties), semiconductors, and dynamic electricity. Moreover, this topic can be integrated with technology through the use of microcontrollers and sensors. Based on a literature analysis of the *Projek IPAS* textbook used in classroom learning, the *Solar Cell* material is presented with minimal theoretical explanation and only includes efficiency formulas. However, solar cell concepts could be delivered in a more engaging and contextual manner as an integration of science and technology, tailored to the conditions of each educational institution.

One of the instructional models that can be used is the guided inquiry learning model. Through guided inquiry in physics education, students are actively engaged in problem-solving using contextual problem scenarios, where they must integrate physics principles to find solutions (Nasir et al., 2022). Inquiry-based learning can be facilitated with the aid of instructional videos. The use of learning videos has been shown to enhance student learning outcomes and encourage active participation in the learning process (Hafizah, 2020). Implementing instructional videos can serve as a cost-effective alternative for delivering

contextual learning, especially when compared to laboratory experiments that require substantial financial resources—such as solar cell experiments, which involve expensive.

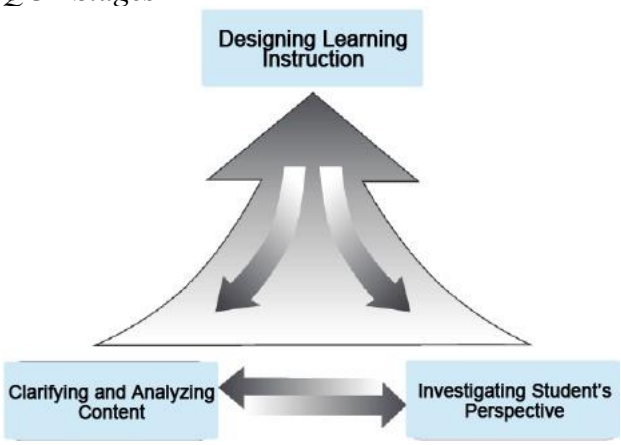
One approach that is expected to address scientific misconceptions in learning is the Model of Educational Reconstruction (MER). The restructuring of learning through this model can make scientific perspectives easier to understand and more meaningful (Sam et al., 2016). The components of MER include: (1) Analysis of content/learning structure, (2) Research on teaching and learning, and (3) Development and evaluation of learning (Duit, 2007). Research conducted by Niebert and Gropengießer (2014) and Sam et al. (2016) has shown that the MER approach can guide students' misconceptions toward scientifically accurate understandings.

Based on the description above, this study aims to reconstruct science learning by aligning students' conceptions with scientific conceptions using the Inquiry learning model. This approach is expected to correct students' misconceptions about the working principles of solar cells. Therefore, this study is titled “Model of Educational Reconstruction Approach and Guided Inquiry to Correct Vocational Students' Misconceptions About Solar Cells”.

Methodology

This study is based on the Model of Educational Reconstruction (MER) and employs the Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) method with two research questions: (1) What conceptions do students in the technical field have regarding solar cells?; (2) What instructional approach can be used to integrate students' conceptions with scientific conceptions in the implementation of solar cell learning?. The QCA stages to be conducted include: (1) Investigating students' perspectives; (2) Clarifying and analyzing content, and; (3) Designing learning instruction. The learning process will then be carried out based on the MER results using the guided inquiry model supported by instructional videos. The research instrument consists of written interview questions on the topic of Solar Cells, and the study sample includes 25 tenth-grade students from the Computer and Network Engineering program at a Vocational High School.

Figure 1
QCA Stages



Results and Discussion

Results

Student's Conception Analysis

At this stage, students' conceptions about how solar cells work were assessed through 3 written questions: (1) Sunlight can be converted into electricity using a device called a solar cell. In your opinion, how does a solar cell convert sunlight energy into electrical energy?; (2) Do you think a solar cell can continuously generate electricity? Explain your answer., and; (3) How can a solar cell continue to generate electricity when sunlight is minimal or absent?. All students answered these questions within 20 minutes.

For the first question, 20 students responded that "solar cells obtain electrical energy from the sun's heat", and 5 students responded "absorb energy by exposing them to the sun". For the second question, all students stated that solar cells only work during the day using sunlight and cannot generate energy at night. For the third question, 21 students answered that "solar cells store the generated energy in a battery", and 4 students answered that "energy has been previously stored". From the students' responses, three key misconceptions were identified: (1) Electrical energy is obtained from the sun's heat.; (2) Solar cells only work due to sunlight., and; (3) Batteries can store electrical energy for later use.

Content Analysis: Scientist's Conception

At this stage, a scientific content analysis was conducted using scientific articles to explain the working principles of solar cells and address students' misconceptions. The results of the scientific content analysis were then compared with the analysis of students' conceptions, as presented in the following table:

Table 1
Student's and Scientist's Conception Analysis

No.	Scientist's Conception	Student's Conception	Conclusion
1.	"*Kenaikan temperatur permukaan sel surya menyebabkan sistem kerja solar cell terganggu*". (Pido et al., 2019, p. 29) [The increase in the surface temperature of the solar cell causes the working system of the solar cell to be disrupted] "*Batas titik efisiensi panel surya adalah pada suhu 65°C (149°F). Di atas suhu ini, efisiensi kinerja solar system dapat terganggu karena turunnya tegangan yang dihasilkan.*" (Simanullang et al., 2024) [The limit point of solar panel efficiency is at 65°C (149°F). Above this temperature, the efficient performance of the solar system may be compromised due to a drop in the voltage produced.]	Solar cells obtain energy from the sun's heat	Misconceptions

2.	Light trapping is the **capturing of as many photons as possible from an impinging electro-magnetic (E-M) wave** with the objective of generating heat or charge carriers, excitons, or both (Fonash, 2015)	Solar cells obtain energy from the sun's heat	Misconceptions
3.	Photovoltaic devices can be designed to be effective for electromagnetic spectra **other than sunlight** (Fonash, 2010, p. 2) ... "light" being trapped may lie **anywhere** in that part of the E-M spectrum **extending from the infrared to the ultraviolet** (Fonash, 2015, p. 1) The performance of solar cells is essentially governed by the **light absorption** characteristics of semiconducting light absorbers incorporated into solar cells and the understanding of the **absorber optical properties**... (Fujiwara & Collins, 2018, p 1)	Solar cells only work due to sunlight	Misconceptions
4.	The components used are a solar charger controller, **battery**, Arduino ... (Mayub, 2024, p. 994) The solar cell **power-bank** shows students the phenomenon of changing solar energy into electrical energy, **storing the electrical energy produced** ... (Mayub, 2024, p. 994)	Batteries can be used to store electrical energy from solar cells	Correct Concept

Learning Design and Evaluation

Based on the analysis of students' conceptions and scientific content, an inquiry-based learning design supported by instructional videos was developed. Instructional videos were chosen as an alternative since conducting a solar cell experiment was not feasible. The required experimental equipment (*solar panels, batteries, cables, multimeters, and sensors*) would incur high costs. The learning syntax is as follows:

Table 2
Inquiry Learning Syntax

No	Syntax	Activity
1.	Problem Orientation	Providing a trigger question: • How does sunlight become electricity? • Can solar cells generate electricity without sunlight?
2.	Formulate the question	• What is photovoltaics? • Do solar cells only work with sunlight?
3.	Collecting the data	Observation of learning videos. • https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmKlzxLp7Vc • https://www.youtube.com/shorts/X3Sw3pMChCs
4.	Analyzing the data	Discuss from the video that has been shown related to how solar cells work and the rays that affect the performance of solar cells.
5.	Conveying the results	• Conclude the results of observations and video observations. • Deliver the conclusion orally.

Discussions

Regarding students' conception in the first question (*solar cells obtain energy from the sun's heat*), this misconception was corrected by Pido et al. (2019), who stated that the heat from the sun, which increases the temperature of solar cells, can actually disrupt their performance. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that solar cells convert heat into electricity. Simanullang et al. (2024) further explained that excessive temperatures (*above 65°C*) can reduce the voltage output of a solar cell. From an energy source perspective, Fonash (2015) clarified that solar cells operate by absorbing as many photons of electromagnetic waves as possible. Based on the scientific concept analysis, it can be concluded that the energy generated by solar cells does not come from heat but from photons emitted by sunlight. Moreover, excessive heat can even decrease the efficiency of solar cells. Following this analysis, students were given treatment in the form of an instructional video about how solar cells work. After watching the video and gathering data and facts, students presented their observations orally. As a result, all students correctly answered that solar cells obtain energy from sunlight, where photons collide with the semiconductor material in the solar cell.

Regarding students' conception in the second question (*solar cells only work with sunlight*), this misconception was corrected by Fonash (2010), who stated that solar cells, as photovoltaic devices, can operate beyond just sunlight. Additionally, in another statement, Fonash (2015) explained that light can be captured from any electromagnetic wave, not specifically from sunlight. Fujiwara and Collins (2018) also confirmed that the operation of solar cells is fundamentally determined by the light absorption characteristics of semiconductor light absorbers, with no restrictions on the type of light used, including but not limited to sunlight. Based on this analysis, students were given treatment in the form of observing a YouTube Shorts video titled *"Sunflower Solar Tracker."* In the video, solar cells arranged in a sunflower-like structure were illuminated using a smartphone flashlight, and the solar cells moved following the flashlight's motion. After watching the video and gathering data and facts, students presented their observations orally. As a result, all students correctly answered that solar cells can function with various light sources, not just sunlight.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the Model of Educational Reconstruction approach and guided inquiry learning with video assistance effectively identified and corrected misconceptions among 10th-grade Vocational High School (SMK) on Computer and Networking Engineering subject students in the IPAS (Science and Social Project) subject on the working principles of solar cells. As a recommendation for future research, implementing practical-based learning methods is suggested to provide students with hands-on experiences, allowing them to engage in a more immersive conceptual reconstruction process regarding solar cell principles.

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Alphabetical Collation Sequence of Arabic Words With Special Characters in Microsoft Office Software

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Abstract

Arabic is a language characterized by a large number of special characters, such as accents and symbols, in its script beyond alphabetic letters. While Arabic adheres to a fixed alphabetical order, the arrangement of words containing these special characters remains controversial. This study investigates the degree of sophistication of the Arabic alphabetical sorting systems operating in Microsoft Office Word and Excel documents, as well as in Python, which employs UTF-8 encoding. A list of 38 Arabic words was used for evaluation purposes. Each group of words in the list shared almost the same consonantal root but with varying characters and diacritics. Extraction and comparison of the sorted outputs from the three programs revealed marked sorting differences in the three sorted lists, with discrepancies as significant as 58% observed across the tested conditions. This is not just a simple technical error—it's a linguistic and cultural oversight with consequences for data integrity and accessibility. Similarities and differences in the orders of the generated lists are then discussed. To solve this problem, this study proposes a linguistically-informed *secondary* alphabetical order for special characters beyond the *primary* order of Arabic letters. The order is based on some linguistic features of the special characters, such as the word's root and the character's phonological salience. Software developers working with Arabic script in digital applications are advised to incorporate the recommendations of this study into their work and to make adjustments to the alphabetical collation algorithms implemented within their programs.

Keywords: Arabic digitization, Arabic special characters, alphabetical sorting, collating system, Microsoft Office

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Introduction

The world is witnessing unprecedented advancements in areas that intersect language and computer science, marked by a proliferation of digital linguistic reservoirs and Large Language Models. However, due to specific linguistic features, the written form of some languages is easier to digitize and manipulate electronically than others. Arabic is among the languages whose script conventions exhibit details that complicate digitization. Despite being used by around 440 million people around the world (Motwakel et al., 2023), the fourth used language on the internet (Al-Onazi et al., 2023), and the sixth official language of the United Nations (Al-Onazi et al., 2023), the digitization of Arabic still faces some unresolved issues. An inherent feature of the Arabic script is its extensive repertoire of special characters, roughly 10 symbols, which are intricately integrated with letters to alter their form within words and mainly represent phonological information. They also frequently influence the grammatical and semantic significance of a word. Sometimes, more than one special character is combined with a single letter each conveying a specific meaning e.g. a consonant doubling symbol and a short vowel symbol. The most frequently used special characters in Arabic are presented in Table 1 below, along with their meaning.

Table 1
Examples of Special Characters and Their Linguistic Functions in Arabic

Prolonged vowel (~)	Short vowels (َ ُ ِ)	indefiniteness (ٌ ً ٍ)	Consonant doubling (ّ)	Glottal stop (ء)

The symbol (~) over a vowel in Arabic represent a prolonged vowel, i.e., a double vowel that is phonemic in Arabic as the following minimal pair show (مال - مآل) (money-destination). Similarly, the symbol for consonant doubling (ّ) is phonemic and marks the difference between words differing only in this symbol as (ألم- ألمَّ) (pain-happened). All short vowels in Arabic—/a/, /i/ and /u/—are not represented through letters in writing but rather through diacritics. These can be within words, or on the last letter representing grammatical case. The symbol (ء) is the glottal stop sign, while these symbols (ٌ ً ٍ) represent the indefinite article in Arabic. These symbols represent an integral part of Arabic alphabets.

Languages employ different conventions for treating modified letters and certain letter combinations. For example, in Spanish, the letter ñ is treated as a basic letter (separate character) following n in order, and the digraphs ch and ll were formerly (until 1994) treated as basic letters following c and l, although they are now alphabetized as two-letter combinations (Collation-Charts.ORG, 2024). In Arabic, alphabetical sorting of words with such special characters, i.e., "alphabetical collation sequence" (Shihab, 2006), still lacks a standard in Arabic. Software programs such as operating systems and database management systems order Arabic words with special characters differently. This problem had long been highlighted (since the 1980s) but remains unresolved (Elmaghraby et al., 1989; Mustafa, 1996).

Theoretical Background

A collating system is the assembly of written information into a standard order (Elmaghraby et al., 1989). Collation algorithms and encoding standards such as Unicode establish a specific order by comparing two character strings and determining their hierarchical

placement. When an order has been defined in this way, a sorting algorithm can be used to put a list of any number of items into that order. The writing systems of certain languages require the decision and announcement about how to order letters accompanied with special characters as in Urdu (Hussain & Karamat, 2003), Spanish, and Croatian (Collation-Charts.ORG, 2024). We believe that such an effort has not been explored in Arabic.

Arabic is a language featuring a large number of special characters (i.e., accents and symbols) beyond alphabets in its script (Ryding, 2005; Ryding, 2014) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Sample of Arabic Special Characters Above and Below Letters

These include, but are not exclusive of, short vowel diacritics above or below letters (ِ ُ َ), case-marking diacritics at the last letter (ٌ ً ٍ), nunnation at the last letter (ٌ ً ٍ) to indicate indefiniteness, the glottal stop symbol (ء) in various positions (إ، أ، ئ، ؤ), and the Prolonged vowels (~). Some letters such as Ta' (ة، ت) and Alef (ا، ى) can have various forms at the end of the word[1] (Ryding, 2005; Ryding, 2014; Shihab, 2006). These details create challenges for the digital manipulation of the Arabic script. Although Arabic adheres to a fixed primary alphabetical order of the letters (Figure 2),[2] the arrangement of words with these special characters (what we refer to in this study as secondary alphabetical order) remains non-unified and lacks a standard. This creates a problem for alphabetical sorting algorithms in Arabic, which require stability as a key feature. Non-standardized sorting algorithms across commonly used software programs (e.g., Word, Excel, Python) create real problems in administrative systems, search engines, lexicons, and education, impacting 440+ million Arabic speakers and users. It is worth mentioning that the Arabic writing system is phonological, where direct correspondence exists between the Arabic written form of words and their pronunciation. Indeed, the written form mirrors exactly how words are pronounced in Arabic. Accordingly, phonological rules can play a role in Arabic sorting systems, as the remainder of this study will show.

[1] The script of the Quran involves much more special characters than regular Arabic writing. They guide the special phonological recitation of verses. They are not all analyzed in this study.
[2] The letter *Wow* precedes the letter *Ha* in the Western Arabic countries unlike Eastern Arabic countries in which *Ha* preceded the *Wow* (Mustafa, 1996).

Figure 2
Arabic 28 Alphabets Ordered in Columns From Right to Left

alif	ا	za	ز	qaf	ق
ba	ب	sin	س	kaf	ك
ta	ت	shin	ش	lam	ل
tha	ث	sad	ص	mim	م
jim	ج	dad	ض	nun	ن
ha	ح	ta	ط	ha	ه
kha	خ	dha	ظ	waw	و
dal	د	ain	ع	ya	ي
dhal	ذ	ghain	غ		
ra	ر	fa	ف		

As a root-pattern language, most Arabic dictionaries order entries depending on the triliteral root consonants (Wehr & Cowan, 1996) following the letters' alphabetical order. Another order system was based on the consonants' place of articulation as in *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, the first Arabic dictionary compiled by Al-Farahidi in the 8th century in which entries were ordered starting from "deepest" pharyngeal letters and ending with bilabial sounds (Al-Makhzūmi & Al-Samirā'ì, 1988).[3]

Establishing a unified scheme and a collating sequence for electronically sorting words with these special characters is crucial for Arabic users (Shihab, 2006). A collation sequence is vital because it determines the rules for comparing and sorting textual data in databases or large documents. It impacts many computerized operations' search results, data retrieval, consistency, and accuracy. It also ensures a successful migration between various software programs more easily. A unified system is necessary for filing systems, data cataloging, indexing, organization of long name lists, legal documents, medical files, reference books, lexicography, and corpora concordance lists, among other uses. As an example of such a need, educators, teachers, and university professors need a fixed alphabetical order in long lists of students' names, particularly when moving these lists from one platform to another, or when entering grades and or other personal information to ensure accuracy. Following a unified alphabetical order is even considered a force for democratizing access to information (Street, 2020).

Objectives

This study investigates the degree of unification and sophistication of Arabic alphabetical sorting systems operating in two widely used Microsoft Office Software 2021 programs, namely Word (MW henceforth) and Excel (ME henceforth). It examines how these programs deal with words with diacritics and special characters under different conditions during alphabetical sorting. Specifically, the study examines the sorting of:

- Different types of initial Alef **(**إ -أ - ا**)**
- Different positions of the glottal stop (أ- ؤ-ئ)
- Short vowel diacritics **(** َ ُ ِ **)**
- Nunnation (final –n indefiniteness symbol) **(**ً ٍ ٌ**)**

[3] An Arabic reference.

- Prolonged vowel (double vowel) **(~)**
- Gemination (double consonants) (ّ)
- Different final Ta shapes (ة -ت)
- Final Ta vs. final Ha (ة-ه)
- Different final Alef types (ا، ى، اء)

If a specific sorting scheme is found across these programs, the study discusses and evaluates it accordingly. The generated lists are then compared to a list obtained from Python that utilizes the Universal Unicode (UTF-8) system. Finally, a recommended order of sequencing these special characters in Arabic is proposed. The proposed system will operate based on the linguistic properties of every symbol. This effort aims to provide a standard Arabic collation sequence for special characters.

Research Questions

1. Is there a specific unified alphabetical order followed by MW and ME in sorting words with special characters?
2. Are the lists obtained from MW and ME identical to the order obtained from Python based on UTF-8?
3. What is the recommended system for alphabetically sorting special characters in Arabic?

Methodology

To evaluate how these systems sort words containing the various special characters mentioned above, the researchers, all native Arabic speakers with expertise in linguistic studies, meticulously compiled and revised a list of 38 actual Arabic words (Table 2). These words were clustered into 12 groups sharing the same consonantal trilateral root. Every word addresses the sorting problem of a specific special character (or combination of characters). The selection criteria for words depended mostly on varying the special character under investigation while holding the rest of the word exactly the same. Each group of these words shared almost the same stem or root of a word (almost the same letters) but with varying special characters (examples shown in Table 3). For every group, variation is only in the symbol under investigation.

Table 2
Arabic Words Included in the Study and Their English Meaning

Arabic word	English meaning	Arabic word	English meaning	Arabic word	English meaning
أبي	My father	سأل	Asked	عَصْرٍ	Age (genitive indefinite)
اثنين	Monday	سَمَا	Surpassed	عَصْرُ	Age (nominative)
إثنين	Two	سَمَاء	Sky	عَصْرَاً	Age (accusative indefinite)
اسم	Name	سؤل	Request	عَصَى	disobeyed
إمارة	Emirate/ principality	سئل	Was asked	الْعِلْم	Knowledge (definite)
أمارة	token/sign	صديقة	A friend (female)	قَلَمُ	A pen
أملاً	In hope of	صديقه	His friend (male)	الْقَلَمُ	The pen
آملاً	I am in hope of	ضَمَّنَ	Included	كِتَاب	A book
الزَّار	Al-Zar (African tradition)	ضَمَنَ	Guaranteed	كَتَبَ	Wrote
زَارَ	Visited	عَصَا	A stick	كُتُبُ	Books
زهرة	Flower	عَصَرَ	Squeezed	كُتِبَ	Was written
الزَّهْرَة	The flower	عَصْرٌ	Age (nominative indefinite)	كَتَبَة	Writers
				كَتَبَت	She wrote

Table 3
Special Characters Examined in the Present Study

Special characters	Name in Arabic	Description	Example/ possible minimal pairs	Type of difference indicated
ا - أ- إ	- همزة الوصل وهمزة القطع -على الألف أو تحت الألف	Various forms of the Alef letter (either combined or not combined with the glottal stop symbol)	اثنين – أمارة إمارة	Morphemic (indicating different morphemes)
أ- ؤ-ئ	مواضع الهمزة المختلفة	Glottal stop shape based on surrounding vowels	سَأَلَ- سُئِل- سُؤْل	Morphemic (indicating different morphemes
(ُ َ)	الحركات على الحروف	Short vowel diacritics above or below the letter	كَتَبَ كُتُبُ كُتِبَ عَصَرَ عَصْرُ	-Morphemic within words (indicating different morphemes) -Allomorphic at the last word

(ٌ ٍ ً)	التنوين	Nunnation- indicator of indefiniteness	عَصْرٌ-عَصْرٍ- عَصْرَاً	-Nunnation is an indefinite morpheme, But the difference between a word with or without it is allomorphic
(~)	المد	Prolonged vowels	أَمَلاً– آملاً	Morphemic
(ة ،ت)	التاء المربوطة والمفتوحة	Letter Ta shapes at the end of the word	كتبة – كتبت	Morphemic
(ا، ى، اء)	الألف الممدودة والمقصو	Letter Alef shapes at the end of the word	عَصَا-عَصَى فنى –فناء	Morphemic
(ة-ه)	التاء المربوطة والهاء المربوطة	Final Ta vs. final Ha	صديقُةٌ صديقة	Morphemic
(ّ)	الشدة	Gemination	ضَمَّن ضَمَن	Morphemic

The list of selected words was inserted into both MW and ME. Additionally, the list was entered in Python, and the program was required to sort the list. The alphabetical order of the list is generated from the three programs (see Table 4).

Results

Table 4
Alphabetically Sorted Lists Generated by MW, ME, and Python

MW		ME		Python (UTF-8)	
Word	Order	Word	Order	Word	Order
أبي	1	أبي	1	آملاً	1
اثنين	2	اثنين	2	أبي	2
إثنين	3	اسم	3	أمارة	3
اسم	4	الْعِلْم	4	أملاً	4
إمارة	5	الْقَلَمُ	5	إثنين	5
أمارة	6	الزَّار	6	إمارة	6
أملاً	7	الزَّار	7	اثنين	7
آملاً	8	الزَّهْرَة	8	اسم	8
الزَّار	9	إثنين	9	الزَّار	9
زَارَ	10	إمارة	10	الزَّهْرَة	10
زهرة	11	أمارة	11	الْعِلْم	11
الزَّهْرَة	12	أملاً	12	الْقَلَمُ	12
زَهْرَة	13	آملاً	13	زهرة	13
سأل	14	زَارَ	14	زَارَ	14
سَمَا	15	زَارَ	15	زَهْرَة	15
سَمَاء	16	زَهْرَة	16	سأل	16
سؤل	17	زهرة	17	سؤل	17

سئل	18	سَمَا	18	سئل	18
صديقة	19	سَمَاء	19	سَمَا	19
صديقه	20	سأل	20	سَمَاء	20
ضَمَّنَ	21	سؤل	21	صديقة	21
ضَمَنَ	22	سئل	22	صديقه	22
عَصَا	23	صديقة	23	ضَمَنَ	23
عَصَرَ	24	صديقة	24	ضَمَّنَ	24
عَصْرٌ	25	صديقه	25	عَصَا	25
عَصْرٍ	26	ضَمَنَ	26	عَصَرَ	26
عَصْرُ	27	ضَمَّنَ	27	عَصَى	27
عَصْرَاً	28	عَصَا	28	عَصْرٌ	28
عَصَى	29	عَصَرَ	29	عَصْرٍ	29
الْعِلْم	30	عَصَى	30	عَصْرَاً	30
قَلَمُ	31	عَصْرٌ	31	عَصْرُ	31
الْقَلَمُ	32	عَصْرٍ	32	قَلَمُ	32
كِتَاب	33	عَصْرَاً	33	كَتَبَ	33
كَتَبَ	34	عَصْرُ	34	كَتَبَة	34
كُتُبُ	35	قَلَمُ	35	كَتَبَت	35
كُتِبَ	36	كَتَبَ	36	كُتُبُ	36
كَتَبَة	37	كُتُبُ	37	كُتِبَ	37
كَتَبَت	38	كِتَاب	38	كِتَاب	38

Analysis

As indicated in Table 3, variations in the special characters under investigation within words are mostly morphemic in Arabic (with the exception of final letter diacritics and nunnation). This means that the existence of a special character makes a different (independent) word and must be considered by software programs as separate, independent characters with a status equal to a letter. Final letter diacritics and nunnation add only syntactic (case-marking) and semantic (indefinites) information to the word. Variations in them are allomorphic. In other words, variations in these special symbols do not create different words, and they do not require consideration as an independent character. The same applies to words written with short vowel diacritics and those in which the diacritics are not recorded. They can be the same words because short vowel diacritics are optional in Arabic writing. A decision on whether they are the same words or not requires contextual information to solve possible ambiguity. This information is important for the normalization processes needed for some software development.

Table 5 below summarizes the analysis of results obtained by comparing the three alphabetically sorted lists generated from the three programs.

Table 5
Comparison of the Alphabetical Lists Obtained From MW, ME, and Python

Conditions and special characters	MW	ME	Python	Unification Status
The letter *Alef* with or without glottal stop ء at the word-initial position (*Hamzat Alwasl and Hamzat Alqata'*) (أ-ا)	ا before أ *Hamzat Alqata' First*	ا before أ *Hamzat Alqata' First*	أ before ا *Hamzat Alwasl First*	Order is different
Words with and without the definite morpheme prefix {ال-}	Does not consider it part of the word; it sorts the words regardless of the existence of the definiteness prefix	Considers it as a part of the word (all definite words are sorted under each other)	Considers it as a part of the word (all definite words are sorted under each other)	Order is different
Glottal stop with the letter *Alef* at the word-initial position (*Hamzat Alwasl and Hamzat Alqata'*) when the rest of the word is different	Considers أ - ا one entity	Considers them different, ا is before أ	Considers أ - ا one entity	Order is different
The letter *Alef* with short vowels: أ – إ	إ before أ	إ before أ	أ before إ	Order is different
Glottal stop at the medial position of the word (medial *Hamzah*)	The order is: أ ؤ ئ	The order is: أ ؤ ئ	The order is: أ ؤ ئ	Order is the same
Short vowel diacritics (*Fatha* /a/ *Dhammah* /u/ *Kasrah* /i/ *Sokon*) ـَ ـُ ـِ ـْ	*Fatha* /a/ *Dhammah* /u/ *Kasrah* /i/ *Sokon*	*Fatha* /a/ *Dhammah* /u/ *Kasrah* /i/ *Sokon*	*Fatha* /a/ *Dhammah* /u/ *Kasrah* /i/ *Sokon*	Order is the same
Words with short vowel diacritics vs. words without short vowel diacritics	Non-diacritized before diacritized	Diacritized before non-diacritized	Non-diacritized before diacritized	Order is different

Varying lengths of words	It sorts words based on the alphabetical order of letters of the words (it compares the first letters, if similar, it compares the second, and so on)	It sorts by comparing vowel diacritics of letters of the words	It sorts by comparing vowel diacritics of letters of the words	Order is different
Indefinite suffix: nunnation				Order is the same
Geminated and non-geminated letters س	Geminated before non-geminated	Non-geminated before geminated	Geminated before non-geminated	Order is different
Prolongededed /a/ vowel آ vs. أ	أ before آ	أ before آ	آ before أ	Order is different
Final *Alef* shapes (*Mamdodah-Maqsurah*) ا – ى	ا before ى	ا before ى	ا before ى	Order is the same
Final *Ta* shapes: (Marbootah-Maftoohah) ت – ة	ة before ت	ة before ت	ة before ت	Order is the same
Final *Ta* vs. final *Ha (Ta Marbootah –Ha Marbootah)* ة – ه	ة before ه	ة before ه	ة before ه	Order is the same

Discussion

A quick glance at the generated ordered lists of words in the three programs in Table 4 shows that none of the lists are identical. Indeed, out of the 14 conditions for sorting, the three programs generated identical order for only 6 conditions comprising 42%. The remaining 58% show varying orders in the three programs (see Table 6). Considering the ranks (1, 2, 3, etc.), no rank (no horizontal line in Table 4) was occupied by the same word in the three programs. This indicates that users must be cautious when migrating long lists between programs.

Table 6
Percentages of Similarities and Differences in the Alphabetically Sorted Lists

	No.	%
Similarities	6	42%
Differences	8	58%
Total	14	100%

The discussion below is supported by some linguistic details and features of the different special characters. It is divided into two sections: one focusing on similarities between the lists of software programs and the other on their differences.

Similarities

The three programs sorted words with specific special characters similarly in the conditions discussed below.

- The three programs sort **short vowel diacritics** in Arabic (َ ُ) as follows: *Fatha* /a/, *Dhamah* /u/ then *Kasrah* /i/. This order is similar to the alphabetical order of the corresponding long vowel letters *Alef* (ا)/a:/, *Wow* (و) /u:/ and finally *Ya'* (ي) /i:/. The same order is followed in all programs with different glottal stop shapes within words (أ)- (ؤ) –(ئ).
- **Nunnation** that combines the indefinite {-n} with different syntactic case-marking short vowels is ordered the same across the three programs. The order is as follows: nominative (ٌ) followed by genitive (ٍ) and finally accusative (ً). Nominative is the default and unmarked case for nouns in Arabic.
- **Final *Alef*** types are ordered in the three programs as follows: (ا) before (ى). This can be explained linguistically since final (ا) is originally a (و) in the underlying root of the word, while (ى) is originally a (ي) in the underlying root of the word (Elmaghraby et al., 1989). In Arabic alphabetical order (و) precedes (ي).
- **Final *Ta*** shapes are ordered in all programs as follows: (ت) *Maftoohah,* then (ة) *Marbootah*. This order is justified linguistically since (ت) represents a more stable (invariant) sound as it has no allophones. It is phonetically more salient[4] than the sound represented by (ة). (ة) has the allophone /h/ (ه) used if the word is followed by a juncture (silence). In addition, the final /h/ is frequently devoiced in speaking in many dialects of Arabic. This results in the possibility of devoicing of (ة) in speech. Furthermore, (ت) is in many cases a part of the underlying trilateral root as in the word بيت "house," as opposed to (ة), which is often part of inflectional or derivational morphology as the feminine (ة) in صديقة "a female friend" (Halawani, 2017). [5]
- Comparing **final *Ta*** (ة) with **final *Ha*** (ه), (ة) always precedes the letter (ه) at the final position, an order aligned with the alphabetical order of the letters (ت) and (ه).

Differences

- Sorting words with initial position *Alef* with and without the glottal stop is variant in the three programs. These are referred to in Arabic as *Hamzat Alwasl* and *Hamzat Alqate'*. The two letters (أ) and (ا) are not allomorphic. Evidently, the two words (إثنين) and (اثنين) only differ in the glottal stop and the first means "Monday" while the other

[4] Phonological salience refers to prominence or perceptual importance/weight of certain sounds. More salient sounds stand out to speakers and listeners due to some phonetic characteristics such as loudness, duration, stress, syllabic complexity, voicing, etc. (Baroni, 2014; Gussman, 2002).
[5] An Arabic reference

means “two.” Python orders (ا) before (أ) while MS and ME orders them the opposite way. /أ/ is phonologically more salient (it contains a consonant and a vowel always) than /ا/ which represents only a vowel in continuous speech. Accordingly, it is linguistically justified to begin with *Alef* with glottal stop (أ) than with the one without (ا).

- However, if the two words contain different letters in the rest of the word as in اسم “name” and أبي “father,” MW and Python treat / ا / and /أ /as one entity and depend on the following letter to sort the words. Accordingly, أبي precedes اسم based on the alphabetical order of the second letter of the word. In this way, MS and Python yield a fluctuating list that appears to be not systemized. In addition, the two letters are independent as mentioned before. On the contrary, ME sticks to its predisposed sorting of (أ) before (ا). This is a more linguistically justified and systemized choice.
- Sorting initial *Alef* with varying vowel diacritics (أ) and (إ) was problematic too. MW and ME sort them staring with (إ) marked with the vowel /i/, i.e., *Kasrah*, followed by (أ) marked with the vowel /a/, i.e., *Fathah*. This is the reverse of the order of short vowel diacritics with other letters. Python systematically follows the same order of vowel diacritics as all other letters. This stand is justified linguistically since in the corresponding long vowels *Alef* and *Ya* are in the same order.
- Sorting words with and without the definite morpheme {-ال}, which is a prefix attached to definite words, was variant across the three programs. ME and Python consider the first letter of the definite article { -ال} as an independent *Alef* letter and a basic constituent of a word. Accordingly, they arrange all the definite words starting with - {ال} before other words that do not contain it. Conversely, ME disregards {-ال} and sorts words based on the first letter following the prefix. This is a better stand than listing all definite words before others, especially in long lists.
- Since vowel diacritics are optional in Arabic (as well as nunnation and germination symbols), many words are written without diacritics. The software programs were tested in sorting words with and without diacritics. MW and Python present the one without diacritics first, while in ME, the opposite happens. Either way is possible, but unification is essential. Furthermore, words without diacritics need not be considered independent entities since any word can be written in a diacritized or non-diacritized way.
- Regarding varying lengths of different words, the MW sorting system totally depends on the alphabetical order of the letters by comparing the first, second, and third letters of the word and so on. Varying vowel diacritics are disregarded in the sorting process. Conversely, ME and Python order words basically based on the vowel diacritics of the word regardless of its length. Python and ME sorting systems give more weight to vowel diacritics, while the MW sorting system gives more weight to letters. Clearly, considering the alphabetical order of letters with words of varying lengths is more reasonable, as letters are more phonological salient than short vowel diacritics and including short vowel diacritics is optional in Arabic writing.
- The comparison list contains words with geminated letter. A geminated letter means a double-consonant or Prolongeded consonant letter. In MW and Python, words with geminated letters precede words without geminated letters. However, the opposite order was found in ME’s generated list. Geminated letters are more phonologically salient, and accordingly, it is more coherent with sorting other characters to order it first.
- Comparing words that start with a lengthened (Prolongeded) vowel /a::/ mark on the *Alef* letter, and a regular *Alef* as in آملا (I hope) and أملا (in hope of), MW and ME place regular *Alef* before Prolongeded *Alef*. Python orders them in the opposite way.

Python's order is more linguistically justified since the Prolongeded *Alef* actually comprises a double vowel of the same kind. A Prolongeded vowel is longer and more salient phonologically, and it is more convenient to place it before the normal *Alef*. In this way, both doubled vowels and doubled consonants follow the same rule and are ordered before a single vowel and a single consonant.

Answers to Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, the answer to the first and second research questions is clearly "no." The generated lists of the three programs differ in many aspects. The software programs lack a standardized method of alphabetical sorting of Arabic words accompanied by special characters. Neither MS- nor ME-sorted lists are identical to Python's list.

The answer to the third question, which requires a recommended *secondary* system for unification of alphabetical sorting of Arabic words with special characters across different software programs, can be achieved by referencing the linguistic features of Arabic letters and sounds. These include reference to the trilateral underlying roots of the words, phonological strength and salience, as well as the original alphabetical order of Arabic letters. Based on the examined special characters in the present study and the linguistic justifications mentioned above, the following *secondary* alphabetical order recommendations are proposed:

- The programs are recommended to sort *Alef* with glottal stop (أ) before *Alef* with the one without (ا) (i.e., *Hamzat Alqate'* before *Hamzat Alwasl).*
- Sorting of short vowel diacritics in Arabic (َ ُ ِ) is recommended as follows: *Fatha* /a/, *Dhamah* /u/ then *Kasrah* /i/ (including *Alef*).
- It is more logical to disregard the definite prefix {-ال} and sort words based on the first letter following the prefix. This order is better than listing all definite words before others, especially in long lists.
- When sorting words with and without diacritics, either order is possible. However, words without diacritics are the unmarked choice, and this can be a reason to begin with them first.
- Considering the alphabetical order of letters with words of varying lengths is more reasonable than sorting words based on their short vowel diacritics.
- It is more coherent with other suggested rules of ordering to sort geminated letters before similar non-geminated letters.
- A prolonged vowel is better sorted before a similar non-prolonged vowel.

Conclusion

The study revealed a lack of consistency in the alphabetically ordered lists generated for the same group of Arabic words containing special characters when utilizing two Microsoft Office 2021 programs, namely MW and ME. The list was ordered differently in Python. This is not just a simple technical error—it's a linguistic and cultural oversight with consequences for data integrity and accessibility. This result highlights a critical issue requiring solutions from software developers. Efforts should be made to harmonize the sorting criteria across programs regarding short vowel diacritics, definite and indefinite words, words with and without diacritics, and words with gemination and prolonged vowels. Program users must be cautious not to consider alphabetically ordered generated outputs of the programs as identical, especially when transferring lists between programs.

Results revealed that, except for nunnation and final vowel diacritics, all the investigated special characters are morphemic and have a semantic effect just like a letter. Accordingly, they must be given the status of a letter in computerized programs. This fact is important when electronic normalization of texts is required. Linguistic features of letters and special characters can also be used to establish a standardized system for alphabetically collating Arabic special characters. Some of these linguistic features include the underlying trilateral root form of the word and phonological salience of different characters. Finally, the study proposed a secondary alphabetical system for collating special characters in Arabic that aims to unify collation rules and is justified through linguistic features as a step toward a standardized, intelligent sorting algorithm that respects the structure of Arabic. Software developers are encouraged to consider the system when developing an updated version of their programs.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

No AI technology tool was used in the writing process.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data used for analysis in this study can be accessed upon request through email communication with the corresponding author.

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Material Witnesses: Environmental Memory and Nonhuman Agency in the Works of Sooyeon Kim

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Korean artist Sooyeon Kim's multimedia practice reveals new modalities of environmental memory formation through material agency and heterochronic temporalities. By analyzing Kim's distinctive techniques—enamel layering, extinct wood printing, and botanical preservation installations—we demonstrate how organic and mineral materials function as active co-agents in memory inscription, challenging anthropocentric approaches to remembrance and historical understanding. Drawing on material ecocriticism and affect theory, we theorize "heterochronic assemblages" as artistic configurations where biological, geological, and human temporalities converge through material processes. Kim's use of Jeju Island botanical specimens, mineral pigments, and chemical solutions creates what we term "botanical memory assemblages"—complex networks that enable more-than-human forms of environmental remembrance. Through collaborative methodology integrating close material analysis with embodied critic-artist encounters, we reveal how Kim's works generate affective, atmospheric responses that exceed purely aesthetic categories. Our findings contribute to memory studies by demonstrating how materiality mediates historical experience across multiple temporal scales, particularly relevant for addressing environmental crisis in the Anthropocene. Kim's practice illustrates how artistic materials—from enamel's geological histories to wood's organic temporalities—participate in memory's construction and transmission. This study advocates for expanded, collaborative research paradigms in environmental humanities that attend to material and non-human agency in cultural memory formation, offering new methodological approaches for interdisciplinary scholarship addressing ecological and temporal multiplicity.

Keywords: material ecocriticism, heterochronic assemblages, more-than-human memory, Sooyeon Kim, relational aesthetics

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Introduction: Materiality, Ecology, and Affective Embodiment in Anthropocene Memory Studies

The Material-Ecological-Affective Turn in Memory Studies

Contemporary memory studies has witnessed a significant convergence of material, ecocritical, and affective approaches, recognizing that remembrance operates through complex networks involving human consciousness, non-human actors, and embodied emotional responses to environmental crisis. This shift challenges both anthropocentric models of memory and purely cognitive approaches to remembrance, revealing how materials, organic substances, environmental processes, and affective intensities actively participate in the construction and transmission of individual and collective memories.

Affective Ecocriticism and Embodied Environmental Experience

The emergence of affective ecocriticism has further complicated our understanding of how environmental and memorial experiences intersect through embodied encounters that exceed purely rational or representational frameworks. As recent scholarship demonstrates, environmental experience is fundamentally affective—involving complex interactions between emotional, physical, and intellectual responses that cannot be easily separated. This affective dimension becomes particularly important in Anthropocene contexts, where environmental crisis generates what Brennan (2004) terms as "ecological affects"—emotional responses to environmental loss, temporal acceleration, and species extinction that operate below the threshold of conscious cognition. Ecological affects—the complex interplay of emotional and sensory responses to natural and constructed environments—offer a critical lens for examining humanity's relationship with the natural world within American literary history. These affects, ranging from awe and joy to grief and nostalgia, are not merely passive reactions but active mediators shaped by sensory stimuli, cultural memory, and sociohistorical contexts. In literature, they serve as narrative forces that reveal how environments shape human consciousness and, conversely, how human perception imbues landscapes with meaning.

Critically engaging with these affects allows scholars to trace shifting attitudes toward nature—from frontier conquest to Anthropocene anxiety—while interrogating whose emotions are privileged in environmental discourse. By analyzing how literature elicits ecological empathy or alienation, this framework bridges the phenomenological and the political, offering new pathways for understanding environmental justice, multispecies ethics, and the role of narrative in ecological thought.

Sooyeon Kim's artistic practice emerges within this complex theoretical landscape, creating works that engage simultaneously with material processes, ecological relationships, and affective intensities in ways that challenge traditional boundaries between human and non-human, past and present, local and global experience. Her preservation of botanical specimens from Jeju Island, her use of "extinct wood print" techniques, and her accumulative enamel processes all participate in "heterochronic assemblages"—temporal configurations that bring together multiple scales of time while generating affective encounters with environmental and historical loss.

Her preservation of botanical specimens from Jeju Island, her deployment of "extinct wood print" techniques, and her accumulative enamel processes collectively constitute what we

theorize as heterochronic assemblages—a temporal mode that, following Jones and Arning's (2006) analysis of artistic temporality, "entangles divergent historical durations to disrupt linear chronologies" (p. 8). These material practices generate what Grosz (2004) describes as "a dynamic multiplicity" (p. 12), where ecological, geological, and artistic temporalities converge within singular aesthetic configurations.

Kim's assemblages operate through what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) theorize as "intensive becomings"—transformative processes that, as they explain, involve "intensive processes tending toward the (virtual) plane of consistency and/or toward (actual) stratification" (p. 40). These intensive becomings exceed representational logic to engage directly with what they term "forces of stratification"—the geological and temporal layering that organizes matter into determinate forms while simultaneously containing the potential for deterritorialization. The materiality of Kim's practice—from fossilized botanical matter to layered enamel surfaces—operates precisely within this tension between stratification and becoming, creating what Deleuze and Guattari describe as assemblages that "emerge through processes of coding and territorialization that can undergo stratification (formation), deterritorialization (dissolution), reterritorialization (reformation)" (p. 88).

Research Questions and Methodology

This study addresses four interconnected questions: How do material artistic practices embody and transmit memory in ways that exceed traditional representational strategies? How do non-human materials participate as active agents in memory's construction while generating affective encounters with environmental loss? How can collaborative artist-critic methodologies generate new forms of knowledge about memory's operation in more-than-human assemblages? And how do heterochronic assemblages address the temporal complexities of environmental crisis and cultural memory in Anthropocene contexts?

Our methodology combines close material analysis of Kim's artworks with collaborative interpretive frameworks developed through sustained dialogue between artist Sooyeon Kim and critic Issei Wake, while incorporating affective attention to the emotional and embodied dimensions of environmental encounter. This approach positions artistic practice not as an object of analysis but as a co-constitutive element in knowledge production, while attending to the agency of materials, non-human actors, and affective intensities in memory's formation.

Theoretical Framework: Toward a Material-Ecocritical-Affective Theory of Heterochronic Memory

Material Ecocriticism and Environmental Imagination

The Storied Materiality of Environmental Memory

Material ecocriticism, as developed by Iovino and Oppermann (2014), proposes that "matter and discourse mutually constitute each other in ways that make both material and discursive phenomena simultaneously real, significant, and effective in their agency" (p. 1). This framework becomes particularly powerful when combined with Buell's concept of environmental imagination—the capacity to perceive and respond to more-than-human agencies and temporalities that exceed anthropocentric frameworks.

Buell's (1995) analysis of Thoreau's development of biocentric vision provides crucial insights into how consciousness might expand to encompass the more-than-human world. As Buell argues, environmental imagination requires "a sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant, a sense of the environment as involving interplay between the human and the non-human, [and] a sense of organic community in which the human is only one voice in the larger conversation of beings" (p. 143).

Figure 1
Botanical Materials Preserved in Liquid Solutions Example

Kim's use of botanical materials preserved in liquid solutions exemplifies this intersection of material agency and environmental imagination. The preserved plant specimens function as what Iovino and Oppermann (2012) term "storied matter"—material substances that carry their own histories and agencies while intersecting with human narrative constructions (p. 451). Simultaneously, they embody what Buell would recognize as evidence of the more-than-human world's active participation in meaning-making processes.

Material Narrativity and Ecological Temporality

The concept of material narrativity challenges traditional distinctions between active subjects and passive objects, revealing how materials themselves participate in storytelling processes that extend across multiple temporal scales. In Kim's work, this manifests through what Ryan (2016) terms "botanical memory"—the ways in which plant materials carry environmental histories, seasonal cycles, and ecological relationships that intersect with human temporal experience while maintaining their own forms of agency.

The preservation process itself becomes a form of material narration that embodies moments when anthropocentric consciousness expands to acknowledge more-than-human agencies and temporalities. These materials continue to change, age, and respond to environmental conditions, making them active participants in the work's temporal unfolding while generating what we term "ecological affects"—emotional responses to environmental agency that operate through embodied encounter rather than intellectual recognition alone.

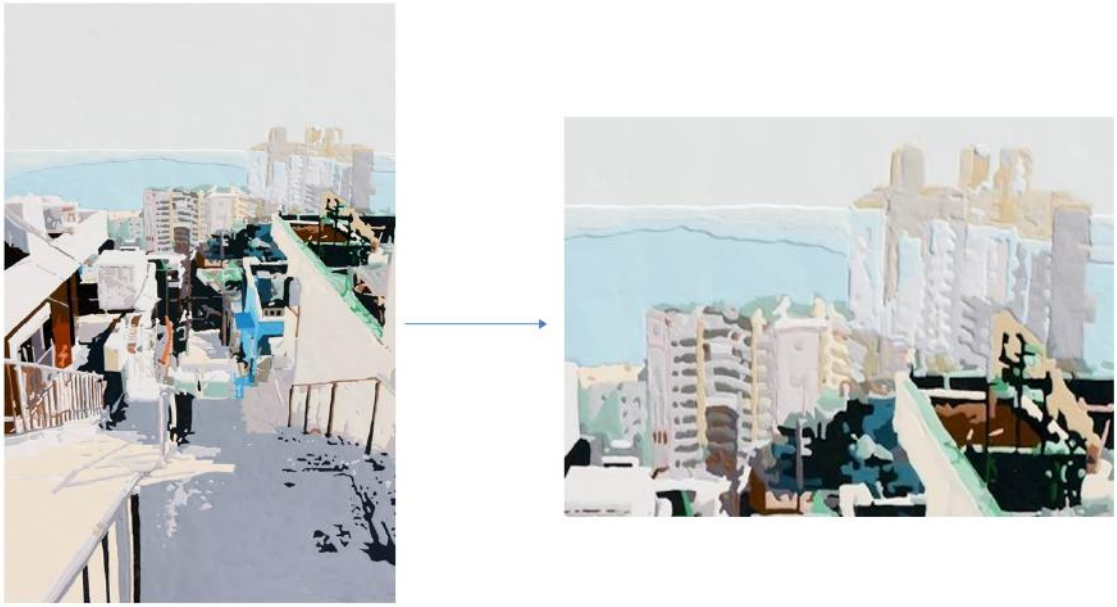
Heterochronic Assemblages in Kim's Material Practice

Enamel Technique: Geological Memory and Temporal Stratification

Kim's enamel works demonstrate how material accumulation can embody what we term "geological memory"—temporal processes that operate on scales far exceeding human biographical time while generating affective encounters that remain accessible to embodied human experience. The mineral-based enamel paints carry their own geological histories through their material composition, while the accumulative layering process creates sedimentary effects that mirror geological stratification while operating through human temporal scales.

This material practice aligns with what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) theorize as assemblages—dynamic configurations where "a body is defined only by longitude and latitude: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude)" (p. 260). Kim's enamel surfaces operate precisely through this dual register: their material longitude encompasses the geological temporalities embedded in mineral pigments, while their affective latitude generates encounters with deep time that exceed representational frameworks.

Figure 2
Layering as Memory Stratification: Memory_162.2x97.0_enamel on canvas_2014



The accumulative layering process in Kim's enamel works creates what we term "stratigraphic affects"—emotional and physical responses that mirror the temporal layering embedded within geological formations. These material practices participate in what Barad (2007) describes as "material-discursive practices" where "matter and meaning are not distinct elements" but rather "materially enfolded" through processes that "iteratively intra-act" (p. 152). The enamel layers embody this intra-activity by simultaneously carrying geological memory and generating contemporary affective encounters.

New Materialist Frameworks and Embodied Temporality

Contemporary materialist thought provides crucial theoretical grounding for understanding how Kim's practice transforms traditional concepts of matter and temporality. This intellectual movement reconceptualizes matter not as static substance but as dynamic, processual becoming—a shift that fundamentally alters our understanding of how artistic materials participate in meaning-making processes (Bennett, 2010, p. 20).

New materialist perspectives challenge traditional hierarchical distinctions between mental and physical realms, cultural and natural domains, and linguistic and material spheres. As Haraway (1988) argues in her foundational work on material-semiotic actors, these approaches reveal how "the boundaries between physical and non-physical are very imprecise for us" (p. 195). This theoretical reorientation advocates for fluid boundaries and interconnected relationalities, examining how material conditions both influence and are influenced by cultural practices and meaning-making systems.

Within this framework, embodied existence participates actively in meaning-making processes through what can be understood as continuously transforming networks of relationships. These dynamic configurations resist fixed boundaries and emphasize what Bennett (2010) calls "thing-power"—the vital materiality that "can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us" (p. 6). Kim's material assemblages operate precisely through such thing-power, creating encounters where mineral, organic, and technological agencies converge to generate new forms of temporal experience.

This perspective emphasizes the indivisible connection between ontology, epistemology, and ethics through what Barad (2007) terms "ethico-onto-epistemology"—the recognition that "ethics, ontology, and epistemology are not separable" because "we are part of the world in its differential becoming" (p. 185). Kim's practice embodies this integration by creating material encounters that simultaneously raise questions about what exists (ontology), how we know it (epistemology), and how we should respond (ethics) to environmental crisis and historical loss.

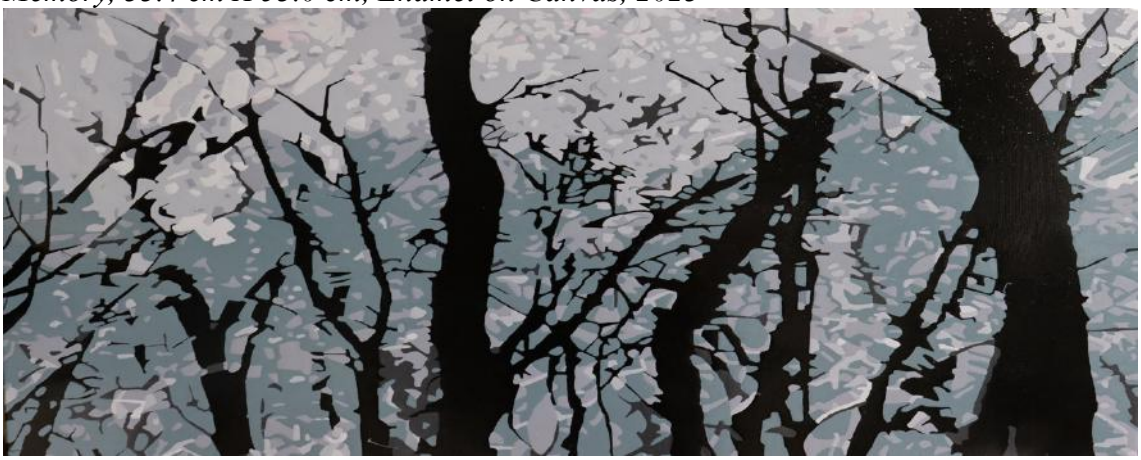
Material Palimpsest and Deep Time Affects

Beginning with photographic imagery, Kim builds up layers of enamel paint that create what we term "material palimpsest"—surfaces that bear traces of multiple temporal moments while engaging with deep geological time through their mineral composition. This process materializes what Morton (2013) terms "hyperobjects" while remaining present and effective in human experience (p. 1).

The affective dimensions of these material palimpsests operate through what we term "deep time affects"—emotional and physical responses to encountering temporal scales that exceed human biographical experience. Recent research in environmental psychology reveals how encounters with geological time can generate complex emotional responses that combine awe, anxiety, and wonder in ways that exceed conventional emotional categories (Clayton & Manning, 2018, pp. 45–67).

Figure 3
Original Picture

Figure 4
Memory, 33.4 cm X 53.0 cm, Enamel on Canvas, 2023



Each layer of enamel exists in what Morton (2013) calls "strange stranger" relationship with other layers—they coexist without fully merging, creating uncanny effects where familiar photographic imagery becomes alien through material transformation (pp. 38–39). This strangeness generates what we term "material uncanny"—emotional responses to the familiar becoming strange through material process rather than psychological projection.

Case Study: "Memory" Series (2016-2023) - Affective Becoming and Environmental Imagination

The evolution of Kim's "Memory" series over seven years demonstrates what we term "affective becoming"—the way artworks continue to develop through ongoing material processes that generate changing emotional and physical responses over extended time. The enamel surfaces continue to cure, crack, and age, making each work a site of ongoing material activity that requires sustained attention and repeated encounter.

The temporal dimension that Buell (1995) identifies as central to environmental awareness—where meaning emerges through sustained observation rather than immediate comprehension—finds parallel expression in Kim's enamel practice (pp. 78–82). The material changes in the enamel surfaces become visible only through repeated encounters over

extended time, creating what Buell would recognize as opportunities for developing expanded environmental consciousness (p. 156).

Figure 5
Memory, 162.2 cm X 97.0 cm, Enamel on Canvas, 2018

The monochromatic palette—predominantly mineral grays and earth tones—connects the works to geological coloration while simultaneously evoking the black-and-white photography that serves as their starting point. This creates temporal bridges between photographic time, geological time, and exhibition time, embodying what Grosz (2004) terms "time's material condition" while generating what we term "chromatic affects"—emotional responses to color that operate through material rather than purely optical encounter (pp. 187–192).

"Extinct Wood Print": Organic Decay and Regenerative Affects

Figure 6
Sketch of "Figure 8"

Figure 7
Process of "Figure 8"

Figure 8
Memory, 22.7 cm X 15.8 cm, Extinct Woodcut Print, 2017

Kim's "extinct wood print" technique transforms traditional printmaking through what we term "regenerative destruction"—a process where the degradation of organic materials generates new forms of creative possibility while addressing environmental crisis through material practice. This technique exemplifies "thing-power"—the capacity of materials to act as vital forces rather than inert matter—while generating complex emotional responses to extinction and environmental loss.

Wood as Affective Material Agent

The woodblocks in Kim's process function as what Bennett (2010) terms "actants"—entities with their own forms of agency that contribute to the work's development in ways that exceed the artist's conscious control while generating emotional responses that exceed purely aesthetic categories (pp. 20–24). Wood grain, density variations, and moisture content all

participate in determining the final appearance of each print, making the material an active collaborator in both creative and affective processes.

Recent research in plant cognition reveals how trees maintain complex forms of memory through their growth patterns, seasonal responses, and chemical communication systems (Gagliano et al., 2017; Trewavas, 2003). Kim's use of wood as artistic material creates encounters with these more-than-human forms of memory while subjecting them to processes of creative destruction that mirror larger patterns of environmental loss and transformation.

As Kim (2019) explains: “The extinction woodcut technique... is a process of removing the difficult parts from the memory and then collecting new pieces again” (artist statement). This description reveals how the material process itself becomes a form of thinking and feeling that operates through embodied encounter with material resistance rather than purely conceptual manipulation.

Organic Temporality and Environmental Grief

The technique embodies what we term “organic temporality”—temporal rhythms derived from natural processes rather than mechanical repetition, while generating what recent environmental scholarship terms “anticipatory grief”—emotional responses to projected future loss that operate through present encounter with material processes (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2017; Ray, 2020).

Each carving responds to the wood's seasonal changes, grain patterns, and aging processes, creating prints that register environmental conditions alongside intentional artistic decisions. This creates what we term “material weather”—the ways in which artworks participate in environmental processes while maintaining their status as cultural objects.

The progressive destruction of the woodblock materializes what Braidotti (2013) terms “sustainable transformations”—processes of change that generate new possibilities through creative engagement with material limitations while acknowledging finite resources (pp. 45–67). Rather than depleting resources, the technique transforms one material configuration (the intact woodblock) into multiple configurations (the series of prints) while generating encounters with loss and transformation that address larger environmental concerns.

Mixed Media Installations: Botanical Memory and Affective Assemblages

Kim's mixed media installations create what we term “botanical memory assemblages”—complex networks involving preserved plant materials, chemical solutions, technological apparatus, human perception, and affective response. These works exemplify what Haraway (2016) calls “symbiogenetic” processes, where meaning emerges through ongoing interactions between different forms of life, matter, and emotional response (pp. 58–98).

"Memorium": Preserved Life and Atmospheric Memory

Figure 9
Memorium, Mixed Media Installation, 2018

Figure 10
Memorium, Mixed Media Installation, 2018

The "Memorium" installation features botanical specimens preserved in liquid solutions—a technique that maintains organic forms while transforming their material conditions and creating complex atmospheric effects that operate through multiple sensory modalities. These preserved plants function as what van Dooren (2014) terms "lively commodities"—entities that retain forms of biological agency even within human cultural systems while generating emotional responses that exceed commodification (pp. 89-112).

The preservation process itself becomes a form of collaboration between human intention, chemical processes, organic matter, and atmospheric generation. The specimens continue to change color, position, and appearance over time, making them active participants in the work's temporal development while creating what we term "atmospheric memories"—environmental conditions that generate lasting emotional impressions through sensory encounter.

The installation creates what Anderson (2009) terms "atmospheric attunement"—emotional responsiveness to environmental conditions that operates below the threshold of conscious

cognition while profoundly shaping experience. Viewers report complex emotional responses that combine fascination, melancholy, and wonder in ways that exceed conventional aesthetic categories.

More-Than-Human Memory Networks and Environmental Imagination

From a material ecocritical perspective, the preserved botanical specimens carry what we term "phyto-memory"—forms of environmental memory encoded in plant structures, seasonal rhythms, and ecological relationships that intersect with human biographical memory and cultural memory to create complex temporal assemblages.

The installation creates what Tsing (2015) calls "contaminated diversity"—spaces where human and non-human histories become entangled in ways that resist easy separation while generating encounters with ecological relationship and environmental loss (pp. 27–44). Viewers encounter not just representations of nature but actual organic matter that carries its own forms of historical inscription and ongoing agency.

Collaborative Interpretation: Affective Dialogue and More-Than-Human Knowledge Production

Methodology of Embodied More-Than-Human Collaboration

Our collaborative methodology expanded beyond human dialogue to include sustained attention to material agencies, non-human actors, and affective intensities in Kim's works. This approach recognizes what Haraway (2016) terms "response-ability"—the capacity to respond to and with other entities in collaborative meaning-making processes that include emotional and embodied dimensions alongside intellectual engagement (p. 34). Such methodological approaches align with what new materialist scholars identify as the need to account for the agency of materials themselves in artistic practices, where "material agencies" operate alongside human intentionality in the creation of meaning (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 9). This collaborative framework acknowledges that meaning-making emerges through entangled relationships between human consciousness, material substances, and more-than-human entities, creating what Cooke and Colucci-Gray describe as "performative, rather than representative" forms of knowledge production (p. 187).

Affective Material Interviews and Embodied Encounters

In addition to conventional interviews, our research included what we term "affective material interviews"—extended periods of observation and interaction with Kim's works that attended to their ongoing material changes, non-human agencies, and the emotional and physical responses they generated. These sessions revealed aspects of the works that exceeded both artistic intention and initial critical interpretation while generating forms of knowledge that operated through embodied encounter rather than purely intellectual analysis (Foster, 2019, p. 89). Such methodological approaches align with what Fries identifies as "experiential embodied engagements with materiality" that follow "material leads through sentient" processes of investigation (p. 156).

The methodology was grounded in sustained, reflective research practices that prioritize deep engagement and repeated encounters with the subject matter over immediate analysis and quick conclusions. This slower temporality allowed for noticing material changes and

affective responses that would be invisible to conventional academic research timelines, creating what DeVerteuil describes as "alternative ways to do research" that resist the pressures of accelerated academic production (p. 145). As Bergthaller et al. argue, such approaches are particularly crucial for environmental humanities work, where understanding ecological processes requires attentiveness to temporal scales that exceed conventional research timeframes (p. 275).

For example, the preserved botanical specimens in "Memorium" continue to shift position within their liquid solutions while generating changing atmospheric effects that influence the emotional tone of the installation space. These material changes function as forms of non-human commentary on the works' meanings, requiring ongoing interpretive attention that exceeds single moments of analysis while generating cumulative emotional responses through repeated encounter (Brown, 2012, p. 67). Such processes demonstrate what Nordström (2018) identifies as the capacity of creative works to generate "events at sites of encounter" that unfold across extended temporal frameworks (p. 201).

The Productive Discrepancy of Affective Material Agency

Our collaboration revealed significant discrepancies not only between artistic intention and critical interpretation but also between human interpretations and material behaviors, and between intellectual analysis and embodied response. We term these "affective material productive discrepancies"—generative spaces where non-human agencies and emotional responses contribute to meaning-making in ways that exceed human control while opening new possibilities for understanding.

The enamel paintings, for instance, continue to develop surface textures and color variations through ongoing chemical processes that generate changing visual and tactile effects alongside shifting emotional responses. These material and affective changes require ongoing interpretive engagement that positions both artist and critic as respondents to material agency and emotional intensity rather than sole authors of meaning.

Environmental Imagination and Collaborative Ecology

Our collaboration demonstrates how meaning emerges through complex assemblages involving human consciousness, material substances, environmental processes, and affective intensities. This approach extends both Bourriaud's (2002) relational aesthetics and Buell's environmental imagination to include non-human actors and embodied responses as participants in collaborative meaning-making.

Beyond Human Subject-Object Relations: Embodied Environmental Knowledge

Traditional art criticism maintains distinctions between human subjects and material objects, but our material-ecocritical-affective approach reveals how subjects and objects co-constitute each other through ongoing material-discursive-affective practices. Kim's artworks are not complete objects awaiting human interpretation but ongoing material processes that continue to develop through multispecies interactions while generating changing emotional and physical responses.

The preservation solutions in "Memorium," for example, create chemical environments that continue to interact with organic specimens in ways that generate new visual, atmospheric,

and emotional effects. These material processes contribute to the works' meanings alongside human interpretive activities while creating ongoing opportunities for embodied learning that exceeds conventional academic frameworks.

Conclusion

Toward Heterochronic Environmental Memory Studies

This study demonstrates how attention to heterochronic assemblages, environmental imagination, and affective ecocriticism can generate new insights into memory's operation as a more-than-human phenomenon that addresses environmental crisis through artistic and collaborative practice. Sooyeon Kim's artistic practice reveals memory as emerging through complex assemblages involving human consciousness, organic matter, mineral substances, chemical processes, technological mediations, and affective intensities that operate across multiple temporal scales while maintaining connection to embodied experience.

Our material-ecocritical-affective approach extends traditional memory studies by revealing the active participation of non-human actors and environmental processes in memory's construction while demonstrating how affective intensities and atmospheric conditions contribute to memorial experience. Kim's botanical specimens, mineral pigments, and preservation technologies function as material narrators that contribute their own forms of agency to memory's ongoing development while creating opportunities for environmental imagination and ecological consciousness.

Our collaborative methodology suggests that memory studies requires approaches that attend to memory's distributed nature across human and non-human networks while incorporating affective attention and environmental imagination. The productive discrepancies that emerged through our dialogue—including discrepancies between human interpretation and material behavior, between intellectual analysis and embodied response—reveal memory as an ongoing process of negotiation involving multiple forms of agency, temporal scales, and environmental relationships.

As memory studies continues to evolve in an era of environmental crisis and technological transformation, we argue for increased attention to the heterochronic dimensions of remembrance and the collaborative possibilities of more-than-human research that incorporates environmental imagination and affective ecocritical approaches. Only through such approaches can the field adequately address the complex challenges of memory in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world where human history is inseparably entangled with non-human processes and environmental crisis demands new forms of temporal and ecological consciousness.

Affective Ecocriticism and Environmental Care

The affective dimensions of Kim's work address what recent environmental scholarship identifies as crucial challenges for environmental care and political response. Environmental crisis generates complex emotional responses that combine grief, anxiety, love, and hope in ways that exceed conventional political frameworks while requiring new forms of cultural and artistic attention.

Kim's preservation techniques create what we term “caring encounters” with environmental loss—experiences that acknowledge destruction while maintaining possibilities for ongoing relationship, attention, and responsibility. These encounters operate through embodied response and affective intensity rather than purely intellectual recognition, generating forms of environmental care that exceed both sentimental attachment and scientific objectification.

Recent scholarship in environmental humanities reveals how environmental care requires forms of attention that can encompass both intimate local relationships and vast spatial and temporal scales simultaneously. Kim's heterochronic assemblages create opportunities for such multi-scalar attention by bringing together biological, geological, technological, and human biographical time in configurations that remain accessible to embodied human experience while acknowledging more-than-human agencies and environmental relationships.

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The Influence of Achievement Motivation and Time Management Skills on Academic Achievement of Medical Faculty Students

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Abstract

Medical students generally have academic abilities and high discipline compared to students in other faculties. In terms of discipline, medical students must have good time management to deal with a busy schedule of lectures, practicums, and assignments. Perseverance and mental endurance are also key to completing long and challenging studies. The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of achievement motivation (AM) and time management (TM) on academic achievement (AA). This study was a cross-sectional study. The subjects of the study were students of the Medical Faculty at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The instruments used in this study were the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C) and Assessment of Time Management Skills. The analysis technique used is multiple linear regression analysis by conducting t-tests and f-tests. In the classical assumption test, the data is declared normal, there is no heteroscedasticity and no multicollinearity. The results of the f test obtained a t-value of 1.059 < from t table 1.688 and a sig value of .297 > 0.05 so it is stated that there is no significant influence of AM partially on AA. Furthermore, TM with a t-value of -.408 < from t table 1.688 and a sig value of .686 > 0.05 stated that there is no significant influence of TM partially on AA. R Square shows a figure of 0.035 stating that the magnitude of the influence of the AM and TM variables simultaneously on AA is 3.5%. Although there is no significant influence, it does not mean that there is no influence between AM and TM on AA, there is an influence but, it is small only 3.5%.

Keywords: achievement motivation, time management skills, academic achievement

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Introduction

Academic achievement is one of the most important criteria in assessing students' ability to complete university studies and graduate. The achievement of medical students is very important because it reflects their understanding of medical science and their ability to apply this knowledge in clinical settings. In addition, medical students often face unique challenges, such as high study load, demands for practical skills, and pressures in clinical practice. Medical students are considered the primary recipients of educational services and are the best source for identifying problems in medical or clinical education, because they are directly and indirectly involved in this interaction process (Abdolalipour et al., 2024).

Medical students generally have academic abilities and high discipline compared to students in other faculties. Academically, medical students face a heavy study load, starting from understanding basic sciences such as anatomy, physiology, and pharmacology to the clinical stage, which requires in-depth understanding and analytical skills in diagnosing and treating patients.

AA is the result of a student's accumulated grades as indicated by GPA (Alammar et al., 2022). Achievement is the result of students' accumulated academic scores that reflect their achievements in the learning process, which are usually indicated by the Cumulative Achievement Index (GPA). GPA is one of the main indicators in assessing a person's academic success because it reflects their understanding, skills, and consistency in learning during their studies. In addition to GPA, AA can also be measured through other achievements, such as academic awards, participation in research, and academic or non-academic competitions. Factors that influence AA include study habits, time management, motivation, social support, and a conducive learning environment. By implementing effective and disciplined study strategies, students can improve their GPA and increase their chances of success in the academic and professional world.

AA is very important for all students who want to achieve a successful career. Study habits and routines are essential to achieve this goal (Aljaffer et al., 2024). AA is an important factor for students who want to achieve success in their careers. Good study habits and routines play a major role in achieving this goal. Effective time management, active learning, and creating a conducive learning environment can help students understand the material better.

Medical students are required to continue learning throughout their lives because of the dynamic nature of medical science. In terms of discipline, medical students must have good TM to deal with a busy schedule of lectures, practicums, and assignments. Perseverance and mental endurance are also key to completing long and challenging studies. Medical students must uphold ethics and professional responsibility from an early age, especially in interacting with patients and other medical personnel. This combination of strong academic abilities and high discipline is what shapes medical students into competent and responsible prospective doctors.

AM is defined as the processes within a person in which behaviors that lead him to achieve standards of excellence (better than others/better than his own previous achievements/perfection of tasks) are aroused and maintainedb (Purwanto, 2022). Motivation is important in the academic performance of medical students due to the highly intensive nature of medical programs (Wu et al., 2020). Motivation is recognized as an important factor

because it helps students achieve good academic performance, well-being and satisfaction, and also helps them become good professionals (Kavousipour et al., 2015).

Effective TM can support AA and reduce stress, tension and anxiety, but students often face difficulties in maintaining a balance between academic life and personal-social life (Abdur Rashid et al., 2020; Alyami et al., 2021). The concept of TM skills is often used in conjunction with cognitive and mental functions and the TM aspects of activity and participation (Janeslätt et al., 2018).

There are many previous studies on TM and AM towards AA, but there is something new in this study where the researcher examined samples that have special characteristics. It is said to have special characteristics because the samples used are students of the Faculty of Medicine, which generally consists of students with high commitment, discipline and have good AA.

Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive survey research design. Respondents in this study were students of the Faculty of Medicine, Surabaya State University. The sampling technique used in this study was quota sampling. Quota sampling was chosen for reasons of research effectiveness. The number of samples determined by the researcher was 36, and it exceeded the Slovin Formula with a minimum number of samples with an error rate of 10%.

Questionnaires are one of the data collection techniques to analyze knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and human characteristics. Questionnaires are in the form of a list of structured questions or statements submitted to respondents. Each statement item must be valid in order to measure what is to be measured. In addition, the questionnaire must also be reliable, meaning it will produce consistent results over time so that the questionnaire is permanent (Bolarinwa, 2015; Heale & Twycross, 2015; Ningsih et al., 2021; Sürücü & Maslakçi, 2020; Taherdoost, 2018).

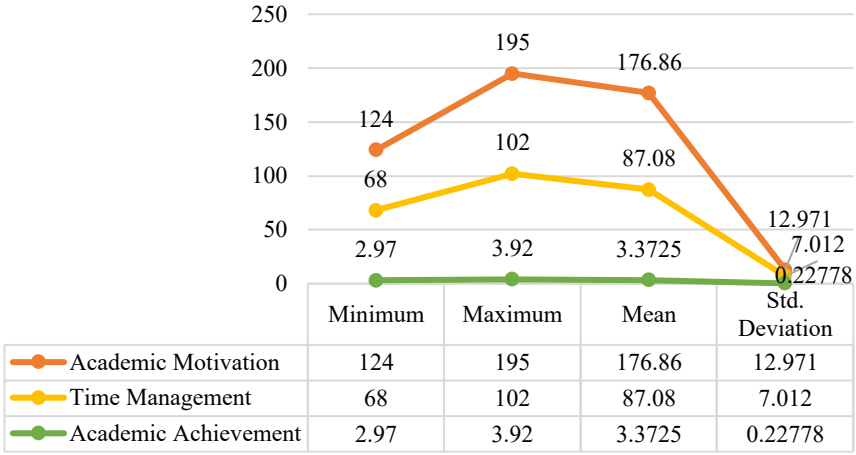
The instrument on variable TM used Assessment of Time Management Skills (Janeslätt et al., 2018; Kapp et al., 2020). The instrument on variable academic motivation use Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28) (Algharaibeh, 2021; Miulescu, 2019; Zeng & Yao, 2023). The Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) is a valuable instrument whose measurement distinguishes motivation derived from interests and actual identification from motivation derived from external control (Utvær & Haugan, 2016). Dimensionality analysis for AMS consisted of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and demotivation, with strong evidence of appropriate adjustment and discrimination (Souza et al., 2021). The data collection procedure includes the process of preparing a Google form, then sharing the link to students of the Faculty of Medicine and limiting the filling time to no more than one week from the time the link is provided. The researcher explained the importance of honesty and responsibility for filling out the statements in the contents of each statement in the instrument.

Researchers conducted classical assumption tests including normality tests, heteroscedasticity tests, and multicollinearity tests. After the regression analysis was conducted, hypothesis testing will be conducted with the f test, t test, and coefficient of determination.

Result and Discussion

The research results show the data displayed in descriptive statistics as follows:

Figure 1
Descriptive Statistics



The results of the normality test with the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test are as follows:

Table 1
One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		AM	TM	AA
N		36	36	36
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	176.86	87.08	3.3725
	Std. Deviation	12.971	7.012	.22778
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.125	.095	.112
	Positive	.081	.061	.112
	Negative	-.125	-.095	-.063
Test Statistic		.125	.095	.112
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.172[c]	.200[c,d]	.200[c,d]

In the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test normality test, the sig. value is > 0.05 with AM of .172, the sig. value of TM is .200 and the sig. value of AA is .200 so that the data is stated as normal.

The results of the heteroscedasticity test are as follows:

Table 2
Heteroscedasticity Test

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.099	.360		.275	.785
	AM	.001	.002	.072	.333	.741
	TM	-.001	.004	-.037	-.174	.863

In the heteroscedasticity test with the Glejser test on the AM and TM variables with sig values of .741 and .863. both > 0.05, it is stated that there is no heteroscedasticity.

The results of the multicollinearity test are as follows:

Table 3
Multicollinearity Test VIF Value

Coefficients[a]			
Model		Collinearity Statistics	
		Tolerance	VIF
1	TM	.652	1.534
	AM	.652	1.534

Furthermore, the results of the multicollinearity test with tolerance and VIF values of TM .655 > 0.100 and 1,534 < 10.00 it is stated that there is no multicollinearity.

The results of the T test are as follows:

Table 4
t-Test

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.187[a]	.035	-.024	.23044

The results of the F test are as follows:

Table 5
ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.063	2	.032	.597	.556[b]
	Residual	1.752	33	.053		
	Total	1.816	35			

The significance value obtained was 0.556 > 0.05, which means that the TM and AM variables simultaneously have no effect on AA.

Table 6
Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.920	.573		5.098	.000
	AM	.004	.004	.224	1.059	.297
	TM	-.003	.007	-.086	-.408	.686

T value 1.059 < from t table 1.688 and sig value .297 > 0.05 then it is stated that there is no significant influence of AM partially on AA. Furthermore, TM with t value -.408 < from t

table 1.688 and sig value .686 > 0.05 it is stated that there is no significant influence of TM partially on AA.

In order for students to successfully plan big things in themselves to be effective in TM, they need to have an awareness of the factors that occupy time. Students need to have a good understanding of how long it takes to complete individual tasks and direct themselves, and be able to make short-term plans (Adams & Blair, 2019). Students' attitude towards TM, short-term and long-term planning plays an important role in improving their GPA (Mulugeta & Pandian, 2022).

Time is a resource that must be managed in a forward-thinking manner. It cannot be regenerated and we must be ready to use it when the time comes. Planning is essential in managing and learning to manage time to complete work with the desired quality. This is an important skill to learn to be productive and fulfilled while making time for other important activities with family, friends, or simply to pursue one's own interests. TM is not about doing the wrong thing faster, t is about doing the right thing, at the right time.

The skills that a person has in managing time, completing tasks, planning schedules, and using time effectively and efficiently so that it provides benefits for him. TM can be trained by anyone. Even individuals who have the ability to manage TM can achieve several goals simultaneously. Good TM and study motivation affect GPA (Andari & Nugraheni, 2016). Previous studies have shown a significant and positive relationship between TM and AM of nursing students. This shows that students' AM increases through successful control and planning of activities within time limits (Ghiasvand et al., 2017; Vu et al., 2022). Good TM skills are necessary for students to learn. Students must take the necessary approaches and implement the strategies to be effective and more productive. TM skills give students the ability to plan ahead and prioritize upcoming tasks and events. This is an important factor in keeping students organized and avoiding procrastination, and ultimately leads to academic success (Cyril, 2015). In addition, the learning environment significantly influences students' professionalism and AA (Almansour et al., 2024).

Structured study habits greatly influence students' AA. Some positive study habits, such as good time management, effective note-taking techniques, active learning, and maintaining consistency and discipline can improve understanding and memory of the contents of the lesson material (Jafari et al., 2019). A conducive learning environment, the use of learning strategies that suit each person's learning style, and the ability to cope with stress and stay motivated also play an important role in academic success. Students who have structured study habits tend to achieve better results than those who study irregularly or rely solely on overnight study systems. Therefore, building good study habits early on can be a long-term investment in education.

It is important for students to identify their strengths and weaknesses to help adjust their study techniques to achieve desired learning outcomes. Students are also encouraged to create individualized learning plans with their academic advisors (O' Sullivan et al., 2024).

Conclusion

AA is essential for all students who want to achieve a successful career. Factors that influence AA include study habits, TM, AM, social support, and a conducive learning environment. By

implementing effective study strategies and discipline, students can improve their GPA and increase their chances of success in the academic and professional world.

Time is a resource that must be managed in a forward-looking manner. The skills that a person has in managing time, completing tasks, making schedules, and utilizing time effectively and efficiently so that it provides benefits for him. The results of the f test obtained no significant effect of TM partially on AA. R Square shows a number stating the magnitude of the influence of the AM and TM variables simultaneously on AA. Although there is no significant effect, it does not mean that there is no effect between AM and TM on AA, there is an effect, but it is small.

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Factors Influencing University Students' Travel Destination Selection Decision

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Abstract

This research examines the factors influencing university students' decision-making in selecting travel destinations and how these factors affect travel behavior. This quantitative study employs survey research, with data collected from 406 university students using questionnaires. The data were analyzed using multiple regression statistics to identify key influential factors. The study found that the majority of respondents rated their opinions on travel decision-making factors at the highest average level (4.36). The top three factors agreed upon by the respondents were safety (4.48), price (4.47), and environment (4.45), respectively. Hypothesis testing revealed that culture and history, travel convenience, sustainability, worthiness, price, experience creation, and self-development travel are significant travel decision-making factors that statistically influence travel behaviour at the .05 level.

Keywords: tourism communication, tourism decision, tourism behavior

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Introduction

The significance of tourism today extends far beyond leisure and recreation; it has profound impacts on both economic and social spheres. By providing opportunities for individuals to experience diverse cultures and environments, tourism has become a vital driver of national development. In the modern era—where technology and long-distance transportation have advanced substantially—travel has become increasingly convenient and accessible. Furthermore, tourism fosters social interaction, mutual understanding, and stronger societal connections, making it a key instrument in cultivating cohesive and resilient communities.

Tourism also serves as a platform for personal growth and the acquisition of various skills, including foreign language proficiency and knowledge of history and cultural heritage across different destinations.

University student travel, in particular, has emerged as an increasingly popular form of tourism. This group often seeks meaningful travel experiences that contribute to self-development. This study focuses specifically on Thai university students who travel within Thailand.

Travel among university students typically combines learning with enjoyment. The primary objective is to develop life skills while also gaining knowledge about the culture, history, and key attractions of the places they visit. Moreover, such travel provides opportunities to strengthen social and teamwork skills, including communication, problem-solving, and collaboration.

These students often travel in groups—usually with friends or classmates—by car, bus, or train. Group travel enhances the sense of enjoyment, safety, and group cohesion. Their preferred accommodations are typically budget-friendly, such as shared rooms or low-cost hotels, allowing them to minimize expenses while practicing life skills such as bed-making, cleaning, and money management during the trip.

The students also prioritize fun and educational activities. They tend to select destinations that are both interesting and compatible with their group's budget, such as national parks (e.g., Khao Luang) or culturally significant sites. In terms of dining, they commonly choose affordable restaurants or popular local food to further reduce costs and increase the enjoyment of the overall travel experience.

This diversity and distinctiveness in travel behaviour among university students highlights the need to better understand their decision-making processes. Therefore, examining the factors influencing university students' travel decisions can provide valuable insights for tourism-related businesses. This understanding can help in developing and adapting offerings to effectively meet the needs and expectations of this demographic.

Research Objective

1. To study the factors influencing travel destination choices among university students.
2. To analyse the travel decision-making factors that affect travel behaviour.

Literature Review

Concept of Travel Decision-Making Factors

Travel decision-making factors are crucial for both tourists and tourism businesses to understand and meet the needs of service users. Recognizing these factors can lead to improvements and enhancements in tourism services to better align with traveler preferences. Key factors influencing travel decisions include:

- Price (Sirakaya et al., 2003): Offering appropriate pricing for services and attractive amenities plays a significant role in attracting tourists and influencing their decisions.
- Information and Communication (Gretzel et al., 2000): Comprehensive and clear information about tourist destinations, along with effective communication with tourists, are vital in the decision-making process.
- Culture and History (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999): Cultural and historical appeal significantly affects tourists' interest and decisions to visit particular destinations. Learning and experiencing local culture is a key attraction for many travelers.
- Safety (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005): The perceived safety of a destination is an important factor in tourist decision-making, as it enhances confidence and comfort in travel.
- Environment (Dolnicar et al., 2008): The natural and built environments' aesthetic and living conditions influence a destination's appeal to tourists.
- Travel Convenience (Lehto et al., 2004): Ease of travel—such as access to travel information, flight connections, and public transportation—affects tourists' decision-making.

As younger generations have different interests and expectations from their predecessors, understanding the travel decision-making factors relevant to this group is essential for tourism businesses seeking to adapt and effectively engage this target demographic. The following are key decision-making factors for the younger generation:

- Technology and social media (Xiang et al., 2015): Young travelers often use digital technology and social platforms to gather information, connect with others, and share their travel experiences. Effective use of these technologies is therefore critical in influencing their decisions.
- Experience Creation (Kim et al., 2012): Younger travelers seek unique, diverse, and personally meaningful experiences. The ability to offer and communicate compelling experiences is a key determinant in their travel choices.
- Sustainability (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009): The younger generation is increasingly interested in sustainable tourism practices—environmentally, culturally, and socially. Destinations that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability are more likely to attract these travelers.
- Educational and Self-Development Travel (Richards, 2011): Many young people look for travel experiences that enhance knowledge, skills, and personal growth. Therefore, offering activities related to education and self-improvement is particularly relevant.
- Value for Money (Huang & Petrick, 2010): Young travelers often seek optimal value in terms of cost, service quality, and overall experience. Their pursuit of value plays a significant role in their travel decisions.

Concept of Tourism for Adolescents

Tourism designed for adolescents typically involves activities tailored to their interests and needs. Developing tourism concepts for this age group should take into account several key factors:

- Social Media Communication: Tourism activities should be designed to be easily shareable on social media, fostering enjoyment and creating memorable experiences.
- Learning and Self-Development: Activities should aim to enhance adolescents' knowledge, skills, and provide new personal development experiences.
- Socialization and Participation: Activities should encourage social bonding within youth groups, promote teamwork, and facilitate interaction with local communities.
- Adventure and Challenge: Tourism for adolescents should include adventurous and challenging activities that build courage, resilience, and problem-solving abilities.
- Sustainability: Activities should align with environmental, cultural, and social sustainability to promote responsible behavior among adolescents.
- Budget-Conscious Options: Tourism offerings should be affordable and provide good value, allowing adolescents to enjoy quality experiences without excessive financial burden.
- Engaging Presentation: Tourism activities should be presented in an appealing manner, such as through multimedia storytelling and illustrative examples of each destination.
- Adaptability to Adolescent Interests: Tourism experiences should be flexible, allowing for customization based on adolescents' preferences in terms of duration, format, and content.
- Long-Term Engagement: Tourism for adolescents should aim to build lasting relationships with this group by regularly collecting their feedback, recommendations, and experiences to continually improve the tourism offerings.

In conclusion, designing tourism concepts for adolescents should focus on meeting their interests and needs through engaging, educational, social, and sustainable activities. Effective use of social media, budget-friendly options, compelling presentation, adaptability, and long-term connection strategies are essential. Integrating these elements can make tourism more appealing and relevant to adolescent travelers.

Concept of Tourist Behavior

Tourist behavior refers to the actions and expressions of individuals who use tourism services, particularly in relation to purchasing decisions and the decision-making processes that influence the acquisition of tourism-related services (Jittangwattana & Wongpantananon, 2014).

Additionally, March, Roger St George, and Woodside (2005, as cited in Khumnonchai and Chansuree, 2022) identified five key components that constitute tourist behavior:

1. Tourists' spending on travel
2. Duration of each trip
3. Travel destinations or attractions
4. Types of accommodations used
5. Tourism activities participated in

These components provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing and understanding tourist behavior.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the travel decision-making factors influencing university students' choice of travel destinations in the Bangkok metropolitan area. It is a quantitative study that collects data from university students in Bangkok who have prior travel experience. A survey method was employed, using a questionnaire based on a rating scale.

The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1967), which is applicable when the population size is known. According to Thai PBS (Santhat Phothisa, 2023), the Generation Z population in Thailand—those of university age—exceeds 7,670,354 individuals. With a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, the resulting sample size for this study was 400 participants. The sampling technique used was convenience sampling.

The data collected were processed and analyzed using statistical software to fulfill the research objectives. The following statistical methods were applied:

1. Descriptive Statistics**:** This includes frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation to analyze the characteristics of both independent and dependent variables.
2. Inferential Statistics**:** This was used to test the research hypothesis and identify which independent variables significantly influenced the dependent variable, using Multiple Linear Regression Analysis**.**

Result

The research findings revealed that the majority of the respondents were female (70.1%). In terms of travel frequency, 33.4% reported traveling 2–3 times per month, 27.4% traveled less than once a month, and 19.7% traveled weekly. Regarding travel experience across various areas, the highest percentage had traveled in the metropolitan outskirts (79.1%), followed by travel within Bangkok (71.1%), and travel to different regions across Thailand (65.3%), respectively.

Figure 1
This Is an Analysis Table of Multiple Linear Regression of Travel Decision Making Factors

ตัวแปร		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.522	.116		4.506	.000
	Price	.082	.029	.102**	2.809	.005
	Information and Communication	.014	.030	.017	.472	.637
	Cultural and historical factors	.106	.021	.184***	5.147	.000
	Safety	-.003	.029	-.003	-.091	.928
	Environment	.060	.037	.062	1.617	.107
	Travel convenience	.111	.026	.144***	4.220	.000
	Technology and social media	.042	.033	.049	1.296	.196
	Experience creation	.093	.028	.115**	3.252	.001
	Sustainability	.144	.027	.201***	5.347	.000
	Self-development travel	.083	.027	.111**	3.065	.002
	Value for money	.150	.030	.183***	5.012	.000

$R = .878$, $R^2 = .771$***

From Figure 1, the hypothesis testing, conducted using multiple regression analysis, confirmed the acceptance of H1—indicating that travel decision-making factors significantly influence the travel behavior of university students at the statistical significance level of .001. Specifically, the following factors were found to have a statistically significant impact which included Cultural and historical factors (B = 0.148, p < .000), Travel convenience (B = 0.144, p < .000), Sustainability (B = 0.201, p < .000) and Value for money (B = 0.138, p < .000).

Additionally, at the .01 significance level, the following factors were also significant included Price (B = 0.102, p < .005), Experience creation (B = 0.115, p < .001) and Self-development travel (B = 0.111, p < .002). These independent variables collectively explained 77.1% of the variance in travel behavior ($R^2 = .771$).

Conclusion

This research represents a significant exploration of the complex relationship between travel decision-making factors and travel behavior among university students. The findings revealed seven key factors that significantly influence the travel behavior of Generation Z included Cultural and historical factors, Travel convenience, Sustainability, Value for money, Price, Experience creation and Self-development through travel.

These decision-making factors collectively account for 77.1% of the variance in travel behavior, indicating their substantial influence. The results highlight that younger generations, particularly university students, place importance on travel as a means of personal development—seeking experiences that align with their stage in life, while also considering affordability and value. Environmental awareness also plays a critical role, reflecting the growing trend toward eco-conscious and sustainable travel.

These findings are consistent with previous studies, such as Dolnicar et al. (2008), who found that the aesthetic and environmental quality—both natural and manmade—significantly impacts tourist interest. Similarly, Kim et al. (2012) observed that younger travelers often seek diverse, non-repetitive experiences that allow them to express their identity, making engaging and personalized experiences a central factor in their travel decisions.

For university students—a group in a formative life stage—travel serves as a vehicle for self-discovery, the exploration of interests, and identity development.

Beyond deepening the understanding of factors affecting university students' travel behavior, the research offers practical implications for marketers and tourism communication professionals. The results can inform targeted communication strategies and help design more effective messaging aimed at this specific segment.

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Creation Through Co-learning: Phetchaburi Rod Puppet Performances in the Context of Creative Tourism

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the factors and processes in the enhancement and revision of Phetchaburi rod puppet performances to help promote tourism in a creative context. Community participatory-based research was adopted as the method. Rod puppet artists, Chatri drama performers, musicians, teachers and students, officers of the province's cultural section, cultural activists, local wisdom scholars, and local media were selected as the stakeholders. The findings reveal that a number of limitations imposed on puppet artists and inheritors, along with the changing purpose of and the area for staging the performances, played critical roles in the form and nature of such enhancement and revision. The process started with a rod puppet performance workshop in one selected school. In order to continue performances of the rod puppets, even after the termination of the research project, the making of rod puppets was included in a workshop, along with training for singing puppet songs and rod puppet manipulation. With the participation of all stakeholders, a new puppet show that could be used to promote Phetchaburi's tourist destination was created during the workshop and will receive continuing support to be able to perform on Phetchaburi's walking street.

Keywords: rod puppet, puppet performance, creative tourism, Phetchaburi province, intangible cultural heritage

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Introduction

"Hun krabok or rod puppets have only heads and hands. The bodies can be made from any kind of rods, mostly either bamboo or PVC, covered with cloth sacks that are finely decorated as costumes" (Prasarnvinijchai, 2019, p. 177). Rod puppet performances originated in the northern part of Thailand during the reign of King Rama V. However, the popularity of such performances has gradually diminished because of new forms of entertainment (Pannengpetch, 1992, pp. E-F). In 2010, the Department of Cultural Promotion (n.d.) recorded rod puppets as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) at the national level.

Because of the precarious status of the rod puppet performance art, prior research has proposed employing cultural tourism as a strategic approach in order to sustain this traditional form of artistic expression (Ratchatakorntrakoon, 2024; Watanasawad, 2012). This method aims to not only secure financial viability for a rod puppet troupe, but also to provide ongoing performance opportunities. Such a recommendation is in line with numerous scholarly works that have emphasized the crucial role of cultural tourism in fortifying the sustainability of performing arts on a global scale (Chen, 2022; Dunbar-Hall, 2001; Kico et al., 2020; Lim & Bendle, 2012; Liu, 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2020). Advocating for the integration of performing arts within the context of cultural tourism is an effective strategy for long-term sustainability, but the process of redefining the role of performing arts necessitates a comprehensive analysis. Since the circumstances surrounding each performing art and the context of each society vary, the intricacies of their interactions are unique.

In the case of Phetchaburi province, Thailand, transitioning the Phetchaburi rod puppetry from "folk entertainment" to "a creative tourism activity" is challenging because of the limitations in the expertise of the puppeteers. The puppeteers are hindered by the ability to receive adequate knowledge and techniques from their instructor because the instructor has not received formal permission from their mentors to provide instruction. For this reason, the Phetchaburi puppet troupe lacks the necessary expertise to pass on to potential inheritors who could contribute to the enhancement of rod puppet performances. The process of transforming Phetchaburi rod puppets in a creative context should, therefore, result in both performance revision and new inheritors. This research analyzes the situation of Phetchaburi rod puppets by addressing the research question of why the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances necessitate revision and how such performances can be enhanced.

Research Objective

To analyze the factors and processes in the enhancement and revision of Phetchaburi rod puppet performances in order to help promote tourism in a creative context.

Method

According to UNESCO's (2022, p. 65) convention, each community plays an important role in transmitting intangible cultural heritage, which in this research is rod puppet performance. For this reason, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) was embraced as the research methodology.

A total of 65 stakeholders contributed their ideas and suggestions regarding the enhancement process and the development of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performance format, including local and external rod puppet artists, Chatri drama performers and musicians, teachers and

students, officers of the province's cultural section, cultural activists, tourists, local wisdom scholars and local media. After non-participant observations of rod puppet performances on Panichcharoen Road, a comprehensive methodology was implemented, encompassing in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observations in rod puppet workshops to collect insights and suggestions from the stakeholders.

Results

Showing Rod Puppets on a Walking Street Demands a High Level of Performance Skill: A Pivotal Element Contributing to the Refinement of the Performance Format

Panichcharoen Road is "an art and culture walking street" where tourists can enjoy engaging in cultural activities such as creating traditional art pieces and watching traditional performances, including rod puppet shows. The Phetchaburi rod puppet troupe has been hired by the municipality of Phetchaburi to perform once a month since September 2023. This regular engagement offers a prime opportunity for the Phetchaburi rod puppet troupe to hone their puppet manipulation skills and enhance their performances. Additionally, showing rod puppetry on a walking street increases the visibility of this traditional art form, potentially serving as a source of inspiration for the younger generation to consider becoming puppetry inheritors.

However, showing rod puppets on a walking street faces many challenges. The researcher examined, two key factors influence the adaptation of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances (Ratchatakorntrakoon, 2024, p. 449). Firstly, the rod puppet shows created for tourists necessitate a level of simplification and brevity. This implies a significant condensation of ideas, techniques, and messages because the performances take place on a public street where numerous other activities can easily divert the attention of tourists. Secondly, there is a constraint on the performances because of the limited proficiency of the puppeteers, as previously mentioned. Hence, in order to establish a more suitable framework for the rod puppet performance within the context of cultural tourism, it is imperative to address these challenges effectively.

The author's analysis established a correlation between the performance context and the skill level of the puppeteers. In a situation where the audience may easily become distracted, the puppeteers must possess exceptional performance skills to captivate the audience. This accentuates the importance of performance context, which is in alignment with William Bascom's (1954, p. 343) suggestion regarding the context of performance that:

> The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless. As we have seen, the interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. … The performance, again, has to be placed in its proper time-setting-the hour of the day, and the season, with the background of the sprouting gardens …

In the case of Phetchaburi rod puppets, Panichcharoen Road may not be a "proper time-setting" for a rod puppet performance, yet it stands as the sole platform where the art of rod puppetry can persist. However, the proficiency of the Phetchaburi puppeteers may be considered limited to perform in this venue, as mentioned in the introduction. For these two reasons, Phetchaburi rod puppetry requires some enhancement and revision to the performance format that is suitable within the context of creative tourism.

Co-learning and Co-creation of the "Khok Saetthi Rod Puppet Show"

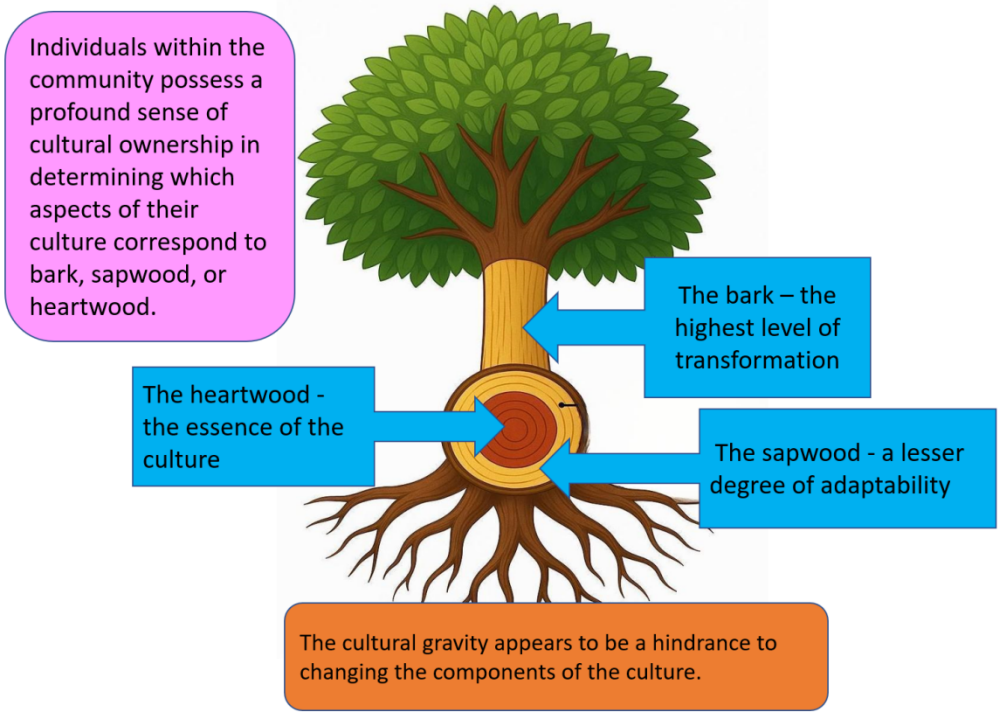
Employing Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), the processes involved in the enhancement and revision of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances commenced with soliciting suggestions from all stakeholders. The local and external rod puppet artists, Chatri drama artists and musicians contributed their knowledge and expertise to selected students through a collaborative workshop that resulted in the "Khok Saetthi rod puppet show" being co-created with the support of cultural activists.

How to Enhance the Phetchaburi Puppet Show From the Perspectives of All Stakeholders

In the course of focus group discussions on November 4, 2024, the leader of cultural activists proposed the adoption of Kanjana Kaewthep's theory on the tree of cultural adaptation as a method for analyzing the enhancement and revision process of the rod puppet performance. Kaewthep drew an analogy between the composition of a tree and the elements of culture. The bark of a tree symbolizes the aspect of culture that resides at the highest level of transformation, while the sapwood embodies a component that exhibits a lesser degree of adaptability. The heartwood represents the essence of the culture, which should be preserved. Moreover, individuals within the community possess a profound sense of cultural ownership in determining which aspects of their culture correspond to bark, sapwood or heartwood. During the process of cultural adaptation, the cultural gravity appears to be a hindrance to changing the components of the culture (Kaewthep et al., 2006, pp. 30-34). This process is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Depiction of Kaewthep's Theory on the Tree of Cultural Adaptation



Source. Figure generated by ChatGPT, with the content synthesized by the researcher

Adopting the theory of the tree of cultural adaptation to analyze the Phetchaburi rod puppet performances, all stakeholders unanimously agreed that the essence of Phetchaburi rod puppetry, the heartwood, lies in the puppet itself that must be preserved. The songs and singing style associated with the rod puppets can be likened to the outer layer of the tree, the sapwood, which can be modified or shortened. As for the stories or content, they can be likened to the bark of the tree, as they are open to transformation from traditional melodramas to new narratives that cater to tourists. This aligns with the context of the Phetchaburi rod puppet performance mentioned earlier, which necessitates revision because of the presentation on a walking street.

To maximize the benefits, the cultural activists and local wisdom scholars have committed to conducting a workshop at the Suwanrungsarit School. The workshop aims to enhance the Phetchaburi rod puppet show and groom the attending students as rod puppetry heirs.

Making Their Own Puppets During the Workshop Creates a Sense of Belonging Among Participants

Suwanrungsarit was selected because this school is dedicated to preserving and promoting local cultural heritage. Three teachers and forty students from the dance and traditional Thai music clubs were included as participants in the workshop. The workshop process consisted of eight sessions dedicated to training in puppet show skills. These sessions encompassed watching the traditional rod puppet show, the art of crafting one's own puppets, mastering puppet manipulation techniques, vocalizing puppet songs, showcasing puppet music, and ultimately, the creation of innovative puppet shows. In light of the limited expertise of local puppet artists, external puppeteers, Chatri drama performers, and musicians were enlisted to instruct the students in vocalizing puppet songs and showcasing puppet music.

The creation of personalized puppets is a key component of the workshop for three primary reasons: firstly, the rod puppet represents the essence of rod puppet performances, as acknowledged by community stakeholders; secondly, participants have the opportunity to hone their skills and stage their own puppet shows even after the workshop concludes; and thirdly, the act of creating one’s own rod puppet enhances the sense of ownership and connection to this art form. This corresponds with Nunn (2020) who emphasized the significance of artistic creation in a participatory arts-based research project as an exceptional sphere of belonging within and beyond the project.

Apart from the creation of rod puppets, a new rod puppet production entitled “Khok Saetthi”, which is based on an ancient heritage site of Phetchaburi province, was developed through a collaborative workshop. The teachers proposed the legend of Khok Saetthi and a researcher authored the script with the assistance of local stakeholders regarding the veracity of the information, then Chatri drama performers and musicians curated the songs and designed the singing style. Additionally, the students who manipulated their own rod puppets were responsible for creating the dialogue for the puppet show. Because of the complexity of vocalizing rod puppet songs, a sound recording was produced for the Khok Saethi puppet show.

Khok Saethi Puppet Show on Panichcharoen Road

At the opening of the “Fun School Break Festival” organized by the cultural activists on 15 March 2025, the selected students from the workshop were granted the opportunity to

showcase the Khok Saethi rod puppet show on Panichcharoen Road. The use of this show examined the hypothesis regarding the appropriateness of the enhancement of rod puppetry within the context of creative tourism.

To gather feedback from all stakeholders, interviews with tourists and focus groups with rod puppet artists, as well as cultural activists, were conducted. Most of the tourists appreciated the captivating new content showcasing the Khok Saetthi heritage site; however, the duration of the rod puppet show, which spans approximately fifteen minutes, may be deemed too lengthy for presentation on a walking street. This aligns with the perspective of cultural activists who suggest that the rod puppet show should be condensed by segmenting the entire narrative into shorter chapters.

Conclusion and Discussion

This research aimed to analyze the factors and processes in the enhancement and revision of Phetchaburi rod puppet performances to help promote tourism in a creative context. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) was adopted as a research method. The theory on the tree of cultural adaptation was used to analyze the process of enhancing and revising rod puppet performance within the context of creative tourism.

Presentation of the new rod puppet show on the Panicharoen walking street plays a pivotal role in elevating the quality of the performance and making it more captivating for the audience, particularly tourists. This contrasts with the continued limited proficiency of local rod puppet artists, as mentioned previously. Therefore, a rod puppet workshop was held by cultural activists and local wisdom scholars as a means to enhance and refine rod puppet performances, as well as to increase the number of new puppet heirs.

The outcome of a workshop was not only new rod puppet learners, but also a new rod puppet performance titled “Khok Saetthi”. However, these outcomes do not definitively prove the sustainable presence of rod puppetry art in Phetchaburi province. All skills required for rod puppet performance, such as singing, vocalization and puppet manipulation, necessitate consistent and extensive practice. In this case, the ongoing involvement of the engaged students is significantly influenced by the support and instruction offered by their teachers.

Viewing through the lens of cultural adaptation, the Khok Saetthi puppet show needs further enhancement and revision. The songs and singing style, the sapwood, require condensation and enhancement. The content, the bark, can be transformed into the topic of well-known tourist destinations, encompassing various segments suitable for a three to five-minute rod puppet presentation. The progression of the rod puppetry in the context of creative tourism necessitates continuous support and active engagement from all stakeholders who are the owners of intangible cultural heritage.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT in order to generate a figure, the tree of cultural adaptation. After using ChatGPT, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Female As Method: The Chinese-American Female Narrative in Films of Contemporary Chinese-American Directors

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Abstract

In recent years, Chinese-American themed films created by Chinese-American directors have attracted attention from within the United States and around the world, as well as from the academic community. In many relevant studies that have emerged, there has been a lack from the point of view of the Chinese-American female narrative. This study has selected five Chinese-American films that have had a certain impact in the past few years: *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), *The Farewell* (L. Wang, 2019), *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020), *Turning Red* (Shi, 2022), *Everything Everywhere All Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022). All of which coincidentally chose to feature Chinese-American women as their protagonists. Mainly using the feminist narratology brought by Susan S. Lanser, the paper explores how Chinese-American directors have constructed film narratives with female as method, while pointing out their future prospects.

Keywords: female narrative, Chinese-American directors, film narratology, feminist narratology

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Introduction

From Ang Lee to Chloe Zhao, from *The Joy Luck Club* (W. Wang, 1993) to *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022), Chinese-American filmmakers never stopped exploring the portrayal of Chinese-Americans on screen from various aspects like identity, family bond, community, culture, and so on. Since the commercial success of *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), Chinese-American films have attracted even more focus from not only American society but also the whole world as they swept through film festivals and awards, causing heated discussions both at public and academic levels. Scholars utilize various methods to compare, induce and conclude valuable approaches to current academic research and filming practice. For instance, Li and Li (2019) compare the Chinese-American narratives in *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crazy Rich Asians* to discover contemporary Hollywood's shift in the cultural construction of the Eastern world, the differences that exist between the heterogeneous cultures of East and West; Kung (2021) analyzes the postfeminist Cinderella narrative in the film to recognize the subjectivity given to the female protagonist; Wang and Wang (2022) choose the cultural theory of the Third Pole to explain the cultural practice phenomenon of *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell* (L. Wang, 2019). When it comes to the holistic analysis of contemporary Chinese-American films, Qi (2022) takes an insightful reading into *Crazy Rich Asians, The Farewell, Turning Red* (Shi, 2022) *and Everything Everywhere All at Once* (referred to as EEAAO). She points out that despite the progress of Chinese-American narratives made by these films, they repeat the same mother-and-daughter relationship and therefore confine Chinese-American films in a rather privatized domain. But aside from this point of view, few other studies conclude the female subject narrative of these recent films altogether.

Therefore, this essay wants to discuss the female narrative in films made by contemporary Chinese-American directors, analyzing the image of female characters and the narrative of those films. Five films that came out last few years have been chosen, which are *Crazy Rich Asians, The Farewell, The Half of It* (Wu, 2020)*, Turning Red,* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once.* Through the analysis of these films, this study wants to find out how the Chinese-American directors choose Chinese-American female characters as the main protagonists in their films and how they use female narrative as a new method to the whole making of Chinese-American films.

Feminist Narratology and Films

In the 1986 article Toward a Feminist Narratology by American scholar Susan S. Lanser, the concept of feminist narratology was first introduced and systematically explained. In 1992, another book on feminist narratology appeared, Susan S. Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. In this book, she proposes to combine "voice" in narratology with "voice" in feminist literary criticism, and to categorize narrative voice into three modes, namely, authorial voice, personal voice, and communal voice. In her denunciation of patriarchal Phallus-centrism based on women's identity as manifested in literary practice, Lancer points out that any narrative subject needs to construct a discursive authority to get close to the dominant social power. It is based on this fact that the discourse formed by textual writing strategies, i.e. the narrative voice, becomes a way of constructing authority.

When it comes to the field of film narratology, being the very scholar to bring out the middle theory and draw people's attention back to the films' inner text, Bordwell (1986) proposes

that "the classical narration tends to be omniscient, highly communicative, and only moderately self-conscious." This view of film narratology suggests a singular (usually male) spectator, which is opposed by many feminist film critics. The most notable example is Laura Mulvey's 1975 article Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Mulvey points out that narrative cinema constructs a subject that is centralizing the male audience, objectifying the female characters on screen. The male audience gains recognition firstly through the camera, and secondly through the point of view of the male characters. It is by fulfilling the voyeurism of the male audience that traditional cinema can create visual pleasure. This male, Eurocentric norm of narrative cannot apply to some diasporic cultures such as Asian-Americans. Machiorlatti (1996) introduces the feminist narratology into the field of indie film study and explores the possible structures toward a feminist narratology in films of Julie Dash, Mona Smith and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who are female directors of independent films featuring different minority female. However, in this paper, the writer wants to expand the scope of applying feminist narratology in film study. Rather than taking it as an approach to studying certain independent films (which also can be taken into the category of "minor cinema" (Martin-Jones, 2009), the paper will try to combine the feminist narratology with a broader selection of films, even taking into account of American genre films to meet the richer and bigger range of contemporary Chinese-American directors' films.

The Narrative Voice in Films of Contemporary Chinese-American Directors

The voice in narratology as proposed by Genette (1980) and expanded upon by Brian Henderson for cinema studies is the narration itself, or "who speaks." Aside from the character narrator, narrative voice also recognizes narration that is understood as the grand (cinematic) narrator working outside the diegesis. Cinematic narration can include all of the technical aspects of lighting, mise en scene, editing, and sound. The cinematic or impersonal narrator "both creates or constructs the fictional world while at the same time referring to it as if it has an autonomous existence, as if it pre-existed the illocutionary act" (Stam, 2005). Cinematic narration can also be ideologically commentative and question dominant ways of representation. In this situation, the placement of women being at the center of film acts as feminist cinematic narration. We can see their centrality in non-hierarchical and non-stereotypical representation (Machiorlatti, 1996). And the writer will apply the theory of feminist narratology proposed by Lanser with the concept of narrative voice in film narratology to elaborate the narrative voice in contemporary Chinese-American directors' films.

Authorial Voice: Revisiting The Duality of Chinese-American Females' Cultural Identity

Lanser (1992) characterizes the authorial narrative voice as "narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential." "Heterodiegetic" is referred to the narrator that is not equal to the characters in the story, but outside the story. Also, "public" means that the object of the narration is the imagined readership, as she writes that "where a distinction between the (implied) author and a public, heterodiegetic narrator is not textually marked, readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author and the narratee with themselves (or their historical equivalents). This conventional equation gives authorial voice a privileged status among narrative forms." In this case, the writer recognizes *The Farewell* directed by Lulu Wang as a film that adopts this mode of narration. Because this film creates a calming space between the narration and the audience, through which obscuring the fictional storytelling and the self-referential sense throughout the film.

Although the whole film does not apply a detached monologue, the director uses a constrained and soothing way to unfold the narration. In the beginning of the film, a caption has already told us that this story is "Based on an actual lie." What emerges on the screen next is a landscape painting that looks like a decoration on the wall, filling out the whole screen. We do not see the first person in this film after the title and the director's name disappears until a few moments later Nai Nai enters the frame from the left side. This scene sets the tone and the main framing technique for the whole film, which shooting the family as a landscape, with the protagonist Billi placed in the center or the position that is closest to audience in depth of field.

After successfully guiding the audience into the story, the director Lulu Wang along with her collaborator, director of photography Anna Franquesa-Solano choose to use simple, clean and minimal style to frame shots that help tell the story (O'Falt, 2020). In deciding the visual language for the film, Wang and Solano decided to represent their subjects both as a family monolith and as individuals. This shooting of a family as a landscape is composed of individual natural elements, so too was the family composed of individual characters. Wang says that "the film revolves around family unity; that led us to take an objective approach to the visual language. It called for a wider aspect ratio that include as many family members as possible in the frame, even though we still had to feel that the protagonist (Billi) is the one who takes us through this journey. It was a delicate balance" (Filmmaker Staff, 2019). The audience goes along with the story but is also not fully engaged, until they see an extra video of Lulu Wang's real-life grandmother at the end of the film. And the subtitles read, "Six years after her diagnosis, Nai Nai is still with us." The subtitle served as the author's voice appears again, reminding the audience of the ending of the real-life story. By doing so, the creators obscure the line between fictional narration and the self-referential sense. Although both exploring of cultural differences between the East and the West through the preparation and organization of a wedding, *The Farewell* differs from the *The Wedding Banquet* (Lee, 1993): the director no longer chooses to present the film as a field where the two cultures are in stark opposition to each other, but rather accepts the duality of Chinese American women's cultural identity; based on the director's real-life experience which provides the self-referential tone to the film, there is no insurmountable gap between the female protagonist, Billi, and her grandmother. Instead, there is always a sense of respect and attachment. It is Nai Nai who represents the attachment of the protagonist to the far-away homeland; it is Nai Nai who offers a new way for the protagonist to reexamine her life.

In the end of the film in which Billi stands on the street of New York, A "ha" she exclaims in scares away the birds in Changchun. This perplexing method of editing breaks the limit of time and space, also breaking the gap between America and China. The female protagonist's sense of belonging shifts with the change of locations, but the end has obscured the difference between "foreign land" and "homeland." Dealing with the cultural identity of the Chinese-American female, the director provides an answer without the answer, which acknowledges the duality of Chinese-female identity by not showing a strong tendency toward either country.

Personal Voice: Retelling Chinese-American Females' Own Story

Lanser points out that the personal voice refers to "narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories." The object of the narration is the character in the story, the "I" narration as a first-person narrator and participant. In other words, the storyteller "I" is not only the narrator of the story, but also the participant of the story, the narrator of her own story. Lanser

suggests with personal voice that both intra and extra diegetic narrative voice should be understood as equal fictions of authority within the text through illustrating the works written by some African-American women as they "restores the black female narrator to a black female audience." Similar to what African-American female writers did, the director Alice Wu retells the story of the Chinese-American female who belongs to the second generation of immigrants by her own mouth.

The Half of It begins with the protagonist Ellie Chu's monologue that tells a theory about "finding the other half of our soul" that comes from Plato in Ancient Greece and takes an abrupt turn: "Of course...the Ancient Greeks never went to high school." This brings our focus onto the film's story and where it takes place, injecting a basic humorous tone to this school romantic comedy. Meanwhile, the beginning conveys a clear message to the audience that this film is going to unfold mainly revolving Ellie's perspective. As the story rolls along, Ellie shows a nerd-like trait and also has great scores, even ghostwrites essays for other students in order to earn extra money, which resembles very much with the Model Minority Myth mentioned by Blackburn (2019). Wu does not stop the shaping of her image from there. In the following plots, she shows us that Ellie also has a sensitive heart and a very cute side through a calm, fresh and natural narrative.

The off-screen voice plays a significant role in the narrative because the director often visualizes the different conversations between Ellie and Aster through letters, spray-paintings and text messages, accompanied by their voicing out the inner thoughts. For instance, in a scene where Ellie and Aster communicate through letter exchange, what Ellie writes appears as a voice-over: "I sometimes hide behind other people's words. For one thing, those people are published. For another...I know nothing about love." Upon hearing Paul's request to ask Aster to "hang out", Ellie's own thoughts emerge and entangle with the letter: "What exactly is... 'hanging out'? But like what do you do?" The lines show double narrative voice in which Ellie not only pretends to be Paul but also hides behind the identity of a boy to express her true feelings. Aster does not know the truth as the audience does, thus what is supposed to be the romantic feelings exchanged between a girl and a boy is replaced by two girls expressing their inner feelings and thoughts. In this way the authority of the narrative voice is silently reestablished.

What Alice Wu achieved in this film is being able to retell the story of Chinese-American female's own through personal voice. As a second generation immigrant, Ellie jumped out of the cycle of generational traumas which can be seen in many other films of Chinese-American directors, including Directer Wu's previous work *Saving Face* (2004). The story is solely focused on a rather simple campus story, featuring three main characters with different races and sexualities. Through the director's calm and relaxed narrative, also the voice-over by the protagonist, the audience is able to empathize with her feelings, thoughts and story. The director shows us that despite being a minority, the story of Chinese-American female does not have to be "minor," just like the end of the film where Ellie stepped on the train that take her to the wider world outside the small town.

Communal Voice: Reinventing Chinese-American Female Representation in Genre Films

The third voice category that Lanser outlines is the communal voice, which refers to "a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority." In this part, the writer uses the idea of communal voice/narration

mainly as a means to further understand the content of films in which female commonalities and differences are central. "Communal voice is the voice which understands women's consciousness. It recognizes multiple character narrators as well as a centralizing feminist ideological and cultural perspective" (Machiorlatti, 1996). The writer will put the argument specifically on the depiction of the female character groups in three genre films, as they all simultaneously spend a great deal of time on narrating generational trauma and use this experience as a bridge to connect the Chinese-American women in the stories, thus serving as a representation of Chinese-American female on the big screen.

Focusing on similar generational traumas as *Crazy Rich Asians, Turning Red* and EEAAO may, they all choose a side of traditional Chinese culture that Chinese-American female have troubles dealing with in a cross-cultural environment they live in. In the case of *Crazy Rich Asians*, the major conflict takes place in marriage and Chinese women's social status in different cultural environments. In a scene where Rachel and Nick gather with his family to make dumplings together, a conversation about passing traditions is exchanged. "...It's nice you appreciate this house and us being together wrapping dumplings. But all this doesn't just happen. It's because we know to put family first, instead of chasing one's passion." The "we" she uses could refer to the elite circle of Singaporean Chinese communities. But most importantly, she is referring to the women in this society and accusing Rachel of not being one of them. The traditional Eastern culture does not value women's ambition or dedication and in fact actively discourages it. So Rachel's ambition and accomplishments aren't the positive traits she thought they would be, but a threat to their social order.

The mahjong scene at the end of the film is a climax and also the turning point for the whole film. In this iconic scene, eventually Rachel tells Eleanor about Nick's proposal and that he is willing to leave his family to be with her. "Don't worry I turned him down." Rachel finds the tile that she needs to win the game, but realizes it's also the tile Eleanor needs. In this moment, Rachel explains there is no winning in this scenario, as marrying Nick means he would have to give up his family. In an analogy of letting go of Nick, she surrenders the winning tile to Eleanor, sacrificing her own happiness for the betterment of Nick's well-being—an act Eleanor assumed she wasn't capable of. It is a powerful moment that makes Eleanor reconsider her assumptions about Rachel. She notices Rachel's mother nearby and the simple look they give each other expresses a lot from their differences in upbringing, class and also their respective traumas in each of their lives. But it also acknowledges their mutual respect for the sacrifices they've made to protect their families. Rachel's characterization shows there is a way to do both to try to do what's best for the people you love and pursue what you want in life, which can also mark the achievements made by the second generation immigrants to successfully balance their in-betweenness. And once Eleanor realized she has been perpetuating the cycle of judgement and ridicule all for the sake of saving face, she made a decision to start undoing the patterns of discouraging women of the next generation. This also means that Eleanor finally considers bring Rachel into the "we" she uses. At the very end of the film, while Nick and Rachel is happily hugging together at the party to celebrate their engagement, Eleanor is not only nodding to Rachel through a bustling crowd, but also nodding to the new identity that comes along with the new wit of the entire second generation of Chinese-American women.

Starting with the perspective and story of the main female protagonist, the film end with connecting the Chinese-female characters together by solving their generational trauma, rather say, common dilemma, which is not recognizing their own value enough. Henceforth, this very first film in Hollywood history that has all-Asian cast gave the power of

representation and thus paving the way for more films to feature Chinese-Americans, also placing Chinese-American female in the center of the narration once again.

The cultural experience *Turning Red* faces on is the family education or being raised in a high-pressured Chinese family. The suffocating experience lies subtly as in the early half the film where the protagonist Meilin Lee battles with many things inside. What may tick the bottom of the heart even more is that because of growing up in this family atmosphere for too long, Meilin takes the blames of everything wrong in her life on herself, trying desperately to be "mother's good girl." This has much to do with the authoritarian parenting style in China playing a role of authority and they do everything in the name of "for the good of children," while the children are expected to obey and serve their parents, maneuvering to meet the standard of "a good child."

In the fantasy world of their ancestors, Meilin discovers that her mother was once merely a helpless girl crushed by stress and expectations from the outside. This time, it is Meilin's turn to comfort her mother. When they make it to the portal leads to the real world, Ming asks her once more to go together. But Meilin refuses. Ming finally understands. "...I'm sorry. So don't hold back, for anyone. The farther you go, the prouder I'll be." From here, the mother and the daughter break free from the generational trauma and comes to mutual understanding. At the very end of the film comes the monologue of Meilin: "We've all got an inner beast. We've all got a messy, loud, weird part of ourselves hidden away. And a lot of us never let it out. But I did. How about you?" This reveals that the red panda symbolizes an emotional, outgoing self, used to correspond to the emphasis on calmness and self-possession in Eastern cultures that advocate the suppression of one's own emotions and desires. It adds another layer of metaphor, which is the way the protagonist chooses not to give up on her red panda spirit implies that the second generation immigrants makes more peace with accepting the double cultural identity they have. Through these metaphors, the director shows us a real dilemma that is fantastical in the movie but may be truly faced by Chinese women in reality. The "we" Meilin uses emphasizes common experiences of Chinese-American females and expresses that they need to let out their emotions sometimes instead of held back by the weight of demands from the traditional Eastern culture. Moreover, through solving the generational trauma, the film is able to find a common ground for real life Chinese-American female to stand on.

In EEAAO, the directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert has featured Chinese-American experience as the "loss of the American Dream" of the first generation immigrants, especially for women. As a start, the film confronts the various ever-on-going troubles in the protagonist Evelyn's life: forever busy work in the laundry house, stacking-high bills and tax sheets, the need of taking care of the elderly, maintaining a good relationship with the neighborhood and a gradually distancing daughter. This just shows a common daily life of the first generation immigrants that can link back directly to the real world. On the way of solving those problems, Evelyn finds out the secret of living a life: reach out to others, which finally makes her face the estrangement between herself and her father, find a way to reconnect with her daughter, and through chatting with the female clerk, she discovers that they have far more in common than imagined—every woman faces common problems in her life.

The directors create a new possibility for constructing the communal voice. That is, connecting different lives and images of the protagonist in the multiverse by constantly shifting between universes in excellently edited parallel montage. The editing often connects the same plot, also the same movement in the shots together. This design of verse-jumping

provides unique self-empowerment to the female protagonist (Coe, 2023). The creation of diverse film spaces to present different lives becomes such a presentation that propels audience think of the infinite possibilities of one woman's life—most importantly, one Chinese-American woman's life.

At the end of the film, when Evelyn in the main universe chases Joy out of the door, Joy begs her to let go. But suddenly the main-universe Evelyn turns around and expresses that she chooses to stay with her. "Then I will cherish these specks of time." Upon her speaking, the multiverse makes a turn where the hero Evelyn successfully pulls villain Joy out of the black hole; chef Evelyn determines to help her colleague get the raccoon back; rock Evelyn takes a free fall off the cliff along with rock Joy; star Evelyn gets another chance with star Waymond...So many universes flash by and then the shot eventually sets on Evelyn and Joy coming into a full embrace, tears streaming down their faces. Through so many universes and possibilities, they finally find each other again. When they are parted, Joy asks: "Do you still want to do your party?" "We can do whatever we want. Nothing matters." Although the generation gap between Evelyn and her daughter Joy still exists, they finally have more understanding and tolerance for each other, and are able to have a harmonious mother-daughter relationship. In this touching moment, the "we" they use reveals that the peace made by Evelyn and Joy is not only between the two characters, but also between the first and second generation immigrants.

By looking into different images of Chinese-American female and connect them together, these films speak louder voices of Chinese-American women on screen, thus showing strong representations with their presence. Chinese American women can identify as a virtual community because they watch the same movies and recognize each other and themselves in their filmic representations (Coe, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper picks out five films released in past few years that place Chinese-American female at the center of the narrative, trying to take a look into their narrative voices, inducing further discussions. Utilizing three narrative voices by Lanser as a means, This paper examines how contemporary Chinese-American directors respond to the cultural need of diasporic groups in our time by putting Chinese-American women at the center of the narrative. With the female narrative built within these films, the image of the Chinese-American female is also being reshaped today. From the perspective of feminist narratology, we can also see that these films try to find a new balance between the duality of Chinese-American women's cultural identity, narrate new story of these women as second-generation immigrants in 21st century, and reinvent the representation of Chinese-American female in different genre films. The contemporary Chinese-American directors are willing to set aside the cultural conflicts, choosing to focus more on a common feminist view instead. That is not to say that the cultural conflicts are completely dissolved, but inferring that these films turn their faces to the collective reality where Chinese-American women live, which is a viewpoint of more modernity.

The limitations of this study may lie in the lack of cases, since the writer only picks five films that are directed by Chinese-American directors and have a certain impact. Also, due to the lack of relevant studies of constructing an adaptable method to operate female narratology brought by Lanser on film studies, the specific methods the author use to analyze the narrative voice in this paper may need further examination.

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Time and Space in Eastern Narratives: Philosophical Foundations, Structural Variations and Contemporary Adaptations

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Abstract

Time and Space serve as fundamental elements in shaping the identity of Eastern and Western narrative traditions; therefore, it is essential to analyse and elucidate their philosophical, structural, and thematic distinctions to enhance a deeper understanding of their narrative frameworks. While Western narratives often adhere to a linear, cause-and-effect chronology, Eastern narratives embrace cyclical time, layered storytelling, and fluid spatiality, influenced by Indian, Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and Sufi Philosophies and mythological structures. The study explores how Indian, Japanese, Chinese, and Middle Eastern storytelling integrates mythological, historical and allegorical dimensions, where time is repetitive, recursive, and multi-perspectival, rather than a progressive sequence of events. Similarly, spatial representations in Eastern narratives transcend mere geography, functioning as symbolic, dreamlike, and liminal landscapes that merge the metaphysical with the mundane. The study partly investigates the modern evolution of these narrative traditions, particularly in literature, cinema and digital storytelling, where the synthesis of fantasy and realism continues to shape contemporary narrative structures. Works such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, *The Tale of Genji*, *Journey to the West*, *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, and modern adaptations in other media forms demonstrate the enduring elasticity and adaptability of Eastern storytelling. By drawing on narrative theory, postcolonial studies, and comparative literary analysis, this research underscores the diverse temporal and spatial constructs that define global storytelling traditions. The findings suggest that Eastern narrative traditions offer an alternative epistemology of time and space, challenging Western literary paradigms and influencing contemporary transmedia narratives worldwide.

Keywords: Eastern narrative traditions, time and space, fantasy and realism, comparative literature

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Introduction

Storytelling has played a fundamental role in Eastern narrative traditions which encompass a broad range of storytelling techniques, structures, and themes originating from Asia, the Middle East, and other non-western cultures. These traditions are deeply influenced by cultural, historical, and philosophical elements, preserving it through various narrative forms. The intertwined notions of time and space must have flowed through the narratives over time within such a framework. In recent years, modern adaptations, digital storytelling, and transnational literary influences have reshaped these narratives creating significant changes in these traditions at the advent of globalization, digitalization, and hybrid cultural exchanges. The present study examines both the historical foundations of Eastern narrative traditions and their contemporary transformations in literature, cinema, and digital media, by exploring key developments, from classical epics to contemporary multimedia narratives.

Philosophical Foundations in Eastern Narrative Traditions

Eastern narrative traditions have historically been shaped by religious, philosophical, and oral storytelling influences. Some prominent classical forms include Indian epics and mythological narratives, Japanese narrative forms, Chinese narrative traditions, and Middle Eastern narrative traditions. The common thread that connects all of them is the coexistence of fantasy and realism which is readily manifested, creating a dynamic interplay between the supernatural and the mundane, the mythical and the historical, the allegorical and the literal. Unlike the Western literary tradition, which often draws a clear line between fantasy and realism, Eastern storytelling embraces a fluid, interwoven approach where the boundaries between these two modes are often blurred. This unique synthesis is evident in classical Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Middle Eastern narratives, where fantastical elements seamlessly coexist with realistic settings, reflecting both cultural worldviews and philosophical underpinnings. Eastern narrative traditions view reality as multifaceted and permeable, where the supernatural is not separate from everyday life but an intrinsic part of existence. Whether in mythological epics, folktales, historical chronicles, or modern literature and cinema, the fusion of fantasy and realism in Eastern narratives serves as a mechanism for historical reflection, cultural transmission, social critique, and spiritual exploration. This elastic relationship between the real and the fantastic allows for a deeply symbolic storytelling tradition that simultaneously preserves the past, critiques the present, and envisions alternative futures.

The philosophical foundations of Eastern storytelling contribute significantly to the fusion of fantasy and realism. In Chinese Daoist thought, reality is perceived as inherently fluid and ever-changing, allowing for narratives where dreams, illusions, and mystical journeys function as legitimate extensions of the real world. This is evident in *Zhuangzi*, where the famous story of a man dreaming, he is a butterfly—and subsequently questioning whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man—highlights the blurred nature of reality and fantasy. Similarly, Buddhist cosmology influences Indian and Japanese storytelling, where the concept of multiple realms, reincarnation, and spiritual transcendence allows narratives to move effortlessly between the physical and metaphysical. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, for example, blend historical realism with divine interventions, moral allegory, and celestial warfare, treating fantasy as an extension of spiritual and moral truth rather than an escape from reality. In Middle Eastern literature, Islamic storytelling traditions, particularly Sufi mysticism, incorporate dream sequences, supernatural encounters, and divine revelations into otherwise realistic settings. The *One*

Thousand and One Arabian Nights is a quintessential example, where nested storytelling structures create a labyrinthine mix of fantasy and realism, mirroring the complexities of human experience. These traditions establish a literary framework in which fantasy is not an anomaly but an essential narrative tool that enhances, rather than diminishes, the realism of human emotions, struggles, and aspirations.

One of the defining characteristics of fantasy in Eastern narratives is its organic integration with historical and everyday realities. In contrast to Western high fantasy, which often constructs separate worlds with their own rules, Eastern fantasy typically emerges within a recognizable cultural and historical landscape. In classical Chinese literature, *Journey to the West* exemplifies this fusion, combining historical travelogue, Buddhist mythology, Confucian morality, and Daoist supernaturalism into an epic adventure that is at once fantastical and deeply grounded in historical reality. The protagonist, Xuanzang, was a real historical figure, but his journey is mythologized through the introduction of fantastical characters such as the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, whose supernatural abilities and mischievous antics serve as allegorical reflections on human folly and spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, in Japanese literature, works like *The Tale of Genji* incorporate ghostly apparitions, supernatural karma, and dreamscapes within a highly detailed and historically accurate Heian court society. This interplay of fantasy and realism allows for a psychological depth and philosophical inquiry that transcends mere entertainment, offering insight into human nature and the moral cosmos.

Symbolic and allegorical function is another key feature of Eastern fantasy-realism. Unlike the purely escapist nature of some Western fantasy traditions, Eastern fantastical elements often serve as metaphors for deeper truths about existence, morality, and society. In Indian and Persian storytelling traditions, supernatural beings such as rakshasas (demons), djinns, and celestial beings are not merely magical creatures but manifestations of human desires, fears, and ethical dilemmas. The Sufi-influenced Persian epic *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid-ud-din Attar of Nishapur uses animal allegory and mythical landscapes to explore the mystical journey of the soul toward divine truth. Similarly, Japanese Noh theatre and ghost stories (kaidan) use supernatural encounters as metaphors for guilt, karma, and unresolved human emotions, where ghosts serve as reminders of past sins rather than mere horror elements. This symbolic approach is also present in Chinese classical poetry and landscape painting, where mythological creatures, enchanted forests, and dreamlike palaces are not meant to depict literal fantasy worlds but rather to evoke philosophical meditations on nature, time and impermanence.

The intersection of fantasy and realism in Eastern storytelling has also found expression in modern literature and cinema, where traditional narrative structures continue to evolve in contemporary forms. In Chinese modern fiction, authors like Mo Yan and Liu Cixin weave magical realism and speculative fiction into historical and political contexts, critiquing the forces of modernity while drawing upon ancient literary techniques. Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, for example, incorporates hallucinatory descriptions, mythical exaggeration, and dreamlike sequences to depict China's turbulent 20th-century history, while Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* fuses scientific realism with cosmic horror and mythic storytelling, creating a unique hybrid of Eastern metaphysics and hard science fiction. In Japanese cinema, filmmakers like Hayao Miyazaki have masterfully blended mythology, environmental realism, and fantasy aesthetics, as seen in *Spirited Away*, where the protagonist's journey into a magical realm is deeply interwoven with themes of industrialization, environmental destruction, and cultural memory. Similarly, Korean dramas and films such as *The Host* and

Parasite incorporate elements of supernatural horror and social realism, reflecting the tension between modern anxieties and traditional values.

This elasticity of fantasy and realism is further amplified in digital and interactive storytelling, where Eastern narratives continue to evolve through video games, anime, and online fiction. Japanese visual novels and role-playing games (RPGs) often blur the boundaries between historical accuracy and mythic storytelling, as seen in *Final Fantasy*, where real-world history and mythology are reimagined through intricate world-building and parallel timeframes. Similarly, Chinese web novels have developed a new genre of Xianxia (immortal hero fantasy), where traditional Daoist and Buddhist cosmology is integrated into fast-paced digital storytelling. These new mediums demonstrate how the fantasy-realism synthesis in Eastern narratives remains culturally resonant and artistically innovative, capable of adapting to changing modes of storytelling while preserving its fundamental philosophical and narrative principles.

Ultimately, the coexistence of fantasy and realism in Eastern narrative traditions reflects a holistic view of reality, one in which the material and spiritual worlds are not in opposition but mutually interwoven. This narrative elasticity allows for stories that are simultaneously mythical and historical, allegorical and literal, supernatural and deeply human. Unlike the rigid genre distinctions often imposed in Western literature, Eastern storytelling embraces a continuum of reality and imagination, where ghosts, gods, and celestial beings are as much a part of the world as emperors, warriors, and peasants. This philosophical and aesthetic approach to narrative continues to shape the storytelling traditions of China, Japan, India, and the Middle East, ensuring that fantasy and realism remain inseparable dimensions of artistic and cultural expression. As Eastern narratives continue to evolve in the globalized world, their unique synthesis of myth, history, and imagination will undoubtedly continue to captivate, inspire, and redefine the possibilities of storytelling in the twenty-first century and beyond.

The elasticity and highly flexible nature of Eastern narrative traditions allows them to evolve across time, adapt to diverse cultural and historical contexts, and fluidly integrating multiple perspectives within a single story. “With this narrative flexibility is probably connected the fluidity of the time within the narrative frame. Narrative time in Indian texts is more psychological in character than logical; and this is one the major differences between nineteenth century western fiction and traditional Indian narrative” (Paniker, p. 14). Unlike the rigid three-act structure that often defines Western storytelling, Eastern narratives embrace cyclical time, layered storytelling, interwoven subplots, and fluid narrative forms that defy conventional temporal and spatial constraints. While examining Indian critical discourse and textual tradition, Vatsyayan aptly observed the innate flexibility in the Indian arts. “Indeed, in the Indian tradition, certain types of oral texts are fixed, frozen and unchanging and the written texts are fluid and changing. The *Natyasastra* is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Flexibility is inbuilt in the very structure of a text” (Vatsyayan, p. 39). This flexibility is evident across various literary and artistic traditions, from ancient epics and folklore to contemporary digital storytelling. Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Middle Eastern narrative traditions particularly exemplify this adaptability, as they have continuously absorbed philosophical, spiritual, and historical influences while remaining deeply rooted in their respective cultural heritages. The non-linearity, meta-narrative qualities, and multi-perspective approach embedded in Eastern storytelling make it uniquely capable of preserving ancient traditions while simultaneously reinventing itself in response to modern artistic and technological shifts. This elasticity is not merely a stylistic or structural

phenomenon; rather, it reflects a fundamental worldview—one that perceives life as a continuum of interconnected events rather than a sequence of isolated moments with fixed beginnings and endings.

Interwoven Temporalities and Cyclical Narratives

The elasticity of time in Eastern narratives plays a crucial role in their adaptability. Unlike Western literary traditions, which generally follow a linear progression of past-present-future, Eastern stories often function within cyclical, layered, and recursive timeframes. This approach to time is deeply influenced by Buddhist, Hindu, and Daoist philosophies, which emphasize the continuity of existence, reincarnation, and the impermanence of life. For instance, Indian epics such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* do not merely recount singular events; rather, they encompass vast temporal arcs where characters experience multiple lifetimes, divine interventions, and karmic repercussions that ripple across centuries. Indian Puranas also represent the boundlessness of its timeframes. As Ayappa Paniker rightly points out, "There is sometimes, as in the Indian Puranas, a deliberate attempt on the part of the narrator to leave the supposed time of the supposed happenings in an undefined area of time, thereby shifting the emphasis from a definite dateline to indefinite infinity." The spatial actions within the Puranas reflect the all-encompassing nature of a story. "The narrative space too is encyclopaedic in the purana, in keeping with the ever-widening range of the action presented" (Paniker, p. 38). Similarly, the *Jataka Tales*, which narrate the past lives of the Buddha, function within an expansive concept of time in which the past, present, and future seamlessly intertwine. This cyclical understanding of time allows narratives to expand infinitely, incorporating new layers, subplots, and interpretations without ever becoming outdated. "In the Indian narrative, time is measured in cosmic terms: day and night, the different phases of moon, the cycle of seasons, the ages or aeons measured out by the stars, as it were" (Paniker, p. 15). Even the critical concepts in Bharata's Natysastra inherently facilitate a multifaceted interpretation of the text, allowing readers to engage with its content in diverse and nuanced ways. "The text itself, then, in its very structure, makes room for fluidity of interpretation and allows for multiple ways of understanding it" (Vatsyayan, p. 38).

Japanese literary traditions, particularly those influenced by Zen Buddhism, also showcase a remarkable elasticity in temporal representation. "…in terms of traditional Japanese thinking, a change in place (and character) brings in a temporal dimension. Thus, it is conventional for Japanese history to be divided into time periods that are associated with places" (Heita, 2004, pp. 36-39). The concept of *mujō* (impermanence) is a recurrent theme in Japanese literature and aesthetics, reflecting a worldview that embraces constant change and transformation. Works such as *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu and Noh theatre performances employ dreamlike transitions between past and present, as well as symbolic representations of fleeting moments that convey deep emotional and existential truths. "The concomitants of the concept of empty space are the deep reflection, intense gaze, symbolism, minimalism and circularity of time. These virtues lead to the realization of *yugen*, the supreme aesthetic feeling that a Noh actor realises while performing" (Damodaran A., 2020, p. 12). In Chinese literature, particularly in classical novels like *Journey to the West*, time often operates in a mythic dimension, where supernatural elements, reincarnation, and shifting temporal frames contribute to the narrative's expansive and dynamic structure. This temporal flexibility allows Eastern narratives to transcend historical constraints, enabling ancient stories to be continuously reinterpreted for modern audiences.

Spatial Fluidity and Boundless Narrative Environments

Just as Eastern narratives exhibit temporal elasticity, they also demonstrate a remarkable flexibility in spatial representation. The concepts of space and time are interconnected with the notion of self-identity, each influencing and shaping the other. "…notion of space and time and that of another self-identity are inter-related and intertwined" (Vatsyayan, p. 3). Rather than treating setting as a fixed and passive backdrop, Eastern storytelling often blurs the boundaries between physical, metaphysical, and psychological spaces. This is particularly evident in Buddhist and Daoist literature, where space is often conceptualized as an extension of the human mind rather than a separate, objective reality. In Daoist texts such as *Zhuangzi*, fantastical landscapes shift and transform according to the protagonist's state of consciousness, reinforcing the idea that reality itself is fluid and ever-changing. Similarly, in Chinese classical poetry, spatial descriptions often serve as emotional landscapes, reflecting the inner lives of characters rather than functioning as mere geographic locations. Even within Indian narrative traditions, space is predominantly conceived in mythological terms. "Since, the location specified for India or Bharata is partly at least mythical and partly sustained by a narrative imagination, the events depicted are ahistorical. Both time and space are mythological, hence the narrative need not be expected to provide statistics about everything" (Paniker, p. 38). Space assumes a heightened significance within Indian narratives, reflecting its integral role in shaping the thematic and structural dimensions of the storytelling tradition. "…(the stage actor), begins his solo narration with a reference to an indefinite past, but the spatial reference is far more specific and more detailed. The Indian narrative can therefore said to be a spatial one" (Paniker, p. 16). Eastern narratives typically commence with an imprecise or ambiguous temporal reference. "Of greater importance in Asian narrative is space. The narrative formula of opening a tale is more specific about place, leaving the exact time imprecise" (Paniker, p. 16). The vastness of space mirrors the limitless nature of human imagination. "… the narrative space is controlled by the imagination, which itself knows no spatial limitation" (Paniker, p. 38).

Japanese Noh theatre and *Haiku* poetry also exemplify this spatial fluidity, using minimalist yet evocative depictions of nature and dreamlike sequences to transcend the physical realm. Based on the story, the empty space of the stage can be transformed by one's imagination into various places and times. "The concept of nothingness and naturalism in Noh can be traced to the philosophical foundations of Zen Buddhism which is typically expressed in Japanese language through the metaphor of *empty space*. Japanese language treasures *ma* or *empty space* that seeks to find hidden meaning in them" (Davies, p. 38). "The circularity of time underlying Noh aesthetics is best expressed in the paradigm that what goes out comes back. The Japanese concept of four seasons accords with this approach of time" (Damodaran A., 2020, p. 12). Noh plays have enjoyed such longevity because the themes are universal. The highly symbolic spaces in Japanese aesthetics often dissolve the distinction between reality and illusion, presence and absence, creating a unique sense of narrative fluidity. In contrast, Indian literature frequently employs liminal spaces, such as forests, rivers, and crossroads, as transformative realms where characters undergo spiritual and psychological metamorphoses. In Indian narrative traditions, "the narrator is not worried too much by the constraints on time, he can concentrate on spatial movements as an indicator of shifts of location. The scene becomes more crucial in the unfolding of the plot than time" (Paniker, p. 16). The elasticity of space in Eastern storytelling allows narratives to exist in multiple dimensions simultaneously, accommodating diverse perspectives and interpretations.

Another key aspect of the highly flexible nature of Eastern narratives is their multiplicity of perspectives and open-ended structures. Unlike Western narratives, which often adhere to a single protagonist-driven plot, Eastern storytelling frequently employs multi-perspectival techniques, in which events are recounted from various viewpoints. This approach is particularly evident in Japanese Rashomon-style narratives, where conflicting accounts of the same event highlight the subjectivity of truth. The Ramayana, for example, exists in numerous regional versions across India, Southeast Asia, and beyond, each offering a different perspective on the characters and events. In Islamic storytelling traditions, such as *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, the use of nested narratives and frame stories creates a kaleidoscopic storytelling experience, where multiple tales unfold within each other like infinite layers of meaning. This openness in storytelling is not just a narrative device but a fundamental worldview—one that resists fixed interpretations and embraces ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction. The flexibility of Eastern narratives allows them to evolve across different cultures and time periods, enabling new generations of storytellers to reinterpret, expand, and transform traditional tales without losing their core essence. This adaptability is one of the reasons why Eastern myths, folktales, and literary works continue to thrive in contemporary digital media, cinema, and transmedia storytelling.

Adaptability in Contemporary Literature, Cinema, and Digital Storytelling

In the modern era, the elasticity of Eastern narrative traditions has allowed them to seamlessly transition into contemporary literature, cinema, and digital storytelling. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literature, for example, continue to incorporate traditional narrative techniques while adapting to new formats such as web novels, anime, and experimental film. Hayao Miyazaki's films, such as *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*, exemplify the fusion of ancient mythic storytelling with modern animation techniques, creating narratives that feel both timeless and contemporary. Similarly, Chinese wuxia (martial arts) novels, such as Jin Yong's *Legend of the Condor Heroes*, maintain the classic elements of Chinese heroic storytelling while integrating modern character psychology and intricate world-building.

Korean dramas and films, such as *Parasite* and *Oldboy*, have gained international recognition for their complex narrative structures, which often employ non-linear time, layered storytelling, and ambiguous moral conclusions—hallmarks of Eastern narrative traditions. In his films, Hong Sang-soo articulates the elusive concept of the present moment and constructs a cinematic space where multiple temporalities coexist, fracturing the linear flow of time. The structure of his film *In Our Day* (2023) creates a disruption of linear chronology. This non-linear approach to time mirrors the way memories and recollections often surface in the present, blurring the boundaries between past and present (Kitikunkamjorn, 2024, p. 789). The rise of transmedia storytelling, where narratives unfold across multiple platforms (e.g., anime, manga, video games, and web novels), further demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of Eastern storytelling traditions in the digital age. The popularity of interactive narratives, such as visual novels and AI-generated storytelling, also highlights how Eastern narratives continue to evolve while retaining their core principles of fluidity, multiplicity, and open-endedness.

Conclusion

The highly flexible and elastic nature of Eastern narratives ensures their continued relevance and evolution in an ever-changing cultural landscape. By embracing cyclical time, spatial fluidity, multi-perspectival storytelling, and open-ended structures, Eastern narratives resist

stagnation and maintain an organic adaptability that allows them to be reinterpreted, expanded, and reshaped for each new generation.

Whether in classical mythology, medieval literature, modern cinema, or interactive digital storytelling, Eastern narratives exhibit a timeless dynamism, continuously reinventing themselves while remaining deeply rooted in their philosophical and aesthetic traditions. This narrative elasticity not only distinguishes Eastern storytelling from its Western counterparts but also positions it as a powerful and enduring artistic force capable of transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. As technology advances and new storytelling mediums emerge, the flexibility of Eastern narratives will undoubtedly continue to shape, inspire, and redefine the future of global storytelling.

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Social Media Marketing Communication: A Semiotic Analysis of the Personal Brand of COC Participant on Instagram

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Abstract

Social media introduces a new approach for brands to interact with their audiences. This digital transformation creates both challenges and opportunities in implementing marketing communication, especially in building more personal relationships with the audience. This study aims to explore marketing communication through social media with a semiotic analysis approach to understand the construction of meaning in digital content. Using a qualitative method through the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this research explores the meaning within social media content. Ruangguru, as the largest education technology platform in Indonesia, was chosen for its success in integrating personal branding of participant in the viral Clash of Champion (COC) program into its marketing communication through Instagram. This study uses Montoya and Vandehey's eight laws of personal branding to analyze how Ruangguru builds the personal brand of COC participant. The research findings reveal that the personal brand of COC participant is not only represented through the academic side but also highlights the authentic personal traits. This indicates that the representation is built to create a natural image with the goal of establishing a stronger emotional connection with the audience.

Keywords: marketing communication, social media, personal brand, digital branding

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Introduction

Social media has become an important instrument in marketing communication. It is viewed as an effective instrument in supporting marketing goals and strategies, particularly in audience engagement, managing interactions with the audience and communication (Alalwan et al., 2017). Mangold and Faulds (2009, as cited in Killian & McManus, 2015) stated that social media has driven a major transformation in communication, making audiences expect brands to interact through platforms where audiences have control. This indicates a shift in communication control from being brand-centric to consumer-centric, creating new approaches in how brands interact with audiences.

The characteristics of social media make it a tool for branding. Social media has interactive aspects that enhance brand awareness and strengthen brand loyalty, making it one of the best media for building loyal and sustainable audiences (Ayvaz, 2022). Interestingly, according to Karaduman (2013), social media provides opportunities to manage personal brands more easily compared to managing product or service brands. Wetsch (2012, as cited in Shafiee et al., 2020) added that the formation and development of a personal brand is essential for achieving success both personally and organizationally. Therefore, social media becomes a strategic platform in building personal brands.

Personal brand has a significant influence on the audience. Kromalcas et al. (2024) stated that personal brand aspects (particularly physical appearance) significantly affect the audience in terms of attracting attention and increasing engagement. Mello et al. (2020) argued that physical attractiveness has proven to be an important determinant of persuasion. Furthermore, Wei et al. (2022) revealed that a personal brand perceived as warm by the audiences has a more significant impact on audience's emotional engagement, while a personal brand perceived as competent is more likely to drive audience's cognitive and behavioral engagement. This indicates that personal brand influences the audience in attracting attention and increasing engagement.

Personal branding research has been conducted from various perspectives such as the study by Fitrianti et al. (2020) titled "Personal Branding Cino Fajrin through Instagram". This study aimed to analyze the process of local influencer Cino Fajrin builds and manages his personal branding on Instagram using a case study method. The results showed that Ciko Fajrin consistently developed a humorous and distinctly Semarang-style personal branding on his Instagram. This increased his personal value and marketability, leading him to collaborate with various parties. Meanwhile, Liu and Suh (2017) conducted study titled "Self-Branding on Social Media: An Analysis of Style Bloggers on Instagram". This research seeks to answer how to build a branded-self on social media and what features distinguish social media as a tool for self-branding through content analysis method. Tmhe results showed that although the majority of female style bloggers follow traditional beauty standards, social media provides opportunities to market themselves according to their increased awareness of women's rights by utilizing Instagram features.

Based on this, it is interesting to examine the representation of personal branding through Instagram. Killian and McManus (2015) stated that the virality of social media offers great opportunities for brands seeking positive attention. However, it can also harm the brand's image when audiences feel they are being treated poorly (Killian & McManus, 2015). Therefore, brands are required to maintain a balance between protecting their image and encouraging deeper relationships with the audiences.

Literature Review

Personal branding is the process of building a unique personal identity, developing communication approaches for personal brand identity to audiences, and evaluating its impact on an individual's image to fulfill personal and professional goals (Khedher, 2014). According to Labrecque et al. (2011) personal branding is an effort to capture and promote one's personal strengths and uniqueness. It is understood as a strategic process involving the identification and promotion of personal strengths and uniqueness to build a strong image.

There are three dimensions that shape personal brand including competence, standards, and style (McNally et al., 2011). The first dimension relates to the identification of the roles played to meet audience expectations, such as being an expert in a particular field. The second dimension focuses on consistently maintained performance. This dimension is understood as the level of quality or consistency in performing roles. The third dimension emphasizes communication and interaction style. Brand style is understood as the emotional image formed during interaction with the audiences. These three dimensions are interconnected in forming a unity that determines the strength of a personal brand.

Meanwhile, Montoya and Vandehey (2002) present the concept of the eight laws of personal branding as the foundation for strong personal branding including specialization, leadership, personality, distinctiveness, visibility, unity, persistence, and goodwill. First, specialization emphasizes the importance of becoming an expert in certain areas as seen through ability, behavior, lifestyle, mission, product, profession, and service. Second, leadership relates to credibility as a leader through excellence, position, and recognition. Third, personality emphasizes authentic characteristics by looking at one's character, capabilities, and personal values. Fourth, distinctiveness refers to how a personal brand is expressed differently through behavior, physicality, and lifestyle.

Fifth, visibility emphasizes being active and consistently increasing one's presence to be recognized by the audiences. Sixth is unity which states that the person behind the personal brand must adhere to the ethics and behavior established by the brand. Seventh, persistence emphasizes the importance of perseverance and consistency in building personal brand. Lastly, goodwill means that personal brand brings positive values to its audience through overcoming challenges, defending noble causes, keeping promises, giving recognition to those who deserve it, and treating others with kindness.

Methodology

The research uses a constructivism paradigm that emphasizes knowledge is not objective or universal, but rather the result of an interpretative process influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). A qualitative approach is used to understand the formation of meaning regarding the representation of personal brand of COC participants displayed by Rungguru on Instagram. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the characteristics of qualitative research focus on meaning and understanding, the position of the researcher as the main instrument, and involve an inductive process with descriptions in the form of words. This research applies Roland Barthes semiotic analysis as an analytical framework to reveal the meanings contained in visual and textual content on Instagram.

The research object is Instagram content from @ruangguru (https://www.instagram.com/ruangguru/) that features COC finalist Axel Giovanni Hartanto

from National University of Singapore. The researcher selected Axel based on criteria including his achievement in reaching the final round of the COC program, his status as an influencer, and his background as a Ruangguru user alumnus. These criteria represent Axel's ability to compete throughout the COC program, his status as an influencer shows that Axel has reach and influence on social media, and his background as an alumnus user of Ruangguru represents Ruangguru's success story. In this research, the selected content time period is from June 29 to August 17, 2024. The selection of this time period was chosen to see how Ruangguru portrayed Axel's personal brand from the airing of the first episode to the final episode of the COC program.

The researcher collected data through documentation of Instagram content from @ruangguru that features Axel during the period from June 29 to August 17, 2024. The research data includes visual content (photos/videos) and captions accompanied by coding sheets to record emerging symbols. The researcher conducted data analysis using Roland Barthes semiotic method by examining two levels of meaning, namely denotative and connotative, through identification of signifier and signified as well as determining myths. The researcher identified visual and textual signs in Instagram content that appear explicitly at the denotative level. Then, the researcher analyzed implicit meanings by relating these signs to broader contexts at the connotative level which can generate myths. Furthermore, analysis was conducted by examining elements from the personal brand concept based the on Montoya and Vandehey's framework of the eight laws of personal branding to understand how Ruangguru built Axel's personal brand.

This research uses Barthes semiotic analysis method, considering its ability to reveal layers of meaning contained in symbols or signs. According to Barthes, semiotics analysis concerns the social production of meaning through systems of signs, an analysis of anything that can represent something else by interpreting verbal and nonverbal signs (Griffin, 2012). This approach is relevant for analyzing Instagram content that is rich in visual or textual symbols and aligns with the research goal of exploring the meaning of COC participants' personal brand constructed by Ruangguru through its representation on Instagram.

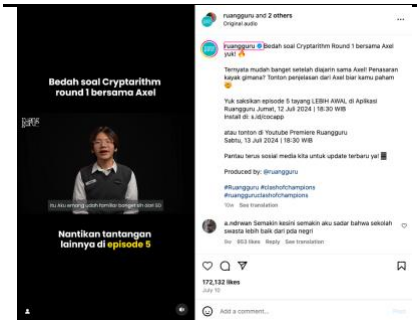
Results and Discussion

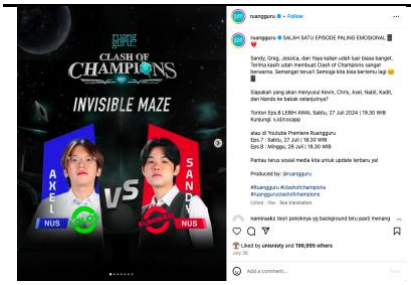
Social media provides an easier space for managing a personal brand, and developing a personal brand has become a necessity for achieving success. In line with this, Ruangguru utilizes Instagram as the main medium to build the personal brand of COC participant, namely Axel. The research findings show that Ruangguru builds Axel's personal brand through academic and non-academic/personal symbols. The representation is reflected through denotative and connotative signified and signifier through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. The researcher found 55 contents featuring Axel from June 29 to August 17, 2024. From this number, the researcher focused the analysis on 21 contents that illustrate the representation of Axel's personal brand with high audience engagement, marked by obtaining more than 100,000 likes for each post.

In the representation of academic aspects, the dominant symbols representing Axel's personal brand are NUS, double major, GPA 4.9/5.0, and achievements in mathematics. Besides these symbols, there are specific symbols such as studying with champions, shuffle and recall (memorizing 52 cards), and cryptarithm that demonstrate Axel's academic capacity in mathematics. The personal brand built through academic symbols reflects Axel as a smart

and accomplished COC participant from a top world university, not easily defeated due to his mathematical expertise, and worthy of being a mentor in the field of mathematics.

Table 1
Academic Representation

Object	Denotative	Connotative
@ruangguru's post on June 29, 2024	Signifier: Photo: Axel wearing NUS jacket. Text includes Ruangguru, COC, NUS, double major, GPA 4.90/5.00, mathematics achievements. Caption: Introducing a high-achieving student from a top global university as a COC participant. Signified: Photo: Axel is portrayed as a smart and accomplished international student participating in COC. Caption: COC is joined by outstanding students from top global universities.	Signifier: Photo: Axel appears confident. Caption: Introducing the COC participant with enthusiasm. Signified: Photo: Axel is confident in joining COC because he comes from NUS, has a double major, a high GPA, and notable achievements. Caption: COC is high-quality because it features outstanding students from top global universities.
 @ruangguru's post on July 10, 2024	Signifier: Video: Axel has been familiar with Cryptarithm problems since elementary school. Caption: Breaking down Cryptarithm problems with Axel. Signified: Video: Axel is familiar with Cryptarithm problems. Caption: Cryptarithm problems can be solved easily.	Signifier: Video: Axel has been familiar with Cryptarithm problems since elementary school, which not many people know about and are considered difficult to solve. Caption: Axel breaks down Cryptarithm problems easily. Signified: Video: Axel states that he has been familiar with Cryptarithm problems since childhood, which are considered foreign and difficult to solve. Caption: Cryptarithm problems are considered easy by Axel.

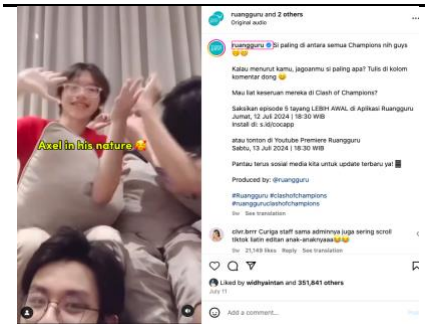
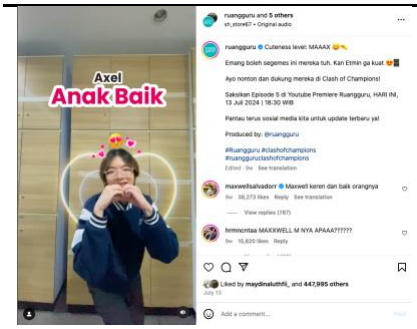
Object	Denotative	Connotative
 @ruangguru's post on July 14, 2024	Signifier: Photo: NUS attributes, Computer Science, GPA 4.90/5.00, the text "Learning with the Champion", and a list of study materials in the field of mathematics. Caption: Learning with the champion, Axel, solving Cryptarithm problems. Signified: Photo: Axel, as a champion, becomes a study mentor in mathematics. Caption: Axel, as a champion, mentors others in solving Cryptarithm problems.	Signifier: Photo: Axel appears confident as a champion inviting others to study mathematics together. Caption: Axel is skilled in quantitative reasoning and generously shares his tips for free. Signified: Photo: Axel serves as a reliable mathematics mentor. Caption: Axel does good deeds by sharing tips freely.
 @ruangguru's post on July 26, 2024	Signifier Photo: Axel with NUS written attribute and qualifying vs Sandy from NUS, *invisible maze* elimination. *Caption*: Congratulations and encouragement to the participants. Signified Photo: Axel from NUS qualifies through the *invisible maze* against Sandy. *Caption*: Appreciation and words of encouragement to the participants.	Signifier Photo: Axel passes the invisible maze against Sandy, his best friend. Caption: The most emotional episode showing competition between best friends. Signified Photo: The consistency of Axel's abilities throughout the competition who always passes even when competing against his best friend from NUS. Caption: Emotional moment between Axel and Sandy.

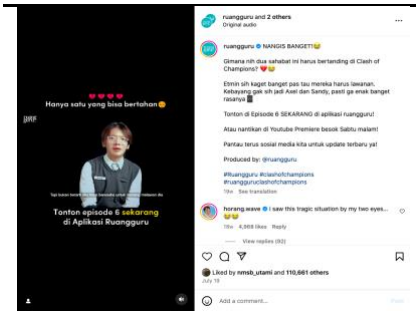
Source. Processed by Researcher (2024)

Meanwhile, in the representation of non-academic/personal aspects, the dominant symbols representing Axel's personal brand are Axel's authentic character including being kind-hearted, having strong social relationships, friendly, never giving up, handsome, and even showing Axel's weaknesses such as also feeling tired when studying. The personal brand built through non-academic/personal symbols reflects that although Axel has extraordinary

intelligence in the field of mathematics, Axel is a COC participant who is authentic and just like people in general.

Table 2
Non-academic/Personal Representation

Object	Denotative	Connotative
 @ruangguru's post on July 11, 2024	Signifier: Video: Axel is actively moving with the text "Axel and his nature" accompanied by a smiling emoji with heart. Caption: The "most" category among all the champions. Signified: Video: Axel shows an active personality. Caption: The COC participant has the nickname "the most".	Signifier: Video: Axel interacts actively and expressively, moving joyfully among other COC participants, highlighting Axel's positive traits. Caption: The other side of a COC participant. Signified: Video: Axel has strong social relationships with other COC participants. Caption: COC participants are not only diligent in studying but also have unique behaviors.
 @ruangguru's post on July 13, 2024	Signifier: Video: Axel with the text "Anak Baik" (Good Kid), a smiling emoji with hearts, and a pose where Axel makes a heart symbol while smiling. Caption: The adorable character of a COC participant. Signified: Video: Axel is a good kid. Caption: Each COC participant has their own adorable traits.	Signifier: Video: Another side of Axel shows him as a kind-hearted child full of love. Caption: The adorable side of a COC participant. Signified: Video: Axel is known for spreading positive energy among COC participants, making him easy to like. Caption: COC participants are ordinary humans who have unique non-academic sides.

Object	Denotative	Connotative
 @ruangguru's post on July 19, 2024	Signifier: Video: Axel is going to compete against Sandy and continues to try his best to win against Sandy. Caption: Sad because two best friends have to face each other. Signified: Video: Axel is determined and keeps fighting against obstacles. Caption: A competition between two close friends.	Signifier: Video: Axel feels sad but doesn't give up and keeps trying to win. Caption: A fun yet bittersweet competition where two best friends must compete against each other. Signified: Video: Axel is committed and never gives up, no matter the obstacle. Caption: A friendship-based competition that creates a dilemma.
 @ruangguru's post on August 6, 2024	Signifier Video: Axel is said to be the most handsome COC participant and display of Axel's photo. Caption: Xaviera's predicted answer. Signified Video: Axel is one of the most handsome COC participants. Caption: Xaviera's answer is still unknown.	Signifier Video: The statement about Axel being the most handsome COC participant is delivered enthusiastically with a photo of Axel posing cool. Caption: Curiosity about Xaviera's answer regarding the most handsome COC participant. Signified Video: Axel has a face that is not only physically handsome but also has a cool aura. Axel's Asian face can be compared to Korean boyband members. Caption: Xaviera's answer points to one of the COC participants.

Source. Processed by Researcher (2024)

To further explore the representation of the COC participant's personal brand through Instagram, the researcher analyzed deeper elements that constitute a strong personal brand, as well as characteristics that reinforce Axel's personal brand as a "champion." This aligns with

the concept of the eight laws of personal branding by Montoya and Vandehey (2002) namely specialization, leadership, personality, distinctiveness, visibility, unity, persistence, and goodwill, as well as concepts from Demes et al. (2020) and Mello et al. (2020) regarding the characteristics of a "champion." These elements carry meaning through the Instagram content presentation, which shapes Axel's personal brand in depth.

Representation of Academic Expertise

Axel's personal brand with academic expertise through specialization elements becomes a prominent representation. The reflected specialization element emphasizes the importance of being an expert in a particular field to build a strong personal brand. This can be established through ability (demonstrating individual capability), lifestyle (one's way of life), mission (a specific individual goal), product (produced outcomes), service (offered services), profession (niche market), and behavior (individual conduct).

Axel's personal brand is built by Ruangguru through elements such as ability, mission, service, profession, and behavior. Axel is represented as a participant from one of the world's top universities with strong abilities and achievements in mathematics (ability). He has a mission to make mathematics appear easy (mission). Axel provides online learning sessions (service). As a COC participant, he is positioned as a potential math mentor (profession), and he generously shares tips about mathematics (behavior).

At the myth determination stage, Axel is portrayed as a champion through the element of specialization emphasizing his expertise in mathematics. This expertise is represented by his university background, academic grades, achievements, and teaching abilities that are inseparable from Axel's passion for mathematics. According to Demes et al. (2020), a champion must love their work, be motivated, dedicated, and able to help create other champions, thus creating a learning environment to help others grow and develop. The portrayal of Axel as a champion not only highlights his skills and accomplishments but also reflects his dedication in creating a supportive learning environment for others growth and development.

Representation of Academic Credibility

Axel's personal brand with representation of academic credibility through the leadership element strengthens the representation of outstanding academic expertise. In this representation, the leadership element emphasizes that personal brand gains credibility considered as a leader within its field. This can be built through excellence (individual expertise in specific fields), position (individual status), and recognition (acknowledgment in the form of awards). Axel's personal brand representation is built by Ruangguru through excellence and recognition. He is portrayed as a COC participant who is difficult to defeat due to his expertise in mathematics (excellence) and his achievements at national and international levels (recognition). There is no representation of Axel's personal brand through position.

At the stage of determining myths, Axel's portrayal as a champion through the leadership element emphasizes his credibility in the field of mathematics, supported by the national and international recognition he has received. This is closely tied to Axel's passion for mathematics since childhood. According to Demes et al. (2020), a champion must love what they do, be motivated and dedicated. The champion has passion for something, believes in it,

and is internally motivated to make a difference. The portrayal of Axel as a champion reflects that leadership in mathematics is not only determined by the recognition achieved, but also by genuine passion and deep dedication.

Representation of Personal Authenticity

In addition to his academic strengths, Axel's personal brand is built through his prominent personality elements. The personality element emphasizes that a successful personal brand must be based on one's authentic personality, including their weaknesses. This law focuses on authenticity, building a personal brand that reflects someone's character, abilities, and values. Axel's personal brand representation is built by Ruangguru through his character of being kind, friendly, and genuine. This shows Axel's authenticity as an ordinary person with his natural characteristics.

At the myth determination stage, Axel representation as a champion is seen through the personality element emphasizes the kind-hearted, friendly and authentic character as his originality that gives positive vibes. According to Demes et al. (2020) a champion must have the skills to understand and share the feelings of others. The representation of Axel as a champion not only highlights his academic expertise, but also emphasizes the importance of kind-hearted character and empathy, which contribute to creating a positive and inspiring environment.

Representation of Personal Uniqueness

Axel's personal brand with representation of personal uniqueness through the distinctiveness element strengthens the representation of personal authenticity. In this representation, the distinctiveness element states how personal brand needs to be displayed in a way that is different from others. This is built through behavior (individual actions and interactions), physicality (physical aspects), and lifestyle (personal life aspect). Axel's personal brand representation is built by Ruangguru through behavior and physicality. Axel is represented as a COC participant who actively interacts with fellow participants (behavior). Additionally, Axel's personal brand is built as one of the most handsome COC participants (physicality). This is displayed both through Axel's physical appearance and other participants' opinions.

At the stage of determining myths, Axel representation as a champion through the distinctiveness element emphasizes social interaction and physical appearance. According to Demes et al. (2020) a champion has the ability to understand and share others' feelings. For physical appearance, Mello et al. (2020) stated that physical attractiveness proves to be an important determinant of persuasion, and persuasive ability is crucial for a champion to possess as the capacity to invite everyone to participate. Axel representation as a champion not only highlights his ability to interact socially, but also shows that an attractive physical appearance can enhance appeal and influence.

Representation of Self-Visibility

Axel’s personal brand self-visibility representation strengthens the representation of his prominent academic expertise. In this representation, visibility emphasizes that to build a successful personal brand, one must be active and consistent in enhancing their presence to be recognized by the audience. To become visible, individuals must promote themselves.

Axel's personal brand is constructed by Ruangguru through the way Axel promotes himself via his academic abilities.

At the myth determination stage, Axel representation as a champion through the element of visibility highlights his ability to promote himself, particularly by showcasing his familiarity with Cryptarithm puzzles since childhood, which are typically considered obscure and difficult. According to Demes et al. (2020) persuasive ability is essential for a champion, as one's capacity to bring others along. Axel's representation as a champion not only reflects his ability to solve complex challenges, but also highlights the importance of persuasion skills to inspire others that mathematics is easy.

Representation of Academic Integrity

Axel's personal brand with integrity representation through the element of academic unity reinforces the representation of prominent academic expertise. In this representation, the unity element states that the individual behind the personal brand must adhere to the behavioral ethics established by the brand. Personal actions and behaviors must reflect the projected brand. Axel's personal brand representation is built by Ruangguru through h behavior of consistently passing COC challenges from the beginning until becoming a finalist, which aligns with the image of a champion and forms a complete unity.

At the stage of determining myths, Axel representation as a champion through the unity element is evident, emphasizing the trait of never giving up on every challenge given until successfully becoming a finalist. According to Demes et al. (2020), a champion is a persistent person who tries to change thesituation, dares to take risks and initiatives to solve problems, and is not afraid to fail. Axel representation as a champion affirms that perseverance and courage in facing challenges are not only keys to achieving success but also serve as inspiration to not give up in overcoming obstacles.

Representation of Perseverance

Axel's personal brand, represented through perseverance, reinforces the representation of his authenticity and personal uniqueness. In this representation, the element of perseverance emphasizes the importance of persistence in building a personal brand. An individual's consistency in the personal branding process will helps establish public trust in the individual as a brand. Axel's personal brand is built by Ruangguru through his consistency and determination in displaying his best abilities even when facing against his own best friend.

At the myth determination stage, Axel representation as a champion is seen through the element of perseverance, emphasizing Axel's consistency and determination to show his best abilities even though he has to face his own best friend. According to Demes et al. (2020), a champion has a strong sense of responsibility, acting with firmness, precision, and seriousness. Axel's representation as a champion not only reflects his perseverance and commitment to excellence but also demonstrates that a sense of responsibility is key to achieving success even when facing difficult situations involving close friends.

Representation of Praiseworthy Behavior

Axel's personal brand with praiseworthy behavior representation through the element of good intention reinforces the representation of personal authenticity and uniqueness. In this study,

the good intention element emphasizes that a personal brand must contain good intentions and carry positive values to its audience. This can be demonstrated through manifesting positive values (hard work or self-development), fighting against obstacles, defending noble causes, keeping promises, giving recognition to those who deserve it, and the golden rule (treating others with kindness and respect).

Axel's personal brand representation is built by Ruangguru through positive values, fighting against obstacles, and the golden rule. Axel is represented as a COC participant with good behavior including being a hard worker and never giving up when facing challenges. Axel has the golden rule trait of treating others with kindness and giving recognition to those who deserve it. However, there is no apparent representation of Axel's personal brand through defending noble causes and keeping promises.

At the myth determination stage, Axel representation as a champion through the good intention element emphasizes the attitude of working hard against obstacles and treating others with kindness. According to Demes et al. (2020), a champion must anticipate problems and be proactive, be a persistent person who strives to change situation. Additionally, a champion should have the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. The representation of Axel as a champion affirms that good intentions and hard work in facing obstacles, as well as empathy towards others, not only define a champion but also create a positive impact that inspires others to act in the same way.

Through the results and discussion presented, this study has the potential to expand the understanding of how the elements that form a personal brand are conveyed through a system of signs at the levels of denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings in digital content. This encourages the development of integrating personal branding elements with a semiotic approach in the context of marketing communication through social media. At a practical level, this research provides perspectives for marketing communication practitioners in designing strategies through personal brand development on Instagram. A deep understanding of the interaction between personal branding elements and visual and textual sign systems helps create more meaningful and strategic digital content.

Conclusion

This research reveals the personal brand representation of COC participants, especially Axel, in @ruangguru Instagram content as part of Ruangguru's marketing communication through social media. Through semiotic analysis of Ruangguru's Instagram content, this research shows that there are two important elements represented namely “champion” characteristics through academic and non-academic/personal aspects. The combination of these elements demonstrates that the representation built by Ruangguru creates a COC participant personal brand that not only inspires academically but also presents a stronger emotional connection with its audience.

In the academic aspect, Ruangguru builds the personal brand of COC participants through measurable and credible achievements. This is reflected in the emphasis on educational background from top world universities, a double major and high academic performance, as well as expertise in mathematics through national and international recognition, which are academic elements displayed by Ruangguru. Meanwhile, in the personal aspect, various characters such as perseverance, hard work, consistency, a willingness to share knowledge, and treating others kindly become personal elements constructed by Ruangguru. This reflects

that Ruangguru emphasizes the importance of balance between academic achievement and personal elements in building COC participants' personal brand. This strategy aims to create a deeper connection with the audience.

Although able to reveal the personal brand representation of COC participants in @ruangguru Instagram content, this research still has certain limitations. The limited sample, which only focuses on a single participant, does not yet provide an overview of the personal brand of other COC participants that may also be applied by Ruangguru. The choice of semiotic analysis method, which focuses more on understanding the meaning of symbols, also limits exploration of other aspects in personal brand formation. Therefore, future research is encouraged to further explore the personal brands of other COC participants. This would provide deeper insight into Ruangguru's personal branding strategy for COC participants as part of its marketing communication on social media, using other research methods to provide different perspectives.

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Research on the Design of Integrating Audio Resonance Into Immersive Stress-Relief Healing

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Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness and feasibility of audio resonance technology combined with immersive stress-relief therapeutic design in promoting mental health and managing emotions. As modern society faces mounting psychological pressure, traditional methods often fail to provide deep relaxation. In response, we integrate audio resonance technology and multi-sensory stimuli to develop an immersive therapeutic environment. An audio resonance chair delivers low-frequency sound waves and surround sound to create a three-dimensional soundscape, further enriched by generative music based on natural elements for guiding users into deep relaxation. This study aims to integrate audio resonance technology with an immersive therapeutic experience to thoroughly investigate its practical effectiveness and application potential in stress relief and emotional regulation. Ultimately, the research objectives focus on finalizing and evaluating a prototype design, successfully constructing an immersive stress-relief therapeutic environment through an audio resonance chair combined with multi-sensory experiences. On the hardware side, emphasis is placed on the integration of the chair's structure and vibration modules to ensure stable transmission of low-frequency sound waves, thereby providing a deep relaxation effect. On the software side, generative music tools and spatial audio processing are employed to create a highly natural sonic environment. Following testing and adjustments based on user feedback, the final prototype demonstrates excellent comfort and immersion, producing preliminary results in emotional release and stress relief. These outcomes offer a feasible reference for applying audio resonance in mind-body therapy and establish a foundation for future research on immersive experiences and practical stress-relief therapeutic applications.

Keywords: audio resonance, immersive experience, stress-relief therapy, emotional granularity, flow experience

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Introduction

As modern life becomes faster-paced and stressors more diverse, an increasing number of people are experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety and chronic stress. University students are particularly affected, facing academic pressure, career uncertainty, and identity shifts. Surveys in Taiwan show rising rates of depressive tendencies among students, with some already exhibiting early symptoms like emotional fatigue, yet many do not seek formal counseling (Ministry of Education, 2020; Wu, 2021).

In this context, accessible, non-invasive, and drug-free stress-relief solutions are increasingly important. Traditional methods like meditation, aromatherapy, and music therapy can be helpful, but may not work for everyone—especially those with high neural sensitivity, for whom overly quiet or unguided settings may heighten anxiety.

Neuroscience research highlights that our bodies react differently to sensory input: sound can quickly trigger emotional responses via the limbic system, touch can promote relaxation through sensory feedback, and vision engages attention and cognition (Patel, 2014). Thus, multisensory integration may better support emotional and physiological regulation.

This study explores the integration of audio resonance and immersive experience design to develop a stress-relief system combining tactile (resonance), auditory (music), and visual (interactive environment) stimuli. The goal is to guide users into a flow state, enhancing emotional regulation and immersion. This approach offers a preventive and supportive therapeutic option for students and stress-sensitive individuals.

Research Motivation

As the pace of modern life continues to accelerate, psychological and physiological stress has become increasingly common, leading to widespread issues such as anxiety, depression, and chronic fatigue. Consequently, the demand for stress-relief and healing methods has grown, with particular attention given to multisensory therapeutic environments. In recent years, both audio resonance technology and immersive experiences have shown great potential in the field of therapeutic design. Audio resonance utilizes low-frequency vibrations to induce relaxation and reduce stress, while immersive experiences enhance emotional well-being through synchronized multisensory environments that foster engagement and comfort.

However, current research and practical applications face two key limitations. First, while audio resonance effectively influences the body through vibrational stimuli, it often lacks contextual and emotional guidance, limiting its impact to the physiological level without reaching deeper psychological effects. Second, although immersive experiences offer high levels of sensory engagement, they frequently lack therapeutic focus and intentionality in addressing specific needs like stress regulation and emotional balance. Therefore, integrating these two complementary approaches—each with its strengths and limitations—has become a pressing research challenge for achieving more comprehensive and effective healing outcomes.

This study is motivated by the need to address these gaps by proposing an innovative integration of visual, auditory, and vibratory stimuli within an emotionally guided, context-aware healing system. Rather than focusing on a single sensory channel or therapeutic method, the proposed design emphasizes multimodal sensory integration and emotional

resonance. Grounded in flow theory, the system aims to lead participants into a state of deep focus and internal alignment, enabling profound relaxation and emotional transformation.

Furthermore, through systematic prototype development, experimental design, and data analysis, this study evaluates the effectiveness of the immersive audio resonance system in real-world applications. It also explores adaptive strategies for different contexts and user needs. The findings aim to bridge existing gaps in stress-relief and therapeutic design practices, offering both methodological insights and empirical evidence. Ultimately, this research aspires to support future applications of healing design in clinical therapy, health promotion, and holistic care, contributing to a more mature and practically valuable direction for the field.

Research Objectives

This study aims to integrate audio resonance technology with immersive experience design to develop and validate an innovative system for stress relief and emotional healing. The specific research objectives are as follows:

1. **To examine the stress-relief effects of audio resonance**
   Investigate how low-frequency sound vibrations influence physiological relaxation (e.g., HRV) and emotional states (e.g., PANAS), validating audio resonance as an effective tool for stress regulation.
2. **To develop an immersive stress-relief prototype using audio resonance**
   Design a multisensory environment integrating visuals, sound, and body vibrations, focusing on interactivity and user comfort through iterative prototype testing.
3. **To evaluate the system's therapeutic effectiveness**
   Use mixed methods to assess changes in physiological indicators, emotional states, and subjective experiences (e.g., flow and relaxation) before and after use.

Stress-Relief and Healing Design

Stress is a complex mind-body response triggered by perceived threats or challenges. Walter Cannon (1932) introduced the "fight or flight" response as a basic survival mechanism involving the sympathetic nervous system. Later, Richard Lazarus (1966) emphasized the role of cognitive appraisal, suggesting that stress is shaped by personal interpretation, not just external events.

In recent years, healing design has gained attention across healthcare, workplaces, urban spaces, and digital environments. By integrating environmental psychology, technology, and health promotion, it seeks to reduce psychological stress and enhance well-being.

However, three major challenges persist:

1. **Mind-body inconsistency** – Healing interventions may improve emotional states but don't always align with physiological indicators (e.g., HRV), making comprehensive evaluation difficult (Ulrich, 2008).
2. **Individual differences** – Users respond differently to the same healing environments based on factors like sensitivity, resilience, and current state, highlighting the need for personalized approaches (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).
3. **Cross-cultural limitations** – Healing preferences and emotional responses vary across cultures, yet many designs lack cultural adaptability (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006).

To address these issues, this study integrates audio resonance with immersive multisensory environments, aiming to create a more holistic, context-aware, and adaptable healing design.

Audio Resonance

Audio resonance involves using sound waves at specific low frequencies to stimulate the body through vibration and tactile input. In recent years, it has shown promising results in health promotion and mind-body healing (Porges, 2011). This technique helps activate parasympathetic responses, reduce sympathetic nervous activity, and promote relaxation and emotional balance.

Studies by Reybrouck et al. (2019) and Chion (2016) highlight that combining auditory and tactile stimuli enhances both physical and psychological relaxation, while also deepening the immersive sensory experience. This multisensory integration has become a growing focus in therapeutic and healing design.

However, current applications often rely on isolated sensory stimuli and lack contextual or emotional guidance. This study aims to address that gap by developing a more integrated, emotionally aware application of audio resonance.

Immersive Experience Design

Immersive experiences originally described a user's full engagement in virtual environments, marked by a strong sense of presence and agency, creating the feeling of "being there" (Witmer & Singer, 1998). The concept has since expanded into fields such as art, healthcare, and entertainment, becoming a key strategy for enhancing user engagement and experience quality.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) linked immersion to the flow state—an optimal experience characterized by deep focus, control, and self-efficacy (Beard, 2015). Immersive design thus aims not only to stimulate the senses, but also to promote psychological and physiological well-being.

Despite its potential, applying immersive experience design effectively for stress relief and healing still requires further research. Designing goal-oriented and emotionally responsive immersive systems remains a key challenge in therapeutic applications.

Literature Review

While audio resonance and immersive experience design differ in their technical principles and methods, they share several key features. Based on a review of existing literature, this study identifies four major commonalities that support the theoretical and practical integration of the two approaches:

1. **Multisensory Input**
   Both techniques emphasize multisensory integration. Audio resonance engages the body through tactile and auditory vibrations, promoting relaxation, while immersive experiences rely on high-fidelity visual, auditory, and interactive elements to create a fully engaging environment. These multisensory stimuli help guide users into a state of emotional and physiological alignment (Reybrouck et al., 2019; Witmer & Singer, 1998).

2. **Connection to the Sense of Reality**
   Audio resonance enhances the perception of physical reality through synchronized sound and touch, while immersive design creates a strong illusion of presence through detailed audiovisual environments. This heightened sense of reality increases user engagement and therapeutic impact (Chion, 2016).
3. **Impact on Emotional and Psychological States**
   Specific frequencies in audio resonance can induce alpha or theta brainwaves associated with relaxation and focus. Immersive experiences influence emotions by simulating contextual scenarios, enhancing affective involvement. These complementary effects support deeper emotional regulation (Beard, 2015; Porges, 2011).
4. **Emotional Synchronization and Entrainment**
   Both techniques promote emotional entrainment. Audio resonance supports rhythmic bodily alignment with external stimuli, while immersive environments foster a sense of agency and active participation. Together, they enhance emotional coherence and engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Witmer & Singer, 1998).

In summary, audio resonance and immersive experience design share strong theoretical and practical synergies in multisensory engagement, perceived realism, emotional influence, and synchronization. Integrating these approaches offers promising potential for advancing the effectiveness and applicability of therapeutic design.

Research Structure

This study adopts a prototype development and experimental approach, carried out in three stages:

1. **Design and development** of the immersive audio resonance healing system.
2. **Pre-test implementation**, including the PANAS emotional scale and HRV physiological data collection.
3. **Execution of the immersive healing experience**, followed by post-test assessments and in-depth interviews.

Prototype Development

The immersive audio resonance healing system developed in this study consists of three main modules: an audio module, a visual module, and a vibroacoustic chair system. The prototype emphasizes multisensory integration and interactivity to enhance immersion and therapeutic experience.

1. **Audio Module: AI-Generated Sound via Stable Audio**
   The system uses Stable Audio to generate healing soundscapes through text-based prompts, allowing customization of style, rhythm, and emotional tone. Keywords like "528 Hz," "alpha waves," or "meditative beats" guide the creation of audio content that supports relaxation. These sounds serve both as spatial audio and as input to drive vibration, achieving synchronized audio-vibration coupling.
2. **Visual Module: Generative Graphics via TouchDesigner**
   TouchDesigner is used to create reactive visuals based on audio rhythm, user interaction, or biometric signals. The system produces dynamic effects such as particle flow, waveforms, and light modulation, enhancing sensory alignment and overall immersion.

3. **Vibroacoustic Chair System**
   The chair system includes a computer, low-frequency audio amplifier, and embedded vibration units. Audio signals are processed and transmitted to tactile transducers embedded in the chair, allowing users to physically feel the sound through low-frequency vibrations across multiple contact points. These vibrations correspond with the music's rhythm and tension, promoting deep physical relaxation.

The overall design supports multimodal integration of sound, light, and vibration, and features adjustable parameters for flexible testing across various experimental or therapeutic scenarios.

Pilot Experiment

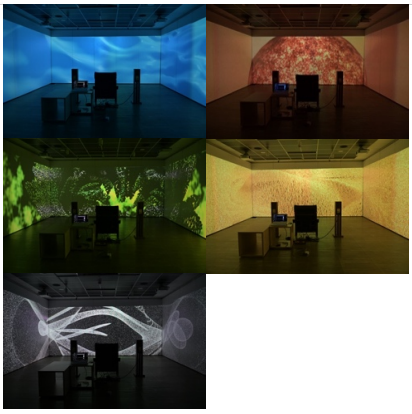
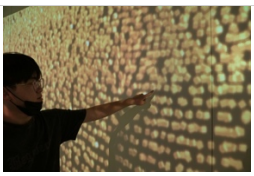
The first pilot study recruited five university students with no major health conditions. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes. The setup included a vibroacoustic chair, a three-wall projection environment, and a surround sound system. The experiment followed this procedure: consent and pre-test → immersive experience → post-test and interview.

Preliminary results showed a slight increase in heart rate variability (HRV) and a decrease in average heart rate, indicating relaxation. Subjective feedback included feelings of calmness and pleasure. Several participants noted the resonance effect as particularly impactful for bodily relaxation and internal grounding.

Experimental Procedure Overview

Table 1
Changes in PANAS Positive and Negative Affect Scores After the Second Immersive Session

步驟	流程	說明	畫面
1		Explanation of study and signing of consent form	
2	Pre-Test (15 min)	Completion of PANAS and emotional granularity scales	
3		Collection of baseline psychological data	

步驟	流程	說明	畫面
4		Guided to vibroacoustic chair	
5	Immersion (15 min)	Selection of visual theme	
6		Equipped with EEG headset and ASUS smartwatch	
7		Immersive audio resonance experience begins	
8		Post-experience data collection on the chair	
9	Post-Test (15 min)	Completion of PANAS, granularity, and flow experience scales	
10		Participant feedback and suggestions	

Methodology & Instruments

To evaluate the stress-relief effects of the immersive audio resonance system, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. Three primary instruments were used to assess changes in physiological and psychological states before and after the experience:

1. **HRV (Heart Rate Variability) Monitoring**
   Participants wore biometric sensors to track HRV indicators such as SDNN, LF, HF, and LF/HF ratio. These values reflect autonomic nervous system regulation and physiological relaxation.
2. **PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule)**
   This self-report questionnaire measured changes in emotional states by comparing scores on positive and negative affect scales before and after the experience.
3. **RDEES (Revised Differential Emotions Experience Scale)**
   RDEES assessed participants' emotional granularity, indicating their ability to identify and describe distinct emotional experiences.

Changes in HRV Indicators Across Two Immersive Sessions

Table 2
Changes in HRV-SDNN (ms) Across Two Immersive Sessions

Participant	Variable |	First Session			Second Session		
		Pre-Experience Test (1st)	Post-Experience Test (1st)	Outcome (1st)	Pre-Experience Test (2nd)	Post-Experience Test (2nd)	Outcome (2nd)
A	HRV-SDNN(ms)	65.1	70	Increase	44.4	63.1	Increase
	LF(ms^2)	310.2	657.7	Moderate	438.8	1118.8	High
	HF(ms^2)	2093.9	2056.7	High	1933.9	198.0	Moderate
	LF/ HF	0.2	0.3	Low	0.2	0.5	Relaxed
B	HRV-SDNN(ms)	56.2	48.5	Decrease	32.9	42.6	Increase
	LF(ms^2)	461.4	897.4	Moderate	677.2	513	Moderate
	HF(ms^2)	500.4	661.9	Moderate	453	314.4	Moderate
	LF/ HF	0.5	1.4	Active	1.5	1.6	Active
C	HRV-SDNN(ms)	24.2	33.9	Increase	14.2	42.4	Increase
	LF(ms^2)	93.4	109.3	Low	19.4	287.9	Moderate
	HF(ms^2)	297.3	445	Moderate	46.5	545	Moderate
	LF/ HF	0.3	0.2	Low	0.4	0.5	Relaxed
D	HRV-SDNN(ms)	17.2	8.4	Decrease	8.2	10.5	Increase
	LF(ms^2)	23.2	4.8	Low	4.8	3.6	Low
	HF(ms^2)	9.5	0.7	Low	3.1	2.5	Low
	LF/ HF	2.5	7.3	Balanced	1.6	1.4	Active

Participant	Variable |	First Session			Second Session		
		Pre-Experience Test (1st)	Post-Experience Test (1st)	Outcome (1st)	Pre-Experience Test (2nd)	Post-Experience Test (2nd)	Outcome (2nd)
E	HRV-SDNN(ms)	36.6	43.4	Increase	34.9	54.5	Increase
	LF(ms^2)	218.1	610.3	Moderate	164.1	1302.1	High
	HF(ms^2)	576.8	752.1	Moderate	394.7	873.1	Moderate
	LF/ HF	0.4	0.8	Relaxed	0.8	0.8	Relaxed

Changes in PANAS Scores After Second Immersive Session

Table 3

Changes in Positive and Negative Affect Scores (PANAS)

Participant	Positive Affect	First Session			Second Session		
		Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference
A	Positive Affect	24	18	-6	19	25	6
	Negative Affect	36	10	-26	22	11	-11
B	Positive Affect	23	15	-8	20	16	-4
	Negative Affect	17	10	-7	12	10	-2
C	Positive Affect	22	27	5	25	25	0
	Negative Affect	24	10	-14	12	10	-2
D	Positive Affect	38	37	-1	32	32	0
	Negative Affect	20	16	-4	10	10	0
E	Positive Affect	31	33	2	31	31	0
	Negative Affect	16	12	-4	12	10	-2

RDEES Data

Table 4
Changes in Revised Differential Emotions Experience Scale (RDEES)

Participant	First Session			Second Session		
	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Difference
A	4.43	4.79	0.36	4.86	4.93	0.07
B	4.21	4.36	0.14	4.07	4.21	0.14
C	4.5	4.21	-0.29	4.0	4.21	0.21
D	3.57	3.93	0.36	3.57	3.93	0.36
E	2.36	2.64	0.29	2.64	3.5	0.86

Note. Scores After the Second Immersive Session. All Participants Showed Increased Emotional Granularity, Indicating Enhanced Emotional Awareness

Findings and Recommendations

This study developed and tested a prototype of an *immersive audio resonance stress-relief system*, conducting an initial experiment and collecting user feedback. Results showed that most participants responded positively to the integration of audio resonance and immersive experience, reporting significant physical and mental relaxation. Data analysis indicated improvements in both subjective experience and objective physiological indicators (e.g., increased HRV, reduced heart rate), demonstrating the system's potential for stress-relief applications.

Based on user interviews and observations, the study proposes the following recommendations for future design and implementation:

1. **Enhance narrative audio and contextual guidance**
   Some participants had difficulty focusing during the early stages of the experience. Incorporating narrative sound design and guided audio could help users enter a flow state more quickly and deeply.
2. **Personalize resonance settings**
   Given individual differences in sensitivity and preference for vibration, future designs should include adjustable parameters (e.g., vibration intensity and frequency) to improve user comfort and therapeutic effectiveness.
3. **Expand multisensory integration**
   While the current system focuses on visual, auditory, and tactile inputs, adding other sensory modalities such as smell or temperature could enhance immersion and overall experience depth.
4. **Explore long-term effects and adaptive feedback**
   This study focused on short-term experiences. Future research should examine the cumulative effects of repeated use and the potential for dynamic system adjustments based on real-time user states.

In conclusion, the integration of audio resonance and immersive design shows strong potential for applications in mental health, workplace stress management, and clinical therapy. It also opens new directions for human-computer interaction and digital therapeutic design.

Results and Conclusion

Comparison of pre- and post-test results showed:

- **PANAS**: Average *positive affect* increased by 7.2 points, and *negative affect* decreased by 5.1 points.
- **HRV**: Average values increased, indicating improved autonomic nervous system activity.
- **Flow scale**: Scores reached moderate to high levels.

Subjective interviews highlighted terms such as *"a sense of safety," "feeling enveloped,"* and *"the flow of sound energy, "*suggesting that the system effectively created an immersive environment with healing potential.

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Designing for Emotional Granularity in VR Meditation: Understanding Emotional Flow in Immersive Experiences

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Abstract

This study aimed to design an immersive Virtual Reality (VR) meditation experience and explore its potential impact on emotional granularity. Emotional granularity refers to an individual's ability to identify and describe emotions with precision, which is closely linked to emotional regulation and psychological well-being. In this project, a multisensory VR meditation system was developed, incorporating visual, auditory, and guided components to create a calming and immersive environment. 8 participants were invited to engage with the experience. To assess changes in emotional granularity, participants completed an emotional granularity scale before and after the VR meditation session. The results showed that many participants demonstrated improved emotional awareness and finer distinctions in emotional expression after the experience. These preliminary findings suggest that immersive VR meditation may be an effective approach for enhancing emotional clarity and fostering self-awareness. Furthermore, the study contributes to a growing body of research exploring the role of emerging technologies in supporting emotional development. The outcomes offer early design insights for future applications of VR in the fields of mental wellness, relaxation, and interactive experience design, particularly in contexts where traditional meditation practices may be less accessible or more difficult to sustain. By combining immersive environments with mindful practices, this research provides a foundation for future interdisciplinary efforts aiming to support emotional health through technology-enhanced interventions.

Keywords: meditation, emotional granularity, virtual reality

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Research Background

This study explores the impact of immersive virtual reality meditation (VR Meditation) on emotional granularity and analyzes its potential for promoting mental health. In today's high-pressure environments, individuals face multiple sources of stress, leading to increasing difficulties in emotional regulation and heightened risks of anxiety and depression.

Emotional granularity refers to an individual's ability to identify and differentiate between emotional experiences, and it is closely linked to effective emotion regulation strategies. High emotional granularity helps reduce psychological distress and stress responses (Hoemann et al., 2022), whereas low emotional granularity often leads to emotional confusion and greater psychological burden (Wang et al., 2018).

Meditation has been widely applied in emotional regulation and stress reduction, but traditional meditation often requires specific time and environmental conditions. Virtual reality meditation, through immersive sensory stimulation and simulated environments, effectively enhances focus and the quality of relaxation (Navarro-Haro et al., 2017), and has demonstrated benefits for emotional stability and psychological resilience in various studies (Beverly et al., 2022; Kaplan-Rakowski et al., 2021).

This study aims to validate the effectiveness of VR meditation in enhancing emotional granularity and emotional regulation, and to propose its feasibility as a modern mental health intervention.

Research Objectives

Virtual Reality (VR) technology has been widely applied in the field of psychological healing, particularly showing positive effects in alleviating stress, anxiety, and depression. Integrating VR with meditation offers a novel immersive relaxation experience and is regarded as a promising psychological intervention approach. However, current research on VR meditation largely remains at the exploratory stage and lacks systematic evaluation.

This study aims to examine the effects of immersive VR meditation on emotional regulation, with a particular focus on changes in emotional recognition and psychophysiological responses. By integrating subjective questionnaires with objective instrument-based assessments, the study develops a novel evaluation process to address the limitations of existing research, which often relies on single-scale measurements.

At the emotional level, the study investigates whether VR meditation can facilitate positive emotional shifts and induce relaxation in terms of arousal. From an applied perspective, the findings aim to provide empirical support for the design of VR meditation experiences, helping to establish more effective and theoretically grounded operational guidelines, and further enhancing its application value in promoting mental health.

Literature Review

Emotional Granularity

Emotional granularity refers to an individual's ability to accurately identify, distinguish, and describe different emotional states (Lin et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2018). This ability is closely related to mental health—individuals with high emotional granularity are less likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors such as alcohol abuse or binge eating when facing stress, and they tend to experience lower levels of depression and anxiety (Li et al., 2024). Moreover, they are more effective at regulating emotions and exhibit greater psychological resilience and emotional insight (Cortiz et al., 2021; Demichelis et al., 2023).

The development of emotional granularity relies on diverse life experiences, cultural stimuli, and the accumulation of emotional vocabulary (Hoemann et al., 2022). Studies have shown that individuals with high granularity demonstrate greater emotional sensitivity and empathy in interpersonal interactions (Lindquist et al., 2014), and they are also able to make more accurate decisions during decision-making processes (Gendron & Barrett, 2019). The value of emotional granularity extends beyond the field of mental health—it has also been applied in artificial intelligence, affective computing, and emotion recognition technologies (Fong & Kumar, 2020).

In terms of assessment, in addition to traditional questionnaires such as PANAS, researchers have integrated semantic analysis, physiological data, and virtual reality simulations to improve the accuracy and ecological validity of measurements (Montana et al., 2020; Shamim & Muazzam, 2020). Virtual reality, in particular, offers an immersive training platform that helps users practice emotion recognition and regulation (Bertagni et al., 2023).

Stress

In modern society, stress has become a widespread factor critically impacting both mental and physical health. Surveys show that up to 22.2% of Taiwanese university students frequently feel depressed, and 13.2% exhibit significant depressive tendencies. Stress is essentially a physiological response to perceived threats. When left unmanaged over time, it may develop into chronic stress, leading to dysregulation across emotional, behavioral, immune, and cognitive systems. The convergence of the pandemic, work pressure, and social expectations has further intensified stress levels—especially in high-pressure professions such as nursing or research and development, which are prone to burnout and emotional exhaustion (Metreveli & Japaridze, 2022).

Chronic stress not only increases the risk of mental illness but also weakens immune function, contributes to cardiovascular problems, and raises healthcare costs. Emotional granularity and psychological resilience are recognized as effective stress-regulating factors, helping individuals more precisely identify stressors and adopt suitable coping strategies. Studies have also shown that non-pharmacological interventions such as meditation and mindfulness can significantly reduce stress responses, enhance resilience, and improve quality of life (Park, 2013).

Among adolescents and university students, common stressors include academic pressure, health-related anxiety, and family expectations. Their psychological resilience is often vulnerable and requires early intervention to prevent future mental health issues (Liu, 2012).

Stress not only affects short-term emotional states but also has long-term implications for career development and social adaptation.

Modern stressors are increasingly diverse and complex, including job insecurity, financial strain, and the intrusion of technology into personal life. Long working hours and low control are among the main risk factors. Research also highlights that social support is a critical protective factor that can effectively buffer the effects of stress. Conversely, the lack of emotional or material support exacerbates stress and contributes to anxiety and depression (Wang & Chen, 2014; Viertiö et al., 2021).

Additionally, sociocultural context and media narratives shape how stress is perceived and expressed. For example, the concept of "anxiety inheritance" in Western culture influences public understanding and responses to mental illness (Rebughini, 2021). In times of intense healthcare and education reform, public awareness of stress is further amplified (Kirby, 2022).

On the physiological level, stress can be quantified through biomarkers such as cortisol, while on the psychological level, it often manifests as symptoms of anxiety and depression. Moreover, women tend to experience higher levels of perceived stress due to social role expectations and unequal access to resources (Bolíbar et al., 2021; Viertiö et al., 2021).

Table 1
Summary Table of Stressors

Current Sources of Stress	Description	References
Job Demands and Control	High job demands combined with low control over work tasks are associated with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, particularly affecting young adults.	Wang & Chen, 2014
Unstable Employment	Temporary contracts, lack of job security, and insufficient social welfare contribute to chronic stress and exacerbate health inequalities.	Bolíbar et al., 2021
Work-Family Conflict	Stress arises from balancing work and family responsibilities. Women experience higher stress levels when work interferes with family life.	Viertiö et al., 2021
Major Life Events and Daily Hassles	Major life events such as illness or financial hardship, along with minor daily hassles, interact with job stress and significantly influence overall stress perception.	Sørensen et al., 2021
Social Support	Lack of social support intensifies stress, while strong social networks can buffer its effects. Support also serves a moderating role, reducing the negative impact of work stress on mental and physical health.	Sørensen et al., 2021; Viertiö et al., 2021; Wang & Chen, 2014
Media-Related Stress	Media representations of stress can amplify perceived stress, especially in fields undergoing transformation such as healthcare and education.	Kirby, 2022
Psychological Distress	Stress is closely linked to symptoms of anxiety and depression, with women being more frequently affected, indicating gender differences.	Viertiö et al., 2021

Meditation

Meditation is a mental and spiritual practice rooted in diverse cultural and religious traditions, encompassing various forms such as mindfulness, compassion, insight (Vipassana), and yoga (Lin, 2017). Modern scientific research has shown that meditation can effectively reduce anxiety, depression, and stress, enhance positive emotions, and improve emotional regulation, making it a valuable tool for promoting mental health. Clinical evidence also indicates that meditation helps alleviate psychological stress responses in cardiovascular patients and supports emotional regulation in individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and chronic illnesses (Malaktaris et al., 2022).

Mindfulness meditation, which emphasizes present-moment awareness, promotes emotional stability and activates brain regions associated with positive affect, and is widely applied in stress reduction and emotion-focused therapies. Loving-kindness meditation cultivates goodwill and empathy, fostering inner calm and enhancing interpersonal understanding. Insight meditation focuses on observing change and impermanence, helping individuals let go of emotional attachments. Yoga meditation, which integrates physical movement and breath control, has demonstrated significant benefits for anxiety, insomnia, and emotional resilience (Tellhed et al., 2019).

With technological advancements, online guided meditation has become increasingly accessible through apps and virtual courses, also showing benefits in reducing anxiety and depression. Although meditation is generally effective for most individuals, it may have adverse effects for those with severe emotional distress and should be approached with caution. Meditation, which combines emotional regulation, cognitive training, and stress management, offers an evidence-based emotional healing method for modern individuals and has been shown to positively influence long-term mental health outcomes (Koh et al., 2022).

Virtual Reality (VR) Technology

Virtual Reality (VR) technology has shown remarkable potential in the field of emotional and mental healing. Its highly immersive nature effectively isolates users from external distractions, creating a personalized and safe psychological space that facilitates relaxation and self-awareness. Studies have shown that VR interventions can improve stress and reduce negative symptoms in 65% of individuals with mental health conditions. By incorporating natural environments and sensory stimuli, VR experiences can enhance emotional stability and positive affect (Seabrook et al., 2020).

In the context of meditation support, VR helps guide users into deeper states of mindfulness. Through visual, auditory, and voice-guided elements, it enhances the quality of meditation and improves concentration. Many of these systems also integrate breath-based biofeedback technologies to assist with emotional regulation and stress relief (Rockstroh et al., 2021).

The key advantage of VR lies in its ability to offer highly personalized healing environments—from forests and water scenes to soft ambient lighting—tailored to individual needs, thereby increasing the appeal of meditation and its therapeutic effectiveness (Seabrook et al., 2020). Further research has also shown that immersive VR experiences can enhance self-awareness, reduce anxiety and emotional distress, and contribute to long-term improvements in psychological well-being (Matamala-Gomez et al., 2021).

Literature Summary

In the context of increasing stress in modern society, effective emotional healing has become a crucial issue in mental health. Emotional granularity, as the ability to identify and regulate emotions, enables individuals to maintain greater stability and resilience under stress, thereby reducing the risk of negative emotions and maladaptive behaviors. When stress remains unaddressed over time, it can lead to physical and psychological distress, disrupting emotional balance and lowering quality of life.

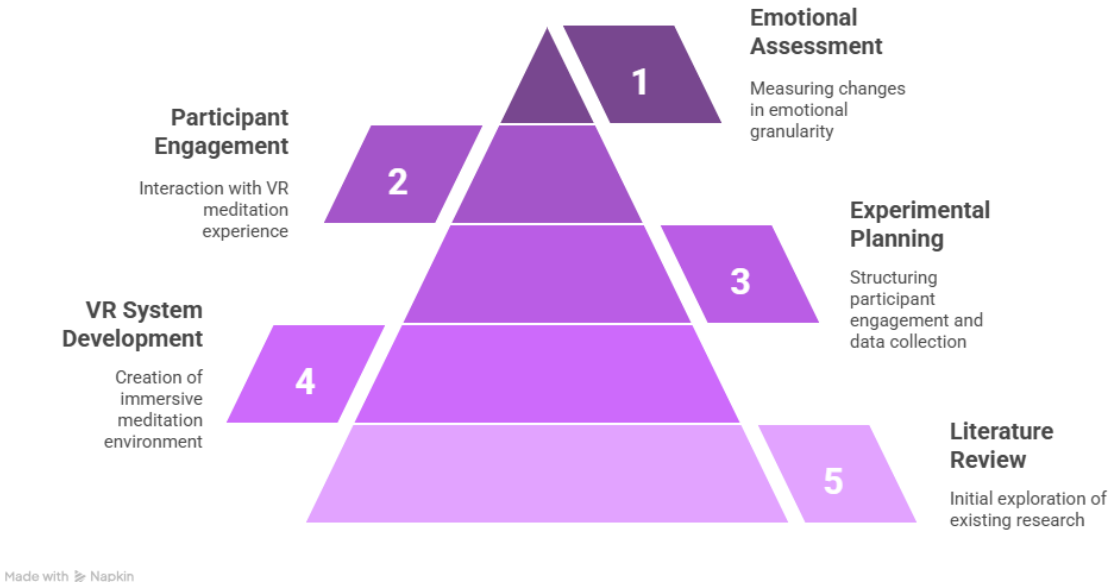
Meditation is widely regarded as an effective self-regulation tool. Through breath awareness and inward focus, it helps stabilize emotions, alleviate stress, and enhance positive psychological experiences. When combined with virtual reality (VR) technology, meditation's healing potential is further expanded. The immersive visuals and sensory stimulation provided by VR allow users to enter a more relaxed state more easily, promoting emotional stability and self-awareness.

Overall, VR meditation demonstrates promising and evidence-based therapeutic value in fostering emotional granularity and relieving stress, offering a feasible and innovative approach to emotional healing in today's demanding environment.

Research Design

This study aims to explore the impact of immersive Virtual Reality (VR) meditation experiences on emotional granularity and to describe the overall research design and implementation process. The study followed a multi-phase structure, including a preliminary literature review, development of the VR meditation system, and experimental planning. The system integrates visual, auditory, and guided voice elements to create an immersive meditation environment that supports relaxation and emotional awareness. A total of 8 participants were invited to engage with the experience. Emotional granularity was assessed before and after the meditation using a designated scale to observe changes in emotional identification and expression. The overall design emphasizes the integration of immersive experience and emotional perception, providing a practical foundation for future studies and related applications.

Figure 1
VR Meditation Research Process



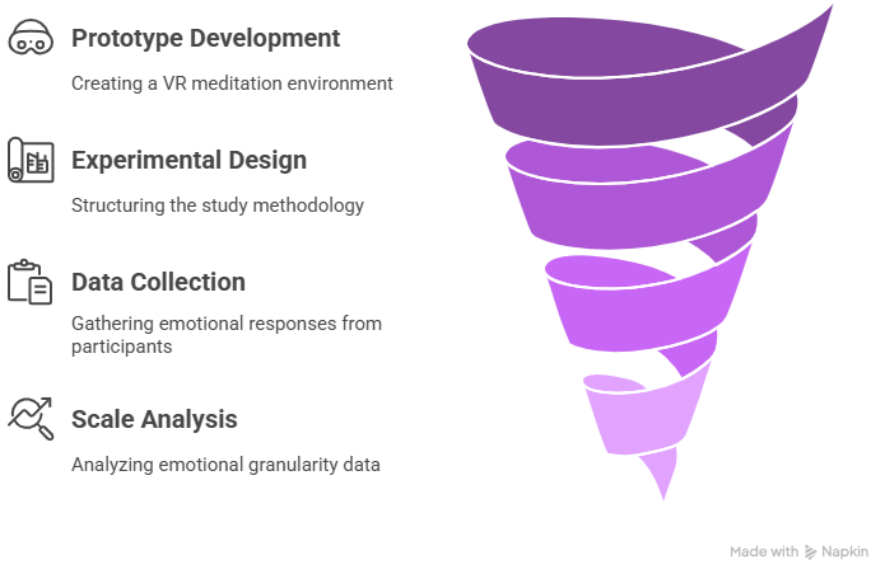
Research Procedure

This study aims to explore the impact of immersive virtual reality (VR) meditation experiences on emotional granularity by constructing a comprehensive experimental framework through a multi-stage process and interdisciplinary methods. The research involved a sequence of literature review, prototype development, and experimental design, integrating psychological theories with VR technology to create a highly immersive meditation environment.

Throughout the process, the Emotional Granularity Scale was employed to systematically collect participants' emotional responses before and after the meditation experience. The study examined the potential benefits of VR meditation in enhancing emotional awareness and improving emotional granularity through scale analysis of pre- and post-test assessments.

The findings not only demonstrate the therapeutic value of immersive meditation but also provide an empirical foundation for future research design and technological development in related fields.

Figure 2
Enhancing Emotional Granularity Through VR Meditation



VR Interface Presentation

This system integrates visual design and interaction design to establish its core value and user appeal. The visual design adopts a minimalist and nature-inspired style, using soft color tones and delicate lighting to create an immersive meditation atmosphere. Elements such as clouds, trees, and flowing water are rendered with realistic dynamic effects, offering users a lifelike natural experience. Previous research has shown that virtual natural environments contribute to stress relief and emotional restoration, effectively compensating for the lack of nature in modern urban life.

The interaction design emphasizes a natural and intuitive user experience by incorporating touch and gesture recognition, along with real-time visual and voice feedback. The system also considers users of different ages and cultural backgrounds to enhance overall usability. Within the meditation scenes, changeable visual elements are embedded to help guide users into deeper meditative states.

The following images illustrate the final visual presentation of the system.

Figure 3
Interface Presentation A

Figure 4
Interface Presentation B

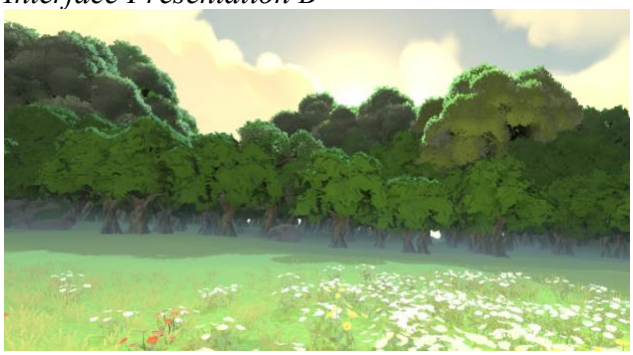
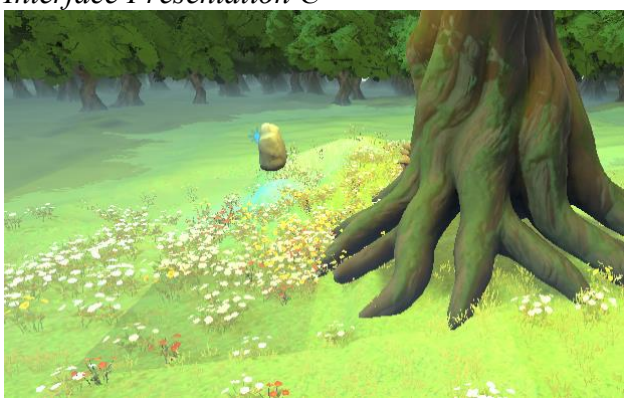


Figure 5
Interface Presentation C



Research Methods - Emotional Granularity Scale

The Emotional Granularity Scale (EGS) is a tool used to assess the degree to which individuals differentiate their emotional experiences. The level of emotional granularity is closely associated with one's ability in emotional regulation and psychological well-being. In this study, the EGS is used to analyze users' subtle emotional changes during interaction with the system. By collecting data through this scale, researchers can gain deeper insights into the emotional nuances experienced by users. Participants with high emotional granularity are better able to describe their emotional experiences in detail, providing concrete references for future system optimization. Additionally, emotional granularity data can support the design of more targeted and context-sensitive feedback mechanisms, thereby enhancing user experience and improving system effectiveness.

The scale consists of 12 items, among which Items 1, 5, 9, and 11 are reverse-scored. These items must be recoded during scoring to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the overall evaluation. This design helps verify the internal consistency of participant responses and reduces potential response bias caused by habitual answering patterns, thereby improving the reliability and interpretability of the scale.

Table 2
Emotional Granularity Scale

No.	Statement	Not at all true → Strongly true				
1	In daily life, I do not experience many different kinds of feelings. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
2	I can notice subtle or fine distinctions within a particular emotional state.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Throughout my life, I have experienced many different kinds of feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Each emotion has a clear and distinct meaning to me.	1	2	3	4	5
5	The emotions I frequently experience are limited. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
6	I tend to make clear distinctions between similar feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I experience a rich and diverse range of emotions.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I am aware that each emotion has a completely different meaning.	1	2	3	4	5
9	In everyday life, I don't feel a wide variety of emotions. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
10	If emotions were described as colors, I would be able to notice subtle differences within each color.	1	2	3	4	5
11	Expressions like "feel good" or "feel bad" are enough to describe most of how I feel in daily life. (R)	1	2	3	4	5
12	Among all emotional experiences, I can sense the fine differences between them.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I want to experience a wide and diverse range of feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I am very good at distinguishing subtle differences between nuanced emotional terms.	1	2	3	4	5

Note. Adapted from "Individual Differences in Emotional Complexity: Their Psychological Implications," by S.-M. Kang and P. Shaver, 2004, Journal of Personality, 72(4), pp. 687–726.

Research Analysis

To investigate the impact of immersive Virtual Reality (VR) meditation experiences on participants' emotional awareness and expression abilities, this study employed the Emotional Granularity Scale administered before and after the meditation session. Emotional granularity refers to an individual's ability to describe and categorize emotional experiences in a nuanced, precise, and differentiated manner. Research has shown that individuals with high emotional granularity tend to perform better in emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and stress management, and are more capable of engaging in emotional self-reflection and social interaction.

In this experiment, a total of 8 participants completed both pre- and post-test measurements. By comparing changes in total scores, this study conducted an initial evaluation of the potential effectiveness of immersive meditation experiences in enhancing emotional granularity. The summarized results are shown in the table above, indicating that most

participants exhibited notable positive changes after the experience. The following section provides a detailed analysis of the data, exploring individual differences, potential influencing factors, and possible interpretations, as well as suggestions for future research.

Table 3
Emotional Granularity Scale Results

Participant	Pre-test	Posttest	Change
B 林 O 凱	18	24	+6
D 陳 O 吟	36	36	+0
F 丁 O 珊	27	33	+6
G 徐 O 謐	1	23	+22
I 陳 O 綺	16	23	+7
J 劉 O 毅	24	23	-1
L 林 O 柔	29	31	+2
M 李 O 霆	17	32	+15

Research Findings

A total of 8 participants were invited to complete pre- and post-assessments using the Emotional Granularity Scale, in order to compare total score differences before and after the meditation experience and evaluate changes in emotional granularity.

Overall most participants showed improvement in emotional granularity after the immersive virtual reality meditation, indicating enhanced ability to identify and differentiate emotional nuances. The most significant change was observed in G 徐 O 謐, whose score increased dramatically from 1 (pre-test) to 23 (post-test), a 22-point gain demonstrating substantial positive growth. M 李 O 霆 also showed a remarkable improvement of 15 points, suggesting a clear enhancement in emotional awareness and expression.

Other participants, such as B 林 O 凱 (+ 6), F 丁 O 珊 (+ 6), I 陳 O 綺 (+ 7), also demonstrated steady progress, reflecting the general effectiveness of the meditation experience in enhancing emotional granularity.

A few exceptions were also observed. For instance, J 劉 O 毅 (- 1) had slightly lower post-test scores compared to pre-test. D 陳 O 吟 showed no change between pre- and post-tests. These cases may be associated with individual baseline emotional stability, psychological state during measurement, or limitations in the scale's sensitivity to certain emotional shifts. Future studies could explore these factors further through qualitative data and expert interviews.

The pre- and post-test results of the Emotional Granularity Scale support the hypothesis that immersive virtual reality meditation may enhance individuals' emotional awareness and fine-grained differentiation ability, showing promising potential as an emotional healing intervention.

Research Conclusion

This study examined the impact of immersive virtual reality (VR) meditation on emotional granularity by analyzing pre- and post-assessment data from 8 participants using the Emotional Granularity Scale. The results showed that most participants experienced an increase in total scores after the VR meditation session, indicating improved emotional recognition and finer differentiation. Among them, participants such as G徐O謚 and M李O霆 demonstrated particularly significant progress, reflecting highly positive changes. Additionally, several other participants showed steady improvement, suggesting a general emotional enhancement effect provided by the VR meditation experience.

Although a few participants exhibited either decreased scores or no change, this may be preliminarily attributed to factors such as individual emotional baselines, momentary psychological states, or the sensitivity of the measurement tool. Further qualitative investigation is needed to better understand these outcomes. Nevertheless, the overall quantitative findings support the research hypothesis: immersive VR meditation can enhance individuals' emotional awareness and their ability to make fine-grained distinctions between emotional states. These results demonstrate its empirical potential and practical value as an emotional healing intervention.

Research Recommendations

Based on the findings and research process of this study, the following three recommendations are proposed for future research and practical applications:

1. *Expand Sample Size and Diversify Participant Backgrounds*
   This study involved a limited sample size, primarily composed of younger individuals with a certain level of technological proficiency. Future research is encouraged to expand the sample size to include participants of varying ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds, in order to examine the applicability and impact of immersive virtual reality meditation across different populations and enhance the external validity of the findings.
2. *Integrate Qualitative Data and Longitudinal Follow-Up*
   This study focused on short-term pre- and post-assessments, which provide only a preliminary view of changes in emotional granularity. To better understand the long-term effects of VR meditation, future research could incorporate qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, or self-recorded journals, along with longitudinal follow-up, to capture the deeper and lasting influences of the meditation experience on emotional development.
3. *Optimize System Design and Interactive Interface*
   Participants responded positively to the immersive quality and interactive feedback of the meditation environment, suggesting strong potential for real-world application. Future improvements could include personalized adjustment mechanisms based on user needs, as well as the integration of AI-guided adaptation, emotion recognition modules, and real-time feedback from physiological data, in order to enhance the precision and therapeutic effectiveness of the meditation experience.

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A Study of Perception Toward an Improvising Learning Management of Piano Teachers in Thailand

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Abstract

Despite substantial scholarly evidence on improvisation's efficacy in cultivating performance aptitude and creative expression in instrumental music education, insights from the researcher's 20+ years of piano teaching, corroborated by this study's data, indicate a significant gap: improvisation remains largely underutilized by many piano teachers in Thailand as an integral pedagogical component. This study therefore investigated Thai piano teachers' perceptions influencing their decision to integrate improvisation techniques. Primary data were gathered from 12 experienced Thai piano teachers (10+ years teaching experience) through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Findings demonstrate a strong majority of teachers recognize improvisation's pivotal role in fostering students' creativity and enhancing musical skills. Critically, however, teachers' individual attitudes and the value they place on improvisation are intricately linked to their varying educational histories. Furthermore, the institutional context demonstrably impacts the feasibility of implementing improvisation activities, with curriculum flexibility and administrative endorsement being particularly influential. This research highlights a pressing need to develop and promote practical strategies that facilitate seamless integration of improvisation, such as emphasizing process-oriented learning, cultivating psychologically safe spaces for experimentation, and strategically employing technology. Advancing effective improvisation pedagogy fundamentally hinges on a holistic integration of teacher knowledge, musical beliefs, curricular structures, and educational policy, which will collectively empower music education in Thailand to more robustly address the demands of fostering creativity in contemporary learning environments.

Keywords: improvisation, perception, piano teacher in Thailand, music education

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Introduction

For two decades, music educators have emphasized developing learner-centered teaching and learning approaches, empowering students to create their own musical experiences (Scott, 2011). Correspondingly, improvisation is a crucial skill for fostering creativity, as it requires students to make real-time decisions on rhythm, melody, harmony, and structure, leading to novel musical ideas and coherent organization (Coss, 2018). Historically, before 1850, improvisation and composition were central to music. However, post-mid-19th century, piano instruction shifted towards repertoire mastery, reducing improvisation's role (Beckstead, 2013). Consequently, developing students' musical creation through improvisation is a pedagogical technique capable of stimulating creativity and enhancing potential (Santi, 2016), with improvised performance often being a collaborative and interactive act (Sawyer, 2011).

Within institutional curricula, piano improvisation is predominantly taught in a jazz context. At the university level in Thailand, this focus has existed for over two decades. Mahidol University's College of Music launched a Bachelor of Arts in Jazz Music in 1998, producing numerous qualified personnel. For over 20 years, Thai universities have developed proficient jazz musicians, offering training programs and competitions. In contrast, while Thai secondary school core curricula for arts and music mention the importance of musical creation for balanced listening, performance, analysis, and creation skills, improvisation is not explicitly stated. Consequently, improvisation teaching by piano teachers at the secondary level remains uncommon in some areas. In some private piano schools, parents often measure musical ability by note-reading proficiency or international grade exams, rather than by improvisation skills, which are not directly scoreable. This aligns with UK research indicating many piano teachers prioritize note-reading, repertoire, and technique over improvisation and composition (Cathcart, 2013). A 2010 piano survey found 95.6% of respondents frequently taught note-reading, but 41.3% rarely taught improvisation. In summary, although the value of improvisation in Thai higher education is increasing, improvisation in fundamental piano education remains underemphasized due to various factors and limitations.

Given these circumstances, this study aimed to investigate Thai piano teachers' perceptions of teaching improvisation. The objective was to explore how Thai piano teachers perceive the integration of improvisation techniques into their instruction. Data were collected from 12 key informants: Thai piano teachers with over 10 years of experience, comprising 8 males and 4 females aged 30-40, each receiving at least one annual improvisation training. Six had classical piano backgrounds, and six had jazz piano backgrounds. They taught in private (7) and public (5) schools. Key dependent variables examined included: 1) Perceptions of improvisation's importance, focusing on attitudes (Biasutti & Frezza, 2009); 2) Pedagogical approaches to improvisation, exploring understanding of concepts and methods (Gordon, 2003; Kratus, 1994), confidence in teaching (Abril, 2013), and practical application; and 3) Institutional context, examining curriculum flexibility, administrative support, and training opportunities (Cossey, 2024). The study's scope covered various regions in Thailand, considering diverse factors to provide a comprehensive overview of improvisation perceptions and applications in Thai piano classrooms. This research seeks to enhance understanding of factors influencing improvisation use in piano teaching, potentially guiding the development and promotion of more diverse piano pedagogy in Thailand and encouraging teachers to fully recognize improvisation's benefits for student musical development.

Perceptions of Improvisation Pedagogy Among Piano Teachers in Thailand

Factors influencing the perception of improvisation pedagogy can be analyzed into three main issues:

Perception Regarding the Importance of Improvisation

Improvisation is a crucial skill that should be cultivated in students from an early stage, as it fosters creativity, critical listening, and free musical expression. Teachers with a jazz background, in particular, often express positive views, asserting that improvisation is the *"heart of music."* In contrast, some classical teachers still perceive improvisation as an *"auxiliary"* skill that may not be essential in the context of examinations or academic piano study. This highlights a divergence in conceptual frameworks and teaching cultures, with individual teachers holding varying perspectives and understandings based on their personal experiences and attitudes, as detailed below:

Unprepared Musical Creation

Improvisation is a musical creation that happens in the moment, without prior preparation. It's often viewed as a highly natural form of musical expression, a vital characteristic for making musical performances lively and engaging. Improvisation as creation involves: 1. Creating melodies and harmonies instinctively: Improvisers must generate melodies and harmonies spontaneously, drawing on musical skills and responding to real-time emotions or situations. Melodies stemming from feeling lend uniqueness to each performance. 2. Responding to the environment: Improvisation isn't solely about internal musical generation; it also involves responding to the environment or communicating with listeners and fellow musicians in real-time. Examples include adjusting tempo to match listener mood or responding to musical characteristics played by collaborators. 3. A limitless tool for expression: Improvised music is often *"one-of-a-kind"* with each performance. 4. Engaging interest: A key value teachers see in improvisation is their ability to bring music to life. The spontaneity of improvisation creates intrinsic interest and charm, transforming a performance from mere note-following into a shared experience immediately perceived by both audience and musicians. This style of playing excites and surprises listeners. 5. Practical training: Some teachers emphasize the importance of practical improvisation training. Improvisation isn't just playing by feel; it requires developed musical skills. Students should practice fundamental musical structures, such as using diverse scales or practicing chord changes, to enhance improvisational flexibility and effective expression.

From many teachers' perspectives, improvisation is more than just playing without prior preparation. It's a tool enabling musicians to create fresh, responsive music in the moment. Improvised music is inherently unpredictable and natural, making performances vibrant and highly engaging for audiences.

Promoting Creativity

Improvisation is considered a vital tool for developing student creativity. Many teachers view its benefits as extending beyond musical skill development, enhancing quick and efficient thinking and decision-making. As one classical piano teacher from a government school noted, "Many students are good at reading notes but are afraid to play without them. Improvisation helps them express themselves more boldly. It's not just a technique; it's a

musical language that needs to be practiced from the very beginning." In improvisation, students face unprepared situations, which encourages creative thinking and adaptability to immediate demands. Key aspects of creativity development through improvisation highlighted by teachers include: 1. Flexible Musical Thinking: Students must adapt their playing to unfolding situations, such as selecting appropriate chords, creating melodies, or playing with different rhythms. 2. Rapid and Effective Decision-Making: A crucial skill is making decisions under time constraints. Students must practice thinking and deciding in the moment, whether selecting a melody fitting the current chord or quickly changing rhythm or playing style. 3. Building Self-Confidence: Creating new music spontaneously instills pride in students' abilities, boosting their confidence in future musical expression. 4. Free Musical Expression: Students express themselves uniquely, without being confined to pre-written notes or structures. 5. Experimentation and Learning from Mistakes: Improvisation offers direct opportunities for learning from errors. When a musical decision doesn't meet expectations, students can learn and adjust immediately, fostering a positive attitude towards experimentation and experiential learning. As a jazz piano teacher from a private school commented, "Many students are accustomed to reading notes; they're afraid of making mistakes when improvising. But I believe we should change their mindset to 'mistakes can also create.'" 6. Connecting Theory and Practice: Improvisation makes music theory more meaningful by allowing students to apply learned theories in real-time, such as using various scales or selecting chords that suit the musical mood. Theory transforms into a creative tool, not just a textbook concept. 7. Developing Listening and Communication with Others: Improvisation isn't solitary; it cultivates listening and communication skills with other musicians. Listening to others and responding instantly fosters teamwork in musical performance and enhances creative collaboration.

Improvisation is a powerful tool for developing student creativity. It encourages flexible thinking, rapid decision-making, and unique musical expression, which in turn builds confidence in playing and develops listening and collaborative skills. Thus, improvisation is an essential practice that enables students to fully express their creativity through music.

Improvisation as a Specialized Skill and Its Perceived Necessity for All Students

Some teachers view improvisation as a specialized skill not necessarily required for all students, particularly those lacking fundamental musical knowledge or interest in this type of performance. Teaching improvisation in such cases can be time and effort-intensive. Thus, some educators believe improvisation isn't universally needed and should only be taught to students with a specific interest or readiness. As one classical piano teacher from a government school stated, "Our curriculum doesn't have much room for improvisation because students are assessed on written notes. Integrating it must be done within limited time." Another added, "Many students learn only for exams and aren't trained to listen or think creatively. So, we rarely have time for them to improvise." Factors influencing the decision to teach improvisation include: 1. Strong Musical Foundation: Improvisation demands solid foundational musical skills, including understanding music theory, chord structures, scales, and rhythms. A lack of such fundamentals can make learning improvisation challenging. 2. High Time and Dedication Investment: Improvisation is a skill requiring significant practice and development, as it involves real-time thinking and creation. The need to select scales and chords under time pressure means improvisation can be time-consuming and unsuitable for uncommitted students. 3. Interest in Performance: While improvisation is crucial for musical performance, not all students are interested in this specific mode. Some prefer pre-prepared, formal piano playing or ensemble music demanding precision and

structure. 4. Early Piano Learning: In some cases, teachers prioritize essential foundational skills like note-reading, structured playing, or precise performance. Improvisation might not be considered a primary skill during initial training. 5. Reducing Student Stress and Anxiety: Learning improvisation can induce stress and anxiety in some students due to its unprepared expressive nature. This might lead to pressure or fear of making mistakes, potentially diminishing their enjoyment of music and negatively impacting future performance.

From some teachers' perspectives, improvisation is a specific skill not essential for all students, especially those lacking musical fundamentals or interest in this performance style. It's also a time- and effort-intensive skill best taught to students with specific interest and readiness.

The Importance of Improvisation in the Context of Music Education

Conversely, improvisation doesn't always imply full-scale performance. It can manifest flexibly, not limited to creative playing within set compositions or spontaneous melodic expression. This adds variety and prevents music lessons from becoming repetitive or boring. Some teachers recognize improvisation's importance in the teaching and learning process, including: 1. Flexible Improvisation within Song Structures: Students can practice improvisation within a song's established structure, such as creating melodies in a given scale or developing harmonies from pre-arranged chords. This structured approach makes teaching less complex. 2. Using Improvisation for Learning Variety: Improvisation can be a tool to make music lessons more diverse and engaging. Teachers can introduce improvisation tasks related to different genres or ask students to create melodies based on a specific mood. This helps students understand music theory and practice creatively, moving beyond strict note-following. 3. Developing Thinking and Decision-Making Skills: Allowing students to choose their musical path spontaneously helps them practice rapid decision-making in unprepared situations. This training not only enhances theoretical understanding but also fosters adaptability and creative thinking. As a jazz piano teacher from a private school put it, "I see improvisation as the soul of music. If we don't teach improvisation, it's like teaching a language without letting children speak it themselves." 4. Playing According to Current Mood: Improvisation involves creating melodies or harmonies within the current emotional scope, stimulating students to develop emotional expression through music. For instance, tasks might involve playing music that conveys sadness or joy without adhering to fixed compositions. 5. Boosting Confidence: Playing music without prior preparation encourages boldness in expression and helps students learn to cope with performance errors. When students enjoy improvisation without pressure, their confidence in other musical contexts grows. 6. Creating Enjoyable and Engaging Experiences: When students can experiment with diverse and creative musical forms, they become more excited and interested in lessons. Improvisation thus makes teaching more engaging and less boring, transforming music learning into an enjoyable and meaningful experience. In the teaching context, improvisation plays a crucial role in adding diversity and interest to music education. It doesn't always require full-scale performance and can serve as a tool to develop students' thinking, decision-making, and emotional expression without unnecessary complexity or pressure.

Most teachers possess diverse understandings of improvisation, encompassing its role in developing performance skills, stimulating creativity, applying music theory, and adapting lessons to student needs. While some teachers view improvisation as essential for everyone, others consider it a skill suited for specific student groups with particular interests or strong musical foundations.

Understanding and Pedagogical Approaches to Improvisation Among Piano Teachers in Thailand

Each piano teacher employs diverse approaches to improvisation pedagogy, influenced by their musical background and the student's context.

Piano Teachers' Improvisation Teaching Methods

Many teachers agree that improvisation in the classroom begins with active listening and understanding song structures, starting with simple, accessible melodies before gradually increasing complexity. For beginners, it's advised to practice familiar notes first, then progressively introduce methods for creating new melodies from these notes. This builds confidence and familiarity with improvisation. Subsequently, more challenging tasks can be introduced, such as playing with rhythms different from the original melody or altering familiar song structures, like increasing/decreasing tempo or varying chord usage. A jazz piano teacher from a private school commented, "We try to start by having them change rhythms or add notes to familiar phrases, then gradually develop it. We don't teach strict jazz, but try to provide space for experimentation." Some students might initially fear improvisation due to its lack of rigid rules. Allowing them to experiment in a low-pressure environment fosters a sense of freedom and inspires confidence in musical expression. Another jazz piano teacher from a private school noted, "I start by having students listen to simple loops and then try to improvise on a pentatonic scale. After that, I gradually introduce chord progressions, asking them to imagine they are learning a new language." Many teachers also utilize collaborative improvisation tasks, such as duets or playing with other instruments, to help students practice harmonious playing and develop real-time musical connection.

A prominent artist and university lecturer in Thailand suggests that transcription is an effective method for learning improvisation. Even with limited initial playing ability, this practice builds confidence and encourages musical experimentation. Learning from real experience and listening to music deepens understanding of playing approaches. Transcribing by ear significantly aids development, as consistent listening and imitation enhance aural skills, leading to accurate note prediction and improved technique. This process not only deepens improvisation understanding but also imparts skills not attainable through self-practice alone, extending beyond mere physical technique to the ability to translate learned concepts into actual performance. Discipline in practice is crucial for effective learning, requiring patience and a gradual approach, starting slowly and progressing incrementally. An instructor or coach can provide external perspective, identifying flaws and suggesting developmental pathways. Students should prioritize slow and accurate practice before increasing speed to avoid errors due to technical unpreparedness. Fundamental knowledge of music theory and improvisation teaching approaches directly influences teachers' confidence in leading instruction. Some piano graduates demonstrate systematic teaching abilities, incorporating harmonic structures, voice leading, and various backing tracks for practice. Conversely, other piano graduates offer different pedagogical perspectives. A classical piano teacher from a government school stated, "For teaching improvisation, we start by changing the ending of a phrase or adding ornaments themselves." However, all teachers agree that annual training enhances teaching approaches and introduces new techniques applicable to students.

Learning improvisation should involve clear goals and an understanding of one's limitations. Musical development shouldn't be rushed but should progress systematically and gradually. Performance should remain within the song's context, avoiding excessive display of skills when inappropriate, to maintain balance and musicality.

Challenges and Issues Faced by Teachers in Teaching Improvisation

Teaching improvisation in music classrooms presents several challenges for educators, especially in fostering student confidence in musical expression. This is particularly true when students must play without worrying about making mistakes or falling out of time, as improvisation lacks the clear framework of pre-written notation. Consequently, some students experience anxiety and a lack of confidence, fearing errors or disrupting the song's form. It's crucial to make students feel comfortable and confident by providing a low-pressure environment where they can experiment without fear of mistakes. Moreover, auditory training plays a significant role. Improvisation demands responsiveness to real-time sounds, so training in listening and evaluating musical events is essential for enhancing students' creative playing. Some students are unfamiliar with improvisation because it differs from playing pre-determined sheet music. Instruction must gradually shift students' understanding of music from rule-following to creative expression, making improvisation seem more difficult and challenging. Beyond building student confidence, another issue is the lack of detailed listening skills. Many students cannot discern whether the resulting sounds are correct. Quality listening training is thus vital for improvisation, as it's not merely playing without limits but also responding to sounds in the moment and applying appropriate musical skills at each juncture.

Many teachers also encounter classroom management issues when students have varying abilities. Some possess strong foundational knowledge and improvise fluently, while others require more time to learn. Ensuring appropriate participation for all is a significant challenge. Furthermore, the teachers' own knowledge and skill levels are a concern. Some piano teachers approach improvisation systematically, using scale patterns, chord progressions, backing tracks, and modes. Others integrate it into lessons through supplementary activities, such as changing rhythms in musical phrases, adding notes to melodic fragments, or using guided improvisation. One classical piano teacher from a government school expressed, "I didn't study jazz before, so when teaching improvisation, I had to research more. It feels difficult without a clear framework." Some piano teachers voiced concerns like "not knowing how to start teaching" and "lacking improvisation fundamentals in their own training," necessitating external training or learning. A classical piano teacher confessed, "I'm not confident when having students try to improvise because I don't know how to assess or advise them." Improvisation training in music classrooms not only requires student confidence but also strong listening and responsive skills, along with creative support for effective improvisation. Additionally, managing classrooms with diverse skill levels and addressing teachers' own skill levels are critical considerations for quality improvisation instruction for all students.

Institutional Context Factors

Institutional policies and the broader teaching context significantly influence the opportunities for integrating improvisation activities. Teachers in private schools often have greater flexibility and autonomy in organizing activities. As one jazz piano teacher in a private school noted, "We organize jam sessions every end of the month. Students really

enjoy it, and we also use that to assess their improvisation skills." Conversely, some classical piano teachers in government schools similarly pointed to limited weekly teaching hours. Teachers often face heavy workloads, including numerous teaching hours, administrative tasks, and extracurricular activities beyond their music responsibilities. A classical piano teacher from a government school stated, "Our teaching hours are limited, the curriculum is packed, and we have to prepare for many exams. There isn't much opportunity for students to improvise, even if some are interested." Teachers affiliated with private schools reported curriculum flexibility, allowing them to design activities freely to promote improvisation, such as group jam sessions, solo improvisation performances, non-notated performance assessments, and collaborative music projects. In contrast, most government school teachers indicated adherence to prescribed curricula, limiting their ability to incorporate improvisation. They often face constraints in terms of time, resources, and administrative support. A piano teacher in a government school remarked, "Here, the focus is on clear results and outcomes; we don't have much room for students to experiment and learn from mistakes." Furthermore, administrative support within each school and parental understanding are co-factors influencing teachers' willingness and dedication to promote improvisation in the classroom.

Institutional context factors significantly impact the implementation of improvisation pedagogy. Teachers in private music institutions generally have greater flexibility in curriculum design and can organize more creativity-promoting activities. Conversely, teachers in government schools often face constraints related to curriculum structure, class time, and administrative policies that prioritize preparation for standardized assessments. Some teachers expressed that despite recognizing improvisation's importance, they cannot fully implement related activities because it doesn't align with evaluation goals within the governmental system. Additionally, administrative support and parental attitudes profoundly affect the space given to teachers for organizing creativity-focused musical activities.

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the perceptions of piano teachers in Thailand with over 10 years of teaching experience regarding improvisation pedagogy, analyzing their views, attitudes, understanding, and influencing factors. Several key findings emerged, which can be discussed in conjunction with relevant concepts and theories:

Perception Regarding the Importance of Improvisation: The study found that most teachers are aware of improvisation's importance, particularly in fostering creativity and developing students' musical skills. This aligns with Biasutti and Frezza (2009), who state that improvisation develops listening, musical responsiveness, and emotional communication in a fluid manner. However, teacher attitudes differed between classical and jazz backgrounds, impacting the value placed on improvisation. Some classically trained teachers still viewed improvisation as non-essential for piano learning, especially within exam preparation frameworks. This highlights the need for a systematic re-understanding of improvisation's role in current music curricula.

Teachers' Knowledge, Understanding, and Ability in Teaching Improvisation: Discussion on this point revealed that teachers' fundamental knowledge and personal experience directly influence their confidence in teaching improvisation. Some piano teachers demonstrated clear, structured teaching approaches and could systematically analyze improvisation, consistent with Kratus (1994) and Gordon (2003). Conversely, some teachers lacked

confidence and clear teaching methods, despite acknowledging improvisation's importance. This underscores the necessity for continuous training and knowledge development in improvisation, supporting Abril (2013), who suggests that creative music teaching abilities can be enhanced through appropriate training.

Role of Institutional Context and Policies in Pedagogy: Findings indicate that institutional context significantly influences opportunities for improvisation activities. Teachers in private music institutions enjoyed greater flexibility in curriculum design and promoting creative activities than those in government schools. Government school teachers faced constraints from rigid curricula and assessment-focused outcomes. Korošec et al. (2022) reached a similar conclusion, noting that providing improvisational performance experiences for students is often not prioritized due to educational policies demanding "clear and measurable outcomes, consistent with a materialistic attitude." This trend aligns with Burnard (2000), who emphasizes that creative activities in music classrooms require both academic freedom and supportive institutional policies. Without curriculum flexibility or administrative backing, teachers cannot effectively experiment or promote creative ideas in the classroom.

In conclusion**,** improvisation pedagogy among piano teachers in Thailand is influenced by both individual and systemic factors**.** Individual factors include attitudes, understanding, confidence, and educational background. Systemic factors encompass curriculum structure, institutional policies, and pedagogical flexibility. This aligns with Biasutti and Frezza (2009), Gordon (2003), Abril (2013), and Burnard (2000), who highlight the significant influence of contextual elements and teacher knowledge on improvisation integration in teaching.

This study demonstrates that *"improvisation pedagogy"* isn't solely about individual teacher capability but also results from multiple interacting components, including the educational system, musical attitudes, and learning environment**.** These elements pose obstacles to effectively integrating improvisation into teaching. Therefore, there's a need to promote approaches that enable teachers to adapt improvisation knowledge appropriately for students at various levels. Examples include designing practice activities that emphasize the creative process over outcomes, providing safe spaces for experimentation, and using technology to support improvisation practice. Ultimately, developing improvisation pedagogy in Thailand requires fostering teacher awareness and understanding, designing open curricula, and ensuring genuine support from national educational policies.

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Utilizing AR in Interactive Art to Create Networks of Happiness Sharing in Online Communities

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Abstract

In today's high-stress socio-economic climate, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional well-being is increasingly at risk. This study explores the potential of Augmented Reality (AR) in interactive art to foster happiness and strengthen social connections in online communities. By embedding AR codes within artistic works, users engage with designed characters that evoke joy, bridging the gap between physical and virtual experiences. The project has two primary objectives: (1) To serve as a medium for transmitting happiness from the physical world to the online world, creating a continuous cycle of joy, and (2) To design an artistic piece focused on the concept of sharing happiness with others. Through an analysis of color, lighting, and symbolic elements, the study examines how multimedia design influences user engagement. To evaluate the effectiveness of the interactive art, we measured user participation through a combination of quantitative surveys (assessing emotional impact) and qualitative feedback (analyzing social media engagement). The results showed that 40 participants rated the visual elements (color, lighting, and design) as highly impactful, with an average satisfaction score of 4.5/5 (SD = 0.23). Additionally, 5 experts in the field of art and media praised the work for its innovative use of AR technology in creating an emotional connection. Early findings suggest a significant increase in positive emotional responses and community sharing of experiences online, with 85% of users reporting an improvement in mood after interacting with the AR installation. This research highlights the potential of AR-driven interactive art as a medium for emotional upliftment and social connectivity, with measurable impacts on user well-being and online engagement.

Keywords: Augmented Reality (AR), interactive art, colors and lighting analysis, virtual world, networks of happiness

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Introduction

In today's fast-paced and competitive world, stress affects individuals at various stages of life from education to career and daily responsibilities. The pressures of academic achievement, securing a job, and the rising cost of living contribute to a cycle of accumulated stress. As a result, people seek activities like gaming, entertainment, and exercise to relax and find happiness.

In addition to these personal activities, the act of giving has emerged as a powerful tool for alleviating stress. Giving whether through material items, time, or emotional support not only benefits the receiver but also brings joy to the giver. This was exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, where initiatives like "Happiness Pantries" (Ratchaburi Provincial Community Development Office, 2020) in Thailand allowed people to share essentials with those in need, creating a mutual sense of well-being and happiness. Furthermore, technological advancements have changed the way people interact and cope with stress. Devices like smartphones and gaming platforms offer new means of communication and stress relief. Technologies such as augmented reality (AR) in games like Pokémon GO (Expedia, 2016) encourage both digital interaction and real-world engagement, enhancing the relaxation experience. This merging of online and offline experiences demonstrates how technology can be a tool for connection and stress management in modern society.

Research Objectives

- To serve as a medium for transmitting happiness from the physical world to the online world, creating a continuous cycle of joy.
- To design an artistic piece focused on the concept of sharing happiness with others.

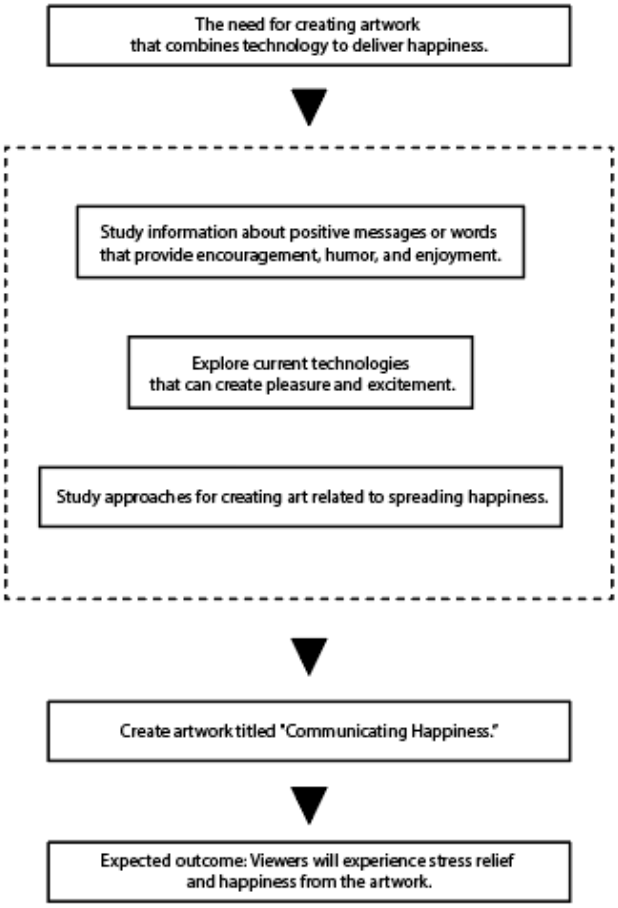
Expected Benefits

The anticipated benefits of this project is Viewers will experience positive emotions, smiles, and humor, which will help relieve stress

Research Framework

This research framework focuses on the creation of art that combines modern technology to spread happiness and relieve stress in viewers. It begins by studying positive messages and encouraging words that inspire happiness, humor, and enjoyment. The framework also explores advanced technologies that have the potential to create fun and excitement for users, such as communication technologies through smartphones or augmented reality games, enhancing the overall engagement and experience. Additionally, it draws inspiration from other artworks that emphasize spreading happiness and positive emotions to audiences, forming the basis for a new creative direction. The final project is designed to create a positive interaction with the audience, encouraging feelings of relaxation, happiness, and stress relief through the experience of the artwork. Ultimately, the project aims to bring viewers a sense of well-being and a lasting experience that transmits happiness and peace into their daily lives.

Figure 1
Research Framework



Methodology

Study Related Arts and Theory

The literature review focuses on various artistic concepts, particularly examining the relationship between music, technology, and communication in contemporary works. It first explores how songs in Thai culture have long been a source of emotional expression, highlighting their influence on society. This analysis then transitions into a discussion on the LINE application (SPTM Thailand, 2019) its evolution following the Tohoku earthquake, and its role in shaping modern digital communication. LINE's innovative use of stickers is emphasized as a creative medium for expressing emotions, paralleling how music communicates feelings. Furthermore, the review introduces the technology of Augmented Reality (AR), particularly in artistic contexts where digital elements are superimposed onto the real world through devices, thereby enhancing interactive art experiences. This exploration of AR, songs, and digital communication forms the basis for the project's creative approach to integrating technology with traditional forms of expression. In addition to these technologies, the literature review delves into the integration of technology and art through various influential works. Yu Chaun Tseng's (Tseng, 2020) Hear, Not Hear demonstrates how artificial intelligence and algorithms can question identity in the digital world, offering insight into the broader digital space discussed earlier. Jamie Alexander Gurnell's (Gurnell, 2020) ABUS Smartest Scream provides another example of how

exaggerated character design can evoke humor and emphasize emotional expression, connecting to the emotional expressions found in both music and LINE stickers. Moreover, Adrien Mondot and Claire Bardainne's (AMCB, 2020) Mirages and Miracles further emphasize the immersive potential of augmented reality, aligning with AR's role in creating engaging, interactive experiences. Lastly, Ben Buche's Yǔzhòu (Arqa, 2017) showcases the creative use of light and translucent materials to build visually captivating, interactive environments, inspiring deeper audience engagement. Together, these works collectively influence the project's goal of using technology to deepen the emotional and sensory experiences of its audience.

Concept and Inspiration

The idea emerged from the desire to create an art project that could alleviate stress and replace it with joy. The focus is on designing characters that communicate happiness through augmented reality (AR) and are shared digitally.

Experiment

The selection of messages in the artwork played a key role in conveying themes of happiness and humor. These messages were sourced from various relatable mediums, including popular song titles, catchy online quotes, humorous truck slogans, and widely shared social media phrases. They were chosen for their simplicity, brevity, and ability to evoke a strong emotional response, whether through humor or inspiration, making them accessible and memorable to a broad audience. The primary purpose was to complement the playful characters in the artwork, enhancing the viewer's experience by delivering moments of joy. By combining lively characters with uplifting and shareable messages, the project aimed to create an engaging, interactive experience that evoked a sense of connection and happiness in those who encountered the artwork. Ultimately, the project sought to foster positive emotional responses, encouraging viewers to feel and share joy, thus fulfilling its goal of delivering happiness., as show in Figure 2.

Figure 2
The Selection of Messages

ใจลอย คอยเธอ	เบิกบาน สำราญใจ	มอบดอกไม้ ให้ทั้งสวน	ความคิดถึง กำลังเดินทาง
มาสร้างฝัน ด้วยกันม๊ย	รักเธอ ทุก พ.ศ.	บอกรัก ฝากใจ	ฝันอีกครึ่ง ต้องพึ่งเธอ
ขอจอง เป็นแรงใจ	แรงใจ รายวัน	สวยเสมอ คือเธอคนเดียว	กำลังใจ ในแววตา
รักล้นใจ	เพื่อแม่ แพ้ไม่ได้	เหนื่อยไหม คนดี	รอสาย ใจสั่งมา

The character design process went through several stages, each focusing on refining the visual and emotional appeal of the characters.

First Set of Characters: The initial designs involved creating characters whose heads were shaped from text phrases. However, this concept made the text difficult to read due to the thickness and proximity of the letters. The characters, inspired by animals with human-like features, were cute but lacked humor, which led to further iterations, as show in Figure 3.

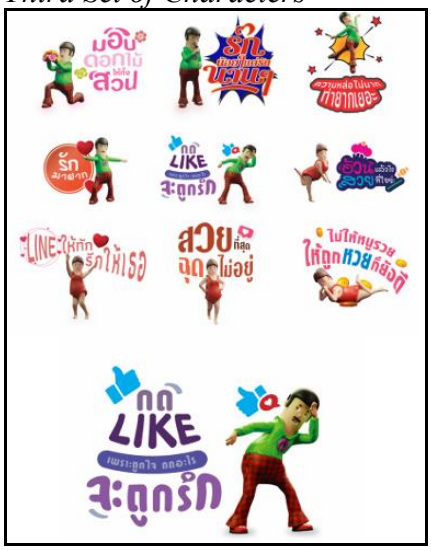
Figure 3
First Set of Characters

Second Set of Characters, this set focused on incorporating elements from popular "Line" stickers. These characters were designed with distinct personalities, but while they were visually appealing, they still failed to stand out significantly from other popular sticker sets on the market, as show in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Second Set of Characters

Third Set of Characters introduced male and female characters with a more uniform design. However, this version lacked the uniqueness needed to differentiate it from existing online content. The adult-like appearance of these characters also made them less suitable for conveying the playful and light-hearted nature of the artwork, as show in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Third Set of Characters



In the final set, the design returned to the use of child-like traits. This version incorporated softer, pastel colors and a “super-deformed” style, featuring large heads and small bodies. This set successfully conveyed humor and warmth, making it the most effective in delivering happiness and joy to viewers. The design also ensured that the characters stood out from other popular figures and were engaging and visually distinctive.

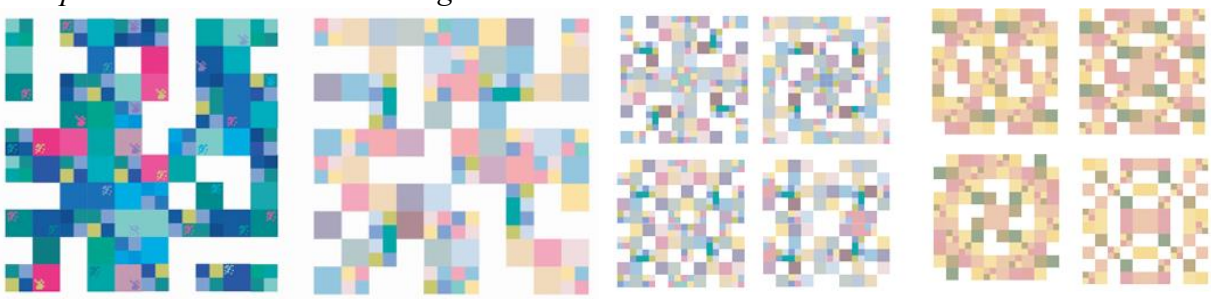
Figure 6
The Final Set Characters

These four stages of development reflect the evolution of the character designs, with each iteration building on the previous one to better convey the intended emotions of happiness and humor. The final set was selected for its ability to connect with the audience and deliver a joyful experience.

Sculpture and Color Design

In the artwork's creation process, the design of the sculptures and the selection of colors were critical to enhancing the overall visual experience. Initially, a soft pastel color scheme was chosen to create a calming, inviting atmosphere. However, after testing, the pastel colors were found to lack impact, and adjustments were made by introducing more intense colors and complementary color pairings to increase the sculptures' visual appeal. These sculptures, integrated with AR technology, served as the central visual element, guiding the viewer’s attention while providing an interactive and aesthetically engaging experience. The use of color and sculpture design was intended to evoke feelings of joy and curiosity, further supporting the project's goal of delivering happiness to the audience. as show in Figure 7.

Figure 7
Sculpture Pattern and Color Design



Steps of Creation

Character and Message Design: The experiment began with the selection of words and phrases meant to evoke joy or humor. These messages were designed using Adobe Illustrator, and various fonts were tested to find the most suitable ones for the project.

3D Modeling: Using Blender 3D software, the characters were created with a "super-deformed" style, focusing on exaggerated proportions to make them appear humorous and inviting. The 3D models were then combined with the selected messages.

AR Development: The characters were integrated into an augmented reality format using Unity software. This allowed the audience to interact with the artwork through their smartphones or tablets by scanning AR codes placed within the installation.

Installation Setup: The experiment also involved setting up a space where visitors could interact with the artwork. The space was designed with sculptures and AR codes, and LED lighting was used to enhance the overall experience. The audience's reactions to the interactive components were observed and documented.

Figure 8
Installation Setup

Sample Groups

For this research, two key sample groups were involved in the data collection process.

The first group consisted of three experts in the fields of digital art, communication technology, and interactive design. These experts were invited to evaluate the project's concept, execution, and potential for delivering emotional impact. Their feedback was crucial in refining the artwork and ensuring its effectiveness in conveying happiness through technology.

The second group included 40 general visitors who experienced the interactive installation firsthand. These participants came from various age groups and backgrounds, providing diverse perspectives. Their reactions, engagement patterns, and emotional responses were closely observed and documented to assess how well the artwork achieved its goal of spreading happiness and relieving stress.

Evaluation Overview

To assess the effectiveness of the artwork, feedback was collected from two sample groups: 3 experts in art and media and 40 general visitors. The evaluation focused on six key criteria clarity, visual appeal, engagement, emotional impact, innovation, and accessibility using a 5-point rating scale. The results reflect both professional insights and audience experiences.

Table 1
Evaluation Overview

Criteria	Experts (Avg. 3 people)	General Visitors (Avg. 40 people)
1. Clarity of Message	4.7	4.5
2. Visual Appeal	4.8	4.6
3. Interactivity & Engagement	4.5	4.4
4. Emotional Impact (Happiness)	4.6	4.7
5. Innovation in Use of Technology	4.9	4.3
6. Accessibility and Usability	4.2	4.0
Overall Satisfaction	**4.6**	**4.5**

5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Results and Conclusion

Steps of Creation

The project was conceived to address the psychological stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic impact. The goal was to spread happiness using communication technologies integrated into daily life, such as online platforms and interactive media.

Artistic Approach

The work is an interactive multimedia installation, combining pastel-colored sculptures with QR codes illuminated by RGB LED lights. Scanning the QR codes using smartphones or tablets triggers animated characters that represent happiness, evoking nostalgia and joy, akin to playing childhood games.

Technical Challenges

Color and Lighting Issues: The RGB lighting created difficulties in scanning the QR codes, particularly when certain colors intensified (e.g., pink, purple, green). This led to delays in displaying the characters, though the changing colors enhanced the digital world's depth.

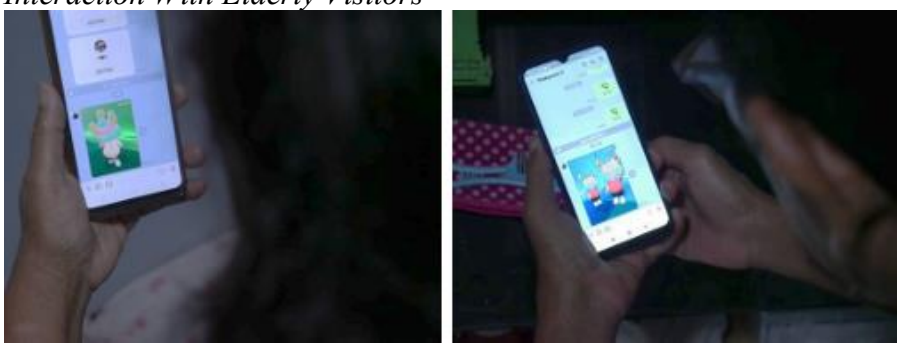
Proximity Problems, Some sculptures were placed too close to each other, causing visitors to accidentally step on QR codes, leading to smudges and difficulties in scanning.

Interaction With Elderly Visitors

Interaction with Elderly Visitors, Elderly visitors faced challenges engaging with the work due to physical limitations (e.g., bending down to scan) and the unfamiliarity with smartphone technology. However, they could still experience the joy by receiving animated

characters through communication platforms like LINE, which is popular among the elderly, as show in Figure 9.

Figure 9
Interaction With Elderly Visitors



Audience Interaction and Feedback

The project elicited unique and unexpected interactions from the audience, demonstrating how they became active participants in the artwork. Below are the key observations regarding audience interaction and feedback.

Beyond Expected Engagement

While the original intent was for visitors to scan the QR codes with their smartphones or tablets and capture images of the animated characters, the audience's interaction went beyond this simple action. Visitors used their hands, bodies, and even physical gestures to engage with the characters. For example, some visitors positioned their hands in a way that made it appear as though the characters were sitting in their palms or interacting with them. Others bent down or used different body parts, like knees and backs, to hold or "support" the animated figures, creating the illusion that the characters existed in their physical space.

Collaboration With Friends

The experience was often shared with others, especially when people came with friends or family. Audience members took turns capturing each other's interactions with the characters, creating collaborative moments of playfulness and joy. They timed their photos to align with different lighting effects, ensuring a variety of visual experiences as the LED lights altered the colors within the exhibition.

Repeated Engagement

Some visitors were so engaged that they scanned the same QR codes multiple times, leading to the appearance of more than one animated character on their device. This added an element of surprise and excitement, as they discovered new ways to interact with the characters and with each other.

Sharing Happiness Online

The enjoyment did not stop at the exhibition itself. Visitors frequently shared their images and experiences on social media platforms, further spreading the "happiness" generated by

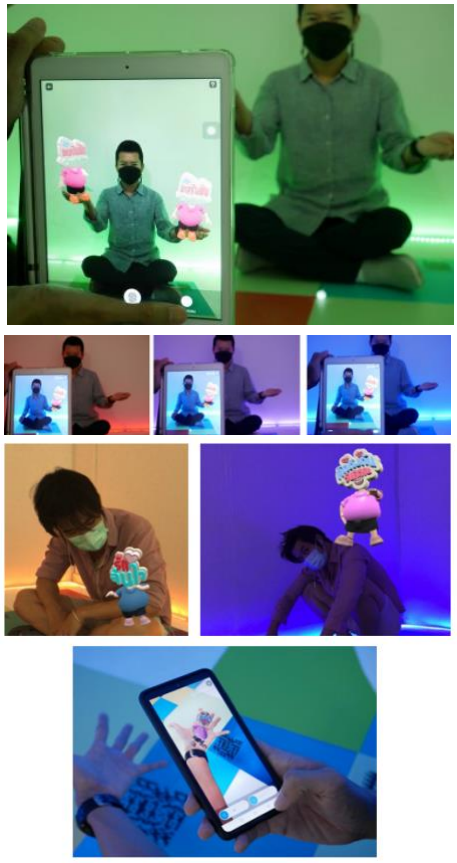
the artwork. The act of taking and sharing photos became an extension of the interactive experience, allowing the happiness to ripple out beyond the physical space of the exhibit.

Emotional Impact

Audience members reported feeling happy and playful while engaging with the artwork. The ability to manipulate how the characters appeared in their surroundings and to share those moments with others contributed to a sense of joy and community. This positive emotional response aligns with the artwork's central goal of spreading happiness, particularly during a period of societal stress.

In summary, the audience's interaction was far more dynamic than anticipated. Visitors took an active role in shaping their experience, using their bodies and creativity to engage with the characters, collaborating with friends, and sharing the joy online, extending the artwork's impact beyond the exhibition space. This interaction highlights the power of art in fostering connections and spreading positivity.

Figure 10
Audience Interaction and Feedback



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A Research Study on Short Film Production for Promoting Community-Based Tourism in Wang Ben Village, Thong Saen Khan District, Uttaradit Province, Thailand

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Abstract

In 2025, community-based tourism (CBT) has gained increasing momentum as part of the national tourism development strategy through participatory processes (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2021). CBT serves as a sustainable resource management tool that fosters local pride and cultural preservation. This study aimed to produce and evaluate a short film promoting CBT in Wang Ben Village, Thong Saen Khan District, Uttaradit Province, Thailand. The research adopted the 3P film production model (Pre-production, Production, Post-production) to develop the video, which was then evaluated by three experts and 40 participants. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed statistically to calculate means and standard deviations. The experts gave the video an overall average score of 3.39, indicating moderate satisfaction. The content was rated at 3.60 and production techniques at 3.70, reflecting high satisfaction. The sample group rated the overall video quality at 3.79, indicating high satisfaction. Content perception and satisfaction with production techniques both scored 3.58. Feedback highlighted that while the film was generally well-received, improvements could still be made. Expert recommendations included enhancing visual composition, color grading, lighting, and subtitle clarity to boost the film's overall effectiveness in promoting CBT.

Keywords: short film, community-based tourism film, short film production, tourism promotion

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Introduction

Background and Significance

Community-based tourism (CBT) has increasingly emerged as a cornerstone in sustainable tourism development, drawing attention from both governmental and private sectors worldwide. Unlike traditional top-down tourism models, CBT prioritizes grassroots participation, empowering local communities to take ownership of tourism initiatives. This participatory approach encourages residents to manage and benefit directly from their natural, cultural, and economic resources, thereby reinforcing their sense of pride, cultural identity, and stewardship of the environment. One of the fundamental principles of CBT lies in its alignment with the concept of sustainability not merely in terms of environmental conservation, but also encompassing economic equity and socio-cultural resilience. Through CBT, communities can create tourism experiences that reflect authentic ways of life, while simultaneously fostering income distribution and skill development. It supports the idea that tourism should not only entertain visitors but also uplift hosts, leading to more equitable growth in rural and marginalized areas. In line with this paradigm, Thailand's National Tourism Development Strategy 2023–2027 places CBT at the heart of its inclusive tourism policy. The strategy envisions CBT as a mechanism to reduce rural poverty, promote regional economic diversification, and create pathways for inclusive development. By integrating local knowledge, traditions, and governance into the tourism value chain, CBT ensures that community members play a meaningful role in decision-making, management, and benefit-sharing (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2021). Wang Ben Village, located in Thong Saen Khan District, Uttaradit Province, exemplifies a potential CBT site with its abundant cultural and ecological assets. The village is home to notable attractions such as Wat Wang Ben a temple that represents the spiritual center of the community; Tad Khun Sri Waterfall a serene natural feature offering eco-tourism opportunities; and immersive cultural experiences that allow visitors to engage with local lifestyle practices such as traditional food preparation, handicrafts, and farming rituals. Despite these rich offerings, Wang Ben faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of visibility and recognition on national and international tourism maps. The lack of effective publicity and modern marketing tools hampers its capacity to attract a steady stream of visitors and capitalize on its tourism potential. In today's digital era, multimedia plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and generating interest among potential travelers. Among various media forms, short films have emerged as powerful storytelling instruments. Unlike static media, short films combine visual imagery, narrative, and sound to evoke emotion, relay cultural narratives, and build compelling identities for destinations. They are especially effective in reaching younger, tech-savvy audiences who rely on digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for travel inspiration and decision-making. (Boontavee, 2019) asserts that digital storytelling, particularly through short videos, enhances destination branding by forging emotional connections with viewers and making cultural experiences more accessible. Additionally, Saayman and Giampiccoli (2016) emphasized the value of video-based media in the promotion of CBT. Their research confirms that audiovisual content not only increases awareness of lesser-known destinations but also galvanizes community involvement and pride. By seeing their stories and identities represented in a respectful and engaging manner, local residents feel a greater sense of ownership and motivation to participate in tourism activities.

This research, therefore, is motivated by the dual objective of promotion and empowerment. It seeks to produce and evaluate a short film that authentically portrays the identity, lifestyle,

and tourism assets of Wang Ben Village. The production process will utilize the 3P model Pre-production, Production, and Post-production ensuring that the content is both technically sound and contextually relevant. The resulting short film aims to serve as a promotional tool for various stakeholders, including local authorities, tourism operators, educators, and content creators, who may wish to promote Wang Ben through modern digital platforms. Moreover, the study aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on media production for community development, offering a case study in how film and storytelling can support local tourism initiatives sustainably and inclusively.

Research Objectives

- To design and produce a short film that reflects the identity, lifestyle, and tourism resources of Wang Ben Village.
- To evaluate expert opinions on the film's content, production techniques, and appropriateness for tourism promotion.

Literature Review

Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

CBT involves local communities managing their natural and cultural resources, with equitable benefit sharing and sustainability at its core (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). The Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2021) defines CBT as vital for income distribution, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation.

Use of Video in Tourism Promotion

Videos are effective in portraying destination stories, emotions, and experiences. Hede and Kellett (2011) found that videos significantly influence tourist perception and travel motivation. Boontavee (2019) emphasized that well-structured, visually appealing short films create a stronger emotional connection with viewers.

The 3P Model (Pre-production, Production, Post-production)

- Pre-production includes scriptwriting, location planning, and preparation (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier, 2013).
- Production involves actual filming with attention to lighting, audio, and camera work.
- Post-production encompasses editing, voiceovers, music, subtitles, and visual refinement (Owens & Millerson, 2011).

Methodology

This quantitative evaluation research assessed the quality and audience reception of the short film promoting CBT in Wang Ben Village. The 3P model guided the production process:

- Pre-production: Field data collection and script development
- Production: On-site filming using authentic visuals and sound
- Post-production: Editing, sound design, subtitling, and final output

Sample Groups:
- Experts (3): Specialists in short film, development communication, and tourism
- Participants (40): Media students selected through purposive sampling

Tools:
- Structured questionnaires (Likert Scale 1–5) to assess content, production, and tourism suitability
- Reliability verified via Cronbach's Alpha (Content: 0.89, Production: 0.86)

Results

Table 1
Evaluation Overview

Group	Evaluation Area	Average Score	Quality Level
Experts (3)	Overall	3.39	Moderate
	Content	3.60	High
	Production Techniques	3.70	High
Media Students (40)	Overall	3.79	High
	Content Perception	3.58	High
	Technical Satisfaction	3.58	High

Rating Scale:
4.50–5.00 = Excellent
3.50–4.49 = Good
2.50–3.49 = Moderate
1.50–2.49 = Fair
1.00–1.49 = Needs Improvement

Discussion

The film received ratings between moderate and high. Experts highlighted strengths in production techniques, though overall quality showed room for enhancement. Students expressed high satisfaction across all dimensions, supporting the film's appeal to younger audiences.

Expert recommendations emphasized improvements in visuals, lighting, color, and subtitle clarity, consistent with Zettl's (2014) findings that aesthetic elements affect viewer perception and message retention.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The short film produced as part of this study demonstrates considerable potential as an effective promotional tool for community-based tourism (CBT), particularly in capturing the attention and interest of younger audiences who are highly active on digital platforms. Through its visual storytelling approach, the film successfully highlights the cultural richness, natural beauty, and unique lifestyle of Wang Ben Village, thereby reinforcing the core values of CBT authenticity, sustainability, and local participation.

However, while the film excels in conveying a compelling narrative, there are areas that warrant improvement to elevate its overall quality and professional appeal. Notably, the audio component specifically the clarity and consistency of voice narration emerged as a key element requiring enhancement. Audio plays a critical role in guiding viewers through the story, establishing emotional tone, and maintaining audience engagement. Subpar voice recording quality, such as background noise, uneven volume levels, or lack of clarity, can detract from the viewer's experience and undermine the credibility of the production. To address this, it is recommended that future projects prioritize the use of high-quality microphones and adopt advanced sound engineering techniques during both the production and post-production phases. Implementing noise reduction, dynamic range compression, and equalization during audio editing can significantly improve the listening experience. Additionally, employing professional voice-over talent or conducting guided narration sessions with proper direction may further enhance the delivery and emotional impact of the message. Overall, while the short film fulfills its core objective of showcasing Wang Ben Village as a promising CBT destination, investing in improved audio quality would not only increase its aesthetic value but also its effectiveness in reaching broader audiences and sustaining their attention. These refinements will contribute to producing media content that is both technically proficient and emotionally resonant, thus maximizing its promotional and educational potential in future applications.

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Communication Strategies of Nano Influencers to Promote Tourism Decision-Making

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Abstract

This study uses qualitative research methodologies to analyse the communication patterns of nano-influencers in relation to travel decision-making. Data was collected through comprehensive interviews with travel nano-influencers and content analysis of travel-related material from social media. The research found that nano-influencers use a blend of credibility, narrative, and persuasion to influence their followers' decisions. Essential elements are (1) proficiency, shown by the provision of precise and comprehensive travel information, (2) trustworthiness, shown by sharing of authentic experiences, and (3) appeal, characterised by a personable attitude and interesting presentation. Furthermore, narrative that is rational and accessible to audiences greatly inspires them. The tourism industry may use these study results to build marketing communication and public relations initiatives using nano-influencers.

Keywords: communication strategies, nano-influencers, influencing travel choices

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Introduction

The role of influencers in shaping consumer behaviour has grown significantly in the digital age. Nano-influencers, defined as individuals with a social media following typically between 1,000 and 10,000, have emerged as powerful communicators due to their high engagement rates and perceived authenticity. This study explores how nano-influencers use communication strategies to influence travel decision-making among their followers. The research highlights the mechanisms of trust, storytelling, and visual communication that make nano-influencers effective agents in tourism promotion. These communication patterns not only reflect personal branding strategies but also the shifting landscape of tourism marketing in an era increasingly influenced by user-generated content and peer recommendation. The significance of nano-influencers lies in their ability to offer a perceived genuine and relatable voice, making them ideal partners in a tourism economy that values authenticity.

Additionally, nano-influencers represent a middle ground between everyday users and celebrities. Their reach, while limited compared to macro-influencers, is offset by a higher level of audience intimacy. This phenomenon plays an important role in the credibility and reception of the messages they share, particularly in decision-heavy domains such as travel. As such, this study aims to examine their communication techniques in greater depth to understand how they guide, inspire, and influence travel decisions.

Literature Review

Influencer marketing has become a vital tool in the tourism industry. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of authenticity and engagement in influencer effectiveness (Abidin, 2016; Freberg et al., 2011). Nano-influencers, despite their smaller audiences, tend to build stronger relationships with followers compared to mega- or macro-influencers (Kay et al., 2020). Their content is often perceived as more relatable and less commercial, which enhances credibility. The literature also notes the growing trend of user-generated content (UGC) shaping travel behaviour (Cox et al., 2009). In addition, the theory of parasocial interaction is frequently cited in influencer research, where audiences develop one-sided yet emotionally involved relationships with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This dynamic is particularly prominent among nano-influencers whose follower base allows for closer, more frequent interaction.

Moreover, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) provides a valuable lens through which to analyse persuasion in influencer communication. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), influencers using both central and peripheral routes of persuasion—such as detailed travel advice versus emotional storytelling—can effectively appeal to different audience motivations. This dual strategy is especially salient in the tourism context, where both rational planning and emotional inspiration drive decisions.

In addition, trustworthiness and social proof play essential roles in enhancing perceived authenticity. Studies show that followers often seek validation from influencers who mirror their own values and travel aspirations (Casaló et al., 2018). This reinforces the idea that nano-influencers are more than just content creators—they are trust brokers who navigate the delicate balance between inspiration and information.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design comprising two methods: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Five travel nano-influencers, each with 1,000 to 10,000 followers, were selected through purposive sampling. In-depth interviews explored their strategies for content creation and audience engagement. Additionally, social media posts from Instagram and TikTok were analysed to identify recurring communication patterns. Data were thematically coded to extract dominant themes and strategies.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions regarding influencer motivations, content planning, perceived audience impact, and collaboration with tourism brands. Participants were selected based on their recent consistent engagement in travel-related posting and willingness to participate in the study. The content analysis focused on a 6-month period of social media activity, during which posts were examined for engagement rates, tone, narrative structure, and use of visual elements.

In analysing the data, NVivo software was used to code and categorize responses into thematic clusters. Codes were iteratively refined as more patterns emerged across interviews. For content analysis, a coding sheet was developed to assess post type (image, video, reel), narrative format (informative, inspirational, promotional), and engagement style (polls, comments, calls to action).

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis revealed three major communication strategies:

1. Proficiency: Influencers provided detailed travel guides, cost breakdowns, and logistical tips, which established them as knowledgeable sources. Posts often included day-by-day itineraries, map screenshots, transportation links, and budgeting tips. These were frequently praised by followers in the comments, reinforcing the influencers' status as reliable planners. The integration of planning tools such as Google Maps, Airbnb reviews, and localized weather data further enhanced informational credibility.
2. Trustworthiness: Sharing genuine personal experiences, including challenges and candid moments, helped build trust with audiences. Several influencers recounted moments when plans failed or when they had to adjust their itineraries due to unexpected events. This transparency increased engagement and relatability. For instance, one influencer discussed missing a connecting bus and being forced to explore an unplanned destination—a post that received overwhelmingly positive responses for its honesty.
3. Appeal: Engaging presentation styles—through humor, emotion, or storytelling—enhanced relatability and impact. Influencers employed visual aesthetics such as curated color schemes, use of background music, captions with local dialects or slang, and behind-the-scenes moments. The narratives were often presented in a first-person voice, simulating a conversation with a friend. Some also included emotional appeals, such as stories about reconnecting with family or overcoming personal fears while traveling alone.

Further analysis showed that influencers regularly engaged in audience interaction through polls, Q&A sessions, and personalized responses. These interactions created a feedback loop where influencers adapted future content based on follower interests. Hashtag use also

emerged as a strategy to connect posts to broader travel trends or seasonal promotions (e.g., #solotravel, #hiddenplaces2025).

Additionally, nano-influencers demonstrated a keen sense of timing. Content was often released strategically around holidays, long weekends, or during travel expo periods. This temporal alignment increased relevance and maximized visibility. Some influencers partnered with local tourism boards to promote lesser-known attractions, using storytelling to reframe perceptions and add novelty to common destinations.

Moreover, the influence of nano-influencers extends beyond their follower base. Several participants noted that tourism businesses—especially small, local operators—reached out for informal collaborations, such as providing free meals or accommodations in exchange for mention. These partnerships were rarely formalized but contributed to destination visibility among niche markets. Influencers reported that their endorsements often led to noticeable spikes in reservations or follower inquiries about featured places.

Conclusion

Nano-influencers play a significant role in shaping tourism decisions by leveraging communication strategies rooted in trust, authenticity, and relatability. Their proficiency in presenting travel content, combined with genuine narratives and emotional connection, makes them effective in promoting destinations and travel experiences. Tourism marketers and public relations professionals can harness these insights to collaborate with nano-influencers in creating compelling campaigns.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of digital tourism marketing by focusing on a relatively underexplored category of influencers. The findings highlight how nano-influencers serve as hybrid communicators—both peers and promoters—who blend strategic content creation with authentic storytelling. For tourism organizations, this means rethinking influencer collaborations not only in terms of reach but also in terms of resonance.

Furthermore, the data suggest that nano-influencers offer a sustainable and adaptable model for destination marketing. Their flexibility, cultural alignment with niche audiences, and consistent engagement practices make them invaluable assets in long-term branding strategies. As tourism becomes increasingly experiential and digitally mediated, nano-influencers are poised to play a central role in influencing not only where people go, but how they travel and what they value.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited by its small sample size and the scope of platforms studied. Future studies may expand to include a wider array of nano-influencers across different cultures and regions. Quantitative approaches could complement qualitative insights to measure the actual conversion rates or behavioral impacts resulting from influencer content. Additionally, comparative studies between nano-, micro-, and macro-influencers may yield further understanding of influence dynamics across scales.

Future research could also explore ethical considerations, such as transparency in sponsorship and the potential mental health impact of constant audience engagement on nano-influencers.

The long-term career sustainability of these individuals and their evolving roles within tourism ecosystems also present rich avenues for inquiry.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the participating nano-influencers for their time and insights, which were invaluable to this study.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author used generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT) in a limited capacity to support grammar checking, paragraph refinement, and formatting suggestions. All ideas, interpretations, and analyses were developed independently by the author.

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The Short Video Competition Process for Promoting Safety by Avoiding Mobile Phone Use While Traveling in Higher Education in Thailand

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Abstract

This study is part of the "Road Safety Promotion Research Project: Discouraging Mobile Phone Use While Traveling, Srinakharinwirot University" project, funded by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth) and the World Health Organization (WHO Thailand). The research explores knowledge communication through a creative short video competition in higher education, conducted under The PAUSE Project. The primary objective is to examine the competition-based approach to promoting travel safety awareness by discouraging mobile phone use while traveling, with a specific case study at Srinakharinwirot University (SWU), using a training course. The study sample consisted of 100 students from SWU Prasarnmit Campus, with data collected through behavioral observations and project presentations. The findings identified four key components essential for an effective competition process: (1) Knowledge Transfer: Participants received safety education from ThaiHealth and media production insights from academic and industry experts. (2) Students presented their approaches to creating short video clips, which were required to be concise (60 seconds), focused, and relevant to both the behaviors and interests of the creators. (3) Competition as a Communication Tool: The competition model served as an effective pedagogical strategy, enabling students to engage with travel safety concepts through a creative and hands-on learning process. And (4) Idea Presentation and Funding: Encouraging students to present their ideas and providing financial support for video production fostered greater engagement and participation. Additionally, the study found that one-day training workshop combining safety education, idea pitching, and media production were effective in maintaining students' interest and active involvement throughout the process.

Keywords: road safety, mobile phone use while traveling, production process

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Introduction

Road traffic accidents remain a leading cause of injury and fatality in Thailand, particularly among youth and university students—populations considered to be at high risk due to impulsive behaviors and lack of situational awareness (Thai Health Promotion Foundation [ThaiHealth], 2023). One increasingly recognized risk factor is mobile phone use while traveling, which has contributed to the emergence of the so-called "smartphone zombie" phenomenon. This condition refers to individuals who, while focused on their smartphones, lose environmental awareness and are therefore more vulnerable to accidents in both public areas and university campuses (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

A report by the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (2022) revealed a rising trend in mobile phone use while commuting among adolescents and university students, posing significant threats to everyday safety. At Srinakharinwirot University (SWU), which features dense foot traffic during peak hours, incidents such as minor collisions and falls have been frequently observed. These accidents are often attributed to mobile phone usage while walking or riding motorcycles within the campus (Student Affairs Division, SWU, 2023).

Although the university has implemented general safety awareness campaigns, these efforts have yet to effectively influence behavioral change. As noted in a recent ThaiHealth report (2023), the communication strategies employed have struggled to resonate with the student population. This underscores the need for innovative approaches that are both engaging and aligned with student interests. One such strategy is the implementation of a creative initiative—the PAUSE Project—which features a short video competition designed to raise road safety awareness. By integrating participatory learning and creative media production, the project seeks to encourage mindfulness and reduce risk behaviors associated with mobile phone use while commuting.

Research Objective

To develop innovative media content that effectively communicates accurate knowledge and understanding of road safety within the university context.

Literature Review

Concept of Generation Z and Communication Behavior

Generation Z, comprising individuals born between 1997 and 2012, is widely recognized for its deep engagement with digital platforms and preference for visual, fast-paced content (Turner, 2015). Members of this generation are often described as digital natives, characterized by short attention spans, high visual literacy, and a preference for interactive and personalized content (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Research has found that Generation Z is particularly responsive to short-form videos, which align with their media consumption habits on platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Therefore, to effectively raise awareness among this demographic, content must not only be informative but also entertaining and relatable to their daily behavior.

In the context of road safety, Generation Z's high mobile phone usage while commuting has emerged as a public health concern. This behavior contributes to the phenomenon known as "smartphone zombie" — a term used to describe individuals distracted by phone usage while

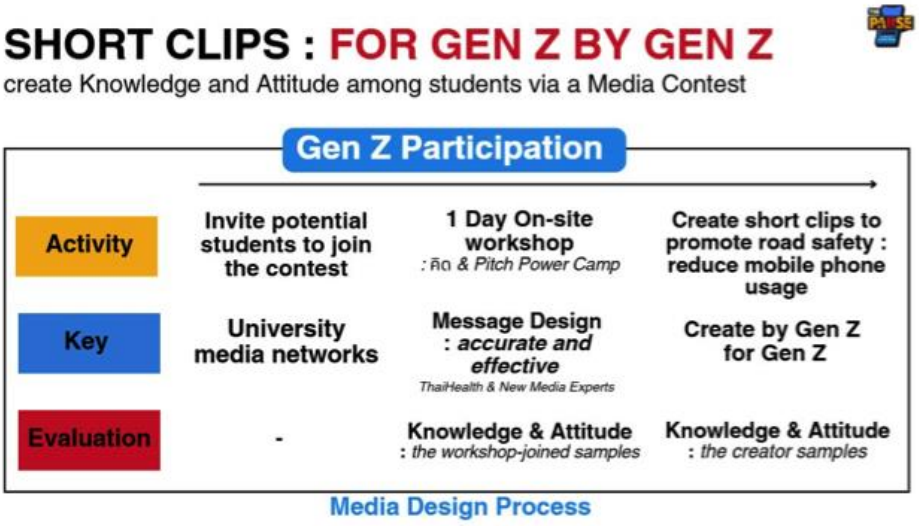
walking or traveling, leading to increased accident risks (WHO, 2023). Thus, creative and engaging media formats are essential for risk communication targeting Generation Z.

Concept of Creative Media Production and Behavioral Change

Creative media, particularly short-form video, has proven effective in public health campaigns aiming to shift attitudes and behaviors. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), individuals learn by observing others, especially through visual storytelling and modeling. When the target audience participates in content creation, they are more likely to internalize messages and promote peer-to-peer influence (Jenkins et al., 2013). This participatory approach enhances message credibility and emotional connection, both crucial for behavioral change.

Moreover, the use of competitions or workshops — such as the PAUSE Project's "Think & Pitch Power Camp" — creates learning environments that combine creativity, collaboration, and real-world impact. Research by Lee and Kotler (2019) in social marketing emphasizes the role of co-creation in health communication, suggesting that engaging the target audience in message development enhances both message resonance and effectiveness.
In summary, targeting Generation Z with creative short-form videos co-produced by peers aligns with both psychological and media theories of behavior

Figure 1
Media Design Process



Research Methodology

Pre-production

The project's pre-production phase began with a public awareness campaign to promote participation in the short video competition. As part of the promotional strategy, the research team designed a dedicated logo titled The PAUSE Project, which was employed across all communication materials.

Figure 2
Logo of "The PAUSE Project"

Key elements of the logo include:

- The word "THE PAUSE": The letter "U" in "PAUSE" is stylized in red to resemble a pause button, symbolizing the idea of "pausing" and encouraging individuals to be present in the moment.
- Mobile phone image: The background features a smartphone, emphasizing the project's goal of reducing inappropriate smartphone usage, particularly while walking.
- Silhouette of a pedestrian: Incorporated within the letter "A" to represent mindful walking without smartphone distraction, promoting awareness of one's surroundings.
- Additional design features: "Project": Indicates that the initiative is structured with a clear behavioral change objective.
- Slogan: "Eyes Up, Phone Down": A direct and impactful message reminding individuals to look away from their screens and pay attention to their environment.
- Color scheme:
    - Yellow represents alertness and energy.
    - Red captures attention and conveys caution or the need to stop.
    - Blue, used in the phone background, symbolizes technology and calmness.

Figure 3
Promotional Poster of the Event

The guest speakers invited by the research team to conduct activities for students were professionals with direct expertise in their respective fields, including a television host and

publishing house owner, a content creator, a writer, a director and storytelling specialist, as well as a faculty member specializing in Interactive Media and Multimedia Design.

Following the promotional phase, students were invited to participate in a training workshop entitled "The PAUSE Project: Think & Pitch Power Camp." The workshop was designed to educate participants on road safety while equipping them with creative video production skills. This phase was particularly important in fostering awareness of safe pedestrian behavior and was enhanced by the involvement of professional media creators.

These experts, recognized for their practical experience and influence as content creators, offered hands-on guidance, providing students with an experiential learning opportunity beyond the traditional classroom setting. After completing the training, participants were required to present their short video concepts, from which the top ten teams were selected to receive funding for full video production.

Figure 4
Students Were Given the Opportunity to Share Their Ideas and Formulate Questions to Be Addressed to the Guest Speakers

Figure 5
The Date of the "Think & Pitch Power Camp" Workshop

Figure 6
During the Idea Presentation Session Following the Training

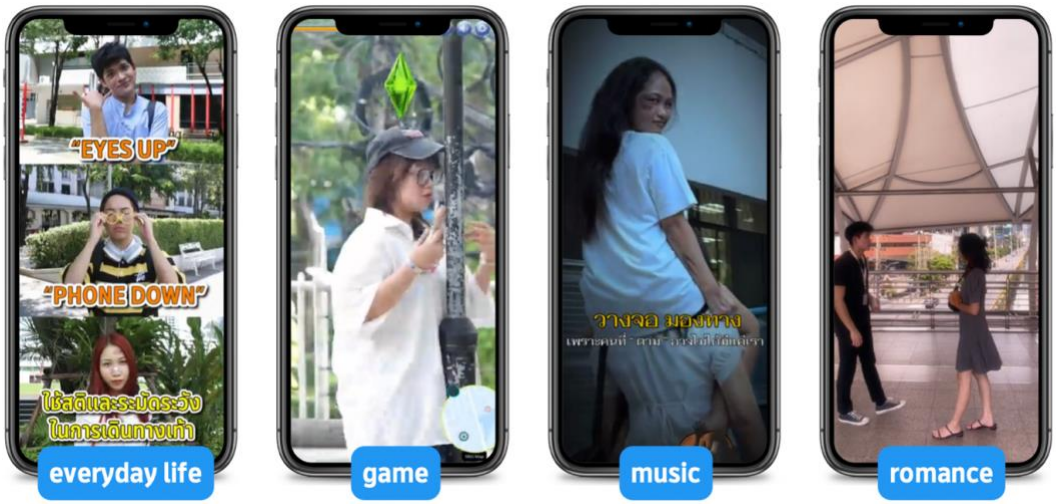
Figure 7
The Judging Panel Provided Feedback and Guidance on How to Improve the Presentation of Ideas

Production

The target group proceeded to produce short-form vertical videos, each not exceeding 60 seconds in length, based on the concepts previously pitched to the judging committee. The production process was entirely student-led, with no restrictions on storytelling techniques or editing styles. Upon completion, the videos were submitted to the committee and expert reviewers for evaluation and constructive feedback, after which participants were given the opportunity to revise their work before the final submission.

During the production phase, each team was able to consult with the research team for guidance. All teams utilized university spaces as filming locations and used mobile phones for both shooting and editing their videos, making the process simple and efficient.

Figure 8
Selected Works by Student Participants in the Project



The video production process resulted in a variety of outputs that reflected each student's individual skills and interests. Despite the differences in storytelling approaches, all videos shared a common objective: to raise awareness about the dangers of using mobile phones while walking.

Post-production

Participants revised their work based on feedback from the committee and experts, and prepared it for public dissemination as part of an ongoing awareness campaign.

Result

The Road Safety Promotion Research Project: Discouraging Mobile Phone Use While Traveling aimed to develop short-form video content produced by the target group—university students and youth—who are considered high-risk in terms of mobile phone usage while commuting. The project was implemented through three key phases: (1) a hands-on training workshop titled "Think & Pitch Power Camp" to provide education on road safety and creative media production; (2) the actual video production by student participants; and (3) a post-production phase, during which participants revised their work based on expert feedback in preparation for public dissemination.

The project yielded several significant findings:

1. Geration Z positively responded to creative short-form videos. The student participants showed strong engagement with short-form vertical videos, especially those reflecting behaviors familiar to their daily lives—such as mobile phone use while walking. The use of vertical video formats under 60 seconds proved effective in delivering concise, easily consumable messages aligned with Generation Z's media consumption habits.
2. Participatory media production enhanced content credibility. Empowering students to take the role of content creators allowed the media outputs to closely reflect the real-life experiences and perspectives of the target audience. As a result, the videos were perceived as more authentic and trustworthy, increasing the likelihood of influencing

behavioral change—particularly when narratives were contemporary and emotionally resonant.

3. Video competitions served as an effective awareness-raising tool. The competition format not only stimulated interest and motivation among participants but also provided a valuable learning experience. Students were able to develop communication skills and gain a deeper awareness of road safety issues from both personal and peer perspectives. The findings indicate that competitions which position the target group as co-creators of media content represent a promising strategy for promoting behavioral change and can be adapted for other public health topics in the future.

Conclusions

The findings of this research highlight the effectiveness of short-form video campaigns co-created by Generation Z participants in promoting road safety and reducing mobile phone use while traveling. This aligns with previous studies indicating that Generation Z responds more positively to interactive and visual content formats that reflect their own behaviors and social environments (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Participants' direct involvement in content creation increased the relatability and trustworthiness of the final media products. This participatory approach is consistent with Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning and peer influence in behavior change. By engaging Generation Z as media producers, the campaign leveraged peer modeling as a tool to encourage safer behavior and greater awareness.

Furthermore, the project incorporated experiential learning through workshops and mentoring, which is supported by Jenkins et al. (2013) who argue that participatory culture enhances learning motivation and message credibility. The use of competitions such as the PAUSE Project's Think & Pitch Power Camp not only fostered creativity but also created a sense of ownership among participants, leading to a more impactful and sustainable outcome (Lee & Kotler, 2019).

Lastly, the strong response from student creators and their peers confirms that short videos are a highly effective medium for risk communication in university settings. This is particularly critical in urban campuses such as Srinakharinwirot University, where pedestrian traffic and smartphone use intersect at high-risk levels (ThaiHealth, 2023; WHO, 2023).

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The Study of Thai Influencer's Component in Personal Branding Creation Through the Use of Digital Media

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Abstract

The research examined and analysed data pertaining to the components, key characteristics, and personal brand identity of prominent individuals who have created online media in the current context. This is a mixed-method research. The sample group is influencers on YouTube channels with more than 1 million subscribers and content related to diary vlogs, entertainment programs, and interviews. The researcher employed quantitative data collection by using a coding sheet related to the components of online media creation, focusing on 15 channels on the YouTube platform. Each channel selected 20 video clips for data collection using simple random sampling. Qualitative data collection was conducted by in-depth interviews with 10 influencers who produce content on YouTube channels by using snowball sampling. The researcher found that the five most significant components of influencer branding through online media creation on the YouTube platform were as follows: (1) Establishing a humorous and entertaining identity (30.12%), (2) Developing an identity that emphasizes storytelling and the dissemination of knowledge (20.15%), (3) Generating interest by inviting celebrities from other channels to participate in video clips (14.85%), (4) Producing content that aligns with current trends (8.24%), and (5) Creating an identity that highlights physical attractiveness, such as beauty, handsomeness, or a pleasant personality (7.47%), which corresponds with the qualitative data collected. Additionally, celebrities continue to place importance on defining their roles and maintaining a consistent image through social media, often portraying characteristics such as calmness, intelligence, and unique perspectives, with audience engagement playing a crucial role in shaping content direction.

Keywords: Thai influencers, personal branding, digital media, YouTube, content creation

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Introduction

The digital media landscape has undergone rapid transformation in recent years, fundamentally altering how individuals present themselves and build personal brands online. Social media platforms have evolved from simple communication tools into sophisticated environments where content creators can establish substantial followings, generate revenue, and develop distinctive personal brands that resonate with millions of users worldwide. Within Thailand's rapidly expanding digital ecosystem, YouTube has emerged as a particularly influential platform where content creators have successfully built substantial audiences and established distinctive personal brands that drive both cultural influence and commercial success.

Personal branding in the digital age represents a significant departure from traditional forms of self-presentation and career development. While conventional personal branding focused primarily on professional advancement through controlled, formal presentations of identity, social media has transformed this process into a multidimensional practice involving continuous content creation, real-time audience engagement, and dynamic identity management. This transformation has created new opportunities for individuals to build influence and economic success through authentic self-expression and strategic content development.

Thailand's digital media landscape presents a unique context for examining personal branding strategies, as the country has experienced remarkable growth in internet penetration and social media adoption. With over 40 million monthly active YouTube users, Thailand represents the second-largest social media market in Southeast Asia, creating a fertile environment for content creators to develop successful personal brands. Thai YouTube culture has developed distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from Western markets, including a strong emphasis on personality-driven content, sophisticated integration of local cultural references with global trends, and innovative monetization strategies through brand partnerships and audience engagement.

The phenomenon of influencer marketing has grown exponentially in Thailand, with successful content creators commanding significant influence over consumer behavior and cultural trends. However, despite the commercial and cultural importance of Thai influencers, academic research examining the specific components and strategies employed by successful Thai content creators remains limited. Most existing research has focused on marketing effectiveness from brand perspectives rather than examining the personal branding strategies employed by creators themselves.

This research addresses a critical gap in understanding how successful Thai influencers develop and maintain their personal brands through digital media platforms. By examining both quantitative patterns in content creation and qualitative insights from practitioners themselves, this study aims to identify the key components that drive successful personal branding among Thai YouTube creators. The findings contribute to both theoretical understanding of digital personal branding and practical knowledge for aspiring content creators, marketers, and platform developers seeking to understand the dynamics of influence in Thai digital culture.

The research questions guiding this investigation include: What are the primary components employed by successful Thai influencers in developing their personal brands on YouTube?

How do these components manifest in actual content creation practices? What role do cultural factors play in shaping personal branding strategies among Thai creators? How do successful influencers maintain consistency and authenticity while adapting to platform changes and audience expectations?

Literature Review

Personal Branding Theory in Digital Contexts

Personal branding, first conceptualized by Peters (1997) as "the process of marketing ourselves to others," has evolved significantly in the digital age. While traditional personal branding focused on career advancement and professional identity development through controlled presentations of expertise and competence, social media has transformed this concept into a multidimensional practice involving continuous content creation, audience engagement, and identity management across multiple platforms and contexts.

Contemporary research by Khamis et al. (2017) identified five key elements of successful personal branding in digital spaces: authenticity and transparency, consistency across platforms, narrative coherence, visual distinctiveness, and audience reciprocity. These elements represent a fundamental shift from traditional branding approaches, emphasizing relationship-building and continuous engagement rather than static presentations of professional credentials. However, these elements may manifest differently across cultural contexts and specific platforms, creating a need for localized research that examines how universal principles adapt to specific cultural and technological environments.

Labrecque et al. (2011) expanded the theoretical framework by examining how digital personal branding differs from traditional marketing concepts. Their research highlighted the importance of authenticity in digital environments, noting that audiences expect genuine self-expression rather than polished marketing messages. This expectation creates both opportunities and challenges for content creators, who must balance strategic brand development with authentic self-expression to maintain audience trust and engagement.

Influencer Marketing and Digital Celebrity

The emergence of social media influencers represents a new form of celebrity that operates according to different principles than traditional media celebrities. Senft (2008) introduced the concept of "microcelebrity" to describe how ordinary individuals can achieve fame and influence through social media platforms. Unlike traditional celebrities who achieve fame through established media industries, digital influencers build their status through direct audience relationships and consistent content creation.

Marwick (2013) further developed this concept by examining how social media creates new forms of status and influence. Her research demonstrated that digital influence operates through different mechanisms than traditional celebrity, emphasizing accessibility, relatability, and ongoing audience interaction rather than distance and exclusivity. This shift has profound implications for personal branding strategies, as successful influencers must maintain a delicate balance between aspirational content and relatable authenticity.

Research by Abidin (2018) on influencer culture in Southeast Asia provided important insights into how cultural factors shape digital influence. Her work demonstrated that

successful influencers in Asian markets often employ different strategies than their Western counterparts, emphasizing community building, cultural sensitivity, and long-term relationship development over rapid growth and monetization. This research suggests that effective personal branding strategies must be adapted to specific cultural contexts and audience expectations.

YouTube as a Personal Branding Platform

YouTube's unique characteristics—including its video-centric format, sophisticated monetization structure, and algorithm-driven content discovery—create specific opportunities and constraints for personal branding. Research by Cunningham and Craig (2017) highlighted how YouTube has fostered "social media entertainment" as a distinct cultural form with its own commercial and aesthetic logics that differ significantly from traditional media production.

The platform's emphasis on consistent content creation, audience engagement, and algorithmic optimization requires creators to develop sophisticated understanding of both technical and creative factors that drive success. Burgess and Green (2018) examined how YouTube's structure shapes content creation practices, noting that successful creators must balance creative expression with strategic optimization for platform algorithms and audience retention.

In Thailand specifically, YouTube has grown to over 40 million monthly active users, making it the second most popular social media platform in the country. Thai YouTube culture has developed distinctive characteristics that reflect local cultural values and communication preferences. Research by Sinpeng (2021) on Thai digital culture identified several unique aspects of Thai social media use, including strong emphasis on personality-driven content, sophisticated integration of traditional and modern cultural elements, and innovative approaches to community building and audience engagement.

Research Gap and Contribution

While international research on influencer marketing and personal branding continues to expand, studies specific to Thai digital media creators remain limited. Existing research has primarily focused on marketing effectiveness from brand perspectives rather than examining the components and strategies employed by creators themselves. Additionally, there has been insufficient analysis of how Thai cultural contexts shape personal branding approaches on platforms like YouTube.

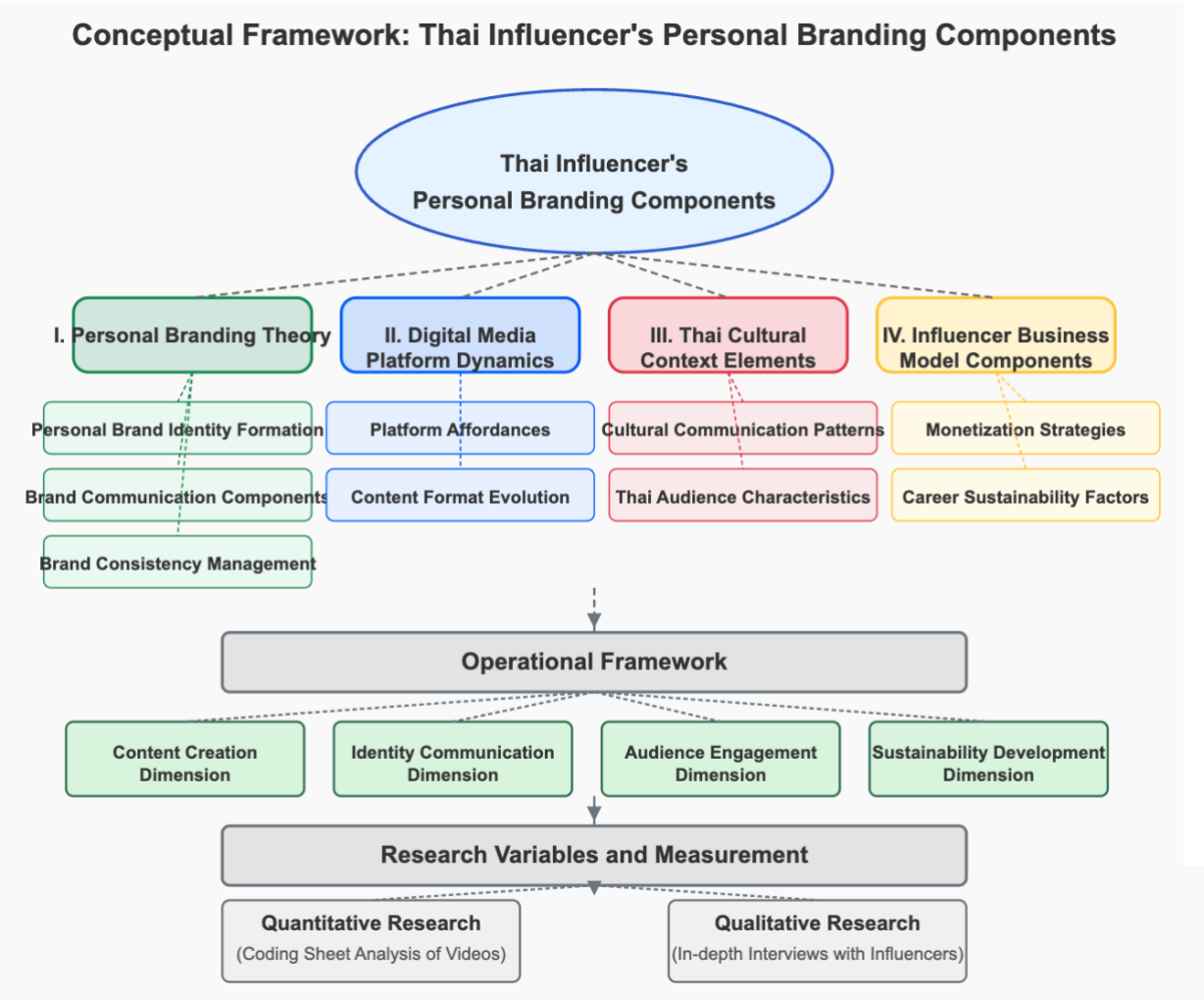
This research aims to address these gaps by examining the specific components that successful Thai influencers employ to develop distinctive personal brands on YouTube, utilizing both quantitative content analysis and qualitative insights from practitioners themselves. The study contributes to theoretical understanding of digital personal branding while providing practical insights for aspiring creators, marketers, and platform developers operating in Thai digital markets.

Objective

The research examined and analysed data pertaining to the components, key characteristics, and personal brand identity of prominent individuals who have created online media in the current context.

Research Framework

Figure 1
Research Framework



Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to provide comprehensive understanding of personal branding components among successful Thai YouTube influencers. The research combined quantitative content analysis with qualitative in-depth interviews to examine both observable patterns in content creation and underlying strategic thinking employed by successful creators.

Research Design

The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both the measurable components of successful personal branding strategies and the contextual insights that explain how and why these strategies are employed. This approach allows for triangulation of findings, providing more robust and comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon than either quantitative or qualitative methods alone could provide.

Quantitative Phase: Content Analysis

Sample Selection: The quantitative phase examined 15 YouTube channels with more than 1 million subscribers, focusing on content related to diary vlogs, entertainment programs, and interviews. Channels were selected based on subscriber count, content category, and consistent posting activity over the previous 12 months. The selection criteria ensured examination of established, successful creators who had demonstrated sustained audience engagement and growth.

Data Collection: From each selected channel, 20 video clips were randomly selected using simple random sampling technique, resulting in a total sample of 300 videos for analysis. The random sampling approach ensured representation across different time periods and content types while avoiding potential bias toward particularly successful or recent content.

Coding Instrument: A comprehensive coding sheet was developed to analyze components of online media creation and personal branding elements. The coding scheme was developed through preliminary analysis of Thai YouTube content and review of existing personal branding literature. Key coding categories included:

- Content format and presentation style
- Personality traits displayed
- Interaction patterns with audience
- Visual and aesthetic elements
- Collaboration and guest appearance patterns
- Trend adoption and cultural reference integration
- Brand consistency indicators

Reliability and Validity: Inter-coder reliability was established through training multiple coders and conducting reliability tests on a subset of videos. Cohen's kappa was calculated to ensure acceptable levels of agreement between coders. Content validity was established through expert review of the coding scheme by digital media researchers and industry practitioners.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify frequency patterns and prevalence of different personal branding components. Cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between different branding elements and channel characteristics.

Qualitative Phase: In-Depth Interviews

Sample Selection: The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 10 YouTube influencers who produce content on YouTube channels with significant followings. Participants were selected using snowball sampling, beginning with initial contacts in the

Thai YouTube community and expanding through referrals. This approach was necessary due to the specialized nature of the population and the need to establish trust with participants who might be reluctant to discuss strategic aspects of their personal branding approaches.

Participant Characteristics: Interview participants represented diverse content categories, subscriber ranges, and career stages to ensure comprehensive understanding of personal branding strategies across different contexts. Participants included creators focused on entertainment, education, lifestyle, and mixed content categories, with subscriber counts ranging from 500,000 to over 1 million.

Data Collection Procedures: Semi-structured interviews were conducted lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each. Interviews were conducted in Thai to ensure participants could express complex ideas in their preferred language. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Interview Guide: The interview guide was designed to explore key aspects of personal branding strategy and implementation:

- Personal branding philosophy and approach
- Content creation decision-making processes
- Audience relationship building strategies
- Platform adaptation and evolution strategies
- Cultural considerations in content creation
- Challenges and opportunities in maintaining authentic personal brands
- Future planning and brand development goals

Data Analysis: Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes and patterns in participants' responses. The coding process involved multiple rounds of analysis to develop comprehensive understanding of the strategic thinking and practical considerations that guide successful personal branding among Thai YouTube creators.

Ethical Considerations

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent for both quantitative content analysis and qualitative interviews. For the quantitative phase, only publicly available content was analyzed. For the qualitative phase, participants were informed about the research purpose, data usage, and their rights to withdraw participation at any time.

Confidentiality was maintained for interview participants, with identifying information removed from transcripts and findings. Participants were offered the opportunity to review findings before publication to ensure accurate representation of their perspectives.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The final analysis integrated quantitative and qualitative findings to provide comprehensive understanding of personal branding components among Thai YouTube influencers. Quantitative findings provided baseline understanding of prevalent strategies and patterns, while qualitative insights explained the reasoning, cultural context, and strategic considerations behind these patterns.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Quantitative Findings

The content analysis of 300 videos from 15 successful Thai YouTube channels revealed distinct patterns in personal branding components. The analysis identified five primary components that emerged as most significant in successful Thai influencer branding strategies, with clear quantitative measures of their prevalence and implementation across the sample.

Primary Personal Branding Components

Component 1: Establishing a Humorous and Entertaining Identity (30.12%)

The most prevalent component among successful Thai influencers was the establishment of a humorous and entertaining identity, appearing in 30.12% of analyzed content. This component manifested through several key characteristics that distinguished successful creators from less engaging content.

Successful implementation of humorous identity involved sophisticated understanding of comedic timing, cultural references, and audience expectations. Creators demonstrated ability to maintain lighthearted content presentation while addressing diverse topics, from serious social issues to everyday experiences. The humor was typically characterized by self-deprecating elements, observational comedy about Thai culture and society, and interactive elements that invited audience participation.

Analysis revealed that creators who successfully employed this component demonstrated consistent comedic personality across different content types and contexts. Rather than relying on scripted jokes or forced humor, successful creators integrated natural comedic elements into their authentic personalities, creating sustainable and believable entertaining identities.

Qualitative interviews confirmed that humor serves multiple strategic functions beyond entertainment value. Participants explained that humorous content creates emotional connections with audiences, makes complex topics more accessible, and provides memorable experiences that encourage sharing and return viewership. Several creators noted that humor helps navigate cultural sensitivities and social issues that might otherwise be controversial or difficult to address directly.

Component 2: Developing an Identity that Emphasizes Storytelling and Knowledge Dissemination (20.15%)

The second most significant component, appearing in 20.15% of analyzed content, involved developing identity through storytelling and knowledge sharing. This component represented sophisticated approach to personal branding that positioned creators as both entertaining and valuable sources of information and insight.

Successful implementation involved presenting educational content within personal narrative frameworks, making learning experiences relatable and engaging. Creators demonstrated ability to transform personal experiences into learning opportunities for audiences, presenting

complex topics in accessible formats that maintained audience interest while providing genuine value.

The storytelling approach typically involved narrative-driven presentations that combined personal experiences with broader insights, expertise demonstration through practical applications, and educational content that maintained entertainment value. Creators who successfully employed this component showed consistent ability to identify learning opportunities in everyday experiences and present them in compelling narrative formats.

Interview participants emphasized that knowledge sharing serves as foundation for long-term audience relationships and sustainable personal branding. Unlike purely entertainment-focused content, educational elements provide lasting value that encourages audience loyalty and positions creators as trusted sources of information and insight.

***Component* 3: *Generating Interest by Inviting Celebrities From Other Channels (*14.85%)**

Collaborative content featuring celebrities and influencers from other channels represented 14.85% of analyzed content, demonstrating strategic approach to cross-audience engagement and brand development. This component showed sophisticated understanding of network effects and community building within Thai YouTube ecosystem.

Successful collaboration strategies involved various formats including interview formats that highlighted guest personalities and expertise, challenges and competitions that created entertaining interactions, and day-in-the-life collaborations that provided authentic insights into creator relationships and personalities.

Analysis revealed that effective collaborations required careful selection of compatible personalities and strategic timing to maximize audience engagement and cross-pollination. Successful creators demonstrated ability to maintain their authentic personalities while adapting to different collaboration contexts and guest dynamics.

Qualitative insights revealed that collaboration serves multiple strategic functions including audience expansion through exposure to new viewer bases, content diversity through different personalities and perspectives, and perceived social validation through association with other successful creators. Participants explained that strategic collaborations help establish credibility and status within the YouTube community while providing fresh content opportunities.

Component 4: Producing Content That Aligns With Current Trends (8.24%)

Trend-aligned content appeared in 8.24% of analyzed videos, representing strategic approach to platform optimization and cultural relevance. This component demonstrated creators' ability to balance personal branding consistency with responsiveness to evolving cultural moments and platform dynamics.

Successful trend adoption involved rapid response to emerging trends while maintaining authentic personal perspectives, adaptation of viral formats to fit individual creator personalities and brand identities, and strategic participation in cultural moments that resonated with target audiences.

Analysis showed that effective trend adoption required sophisticated understanding of which trends aligned with creator personalities and audience expectations. Rather than following every trend, successful creators demonstrated selective approach that maintained brand consistency while capitalizing on relevant cultural moments.

Interview participants explained that trend adoption serves as tool for platform optimization and audience growth while presenting challenges for maintaining authentic personal branding. Successful creators developed strategies for evaluating trends based on alignment with personal values and audience interests rather than simply pursuing viral potential.

Component 5: Creating an Identity That Highlights Physical Attractiveness (7.47%)

Physical attractiveness and visual presentation appeared as deliberate branding element in 7.47% of analyzed content. This component involved strategic attention to visual aesthetics, personal style development, and production quality that enhanced creator appeal and professionalism.

Successful implementation involved consistent visual identity across content and platforms, strategic attention to thumbnail and visual content optimization that improved click-through rates and audience retention, and personal style development that reflected creator personality while maintaining broad appeal.

Analysis revealed that visual presentation served both aesthetic and strategic functions, contributing to professional credibility and audience engagement while supporting other branding components. Rather than relying solely on physical appearance, successful creators integrated visual elements into broader personal branding strategies.

Qualitative findings indicated that visual presentation requires balance between authentic self-expression and strategic optimization for platform algorithms and audience preferences. Participants explained that consistent visual identity helps establish recognition and professionalism while supporting other aspects of personal branding strategy.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative patterns with qualitative insights revealed sophisticated understanding of personal branding strategy among successful Thai YouTube creators. The five primary components identified through content analysis were confirmed and elaborated through participant interviews, providing comprehensive understanding of both what successful creators do and why these strategies are effective.

Additional Qualitative Insights

Beyond the five primary quantitative components, qualitative interviews revealed several additional strategic considerations that influence successful personal branding among Thai creators:

Role Definition and Character Development: Participants emphasized importance of developing clear, consistent character personas that audiences can understand and connect with. This involves defining specific roles within the YouTube ecosystem and maintaining consistency across content and platforms.

Cultural Sensitivity and Authenticity: Successful creators demonstrated sophisticated understanding of Thai cultural values and communication preferences, integrating traditional concepts such as respect, harmony, and community orientation into their digital personas while maintaining authenticity and relatability.

Audience Relationship Management: Participants described personal branding as ongoing relationship-building process rather than static identity presentation. This involves continuous attention to audience feedback, adaptation to changing preferences, and maintenance of genuine connections despite growing audience sizes.

Platform Evolution and Adaptation: Successful creators showed ability to adapt their personal branding strategies to platform changes, algorithm updates, and evolving creator economy while maintaining core identity elements that define their unique value propositions.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to personal branding theory by demonstrating how universal principles adapt to specific cultural and technological contexts, addressing a critical gap identified in previous research. As noted by Saleem and Iglesias Bedós (2013), there has been insufficient analysis of cross-cultural applicability of personal branding practices in various cultural contexts, particularly in non-Western settings. This study provides empirical evidence supporting the argument that personal branding strategies must be culturally contextualized rather than universally applied.

The prominence of humor and entertainment in Thai YouTube personal branding (30.12%) aligns with Bourdieu's (1993) theories of cultural capital accumulation, where creators develop culturally specific assets that resonate within their particular social field. This reflects broader Thai cultural values that prioritize "sanuk" (enjoyment) and social harmony, demonstrating how personal branding theory must incorporate cultural communication patterns identified in Southeast Asian research (Sinpeng, 2021). The emphasis on knowledge sharing (20.15%) supports Giddens' (1991) reflexivity theories about how individuals build identities in fast-changing technological environments, while simultaneously addressing audience expectations for valuable content that justifies time investment.

The research extends existing literature by providing empirical evidence of how personal branding components manifest in actual content creation practices and strategic decision-making, responding to calls for more systematic investigation of branding processes over time (Christodoulides & Chernatony, 2011). The integration of quantitative patterns with qualitative insights provides more comprehensive understanding of personal branding as both strategic practice and authentic self-expression, addressing limitations noted in previous research that relied primarily on European, Australian, or North American settings (Lair et al., 2005).

Furthermore, this study contributes to cultural branding theory by demonstrating how digital platforms enable culturally adaptive personal branding strategies that maintain authentic cultural identity while achieving commercial success. The findings support arguments that cultural sensitivity in branding requires deep understanding of local nuances beyond surface-level adaptation (Hofstede, 2001), while providing practical evidence of how successful creators navigate the balance between global platform requirements and local cultural authenticity.

Practical Implications

For aspiring influencers, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for developing effective personal branding strategies that resonate with Thai audiences. The identification of five primary components offers concrete starting points for brand development while emphasizing importance of authentic integration rather than superficial adoption.

For marketers and brand partners, the research provides insights into influencer selection criteria and collaboration strategies that align with successful personal branding approaches. Understanding the strategic thinking behind successful personal brands enables more effective partnership development and campaign design.

For platform developers and industry stakeholders, the findings highlight features and support mechanisms that could enhance creator success and audience engagement within Thai digital media ecosystem.

Conclusion

This research provides comprehensive examination of personal branding components among successful Thai YouTube influencers, revealing five primary strategies that drive audience engagement and sustainable success in Thailand's dynamic digital media landscape. Through mixed-methods analysis combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative practitioner insights, the study offers both empirical evidence and strategic understanding of how successful creators develop and maintain authentic personal brands in culturally specific contexts.

Suggestion

This research focused specifically on YouTube platform and Thai cultural context, which may limit generalizability to other platforms or cultural markets. Future research could examine how personal branding components vary across different social media platforms and cultural contexts, providing broader understanding of digital influence strategies.

The temporal nature of digital media creates additional limitations, as trends and platform dynamics evolve rapidly. Longitudinal studies examining how personal branding strategies adapt to changing platforms, audience preferences, and cultural shifts would provide valuable insights into brand evolution and sustainability.

Sample size considerations, particularly for qualitative interviews, suggest opportunities for larger-scale studies that could examine personal branding strategies across broader creator populations and content categories. Quantitative surveys of both creators and audiences could provide additional perspectives on effective personal branding components and their impact on audience engagement.

Future research directions include cross-platform comparison studies examining how creators adapt their personal brands across multiple social media platforms, audience perception analysis investigating how different demographic groups respond to various personal branding strategies, longitudinal studies of brand evolution tracking how successful creators adapt their strategies over time, and comparative cultural analysis examining personal branding approaches across different Southeast Asian markets.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors acknowledge the use of AI-assisted technologies for English grammar checking, data analysis support, and organizing information presentation in this research manuscript. These AI applications were limited to technical writing assistance and did not involve the generation of research content, findings, or academic conclusions. All substantive research contributions represent original work conducted by the researcher.

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Polymorph Wants a Cracker? Is AI an Inventor or "Stochastic Parrot" Hacker?

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Abstract

This study explores the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit case Thaler *v.* Vidal (2022), which ruled that artificial intelligence cannot be classified as an "inventor," rendering AI ineligible for patenting. Through an exploration of rhetorical mystification and demystification of AI, arguments presented by Plaintiff Stephen Thaler will be contrasted with arguments presented by Appellant Katherine K. Vidal. Arguments will be charted according to rhetorical and linguistic theorist Kenneth Burke's model of dramatism, featuring twenty possible pentadic ratio pairings of terms including scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose. For example, a scene/agent ratio casts a different meaning than does an act/purpose ratio. Of special note is how a repositioning of emphasis on these pentadic terms inscribes the way in which artificial intelligence is conceptualized and codified within legal spheres—whether it invents or merely imitates.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, dramatistic pentad, demystification/mystification, imitation, invention

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Introduction

Is AI an inventor? Or does intelligence created artificially simply parrot the data input by its designers and trainers, albeit in recombinant, algorithmic ways? More specifically, can AI be designated as an author of a created work, thereby rendering it eligible for patent application?

The purpose of this study is to provide a template for determining whether artificial intelligence, in the form of a painting created by scientist Stephen Thaler's Creativity Machine, constitutes authorship. Via a rhetorical examination of the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit's decision (2022), in Thaler *v.* Vidal, the notion of what constitutes invention versus mimicry will be elucidated. The case will be treated as an exemplar of the arguments involving how artificial intelligence is defined, legally codified, and rhetorically managed.

At the center of the controversy is a painting generated by Stephen Thaler's Creativity Machine. Titled "A Recent Entrance to Paradise," Plaintiff-Appellant Thaler claims that the painting is the original work of Creativity Machine and, therefore, should be eligible for patenting under the auspices of patent protection. Opposing Thaler's claim is Defendants-Appellees Katherine K. Vidal, Under Secretary of Commerce For Intellectual Property and Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

The following are the research questions:

> RQ1: How does language cast the role of artificial intelligence as imitator or inventor?
>
> RQ2: What are the rhetorical challenges of codifying artificial intelligence in a legal domain?

Methodology

To analyze the United States Court of Appeals Opinion for the Federal Circuit in Thaler *v.* Vidal I formulate my review according to rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad.[1] Known as a word artist, Burke emphasizes the dynamic power of language to engage or alienate. Though the five elements of Burke's model may initially appear simply as a journalist's incisive who, what, when, why, where, and how questions, three features distinguish the model.

Linguistic DNA is the first feature distinguishing Burke's model. Only the words in the rhetorical artifact are fair game for analysis. Paraphrasing is not allowed, concordant with the belief that one's own words best represent the authentic, unfiltered worldview of the rhetor. Paraphrasing or otherwise substituting another's interpretation skews the author's power of verbal voice and choice. Much as a detective would not mar a crime scene by tracking their own footprints over it, a rhetorical investigation using dramatism preserves the integrity of the persuader's verbal voiceprints. Hence the analyst selects a rhetorical artifact (such as a court transcript) and codes words in the artifact into the five categories of scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose.

Scene codes contextual elements, including where and when, letting us "see" or imagine the setting. Act represents purposeful activity, typically designated by verbs. Agent involves

[1]Burke's method is introduced and described in *A Grammar of Motives*.

character prototypes, delineating who is taking the action, including any descriptors such as demographic, psychographic, physical appearance, and roles or titles. Agency reveals how the act is accomplished. Purpose asks why, an indices of the rhetor's goal. (Attitude was later added by Burke as an additional consideration, which could include mood or climate of the rhetor's meaning and method.)

Rhetorical ratio is the second defining feature of Burke's model. Once coding has been accomplished for each of the pentadic terms, these words are sorted according to which terms are strongest—which words predominate. To establish a rhetorical ratio a pairing is made between any of the ten possible pairings of scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose. Reversing the order of the pairing creates another ten possibilities, for a total of twenty. The recombinant results include:

Table 1
Rhetorical Ratios

Scene-Act	Scene-Agent	Scene-Agency	Scene-Purpose
Act-Agent	Act-Agency	Act-Scene	Act-Purpose
Agent-Act	Agent-Agency	Agent-Scene	Agent-Purpose
Agency-Act	Agency-Agent	Agency-Scene	Agency-Purpose
Purpose-Act	Purpose-Agent	Purpose-Agency	Purpose-Scene

Pentadic philosophy is the third distinguishing feature of Burke's model. The predominant ratio determined by coding the five terms then is matched to a corresponding philosophy, said to reveal the rhetor's worldview or ideology. Scene is correlated with materialism, act is correlated with realism, agent is correlated with idealism, agency is correlated with pragmatism, and purpose is correlated with mysticism. Focusing on one ratio rather than another can and does have perceptual, interpretive, and actional consequences. It provides a frame through which the world is seen, engaged, and acted upon. In short, the pentad assigns priorities to possibilities, highlighting some and diminishing or even obscuring others.

Analysis

Scene

Scene refers to contextual considerations. Thaler's scene is mapped by present and futuristic contexts that transcend the bounds of what we consider invention and inventor. The inventory story is of what might be.

Thaler draws upon the significance of scene: "Thaler emphasizes that the term 'inventor' must be interpreted with attention to the 'context in which that language is used and the broader context of the statute as a whole'" (p. 9).[2]

The Court's scene materializes historically, a circumference of precedent, tradition, continuity, and commonality. Precedential Opinions cited include Univ. of Utah v. Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Forderung der Wissenschaften (2013) and Beech Aircraft Corp. v. EDO Corp (1993).

[2] Page #s cited in this manuscript refer to the Court Transcript in Thaler *v.* Vidal (2022).

Act

Thaler ousts himself from the act, stipulating his lack of contribution to what was created by "Creativity Machine," claiming that "any person having skill in the art could have taken DABUS' output and reduced the ideas in the applications to practice" (p. 3), while the Court labels "putative inventions" (p. 3).

Thaler argues that since a non-human entity may infringe a patent, it also should be regarded that such an entity could also invent something worthy of patent recognition (p. 8). The Court, however, does not equate infringing with inventing: "That non-humans may infringe patents does not tell us anything about whether non-humans may also be inventors of patents" (p. 8).

Agent

Use of agentic terms invoked in Thaler's argument include "Creativity Machine" and DABUS (Device for the autonomous Bootstrapping of Unified Sentience). Thaler's description of DABUS is "a collection of source code or programming and a software program" (p. 3), assigning the role of agent as "sole inventor" (p. 3). This program also entails "a particular type of connectionist artificial intelligence" (p. 4).

The Court further distinguishes agent from act, codifying the rhetorical separation of the two: A Congressional definition is cited as an individual being distinct from a list of artificial entities (p. 6). Even so, there is a caveat in the clause cited by Stark as the term "individual" is used "to indicate natural persons *unless other noted*" (p. 7) (italics mine). The rhetorical hedge continues with *unless* (italics mine) Congress intended a different reading of the definition.

Agentic terms invoked in the Court's Opinion include the Patent and Trademark's Office (PTO) limitation of inventor as "natural persons" or "human beings" (p. 5). Also included are the terms "individuals" and "joint individuals" (p. 6), recognizing the possibilities of sole or collaborative efforts. Collaborative efforts may include corporations, companies, associations, firms, partnerships, societies, and joint stock companies. Another agentic argument arises through a reference to personal pronouns, noting that the Patent Act refers to "himself" and "herself," rather than to "it" (p. 7).

Agency

Thaler's argument that a machine should be qualified to be an inventor is this: "Thaler contends that AI software programs must qualify as inventors because otherwise patentability would depend on 'the manner in which the invention was made'" (p. 8). Here, Thaler directs attention to agent as the key term, rather than agency. The means or method, according to Thaler, are not as significant as the creator-agent. The Court responds that "This statutory provision related to *how* an invention is made and does not trump a provision that specifically addresses *who* may be an inventor" (pp. 7-8).

Purpose

Thaler argues from the vantage point of AI design and programming, contending that the very essence of artificial intelligence is the power of invention—to view AI merely as a

subservient task master is to miss its more vital potential as a creator. If it only does what humans can do yet in a faster manner then we are missing out on what it truly can achieve—beyond human capacity and caprice.

Thaler's argument based on purpose is refuted by the Court on the grounds of speculative-driven policy projections enshrouded in vagueness: "Thaler argues that invention generated by AI should be patentable in order to encourage innovation and public disclosure" (p. 10).

Results/Discussion

Dramatistic Ratio

The Court is not persuaded re Appellant's arguments, "Thaler directs us to several provisions of the Patent Act as supposed support for his position that 'inventor' should be broadly read to include AI software, but each fails to persuade" (p. 7). Is it that Thaler's argument does not persuade or is it that the Court has unswervingly locked itself into an emphasis on the pentadic term agent defined as a human, precluding any other conception of what an agent might become in the artificial intelligence realm?

Not only does the Court rely heavily on agentic terms in its decision, it considers these as paramount in its decision, providing an explicit rationale. Justification includes both precedent and practicality. From the outset Judge Stark declares the case stasis: "This case presents the question of who, or what, can be an inventor," (p. 2) subsequently affirming it as the "sole" case issue (p. 5).

Thaler not only distances himself from the act, he removes his authorial power entirely, delegating or relegating it to Creativity Machine. In lieu of his last name on the patent application he lists artificial intelligence as the entity to be credited.

The Court further emphasizes the certainty of its stance, stating, "Here, there is no ambiguity" (p. 5). This stance is rhetorically reinforced: inventors "are unambiguously natural persons" (p. 9). This assuredness is interesting in light of Kenneth Burke's exploration of ambiguity as a resource.[3]

By recognizing collaborative efforts within the legal domain of patent eligibility, a logical step for Plaintiff-Appellant would be to argue at least the role of DABUS as a mutual collaborator. This might be an intermediary bridge to recognize the creative authorial power of AI.

The Court itself seems to hedge rhetorically (though perhaps unwittingly) on the definition of person: "The Supreme Court has explained, when used [a]s a noun, individual *ordinarily* means a human being a person" (p. 6) (italics mine) Invoking the ordinary does not preclude the possibility of an unusual, evolving, extraordinary sense of the word "person." In like manner, Judge Stark refers to the "common understanding" provided in dictionaries for the word "person" or "natural person." It might be argued that AI is not within the realm of our common nomenclature, thereby directing us to a second (or third) legal look.

[3] See *A Grammar of Motives*.

The legal hedge also is evidenced in the word *unless,* indicating a least a possibility of exception to the definition and understanding of what constitutes a human being. Plaintiff-Appellant might want to explore these clauses in further argumentative stance. Could it be that the "default meaning" attached to the Congressional definition of individual is not the sole definition worthy of consideration?

Stark's argument relies to a certain extent on what is not included, using rhetorical absence as a justification for his ruling. If Congress or the courts had intended to include non-humans, wouldn't they have said so? This seems to be grounds for a legal objection: calls for speculation. At any rate, such hypothetical syllogistic reason might be called into a least a slight doubt of what a human is and is not all about.

Dramatistic Recommendation

Plaintiff-Appellant might focus more substantially on drawing a rhetorical equation between infringe and invent. If a non-human can infringe, with the legal prohibitions attached to such an act, how is that act is functionally distinct in terms of the power of inventing? Granted, they are two different kinds of acts, likely with different motives attached, but are they substantially dissimilar enough to disregard entirely Thaler's meaning? Contextual considerations are a vital factor in that the precedential cases cited by the Court include opinions issued in 1993 and 2013; one might ponder the extent to which artificial intelligence has evolved since those earlier, more primitive, understandings of cognitive capability.

Conclusion

Plaintiff's argument is based on a mystification view of AI, where it both attracts and eludes our desire to know, comprehend, or explain. In contrast, the Court's argument is based on a demystification view of AI, where the parameters established in precedent claim that only humans can engage in inventing. To assume we know everything artificial intelligence can and cannot accomplish puts Polymorph into a prefabricated box, portending its potential.

Conceptualizing Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad as a rhetorical Rubik's Cube displays where turning/twisting the terms in various combinations produces varying vantage points from which to view the phenomenon. Of particular import for both Plaintiff and Appellant to consider is the element of purpose. Although both sides rely heavily on agent and scene in their argument a more indicative approach may be to focus on purpose. What draws or even compels humans to invent? What, if anything, might draw a future version of AI to invent (beyond the premises of human prompting)? Does Polymorph want a cracker or is Polymorph the code cracker?

Ultimately, the case question may be thought of as who is entitled and equipped to wear an artist's smock. Whereas Picasso once mused that "art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life,"[4] might it be that AI washes away from the soul the life of everyday dust?

[4] https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3253.Pablo_Picasso

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From Oswald to Oswalda: The Penguin's Contradictory Discourse of Gender Swap and Femme Fatale in *Batman: Caped Crusader*

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Abstract

Film is one of the media that has become an ideological machine either to maintain or resist dominant reality. The animated series *Batman: Caped Crusader* (Timm, 2024) which was released last August shows the ability of film to challenge dominant gender ideology through alternative discourses. The latest superhero comic adaptation features Penguin, an antagonist character usually represented as a male gangster, gender-swapped by the series creators to a female. Although the movie brings new perspectives on women's position in society, it also gives rise to a contradictory discourse where the character remains positioned as a villain, like in the concept of femme fatale. Through Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, I uncover the underlying issue behind the gender swap and its contradictory femme fatale aspect in relation to the socio-political context at the time of the series' release. The findings show that scenarios, dialogues, and visual elements in the series are able to present alternative gender discourses amid an increasingly politically polarized society. Unfortunately, these discourses become less effective as it is still tied to the femme fatale formula which generates the notion that to be dominant, women have to be positioned as antagonistic figures towards male protagonists.

Keywords: film, gender swap, femme fatale, alternative discourse, contradiction

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Introduction

Film is considered an ideological machine that reproduces power structures (Storey, 2009), but also a powerful tool to influence power dynamics using its symbolic and material aspects that shape people's logic and inflict subversive thinking (Chen, 2024). In *Batman: Caped Crusader* (Timm, 2024) animated series, film serves its role as a medium that counters reality construction by swapping the gender identity of Penguin, one of the most popular antagonists in the Batman lore. Instead of showing a middle-aged man wearing a black-magician hat that carry an umbrella-turn-gun with a swaying gait, Penguin is portrayed as a female gangster with two sons in the newest animated adaptation. The character's real name is also changed from Oswald Cobblepot to Oswalda Cobblepot.

Gender swapping is one of many steps taken to show inclusive representations. However, this representation is not without problems. Characters are usually only changed based on their biological sex, not their traits. The efforts are then only seen as merely a political strategy to better align with social justice movement. In the case of Penguin, the gender swapping is ineffective as she still positioned as antagonist. This then intersects with the concept of the *femme fatale* in noir films, where antagonist women become the source of men's own paranoia. Most female characters were still positioned as opponents of the male protagonist, where good behaviors of women are practiced by men and negative behavior of men are practiced by women (Xu, 2024).

Efforts to present gender equity in adaptations are often caught in a contradiction between loyalty to the source material and the demand to be relevant in changing social landscape. Therefore, this study is important to explore how alternative discourses try to emerge amidst the contradictions of old discourses that are still maintained. *Batman: Caped Crusader* deserve to be included in discussions on how media content should show representations that are not half-hearted in sparking that social change. Using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this article aims to uncover social discourses hidden in mediums such as films. Critical paradigm is used to make this article a relevant source that able to initiate the public's critical thinking towards texts, instead of accepting it as absolute reality.

Literature Review

In a male-dominated film industry, female characters are still underrepresented. The research on the portrayal of female characters in 100 top grossing films of of 2019 conducted by Lauzen (2020) shows that even though the percentage of female protagonists rose by 9 percent (31 percent in 2018 to 40 percent in 2019), most of these films are still dominated by male protagonist with 43 percent. This research also shows that popular films – which are distributed by prominent film industries – are likely to show male protagonists with a percentage of 57 percent. Another research by Sá et al. (2023) shows there were only 20.8 percent of 260 popular films that featured women as the main protagonists. Most of female characters that appear in popular films are also trapped in stereotypical narrative where women are more likely to be the main character in the romance, horror, and musical genres, while male characters are associated with sports, war, and science fiction (Gala et al., 2020; Lauzen, 2020).

Gender swapping from male characters to female considered a form of alternative representations. It is become an important issue related to gender relations in society dominated by men and masculinities. However, Oulton (2024) dismissed the term "gender-

swap" and proposed the term "sex-swap," as it describes the reality that the characters' transition only changes the biological sex rather than their constructed gender traits, just as Penguin who is still considered a villain. In this case, gender swap effort only appears as a political strategy to show inclusivity (Jenner, 2023) without actually trying to create authentic characters and alternative discourses.

The representations of female as villain create a contradiction shown in the concept of *femme fatale*. It is a narrative concept that often appear in *noir* films, a type of films that began to develop after World War II by exploring moral ambiguity and existential crisis among its characters (Conard, 2006). Generally, the protagonists in *noir* films are men who experience alienation, moral dilemmas, and anxiety with such expressions like skepticism, paranoia, and even fear (Kožul, 2023). The *femme fatale* usually presented as the culprit of this paranoia, symbolizes male fantasy, but also becomes the only character that represents an effort to break male dominance (Piotrowska, 2019). Unfortunately, this representation is only shown briefly. Towards the end, the *femme fatales* are still defeated by man who seeks to restore masculinity's control over the world. Thus, women are symbolized as active and strong individual, but they also experience reductions of their personality by only built as characters that use their beauty to gain benefits from male figures.

Research Methods

This research was conducted using the *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) method, which analyzes language not only from its linguistic aspects, but also its relation to social practices and contexts (Eriyanto, 2001). Fairclough's CDA concerns on three analytical dimensions: text, *discourse* practice, and *sociocultural practice*, that gives attention not only from the gender or feminist perspective, but also the society as a whole interconnected issue. Thus, the scope of analysis is more holistic and able to connect discourses with social change, as well as highlighting forms of resistance within. In the context of film as popular culture, the interaction between film texts and social structures is very important.

I used qualitative approach to analyze the scenes in the first episode of *Batman: Caped Crusader* series entitled *In Treacherous Waters*, the one and only appearance of the Penguin throughout the whole 8 episodes. After the text analysis was carried out, I continued the process of analyzing news articles containing interviews with series producers to strengthen the analysis on the discourse practices and social practices section. In addition, I also used several literatures such as news articles and scientific writings that were able to provide a clear picture of the socio-political dynamics in United States when this series was made.

Results and Discussion

Text Analysis

Powerlessness of Men in the Face of Woman

The first scene of episode 1 shows a man named Clarence tied to a chair during an interrogation. He appears to be one of the workers in the "boss" family business who is suspected of leaking the family's secret plans. In the scene, Clarence is extremely afraid and tries to convince an executioner to believe his words. His fear of the "incoming danger" is amplified after one of the executioners says, "Sure Clarence, but the boss would like to have a word with you anyway." The executioners then left him while at the same time, a shadowy

figure of a woman wearing magician's hat appears, holding an umbrella whose tip turns sharp just like a bayonet.

The discourse of gender swap can be seen from how gender transition also changes the gender power relations. The scene shows woman as bosses or leaders who have higher positions than their male workers. Right from the first scene, audience has been exposed by the alternate discourse for men's powerlessness in front of the woman. However, the discourse of *femme fatale* appears when woman who is shown to practice the "evil" side of male characters wo are dominant and powerful over the opposite sex.

Courage Against Male Power

Scene 3 shows two crucial characters, Batman/Bruce Wayne and his servant Alfred Pennyworth discussing the latest crime that deliberately targets the buildings owned by crime boss Rupert Thorne. The dialog between the two characters shows the courage of the unknown gangster, but actually refers to the Penguin. "Someone's declared war on Thorne, but they're covering their tracks," Batman said. "That would suggest there's a crime boss we don't know about. One who's bold enough to take on Rupert Thorne," Alfred responded.

This dialog implicitly concludes Penguin's courage as a gangster against Rupert Thorne's business empire. Bruce Wayne and Alfred's conversation shows the impression of a woman who dares to fight against male domination. The discourse of *femme fatale* puts Penguin as a strong woman who represents efforts to break male dominance and women passivity. However, the way she does her work is still represents the bad nature of men.

Cabaret Contradictions

Scene 7 shows Penguin performing a *cabaret* show and dancing to music in the lounge of her ship, Iceberg. But, the audience of her performance are mostly men. Despite not wearing clothes that are identical to female stereotypes (revealing clothes with flashy colors), this scene still shows Penguin as the object of the audience's gaze. After the dance is over, she even says some flirting words to some of the male audience members.

The gender swap discourse instead plunges Penguin back into the stereotype of female characters in the *noir* films which utilize their beauty to trap men. This plot brings back the old representation that reproduces the patriarchal system. Thus, the discourse of *femme fatale* in this scene is more evident and the representation contradicts the actual objectives of gender transition.

The Cold-Blooded Woman

In scene 8, Penguin is shown as a cruel and cold-blooded character who punishes her own son by putting him in a locked safe box and throws it into the sea. This punishment is carried out due to the accusation that Aaron, his younger son, leaked his illegal business secrets. In the scene 10 it is revealed that her older son Ronnie is the actual whistleblower. In regards of this new fact, Penguin doesn't regret killing Aaron. She even says her wicked views out loud, "Do you have any idea what this means?." which Iggy then speculatively answered, "That Thorne got you to kill the wrong son?" Penguin then shouted back, "No! It means that brat's gonna squeal about the whole operation!"

Penguin's answer reinforces her as a cold-blooded and objective character. She doesn't really care about her son and instead relies more on rational thinking. Gender transition thus revolutionizes women as objective and rational characters, much like male characters usually associated with them. However, this rationality is problematic as it relates to the murder of her own biological son. Therefore, the *femme fatale* is back in the picture.

In addition, the dressing room seems to represent the "center" of femininity. The dressing table, even though its use is genderless, is often still used to associate with the feminine image. Penguin's anger can be seen as her feminine center through the setting of the dressing room. She doesn't act outside the construct of femininity despite his cruel nature. Thus, her femininity is still explored, avoiding the need for her to appear brave and powerful which usually become the standard of male characters.

Duel Against Batman and Penguin's Successful Attack

Scene 16 becomes the peak conflict and resolution characterized by Penguin's duel fight against Batman and her success attacking the police station with her ship's cannon. Penguin's success leaves small details that are easy to miss. Before shooting the cannon, for example, she insists on shooting it herself instead of his male workers. The fight between Penguin and Batman is also intense and has a fairly long duration. Apart from the possibility enhancing the aesthetics for the ultimate battle, this details still shows Penguin as a strong female villain who is not easily defeated.

The fight between Penguin and Batman raises the discourse that gender swap succeeds in positioning Penguin as a character who is also physically strong to fight Batman. The discourse of *femme fatale* emerges through the depiction that offers an alternative to female dominance. However, at the same time, another meaning of *femme fatale* also emerges: women must become antagonists to be equal to men.

The climax of the first episode also shows Penguin's success in bombing the police station. This scenario brings up the discourse that Penguin's gender swapping puts women as characters who actually succeed in carrying out her plan. The bombing of the police station creates a strong meaning, considering that police officers are usually represent masculinity. Thus, Penguin*'s* gender swap once again shows an alternative to women's equity, although it is also trapped in a *femme fatale* discourse that makes *gender swap* not entirely effective in bringing new perspective.

Discourse Practice

Text Production

Batman: Caped Crusader is the result of collaborative work by James Tucker and DC Comics legend Bruce Timm. In the early 1990s, Timm was a central figure who launch fan-favorite *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995). Thus, *Caped Crusader* was long awaited by DC fans. Collaborating with James Tucker, Timm is again the central figure in many narrative decisions for *Caped Crusader*, including the *gender swap* of Penguin and its contradiction with the discourse on *femme fatale*. Penguin itself is an antagonist first appeared in the December 1941 issue of Detective Comics #58. The character, whose real name is Oswald Chesterfield Cobblepot, was created by Bill Finger and Bob Kane as a male gangster who has various crime scenarios.

Quoted from the Fiction Horizon website, Timm and Tucker explained the simple reason behind gender swapping move in an interview section. "One of the problems with Batman, as he is, is there's a lack of good villains. You've got Catwoman, you've got Poison Ivy, you've got Harley Quinn. But it would be really good to have more female villains" (Kraljik, 2024). Based on the interview, they didn't have any specific reason for Penguin′s gender swap, besides from their assumption that Batman lacks good villains.

However, this statement contradicts Timm's previous statement at the 2021 DC FanDome event. According to Timm, *Batman: Caped Crusader* will bring some updates to stay relevant to the themes of inclusivity and representation, "The way we deal with the characters is going to be quite a bit more modern in terms of inclusivity, representation, things like that" (Trent, 2024). Thus, discourses such as *gender swap* are part of the initial plan to bring inclusivity and representation. What may not be realized is the emergence of the *femme fatale* contradiction, which clearly follows the gender swap discourse as it relates to the embedding of the female gender in antagonistic characters

Meanwhile, the voice of Penguin in the Minnie Driver series also responded to her character's gender transition,

> It's believable that this bizarre, strange, larger than life character is genderless because that's the essence of The Penguin. What we are looking at is the essence of the original comics and animation. When you look at her, she's weirdly genderless, she's a creature, and I love that that's what we are exploring now. (Murray, 2024)

Driver seems to understands his role as a form of expansion of alternative discourse in the public presented through the Penguin character.

Text Consumption

The gender swap move didn't go well with the audience reception which mostly consist of Batman fans. Disapproval from audience dominated the comment section in Prime Video's X account. For information, Prime Video is the latest Batman series' distributor. One of those harsh comments can be found in @realJacobAirey account, which stated,

> PUT A CHICK IN IT AND MAKE HER GAY AND LAME! Dang, they cast Minnie Driver and instead of using her talent for someone like Catwoman, Silver, Nocturna, we get this lame gender swap. What a waste of talent. Batman has a plethora of female villains. This was unnecessary. (Trent, 2024)

This comment shows a strong rejection to gender swapped Penguin. Airey argued that Batman doesn't really lack of female villains, making the Penguin gender shift unnecessary. He also highlights the least comfortable where Minnie Driver's brilliant work used only for gender swapped character. Meanwhile, a similar but harsher comment came from @JasonCr19525171 who stated, "Stop f***ing doing this bulls**t. There are plenty of good characters that women play in the Batman series and there is no reason to do this gender swap crap. I can guarantee I will not watch this show" (Trent, 2024).

The account's owner expressed his frustration over the producer's move to gender swapping Penguin which deemed to have failed to see the potential of other female villains. Blog writer

Tronix (2024) from *bwspotlight.com* also expressed his concern with Penguin's gender swap by stating,

> Cobblepot was still Oswald, not Oswalda, and I still can't believe 's an actual name. I looked it up for the show review, and it just sounds like a made-up name, doesn't it? He was never a woman, or genderless, or anything else you want to use to own people with something you clearly have nothing about. We're talking about superhero geeks here. They're less forgiving than Congress when it comes to that nonsense. (Tronix, 2024)

The blogger insisted that Penguin's gender transition is absurd and can provoke anger from Batman fans. He explained that superhero fans tend to be loyal to the source material of adaptation and usually triggered when the adaptation changes many aspects of the original.

However, Asraff (2024) there was still some enthusiasm from the audience. On Culture Cave's X account, a positive reaction from @lepslair account was spotted in negative-dominated reactions, stated "Minnie Driver? Hell yea!" Another positive reaction also came from @PromptlyAI_YT account, "Really? That's a new one. No worries. I like Minnie Driver. Sure she does a fine job." While both of these comments refer more to the appreciation of the Penguin voice actor Minnie Driver, the expression from the used phrases still show an optimistic reaction to the latest Penguin adaptation.

Sociocultural Analysis

Situational

Batman: Caped Crusader series was released in August of 2024, the year characterized by political turmoil in US. The criminal charges against President Donald Trump further polarized two major political movements, conservatism and liberalism. US political polarization also can't be separated from the series of crisis starting all the way back from the death of George Floyd, racist-motivated mass shootings, leading to the attack on Capitol Building by Trump's fanatics.

This chain of events led to Executive Order known as DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Signed by former US president Joe Biden in 2021, the order enforces federal institutions to promote equal opportunity in workforce. DEI focuses on representation, fairness, and also recognition employees' value without discriminatory towards certain background (Arsel et al., 2021; Schneid, 2025) that this order is an issue oriented towards procedural and distributive justice in institutions. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center study, 52 percent of US adults said they attended DEI training or meetings at work, while 33 percent stated that their company had a staff member designated as a DEI promoter (Ellis, 2025).

The increasing acknowledgement of DEI affected the creative media. Penguin's gender swapping can be concluded as one of the implementations of DEI, as Bruce Timm stated that he wanted to enrich his latest series with updated characters based on issues of inclusivity and representation (Trent, 2024). Unfortunately, the position and traits of Penguin that remain unchanged as an antagonist eventually become *femme fatale*, making this effort of implementing DEI miss its objectives.

Institutional

Prior to the series' release, DC Comics and their studio producer-distributor Warner Bros. (WB) had gone through various crises that led to low levels of satisfaction from *fans* and audiences in general. One crisis that probably had the most media attention is the interference of the studio in the production of *Justice League* (Snyder, 2017). This controversy led to *#ReleaseTheSnyderCut* movements among DC fans for WB to release the original director Zack Snyder's version of the film before heavily edited to be in tune with the studio and stakeholder's vision. The other case would be the crimes committed by the superhero Flash actor Ezra Miller, which charged with under-aged grooming and fans choking (Roundtree, 2023).

While WB still deep covered by crisis, they held an online event called DC FanDome in 2021. This event is intended to be a celebration of DC Comics audio-visual content where various project announcements and movie trailers are released to general audience. *Batman: Caped Crusader* was one of the projects announced. In 2022, the merger of Warner Bros' parent company WarnerMedia with Discovery brought new strategy for the studio's superhero content management while at the same time restoring the dispute between DC fans and the studio. It was in January 2023 that DC Comics superhero films finally reappeared with a new franchise plan called DCU (DC Universe) which will really focus on developing interconnected *superhero* stories under the label DC Studios. In addition, DC also announced another content franchise called DC *Elseworld* which will accommodate superhero stories outside the official DC Universe franchise, of which the animated series *Batman: Caped Crusader* is a part.

The fresh start presented by DC Comics seems to show how DC Comics and WB as industry are now more committed in telling interconnected story and also being actively involved in presenting inclusive representation. But the realization of this new-found inclusivity seems to lack thoroughness. The gender swapped Penguin might just fall back to only in swapping sex rather than gender, resulted in the final product where Penguin instead become a *femme fatale.*

Social Dimension

The emergence of the superhero comic books and their adaptation to the screen in late 1940s reflected the prevailing gender role which saw men in a central position as the embodiment of progress and rationality. As social revolutions occur globally, superhero principles present a transition in female characters that become powerful rather than dominated by men (Kasiyarno et al., 2023). The emergence of female superheroes such as Ms. Marvel, Batgirl, and Supergirl are some efforts conducted by comic artist and media industry to represent gender relation that increasingly moving towards inclusivity and multilayered storytelling. Female superhero adaptations such as *Supergirl* (Szwarc, 1984), *Elektra* (Bowman, 2005), and the series *Ms. Marvel* (Arbi & Fallah, 2022) are also beginning to appear and gaining global attention.

However, there are people who also criticize this movements and associate it with the *woke* culture. *Woke* actually related to racial awareness and anti-racism struggles by black community, first appeared in the 1938 protest song Scottsboro Boys (Cammaerts, 2022). But over the past few years, the use of "*woke"* expands to also represent other marginalized groups such as women and the LGBTQ+ community. The *woke* itself is still debated by both conservative groups and public in general. According to Allen (2023), *woke* has gone through

misappropriation in social media and instead referring more to person that overreacting and insincerely concerned with social justice issues. The movement has privileged the weakest social communities, turning them into political movement with fundamentalist tones which see the whole society as power struggle (Madrid Gil, 2023). Conservatives on the other hand perceive *woke* as an attempt to impose progressive overreaction through "liberal media."

The gender swapped Penguin in *Batman: Caped Crusader* can be considered emerging in a polarized society. People who adopt both liberal and conservative political ideology in the US are increasingly clinging to the polar ends of their respective ideologies, causing continuous conflict without any tendency towards moderation. The debates around *woke* culture overshadows Penguin's gender swapped adaptation, which then seems to be forced in order to implement liberal agenda. The goal of presenting alternative gender representation to the general audience, isn't optimally realized. In addition, the discourse of *femme fatale*, which is one of the tropes that maintained the established masculinity domination, also creates contradictions on the series' initial discourse.

Conclusion

As we look deeper, the gender swapped Penguin actually shows the effort taken by producers Bruce Timm and James Tucker to redefine the legendary villain in modern and inclusive society. Penguin now represents women as strong characters who are able to rationally holds business control, just as men are often constructed based on gender-associated traits. Although she only appears in first episode, her character leaves a bold impression by putting forward an alternative gender discourse.

However, this adaptation can't be separated from the concept of *femme fatale.* Gender transition does not necessarily change Penguin's role as an antagonist. This backfires on DC Comics, which plunges the institution back into the female antagonist narrative of old *noir* films. Women only hold the central role temporarily before finally being defeated by the male hero. The contradiction of these two discourses also becomes an obstacle in presenting alternative gender representations through the concept of DEI, as it is also related to the *woke* culture labelling and affected the increasing polarization of society. The effort to bring inclusivity by featuring alternate gender in popular media is still caught up in *status quo*.

The development of popular content and its adaptation has always been tied to the socio-political conditions at the time of their release. These contents are crucial to reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies. Although I have tried to present the findings comprehensively using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this article still has some limitations, such as the analysis which is only conducted on one episode in the series. Thus, the findings in this study are not able to represent the comprehensive gender discourse of the entire series. Several female protagonists and antagonist in the series are also not the object of study because they do not include in gender swap discourse, even though their presence shows a strong gender discourse. Therefore, more critical discourse research is needed in the complex study of popular culture texts as well as the production process. This is so that media content products do not give contradictory social discourses.

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Preventing the Burnout and the Burn Through: Leaning Into Structured and Strategic Rest

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Abstract

Burnout is a known issue in higher education, but *burn through*—the way institutional practices drive individuals into and beyond burnout—is less recognized. This paper explores the definitions and contributing factors of both burnout and burn through, providing a conceptual framework grounded in care, well-being, and cultural change. This paper advocates for intentional rest practices as a form of resistance and change to institutional overwork and misalignment by presenting the concept of structured and strategic rest, rooted in the work of scholars such as Tricia Hersey and Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith. It further asserts practical tools and leadership strategies that support cultural shifts toward sustainability, wholeness, and humane professional expectations.

Keywords: burnout, burn through, structured rest, higher education, leadership

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Introduction

The prevalence of burnout in higher education has been well-documented, yet a lesser-discussed phenomenon—*burn through*—continues to erode the health of institutions and their people. Burnout refers to the personal impact of chronic overwork, emotional fatigue, and structural imbalance, while burn through highlights systemic patterns that rapidly consume and discard people and their talent. This paper examines both phenomena through the lens of institutional leadership, care work, and the power of rest. Using insights from leadership practitioners and rest scholars, including Tricia Hersey (2022) and Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith (2017), the following sections frame rest not as a luxury, but as a strategic imperative for sustainable leadership and organizational transformation.

Understanding Burnout

Burnout is often classified as emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion resulting from ongoing stress and overwork. Contributing factors in higher education, include chronic workload, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, digital fatigue, emotional labor, and values misalignment. Faculty, staff, and administrators are often faced with growing pressures to do more with less, respond to constant demands, and sustain high levels of performance amid shrinking resources. These conditions erode morale, damage retention, and diminish the quality of service to students and communities. Burnout is not simply the result of personal inefficiency or weak coping skills—it is the predictable outcome of systems that perpetuate urgency, inequity, and unsustainable expectations.

Beth Godbee (2023) expands this understanding by distinguishing between structural and individual causes of burnout, urging institutions to stop treating it as an isolated personal failing. She highlighted that the problem is not just overwork, but the cultural and systemic norms that reward overextension and neglect recovery. Without institutional accountability—such as fair workload distribution, recognition of invisible labor, and the cultivation of psychological safety—efforts at personal resilience amount to "band-aid fixes" for deeper structural wounds. Burnout thrives in environments where autonomy is restricted, community is undervalued, and well-being is deprioritized.

Recognizing Burn Through

Burn through differs from burnout in that it highlights the institutional mechanisms that drive turnover, exploit key personnel, and neglect infrastructure investments that impact personnel. This pattern results in the rapid consumption of talent, insufficient support systems, poor change management, and a cycle of crisis response. Burn through disproportionately affects those in care-oriented roles and historically and systemically marginalized communities, compounding systemic inequities – and expands both conceptually and in name what Goodbee (2022, 2023) highlighted as a systemic rather than individual problem.

Burn through refers to the institutional process by which individuals are pushed beyond burnout due to systemic neglect, exploitative practices, and normalized expectations of overwork. Unlike burnout, which focuses on individual symptoms, burn through highlights how institutions continue to demand labor from already depleted individuals, often until disengagement, departure, or collapse occurs.

Expanding the Concept of Burn Through

Although *burn through* is not yet widely recognized in academic literature as a formal term distinct from burnout, it aptly describes a worsening condition wherein individuals persist through deep exhaustion, driven by systemic pressures. Instead of being supported in slowing down when facing burnout symptoms, individuals pushed into burn through mode often continue working beyond their limits—sometimes due to necessity, internalized and externally pushed expectations, or cultural norms and deficiencies within institutions that seek only productivity without appropriate support structures in place.

In the context of higher education, burn through can manifest when faculty, staff, or administrators face ongoing demands without institutional mechanisms to support recovery or redistribute labor. These conditions are especially prevalent in under-resourced environments and care-oriented roles, where the work is mission-driven, people-powered, and the boundaries between work and personal life are often blurred. The expectation to "power through" can ultimately intensify harm, erode long-term capacity, and normalize crisis-driven work cultures.

Godbee (2022) reinforces this framing, arguing that burnout is not simply an individual failure to manage stress, but a "collectively constructed" issue rooted in dehumanizing institutional structures. Recognizing burn through as an institutional pattern—not just a personal shortcoming—invites leadership and institutional actors to take responsibility for cultivating cultures of care, rest, and sustainability.

Institutional strategies to address burn through include creating space for candid conversations about workload, embedding rest into professional development structures, adjusting expectations around availability and urgency, and publicly modeling balanced behaviors from the top down. Without these changes, individual efforts to resist burnout are unlikely to succeed. To this point, Godbee (2022) notes that the collective efforts, and collective care, is what is most needed.

Intersectional Impacts of Burn Through

Burn through is not experienced uniformly across the workforce; it disproportionately affects individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. Structural inequities—such as racism, sexism, and classism—shape how burnout manifests, how it is responded to, and who is most likely to carry its burdens. Black women and other women of color in leadership often find themselves navigating both hypervisibility and invisibility: expected to lead equity work, mentor across difference, and perform at high levels while contending with racialized and gendered scrutiny. The expectation to constantly adapt, perform, and translate across dominant cultural frameworks creates a state of leadership code-switching—a survival strategy that is both cognitively taxing and emotionally depleting (Grier, 2021). These dynamics accelerate burn through by compelling leaders to remain visible, credible, and resilient in the face of sustained institutional resistance.

The concept of "racial battle fatigue" (Smith, 2004) helps explain the cumulative toll of navigating racially hostile or invalidating spaces. Constant code-switching, microaggressions, and resistance to inclusion efforts deplete emotional and cognitive resources, contributing to what King (1988) terms "multiple jeopardy"—the compounded effects of holding multiple marginalized identities. Harris-Perry's (2011) work on the "Strong Black Woman" schema

further illustrates how cultural expectations of unbreakable strength discourage vulnerability, help-seeking, or rest. Individuals experiencing burn through under these dynamics may mask their depletion to meet external and internalized expectations, leading to patterns of compartmentalized or silent burn through. Without intersectionally informed interventions, institutions risk reinforcing the very inequities they claim to dismantle. Rest-forward structures must account for these nuanced dynamics by embedding cultural competence, workload equity, and trauma-informed care into policies and leadership practice.

Strategic and Structured Rest

Structured and strategic rest refers to the intentional creation of rhythms, routines, and policies that support recovery, conserve energy, and promote long-term, sustainable efforts that center on and care for our humanity. It expands rest beyond the personal into the structural, recognizing that exhaustion is often built into the architecture of academic institutions and other complex organizations. Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith (2017) identifies seven types of rest—physical, mental, sensory, creative, emotional, social, and spiritual—that respond to distinct forms of fatigue. This framework helps to more appropriately diagnose areas of depletion and respond with targeted recovery strategies. Tricia Hersey's Rest is Resistance (2022) extends this thinking into the political realm, asserting that reclaiming rest challenges grind culture and reclaims dignity, particularly for communities historically dehumanized by labor systems.

Rest cannot be sustained by individuals alone. Beth Godbee (2023) argues that burnout is a systemic failure, not a personal flaw, and calls for "large-scale and long-haul" institutional interventions. These include policies that slow down workflow expectations, distribute labor equitably, and scale back harmful norms. Strategic rest, in this context, becomes a tool for redesign, disrupting the status quo of overextension and offering pathways toward more humane work cultures. Drawing on Grier's (2021) research, structured respite can include practices such as biennial sabbaticals, maximum leave accrual, and meeting-free weeks—not only for executive leaders, but for faculty, staff, and frontline professionals whose roles demand continuous emotional labor and cognitive output. When institutions embed these structures across all roles and ranks, they affirm rest not as reward or escape, but as a shared responsibility and strategic necessity. Rest becomes infrastructure—essential to retention, equity, and institutional integrity.

In practice, leaders and staff alike can benefit from learning to diagnose their own fatigue and respond with the appropriate form of rest. For example, after a day of back-to-back virtual meetings, sensory and mental rest may be most needed. After a difficult conflict resolution meeting, emotional and social rest may be more appropriate. By building awareness of these distinctions, individuals and organizations can cultivate more resilient, responsive rhythms of recovery. Leaning into these ideas can be done much like any other data-informed decision is made in an institutional setting. Thus, structured rest must be viewed as a necessary strategy for individual and institutional success.

Rest as Leadership Practice

Rest is not just an individual behavior; it is a leadership stance and strategic competency. Leaders who model and prioritize rest actively reshape organizational culture by interrupting the normalization of urgency, overextension, and extraction as ways of working. In doing so, they signal that well-being, reflection, and restoration are not counterproductive—they are

essential to effective leadership and institutional longevity. Leadership that values rest cultivates more resilient teams, reduces attrition, and enhances decision-making through greater clarity and emotional regulation. This is particularly critical in environments where burnout is prevalent, and care labor is unequally distributed.

Rest-forward leadership includes three key dimensions: modeling, designing, and protecting. Modeling rest means leaders visibly practice boundary-setting, take their leave, acknowledge fatigue, and normalize the importance of recovery. Designing for rest means building structures—such as meeting-free periods, distributed decision-making, and workload audits—that embed rest into the work ecosystem. Protecting rest means ensuring that policies are equitably applied, that rest is not penalized or pathologized, and that cultures of overwork are actively disrupted. As Godbee (2023) argues, this work includes dismantling the "way things are done" and intentionally slowing down timelines to prevent institutional harm. Grier (2021) adds that for systemically non-dominant leaders and equity practitioners, rest is also a mechanism for resilience in the face of cultural taxation. Leadership, then, becomes not about how much one produces, but about how effectively one stewards energy—one's own and that of others.

Structured Leave for Leadership Roles

As leadership roles carry heightened visibility, decision fatigue, and emotional labor, several institutions have begun to develop leave policies specifically for individuals in administrative or managerial positions. These structured leave programs recognize the unique intensity of leadership work and the necessity for intentional rest to maintain effectiveness and innovation. At the University of Utah, "Administrator Leave" is offered to faculty members who have completed terms in significant leadership roles. This policy provides one semester of paid leave after three years of administrative service, and two semesters after five years, framing the break as both a reward and a recalibration opportunity.

Hillsborough Community College in Florida offers a sabbatical program for administrators and professional/managerial employees that mirrors traditional faculty structures. Eligible staff members can take leave for one to six months at 75% pay, provided they demonstrate how their leave will contribute to their professional growth and the improvement of the institution. Similarly, the County College of Morris in New Jersey offers both full and "mini" sabbaticals to its management team, designed to support creative work, professional exploration, and sector engagement.

These leadership-focused policies underscore a broader commitment to shared sustainability. By acknowledging that those responsible for guiding institutions also require rest, recalibration, and space to innovate, these programs challenge outdated assumptions that leadership requires constant availability or self-sacrifice. When structured leave is extended to those in positions of influence, it sets a cultural precedent: wellness and institutional effectiveness are not opposing forces but interdependent priorities. In this way, structured rest becomes a model for leadership integrity, not an exception to it.

Structured Leave Across Sectors

Structured leave policies—such as sabbaticals and restorative leaves—are increasingly recognized as essential tools for addressing systemic exhaustion and fostering long-term well-being. While historically concentrated in academic settings, these practices are now

expanding across sectors as organizations acknowledge the need to embed rest into the rhythm of professional life. In the corporate sector, companies such as Adobe, Bank of America, and PayPal have offered formal sabbatical programs to employees with five or more years of service. These programs range from four weeks to three months, often fully or partially paid, and are framed as periods for renewal, reflection, or personal growth. Importantly, such policies are not reserved for executive roles alone; they are becoming a valued part of talent retention and engagement strategies across all levels of the organization.

In the nonprofit sector, structured leave is increasingly framed not just as a benefit, but as an equity tool. Organizations like the Durfee Foundation and YES! have developed sabbatical programs tailored specifically for nonprofit leaders and staff in high-touch roles, acknowledging the emotional and relational demands of mission-driven work. These policies are often tied to leadership development and sustainability rather than crisis response, positioning rest as a proactive organizational value. Some programs, such as those funded by philanthropic initiatives, also prioritize accessibility by offering full salary continuation and funding for organizational support during the absence.

Higher education institutions continue to lead in formalizing sabbatical structures, especially for tenured faculty. Colleges like Oregon State University and Salt Lake Community College offer sabbaticals after six years of service, often for one or two semesters, to promote scholarly renewal and research advancement. Notably, some community colleges have extended sabbatical eligibility to include professional staff or administrators. These examples signal a growing awareness that rest, creativity, and institutional contribution are deeply linked, regardless of job classification. The expansion of leave policies across sectors reflects a shifting paradigm: rest is not a reward for surviving overwork, but a structural component of thriving, sustainable workplaces.

Leaders play a crucial role in modeling and promoting a restful culture. This includes advocating for time-off policies, protecting team members from overextension, and designing workflows that do not rely on constant urgency. Rest-forward leadership prioritizes care, sustainability, and alignment, positioning well-being as a core component of institutional transformation.

Structured Rest Across Cultures and Time

In addition to Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's seven types of rest, Ximena Vengoechea's Rest Easy (2023) offers a contemporary, person-centered approach to implementing rest as a resilience practice. She frames rest not as a luxury but as a form of self-preservation and abundance, presenting diverse strategies—including movement, sound, journaling, digital disconnection, and mindfulness—that align with and expand upon Dalton-Smith's model. A key contribution of her work is the emphasis on personalization; readers are encouraged to take a self-assessment to identify their ideal rest modalities, underscoring that adequate rest must be responsive to one's identity, context, and specific patterns of fatigue.

Vengoechea also addresses the cultural and technological barriers that make rest difficult, especially in high-pressure environments like higher education. She advocates for proactive digital boundaries, intentional pauses, and compassionate self-talk to counteract internalized norms of productivity. These strategies provide practical ways to incorporate sustainable care into daily routines. By foregrounding rest as both individualized and institutionally relevant,

her work reinforces and complements leadership-centered approaches to rest, adding nuance to how organizations can embed recovery and well-being into their everyday operations.

Structured rest is not a modern invention but a deeply rooted global phenomenon embedded in spiritual, communal, and environmental traditions across cultures. Throughout history, rest has served not only as physical recuperation but also as a spiritual, emotional, and social necessity—intertwining recovery with ritual, meaning-making, and ecological rhythms.

In Judaism, the observance of Shabbat as a sacred, weekly cessation from labor reflects a covenantal rest—a divine mandate to pause, reflect, and connect with others. Shabbat emphasizes both spiritual renewal and social equity by mandating rest for all, including servants and animals. Christianity similarly preserves Sabbath traditions, although the day and emphasis vary among denominations, emphasizing rest as a form of renewal and honoring the resurrection. In Islam, Friday (Jumu'ah) prayers form a rhythm of rest through spiritual gathering and communal pause. These structured times of spiritual rest are not just about inactivity but about centering values, relationships, and intentional stillness.

Rest practices are integral in many Indigenous knowledge systems, where well-being is viewed as holistic, relational, and inseparable from spiritual and communal life. For the Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand), the Te Whare Tapa Whā model—developed by Sir Mason Durie—emphasizes balance across four interconnected dimensions: taha tinana (physical well-being), taha wairua (spiritual well-being), taha whānau (family and social relationships), and taha hinengaro (mental and emotional well-being). This framework positions rest not as an isolated activity, but as a natural expression of maintaining harmony across one's internal and external worlds (Durie, 1998). Similarly, in many Native American traditions, rest is embedded in ceremonial and communal practices, such as sweat lodges, talking circles, and healing rituals. These practices often involve intentional withdrawal from daily routines and serve as opportunities for physical purification, emotional release, spiritual connection, and collective healing (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Hart, 2002). Across these Indigenous frameworks, rest is not merely recuperative—it is restorative, ceremonial, and essential to the ongoing health of individuals, communities, and ecosystems.

Across African cultural traditions, rest is often expressed through communal, spiritual, and cosmological rhythms that are deeply intertwined with daily life and ancestral connection. Among the Serer people of Senegal, certain days—particularly Mondays and Thursdays—are traditionally observed as sacred or spiritually significant, often reserved for ritual prayer, familial gatherings, and ancestral veneration (Diouf, 1998). Ceremonies such as the Xooy divination ceremony, led by Saltigue priest-healers, and seasonal rituals like the Raan Festival, create structured times for reflection, renewal, and alignment with cosmological cycles. In Gabon, Bwiti spiritual practices—primarily associated with the Fang and Mitsogo peoples—incorporate overnight ceremonies that involve music, communal introspection, and the use of iboga, a psychoactive root used in healing and spiritual work. These rituals are designed to facilitate physical, emotional, and spiritual balance through guided rest and altered states of consciousness (Fernandez, 1982). Across these traditions, rest is not passive disengagement but a communal return to rhythm, meaning, and ancestral wisdom.

Contemporary models like Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's seven types of rest (physical, mental, sensory, creative, emotional, social, and spiritual) echo these ancestral patterns. Recent contributions, such as Ximena Vengoechea's person-centered framework and research on deep rest, cognitive rest, and systemic rest, suggest that rest is most effective when it aligns

with context, identity, and need. Taken together, these cross-cultural and scholarly insights affirm that structured rest is not an escape from responsibility—it is a return to wholeness, community, and a deeper understanding of meaning.

Recommendations and Tools for Interrupting Burn Through

Burn through is not simply a result of overwork—it is the product of cultural, structural, and institutional choices. Moving from recognition to repair requires a rest-centered redesign of how organizations lead, support, and sustain people. The following recommendations align with both contemporary scholarship and activist frameworks such as Tricia Hersey's *Rest is Resistance* (Hersey, 2022) and Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's *Sacred Rest* (Dalton-Smith, 2017).

Leadership Strategies

1. Model Boundaries and Rest Literacy: Leaders should demonstrate a nuanced understanding of rest beyond sleep or vacation. As Dalton-Smith (2017) explains, burnout often stems from deficits in specific types of rest—such as mental or creative rest—not just physical fatigue.
2. Disrupt Urgency Culture: Hersey (2022) critiques grind culture as a tool of white supremacy that normalizes overproduction and detachment from bodily needs. Leaders must interrupt urgency as a default mode.
3. Rest-Centered Performance Reviews: Shift evaluative systems to value long-term sustainability and energy stewardship. Ask: "What would it mean to lead well and rested?"

Human Resources and Policy Shifts

1. Restorative Leave and Rest Spaces: Inspired by Hersey's (2022) call for communal rest, institutions can establish policies like restorative leave and reimagine space, offering rest pods, sensory-reduced rooms, and encouraging break taking for all employees.
2. Cultural Workload Audits: Include assessments of invisible labor and rest accessibility audits: Who is never "off"? Who gets to step away? What barriers do we need to remove so that everyone can better manage their rest needs?
3. Use Rest Typologies as Tools: Dalton-Smith's (2017) *7 Types of Rest* framework can guide onboarding and retreats to help teams identify where their energy is most depleted.

Team and Organizational Practices

1. Team Rest Charters: Co-create team norms that protect boundaries, such as no Friday emails or seasonal "slow weeks" (Hersey, 2022).
2. Check-Ins Rooted in Rest: Use questions like "What kind of rest do you need right now?" to normalize the need to pause.
3. Protect Deep Work and Creative Time: As Dalton-Smith (2017) notes, creative rest is especially overlooked in care-based professions. Allowing for silence, beauty, and uninterrupted work enhances well-being and innovation.

These practices shift rest from the margins to the center of institutional life. When rest is viewed not as a reward for productivity, but as a birthright and a relational ethic, organizations become spaces of renewal rather than extraction.

Conclusion

While burnout has become a recognizable term in workplace discourse, burn through remains under-theorized. Yet it surfaces in distinct patterns that reveal the varying ways people cope with chronic institutional neglect. Identifying these patterns helps shift the burden from individual failure to systemic malfunction. This typology outlines three core forms: silent burn through, explosive burn through, and compartmentalized burn through.

Silent Burn Through

This form often affects individuals who internalize exhaustion without expressing it outwardly. They may continue to perform their duties—quietly absorbing stress, hiding fatigue, and avoiding conflict—until they suddenly resign or disengage without warning, or worse, begin to have health issues. Silent burn through is dangerous because it can go unnoticed by leadership, creating false perceptions of stability until critical knowledge and relationships are lost.

Explosive Burn Through

Characterized by a dramatic rupture, this type includes public resignations, emotional breakdowns, or conflict that erupts after sustained institutional harm. Often, this is not the result of a single incident but the accumulation of unresolved stress and microaggressions. Explosive burn through challenges the narrative of the “angry” or “unprofessional” employee by revealing the weight of prolonged neglect.

Compartmentalized Burn Through

In this model, individuals maintain high performance publicly but experience emotional, mental, or physical collapse privately. They may continue meeting goals while relying on dissociation, overwork, or detachment. This pattern frequently appears in high-achieving professionals who feel both pressure to represent their communities and fear of disappointing their institutions.

These manifestations are not mutually exclusive. Many individuals cycle through different types or experience hybrid forms. The value of this typology lies in helping leaders and organizations recognize the early signs of burn through—not just burnout—and respond with accountability and structural change rather than individual intervention alone.

Institutional and organizational success is predicated on the success of whole and comprehensively cared for individuals and teams. Rest, as a strategic imperative, must be part of the ongoing processes we incorporate into leadership structures, and institutional priorities to best care for teams and prevent burn through.

Burnout and burn through are intertwined challenges that demand both individual strategies and systemic change. Structured and strategic rest provides a pathway toward renewal and institutional accountability. By shifting cultural expectations and embedding care into

leadership and policy, we can build more humane and effective institutions. Rest is not a pause from the work; it is the work of caring for self and others.

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Divinity, Selfhood, and Paradoxes: Conceptualizing Kodungallur Bharani Ritual Space as a Heterotopia

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Abstract

The Bharani festival held annually at the Sree Kurumba temple, Kodungallur, Kerala, is noted for its remarkable spectacle of the storming of pilgrims into the temple premises, singing ribald songs, and inflicting self-injury on their foreheads with the holy weapon of the Goddess. The performers hurl abuses at the Goddess while simultaneously submitting themselves to her in rapt devotion, addressing her as *Amme* or the Mother. The act of self-injury in this manner signifies an act of submission of the body as it is believed to engender communion with the Goddess, rendering them as oracles or *komaram.* Most of these pilgrims hail from various subaltern, marginalized groups across Kerala. Thus, as popularly argued, the temple becomes the ritual site where piety becomes a temporary tool to contest social hierarchies and demand visibility. However, as Nimisha Jayan argues in her thesis, power hierarchies are ingrained at every stage of the ritual through instances like the oracles awaiting permission from the Thamburan (the ruler) to enter the temple. She asserts that Kodungallur Bharani consists of various rites of passage for the subaltern and facilitates the temporary suspension of caste hierarchies. Grounding the research against the paradoxical nature of Bharani, I attempt to further these assertions by conceptualizing the temple site as a heterotopia, where "all the other real sites that can be found in a culture are simultaneously represented, converted, and inverted" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 24). After conceiving Bharani as a heterotopia, I employ psychoanalysis to understand the consequences of it on the performer and how the notions of divinity become operative in this transformation process, promoting negotiations between the social and inner selves of the komaram.

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Introduction

Kodungallur Bharani, an annual festival held at the Sree Kurumba Temple of Kodungallur, Kerala and popularly glorified as a subaltern festival, one of its unique features involves the pilgrims rushing into the temple premises, singing songs that are deemed vulgar, and striking their foreheads using the holy weapon. This phenomenon, called the *kavutheendal*, translates into the "pollution of the sacred grove"; the research exclusively centres around this stage of Bharani. The preparations for Bharani start months before the festival, such as the "velichapaadu" or the oracles pledging their devotion to the Kurumba Goddess by observing penance through specific practices such as abstinence. The oracles reckon this shall maintain the "purity" of their bodies so that the Goddess enters it. The day of "kavutheendal" is the culmination of these long preparations as they make incisions on their foreheads to identify with the Goddess in a trance-like state and commune with the divine. The oracles or the *komaram* circumambulate the temple, blood oozing from their wounds, shouting "*Amme*" (mother) at the Goddess. This research conceptualizes the ritual space as a heterotopia and juxtaposes it with a psychoanalytic reading of the performer/ oracle/ komaram. The oracles report not feeling any pain during the act, and psychoanalytically, the research scrutinizes this willful fragmentation of bodily unity by the oracles, and places this inner world of the komaram against the heterotopic ritual space.

Many myths and legends surround Kodungallur Bharani and the origins of the temple. The two archetypes associated with the temple are the Bhadrakali tradition and the Kannaki/ Pathini cult. I approach the subject in the current study primarily through the popular Bhadrakali narrative. This chronicle treats her as a benevolent protector and addresses her as *Amma,* or the mother. One of these myths celebrates Bharani as the triumph of Goddess Kali over the demon king Darika, who terrorised the universe. An oracle quotes that the oracles perform acts of mutilation to resemble Kali's wounded body following the battle (Online Keralam, 2022). Another myth associated with Bharani is that it is reminiscent of Kannaki's wrath after the burning of Madurai in Silapathikaram. According to the myth, Kannaki, owing to the unfair killing of her husband, rages and burns down the city of Madurai. The belief is that Kodungallur Temple is her final resting place. V R Chandran quotes that the king Cheran Chenguttuvan installed the Kodungallur Temple to worship Kannaki as she was considered a reincarnation of Goddess Durga (Chandran, 1990, as cited in Jayan, 2020, p. 23). Thus, the Kodungallur Goddess is worshipped as Bhagavathi through the Bhadrakali and Kannaki traditions.

This research paper explores how the Bharani ritual space functions as a heterotopia, which will be explained later in this paper. As mentioned in the abstract, Bharani is a contested space; the research attempts to show the paradoxes surrounding the ritual and how they add to the complexity of the hierarchies explicated in Bharani. Even though Bharani is upheld as a subversive festival, social ranks and divisions are inscribed into its fabric. As quoted in the abstract of the paper, not only is the involvement of the royal head pertinent to "allowing" the performers into the ritual space, but there is also a clear-cut social order and structure within the performing groups. This interweaving of hierarchies and social norms perpetuates consequences on the selfhood of the performer. The collective act of performance and undoubtedly the devotion to the Goddess translate into creating the komaram as an individual. Against this rubric, the study critically examines how Komaram's identification with the Goddess plays into this equation. Finally, I attempt to place the ambivalent position of Komaram against the notion of heterotopia.

Figure 1
Oracles at the Bharani Festival

Source. "Bharani Festival- Kodungallur Thrissur," by Salim. I. E. April 4, 2014, https://organikos.net/2014/04/04/bharani-festival-kodungallur-thrissur/

Literature Review

One of the extensive works on Kodungallur Bharani, Nimisha K Jayan's thesis, *Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival* details the Kodungallur Bharani as a performance that dramatises social structures imperative to the workings of Bharani, where she considers Bharani as an amalgamation of diverse paradoxical behaviours constituted through history. Her method is ethnographic, focusing on the experientiality of the oracles and their metamorphosis through the ritual. She analyzes the interplay of ritualised bodies and society and how it constitutes the concept of the oracle. For this, she employs concepts such as Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage and Victor Turner's liminality to illustrate the transformative effect of Bharani. She identifies the participants traverse through a liminal stage where communitas is achieved. However, there is no permanent resolution, and characterizes Bharani by borrowing from Max Gluckman as a "ritual of rebellion" (Jayan, 2020, pp. 131–132). While she focuses on how Bharani ritual space executes transformation through the concepts of body, space, and ritual by utilising concepts like liminal space and performance theories of Richard Schneider, I approach Bharani ritual through the lens of heterotopia. Although our objects of inquiry may seem similar, this research differs because it demonstrates how Bharani space functions as a heterotopia (a space that represents and subverts the relations it depicts) to facilitate the "outside-the-body" identification with the Goddess and its after effects on the Komaram. Our similarity is that both of us account for the transformation of the Komaram; this study addresses the question through the trialectics of spatiality, heterotopia, and psychoanalysis.

In another article, Nimisha K Jayan (2017, p. 55) argues that Bharani does not account for any real change and views it as a submission practice. Similarly, Manju Edachira (Kerala Museum, 2023) examines this practice through the concept of Bakhtin's carnival, where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended. She argues that Bharani was the only time lower castes were allowed into the temple premises in the past, and the kavutheendal, as a process, sums up the rage of the subaltern towards the practice. However, she asserts that Bharani is not a carnival as it does not promote equality between all sections of people, but a mere "safety valve" to direct their anger and frustration. Thus, she terms it a casteist festival that fortifies caste structures by according specific roles to different castes. Also, about self-

injury, she terms it a sacrificial act where "self withdraws from itself" during the performance and acts as an "offering" for the Goddess and the community (Kerala Museum, 2023). In line with the sacrificial nature of the bleeding caste body for the greater common good, Akhila Vimal (2023, p. 53) points out how the upper caste's opposition to the festival was ironically on the grounds of the animal sacrifice and not because of the bleeding caste body. These observations cement the notion that power is invariably tied to the ritual, where the bleeding bodies become a spectacle for the general public. These bodies are simultaneously held with awe and abjection. Moreover, these bodies and communities are othered in the mainstream with widespread prejudice against the oracles outside the Bharani ritual space.

For example, an oracle called Subhadra quotes how families refuse to marry oracle women because of the stigma attached to it (as cited in Justin & MS, p. 377). Nimisha K Jayan argues this as a "humiliating experience" for the oracles (2017, p. 55). Akhila Vimal. C also points out how traditions like self-mutilation challenge the region's "refined belief system" (Vimal, 2023, p. 54). I concur with the notion of how caste power is entrenched in the Bharani ritual. Nevertheless, undeniably, hierarchies are temporarily upended. Also, the idea of faith is far too complex to be seen in black and white terms, and viewing it as something completely coming out of the naivety of the subaltern will be a flawed and condescending stance. Thus, the research considers this notion when speaking about the transition the oracles undergo while they cross the threshold of the ritual space.

Research Methodology

Most of the research on Bharani has adopted ethnographic or historical methods. This research paper relies on secondary material and applies qualitative analysis to the specific rituals of Bharani. Also, these are stories, myths, and practices that I have grown up hearing, and I incorporate the same into the paper as well. The research paper performs this through the theoretical framework of spatial analysis, mainly the concept of heterotopia and psychoanalysis, focusing on the oracles' willful fragmentation of the body to identify with the mother. Firstly, the three spaces comprising the Bharani ritual space are analyzed. Edward Soja (1996, pp. 66–68) develops Lefebvre's concept of the trialectics of spatiality to organise space into the first, second, and third spaces. The first space is the perceived space that is empirical, measurable, and tangible. The second space involves the spaces produced from "discursively devised representations of space." These are "ideational" and are "projections" of the "imagined geographies" (Soja, 1996, p. 79). Here, the emphasis shifts from the material to how the human mind imagines and conceives spatiality. This space is the dominant space in society, and it consists of verbal signs relating to "language, discourse, text, logos: the written and spoken word" (Soja, 1996, p. 67). Finally, the third space is the "lived space," which is the "space of radical openness, the space of social struggle" (Soja, 1996, p. 68).

The next concept that would be employed is Foucault's heterotopia. Heterotopias are "counter sites" in society where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 24). There are various principles of heterotopia, which will be elaborated on later in this paper. The final concept I will use is "excorporative" identification (Silverman, 1996, p. 21), which translates to outside-the-body identification. Psychoanalysis talks about how the primary identification of the self with the image is the basis on which all other future identifications of the child are designed. On elaborating the primary identification, Henri Wallon talks about how, for apprehending the self, the mere existence of the external image

is insufficient. He talks about the proprioceptive ego or "sensational ego," which encompasses the "muscular system in its totality" and which encloses "muscular and cutaneous sensation" (Silverman, 1996, p. 16). For self-knowledge, the "proprioceptive ego" and the "excorporative ego" must be combined (Silverman, 1996, p. 21). However, the relationship between the proprioceptive ego and the visual image or the excorporative ego is weak and talks about "the breaking away of the visual image from the proprioceptive body in states of confusion" (Silverman, 1996, p. 21). In this study, it is argued that this occurs in the trance-like state the oracle enters during *kavutheendal*.

Defining Bharani Ritual Space

Approach Through the Trialectics of Spatiality

Defining the different sites that Bharani encompasses, firstly, it contains the empirical space of the temple, the perceived space, or the "first space" where the action plays out (Soja, 1996, p. 66). Next is the mental space of the participants where the power hierarchies, social norms, and prejudices surrounding Bharani are organized, or the "conceived space"/ "second space" (Soja, 1996, p. 67). As mentioned earlier, this dominant space offers the discourse that structures the second space of Bharani. It codifies the regulations and rituals that the performers and participants (including the audience) follow around it. It establishes the power relations that generate the third space, the site of struggle between hierarchies. The third space is the site of contestation, the "lived" space that the artists inhabit to achieve liberation from oppression. These are the margins or the space of "radical openness, the space of social struggle" (Soja, 1996, pp. 67–68). I would argue that Bharani creates a heterotopia from this third space.

Conceptualizing the ritual space through the trialectics of spatiality, the lived space of Bharani exerts force on the second space temporarily. The fervid and feverish atmosphere is rife with the singing of "obscene" songs depicting sexual acts, desire, and even sexualising the Goddess. It seems counterintuitive to hurl abuses at the Goddess one worships. However, to offer an example, one of the songs describes how the sexual appetite of the *Kodungalluramma* (Mother Goddess of Kodungallur) must be satisfied using the temple flag pole. It is interesting to note that even women, especially older women, participate in singing these types of songs that are deemed vulgar, functioning as a striking articulation of female sexuality. Also, it is noteworthy how women achieve mobility through participation in this ritual. They could travel from their small towns to Kodungallur city and experience camaraderie and companionship. Also, they behave hysterically, beyond the social norms and standards set for the female body. Irigaray argues that hysteria is the "unheard voice" communicated through "somatic symptoms" (Whitford, 1991, p. 26). For theorists like Irigaray, the body is central for women to articulate themselves, and hysteria is a transcendence of social propriety, especially for women. This internal space will be psychoanalyzed later in the paper.

Hence, the oppressed assumes visibility, and an impermanent subversion of social propriety occurs. From the Thamburan, the royal head, to the lower caste performers, it assembles varying social classes and castes under the ambit of piety. The royal head and thousands of onlookers attend this spectacular ritual. Thus, Bharani space can be seen as a microcosm for society, encompassing all the sites and the relations between them. What unites these diverse groups, with exceptions, is devotion to their *Kodungalluramma,* the Mother Goddess.

Nevertheless, the counterargument to this is that Bharani is an upper caste design that proves to be a pretence of liberation. Nimisha K Jayan, in her thesis titled, Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival, likens Bharani to a "psychoanalytical procedure," where the unconscious impulses of the upper castes are projected onto the lower castes (Jayan, 2020, p. 142). Nimisha asserts that Kodungallur Bharani does not entail any real consequences for the subaltern. Even today, the Bharani ritual is stigmatised in the popular imagination. This stigma is evident in the mockery associated with Bharanipattu/ Bharani songs in popular cinema. It becomes a "social drama" where the dominant structure sanctions rebellion to maintain the status quo (Jayan, 2020, p. 142). She argues this along the lines of Max Gluckman's "rituals of rebellion." Max Gluckman's ritual of rebellion involves the "controlled allowance of protest" and thereby maintains social order (Jayan, 2020, p. 134). Although Bharani offers subaltern visibility, power hierarchy is etched into all Bharani's rituals, as at every stage, the Thamburan, the royal head of Kodugallur, must be appeased. For example, for initiating one of the significant stages of Bharani, kozhikkallu moodal, or the ritual covering of a stone with red cloth, an offering or kaazhchakula must be presented to the Kodungallur Valiya Thamburan.

Bharani Ritual Space as a Heterotopia

This research paper views the brief overturning of the established order through heterotopia. As quoted earlier, heterotopia assembles all the social relations in a society, and is "represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 24). Owing to the diverse participation in the ritual, the concomitant representation and inversion of all the sites/ spaces found in society, it can be argued that the Bharani ritual space is a heterotopia. As a heterotopia, it lies outside of all the normative spaces of Kerala society. It partially differs from the social relations it alludes to, the normative social hierarchies, while at the same time covertly depicting them. It must be noted that the komaram or the oracles/ performers rarely have any kind of social ascendence outside the ritual space. They are viewed with abjection as opposed to the time of the ritual, where the public witnesses them with awe and reverence. As quoted earlier, female oracles are treated with prejudice by society. Hence, I would argue that Bharani ritual space can be hypothesized as a "heterotopia of deviation" (Foucault, 1986, p. 25), where individuals who deviate from the established norms are allowed to assume the foreground.

Following the next principle of heterotopia, its gatekeeping nature can be discerned through the initiation ritual of *vettitheliyuka* to become the velichapaadu/komaram. During the initiation ceremony, "vettitheliyuka," the first time they cut their forehead, the head of the young person to be initiated is placed on the lap of the chief oracle from their sect. Next, the chief oracle offers the ritual sword to them, and they make incisions on their forehead with it. Foucault & Miscowiec argues that the entry into the heterotopic space is controlled through specific mechanisms. Other rites of purification include sexual abstinence. These practices prove that the entry of the Komaram into the ritual space is carefully regulated through particular acts of penance. In the case of the public, entry for women as onlookers is difficult as they will be hurled abuse at. Nevertheless, female believers do enter the space as participants and witnesses. It is simultaneously inaccessible yet penetrable for women and completely closed for children. Thus, several cultural and ideological factors regulate entry into the heterotopia.

Looking at Bharani through the following principle, as a heterotopia, it houses several "incompatible" sites (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 25). As cited earlier, it brings together

several conflicting social groups and hierarchies in reverence directed towards the Mother Goddess. It houses mechanisms of ideological and caste power exerted by the social order, such as the police, royal head, temple priests, etc., and spurts of rebellion simultaneously. Furthermore, heterotopias are commonly associated with time, as "heterochronies" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 26). Induchudan asserts that Kannaki's remains are preserved underneath the temple, standing alongside Foucault's example of the cemetery as a site that symbolizes loss and permanence simultaneously (Induchudan, 1969, p. 118). Access to this chamber is closed now, while specialised access to the head priest was provided before. Moreover, the ritual involves hanging temporary decorations and covering the *kozhikallu* (ritual stone) with red clothes to mimic the appearance of blood. These practices are conducted only during the Kodungallur Bharani, and thus, the ritual space becomes a "chronique," where time is fleeting (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 26). Finally, it proves to have a function concerning the other spaces it constitutes. To reiterate Nimisha's (2020, p. 134) argument, it acts as a space where rebellion is permitted so that complete reversal of the social order does not occur. It is therefore a heterotopia of "compensation" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27), a perfected place that presents the illusion of rebellion and social visibility for the oppressed without any tangible change.

The Excorporative Identification of the Komaram

Next, I seek to define the individual subjectivity of Komaram in relation to being placed inside this heterotopia. For that, the research attempts to scrutinise the notion through psychoanalysis. Nimisha K Jayan argues that psychoanalytically, for the Komaram, it involves a return to the imaginary. I seek to further this notion in this research paper. Here, the Komaram identifies with and idealises the Goddess, an identification outside the body or "excorporative" (Silverman, 1996, p. 23). Lacan characterises the mirror as the "threshold of the visible world" (Lacan as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 11), as the subject enters from the imaginary to the symbolic, forming the ego. All the future identifications for the child depend on the child"s primary identification with the reflected image in the mirror. Likewise, the Bharani space or the "kavu theendal" becomes a threshold space where a reversal of the same occurs. As argued by Nimisha K Jayan, the crossing of the threshold space re-enacts the process of primary identification. I would add that this process reverses the primary identification precisely because the "komaram" consciously identifies with the image. The image of Bhagavati already exists, and the Komaram imitates the Bhagavati, incorporating her iconography into their dressing, complete with "Armani"/waistband, "chilamb"/ anklets, and red silk. As opposed to the mirror passively reflecting the image of the self, during Bharani, the "komaram" imitates the image of the Bhagavati. Hence, reversal ensues.

In Bharani, a trance-like state is induced as the bodily unity is willfully disintegrated, that is, by the act of splitting open their heads. Simultaneous dread and jouissance are part of the primary identification, as characterized by Lacan. The infant experiences elation by witnessing wholeness in the mirror; this becomes the ideal ego for the infant, but it is immediately fragmented. However, the mother restores unity. Mother holds the infant to the mirror; without her, the infant's body is again fragmented (Bandhopadhyay, 2021, p. 316). In this fragmented state, the "komaram" loses his sense of his ideal ego, replaced by the image of the Goddess. To paraphrase Manju Edachira (Kerala Museum, 2023), there is a withdrawal of the self from itself. Despite that, like the infant clinging to the mother to restore bodily unity, the oracles attach themselves to their Mother Goddess. Here, faith is a potent tool to feel empowered, and this can be seen as a by-product of the subaltern's subjugation. For Nimisha (2020, p. 142), kavutheendal is a process through which repressed instincts from the

performer's unconscious mind are transferred to the conscious level and then sublimated into something more noble, presented as piety. Additionally, she interprets the longing for the mother goddess expressed in folk songs about Kodungallur Devi as the devotees" separation from her and their entry into the symbolic order. Therefore, for the "komaram," the event represents a return to the realm of the imaginary from the symbolic order.

During primary identification, the mother not only holds the child to the mirror but also offers the "imaginary alignment of the child with the reflection" (Silverman, 1996, p. 18). As interpreted above, Komaram holds onto the image of the Mother Goddess in a delirious state. She helps the child in the process of identification, and instead of identifying with their ideal ego, they identify with the Mother Goddess, facilitating a feeling of power. Additionally, concerning the role of the Mother Goddess, during the initiation ceremony, *"vettitheliyuka,"* the first time they cut their forehead, the head of the young person to be initiated is placed on the lap of the chief oracle from their sect. Next, the chief oracle offers the ritual sword to them, and they start cutting their forehead with it. This process mimics the primary identification as the oracles play the mother figure role, aligning the infant with the image. The only difference is that the image is not of themselves, but of the Goddess. As a result, the Mother Goddess functions to allow another identity for the komaram, something larger than their ordinary lives.

Nevertheless, although the subject momentarily returns to the imaginary and excorporatively identifies with the mother, the subject cannot completely attain the fullness it experienced during the pre-mirror stage. The Komaram's self-concept, having been initiated into the symbolic order, is already split. In other words, the momentary wholeness the subject experiences during the ritual resembles heterotopia's simultaneous "real and mythic" contestation of social relations depicted by it (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). There is a struggle against the symbolic order that cannot reach its fruition. Furthermore, Bharani fails to enable any real improvement, which can be answered through the question of gaze. Kaja Silverman argues that "the subject can only successfully misrecognize him/herself within that image or cluster of images through which he or she is culturally apprehended" (Silverman, 1996, p. 18). Here, the lack of systemic change in Kerala society towards the lower caste groups participating in Bharani and the sustained stigma surrounding the festival and its practitioners disallow the Komaram from recognizing themselves outside the ritual space beyond what they are culturally ratified.

Against these varied social phenomena, Bharani proves to be a complex, ambivalent phenomenon. Bharani's second space develops from the symbolic order, and the second space counteracts the rebellion from Bharani's third space. As argued earlier, the third space generates a heterotopic space of Bharani. Thus, the second space opposes Bharani as a heterotopia. Consequently, Bharani's ambivalence extends from the external heterotopic space to the performer's selfhood. This internal space of selfhood mirrors the heterotopic space that both originates in the paradoxical position of the Bharani performer as a social subject.

Concluding Observations

This research paper compares the notion of space to the performer's selfhood to provide a conclusive argument about how the external and the internal are akin to each other by being placed inside Bharani's heterotopic space. The analysis began by detailing the three different levels of spatiality: the first (perceived) space, the second (conceived) space, and the final

third (lived) space. It was hypothesized that the Bharani's second space consists of the various ritual stages, regulations, and popular discourse surrounding Bharani, which is inevitably structured by language. The third space is outside this level, where resistance emerges from. Third spaces are the culturally significant meeting places of diverse social sects, and Bharani proves to be the same.

Next, the idea of Bharani as a heterotopia was scrutinised. It was argued that Bharani is a ritual space that obeys the principles of heterotopia. Bharani encompasses and assembles varied social classes and ranks while depicting and challenging their relations. Moreover, it was observed that Bharani restricts entry into it by emphasizing certain factors, rendering it a heterotopia. The Bharani ritual space was recognized as a heterotopia of deviation and compensation. Finally, it has a function related to all its other sites, with rebellion and its controlled regulation. For the subaltern, entry into the space entails feeling empowered while the dominant classes conduct a ritualised acting out of rebellion without any radical change. Following this, the subjectivity of the Komaram while being placed within the heterotopia was elaborated. It was determined that, akin to the paradox of Bharani, the selfhood of the Komaram is paradoxical. It oscillates between the symbolic and the imaginary during the *kavutheendal* stage.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

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Hybridity of *Peranakan* Chinese House Design in Lasem: A Case Study of Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage

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Abstract

The dynamic interaction between history, culture, and power relations forms cultural identity, which is represented in visual design. The case study is the design of *Peranakan* Chinese houses in Lasem, which the complexity of the identity representation issue makes it interesting. In addition to experiencing external colonialism originating from Dutch colonialism, they also experience internal colonialism originating from the dominance of Javanese culture. The *Peranakan* Chinese ethnic group acculturated Javanese culture as part of a survival strategy to be able to interact with local communities and gain social positions, to enter the highest class of society held by Javanese nobles before the 19th century. The research question relates to the problem of hybridity of form due to the acculturation of Chinese-Javanese culture. How is the shift in form that occurs when this *Peranakan* design is compared with its original design in China? What is the meaning behind the hybridity? The study uses a case study research method. The case is Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage. The analyzing variables are generated from hybridity and cultural identity theory. The result is that the tropical climate, the communalism of the local Javanese community, and the colonial design style originating from the Dutch colonial culture have influenced the *Peranakan* Chinese design forms in Lasem. The meaning of hybridity is related to the negotiation of identity, that hybridity as a third space is a dialogue between differences. Identity, constructed by history, culture, and power, is always in the process of formation (identity of becoming).

Keywords: hybridity, *Peranakan*, Chinese, history, identity

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Introduction

The current postmodern era is an era of pluralism and multiculturalism. Pluralism is a school of thought or belief that in a society of various political, ideological, cultural, or ethnic groups, no group should think and feel dominant. Each should respect political, ideological, and cultural differences (including religious and ethnic differences). Multiculturalism is a belief or movement to recognize and accept diversity, differences, and identities (social, cultural, racial, and ethnic identities) (Piliang, 2003). Multiculturalism in Indonesia has occurred since ethnic Chinese began to come to Indonesia to trade. Then, they settled and lived mixed with the local community in Java. The Chinese first came to Indonesia in the 5th century AD (Monk Fa Hien was stranded in Tarumanegara in 414 AD) and began to arrive in large numbers in the 7th-10th centuries AD (618-907 AD Chinese people went to Sumatra and Java to seek direct contact with spice traders), the wave also took place on the 15th century (Cheng Ho's expedition) and during the Dutch colonial period (during the Qing Dynasty in the late 19th century there were crop failures, stagnant agriculture and famine in China). The opening of new mines by the Dutch East Indies Government required much labor, thus encouraging Chinese people to migrate from China (mostly from Fujian and Guandong) to Indonesia (in this case Batavia in Java, then migrated to Lasem in Central Java), to seek a better life. The acculturation of Chinese and Javanese culture in the archipelago is strengthened by Denys Lombard's statement that Java, before the Dutch colonial era, was very open to cultures mixing from outside, which were generally brought by trade missions, including from China (Lombard, 2005).

Lasem is a sub-district town in the east of Semarang, Central Java, which is nicknamed The China of Java (see Figure 1). Lasem still has many traditional Chinese houses, temples, and colonial Chinese houses. The Chinese first landed in Lasem during the Singasari Kingdom (1222-1292). This is confirmed by data that the Chinese troops under Kublai Khan of the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1367) who came to Java to attack Kertanegara (the last king of Singasari, 1268-1292) because Singasari refused to pay tribute, stated that when they landed on the northern coast of Java, they found that there were already Chinese intermediary traders, farmers, and artisans living side by side with the local community (Setiono, 2008). Then, in the 15th century (1413), when Cheng Ho's expedition landed in Lasem, the captain of Cheng Ho's ship, namely Bi Nang Un, was interested in settling in Lasem and spreading Islam. According to the book by Santi Badra (1966), there was already a Chinese community in Lasem, the majority of whom were Confucian and Buddhist and had skills in dancing, batik making, and playing gamelan.

This study took a Chinese house in Lasem as its case study. This house is currently used as a homestay called the “Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage,” a hybrid of traditional Chinese-Javanese and Chinese-colonial (Indische Empire) styles. This house was chosen as a case study because it is an intensity sampling (Morris, 2006), an example of a case that can explain the theory of hybridity, provide a lot of data (relevant), and provide access to conduct in-depth interviews. The research questions are related to the hybridity of the Red House of Lasem Heritage's design: (1) What is the form of hybridity, and (2) What is the meaning behind the hybridity of form?

A case study research method is used to answer this question. This study uses a case study research model because the final answer sought is related to the meaning of the hybridity of *Peranakan* Chinese design, which is associated with the conceptual idea of hybrid identity or multicultural identity. The study aims to conduct a study that proves the contact, mixing, and

compounding of Javanese and Chinese cultures to form a hybrid *Peranakan* Chinese identity, which is different from the Chinese identity in its country of origin.

Figure 1

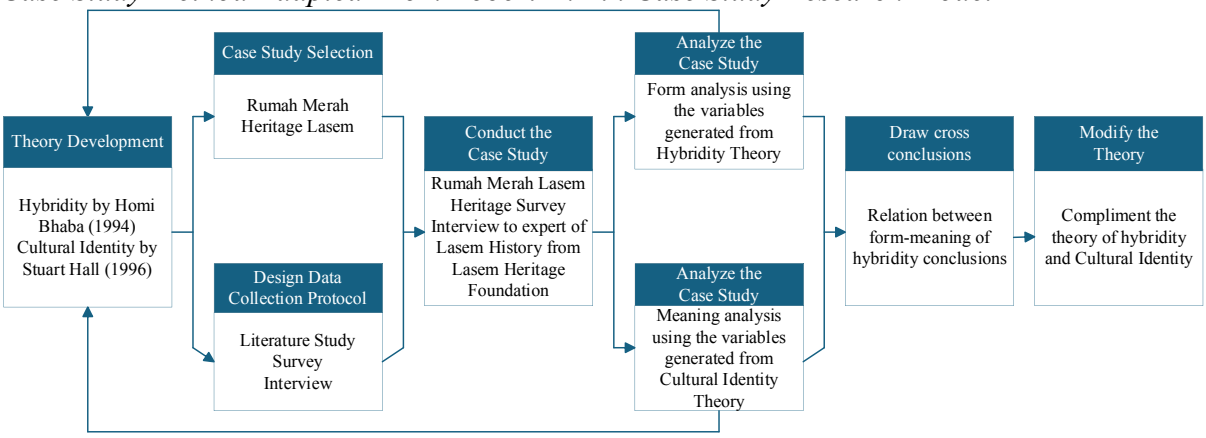
The Location of Lasem in North Coast of Central Java, Java Island, Indonesia

Methods

According to Robert K. Yin's research model (Yin, 2014), case study research is preceded by a theory development stage. In this study, the hybridity theory or the third space theory of Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994) is used to analyze the hybridity of design forms. Meanwhile, Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory is used to analyze the meaning behind the form, namely the representation of identity (Hall, 1993, 1996). After the theory development stage, the next stage is the selection of a case study, in this case, the Rumah Merah Heritage Lasem, and the design of data collection methods, namely literature studies, field surveys, and interviews. After that, a case analysis was carried out using analysis variables derived from the theory of hybridity and cultural identity. The analysis is divided into two parts, namely, the analysis of the hybridity of form and the meaning behind the hybridity of form. The next stage is the analysis of the research results and their comparison with previous theories on hybridity and cultural identity, whether the research results contribute to science to modify or develop previously existing theories. The case study method adapted from Robert K. Yin's case study research model can be summarized in the following research flowchart:

Figure 2

Case Study Method Adapted From Robert K. Yin Case Study Research Model



Source. Yin, 2014

Results

The Form of Hybridity

The Red House Complex has three building masses; two are used as homestays, and one building mass is used as a batik gallery. From the design of the building facade, the Red House has an Indische Empire building style. The Empire style is part of or the second phase of the European Neoclassical style originating from France (1804-1814). This style arose or developed to fulfill the wishes of Napoleon Bonaparte, who wanted to combine the grandeur of the style of ancient Egyptian buildings with that of the Roman Empire. Along with the growth of Napoleon's power in Europe, this style spread to other European countries, including the Netherlands, and was introduced by the Governor of the Dutch East Indies to Indonesia in the early 19th century. However, when introduced to Indonesia, this style underwent adjustments to the tropical climate, which was marked by adding a large front and back terrace with a broad roof canopy, which was later called the Indische Empire style. The Indische Empire style of the Red House is characterized by a symmetrical facade, wide front and back terraces, wide roof canopies, and Tuscan-style Roman columns (2 homestay building masses) or Doric-style columns with a more complex pediment style (1 batik gallery building mass) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Indische Empire Style of the Red House

Indische Empire Style Facades of 3 Buildings in Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage complex: 1st Home stay Building (3a), Batik Gallery (3b), 2nd Home Stay Building (3c)
Picture Source. Hidayat, 2025

Although the building is in the Indische Empire style (Dutch colonial culture), the building complex is surrounded by a high wall typical of a Chinese residential complex with an entrance gate adopted from the traditional Chinese style (see Figure 4). Likewise, the main entrance, although it follows the Empire style (3 in number, symmetrical, high with a bouvenlicht at the top of the door), on the left and right of the door is equipped with verses containing hopes or advice for the residents of the house which is the style of a traditional Chinese house (see Figure 4). The main entrance gate has a roof shape adopted from the style of a traditional Chinese house gate roof combined with a low, transparent barred door called the wind door (see Figure 4).

In addition to being an adaptation to the tropical climate, the wind door is also a form of influence from the communal lifestyle of the Javanese people in Lasem. In the traditional Chinese style in China, the residential complex is surrounded by high walls and closed doors because for the Chinese, privacy and security are important values. Chinese families generally adhere to familism, where communal relations are maintained among extended family members. The traditional Javanese house is the opposite, having a low and open fence due to the communal lifestyle. Communal relations in Javanese society are between members of society in their environment. When the house's occupants are in the house, the high gate will be opened, and the occupants sitting on the terrace can exchange greetings with

neighbors passing in front of the house. When Chinese-Javanese people lived in Lasem, they adapted to the communal lifestyle of the Javanese people and the tropical climate, so open wind doors were installed in addition to the closed main entrance gate.

Figure 4
High Wall Around Rumah Merah Residential Complex, Main Entrance Gate, Main Entrance

Picture Source. Hidayat, 2025

The same thing goes with the house's interior; the spatial organization shows the type of Indische Empire building plan, namely the bedrooms on the left and right sides of the house, which are arranged symmetrically. However, in the Chinese family home, the middle room is adapted into a prayer room, where extended family members gather to pray to the gods or ancestors. When the Red House is used as a homestay, the prayer room is used to place statues of gods. The hybridity of form occurs when the building and spatial organization in the Indische Empire style are filled with traditional Chinese furniture with traditional Chinese ornamental patterns such as mythological animals, namely dragons and phoenixes (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
Chinese Ornamental Patterns

Interior of Rumah Merah (5a), Furnitur (5b), Furniture Ornaments (5c, 5d)
Picture Source. Hidayat, 2025

The Meaning of Hybridity

The hybridity represents the hybrid identity of *Peranakan* Chinese formed or constructed by the historical background, culture, and power relations of *Peranakan* Chinese in Lasem. The historical context that determines the identity of *Peranakan* Chinese in Lasem is the social assimilation and cultural acculturation with the local Javanese population, interaction with the Dutch colonialists, the arrested development or undevelopment of Chinese culture during the New Order government, and the freedom to develop Chinese culture during the reformation era. Social assimilation occurred because the Chinese immigrants who came to the archipelago were initially all men (traders, farmers, laborers, unemployed, and political refugees). Most of them came from the provinces of Fujian and Guandong in Southeast China and came to Indonesia following the Sino-European trade route known as the Silk Road.

Initially, they settled temporarily while waiting for the monsoon winds to return to China, but eventually decided to settle, build permanent homes, and build Chinese community villages. Chinese immigrants who were married or unmarried then married local women who were generally Muslim and then converted to Islam. If they still practice Confucianism or Buddhism, they marry Balinese Hindu women who are not against eating pork.

Chinese-Javanese cultural acculturation was the next thing that followed after the social assimilation through mixed marriages between Chinese and Javanese people took place. Acculturation is a social process that occurs when a group of people from a particular culture are confronted with elements of a foreign culture in such a way that the foreign culture is gradually accepted as part of a larger culture without causing the loss of the dominant cultural personality, or the personality (identity) of the foreign culture. Thus, the nature of acculturation is like the nature of a mixture. The mixing of Chinese culture with Javanese culture produces a mixed Chinese-Javanese culture. An example of Chinese-Javanese cultural acculturation is how Chinese familialism coexists with Javanese communalism. Prioritizing family over personal interests coexists (not changing) with prioritizing group interests over family interests. The patrilinealism coexists with the matrilinealism when sometimes the wedding party is held by the woman's family, and the husband lives in the middle of the woman's family, or when inheritance is also given to daughters, not only to sons (traditional Chinese family culture considers daughters to belong to the husband's family).

Power relations in social and political interactions influence material culture, including houses. At the beginning of the arrival of Chinese people in Java, the nobility and the Javanese Kingdom (Singasari and Majapahit) held the power. Understanding that, the Chinese community then built social relations with the rulers for trade security and the potential to become suppliers to the kingdom. Chinese houses also adapted to the communal style of Javanese culture. The ornaments in Chinese residential furniture are a blend of Chinese and Javanese ornaments. When the Dutch colonized Indonesia, the rulers changed into the Dutch colonizers. Rich Chinese people also tried to enter the circle of the rulers by building houses similar to those of the rulers, namely in the European neoclassical style, such as the Indische Empire.

When Indonesia became independent, during the New Order (1968-1998), President Soeharto banned the celebration of Chinese culture outside the family environment. In the 1950s, along with the anti-Indonesian Communist Party movement, many Chinese schools were disbanded and banned from being established in Indonesia. The anti-Indonesian Communist Party movement was regarded as the same as the anti-Chinese movement, so the government banned using Chinese as the daily language of instruction, so Mandarin was only used among Chinese people (internal circles). Government regulations that limited the development of Chinese culture in Indonesia during the New Order (President Soeharto's reign) directly or indirectly caused the younger generation of Chinese to be unable to speak Chinese, not to know Chinese traditions, and not to understand their own culture. This circumstance affected the architecture of Chinese houses, where modern Chinese people sought a safe path by not showing their Chinese identity by building modern-style houses that were neutral regarding ethnic identity. Traditional Chinese houses in Lasem also removed the Chinese characters written on the gates not to highlight their Chinese cultural identity.

In the reform era, restrictions on Chinese New Year celebrations were lifted during the administration of President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati (2001-2004). Since then, Chinese New Year has been celebrated as a national holiday. As there was no

longer a ban on publicly celebrating Chinese holidays, the young generation of Chinese seemed to rediscover their Chinese identity. The power relations in the modern Chinese generation came from the reform era government and universal modern culture that made modern Chinese people reinterpret their traditional culture and past design codes in new ways that were sometimes personal. This development influenced the design of living spaces in the form of a combination of modern design elements and traditional design elements. However, these design elements from the past were presented in new ways, which sometimes were the subjective preferences of the occupants. In the Red House, when the occupants painted the walls with the traditional Chinese-style entrance gate with a specific red and a certain yellow, also by the Red House logo; this was a subjective preference and interpretation of the symbols of red and gold in Chinese culture which meant happiness and wealth (prosperity).

Discussion

In the discussion section for the hybridity of forms, we will discuss the findings of the hybridity of forms, namely the existence of adoption, adaptation, and adaptation strategies in presenting the hybridity of forms. Meanwhile, for the meaning of hybridity as a representation of identity, what needs to be discussed and reflected on is the existence of dynamic identity construction that constantly demands to be reinterpreted because the context of history, culture, and power relations continue to change and develop over time.

Strategy of Creating the Hybrid Form: Adoption, Adaptation and Adeptation

In the context of creation, adoption is the uncritical imitation of a form in the sense of merely imitating and not producing anything new. However, this strategy falls into the strategies for creating hybridity because even imitation can create differences. Design is a language because design is a medium for communication; design is a visual language. When someone from Indonesia speaks English, even though he pronounces the language with an uncritical imitation strategy instead of trying to pronounce it as closely as possible according to how native speakers speak, people can still recognize him as a non-native speaker. Why is that? Because of the adoption of language here, the imitation of the use of language still has elements of dialect or accent that can distinguish a native speaker from a non-native speaker, original and non-original. Likewise, when adoption is used as a strategy to present the past, translation, or a way of copying that is influenced by the background of the maker, it affects the results of adoption.

Figure 6
Entrance Doors of Rumah Merah

The First Phase of Hybridity: Adoption with Translation. Indische Empire Typical Architecture as shown by The Colonial House in Batavia in 19 Century (6a) (Handinoto, 2009), Typical Plan of Indische Empire House (6b) (Handinoto, 2009), Rumah Merah Façade (6c), Rumah Merah Main Gate (6d).
Picture Source. Handinoto, 2009; Hidayat, 2025

Combining subjective or contextual translation with the imitated objective design pattern creates hybridity. In the context of Rumah Merah, the adoption strategy is displayed in the facade design of the colonial Chinese house in the Indische Empire style. Although it adopts the Indische Empire style, individual translation still occurs. Example: The iron bars on the bouvenlicht part of the entrance doors of Rumah Merah are an abstraction of the Rumah Merah logo in the form of a star or sun (see Figure 6). Adoption is presented to appreciate the beauty of past design and culture, both in form and the values behind the form. In this case, the aim of preserving the Chinese-colonial house is to learn about the intervention of Dutch colonial culture in the history of the development of *Peranakan* Chinese culture in Lasem as a consequence of the interaction between wealthy traders and the colonizers as rulers when the house was built; design as a representation of history, culture and power relations (Hidayat, 2007).

Adaptation is a strategy to adjust design elements when presented in different spatial and temporal contexts related to adjustments to climate differences, adjustments to changes in construction techniques, material processing techniques, and functions. In this context, the Indische Empire style is an adaptation of the Empire style to the tropical climate by equipping the Empire-style house with a spacious front terrace with a broad roof canopy. The Red House also underwent an adjustment in function from a residence to a homestay so that the bedrooms are equipped with modern bathrooms that create double coding (modern and traditional codes are present together in one space).

Adeptation occurs when past elements are presented together with modern design. However, these past elements are presented in a new way, which is often subjective and not found in the original design reference that formed it (not in the traditional Chinese design pattern that formed it. The purpose of adeptation is no longer to represent the identity of the Chinese group or community in Lasem but is already a representation of the identity of the owner (subjective preference) of Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage. An example of adeptation is the main entrance gate of Rumah Merah, which follows the pattern of the entrance gate of a traditional Chinese house but is painted in red, yellow, and black with white checkered colors and is equipped with a wind door as an adaptation to the Javanese communal lifestyle. This composition (syntax) is not in the traditional design pattern of the main entrance door of the traditional Chinese house that formed it (see Figure 7).

Figure 7
Traditional Design Pattern of the Main Entrance Door

Adeption of Rumah Merah Main Entrance Gate (7d). Form structure is the same with the pattern of main entrance gates in China (7a, 7b, 7c) but the colour is the owner subjective preference following the brand colour of Rumah Merah. It Has Been Added by the Low and Semi-transparent Wind Door As the Adaptation of Tropical Climate and Communal-Life Style of Local Javanese, Creating the New Syntax of Main Entrance Gate Design.
Picture Source. Knapp, 2005 (7a,7b, 7c); Hidayat, 2025 (7d)

The Meaning of Hybridity: Representation of Identity of Becoming

Referring to Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity (Hall, 1993, 1996), there are two types of identity. The first identity is original identity, which is an identity related to a person's initial existence, which can be identified most easily from their racial, ethnic, religion, gender, and other standard criteria that exist in a particular cultural system. In this case, identity is a fixed and uniform value for *Peranakan* Chinese. However, understanding identity as a fixed value and related to equality is an oversimplification of the problem because the reality of a person's life journey, including Chinese people in Lasem, is very complex. In social interactions, education, and cyberspace-based interaction, a Chinese person is influenced by various cultural factors. The second identity is formed identity, which is an identity that is always in the process of formation and in the process of becoming. This identity can be seen clearly in the history of the *Peranakan* Chinese community in Lasem and is reflected in the design of their hybrid homes. Initially, Chinese culture in Lasem was influenced by Javanese culture, which became *Peranakan* Chinese culture. Next, it is influenced by Dutch colonial culture and then modern culture. This is reflected in the house, which is a mixture of design elements originating from Chinese, Javanese, and modern cultures. As long as the occupants of the house are still alive, the design of the house continues to develop because the occupants continue to be influenced by foreign cultures, especially in the era of internet technology like today, where conversations are not limited to physical meetings and friendships are not limited to people from the same culture and the surrounding environment. Rumah Merah, as a homestay, is also visited by various foreign tourists, so it is required to keep developing to meet modern hotel standards and the needs of foreign tourists while maintaining a hybrid Chinese identity.

Conclusions

The design of *Peranakan* Chinese houses in Lasem is a hybrid, combining design elements from traditional Chinese, Javanese, Dutch colonial, and modern cultures. The hybrid design of *Peranakan* Chinese houses will continue to evolve along with the development of the culture of its users and residents. The meaning of the hybridity of the design of Chinese houses in Lasem, in this case Rumah Merah, represents the hybrid cultural identity of *Peranakan* Chinese. Identity is a dynamic formation formed by historical background, culture, and power relations. Hybrid identity in Lasem is a natural or logical consequence of the history of *Peranakan* Chinese, who received intervention from Javanese, colonial, and modern cultures. From a Chinese cultural perspective, assimilation is a natural process, in line with the view of life in Chinese culture that goes with the saying, “When in Rome, do as Romans do.” Chinese people must live in harmony, acculturation, and assimilation with local cultures. Orientation towards economic activities as part of an effort to survive also requires economic actors to interact with the authorities for their business's security, potential, and profit. Ultimately, hybridity is a space for identity negotiation that is always in the process of formation (identity of becoming).

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