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Sociodemographic Conditions of the German Language Acquisition in Germany: Asian vs. Non-Asian Immigrant Children

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Abstract

Introduction. The pace of the language acquisition depends not only on children's cognitive skills and medical issues but also, among other things, on numerous sociodemographic conditions such as immigrant background. For instance, children of Turkish origin lag behind in the German language acquisition in Germany because they acquire German under comparatively unfavourable sociodemographic conditions in terms of quality and quantity of the German language input. In the current study, German language skills of Asian children (predominantly from Japan, Thailand, Iran, and India) were compared to those of non-Asian immigrant children under consideration of sociodemographic conditions. Methods. A sample of 984 four-year-old bi-/multilingual children (112 Asians, 872 non-Asians) was tested with the language screening "Kindersprachscreening" (KiSS.2): speech comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and phonological short-term memory. Sociodemographic conditions of the German language acquisition were assessed by the KiSS.2 questionnaires for parents and kindergarten teachers and compared for Asian and non-Asian children. Results. Asian children showed comparatively weak German language skills because, among other things, German was spoken less often in their families than in the families of other immigrants. However, there were also indirect positive factors such as a higher educational level of fathers of Asian children. Discussion. Asian children lag behind in the German language acquisition in comparison with other immigrant children. However, German statistics on the academic success show that Asian children are overrepresented in the prestigious grammar schools and universities. This demonstrates that Asian children catch up with their peers in the German language skills, probably in primary schools.

Keywords: language acquisition, German language, language assessment, language screening, Asian children

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Introduction

The pace of the language acquisition usually depends on (a) children's cognitive skills such as attention, memory (including phonological short-term memory), and processing speed (Asadi et al., 2025; Kormos & Safar, 2008; Larson et al., 2023), (b) children's medical issues such as hearing disorders, risk or early birth, Developmental Language Disorder or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Zaretsky & Lange, 2017), (c) familial predisposition for language disorders (Zaretsky & Lange, 2017), (d) numerous sociodemographic conditions such as immigrant background (Author Group Educational Reporting, 2016). For instance, in Germany, Russian-speaking children acquire German more quickly than Turkish-speaking children because the former attend more often nursery schools, associations, and study groups, begin earlier to acquire German, speak less often their non-German first language in kindergartens, and play more often with German-speaking children (Zaretsky et al., 2013). Italian-speaking children in Germany have somewhat better German language skills than other bi-/multilinguals because they attend more often nursery schools and play more often, both in kindergartens and beyond, with German-speaking children (Zaretsky & Lange, 2015). Usually such sociodemographic (or sociolinguistic) factors are directly or indirectly associated with the quality and quantity of the German language input. Also, some geographical factors were identified that are associated with better German language skills. For instance, children with weak vocabulary skills in German live in districts/regions with a high percentage of foreigners, immigrants, recipients of the financial aid from the state, underemployed, unemployed, families with many children (usually non-Germans), lone parents, kindergarten children speaking other languages than German, kindergarten children who attend kindergartens for half a day (not full day) or for a short period of time, families with a low income, inhabitants with a low living area per person (in m^2), and inhabitants with a low educational level (Zaretsky, 2019). Again, such factors are associated with sociodemographic or socioeconomic variables that can influence the pace of the language acquisition through access to speech-language therapies, parents' educational level, and many other factors.

The current study focuses on Asian children acquiring German. There are 2.5 million Asians out of 83.5 million inhabitants in Germany (Werner, 2023). Asians are very different from other immigrants in Germany. For instance, all Asians aged 19+ years come to Germany to study, whereas other subgroups of immigrants come for asylum, work, or family re-union in most cases (Baas, 2021). Among Asians aged 0–18 years, the percentage of those coming for asylum is lower than in other subgroups of immigrants from non-European countries. Whereas all immigrants (age 0–18 years) from typical refugee countries such as Afghanistan come for asylum or family re-union (not to work or study), Asians of the same age usually come for the family re-union or to study. Thus, one can expect certain sociodemographic differences between Asians and non-Asians that can also find their reflection in the German language competence of children. It should also be mentioned that typologically Asian languages are much more distant from German than languages of immigrants from European countries, which makes the German language acquisition for Asians more difficult.

In the current study, Asian and non-Asian kindergarten children were compared regarding their German language skills, sociodemographic and medical characteristics. Differences between these two large subgroups of children in the German language competence were explained in terms of the quality and quantity of the German language input.

Methods

The study re-analysed retrospectively a sample of 984 four-year-old children (540/54.9% males, 444/45.1% females, age $M = 51.8$ months). Originally, these children were recruited for a prospective study on the development of two language tests. The inclusion criteria were age (4;0–4;11 years) and a written consent signed by parents. All children were either bilingual (935/95.0%) or multilingual (49/5.0%).

All immigrant children were categorized as Asians (112/11.4%) or non-Asians (872/88.6%). Asians originated predominantly from Japan, Thailand, Iran, and India. Non-Asian children (or their parents) came predominantly from Turkey, Arabic- and Russian-speaking countries as well as Italy. There were no significant differences between Asians and non-Asians in age and biological sex (ps > .05).

For some statistical calculations, a sample of four-year-old monolingual German children from the same study was used: n = 1,657 (880/53.1% males, 777/46.9% females, age M = 52.7 months). However, their results can be found only in descriptive comparisons.

All children were tested with the well-known, validated, standardized German language test for four-year-old children "Kindersprachscreening" in the second version (KiSS.2, "Language screening for children"; Holler-Zittlau et al., 2011). It contains (a) subtests on speech comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, phonological short-term memory (repetition of non-words and sentences), (b) questionnaires for parents and kindergarten teachers to assess sociodemographic and medical characteristics of children and their families. All children were classified as bi-/multilinguals or monolingual Germans on the basis of KiSS.2 questionnaires for parents (item "Languages spoken at home"). KiSS.2 results can be dichotomized as follows:

- need of additional educational assistance in acquiring German (German language courses),
- need of additional medical assistance in acquiring German (language-related therapies, e.g., speech-language therapy),
- age-appropriate ("pass") vs. not age-appropriate ("fail") German language skills, with "fail" meaning need of additional educational and/or medical assistance in acquiring German.

KiSS.2 is used in a large-scale language assessment program in the German state of Hesse (Weiland et al., 2019).

In the statistical analyses, first, German language skills of Asian and non-Asian children were compared by means of Chi-Square tests (dichotomized KiSS.2 results) and Mann-Whitney U-tests (total scores of correct answers in KiSS.2). Also, subjective estimations of German language skills by kindergarten teachers and parents were compared for Asians and non-Asians by means of Chi-Square tests and linear-by-linear associations (lbl). Next, differences in the German language competence between Asians and non-Asians were explained in terms of their sociodemographic and medical characteristics. For this purpose, these characteristics were compared by means of Mann-Whitney U-tests (metrical variables), linear-by-linear associations (dichotomous vs. ordinal variables), and Chi-Square tests (dichotomous variables).

Results

According to Chi-Square tests, Asians needed more often educational help in acquiring German than non-Asians and therefore failed more often in KiSS.2 (Table 1). Due to test aborts, dichotomized results were not available for some children.

Table 1
Dichotomized Results of the Language Test KiSS.2 in the Subgroups of Asians vs. Non-Asians: Chi-Square Test

KiSS.2 results	Asian	Non-Asian	$\chi^2_{(1)}$
Need of educational assistance in acquiring German	72/94 (76.6%)	400/665 (60.2%)	9.47**
Need of medical assistance in acquiring German	20/94 (21.3%)	116/665 (17.4%)	0.82
"Fail" in KiSS.2	72/94 (76.6%)	407/665 (61.2%)	8.38**

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

For a comparison: out of 1,657 monolingual German children, 301 (18.2%) needed educational assistance in acquiring German, 263 (15.9%) needed medical assistance, and 349 (21.1%) failed in KiSS.2.

Table 2 shows that non-Asian children outperformed Asian children in KiSS.2 subtests on speech comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and repetition of sentences.

Table 2
Language Test Results of Asian vs. Non-Asian Children: Mann-Whitney U-Test

KiSS.2 subtests	Asian *M* ±SD	Non-Asian *M* ±SD	Mann-Whitney *U*-test (*Z*)
Speech comprehension	3.8 ±2.8	4.5 ±2.7	-2.36*
Vocabulary	9.0 ±6.3	11.3 ±6.6	-3.45**
Grammar	7.3 ±8.4	10.5 ±8.6	-3.79***
Pronunciation	12.6 ±3.3	13.1 ±3.3	-1.39
Repetition of non-words	6.1 ±3.7	6.5 ±3.8	-1.06
Repetition of sentences	6.5 ±4.7	7.9 ±4.8	-2.66**

Note. *M* = mean, SD = standard deviation, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Monolingual German children showed much higher mean values in all KiSS.2 subtests: speech comprehension (M = 6.5 ±2.2), vocabulary (M = 17.9 ±4.3), pronunciation (M = 13.7 ±3.2), grammar (M = 20.8 ±7.1), repetition of non-words (M = 7.1 ±3.6) and sentences (M = 12.1 ±3.8).

In the KiSS.2 questionnaire for kindergarten teachers some additional items on children's German language competence were available. In most of them, there were no differences between Asians and non-Asians:

- "The child understands complex handling instructions",
- "The child's vocabulary is age-appropriate",
- "Everybody can understand the child",
- "The child's pronunciation appears age-appropriate",
- "The child speaks in complete sentences",
- "School grade for the child's German language skills at the beginning of the kindergarten attendance",
- "School grade for the child's German language skills now [at the time point of KiSS.2]".

However, Asians had weaker language skills than non-Asians according to items "The child uses articles (*der*, *die*, *das*) correctly" (lbl = 7.51, $p = .006$) and "The child speaks German age-appropriately" (lbl = 6.95, $p = .008$). Both variables were ordinal, from 1 "never" to 5 "always". In the questionnaire for parents, there was a comparable item, "Does the child speak German age-appropriately?" However, there were no differences between Asians and non-Asians according to this item.

Thus, German language skills of Asians were somewhat weaker than those of non-Asians. In the next statistical analyses, sociodemographic and medical conditions of the German language acquisition were compared for these two subgroups. There were very few statically significant results. First, Asians had more often peers in the kindergarten group who spoke the same non-German language: $\chi^2_{(1)} = 16.55$, $p < .001$. Second, in the families of Asian children, other languages than German were spoken more often than in the families of non-Asians: lbl = 7.87, $p < .001$. Third, fathers of Asians had a higher educational level than fathers of non-Asians: lbl = 8.70, $p < .001$. Fourth, mothers of Asians began later to acquire or to learn German than mothers on non-Asians: $Z = -2.18$, $p = .029$. However, in most available questionnaire items, there were no differences between Asians and non-Asians:

- "The child likes to attend the kindergarten",
- "The child attends kindergarten for a full day or half a day",
- "The child attends kindergarten regularly",
- "Length of kindergarten attendance in months",
- "The child attended a nursery school in the first two years of life",
- "The child attends an association or a study group",
- "The child speaks out when playing in groups",
- "The child likes to play with other children",
- "The child plays with German-speaking children [in the kindergarten]",
- "The child plays with German-speaking children [after kindergarten time]",
- "The child attends a German language course",
- "The child does not hear well",
- "The child speaks his/her first language age-appropriately",
- "The child has some disorder or impairment that is related to language",
- "The child undergoes a speech-language therapy",
- "The child has to attend a paediatrician more often than other children",
- "The child has a permanent hearing disorder",
- "The child has a permanent sight disorder",
- "The child often has otitis media",
- "The child has a motor disorder",

- “The child had a risk or early birth”,
- Familial predisposition:
- “cases of problems with reading and writing (dyslexia) in the family”,
- “cases of language disorders in the family”,
- “Mother’s educational level”,
- “Age of the German language acquisition: father”.

Discussion

Asian children showed weaker German language skills than non-Asians. According to the validated, standardized German language test KiSS.2, they needed more often additional educational assistance in acquiring German. Their speech comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar skills were comparatively weak. Repetition of sentences reflects the same findings because, apart from memory, all these skills are necessary to repeat sentences (Klem et al., 2014; Riches, 2012). According to the subjective estimation of the German language competence by kindergarten teachers, only grammar skills of Asian children were weaker. Parents did not notice differences between Asian and non-Asian children.

The sociodemographic explanation for the comparatively weak results of Asian children was found in questionnaires for parents and kindergarten teachers. Asian children spoke less often German both in kindergartens and at home. Also, their mothers began later to learn or to acquire German. In numerous other characteristics Asians and non-Asians did not show any differences. Interestingly, this is also valid for children’s participation in German language courses. Although kindergarten teachers were aware of the fact that Asian children lagged behind in the German language acquisition, they did not choose these children for the participation in German language courses (offered by most kindergartens in Germany). Unfortunately, it is a frequent finding that children are chosen for such courses in a chaotic way and the motivation behind such decisions is often unclear (Zaretsky & Lange, 2016).

Usually, children who lag behind in the German language acquisition also show poor results in German schools. Here, Asian children represent an exception. According to the German statistics on the academic success, Asian children are overrepresented in the prestigious grammar schools and in universities in Germany (Baas, 2021). For instance, 47% of non-immigrant German children and 64% of Vietnamese children attend grammar schools (Werner, 2023). It can mean that Asian children catch up with their peers in German language skills not in kindergartens (where the current study was conducted) but in primary schools, two or three years later. When children are chosen for grammar schools after the fourth grade, Asian children already speak age-appropriate German and show above-average performance in school subjects. It may well be that the fathers’ higher educational level of Asians contributes to this development (according to Results, fathers of Asians have a higher educational level than fathers of non-Asians). It can be directly or indirectly associated with a number of other variables, from children’s higher IQ and better cognitive skills to a better access to children and adults with a higher educational level (and, thus, speaking better German). Higher educational level is associated with a higher income, and the latter can also mean better access to the German healthcare system, better equipped kindergartens attended by more monolingual Germans, better German language courses offered by such kindergartens etc.

It should be noted that the subgroup of Asians was heterogeneous. There is hardly a common denominator between Japanese and Indian children in terms of sociodemographic and

socioeconomic variables. But the same is valid for the non-Asians who came from all over the world, from North America to Africa.

Conclusion

Asian children acquire German more slowly in the first years of life due to less favourable sociodemographic conditions. However, this difference is minimal and can be found only in a couple of variables. Also, these factors do not prevent Asian children from attending prestigious grammar schools several years later, which means that Asians catch up with non-Asians in the German language in the first years of school.

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

The authors declare that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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The Intercultural Critical Incident in Pixar's *Coco*

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Abstract

This paper examines Pixar's *Coco* (2017) to explore how cultural discourse can shape narrative causality in global animated films. To this end, rather than treating the "inciting incident" as a simple narrative trigger (Field, 2005), this study reframes it as an "intercultural critical incident" (Byram, 1997; Tripp, 1993), a moment where cultural worlds meet and clash, generating the moral and communicative tensions that propel the story forward. In *Coco*, this intercultural encounter takes the form of an intergenerational rupture with Miguel's defiance of his family's ban on music revealing deeper conflicts between ancestral memory, familial duty, and individual aspiration. Drawing on Carbaugh's (2007) Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA), the study relies on screenplay analysis to uncover and describe recurrent linguistic motifs. These motifs frame *Coco's* narrative structure as family-driven, emphasizing relational and intergenerational ethics over conventional action- or character-driven paradigms. More specifically, screenplay analysis reveals that Miguel's conflict with his grandmother is more than a plot device; it acts as a communicative event that exposes tensions rooted in intergenerational memory, relational ethics, and self-expression. The film transforms narrative conflict into a process of cultural negotiation, in which reconciliation becomes possible through dialogue, song and shared remembrance. By reconceptualizing the inciting incident as both a narrative and cultural event, Coco reveals how intercultural discourse operates as the generative core of storytelling itself, signaling Disney's commitment to narratives that imagine global ethics, familial interconnectedness, and the moral possibilities of cultural encounter.

Keywords: *Coco*, narrative causality, Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA), intergenerational conflict, family discourse, screenplay analysis

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Introduction

This paper uses *Coco* as a case study to examine how cultural meaning is constructed in popular culture cinema. Screenplays are approached as cultural texts where values, identity, and morality are encoded to be circulated across interpretive contexts (Turner, 2006). Within this framework, narrative causality is understood as both a constructed and an interpretive process (Bordwell, 1985). It is constructed insofar as it organizes the progression of the story, and interpretive insofar as it allows culture-specific meanings to shape how events are understood, connected, and ultimately resolved. Consequently, narrative causality extends beyond a neutral sequence of actions to emerge through discourse as a social practice in which meanings are produced, negotiated, and embedded within culturally shared systems of value (Fairclough, 1995).

This perspective foregrounds the role of the inciting incident, conventionally defined in screenwriting theory as the structural event that initiates narrative progression through causal chains of action (Field, 2005). While effective in accounting for narrative structure, this view privileges form over meaning and overlooks the cultural embeddedness of narrative turning points. To address this limitation, the present study reconceptualizes the inciting incident as an intercultural critical incident (Byram, 1997; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Tripp, 1993), approaching it as a communicative event in the sense proposed by Hymes (1974), where competing cultural worldviews generate the moral and communicative tensions through which narrative development unfolds.

It is important to emphasize that the inciting incident in *Coco* is more than a plot mechanism that initiates narrative action. Its function tends to be that of a communicative event in which intergenerational conflict becomes synonymous with cultural negotiation. Miguel's confrontation with his grandmother brings into tension competing understandings of family obligation, ancestral memory, and individual aspiration. These tensions are not external to narrative structure but constitutive of it, as they shape both the progression of the story and the protagonist's evolving sense of self.

Methodologically, the study draws on Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2007) and screenplay analysis as complementary frameworks. The screenplay is examined through scene-based and discourse-oriented analysis, with particular focus on the inciting incident as a pivotal communicative event. Guided by Carbaugh's (2007) hubs of cultural meaning, i.e., "personhood" and "relationships," the analysis identifies recurring discourse patterns that reveal how culture-specific meanings organize the narrative through evolving understandings of selfhood, family, and moral obligation. The integration of these perspectives makes it possible to examine how narrative conflict may be both linguistically realized and culturally organized, when linking local interactional practices to the broader cultural premises that underpin narrative causality.

From this perspective, it is argued that narrative causality in *Coco* is not primarily action-driven, as classical screenwriting theory suggests, but family-driven, connected as it is to the negotiation of culture-specific meanings. Accordingly, the inciting incident functions as both a narrative and a cultural catalyst, transforming intergenerational conflict into a process of meaning-making through which dialogue, song, and shared remembrance become the means of reconciliation. In doing so, the study repositions cultural discourse not as a contextual backdrop to storytelling, but as the generative force through which narrative development unfolds.

The reconceptualization of the inciting incident as a communicative event advances a culture-based understanding of narrative causality, demonstrating that stories progress not simply through actions, but through the negotiation of meanings, identities, and moral relationships. This paper's originality lies in its proposal of an integrative framework that brings together narrative theory, intercultural communication, and Cultural Discourse Analysis for the study of popular culture screenplays.

Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the key theoretical concepts that underpin the present study, drawing on screenwriting theory, intercultural communication, and Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA). It clarifies how the inciting incident, intercultural critical incidents, communicative events, and CuDA contribute to a rethinking of narrative causality as grounded in cultural meaning-making practices and articulated through discourse, rather than viewing it as a purely structural phenomenon.

The Inciting Incident as an Intercultural Critical Incident

The inciting incident is traditionally understood within screenwriting theory as the structural event that initiates narrative progression (Field, 2005). In this study, however, it is reinterpreted through the concept of the intercultural critical incident (Byram, 1997; Tripp, 1993), which refers to moments where underlying cultural values and assumptions become visible through tension. This perspective sheds light on the inciting incident not only as a narrative trigger but also as a site of cultural negotiation, where conflict generates the meanings that propel narrative development.

The Intergenerational Conflict as a Communicative Event

Conflict in this study is approached as a communicative event in the sense proposed by Hymes (1974), where meaning, identity, and social relationships are actively constructed and negotiated through discourse. Intergenerational conflict is understood not as purely thematic or psychological opposition, but as the type of interaction that allows space for cultural values to be articulated and contested through the encounter of opposing generational worldviews. In the context of the film, intergenerational conflict becomes the discursive arena in which family authority, moral expectations, and individual aspiration are brought into tension and negotiated.

Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) and Screenplay Analysis

Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2007), combined with screenplay analysis, provides the methodological framework for this study. On the one hand, CuDA focuses on how cultural meaning is enacted through discourse, particularly through recurring patterns of language use and interaction. More specifically, the analysis is guided by Carbaugh's "hubs of cultural meaning," namely "personhood" and "relationships," which provide the points of entry for examining how cultural meaning affects narrative development. On the other hand, screenplay analysis is used to examine dialogue, scene structure, and narrative turning points, enabling a systematic exploration of how cultural meaning is embedded in the film's narrative construction. These complementary approaches provide a rationale for relating micro-level discourse practices to the broader cultural premises that organize narrative conflict and narrative causality.

Research Questions

As can be evidenced from the conceptual framework developed above, the present study examines how narrative causality may be reinterpreted when the inciting incident is approached from an intercultural and discourse-oriented perspective. To this end, the analysis is guided by two complementary research questions, with the second extending the theoretical implications of the first.

RQ1. How can the inciting incident in Coco be reconceptualized as an intercultural critical incident and communicative event, and what does this reveal about the relationship between cultural discourse and narrative causality?

The first question establishes the study's conceptual point of departure by examining the extent to which the inciting incident can be understood beyond its conventional structural function as a culture-specific moment of communicative significance.

RQ2. If the inciting incident is understood as an intercultural communicative event, how does it shape intergenerational conflict as a process of cultural meaning negotiation, and how does this reconfigure narrative progression as family-driven rather than action-driven?

Building on this reconceptualization, the second question explores the implications for the narrative as a whole. Now the focus is on how culture-based meanings are negotiated through interaction and how these processes organize conflict, character development, and the progression of the story.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach that combines screenplay analysis with Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) to explore how narrative causality is organized through discourse. The screenplay of *Coco* serves as the primary data source, with the inciting incident constituting the main focus. The emphasis is on the interactional and structural features of the screenplay that reveal how the relationship between character development, conflict, and culture-based meaning-making contributes to the reconfiguration of narrative causality.

Data

The analysis involved:

- analyzing the screenplay of *Coco* as the primary corpus;
- extracting screenplay data through scene-based and dialogue-driven breakdowns;
- scanning Miguel's voice-overs, key interactions, and inciting incident cues;
- performing screenplay segmentation (character, conflict, and transformation) for systematic discourse analysis.

Character Study

The discourse analysis focused on character study, following Bang (2022), which entails:

- examining Miguel's character through backstory, objective, conflict, and transformation;
- establishing the backstory through voice-overs that reveal family trauma and Miguel's initial worldview;

- tracing the protagonist's objective as it emerges from the inciting incident and shapes subsequent narrative development;
- examining both external (family versus self) and internal (competing beliefs) conflicts as forces driving character and story development;
- interpreting transformation as a shift in perspective culminating in reconciliation with family values.

These analytical procedures provide a systematic framework for examining how discourse organizes character development and narrative progression. The integration of scene-based analysis, screenplay segmentation, and CuDA makes it possible to investigate how the negotiation of culture-based meanings shapes both the protagonist's transformation and the causal logic of the narrative.

The Hubs of Cultural Meaning

Building on the methodological framework outlined above, the analysis further draws on Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA), and, more specifically, on Carbaugh's (2007) hubs of cultural meaning, namely "personhood" and "relationships." These hubs were selected because they provide a means of examining how cultural meanings are organized through discourse and how such meanings contribute to narrative development.

More specifically, these hubs make it possible to:

- examine how personhood is constructed through culture-based expectations, values, and forms of self-understanding, including orientations associated with individualism and collectivism;
- explore how family ties, hierarchy, obligation, and authority shape interaction and moral evaluation within collectivist systems of meaning;
- interpret the inciting incident as a cultural trigger that disrupts previously shared meanings and assumptions;
- trace how competing orientations toward individual aspiration and collective responsibility contribute to narrative progression;
- connect local interactional moments to broader cultural premises that inform the narrative;
- investigate how discourse mediates the relationship between family, identity, cultural continuity, and the negotiation of competing cultural orientations.

These categories support a culture-based understanding of narrative causality. Narrative progression is thereby understood as emerging through the negotiation, disruption, and reconfiguration of culture-based meanings, including the dynamic interplay between individualist and collectivist orientations (Hofstede, 2001), rather than being treated as the outcome of action alone.

From Scene Breakdown…

Having established the analytical framework, the study proceeds to a scene-based breakdown of the inciting incident in *Coco*. Examining the scene as a coherent interactional unit makes it possible to investigate the discursive mechanisms through which conflict emerges and the protagonist's trajectory is established.

More specifically, the scene-level analysis focuses on:

- identifying communicative rupture through the progressive escalation of dialogue;
- examining moral conflict through the opposition between the family's prohibition of music and Miguel's pursuit of self-expression;
- tracing the emergence of the protagonist's objective in response to familial resistance.

These elements confirm that the inciting incident functions as the narrative's primary communicative turning point. The scene breakdown further demonstrates how this turning point initiates a shift in narrative direction through the intensification of intergenerational conflict and the reconfiguration of values.

…to Screenplay Segmentation

Building on the scene-level analysis of the Miguel-Abuelita confrontation, the following section shifts the focus to screenplay segmentation in order to further specify how the inciting incident operates within the narrative structure of *Coco*. While the scene analysis outlined the dynamics of cultural conflict, this stage of analysis examines how these dynamics are distributed across key structural components of the screenplay. In doing so, it becomes possible to trace how discourse at the micro-level of interaction is translated into narrative functions that organize character development and causal progression at the macro level.

The same inciting incident is mapped onto screenplay structure following Bang (2022):

- Backstory activation → implicit family trauma revealed through the prohibition of music
- Objective formation → Miguel's commitment to becoming a musician
- Conflict initiation → intergenerational tension between family obligation and individual aspiration
- Structural role → initiating the narrative arc of transformation

Screenplay segmentation demonstrates how the inciting incident operates at both the structural and the cultural level, linking narrative form to discourse-based meaning-making. Building on the scene-level analysis, the inciting incident is further examined through screenplay segmentation following Bang (2022). Instead of fulfilling a singular narrative function, it operates across multiple dimensions of storytelling. First, it activates the backstory, where family history and implicit trauma position music as a culturally charged and restricted practice. It also crystallizes Miguel's objective, as he explicitly articulates his desire to become a musician in opposition to familial expectations. At the same time, it initiates the central conflict of the narrative, framed as intergenerational tension between collective obligation and individual aspiration. Finally, it establishes the protagonist's transformational trajectory, which structures the remainder of the film.

This segmentation shows that the inciting incident cannot be reduced to a structural trigger. Instead, it functions as a culturally embedded turning point where discourse, character formation, and narrative causality converge. In this sense, screenplay segmentation reveals how micro-level interactional conflict scales into macro-level narrative progression.

Results

The Inciting Incident as an Intercultural Communicative Event

To address the research questions, the analysis begins with the screenplay's inciting incident, reproduced verbatim below. As mentioned earlier, this scene marks the event that initiates narrative development. From the perspective adopted in the present study, however, it also constitutes the primary communicative event through which competing cultural perspectives become visible. As such, the extract serves as the principal unit of analysis for examining how discourse organizes conflict, identity, and narrative causality (Table 1).

Table 1
The Inciting Incident in Coco

INCITING INCIDENT
MIGUEL: I'm gonna be a musician!
CUT TO: EXT. COURTYARD - EARLY EVENING
Miguel's guitar is cast at his feet, along with his de la Cruz albums. The whole **family** encircles the boy.
ABUELITA: What is all this? You keep secrets from your own **family**?
TÍO BERTO**:** It's all that time he spends in the plaza...
TÍA GLORIA: ...Fills his head with crazy fantasies!
MIGUEL: It's not a fantasy!
Miguel hands Papá the photo and points to the skull guitar.
MIGUEL (CONT'D): That man was Ernesto de la Cruz! The greatest musician of all time!
PAPÁ: We've never known anything about this man. But whoever he was, he still abandoned his **family**. This is no future for my son.
MIGUEL: But Papá, you said my **family** would guide me! Well, de la Cruz IS my **family**! I'm supposed to play music!
ABUELITA: Never! That man's music was a curse! I will not allow it!
MIGUEL: If you would just let--
MAMÁ (warning): Miguel--
PAPÁ: You will listen to your **family**. No more music.
MIGUEL: Just listen to me play--
PAPÁ: End of argument.
Miguel lifts his guitar to play when Abuelita snatches the instrument away. She points to the man in the photo.
ABUELITA: You want to end up like that man? Forgotten? Left off your **family's** ofrenda?!
MIGUEL: I don't care if I'm on some stupid ofrenda!
Gasps from the **family**. Abuelita's brow hardens. She lifts the guitar in the air.
MIGUEL: No!
PAPÁ: Mamá...
Abuelita smashes it to bits!
ABUELITA: There. No guitar, no music. (softening)

(MORE)
ABUELITA (CONT'D): Come. You'll feel better after you eat with your **family**.
She reaches out to comfort Miguel, but he is hurt beyond repair.
MIGUEL: I don't wanna be in this **family**!
He snatches the photo from Papá and bolts out of the hacienda.

Note. From https://imsdb.com/scripts/Coco.html

The extract demonstrates that the inciting incident extends beyond its conventional structural function as the moment that sets the plot in motion. What it does is compile the principal cultural tensions that govern the narrative as a whole. The repeated lexical realization of "family" throughout the dialogue establishes the interactional framework within which the conflict unfolds. Throughout the exchange, "family" functions not merely as a social unit but as the central cultural framework through which identity, belonging, and moral obligation are negotiated.

Within this interaction, Miguel's declaration, "I'm gonna be a musician!" constructs music as a resource for selfhood and identity formation (DeNora, 2000). The family's responses, by contrast, consistently construct music as incompatible with family continuity, ancestral memory, and collective responsibility. The conflict therefore does not arise simply from opposing opinions but from fundamentally different cultural understandings of what it means to belong to a family.

This opposition becomes visible in the interaction between Miguel and Abuelita. The repeated use of prohibitive and authoritative language, i.e., "Never!", "You will listen to your family," "End of argument," progressively reinforces family authority until it culminates in the destruction of Miguel's guitar. Within this interaction, the guitar functions as more than a musical instrument. Actually, its destruction symbolically reasserts the family's moral order while attempting to regulate Miguel's emerging identity.

Miguel's response, "I don't wanna be in this family!", marks the communicative climax of the exchange. At this point, the interaction ceases to be a disagreement over music and becomes an explicit rupture in the family's shared system of meanings. The communicative event exposes competing interpretations of family, memory, authority, and selfhood, transforming interpersonal disagreement into a culture-based conflict.

Viewed through the concepts introduced in the previous section, the screenplay extract illustrates how the inciting incident assumes the role of an intercultural critical incident that communicates underlying cultural tensions. The story is founded not on action alone, but on the cultural premises from which subsequent narrative development proceeds. Narrative causality therefore emerges through the negotiation of meanings embedded in family relationships. Consequently, the progression of *Coco* depends less on the succession of events and more on the continual reconfiguration of culture-specific values.

Intergenerational Conflict as Cultural Meaning Negotiation

The communicative rupture identified in the inciting incident is embodied in the relationship between Miguel and Abuelita who are more than opposing characters within the narrative as they represent distinct generational orientations toward family, memory, and identity. Miguel articulates a forward-looking sense of self grounded in aspiration and personal vocation, while

Abuelita assumes the role of custodian of family continuity, ancestral memory, and moral authority. Their opposition reflects not merely individual disagreement but contrasting generational orientations toward cultural values and social continuity (Mannheim, 1952). As a result, the conflict between them extends beyond individual disagreement and becomes a confrontation between competing understandings of belonging and responsibility.

Importantly, this intergenerational tension is not constructed in isolation from the broader cultural context from which the film emerges. As Adrian Molina, co-writer and co-director of *Coco*, observes, "the most valuable thing that I took from this experience... was having the opportunity to discover my culture, reconnect with my history, and learn about my family" (Betancourt, 2018). Molina's reflection foregrounds family as a lived cultural experience that informs the film's representation of identity, memory, and interpersonal relationships.

In this light, the conflict between Miguel and Abuelita can be understood as an extension of the film's broader engagement with family as a relational space where differing generational perspectives coexist in productive tension. Their interaction reveals how family functions both as a source of continuity and as a discursive space where values, aspirations, and identities are continuously negotiated. What initially appears as a disagreement about music ultimately unfolds as a conflict over the meanings attached to heritage, obligation, and selfhood.

The significance of the inciting incident therefore lies not only in its narrative function but also in its cultural resonance. Through the interaction between Miguel and Abuelita, the screenplay transforms intergenerational conflict into a communicative process through which questions of belonging, memory, and identity are brought into focus.

Cultural Hubs Restructuring Narrative Causality

In *Coco*, narrative causality is organized through culture-based meanings rather than action sequences. The inciting incident activates conflict by destabilizing both personhood and relationships. At the level of personhood, competing constructions of selfhood emerge between individual aspiration and family-defined identity. At the level of relationships, family hierarchy, authority, and obligation are disrupted through the public confrontation over Miguel's musical aspiration and the subsequent destruction of his guitar. Narrative progression unfolds through the reconfiguration of personhood within shifting family dynamics, while cultural meanings such as memory, obligation, and moral order function as causal forces shaping both identity and interaction. In this sense, causality emerges through transformations in personhood and relationships.

Having moved from scene breakdown to screenplay segmentation, the analysis proceeds to the interpretive level, where Carbaugh's hubs of cultural meaning are employed to account for how narrative causality is restructured in *Coco*. Narrative causality is not primarily organized through sequences of action, but through culturally grounded meanings that become visible through disruption. More specifically, the inciting incident activates conflict by destabilizing the two dimensions outlined above, i.e., personhood and relationships.

At the level of personhood, competing constructions of selfhood are brought into tension as Miguel openly declares his intention to become a musician, positioning himself against the family's established rejection of music as a legitimate form of life. This is intensified when his aspiration is dismissed within the family gathering, culminating in a moment where his identity claim is rejected as incompatible with family continuity. At the level of relationships, the scene

unsettles family hierarchy, authority, and moral expectation through a collective family intervention in which multiple family members reinforce the prohibition of music, and Abuelita ultimately enforces this authority by physically removing and destroying the guitar. This produces a rupture in the shared social order that must be renegotiated for narrative development to proceed.

From this point onward, narrative progression unfolds through the reconfiguration of personhood within shifting family dynamics rather than through a linear sequence of events, while cultural meanings, particularly those related to memory, obligation, and moral order, operate as causal forces shaping both interaction and character trajectory.

In this sense, causality emerges through transformation in personhood and relationships, offering a culturally grounded account of narrative movement in the film. Rather than being driven by a linear chain of actions, the progression of *Coco* depends on shifts in how identity is understood and how relational obligations are negotiated within the family structure. Narrative development is sustained through ongoing processes of meaning renegotiation, where changes in cultural values reshape both character trajectories and interactional dynamics. The film's narrative logic is therefore revealed as fundamentally discursive and culturally embedded, with transformation arising from the reconfiguration of shared meanings rather than from action alone.

From Cultural Hubs to Family-Driven Causality

Building on the analysis of cultural hubs, this section expands the argument to a broader account of family-driven narrative causality. It shifts the focus from analytical categories of personhood and relationships to the overarching logic through which *Coco* constructs narrative progression as family-oriented.

In *Coco*, the narrative trajectory reflects a movement from individuated personhood toward a culturally constituted form of selfhood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), shaped and regulated by family values, memory, and inherited expectations, as seen in the family's collective intervention during Miguel's musical performance and the immediate enforcement of prohibition within the household space. Within this framework, conflict does not emerge as a simple opposition between characters, but as a misalignment between competing constructions of selfhood and the normative demands embedded in family structures, most visibly enacted when Miguel's pursuit of music is met with coordinated familial rejection and the removal of his instrument as a symbolic boundary marker. Accordingly, resolution is not achieved through the elimination of conflict or the resolution of external obstacles, but through a process of realignment. This involves, first, the reconfiguration of personhood in relation to family values, as Miguel's identity trajectory is gradually redirected through his encounters with family expectations, and second, the restoration of relational bonds and moral order within the family system, which becomes narratively necessary after the rupture produced in the inciting incident. Drawing on the combined insights of Bang and Carbaugh, narrative development can thus be understood as anchored in cultural premises that govern identity formation and social relationships. Rather than function as an action-driven sequence of events, the story is structured through shifts in meaning, where changes in identity and relational alignment generate narrative movement.

In this sense, *Coco* exemplifies a family-driven and culture-based model of narrative causality, in which storytelling progresses through the ongoing negotiation, adjustment, and stabilization

of personhood and relationships. The analysis thus demonstrates how narrative structure can be understood as emerging from discourse-mediated processes of cultural meaning-making.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study suggest that narrative causality in *Coco* is not primarily driven by action sequences, but is instead structured through culture-based meanings that emerge in moments of communicative tension. By reframing the inciting incident as an intercultural communicative event, the analysis demonstrates how narrative progression is initiated through disruptions in shared cultural understandings, particularly those relating to family, identity, and obligation. In this sense, the film's causal logic is shown to be discursive and relational, with meaning negotiation rather than event succession functioning as the primary mechanism of narrative development.

The study carries several theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications. First, in relation to narrative theory, it suggests that narrative causality can be reconceptualized as culture-based, where progression emerges through shifts in meanings, values, and social roles rather than sequences of action alone (Herman, 2009). Second, for intercultural communication research, the reframing of the inciting incident as an intercultural communicative event provides a useful analytical lens for examining how cultural tensions, misunderstandings, and value conflicts generate narrative movement. Third, the study extends Cultural Discourse Analysis by demonstrating the applicability of Carbaugh's hubs of cultural meaning, i.e., "personhood" and "relationships," to media narratives, showing how discourse structures both identity formation and storytelling. In addition, it challenges conventional approaches to character and conflict by shifting the focus from psychological or purely structural interpretations toward dynamic processes of culture-based identity negotiation. Furthermore, the findings highlight the role of family as a central narrative engine in culturally resonant storytelling, illustrating how films such as *Coco* organize progression through family-based moral frameworks that travel across cultural contexts. Finally, there are important pedagogical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and media literacy education, as film narratives can be used to foster intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997) by exposing learners to culturally embedded meaning-making processes and encouraging reflection on how identities and values are constructed through discourse (Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2011).

Overall, this study underscores the value of integrating Cultural Discourse Analysis with screenplay analysis for rethinking narrative meaning production. It demonstrates that what appears as structural storytelling is deeply embedded in cultural processes of meaning-making, where narrative movement is sustained through the continuous negotiation of personhood and relationships.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the inciting incident in *Coco* functions as a structuring principle of meaning, organizing how conflict is generated, sustained, and developed throughout the narrative. Rather than follow a linear model of goal pursuit, narrative development is shown to rely on the progressive reorientation of the protagonist's objective, as shifts in cultural meanings and values reshape the direction of the story. Within this process, the character trajectory is constructed through a movement from assertion to recognition, culminating in alignment with a broader cultural and moral framework.

At the interactional level, the analysis reveals that narrative conflict is not grounded in simple opposition between characters, but in competing interpretations of legitimacy, authority, and obligation. Story resolution, therefore, is achieved not through the elimination of obstacles, but through the re-establishment of a coherent moral order that stabilizes relationships and meaning systems within the family context. In this sense, the study establishes a systematic link between micro-level discourse and macro-level narrative structure, showing how processes of meaning-making underpin storytelling and drive narrative progression.

Narrative progression, then, is not driven by what characters do, but by how meanings of self and family are disrupted and redefined. The story advances through shifts in how identity, obligation, and belonging are understood within interaction, rather than through a sequence of external actions. In *Coco*, narrative movement is produced when shared cultural meanings are unsettled and gradually realigned, allowing tensions between personal aspiration and family expectations to be renegotiated. This demonstrates that cultural discourse is not merely the backdrop of storytelling but a constitutive force that shapes narrative causality itself, with closure emerging through the restoration of coherence between personhood, relationships, and cultural values.

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The Trans-Babelism Paradox: When AI Translates Meaning but Not Culture

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Abstract

This presentation introduces The Trans-Babelism Paradox (TBP), a conceptual framework that examines how AI transcends linguistic barriers yet fails to convey cultural depth. For decades, English has functioned as the global lingua franca, centralizing access to knowledge and power. AI-driven translation now promises to dissolve this monopoly, creating a post-lingua-franca world where all languages can coexist through technological mediation. However, beneath this equality lies a paradox: while AI enables lexical comprehension across languages, it often erases the cultural, emotional, and contextual nuances that give language its human texture. Drawing on sociolinguistics, cognitive semiotics, and AI ethics, this paper proposes a two-layer model of translation: (a) the lexical-syntactic layer effectively handled by AI; and (b) the cultural-cognitive layer that remains irreducibly human. The study argues that true communication in the AI era will depend not on achieving universal intelligibility but on preserving cultural particularity within automated translation systems. The TBP challenges the optimism surrounding AI multilingualism by asking: if machines can translate every word but misunderstand every world, have we truly transcended Babel or merely rebuilt it in code?

Keywords: Trans-Babelism Paradox (TBP), AI translation, multilingual communication, cultural meaning, algorithmic mediation

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Introduction

The history of global communication has long been shaped by the dominance of particular languages that function as gateways to knowledge, authority, and social mobility. Latin, French, and later English served as lingua francas that enabled large-scale interaction while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchies of power (Crystal, 2003; Phillipson, 2018). In the contemporary era, English continues to dominate scientific publication, digital communication, and international institutions, creating structural advantages for speakers of high-resource languages (Hamel, 2007; Lukianenko, 2024). Recent developments in artificial intelligence appear to challenge this linguistic order. Neural machine translation, multilingual large language models, and speech-to-speech systems allow communication across languages without requiring speakers to learn a common tongue (Ataman et al., 2025; Kocmi et al., 2023). These technologies suggest the possibility of a post-lingua-franca world in which linguistic diversity can coexist without restricting global interaction. However, the disappearance of linguistic barriers does not necessarily imply the achievement of mutual understanding. Translation involves not only grammar and vocabulary but also cultural knowledge, social norms, and emotional context (Apter, 2013; Nida, 2002). When these elements are reduced to statistical correspondences, communication may remain formally correct while losing interpretive depth.

Recent theoretical discussions on AI-mediated language have suggested that the digital age is transforming the global linguistic order by shifting authority from human speakers to computational systems (H. N. Tran, 2026). Yet the everyday consequences of this transformation remain insufficiently explored. The present study proposes the concept of the Trans-Babelism Paradox (TBP) to describe the tension between technological intelligibility and cultural incomprehension in AI-mediated communication. The central question guiding this paper is therefore not whether machines can translate languages, but whether automated translation can preserve the human meanings embedded in them.

Language, Power, and Cultural Meaning

Language as Symbolic Power

Language is not only a means of communication but also a form of social power. Sociolinguistic theory shows that linguistic competence often determines access to education, employment, and authority within a global system (Bourdieu, 1991; Canagarajah, 2012). The global spread of English illustrates this dynamic, as proficiency in English frequently functions as a prerequisite for participation in academic and technological networks (Phillipson, 2018). Digital globalization has intensified this hierarchy. Most online content, scientific databases, and training corpora for AI systems are dominated by English-language data, reinforcing the privileged position of high-resource languages (Blodgett et al., 2020; W3Techs, 2025). As a result, linguistic inequality may persist even when translation technologies appear to remove barriers.

Language as Cultural Experience

Language also encodes cultural knowledge, emotional associations, and shared histories. Expressions of politeness, metaphor, humor, and social hierarchy differ across societies and cannot always be translated directly (Apter, 2013; Pavlick & Kwiatkowski, 2019). Translation therefore requires interpretation rather than simple substitution. Human translators rely on

contextual understanding to preserve meaning across languages. Artificial intelligence, in contrast, relies on statistical patterns extracted from large datasets (Bender & Koller, 2020). While this approach allows rapid translation, it may fail to capture the cultural dimensions of communication.

AI Translation and the Illusion of Neutrality

Recent advances in neural translation have led to claims that language differences will soon become irrelevant. Multilingual models can generate fluent text in hundreds of languages, suggesting the emergence of technological multilingualism (Costa-jussà, 2022). However, research has shown that AI systems often reflect biases present in their training data, including cultural, ideological, and linguistic asymmetries (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Crawford, 2022). Studies of machine translation demonstrate that models frequently normalize expressions toward dominant linguistic patterns, particularly those derived from English-language corpora (Gao et al., 2024; Stanovsky et al., 2019). Consequently, the apparent neutrality of AI translation may conceal a deeper form of standardization. These observations indicate that the disappearance of linguistic barriers does not eliminate inequality but may instead transform it.

The Trans-Babelism Paradox

The TBP refers to the contradictory condition in which artificial intelligence appears to overcome linguistic fragmentation while simultaneously weakening the cultural depth required for genuine understanding. Advances in neural machine translation and multilingual language models allow speakers of different languages to communicate with unprecedented ease, suggesting the possibility of a post-lingua-franca era in which no single language dominates global exchange. However, communication involves more than the accurate transfer of words. Language carries emotional, historical, and social meanings that are rooted in shared cultural experience and cannot always be reduced to formal structures. When translation is performed primarily through statistical and computational processes, lexical equivalence may be achieved while contextual meaning is partially lost. The paradox therefore lies in the coexistence of universal intelligibility and interpretive incompleteness: the more effectively machines translate language, the more visible the limits of their ability to translate culture. In this sense, the contemporary condition may be understood as a new form of Babel, not a division caused by different languages, but a division caused by differences in meaning.

In AI-mediated communication, translation often succeeds at the level of linguistic form but remains incomplete at the level of cultural interpretation. Artificial intelligence can reproduce grammar and vocabulary with high accuracy, yet it frequently fails to preserve the contextual knowledge that gives language its human significance. As communication becomes increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems, linguistic barriers diminish while interpretive gaps remain. This shift reflects a broader transformation in the structure of global communication, in which understanding is no longer negotiated primarily between speakers but is filtered through computational infrastructures.

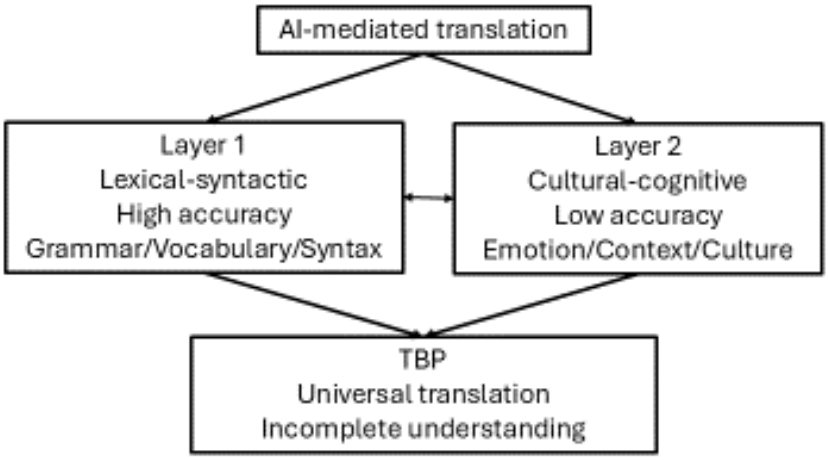
Recent theoretical work on the changing linguistic order in the age of artificial intelligence suggests that communication is increasingly shaped by algorithmic mediation rather than by direct human interaction (H. N. Tran, 2026). Within this environment, linguistic diversity may persist at the surface level, while underlying interpretations become standardized according to the statistical patterns embedded in training data. As a result, translation can achieve formal accuracy without ensuring cultural fidelity.

TBP therefore emerges when technological systems enable universal translation while simultaneously exposing the limits of machine interpretation. What appears to be the end of Babel at the level of language reveals a new form of Babel at the level of meaning, where words can be shared globally but cultural understanding remains uneven.

A Two-Layer Model of Translation

To explain the TBP, this study proposes a two-layer model of translation that distinguishes between the structural components of language that can be effectively processed by artificial intelligence and the contextual dimensions that remain resistant to automation (Figure 1). The model is based on the assumption that successful communication requires both linguistic accuracy and cultural interpretation, yet current AI systems primarily operate on the former. By separating these two levels, the paradox of universal intelligibility combined with incomplete understanding can be more clearly described.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of the Trans-Babelism Paradox



The figure illustrates the two-layer model of AI-mediated translation. Artificial intelligence processes language effectively at the lexical–syntactic layer, while the cultural–cognitive layer remains only partially interpretable. The imbalance between these layers produces the TBP, in which universal translation coexists with incomplete cultural understanding.

Lexical-Syntactic Layer

The first layer consists of the lexical and syntactic structures of language, including vocabulary, grammar, and basic semantic relations. These elements can be represented statistically and are therefore well suited to computational processing. Neural machine translation and large language models achieve high performance in this domain by learning patterns from large multilingual corpora (Kocmi et al., 2023; Vaswani et al., 2017). When sufficient training data are available, AI systems can produce translations that are grammatically correct and semantically coherent, often approaching human-level performance in high-resource language pairs. The success of this layer explains the widespread perception that AI translation has solved the problem of multilingual communication. Real-time translation tools allow users to interact across languages without specialized training, reinforcing the belief that linguistic barriers are becoming irrelevant (Ataman et al., 2025). However, this effectiveness is largely limited to aspects of language that can be formalized, measured, and optimized. Words are

treated as tokens, and meaning is inferred from statistical probability rather than lived experience (Bender & Koller, 2020). Because the lexical–syntactic layer is computationally tractable, it becomes the primary focus of technological development. As a result, translation systems may appear highly accurate while operating within a reduced representation of language.

Cultural-Cognitive Layer

The second layer consists of cultural, emotional, and contextual dimensions of language that cannot be fully captured through statistical modeling. These include metaphor, humor, politeness, social hierarchy, and historical reference, all of which depend on shared cultural knowledge rather than formal structure (Apter, 2013; Nida, 2002). In human communication, such elements are interpreted through experience, empathy, and familiarity with social norms. In machine translation, however, they are often simplified or normalized. Research on multilingual language models shows that even advanced systems struggle to interpret pragmatic meaning, indirect speech, and culturally specific expressions (Pavlick & Kwiatkowski, 2019; Resck et al., 2025). Because training data are unevenly distributed across languages, models may also reproduce biases toward dominant linguistic and cultural patterns (Blodgett et al., 2020; Crawford, 2022). Consequently, translations that are technically correct may still fail to convey the intended meaning. This limitation becomes more pronounced as language moves away from literal description and toward symbolic or emotional expression. Idioms, proverbs, and humor often rely on shared cultural assumptions that cannot be inferred solely from textual data. When such expressions are translated by AI systems, the result may preserve the surface meaning while losing the deeper significance.

Interaction Between the Two Layers

The TBP emerges from the imbalance between these two layers. The lexical–syntactic layer enables efficient communication across languages, while the cultural–cognitive layer remains only partially interpretable by machine systems. As AI translation becomes more accurate at the structural level, the absence of cultural interpretation becomes more noticeable. Communication appears fluent but may lack the contextual depth required for genuine understanding. This imbalance reflects a broader transformation in the nature of global communication. In earlier linguistic orders, understanding depended primarily on human translators who negotiated meaning between cultures. In the AI-mediated environment, interpretation is increasingly delegated to computational systems trained on large datasets (H. N. Tran, 2026). As a result, linguistic diversity may persist at the level of form, while interpretive frameworks become standardized. The two-layer model therefore clarifies why the removal of linguistic barriers does not automatically produce mutual understanding. Artificial intelligence can translate words with increasing precision, yet the cultural knowledge that gives those words meaning remains only partially accessible to machines. The TBP arises precisely at this point, where technological progress in translation reveals the limits of automated interpretation.

Manifestations of the Paradox in AI Communication

The TBP becomes most visible in practical situations where artificial intelligence successfully translates linguistic form but fails to preserve cultural meaning. While modern translation systems demonstrate high accuracy in controlled evaluations, real-world communication often involves metaphor, emotion, and social context that cannot be fully captured by statistical

models. Examining these cases helps illustrate how the lexical–syntactic layer can function effectively while the cultural–cognitive layer remains only partially interpreted.

Idioms, Metaphor, and Figurative Language

Idiomatic expressions present one of the clearest examples of the paradox. Idioms often rely on culturally specific imagery and cannot be understood through literal translation. Neural translation systems tend to favor lexical equivalence, producing grammatically correct sentences that lack the intended meaning (Apter, 2013). For example, figurative expressions in many languages encode historical or symbolic references that are unfamiliar to speakers outside the cultural context. When translated automatically, these expressions are frequently converted into neutral phrases, preserving informational content but losing emotional and cultural resonance. Research in neural machine translation confirms that figurative language remains a persistent challenge, even for advanced transformer-based models (Toral & Way, 2018). Because such expressions occur less frequently in training data, models often default to literal interpretations. This limitation demonstrates the gap between computational accuracy and interpretive understanding, which lies at the core of the TBP.

Humor, Irony, and Pragmatic Meaning

Humor provides another domain in which translation systems reveal the limits of automated interpretation. Understanding humor requires knowledge of social norms, shared assumptions, and contextual cues that cannot easily be represented as statistical patterns. Studies show that multilingual language models have difficulty detecting sarcasm, irony, and indirect speech, particularly when cultural references are involved (Hossain et al., 2020). Even when the literal meaning of a sentence is translated correctly, the intended tone may be lost or misinterpreted. Pragmatic meaning also varies across cultures. Languages differ in how they express politeness, authority, and emotional distance. Machine translation systems often normalize these differences, producing outputs that are grammatically acceptable but socially inappropriate (Pavlick & Kwiatkowski, 2019). This tendency reflects the fact that AI models learn from large datasets that may not fully represent the diversity of communicative practices. These failures illustrate that successful translation requires more than lexical correspondence. It requires the ability to interpret intention, which remains a primarily human capacity.

Cultural and Ideological Framing in Translation

The paradox is also evident in the translation of political, ethical, and culturally sensitive language. Words such as “freedom,” “tradition,” or “community” carry different meanings across societies. When AI systems translate such terms, they often map them to the closest statistical equivalent rather than preserving their cultural context. Because training data are dominated by high-resource languages, particularly English, translations may reflect the semantic patterns of those languages even when the source text originates elsewhere (Blodgett et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2024). Studies of bias in machine translation have shown that models may reproduce gender stereotypes, ideological assumptions, or culturally specific interpretations present in the data on which they were trained (Crawford, 2022; Stanovsky et al., 2019). These tendencies suggest that AI translation is not neutral but shaped by the linguistic and cultural distribution of available corpora. As a result, communication mediated by AI may appear multilingual while still being guided by a limited set of interpretive frameworks. This phenomenon supports the argument that the disappearance of linguistic barriers does not eliminate inequality but transforms it into a subtler form.

Standardization Through Algorithmic Mediation

A further manifestation of the paradox is the gradual standardization of expression in AI-mediated communication. Because translation systems are optimized for clarity and probability, they tend to favor commonly occurring structures over culturally specific ones. This process can lead to what has been described as the normalization of language in digital environments, where diverse expressions are reshaped to fit patterns that are easier for machines to process (Couldry & Mejias, 2020). As communication increasingly passes through algorithmic systems, linguistic diversity may remain visible at the level of vocabulary while deeper interpretive differences are reduced. Users may feel that they understand each other because the translated text appears fluent, yet important cultural meanings may be absent. This condition exemplifies the TBP: the more efficient translation becomes, the more apparent the limits of machine interpretation.

From Linguistic Equality to Interpretive Imbalance

These examples suggest that AI translation does not simply remove barriers but reorganizes them. In earlier periods, misunderstanding resulted from the inability to translate words. In the AI-mediated environment, misunderstanding may arise even when translation is technically correct. The obstacle shifts from language itself to the interpretation of meaning. Recent discussions on the transformation of global linguistic order emphasize that communication is increasingly shaped by computational infrastructures rather than direct human interaction (H. N. Tran, 2026). Similar issues have been observed in intercultural communication settings in higher education, where shared language does not always guarantee mutual understanding, and structured interaction programs are required to bridge cultural differences (H.-N. Tran et al., 2026). Within such systems, languages may coexist at the surface level, but the interpretive logic guiding translation is determined by the architecture of the model. The result is a form of linguistic equality combined with interpretive imbalance, where all languages can be translated but not all meanings can be preserved. The TBP therefore becomes most visible in everyday communication, where technological success in translation reveals the continuing importance of cultural understanding.

Implications for Global Communication

The TBP has significant implications for the future of global communication. While artificial intelligence reduces linguistic barriers, it also changes the conditions under which understanding takes place. Communication is no longer mediated solely by human speakers but increasingly by algorithmic systems that filter, translate, and generate language. This shift raises questions about the nature of multilingual interaction, the preservation of cultural diversity, and the distribution of linguistic power in the digital age.

From Lingua Franca to Algorithmic Mediation

For centuries, global communication relied on the dominance of particular languages that functioned as lingua francas. Latin, French, and later English enabled interaction across regions while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchical structures of knowledge and authority (Crystal, 2003; Phillipson, 2018). The development of AI translation suggests a transition toward a different model, in which communication does not require a shared language but instead depends on technological mediation. In this environment, English may no longer be necessary as a spoken global standard, yet it continues to play a central role in the infrastructure of

translation systems. Large language models are trained primarily on high-resource languages, and English remains dominant in scientific publications, digital archives, and online content (Gao et al., 2024; W3Techs, 2025). As a result, even when users communicate in different languages, their interaction may still be shaped by patterns derived from English-language data. This shift represents a transformation rather than the disappearance of linguistic hierarchy. The TBP highlights this transition. Linguistic equality appears to increase at the level of communication, but interpretive authority may remain concentrated in the architecture of AI systems.

Efficiency Versus Cultural Depth

AI-mediated translation prioritizes efficiency, clarity, and speed. These qualities are valuable in many contexts, such as international collaboration, online education, and global business. However, communication that relies primarily on computational translation may sacrifice cultural nuance in order to achieve technical accuracy. Because machine translation is optimized for probabilistic correctness, expressions that depend on metaphor, historical reference, or social convention may be simplified or normalized (Couldry & Mejias, 2020). Research in bilingual cognition suggests that language diversity contributes to perspective-taking and cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2018). When translation systems reduce linguistic differences to standardized forms, the variety of ways in which people understand the world may also become less visible. The paradox therefore lies in the coexistence of greater accessibility with reduced interpretive richness. This tension does not imply that AI translation should be rejected, but it suggests that technological progress alone cannot guarantee meaningful communication.

Multilingualism in the Age of AI

One of the most frequently discussed benefits of AI translation is the possibility of true multilingual coexistence. Speakers can use their native language while relying on machines to bridge differences. This development may reduce the pressure to adopt a single dominant language, allowing more languages to remain in active use (UNESCO, 2025). At the same time, multilingual communication mediated by AI may become increasingly standardized. Because translation systems rely on large datasets, languages with limited digital presence are less accurately represented (Blodgett et al., 2020). This imbalance may lead to a situation in which linguistic diversity persists formally but is interpreted through a narrower set of semantic patterns. Such a condition reflects the TBP: diversity is preserved at the level of language yet reduced at the level of meaning.

Ethical Questions in AI-Mediated Language

The paradox also raises ethical concerns about the design and use of language technologies. If translation systems influence how meaning is interpreted, then decisions about data selection, model architecture, and evaluation criteria become questions of cultural representation. Scholars have described this issue as a form of algorithmic bias, in which dominant languages and worldviews are more strongly reflected in AI outputs (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Crawford, 2022). Because large language models are trained on unevenly distributed data, they may reproduce existing inequalities even while appearing neutral. This problem becomes particularly significant for languages with limited digital resources, whose cultural expressions may be simplified or mistranslated. Ensuring fairness in multilingual AI therefore requires not only technical improvements but also attention to linguistic diversity and epistemic justice

(Mohamed et al., 2020). The TBP suggests that the future of language technology must be evaluated not only in terms of accuracy but also in terms of its ability to preserve cultural meaning.

Toward Interpretive Awareness in Global Communication

The most important implication of the paradox is that understanding cannot be fully automated. Even if machines can translate words with high precision, human interpretation remains necessary to grasp the cultural context in which those words are used. Global communication in the AI era will therefore depend on a combination of technological tools and interpretive awareness. Rather than eliminating the need for cultural knowledge, AI translation may make such knowledge more important. Users must recognize that fluent translation does not always imply complete understanding. Awareness of this limitation can help prevent the illusion of comprehension that the TBP describes. In this sense, the future of global communication will not be defined solely by the ability to translate languages, but by the ability to preserve the diversity of meanings that those languages carry.

Conclusion

AI has brought humanity closer than ever to overcoming linguistic barriers. Yet the disappearance of linguistic obstacles does not automatically produce genuine understanding. This paper introduces the term *Trans-Babelism Paradox (TBP)* to describe the contradictory condition in which artificial intelligence enables universal translation while simultaneously weakening the cultural depth required for meaningful communication. The TBP highlights the coexistence of universal translation and cultural loss. Machines can reproduce words with remarkable precision, but they often fail to convey the experiences that give those words meaning. The challenge of the AI era is therefore not simply to translate more accurately, but to preserve cultural particularity within automated systems. If technology enables every language to be understood yet reduces every culture to the same interpretive framework, humanity may not have transcended Babel but rebuilt it in digital form.

Understanding the TBP is therefore essential for evaluating the role of artificial intelligence in multilingual societies. The challenge ahead is not only to improve the accuracy of translation systems, but to design technologies that respect the diversity of cultural expression. True transcendence of Babel will not be achieved when every word can be translated, but when communication across languages can preserve the differences that give those words meaning. In this sense, the paradox identified in this study complements recent theoretical discussions on the transformation of global linguistic order in the age of artificial intelligence, which suggest that language is increasingly mediated by computational infrastructures rather than direct human interaction (H. N. Tran, 2026).

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Gender, Rural Governance, and Clan Networks: Rethinking a High-Profile Case in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This article has attempted to examine the incident of the chained woman that took place in Dongji Village, China, in 2022 through the lens of traditional culture. The chained woman's living place was not locked, and villagers were generally aware of her situation—but why was she not rescued? Why did the local Douyin blogger who found her use her story as social media fodder rather than recognise it as a crime of gender violence? From the perspective of traditional Confucianism and clan culture, this paper has revealed the connection between gender violence against women in contemporary rural China and the traditional culture of local clans. It argues that, in some grassroots villages in China today, the existence of clans is not only a collective identity system that maintains the patriarchal social order but also a social network that implicitly supports gender oppression. This network reinforces mutual support and patronage among men of the same surname, creates an exclusive structure in the distribution of power and benefits, and shapes local villagers' consciousness and conception of women, placing women in a position of instrumentality and dependence.

Keywords: chained woman, clan culture, Confucianism, rural area, gender-based violence

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Introduction

In December 2021, the Urban Management Bureau and the Veteran Affairs Bureau in Fengxian County, Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, China jointly organized a charity event to provide living assistance to low-income families. Dong Zhimin, a villager from Dongji Village in Fengxian County, was one of the beneficiaries. According to local media, Dong's family was financially tight, and he needed to support his aged mother and a disabled brother. In addition, he had eight children, of which seven were between 3 and 10 years old. After this event, some local Douyin (TikTok China) bloggers went to Dong's family to take videos that were about the shabby house and seven children playing happily, showing the contrast of "difficult but optimistic". Furthermore, Dong Zhimin was portrayed as a great father who took on the responsibility of the family.

However, in the process of constructing the image of the "poor but tough household", such narratives have overlooked one key point: the mother of the eight children had never appeared. It wasn't until 28 January 2022 that Douyin blogger @徐州一修哥 happened to film a simple shack next to the compound during a live broadcast of the Dong family, pushed the door open and found a woman chained at the neck inside. The video soon attracted around 2 billion views after the incident sparked public outrage. The underlying mechanism of violence behind the incident was further revealed when the woman muttered in front of the camera, "This house is full of rapists", and "The world doesn't want me anymore" (Ai, 2022).

The rise of the Internet has provided new possibilities for the development of civil society in China (Hassid, 2012). The incident of the chained woman aroused great concern in cyberspace and became an important issue in the court of public opinion. Although the blogger who shot the video did not aim to rescue her, the proliferation of new media allowed the imprisonment to be immediately exposed through live broadcasting. After the video exploded on the Douyin platform, netizens continued to repost it on other social media platforms such as Weibo (Microblog) and Xiaohongshu (Red), quickly generating widespread public concern (Chau, 2024).

The public's intense concern and indignation over the truth of the incident centred on the following points: why was this woman chained around her neck and detained in winter in a dilapidated house wearing thin clothes with a draft on all sides? Secondly, if she was mentally ill, why wasn't she sent for treatment? According to the video, the chained woman had a young face but her teeth were badly missing; did that mean that she had been abused? In addition, the most crucial question is whether Dong Zhimin is suspected of trafficking women.

In order to calm public pressure and respond to questions, from the date of the incident to early February 2022, the Feng County and Xuzhou municipal governments issued a number of official announcements. However, these announcements did not provide sufficient explanations in the eyes of the public, but rather raised more questions (BBC, 11 February 2022). In particular, in the two announcements of 28 and 30 January 2022, the investigation team organised by the Feng County emphasised that the imprisoned woman "suffered from mental illness" as the main explanation for her detention in chains, and the issue of "whether Dong Zhimin was involved in illegal imprisonment" was not mentioned at all. Netizens have pointed out that this is an "easy-going" approach that lacks basic humane care and legal justice.

Immediately thereafter, netizens continued to ask questions, with the public further asking whether the local administrative system had intentionally shielded the suspect, Dong Zhimin,

and in particular, whether there was a structural protection mechanism in place for the local government where the incident took place. This compelled the Xuzhou municipal government to issue another notice on 10 February 2022, stating for the first time that Dong Zhimin was indeed "suspected of unlawful detention" (BBC News, 2022; Wang & Dong, 2022). Then, on 23 February 2022, the Jiangsu provincial government released the results of a further investigation. Notably, the investigation report still avoided the key question of whether the chained woman was illegally trafficked, and instead blamed local administrators for family planning mismanagement, loopholes in the marriage registration system, ineffective supervision of domestic violence and overbreeding, and the lack of a system for rescuing and treating people with mental disorders. This move has been interpreted by the public as an evasion of the core issues of the incident, further fuelling public criticism of the systemic failure to take responsibility.

Literature Review

Academic research on the chained woman incident has been carried out from multiple dimensions such as new media, communication, civil society mobilisation, and improvement of the legal system, reflecting a comprehensive interdisciplinary and multi-perspective analysis path. In particular, the online communication and mobilisation of public opinion triggered by this incident have been at the centre of many research, with Yang and Wang (2025) examining how netizens became self-assigned detectives after the release of inaccurate information by the local government, and went to Feng County to conduct field investigations. Zhang and Zhang (2024) analysed how civil society, represented by feminist netizens, strategically appropriated and adapted officially sanctioned discursive resources to fight for public opinion space and the right to express themselves under state censorship and repression, using the chained woman incident as an entry point. Zhang (2022) further pointed out that social media has significantly expanded the public awareness of the chained woman incident in the process of dissemination, providing a new mechanism for event exposure and monitoring. In addition, Zhou et al. (2022) analysed the metaphorical strategies of reporting under different media regimes, pointing out that due to the complexity and sensitivity of the chained woman incident, all kinds of metaphors worked together to serve the established media power structure and ideological goals, while Lam et al. (2025), through comparison, found that mainland Chinese media tended to portray domestic violence as a "private issue" of internal family disputes, in contrast to the differences in media presentation in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Scholars in the field of law have also debated the chained woman incident. Hao and Yang (2022) argue that the statutory penalties for human trafficking under the current law were basically reasonable, and there was no need to raise them. Luo (2022), on the other hand, argued that the criminal justice system for human trafficking must be systematically consolidated, and the statutory penalties for buyers should be moderately increased. Wang (2023) further pointed out that simply increasing the penalties is not enough to effectively curb the relevant crimes; on the contrary, it is necessary to increase deterrence through the application of the existing legal provisions and by combining the rules of adjudication in typical cases to enhance the normativity of judicial application.

In addition, Xu (2022) suggested that there were also possible ways to address the issue of women trafficking from cultural and ethical perspectives. She suggested that Confucian values and the complementary theory of "Yin and Yang" in the I Ching can serve as ideological resources for the promotion of women's status in society, which can help to enhance the awareness of gender equality as a whole. At the same time, Xu also called for paying more

attention to the characteristics of values and ethical systems in rural areas. This view of hers is highly compatible with the view of this article.

The incident of the chained woman exposes not only the tragedy of individual women being trafficked, but also the result of the phenomenon of small-community crime in rural areas being nurtured in a specific cultural soil. Starting from Confucianism and the clan system in traditional Chinese culture, this article tries to explore the cultural roots of the indifference, connivance, and even rationalisation shown by the people in rural areas in the face of gender violence. Two main issues will be discussed: first, how are the Confucian ethical concepts of women, family harmony and maintenance of social order used to shield individual rights violations in rural societies? Secondly, while maintaining the internal stability of rural society, does the clan system form an implicit mechanism of exclusion and domination over outsiders (especially women)? Through this analysis, this article aims to reveal the more complex and deeper cultural and social structural factors behind the problem of gender violence in contemporary rural China.

Research Methods

Based on a traditional cultural perspective, this article takes Confucianism and the clan system as its analytical framework and adopts qualitative research and documentary analysis to systematically examine the cultural roots of indifference to gender violence and the tendency to rationalise it among people in rural areas. The study is mainly carried out through the following paths.

Firstly, through a combing of classical Confucian literature and local archives, this article traces the process of institutionalisation of traditional gender concepts and their modern changes, focusing on how the conceptual system of Confucian ethics on the positioning of women's roles and the construction of the social order has evolved into a discourse tool for suppressing the rights of the female individual in modern rural society. Secondly, this article analyses in depth how the clan system, while maintaining the stability of rural society, has formed a set of hidden mechanisms to exclude and dominate female members through its organisational structure and mindset. On this basis, the interaction between Confucian ethics and the clan system will be further explored, revealing how the two together shape the gender power pattern in rural society. Ultimately, the above analysis will shed light on how traditional cultural factors influence people's collective perceptions of and behavioural responses to gender-based violence, thereby revealing the complex mechanisms linking traditional culture and contemporary gender-based violence.

The View of Women in Clan Society in the Context of Confucian Culture

Xuzhou City is located in the northwestern part of Jiangsu Province, bordering Shandong Province, and has long been within the radiation range of the Central Plains culture. Shandong has been an important birthplace of Confucian culture and is the hometown of Confucius, the founder of Confucianism. Influenced by its geography, Xuzhou has been deeply imbued with Confucianism since ancient times. Since the Han Dynasty, Liu Che (156–87 BCE), the Western Han Emperor who originated from Xuzhou, implemented the policy of “Dismissing the Hundred Schools of Thought and Exalting Only Confucianism” during his reign, establishing Confucianism as the core of the state’s ideology and vigorously pursuing a system of “ritual” and “filial piety”. This policy established the central position of Confucianism in state ideology and vigorously promoted Confucian ethical culture based on the two systems of “rites” and

"filial piety". The system of "rites" maintained the hierarchical order of the ruler, his subjects, and the people by regulating the code of conduct in society. "Filial piety" is a family ethic focused on respecting and obeying one's parents; it is based on the ethics of blood ties, stressing the obligation of children to honour, support, and obey their parents, and it expands to become the core ethical norm that maintains family order and social stability. "Rites" and "filial piety" are mutually reinforcing, with "rites" providing social norms for "filial piety", and "filial piety" laying the family foundation for "rites". The purpose of the feudal ruling class in putting forward the concepts of rites and filial piety was to control the minds of the people in order to maintain the Confucian social order of "the unity of family and state", with the fundamental aim of consolidating their rule.

The implementation of Confucianism not only strengthened the legitimacy of imperial rule but also played a profound role in educating the people. As a military and economic centre, Xuzhou absorbed the Confucian ethical concepts of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and righteousness. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the local government cultivated local scholars through the establishment of Confucian institutions such as the Yunlong Academy. During this period, the imperial examination system—a system of selecting officials centred on the Confucian classics—further promoted the socialisation of Confucianism: the examinations were based on the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics*, and the *Ba Gu Wen* (eight-legged essay) was strictly adopted (Gao, 2006). After receiving Confucian training through the academies, Xuzhou literati advanced to the civil service through the imperial examinations, thus reinforcing the dominance of Confucianism at the local level.

The clan system is a form of social organisation that was formed and strengthened under the influence of Confucianism. The Confucian core idea of filial piety, which emphasises respect for ancestors and parents, provides the theoretical basis for the clan system. Confucianism advocates "benevolence and love", but "love has its differences". In contrast to Christian brotherly love in the Western world, which emphasises the equality of love, Confucianism advocates "love with difference", which asserts that one's love for others should be differentiated according to the closeness of kinship: the love of blood relatives is love based on natural blood relations, and within that love, the differentiation of love is a basic feature, constituting the foundation and root of benevolence (Chen, 2011). Based on blood affinity and ethical relations, love for people follows the principle of differential order from near to far, and from close to distant. For example, a Confucian scholar would prioritise caring for his own family, followed by helping more distant relatives, and finally benefiting neighbours and outsiders as the most distant. This hierarchy of care from relatives to the most distant is a typical manifestation of the "differential order of love". As Fei (1997) once commented, "In this Confucian society, all universal standards do not come into play, and one must ask who the target person is, and what relationship he or she has with that person before deciding what standards to apply."

The clan, as a characteristic product of traditional Chinese culture, is composed of members who are brought together on the basis of patrilineal blood relations. In traditional China, clans are centred on males of the same surname and lineage, with an emphasis on continuity of lineage and common ancestry. A clan usually includes both direct and collateral male members, such as grandfathers, fathers, sons, grandsons, uncles, and male cousins. These male members constitute the main force of the clan, holding decision-making and executive power in clan affairs, ancestral rituals, and land distribution. The Confucian notion that "there is a difference in love" fits perfectly with the clan's practice of "internal and external differentiation"—a distinction that often renders women and outsiders as perpetual "outsiders" even within the

household. The clan tends to differentiate between inside and outside, to order kinship, to put the interests of the family first, and to advocate "familyism", which requires all members of the clan to evaluate all matters on the basis of the interests of the family. When a conflict arises between the interests of the family and the interests of others, members of the clan are obliged to defend the interests of the family (Ye, 1996).

As a historical legacy, the clan network still exerts a far-reaching influence in contemporary Chinese rural society, particularly in regions like Xuzhou where Confucian traditions remain deeply embedded. For a long time, the family system in Xuzhou has generally emphasised traditional etiquette and patriarchal order, stressing "the proper order between the elder and the young" and "the virtues of filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and trustworthiness". In social practices such as weddings, funerals, and ancestor worship, and through the implementation of systems such as ancestral halls, genealogical records, and clan rules, clans have effectively assumed the functions of local governance, education, and relief. Xuzhou clans practised the "clan chief system", in which elders of high moral standing who were well-versed in Confucianism acted as clan chiefs, managing their clans according to the Confucian concepts of "moral governance" and "governance by virtue". Some large clans also established charitable estates and schools—such as the charitable land system of the Cui clan in Tongshan during the Qing Dynasty—which provided support for the poor and weak within the clan, embodying the Confucian ideal of "respecting the elderly of one's own family as well as those of others". This interaction demonstrates that Confucianism provided moral legitimacy to the Xuzhou clan system, while the clan system served as the concrete practice of Confucian ethics in grassroots society.

The combination of Confucianism and the clan system has produced specific social norms, and the gender concepts embedded in the clan system are likewise derived from Confucianism. Although the representative figures of Confucianism, Confucius and Mencius, both lost their fathers at an early age and were brought up by their mothers, the overall gender concepts established in the Confucian system of thought reinforced the subordinate status of women. The traditional patriarchal society was founded on the hierarchical principles of "respect for elders and the subordination of women". Confucian classics such as *Li Ji Nei Ze* (The Book of Rites: Domestic Rules) and *Yi Li* (The Ceremonials and Rites) explicitly prescribed the subordinate role of women as "obeying their fathers before marriage, their husbands after marriage, and their sons in widowhood".

The gender inequality that prevailed in ancient Chinese society was concretely and profoundly reflected in the clan system of the Xuzhou region. The clan, as a social organisation linked by blood ties, operates on a distinctly patriarchal membership basis. In this system, women associated with the male members of the clan—such as wives, mothers, and unmarried daughters—although living within the clan, occupy a marginal position. Wives, though married into their husbands' clans, are often regarded as "outsiders", while daughters, once married, are regarded as "spilled water" and formally separated from their natal clans to join their husbands' clans. This arrangement of gender marginalisation not only shapes the power structure within the family but also has a profound impact on the social relations and ethical order of rural society.

By controlling marriage arrangements and property inheritance, the clan system effectively preserves and transmits Confucian gender ethics and perpetuates patriarchal power structures from generation to generation. Although the women's liberation movement after the founding of New China abolished many customs that discriminated against women, concepts such as the

preference for men over women still exist to varying degrees in areas where clan culture is deeply rooted, such as Xuzhou. Men still hold decision-making power and the right to speak within the clan, while women remain primarily responsible for the reproductive labour of the family. This phenomenon demonstrates that the cultural traditions formed through the long-term interaction between Confucianism and the clan system have had a profound and complex impact on the shaping of gender concepts, and that their legacy has not yet completely dissipated in contemporary society.

Discussion

Clan descent is a key element in understanding the structure of traditional Chinese society. As the core of descent theory, the patriarchal system not only establishes the organisational principles of the clan but also bears the primary responsibility for presiding over religious and ethical affairs such as ancestor worship (Hu, 2015). In ancient times, due to the low productivity of agricultural societies, the bureaucratic system originating from the will of the emperor could hardly penetrate grassroots areas below the county level. At the same time, the land-centred production model of agriculture made people tend to live together in family units, forming a village structure centred on the family and constructing a typical vernacular society. Particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the state delegated grassroots governance to local gentry groups, Confucianism established a patriarchal network of grassroots society through the intermediary power of clans, thus becoming an important tool for the state to govern grassroots society. Although clan leaders nowadays are usually no longer in control of political or economic power, they are still able to effectively organise and discipline their clan members with the help of traditional Confucian ideology. As a result of the clan chiefs' promotion of Confucian values, Confucianism not only functioned as the ideology of the ruling class at the level of the ancient Chinese feudal state but also exerts a profound influence on grassroots societies today. It can be said that Confucianism not only carries the concept of governance “above the temple” but also plays a role in organising rural society.

The Xuzhou region has long been known for its advanced agriculture and is an important base for the production of agricultural and sideline products in China. The predominantly agricultural way of life in the region has led to a pattern of settlement centred on single-surname families, with many villages forming a “one village, one surname” structure. These families often multiplied over generations and were large in scale, forming powerful clan organisations. Dongji Village, for example, falls under the jurisdiction of Huankou Town, which has 36 administrative villages, including Dongji, Dongzhuang, and Dongtang—three villages with the surname “Dong” in their names (Xuzhou Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This clearly indicates that the Dong family name holds significant influence in the local community. The Dong family in Huankou Town has a history of nearly 600 years and has established a typical large-scale clan system, complete with a clan temple, an ancestral tomb, as well as a matriarch and a family council. Historically, the Dong family has held a prominent position in Feng County, and there is even a saying: “Although you may possess a thousand hectares of good land, it is even better to have the surname Dong,” reflecting the family's prestige and influence in the local community. This is precisely the underlying reason why the chained woman was imprisoned for such a long time. The intertwining interests of blood, kinship, and geography have turned all the Dongji villagers who knew about the existence of the chained woman into a criminal community. Rural villages in China are fundamentally natural villages, and in single-surname villages such as Dongji Village in particular, the villagers have long since formed a community of shared interests in which concealing a crime becomes an act of collective self-preservation.

In the 1980s, as the urban-rural household registration system was loosened following the reforms and opening up, and as farmers began to have money in their hands to participate in the market economy, the crime of human trafficking, particularly of women from impoverished inland regions, grew significantly in China. Xuzhou, as an area that was relatively lagging behind in economic development, also retained a deep-rooted traditional clan culture. This dual context made the pursuit of gender equality there a particular challenge. Deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes were not only reflected in social perceptions but also had a profound impact on practical areas such as resource allocation and family decision-making, leading to a more prominent imbalance in gender development in the region. Many poor men were unable to find a wife locally; thus, in order to carry on the family line, they would purchase a wife from the even poorer mountainous regions of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan (Xie & Jia, 1989).

Victims and buyers of trafficking offences are usually concentrated in rural areas. The crime of trafficking in women encompasses the sale of human beings, prolonged rape, unlawful detention, and abuse. It is often committed by more than one perpetrator and is the result of a combination of group complicity and collective harbouring. Even well-educated women from upper-middle-class backgrounds who are targeted by traffickers may be trafficked to impoverished areas, where they may face unlawful confinement, violent beatings, humiliation, rape, and forced childbirth. Although the chained woman wore chains around her neck, the house she lived in was not locked, and villagers could see her —yet no one cared. The villagers remained indifferent and did not see the imprisonment as a criminal offence—or perhaps, as the passage suggests, did not see it as a matter worth intervening in. Furthermore, the blogger who found the "chained woman" admitted that he chose to expose the incident rather than report it to the police because he hoped to use the pressure of public opinion to make Dong Zhimin treat the chained woman more kindly. He also worried that if Dong Zhimin were arrested, the children would be left unattended (Zeng, 2022).

As a result, in this environment, trafficked women are not only objectified as "commodities" but also alienated as a form of "special private property". To protect this "property", villagers belonging to the same clan form a set of unwritten "township rules and regulations' as well as an unspoken 'system of complicity'" (Zhao & Fu 2023). For example, if a trafficked woman is found to be trying to escape, the buyer and nearby villagers will unite to keep a close watch on her; when the police come to rescue her, the villagers will notify each other and refuse to cooperate, making it impossible for the police to locate her. Should a bought wife be discovered, the villagers will gather to obstruct the police from taking her away. This phenomenon is not unique to Dongji Village. In fact, when it comes to the abduction and trafficking of women and children, the villages involved effectively become a criminal community, bound not by formal conspiracy but by shared economic interests and kinship obligations. (He, 2022).

So why did the Dong clan, an important part of the local power structure, fail to stand up and stop this tragedy? There are two reasons. First, clan culture itself is strongly patriarchal, and women are often seen as subordinates or outsiders. This is a feudal legacy of traditional Chinese culture that persists today (Gu, 2006). In the traditional clan order, the status of male members is naturally higher than that of females, especially those who are not from the clan—such as women who have been trafficked or married out of the clan. As a "foreigner" with the surname Yang, the chained woman was seen by the Dong clan as a mere "tool to carry on the family line" rather than as a member of the clan worthy of protection. Even if she was illegally detained, abused, or subjected to sexual violence, members of the clan may have regarded it as "Dong Zhimin's family business" and thus lacked the moral motivation to intervene. This

indifference is not accidental but stems from the deeper logic of Confucian patriarchal culture, which enshrines the principles of "distinction between inner and outer spheres" and "male superiority over female inferiority". Within this framework, women are tacitly assigned to their husband's family, their fates dictated by male authority, while outsiders—including other male clan members—are accorded no right to intervene, as the Confucian ethical order systematically delegitimises external interference in what is constructed as a "domestic affair".

Second, clan society attaches great importance to "honour" and "decency", and tends to digest conflicts internally rather than expose problems publicly. After public opinion surrounding the chained woman incident intensified, some Dongji villagers still tried to defend Dong Zhimin, claiming that "the chained woman has mental problems, and it is for her own good that she is locked up" (Jimu News, 2022). Behind this kind of rhetoric lies the clan culture's obsession with the notion that "family scandal cannot be publicised". In their view, rather than allowing what happened to the chained woman to become the focus of society and tarnish the clan's image, it is better to maintain superficial harmony and condone the continuation of atrocities in the shadows—a logic that prioritises collective reputation over individual suffering and effectively sanctions impunity.

Conclusion

The chain that had been locked around the woman's neck for years was not only a constraint on her body but also an extreme trampling of her humanity and dignity. The villagers' blindness and the passive inaction of local law enforcement agencies reflected a serious lack of state public power at the grassroots level. This kind of power indulgence and governance failure has exacerbated the deterioration of the social ecology, turning the countryside into a marginal zone on the verge of a breakdown of civilised order. There is no constant boundary between the "normal" and the "pathological"; they are in a state of historical flux and evolution (Canguilhem, 1991). What becomes "normal" in a given social context is thus the product of contingent historical forces, not of moral or medical necessity. Trafficking in women is not only tolerated but is even condoned and internalised as a normal norm—a socially generated pathology. Communities of interest, bound by blood, kinship, and geography, have created a "norm" in rural societies of "joint criminality" that harbours the abuse of women. This "norm" is neither natural nor historically inevitable but is the result of the co-construction of local social structures and cultural mechanisms.

The structural characteristics of clan culture not only promote the objectification and control of women's bodies but also perpetuate and reproduce gender violence in local societies through implicit power mechanisms. The failure of the Dong clan to explicitly stop Dong Zhimin's abusive behaviour towards women reflects a deep-seated problem: the dysfunctionality and ethical failure of traditional clan culture in rural societies that have not yet been adequately penetrated by the modern legal order. When clan culture, local protectionism, and gender violence form a conspiracy, the law often fails to be fully effective. In this case, despite strong public condemnation, only a handful of grassroots officials were held accountable, while the clan forces that had long condoned or even participated in the cover-up were not fundamentally challenged. It was not the self-purification of the clan that made the incident publicised and widely disseminated, but rather the involvement of external media, the sustained voice of public opinion, and the active intervention of the state's judicial power. In short, the chained woman incident demonstrates that to break this cycle, it is not only necessary to improve law enforcement but even more crucial to deconstruct the patriarchal network of clan control over

rural society; otherwise, more chained women will exist in even more insidious ways in the future.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Plant Knowledge Transmission and the Resilience of Karen Poetics in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

This article reveals the complex cultural meanings of Karen poetics (*hta*), which encode diverse plant names, seasonal knowledge, and ecological ethics among Karen communities in Northern Thailand. The study focuses on the processes of plant knowledge transmission through poetics and related stories that circulate within households, ritual spaces, and community gatherings. Ethnographic fieldwork and local plant surveys were employed to document poetics and narratives that include local plants and their uses. The findings indicate a wide range of plant-related narratives that connect human communities with their ecological systems, demonstrating the deep-rooted relationship between the Karen and their surrounding forest environments as expressed through the singing of *hta*. This also reflects the long-term adaptation of Karen communities to mountainous environments. The collective memory embedded in these poetics supports the resilience strategies of Karen communities and serves as a method for negotiating with government officers by demonstrating sustainable ways of living with nature, highlighting their capacity to manage and coexist with forest landscapes.

Keywords: Karen poetics, plant knowledge, oral poetry, northern Thailand

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Introduction

The Karen community is the largest ethnic group in Thailand, with settlements primarily located in northern, western, and parts of central Thailand. Often referred to by outsiders as *Kariang* or *Yang*, Karen people in Thailand are internally diverse and are broadly classified into two major sub-groups: Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. The majority belong to the Sgaw Karen, who identify themselves as Pgaz K'Nyau, meaning "human being" (Laungaramsri, 2003, p. 23). In northern Thailand, Karen settlements are typically located at elevations between 500 and 1,000 meters, positioned between lowland Tai populations and other upland ethnic groups such as the Hmong, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, and Yao (Anderson, 1993, pp. 19–35). Living in mountainous landscapes and forested environments, Karen communities have long maintained close and reciprocal relationships with their surrounding ecosystems. The Pgaz K'Nyau, in particular, are frequently described as attentive and responsible environmental stewards (Forsyth & Walker, 2008). Their ecological worldview positions humans as an integral part of the natural world rather than as separate from it. Karen communities are recognized for their environmental stewardship, grounded in traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual and ethnical obligations to the forest. However, the relationship between Karen communities in highlands of Thailand and other agencies has increasingly become subject to pressure from conservation policies, land disputes and encounter with modernity that have led to erosion of traditional practices. Observing the transmission of plant knowledge encoded in Karen poetics, therefore reflects the deep understanding of traditional ecological knowledge and resilience processes among Karen communities.

This paper addresses this analytical gap by examining plant knowledge transmission through poetics among Karen communities in northern Thailand. Local plant narratives are fundamental to the construction and transmission of traditional plant knowledge. These narratives are expressed through oral poetry (*hta*), everyday storytelling, and practical engagement with plants. Karen poetics function as mnemonic devices that encode ecological knowledge within cultural forms. Plants are not treated merely as passive resources but as relational entities embedded in social memory and ethical relations with the forest. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in five villages, namely Mae Klang Luang, Nong Tao, Khun Pae, Mae Sa-pok, and Pok Ka-long villages, in Chiang Mai Province, the study explores how plant knowledge is transmitted by conveying diverse plant names, seasonal knowledge, and ecological ethics. It demonstrates how Karen communities negotiate, adapt, and construct meanings that revitalize and sustain human-environment relationships and ways of life in northern Thailand.

Literature Review

Plant Knowledge

The study of plant knowledge within indigenous and local communities has undergone intensive research over recent decades, encompassing ethnobotanical, cultural, and interdisciplinary approaches. Salmón (2012) demonstrated the relationship between indigenous communities and plants by showing that plants occupy a position reflecting social categories, with the moral and behavioral attributes of those human social categories projected onto the corresponding categories of people. This perspective moved beyond a purely scientific approach by revealing plants as social actors embedded in human-nature relations within networks of reciprocity.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is an adaptive knowledge and beliefs that passed down across generations related to living beings with one another and with their environment (Berkes, 1999). Traditional ecological knowledge is not only transmitted through practical knowledge such as farming forest management. Traditional Ecological Knowledge can be observed through cultural forms such as oral poetry, ritual and everyday story telling. This paper focus on Karen poetics (*hta*) as a medium of traditional ecological knowledge transmission encoded in the form of oral poetry, functioning both as repository of traditional knowledge and as a mean of transmitting plant knowledge across generations within Karen communities.

Collective Memory

As Halbwachs argued, individual memory is constructed through interaction and communication with others, because individuals must participate in a collective symbolic order to differentiate, interpret, and remember past events (Erll, 2011, p. 15). The interaction of "everyday life practice" and "ritual" generates different forms of cultural memory. Halbwachs' view of memory is that it serves as a tool to reconnect us with past experiences. "A remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a construction prepared, furthermore, by reconstruction of early periods wherein past images had already been altered" (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 68). Everyday practice and interaction in communicative memory constitute temporary forms of memory that individuals can personally interpret, shaped by the external factors influencing the self-presentation and memory of individuals, which are in turn shaped by collective memory. Individual memory is organic and always interplays with a collective memory of the groups. "One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). The concept of collective memory is particularly productive for understanding Karen poetics which function as sites where individual experience and communal knowledge converge in act of remembrance that are simultaneously personal and collective. Karen poetics are treated as "cultural memory" (Assmann, 2011) that is a formalized form of collective memory that serves as a repository of local knowledge accumulated over generations. The transmission of cultural memory integrating ecological knowledge and collective memories, supports the understanding and reproduction of ecological knowledge across generations, even under condition of the erosion of cultural knowledge.

Methodology

Data collection focused on five primary field sites. In Mae Wang District, data were collected from Nong Tao Village and Mae Sa-pok Village. In Chom Thong District, fieldwork was conducted in Mae Klang Luang Village and Khun Pae Village. The final site was Pok Ka-long Village in Galyani Vadhana District. A multi-sited ethnographic approach was employed to compare Karen poetics across different locations and to analyze similarities and differences in meanings and narratives associated with plants.

The study employed group interviews using semi-structured questions. Semi-structured interviews were supported by detailed field notes and audio recordings. Interviews were conducted between April and December 2025. After each interview, audio recordings were transcribed, and the accuracy of the narratives was verified by revisiting the key informants to reconfirm the content. Data were documented through video recordings to capture local plant narratives in the forms of oral poetry (*hta*) and storytelling. In addition, the author conducted

participant observation in nearby forests and orchard gardens to observe plant species, explore their locations and uses, and listen to narratives related to specific plants encountered during field observation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with organizing and reviewing the compiled list of local plant narratives collected during the fieldwork. The researcher analyzed the data by interpreting participant observations, interview content, and everyday conversations recorded during fieldwork. The narratives were categorized into thematic groups reflecting relationships between humans and nature, including rice, flora and fauna, forests and mountains, and agricultural activities. Narratives were repeatedly examined through field notes and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes through a triangulation process.

Results

Karen poetics (*hta*) functions not only as a narrative form describing plant usage but also carries layered meanings within Karen communities. The implications of *hta* can be understood in at least two ways. First, *hta* conveys cultural meanings by transmitting Karen values and ways of life to younger generations. Second, *hta* operates as a temporal indicator, linking specific plants, animals, and natural phenomena to seasonal cycles and agricultural activities. This section elaborates on these two implications by examining how *hta* integrates relationships between plants, humans, and seasonal cycles.

Cultural Meanings and Seasonal Indicators

Oral Poetry in Karen Language	Meaning
La le chri pu ho wo por	Go to the field, flowers of phak i-luen
La le chri pu ho wo por	Go to the field, flowers of Phak i-luen
Se hyeu ba na ho chi nor	Thinking of you, sitting and crying
Se hyeu ba na ho chi nor	Thinking of you, sitting and crying
La le chri pu ho wo pa	Go to the field, flowers of phak i-luen
La le chri pu ho wo pa	Go to the field, flowers of phak i-luen
Se hyeu ba na mae tee ywa	Thinking of you, tears flow
Se hyeu ba na mae tee ywa	Thinking of you, tears flow

*Note. * phak i-luen = Isodon ternifolius* (D.Don) Kudo

Composition of Karen Poetic

Scene: Field
Main plant: *Phak i-luen* (*Isodon ternifolius* [D.Don] Kudo)
Action: Thinking of others, sitting and crying

Implications

1. This *hta* expresses a sense of longing and reminiscence triggered by encountering *phak i-luen* in the field. The plant evokes memories of collective labor and shared moments, as *phak i-luen* is traditionally cooked and eaten together after working in the fields. Its distinctive mint-like aroma becomes associated with communal meals and cooperation during agricultural seasons.

2. The planting of *phak i-luen* alongside rice serves as a seasonal indicator. Its presence in the fields signals the rice harvesting period, typically from late October to early November, when community members gather to assist one another in harvesting ripe rice. The plant thus links emotional memory, social relations, and agricultural cycles.

Ecological Ethic

Oral Poetry in Karen Language	Meaning
Ta pwa o di ta mue di	The forest still exists, still lives in happiness
Ta pwa o di ta mue di	The forest still exists, still lives in happiness
Li lu pli bor bo a sui	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves, make nests
Li lu pli bor bo a sui	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves, make nests
Ta pwa o di ta mue ma	The forest still exists, living very happily
Ta pwa o di ta mue ma	The forest still exists, living very happily
Li lu pli bor bo a sa	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves
Li lu pli bor bo a sa	Squirrels, flying squirrels, wrap themselves

***Composition of* hta**

Scene: Forest
Main animals: Squirrels and flying squirrels
Action: Nesting and sheltering

Implications

1. This *hta* emphasizes the importance of forests as spaces that sustain life and well-being. The imagery of squirrels nesting and wrapping themselves parallels how forests provide shelter and security for humans. The poem conveys its ethical message through the behavior of squirrels and flying squirrels, framing forest protection as a matter of shared survival between human (metaphorically represented by animals) and the forest.
2. The poem highlights forest biodiversity and interdependence, reinforcing the belief that humans must protect ecological diversity in the same way animals depend on forests for survival. This poem presents the forest as living entity linked to the human community through the imagery of a forest as “exists” and “lives in happiness,” reflecting a reciprocal relationship between humans and the forest environment.

Discussion

Plant Knowledge Transmission

Based on ethnographic observation and interviews, local plant knowledge, including plant species, growth patterns, surrounding environments, and agricultural practices, is repeatedly referenced and reinforced through oral poetry across multiple contexts. Informants emphasized that these narratives often serve as foundational stories shaping practical knowledge related to seed collection, seasonal agricultural activities, and land use. This integration of practice and narrative reflects how Pgaz K'Nyau culture is constituted through the interdependence of natural ecosystems and cultural practices, highlighting the importance of protecting both tangible and intangible cultural expressions alongside biodiversity (Tamborrino et al., 2022).

Local plant narratives among the Karen articulate a worldview in which humans coexist with a natural world, where all beings possess spiritual owners. This belief system is consistently expressed through oral poetry that encodes ecological understanding, ethical conduct, and social values (Maniratanavongsiri, 1997). *Hta* is frequently recognized as a repository of ancient wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge, illustrating how Pgaz K'Nyau communities sustain harmonious relationships with their environments. Beyond narrating human-nature relations, local plant narratives also identify specific plant species, ecological settings, cultural meanings, and seasonal cycles, demonstrating the multifunctional role of oral poetry in constructing local plant knowledge among Karen communities.

Transmission and Resilient Local Plant Knowledge

Karen poetics can be used as references to observe the biodiversity of plants and animals that closely correspond to seasonal change and agricultural practices, illustrating the community's deep environmental knowledge and adaptive strategies. These narratives contribute to broader understandings of cultural diversity among ethnic groups in Northern Thailand, functioning not only as cultural expressions but also as repositories of ecological knowledge. Cultural diversity is defined as the variety of expressions, languages, practices, and traditions within societies that supports biodiversity conservation by embedding ecological knowledge in rituals, songs, and everyday practices (Bates et al., 2021, p. 163–174). The findings suggest that oral poetry constitutes a form of ecological memory that integrates lived experience, collective memory, and environmental observation, offering an alternative perspective on human-ecological relationships beyond resource-based interpretations. By foregrounding narrative and performance, this research highlights how intangible cultural practices contribute to food security, ecological balance, and community continuity. The evidence suggests that Karen poetics encode e the long-term ecological knowledge required for effective forest management.

Summary

The research sought to connect the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in the form of ecological memory with concrete examples of Karen poetics. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and observation, the results reveal the deep understanding of the relationship between plant, human and ecological knowledge – not only regarding agricultural practice but also in the cultural meaning derived from the specific characteristics of plants, animals, and forest, and to the relationship between humans and flora and fauna in mountainous areas. Moreover, it reveals seasonal cycle to indicate important timeline of Pgaz K'Nyau's way of life. This research sheds light on the study of narratives that reveal the connection to

collective memory of local people articulated through poetry as one form of oral poetry to inscribe of the close relationship of humans to ecological settings and as reminder of time and an indicator of the initial point to start agricultural activities. This enriches understanding of daily life and plant usage and can be one of models of how people can live sustainably within the forest. This research will be one of the focal points to develop the understanding of how Karen food security works without disrupting the balance the natural world.

Recommendation

Future research may further explore how narrative-based ecological knowledge can advance the study of food security and community resilience through locally grounded strategies that sustain livelihoods while maintaining balance within forest and mountainous environments. Comparative studies across Karen communities and across different highland communities in mainland Southeast Asia would help to clarify which feature of oral poetry-based transmission are specific to the Karen communities and which may reflect boarder patterns in oral traditions and plant knowledge transmission across generations.

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

The author declares that Claude, an AI-assisted writing tool, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Claude, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Pagpánaw: The Solon House Deaths, Wakes, and Culture of Grief

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Abstract

A journey through three generations, *Pagpánaw* answers the question: How does a family hold space for grief and construct meaning around death? Tethered to cultural memory theories, the paper examines death and grief in the smallest unit of society—the Solon House, also a structure in the village of Mabolo in Cebu City, Philippines. Through autoethnography and phenomenology, the exhumed data in the form of written reconstructed memory evocative vignettes and narrated lived experiences gathered from chat and interview transcripts are analyzed and coded to extract and name grief and its many faces and describe the spaces it inhabits. The collated data reveal the rituals and cultural beliefs not only limited to the family, but also part of a larger death and grief culture. A belief example, mind the sumpa (counterspell) when arranging the funeral in the house to avoid successive deaths—the coffin placement of the recently deceased family member must not be in the same spot as the earlier held funeral. One of the offshoots of the *Katingaláhan* study, the paper also lightly touches on the curious connection between ghost sighting or katingaláhan manifestation and the family's concepts of grief and death. It informs other area studies and disciplines including Asian studies, thanatology, memory, and vernacular language heritage.

Keywords: cultural studies, place memory, death, grief

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Introduction

How does a family hold space for grief and construct meaning around death? This is the overarching question the *Pagpánaw* paper tries to answer.

Pagpánaw Defined

Traced as far back as proto-Austronesian, proto-Malayo-Polynesian, and proto-Oceanic, pánaw and its reconstruction means "travel, journey, go, walk away, depart (on foot), leave on a journey" and "die; death" (Blust et al., 2023). Understandably, *pagpánaw* contains the words *pán* (bread; make bread) associated with "life" and "sustaining life" which can *pánas* (erase) hunger, shifting to mean "death" especially —*sa láing kalibútan* (Wolff, 1972). Suffice to say, *Pagpánaw* essentially contains life, journey, and death—a person's entire lifespan.

Cultural Memory

How societies remember their past to construct identity in the present is the realm of cultural memory, the "handing down of meaning" from mimetic memory, memory of things, and communicative memory that functions as identity construct, adaptation, and resistance (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1950; Nora, 1989; Steigler, 1998). The act of remembering reworks to re-define and re-construct depiction—paghulagway—and identity, a constant update grounded in the language of the current milieu (Kintanar-Alburo, 2026). Collective memory finds interest in developmental memory, neuroscience, reconstruction, autobiographical memory and narratives, etcetera (Conway, 2001; Elliot, 2016; Larcy & Stark, 2013; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Roediger III et al., 1993; Roediger III, 2001; Schneider, 2011; Smorti, 2011).

Place and Space

A space with meanings, the Solon House, a place located in the village of Mabolo in Cebu City built before the Second World War (descriptive approach), celebrates not only history, but importantly, family and intergenerational stories; a reflexive space that welcomes (home)birthing, accommodates living, and supports dying, death and grief (social constructionist approach). The family's perception and lived experience connects them to the physical structure and spaces through meaning attachment (phenomenological approach), the root of place-making and knowledge of places (Del Aguila et al., 2019; El-Bizri, 2018; Halbwachs,1950).

Death and Grief

The finality or temporal ideas on death are usually associated with grief. Origins and beliefs surrounding death by early Filipinos are documented in Demetrio (1966) while attempts to capture how the dead remain and linger on in the minds of the living are in Ruin (2019). For the current paper, *Pagpánaw* takes from the psychological and philosophical approaches using the theories of five stages of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1997, 2026), sixth stage of grief in perspective (Kessler, 2019), grief meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2006), and phenomenology (Heidegger, 2008).

Autoethnography

Defined as an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural and communication practices, traditions, shared meanings, and emotions utilized in family research, autoethnography is the best method for *Pagpánaw* (Adams & Manning, 2015; Poulos, 2021). Because the self is a basic unit of culture "consistently connected to others", my sharing of personal narratives with verisimilitude as qualitative data, which bares the most vulnerable experiences that shaped me, gives me the agency to interpret them as best I can (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2022; Beattie, 2024; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2016). As an autoethnographer writing *Pagpánaw* vignettes, I help preserve intangible heritage that embodies culture and enable "cultural continuity" (Kintanar-Alburo, 2015). Autoethnography bridges creative writing through vignettes to heritage studies to memory studies, and goes beyond genealogy and memory (Ortiz-Vilarelle, 2021).

Phenomenology

Smith (2018) defines phenomenology as "the study of structures of experiences, or consciousness" which examines how death and grief appear to the Solon House and their meanings. Phenomenology, a first-person vantage point, is a suitable method for dissecting the *pagpánaw* lived-experience narratives of my family, including the ethical handling and careful analysis of how grief is embodied through rituals, how our home shaped the family's death and grief sensory experiences, and how generational mourning is observed. *Pagpánaw* digs into my family's personal narratives from interviews and group chat transcripts—the primary source of data.

Summary

Briefly, the *Pagpánaw* paper tethers to cultural memory as it maneuvers a three-generation walk with and inside the Solon House through autoethnography and phenomenology, sweeping every nook, crevice, and corner of embodied experience, trauma, and reconstructed memory for a collective meaning of death and grief.

Party and Silence: Death of the Solon Patriarch and the Solon Bishop

> My earliest memory of death was that it felt like a party without balloons. At least that was how it seemed like during my paternal grandfather's funeral in our ancestral house. I was barely two years old. My faint, reconstructed memory included lights all over the place, more lights near the casket, which was taller than me, so that my mama would carry me in her arms to take a look through the casket's glass at my sleeping grandfather. There were servings of food and drinks, novena recitations, various games, like cards, bingo, and mahjong, and us kids ran around after endless amin to elders. There were various kinds of emotion and gesture roasting—laughter, cries, hugs, explosive greetings, reunions with relatives and old friends from distant places. There might be other deaths and funerals of family and relatives in our eskinita and barangay where I was taken along by my parents, and I surmise they come in the same experience to a child—a party without balloons.

However, when I was about eight years old, I remember being ushered by my Papa from the family bedroom to the sala to meet and 'bless' the man reading a newspaper, sitting near the sala-balcony door Sa Taas (upstairs). I was asked to call him Titi Benny.

I reached for his hand, which he obliged to give, then tapped the back of his hand to my forehead—the gesture of amin, a sign of respect to elders and for elders to shower blessings on the young.

That was the only encounter I had with Titi Benny. My mind as a kid was always occupied with finishing homework, a license before playing with cousins and neighbors.

The next scene in the same area Sa Taas sometime later was the arrival of my Tita Eva and her siblings from Iligan. Papa rushed to open the balcony door and meet them, and that was when I heard my Tita Eva calling my papa's name and saw her break down in tears. They were comforting each other on the balcony.

I was standing next to the wooden railings of the stairs near the altar wall looking at grief—immensely hovering from the balcony to the sala before taking on the entire Solon House.

Across the balcony door and about five feet from the sala floor protruded the altar where the large portrait of the Sacred Heart of Jesus hung with backlights. The portrait was what anyone can see from the bottom of the stairs climbing up. That was what Tiya Lucy sees as she climbs up the stairs to meet her nieces. When she arrived Sa Taas where I was still standing next to the wooden railings of the stairs near the altar, I asked Tiya Lucy what happened to Titi Benny.

Tiya replied with a heavy silence. Her eyes were like the large tangke sa tubig (water tank) Sa Gawas (outside) our home, which is connected to the puso (water pump)—after four hundred ninety-nine manual pumps are done—full and only a pump away to overflow.

The weight and intensity of that particularly unnamed silence was inconsolable.

It was grief desperately yearning to find closure.

Titi Benny—known by many as His Most Excellency Bishop Bienvenido Solon Tudtud—Tatay Bido and Bapa Benny to close friends, was the first Prelate of Iligan and Marawi. For everyone, he was a dearly loved bishop. For Papa and Tiya Lucy, he was first and foremost their first cousin, our beloved family member.

Titi Benny perished in the plane crash on board Philippine Airlines flight 206, the one from Manila on its way to Baguio on June 26, 1987. Every single soul in that flight perished–all fifty of them. Nothing was recovered. Everything was ash.

How does a family mourn this kind of departure?

The scene of grief in the balcony that I witnessed as a child would make sense decades later when my generation lost our eldest first cousin, our Manoy. But we were able to

> see our Manoy, held his funeral, and saw him off to his burial. Papa, Tiya Lucy, Tita Eva and the family never had that chance to do the same for Titi Benny.
>
> Inside the Solon House that time in 1987, some sinister fiend named Death found a way to prick all colorful balloons, bursting them all at once. Death turned our home unbearably gray and silent.

Reflexivity Turn

My reconstructed memories in paragraph 1 are gathered based on later experiences of death rituals at home. I pieced together the few snippets of my lived experiences (e.g. lights, height of the casket, mama carrying me to view my sleeping grandfather) to form meaning, following the notions of autobiographical and narrative memories as well as memory reconstruction (Conway, 2001; Elliot, 2016; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Lacy & Stark, 2013; Roediger III et al., 1993; Roediger III, 2001; Schneider, 2011; Smorti, 2011). Writing the vignettes, Jackson's (2026) words ring true: "Every elder who passes without sharing their knowledge represents an irreplaceable loss." Tatay Andy and Titi Benny, whom I knew only from the stories shared by elders and palpable evidence of typewritten manuscripts (please see *Figures 1 and 2*) are irreplaceable losses. To wonder what writing would have been like for me had I the good fortune of conversing and learning from "dialogues" about their crafts is missed-chance in action, a particular grief I named **Anúgon**—a thought, a feeling to describe grief in a small "what a pity" incident or a large-scale lament (Binisaya.com, 2007). The elder Solon writers' deaths meant a period of wrestling with my own identity, so that I had to find a semblance of connection at universities (studied and taught language and literature). The identity wrestling is not isolated as my 4th generation niece wrote:

> Papa mentioned how Lolo Andres dabbled on a lot of things, […] worked in radio, he was also part of a group that created poems using old Bisaya language […] wrote scripts and not just poems. I remember being surprised and happy when I heard that, Ate said maybe that's where I get it from and that really made me think – if our passion and interests can be genetically inherited? Did I get it from him or did I choose this path? Either way, I'm very glad that we share the same interests and love for words. Hearing that he was also a writer gave me comfort somehow. (Solon Descendants, 2022, p. 15)

She went on to share her childhood experience seeing the ghost of Tatay Andy sitting on the rocking chair in the sala with a reflective reference to anúgon:

> I noticed there was a glow, I then saw a bright apparition sitting on the rocking chair, I walked closer and that's when I could make out his face but since I didn't know who he was then (I only knew it was Lolo Andres when Kuya Mark showed me a photo of him the next day) I ended up running. I wonder sometimes if I hadn't run away then what would've happened, what would he have said? (Solon Descendants, 2022, p. 16)

Reflecting on spectral and Ruin's (2019) "the dead remain and linger on the minds of the living as an incomplete process of mourning" idea, I found myself curious on how a child like my niece had an "incomplete process of mourning" when she did not even know or meet her own great grandfather in the first place. Interestingly, Steigler (1998) tackled three types of memories: (1) genetic–through DNA, (2) epigenetic–through the central nervous system, and (3) epiphylogenetic–through language, rituals, books, etcetera. Can incomplete mourning be passed down through genetic and epigenetic memories? Epiphylogenetic—evidenced by the

manuscripts of Tatay and Titi plus the Solon House's ongoing intangible heritage documentation as bridge linking ancestors and descendants—is an accessible "matter of survival" memory storage for generations down the line that longed for connection and identity like my niece and I did (Kintanar-Alburo, 2015).

Full Circle: Death of the Solon Matriarch

My first vivid encounter with death was with my Lola Nena, my paternal grandmother and the Solon House Matriarch. I was in first year high school, around thirteen years old.

I was present when Lola Nena succumbed to a heart attack. Lola was seated in her favorite chair Sa Silong (ground floor), near the dining area and the kitchen. Deep, resonant snoring was heard, overpowering the volume of the radio drama she was listening to while holding her hand-made paspas (mosquito duster). The snoring was no longer normal. I went closer to her and tried to wake her up. My cousins also did the same, but our Lola would not wake up. My Mama, who was washing clothes Sa Gawas (outside) the house near the puso (water pump), and Ate, my cousin's girlfriend, a registered nurse who was off-duty at that time, rushed to Lola's aid. Then there was such a commotion, a panic difficult to ignore. Mama instructed me in the form of a command to call an ambulance.

Still in shock and with no prior briefing what to do during emergency cases like this, I dialed the Emergency Rescue Unit Foundation (ERUF) number. It took a while between panic and fear in my Lola's life for me to realize that I was repeatedly screaming the complete address of our home to the ERUF responder on the other end of the phone because the responder would not hurry. They kept trying to calm me down. They were asking for landmarks.

'Unsa may kinaduolan nga building o tindahan sa inyoha?' (What's the nearest building or store near your home?)

I replied, 'Luyo sa Caltex, duol sa simbahan.' (At the back of Caltex, near the church.) The responder assured that the rescuers would arrive in a few minutes.

I put the phone receiver down and screamed, "Padung na ang ERUF!" (ERUF is on its way!)

Everyone was hysterical. More cousins and elders arrived at the scene where my Lola was still heavily snoring. High on adrenaline, Tiyo carried the dead weight of our Lola from the rocking chair to the dining table. My Mama and Ate tried to revive our Lola with the heart pumping cardiopulmonary resuscitation that seemed like forever at that time. When the ERUF paramedics arrived, they carried my revived Lola onto the stretcher, rolled her out of the house, then slid her in the back of the ambulance. A family member went in to accompany Lola.

An awkward disbelief vacuumed the Solon House. Intense. Suspended in the air like dark, nimbus clouds. A stillness gathering storms like the one before Super Typhoon Ruping released its wrath at our home barely two years prior. Several minutes after the ambulance drove off, Category 5 made its landfall. Silence broke free. Stillness turned

to chaos. Packed with maximum sustained winds and intense wind gust, each family member emotionally shared their experience at the eye of the storm.

If there was one thing that must be said: My Lola Nena was a fighter. She survived the second World War evacuating her family—and with her three children between the ages of six and four, no less—to the mountains of Cantipla in Balamban, the death of her two young sons at the age of seven years old and of six months, and the death of her husband. She lived on for her living children and grandchildren, managing the home as usual. There was no heart attack that could bring her down without a fight.

How does a family care for the sick and the dying?

Reflexivity Turn

The reconstruction of this memory was done in drafts and cross-references with the family's lived memories. A couple of actors during the emergency in my initial recall were not the ones present. For example, I thought it was my cousin Manoy B who carried Lola from the chair to the dining table. Mama, an early septuagenarian, corrected me and said it was my Tiyo M. I cross-checked with my cousin Manoy B and he said he was at work when the emergency happened. Mama was correct. I cross-checked with Tiyo M, an early octogenarian, who remembered being at the scene but forgot about carrying Lola's dead weight and attributed the lifting to adrenaline. Because memory is pliable, the practice of collaborative memory reconstruction is essential as it involves the family's "weaving together episodes and facts" into "a plausible story of our past" (Roediger III et al., 1993). While the experience in the vignette's paragraphs 4–6 taught me the value of landmarks in swiftly locating destinations, my elder cousins underwent rescue response training and became ERUF volunteers themselves, which was why, later on, Rescue 911 hosted by William Shatner became a must-watch television show at home.

Atiman: The Solon House Caring Rituals

Lola Nena spent months in the hospital. Family members took turns pagatiman (caring) for Lola. This went on until the family decided—her children, to be precise—to transform a quarter of the Solon House sala into a private hospital room, so that Lola Nena could finally come home. Years later, I understood that it is customary for the Solons to come home and rest eternally—as much as humanly possible, no one wanted to die in the hospital.

The hospital room in the sala was patient-ready when Lola arrived. Oxygen tanks, suction, and other medical paraphernalia were visibly installed and placed.

A hole in Lola's throat was a normal sight. It was an incision made so that a circular device was inserted as the entry point of the tube used to suck out phlegm, making my Lola unable to speak and only communicate through eye blinks or us lip-reading what she was saying. Older cousins became her private nurses—changing her dextrose, oxygen tanks, taking her vital signs and logging them, managing her medication schedule and such. Everyone had a role in caring. Older cousins taught us younger ones to do the same. My younger brother Mark was braver and learned before I did—I never had the emotional capacity to watch someone close in such a painful, delicate state. He

taught me how to execute the suction, adjust the dextrose drip, ease the bed pan in, wipe Lola's parched lips with a damp cotton ball, etcetera.

At least I was able to play the piano daily. Every day I sat on the piano bench in the sala, ran my fingers on the ebony and ivory keys, and played, among other pieces, Lola's favorite: Vera's Theme. Maybe Vera's Theme meant something more to my Lola, because that was always what she would request for me to play whenever I practiced. Before the fatal attack, Lola would climb up the stairs from her rocking chair Sa Silong when I started playing. I would know she was the one climbing up the stairs—she had a signature dragging of her steps from the staircase to the sala. Whenever she would land that final step, she always turned her face toward me while I played, catching her looking at me when I occasionally look up from the keys to note read. Opening the windows and the balcony-sala door as her way of telling the neighbors, 'Apo ni nako!,' a glow of pride on her face as she dragged her steps around, her daster (long skirt) sweeping the floors of the sala—the same signature dragging steps that would, in many late nights and witching hours later, haunt Kuya Andro, our uncle, who, even after Lola's passing, continued to sleep in our sala during his college days stay in the Solon House.

In caring for our Lola, love, gentleness, and compassion became a blueprint on how the family should take care of the sick and dying. For two months, our care routine went on—check and log the vital signs, change the dextrose, suction the phlegm, change the adult diaper, turn the body side to side and tap the back, monitor the oxygen tank, etcetera. We weaved caring into the fibers of our daily life, reporting to Lola duties and living our lives as usual—school and work, play and relax. No full disruption.

In the sala in the last quarter of '92, we celebrated Lola's 70th birthday, had our Christmas with her, and days into the New Year's, on my birthday, Lola Nena joined Tatay Andy. Mama knocked on my bedroom door not for my mañanita, but for information about Lola's passing. A cold breeze kissed my cheeks. Then the wailing and cries of death poured in, flooding our home.

How does one celebrate a birthday and a wake on the same day? How does a family celebrate the coming of a new year while in mourning?

Reflexivity Turn

I realized earlier on that I stopped playing Lola's favorite piece when I shared the grief story to family. However, the thought process in the above vignette's paragraph 4 landed on the paper a little differently. From radio drama to music, listening had been Lola's companion. In Atiman, music was (and is) part of the Solon House's caring ritual. It was (and is) a language fluently used by family members, the majority of whom are introverted—choosing a song for the specific ordeal to play on the cassette (Spotify in the current times) to communicate care—a hug without intruding, an assuring "I see you" without words, without leaving our room. This language is an intimate atiman which, in a larger reach, is similar to Heidegger's (2008) Sorge. Like music, Atiman's paragraphs 1–2 show how fascinatingly fluid a solid structure such as the house move and dismantle its interior elements—holding old spaces with new meanings—to accommodate and care for the family (Del Aguila et al., 2019; El-Bizri, 2018; Halbwachs, 1950).

Pánaw: The Solon House Death Rituals

Embalsamar

Lola was embalmed in the sala on my birthday. Her body was laid down on the long bamboo bench next to the long glass table where my annual birthday cake from La Fortuna, spaghetti, leche flan, maja blanca, lechon, humba, juice and soft drinks used to be displayed. Embalming paraphernalia like jars and hoses surrounded the table and bench instead of colorful balloons.

Papa held my hand and accompanied me Sa Taas to the sala where my Lola lay in repose. He allowed me to witness how the blood and fluids from my Lola's body were sucked out and explained why there was a need to inject formalin to preserve the body for a few more days. After the blood was sucked out and funneled into the jars before the formalin injection was performed, he led me away Sa Silong to help my Mama with chores. Papa only called me back to the sala when the air cleared. He stayed with me while we watched the carers put make-up on my Lola's face. Family members were also there to witness how caring for our dead loved one is performed, while elders do their duties: help put on Lola's fresh clothes and shoes, rosary in hand, scapular around her neck, and habak around her waist. I was front row witness through it all until Lola was entered into her casket.

Lugar sa Lungon

A specific belief was followed after: lugar sa lungon (placement of the casket). As sumpa (counterspell) preventing a series of family deaths, the casket must NOT be placed in the same spot as the last deceased family member's wake. For example, if in the prior wake of a dearly departed the casket was placed in the library then the next wake must not be in the same spot. Lola Nena's casket was specifically placed following the sumpa.

Haya

The Solon House sala was transformed again to accommodate the haya (wake). We put down, cleaned, and kept away the section of the sala where the hospital private room was located, making way for sofa and chairs to cater to family, relatives, neighbors and friends who would come to **bilar**, a custom for visitors to stay up until dawn in order to accompany and console the grieving family. To stay awake while nagbilar, traditions are observed: games like mahjong, bingo, and baraha; tagay (drinking session); and the serving of overflowing beverage and food. Stories and gossip are also brewed, if only those could raise the dead back to life. Guitar playing and singing of songs and other ways to comfort the bereaved family are allowed.

Novena sa Siyam Ka Adlaw

The family called on our neighbor and distant relative, Lola Mary, the suking mananabtan (our known prayer leader) to lead the family and nangbilar (visitors) for siyam ka adlaw (nine days) to pray the novena for the dead. The novena was always scheduled in the evening, around seven o'clock. Before the nine days end, I would have memorized the entire repertoire.

Our elders assigned us tasks. They approached the large daily events with the concept of divide and conquer, assigning us with the following: (1) suwat sa pangalan—keep the book where the visitors suwat sa pangalan (write their name), (2) dawat sa abuloy—treasurer who receives the donation and keeps the list, (3) tig-andam—a team to purchase and prepare the snacks, (4) tig-silbi—a team to bring the snacks from the kitchen area to the sala.

The evening of my birthday was also the first day of the novena. With bright lights on huge lampstands guarding the open casket plus all the fluorescent lights Sa Silong, Sa Taas, and Sa Gawas; visitors filling our home; and food and drinks being served, it was like a party again—without balloons.

Lubong[1]

A couple of days before the nine days novena ended, the lubong (funeral and interment) was held. In the Solon House, it is customary that the lubong starts with a mass officiated by a Catholic priest, usually one who is close to the family. It may be held at home or in St. Joseph The Patriarch Parish Church, the closest church to our home and itself a site of *katingaláhan*[2] where we were baptized and had other Sacred Sacraments.

Lola Nena's mass was held at home where the priest consecrated the casket with holy water and incense. After, a few elders gave their eulogy. Laughter and tears broke during the eulogies, allowing everyone to celebrate Lola's life while also mourning. Papa tasked me to send off my Lola while playing Vera's Theme on the piano. So, I did. Prior carrying the casket out of the sala and down Sa Gawas, all family members walked under Lola's casket while it was being lifted up by male family elders and members, another sumpa ritual to ensure there will be no series of deaths in the family. After I walked under the casket, I went back to the piano and continued playing Lola's favorite song while the rest of the family members were taking turns doing the ritual. After the sumpa, Lola's casket rested on the shoulders of male family elders and members before it was slowly carried out of the sala, climbed down the balcony stairs, and walked Sa Gawas to the purlon (a coach for the dead).

That was the last time I played Vera's Theme on the piano. I felt the song only belonged to my Lola and allowing her to take the song to her grave was my own way of dealing with grief. Maybe. Because it took more than half a decade after the funeral before I was able to play Vera's Theme again. But always, always, I would dedicate it to my Lola.

Prosesyon

The prosesyon (procession) of families, relatives, and friends of Lola Nena followed her purlon. Some walked, others rode in a car or van. The prosesyon from the Solon

[1] The Santo Entierro (Holy Burial *in Figure 3*) is the Solon House's panata (vow) every Holy Week's Good Friday procession. Now reaching the 5th Generation, the devotion was handed down to us from Tatay Andy's father.

[2] In Gumanay, J. (2024, September 21) Faith and Fear in the Church: An Analysis of Supernatural Tales in St. Joseph the Patriarch Parish Mabolo paper presentation

House to the cemetery was slow. There was no hurry. No appointment to miss. Each one sending off my Lola was allowed to grieve in slow pace.

Several barangay tanod (village policemen) assisted the prosesyon to ensure the traffic along the national road all the way to the burial place was smooth. Also, a part of the **abuloy** custom, passengers of jeepneys and other vehicles we came across threw out coins at the prosesyon while those who were in the prosesyon picked the coins up and added them to the abuloy. On the purlon, a sad song of mourning played on repeat as the prosesyon went on—usually, and in this case, 'Hindi Kita Malilimutan'.

When the purlon and prosesyon reached the cemetery, the interment took place. A rectangular hole was already dug out for Lola's final resting place. We had a last viewing of our Lola Nena before the lid of her casket was shut and the entire casket was lowered six feet to the ground. We took a bit of the earth to throw at the casket, a ritual of burying our loved one ourselves, before the caretakers in the cemetery shovel in more soil to cover the hole in the ground. The gravestone inscribed with my Lola's complete name, date of birth, date of death, and epitaph became a mark of her new permanent address, with Tatay Andy, neighbors to departed in-laws and relatives.

How long does a family mourn the death of a loved one?

Subô: The Solon House Grief Rituals

Quarenta Dias

The Catholic belief of Quarenta Dias (Forty Days) or the end of mourning is customary in the Solon House. Quarenta Dias after the death of Lola Nena, a novena mass was offered for the eternal repose of her soul. On this 40th day, the family believed that Lola's soul had completed the transition to the afterlife, and that she no longer walked the earth. The living family members gathered together at home for a celebration in the form of a special meal, a kind of party thrown, trusting that Lola is in a better place, or heaven, with all the ancestors and family members who passed on.

Although grief rituals suggest an end to mourning, Lola Nena's ghost continues to walk the signature footsteps in the Solon House.

Reflexivity Turn

I used the two autoethnographic evocative vignettes to do the heavy lifting (Pitard, 2016). The Pánaw section shows the general template of the death rituals— at least in the 90's. While there is an end to mourning as prescribed by the Quarenta Dias grief ritual, in actuality there is no telling anyone when to stop mourning nor is there a calendar scheduling grief's end. In fact, it may never end, only carried with grace throughout life (Kessler, 2026; Kubler-Ross, 2026). After answering the "whys" embark on the Solon projects, I am convinced that this paper is a fraction of my grief work.

Figure 1
Epiphylogenetic: Two of Tatay Andy's Original Manuscripts at the University of San Carlos Library

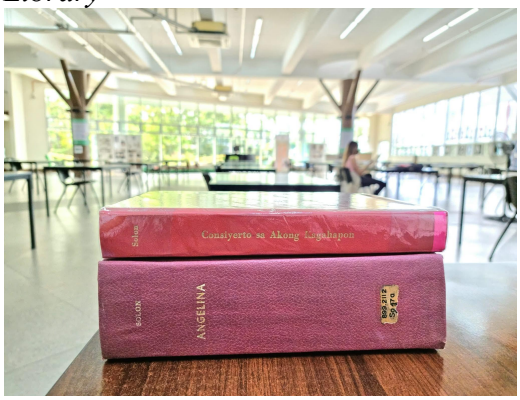

Figure 2
Epiphylogenetic: One of Titi Benny's Original Manuscript and Its Copies Donated to the Cebuano Studies Center, and the Posthumously Published Book

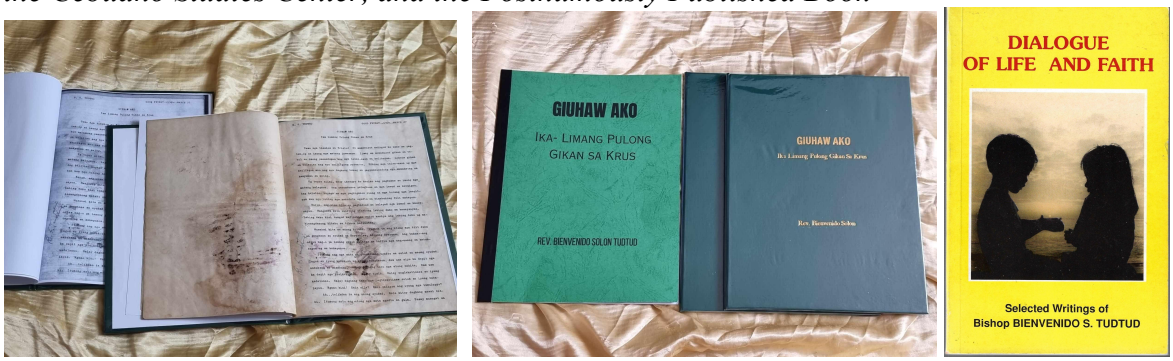

Figure 3
Epiphylogenetic in Rituals: The Solon House Santo Entierro Panata. (Solon Archive: Semana Santa Collection by Lucas Andre Tancawan Solon)

Pagpánaw Embodied: The Solon House Death and Grief Phenomena

The tables hereafter show the triangulation of concepts and the family's embodied grief.

Table 1
Phenomenological Themes Triangulation: Psychology, Philosophy, and Heritage Preservation

Psychology	Philosophy	Heritage Preservation
Stages of Grief (*Kessler's, 2019, 2026; Kubbler-Ross's, 1997, 2026; **Neimeyer, 2001)	**Phenomenology** (Heidegger, 2008)	**Cebuano Language** (Binisaya.com, 2007; Kintanar-Alburo,2015, 2026; Wolff, 1972)
Stage 1- Denial: meaningless feelings, surviving the loss	**das Man:** (the Anyone) – the Being's alienation	***Paglimod*** (denial)
Stage 2- Anger: disconnecting, feeling abandoned	**Geworfenheit:** (throw, thrownness) – no control	***Kalágot*** (disgust)
Stage 3- Bargaining: guilt, staying in past, negotiating ways out of hurt	**das Noch-nicht:** (the not-yet) – possibilities	***Namásin*** (maybe, hoping)
Stage 4- Depression: deepening grief, withdrawing from life	**Angst:** – anxiety and dread	***Kasubô*** (sadness)
Stage 5- Acceptance: maneuvering the reality that our loved one is mortally gone	**Sein-zum-Tode:** (being-towards-death) – embracing truth	***Pagdáwat*** (acceptance)
Stage 6- Meaning* & Reconstruction:** rebuilding meaning	**Sinn:** – meaning	***Úyokan*** (essence)
		Anúgon (missed-chance) *extracted from vignette 1*

Table 2
The Solon House Pagpánaw Embodiment and Phenomenological Themes

Phenomenological Themes	The Solon House *Pagpánaw* Embodiment
1. *Paglimod*	*The First Loss:* kay mao ang pina ka first na experience na death (S14G); Lolo King was the first loss (S114G) *Sudden Death:* Manoy's passing was so sudden—he was cheerful when we last spoke, and then he suffered a stroke. I learned about it the following day, and within a few days, he was gone. (S34G) *Difficulty in expressing:* Sige pud balik balik sa ako huna huna ang phrase nga "mao ba?" murag dili maka tou ba (S143G); <nihilak ka?> Yeh ofc (S54G) *Shock:* At first, it did not feel real. (S114G); the feeling was always a mix of shock and heaviness (S104G); it didn't feel real (S104G); …felt confusing and almost impossible to accept…(S114G).
2. *Kalágot*	*Witnessing pain & suffering:* dakog impact kay na feel niya kaayu ang pain (S14G) *Primary caregiver difficulty:* Ako bayay nag atiman ato. (S43G); mag ANTOS samtang g trapuhan g ingnn nako nga pahuway na sa imng kasakit DNA mahingawa. (S43G) *Anger and difficulty in Expressing:* Kung naay mopanaw either family or kaila, tungod kay introvert ko, kasagaran wala ko ka socialize,spend time or ka bonding pirmi, (S143G); Awkward pud ko kay pirmi ko dili kahibaw unsaon nako

	pag istroya ang direct family, ang ending, wala koy ma istorya. (S143G); The most difficult losses for me to process (S34G); naglagut ug naguol (S93G).
3. *Namásin*	I remember questioning how someone who had always been present could suddenly no longer be there (S114G).
4. *Kasubô*	*Sadness and Grief:* Sad ko sa death ni lolo (S14G); Sakit to oy Kang mama (S43G); hilak pod sa kaluoy (S43G); aside sa kamingaw (S143G); I felt shocked katong and sad pag kabalo nako (S54G); pwerteng hilak nakos sakyanan (S63G); it made me feel really sad. I still miss them until now. (S84G); very sad (S93G); I didn't fully understand what death meant back then, but I could feel the sadness around me. (S104G); Grief came in waves, there were days filled with sadness and longing, and sometimes regret for the words I never got to say. (S104G); …the first time I felt a deep kind of sadness and helplessness, a pain that came from something I could not change or control. (S114G); I was really just sad. (S124G); I was still young when they passed, I didn't know such emotions, other that sadness, exist. (S124G); naa gyud ang kasubo sa pag hinomdom sa memories ug naay moment nga numb kay dili maka tou. (S143G)
5. *Pagdáwat*	*Time and acceptance:* but in other side happy pud KO Kay nahumana iya pag antus SA iya sakit (S93G); normal lng ang pain nga mawagtangan ka ug love ones (S133G); I can accept death (S24G); at first lisod.pero khbaw ko naa Ra cya perme.dawaton jud bisag lisod (S43G); At first, it was hard to accept because I didn't fully understand it, but as time went by, I slowly learned how to accept it even if it still hurts sometimes (S84G); but we both have a good time before he depart (S93G); Acceptance didn't happen overnight. It came little by little (S104G); Over time, that disbelief slowly turned into understanding (S114G); I began to accept that his absence was real, even if it still felt heavy in my heart (S114G); gidawat nako ang pag pass away nila tungod dako ko (S133G).
6. *Úyokan*	*Meaning-making:* Through this experience, I learned that grief does not disappear, but becomes something we learn to carry with love and remembrance (S114G); Ang kani nga idea mo pabilin nako bisan pag nahuman na ang lubong or buwan na ni agi (S143G); just to continue living (S124G). So iya burial, unique pud, Hawaiian style Sea Burial sa Chubu (Nagoya) Airport. Nag rent mi ug gamay nga Yacht nya gi scatter namo iya ashes sa dagat, so everytime mo uli mi Japan, inig landing namo sa Chubu Airport, mura mi gi sugat sa ako Mother-in-law (S143G).
7. Anúgon and other themes	*Anúgon: 1-Dying Young:* og young pa kaayu siya. (S14G); *2-Missed chance to see the dying:* not sudden, but it was just as painful in a different way. We didn't get the chance to see her while she was sick, which made it even harder to accept. (S34G). *Dealing with Death (Mental, Physical, Social) 1-Physical activities:* Na deal nako by stabilizing my emotions through fun activities. (S14G); Gipa aagi nko ug hilak ug inom (S73G); Atiman langs bata (S43G). *2-Remembering:* I just thought of the good memories (S54G); through remembering them, hearing stories about their lives, and realizing that even though they are gone, the love and lessons they shared are still with us. (S104G); everytime maka hinomdom ko sa nipanaw (S143G); ug sa memories (S143G). *3-Belief:* everyone will one day become part of the cycle of life and death. (S14G); Cge lang pamesa (S43G); na learn nga someday

	magkita ra mi (S133G); gidawat nako ang kamatayon moagi jud ta ana ky mao na ang plano sa Atong Langitnong Amahan (S133G). *4-Thinking of own mortality:* kay at the same time ma remind sa akoang pagka mortal nga mamatay man pud diay ko... (S143G); ma remindan ko anha pud diay ko padung. (S143G). *5-Support System:* nag comfort dayun ka namo (S14G); mga ig agaw nako…gi help ko og cheer up (S54G). *6-Memory and Place:* sa room nato na old (S14G); Naa mangko sa Talisay at the time (S54G); ddto mi sa Compostela.. pagpadulong namo og uli daput nami sa liloan nanawag si mama na namatay nas daddy (S63G).

Pagpánaw Concluded: The Solon House Collective Identity

The Solon House holds space for grief and constructs meaning around death through intimate and anthropological ancestral practices, giving them their collective identity: *Atiman* (caring rituals), *Pánaw* (death rituals), *Subô* (grief rituals). Moreover, the Solon House's grief embodiment is tied to the larger cultural systems through overarching phenomenological themes: *Paglimod* (denial), *Kalágot* (disgust), *Namásin* (hoping), *Kasubô* (sadness), *Pagdáwat* (acceptance), *Úyokan* (essence), *Anúgon* (missed-chance). In conclusion, *Pagpánaw* tethered to cultural memory as it maneuvered a three-generation walk with and inside the Solon House through autoethnography and phenomenology, sweeping every nook, crevice, and corner of embodied experience, trauma, and reconstructed memory for a collective meaning of death and grief.

Contribution to Knowledge

The paper will be utilized in the writing of or included as a chapter in the family's second book project. Additionally, its discussion informs other area studies and disciplines, including Asian studies, hauntology, vernacular language heritage, philosophy, and thanatology.

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

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of research.

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Thai-Australian Identities in Architecture: Case Studies of Australian and Thai Embassies

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Abstract

Thailand and Australia have a long-standing relationship. Both countries have engaged in diverse cultural exchanges over the years, including the construction of architecture that combines and transfers the identities of each nation, like embassies. This paper examines cultural exchange and identity exchange through the architecture of both countries as cultural bridges. These embassies act as bridges between the two countries, showcasing Thai architecture in Australia and Australian design influences in Thailand. This paper also traces and compares the design and concept of the cultural interpretation of both countries in these buildings. These buildings not only serve a political and diplomatic purpose but also play a significant cultural role by conveying concepts about national identity by using a design that represents their culture and national styles. These buildings are applied and hybridised with local architecture to interpret the exchange and relationship. This study analyses the design resources of both embassies of Thailand and Australia, including their design concept, material construction and cultural elements, to explore how they disseminate identity and interpret the local culture and architecture and maintain their identities. The research was focused and based on data in archival documents, observation, and visual analysis. The findings reveal that the architectural designs of both countries incorporate elements of cultural exchange, sharing ideas and expressions of identity while respecting each nation's unique context. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of transnationalism in fostering connections between cultures and enhancing international relations, ultimately contributing to the expression of individual identities across different continents.

Keywords: Thai architecture, Australian architecture, embassy, cultural interpretation, identities in architecture

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Introduction

Thailand and Australia have had a long-standing relationship since 1952. Both countries have engaged in diverse cultural exchanges that have increased each year (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.), including the construction of architecture that combines and transfers the identities of each nation, such as embassies. This paper examines cultural exchange and identity exchange through the architecture of both countries as cultural bridges. These embassies act as bridges between the two countries, showcasing Thai architecture in Australia and Australian design influences in Thailand. This paper also traces and compares the design and concept of the cultural interpretation of both countries in these buildings. These buildings not only serve a political and diplomatic purpose but also play a significant cultural role by conveying concepts about national identity by using a design that represents their culture and national styles. These buildings are applied and hybridised with local architecture to interpret the exchange and relationship. This study analyses the design resources of both embassies of Thailand and Australia, including their design concept, material construction and cultural elements, to explore how they disseminate identity and interpret the local culture and architecture and represent their identities.

This paper aims to study, analyse and understand a general overview of the architecture that applies its culture and national styles and hybridises with local architecture to interpret the exchange and relationship. Furthermore, the author aims to explore how embassies of Thailand and Australia disseminate identity, interpret the local culture and architecture and also represent their identities.

Methodology

The author used documentary research methods and was focused and based on data in archival documents, primary and secondary data, observation, and visual analysis (Aksamija, 2021). For the case studies, the author selected embassies located in capital cities and selected the cases that were constructed in the same period: specifically, the Old Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, and the Thai Embassy in Canberra, Australia. These two buildings were built in the 1970s.

The author selected embassy buildings that were constructed in similar periods, including the old Australian Embassy and the current Thai Embassy in Australia, because these cases allow for a better understanding of the context during that time, the use of similar construction materials, and insights into the similarities and differences in representation and styles between the two countries.

Results and Discussion

The findings reveal that the architectural designs of both countries incorporate elements of cultural exchange, sharing ideas and expressions of identity while respecting each nation's unique context. The old Australian Embassy building in Thailand was designed by Ken Woolley from the firm Ancher, Mortlock, and Woolley, in collaboration with Thai architect M.L. Tridhosyuth Devakul (see Figure 1). Construction began in 1973, with the Australian architect working closely with the Thai architect, who acted as a consultant. Ken Woolley specialised in Modernist architecture and was part of a movement known as the Sydney School style. This style emerged in Australia during the 1960s, blending Modernist principles with consideration for the local climate, natural settings, and the use of local materials, resulting in

a distinctive style of modern architecture in Australia (Horyingsawad, 2017; Jackson, 2022). In the design of the Australian Embassy, this architectural style was integrated with elements of Thai architecture. M.L. Tridhosyuth Devakul, the Thai architect, had expertise in resort design, and together, they combined features of Australian Modernist architecture with aspects from the Suan Pakkad Palace, which is characterised by its vernacular architecture set amidst ponds and nature.

The result is an architectural style that merges two cultures. The embassy's main building consists of elevated modern structures surrounded by waterways, reflecting Bangkok's informal style while being enveloped by numerous trees that evoke Australia's natural beauty (see Figure 2). The elevated design addresses environmental needs, while the cantilevered upper floors provide shade for the lower levels, protecting them from the heat of the sun. The freestanding column design draws inspiration from traditional Thai architecture, where buildings are raised on stilts. The raised foundation and large courtyard further emphasise Thai architectural characteristics and align with the principles of vernacular architecture, while these freestanding columns are also a common feature in Sydney School style's architecture. The exterior, resembling a castle, is adorned with yellow ceramic tiles, similar to those used in traditional Thai roofs and building facades (Horayangkura, 2017; Horyingsawad, 2017).

On the other hand, the Thai Embassy in Canberra, Australia, was constructed between 1970 and 1971. The building is located in a central area, close to key Australian government agencies in the capital. From the outside, the embassy architecture is an intriguing blend of the two cultures' architectural styles (see Figure 3). The design is based on a traditional Thai architectural style, adapted by Australian architect Tibor N. Olgay. Olgay created a Western-style floor plan that is proportionally balanced and focused on functionality, resulting in a modern two-story building. The roof design used elements from traditional Thai vernacular houses. The gables and pediments were designed and constructed by the Thai Fine Arts Department (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2019). These roof ornaments are masterpieces and elegant, and they are reflective of traditional Thai architecture that is hybridised with Australian two-story houses. This design integrates seamlessly with the modern floor plan while emphasising the unique traditional Thai identity.

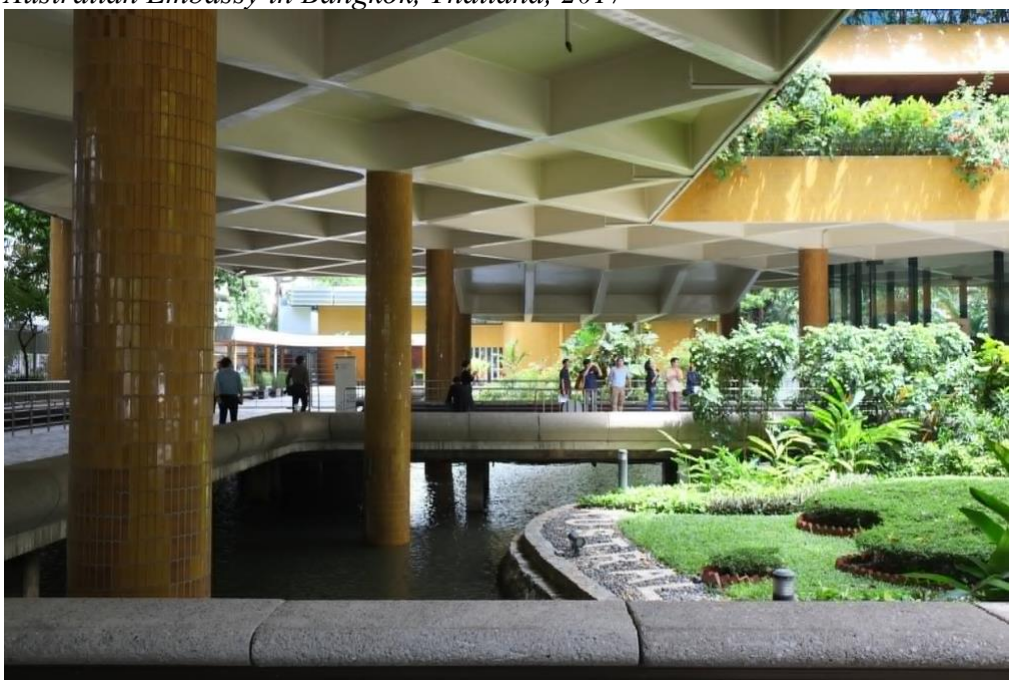
Figure 1

Model - Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, 1975

Note.: Model - Australian Embassy, Bangkok, Thailand. Photograph b&w print. Preservation material. From National Archives of Australia, 1975 (https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/PhotoDetail.aspx?Barcode=9737498). Copyright 2026 by National Archives of Australia. In the public domain.

Figure 2

Australian Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, 2017



Note. Photograph of the Australian Embassy in Bangkok, 2017, by Waricha Wongphyat. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3

Thai Embassy in Canberra, Australia, 1971

Note. International relations - Diplomatic representation - Royal Thai Embassy Canberra (Ian Mitchell). From National Archives of Australia, 1971 (https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/PhotoDetail.aspx?Barcode=11828909). Copyright 2026 by National Archives of Australia. In the public domain.

Conclusion

The architectural designs of both embassies reflect a combination of national identities and local influences. The old Australian Embassy in Bangkok features materials, styles, and elements from the natural landscape of Thailand, which complement its modern Sydney School-style architecture. This integration creates a harmonious aesthetic, resulting in a distinctly modern building. In contrast, the Thai Embassy in Australia presents a more pronounced blend of styles. Although the layout is modern and designed by an Australian architect, the roofs are crafted by the Thai Fine Arts Department, which stands out as a separate element and is not as seamlessly integrated as the roof of the Australian Embassy in Thailand. The roof of the Thai Embassy in Australia also represents a more traditional architectural design. Nevertheless, both buildings exemplify cultural hybridity. Despite the differing approaches, they share a common objective: to express their national identity while honouring the local context and highlighting the importance of transnationalism.

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

The author declares that this paper has used AI-assisted writing tools and technologies, namely Grammarly and ChatGPT (version 5.3), merely for language editing, translation, and proofreading purposes. The usage was limited to correcting grammar and spelling, improving clarity, concising and refining wording, and enhancing the accuracy of translations. No AI technologies other than Grammarly and ChatGPT were employed in the preparation of this manuscript. The content, research design, methodology, results, analyses, and conclusions presented in this work are entirely the author's own and are based on original research and appropriate scholarly sources.

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Fan Culture and Consumerism: Behind Private Events of the Thailand Boys Love Industry

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Abstract

Thailand's Boys' Love (BL) industry, as part of queer pop culture, has become a worldwide phenomenon, attracting audiences both domestically and internationally. The industry extends beyond media production; one of its major selling points is real-life fan events where audiences can interact with actors in real time. These private events include lucky fan meetings and top-spender activities. International audience is not only a passive audience, but also takes part in these events. This research uses critical ethnography, and aca-fan approaches through participant observation and in-depth interviews with international fans that win private events. The study aims to critique the industry capitalism and consumerism within fan culture. The findings reveal how the industry promotes consumerism by constructing the identity of the "ideal fan," thus pressuring fans to maintain their identity and social positioning through consumption. The industry created a capitalist environment that encourages fans to purchase products and chances to gain intimacy with actors in those private events. As the industry is heavily profit-oriented, fans are often valued according to the amount of money they spend, with the promise of intimacy with actors as the main attraction. Furthermore, the industry also creates potential problems for fans. Some events use gambling-like mechanisms to determine winners, which encourages excessive gambling behaviour among fans. In addition, the intimacy and emotional satisfaction provided during these events bring such happiness, leading fans to seek repeated experiences. As a result, some fans may resort to excessive spending in pursuit of further intimacy with the actors.

Keywords: Thailand boys love, private events, queer pop-culture, fandom, neo-capitalism

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Introduction

Boys Love is a term used to describe media products that focus on romantic and sexual relationships between males. This type of media originated in Japan as "yaoi." As it spread globally, the term "boys' love" came into use. Eventually, each country developed its own term depending on the product. In Thailand, Boys Love became popular as a TV series. Internationally, these are known as Thailand Boys Love (Thai BL), but in Thailand, they are called "Series Y" (Baudinette, 2019). "Love Sick the Series" marked the beginning of Thai BL in 2014 by blending elements from Japanese Yaoi with Thai culture (Supawantanakul, 2023). Thai BL gained audiences for two main reasons: the cultural and traditional hybridization that showcases Thailand's identity (Prasannam, 2019), and the storylines about two young, handsome men falling in love (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023). Over the years, Thai BL production has grown from just one series into one of Thailand's largest cultural exports, even contributing to the media industry's biggest profits (ONE Ent Yearly Report). Outside Thailand, the BL series is distributed via paid streaming services, delivering content directly with English subtitles.

Boys Love is a transnational, transcultural, and transboundary phenomenon, including its fandom (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023). The industry is built from the creators, actors, screenwriters, producers, and more (Promkhuntong, 2025). Media companies commodify queer into BL content to cultivate loyal fanbases and maximize profit, transforming fans into consumers whose emotional investments directly benefit corporate interests (Kwon, 2015). Industry develops strategies to make fans remember, relate, and therefore support it (Baudinette, 2023). In many cases, the corporation relies too heavily on harvesting fans' emotional attachment through cultural consumption (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023; Prasannam, 2019). It is also often exploited by the industry, with their enthusiasm being monetized at every opportunity (Shimauchi, 2024).

The Thai BL industry includes commercial brands that amplify advertisement campaigns and use romantic narratives to market their products (Santos, 2020), creating intertextual consumption that deepens fans' emotional investment, and those advertisements draw on fans' memory and parasocial connection to stimulate satisfaction and encourage fans to purchase the products (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023). In turn, actors will provide fan services to them, including gestures, interactions, performances, and intimacy, reinforcing fans' spending habits (Santos, 2020). Nowadays, Boys Love fans intertwine commercial consumption through events that sell fan services and intimacy. Commercial consumption can be exploitative, as the Boys Love industry preys on fans' desires, turning fandom enthusiasm into a profit mechanism (Garg & Yang, 2023). Fans are encouraged to spend more money in exchange for intimate interaction with the actors, ships, and more. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the question of how participation in private fan events, as a form of transnational consumerism, influences the culture of Thai BL fans?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Boys Love Industry and Neo-Capitalism

Capitalism is not only part of the standard industry, but also in the cultural industry. The cultural industry creates commodities from culture for mass consumption, thus generating economic movement (Strinati, 2004). While traditional capitalism views this as the audience conforming to identity, neo-capitalism views it as a new way to create greater profit while

working with institutions. Neo-capitalism creates a broader market audience, and the media industry is becoming fragmented, niche, and personalized, allowing audiences to seek their own identities. Although it could create a prosumer audience, the hegemony of power that creates that culture is controlled by the industry (Adorno & Horkheimer).

Thai BL meets all the criteria for the neo-capitalist industry. Within Thai BL itself, there are also Series, actors, and ships. And every part of this industry has the same goal: to gain profit. To do that, it will rely on the audience and fans. In the neo-capital industry, the audience is both a customer and an economic metric. And modern societies see consumption as no longer about needs and utility but also about symbolic value and goods (Baudrillard, 2017). Consumption is part of capitalism, and as modernization progresses, it's no longer possible to avoid being a consumer culture (Featherstone, 2007). Commercial consumption by the media industry has increased as the line between needs and wants has blurred; the industry continues to maintain the audience's desire (Baudrillard, 2017). The Thai BL industry uses series, actors, and ships to create value and use it as a brand. It is also marketed as part of a fan's identity, creating pseudo-individualism (Adorno, 2005). The Thai BL industry aims to gain more profit as many audiences consume their product, either in the form of merchandise or the illusion of intimacy with the actors and ship in the form of events. The industry plays with fans' emotions to get them attached to this product (Ahmed, 2014). Using media and advertising, endorsed with celebrities (Featherstone, 2007), just like in Thailand Boys Love.

Critical Ethnography

The critical approach views the dynamic between industry and fans from the audience's perspective. Critical ethnography is used to see beyond the culture. Critical ethnography is not only about describing culture, but also about challenging injustice, amplifying marginalized voices, and transforming power relations in the culture (Madison, 2012). As critical ethnography looks beyond cultures to disturb the status quo and challenge the 'taken for granted' assumption, it will also examine the power and control behind those cultures (Madison, 2012). Critical ethnography will also be used to challenge the dominant ideology, including deconstructing the knowledge (Madison, 2012). One key concept in critical ethnography is that culture is performative, in which identity, culture, and social practice are enacted through language, behavior, and interaction (Madison, 2012). Performance, as used in this research, is how fans reflect their identity (Madison, 2012).

Aca-Fan Methods

Aca-fan ethnography, short for academic fandom, is an ethnographic approach used in fandom studies. It serves as a bridge between academic and fan communities, making research accessible to both (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017), and transmits knowledge from fandom to academic texts. The observed and researched subjects are members of fandom culture. This ethnography also explores media consumption practices, focusing on the target population of media culture (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017). In short, Aca-fan ethnography examines fandom culture and communicates insights to academia. Two types of data are collected: spontaneous synchronous data, gathered during events as they occur (e.g., participant observations); and triggered synchronous data, produced through initiated events (e.g., in-depth interviews).

For this research, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 international fans who won and participated in Private events. Both critical ethnography and aca-fan ethnography were used to dissect the industry's power dynamics in fandom, which is privileged, biased, and not neutral (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017; Madison, 2012).

Thailand Boys Love Events: Capitalism and Consumerism

Thailand Boys Love Events

The Thai BL industry extends beyond the screen, allowing audiences not only to watch actors in a series but also to interact with them in real time, through events and fan activities. Thai BL creates a form of hyperreal romance in which both couple interactions and fan–idol interactions are made accessible. These events are marketed not only as performances to watch but also as experiences that offer exclusive benefits to attendees. The availability and type of benefits often distinguish one event from another. This research categorizes Thai BL events into two types: public and private. The classification is based on the benefits offered, price range, and attendance system for each event.

Public Event

Public events are those that take place in public settings, such as malls, halls, or parks. This type of event is usually used for promotional purposes, either for brands or series. Public events are divided into two types: free and paid. Free one is where fans could see the artist for free, usually in an open space. These usually don't offer any benefit and are just to promote the artist.

On the other hand, paid public events are held in public spaces but require a ticket to enter. This event, such as a screening or fan concert, usually has a benefit. Benefits start from hi-bye, where fans will walk across the artist while waving goodbye without touching. The next tier benefit is Hi-touch: the same scenario, but adds a high-five (touching) with the artist. The usual highest-tier benefit for a paid public event is a group photo, where a group of fans takes a picture with the artist.

Figure 1
Paid Public Event (Last Episode Screening "My Romance Scammer the Series")

Source: GMMTV

Private Event

The private event takes place in a more secluded setting rather than in open spaces or large halls. Examples include meeting rooms, restaurants, dinner cruises, or even domestic and international trips. The benefits offered at private events usually include those available at public events. In addition, private events offer extra benefits. These may range from private photo sessions to one-on-one interactions with the artist. These conversations typically last between 30 seconds and three minutes. This allows fans to speak directly with the artist without restrictions. It's called Private Talks. Such benefits are highly valued by fans because they are rare and difficult to obtain.

Unlike public events, where fans can attend by purchasing tickets or gathering in open spaces, private events have their own selection mechanisms for choosing winners. Private events are typically divided into two schemes: top spender and lucky fan. Under the top spender scheme, winners are selected based on the total accumulated amount fans spend on designated products. Meanwhile, the lucky fan scheme usually operates through a lottery system, where a certain purchase amount grants one entry into the draw. The top-spender scheme is generally associated with fewer winners and more exclusive events, such as private dinners or trips. Meanwhile, the lucky fan scheme usually accommodates more winners and often offers smaller benefits.

Figure 2
Private Trip With Keng Namping x Dr. Ally Brand

Source: Dr.AllyBrand official X

Neo-Capitalism and Consumerism

Neo-Capitalism does not differ much from traditional capitalism. One of the key differences is how neo-capitalism aligns with institutions to pursue the same aim: profit. In Thailand, the government was supporting the Thai BL and its event. As a sponsor of certain series or events, the THACC (Thailand Creative Culture Agency), a government agency that supports Thailand's soft power movement through culture, was involved. The aim is to promote Thai culture, which will eventually drive the creative economy. Following the cultural industry, which also aims for profit (Adorno, 2005), this is evident specifically in Thai BL private events. As mentioned above about how these private event schemes are going, this also results in fans becoming consumers of certain acts and products. To get the benefit they want, they will buy

what is needed to win. Two acts of consumerism were conducted to win: buying the product and buying a chance.

Buying Product

The first act of consumerism is buying products. Most of the private events are also part of the brand's deal. Artists and agencies collaborate with brands to conduct these events as part of the brands' marketing campaigns. The aim is to increase product sales. Fans, as the main subject of this campaign, need to buy the products to join the events. This supports the idea of consumerism in both schemes. For the top-spender scheme, for example, they must buy many products, so their accumulated amount makes them one of the top 20 spenders. Meanwhile, under the lucky fans scheme, purchasing a certain number of products grants entry to the event lottery, and fans aim to obtain as many entries as possible. Therefore, based on both schemes, fans tend to buy more products to increase their chances of winning. This act of consumerism targets the feeling of not having enough (Ahmed, 2014), creating a sense of vulnerability that encourages fans to keep buying so that winning seems more guaranteed. As product sales increase, profits also increase. However, this can lead to overbuying, resulting in unused products.

Figure 3
Updated Amount of Top Spender Events

Source: Dr.AllyBrand official X

Buying Chance

The second act of consumerism is buying chance. Instead of buying the actual product to increase their chances of winning, Fans buy other people's proof of purchase and claim it as their own, or buy the product for other people and take the receipts as their own. For example, buying a receipt or a coupon to be put in the lottery box. To increase their chances of winning, they use not only their own receipt or coupon but also others'. They buy other people's chances and take them for themselves. This buying chance practice is another side of capitalism. It is not only because they were emotionally afraid of losing, but also because of their willingness to win; capitalism plays with their emotions to create spending (Ahmed, 2014). And the brands or event organizers did not stop this practice, as in the brand's eyes, this still brings benefit for them, which creates access to loopholes from the industry (Baudrillard, 2017). This creates two

sides to the effect: it may reduce unused products from excessive buying, but it also creates a new problem: fans will eventually take steps to increase their chances of winning, encouraged by brands that do not stop this act of consumerism.

Figure 4
Lottery Box and Coupon to Pick Up Lucky Fans Winner

Source: Fansaccount on X (@KxxxxnKxxxl)

Neo-Capitalism Creating an "Ideal Fan" of Thailand Boys Love

The key concept shared by both neo-capitalism and the cultural industry is their creation of pseudo-individualism (Adorno, 2005). The cultural industry creates identity and conformity, while traditional capitalism views this as the audience conforming to identity, and neo-capitalism views it as a new way to increase profit by working with institutions (Adorno & Horkheimer). Neo-capitalism creates a wider market audience, and the media industry, as part of the cultural industry, is becoming fragmented, niche, and personalized, allowing audiences to seek their own culture and identity (Adorno & Horkheimer). Capitalism creates this so that the audience can develop their own identity and express themselves (Kidd, 2002). This is included in the fans as the cultural customer. By purchasing and consuming the culture, they embedded the identity in themselves. Fans construct and express their identities through consumption (Featherstone, 2007). Unfortunately, this individualistic identity is shaped by capitalism (Adorno & Horkheimer). Pseudo-individualism is shaped as part of a fan's identity, which is actually how it is dictated as an 'ideal fan'. The industry created 'ideal fan' identity, which standardized (Adorno & Horkheimer) how support should be, such as going to events, doing hashtag trends, and even purchasing any possible connection, such as brands and merchandise. This relates to how fans take it upon themselves and create their own identity and positioning within the fandom (Featherstone, 2007). Not only that, but also how they perceive these private events as part of the exclusive part of the fandom. Based on the in-depth interview with the winners, the identity and positioning being created is based on 'ideal fan' being spread across the fandom, and how they were part of the secret club.

Identity and Positioning

In the cultural industry, pseudo-individuality is created as standardization (Adorno, 2005), including in the Thai BL fandom. It includes how consumerism creates fans' identity (Featherstone, 2007). Unlike how fans were being described before, the neo-capitalist cultural industry creates the standard that unconsciously brings them profit. The emergence of the ideal fan has started. To be an 'ideal fan', fans need to support and show love by going to events, buying brand merchandise, and even trending hashtags on the internet. Emotional consumption is needed (Ahmed, 2014) to have that fan identity.

Some of the information gained from the winner, such as: "I need to show my support to him by going to events" (E, Indonesia, Mar 2026). "I feel bad if my artist event is empty, he deserves all the love" (L, Germany, Jan, 2026). "I buy the brands so they know that my artists have a good reputation" (Y, USA, Feb 2026). "If other fandoms see the support for my favorite is small, I will be embarrassed" (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026).

The support and love that fans showed prove that they, as fans, evolve not only within the fandom but also by creating their own identity and branding (Featherstone, 2007). The more they can attend, the more stable their fan identity becomes, and when fans can attend more private events, their positioning in the fandom increases and becomes more dominant. To put it simply, the support and love they constantly receive mean that, once they are winning, they become a small percentage of fans who are able to interact intimately; their positioning is increasing and becoming more dominant within the fandom (Baudinette, 2023). To maintain their positioning, they consume more and more (Baudrillard, 2017). As explained by the winners: "I think because so many of my friends are going. But now I want to go. Maybe it's peer pressure" (P, Malaysia, Mar 2026). "My own fun life. That is really good already. Like Proxie know me. They've talked to me. They've come to me themselves at the concert. They even walked back to me to talk to me" (L, Singapore, Feb 2026,). "Fans feel like they have to be the most supportive because of potentially the circle they're interacting with" (M, Australia, Jan 2026). "My favs only have private events, I have no other choice as his fans" (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026). For the last one, the industry creates an environment where fans can only meet if they spend money by having private events.

Secret Club Societies

"The Top Spender, I just, it felt like a secret club and I wanted to see what it actually was like and like being able to say I had dinner with my idol which is, is really, is really fun." (H, UK, Feb 2026)

Since only a small percentage of fans can be winners for private events, within the fandom, it has been called a secret club, and the winner that be able to be close and intimate with the artist are part of these societies. This hierarchy create differentiation between fans, and even creates social distinction (Baudrillard, 2017) within fandom, thus the emergence of the secret club. The industry created this situation to create favoritism and elite identity. The winner of the private events, especially the top spender, was known to be the top customer, they were treated like an elite by the industry and even treated differently by the artist. They know them personally, call the fans names, somehow, if able to enter these elites, they increase their rank and positioning within fandom, not only being an ideal fan but more than that.

Potential Problem of Neo-Capitalism and Consumerism

Neo-capitalist industry, including the media industry, focuses on profit (Adorno, 2005); therefore, top spenders and lucky fans were emerging. Unfortunately, this is what we want to criticize about the industry: not only was it predatory towards fans, pressuring them to consume, but it could also pose potential problems. The fans consume it not merely as customers but also as a form of identity construction (Feathersome, 2007). It could lead to competition and overconsumption in pursuit of it (Baudrillard, 2017). Moreover, since many of the event winners were decided in some scheme like gambling, this could actually lead to gambling and addiction problems for fans.

Overconsumption of Useless Products

One potential problem with consumerism is overconsumption of products. As was mentioned above, the fans were buying products, a lot of them. And most of them won't use it at all. This meant that, despite overconsumption, fans understand the actions they take, actions because they want to, because of the private event, the practice of overconsumption still occurs in this industry. This particular overconsumption is not only about wanting to be part of the fandom and create identity (Feathersome, 2007), like overbuying merchandise or albums, but also about brands that host private events, where the product could actually be used if they buy in a regular amount. But since they want to win the events, fans will buy more than necessary, which ends up being a waste. Just as the winner states: “I ended up as a useless product. I go home with hundreds of lipsticks, what do I do with that?” (L, Singapore, Feb 2026). “As an environmentalist, I kinda feel bad because I buy a lot of products that end up as waste” (M, Australia, Jan 2026). “I don’t waste it, I donate it to the temple or people in need, or I just give it away to friends, I don’t want to bring back products” (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026).

Gambling and Addiction

It's kind of risky to claim that gambling and addiction could be problems emerging because of private events. But the winner of the events is the one who discloses that they feel this is part of schematic gambling. “It’s a hard and calculated gambling. I need to calculate everything.” (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026). “Kind of just going off on your own to try to figure out, like how much it is you need to spend.” (E, Indonesia, Mar 2026). “So I thought I had a good chance for it. So I even had bought the, like, tickets a month and a half before the event and before I even knew if I was selected or not. But that was a kind of gamble” (Y, USA, Feb 2026). “It's purely luck. I mean like, there might be chances if you buy more and then you get it, but it would be like an unknown thing” (P, Malaysia, Mar 2026).

Gambling could not be the only potential problem that shadow fans face. When fans start gambling and then win, they become part of the secret club societies, gaining first-hand intimacy with the actors, which could lead to addiction. The fans want it more and will try to win again for the next opportunity. “And I was like oh my God, that will be my dream. I can’t get enough” (Y, USA, Feb 2026).

> So I would love to go to the event as many events as I could when I'm there. So, when I get a chance to see them, I want to see them. Like I, I, I know it's, it's very expensive for everybody, But I want to use the most out of it. I want to get that opportunity to see them. (L, USA, Feb 2026)

Conclusion

Thailand Boys Love, a newly emerging product of queer pop culture, is part of the media and cultural industries. The media and cultural industry is treated like any other industry in the neo-capitalist world to generate profit, including securing support from the country as part of soft power and national development. Eventually, profit-making falls into the fans' responsibility. The Thai BL industry gets a chance to not only reach fans but also go beyond, through deals, endorsements, merchandise, and real-life events that encourage interaction. They sell it as events, and the more fans pay, the better the benefits and interaction they get. That's how private events start. These types of events decided the winner with a gambling-like scheme, which could create potential problems as fans could become gamblers and addicted. The excuse is that with the money fans spend, they get back in the form of intimacy. These profit-marketed events use fans' emotions and vulnerability, create pseudo-individuality, and make fans crave more. The industry, instead of providing accessibility for its audience, created ways to prey on fans more. This is not included in how the industry also gaslights fans into believing they are responsible for their favorite actors' jobs by promoting the actors, as mentioned by the head of GMMTV in an interview with Thailand Public Show Broadcast (ThaiPBS, 2025). The industry was creating an unhealthy relationship between fans and idols. In many previous studies, fans were being told to be more responsible for their spending, to be responsible for being fans. Many of the theories are also being produced as criticisms of fans' intimate relationship with idols, stating their psychology, but in this research, it was pointed out that fans are merely responding to how the industry wants them to be. The industry created the opportunity and availability. Therefore, the possibility of deviance among fans should be a shared responsibility between fans and the industry. The deviant will not change if the industry doesn't change.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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Appendix

List of Informants

No	Code	Country	Winner of	Interview Time
1	M	Australia	Mos - Bank	January 2026
2	L	Germany	Sailub-Pon	January 2026
3	Y	USA	Joong-Dunk	February 2026
4	L	Singapore	Proxie	February 2026
5	L	USA	Billy-Babe	February 2026
6	H	UK	Zee-Nunew	February 2026
7	A	France	Tutot - Yim	February 2026
8	A	Indonesia	Great Sapol	February 2026
9	E	Indonesia	Singto - Krist	March 2026
10	P	Malaysia	Pond - Phuwin	March 2026

Literary Witness to Hidden Labor: Amy Dorrit and the Legacy of Young Caring Roles

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Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines the parallels between Amy (Little) Dorrit in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857) and contemporary young carers, highlighting how the Victorian literary figure illuminates the realities of contemporary young carers. Amy's premature assumption of adult responsibilities strongly resonates with the lived experiences of modern young carers, who often shoulder emotionally and physically demanding caregiving roles within their families, with little recognition or institutional support. By comparing Dickens's narrative with recent sociological research, this study highlights Dickens's enduring relevance in exposing the systemic failures that compel young people to assume disproportionate domestic and emotional burdens. The study combines textual analysis with comparative thematic mapping to clarify recurring motifs—self-effacement, resilience, moralized responsibility, and restricted life opportunities—and the narrative strategies Dickens uses to evoke sympathy and critique structural neglect. Finally, the analysis underscores Victorian fiction's importance as a critical framework for understanding persistent caregiving inequalities in contemporary welfare states.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, caregiving, employment, gender, family, *Little Dorrit*, young carers, Victorian women

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Introduction

Charles Dickens's childhood—marked by his family's imprisonment in the Marshalsea debtors' prison and his premature employment at the age of 12 at Warren's Blacking Warehouse—left an indelible imprint on his imagination and shaped his recurring concern for children facing emotional and financial vulnerabilities. As observed by Adrian (1984), Dickens depicts parent–child role reversals so frequently that the pattern "appears nothing less than an obsession" (p. 119). In many of his novels, parents exploit their children's labor, and the children themselves assume responsibilities as breadwinners and caregivers without complaint.

This study examines *Little Dorrit*, which features one of Dickens's many victimized children, Amy (Little) Dorrit,※ who simultaneously undertakes the roles of breadwinner, caregiver, companion, guardian, and surrogate mother. However, as implied by her diminutive nickname, "little," her labor remains unrecognized. Amy internalizes her duty to such an extent that she never questions her obligation toward her family, despite being its youngest member. Her self-effacement aligns with "willed smallness" (Schor, 1999/2007, p. 126). Dickens's fiction often assigns informal care to girls, reflecting Victorian culture's normalization of the suffering of women and moralization of their domestic labor. As noted by Slater (1983/1986, p. 339), Victorian people took women's endurance for granted.

The domestic work performed by Amy, which is emotionally and physically exhausting, unpaid, and undervalued, parallels the work done by modern young carers. By comparing Amy's silent suffering with the experiences of today's young carers, this study reveals the persistent dynamics that force young people—particularly girls—into exhaustive and unrewarding domestic labor under the moral banner of "family duty."

Amy Dorrit's Paradoxical Status

Amy Dorrit occupies a paradoxical position within her family. Despite being the household's least powerful member, Amy is the one on whom everyone depends for survival. This contradiction is both structural (rooted in hierarchy, authority, and gender) and operational, as reflected in the daily labor that sustains the Dorrit family. As the youngest daughter, Amy holds no authority and receives little recognition, and her only means of contributing is to meet Mr. Dorrit's constant demands. Confined with him in the cramped Marshalsea cell, Amy cooks and mends, while also soothing, comforting, and protecting Mr. Dorrit, habitually at the expense of her own well-being. One of the most important examples of her self-sacrifice is her tendency to secretly starve herself, giving her food to her father so that he can maintain the illusion of gentility. Schor (1999/2007, p. 126) interprets this act as an extreme form of self-effacement. Similarly, Waters (1997) notes that Amy's "diminutive stature, silence, and the invisibility of her work" (p. 119) tend to erase her material presence. In effect, Amy becomes the family's invisible laborer, performing the emotional and physical work that enables Mr. Dorrit to maintain his fragile dignity.

Amy's relationship with her father reverses the ordinary father–daughter dynamic; she becomes a "little mother" to him. Mr. Dorrit abdicates all parental responsibility, leaving Amy to manage the household, earn money, supervise finances, arrange her siblings' employment, and shield

※ To avoid confusion, this study consistently refers to the protagonist as Amy Dorrit.

him from shame. This inversion—the youngest child becoming the family's primary organizer—reveals the extent of the Dorrit family's dysfunction. Holbrook (1993) famously remarked that "the trouble with Little Dorrit is that she is too good" (p. 78); this remark positions Amy as a figure who reflects the Victorian ideal of feminine virtue—being modest, patient, self-effacing, and endlessly giving. Similarly, according to Shoemaker (1998, p. 23), conduct literature repeatedly emphasizes virtues such as modesty, meekness, tenderness, and compassion as the hallmarks of ideal womanhood. In this sense, Amy embodies these traits so completely that her goodness becomes a mechanism for her own erasure.

Her family's treatment of Amy reinforces this erasure as well. Instead of acknowledging her sacrifices or providing emotional support, Mr. Dorrit demands her obedience and reprimands her when she fails to meet his expectations. Her brother Tip contributes nothing but debt, thereby increasing her burden, whereas her sister Fanny despises Amy for being born in the Marshalsea. The narrator clarifies that this disregard is not accidental but structural: "It was the family custom to lay it down as family law that she was a plain domestic little creature. . . . Not to make too much of [her services]" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, pp. 279–280). The Dorrits insist on minimizing Amy's contributions to maintain their fiction of gentility. Acknowledging Amy's labor would expose the family's dependence on the very child whom they consider insignificant.

Amy's structural invisibility becomes particularly clear during the family's release from the Marshalsea. As Mr. Dorrit and the others depart in new clothes, Amy is forgotten in her cell, lying unconscious on the floor. Subsequently, Arthur Clennam carries her to the carriage, remarking, "She has been forgotten" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 481). This scene crystallizes the family's exploitation of Amy, an indispensable yet unseen laboring body whose existence must remain invisible to preserve the family's self-image.

Dickens uses this paradox to expose the moral and emotional economy of Victorian families. Amy's insignificance is not a natural condition but a socially produced one that enables the Dorrits to function. Her position reveals a distorted power dynamic in which authority rests with those who contribute the least, and the family's survival depends on the silent labor of the one deemed least important.

Amy's Internalization of Her Filial Duty

Amy Dorrit's acquaintances—both educated and less formally educated—recognize her family's exploitation of her, albeit in different ways. For instance, Mrs. Chivery misinterprets Amy's refusal to marry her son but accurately identifies the structural dynamic that traps Amy: a father who demands exclusive emotional possession, siblings who hold "high views" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 304), and a young woman who believes she must "be always a sacrifice" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 304). Mrs. Chivery's words capture the essence of Amy's predicament: she is "doomed to be a constant slave to them that are not worthy" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 304). Dickens uses this outsider perspective to expose the Dorrit family's moral blindness and the emotional logic sustaining Amy's self-erasure.

Amy's internalization of her duties begins early in her childhood. After her mother's death, she assumes family responsibilities at the age of 8, inspired "to be something which was not what the rest were . . . for the sake of the rest" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 111). At age 13, she understands her father's incapacity—"no one better"—but continues to uphold the fiction of his gentility (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 112). This self-imposed obligation functions as

psychological internalization: Amy convinces herself that her purpose is to protect and serve her father, despite recognizing his failures. Her devotion is tantamount to self-conditioning, shaped by love but reinforced by Victorian gender ideology.

The period's conduct literature clarifies Amy's mindset. Ellis (1839) insists that even "the most servile drudgery may be ennobled" (p. 38) when performed with patience and cheerful submission. Amy embodies this ideal perfectly, as her labor becomes not merely a practical necessity but a moral performance that confirms her identity as a virtuous woman. However, Dickens complicates this ideal by highlighting its psychological cost: Amy's self-sacrifice becomes compulsive, that is, a defining feature of her sense of self, rather than a freely chosen act.

Further, Dickens illustrates the limits of legal and ideological protections through an episode involving the Marshalsea turnkey Bob, who contemplates leaving his savings to Amy. Although the law could secure her inheritance, it could not protect her from emotional manipulation. As observed by Bob, no legal mechanism can prevent a "tender-hearted" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, pp. 110–111) girl from being persuaded—or guilted—into relinquishing her resources. This scene underscores the novel's central theme: the law can regulate property but not affection, obligation, or the moral pressures of family life.

The true harm of Amy's dedication is not physical exhaustion but the erosion of her capacity to imagine a life of her own. For her, service is second nature. When Arthur Clennam encourages her to leave the Marshalsea, Amy insists that remaining there is "much better, much more dutiful, much happier" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 309). Following the family's release, she feels displaced and purposeless because others now care for her father. According to Dickens (1855–1857/1985), Amy has "no one to think for, nothing to plan and contrive" (p. 516) anymore, and she finds the absence of responsibility more alien than the mountains of Italy. Her identity is so tightly linked to caregiving that she considers leisure intolerable.

This dynamic intensifies during Mr. Dorrit's final illness. In his delirium, Mr. Dorrit imagines himself back in the Marshalsea, with Amy, his "little mother," tending to him with unwavering devotion. Dickens (1855–1857/1985) writes that she "would have laid down her own life to restore him" (pp. 710–711) and portrays her care as both heroic and troubling—an act of love bordering on self-annihilation. Dickens reveals that Victorian ideology, which praised self-effacement as women's virtue, can cause emotional dependency and compulsive caregiving.

Even after Mr. Dorrit's death, Amy remains bound to her past. At the novel's conclusion, although Arthur pleads that "this sacrifice of you must be ended" (Dickens, 1855–57/1985, p. 884), Amy plans to devote herself to Fanny's neglected children and tend to Tip's needs. Moreover, the final description of Amy's "modest life of usefulness" (Dickens, 1855–1857/1985, p. 895) suggests continuity rather than liberation. According to Byler (2013), Amy's compassion becomes her "imperial" (p. 238)—a force that governs her life as powerfully as any external authority.

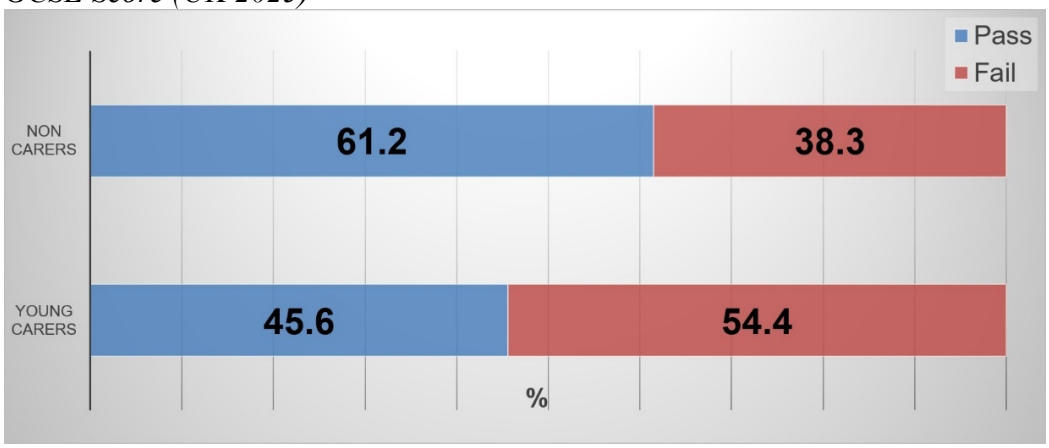
Therefore, Amy's internalization of her duties reveals the emotional mechanisms through which ideology of feminine self-sacrifice operates. Rather than being imposed on her solely from the outside, Amy's self-sacrifice is sustained by her own beliefs about love, virtue, and responsibility. Dickens's portrayal exposes the psychological cost of a system that equates femininity with service and moral worth with self-denial.

Little Dorrit's Legacy: Statistics on Modern Young Carers

Amy Dorrit's self-effacement, patience, and suffering are often interpreted as sentimental or exaggerated. Holbrook (1993) argues that her submissiveness "forfeits credibility as an adult" (p. 87) and reflects Dickens's tendency to idealize the "angelic" (p. 87) woman. However, the hardships endured by Amy were not merely fictional constructs; as noted by Slater (1983/1986, p. 339), Victorian society routinely normalized women's suffering and expected them to bear emotional and domestic burdens without complaint. The patterns depicted by Dickens—youthful sacrifice, gendered caregiving, and the moralization of duty—persist in contemporary societies. Even today, many "Little Dorrits" exist in the form of young carers.

The United Kingdom is a global leader in recognizing and supporting young carers. It defines a young carer as "someone aged under 18 who cares for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem, or an addiction, cannot cope without their support" (Carers Trust, n.d. [b]). The challenges faced by unpaid young carers include low academic achievement; frequent absences from school; social isolation; experiences of bullying; and emotional strain, including ambivalent or negative feelings toward the person they care for. Moreover, young adult carers aged 16–25 experience additional pressures—mental health difficulties, stress from balancing study and caregiving, and disruptions to educational or employment trajectories. These factors often result in unemployment, low income, and ongoing emotional instability, and may disrupt individuals' long-term life planning. In 2022–2023, young carers missed an average of 23 school days (Carers Trust, 2024)—more than 1.5 times the rate of their non-carer peers—and their persistent absence rate was nearly double that of their peers (39.9% compared with 21.1%). Further, 2025 data revealed a substantial attainment gap between carers and non-carers: 45.6% of young carers achieved five General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes, compared with 61.2% of non-carers (Carers Trust, 2025, see Figure 1).

Figure 1
GCSE Score (UK 2025)



Carers Trust (n.d. [a]) provides numerous firsthand accounts of the diversity and severity of such experiences. Some young carers began providing care at 5 or 6 years of age, and many report experiencing panic disorders, chronic isolation, or repeated conflicts with teachers who misunderstand their circumstances. Several do not initially recognize themselves as carers, whereas others leave college or employment to support family members. Many young carers care for multiple relatives or face financial hardships. Despite facing these challenges, the young carers featured by Carers Trust often describe improved well-being after receiving

institutional support; however, they form only a small proportion of the many young carers whose struggles remain unseen.

The 2021 Census for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2023) confirmed the uneven distribution of unpaid care by age and gender and recorded the presence of 127,175 carers under 17 years of age (1.4% of that age group) and 229,690 carers in the 18–24 age group (4.6%). Among 4.99 million unpaid carers, nearly three-fifths were women (2.95 million), and women provided care for significantly longer hours than men (Office for National Statistics, 2023, see Figures 2 and 3). These patterns underscore caregiving's gendered nature, a dynamic central to Dickens's depiction of Amy.

Figure 2
Men vs. Women in Unpaid Care (England and Wales 2021)

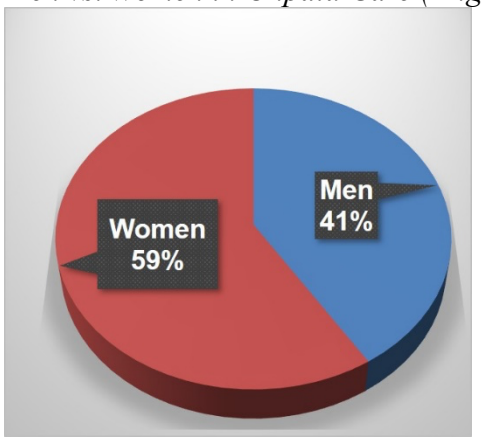
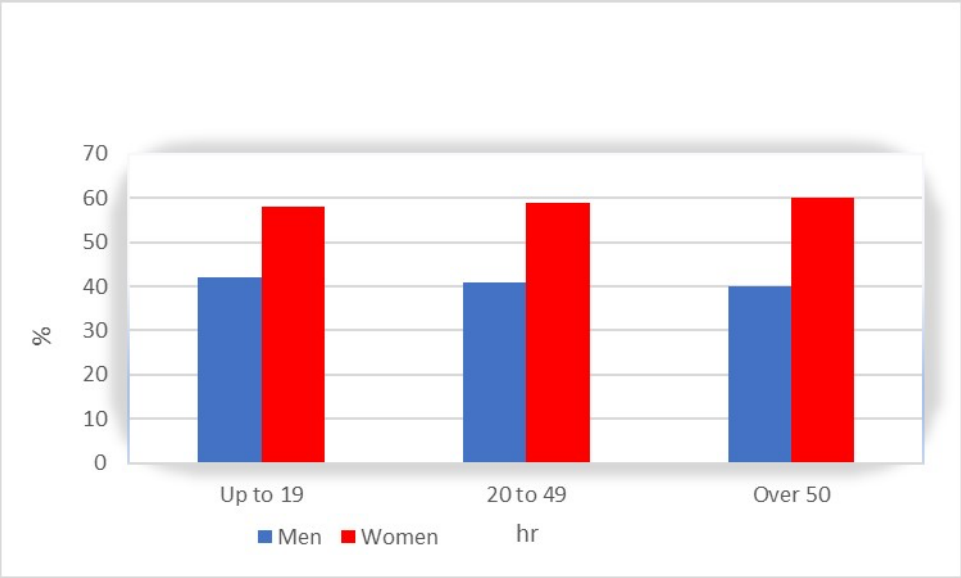


Figure 3
Hours Spent in Caregiving (England and Wales 2021)



Australia's national data reveal similar trends. The 2022 survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024a, b) identified more than 105,000 carers under 15 years of age (2.2% of that age group) and 287,900 carers aged 15–24 years (9.3%), indicating a significant increase from 2018. Among the 3.04 million carers nationwide, women accounted for more than half (1.64 million, see Figure 4). Further, women accounted for more than two-thirds of primary carers providing

the most intensive support (781,700). Women tend to provide care for longer periods as well (see Figure 5).

Figure 4
Men vs. Women in Unpaid Care (Australia 2022)

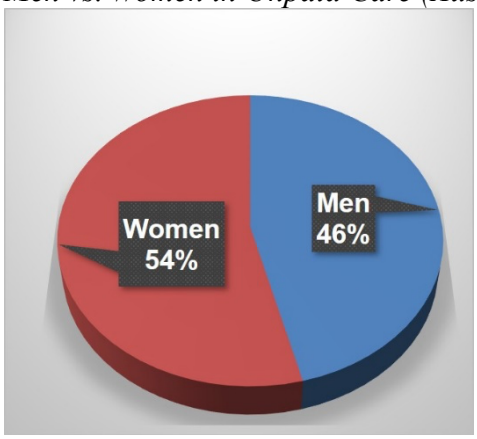
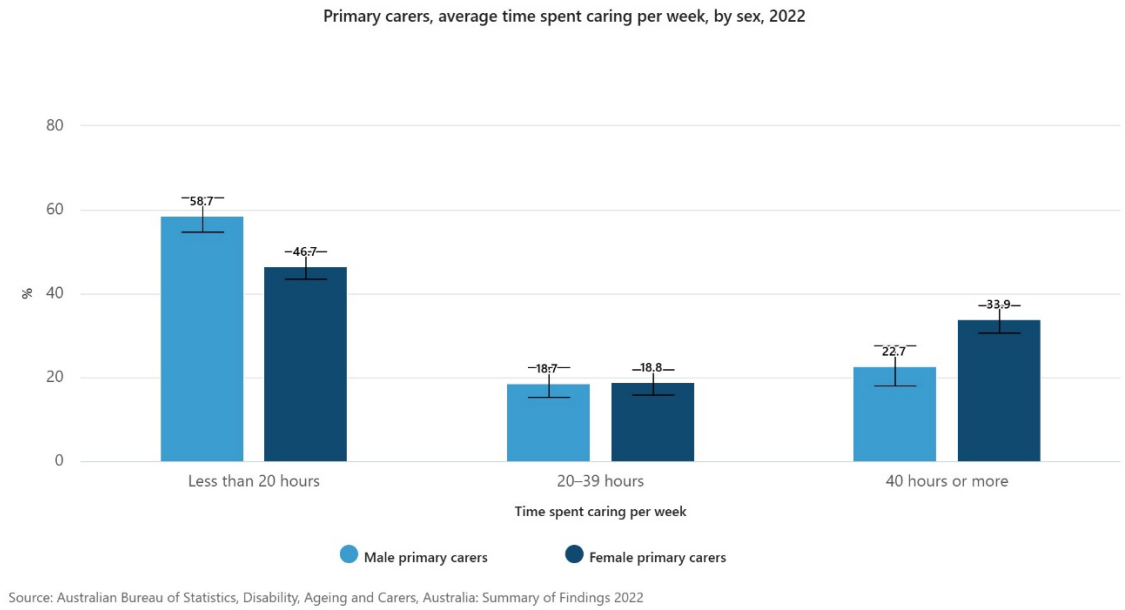


Figure 5
Hours Spent in Caregiving (Australia 2022)



The reasons most frequently cited by young carers for taking on a caring role are as follows: (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024a, b)

1. A sense of responsibility toward one's family (64.7%)
2. Emotional obligation (47.4%)
3. The belief that they can provide better care than anyone else (46.0%)

These motivations—responsibility, emotional duty, and a self-sacrificing mentality—closely mirror the forces that shaped Amy Dorrit's caregiving in the 1850s.

Comparative Analysis: Continuities Across Time

The tasks performed by modern young carers closely resemble those undertaken by Amy Dorrit. Contemporary young carers administer medication, assist with feeding and dressing, manage household cleaning and finances, supervise younger siblings, and provide emotional support. However, as with Amy's labor in the Marshalsea, the carers' work often remains invisible to teachers, neighbors, and even social service professionals. Families may conceal young carers' presence due to stigma or fear of intervention, whereas the carers themselves frequently feel embarrassed or reluctant to disclose their responsibilities (Phelps, 2020, pp. 15–16). Further, limited caregiver identity restricts access to information and external support.

Socioeconomic and demographic factors heighten young carers' vulnerability. According to Hounsell (2013, pp. 5, 8, 11), young carers are more than 1.5 times more likely to have minority ethnic or non-native English-speaking backgrounds, and their families typically have lower educational and income levels than non-carers' families. As in Dickens's London, economic precarity and social marginalization significantly influence who becomes a young carer and the severity of the associated burden.

A second continuity lies in the emotional logic that sustains caregiving. Amy's sense of duty is rooted in love, guilt, and internalized expectations of feminine virtue. Similarly, contemporary young carers frequently cite the following motivations: family responsibility, emotional obligation, and the belief that they can provide better care than anyone else. These motivations reflect a persistent cultural narrative that frames caregiving as a moral imperative, rather than a shared social responsibility, thereby shifting the burden from institutions to individuals.

Gender is another defining factor in caregiving. Victorian ideology explicitly linked femininity with characteristics such as self-sacrifice, patience, and domestic labor. Although contemporary societies no longer codify such expectations through conduct books, caregiving remains disproportionately feminized. Statistical data from the United Kingdom and Australia reveal that women are significantly more likely than men to become primary carers, mirroring the gendered patterns depicted by Dickens. Therefore, Amy's experience resonates with the lived realities of countless modern girls who assume caregiving roles because they are considered more responsible, nurturing, or available than their male counterparts.

Another parallel between contemporary and Victorian carers is their social invisibility. Whereas Amy's family deliberately minimized her labor to preserve their fictitious gentility, many modern young carers struggle with invisibility in schools, workplaces, and social settings. Teachers may misinterpret lateness or absences, peers may misunderstand the constraints of caregiving, and institutions may fail to recognize the carers' need for support. This invisibility obscures the extent of their labor and limits their access to the resources that can alleviate their burden.

However, there are important differences between contemporary and Victorian caregiving. Contemporary welfare states provide at least some formal recognition and support to young carers through organizations such as the Carers Trust, educational accommodations, and social services, whereas Amy operated within a system that offered no institutional safety nets. Therefore, Dickens's portrayal is both historically specific and uncannily prescient because it exposes the emotional and structural mechanisms that continue to shape caregiving even as social frameworks evolve.

Together, these continuities suggest that *Little Dorrit* offers more than a sentimental portrait of Victorian suffering. It provides a critical lens for examining the persistent undervaluation of caregiving labor and the enduring pressures placed on young people, particularly young women, to sacrifice their own well-being for family stability. By reading Amy Dorrit's narrative alongside those of modern young carers, we can better understand the cultural narratives that sustain caregiving inequalities and the urgent need for greater visibility, recognition, and institutional support.

Discussion

Victorian literature must be read from an interdisciplinary perspective to understand the caregiving narratives of Amy Dorrit and modern young carers. Dickens's portrayal of Amy is not merely a sentimental narrative device but a cultural artifact that exposes the emotional, gendered, and structural dimensions of caregiving. Contemporary sociological research reveals that the distribution, perception, and moral framing of caregiving labor depicted in *Little Dorrit* remain relevant across time.

One of the most significant insights of this comparison is the persistence of caregiving invisibility. Dickens dramatizes the Dorrit family's systematic minimization of Amy's labor to preserve their fragile sense of gentility. Modern young carers experience a similar erasure because their work is often hidden within the private sphere, misunderstood by educators, and overlooked by institutions. Carers' invisibility has material consequences: it limits their access to support and intensifies emotional strain. Literature can expose this hidden labor by making its moral and emotional cost visible. Dickens's narrative strategies—sympathetic characterization, irony, and the juxtaposition of public appearance with private suffering—enable readers to confront the moral and emotional costs of caregiving ignored by society.

The second insight is related to the moral burden of family duty. Amy's caregiving is framed as a natural extension of her virtues, in alignment with Victorian ideals of femininity. Despite living in a different ideological landscape, contemporary young carers often articulate their motivations in similar moral terms: responsibility, love, guilt, and the belief that "family comes first." These continuities suggest that caregiving is not merely a practical task but a culturally constructed role shaped by expectations pertaining to gender, emotion, and morality. Dickens's novel highlights how these expectations act as psychological mechanisms that enable carers to internalize their caregiving obligations.

This comparison also highlights the limitations of institutional support. Although modern welfare states provide more resources to carers than Victorian England, young carers continue to face significant barriers to recognition and assistance. Dickens's depiction of the Marshalsea underscores the inadequacy of systems that rely on private sacrifice to compensate for structural failures. In this sense, *Little Dorrit* anticipates contemporary debates on care ethics, social policy, and emotional labor distribution. The novel's critique of institutional neglect resonates with present-day concerns about how societies allocate responsibility for care and how they do, or do not, value the labor of those who provide it.

Finally, this interdisciplinary approach underscores literature's importance as a form of social knowledge. Fiction can reveal the emotional truths and structural dynamics that statistics alone cannot capture. By interpreting Dickens's narrative through contemporary sociological research findings, this study highlights how literature clarifies caregiving's emotional and structural dimensions.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Amy Dorrit's caregiving experiences in *Little Dorrit* offer a compelling framework for understanding modern young carers' realities. Despite being separated by more than a century and existing within radically different social structures, Amy and contemporary young carers share the following core dynamics: the invisibility of labor, the moralization of duty, the gendered distribution of care, and emotional pressures that compel them to sacrifice personal well-being for family stability. Accordingly, Dickens's portrayal of Amy transcends its Victorian context to reveal enduring patterns of society's reliance on the unpaid, unacknowledged labor of the young, particularly women.

By interpreting Dickens's narrative through contemporary sociological research findings, this study highlights how literature clarifies caregiving's emotional and structural dimensions, which cannot be comprehensively captured by statistics alone. Amy's story exposes the psychological mechanisms underlying caregivers' internalized sense of obligation, cultural narratives that frame self-sacrifice as a virtue, and institutional failures that force vulnerable individuals to compensate for systemic shortcomings. These insights strongly resonate with the lived realities of contemporary young carers, who continue to experience educational disruption, emotional strain, and social isolation while providing essential support to their families.

Further, this comparison underscores the importance of using interdisciplinary approaches in caregiving studies. Rather than being merely historical or sentimental, Victorian fiction offers a rich archive for examining the cultural construction of duty, gender, and emotional labor. A comparative reading of Amy Dorrit's experiences and modern young carers' realities highlights the necessity of ensuring greater visibility, recognition, and institutional support for young caregivers. Moreover, it requires scholars to examine how narratives of virtue and sacrifice shape public perceptions of care and obscure underlying structural inequalities.

In summary, *Little Dorrit*, a literary witness to hidden labor, serves as a reminder that caregiving, when left unacknowledged and unsupported, can limit carers' life opportunities. This study's comparison of the experiences of Amy Dorrit with those of contemporary young carers clarifies the historical continuity of caregiving burdens and the urgent need for modern welfare systems to address them.

Acknowledgment

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

The author declares that generative AI and AI-assisted tools were used solely for proofreading the manuscript and improving its language and readability. The author is fully responsible for the contents of the paper.

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Urban-Centric Narratives in Emerging Naga Digital Media Platforms: Whose Stories Get Told?

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Abstract

Media gatekeeping and the construction of newsworthiness are inherently subjective processes that often privilege urban events over rural concerns, reinforcing urbannormative biases in news production. Such patterns of coverage not only shape public perception but also influence the historical record, as archives built on urban-centric reporting risk obscuring or omitting rural experiences. In the context of the rapidly blooming digital media landscape in India, new opportunities have emerged for expanding the visibility of rural issues and strengthening civic engagement. This study examines how three major regional digital news platforms in Nagaland, India—Hornbill TV, Global Window, and NLTV—report on developments across the state. Employing content analysis, the research systematically reviews and thematically categorizes news videos from each platform's YouTube channel, focusing on key development indicators including infrastructure, education, healthcare, livelihood, agriculture, governance, policy, and the distribution of urban versus rural coverage. The findings reveal a marked imbalance, with media outlets prioritizing urban-centric regional, national, and international stories over those originating from rural areas. The study highlights the strengths and limitations of digital media in fostering inclusive journalism and underscores the need for improved representation of rural issues to support equitable information access and more responsive policymaking.

Keywords: media gatekeeping, urban-rural news coverage, digital journalism, content analysis

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Introduction

Journalistic gatekeeping serves as a critical filter that systematically culls information, often prioritizing metropolitan perspectives while marginalizing rural or non-urban realities in the construction of newsworthiness (Fu et al., 2024; Soroka, 2012). This selective processing relies on institutionalized news values and routine procedures that prioritize urban-centric narratives, often relegating peripheral regions to superficial or negative portrayals (Sucháček et al., 2016, 2023). This process is further complicated by the fact that newsroom decision-makers often curate content based on perceptions of audience preferences, which may unconsciously mirror the dominant, urban-centric ideologies of the journalists themselves. Furthermore, this gatekeeping process is rarely neutral, as the underlying journalistic epistemology often fails to account for the specific social cohesion and unique knowledge-building practices required to report on rural communities effectively (Perreault et al., 2024). Consequently, this institutional bias results in the systematic silencing or tokenization of peripheral populations, as editorial gatekeeping decisions frequently erase the lived experiences of those residing outside metropolitan centres (Mukherjee, 2026). This concentration of editorial power often mirrors broader societal hierarchies, where the interests of political and economic centers dictate which regional narratives are deemed worthy of public attention (Nath & Tamuli, 2022). This structural imbalance is exacerbated by the economic decline of regional journalism, where the closure of local outlets leaves a vacuum often filled by metropolitan entities that lack the contextual literacy to accurately interpret rural phenomena (Perreault et al., 2022). As this center-periphery dynamic dictates the flow of information, media organizations inadvertently reinforce a model where industrial and geographic peripheries are effectively excluded from the national discourse (Robinson, 2013).

While center-periphery imbalances have traditionally been studied within legacy media, the contemporary "digital turn" was widely expected to disrupt these inequities. This shift represents far more than an augmentation of broadcasting capacity; it fundamentally transforms our perceptions of news based on evolving societal expectations (Eldridge II, 2020), including the premise that local news organizations must crucially serve and represent their immediate communities (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2023). Theoretically, digital journalism leverages two-way communication by integrating technological, commercial, and editorial roles (Doyle, 2013). Because rapid, real-time dissemination is now a defining feature of digital media (Priyonggo & Adnan, 2021), these platforms inherently possess the structural capability to hyper-localize reporting and instantly elevate peripheral narratives.

However, the digital media landscape in Nagaland, located in North East India, presents a critical paradox. Administratively, Nagaland consists of 17 districts with a diverse mix of urban, semi-urban and rural regions; many districts remain predominantly rural due to their rugged geography, lower population density, and agrarian economies. Yet, the state's media architecture is highly centralized, with most media houses headquartered in urban hubs like Dimapur, Kohima, and Mokokchung. While emerging digital portals and social media journalism initially promised to democratize this ecosystem and bypass traditional geographic gatekeepers, early observations suggest they frequently replicate existing biases. Driven by the urgency of real-time dissemination (Priyonggo & Adnan, 2021) and the commercial pressures of digital survival (Doyle, 2013), these platforms remain tethered to the urban axis where infrastructure, advertising revenue, and media literacy are concentrated.

Consequently, the unique governance systems, knowledge-building practices, and lived realities of Nagaland's rural districts remain largely invisible, filtered through an urban digital

gaze that lacks deep contextual literacy. This study addresses this gap by critically analyzing the gatekeeping mechanisms of emerging Naga digital media platforms. By evaluating a dataset of $N = 879$ YouTube news reports broadcast during November 2025 by three dominant digital news channels in the state, HornbillTV, Global Window, and NLTV, this paper asks, *"Whose stories get told?"* In doing so, it examines the structural, economic, and ideological forces dictating newsworthiness in Nagaland's digital frontier, exploring whether these platforms serve as genuine tools for peripheral empowerment or merely as digital echoes of older, urban-centric hegemonies.

Gatekeeping, Newsworthiness, and Urban Bias in Media

Theoretical Foundations and Evolution of Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping theory remains a foundational concept in mass communication studies, retaining its relevance since its emergence in the post-World War II era. Roberts (2005) emphasizes that the rise of weblogs has renewed scholarly attention to gatekeeping, reinforcing its importance in understanding modern media systems. Gatekeeping refers to the process through which information is filtered and shaped before reaching audiences, thereby constructing social reality (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These decisions, though seemingly minor in isolation, collectively influence the nature, tone, and direction of news narratives (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The evolution of journalism in response to economic and technological transformations has significantly altered traditional gatekeeping structures. Vos and Heinderyckx (2015) argue that these changes have introduced new actors, routines, and distribution channels, reshaping how news is produced and disseminated. Despite these disruptions, gatekeeping continues to adapt rather than disappear (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2013). The emergence of user-generated content has further complicated this process by blurring the distinction between gatekeepers and audiences (Deluliis, 2015). Vos (2014) highlights that inclusion and exclusion in news content directly influence how audiences perceive reality, making gatekeeping a critical site of analysis.

Institutional Norms and Organisational Structures

Journalistic practices and institutional contexts also play a crucial role in shaping gatekeeping decisions. Thorson and Wells (2015) demonstrate that journalists' truth-justification strategies are influenced by their professional positions, reinforcing institutional norms. Similarly, Lowrey (2015) identifies a shift toward solution-oriented journalism, where news selection considers community impact. These perspectives suggest that gatekeeping is embedded within broader social and organizational structures.

The Subjectivity of Newsworthiness and News Selection

A central component of gatekeeping is newsworthiness, which determines the selection and prioritization of news stories. Information related to significant, controversial, or timely issues is more likely to be selected (Shabir et al., 2015). News values such as proximity, importance, and novelty guide these decisions and enhance audience engagement (Zhang et al., 2016). Editors and media managers continuously evaluate competing stories to determine their relevance and prominence (Pashler & Heriot, 2018). However, newsworthiness is inherently subjective. Caple (2015) argues that it may reside in journalists' cognitive frameworks, the nature of events, or discursive practices within news production.

Structural Influence and Systematic Media Biases

Structural influences further shape news selection and representation. Herman (1994) highlights how ownership, advertising, sourcing, and ideological constraints influence media content. Additionally, while journalists often select topics, editorial decisions at higher levels determine the prominence and placement of stories (Boukes et al., 2020). Empirical studies reveal how these processes produce systematic biases. Bartlett et al. (2002b) found that newspapers often neglect research from developing countries and prioritize certain types of studies, while Lundman (2003) demonstrates that crime reporting is influenced by racial and gender stereotypes. In digital media environments, news selection continues to reflect patterns of perceived newsworthiness. Kim and Lu (2026) show that audiences are more likely to engage with headlines that rank higher in perceived importance compared to others. Similarly, Jacobs and Van Spanje (2023) find that certain types of hate crimes receive more coverage than others, shaping public awareness and political responses. However, evaluating bias remains complex, as defining a standard of impartial reporting is inherently difficult (Armona et al., 2024). Media coverage also varies based on demographic and situational factors, with more "newsworthy" events receiving greater attention (Jeanis & Powers, 2016).

Urbannormativity and the Rural-Urban Representation Divide

A critical dimension of media bias is urbannormativity, which privileges urban experiences while marginalizing rural realities. Urbannormativity reflects a cultural assumption that urban life is progressive and desirable, while rural life is perceived as backward or deviant (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016; Nazariadli, 2018). These biases influence both media production and representation. Media consumption itself is shaped by geographic and social contexts, including lifestyle, occupation, and community engagement (Bostian, 1974). Research further highlights disparities in information access between rural and urban populations. Chen et al. (2018) demonstrate that rural communities often face structural barriers, including limited access to healthcare information and media exposure. From a production standpoint, Cruikshank (2016) shows that metropolitan media outlets tend to focus on national political agendas, whereas rural outlets prioritize locally relevant issues. While Okeke et al. (2026) challenge the assumption of qualitative bias by finding no significant difference in the quality of rural versus urban coverage, they acknowledge a persistent quantitative imbalance in representation.

Resource Disparities and Public Relations Infrastructure

External factors such as public relations and institutional support influence media visibility. Lahav et al. (2013) highlight that sustained professional public relations efforts are essential for rural areas to gain consistent and favorable media coverage. This suggests that disparities in representation are not solely editorial but also linked to unequal access to communication resources.

Existing literature demonstrates that gatekeeping and newsworthiness are dynamic processes shaped by technological, institutional, and cultural factors. These processes often reinforce urban-centric biases, contributing to the marginalization of rural perspectives in media coverage. This study builds on these insights by examining how such dynamics operate within regional digital news platforms in Nagaland.

Methodology

This study employs purposive sampling to analyse a dataset of $N = 879$ YouTube news reports broadcast during November 2025 from three YouTube news channels based in Nagaland: HornbillTV (757K subscribers), Global Window (555K subscribers), and NLTV (530K subscribers). HornbillTV and NLTV operate as satellite channels, while Global Window is a digital-native news platform. All three were selected on the basis of subscriber count as a proxy for reach and influence, ensuring the analysis captures channels with substantial audience impact. With only three channels analysed, findings reflect patterns within these high-reach outlets and may not generalize to the broader population of regional YouTube news channels.

Content from these channels was analysed using content analysis, defined by Berelson (1952) as a technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of communication content, and applied directly to YouTube news by the Pew Research Centre (2020). Stories were classified by geographic origin, following the Pew Research Centre (2019), which found that urban and rural audiences differ systematically in perceived coverage and topic priorities. Subject categories were assigned using the news values and gatekeeping framework of Galtung and Ruge (1965), later revisited by Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017), which explains why news coverage consistently sorts into recurring topical categories. Each story was further coded by style—investigative, opinion, event coverage, press conference, or press release, following established genre-classification practice (Möller & Hase, 2022) and the byline-based investigative/non-investigative distinction used by Lewis et al. (2008). Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation were then used to summarize the coded data, consistent with the centrality of quantification to content analysis as outlined by Krippendorff (2019) and Berelson (1952). Finally, news frequency was compared across geographic scope—international, national, regional, and local, following the international news flow framework of Segev (2016) and the local-to-national comparative approach of Guo and Zhang (2023).

Results and Discussion

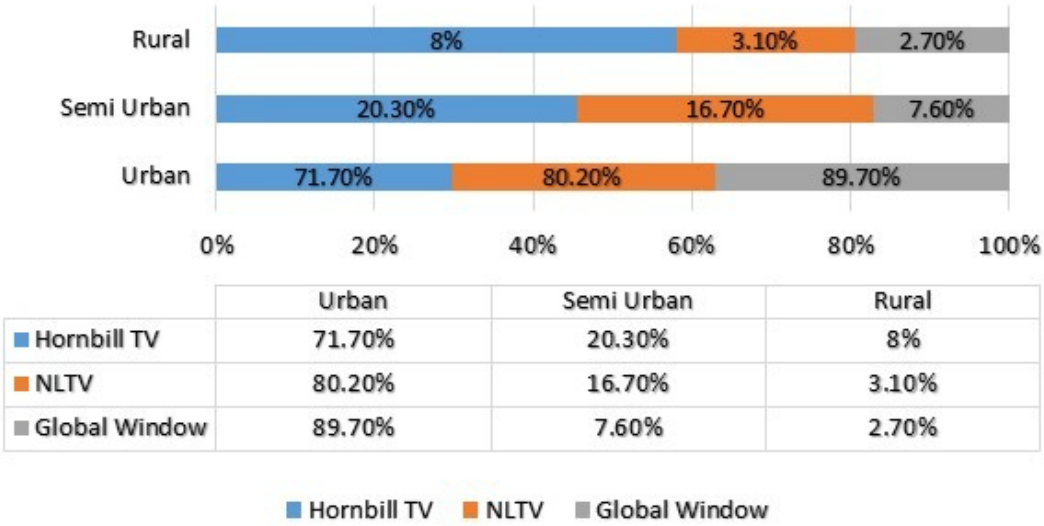
In Nagaland, the classification of places into Urban, Semi-Urban, and Rural zones is closely tied to its unique topography, administrative structure, and economic activities. Mapping out these zones across all 17 administrative districts requires looking at how each district's headquarters and sub-towns are governed. The state designates 3 Municipal Councils (urban hubs) and 36 Town Councils (semi-urban administrative and trade hubs). Districts that do not host a full municipal council or a heavily populated commercial zone are categorized by their main headquarters acting as the semi-urban centre, surrounded by a purely rural landscape (NewsOnAir, 2024).

Table 1
Geographic Distribution

#	District	Urban Zones	Semi-Urban Zones (Town Councils)	Rural Footprint
1.	**Dimapur**	Dimapur (Municipal Council)	East Dimapur	Minor rural fringe
2.	**Kohima**	Kohima (Municipal Council)	Chiephobozou	Large (e.g., Jakhama, Khonoma)
3.	**Mokokchung**	Mokokchung (Municipal)	Tuli, Changtongya, Mangkolemba	Dominant (Traditional Ao villages)
4.	**Chümoukedima**	Chümoukedima Town	Medziphema	Moderate agricultural plains
5.	**Wokha**	*None*	Wokha Town, Bhandari	High (Lotha Naga heartland villages)
6.	**Zünheboto**	*None*	Zünheboto Town, Satakha, Aghunato, Atoizu	Heavy (Sumi Naga villages)
7.	**Mon**	*None*	Mon Town, Naginimora, Aboi, Tizit, Tobu	Massive rural border villages (e.g., Longwa)
8.	**Tuensang**	*None*	Tuensang Town, Longkhim	Heavily rural
9.	**Phek**	*None*	Phek Town, Pfütsero, Chozuba	High (Chizami, Pfütsero agricultural villages)
10.	**Peren**	*None*	Jalukie (Major trade hub), Peren Town, Tening	Dominant rural forests/hills
11.	**Kiphire**	*None*	Kiphire Town, Pungro, Seyochung	Deeply rural mountainous terrain
12.	**Longleng**	*None*	Longleng Town, Tamlu	Highly rural
13.	**Noklak**	*None*	Noklak Town	High border-village footprint
14.	**Shamator**	*None*	Shamator Town	Predominantly rural
15.	**Tseminyü**	*None*	Tseminyü Town	Dense rural Rengma villages
16.	**Niuland**	Niuland Town area	Proximity sub-towns	Agro-plains
17.	**Meluri**	*None*	Meluri Town	Highly rural (Pochury Naga villages)

Data are presented below as percentages rather than raw counts to allow proportional comparison across channels with differing total story volumes, consistent with standard content analysis practice of using percentage distributions for cross-tabulated categorical data (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2019). This approach enables direct comparison of coverage patterns—geographic distribution, subject matter, journalistic style, and news frequency—across channels regardless of differences in overall output, ensuring that a channel with a larger sample size does not disproportionately influence the comparative findings. Percentages also facilitate cross-tabulation, allowing patterns within each channel to be read both independently and against one another, which supports the comparative aims of this study.

Figure 1
Geographic Distribution of Coverage

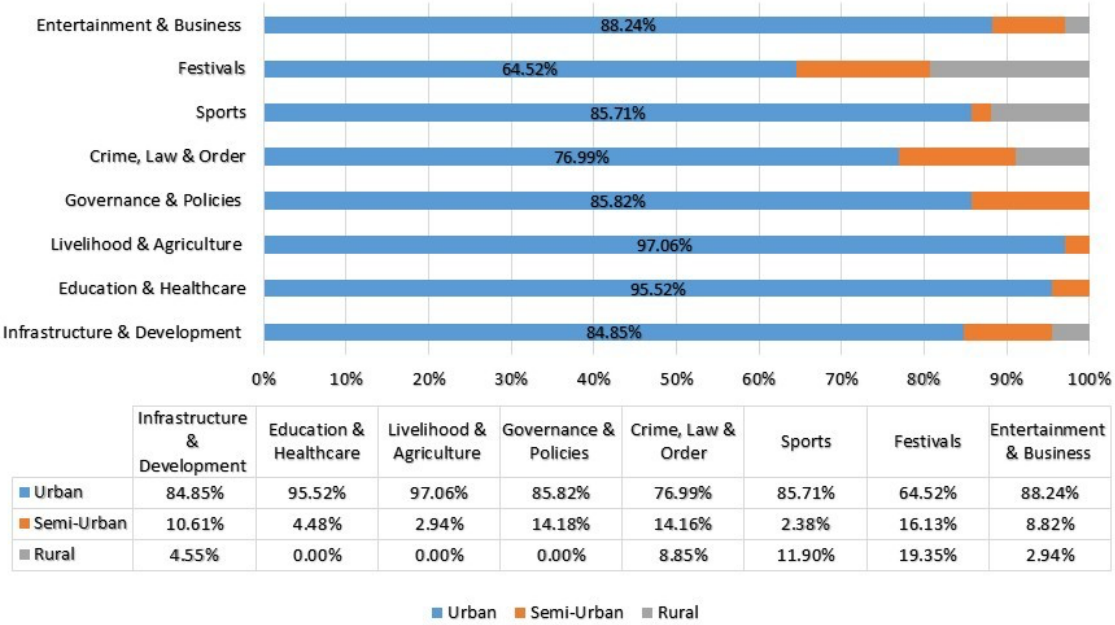


	Urban	Semi Urban	Rural
Hornbill TV	71.70%	20.30%	8%
NLTV	80.20%	16.70%	3.10%
Global Window	89.70%	7.60%	2.70%

Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of geographic distribution in Figure 1 by channels reveals a pronounced urban skew across all three outlets. Urban coverage dominated each channel's output, Global Window (89.70%), Hornbill TV (71.70%), and NLTV (80.20%), while rural coverage remained minimal across the board (2.70%–8%), and semi-urban coverage occupied an intermediate position, with Hornbill TV allocating the largest share (20.30%) compared to NLTV (16.70%) and Global Window (7.60%). This pattern is consistent with the established literature on urban bias in media coverage, which finds that news organizations disproportionately favor urban-based content over rural reporting (Pew Research Centre, 2019). Notably, Global Window shows the strongest urban concentration and weakest rural presence of the three channels, with rural coverage remaining negligible across all formats.

Figure 2
Regional Sector Analysis

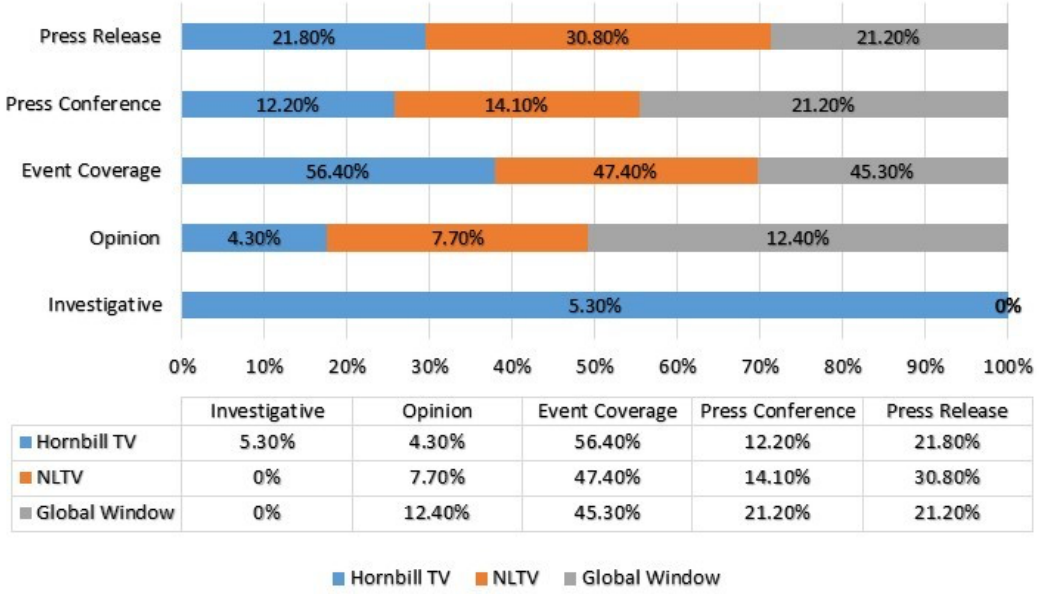


	Infrastructure & Development	Education & Healthcare	Livelihood & Agriculture	Governance & Policies	Crime, Law & Order	Sports	Festivals	Entertainment & Business
Urban	84.85%	95.52%	97.06%	85.82%	76.99%	85.71%	64.52%	88.24%
Semi-Urban	10.61%	4.48%	2.94%	14.18%	14.16%	2.38%	16.13%	8.82%
Rural	4.55%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	8.85%	11.90%	19.35%	2.94%

Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of regional sector analysis in Figure 2 by geographic origin shows that urban coverage dominates every category, ranging from 64.52% (Festivals) to 97.06% (Livelihood & Agriculture). Categories tied to institutional and infrastructural development—Livelihood & Agriculture (97.06%), Education & Healthcare (95.52%), and Entertainment & Business (88.24%)—show the highest urban concentration and negligible rural presence, indicating that development-related reporting is almost exclusively cantered on urban areas despite its direct relevance to rural populations. Festivals recorded the highest rural share (19.35%) and the lowest urban share (64.52%) of any category, suggesting that rural coverage is largely confined to cultural events rather than governance, infrastructure, or livelihood issues that more directly affect rural communities. This pattern reinforces the urban-bias trend observed in the geographic distribution data and aligns with prior findings that rural areas receive disproportionately less coverage on substantive policy and development topics relative to urban centres (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

Figure 3
Comparative Themes

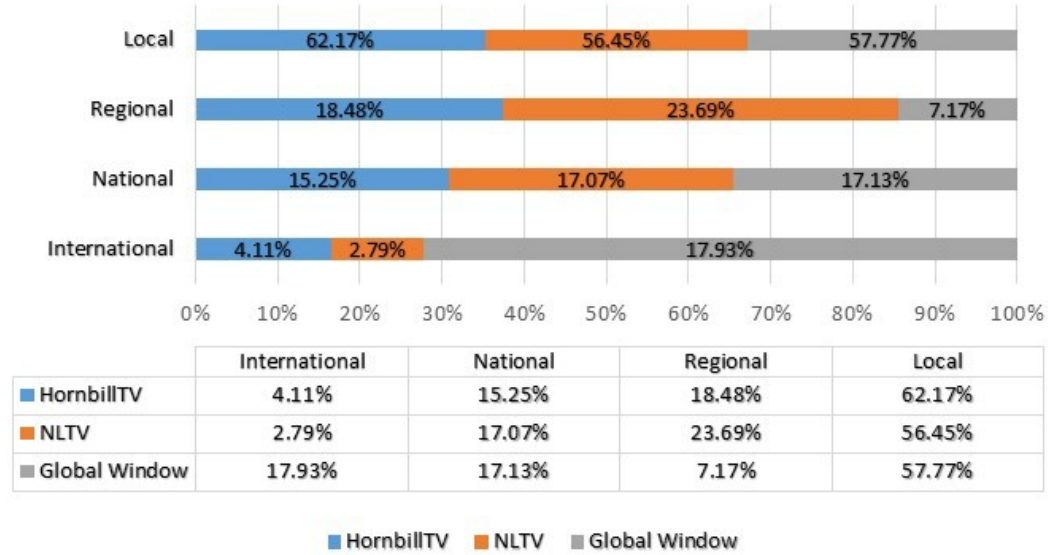


	Investigative	Opinion	Event Coverage	Press Conference	Press Release
Hornbill TV	5.30%	4.30%	56.40%	12.20%	21.80%
NLTV	0%	7.70%	47.40%	14.10%	30.80%
Global Window	0%	12.40%	45.30%	21.20%	21.20%

Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of journalistic style in Figure 3 by channel shows that Event Coverage is the dominant format across all three outlets—Hornbill TV (56.40%), NLTV (47.40%), and Global Window (45.30%) followed by Press Release, which ranged from 21.20% to 30.80%. Investigative reporting was nearly absent, appearing only on Hornbill TV (5.30%), while NLTV and Global Window recorded 0%. Opinion content was similarly minimal across all channels (4.30%–12.40%). This distribution indicates a strong reliance on event-driven and press-release-based reporting over original investigative work, a pattern consistent with the byline-based investigative/non-investigative distinction noted by Lewis et al. (2008), who similarly found independently investigated content to be a small minority relative to event coverage and agency- or release-driven reporting.

Figure 4
Comparative News Frequency



	International	National	Regional	Local
HornbillTV	4.11%	15.25%	18.48%	62.17%
NLTV	2.79%	17.07%	23.69%	56.45%
Global Window	17.93%	17.13%	7.17%	57.77%

Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of news frequency in Figure 4 by geographic scope shows that local news dominates coverage across all three channels—Hornbill TV (62.17%), NLTV (56.45%), and Global Window (57.77%)—confirming a strong local-news orientation consistent with the channels' regional positioning. Regional and national coverage occupied a secondary, comparatively modest share (7.17%–23.69%), while international coverage was the least represented category overall, particularly for Hornbill TV (4.11%) and NLTV (2.79%). Notably, Global Window allocated a markedly higher share to international news (17.93%) than the other two channels, despite a comparatively lower regional share (7.17%), suggesting a relatively broader geographic scope in its overall coverage mix. This local-to-international gradient aligns with the international news flow framework of Segev (2016), which holds that geographic proximity and relatedness to the audience are key determinants of news prominence.

Conclusion

The findings reveal a consistent pattern of urban-centric, local-oriented news coverage across all three Nagaland-based YouTube news channels. Geographic distribution data show urban coverage overwhelmingly dominant (71.70%-89.70%) while rural coverage remains minimal across all channels, a skew that persists across virtually every subject category, with development-related topics such as Livelihood & Agriculture and Education & Healthcare showing the strongest urban concentration. Stylistically, coverage is driven primarily by event coverage and press releases rather than investigative reporting, indicating a reliance on readily available, event-driven content over independently sourced journalism. Frequency comparisons further confirm that these channels prioritize local news above regional, national, and international coverage, reflecting their core function as community-oriented outlets. Collectively, these patterns suggest that while YouTube news channels in Nagaland fulfil an important role in local information dissemination, rural communities and substantive investigative reporting remain comparatively underserved—a gap with implications for equitable information access across the state. As the sample is limited to three high-reach channels, these conclusions should be read as indicative of patterns within this subset rather than generalizable to the broader regional news ecosystem.

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

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with literature identification, and language refinement, and QuillBot to assist with citation generation. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and content of the publication.

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Emotion, Identity and Tradition: Community Narratives of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Jagadhatri Puja Festival in India

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Abstract

The Jagadhatri Puja festival represents a rich and enduring form of intangible cultural heritage yet remains largely understudied within broad research domain cultural heritage studies. With origins traced back to 300 years ago under the zamindari (landlord) system, the festival has gradually transformed from an elite section of society to a community-organized public festival. The city, Chandernagore, reflects an evolving tradition of illumination, moving from hand-held lanterns to contemporary lighting technologies. The festival portrays its ritual expressions and upholds its unique cultural identity through several distinctive cultural elements. The term Jagadhatri, literally "Bearer of the World," symbolizes divine power, where community members collectively perform roles imbued with deep cultural significance. Considering this context, the main objective of this research is to examine how emotions, memory, and cultural pride are transmitted across generations and embedded within cultural practices of the festival thus bridging the academic gap of this research domain. The study employed mixed research methods by adopting a "Big Q" reflexive approach of thematic analysis complemented by sentiment analysis. The findings reveal that community emotions play a crucial role in shaping cultural identity and sustaining heritage continuity. It also demonstrates how Jagadhatri Puja in Chandernagore functions as a living cultural system amid rapid urban change. The research contributes to broader domain on intangible cultural heritage, urban cultural identity, and the emotional geographies of festival traditions in contemporary India.

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Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) represents living cultural expressions transmitted across generations through ritual, performance, craftsmanship, and collective memory. The research domain of cultural heritage has already established that cultural heritage comprises of the sets of tangible and intangible resources which are developed, transmitted, distilled to essence and enhance economic landscape of a territory (Lenzerini, 2011). Urban heritage research increasingly recognizes the dynamic relationship between the physical fabric of cities and the cultural practices that shape community identity. Festivals constitute an important component of intangible cultural heritage because they embody collective memories, cultural practices, social relationships, and emotional attachments (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023). It enables communities to express cultural identity and maintain continuity amid social change. Jagadhatri Puja, celebrated extensively in Chandernagore, India offers a remarkable example of such a living heritage tradition. With a history extending over three centuries and shaped by the unique socio-cultural context of the former French colony, the festival has evolved into one of the most significant cultural events in eastern India.

Unlike conventional approaches that focus primarily on rituals or economic aspects of festivals, the present study examines the emotional and identity-related dimensions embedded within community narratives. Lexically, it explores how residents, devotees, artisans, organizers, and visitors perceive Jagadhatri Puja as a cultural symbol that fosters belonging, continuity, and collective pride. The central argument is how emotion, identity, and tradition are articulated through community narratives of Jagadhatri Puja. The present study examines the ways in which lived experiences, shared memories, and cultural practices contribute to the continuity and safeguarding of the evolving heritage tradition.

Conceptual Framework

The study is grounded in four complementary theoretical perspectives. UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage framework defines heritage as living traditions and practices recognized by communities and transmitted from generation to generation. Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from membership in social groups. Collective memory theory emphasizes the role of shared remembrance in shaping community identity, while affective heritage studies highlight the importance of emotions and sensory experiences in heritage engagement. Combining these perspectives allows Jagadhatri Puja to be understood not merely as a religious celebration but as an evolving heritage system sustained through emotional attachment, collective memory, and social participation. The framework also provides a lens to examine how communities negotiate continuity and change in an urban setting.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to map the spectrum of emotions associated with Jagadhatri Puja and examine how feelings of place attachment are embedded within community narratives which contribute to the construction of urban cultural identity. It further explores the role of intangible cultural heritage in sustaining the intergenerational transmission of traditions and cultural values. By analyzing the interplay between emotion, identity, and heritage, the study seeks to generate insights that can support sustainable cultural planning and heritage management in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which promotes inclusive, resilient, and culturally vibrant cities and communities.

Methodology

The research adopts a mixed-method case study approach. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during the 2024 and 2025 festival celebrations. Participant observation covered major ritual events for five days from Ghot Sthapan to immersion processions. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with priests, artisans, local historians, youth volunteers, puja committee members, residents, and visitors. Historical documents, newspapers, committee records, and archival materials were also reviewed.

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring themes related to emotion, identity, place attachment, tradition, and heritage continuity. Quantitative sentiment analysis was additionally conducted to capture emotional perceptions among host communities and visitors. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and quadrant mapping were employed to identify dominant emotional dimensions and generational differences in festival experiences.

Emotion as Heritage: The Affective Landscape of Jagadhatri Puja

Figure 1
The Affective Landscape of Jagadhatri Puja

One of the most significant findings of the study is the central role of emotion in shaping community engagement with Jagadhatri Puja. Rituals, processions, devotional songs, illumination displays, and immersion ceremonies collectively generate powerful emotional experiences. Community members frequently described feelings of devotion, joy, pride, fulfilment, and belonging during the festival. At the same time, immersion rituals evoke profound sadness and nostalgia associated with the departure of the goddess.

Narratives surrounding Bijoya Dashami reveal a complex emotional spectrum. Expressions such as “tears of sorrow,” “my heart refuses to understand,” and “do come again” reflect the emotional climax associated with the goddess’s departure. The emotional experience is not simply one of loss but represents a cyclical process in which grief is transformed into hope through anticipation of the next annual celebration.

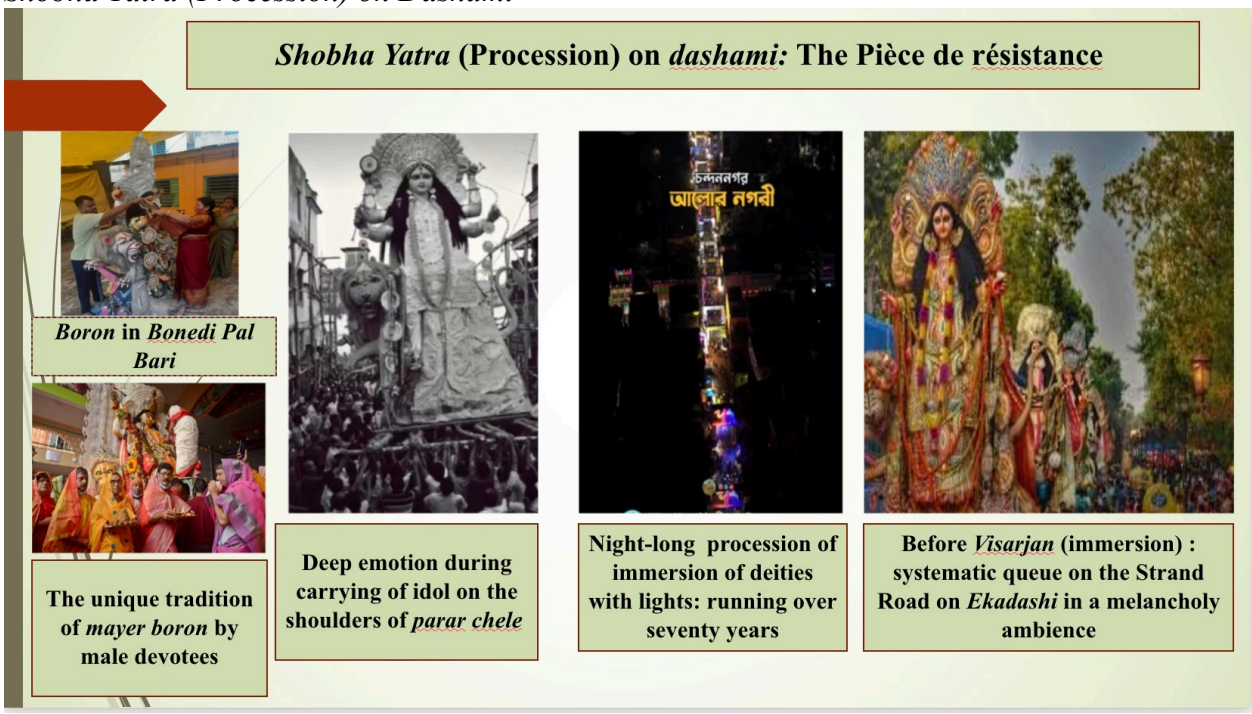
Sentiment analysis further demonstrates that positive emotions dominate community perceptions of the festival. Variables such as serenity, blessing, faith, loving attachment, communal euphoria, social cohesion, and belonging emerged strongly within the emotional structure of the festival experience. Simultaneously, emotions such as melancholy, sadness, grief, and nostalgia appeared primarily during immersion rituals, thereby illustrating the coexistence of joy and sorrow within the heritage experience.

These findings support the argument that emotions are not incidental outcomes of participation but integral components of intangible heritage itself. Emotional experiences strengthen collective memory and motivate continued participation in cultural practices.

Place Identity and Urban Cultural Belonging

Community narratives reveal a strong relationship between Jagadhatri Puja and place identity. Residents frequently personify Chandernagore as a unique and exceptional cultural space. The festival serves as a symbol through which local identity is expressed, reinforced, and celebrated (Strandberg & Styvén, 2024). Community members associate the city's distinctiveness with its illumination displays, disciplined processions, artistic excellence, and long-standing traditions.

Figure 2
Shobha Yatra (Procession) on Dashami



The concept of place attachment emerged strongly from interview narratives. Many respondents described Chandernagore not merely as a geographical location but as an emotional homeland deeply connected to the festival. Pride in local heritage, historical consciousness, and collective guardianship were recurring themes. The findings suggest that Jagadhatri Puja contributes significantly to the construction of urban identity. Through ritual participation, community members reaffirm their relationship with place, thereby transforming cultural heritage into a lived experience of belonging.

Tradition and Intergenerational Continuity

A defining feature of Jagadhatri Puja is its capacity to transmit cultural practices across generations. The festival encompasses a sequence of rituals including *Ghot Sthapan, Kumari Puja, Pradip Daan, Dhuno Porano, Boron, Sindoor Khela, immersion ceremonies,* and subsequent religious observances. These ritual practices function as mechanisms for preserving and reproducing cultural knowledge.

Figure 3
Rituals: Upholding Tradition Across Generations

Intergenerational participation was evident across all aspects of the festival. Elders play a crucial role in transmitting ritual knowledge, while younger generations contribute through volunteer activities, cultural performances, digital promotion, and organizational support. Community-based practices such as *alpona (floor art)* creation involve participants ranging from senior citizens to children.

Figure 4
Ritualistic Floor Art (Alpona): An Evolving Expression of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The study found that tradition is not understood as rigid preservation. Rather, community members actively reinterpret and adapt practices while maintaining their symbolic significance.

Modernization and Adaptive Heritage

An important dimension of the study concerns the interaction between tradition and modernization. Chandernagore's famous illumination displays illustrate how heritage practices evolve through technological innovation. Historical lighting methods involving torches and early electrical systems have gradually been replaced by LED technologies and computerized three-dimensional animations. Despite these technological transformations, the cultural meaning of illumination as a defining feature of the festival remains intact.

Similarly, contemporary concerns regarding environmental sustainability have influenced festival management. Measures such as banning plastic, restricting fireworks, prohibiting excessive sound pollution, promoting lead-free materials, and strengthening waste-management practices demonstrate how heritage traditions can adapt to modern environmental challenges.

These developments indicate that cultural continuity is achieved not through resistance to change but through selective adaptation. Community stakeholders actively negotiate modifications that preserve the sacred essence of the festival while addressing contemporary social and environmental concerns.

Generational Variations in Festival Experience

The quantitative analysis revealed notable generational differences in emotional engagement with Jagadhatri Puja. Younger participants, particularly Generation Z and multi-generational families, reported high levels of happiness, fulfilment, and excitement. Boomers associated the

festival primarily with peace and serenity, while millennials emphasized faith, spirituality, and reflective engagement. Generation X participants displayed strong involvement characterized by happiness and emotional stability. PCA quadrant analysis resulted that different age groups derive distinct meanings from the festival. For younger participants, visual spectacle and collective celebration were central attractions. Older generations, by contrast, valued spiritual reflection, continuity, and cultural memory. The oldest generation occasionally experienced anxiety associated with crowds and changing festival dynamics. These findings indicate that although emotional expressions vary across generations, the festival remains a shared cultural platform capable of accommodating diverse experiences while maintaining social cohesion.

Conclusion

Jagadhatri Puja represents a vibrant example of living intangible cultural heritage in contemporary urban India. The study demonstrates that emotion, identity, and tradition form interconnected dimensions through which the festival is experienced, interpreted, and sustained. Community narratives reveal that rituals, processions, illumination, *alpona,* and devotional participation collectively generate strong emotional attachments and reinforce place-based identities.

The findings further suggest that heritage continuity depends on active community participation and adaptive modernization. Rather than existing as a static tradition, Jagadhatri Puja continuously evolves through technological innovation, environmental awareness, and intergenerational engagement. Emotions such as pride, devotion, nostalgia, and belonging serve as cultural resources that strengthen collective memory and social cohesion.

As cities face increasing pressures of globalization and cultural homogenization, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires greater recognition of community narratives and emotional experiences. Jagadhatri Puja demonstrates how living heritage can simultaneously preserve tradition, foster urban identity, and contribute to sustainable cultural development. In this regard, the festival stands as a powerful example of how intangible cultural heritage continues to shape contemporary urban life while ensuring cultural continuity for future generations.

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Listening to Ancestors: Southern African Sonic and Spiritual Approaches to Relational Architecture

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Abstract

Eurocentric paradigms, worldviews, and values are dominant epistemologies that drive architectural activities, shaping the fabric of society from the perspectives of both the Global North and, more significantly, the Global South. Focusing on the Southern African context, these values seem to create mono-narratives that not only influence the legitimisation of these ontologies but also affect contemporary adaptations of life. It is recognised that in the Global South, Indigenous peoples carry narratives that enrich the distinct cultures and communities from which they originate. However, the Eurocentric values conflict with indigenous practices. At the same time, contemporary Indigenous people remain invisible in public narratives and have minimal influence on architectural discourse and debates. Incorporating marginalised identities and their material cultures into the architectural canon would benefit not only their self-determination and affirmation of their invaluable contributions but also the advancement of knowledge. Bungoma practices, a Southern African divinity healing practice rooted in spiritual, ancestral, and sensorial knowledge, offer an alternative epistemological and methodological framework. This paper proposes sensory and spiritually charged methodological strategies and tools that emerge from Bungoma's philosophical practices and ancestralities. Two contextual sites are discussed in distinct settings across the urban and rural landscapes of South Africa through a sonic reading that examines how these diverse spaces are influenced by soundscapes. The paper makes the claim that such an inquiry reveals alternative ways of practicing architecture centred on relationality, community (Ubuntu) ethics, place, and embodied practices.

Keywords: ancestral knowledge, indigenous knowledge systems, relationality, sensory methodologies, ubungoma

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Introduction

The arrival of modernity in Africa, and its prior historical epochs characterised as colonialism and globalisation, have eradicated, and subsequently mythologised, indigenous knowledge systems, casting them as invalid ways of knowing and being (Badugela, 2024; Mawere, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2005; Opata, 2020). This process, termed "epistemicide," involved the systematic destruction of African epistemologies while benefiting Eurocentric knowledge systems (Abudu, 2022). In the face of modernity, these vital forms are not only subjugated but, when made visible and explored as contemporary forms, run the harmful risk of cultural appropriation (Araya, 2024; Sarah et al., 2018), romanticisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2005), infantilisation (Schupman et al., 2022), and marginalisation (Ibagere & Anyanwu, 2024; Mawere, 2015), furthering the ongoing epistemic violence and silencing of indigenous knowledge systems. This is especially evident in African architecture, arts, humanities, and many other notable fields of study. Indigenous people today continue to practice their forms of self-expression and spiritual self-determination, albeit at the periphery of knowledge production (Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Indigenous communities and their philosophies offer a unique understanding of sensory and spiritual embodied ways of knowing that guide their practices and worldviews. Despite their peripheral status, they are valid epistemological forms unique to the local contexts in which they originate (Mistry et al., 2019; Monyela, 2023). A relook at these conditions of intangible heritage and indigenous knowledge systems is vital as a call to decolonise knowledge in design and more broadly (Bribena, 2019; Ofosu-Asare, 2024) towards epistemic justice (Makalela & Lemmenyane, 2026). Effective decolonising methodologies should address relational epistemologies (Igwe et al., 2022; Parsons & Taylor, 2022; wa Mungai, 2022), community-based practices (Igwe et al., 2022), reframed policy frameworks (Ahmed, 2024), and co-creation between researchers and participants (Held, 2019). The subject of Southern African divinity healing practice of *uBungoma* sacralises the foundations of alternative methodologies undertaken in the study and infuses the indigenous practice with sensory methodologies- particularly the sonic modalities. The contributions this study makes are to situate *uBungoma* as a legitimate sensory and spiritual episteme and, subsequently, to propose methodological strategies and tools that emerge from *uBungoma's* practices and ancestral systems towards dominant architectural domains.

Through a brief discussion of two distinct contextual sites in urban and rural localities of South Africa, the Kwa Mai Mai Traditional Market and the Mautse Sacred Caves, respectively, are the principal sites where daily healing practices, ancestral teachings, and sonic rituals occur. Whilst seemingly distinct in their natural and urban morphologies, the sites are key to spiritual pilgrimage and generate their own meanings within the surrounding landscapes. The sites offer distinct resonances that have the potential to shape how architecture performs and to reveal alternative architectural practices grounded in relationality, community ethics, and placemaking.

My decision to situate these sites in conversation is not only rooted in their methodological potentials, but also in a personal and spiritual imperative, as a researcher with a specific indigeneity that straddles these sites where I professionally practice and where my ancestral lineages and roots lie. The question that animates the research, central to the researcher's doctoral thesis: *how can uBungoma's sensory and spiritually grounded methodologies, particularly surfaced through sonic modalities, reframe the practice of architecture in Southern African contexts, beyond Eurocentric paradigms*? Firstly, I discuss the mono-narratives produced from the epistemic dominance of Eurocentric paradigms. Secondly, I situate *uBungoma* practice as an epistemology by defining what *uBungoma* offers and

demystifying it. Thirdly, to explore sonic methodologies, specifically sound as a spatial tool, listening as a method and sensory engagement beyond vision. In this section, I link *uBungoma* to the methodologies explored and ultimately relate its relevance to architecture. In the last section, I describe the spatial conditions and provide a sonic reading, along with the relationships that emerge through listening, as informed by *uBungoma* principles. Together, these illuminate *uBungoma* practice as a means of knowing, the importance of spirituality and a reading of architecture approached through sonic registers. This paper is exploratory (and speculative) in nature, and the methodologies proposed are central to and ongoing in the researcher's PhD studies in the School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, with the topic titled "*Eyes of the Spirit: Situating uBungoma practices in an Architectural Praxis*."

Eurocentrism, Architecture, and Epistemic Violence

The title of the doctoral studies, from which this paper derives its concepts, "*Eyes of the Spirit*," aims to trace an indigenous theory of sensing, querying what it means to disrupt the constructed dualisms of subject and object, mind and body, material and immaterial, as premised by Kidd (2021, p. 2). One end of the prism indicates the prominence of visual art disciplines and their plight — *Eyes* as the central sensory modality. To elaborate on the above, the Age of Enlightenment was a critical period in intellectual, cultural, and artistic movements, emphasising reason, scientific advances, and rationalism (McGrath & Martin, 2017). Observational drawings of the Renaissance period underpinned Western scientific traditions, in which the ocular laid the foundation for quantifying objective truth. Architectural approaches to the ocular, including the modernist movement and cultural paradigms that introduced the disciplines and terms "aesthetic," "patina," and "picturesque" (Jokilehto, 2017), marked an essential interest in pornographic imagery in architecture today. On the other hand —*Spirit* describes the sensory experience and subjective truth that recognises the sixth sense as vitalities that sustain indigenous intelligence (Howes, 2011). As a reference to the painting by Caravaggio (1571–1610) titled *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (Figure 1), we are reminded of the tactile senses that shape our experience and understanding of the world, and, secondly, that the skin functions as our first medium of communication. To marry the above with Kidd's (2021, p.2) understanding, "our bodies, and our environment [are] neither contained nor stable, but always affecting and being affected by the other, generating new forms of material and embodied experiences." *Eyes of the Spirit* is an attempt at epistemic disruption, placing reverence for indigenous ways of knowing and thereby attuning us to the environment through our perceptual fields.

Figure 1
The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, Carravagio (15th century)

Source: https://www.caravaggio.org/the-incredulity-of-saint-thomas.jsp

It is vital that we examine the epistemic dominance that has instead prevailed, which has lent itself to mononarratives (coloniality of knowledge) and universalism. Eurocentric paradigms have dominated and continue to shape architectural projects in Southern Africa and the Global South. Architectural trends focus on global identity and the appeal of modern architectural looks, which are alluring and seductive, featuring reflective glass facades and high-end technology. The "pornographic" imagery alienates all our vital senses that are functional to how we use our sensory perceptions, neglecting and hierarchising the senses, with the visual as the most credible. The dominance of visual archetypes positions the architectural endeavour as possessing brilliant architectural features, placing indigenous worldviews as inferior. Not only do they make invisible intangible architectural forms, but they also produce singular narratives that perpetuate Eurocentric ideals and technological advancements. They validate and legitimise their forms, rendering the unseen unquantifiable and unintelligible. Surveillance and eyewitness testimony are lauded examples of forensic evidence that we can consider in how truth is factualised (Porter & Kennedy, 2012). Yet, as Ariella Azoulay articulates on her concept of the *imperial shutter*, technologies of vision, such as the shutter (a technical component of the camera), play a constitutive role in imperialism, which has had the potential to suppress, forget, ignore, as well as for the photograph taken, for its meaning to be accepted (Azoulay, 2019). She articulates that "the shutter is a synecdoche for the operation of the imperial enterprise altogether, on which the invention of the photograph, as well as other technological media, was modelled" (Azoulay, 2019, p.16). The shutter, it would seem, fixes moments and photographic events as objective frames that are mobilised by dominant powers. This resonates with the privileged ocular dimensions over other modes of knowing, such as the *unseen*, which are often relegated to the margins as subjective and inferior.

The tradition of a dominant epistemic framework has manifested in spatial practices that ignore local specificity, ecological and social contexts in favour of Eurocentric norms (Bennett, 2025; Ponciano, 2025). The insufficient nature of this framework is evident in the inability to honour more culturally rooted epistemologies, leading to a devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems and the injustice thereof. Gayatri Spivak speak fluently of this idea in her essay, "*Can*

the Subaltern Speak?" highlighting the concerns of the power structures that make it difficult for the subaltern community to express their own experiences. Historically, they have been spoken *for* rather than listened *to*. The question to ponder on, while not addressed extensively in this edition, is how such a novel study attends to the risk and harm that could be sensationalised with sacred knowledges? If this research aims to make visible what has been invisible, what then becomes of this "new" geography articulated? What this study seeks to do instead is to navigate the methodological tools that address the central claim articulated in the introductory outline.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and *uBungoma* as Epistemology

The practice I shed light on in this study requires an ethics of care and accountability, which are essential to studies in indigenous postcolonial paradigms, African-based relational practices, and community representation. These notions are expressed by many prominent African scholars (Chilisa, 2019; Chilisa et al., 2017; Reo, 2019; Snow et al., 2016) to describe culturally resonant research that links individuals to communities in an ongoing relationship that implicates them. Thus, in my long pursuit of this research, there is a need to be accountable to the community, to adopt a bottom-up approach, and to de-emphasise the violent harms of colonisation (Defries, 2014). The work of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, p. 4), a decolonial scholar from South Africa, calls for the deprovincialisation of Africa, describing it as "an intellectual and academic process of centring Africa as a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world." It demands a restructuring of epistemological foundations and production. It requires the reclamation of indigenous perspectives through what Walter Mignolo terms "epistemic disobedience" – a conscious delinking from modernity's hierarchies and entanglements of power (Mignolo, 2009). Ndlovu-Gatsheni, along with Walter Mignolo, Sylvia Wynter, and other decolonisation scholars, urge us to reposition knowledge within "ex-colonised epistemic sites" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The study undertakes the strong directive to take epistemic disobedience seriously and to think rebelliously about "deprovincializing" historically dominant sites of knowledge, by adopting indigenous-led research epistemologies framed through *uBungoma* practices. An indigenous articulation (in place of a worldview) privileges Indigenous concerns, practices, and participation as both researchers and the researched. Wilson (2020, p. 54) articulated this concern, noting that "indigenous people are at a stage where they want research and research design to contribute to their self-determination and liberation struggles, as it is defined and controlled by their communities." Addressing this problem requires a methodological shift grounded in relational ethics, particularly considering the exploitative history of research conducted on Indigenous communities (Smith, 2021).

uBungoma encompasses the philosophy, spirituality, and practice associated with traditional healers across Southern and Central Africa (Janzen, 1992), known locally as sangomas, izangoma (isiZulu), igqirha (isiXhosa) or lethuela (Sesotho). These practices are transmitted orally and embodied through ritual, emphasising relationality over textual archive. While *uBungoma* has deep rural roots and a peripheral identity, it is becoming increasingly visible in urban contexts, reflecting the need to situate the practice (and, by that, make it relevant and ethically practised) for a modernised world and to usher it into contemporary society. In this context, the *uBungoma* practice—a Southern African divinity healing practice grounded in spiritual, ancestral, and sensorial knowledge—offers an alternative epistemological framework. Rooted in oral traditions, rituals, and human archival knowledge, uBungoma exemplifies a sensorialist logic that fundamentally departs from Cartesian rationalism. Despite

ongoing scholarship on IKS (Chilisa, 2019; Ramabu, 2026; Wilson, 2020), *uBungoma* remains excluded from contemporary architectural thinking and practice. Compounding this is the long-standing victimisation of Indigenous systems by colonial mythologies, Western stereotyping, and romanticisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2005). *uBungoma*'s refusal to be fully known, codified, or revealed is a methodological stance, not a limitation. The practice enjoys, to recall Edouard Glissant's concept, the *right to opacity,* as illustrated in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1990/ 1997). In it, he warns us about the rights of individuals to remain incomprehensible to a Western audience, to demand opacity, especially to the curious researcher, whose colonial impulse and yearning for knowledge seek mastery and expertise, thereby making transparent the very same knowledge prone to dilution, simplification, and instrumentalisation. While the academy often demands clarity, objectivity, and proof, *uBungoma* operates in the "fugitive" – the sensory and the spiritual, visible but not immediately apparent to the naked eye. As a researcher, being embedded and resisting the academy is a double conundrum, and one must navigate the tensions between academic rigour and Indigenous relationality. The research problem is both epistemological and institutional; what does writing and designing from within this opacity and transparency mean?

uBungoma's sensorial, ancestral and extrasensory rationalities are pivotal to reassessing architectural discourse. In the context of modernism, current *uBungoma* practices remain untranslatable into the language of architecture, rendering them "unintelligible" in academic spaces. This framing invites architectural research and practice that is not solely about spatial design, but rather about a creative, complex methodological process, ethical positioning, and epistemic resistance.

Sonic & Sensory Readings of Space

Sensory heritage studies and sensory perception examine the material manifestations of the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile fields within societies, drawing on interdisciplinary strands, including the anthropology of the senses. These studies recognise that sensory perception is culturally contingent, with each community interpreting and responding to the world in distinct ways. The task at hand is not one of adding sensory context through which we can understand the past, but what and how we hear shapes subjectivity in important ways, as argued by Mansell (2020). The role of the historians, as he argues, is to *hear with* rather than *listen to* the past. It is useful in decolonial studies to make this distinction. Listening denotes the historian as privileging a particular audition, seeking knowledge, and making what they have listened to part of the historical record. These audible forms are the reason for cultures of class and gender. Listening is contingent on the listener. Hearing with, instead, is only what the historian hears. Mansell (2020, p. 100) calls this the "historicity of truths as they have taken sonic form." It is also vital in decolonial studies to think through listening as an ethical act of responsibility, accountability, and politics of care and relationality. By tuning in to the sonic and hearing with, we also invite hearing between frames of noise and silence, not necessarily as divergent listening ranges but as offerings of vibrances and resonances of being in spaces, in the quest for spatial knowledge. Furthermore, as deviating from extractive measures of listening to or observing. Later, I discuss the two contextual sites parallel to the sonic ranges of noise and silence. By deploying the *sangomas* (*uBungoma* practitioners) as epistemological agents attuned to sonic-spatial awareness, I can view sensing as a bodily function that gathers information about their environment. *uBungoma*, as an episteme of indigenous intelligence, is laden with sensorial modalities that encode ancestral knowledge and ways of being. The sangoma's body is not only a communicative vessel but also a living, sensorial, archival body that transmits heritage signals across cosmologies, time, and space.

These modalities include codes, philosophies, rituals, and technologies that express a "language of the spirit" (Wreford, 2008). Preliminary observations suggest that these practices involve communication with ancestral spirits through kinaesthetic movement, trance states, and sonic enactments—especially the drum *ngoma*, from which the term *uBungoma* derives its name. Along with song and dance, the drum initiates ritual states and facilitates ancestral communion between the sangoma, the ancestor and the patient. Entering a trance, facilitated by sound, scent, and movement (as an individual and collective participation), becomes a form of ancestral resonance. Additional sonic artefacts, such as the whistle, used to summon ancestors, resonate across African spiritual practices. These communicative devices not only summon but also structure the spiritual presence in space. In some traditions, children are discouraged from whistling at night because it is believed to summon snakes, which are symbols of spirit guides in many sangoma cosmologies. Further sonic gestures include foot stomping, vocal burping (signifying ancestral presence), and rhythmic clapping accompanied by the call "*thokoza*," all of which invoke, acknowledge, and honour ancestral presence. The idea of the multisensory is especially important, as sonic gestures are modes of spatial invitation (and cues) that interface with spatial knowledge. Therefore, the sonic becomes an access point, or a means of granting spiritual permissions, and assists in establishing aspects of space-making.

Could we extend this thinking to the architectural discipline and consider learning from and with sangomas about the creation of space and its functionality, not only to heal people and their relationships, but also to enable architecture to learn from and with sangomas in the making of space? Understanding the spiritual fabric of the city as a living, responsive entity reframes architecture not as an inert structure but as a sensorial, relational and ethical act. A decolonial lens is essential for accommodating the forms of extrasensory perception (Geurts, 2003) within architectural discourse, especially in ways that resist dominant ocular-centric narratives. The simplistic taxonomy of the classic five senses is enlivened by a nuanced reading of the *uBungoma* practice. Conventional academic approaches, such as participant observation, while valuable and necessary, are ocularcentric and might prove insufficient for the nature of this study. The research involves immersive, respectful engagement with *uBungoma* rituals and practitioners, where knowledge is shared through reciprocity, humility, and co-presence (Smith, 2021). As custodians of this knowledge, sangomas must be acknowledged as co-researchers whose practices shape the process and outcomes. By minimising research practices centred on visual observations, a sonic and sensory ethnographic practice is situated to refuse the colonial gaze as evidence of how we come to know. The thinking above gives rise to decolonial methodologies proposed towards developing spatial tools. These encompass a range of research methods aligned to the conceptual frame of sensory readings of space. To enlist these are:

1. Site immersion, guided by Thornton's conception of the *Exposed Being* fully implicated in the study (Thornton, 2017).
2. Listening as a Method through soundwalks. This entails walking with and allowing universes to unfold through conversation and prompts. The walking conversations allow sangomas' narratives to be understood through movement and body language.
3. Sound journalling. This is the practice of recording thoughts, feelings and experiences, including documenting sounds of the environment.
4. Autoethnography. Reflexive writing, which attends to the researcher as implicated in the study, is reflected through journal entries.
5. Refusal/ Letting go/ Abandoning (Smith, 2021, pp. 191–192). This surfaces a decolonial ethics of practice, which demands that some knowledges are sacred and

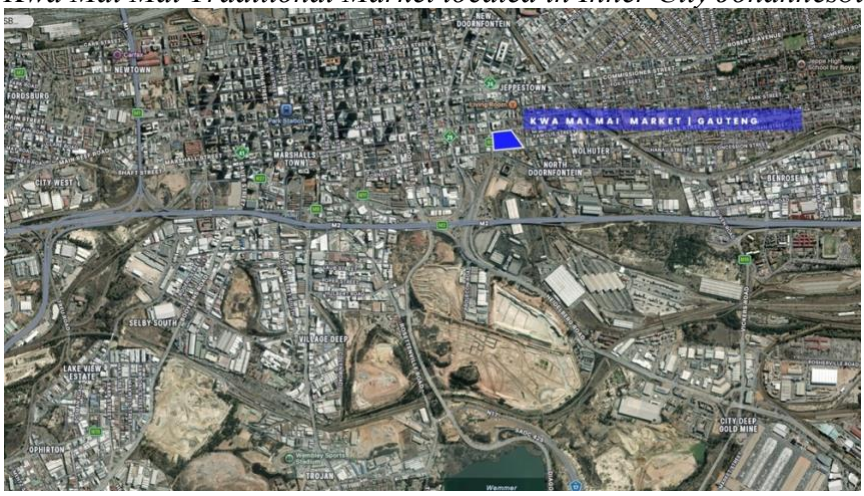
cannot be known, and that the researcher is content to abandon some parts of knowledge production.

Contextual Case Discussion

The study is situated across two sites in urban and rural South Africa. These are grounded to ascertain how decolonial architecture can learn from *uBungoma's* practices, rituals, and ancestral knowledges. Kwa Mai Mai Traditional Market is situated in a thriving urban precinct where traditional healers reside, and cultural entrepreneurs liven the atmosphere through their own economic and cultural self-determination (Figures 2 and 3). Kwa Mai Mai also demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of the *uBungoma* practise in an urban precinct. It is a dynamic site where migrant communities actively sustain and transform their cultural practices. In this sense, the market exemplifies a form of autonomy that resonates with Marx's conception of "man as producer." Yet, unlike Marx's materialist emphasis, this production is not purely economic but also spiritual and epistemic.

Figure 2

Kwa Mai Mai Traditional Market located in Inner City Johannesburg



Source: Google Maps

Figure 3

Kwa Mai Mai Precinct Site Image

Source: Author

Conversely, Mautse Sacred Caves is situated in a rural area of the Eastern Free State Province in South Africa, along the Caledon River Valley, on private farmland (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Mautse Sacred Caves

Source: Google Maps

The sites act as affirmations of the existence of worlds within dominant worlds, self-determining towards indigenousness (freedom) and indigeneity. Simpson (2017) advances decolonial scholarship by emphasising the importance of land as the anchor of decolonial practice, recognising that land dispossession, surveillance, and violence have been enactments of colonial impositions and disruptions. These sites have thus lain outside the domain of Eurocentric heritage frameworks and their potential to inform a decolonial and spiritual approach that listens, senses, and relates rather than sees, measures, and fixes.

The site's offerings can be conceptually read within the conceptual framework of *Noise and Silence.* The approach involves attentiveness to sounds and their resonant implications in research contexts, aiming to stimulate alternative ways of engaging with these contexts, given the traditional practices of architecture that seek to know through the visual field. It stimulates new ways of dealing with places, people and objects. This approach allows us to recall not only spiritual practices but also African folktales and their resounding mythologies. Listening in this sense, according to Voegelin (2010, p. 13), one I contend with, is "an aesthetical activity that challenges the philosophical tradition of the West…sound is left to describe and enhance but never to do and become." Investigating sound is an interdisciplinary endeavour that involves attentive listening to the everyday, offering a cultural and historical contextualisation of auditory perception and considering the context in which listening practices take place (Bull & Cobussen, 2020).

Conclusion

A focus on decolonial scholarship and aligning to the demands of a sacred practice are not without pertinent questions; What does it mean for a sacred practice to be situated within dominant canons of knowledge? How does such a novel study attend to the looming risks and harm that could be sensationalised with sacred knowledges? A relational spatial practice, as I have demonstrated, founded on decolonial and indigenous-led research methodologies, is key to understanding these dynamics and epistemic considerations.

I unpacked what Azoulay terms the imperial shutter, as moments within historical narratives that favour objective "frames" captured by dominant powers. This study epistemically develops a decolonised shutter, so to speak, or epistemic site, through which indigenous knowledges (and technologies) can find grounding. A new epistemic site is also about attending to the question concerning land, as a decolonial practice amplified through listening as a mode of knowing and, ultimately, as a form of *healing* (of contexts, histories, people, and architectures). The methodologies presented have been driven by an ethical, theoretical, and epistemological framework, not only to honour the practice of *uBungoma* but also as acts of refusal and rights to opacity that such a practice demands in the advancement of knowledge.

Finally, the article presented a reading of the sites, conceptually *seen* through noise and silence. Not just in their sonic status as urban and rural ambiences, but as a modality for engaging with contexts and describing places. It asks, what can we hear when we momentarily close our eyes, and then ultimately what are some of the teachings that can emanate from such a study to inform a decolonial architectural practice- one that does not alienate, as the modernity project has done, but affords the spaces designed by architects an imbued significance in *healing* and *making* being. Therefore, the visual gap is replaced by a sensory and "sonic" offering that is not conclusive but addresses a sensibility that mediates the philosophical, methodological, and ethical dimensions.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing tool, was used to proofread and refine the manuscript's language. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, analyses, and discussion are original and derived from the appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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Coded Desires: Platform Governance, Censorship, and Queer Cultural Production in Sinophone East Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines how tongzhi (queer) communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China negotiate platform governance as a condition of cultural production and public belonging. Drawing on interviews with LGBTQ individuals and cultural creators, alongside close readings of fan practices, memes, short-video cultures, and platform policy materials, it traces how algorithmic ranking, content moderation, and commercial imperatives shape the forms of queer visibility that can circulate within Sinophone digital environments. In Mainland China, overlapping censorship regimes and risk-averse corporate enforcement incentivize everyday subterfuge, including creative punctuation, homophones, visual remix, coded references, and platform-switching that keep narratives legible to insiders while remaining ambiguous to automated and human reviewers. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, where formal restrictions are comparatively lighter, market and algorithmic pressures still privilege advertiser-friendly, commercially legible, and politically moderate representations while reducing the reach of more critical or non-normative queer politics. I develop the concept of coded visibility to theorize these practices as a situated mode of platform citizenship, one that leverages consumer-friendly aesthetics and layered communication to secure circulation while carrying critique through memes, fan rituals, in-jokes, and ephemeral content. The paper contributes to cultural studies debates on platform governance and to queer theory on uneven sexual citizenship by demonstrating how human and artificial intelligences co-produce the boundaries of recognition, participation, and risk across Sinophone East Asia.

Keywords: coded visibility, platform governance, tongzhi media ecologies, algorithmic censorship, queer cultural production

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Introduction

Platformed cultural life is often narrated through a simple opposition between expression and repression, yet queer cultural production rarely inhabits either pole cleanly. Across Sinophone East Asia, tongzhi publics take shape through commercial social media infrastructures that simultaneously extend reach and regulate forms, genres, affects, and styles of visibility. These infrastructures govern not only what appears online, but also what becomes discoverable, monetizable, searchable, recommendable, and safely shareable. Visibility therefore becomes inseparable from risk management and from the labour of interpreting platform codes.

This paper examines how queer users and creators in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China negotiate platform governance as a condition of participation in digital cultural life. Rather than asking whether platforms simply liberate or censor queer expression, I ask how digital infrastructures organize the boundaries of recognizability and circulation. Put differently, the concern is not only whether queer content survives moderation, but how governance systems shape the cultural forms that become sustainable, visible, and socially intelligible.

The paper approaches platforms as cultural institutions that organize contemporary forms of sexual citizenship in practice. Recommendation systems, moderation infrastructures, monetization thresholds, advertiser guidelines, and user-reporting systems collectively shape what kinds of queer visibility can circulate at scale. These systems are experienced unevenly across Sinophone East Asia, where platform capitalism intersects with different histories of colonialism, authoritarian governance, neoliberal restructuring, and national identity formation.

The post-1990s tongzhi generation examined in this research has come of age in a period marked by decriminalization, expanded consumer cultures, dating applications, social media publics, and new queer infrastructures. Yet these conditions have not produced a simple movement from silence to freedom. They have emerged alongside China's rise, the intensification of authoritarian state power, the democratic consolidation and international marginalization of Taiwan, the post-handover transformation of Hong Kong, and the neoliberal organization of work, intimacy, and selfhood. Digital infrastructures are therefore not external tools that queer subjects merely use. They are part of the historical environment through which post-1990s Sinophone queer subjectivities are produced.

Rather than treating Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China as points on a simple continuum ranging from repression to openness, this paper approaches them as differentiated yet interconnected media ecologies. Each site is shaped by shared linguistic repertoires, overlapping platform infrastructures, and transregional cultural flows, yet each also operates through distinct political and commercial conditions. A comparative Sinophone framework makes it possible to analyze how similar platform logics become locally specific through policy interpretation, corporate compliance cultures, state pressure, market incentives, and everyday cultural tactics.

The paper develops the concept of *coded visibility* to theorize how queer users negotiate these conditions. Coded visibility refers to a situated mode of cultural production that secures circulation through ambiguity, layered meaning, insider references, and commercially legible aesthetics. It is a form of double address: content must appear sufficiently ordinary, entertaining, or advertiser-safe to survive algorithmic and human scrutiny while simultaneously remaining meaningful to queer publics who know how to interpret the code.

Coded visibility therefore operates not merely as style, but as a governance practice produced within conditions of uneven platform citizenship.

Platform Governance, Sexual Citizenship, and Queer Asia

Critical platform studies has demonstrated that content moderation is not a neutral technical function but a distributed set of normative decisions enacted through policies, contractors, machine-learning systems, monetization structures, and ranking infrastructures (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). Platform governance operates through multiple layers simultaneously: formal community guidelines, probabilistic detection systems, user reporting mechanisms, and opaque recommendation algorithms that collectively determine whether content is promoted, buried, demonetized, shadowed, or removed. These infrastructures increasingly shape cultural production itself. Platformization reorganizes creative labour around metrics of engagement, watch time, visibility, monetization, and brand safety (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Srnicek, 2017).

Algorithmic power is not experienced only through explicit rules. It is also felt through anticipation. Bucher (2018) argues that algorithmic systems become politically significant because users orient themselves toward what they imagine algorithms to reward or punish. Cotter (2019) similarly describes creators as playing a "visibility game," in which platform users produce folk theories about ranking systems and adjust their behaviour accordingly. This dynamic is crucial for queer cultural production because users often interpret reduced reach, unstable searchability, or sudden demonetization without receiving clear explanations. Governance therefore operates through uncertainty as much as through enforcement.

Queer theory has long emphasized that recognition and belonging are distributed unevenly through norms of intimacy, respectability, consumption, and public legitimacy (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Weeks, 1998). Sexual citizenship has historically depended on demonstrating forms of identity and intimacy deemed socially intelligible within dominant institutions. However, digital environments intensify these dynamics by transforming recognition into a measurable and algorithmically sortable property. On many platforms, queer visibility is evaluated simultaneously through engagement metrics and brand compatibility. Visibility is tied not only to legality or social acceptance, but also to monetization thresholds, advertiser friendliness, and recommendation potential.

This paper extends sexual citizenship into the concept of *platform citizenship*. Platform citizenship refers to conditions in which participation depends upon navigating opaque technical systems, corporate governance structures, and commercial visibility regimes. In this framework, belonging is not only legal or cultural. It is infrastructural. Participation depends upon understanding how to remain legible to algorithms, moderators, advertisers, and audiences simultaneously. Following Isin's (2002) broader attention to citizenship as a field of practice rather than only a formal legal status, platform citizenship highlights how users enact claims to presence within systems that distribute recognition unevenly.

Situating these questions within queer Asia scholarship is essential. Rofel's (1999) work on gay identities in China emphasizes that Chinese queer subjectivities are not simply imported from Euro-American sexual modernity, but are produced through negotiations among desire, nation, consumption, and cultural citizenship. Altman (2001), Wilson (2004), Yue (2003), and Benedicto (2014) similarly show that queer globalization is never only the diffusion of Western identities. It is also a process of regional translation, commodification, urban restructuring, and aspirational mobility. For Sinophone queer publics, online cultural production often moves

through shared linguistic and regional repertoires while being shaped by distinct political conditions and platform infrastructures.

Within Sinophone contexts, these dynamics are amplified by the coexistence of state governance, platform capitalism, and regionally specific histories of sovereignty and belonging. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China all participate in transregional digital cultures while simultaneously producing distinct conditions of risk, circulation, and public expression. Coded visibility names how queer belonging is made under these uneven conditions.

Sinophone Media Ecologies and Postcolonial Differentiation

A Sinophone framework helps resist simplistic China-versus-West binaries and avoids treating Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China as merely more or less democratic versions of the same social formation. Instead, Sinophone studies foreground relational histories of language, migration, colonialism, nationalism, and uneven sovereignty (Chiang & Heinrich, 2014). This perspective is particularly important for studying queer digital cultures because media flows across these sites are deeply interconnected. Tongzhi users frequently consume similar popular culture, engage shared online references, and move across overlapping digital infrastructures. Yet these flows occur within dramatically different governance arrangements.

In Mainland China, digital life operates within systems shaped by state censorship, platform compliance cultures, and expanding surveillance infrastructures. In Hong Kong, the political environment has shifted significantly under the National Security Law era, generating new forms of caution and uncertainty around political expression. Taiwan, by contrast, maintains comparatively expansive democratic protections and legalized same-sex marriage, yet still operates within neoliberal platform economies that privilege commercial palatability.

A comparative Sinophone approach therefore avoids treating visibility as equivalent to freedom. Liberal environments may still produce market-based exclusions and algorithmic marginalization, while authoritarian environments may generate highly inventive cultural practices through ambiguity, code, and infrastructural adaptation. The central question is not which society is simply more open, but how visibility regimes become locally specific through political conditions, corporate interpretation, and everyday tactics.

These differences also shape how queer users imagine risk. In Mainland China, risk may involve account deletion, state scrutiny, reputational harm, or collective censorship campaigns. In Hong Kong, political uncertainty increasingly intersects with anxieties around surveillance, self-censorship, and the narrowing of civic expression. In Taiwan, risks are more often linked to commercialization, algorithmic deprioritization, anti-LGBTQ backlash, and the marketability of particular queer identities.

Despite these differences, all three sites reveal how platformed participation is organized by asymmetrical power. Young tongzhi users do not simply inherit homosexuality as a stable identity category. They interpret and perform it through family obligation, education, labour, intimacy, consumer culture, dating applications, popular media, and the changing regional order shaped by China's rise. Digital visibility therefore becomes one arena in which uneven queer modernities are lived, managed, and contested.

Methodology

This paper draws on a mixed qualitative methodology informed by cultural studies, digital ethnography, and interpretive sociology. The analysis combines three primary forms of material. First, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ individuals and cultural creators across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China. Participants discussed their experiences with digital visibility, platform moderation, online community formation, censorship, algorithmic change, and the everyday management of risk within platformed environments.

Second, the paper engages close readings of platform-native cultural practices, including memes, short-video formats, livestream fragments, fandom rituals, visual remix cultures, coded language practices, and ephemeral story content. These materials were analyzed not simply as texts, but as adaptive practices shaped through governance conditions. Third, the study examines platform policy documents, moderation statements, publicly available guidance concerning monetization and content regulation, and discussions surrounding algorithmic governance. This triangulation allows cultural practice to be read alongside the infrastructural systems that shape whether those practices can circulate.

Methodologically, coded visibility is treated both as an empirical pattern and as an analytic lens. As an empirical pattern, it appears in recurring tactics such as the substitution of homophones, fragmented keywords, visual overlays, altered spellings, coded emojis, and layered references that evade automated detection while preserving shared meaning for intended audiences. As an analytic lens, coded visibility foregrounds how meaning is produced through multiple simultaneous audiences. Queer creators increasingly address not only peers and followers, but also recommendation algorithms, automated moderation systems, advertisers, human reviewers, and potential political actors.

The study also adopts an interpretive ethics approach attentive to vulnerability and exposure. Because many participants operate within environments where visibility can produce social, economic, or political risk, anonymity and contextual sensitivity remain central methodological concerns. This is especially important in research on digital cultures, where quoting, naming, or describing content too precisely can inadvertently increase exposure for users whose safety depends on partial obscurity.

Coded Visibility in Practice

Mainland China: Ambiguity as Everyday Infrastructure

In Mainland China, coded visibility emerges through overlapping forms of state regulation, platform compliance, and anticipatory corporate governance. Participants frequently described governance not simply as explicit censorship, but as a broader atmosphere of uncertainty characterized by sudden account fragility, disappearing searchability, reduced reach, inconsistent enforcement, and shifting moderation boundaries. These experiences resonate with Roberts's (2018) account of censorship as a system that shapes attention and knowledge indirectly, not only through outright removal.

Platforms operating within Mainland China often engage in anticipatory over-compliance because penalties for insufficient moderation can be severe. This creates conditions where enforcement exceeds formal rules, encouraging creators to avoid topics perceived as politically

risky even when boundaries remain unclear. Governance therefore operates not only through deletion, but also through ambiguity. Participants described adapting to these conditions through a wide range of vernacular tactics. Homophones, altered punctuation, visual substitution, meme references, coded nicknames, and partial textual fragmentation allowed creators to communicate meaning while reducing detection risks. Certain keywords associated with sexuality, activism, or collective mobilization were routinely avoided or modified.

Visual culture became especially important under these conditions. Rather than relying exclusively on explicit textual identification, users embedded queer meaning through aesthetics, fandom references, symbolic objects, colour palettes, reaction images, or emotionally coded performances recognizable to intended audiences. Meaning was often dispersed across comments, image choices, livestream behaviour, and collective interpretation rather than concentrated within singular explicit statements. This dispersed structure allowed content to remain plausible to outsiders while sustaining intimacy among insiders.

Platform-switching also emerged as a recurring practice. Participants described moving audiences across multiple apps, private groups, encrypted channels, or temporary accounts. Infrastructural movement became a survival strategy. Community therefore operated less as a stable public sphere and more as a shifting network of portals, fragments, and temporary gathering points. Such movement should not be romanticized simply as resistance. Participants often described the fatigue associated with continuously interpreting rules, anticipating moderation, and redesigning expression around uncertainty. The labour of coded visibility requires constant adaptation.

This labour is generationally specific. Post-1990s queer users in Mainland China often encountered dating applications, microblogs, short-video platforms, and livestream cultures as ordinary infrastructures of sociality, yet these infrastructures were embedded in political conditions that made public queer life precarious. Digital participation could enable intimacy, friendship, and self-recognition, but it also required a disciplined awareness of what could not be said too directly. Coded visibility therefore became a learned practice of everyday survival.

Hong Kong and Taiwan: Market-Based Sorting and Algorithmic Palatability

In Hong Kong and Taiwan, participants generally encountered fewer direct forms of formal censorship regarding queer expression. However, governance still operated through market and algorithmic pressures that shaped what kinds of queer visibility achieved circulation and sustainability. Recommendation systems consistently rewarded content perceived as commercially legible, emotionally upbeat, visually attractive, and advertiser-friendly. Participants frequently observed that lifestyle-oriented queer content, romantic couple narratives, fitness aesthetics, beauty cultures, and aspirational consumption tended to receive greater algorithmic amplification.

By contrast, content associated with political critique, structural inequality, anti-capitalist perspectives, non-monogamy, gender nonconformity, or more confrontational activist discourse was often experienced as less visible, less monetizable, or less algorithmically rewarded. These forms of soft governance were not always experienced as explicit censorship. Instead, they appeared as stagnating engagement, unstable reach, or algorithmic invisibility. Participants often interpreted these conditions as requiring strategic moderation of self-presentation. Queer creators learned to package identity through emotionally consumable formats aligned with platform logics favouring positivity, relatability, and marketability.

The result is a form of governance operating through palatability rather than prohibition. Certain forms of queerness become highly visible precisely because they remain commercially compatible with platform capitalism. Other forms remain structurally marginalized even without formal bans. This dynamic resonates with scholarship on homonormativity and homocapitalism, which shows how LGBTQ inclusion can be routed through consumption, urban branding, respectable intimacy, and market participation (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Conway, 2025; McCaskell, 2016; Puar, 2007).

In Hong Kong specifically, political anxieties increasingly intersected with digital caution following broader transformations in civic and media life after 2020. Participants described heightened uncertainty concerning political speech and public expression more generally, which shaped how some queer creators approached discussions of identity, activism, and social critique online. Queer visibility could still circulate, but political critique often required careful tonal and aesthetic calibration.

Taiwan presented a somewhat different dynamic. Participants frequently described Taiwan as comparatively open and affirming, especially following the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2019. Yet they also emphasized the growing commercialization of queer visibility and the pressure to translate identity into marketable content forms. In this setting, queer visibility often appeared celebrated, but only some forms of queerness became easily legible as national progress, liberal modernity, or consumer lifestyle.

Across both sites, coded visibility operated less as evasion from direct state censorship and more as negotiation with platform capitalism and algorithmic attention economies. The distinction matters analytically: where Mainland Chinese users often coded content to reduce political or institutional risk, Hong Kong and Taiwan creators more often coded content to remain circulate-able within commercial systems that rewarded moderation, aspiration, beauty, coupledom, and emotional accessibility.

Vernacular Algorithmic Knowledge and the Labour of Interpretation

One of the central arguments of this paper is that queer visibility within platformed environments is co-produced through interactions between human and artificial intelligences. Moderation systems are neither purely automated nor purely human. Instead, visibility emerges through layered interactions among machine-learning systems, moderators, users, advertisers, platform designers, and states.

Algorithms do not merely classify content neutrally. They operationalize normative assumptions concerning safety, engagement, risk, and monetization. Recommendation systems privilege particular emotional intensities, visual formats, posting rhythms, and behavioural patterns. Moderation systems similarly embed assumptions about acceptable visibility, political sensitivity, sexual explicitness, and commercial compatibility.

At the same time, users actively interpret and adapt to these systems. Participants routinely theorized platform behaviour, shared folk knowledge concerning algorithmic changes, and collectively experimented with tactics for maximizing circulation or minimizing detection. These practices included altering posting times, avoiding certain hashtags, breaking up sensitive keywords, moving conversations into private groups, using visual rather than textual cues, and observing which types of content appeared to survive moderation. In this sense, users develop vernacular theories of governance.

Artificial intelligence systems therefore do not replace human interpretation. Rather, they reorganize it. Human creators increasingly orient themselves toward imagined algorithmic audiences whose precise operations remain unknowable. The result is a recursive process in which users continuously adapt expression according to anticipated platform behaviour. Coded visibility emerges precisely because users recognize that content is being interpreted simultaneously by multiple audiences with different capacities and interests. Content must remain intelligible to intended queer publics while appearing sufficiently ordinary, entertaining, or commercially acceptable to algorithmic and institutional systems.

This interpretive labour is unevenly distributed. Users whose content is most vulnerable to demonetization, removal, political scrutiny, or social exposure often shoulder the greatest burden of adaptation. They must monitor shifting rules, revise language, interpret unexplained changes in reach, and manage the emotional consequences of uncertainty. Platform citizenship is therefore not a neutral condition of participation. It demands continuous labour from those seeking recognition within infrastructures that do not recognize them equally.

Discussion: What Coded Visibility Makes Possible and What It Costs

Coded visibility makes several forms of participation possible within constrained or commercially uneven environments. It allows queer users to maintain community, circulate affect, preserve cultural memory, and sustain forms of publicness that might otherwise become inaccessible. Through memes, layered humour, fandom references, visual symbolism, and ephemeral content, queer users construct recognizable publics even when explicit articulation remains risky or commercially disadvantaged. Coded visibility therefore functions as a form of adaptive cultural infrastructure.

At the same time, coded visibility carries significant limitations. Because participation depends upon ambiguity and strategic legibility, users often experience exhaustion associated with constant self-monitoring and adaptation. The labour of interpretation becomes unevenly distributed toward those most vulnerable to exposure, demonetization, or political scrutiny. Moreover, coded visibility can produce fragmented publics. Platform-switching, disappearing content, algorithmic instability, and differentiated visibility regimes complicate sustained collective organizing. Visibility becomes temporary, unstable, and unevenly distributed.

Commercial platform environments also incentivize forms of depoliticization. Queer visibility becomes increasingly tied to marketability, emotional positivity, and advertiser compatibility. Under these conditions, commercially attractive representations may expand while structural critique remains marginalized. This dynamic helps explain why visibility alone cannot be equated with liberation. Increased representation does not necessarily transform the infrastructures governing participation. Instead, governance increasingly operates through differentiated amplification. Some forms of queer life become highly visible precisely because they remain compatible with platform capitalism.

Coded visibility also complicates the language of resistance. It is tempting to describe coded practices as creative resistance to censorship or exclusion, and they often are. Yet they are also evidence of constraint. The need to code, fragment, soften, aestheticize, or reroute queer expression reveals the unequal conditions under which participation occurs. Coded visibility is therefore both enabling and costly. It permits circulation, but it does not abolish the regimes that make direct articulation risky, unprofitable, or algorithmically fragile.

This tension is especially important for understanding queer cultural production across Sinophone East Asia. In Mainland China, coded visibility allows publics to persist under censorship and compliance regimes. In Hong Kong, it increasingly intersects with the narrowing of civic space and the recalibration of political speech. In Taiwan, it reveals the limits of liberal visibility when queer life is absorbed into marketable narratives of national progress, consumer belonging, and respectable inclusion. Across all three sites, the central issue is not simply whether queer content appears, but under what conditions it appears and what forms of queer life are made difficult to sustain.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how queer communities across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China negotiate platform governance as a condition of cultural production and public belonging. Rather than approaching digital media through a simple liberation-versus-censorship framework, the paper has argued that visibility itself is governed through algorithmic ranking, moderation infrastructures, commercial pressures, and regionally specific political conditions.

The concept of coded visibility provides a framework for understanding how queer users adapt to these conditions through layered communication practices that simultaneously secure circulation and preserve community meaning. These practices emerge not simply from creativity, but from the necessity of navigating opaque and unequal infrastructures. Across Sinophone East Asia, queer participation increasingly depends upon forms of platform citizenship in which recognition is shaped through engagement metrics, advertiser compatibility, recommendation systems, and governance structures that remain partially invisible to users themselves.

The comparative Sinophone framework developed here demonstrates that governance does not operate identically across contexts. In Mainland China, coded visibility emerges primarily through negotiation with censorship and anticipatory compliance cultures. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, governance operates more frequently through market-based sorting and algorithmic palatability. Yet across all three sites, platform infrastructures shape what forms of queer visibility become sustainable.

Ultimately, platform governance should be understood not merely as a technical system but as a cultural and political infrastructure that organizes the boundaries of recognition, participation, and risk. Queer visibility within digital environments is increasingly co-produced through interactions among states, corporations, algorithms, moderators, advertisers, and users themselves.

The broader implication is that contemporary queer belonging increasingly unfolds through conditional inclusion. Queer users may be visible, but only when visibility can be rendered legible, safe, profitable, apolitical, or ambiguously coded. Coded visibility makes life possible within these constraints, but it also exposes the uneven labour required to inhabit digital publics. To understand queer cultural production today, scholars must therefore attend not only to representation, but also to the infrastructures that decide which representations travel, which disappear, and which must learn to speak in code.

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Silence of the Tachiarai Airfield: Selective Memory and Collective Amnesia

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Abstract

Memory politics is a powerful tool in international relations for states to dismiss their responsibilities for violating international norms and highlight their victimhood and a newly constructed image without justified consequences. Instead of undergoing an intensive process of reconciliation and reparation like its World War II ally Germany, Japan's approach to remembering its imperialist past contrasts in its narratives, education, and means. The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum, a small cultural institution located on the former grounds of the Tachiarai Imperial Airbase in Kyushu, Japan, serves as a case study of how local museums construct narratives about the war using historical sites and evidence. Using analysis of theoretical frameworks set forth by Pierre Nora, Tony Bennett, Adam Lerner, and other scholars whose case studies concerns various types of memorial sites across cultures and states, this essay qualitatively breaks down the institutional, social, and mnemonic effects of the site, and seek to explain its power dynamics with local and national communities. This paper argues that the Memorial Museum fosters collective amnesia by selectively emphasizing Japan's victimhood while omitting its imperialist actions during World War II. This approach complicates Japan's ability to reconcile with its past, shapes contemporary identity and international relations, and reinforces a narrative of victimhood nationalism.

Keywords: memory politics, Japan, nationalism, memorial

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Introduction

The majority of Japan's top imperial government officials, including wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, were labeled as war criminals during the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in 1946 and were punished through imprisonment and executions (MacArthur, 1946). However, the fundamental structures of imperial Japan were not dismantled as thoroughly as those of Nazi Germany. As part of General MacArthur's effort to rebuild Japan into a pacifist ally under U.S. occupation, the imperial family, led by Emperor Hirohito, was retained as the head of state. Wartime cultural and social structures and norms were also left largely intact (Moore & Robinson, 2002, 81). This allowed the world's oldest monarchy to persist and enabled the survival of right-wing symbols and nationalist ideals in contemporary Japan. While the significance of the royal family today remains a topic of debate among historians, the way memory is curated and shared by institutions and museums undeniably impacts both Japanese domestic and international politics.

This essay focuses on the former Tachiarai Imperial Airfield, now the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum. Built in 1919, the airfield played a significant role during the Second Sino-Japanese War, serving as a base for Mitsubishi-built jet fighters and bombers that indiscriminately raided cities in mainland China and Korea. Toward the end of World War II, the airfield was used to train kamikaze pilots, mostly teenagers, for suicide missions in the Pacific War (Bernstein, 1999). Yet, its role in the deaths of thousands of civilians in China and Korea, as well as the forced recruitment of young Japanese teenagers for suicide missions, has largely been overshadowed. Instead, narratives focus on the airfield's strategic destruction by American bombings near the war's end, which resulted in the deaths of civilians, including a group of school children.

By analyzing its institutional and social mnemonic effects, this paper argues that the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum fosters collective amnesia by selectively emphasizing Japan's victimhood while omitting its imperialist actions during World War II, reinforcing a narrative of victimhood nationalism.

Literature Review

Research and analysis on the politics of memory have always been comparatively parochial in the field of social sciences. While a growing literature on mnemonic politics focusing on social dynamics, political power structures, and historical process of conciliation are beginning to bring memory analysis from mere thought experiments in philosophy to contemporary applications, few have used the same interdisciplinary lens to re-evaluate the heavily contested mnemonic landscape of East Asia.

Growing out from a Euro-centric philosophical background, the theoretical foundations of memory often bridge from critics of history as the means to remember the distant past. Nietzsche's concept of memory, which derives from the socio-political background of the late 19th century Europe, believes that the overtly objective and scientific approach to history is counterproductive in that it fails to account for the balance needed for the monumental (inspiring models), the antiquarian (revering roots), and the critical (interrogating and breaking with the past) to advance culturally and politically (Nietzsche, 1997). Gadamer argues that total detachment from the past is undesirable, given that our relationship with the past engages in a "fusion of horizons", in which memories become irreplaceable conditions for us to understand the present and the future (Gadamer, 2013). The biggest issue of these hypotheses on memory

is that the distinction between individual and collective memory is weak. While individual stories can be powerful, it does not offer enough analytical evidence to explain the need for communities to commemorate a shared past in shared spaces, despite differences in their individual memories.

Stepping out from the pre-assumption that remembrance is a psychologically individual act, Halbwachs believes that it is a social collective framework. History, in this case, is determined by the political and social forces which influence the collective society on what to let go and what to retain (Halbwachs & Coser, 1992). Building on top of this, Olick believes a continuous "mnemonic practice" drives states to instrumentally construct narratives, legitimize power, and form identities. While Olick used post-WWII Germany as an exemplary case, it is difficult to apply such directly to Japan, given its different socio-political conditions and historical trajectories, despite their similarities.

Theoretical development in analyzing sites of memories also contributes to the tool boxes for scholars in the 21st century to conduct case studies across cultures and polities. Williams suggests that the global phenomenon of constructing sites of memories serves dual purposes for both state instrumentalization for legitimacy and identity building, and educational assets to prevent future atrocities (Williams, 2007). While this framework is applicable to many post-war memorial sites, it is difficult to suggest these sites in Japan strictly follow these two purposes. Although narratively, all post-war sites in Japan are constructed for peace, lack of reconciliation mechanisms and historical educational awareness limits their functions. Sodaro, on the other hand, critically examines memorial museums as politicized narrative spaces with lack of neutrality: even the moral educational narratives serve to construct and justify specific state ideologies and policies (Sodaro, 2018). Lerner further develops the instrumentalization of memorial politics into means of victimhood nationalism to justify state ideologies and relations on the international stage (Lerner, 2022). While this may be true for the cases of well-known memorial sites, like the 9/11 Memorial, the Vietnam War Monument, the Kigali Genocide Memorial, and the Berlin Wall, lesser-known local sites may reveal a different dynamic in which are instrumentalized at a different extent by states at the national and international level.

Karl Gustafsson has shown that memory politics in East Asia can play a diplomatic role through representations of collective memory and history in museums and memorials (Gustafsson, 2014). Yet, these interactions also suggest that places of memory that have an international audience are also much more likely to be influenced by states' national interests and foreign diplomatic pressure. Located in the middle of rural Kyushu, Tachiarai neither has the international fame, nor access to enough infrastructural access for it to serve an international audience, compared to sites such as the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders in China, and the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo (Takenaka, 2015). This makes Tachiarai a specifically local site of remembrance worthy of analysis. As a part of the collective effort to bring forth the effects of memory politics in socio-political dynamics, this paper contributes to the field by bringing the perspective of localized memorial sites, and understanding the broader implications of national narratives in which smaller communities may play a lesser, but nevertheless existing role.

Methodology

A qualitative case study on the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum as a singular local site of memory in rural Kyushu, Japan, will be conducted through contextualized examination of its institution constructs, content displays, and disseminates historical narratives at the local level.

Primary sources include on-site exhibits, museum displays, and artifacts such as kamikaze pilot suicide notes, survivor testimony compiled in the museum's second chapter, the museum's self-presentation materials, and the aircraft on display. These materials are analyzed for the narratives they construct as well as those they omit.

Interdisciplinarily, I seek to bring theoretical frameworks from memory studies, nationalism theory, and museology: Pierre Nora's distinction between Lieux de Mémoire and Milieux de Mémoire provides the foundational lens for examining how the museum reconstructs rather than preserves historical memory. Lerner's theory of victimhood nationalism informs the analysis of how Japan's wartime identity is selectively framed through trauma and grievance.

Bennett's concept of the exhibitionary complex, drawing on Foucault and Gramsci, is used to situate the museum within broader state-society power dynamics. Additional frameworks by Poole (memory and responsibility), Connerton (typologies of collective amnesia), Dembinska (intercommunity trust-building), and Foote and Azaryahu (commemorative selectivity) are applied to examine the institutional and social mechanisms through which historical amnesia is produced and sustained. Taken together, these frameworks enable a multi-layered critique of how the Tachiarai Museum functions simultaneously as a cultural institution, a community spectacle, and a site of political memory-making. First, this paper will examine the museum as a site of collective amnesia, focusing on the limitations that the site has on seeking historical objectivity and evoking conciliation, communication, and reflection as a process of peace building. Secondly, the position in which the site lies in the bigger framework of Japanese societal and political memorization of its imperialist past will be discussed in relation to the power dynamics between state, societies, and the site, as well as victimhood nationalism.

The Site of Collective Memory and Amnesia

Amnesia itself can replace a collective memory. Unlike other cases of memory politics, Japanese war narratives are characterized by scholarly debates framed within complex theoretical frameworks. Hein argues that the internal division within Japan between revisionists and nationalists “prevents the formation of a collective memory” (Hein, 2020, p. 47). Similarly, Han concludes that “contemporary Japan's public memory-making and -remaking processes are shaped by contestants to reclaim places” (Han, 2012, p. 510). The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum contributes to this discourse by narrating a memory that selectively excludes crucial historical details and contexts. As a result, amnesia became the dominant impression of World War II among younger Japanese generations.

Pierre Nora suggests that collective memory is constructed through selective remembrance and forgetting, a process most visibly demonstrated in museums and memorials (Nora, 1989, p. 7). Drawing on Aristotle's notion of memory, Nora argues that present historical memories exist as reconstructed entities, distinct from the actual historical events they purport to represent. Accordingly, Lieux de Mémoire (sites of memory) are no more than reconstructed accounts of the now-absent Milieux de Mémoire (real environments of memory). Through its emphasis on civilian suffering and the heroism of kamikaze pilots, the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum curates a narrative that downplays Japan's role as a perpetrator in World War II. This selective amnesia mirrors broader national tendencies to avoid accountability for wartime atrocities, shaping a skewed historical understanding among younger generations.

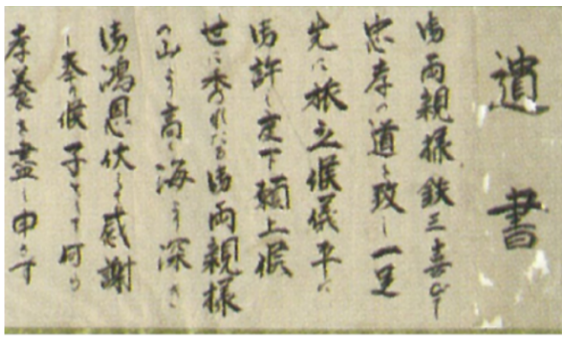
Tachiarai is situated on the physical space which accommodates milieux de memoire, but its contemporary artifacts and narratives are lieux de memoire in nature. Nora differentiates

memory from history in that memory "only accommodates those facts that suit it", while history, "because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism" (Nora, 1989, p. 9). In this case, the lack of intellectual and secular production is brought by the limitation of sources of references to milieux de memoire, allowing the space to be more accommodating to memory than history.

The Selection and Narrative of Memories

At the Tachiarai Museum, the curated memories rely heavily on accounts from local survivors and suicide notes from kamikaze pilots, creating a collective memory centered on victimhood. For instance, the suicide note (Figure 1) conveys an emotional message from a kamikaze pilot, expressing gratitude to his parents and acknowledging his perceived duty to serve his country.

Figure 1
The Suicide Note



Source: http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/

However, absent from this narrative is the historical and political context of Japanese imperialism and the airfield's role as a base for inflicting harm upon other civilians. These elements of history can only be preserved and understood by engaging with the lost Milieux de Mémoire. The museum's second chapter, "Tachiarai Airfield and the Lives of the People" (Figure 2), includes accounts from survivors of the American bombing near the war's end. This chapter develops a Lieux de Mémoire rooted in a disproportionate focus on victim narratives over perpetrator narratives. As a result, the memory constructed within the museum perpetuates a one-sided understanding of history.

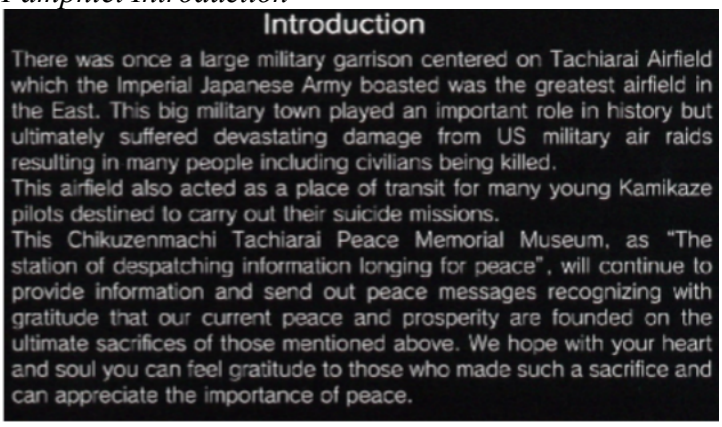
Figure 2
Pamphlet on the Lives of the People

Source: http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/

Although the absence of official frameworks for reconciliation may limit smaller and local memorial sites' ability to present a balanced historical narrative, the museum itself bears the responsibility of revealing the moral contexts and legacies associated with its site. Poole argues that memory is not merely about preserving the past but is also deeply tied to responsibilities (Poole, 2008, p. 150). The amnesia surrounding Japanese imperialism risks eroding the duties to reconcile and educate, fostering a phenomenon of historical detachment among younger Japanese populations. While aggressor narratives do exist within certain demographics, individuals who hold these perspectives often align with the prevailing victimhood narrative to gain social acceptance in Japan (Yu, 2020, 5). The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum attempts to reframe its responsibility by presenting itself as "the station of dispatching information longing for peace" (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Pamphlet Introduction


Introduction

There was once a large military garrison centered on Tachiarai Airfield which the Imperial Japanese Army boasted was the greatest airfield in the East. This big military town played an important role in history but ultimately suffered devastating damage from US military air raids resulting in many people including civilians being killed.

This airfield also acted as a place of transit for many young Kamikaze pilots destined to carry out their suicide missions.

This Chikuzenmachi Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum, as "The station of despatching information longing for peace", will continue to provide information and send out peace messages recognizing with gratitude that our current peace and prosperity are founded on the ultimate sacrifices of those mentioned above. We hope with your heart and soul you can feel gratitude to those who made such a sacrifice and can appreciate the importance of peace.

Source: http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/

However, revisionist historical narratives that contribute to collective amnesia in contemporary Japan persist within the museum's exhibits. This selective framing of history carries significant domestic and international political implications.

Victimhood Nationalism

The portrayal of specific artifacts that evoke an orchestrated sense of sentimentalities aligns with Lerner's theory of victimhood nationalism, which identifies two key qualities: (1) it is constructed on perceived or real collective trauma, and (2) it projects grievances onto otherwise uninvolved international actors (Lerner, 2020, p. 63). In the case of the Tachiarai Museum, the collective memory shaped by amnesia replaces explicit grievances with a vague perception of peace. However, this absence of direct acknowledgment or projection of grievances risks leaving historical conflicts unresolved, particularly with other states such as Korea and China. By emphasizing Japan's victimhood without addressing its responsibilities, the museum perpetuates unresolved historical tensions and complicates Japan's international relations.

This selective framing also poses a domestic threat by fueling the resurgence of right-wing nationalism in Japan, where historical amnesia transforms into a form of impunity (Soyinka-Airewele, 1999). The museum's narrative thus not only undermines reconciliation with other nations but also fosters an internal environment conducive to revisionist and nationalist ideologies. Although "peace" is the central theme of this Lieux de Mémoire, the exhibition subtly portrays a fading collective memory of nationalism, justified through perceptions of pride and self-defense. The museum's highlights are two aircraft: a restored Type 97 Fighter

from a Kamikaze mission (Figure 4) and the only remaining Naval Type 0 Carrier Fighter in the world (Figure 5).

These aircraft are displayed with a strong focus on Japan's industrial and technological advancements at the time, while the political and social conditions surrounding the Kamikaze pilots are only briefly mentioned in a few official posters and notices. The museum's narrative often echoes the honorable tone of wartime propaganda, further perpetuating a sense of pride and sacrifice.

Figure 4
Type 97 Fighter

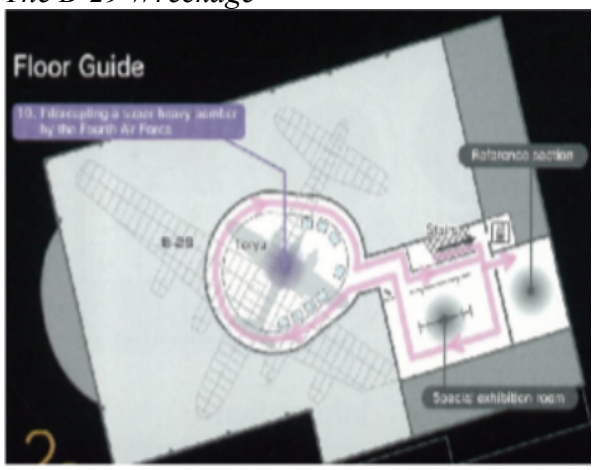
Source: http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/

Figure 5
Type 0 Carrier Fighter

Source: http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/

The victimhood narrative centers on the American bombing of the site, symbolized by a B-29 bomber wreckage hanging from the ceiling (Figure 6). A reconstructed video recounts the downing of the B-29 by a Toryu interceptor, narrated by survivors describing the bombing's horrors.

Figure 6
The B-29 Wreckage



Source: http://tachiarai-heiwa.jp/

While this comforts local families, it risks promoting victimhood nationalism, aligning with Soyinka-Airewele's warning that selective memory can justify impunity. In the context of post-war Japan, this parallels the reconstruction efforts that selectively pardoned war criminals of the past through the creation of vague collective memories or historical amnesia. By omitting the broader context of Japan's imperialist actions and focusing on narratives of victimhood, the museum reinforces a skewed understanding of history, complicating efforts to achieve reconciliation and accountability.

Institutional Power and the Politics of Commemoration

With that being said, how does this local site contribute to the mnemonic landscape of the surrounding community, and as a part of the memory identity of the state? The museum offers discounts and group tours for local students, but its internal structure serves less as a place that encourages reconciliation and discussion. Rather, its focus remains on the physicality of displays. This limitation in memorial characteristics, as argues Nicole Fox, can "affect the extent to which certain narratives of victimhood are remembered or forgotten" (Fox, 2019). The lack of interactivity further prevents conciliation with the past, and lack of definition of peace provides a form of indoctrination rather than communication and reconciliation through a very patriotic masculinity perspective that contrasts with feminine sentimentality and victimization.

Building on Schöpfin (2000) and Smith's (1999) conception on myths and symbols, Dembinska argues that historical reconsideration requires a form of "appeasement of conflicting memories through processes that transform myths" (Dembinska, 2010, 316). Using the case of Eastern Europe, Dembinska's intercommunity trust-building framework stresses an equally important role that both states (official discourses, recognitions, and initiatives) and civil societies (reimagined collective memories, debates, integrative symbols) can play. Yet, when applied to the monoethnic communities in rural Kyushu, the lack of contestation between collective memories, along with a strong governmental narrative and identity as a post-war pacifist state created the anomaly of a victimization of pacifist national identity. In other words, the pacifist movements in the post-war late 20th century have influenced the narrative purpose of these sites of memory to maintain and promote peace. The content of the collective memory that is reminiscent of ideals and narratives from a time of imperial militarism remains.

The effects of such are layered. From the analytical level of social governance and power dynamics between the state and the individual, Bennett argues that the exhibitionary complex reveals an intertwined power dynamic in which memory sites play between societies and governments. Drawing from the perspectives of Foucault and Gramsci, Bennett describes three key developments in which 19th century European societies have re-oriented their own identities and relationship with the state through the paradox of both functioning as spectacles and under surveillance: 1. Societies see themselves as spectacles; 2. State involvement in the provision of such spectacles; 3. The permanent display of power/knowledge (Bennett, 1996, 20). This explains one purpose that the memorial museum serves for the surrounding rural communities, where engaging with a particular site for collective remembrance of the communities' past is one way in which the society "spectacularize" themselves. If such is true, then it would naturally fit into the greater power dynamic with the state. Evidently, the Tachiarai Memorial Museum had its roots in being a physical site to present replicas of World War II era Japanese aircraft, first of which was the Nakajima Ki-27 recovered from Hakata Bay. These artifacts, along with the most recent purchase of the replica model of Shinden fighter in 2022, were all initiated by the town government of Chikuzen (Watanabe, 2022). Foote and Azaryahu define historical amnesia as selectivity of elements for commemoration, but specifically in ways that official commemoration of certain memories overrides those that were not commemorated (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). The involvement of the local government not only conspicuously builds commemoration of narratives, but also shapes what kind of spectacle the community sees itself as.

Paul Connerton further categorizes collective amnesia into ones that are resulted from states and governments, individuals and family groups, civil societies, or other forces of capitalist development (Connerton, 2008). Yet, while post-war governments and the revisionist elements within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party arguably engage in repressive erasure on crimes committed during the imperial era and prescriptive forgetting for revitalizing some sense of national pride for post-war reconstruction, the results of such have shifted into constitutive forgetting in the formation of new identity, as well as structural amnesia. While the former two types of forgetting are government incentivized, the latter two are social phenomena reflected on individuals. Pushback against amnesia does exist during the post-war era, and yet, most of the society was engaged in the amnesia of humiliated silence, in which veterans refuse to revisit memories that were deemed too traumatic. Many characters from Kazuo Hara's documentary reveal just this dynamic (The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On, 1987).

Conclusion

The Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum exemplifies how selective memory, framed through narratives of victimhood and national pride, perpetuates historical amnesia, hindering reconciliation and posing ongoing challenges to both Japan's domestic identity and its international relations. Domestically, Japanese right-wing sentiments are fueled by the lack of reconciliation, with memories of war crimes replaced by a victimhood mentality. This can hinder Japan's pacifist promises and approach, with many younger hard-line politicians promoting more confrontational policies. Given the limited scale and scope of the Tachiarai Peace Memorial Museum, more comparative investigation should be conducted with other memorial museums on other war-time events, such as the atomic bomb memorials in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to prove the existence of collective amnesia. The lack of war reconciliation from modern Japan not only hinders the stability of the region but also fuels Chinese and Korean nationalism based on anti-Japanese sentiments that are passed down from wartime generations. Scholars such as Mangan and Kim investigate East-Asian relations and

further reveal a causal relationship between Chinese and Korean nationalism and the lack of Japanese war crime reconciliation (Mangan et al., 2013). Further research on memorial efforts of Japanese war memories should be conducted beyond national boundaries, and use the concept of collective amnesia as a basis to examine victimhood nationalism.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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A Practical Study on the Application of Generative Painting in Ancient Poetry Teaching at Primary Schools

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Abstract

Teaching classical poetry in primary schools is important; however, current instruction often remains confined to word-by-word explanations and verse translations, leading to insufficient student engagement. Generative painting, grounded in generative learning theory, emphasizes learners 'active processing of information and transformation of textual content into visual representations—a natural fit for the inherent connection between poetry and painting that aligns well with classical poetry instruction. Using the teaching practices of third-grade classical poems “Looking at Tianmen Mountain” and “Jueju” at B Primary School in Xuzhou as a case study, this paper explores the application of generative painting in poetry education. Practice demonstrates that this approach significantly enhances students' interest in learning classical poetry, aids their comprehension of poetic content and emotional nuances, and fosters core literacy development. Accordingly, a practical pathway is proposed: combining teacher guidance with student initiative, implementing engaging hands-on activities, and establishing a multimodal evaluation system to effectively improve the quality of classical poetry instruction in primary schools.

Keywords: generative painting, primary school Chinese language education, ancient poetry teaching

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Introduction

Ancient poetry constitutes a core component of China's outstanding traditional culture, and teaching it to primary school students—future pillars of national development—is particularly vital. Yet current instruction often remains confined to explaining vocabulary and translating verses, leading students to adopt a passive approach to learning, lacking initiative and interest, and thus failing to appreciate the true charm of ancient poetry.

"The application of generative painting principles in elementary school classical poetry instruction" offers a novel approach to addressing these challenges. As an intuitive art form, painting shares a natural connection with classical poetry—indeed, as the saying goes, "poetry is formless painting, and painting is tangible poetry." Utilizing generative painting to support classical poetry teaching in primary school Chinese classes, encouraging students to create paintings that express their understanding of the poems, can stimulate learning interest, deepen comprehension and appreciation of classical poetry, and foster creativity and aesthetic sensitivity.

Theoretical Foundations of Applying Generative Painting to Ancient Poetry Teaching in Primary Schools

Relevant Research on Generative Learning

American psychologist Wittrock proposed the Generative Learning Theory, positing that learners are active participants in the learning process. Throughout learning, learners serve as the central agents; it is through their active processing of information that they construct meaningful understandings, thereby achieving effective learning. Generative learning encompasses four key components: knowledge generation, motivation, the learning process, and the knowledge creation process.

The essence of generative learning lies in knowledge generation. Only when learners actively process knowledge and experience to establish meaningful connections and understanding can they truly master the material. Learners must recognize their responsibility during the learning process, engage in proactive thinking, and link existing knowledge with new information. Interest will only increase when learners perceive that their efforts in knowledge generation contribute to their success. Furthermore, learners should exercise self-regulation in generating meaning, manage their current capabilities and acquired knowledge, adjust learning strategies accordingly, and ultimately produce relevant insights.

Relevant Research on Generative Painting

Since the 1970s, generative drawing has garnered attention from international educators. American educational psychologist Richard E. Mayer and colleagues introduced the principle of generative drawing in multimedia learning research, emphasizing that learners create diagrams while reading texts, actively engaging in generative processing to visualize the relationships between textual elements through spatial diagrams, thereby enhancing learning outcomes. Van Meter et al. conducted a systematic review of generative drawing research, concluding that this approach exhibits both representational pictorial characteristics and learner-generated features.

The steps of generative painting are as follows: First, while reading the text, learners select verbal materials and store them in memory; when preparing to draw, they reorganize these materials into a verbal mental model. During drawing, they refer to visual materials and construct a graphical model in working memory. Then, connections are established between the textual and graphical models to form a coherent mental model, which serves as the foundation for creating the final visual representation.

Generative painting emphasizes learners' active creation and processing of visual compositions. Generative learning theory posits that learners proactively establish connections between learning content and their existing knowledge and experiences; thus, the learner-centered approach and active generative processing inherent in generative painting can be fully explained by this theoretical framework.

The Relationship Between Generative Painting and Ancient Poetry Teaching

Through the preceding theories of generative learning and generative painting, it is evident that guiding students to learn via generative painting fosters their active engagement in the learning process.

Given the inherent connection between painting and classical poetry, we can apply this approach to teaching classical poetry. During instruction, teachers should provide appropriate guidance to encourage students to actively engage in creative learning: by thinking critically, they can visualize textual content and use painting to convey their interpretation of the poem. This process fosters active student participation in both learning and artistic expression, leading to enhanced mastery of classical poetry.

Practical Exploration of Generative Painting in Primary School Classical Poetry Teaching: A Case Study of Teaching "Gazing at Tianmen Mountain" and "Quatrains"

As a graduate student in primary education, during my internship at B Primary School in Xuzhou, I applied generative painting to ancient poetry instruction, enabling students to visualize poetic content through artistic expression based on their understanding of the poems. Below, I provide a summary and analysis of teaching approaches for two classical poems: "Gazing at Tianmen Mountain" and "Jueju."

Practical Exploration of Generative Painting Application in "Viewing Tianmen Mountain"

Teaching Design for "Viewing Tianmen Mountain"

Analysis of Teaching Content. "Gazing at Tianmen Mountain" is an ancient poem included in the third-grade Chinese textbook published by the Ministry of Education. It depicts the magnificent scene of the mighty Yangtze River flowing eastward through Tianmen Mountain, serving as a landscape poem that embodies vivid imagery and conveys poet Li Bai's profound love for China's natural scenery; it reads smoothly and effortlessly. So how can we help students better understand this poem? We may employ the design philosophy of generative painting to structure teaching activities.

Student Analysis. Third-grade students are at the concrete operational stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development: they can perform basic logical reasoning but still rely on

concrete experiences. Additionally, they are highly active and quick-witted, yet show little interest in monotonous classroom activities and struggle with sustained attention. Therefore, instructional design must be tailored to these developmental characteristics to ensure effective learning outcomes.

Teaching Objectives. There are three objects of teaching: “Viewing Tianmen Mountain.”

1. Be able to write new characters such as “wang” and “duan”, read the poem “Gazing at Tianmen Mountain” with emotion, and recite and write it from memory;
2. Be able to combine the annotations to imagine the scenery depicted in the poem and express the meaning of the lines in your own words;
3. Understand the emotions expressed by the poet and foster students 'appreciation for their country's beautiful landscapes.

Teaching Process. The processes are described in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1
Teaching Process

Teaching Link	Teacher Activities	Student Activities	Design Idea
I. Classroom Introduction	The teacher introduces the ancient poem by playing video music using PowerPoint.		
II. Explanation of Ancient Poetry	The teacher explains the basic characters, words, and sentences of the ancient poem, with the duration appropriately shortened to allow time for subsequent activities.	The students listened attentively and grasped the basic characters, words, and phrases of the ancient poem.	To conduct generative painting activities, students must have a basic understanding of classical poetry as a prerequisite.
III. Arrangement of Generative Painting Activities	Through example videos, students observe and learn painting techniques.	Students observe the teacher's exemplary behavior.	Students attempt to understand how generative painting is carried out.
	The teacher provided explanations regarding the painting requirements and conducted a preliminary analysis of the ancient poem's content. Drawing instructions: Based on your understanding of the ancient poem, draw its content.	The students listened attentively.	

IV. Work Exhibition and Sharing	Guide students to create paintings based on their understanding of the ancient poem's content, while emphasizing key details that require attention.	Students carry out activities under the guidance of their teachers.	
V. Evaluation and Summary	Evaluate and summarize the work.	Share proactively.	Help students understand the differences in their interpretations of ancient poetry content.

Teaching Implementation

Implementation of Teaching Activities. This teaching session was designed around the poem "Gazing at Tianmen Mountain" and implemented in a class at B Primary School in Xuzhou. As a Chinese language teacher, I attempted to apply generative painting in ancient poetry instruction: first explaining the poem's basic vocabulary and content, then asking students to visualize its meaning through artistic expression based on their understanding. Classroom observations were conducted, followed by interviews with selected students.

Observation and Interviews. During the course of teaching, the author observed students' classroom behavior and conducted post-class interviews to assess instructional effectiveness.

1) Observe the Situation

Through my observations in teaching practice, I have found that students demonstrate high enthusiasm for using generative painting techniques, and the classroom atmosphere is significantly more lively than that of a conventional classical poetry class. The following records summarize their classroom performance:

Table 2

Results of Classroom Observation

Observation Item	Observed Result
The level of interest among students	The students have a great interest in painting.
Level of student participation	The level of student participation is quite high.
Students' level of understanding	Some students have not fully understood.
Students demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm and initiative.	The students demonstrated high enthusiasm and actively participated in the painting activities.
Status of student project completion	The majority of student works are well completed.
Performance compared to regular classroom settings	Class participation and engagement levels have significantly increased.

The students demonstrated strong learning attitudes and were highly engaged in class, all using colored pens to draw diligently; only a few failed to complete their work fully due to comprehension difficulties or time constraints.

2) Student Interviews

Conduct interviews with students to understand their attitudes and suggestions regarding the application of generative painting in ancient poetry teaching.

First question: Do you like the current way classes are conducted? Why?

Second question: Do you think this method can help you understand classical poetry, and how exactly does it assist you?

Third question: What challenges did you encounter during the class?

Student interview results indicate that nearly all students favor this teaching approach; some believe that learning ancient poetry while painting helps them understand and memorize the poems, enabling them to associate relevant images when recalling the verses and subsequently recall the corresponding poems, often achieving near-mastery after completing the drawings; however, a common issue among some students is a lack of clear understanding of their specific tasks.

Display of Student Works and Analysis of Identified Issues. Student work is displayed and analyzed, and reflections are generated on different issues.

1) Display and Analysis of Student Works:

Figure 1

Exhibition of Works by Selected Students

Note. This figure displays the exhibition of works created by selected students.

Most students 'works accurately and comprehensively depicted the key imagery of this poem—“Tianmen Mountain, the Yangtze River, a solitary sail, and the sun” —while precisely illustrating the spatial relationship among Tianmen Mountain, the Yangtze River, and the solitary sail, with the two mountains facing each other across the river. This demonstrates that

the students have fully grasped the poem's content, their enthusiasm has significantly increased, all drawing attentively, and many eagerly showcase their artwork to me, their faces beaming with joy. I recognize that this approach proves highly effective in enhancing the appeal of classical poetry instruction.

2) Analysis and reflection of the issues encountered:

During this teaching session, I observed that students showed great interest in this instructional approach and participated actively in class. The use of generative painting helped students memorize and understand classical poetry in a novel way. Through interactions with the students, I also learned about their appreciation for this innovative teaching method. However, certain challenges were identified during implementation, primarily as follows:

First, collaboration and communication among students are insufficient; effective interaction between different students can foster intellectual exchange and generate new ideas, thereby enhancing the quality of artistic works. Therefore, it is essential to optimize collaborative practices by encouraging peer support within groups, which will improve both teaching effectiveness and efficiency.

Second, as this is students 'first attempt at this learning approach, some have not fully grasped the teacher's guidance. Additionally, certain task instructions were not sufficiently specific, leading to deviations in task execution and shifts in attention.

Therefore, regarding the issues identified in this teaching session, I suggest further refining the guidance components in future lessons and placing greater emphasis on student collaboration and communication. Group work can be effectively employed to enhance the efficiency of painting activities.

Practical Exploration of Applying Generative Painting to "Jueju" Poetry

(1) Teaching Design for "Jueju" (A Four-Character Verse)

Analysis of Teaching Content. "Jueju" is an ancient poem included in the third-grade Chinese textbook published by the National Education Press and Publication Administration (NEPAP). Poet Du Fu depicts the vibrant and harmonious spring scenery around the Caotang residence and Huanhua Stream, brimming with vitality and showcasing his deep affection for spring. Compared to his previous poem, this one features richer imagery and greater artistic complexity.

Student Analysis. Third-grade students are at the concrete operational stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development: they can perform basic logical reasoning but still rely on concrete experiences. Additionally, they are highly active and quick-witted, yet show little interest in monotonous classroom activities and struggle with sustained attention. Therefore, instructional design must be tailored to these developmental characteristics to ensure effective learning outcomes.

Teaching Objectives. Teaching objectives are discussed.

1. Be able to write new characters such as "Rong" and "Yan"; read the poem "Jueju" aloud with emotion; recite it from memory and write it down from memory.
2. Be able to understand the meaning of "Jueju" through annotations and illustrations, visualize the scenes depicted, and describe them in words.

Teaching Process. The teaching process is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3
Teaching Process

Teaching Link	Teacher Activities	Student Activities	Design Idea
I. Classroom Introduction	The teacher introduces the new lesson by reviewing previously studied classical poems about spring.		
II. Explanation of Ancient Poetry	The teacher explains the basic characters, words, and sentences of the ancient poem, with the duration appropriately shortened to allow time for subsequent activities.	The students listened attentively and grasped the basic characters, words, and phrases of the ancient poem.	To conduct generative painting activities, students must have a basic understanding of classical poetry as a prerequisite.
III. Arrangement of Generative Painting Activities	Divide the students into groups, explain how the activity will be conducted, and clarify the methods for generative painting as well as the task objectives. Task Objective: Based on your understanding of the ancient poem, illustrate its content. Note: Do not omit any imagery from the ancient poem.	The students draw according to the teacher's instructions.	Conduct a generative painting activity.
IV. Group Collaboration and Sharing	Encourage mutual support within the group and prioritize	Members of the group help each other to complete	Encourage students to collaborate, thereby enhancing

	sharing within the group.	tasks assigned by the teacher.	their understanding of the activity.
V. Group Presentation	Select representative works from the group for display.	Communicate with each other.	
VI. Summary and Evaluation	Evaluate and summarize the work.		

(2) Teaching Implementation

Implementation of Teaching Activities. This lesson is designed around the content of the poem "Jueju." Building upon previous teaching sessions, it represents a second practical implementation aimed at addressing identified issues and evaluating the final outcomes.

Observation and Interviews. During the course of teaching, the author observed students' classroom behavior and conducted post-class interviews to assess instructional effectiveness.

1. Observe the situation

Through observations in teaching practice, the author found that students highlyare strong enthusiastic about generative painting. Their classroom performance is recorded as follows:

Table 4
Results of Classroom Observation

Observation Item	Observed Result
The level of interest among students	High level of interest
The atmosphere of classroom interaction	The interaction atmosphere was very positive.
Level of student participation	High level of participation
The level of collaborative learning among students	Collaborative learning works well.
Students demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm and initiative.	Demonstrates a high level of enthusiasm.
Student Sharing Status	Sharing is very positive.
Performance compared to regular classroom settings	Class participation and engagement levels have significantly increased.

The students demonstrated strong learning attitudes and were highly engaged in class, all using colored pens to draw diligently; only a few failed to complete their work fully due to comprehension difficulties or time constraints.

2. Student Interviews:

To understand students' perspectives on this generative painting teaching approach, post-class interviews were conducted as follows:

First question: Do you still find this lesson interesting?

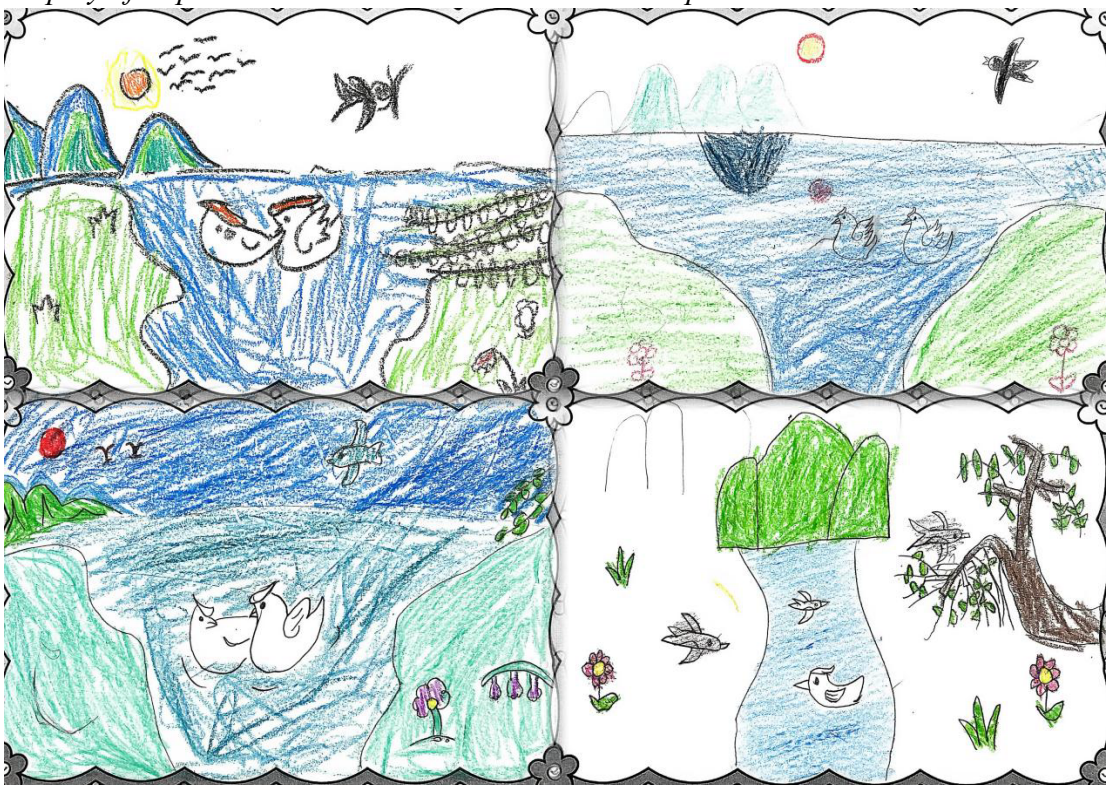
Second question: Compared to the previous class, what changes do you think have occurred?
Third question: Do you think you can independently learn other classical poems using this method?

The student interview results indicate that the vast majority of students still find this method highly engaging and particularly appealing. Regarding the second question, students provided diverse subjective responses; given their prior experience, their doubts were significantly fewer this time. For the third question, two-thirds of students stated they could use this approach to study other classical poems.

Display, Reflection, and Summary of Student Works.

1. Display and Analysis of Student Works

Figure 2
Display of Representative Works From Selected Groups



Although the students did not possess exceptional drawing skills, most of their works successfully depicted all elements—including "colorful flowers,""flying swallows," and "dormant mandarin ducks" —without omission. Furthermore, by interpreting the content of the ancient poem, they arranged these visual elements appropriately to create a vivid spring scene. This demonstrates that the students fully grasped the poem's meaning; their paintings feature complete compositions, well-balanced layouts, and rich color palettes, making them outstanding works even for third-grade students.

The application of generative painting in teaching the ancient poem "Jueju" has yielded excellent instructional outcomes and demonstrated strong appeal to students. Student collaboration and peer evaluation within groups were highly effective, with remarkable participation and

enthusiasm. This demonstrates that generative painting is a practical approach for ancient poetry instruction in primary school Chinese classes and effectively enhances its educational appeal. The following are key reflections:

First, integrating generative painting into the teaching process is well-received by students. The poem "Jueju" is particularly well-suited for artistic expression, as it features rich and easily understandable spring imagery. Through the painting process, students not only grasp the visuals depicted in the poem but also deeply comprehend the emotions conveyed by the poet.

Second, this also validates the feasibility of applying the previously designed generative painting approach to ancient poetry teaching.

Third, building on the previous teaching experience with "Looking at Tianmen Mountain," instruction in "Jueju" proceeded much more smoothly for both teachers and students, with the entire process unfolding exceptionally well. Students demonstrated high engagement throughout.

Key Implementation Points for Applying Generative Painting in Primary School Classical Poetry Teaching

Through practical exploration of the two classical poems "Looking at Tianmen Mountain" and "Quatrain," the following key implementation principles for applying generative painting in elementary school poetry instruction have been identified.

Select Appropriate Teaching Content

The instructional materials suitable for generative painting are limited. For elementary school poetry teaching, most classical poems contain descriptive elements of natural scenery, making them highly appropriate for this approach. However, applying generative painting methods indiscriminately to all content would prove counterproductive.

Emphasize the Engaging Nature of Learning Content and the Appeal of Classroom Instruction

For elementary school students, the engaging nature of learning content significantly influences their motivation to learn. Therefore, when implementing generative painting instruction, it is essential to prevent students from feeling bored; instead, provide examples to help them understand the process and encourage active participation. Additionally, guidance must be sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to ensure students can successfully complete generative painting activities.

Strengthen Collaborative Group Learning

Group collaborative learning holds significant value for generative painting; through collaboration, students deepen their understanding of painting techniques, while the sharing process allows them to appreciate diverse perspectives and learn from one another, thereby enhancing their comprehension of classical poetry instruction.

The Effect of Generative Painting in Teaching Ancient Poetry in Primary Schools

Enhancing Primary School Students' Interest and Motivation in Learning

A summary of the two preceding teaching examples demonstrates that incorporating generative painting into elementary school classical poetry instruction significantly enhances students' learning engagement and academic performance. Key findings can be summarized as follows:

Better Stimulates Elementary School Students' Interest in Learning

Primary school students primarily rely on visual thinking, making teaching content that is intuitive and highly interactive particularly appealing to them. By stimulating their interest, such approaches help students better comprehend and memorize classical poetry. Interviews with students revealed strong enthusiasm for this new learning method; once they grasp the principles, they actively engage in the process, enhancing their understanding of poetic content and attempting to visualize it. This not only enhances the appeal of classroom instruction but also improves teaching effectiveness.

Helps Elementary School Students Better Understand the Teaching Content

The ancient poems selected for textbooks are predominantly well-known, simple, and easy-to-understand masterpieces. However, given that primary school students have limited cognitive development, comprehending and memorizing the content of these poems remains challenging. Incorporating generative painting into poetry instruction enables greater student engagement in learning. Through the drawing process, students repeatedly recall the poems; some read them silently and then conceptualize their interpretations as visual representations on paper. These tangible, personally created illustrations enhance their understanding and aid memorization. This approach yields excellent learning outcomes, naturally increasing students' motivation to learn and participate actively in class, thereby enhancing instructional appeal.

Enhancing the Emotional Experiences of Primary School Students

Through the application of generative painting, students engage not merely in mechanical recitation of classical poems or passive acceptance of teachers 'analyses of their ideas and emotions, but actively participate in the learning process. By using painting as a medium, they deepen their understanding of the poetic content while fostering reflection and association with the depicted scenes and sentiments. This approach enhances students' comprehension of the emotions embedded in classical poetry and enriches their emotional experience during learning.

Implementation Approaches for Applying Generative Painting in Primary School Classical Poetry Teaching

Implement Thinking Training by Combining Teacher Guidance With Student Initiative

Generative painting advocates that learners autonomously generate knowledge, representing a constructive learning activity. When students employ generative painting to study classical poetry, increased cognitive engagement ensures optimal learning outcomes. The key question is: how can we enhance students' cognitive investment?

On the one hand, teachers 'guidance is essential. Before painting, educators should emphasize the proper sequence of steps. During the painting process, teachers should offer suggestions to enhance quality without interfering with students' creative vision. Upon completion, teachers can guide students to compare their artwork with the original poem, reading it aloud while reviewing their drawings to continuously refine and improve their work.

On the other hand, students 'active participation is crucial. When constructing poetic imagery in their minds, students engage in substantial cognitive processing to prepare for subsequent paper-based drawing activities. The post-drawing revision and discussion phases similarly rely on integrating visual and textual elements, such as observing and analyzing the relationship between the artwork and the ancient poem's content. By fully committing cognitive resources during this process, students can enhance their familiarity with the ancient poetry and further strengthen its memorization.

Grounded in Creative Practice, Fostering Competencies Through Authentic, Practical Activities

Ancient Poetry Painting: Conducting Vibrant Artistic Creation Activities

The concept of "aesthetic creation" within the core competencies of Chinese language education under the new curriculum standards refers to students 'ability, through appreciating and evaluating linguistic texts and literary works, to initially perceive beauty, discover beauty, and utilize language to express and create beauty. Students' practice of depicting ancient poetry content through painting and engaging in personalized artistic creations centered on the poem's artistic conception constitutes a concrete expression of poetic beauty. During this process, by transforming textual content into visual forms, students gain profound insight into the poem's artistic essence and reinterpret its meaning—a practice that embodies the attributes of "aesthetic creation." Thus, the learning outcomes demonstrated by students after studying ancient poetry through painting can be understood as a form of re-creation of poetic beauty.

Reading and Writing Assistance: Creating Authentic Pragmatic Contexts

Reading aloud serves as the foundation for students to initially appreciate classical poetry and effectively visualize it through painting. Reading the poem aloud before painting helps students perceive its visual beauty and distinguish poetic imagery. Properly reading the poem with appropriate pauses enables students to identify poetic images before beginning their artwork, preparing them for painting. After completing the painting, revisiting the poem by comparing the text with the artwork further enhances students' memory retention of the poem and reduces recitation difficulty.

Writing classical poetry can be understood as a calligraphic creation inspired by the poem's content after painting, which helps further enhance students' aesthetic literacy. "Poetry inscribed on paintings" achieves an artistic integration of poetry and painting. Poetry uses linguistic artistry to convey the essence of the artwork, creating a "vocal painting," while painting employs line art to express the poem's profound charm, resulting in a "silent poem." The two elements are organically unified, forming a cohesive beauty.

Based on this approach, frontline educators can integrate generative painting with literacy support by assigning the "Ancient Poetry Reading, Writing, and Painting Learning Sheet" as homework, encouraging students to independently engage in diverse activities such as reciting

ancient poems and illustrating them, thereby experiencing the variety of ways to learn classical poetry.

Establishing a Multimodal Evaluation System

The effective implementation and sustainable development of generative painting in primary school classical poetry teaching rely on a corresponding scientific evaluation system (Table 5). This system adheres to the educational philosophy of "student-centeredness and teaching enhancement through learning," providing teachers with sufficient time and space for students as evaluators to fully participate in the assessment process, promoting autonomous learning, and focusing particularly on students 'knowledge construction processes and acquisition of learning methods. Potential learning outcomes—including classical poetry paintings, calligraphy creations, classical poetry recitation worksheets, learning motivation questionnaires, and reflective assessments—are selected as evaluation criteria. Using a combination of student self-assessment, peer evaluation, and teacher assessment, these outcomes are evaluated with a three-tier rating system (Grade A, Grade B, Grade C) to assess the quality of students' learning in classical poetry.

Table 5
Evaluation Form

Evaluation Object	Evaluation Criteria	Grade A	Grade B	Grade C
Ancient Poetry and Paintings	Present the content of classical poetry creatively, incorporating personal interpretation through elements such as color usage, imagery, and composition.	The painting comprehensively and fully depicts ancient poetry; it features harmonious colors, clear imagery, and an aesthetically pleasing composition.	The painting is comprehensive, primarily depicting classical poetry; its colors are monochromatic, and the imagery and composition are quite natural.	The painting is incomplete, featuring only a few elements of classical poetry; the colors are monotonous, the imagery is disorganized, and the composition is fragmented.
Calligraphy Creation	It achieves a fusion of poetry and painting, presenting both fairness and aesthetic beauty.	Calligraphic works achieve a harmonious unity with classical poetry and painting.	Calligraphic works are more consistent with paintings.	Calligraphic works influence the aesthetic appeal of paintings.
Ancient Poetry Memorization Learning Sheet	Run two tests: the first to check the effect before drawing; the second to check the effect	The second test was significantly better than the first.	No significant changes were observed between the two tests.	Both test scores were relatively low.

	after drawing.	
Learning Motivation Questionnaire	Summarize your learning experiences and share your thoughts on this approach to studying classical poetry.	For data collection only; no grading is performed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, generative painting provides a practical approach to enhance the appeal and effectiveness of ancient poetry instruction in primary schools, boosting classroom vitality and engagement. Its application in poetry teaching helps students gain deeper insights into the artistic conception and emotional nuances of classical verses, stimulates learning interest and creativity, while fostering core competencies in aesthetic appreciation, cognitive development, cultural preservation, and collaborative communication—thereby enriching their learning experience. Teachers are encouraged to actively explore and implement this methodology to make poetry education more dynamic, engaging, and productive, enabling students to draw rich cultural nourishment from the vast ocean of classical poetry.

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The Legend of the Bird: Reviving Cultural Heritage Through the Yala Province Festival, Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to study the history and significance of the bird procession tradition in Yala province, including the transmission of related legends and cultural stories, as well as to revive the old tradition of the bird procession to create a cultural festival in Yala. A mixed-methods research design was used, combining both qualitative and quantitative research. For the qualitative research, data collection tools included focus group discussions and development actions. For the quantitative research, questionnaires were used to collect data from 328 samples, including young people, local artists, community scholars, and cultural entrepreneurs. This study focuses on analyzing the economic value created by managing cultural capital and evaluating the economic and social outcomes of the cultural market. Qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive analysis, focusing on the perspectives of the community members (lay views), which led to conclusions and suggestions for further development. Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics to calculate the mean, standard deviation, and percentage, with results presented in tables and descriptive narration. The findings of this research will help highlight the importance and potential of developing the bird procession tradition as part of a creative festival and tourism attraction, benefiting the economy and society of Yala province. The aim is to revive cultural heritage and foster local pride.

Keywords: legend, bird parade, revival, cultural heritage, burung market

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Introduction

This research explores *The Legend of Birds: Revitalizing the Cultural Heritage of Yala Province*, focusing on the symbolic significance of mythical birds across diverse cultures while examining the revitalization and preservation of cultural heritage in the southern region of Thailand, specifically in Yala Province. The study investigates how local bird legends are intertwined with economic and tourism development in the region. By delving into these cultural symbols and myths, the research underscores the importance of integrating cultural heritage with contemporary economic strategies to enhance the local economy, particularly through tourism development.

The exploration of mythical birds offers a comparative analysis of various global symbols, such as the Phoenix from ancient Egypt, the Grifin from European traditions, the Vermilion Bird from Chinese mythology, and the Thunderbird from Native American lore. This research highlights how these bird legends contribute to forming local identities, helping revitalize cultural heritage through their inclusion in local narratives and practices. By focusing on Yala Province, this study examines how cultural heritage can be preserved while promoting sustainable tourism, which in turn aids in the region's economic growth (Faulkner, 2003; Fitzhugh, 2008). With its rich history and diverse cultural landscape, Yala Province plays a pivotal role in preserving and promoting the community's cultural heritage. Integrating mythical bird stories into local arts, crafts, performances, and tourism attractions serves as a living exhibition that fosters greater understanding and appreciation of the region's history and traditions. As tourism in Yala grows, revitalizing these cultural symbols creates new opportunities for cultural and economic development (Smith, 2017). This process balances cultural preservation and sustainable development, providing a model for other regions facing similar challenges.

Revitalizing bird legends in Yala provides an opportunity to integrate these myths into local economic development strategies in ways that respect cultural sustainability (Alim, 2013; Chen, 2015). This process not only helps preserve local heritage but also introduces new meanings, deepening the connection between cultural identity and contemporary global practices. Through the strategic use of mythical birds in storytelling, art, and tourism, Yala Province becomes a focal point for the intersection of cultural heritage and economic vitality, demonstrating how cultural revitalization can drive tourism and sustainable economic growth.

As the global tourism industry increasingly emphasizes cultural heritage as a cornerstone of authentic experiences, the case of Yala offers invaluable insights into how cultural revitalization can be effectively linked to tourism development. The integration of local myths with economic initiatives offers a unique opportunity to preserve and promote regional traditions while contributing to broader goals of sustainable tourism and heritage management. Given the complex relationship between cultural preservation and economic development in today's globalized world, this research is timely and necessary to understand how these dynamics can be successfully navigated. It aims to contribute to the growing field of heritage tourism and cultural sustainability, offering a model that can be replicated in other regions with similar cultural assets and economic challenges.

Literature Review

Mythical Birds and Their Cultural Significance

The Griffin (England and France)**.** The Griffin, a legendary creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion, symbolizes courage, protection, and sacredness in ancient European cultures, particularly in England and France. Often associated with the supernatural, the Griffin embodies the fusion of two powerful animals and represents a balance between strength and wisdom. The Griffin's connection to sacred power and its possible origins in ancient fossil discoveries in Central Asia (Fitzhugh, 2008) offers valuable insight into the ways myths adapt and reflect the natural world and human imagination.

The Phoenix (Ancient Egypt)**.** The Phoenix, known as Bennu in ancient Egyptian mythology, represents rebirth and immortality. The bird's unique life cycle—consuming itself in flames only to rise again from the ashes—symbolizes the eternal cycle of life and death. This powerful image of regeneration speaks to the Egyptian belief in the afterlife and the enduring nature of the soul (Faulkner, 2003). The Phoenix not only reflects death and resurrection but also encapsulates the broader themes of renewal found in Egyptian cosmology.

The Vermilion Bird and the Phoenix (China)**.** In Chinese mythology, the Vermilion Bird (Zhuque), one of the Four Sacred Animals, guards the southern direction and symbolizes summer and fire. Similarly, the Phoenix (Fenghuang) represents virtue, grace, and rebirth, often depicted as a harmonious union of opposing forces, exemplifying balance within the universe (Chen, 2015). These birds are deeply embedded in Chinese culture, symbolizing both cosmic order and moral integrity.

The Garuda (Thailand and Indonesia). In both Thai and Indonesian cultures, the Garuda, a bird-like creature from Hindu mythology, serves as the vehicle of the god Vishnu. It is regarded as a symbol of sovereignty, power, and protection. The Garuda's prominence in national symbols and religious rituals underscores its role as a guardian figure, embodying authority and divine strength (Alim, 2013).

The Thunderbird (Native American). The Thunderbird is a revered figure in Native American folklore, particularly among northern tribes. Known for its ability to create thunder and lightning, the Thunderbird represents the raw power of nature and serves as a protector of the people. Its mythological significance extends beyond physical strength, symbolizing the interconnectedness of all life and the respect for natural forces that human beings cannot control (Smith, 2017).

The Robin (Birth of Jesus). In European folklore, the Robin is associated with the birth of Jesus Christ. One poignant legend suggests that the Robin, in an act of compassion, comforted Jesus during His crucifixion, resulting in its breast being stained with blood. The red breast is thus seen as a symbol of sacrifice and kindness in Christian teachings (Hughes, 2011). The Robin represents hope, compassion, and the willingness to help others during times of suffering.

Southern Thai Bird Procession Tradition

The bird procession tradition is an ancient local custom of the three southern border provinces: Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. This tradition has been passed down for generations

and is occasionally held to welcome important guests, celebrate various occasions, or for entertainment. For example, it is often performed during the "Maso Yawi" ceremony (a circumcision ritual) or sometimes organized for contests unrelated to religious events or significant dates in the calendar. Typically, these events are held at suitable times for enjoyment and to express local artistic creativity. It also serves as a gesture of respect and loyalty to elders or a way to welcome distinguished guests on special occasions (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2020).

The bird procession tradition is unique because it involves a parade featuring elaborately designed bird sculptures, including beautifully crafted bird heads and bodies. However, in recent years, the tradition of bird procession in Yala province has been fading. Several factors contribute to this decline, such as the limited transmission of knowledge regarding the bird procession, especially the craft of making bird sculptures (bird heads and bodies) and the performance art of "Sila Bueng See Rae." The number of skilled artisans in Yala who can make bird sculptures is small. Additionally, there are issues related to the lack of demand for the art and the reluctance of owners to preserve the artworks due to the absence of caretakers and successors (National Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2023). Moreover, various government agencies have not given sufficient attention to revitalizing the bird procession tradition, possibly due to factors like high event costs, local values that do not emphasize the preservation of local arts according to religious principles, the difficulty in organizing the parade requiring a large number of participants, and the lack of proper support from the government. As a result, this tradition is at risk of disappearing permanently (National Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2023).

Revitalizing the bird procession tradition is crucial to preserve the community's unique cultural heritage and create new value for the tradition. This requires promoting knowledge transfer and support from both the government and the private sector, as well as developing the necessary infrastructure to ensure the sustainability of the bird procession and its continuation for future generations.

Research Methodology

A mixed-methods design was employed:

- Qualitative: Focus group discussions with community members and action-based development workshops captured lay perspectives and generated development plans.
- Quantitative: Survey questionnaires administered to 328 stakeholders (youth, artists, scholars, entrepreneurs) measured attitudes toward economic and social outcomes.

Data analysis:

- Quantitative Qualitative: Descriptive thematic analysis.
- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, percentage).

Results

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data collected through focus group discussions revealed the deep-rooted cultural and emotional connection between the local people and the bird procession tradition. Community members perceived the procession as a valuable expression of shared identity, aesthetic sensibility, and intergenerational continuity. Participants noted that the intricate bird

sculptures and accompanying performances served not only as artistic displays but also as a means to teach younger generations about cultural pride and moral values.

Elder artisans and cultural scholars emphasized that the tradition once played a central role in village festivals and religious ceremonies, fostering a sense of togetherness among ethnically diverse groups in the region. However, the decline in practice was attributed to multiple interrelated factors: lack of formal education on cultural arts, insufficient financial support for materials and performances, and the gradual disappearance of master craftsmen who once passed down the techniques orally and practically.

Another significant theme that emerged was the tension between traditional imagery and Islamic values. Some community leaders expressed concern that the bird sculptures could be seen as idolatrous under certain interpretations of Islamic law. To address this issue, focus group participants proposed integrating symbolic, non-figurative designs that align with cultural intentions while respecting religious sensitivities.

Suggestions for revitalization included: (1) forming cultural preservation clubs in schools and local communities; (2) organizing training programs to revive craftsmanship; (3) utilizing digital platforms to document, archive, and promote the tradition; and (4) creating an inclusive planning committee composed of artists, religious leaders, educators, and local government representatives.

These findings underscore the importance of both cultural sensitivity and community collaboration in designing sustainable cultural festivals that can strengthen local identity and boost regional tourism.

This elaborate organization reflects the rich cultural heritage and traditions associated with the Bird Procession.

Figure 1
The Bird Procession Tradition (Photographed on July 27, 2023)

The Bird Procession: Participants wear shirts and pants wrapped in cloth (Krabong), with the number of participants corresponding to the size of the bird.
The Spear Procession: A procession of soldiers and commanders, dressed in short pants, red, white, or black shirts, and headscarves.
Sacred Sticky Rice: The rice is colored yellow, red, and white, shaped into a cluster with one boiled egg peeled and placed on top of the rice.
Sacred Sweets: Includes snacks such as *Kalamai*, *Kanom La*, *Kanom Jeoh Hu*, *Kanom Ko*, puffed rice, sweet sticky rice (Nasimanis), or glassy sticky rice.
Incense Tray
Betel Nut Tray
Bunga Sereh: A type of floral decoration used in the procession.

Making and Assembling the Bird for the Bird Procession Ceremony

The steps to make the bird's head are as follows:

Figure 2
The Process of Making the Bird's Head (taken on July 9, 2023)

Use wire to stretch over the components of the bird's head for added strength.

Figure 3
Steps in Making the Bird Head (taken on July 9, 2023)

Begin by taking an egg carton or scraps of paper, tearing them into small pieces, and soaking them in water overnight. Once soaked, place the mixture in a blender and blend it until the paper becomes fine and smooth. The blended mixture should then be strained using a fine sieve to separate the water from the pulp. After straining, add glue to the pulp and stir the mixture thoroughly. The prepared mixture can then be applied evenly onto the bird head structure. Allow it to dry completely in the sun. Finally, decorate the dried structure using poster paint to enhance the appearance of the bird head. Steps for making a bird

Figure 4
Steps to Make a Bird Figure (taken on July 9, 2023)

The bird's body is constructed by tying bamboo together to form a frame, which is then attached to a carrying beam. A layer of paper is applied as the base. Colored fabric or reflective paper is then cut into feather shapes and used to decorate various parts of the bird to enhance its beauty and make it eye-catching. Commonly used colors include green, gold, and silver while contrasting colors are also added for emphasis. Fringes are often attached along the edges of the wings to complete the look.

Once the frame and decorations are finished, the bird's head and wings are securely attached to the body using wire. Final adjustments ensure every detail is in place and the bird fully prepares for the ceremonial procession.

To Restore the Old Tradition of the Bird Procession Into a Cultural Festival in Yala Province

Based on interviews with religious scholars regarding appropriate approaches to reviving the bird procession tradition in Yala Province while respecting Islamic principles (Ibroheng Yanya, interview on December 14, 2023; Niyabdurrokib Bin Nihassan, interview on November 24, 2023), several key ideas emerged.

The revival of the tradition should consider the current social and cultural context. It is suggested that the bird procession be adapted into an economic activity—functioning as a cultural event that generates income for the local community. This approach should emphasize that the festival is cultural in nature, rather than religious, and is open to participation from people of all faiths. This inclusivity supports both economic sustainability and social harmony.

To avoid religious conflict, particularly with Islamic teachings prohibiting idol worship, the bird figures used in the procession should not be made in a form resembling statues intended for reverence or worship. This ensures that the cultural aspect of the tradition does not conflict with religious beliefs.

The bird procession can still be held as a parade for aesthetic and cultural display, celebrating the local identity and heritage of Yala Province. However, avoiding holding the procession near religious sites such as the central city shrine is recommended, where associations with worship practices could arise.

Ultimately, the revival of the bird procession in Yala should focus on cultural preservation, community engagement, and economic benefit while ensuring that the practice aligns with religious sensitivities. To support this effort, establishing a network of clubs or organizations dedicated to preserving and revitalizing the bird procession tradition is encouraged. These groups can play a vital role in promoting the tradition respectfully, inclusively, and sustainably.

Development of a Cultural Community Network for Reviving the Bird Procession Tradition and Yala's Cultural Market

On October 31, 2023, an activity was held to develop a cultural community network to revive the bird procession tradition and Yala’s cultural market. In 2024, representatives from government agencies, educational institutions, and local entrepreneurs presented their cooperation in developing a cultural network for revival and the Burung Market as follows:

Yala City Municipality (educational and cultural scholars) will integrate the bird procession and cultural market into the municipality’s event calendar. They will provide facilities, set up venues, and promote the event through the municipality’s official page, which has over 100,000 followers, to increase awareness and make the Burung Market a new attraction for the Yala Marathon on August 4, 2024. The municipality will share information and invite the research team to attend meetings to plan for the Yala Marathon and the festival.

The Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) will present the information from this forum to the management and is willing to participate in organizing the cultural festival.

Yala Archives will collaborate to organize an exhibition to revive the bird procession tradition alongside the university, providing a learning resource for locals and tourists. This exhibition aims to promote the revival of the lost tradition in the area.

Educational Institutions (Municipal School 5) are interested in having the school and students participate in local history youth research activities to restore, preserve, and continue traditions lost in the area.

Yala Culture has proposed a project for the 2024 fiscal year, which has received support to help researchers connect activities with the province's projects.

Experts in language and cultural arts (Dr. Asiya Wan-Alo) have presented ideas on connecting religion and tradition to raise awareness among the local population.

Local entrepreneurs on Nualsakul Road (Alex Coffee and Zhong Tea House) have cooperated in becoming cultural product sellers and developing their store products to contribute to reviving the lost bird procession tradition, such as creating birds from leftover glass materials from their shops.

Reviving the Southern Border Culture Bird Procession in a Multicultural Form

Reviving Southern Border Culture Through the Bird Procession: A Multicultural Celebration

Figure 5
Bird Procession Welcoming Distinguished Guests at RESEARCH DAY 2023 (taken on July 27, 2023)

A series of activities have been organized to breathe life into the southern border culture by simulating the bird procession in a multicultural format under the theme "Tracing the Past, Nibong Village, Kebudayaan An Burong." This event was graced by the presence of local scholar Mr. Saman Dosomi and held in collaboration with the Cultural Arts Center and the Southern Border Research and Development Institute of Yala Rajabhat University as a special occasion to welcome distinguished guests during the YRU RESEARCH DAY 2023 on July 27, 2023.

Figure 6
Bird Procession at the Ma-Soyawi (Circumcision) Ceremony (taken on August 18, 2023)

In a continuation of the cultural revival, on August 18, 2023, the bird procession was organized for the Ma-Soyawi (circumcision) ceremony at Kampong Baru Village, Reaing Subdistrict, Rueso District, Narathiwat Province.

Figure 7
Multicultural Bird Procession "Tracing the Past, Nibong Village, Kebudayaan An Burong" (KEBUDAYAAN BURUNG) at the 4th Burong Market 2024 (taken on August 3, 2024)

Looking ahead, on August 3, 2024, the First Multicultural Bird Procession Contest**,** themed "Tracing the Past, Nibong Village, Kebudayaan An Burong" (KEBUDAYAAN BURUNG), will take place in Yala Province. This vibrant event will also feature the Burong Puteri Creative Dance Competition and the 4th Burong Market, located at Nualsakul Road (Vegetable Garden Community) in Muang District, Yala. This cultural festival promises to be a highlight, welcoming both locals and visitors alike.

Figure 8
Bird Procession at the 31st Arts and Culture Festival "Simple and Sustainable Culture" at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus (taken on September 13, 2024)

The celebration will continue on September 13, 2024, as the bird procession becomes a key feature of the 31st Arts and Culture Festival, titled "Simple and Sustainable Culture," at the Kalyaniwuththana Cultural Studies Institute at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus. The procession will showcase the talents of Mr. Saman Dosomi and the creative dance performers from Bunnangsta Wittaya School**,** the winners of the creative dance contest, as they participate in this culturally significant procession.

This series of events not only revives a cherished tradition but also celebrates the multicultural richness of the southern border, making it an unforgettable cultural experience for everyone involved.

The Revival of the Bird Procession Tradition in Yala Province Seeks to Promote Conservation, Deepen Cultural Understanding, and Encourage Active Community Participation. This Effort Can Take Many Forms.

The historical transmission of the bird procession tradition plays a key role in preserving and sharing the community's rich cultural heritage. Historical details about the tradition can be used to create informative displays at cultural markets, offering visitors insight into the origins, evolution, and significance of the procession within the community's daily life. Events like the creative “Burong Puteri” dance competition and exhibitions at the cultural market can provide immersive experiences that foster a stronger connection to the tradition.

Activity design for demonstrations or performances is another vital way to educate both locals and tourists about the bird procession tradition. Public events such as re-enactments of the procession or storytelling through music can bring the culture to life, offering a chance for hands-on learning and active participation in traditional customs.

The use of digital learning media is also an effective tool for expanding the reach of the bird procession tradition. By converting historical information into digital resources, such as websites and online databases, the tradition becomes more accessible to younger generations and people from other regions. These digital platforms can serve educational purposes, especially in schools and universities, making the tradition more relevant in today’s digital age.

Promotion of cultural tourism can help further integrate the bird procession tradition into the community's economic and social fabric. This can include creating cultural tourism routes that highlight significant locations related to the procession, as well as offering signage or brochures that explain the tradition's historical importance. Additionally, local products and souvenirs reflecting the cultural identity—such as bird-patterned yukata shirts, bird-themed t-shirts, notebooks, and fabric bags—can be developed to help share the tradition with visitors and generate sustainable income for the community.

Creating activities that foster community connections is another powerful way to honor the tradition. The bird procession tradition, which reflects deep community collaboration, can be a foundation for multicultural events that unite the Thai, Chinese, and Malay communities. For example, cultural performances, such as the “Burong Puteri” dance competition, Chinese traditional dance, or Malay song performances, can help build strong relationships and instill pride in the community’s cultural heritage.

Lastly, the conservation and revival of the tradition must be rooted in historical accuracy and respect for the original customs. By using historical data, the bird procession can be adapted to modern contexts while maintaining its cultural essence. This ensures that the tradition not only survives but thrives, continuing to enrich the community's daily life and fostering learning and participation from all generations and backgrounds.

Quantitative Findings

Survey results indicated strong positive interest in festival participation (M = 4.2, SD = 0.6), perceived economic benefits (M = 4.0, SD = 0.7), and community pride (M = 4.3, SD = 0.5). Over 80% of respondents supported government and private sector partnerships for sustainable festival management.

Discussion

Research Findings: The Bird Procession Tradition in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces

The bird procession is a captivating and culturally significant tradition among the Malay Muslims in Thailand's southern border provinces, including Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Passed down through generations, this secular practice is not tied to religious events or specific holidays but is instead celebrated during special occasions meant for joy, creativity, and community bonding. The procession acts as a vibrant expression of local artistry, often organized to honor elders, welcome distinguished guests, or mark joyous events such as circumcision ceremonies (referred to as *Maso Yawi*) and festive competitions.

In Pattani today, this tradition is kept alive by a small group of dedicated artisans, mainly in districts such as Muang Pattani, Yaring, Panare, and Nong Chik. These craftsmen primarily create two types of birds for the procession: the *Kha-Kea-Sura* (also known as *Kaka-Sura*) and the *Buhrong-Singo* (Lion Bird). Of these, the *Buhrong-Singo* holds particular importance and continues to play a key role in local celebrations. This bird is featured in various ceremonial events, including circumcisions, weddings, and other cultural gatherings, and the procession is commonly referred to as the "*Buhrong-Singo procession*."

The Legend Behind the Bird Procession

The bird procession tradition is deeply rooted in a local legend that adds layers of intrigue and cultural depth to the practice. According to the story, a king once sailed along a waterway and encountered a group of fishermen who shared a remarkable tale. They spoke of a giant bird they had encountered while fishing in the deep sea—an intimidating creature with large red eyes, tusks, and fangs. Yet, when the bird took flight, its vibrant feathers and graceful form appeared so beautiful that the fishermen believed it to be a celestial bird rather than an ordinary creature. Upon returning to his palace, the king ordered craftsmen to create four bird figures, naming them *Laksamano*, *Kha-Kea-Sura*, *Karudo*, and *Singo* (Anant Wattananikorn, 1985).

Preserving and Promoting Cultural Heritage

While the bird procession is now primarily associated with the *Kha-Kea-Sura* and *Buhrong-Singo* birds, its significance goes beyond the visual spectacle. The procession serves as a means of preserving and promoting local culture, including traditional music, dance, and crafts like *Bung Si-Re* (ceremonial trays). These cultural practices continue to form a crucial part of Pattani's identity, fostering a sense of unity and pride within the community.

Research and Documentation of the Bird Procession Tradition

A recent research initiative has focused on documenting the history and stories surrounding the bird procession. The research team conducted interviews with local scholars, artisans, and academics, as well as consultations with experts in literature, culture, and local wisdom. These efforts have uncovered a wealth of historical knowledge, which has been compiled into a comprehensive database. This database not only preserves this unique aspect of southern Thai heritage but also aims to promote the bird procession as a cultural tourism attraction, ensuring that the tradition remains alive for future generations.

Thematic Categories and Preservation of Knowledge

The knowledge gathered from this research has been organized into various thematic categories to ensure its accessibility and usefulness. One key category is the *Concept of the Bird Procession Tradition in Yala Province*. The bird procession was originally organized to welcome important guests or figures visiting the area. It was also an integral part of the traditional Muslim circumcision ceremony, symbolizing the wealth and social status of the host. Over time, the bird procession became more than just a local event—it came to represent joy, celebration, and community unity. The preparation and procession of the bird heads require the active involvement of many community members, strengthening social bonds.

As the tradition evolved, the government became more involved, providing financial support to organize and hold procession contests. In Yala Province, the tradition also absorbed cultural elements from the multicultural society, including influences from the Chinese, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, further enriching the local cultural landscape.

The Components of the Bird Procession Are as Follows

The organization of the Bird Procession is a vibrant and elaborate event featuring various processions, each with its unique significance and participants.

The **Musical Procession**, known as **Silah**, includes 30 musicians who create a festive atmosphere. Following this is the **High-Offering Procession**, which showcases a variety of offerings. This procession features a tray of incense, betel leaves, and areca nuts, along with a pair of “Bunga Sireh,” a traditional flower arrangement. Additionally, a selection of “Kwan” sweets is presented, including Kalamae, Kanom La, Kanom Jor Hu, Kanom Ko, rice puffs, and sweet sticky rice, known as Nasimanis. A mound of Kwan sticky rice, colored in yellow, red, and white, is topped with a peeled boiled egg. The procession also includes “Kwan” fruits, traditionally bananas, along with candles, water vessels, and Dulun (or Talum), which consists of two containers for sweets. Decorative silver and gold flowers are also part of the offerings, alongside Guwaekapeh, a decorative thread tied to bamboo that represents nobility status. This aspect features seven colors of thread for nobles and three for commoners, typically held by women dressed in beautiful traditional Malay attire, with around 40 participants.

Next is the **Noble Procession**, where figures such as Datoh, Senah, Amat, and the Village Head don traditional Malay men's attire, complete with a kris, reflecting their rank. The **Bird Procession** follows, with participants dressed in shirts and pants, wrapped in “Pha Khao Ma,” a traditional cloth corresponding to the size of the birds represented in the event.

Lastly, the **Spearman Procession**, consisting of military personnel and generals, features 30 participants dressed in red, white, or black pants and shirts, along with head coverings. The event culminates with a **Performance Group**, showcasing costumes in the "Mayong" or "Rongheng" style, often accompanied by music and dance, enhancing the festive spirit of the procession.

Suggestions

On Education and Recording of Historical StoriesEfforts should be made to digitally archive historical information in various formats to raise public awareness and make this data available for educational purposes. Additionally, it should serve as a cultural tourism resource that generates sustainable income for the community.

On Reviving Lost Traditions in the Three Southern Border Provinces Many local traditions that are part of the region's identity have been lost due to changes in the social context. To revive these lost traditions in a way that aligns with current circumstances, support from both the government and private sectors is essential. This includes financial backing, provision of venues, policies, and other resources. Cultural festivals should be promoted to generate income for the local population, particularly through cultural tourism, leveraging soft power and local identity in a sustainable manner.

Conclusion

This research emphasizes the profound role that mythical birds play in shaping cultural identities and how they can be utilized as instruments of cultural and economic revitalization. The integration of these ancient symbols in Yala Province offers a unique opportunity to preserve and promote local heritage while enhancing tourism and economic growth. As global tourism continues to prioritize cultural authenticity, the study provides valuable insights into how communities can balance heritage preservation with contemporary development goals. By examining the intersection of cultural myths and economic strategies, this research contributes to the broader field of heritage tourism and offers a sustainable model for cultural revitalization worldwide.

The study of mythical bird legends from various cultures not only helps us understand the diverse ways in which birds are used as symbols in mythology and literature but also offers insight into the spiritual interpretations and societal changes associated with these beliefs (Faulkner, 2003; Fitzhugh, 2008; Smith, 2017). Integrating these symbols into local heritage preservation and tourism development, particularly in the Burong Market of Yala, showcases how cultural revitalization can be linked to economic growth while maintaining cultural sustainability.

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Comparing Customer Satisfaction Between AI Chatbots and Human Live Agents in E-commerce: The Roles of Perceived Warmth, Perceived Competence, Trust

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Abstract

The rapid development of e-commerce has encouraged companies to implement AI chatbots as a customer service facility to improve efficiency and speed. Human live agents are considered superior in building emotional relationships and handling complex problems. This explains that psychological factors perceived by customers under the type of service agent also influence customer satisfaction. This research aims to compare customer satisfaction between AI chatbots services and human live agents services in an e-commerce context. It further examines how customers' psychological perceptions—perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust—affect customer satisfaction under each service condition. Based on the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), customer perceptions of service agents based on perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust can influence customer satisfaction. The research gap found is the lack of research comparing the two types of service agents in a single integrated conceptual model. This research uses a quantitative approach with a comparative and within-subject design. The population is e-commerce users in Indonesia who have used AI chatbots and human live agents services. Respondent data was collected through an online questionnaire survey and analyzed using SPSS. The results of this research found that the increase in customer satisfaction by AI chatbots and human live agents occurred due to different psychological factors. Perceived competence had a stronger predictive effect on customer satisfaction under AI chatbots services. while perceived warmth and trust were stronger under human live agents. This indicates that both types of services are complementary in e-commerce.

Keywords: AI chatbots, human live agents, customer satisfaction, perceived warmth, trust

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Introduction

The rapid growth of the e-commerce industry is driving companies to leverage various digital technologies to improve the quality of customer service. One innovation that is increasingly being adopted is AI chatbots. This technology is capable of providing quick responses, serving customers 24 hours a day, and handling basic needs at a relatively lower cost. As customer expectations for practical and easily accessible services increase, the use of AI-based chatbots continues to increase (Marshall, 2026; SellersCommerce, 2025; Shukairy, 2025).

However, despite these advantages, AI chatbots still have limitations, particularly when faced with complex issues or situations involving customers' emotional responses. In such situations, the presence of human live agents is often considered more effective because they are able to demonstrate empathy, understand the context more deeply, and tailor their responses to customer needs (Huang et al., 2024; Huang & Rust, 2021). This indicates that customer satisfaction is not only determined by the speed or efficiency of service, but also by how customers perceive and interpret the interactions they experience.

To explain this phenomenon, this research uses the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), which states that individuals' evaluations of a group are generally based on two main dimensions: perceived warmth and perceived competence (Abele et al., 2021). In the context of customer service, perceived warmth refers to the perception of the service provider's friendliness and goodwill, while perceived competence relates to the ability to resolve issues effectively. Both of these aspects are known to play a crucial role in shaping customers' evaluations of the services provided, whether by AI or humans (McKee et al., 2023). Additionally, the factor of trust is a critical element in digital environments as it can reduce uncertainty while simultaneously increasing customers' confidence in the services they use (Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Although research on AI chatbots and customer service continues to evolve, there are still a number of gaps that have not been extensively studied. Most studies tend to examine AI chatbots and human live agents separately (Hsu & Lin, 2023). On the other hand, the variables perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust are generally studied separately, so the relationship between the three in explaining customer satisfaction has not been extensively analyzed in an integrated form (Cai et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2022). Furthermore, research that directly compares the two types of services using a within-subjects approach remains relatively limited.

Based on this gap, this research aims to compare customer satisfaction levels between AI chatbots and human live agents in the context of e-commerce. In addition, this research also examines the influence of perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust on customer satisfaction for each type of service, as well as compares the strength of the influence of these three factors between the two types of services.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

This research adopts the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) to understand how customers evaluate service agents in the context of e-commerce. In this model, evaluations of a social entity are generally based on two main dimensions: perceived warmth and perceived competence (Abele et al., 2021; Fiske et al., 2002). Perceived warmth refers to how

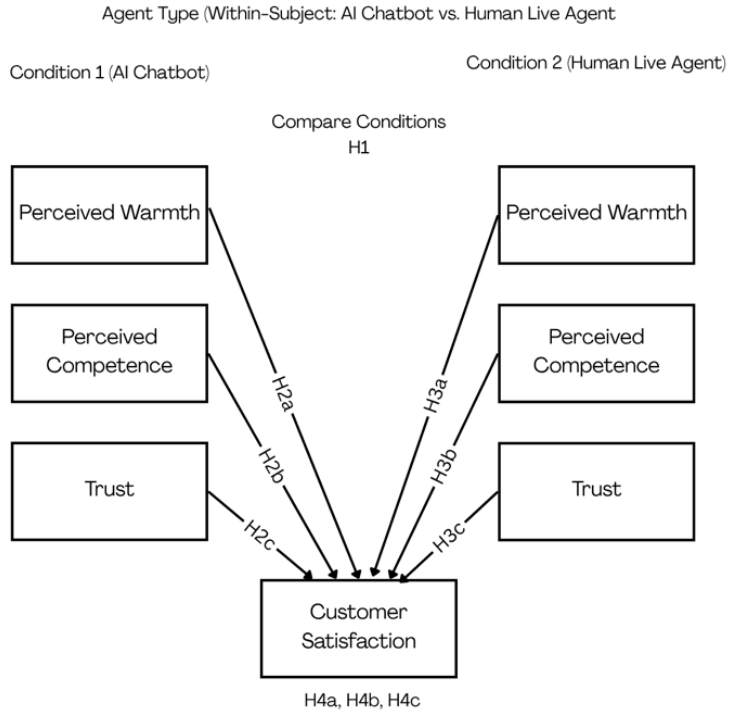
customers view the friendliness, concern, and goodwill of service agents. Meanwhile, perceived competence relates to perceptions of the agent's ability, expertise, and effectiveness in completing tasks. Previous studies have shown that these two dimensions are not only used in evaluating humans but are also relevant for evaluating artificial intelligence-based technologies such as AI chatbots (McKee et al., 2023).

In e-commerce, customers can interact with both AI chatbots and human live agents. Although both share the same goal of providing customer service, perceptions of the two often differ. AI chatbots are generally viewed as superior in terms of competence because they can provide quick, consistent, and relatively accurate responses. Meanwhile, human live agents are generally considered superior in terms of warmth because they can demonstrate empathy, understand customers' emotional states, and provide more personalized responses (Huang et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2023). Besides these two dimensions, trust is also a critical factor in the e-commerce context, given that customers frequently face uncertainties regarding data security, the accuracy of information, and the outcomes of their transactions (Wang et al., 2023).

Several studies have shown that the use of AI chatbots can improve customer satisfaction, particularly for routine and informational services, such as providing product information, answering frequently asked questions, or assisting with order tracking (Hsu & Lin, 2023; Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). However, in more complex situations or those involving emotional aspects, human live agents tend to yield higher satisfaction levels. This is due to their ability to build trust and provide responses that better align with customers' emotional needs (Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Perceived warmth plays a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction, as interactions that are perceived as friendly, caring, and empathetic can foster positive evaluations of the service (Cai et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2023). Furthermore, perceived competence also makes a significant contribution, as customers tend to feel more satisfied when service agents are perceived as capable of providing accurate information and effective solutions (Hsu & Lin, 2023; Huang et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2023). Meanwhile, trust serves as a factor that helps reduce perceived risk while increasing customer confidence in service quality, which eventually has a positive impact on customer satisfaction levels (Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Figure 1
Research Framework Diagram



Based on previous research, AI chatbots and human live agents show different service characteristics, meaning that they have the potential to result in different levels of customer satisfaction. Therefore, this research proposes the hypothesis that there is a difference in customer satisfaction under AI chatbots services and human live agents services in the context of e-commerce (H1). Within the framework of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), perceived warmth is one of the factors that influence how customers evaluate service agents. When service agents are perceived as friendly, caring, and capable of showing empathy, customers tend to give more positive ratings of the service experience they receive (Cai et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2023). Therefore, perceived warmth is hypothesized to have a positive influence on customer satisfaction, for both under AI chatbots (H2a) and human live agents (H3a).

Furthermore, perceived competence is also expected to contribute to customer satisfaction. Customers generally feel more satisfied when service agents are perceived to be competent in providing information and resolving issues effectively (Hsu & Lin, 2023; Huang et al., 2024; McKee et al., 2023). Thus, perceived competence is hypothesized to have a positive effect on customer satisfaction under AI chatbots services (H2b) and human live agents (H3b).

Moreover, trust is also a key factor influencing customer satisfaction. Customers who have a high level of trust in service agents tend to provide more positive evaluations of their service experiences (Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Therefore, it is hypothesized that trust has a positive effect on customer satisfaction under AI chatbots (H2c) and human live agents (H3c).

Due to the differences in characteristics between AI chatbots and human live agents, the effects of perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust on customer satisfaction are also expected to vary between the two. Thus, this research proposes the hypothesis that there

are differences in the effects of perceived warmth (H4a), perceived competence (H4b), and trust (H4c) on customer satisfaction between AI chatbots services and human live agents.

Methodology

Research Design

This research applies a quantitative approach with a within-subject comparative design to compare customer satisfaction levels between AI chatbots and human live agents in the context of e-commerce. Besides comparing these two types of services, this research also examines the influence of perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust on customer satisfaction under each service condition. The choice of a within-subject design is based on the consideration that each respondent is asked to evaluate both types of service agents. Thus, differences between individuals can be minimized, making the comparison results more accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Lakens, 2022). This approach is also consistent with a number of previous studies that examined the comparison between AI chatbots and human live agents in the context of digital-based customer service (Hsu & Lin, 2023; Huang et al., 2024).

Data Collection and Sampling

The data for this research was collected through an online survey using a structured questionnaire adapted from previous studies on AI chatbots, digital customer service, and customer satisfaction (Hsu & Lin, 2023; Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Each question item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (Hair et al., 2022). The order of evaluation for AI chatbots and human live agents was randomized to reduce potential bias in questionnaire completion. The research population consisted of e-commerce customers in Indonesia who had experience using both AI chatbots and human live agents. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling, with respondent criteria including Indonesian citizenship, a history of transactions via e-commerce platforms, and experience interacting with both types of services. This approach was used to ensure that the respondents involved truly possess relevant experience in evaluating both service conditions (Cai et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Based on recommendations from previous studies, the minimum number of respondents required to participate in this research questionnaire is approximately 5 to 10 respondents per question item (Bujang et al., 2024). Given the 40 measurement items included in the questionnaire, the minimum sample size required was 200 valid respondents. Furthermore, when using multiple regression analysis, sample size determination must consider effect size, the number of predictor variables, and the significance level, as recommended by Hair et al. (2022). Based on these considerations, the sample size in this research is considered sufficient to support the statistical analysis.

Measurement Instruments

This research examines four main constructs: perceived warmth, perceived competence, trust, and customer satisfaction. Perceived warmth is measured through customers' perceptions of friendliness, attentiveness, empathy, goodwill, and comfort during interactions with service agents. Meanwhile, perceived competence reflects customers' evaluations of agents' capabilities, including effectiveness, level of knowledge, efficiency, and reliability in providing service. The trust variable is measured based on customers' perceptions of their level of trust in service agents, which includes aspects of honesty, goodwill, a sense of

security, and confidence in using the service. Meanwhile, customer satisfaction is measured through several indicators, such as overall satisfaction, the alignment of the service with expectations, the perceived experience, satisfaction with the service outcomes, and the intention to use the service again in the future.

Data Analysis

The data in this research was analyzed using SPSS. The initial stage involved data screening and descriptive analysis aimed at describing the characteristics of the respondents and the distribution of the data obtained (Hair et al., 2022). Next, the validity and reliability of the instruments were tested using corrected item-total correlation and Cronbach's alpha to ensure the quality of the measurement tools used (Hair et al., 2022). In the next stage, a paired-sample t-test was used to compare customer satisfaction levels between AI chatbots services and human live agents services, in accordance with the within-subjects design applied in this research (Lakens, 2022). To analyze the influence of perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust on customer satisfaction, multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for each type of service. The final stage involved comparing the results of the two regression models to identify differences in the strength of the influence of psychological variables on customer satisfaction between AI chatbots and human live agents services (Huang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Result and Discussion

Respondent Profile

This research distributed a total of 400 questionnaires. After the data screening process and the elimination of invalid responses, 385 valid questionnaires were obtained, with a validity rate of 96.25%. The respondent profile shows that the majority are women (57.1%), in the 26–30 age range (28.6%), and are predominantly students (34.8%) and private-sector employees (34.3%). Most respondents used e-commerce platforms several times a week (41.8%) and had used customer service 2–3 times in the past six months (47.0%).

Table 1
Analysis of Demographic Profile (N = 385)

Variable Name	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	220	57.1%
	Male	165	42.9%
Age	18–20 years	102	26.5%
	20–25 years	101	26.2%
	26–30 years	110	28.6%
	31–35 years	44	11.4%
	> 35 years	28	7.3%

Employment Status	Student	134	34.8%
	Private Sector Employee	132	34.3%
	Civil Servant	75	19.5%
	Entrepreneur	38	9.9%
	Others	6	1.5%
Platform Usage Frequency	Several times a week	161	41.8%
	Almost every day	142	36.9%
	Several times a month	67	17.4%
	Rarely	15	3.9%
Frequency use of Customer Service in the Last 6 Months	2–3 times	181	47.0%
	4–5 times	106	27.5%
	1 time	78	20.3%
	More than 5 times	20	5.2%

Descriptive Statistics, Validity, and Reliability Analysis

The results of the descriptive analysis show that the mean scores for all variables are in the high range, ranging from 3.94 to 4.08. In comparison, human live agents consistently received higher mean scores than AI chatbots on all variables examined, which are perceived warmth, perceived competence, trust, and customer satisfaction. This indicates that respondents tend to have a more positive perception of interactions with human agents. Meanwhile, instrument quality testing showed that all items met the validity criteria, as indicated by corrected item-total correlation (CITC) values above the minimum threshold of 0.30. Reliability testing also yielded high Cronbach's Alpha values, ranging from 0.861 to 0.905 for AI chatbots and 0.877 to 0.887 for human live agents. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the research instrument possesses good levels of consistency and reliability.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Research Variables

Variable	AI Chatbots Mean (SD)	Human Live Agents Mean (SD)
Perceived Warmth	3.97 (0.79)	4.06 (0.77)
Perceived Competence	3.95 (0.82)	4.08 (0.76)
Trust	3.95 (0.77)	4.06 (0.76)
Customer Satisfaction	3.94 (0.85)	4.07 (0.77)

Table 3
Validity and Reliability Analysis of Research Variables

Agent Type	Variable	Item	CITC	Cronbach's Alpha
AI Chatbots	Perceived Warmth	AI Chatbots are friendly when serving me (AI_W1)	0.626	0.861
		AI Chatbots show concern when serving me (AI_W2)	0.690	
		AI Chatbots can understand my feelings when providing service (AI_W3)	0.660	
		AI Chatbots have good intentions when serving me (AI_W4)	0.704	
		AI Chatbots are easy to approach and comfortable to interact with (AI_W5)	0.718	
	Perceived Competence	AI Chatbots are competent in handling my issues (AI_C1)	0.754	0.887
		AI Chatbots provide effective solutions (AI_C2)	0.734	
		AI Chatbots have sufficient knowledge (AI_C3)	0.716	
		AI Chatbots work efficiently (AI_C4)	0.724	
		AI Chatbots perform reliably (AI_C5)	0.705	
	Trust	AI Chatbots are trustworthy (AI_T1)	0.737	0.869
		AI Chatbots provide honest information (AI_T2)	0.652	
		AI Chatbots act in accordance with my needs (AI_T3)	0.705	
		The solutions provided by AI Chatbots are safe to follow (AI_T4)	0.653	
		I feel confident in the results obtained from AI Chatbots (AI_T5)	0.719	

	Customer Satisfaction	Overall, I am satisfied with AI Chatbots services (AI_S1)	0.784	
		AI Chatbots services meet my expectations (AI_S2)	0.772	
		My experience with AI Chatbots services is pleasant (AI_S3)	0.749	0.905
		I am satisfied with the solutions provided by AI Chatbots (AI_S4)	0.755	
		I would use AI Chatbots services again in the future (AI_S5)	0.746	
	Perceived Warmth	Human Live Agents are friendly (H_W1)	0.759	
		Human Live Agents show concern (H_W2)	0.703	
		Human Live Agents understand my feelings (H_W3)	0.723	0.882
		Human Live Agents have good intentions (H_W4)	0.710	
		Human Live Agents are easy to approach (H_W5)	0.691	
Human Live Agents	Perceived Competence	Human Live Agents are competent (H_C1)	0.724	
		Human Live Agents provide effective solutions (H_C2)	0.671	
		Human Live Agents have sufficient knowledge (H_C3)	0.728	0.878
		Human Live Agents work efficiently (H_C4)	0.731	
		Human Live Agents perform reliably (H_C5)	0.695	

Trust	Human Live Agents are trustworthy (H_T1)	0.722	
	Human Live Agents provide honest information (H_T2)	0.685	
	Human Live Agents act in accordance with my needs (H_T3)	0.695	0.877
	The solutions provided by Human Live Agents are safe to follow (H_T4)	0.774	
	I feel confident in the results obtained from Human Live Agents (H_T5)	0.661	
Customer Satisfaction	Overall, I am satisfied with Human Live Agents services (H_S1)	0.768	
	Human Live Agents services meet my expectations (H_S2)	0.707	
	My experience with Human Live Agents is pleasant (H_S3)	0.711	0.887
	I am satisfied with the solutions provided by Human Live Agents (H_S4)	0.752	
	I would use Human Live Agents services again in the future (H_S5)	0.695	

Hypothesis Testing

The results of the paired-sample t-test indicate a significant difference between AI chatbots and human live agents across all variables examined. These differences are evident in perceived warmth ($t = -4.101$, $p < 0.001$), perceived competence ($t = -5.061$, $p < 0.001$), trust ($t = -5.175$, $p < 0.001$), and customer satisfaction ($t = -4.277$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that the two types of service do indeed provide different experiences for customers, thus supporting Hypothesis H1. However, the effect sizes were relatively small, with Cohen's dz values ranging from 0.209 to 0.264, indicating that although the differences were statistically significant, their practical significance was relatively modest. Furthermore, the regression analysis results show that the three variables, which are perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust, all have a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction, both for AI chatbots and human live agents ($p < 0.001$). In the AI chatbots service, perceived competence appears as the most dominant factor influencing customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.561$). Meanwhile, for human live agents services, perceived warmth ($\beta = 0.260$) and trust ($\beta = 0.273$) had a relatively stronger influence compared to AI chatbots.

Thus, all hypotheses from H2a to H3c can be considered supported. Further comparative results also support these findings. The results of the comparison of standardized coefficients suggest that the role of each variable may vary across the two types of service. For AI chatbots, perceived competence is the most dominant factor in predicting customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, for human live agents, perceived warmth and trust have a relatively greater influence on customer satisfaction (H4a-H4c). To assess the potential for multicollinearity, this research examined tolerance values and the variance inflation factor (VIF). The results show that all tolerance values are above 0.10 and all VIF values are below 10.00, for both the AI chatbots and human live agents models. This indicates that multicollinearity is not a significant concern in the regression analysis conducted (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 4
Paired Sample t-Test Results of Research Variables

Variables	AI Chatbots Mean (SD)	Human Live Agents Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value	Cohen's dz
Perceived Warmth	3.97 (0.79)	4.06 (0.77)	-0.091	-4.101	< 0.001***	0.209
Perceived Competence	3.95 (0.82)	4.08 (0.76)	-0.126	-5.061	< 0.001***	0.258
Trust	3.95 (0.77)	4.06 (0.76)	-0.115	-5.175	< 0.001***	0.264
Customer Satisfaction	3.94 (0.85)	4.07 (0.77)	-0.128	-4.277	< 0.001***	0.218

Note. n = 385; SD = Standard Deviation; ***P < 0.001

Table 5
Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Results of Research Variables

Variable	AI Chatbots (β Coefficient)	t	p-value	Human Live Agents (β Coefficient)	t	p-value
Perceived Warmth	0.226	5.700	< 0.001***	0.260	6.206	< 0.001***
Perceived Competence	0.561	14.109	< 0.001***	0.445	10.255	< 0.001***
Trust	0.194	4.763	< 0.001***	0.273	5.615	< 0.001***
Model Fit	**AI Chatbots**	**Human Live Agents**				
R^2	0.898	0.894				
Adj. R^2	0.898	0.894				
F	1122.468***	1076.029***				
Durbin-Watson	1.942	1.779				

Note. Dependent Variable = Customer Satisfaction; ***p < 0.001

Discussion

The results of this research indicate that human live agents generate higher levels of customer satisfaction compared to AI chatbots. These findings suggest that, although AI chatbots are superior in terms of speed and efficiency, customers still value interactions with humans more highly. This is closely related to human agents' ability to demonstrate empathy, understand situations more deeply, and build emotional connections during the service process. Interactions with human live agents allow for more personalized communication and emotional support, aspects that AI chatbots still struggle to fully replicate. These findings

align with several previous studies by Zhou et al. (2023), Zhang et al. (2025), Deng and Yan (2025). More specifically, when it comes to AI chatbots services, perceived competence is the most significant factor in improving customer satisfaction. This means that customers tend to evaluate AI chatbots based on their ability to provide accurate information, effective solutions, and quick, consistent responses, mainly based on their functional performance rather than relational aspects. In contrast, for human live agents services, perceived warmth and trust actually have a greater influence. This indicates that in interactions with humans, customers consider not only functional aspects but also the quality of the relationship built during the service process. Human live agents are more strongly influenced by emotional and relational aspects, including warmth and trust. These findings are also consistent with previous research indicating that AI chatbots are more competent, while human live agents are more prominent in emotional and relational aspects (Zhang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings of this research support the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) framework, which emphasizes the importance of the competence and warmth dimensions in shaping customers' evaluations of service agents. However, the role of these two dimensions appears to differ depending on the type of service used. Competence is more dominant in the context of AI chatbots, while warmth and trust are more prominent with human live agents. Based on these findings, e-commerce companies may consider implementing a hybrid service strategy, which combines the efficiency of AI chatbots with the interpersonal skills of human live agents, to create a more optimal customer experience.

Conclusion

This research aims to compare customer satisfaction levels between AI chatbots services and human live agents, while also analyzing the role of perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust in influencing satisfaction for each type of service. The results indicate that customer satisfaction with human live agents tends to be higher than with AI chatbots. Furthermore, the three variables which are perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust were found to have a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction, both in AI-based services and in services involving human agents. However, the strength of each factor's influence differs across these two contexts. For AI chatbots, perceived competence is the most dominant factor, indicating that customers prioritize the system's ability to provide accurate information and effective solutions. In contrast, with human live agents, perceived warmth and trust actually have a greater influence on customer satisfaction. This indicates that in interactions with humans, customers consider not only performance aspects but also the quality of the relationship built during the service process. Thus, it can be concluded that customers tend to evaluate AI chatbots based on functional aspects, while human live agents are evaluated through a combination of functional and relational aspects.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes by extending the application of the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) to the context of digital services, specifically by simultaneously examining the roles of perceived warmth and perceived competence in AI chatbots and human live agents. The findings confirm that perceived competence remains a key factor in shaping customer satisfaction, particularly in technology-based services. Meanwhile, perceived warmth and trust appear to play a more prominent role in service contexts involving human live agents. Furthermore, this research also helps fill a gap in the literature by employing a within-

subjects design, which allows for a direct comparison between AI chatbots and human live agents within the same research framework. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how customers evaluate both types of services.

Practical Implications

For e-commerce companies, the findings of this research suggest that AI chatbots and human live agents should be positioned to complement one another. AI chatbots can be optimized to handle tasks that require speed, accuracy, and efficiency, such as answering common questions or providing basic information. Meanwhile, human live agents continue to play a crucial role in handling more complex situations, particularly those requiring empathy, contextual understanding, and the ability to build trust with customers. Thus, implementing a hybrid service strategy that combines the strengths of AI chatbots and human live agents can be an effective approach to improving customer satisfaction. Additionally, companies also need to continue developing the capabilities of AI chatbots so they can better display a more "human-like" side, thereby increasing the perceived warmth and trust customers have in the services provided.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations that should be noted. First, this research was conducted solely in the context of e-commerce, so the results obtained may not necessarily be directly generalized to other service sectors. Each industry has different characteristics of customer interactions and needs, which could potentially influence the research results. In addition, this research utilized self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by subjective judgments and the tendency of respondents to provide socially desirable answers. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to draw causal inferences or observe changes in customer perceptions over time. Moreover, the sample was restricted to Indonesian consumers, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other cultural settings. Participants were asked to recall their past experiences with AI chatbots and human live agents, which may introduce recall bias. The research also did not account for differences in the complexity of customer service situations or variations across e-commerce platforms, both of which could have affected customer evaluations and satisfaction.

Furthermore, this research focuses only on three main variables: perceived warmth, perceived competence, and trust. However, there are various other factors that can also influence customer satisfaction. Therefore, future research is recommended to test this model in different industry contexts, such as tourism, banking, or healthcare. Future research may also consider additional variables, such as perceived usefulness, perceived risk, and emotional attachment, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of customer satisfaction in AI- and human-based services.

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Enhancing the Creativity of Living Space Design Through Reflection on 3D Software Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This study explores how integrating reflective learning experiences into 3D software instruction can enhance creativity in residential space design. Although 3D software has become a fundamental skill in interior design education, technical proficiency alone does not necessarily lead to creative design outcomes. Therefore, this research examines the relationship between students' reflection on the 3D software learning process and their creative performance in residential space design. The study was conducted within interior design-related courses, where students developed 3D models based on residential design themes. Data were collected through mid-term design projects, reflective learning worksheets, and design performance assessments. The analysis focused on how students linked software learning experiences to design decisions and daily life contexts to examine the role of reflection in design creativity. Results show that students with higher creative performance moved beyond basic software operations to engage in deeper reflective thinking during the design process. These students actively searched for design precedents or imagined usage scenarios to infer user lifestyles, established clear design styles, considered psychological reactions triggered by spatial configurations, and explored material and color combinations to shape the overall spatial image. The findings indicate that design creativity stems from the integration of reflective learning, life experience, and design thinking, rather than simple technical skills. Therefore, integrating reflection-oriented learning strategies into 3D software instruction can effectively support the development of meaningful and creative spatial design outcomes.

Keywords: 3d software, reflective learning, creativity, interior design education, residential design

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Introduction

In the digital age, 3D modeling software such as SketchUp, Rhino, and AutoCAD has transformed interior design education, allowing students to visualize complex spatial relationships with unprecedented precision (Wei & Phongsatha, 2026). These tools facilitate rapid prototyping and iteration, which are key to modern design workflows. However, an increasing concern in design education is that an overemphasis on technical mastery often leads to formulaic outputs, stifling the creative spark required for innovative residential spaces (Chen et al., 2024). Residential space design particularly requires creativity that resonates with the emotional and psychological needs of users, merging functionality with aesthetic and experiential depth.

This study addresses a critical gap: while 3D software proficiency is a fundamental competency, its potential to foster creativity remains under-explored, especially through reflective practice. Reflection, as defined by Schön (2017), involves "reflection-in-action" during the design process and "reflection-on-action" after the fact, allowing learners to connect technical actions to broader conceptual insights . We hypothesize that guiding students to reflect on 3D software experiences—linking tool constraints, iterative attempts, and personal life experiences—can elevate design creativity beyond the level of technical execution.

Based on an empirical study of interior design courses in Taiwan, this paper analyzes how reflective learning mediates the relationship between 3D software use and creative outcomes in residential space design. The findings provide educators with practical strategies to integrate reflection-oriented learning, ultimately nurturing human-centered designers who create living spaces that are not only feasible but also deeply touching.

Literature Review

Reflection on Software Learning Experiences and Creativity Enhancement

Applying reflective learning principles to 3D software learning experiences can effectively bridge the gap between technical tool operation and creative output.

Schoormann et al. (2020) investigated how software tools can support collaborative reflection in design thinking projects. They noted that by "actually doing something, tacit knowledge (i.e., knowing-in-action) of individuals is disclosed," which allows teams to draw on information and experiences beyond single individuals to solve "wicked problems". This suggests that 3D software learning environments should incorporate features that facilitate both individual and collaborative reflection to foster collective intelligence.

Kinik et al. (2025) explored the impact of structured reflective journaling in a modular furniture design course. They found that journaling "supported idea development and progress tracking," but highlighted that "reflection does not naturally occur at a deep level without structured guidance". The study emphasized that using a rubric played a key role in guiding deeper reflection, as students otherwise tend toward superficial task summaries. They recommended flexible milestones and alternative formats to overcome time constraints and engagement challenges.

Creativity Enhancement Strategies in Residential Space Design Education

In residential space design education, combining 3D software with reflective learning enables various pedagogical strategies to enhance creativity.

Couzens et al. (2026) reflected on using 3D simulations for practice-based learning, finding that 3D models can effectively "integrate technical, creative, and user-centered considerations" and provide a more intuitive learning experience than traditional case studies. This underscores the unique advantage of 3D software in providing an immersive practice environment that serves as the basis for reflection.

Notably, Almaz et al. (2024) explored the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration in architectural and interior design education. He pointed out that AI can "generate initial project proposals" and assist cognitive tactics, thereby "improving efficiency, sustainability, and creativity". AI tools can serve as triggers for reflection, allowing students to critically evaluate diverse generated options rather than replacing the creative process itself.

Research Methodology

Participants and Context

This study recruited 48 second-year undergraduate interior design students from two courses at a university in Taiwan (First Semester, 2025). Participants included 32 females and 16 males, with an average age of 20.3 years. All participants had basic 2D drafting experience, including AutoCAD floor plan drawing, but limited 3D modeling proficiency, with most having only preliminary exposure. The courses focused on residential design themes, such as "Compact Urban Living for Young Families," using SketchUp as the primary modeling tool.

SketchUp was chosen as the instructional tool due to its user-friendly interface, gentle learning curve, and widespread application in interior design practice. The course design covered everything from basic operations to full project development, providing students with ample opportunities for learning and reflection.

Research Procedure

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design, integrating reflective intervention strategies throughout an 18-week course:

- Weeks 1–2: Understanding Learning Background This stage primarily collected students' learning backgrounds and prior competencies, including their 3D software experience, design learning history, and basic spatial representation abilities. Researchers used questionnaires, classroom observations, and preliminary interviews as a basis for subsequent teaching arrangements and comparative analysis.
- Weeks 3–8: Technical Instruction Phase This stage provided systematic software instruction, including lectures and hands-on exercises. Content covered basic 3D modeling skills, such as object creation, Push/Pull, material mapping, lighting settings, and basic rendering techniques. Students became familiar with the interface and tool logic through small exercises.
- Week 9: Wardrobe Project Development Phase Applying the 3D software operation techniques learned in class, students designed and modeled a wardrobe project as a mid-term test.

- Reflective Intervention Components Reflective learning worksheets were distributed weekly, guiding students to record their learning process. Prompt questions included: “How did software constraints shape your design decisions? Please link to real-life contexts.” “What design precedents or cases inspired your spatial layout?” “How do you imagine users' daily activities in this space?” These prompts encouraged students to move beyond technical aspects and think about the meaning and context behind the design.
- Weeks 10–16: Advanced Technical Instruction The mid-term submission included a complete 3D model, multi-angle renderings, floor plans, and sections, as well as a 1,500-word final reflection paper. The reflection paper required students to synthesize the entire design process, explain how software learning experiences influenced design decisions, and reflect on personal growth and challenges.
- Weeks 17–18: Assessment Phase Students created a 3D model of a 60-square-meter apartment based on the design brief provided in the course. The design brief emphasized the balance between function and aesthetics, requiring students to consider the needs of specific user groups (such as young couples, single professionals, or small families). Students underwent multiple iterations during this stage, adjusting designs based on peer feedback and instructor guidance.

Data Collection Methods

This study collected three types of data for multi-perspective analysis:

Design Project Works (n = 48): Evaluation of creativity performance in 3D models, floor plans, and renderings. Assessment dimensions included originality of spatial configuration, integration of function and aesthetics, appropriateness of material and color use, and completeness of the overall design concept.

Reflective Worksheets (n = 192 records): Each student submitted 4 worksheets during the 4-week project development period, totaling 192 records. Worksheet content was qualitatively coded to distinguish reflection depth: Surface Reflection (only describing operational difficulties), Process Reflection (linking attempts to decisions), and Deep Reflection (linking to life context and user experience).

Design Performance Assessment: Scoring used a structured scale, independently graded by two senior interior design teachers. Assessment dimensions included four categories, each scored 1–10:

Design Precedents and Lifestyle Inference: Whether appropriate cases were referenced and user life scenarios imagined.

Design Style Establishment: Whether a consistent and clear design vocabulary was presented.

Spatial Psychological Considerations: Whether the spatial configuration considered users' psychological feelings and emotional reactions.

Material and Color Exploration: Whether the combination of materials and colors created an overall spatial atmosphere.

Data Analysis Methods

This study used a mixed-methods analysis. Qualitative data used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identifying reflection patterns through open coding, focused coding, and thematic induction. Two researchers coded independently and then discussed to reach a consensus.

Quantitative data analysis used Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationship between reflection depth scores and total creativity scores as well as scores for each dimension. Inter-rater reliability tests showed high consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$), ensuring scoring reliability.

Research Results

Overall Creativity Performance Profile

The average total creativity score for the 48 students was 7.2 (out of 10, SD = 1.4). According to the score distribution, 35% of students (17) scored 8 or above, classified as the High Creativity Group; 42% of students (20) scored 6 or below, classified as the Low Creativity Group; the remaining 23% (11) were the Medium Creativity Group.

Works from the High Creativity Group demonstrated clear design concepts and integration abilities, skillfully combining functional requirements with aesthetic expression. In contrast, designs from the Low Creativity Group relied heavily on classroom teaching examples, lacking personal interpretation and innovative elements, presenting more formulaic spatial configurations.

Thematic Analysis of Reflection Patterns

Through qualitative coding of 192 reflective worksheet records, three levels of reflection were identified:

- Surface Reflection (41% of records): These reflections focused on software operation difficulties and technical issues, such as “layer management is hard to grasp,” “computer is slow during rendering,” or “don't know how to adjust material parameters.” These records remained at the level of problem description without further thinking about the meaning behind the problems or solution strategies. For example, Student A stated, “Initially, I did not feel obvious operational difficulties during the design process,” showing that their understanding of software steps remained at the basic execution level.
- Process Reflection (32% of records): These reflections began to link the trial process with design decisions. For example, Student B stated, “Through multiple corrections in SketchUp, I found that an open kitchen better fits the circulation needs.” Student A also stated, “After adjusting the window position, the light distribution improved the brightness of the living room,” representing students' preliminary understanding of the relationship between tools and design at this level.
- Deep Reflection (27% of records): These reflections linked software experience to real-life contexts and user experiences. For example, Student C stated, “The shadow effects in the software reminded me of Taipei's rainy climate, so I chose warm lighting tones to create a sense of home comfort.” Student B also stated while building the 3D model, “I imagined an old couple drinking tea and chatting in the living room, which influenced

me to lower the furniture height to enhance intimacy." These reflections demonstrate design empathy and contextual sensitivity.

Correlation Between Reflection Depth and Creativity

Statistical analysis showed that high-creativity students generated 62% of deep reflection records, showing a significant positive correlation with total creativity scores ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, low-creativity students generated only 12% of deep reflections, mostly staying at the surface and process reflection levels. This indicates that reflection depth is an important predictor of creativity performance.

Detailed Analysis of Reflection

Four reflection categories showed excellent performance in the High Creativity Group:

1. Design Precedents and Lifestyle Inference (Avg. 8.5): 78% of high-creativity students actively searched for online design cases or magazine images as sources of inspiration, including Japanese minimalist residences, cozy Nordic styles, and modern industrial styles. More importantly, they did not just imitate forms but deeply imagined usage scenarios, such as "a reading corner for a retired teacher couple" or "a play space for a young mother accompanying a toddler." This lifestyle inference demonstrates a deep understanding of user needs.
2. Design Style Establishment (Avg. 8.2): High-creativity students established clear and consistent design themes, such as "Biophilic Modern Style" integrating indoor plants and natural materials, "Minimalist Japanese" emphasizing white space and rustic aesthetics, or "Urban Light Luxury" combining metal elements and dark tones. These styles were not superficial collages but complete systems throughout spatial configuration, material selection, and color planning.
3. Spatial Psychological Considerations (Avg. 8.0): Students showed sensitivity to how spatial configuration affects psychological feelings. For example, using curved walls to alleviate urban life stress, creating spatial hierarchy through ceiling height changes, and using open and semi-open spaces to balance privacy and interaction needs. One student mentioned: "I deliberately designed the bedroom entrance in a more hidden place from the living room view, giving users a psychological transition from public to private."
4. Material and Color Exploration (Avg. 7.9): High-creativity students were not satisfied with software default materials and actively explored different combinations to shape the spatial atmosphere. For example, "matte earth tones paired with wood textures to create tactile warmth" or "dark gray stone and copper-colored metal to create a steady modern feel." Students understood that materials are not just visual elements but also affect the tactile imagination and emotional keynote of the space.

Correlation Analysis of Reflection and Creativity

Statistical analysis further revealed the correlation between reflection depth and each creativity dimension:

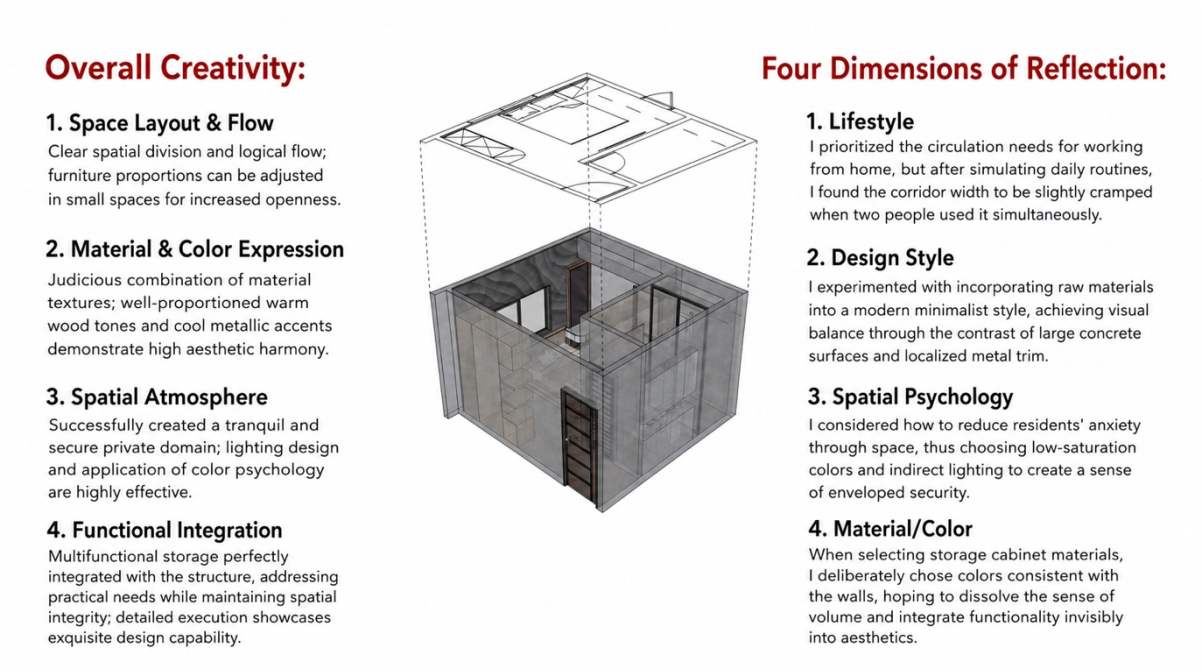
Table 1
Pearson Correlation Matrix of Reflection and Creativity Dimensions

Dimension	Deep Reflection	Precedent/Lifestyle	Style	Psychology	Material
Deep Reflection	1.00	0.72**	0.65**	0.59**	0.61**
Total Creativity	0.68**	0.81**	0.77**	0.74**	0.70**

Note: *$p < 0.01$; $n = 48$

Results show that deep reflection is significantly positively correlated with all creativity dimensions, with the highest correlation being with "Design Precedents and Lifestyle Inference" ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, among all creativity indicators, total creativity had the highest correlation with lifestyle ($r = 0.81$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that if students can deeply deliberate on users' life contexts through reflection and concretely imagine their daily needs, it will be more helpful in enhancing overall design creativity.

Figure 1
Correlation Between Total Creativity and Four Reflection Dimensions



Typical Case Analysis

High Creativity Case: Student A's Multi-functional Living Space

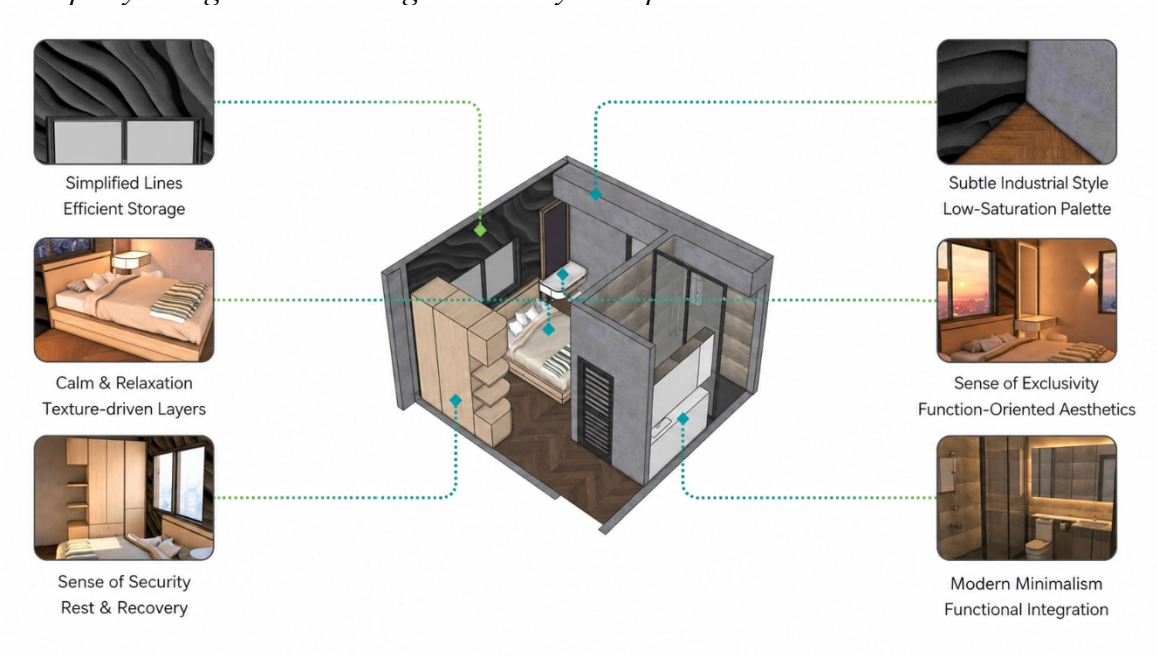
Student A designed a 20m² studio for a young single professional with the core concept of "flexible life scenarios." The highlight was a rotating multi-functional wall that served as a soft divider between the workspace and living room by day, and rotated to become the bedroom's headboard by night.

In the reflection questionnaire, Student A wrote:

> While modeling in SketchUp, I tried the Rotate function multiple times to rotate objects but kept failing. These virtual failures made me think: What if the wall itself could rotate? I thought of many small studios near MRT stations where single residents need to switch between work and rest modes in limited space. This idea came from software frustration but became the core of the design.

This case demonstrates how deep reflection transforms technical frustration into creative insight.

Figure 2
Exemplary Design From the High Creativity Group



Low Creativity Case Comparison

In contrast, designs from the low-creativity group followed classroom examples, such as standard one-bedroom layouts and formulaic furniture arrangements, lacking imagination for specific users. Their reflective worksheets mostly contained operational descriptions like “learned how to use the material library” or “completed the floor plan drawing,” without showing deep thinking.

Discussion

Reflection as a Catalyst for Creativity

The results confirm that reflection transforms 3D software from a mere technical tool into a catalyst for creativity. The deep reflection of high-creativity students echoes (Schön, 2017) reflective practitioner model, where they transform software “backtalk” (e.g., rendering failures, operational constraints) into insights about user life. This process is particularly vital in Taiwan's dense urban context, where students must understand how to create rich life experiences within limited space.

This study extends prior literature: unlike the tool fixation phenomenon noted by Kvan & Jia (2005), reflective intervention strategies successfully shifted students' attention from the interface to the external real world, promoting divergent thinking (Guilford, 1967). When guided to reflect on the link between software experience and life, students naturally began searching for precedents, imagining usage scenarios, and considering psychological feelings—the core elements of creativity.

Spatial Psychology and Environmental Empathy

The spatial psychological consideration dimension found in the study echoes core concepts of environmental psychology. Wilson (1993) noted that spatial configurations can trigger restorative psychological responses, reducing stress and enhancing well-being. The "reflective spatial empathy" shown by high-creativity students allowed them to foresee users' emotional reactions, such as reducing stress through curves, creating drama through light and shadow, and balancing social interaction and privacy through openness.

This empathy is not innate but cultivated through reflection. When asked to "imagine how users feel in this space," students shifted from self-centered technical operation to other-oriented design care—a key difference between professional designers and novices.

Integration of Life Experience and Design Knowledge

Another characteristic of deep reflection is integrating personal life experience into design, such as Taipei's rainy season, spatial constraints of apartments in Banqiao, or cultural habits of family tea gatherings. This localized life knowledge allows designs to move beyond superficial imitation of international styles to present authentic cultural appropriateness.

Schön (2017) experiential learning theory emphasizes that learning is a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. This study shows that if 3D software courses can guide students to combine software experience (concrete experience) with life observations, forming design concepts (abstract conceptualization) through reflection (reflective observation), and then experimenting through modeling (active experimentation), a complete creative learning cycle can be achieved.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from only two courses at a single university, limiting representativeness; future research could include different schools and grade levels. Second, reflective worksheets are self-reported data, which may involve social desirability bias. Future studies could use eye-tracking technology to observe actual attention distribution during modeling or use interviews for deeper exploration.

Furthermore, this was an 18-week short-term intervention. Longitudinal tracking could observe if reflective habits continue to influence creativity in advanced courses or practice. Finally, different software (e.g., Rhino, Revit) might generate different reflective experiences. Despite these limitations, this study provides important evidence that reflection-oriented teaching strategies effectively enhance design creativity.

Practical Implications and Pedagogical Suggestions

Integrating Reflection-Oriented Teaching Strategies

Based on the findings, it is suggested that interior design 3D software courses adopt the following strategies:

1. Design of Weekly Reflective Prompts: Regularly provide structured prompts such as "Which software constraints made you rethink your design direction this week?" or "How did a life experience influence your spatial layout decision?"
2. Integrating AI Tools for Precedent Exploration: Encourage using AI image generation (e.g., Midjourney) to quickly collect precedents and analyze their underlying lifestyle assumptions.
3. Portfolio Assessment over Single Tests: Shift from assessing only the final 3D model to a portfolio assessment that integrates models with reflection papers, emphasizing the process of failure and adjustment.

Implications for Interior Design Education in Taiwan

This study supports integrating educational technology with humanistic reflection. As urbanization intensifies, Taiwan's living spaces become more compact, requiring students to create quality of life in limited space. This requires empathy, cultural sensitivity, and reflection beyond pure technical training. It echoes the core value of "human-centered" design, nurturing professionals who understand human behavior and care for society through their tools.

Cultivating Reflective Practitioners

The ultimate goal of design education is to cultivate lifelong reflective practitioners. Schön (2017) emphasized that professional competence lies in the habit of "reflection-in-action". When students develop this habit, they will naturally pause, question, and seek innovative solutions when facing complex problems in their careers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that design creativity stems from the integration of technical ability, reflective thinking, life experience, and design empathy. High-creativity students transform technical frustrations and constraints into insights about user lifestyles, producing spatial designs that are both aesthetic and deeply humanistic.

Reflection depth is significantly positively correlated with all dimensions of creativity. These findings challenge the view of 3D software courses as pure technical training and argue for integrating reflective practice into the core of instruction. The role of the educator is not just to teach software commands but to guide students to transform technology into creativity, operation into care, and virtual models into poetic imaginations of real life.

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Egalitarianism Meets Confucianism: Masculinity Negotiation and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Swedish Male Spouses in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study investigates the cross-cultural adaptation process of Swedish men, rooted in Nordic egalitarianism, who relocate to Taiwan, a society emphasizing Confucian ethics and relationship orientation. While existing research on marriage migration in Asia predominately focuses on Southeast Asian female marriage migrants, this study focus on Western men who despite their privileged gender status, navigate significant structural conflicts within Taiwanese kinship and social structures. Adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), interviews were conducted with five Swedish spouses residing in Taiwan through a thorough bottom-up analysis following Yardley's criteria for validity to ensure research rigor. By integrating phenomenology with C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination" as a dual theoretical lens, the results reveal how participants experience structural tensions in the division of domestic labor, filial piety, and parenting. Furthermore, it explores how they reconstruct family roles, negotiate masculinity, and develop unique acculturation strategies regarding cultural conflicts. This research offers empirical insights into family sociology, examining how Nordic values resonate with Taiwanese family concepts, thereby enriching cross-cultural dialogue from the perspective of global citizenship.

Keywords: cross-border, multiculturalism, family issues

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Introduction

"Marriage is not merely a matter between the bride and groom, but a union of two families" (Liang, 2016). In Chinese society, the institution of marriage often transcends the will of the individual, bearing intergenerational responsibilities and familial expectations that extend beyond the individual level (Liang, 2016). As such, for marriage immigrants in Taiwan, their interactions in daily life extend beyond the couple themselves and are intimately connected with the entire family and even the interplay of two cultures.

The above discussion serves as a framework for the majority of the subsequent content. It highlights the core objective of this study, which is not merely to observe "whether a foreigner is living well in Taiwan," but to explore the cultural script conflicts encountered by Swedish male marriage immigrants when entering family and kinship networks centered on "Confucian ethics" and "social orientation." The study aims to gain a deep understanding of their subjective perceptions and interpretations, and to analyze how these Swedish men negotiate and adapt within the cultural context of a Chinese society-oriented environment.

In their research, Lin (2008) details the nature of family adaptation among marriage migrants. It is explained as family relationships centered, with emotional bonds among family members serving as the foundation for interaction, thereby developing a multi-layered adaptation process encompassing psychological states, family status, communication behaviors, and participation in decision-making (Lin, 2008). Our objective is to highlight the impact of cultural differences on individuals' subjective experiences of family life. Our further objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the compromise and adaptation strategies Swedish husband employs when integrating into Taiwanese family life.

Literature Review

"I" and "We"—The Influence of Values and Culture

In this study, the conflicts these Swedish men experienced with their in-laws were not merely simple disagreements, but rather a clash between Chinese "collectivist" and Swedish "individualist" values. According to Wang (2005), to understand how values influence people's daily lives and actions, they must be examined within specific cultural and social contexts; they cannot exist independently of their context. Similarly, Johnson (2014) points out that the scope of values extends beyond mere behavioral choices to encompass how individuals treat themselves and others. Our focus lies in how values influence people's thoughts and actions. We argue that the conflicts and unease experienced by Swedish men within their in-laws' families in Taiwan are not merely issues of personal cross-cultural adaptation, but rather structural tensions arising from the socio-cultural differences between Sweden and Taiwan.

First, we explore the nature of Chinese cultural traditions. Scholars refer to the fundamental roots of the Chinese people's psychological structure, behavior, and lifestyle as "social orientation" (Yang, 2005). To adapt to the lifestyle of an agricultural economy, specifically in terms of protection, production, and consumption, the family serves as the core unit. To manage the allocation of limited resources, the role-based nature of relationships within and outside the family enabled individuals to stay within their proper bounds and act in accordance with propriety to maintain order. Consequently, the Chinese social orientation is grounded in familism; the relational orientation concerns how individuals interact with others; the authority orientation explains how individuals align with those holding power within a group; and the

other-oriented dimension describes how others' evaluations of an individual influence that person (Yang, 2005). Confucian thought is the product of the institutionalization of these social orientations. Lee (2025) summarizes the dimensions in which Confucian values manifest in personal life as follows: (1) Family-centeredness: Filial piety toward parents and respect for ancestors, with the family's honor, disgrace, and interests taking precedence; (2) Power distance: adherence to order, emphasis on individual roles and hierarchical power positions, and gender-specific responsibilities and obedience; (3) Other-oriented: group harmony and reciprocity, emphasizing values centered on others; (4) Personal cultivation: suppression of personal preferences and feelings, acceptance of reality, and avoidance of conflict.

Hofstede's Culture Dimensions

Hofstede's research has made significant contributions to understanding the value systems and lifestyles of various societies; When examining cross-cultural conflicts, the primary task is to clarify the cultural traits involved in the clash; this understanding serves as the core foundation for subsequent problem-solving (Lan, 2014). In this study, we focus on three of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: 1. Individualism/Collectivism; 2. High/Low Power Distance; and 3. Masculinity (Competition)-Oriented/Femininity (Care)-Oriented. This framework is applied to examine the cultural value contexts of the Swedish marriage migrants and the Taiwanese counterpart, as well as the resulting differences.

According to Hofstede's theory, in individualistic societies, individuals are encouraged to care only for themselves and their immediate family; self-expression is accepted; and each person should independently maintain their own income and manage their own expenses (Hofstede, 2011). While a certain score of Sweden's level of individualism differs between publications, methods and datasets, the current consensus is that Sweden has one of the highest levels of individualism. (Komisarof & Akaliyski, 2025). In the Swedish individualistic culture; the individual and their closest family are of utmost importance, and the country is considered to adopt progressive ideals regarding child-rearing (Gurdal & Sorbring, 2024).

In collectivist societies, individuals are taught to uphold the virtue of maintaining harmony within their group and to practice economic reciprocity among family members. Scholar Yang (2005) refers to collectivism within ethnic Chinese families as "family collectivism," or a family-oriented approach, whose core elements are summarized as follows: a sense of unity among family members that promotes solidarity; mutual dependence to maintain family prosperity; and self-restraint and conformity to preserve family harmony (Yang & Yae, 2005).

Power distance refers to the extent to which individuals are aware of their position within the power structure and the degree to which less powerful members accept unequal distribution of power. In high-power-distance societies, the family-based notion is that children are expected to obey their parents, and parental authority continues to exert influence throughout a person's life. Parents do their utmost to provide care and affection when their children are young, and even after children reach adulthood and are capable of managing their own lives, they are still expected to be obedient and show respect toward their parents and other elders (Hofstede, 2010). Confucianism, through four of the Five Relationships (excluding friendship)—ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, and brother-brother—emphasizes hierarchical and sequential relationships in social interactions (Huang, 2005). In contrast, societies with low power distance encourage children to take charge of their own affairs and lives as early as possible. Once children grow up, they are treated as independent individuals who interact with

others on an equal footing, regardless of age or status, and do not formally express respect or obedience (Hofstede, 2011).

Masculine (competition)-oriented and feminine (care)-oriented refer to the gender roles and functions of men and women. These are distinguished based on the degree of diversity and consistency in a society's gender values: if men and women share a significant degree of humility and care-oriented values, the society is considered feminine, where both men and women are expected to be humble, gentle, and focused on quality of life; Conversely, if a society's gender values are clearly differentiated and place greater emphasis on masculine traits such as resilience, ambition, and achievement, it is a masculine society (Hofstede, 2010). In Hofstede's research, Sweden was the most feminine country among all those studied, a finding corroborated by the prevalence of cohabitation without marriage (Andersson et al., 2017), general shared house chores (Ruppanner et al., 2017) and low expectations on males being the predominant economic provider (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2022).

The Role of Phenomenology and the Sociological Imagination in Research on Marriage Migration

Phenomenology is regarded as the study of the appearance of things. That is, the way things present themselves in our experience, or the way we experience them. Its purpose is to reveal the meaning inherent in experiences as perceived from a subjective or first-person perspective (Smith, 2013). Phenomenology holds that experience as a whole. Even when analyzing specific aspects of an individual's experience, we can return to the phenomenon as a whole to discern its existential context and circumstances (Lin et al., 2022). The background of this study is the cultural differences and conflicts encountered by marriage immigrants from Sweden who have relocated to Taiwan. In research on cross-cultural marriage immigrants, by suspending our prior knowledge of a subject, we encounter the subject's experiential phenomena through a direct, essence-oriented perspective (Lee & Lai, 2009).

This research employs phenomenology as a method to restore the essence of experience and deepen our understanding of the interview data; We also draw upon Mills's concept of sociological imagination, using "experience" and "comparison" to identify the personal struggles faced by Swedish men when confronted with the Confucian ethical values cherished by the Taiwanese community, as well as which of the values they hold dear are threatened in their interactions with their in-laws in Taiwan, it is necessary to consider the deeper social conflicts built into how these family relationships work. (Mills, 1996). Sociological imagination enables researchers to shift perspectives within a given context, navigating the intersection of individual experience and broader society, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive assessment and interpretation (P, 2023). It is worth noting that this study emphasizes "differences in scripts" rather than "the superiority or inferiority of civilizations," with the aim of promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Context and Method: Setting the Scene

This study employs interviews to capture the subjective accounts of five Swedish male marriage immigrants regarding their interactions with their in-laws in Taiwan. All interviewees reside in Taiwan and have been married for one to three years. While the Nordic countries all share similar egalitarian views, the focus was limited to Sweden due to time constraints. Sweden was especially chosen because it has the largest number of married men from the five

Nordic countries in Taiwan; consequently, not only is the pool of potential interviewees broader, but these men also have the potential to make greater contributions to local society.

Our study was conducted using qualitative research interviews. With the participants' consent, we recorded the interviews and transcribed them. Qualitative research focuses particularly on individuals' interpretations of current social conditions; therefore, the interview method allows us to explore how interviewees feel about their experiences and how they interpret these phenomena (Wu, 2015). When conducting research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, IPA, the key to success lies in implementing the dynamic process of "double hermeneutics," meaning that researchers must attempt to understand how research participants themselves understand and construct the meaning of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interview results in this paper were analyzed using the interpretive phenomenological analysis steps detailed by Gauci (2019), which integrate the operational guidelines of Smith et al.: (1) carefully reading and repeatedly listening to the verbatim transcripts to immerse oneself in the participants' meanings and contexts; (2) recording the researcher's own understandings and thoughts to capture the development of the double hermeneutic; (3) independently identifying and extracting emerging themes for each participant; (4) conducting a second-order analysis to gather the researcher's inferences and reactions to the text; (5) adopting an idiographic approach, gradually expanding from the specific experiences of individual participants to general categories; and (6) developing overarching themes across all interview data. By repeatedly moving back and forth between the text and the data processing process within the "hermeneutic circle," and through continuous comprehension and suspicion, we can uncover the deeper meanings hidden beneath the literal meaning in the minute details (parts) of the text and the participants' first-person experiences. Finally, we return to the text as a whole and the specific lifeworld context of the participants (Gauci, 2019).

To ensure the quality and reliability of this study, we evaluated our research methodology based on the four core criteria for qualitative research proposed by Yardley (2000). Regarding "sensitivity to context," rather than simply matching theoretical frameworks, we comprehensively reviewed prior studies to deeply contextualize the cultural nuances between Taiwan and Sweden. We prioritized the participants' subjective voices and maintained strict ethical standards to safeguard their well-being throughout the interview process.

To fulfill "commitment and rigor," the research team dedicated extensive time to immerse themselves in cross-cultural issues. We systematically gathered comprehensive interview transcripts and applied a thorough analytical approach to capture both the overarching themes and the subtle details of the immigrants' lived experiences.

In terms of "transparency and coherence," we explicitly detailed our research design and findings, ensuring that our interpretative phenomenological methodology aligned seamlessly with our theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, we actively maintained reflective journals to practice reflexivity, critically examining how our own pre-existing cultural biases might impact the interpretative process.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates "impact and importance" by offering substantive theoretical and socio-cultural insights. By assisting readers in developing a more profound understanding of cross-cultural adaptation within a globalized era, this research aims to foster societal empathy and cultural inclusivity, translating academic findings into concrete, practical awareness.

Result and Discussion: Unpacking the Experiences of Taiwanese Integration

The Essence of Marriage and the Significance of Family Roles in the Eyes of Swedish Men

Interviewees brought egalitarian ideals to their marriages in Taiwan, shaping their perceptions of household equality. They view the central idea of marriage as built on mutual support and the realization of personal achievements, demonstrating the Swedish cultural emphasis on "equality" and "shared responsibility" within marriage. The foundation of the partnership is characterized by an absolute structure of equality, emphasizing mutual support and the joint raising of children. The core idea of the interviewees of equality was according to the 50-50 principle, that each partner should contribute to 50% of the household work. While the allocation of the kinds of household didn't necessarily deviate from gender stereotypes, allocations were based on mutual decisions interviewees described aligned to what each partner preferred and saw strength within. Interviewee 2 stated: "I think the division of the house work shares my Swedish values. I mean she's much better than me at cooking so it makes sense that she does most of it and I do other stuff."

The financial responsibilities were also grounded in what was fair rather than an obligation related to gender, adapting to both partners' income and current needs, as one interviewee stated:

> Because both of our so both have individual companies, right? So it depends. [...] sometimes maybe it will be me who pay most of [...] the expenses uh a month and maybe some months it will be her that will pay the majority of them. (interviewee 4)

Interviewee 2 shared "And also since my salary is higher, I pay for most of the stuff at least the bigger stuff like rent and uh if we want to buy something bigger." The 50/50 principle is again mentioned both by interviewee 3 stating that he would feel "bad" if he wasn't "at least approaching kind of 50/50", and interviewee 5 explaining:

> I take care of the bills and I usually take care of like daily eating outside and paying for groceries. [...] I mean of course, my wife does handle the finance of the house but in my way of thinking is that if we ever would sell the house then that's her money. So I think it's uh I think I would say it's still 50 50. (interviewee 5)

In short, all interviewees sought to implement their egalitarian ideals regarding financial and domestic labor within their Taiwanese households, and none reported encountering significant spousal friction or resistance. This was also the conclusion related to the larger family. The interviewees neither had experienced any encounters with traditional masculine expectations emphasizing achievement and responsibility when dealing with Taiwanese in-laws; Instead, for some interviewees, the in-laws in contrast demonstrated more feminine values as concern for happiness and well-being. "He didn't expect anything. He only said we need to support each other", explained interviewee 2, which interviewee 3 echoed, "I don't think they had many expectations except for the children part. [...] treat each other well and take care of each other. These are the things they have said to us."

From Independency to Interdependency

One area the interviewees frequently shared experiences of frustration within was the dynamic relationships of the large Taiwanese families. The collectivistic nature of the Taiwanese family, how it operates and the hierarchy of it, clashed with the interviewees' perception of how a family "should" work. The family contrast was described by one of the interviewees:

> In Sweden, parents don't interfere in their children's daily lives. [...] You can decide for yourself what to tell them and what to share. [...] But in Taiwan, the whole family is like a single entity—everyone shares everything, even personal matters. And when it comes to money, people just casually give gifts to family members, [...] Everyone has this 'we're family' mindset; there are no secrets—we're like one. (interviewee 1)

This distinct "we're family" mindset translates into daily interactions that the Swedish interviewees often perceived as overprotectiveness and coercive giving, which fundamentally challenged their egalitarian values. In their daily experiences, acts traditionally coded as "care" or "goodwill" in Taiwanese culture were often felt as boundary violations. For instance, Interviewee 5 recalled an incident at a furniture store: "I was going to pay for my food, and my wife's mom did not accept that. So she pushed through and put her credit card on the machine which for me is... seen as very disrespectful in Sweden." Rather than feeling supported, the interviewees felt stripped of their status as equal, independent adults. Interviewee 1 shared a similar frustration when temporarily living with in-laws, noting that the parents were "refusing us to even like help with like cleaning chopsticks." Through the lens of the independent self, being placed at the receiving end of this unidirectional care forced them into a passive role of dependency.

Consequently, navigating this intense collectivistic environment becomes exhausting, often likened to "a strategy game of trying to make the correct move at the correct time" (interviewee 5). This constant flow of unsolicited generosity generates a profound sense of social debt. From a Swedish cultural perspective, which emphasizes self-reliance and the give-and-take mentality, this dynamic is highly uncomfortable. The interviewees 3 revealed an internal conflict: "sometimes, like subconsciously, but sometimes also actively, do not want to... accept all the generosity or the friendliness because I'm worried that getting so close will give them leverage to make these demands" (interviewee 3).

The climax of this struggle between the independent self and the family power structure manifests when this perceived leverage infringes upon highly private, non-negotiable life decisions, such as childbearing. Rooted in traditional notions of filial piety, the Taiwanese family structure normalizes elders' natural control and expectations over the younger generation's major life events. When faced with familial expectations regarding having children, interviewee 3 felt deeply violated, describing it as an "authoritarian or invasive way of parenting." He further explained that it felt like "taking for granted that they could simply dictate such a massive part of our lives." Moving from an independent upbringing to a community-focused system often means their personal boundaries are repeatedly violated in the name of tradition.

Ultimately, immersed in a system where living spaces, finances, and time are intensely shared the interviewees found themselves continuously forced to adapt their lifestyles. They struggle to "shake the feeling of someone kind of being over your shoulder and having expectations" (interviewee 3). This ongoing cultural tension powerfully illustrates how structural "care" in a

collectivistic society can transform into an oppressive force, leading to a profound struggle for the independent self-striving to maintain its boundaries within a deeply entrenched power structure.

Strategy and Process of Adapt

Although they exhibited different behavioral patterns, the five Swedish marriage immigrants demonstrated a high degree of consistency in their passiveness when facing cultural conflicts with their in-laws in Taiwan. Their approaches to conflict resolution often involved "letting them have their way" or "shutting down" (interviewee 5), essentially adopting a hands-off attitude. By "swallowing" their dissatisfaction or conforming to the in-laws' wishes, they aimed to avoid escalating tensions. When asked how they dealt with cultural conflicts, interviewee 1 mentioned: "I would respect them and I would play by their rules."

This act of resisting the expression of genuine feelings and putting on a mask to maintain harmony within the in-laws' family system accurately reflects the "surface acting" strategy in emotional labor as described in Hochschild's theory (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

> It was, like, playing a role or putting on a character a bit. Like, how I talk, behave, act, everything, because there's just a sense of you have to listen, what is expected from you, and then you have to kind of like respond to that. (interviewee 3)

Such behavioral responses actually trace back to the unique characteristics of Swedish culture: although Sweden is often viewed as a highly individualistic country, as noted by Tian & Guang (2017), Swedish society also retains collectivist traits that emphasize maintaining group harmony and avoiding conflict. Consequently, in social interactions, when they are concerned that their direct expressions might offend their in-laws, they tend to consciously suspend the Swedish cultural trait of expressing opinions: "In Sweden we love to share opinions uh so I try to just silence them a bit and just go along with them" (interviewee 3).

Discussing with their wives and have them help convey or establish boundaries in a harmonious manner that fits within the cultural context of Taiwan. In cross-cultural adaptation, this post-event communication is not only an outlet for emotions but also a process of trying to understand the underlying reasons behind cultural differences in Taiwan. By understanding the cultural context (such as understanding the well-intentioned motives behind Taiwanese parents' overprotectiveness), they can truly accept it internally and generate corresponding emotions, thereby transforming from "surface acting" to "deep acting" (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

> The kind of newest addition to how I act[...] It's just the newest part, instead of being, like, a theatre mask that I put on, now it's just another piece of clothing, maybe, that I put on. So it feels more normal. (interviewee 3)

> I would say adjusting and also yeah adjust my self and changing a bit my behavior maybe like you know like ing and trying to just relax and enjoy the ride. (interviewee 5)

The key to helping marriage immigrants adapt lies in placing individual behaviors within a broader ethnic cultural context and developing multiethnic perspective. When they realize that the habits of their in-laws actually stem from their social orientation toward "harmony" and "authority", such as they are asked to respect elders and the expectation of compulsory giving

them food, they can lower their personal defenses and maintain an open attitude toward different values (McGoldrick & Preto, 2005). This adaptation process does not involve completely abandoning one's personal values, but rather developing a cross-cultural competence and self-identity that blends "soft on the outside, strong on the inside."

> It maybe completes me more, like, expanded my personality or like my cultural repertoire, [...]you kind of, inventing a new personality, or, like, in how you communicate, and now it has become a more complemental part of my original person. (interviewee 3)

Conclusion

This research shows that when Nordic egalitarianism meets Confucianism, the greatest friction does not come from negotiating masculinity or breadwinner roles, but from navigating family hierarchy and collectivist care. The findings indicate that when confronting structural conflicts, specifically, the encroachment on individual boundaries by Chinese "family collectivism" and the structural dominance of elders over younger members under "high power distance", Scandinavian men exhibit a dynamic adaptation strategy. This strategy progresses from "self-suspension" and "delegating boundary agency" to their spouses, to ultimately developing a "multiethnic perspective", characterized by an "outer-soft, inner-firm" approach. On one hand, they strive to maintain harmony within the family sphere by enacting the role of compliant, amiable sons-in-law. On the other hand, they tend to redefine the connotations of family roles and masculinity. By striking a balance between the achievement-oriented, economic provider expectations of traditional masculine societies and the shared responsibilities of a supportive partnership, they actively demonstrate the egalitarian values of feminine cultures that prioritize quality of life and emotional support.

This study contributes to the growing literature on marriage migration by describing and analyzing the interaction dynamics and negotiation strategies of Swedish men within their Taiwanese in-laws' families, thereby demonstrating cross-cultural competence. There are some limitations to our study. First, the presented findings may not fully represent all Swedish marriage immigrants in Taiwan. Future research could not only compare whether the negotiation and adaptation strategies of long-term Swedish marriage immigrants in Taiwan undergo deeper changes and differences, but also explore those who have interacted with their in-laws but failed to adapt and could not reside in Taiwan long-term. Additionally, studies could investigate cases where the failure to adapt led to severe conflicts, ultimately making them unable to maintain their marital relationships. Although we have presented some findings that differ from previous perspectives, our study is limited to exploring the cultures and adaptation strategies of two specific countries. Therefore, in the face of a globalized and multiethnic social context, it is crucial to conduct more diverse research on the encounters between different cultures.

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

The author declares that, while reviewing and refining the language of this manuscript, they utilized the AI-assisted writing software DeepL, Gemini and NotebookLM. Their use was limited to:

1. Preliminary translation of certain paragraphs to ensure precise wording and structure, as well as the translation of foreign-language literature.
2. Verifying data sources and conducting similarity checks in compliance with academic ethics standards.
3. Translating and transcribing the preliminary interview data in order to allocate more time towards the analysis.

The author further declares that, apart from DeepL, Gemini and NotebookLM, no other artificial intelligence or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate content while writing this manuscript. The concepts, research design, experimental procedures, research results, analysis, and discussion in this manuscript are original and derived from careful and systematic research execution.

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Reintroducing Taiwanese Literature in Museums: Museum Atmospherics for Enhancing Visitor Learning and Engagement

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Abstract

Taiwanese literature embodies rich historical, linguistic, and social memory, yet its marginalization in education and public culture has limited public understanding and engagement. Literary museums therefore serve as vital platforms; the third-phase permanent exhibition of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature (2020–2030) attracts 330,000–690,000 visitors annually, demonstrating its potential for cultural promotion. However, research on audience perception remains limited. Given that atmospherics shape perception and meaning by guiding experience, this study uses the exhibition as a case study to examine the strengths and limitations of its atmospheric design and to propose recommendations for the fourth-phase permanent exhibition to enhance public interest and understanding. Data include curator interviews, alongside structured observation and semi-structured interviews with 15 "literary youth" target audiences aged 18–44, a culturally interested non-academic group, analyzed through thematic analysis to explore how four atmospheric cues—spatial design, learning experience, lighting, and staff interaction—shape experience. Results show that in spatial design, bright colors and background sound help deformalize literature, yet repeated blue and yellow tones blur narrative shifts; greater variation in materials, colors, and sound across periods is needed. In learning experience, personality-revealing objects enhance interest. Personally designed games should be streamlined and visually enhanced to prevent being overlooked; while games with unpredictable outcomes are already popular. Although short texts suit fragmented reading, excessive content causes fatigue; QR codes can reduce overload. Lighting builds emotional tension but is often unnoticed; varying tone and intensity can strengthen narrative-emotional connections. As visitors prefer self-guided exploration, staff should shift toward experiential facilitation.

Keywords: museum atmospherics, literary exhibition, visitor experience

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Introduction

Scholars have emphasized the close relationship between language, literature, and culture, viewing literature as a medium that conveys cultural meanings and emotional experiences. It functions as a form of cultural encoding, embedding social values, historical contexts, and affective dimensions within texts, evoking emotional responses through its narrative and stylistic elements (Shanahan, 1997). Beyond individual reading experiences, literature also transmits memory across communities and generations (Rigney, 2004): unlike fixed physical monuments, texts circulate across regions and time periods, enabling broader cultural transmission, while poetic and narrative forms shape which memories are preserved or forgotten (Rigney, 2004).

Together, these perspectives position literature not merely as a vehicle for meaning, but as an active force in shaping cultural understanding across time and space. How such potential is realized, however, depends significantly on how literature is transmitted—through education, institutions, and public culture.

Museums and Public Engagement With Taiwanese Literature

Taiwanese literature embodies this potential richly, reflecting the island's diverse cultural memories, historical narratives, and literary techniques. While postmodernism and postcolonialism arrived alongside Western developments, their local expressions differ: postmodern works often blend transnational and popular culture and commodification, whereas postcolonial literature explores diverse identities—including women, LGBTQ+ communities, Indigenous peoples, and military dependents' villages—through historical memory, urban experience, and science fiction (Liu, 2006). Despite this richness, Taiwanese literature often lacks a concrete image for the general public, sometimes perceived as “rustic, emotional, and politically tinged” (Lin, 2023).

This unfamiliarity is partly rooted in educational history: after 1945, high school curricula primarily emphasized Chinese literary works, largely excluding Taiwanese literature, and it was not until the 1970s that Taiwanese texts began to appear in textbooks (Chen, 2020). Although later reforms expanded content diversity, Chinese authors still account for about 63% of readings compared to 33% related to Taiwanese contexts (Li, 2023), leaving Taiwanese literature in a relatively peripheral position.

Against this backdrop, museums have emerged as important sites for public engagement with Taiwanese literature. Korff (1999) characterises museums as sites where visitors encounter unfamiliar objects and cultures, bridging experiences across temporal, cultural, and social contexts, and providing learning that extends beyond factual knowledge to include emotional and aesthetic experiences (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Exhibitions serve as the primary medium for conveying knowledge and meaning. Kember et al. (2010) note that they offer alternative perspectives, manifest through historical practices, and bring audiences into direct contact with cultural narratives. Established in 2003 (Lin, 2004), the Taiwan Literary Museum archives literary works from various historical periods (Zhang, 2010) and has continuously organized exhibitions. Its third permanent exhibition, *Literary Power* (2020), reflects a shift toward making literary themes accessible to diverse audiences, strengthening the link between heritage and public cultural experience (Chien, 2023).

Research Gap in Audience Studies of the Exhibition

Given the shift in curatorial strategy, it is important to assess how effectively these exhibitions engage audiences. While annual visitor statistics cannot isolate attendance for a specific permanent exhibition, they offer a useful reference for gauging the communication of Taiwanese literature to the public. Visitor numbers for the *Power of Literature* exhibition increased steadily between 2020 and 2024, indicating growing public interest. Growth was relatively gradual between 2020 and 2022 due to COVID-19 restrictions; however, attendance increased more rapidly as restrictions eased, reaching approximately 330,000 visitors in 2022, 410,000 in 2023, and 690,000 in 2024.

Despite these strong figures, research on audience experiences remains limited. Most existing studies focus on curatorial concepts and exhibition design (Chien, 2023; Qi & Wu, 2020; Su, 2020; Wu, 2020; Zhu, 2020), with only one study addressing visitor responses—and it examines a temporary, rather than permanent, exhibition (Gao & Zhao, 2024). This gap underscores the need to better understand how visitors experience permanent exhibitions, which is the focus of the present study.

Museum Atmospheres and Museum Visitor Experience

To address this gap, this study adopts an atmospheric perspective to examine visitors' exhibition experiences. Previous research suggests that atmosphere underpins museum experience, emerging from the relational space between objects and subjects (Bjerregaard, 2015), and functions as a mediating force that bridges spatial distance (Dorrian, 2014). Studies in the commercial sector further show that atmospheric elements—such as color, lighting, and signage—can significantly influence visitors' behavioural intentions, including revisitation and recommendation (Bonn et al., 2007).

Building on this perspective, atmosphere has become an important framework in museum visitor research (A. N. Kartal & H. B. Kartal, 2026). With the development of digital technologies, it has also been applied to virtual museum contexts to examine cognitive and emotional responses (Loureiro & Rato, 2024). In this study, four key atmospheric factors are identified: design, learning, lighting, and staff (Loureiro, 2019).

In light of this perspective, this study adopts an atmospheric approach to examine visitors' perceptions of the third-phase permanent exhibition, *The Power of Literature*. By analyzing its strengths and limitations in terms of atmospheric qualities, the study aims to provide insights that may inform the design of the fourth-phase permanent exhibition and contribute to enhancing overall visitor experience. To this end, the following research questions are proposed:

Q1. From the four elements of museum atmosphere—design, learning, lighting, and staff—how are the exhibition design and planning of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature's *Literary Power* exhibition reflected in each element?

Q2. Considering the four components of museum atmosphere—design, learning, lighting, and staff—how do visitors experience each element during the exhibition?

Q3. From the visitors' perspective, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the four elements of museum atmosphere mentioned above, and how could they be optimized or improved in the future fourth permanent exhibition?

Museum Atmospheres

According to Loureiro (2019), museum atmospheres can be categorized into four main atmospheric cues: design, lighting, learning, and staff. The detailed definitions and explanations of these elements are as follows.

Element 1: Design

Museum atmosphere is shaped by visual and spatial elements—such as colors, displays, décor (Loureiro, 2019), and spatial qualities like orientation and visitor flow (Baker, 1987)—which influence visitor responses (Bonn et al., 2007).

Element 2: Lighting

The adequacy and appropriateness of illumination throughout the exhibition, influencing visibility, mood, and focus (Loureiro, 2019).

Element 3: Learning

Learning reflects visitors' cognitive and emotional engagement, encompassing interest, novelty, enjoyment, and knowledge acquisition during the exhibition experience. Among the four atmospheric cues, it has been identified as the most influential factor, carrying the highest weight and playing a dominant role in shaping visitors' overall perceptions of the museum experience (Loureiro, 2019).

Element 4: Staff

Museum personnel—through their appearance, friendliness, empathy, and professional knowledge (Loureiro, 2019—can strongly influence visitors' comfort, satisfaction, and overall experience (Huang & Hsu, 2009). Visitor expectations vary: children and older adults often need more support, while parents prefer staff who are calm, attentive, and ready to assist without being intrusive. Clear, friendly uniforms can also enhance trust and safety (Brown et al., 2019). Conversely, rigid enforcement of rules may disrupt engagement and diminish the visitor experience (Henry, 2000).

Methods and Procedure

This study adopts a multi-phase qualitative research design combining semi-structured interviews, on-site observation, and document analysis to examine how the four elements of museum atmosphere—design, learning, lighting, and staff—were conceptualized and experienced in *The Power of Literature* exhibition at the National Museum of Taiwan Literature (NMTL).

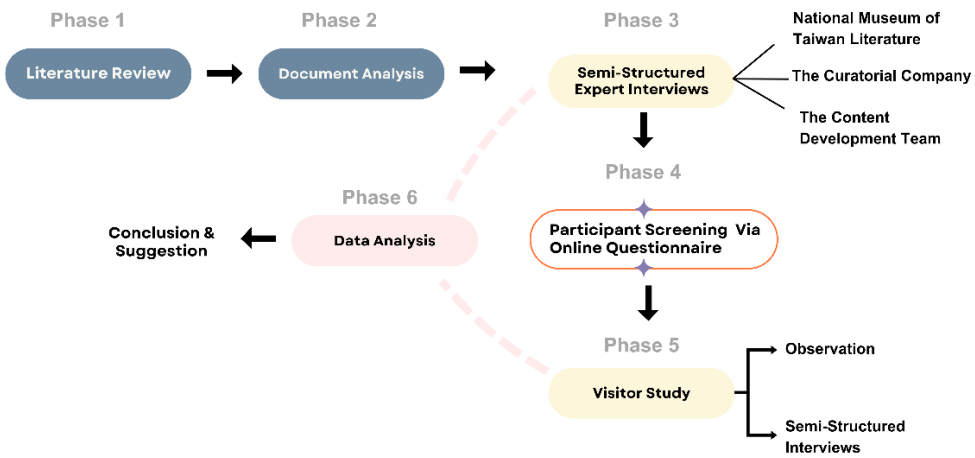
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including Mr. Jian from the NMTL curatorial team, Ms. Chen from the exhibition contractor *Art Happening Company*, and writer Chu Yu-hsun, who collaborated on content development. These interviews explored the curatorial decision-making processes, design rationales, and intended visitor experiences associated with each atmospheric dimension.

Parallel to this, visitor experiences were investigated through observation and interviews with recruited participants, focusing on their interaction with exhibition spaces and their perceptual responses to the same four dimensions. The primary visitor group consisted of "wenqing" (Close equivalent terms in English include "hipster" and "young literati"), identified by the curatorial team as a key target audience encompassing individuals with sustained interest in literature and the arts, non-mainstream cultural preferences, and integrated aesthetic sensibilities in daily life (Deng, 2015; Xu, 2018). Drawing on Yang's (2019) definition of young literati in the Taiwanese context, this study adopts an age range of 19 to 44. Positioned between the general public and academic specialists, this group acts as an interpretive bridge, extending literary narratives to wider audiences.

From thirty online questionnaires, fifteen visitors whose characteristics most closely aligned with this profile were selected for in-depth interviews. To ensure transparency, participants are referred to by pseudonyms V1 through V15, assigned in interview order. As illustrated in Figure 2, they are also broadly distributed along a spectrum of literary engagement: those positioned toward the inner range demonstrate deeper personal investment in literature, while those toward the outer range show stronger affinity with cultural activities—such as lectures, exhibitions, and arts festivals—but relatively lighter engagement with literature itself.

All qualitative data were coded and comparatively analyzed to identify consistencies and differences between curatorial intentions and visitor perceptions. Findings are structured around the four thematic components of museum atmosphere—design, learning, lighting, and staff—each discussed in relation to (1) curatorial strategies, (2) visitor experience and interpretation, and (3) recommendations for the National Museum of Taiwan Literature's upcoming fourth permanent exhibition (scheduled for 2030 onward).

Figure 1
Research Method



Source: The researcher

Figure 2
Distribution of Visitor Types

Source: The researcher

Result

Design: Curatorial Strategies and Visitor Perception

Color: Symbolism and Emotional Tone

Color plays a crucial role in shaping both the atmosphere and meaning of exhibition spaces, influencing thematic expression and emotional response. Highly saturated hues tend to evoke excitement and visual complexity, while less saturated tones are generally perceived as more calming (Mahnke & Mahnke, 1987). Beyond these psychological effects, color also carries symbolic meanings that vary across cultural contexts, as Van Leeuwen (2011) notes, color could operate as a socially coded semiotic resource.

Drawing on these principles, the curatorial team regarded color as a narrative device. Ms. Chen explained that "blue is used in the first zone to convey the early stage of Taiwanese literary history, drawing on the imagery of the sea as a symbol of origin," while brightness gradually increases toward yellow, "a color symbolizing hope." This palette was designed to express both historical progression and emotional transition—from beginnings shaped by constraint to the eventual sense of openness and optimism (Figure 3 & 4).

Figure 3
Blue

Source: Art Happening Company

Figure 4
Yellow

Source: Art Happening Company

Visitor responses confirmed the emotional success of this approach, though they also revealed a gap in symbolic recognition. Participants consistently described the palette as bright, vibrant, and comfortable. One noted that the use of yellow and blue—highly contrasting colors—gave the space a lively quality (V8), while another observed that the brightness of both text and visuals made them easy to notice and engaging to look at (V10). The sense of clarity was equally appreciated: respondents found the predominantly white background, accented with yellow and blue, simple yet visually inviting (V11). As one participant put it, the colors felt balanced—varied enough to be interesting, but not overwhelming—with the contrast between white, blue, and yellow reading as comfortable rather than busy (V13).

Despite this positive reception, none of the respondents recognized the curatorial intent behind the palette: a gradual brightening designed to symbolize temporal change. Most interpreted the colors simply as zone markers. This suggests that while the color scheme succeeded in creating visual comfort and approachability, its narrative dimension remained below the threshold of conscious perception.

Such divergence suggests that color alone cannot fully communicate complex historical transitions. Integrating other sensory cues—such as changes in texture, sound, or light temperature—could make the temporal progression more legible, contributing to more memorable experiences (Gamal et al., 2023). As Pallasmaa (2005) suggests, vision carries a tactile dimension—surfaces and textures are perceptually "felt" even at a distance, shaping

one's sense of comfort or unease. Applying some strategies could help reinforce the link between chromatic change and historical narrative in future exhibitions.

Spatial Rhythm: Metaphor and Interpretation

In spatial design, the curatorial team sought to translate Taiwan's literary rhythms into architectural form. As Mr. Jian described, the exhibition panels were intentionally non-planar—layered like sedimentary rock—and the visitor path was made slightly irregular, deliberately departing from a conventional two-row layout. Wide, open passages were meant to evoke periods of cultural openness, with the expansive space of the Japanese colonial era gesturing toward the broadening intellectual outlook of that time. Conversely, narrowed corridors were designed to embody the sense of constriction felt during the martial law period.

Visitor perception, however, tended toward spatial comfort rather than metaphorical reading. No participant identified the variations in width or ceiling height as representations of historical rhythm; instead, these physical shifts were interpreted largely as functional or aesthetic choices. This disjunction points to the limits of purely spatial symbolism when interpretive cues are absent. Subtle interventions—decoration, shifts in lighting, changes in texture or ambient sound—could render the metaphor more legible without sacrificing the poetic quality of the space. Sound, in particular, carries atmospheric potential: as Locker (2010) notes, auditory cues alone can evoke spatial moods as distinct as the oppressive chill of an enclosed dungeon and the open ambience of a seaside environment, suggesting that carefully chosen soundscapes could meaningfully reinforce the exhibition's historical narrative.

Multimedia and the Feeling of Familiarity

A key design strategy was to situate literature within everyday life through four media walls combining images, sound, and text. As Ms. Chen noted, “we start from things close to daily life—shop signs, newspapers, and songs—to remind visitors that literature is already around them.” This approach aimed to replace distant textual authority with intimacy and recognition.

Visitors responded strongly to this strategy. The large multimedia wall at the entrance was repeatedly described as “memorable,” “nostalgic,” and “inviting.” One interviewee recalled childhood advertisements and background music from the space, noting that the familiar sounds “made me stay longer” (V10)—suggesting that emotionally resonant content not only attracts attention but extends engagement. This effect was particularly evident in intergenerational connections: one participant noted that the screen featured old Taiwanese songs with audio, songs their parents had listened to and that they themselves had grown up hearing (V11), illustrating how shared musical memory can bridge generational experience within a single visit. Several participants also remarked that playful textual elements—such as local slang and colloquial phrases—broadened their understanding of what literature could be, helping to “break the assumption that literature must be highbrow” (V1) (Figure 5).

Figure 5
The Opening

Source: Art Happening Company

These responses demonstrate a close alignment between curatorial intention and visitor experience. Multimedia not only attracted attention but also eased cognitive entry into literary themes by grounding them in shared cultural memory. Through this translation of literature into the language of everyday media, the exhibition successfully lowered interpretive barriers and expanded its reach beyond habitual readers.

Synthesis

Comparing curatorial strategies with audience experience reveals a consistent pattern: formal design elements—color, spatial rhythm, and multimedia—were all effective in creating comfort, accessibility, and affective engagement. Yet the more abstract symbolic intentions (e.g., color gradation as historical metaphor or circulation as narrative rhythm) remained largely unnoticed without interpretive support. The findings suggest that while visitors value atmosphere and emotional coherence, curatorial meaning requires reinforcement through multimodal cues—light, texture, sound, or brief contextual texts—to transform perceptual comfort into narrative understanding.

Lighting: Curatorial Intentions and Visitor Perception

Brightness and Accessibility

From the curatorial perspective, brightness formed the foundation of the exhibition's design philosophy—one rooted not in curatorial preference alone, but in the building's original architectural intent. As Mr. Jian explained, this was a guiding principle established by the architectural team from the outset:

> the historic building itself is inherently beautiful—not only in its lines and brickwork, but also in the way sunlight enters the space. This became a matter of setting the overall tone, shaping not only the exhibition content and intended effects, but also the architectural aesthetics.

In practice, the team adopted an open lighting strategy with minimal shading, allowing natural light to enhance the visibility of the architecture and inform display decisions throughout.

This exhibition's achieves full illumination by using reproductions rather than originals—freeing the space from conservation constraints while enabling visitors to move comfortably and read textual material with ease. As Mr. Jian noted, this brightness was further reinforced through "highly saturated colors (e.g., yellow, blue, and green), resulting in a combined effect of light, architecture, and visual design." The curatorial team thus understood brightness not simply as an ambient condition, but as a symbol of openness and accessibility—and as the medium through which architectural heritage and exhibition narrative become one.

Visitor responses closely aligned with this intent. Participants consistently described the exhibition as bright, comfortable, and easy to navigate, with responses including "clear and comfortable" (V1, V6, V11), "warm and approachable" (V2), and "soft and warm-toned" (V9). One visitor elaborated that "the light feels warm and clear—it makes the displays friendly rather than distant" (V2), suggesting that the curatorial goal of balancing visibility and approachability was effectively achieved.

Nevertheless, the consistent illumination also yielded a visually uniform environment. Without sufficient contrast or localized focus, the lighting lacked expressive variation, which limited visitors' sense of spatial rhythm. While functionality was ensured, the aesthetic potential of lighting as an interpretive tool remained underutilized.

Variation and Immersion

The curators acknowledged that lighting adjustments across zones were minimal. As Mr. Jian noted, "there was no special lighting for each section; only projection areas were darker to suit the screens." The plan prioritized even illumination for cohesion rather than narrative differentiation.

Visitors consistently identified one notable exception—the dark corridor lined with illuminated screens (Figure 6). Described as "distinctive and immersive," it stood out as a deliberate contrast to the otherwise evenly lit space: "a transition, like lights coming on after a film" (V1), with others noting its sense of depth and visual intensity (V2, V8). One participant called it the most memorable section of the exhibition, observing that "the darker lighting and visual atmosphere created a very strong and effective ambiance" (V9, V14, V15). This interplay of darkness and light intensified focus and produced the exhibition's most viscerally engaging moment—an observation further supported by behavioral data: all 15 visitors paused for an extended period in this section, and three were observed taking photographs. This reaction underlines the spatial and emotional power of lighting contrast. As Gobbato (2021) observes, selective illumination in darker environments heightens attention, stimulates imagination, and transforms exhibition rhythm.

Figure 6
The Dark Corridor

Source: Art Happening Company

Several visitors expressed a desire for greater lighting variation across the exhibition. V3 noted that the current reliance on warm lighting, while effective in preserving the historic ambiance, may limit expressive possibilities; V6 & V15 similarly anticipated feeling a sense of change between historical periods as they moved through the space. These responses align with established curatorial thinking: Dernie (2006) argues that artificial lighting can redefine spatial boundaries akin to film, while Gobbato (2021) similarly contends that lighting guides the visitor's gaze and communicates meaning as part of the exhibition's narrative.

Building on these principles, subtle variation in brightness, tone, and color temperature could be introduced to visualize the exhibition's historical progression—from repression to openness—while sustaining emotional engagement across zones. Lighting, in this sense, functions as both an atmospheric and narrative instrument, transforming practical illumination into a central dimension of curatorial storytelling.

Learning: Curatorial Strategies and Visitor Experience

Interactivity and Participation

The curatorial team envisioned literature as a multisensory and participatory experience. As Mr. Jian explained, activities such as typing or pressing buttons allow visitors to generate personalized content, “transforming them from passive recipients into active participants”—in contrast to the one-way communication of watching or listening alone. Interactive installations such as Poetry in Play and Poetry Fortune were designed with this principle in mind.

Visitor responses confirmed the approach's effectiveness. Most participants, totaling 13, were drawn to interactive zones and reported longer dwell times: “fun and motivating—interactive exhibits make me want to understand more” (V2, V5). The element of comparison proved particularly engaging: V8 noted that seeing their own writing alongside the original author's “made me feel quite involved,” while V1 highlighted its accessibility—”for people who are not familiar with literature, it feels very fun.” Even visitors with little prior interest in literature found interactivity a welcoming entry point: V9 noted that while literature was not a personal interest, interactive sections would still draw them in if visiting with friends—suggesting that interactivity plays a meaningful role in lowering participation barriers and broadening audiences. Overall, the interactive displays succeeded in shifting visitors from passive

recipients to active learners, echoing Hein's (1998) concept of discovery-based learning, where hands-on and minds-on engagement fosters more meaningful knowledge construction.

However, engagement was concentrated in Poetry Fortune and Poetry in Play, while other installations saw limited use—likely due to low appeal. As one participant observed, some interactive designs felt "a bit too old-fashioned" to attract younger audiences (V3 & V15). Future exhibits should reduce redundant interactive games and replace them with more contemporary modalities, such as gesture-based controls and refreshed visual design, to broaden cross-generational appeal.

Clipboard Displays: Aesthetic Appeal and Reading Challenge

The clipboard installation was conceived as a bridge between literary depth and contemporary reading behavior. As Ms. Chen explained, short excerpts were designed to spark curiosity "similar to how modern readers share notable sentences on social media, which may lead them to check the book, borrow it from the library, or revisit the exhibition panels." Writer Chu described the selection principle as "first based on aesthetic quality, then on historical significance," aiming to present excerpts that were both beautiful and meaningful. The semi-transparent surfaces and luminous display were further designed to elevate text into an aesthetic object in its own right.

Visitors responded strongly to this aesthetic dimension. Several were immediately drawn to the installation's visual quality: "I think it's very beautiful and has a strong sense of quality—I was immediately drawn to it, and it also feels very suitable for taking photos or sharing online" (V5). Others noted its departure from conventional text formats: "It transforms text into light and form, which is very appealing" (V7), while one participant admitted, "Its appearance is quite beautiful—because it looks aesthetically pleasing, I would want to take a look, though not necessarily to read the text" (V8). Together, these responses suggest that the material and lighting effectively extended the medium of textual display, fostering initial attention, aesthetic engagement, and willingness to photograph or share (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Clip Holder

Source: Art Happening Company

However, observation revealed a gap between visual attraction and content engagement. Although 12 out of 15 visitors stopped at the clipboards, 8 of those 12 did not clearly understand their purpose. With approximately 18 clipboard stations each displaying 2–3 excerpts, the zone contained over 50 passages in total—a volume that appeared to compound visual fatigue.

Feedback consistently pointed to text volume as a barrier: “At first glance, it's just a lot of text—I didn't read every single one” (V7); “There's so much text—who could finish reading it?” (V3). Content relevance and the literary aesthetic of the texts also emerged as a concern: “It looks kind of boring, all modern poetry” (V9); “I'm not sure why this passage was selected” (V1, V14, V15); and “If you're not very familiar with the authors, you wouldn't read it carefully unless a particular line catches your attention” (V8).

This tension reflects a common challenge in literary exhibitions—balancing beauty with readability. While the clipboards effectively visualized textual culture, the sheer volume of material and the absence of interpretive framing limited their function as learning tools. Reducing the number of passages, selecting two or three concise sentences per station, applying more rigorous criteria for literary and aesthetic merit in text selection, and adding brief contextual notes or QR references could strengthen comprehension while preserving visual impact.

Objects as Connectors: Imagination and Resonance

Personal artifacts of writers were curated as tangible mediators linking literary ideas with everyday life. The curatorial team explained that “we use these objects to tell stories; they are more vivid and relatable.” Items such as Liu Na’ou’s mahjong set, Lin Hai-yin’s elephant figurines, and a writer’s wedding dress were selected to reveal individuality beyond textual identity.

Visitors responded strongly to this strategy, emphasizing how material presence stimulated imagination and emotional connection. Personal objects proved particularly effective at humanizing literary figures: one participant noted that seeing Lin Hai-yin's wedding and tennis dress made her feel she could “imagine her life” and understand her better (V8), while another found that her figurines evoked a sense of ordinariness, “seeing Lin Hai-yin’s elephant figurines reminds me that my uncle also likes collecting elephants, it makes writers feel like ordinary people” (V6) (Figure 9). Distinctive and appealing resonant objects drew similar responses: V13 remarked that encountering a qipao and mahjong set felt striking enough to “stop and read the descriptions.” Such comments illustrate how everyday objects personalize literary figures and reduce the perceived distance between artist and audience.

Figure 8
Lin Hai-Yin’s Elephant Figurines

Source: Liu, T.

For some, the objects opened broader historical insight: V10 observed that Lin Hai-yin's elephant collection illuminated the relatively open and diverse status of women at the time, reflecting Western cultural influences and more progressive thinking on gender equality. Everyday artifacts also bridged temporal distance: V5 remarked that San Mao's license plate sparked an imagining of her daily life, “forming a connection with the writer even though I've never met her.” Across these responses, material culture consistently functioned as a point of entry—transforming biographical detail into personal resonance.

At the same time, these responses were most prominent among visitors already familiar with Taiwanese literature. Those with limited prior knowledge seldom mentioned the collections, suggesting that personal artifacts are powerful for deepening engagement but less effective as entry points for unfamiliar audiences.

Staff: Non-intrusive Guidance and Independent Exploration

The curatorial strategy emphasized a non-intrusive mode of visitor support in which floor volunteers act primarily as quiet observers rather than active guides. As Mr. Jian explained, “Under normal circumstances, visitors explore and interact on their own, while I simply watch to ensure nothing is damaged, without stepping in unless necessary.” Volunteers were seated on unobtrusive black chairs positioned to cover the widest possible area, ensuring supervision without drawing attention. This arrangement aimed to preserve both order and autonomy, allowing visitors to navigate freely through the exhibition.

Visitor feedback confirmed that this passive presence aligned well with their preferred style of engagement. Most participants described the atmosphere as relaxed and pressure-free, appreciating that staff remained available but unobtrusive. One visitor noted, “When people needed help with an interactive display, a staff member came over gently and assisted me, but otherwise they didn’t interrupt my experience” (V8, V9). Another remarked that this quiet support “let me stay immersed and explore at my own pace” (V4).

This congruence between curatorial design and visitor expectation underscores the suitability of low-intensity social interaction within contemporary exhibitions. In this exhibition, the volunteers’ silent guardianship functioned as a subtle framework that maintained both spatial care and emotional comfort. Their restrained assistance model exemplifies an effective balance between safeguarding the exhibits and fostering a reflective, self-directed visitor experience.

Conclusion

The Power of Literature demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of atmosphere-driven exhibition design. Across the four dimensions of design, lighting, learning, and staff, the exhibition largely succeeded in creating a welcoming, accessible, and emotionally engaging environment. Color, materiality, and interactive elements fostered comfort and personal resonance, while the non-intrusive staff model supported autonomous exploration.

However, a recurring gap emerged between curatorial intent and visitor perception: spatial metaphors, chromatic symbolism, and lighting narratives were rarely decoded without explicit interpretive cues. These findings suggest that poetic design strategies, while affectively effective, benefit from supplementary framing to communicate their deeper meaning.

Visitor responses also point toward an underexplored opportunity. Despite the exhibition's limited use of artistic media—currently comprising a single metal sculpture depicting literary gatherings and writers' food culture—13 out of 15 participants expressed clear interest in cross-media interpretations of literary themes, such as oil paintings and photography, with V9 and V12 noting that visual representations make literary content more memorable, and V11,13, 15 adding that such formats spark curiosity and encourage visitors to read the accompanying interpretive texts. Incorporating such works into future exhibitions would diversify the visual language and offer multiple entry points for visitors with varying degrees of literary familiarity.

As the National Museum of Taiwan Literature prepares its fourth permanent exhibition, integrating multisensory layering, cross-media artworks, and contextual signage could strengthen the bridge between literary heritage and public experience—ensuring that atmosphere functions not only as aesthetic backdrop, but as a legible narrative in its own right.

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

During the writing of this study, the researcher made use of Claude and ChatGPT to assist with content organization, the refinement of academic expression, and the improvement of overall textual readability. These AI tools were primarily employed to support sentence fluency, provide suggestions for academic terminology, and summarize relevant literature. All outputs generated by these tools were individually reviewed, revised, and expanded upon by the researcher to ensure the accuracy, originality, and academic integrity of the thesis. The researcher assumes full responsibility for all content presented in this work.

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Competing Narratives of Pashtun Nationalism: *The Kabul Times*, *The Pakistan Observer* and *The Guardian* During the Pashtunistan Crisis (1960–1962)

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Abstract

The Pashtunistan question constitutes one of the most enduring legacies of colonial boundary-making in South Asia. Originating from the imposition of the Durand Line in 1893, which divided Pashtun communities between Afghanistan and British India, the issue intensified following the creation of Pakistan in 1947. This article examines how Afghan, Pakistani, and British newspapers represented the Pashtunistan dispute during the period of heightened tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan from 1960 to 1962. Drawing upon discourse analysis and the theoretical contributions of Anthony D. Smith, Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, Reinhart Koselleck, Patrick Charaudeau, and Michel Pêcheux, the study compares reports published in *The Kabul Times*, *The Pakistan Observer*, *The Dawn*, and *The Guardian*. The findings demonstrate that each newspaper constructed distinct narratives concerning identity, sovereignty, territorial legitimacy, and self-determination. While *The Kabul Times* portrayed Pashtun nationalism as a legitimate anti-colonial struggle, Pakistani newspapers emphasized territorial integrity and national unity. *The Guardian*, meanwhile, reproduced elements of colonial and orientalist discourse in its representations of Afghanistan and the Pashtuns. By comparing these competing narratives, the article contributes to broader debates on nationalism, colonial legacies, media discourse, and identity formation in South Asia during the Cold War.

Keywords: Pashtunistan, Pashtun nationalism, Afghanistan, Pakistan, discourse analysis

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Introduction

The partition of British India in 1947 generated a series of territorial, political, and identity-related disputes whose consequences continue to shape South Asian geopolitics. Among these disputes, the Pashtunistan question occupies a distinctive position due to its connection with colonial border-making, ethnic nationalism, and competing projects of state formation. The issue emerged from the legacy of the Durand Line, established in 1893 between Afghanistan and British India, which divided territories historically inhabited by Pashtun populations (Shah, 2000).

When Pakistan emerged as an independent state in 1947, it inherited the Durand Line as its western frontier. Afghanistan, however, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the border in its existing form and became the only country to oppose Pakistan's admission to the United Nations. Afghan governments argued that Pashtun communities residing west of the Indus River should be granted the right of self-determination. Pakistani authorities, by contrast, viewed such claims as direct threats to national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The dispute intensified during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Diplomatic relations between Kabul and Karachi deteriorated significantly, culminating in military incidents, border tensions, economic restrictions, and competing propaganda campaigns. Newspapers became important arenas through which these political conflicts were articulated and communicated to domestic and international audiences.

Rather than functioning merely as vehicles of information, newspapers actively participated in the production of political meanings. As argued by Neves (2003), periodicals publicized debates, influenced readers, formulated and interpreted ideas, contested and defended positions, proposed solutions, and represented a wide range of interests. Listening to these voices is essential for understanding the diverse political concepts and languages that were being structured and restructured over time.

This article examines how Afghan, Pakistani, and British newspapers represented the Pashtunistan question between 1960 and 1962. It focuses specifically on *The Kabul Times*, *The Pakistan Observer*, *The Dawn*, and *The Guardian*. The central argument advanced here is that these newspapers constructed competing discourses concerning nationalism, sovereignty, and historical legitimacy. *The Kabul Times* framed Pashtun nationalism as a continuation of anti-colonial resistance and national self-determination. Pakistani newspapers defended territorial integrity and state sovereignty, portraying Pashtunistan as a separatist project encouraged by external actors. *The Guardian*, while presenting itself as an independent observer, frequently reproduced colonial and orientalist assumptions in its representations of Afghanistan and the Pashtuns.

By examining these competing narratives, this article seeks to contribute to discussions concerning ethnonationalism, colonial legacies, and the role of the press in shaping political identities. More broadly, it highlights how media representations become instruments through which historical disputes are interpreted, legitimized, and contested.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily informed by Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach to nationalism. Smith (1991, 1999, 2009) argues that modern nations do not emerge from a

historical vacuum. Rather, they are frequently rooted in pre-existing ethnic communities, or ethnies, characterized by shared myths, historical memories, symbols, values, traditions, and attachments to specific territories.

According to Smith (1991), nationalism can be defined as an ideological movement seeking autonomy, unity, and identity for a population perceived as constituting a nation. Ethnonationalism emerges when these aspirations are grounded primarily in ethnic identity and collective memory. Such movements commonly invoke narratives of common ancestry, historical continuity, territorial belonging, and cultural uniqueness.

The Pashtun case illustrates many of these characteristics. Narratives concerning the Durand Line, anti-colonial resistance, tribal traditions, and linguistic unity frequently appear within nationalist discourse. References to a lost territorial homeland and to historical injustices inflicted by colonial powers serve as important symbolic resources in the construction of collective identity.

Complementing Smith's framework, Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah (2000) emphasizes the distinctiveness of Pashtun political identity. His concept of ethnoparticularism highlights how Pashtun political consciousness developed independently from both Pakistani nationalism and broader Islamic political movements. According to Shah, Pashtun identity rests upon a combination of language, tribal traditions, historical experience, and cultural practices that cannot be fully reduced to religious or state-centered identities.

This article also draws upon Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) theory of historical temporality. Koselleck distinguishes between the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation." The former refers to interpretations of the past that influence present political action, while the latter concerns future aspirations projected from the present. These concepts are particularly useful in analyzing Pashtun nationalist discourse, which frequently invokes historical memories of territorial division while simultaneously envisioning future political autonomy.

Finally, the article incorporates perspectives from discourse analysis. Charaudeau (2013) argues that political communication often relies not only upon explicit statements but also upon implicit meanings, omissions, and presuppositions. Similarly, Pêcheux (1982) emphasizes how ideological structures shape the production and circulation of discourse. Together, these approaches enable an examination of newspapers not simply as repositories of information but as sites where political meanings are actively produced and contested.

By combining ethnonationalist theory with discourse analysis, this study seeks to understand both the symbolic foundations of Pashtun nationalism and the mechanisms through which competing representations were disseminated through the press during the Pashtunistan crisis.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine representations of the Pashtunistan question in Afghan, Pakistani, and British newspapers between 1960 and 1962. The methodological approach is informed by the understanding that newspapers do not merely report political events but actively participate in the construction of social and political realities. Consequently, newspaper texts are treated not as neutral descriptions of events but as discursive artifacts embedded within broader ideological, political, and historical contexts.

The corpus consists of newspaper articles selected from four publications: *The Kabul Times*, *The Pakistan Observer*, *The Dawn*, and *The Guardian*. These newspapers were chosen because they represent distinct political, national, and ideological perspectives regarding the Pashtunistan issue. *The Kabul Times* served as the principal English-language newspaper of the Afghan government and functioned as an important instrument of public diplomacy. *The Pakistan Observer* and *The Dawn* represented influential Pakistani perspectives, while *The Guardian* provided insight into British interpretations of the conflict and its colonial legacies.

The articles selected directly addressed Afghan-Pakistani relations, Pashtun nationalism, border disputes, military incidents, or diplomatic controversies associated with the Pashtunistan question. Particular attention was devoted to reports published during periods of heightened tension, including Afghan incursions into Pakistani territory and the subsequent deterioration of diplomatic relations.

Three analytical dimensions guide the investigation. First, the study examines how each newspaper defined the origins and causes of the Pashtunistan question. Second, it analyzes representations of key political actors, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Pashtun nationalists, British colonial authorities, and international actors. Third, it investigates the ideological assumptions embedded in discussions of nationalism, sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial legitimacy.

The analysis draws upon concepts developed by Charaudeau (2013) and Pêcheux (1982), particularly regarding implicit meanings, ideological positioning, and discursive formations. These perspectives enable an examination of both explicit statements and underlying assumptions embedded within journalistic narratives. Particular attention is devoted to recurring themes, metaphors, historical references, and evaluative language employed by each publication.

Rather than assessing the factual accuracy of individual reports, the study focuses on how newspapers constructed competing interpretations of the same historical events. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how media discourse contributed to the political contestation surrounding Pashtun identity, state sovereignty, and historical memory during the Cold War era.

The Guardian and the Persistence of Colonial Discourse

The Guardian's coverage of the Pashtunistan question reflected broader British concerns regarding regional stability, Cold War geopolitics, and the preservation of territorial arrangements inherited from the colonial era. Although the newspaper frequently presented itself as an objective observer of international affairs, its reporting often reproduced assumptions deeply rooted in imperial modes of representation.

One recurring theme was the characterization of Pashtunistan as an unrealistic or impractical political project. Reports frequently questioned the viability of an independent Pashtun state and emphasized the absence of clearly defined territorial boundaries. Through this framing, the newspaper implicitly legitimized the post-colonial territorial order established following the partition of British India.

Particularly significant was *The Guardian*'s treatment of the Durand Line. Rather than portraying the frontier as a contested colonial imposition, the newspaper generally accepted it

as a legitimate international boundary inherited by Pakistan. Afghan challenges to the border were therefore interpreted less as expressions of anti-colonial nationalism and more as sources of instability within a strategically sensitive region.

This perspective was reinforced by Cold War concerns. Throughout the period examined, Afghanistan maintained increasingly close economic and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. *The Guardian* frequently associated Afghan support for Pashtun self-determination with broader Soviet strategic interests. Consequently, the Pashtunistan question was often transformed from an ethnic and historical dispute into a geopolitical issue connected to the global rivalry between East and West.

James Morris and Orientalist Representations of Afghanistan

The clearest examples of colonial discourse appeared in the travel reports and political commentaries of journalist James Morris. His writings offer valuable insight into how Afghanistan continued to be represented through orientalist frameworks long after the formal end of British imperial rule in South Asia.

Morris frequently described Afghanistan as a land suspended between civilization and barbarism. Tribal societies were portrayed as remnants of an earlier historical stage, while political institutions were depicted as fragile, authoritarian, or underdeveloped. Such descriptions closely resemble what Edward Said (2003) identified as Orientalism: a system of knowledge that constructs the East as exotic, irrational, and fundamentally different from the modern West.

Afghanistan emerged in Morris's writings as both fascinating and backward. The country was represented as a geographical frontier populated by fierce tribes, ancient customs, and political instability. Development and modernization were portrayed as external processes introduced through foreign assistance, whether Soviet or Western. Afghans themselves appeared less as historical agents than as passive recipients of modernization projects.

These representations carried important political implications. By emphasizing Afghan backwardness and political immaturity, Morris indirectly reinforced arguments supporting existing geopolitical arrangements. If Afghanistan was perceived as politically fragile and socially underdeveloped, then Afghan claims concerning Pashtun self-determination could be dismissed more easily as unrealistic or irresponsible.

The language employed by Morris frequently reflected paternalistic assumptions characteristic of colonial discourse. Afghan society was often evaluated according to Western standards of political development and social progress. Tribal institutions were depicted as obstacles to modernization rather than as historically rooted forms of social organization. Such representations contributed to a broader narrative in which Western models of governance and development appeared naturally superior.

Abdul Huq Waleh and the Contestation of Colonial Narratives

The orientalist representations advanced by Morris did not go unchallenged. One of the most significant responses came from Abdul Huq Waleh, a member of the Royal Afghan Embassy in London. Through a public letter addressed to *The Guardian*, Waleh directly criticized Morris's portrayal of Afghanistan.

Waleh accused Morris of relying upon outdated stereotypes inherited from nineteenth-century colonial literature. According to Waleh, the journalist ignored significant social, economic, and political transformations occurring within Afghanistan. Educational reforms, infrastructure projects, industrial development, and urban modernization received little attention in Morris's account, despite their importance in contemporary Afghan society.

More importantly, Waleh challenged the underlying assumptions embedded within Morris's narrative. He argued that Afghanistan should not be judged according to colonial standards that portrayed non-Western societies as perpetually deficient or incomplete. Instead, Afghanistan should be understood on its own historical and cultural terms.

The exchange between Morris and Waleh illustrates that representations of Afghanistan were themselves sites of political struggle. Competing narratives emerged not only regarding the Pashtunistan question but also concerning the meaning of modernity, development, and national identity. Whereas Morris reproduced elements of an orientalist worldview, Waleh sought to challenge and deconstruct those representations.

This contestation reveals the persistence of colonial epistemologies within post-colonial media discourse. Even after the formal end of empire, struggles over representation continued to shape how Afghanistan and its people were understood internationally. The Pashtunistan question cannot therefore be separated from broader debates concerning knowledge, power, and the legacy of colonialism in South Asia.

The Kabul Times and the Anti-colonial Narrative

In contrast to *The Guardian*, *The Kabul Times* consistently interpreted the Pashtunistan question through the lens of anti-colonialism and national self-determination. As the first English-language newspaper published by the Afghan government, it functioned not merely as a source of information but as an instrument of public diplomacy designed to communicate Afghan perspectives to international audiences.

The newspaper's treatment of the Pashtunistan issue was deeply influenced by the official position of the Afghan state. Throughout the articles examined, the Durand Line was portrayed as an illegitimate colonial imposition forced upon Afghanistan by the British Empire. Rather than recognizing the border as a legitimate international frontier, *The Kabul Times* consistently represented it as an artificial division that fragmented a historically unified people.

This interpretation transformed the Pashtunistan question from a bilateral dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan into a broader issue of decolonization. The struggle for Pashtun self-determination was presented as part of a wider historical process through which colonized peoples sought to recover rights denied by imperial powers.

Such a perspective reflected broader political developments occurring throughout Asia and Africa during the mid-twentieth century. As former colonies gained independence and challenged inherited colonial boundaries, concepts such as self-determination, sovereignty, and national liberation acquired increasing importance within international political discourse. *The Kabul Times* situated the Pashtun cause within this broader global movement.

Abdul Rahman Pazhwak and the Historical Foundations of Pashtun Nationalism

A central figure in the newspaper's treatment of the Pashtunistan question was Abdul Rahman Pazhwak. Diplomat, poet, journalist, and former representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Pazhwak authored a series of articles dedicated to explaining the historical origins and political legitimacy of the Pashtunistan movement.

Pazhwak's writings reveal a sophisticated effort to construct a historical narrative capable of legitimizing contemporary political claims. Rather than focusing exclusively upon recent political events, he situated the Pashtun question within a much longer historical framework extending back to antiquity.

References to classical authors, particularly Herodotus, were employed to emphasize the antiquity of Pashtun presence in the region. Similarly, frequent references to Ariana and other historical territorial designations sought to demonstrate continuity between ancient populations and contemporary Pashtun communities. Through these historical connections, Pazhwak attempted to establish that Pashtun identity predated both British colonialism and the creation of Pakistan.

This strategy closely corresponds to Anthony Smith's (1999) observation that nationalist movements frequently mobilize myths of origin, collective memories, and symbolic attachments to territory.

For Pazhwak, the significance of history extended beyond the mere reconstruction of the past. Historical memory functioned as a tool through which contemporary political claims could be legitimized. The Durand Line was not simply represented as a diplomatic agreement imposed in 1893; it was portrayed as a historical injustice that interrupted the natural development of a national community.

Historical Memory and Ethnonationalist Discourse

One of the most distinctive features of *The Kabul Times* was its systematic use of historical memory as a mechanism of political persuasion. The newspaper repeatedly invoked episodes of anti-colonial resistance, tribal autonomy, and cultural continuity in order to strengthen the legitimacy of Pashtun nationalist aspirations.

This approach aligns closely with Smith's (2009) ethno-symbolist framework. According to Smith, nationalism frequently draws its strength from pre-existing cultural resources, including myths, memories, traditions, heroes, and sacred territories. These symbolic elements provide emotional and historical depth to political projects seeking autonomy or independence.

Within *The Kabul Times*, Pashtun nationalism was consistently represented as the continuation of a historical struggle rather than as a recent political invention. British military campaigns in frontier regions were recalled as evidence of long-standing resistance against foreign domination. Tribal leaders and anti-colonial activists were transformed into symbols of collective perseverance and national dignity.

The repeated invocation of historical suffering served an important political purpose. By emphasizing colonial oppression and territorial division, the newspaper constructed a narrative

in which the demand for self-determination appeared not only legitimate but morally necessary. Contemporary political aspirations were therefore linked directly to historical grievances.

This process illustrates how collective memory can function as a powerful instrument of political mobilization. Rather than providing a neutral account of the past, *The Kabul Times* selectively interpreted historical events in ways that reinforced contemporary nationalist objectives.

Koselleck, Historical Time, and the Pashtunistan Question

Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) concepts of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation" provide a particularly useful framework for understanding the temporal structure of Pashtun nationalist discourse.

The "space of experience" refers to how historical experiences are remembered and interpreted in the present. In the case of *The Kabul Times*, this space was populated by memories of colonial intervention, territorial fragmentation, anti-colonial resistance, and cultural continuity. These historical experiences formed the foundation upon which contemporary political arguments were constructed.

The "horizon of expectation," by contrast, refers to future possibilities imagined from the standpoint of the present. Throughout the newspaper's coverage, the future was imagined as a moment in which Pashtun communities would recover political autonomy and overcome the injustices associated with colonial rule.

The relationship between these two temporal dimensions is particularly significant. The newspaper's political project depended upon transforming historical memories into future aspirations. The past was not merely remembered; it was mobilized to justify expectations concerning the future.

This temporal structure helps explain the persistence of the Pashtunistan question. Even though the Durand Line had existed for decades, its meaning continued to be reinterpreted through nationalist discourse. Historical grievances remained politically relevant because they were continuously connected to future hopes of self-determination.

Pakistan as the Successor to Colonial Rule

Perhaps the most important discursive strategy employed by *The Kabul Times* involved portraying Pakistan as the successor to British colonial authority in the region.

This argument rested upon several interconnected claims. First, Pakistan inherited and maintained the Durand Line, thereby preserving what the newspaper regarded as an illegitimate colonial boundary. Second, Pakistani authorities were accused of continuing administrative and security practices originally established under British rule. Third, Pakistan was portrayed as systematically denying Pashtun communities the right to determine their own political future.

By constructing Pakistan as a continuation of colonial authority, *The Kabul Times* transformed a contemporary interstate dispute into a broader struggle between colonialism and national liberation. The Afghan state appeared as the defender of anti-colonial principles, while Pakistan emerged as the guardian of an inherited colonial order.

This narrative simplified complex political realities, yet it proved highly effective as a form of political communication. By linking the Pashtunistan issue to global anti-colonial movements, the newspaper situated the Pashtun cause within a moral framework that resonated strongly during the era of decolonization.

The result was a powerful nationalist discourse in which history, memory, identity, and political aspiration converged. Through its coverage of the Pashtunistan question, *The Kabul Times* did not merely report political events; it actively participated in the construction of a collective narrative designed to legitimize claims for self-determination and challenge the territorial order inherited from colonial rule.

The Pakistan Observer, *The Dawn*, and the Defense of Territorial Integrity

In contrast to the anti-colonial discourse promoted by *The Kabul Times*, Pakistani newspapers approached the Pashtunistan question primarily through the framework of state sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity. Both *The Pakistan Observer* and *The Dawn* consistently rejected Afghan claims regarding Pashtun self-determination and portrayed the issue as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Pakistani state.

For Pakistani commentators, the creation of Pakistan in 1947 represented the culmination of Muslim political aspirations in South Asia. The incorporation of the former North-West Frontier Province into Pakistan was therefore considered a settled political and constitutional matter. Consequently, Afghan support for Pashtun nationalism was interpreted not as a legitimate concern for self-determination but as interference in Pakistan's internal affairs.

This position was reinforced by references to political participation and economic development within Pashtun-majority regions. Pakistani newspapers emphasized infrastructure projects, educational expansion, administrative reforms, and increasing political representation as evidence that Pashtun communities were fully integrated into the Pakistani state. Such arguments sought to undermine claims that Pashtuns remained politically marginalized or colonized.

From this perspective, Pashtunistan was represented as an artificial political project promoted by Kabul rather than a genuine expression of popular sentiment among Pakistani Pashtuns. The movement was frequently described as a source of instability that threatened national cohesion and regional security.

The emphasis on territorial integrity reflected broader concerns regarding state-building in post-colonial Pakistan. Given the country's ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity, separatist movements posed significant challenges to political consolidation. Consequently, official narratives frequently portrayed demands for autonomy as threats to national unity.

Comparative Analysis of Competing Discourses

The comparison of Afghan, Pakistani, and British newspapers reveals substantial differences in how the Pashtunistan question was understood and represented.

Each newspaper assigned responsibility for the conflict differently. *The Kabul Times* identified British colonialism and the Durand Line as the primary causes of the dispute, while simultaneously portraying Pakistan as the inheritor of colonial structures. Pakistani newspapers

attributed responsibility to Afghan interference and nationalist agitation. *The Guardian* generally framed the issue as the result of Afghan political ambitions and regional instability.

Differences also emerged regarding the representation of Pashtun nationalism itself. *The Kabul Times* portrayed the movement as a legitimate expression of historical identity and anti-colonial resistance. Pakistani newspapers depicted it as a separatist project that threatened national sovereignty. British reporting frequently represented it as an impractical political aspiration lacking clear territorial and institutional foundations.

Historical narratives varied considerably across the three media environments. Afghan newspapers relied heavily upon collective memory, historical continuity, and anti-colonial symbolism. Pakistani newspapers emphasized constitutional legality, state formation, and territorial legitimacy. British reporting frequently drew upon imperial perspectives and Cold War geopolitical concerns.

Perhaps most significantly, each newspaper constructed a different understanding of political legitimacy. For *The Kabul Times*, legitimacy derived from historical identity and the principle of self-determination. For Pakistani newspapers, legitimacy emerged from state sovereignty and constitutional authority. For *The Guardian*, legitimacy was generally associated with international stability and the preservation of existing territorial arrangements.

The Politics of Representation

The comparison demonstrates that newspapers functioned as active participants in political struggles rather than neutral observers of events. Through framing, selection, omission, and interpretation, they shaped competing understandings of history, identity, and legitimacy.

The Kabul Times mobilized historical memory and anti-colonial rhetoric to internationalize the Pashtun cause. Pakistani newspapers employed the language of sovereignty and statehood to defend the territorial status quo. *The Guardian* reproduced elements of colonial and orientalist discourse while simultaneously interpreting the conflict through Cold War strategic concerns.

These competing narratives illustrate how media institutions contribute to the construction of political realities. Newspapers not only inform audiences but also shape collective understandings of the past, define the boundaries of legitimate political action, and influence perceptions of national identity.

The Pashtunistan question therefore existed not only as a territorial and political dispute but also as a discursive struggle over meaning. Competing actors sought to define who possessed legitimate claims to territory, identity, and sovereignty. The press became one of the principal arenas through which these struggles were articulated and contested.

Conclusion

This article examined the representations of the Pashtunistan question in *The Kabul Times*, *The Pakistan Observer*, *The Dawn*, and *The Guardian* during the period of heightened Afghan-Pakistani tensions between 1960 and 1962. Through a comparative analysis of media discourse, the study demonstrated that newspapers functioned not merely as sources of information but as active participants in the construction of political meanings, historical narratives, and national identities.

The findings reveal that the newspapers analyzed produced markedly different interpretations of the same historical events. *The Kabul Times* consistently framed Pashtun nationalism as a legitimate anti-colonial movement rooted in historical continuity, ethnic identity, and the right to self-determination. Through the mobilization of historical memory, references to colonial injustice, and appeals to collective identity, the newspaper sought to legitimize Afghan support for the Pashtun cause and challenge the territorial order established by the Durand Line.

Pakistani newspapers adopted an opposing perspective. *The Pakistan Observer* and *The Dawn* emphasized territorial integrity, constitutional legitimacy, and state sovereignty. Afghan support for Pashtun nationalism was interpreted as interference in Pakistan's domestic affairs and as a threat to national unity. The resulting discourse reinforced the legitimacy of the Pakistani state while delegitimizing separatist aspirations.

The Guardian occupied a distinct position. Although formally detached from the dispute, its reporting frequently reflected assumptions inherited from Britain's colonial experience in South Asia. The newspaper often portrayed Pashtunistan as an unrealistic political project and represented Afghanistan through orientalist frameworks that emphasized backwardness, instability, and political immaturity. Such representations reveal the persistence of colonial modes of understanding long after the formal dissolution of empire.

The study further demonstrates the usefulness of ethnonationalist theory for understanding the Pashtun question. Smith's concepts of ethnic identity, collective memory, myths of origin, and territorial attachment provide valuable tools for interpreting the symbolic foundations of Pashtun nationalism. Similarly, Koselleck's concepts of the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” help explain how historical grievances concerning the Durand Line continued to shape political aspirations decades after the establishment of the border.

More broadly, the article contributes to scholarship on nationalism, media discourse, and post-colonial state formation by illustrating how competing narratives shape understandings of legitimacy and sovereignty. The Pashtunistan question existed not only as a geopolitical dispute but also as a struggle over historical interpretation, identity construction, and political meaning.

Although the geopolitical environment of South Asia has changed considerably since the early 1960s, many of the issues examined in this study remain relevant. Debates concerning the Durand Line, Pashtun identity, and self-determination continue to influence Afghan-Pakistani relations. The historical narratives analyzed here continue to resonate within contemporary political discourse, demonstrating the enduring significance of colonial boundaries and ethnonationalist claims in the region.

This study is limited by its focus on a selected corpus of English-language newspapers. While these publications provide valuable insight into official and elite perspectives, they do not fully capture the diversity of opinions present among Pashtun communities themselves. Future research may benefit from incorporating Pashto-language newspapers, oral histories, memoirs, and archival materials from both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Additionally, the study focuses on a relatively short period between 1960 and 1962. Expanding the chronological scope to include earlier and later phases of the Pashtunistan movement would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of nationalist discourse in the region.

Future studies may explore comparative studies involving other ethnonationalist movements in South Asia and the Middle East may also provide valuable insights into the relationship between historical memory, media discourse, and political mobilization.

Furthermore, digital archives and computational methods offer new opportunities for examining large collections of newspapers and tracing discursive patterns across longer periods of time. Such approaches may deepen our understanding of how nationalist narratives are constructed, transformed, and disseminated.

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Generative AI technology was used during the translation and language revision, and formatting of this manuscript in accordance with the IAFOR Conference Proceedings Guidelines. The author reviewed, edited, verified, and assumes full responsibility for all arguments, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the final manuscript.

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Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Consciousness in China's New Elementary English Standards

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Abstract

The 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in China denote an important shift toward developing "cultural awareness" as a core competency. However, the pragmatic implementation of "cross-cultural consciousness" in elementary English education remains fraught with pedagogical and structural tensions. Drawing upon Vygotsky's Cultural-historical Theory, this paper assesses the current framework's ability to move beyond a binary of "source culture" versus "target culture." From a Vygotskian perspective, language is a psychological tool that mediates higher mental functions through social interaction. This study argues that the 2022 Standards risk reducing cultural learning to the acquisition of static knowledge rather than a dynamic process of social mediation. While the current Standards champion "cultural confidence" by weaving traditional Chinese elements into the curriculum, they inadvertently leave a "cultural vacuum" within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this instructional space, a child's lived experience. That is what Vygotsky terms the "everyday concept"—frequently clashes with, rather than merges into, the rigid cultural categories of the curriculum (the "scientific concept"). This failure to achieve a genuine dialectical synthesis stems from three systemic issues: the instrumentalization of cultural content, a stark imbalance in international representation, and a pervasive mediation deficit. These neat categories might help students practice basic comparisons, but they do not build a true intercultural "Third Space" where different cultural tools actually merge. Without that deeper friction, the lesson loses its transformative weight. The learner simply walks away unchanged, keeping their original identity completely untouched on one side of a superficial divide.

Keywords: intercultural consciousness, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, Chinese English education, curriculum standards, cultural identity

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Introduction

The state of English-language education in China has undergone continuous transformation, reflecting the nation's shifting socio-political priorities and developing relationship with the global community. The 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education sent a strong signal that prioritizing the implementation of the core competencies was moving toward "cultural awareness." This shift features an ideology of integrating cultures.

How this cultural integration actually functions deserves a closer look. Current language pedagogy draws a clear line between "cross-cultural" and "intercultural" competence. A cross-cultural approach tends to treat cultures as fixed, separate entities to be compared from the outside. Intercultural competence, however, centers on the active negotiation of meaning and identity within a fluid "Third Space." This is more than a debate over terminology; it shapes our underlying assumptions about how a student interacts with a foreign language and the culture embedded within it.

This study uses Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology as an analytical system to evaluate the cross-cultural consciousness embedded within the 2022 Elementary English Standards. Vygotsky's ideas about the social origins of higher psychological functions and the changing nature of internalization provide a strong lens for examining how the standards conceptualize the learner's interaction with the foreign "Other." Through a detailed textual analysis of the curriculum's stated objectives, pedagogical recommendations, and definitions of core competencies, we argue that the 2022 Standards manifest a cross-cultural rather than an intercultural orientation. The document uses intercultural terminology, but its actual structure reduces cultural engagement to mere observation, identification, and comparison. This setup completely misses the deeper self-transformation that Vygotsky considered the highest stage of cultural development.

Literature Review: Defining the Cultural Lens

To carefully examine the cultural dimensions of the 2022 Standards, it is necessary to first delineate the conceptual boundaries between cross-cultural and intercultural paradigms. These conceptions offer divergent conceptualizations of what culture is, how it functions in language learning, and what the ultimate outcomes of cultural encounters should be.

The Cross-Cultural Paradigm: Observation and Comparison

The cross-cultural approach, frequently associated with the basic work of scholars like Milton Bennett (1998), views cultures as distinct, relatively stable entities. In this paradigm, culture is treated as an external variable—a set of identifiable traits, behaviors, and values belonging to a specific national or ethnic group. The main mechanism of cross-cultural learning is observation and comparison. Learners are positioned as observers who examine the similarities and differences between their native culture (Culture A) and the target culture (Culture B).

Under this system, the learner's identity is a stable, fixed membership within their home culture. The goal of language education is to furnish learners with knowledge of the target culture to minimize confusion and promote seamless interactions. As Bennett notes, this strategy concentrates on "comparison among distinct, static entities." Cultures are variables to be measured against one another. While this reduces ethnocentrism via acknowledging cultural differences, it rarely demands a fundamental reconstruction of the learner's own identity. The

outcome is cognitive knowledge of group traits rather than profound social and psychological growth.

The Intercultural Paradigm: Dialogic Interaction and the Third Space

Kramsch (1993, 1998) rejects the idea that cultures are fixed, self-contained blocks, treating them instead as fluid processes built through discourse. This framework puts dialogue at the very center of interculturality. The objective is no longer just decoding an unfamiliar "Other"—it is tracking how the self and the Other actually encounter one another to negotiate and build meaning in real time.

Kramsch's framework concerns "the Third Space," or Third Place. It is the idea of a zone between learners, operating within the strict domains of their L1 culture externally, without being assimilated into the L2 culture. In the space of the zone, identity becomes a fluid of "becoming," that is, kept under negotiation and challenge.

Culture shifts from an auxiliary static subject of study into an active tool for making meaning. At the same time, learning moves past the mere observation of differences and requires deep, personal engagement. The payoff isn't just content knowledge, but a broader cognitive and social evolution that gives rise to a genuinely hybrid subjectivity.

Key Differences at a Glance

The dichotomy between these two lenses can be summarized along four dimensions:

- Role of Culture: The cross-cultural perspective, culture is an external variable or category. In the intercultural view, it is a psychological and linguistic toolkit for meaning-making.
- Identity: The cross-cultural paradigm assumes stable, fixed membership. The intercultural paradigm embraces dynamic, fluid identity formation (becoming).
- Mechanism: Cross-culturalism relies on observing differences. Interculturality demands participation and transformation.
- Outcome: The former yields knowledge of group traits; the latter yields cognitive and social growth.

Theoretical Framework: Vygotskian Cultural-Historical Perspectives

Social Origins of Higher Psychological Functions

A keystone of Vygotskian theory is the genetic law of cultural development. Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) famously argued: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level (interpsychological), and later, on the individual level (intrapsychological)." This means that higher psychological processes—such as critical thinking, voluntary attention, and intercultural consciousness—are not innate but are formed through social interaction mediated by cultural tools, most notably language.

In the context of language education, encountering a foreign language and culture constitutes an interpsychological event. It is a social relation with the "Other." If language learning is restricted to rote memorization or the mere coding of native thoughts into foreign symbols, the social level is impoverished, and the subsequent intrapsychological development is severely constrained.

Internalization as Transformation

Furthermore, Vygotsky emphasizes that internalization is not a process of passive absorption. “The process of internalization is not a simple transfer from outside to inside, but a transformation of the activity itself... Personality represents the sum of social relations internalized” (Vygotsky, 1997, Vol. 4, p. 106).

When a learner engages with a foreign culture interculturally, the internalization of those social relations changes their existing cognitive structures and identity. They do not simply “add” foreign facts to their memory; their subjectivity is radically changed by the dialectical tension between the native and the foreign. Therefore, an educational standard that aims for profound cultural awareness must facilitate this deep internalization, rather than merely asking students to catalog cultural artifacts.

Textual Analysis of the 2022 Elementary English Standards

Applying this conceptual framework to the 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education reveals a continuing tension between the document's stated goals and its underlying epistemological stance. While the standards champion “cultural awareness,” the specific language used throughout the text aligns overwhelmingly with the fixed, cross-cultural paradigm.

The Static Focus: Observation and Identification

A primary piece of textual evidence for this cross-cultural orientation is found in the curriculum's pedagogical directives. On page 18, the standard states that teaching should “Improve the ability to identify differences and similarities between Chinese and foreign cultures.”

From a Vygotskian standpoint, framing the learning process around “identification” is deeply flawed. The term betrays an epistemological bias, reducing the learner to an outsider staring at two neatly sealed, parallel containers of culture. The primary cognitive task becomes mere sorting and sorting again—noting that Culture A does this, while Culture B does that.

Sorting concepts into neat categories gives students basic comparative practice, but it doesn't create a true intercultural “Third Space” where different cultural tools can actually disrupt and merge with one another. Without that internal friction, the lesson loses its impact. The learner simply walks away with their identity untouched, safely parked on their own side of the divide.

Core Competencies: From Knowledge to Orthodoxy

The definition of “Cultural Awareness” as a core competency further illustrates this limitation. The standard (p. 4) defines cultural awareness as “students' understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures and their identification with outstanding cultures. It is manifested, in the context of the new era, in students' intercultural cognition, attitudes, and behavioral choices.”

While Vygotsky regards cultural awareness as the dynamic internalization of social interaction, the standard's phrasing—specifically the mandate to achieve “identification with outstanding culture”—reveals a divergent goal. In the wider socio-political context of the document, “outstanding culture” implicitly refers to orthodox Chinese traditions and contemporary

national narratives. The emphasis is on orthodoxy, cultural alignment, and ideological preservation, rather than on the dialectical negotiation and reconstruction of identity within a "Third Space."

Because the desired outcome is a return to and fortification of a pre-existing identity, the process cannot properly be regarded as intercultural. It forecloses the possibility of identity evolution that Kramsch and Vygotsky identify as the hallmark of true cultural encounter.

Curriculum Objectives: The Monologue Strategy

The instrumentalist view of language in the standards is most evident in the stated curriculum objectives. On page 5, the document asserts: "Through English learning, students are able to strengthen cultural confidence, learn to tell China's stories in English, and present to the world a China that is authentic, multidimensional, and comprehensive."

This objective embodies what we term the "Monologue Strategy." It essentially means using English as a symbolic medium to project a domestic narrative outward. However, the curriculum does not explain how learners come to understand and integrate the cultural differences embedded within the English "language tool" itself. It assumes that English can be stripped of its cultural history and used purely as an objective code to transmit Chinese content.

This approach manifests three specific theoretical flaws regarding self-transformation:

1. **Symbol Swap:** English is used merely as a code for Chinese content. English symbols are mapped onto Chinese logic without altering the "psychological tool." The language fails to mediate new ways of thinking.
2. **Internal Audience:** The mandate to "tell Chinese stories" is often observed in Chinese classrooms by Chinese students. This removes the authentic "Foreign Other," effectively collapsing the social Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) necessary for intercultural growth.
3. **Identity Reinforcement:** The ultimate goal is to solidify a pre-existing national identity rather than allowing the identity to be rebuilt through encounters with difference.

Vygotsky argued that "we become ourselves through others." When the "Other" is silenced, instrumentalized, or replaced by an internal shadow, the engine of mental and cultural development stalls. Through prioritizing the outward projection of the self ("telling China's stories") over the dialogic intake of the Other, the 2022 Standard effectively promotes intra-cultural education under an intercultural label.

Pedagogical Recommendations and the Limit of Critical Thinking

The limitations of this approach also constrain the development of critical thinking. The pedagogical recommendations (p. 47) advise: "Teachers should guide students, in authentic contexts, to participate in language learning activities characterized by comprehensiveness, connectedness, and usefulness, including observation, analysis, comparison, evaluation, and creation."

These verbs imply rigorous cognitive work, but they ultimately serve a very narrow purpose. The earlier directive to "identify with excellent culture" (p. 4) shifts the entire goal of critical thinking. It stops being an open-ended exploration and becomes a way to validate a

predetermined narrative. Within this policy framework, critical inquiry is essentially repurposed to “tell the story well” and protect local identity from outside ideological influence.

Conversely, the Vygotskian view proposes that critical thinking should serve as a meta-cognitive tool that permits individuals to objectify their own culture. True critical interculturality involves turning the analytical look inward, identifying the constructed nature of one's own cultural assumptions, and achieving a higher, more objective level of self-consciousness. The curriculum, by restricting analysis to “similarities and differences” (p. 18), arrests this development at the cross-cultural stage. It uses English as a medium for representing fixed national content (Cultural Display) and recognizing similarities and differences across cultures (Cross-cultural comparison), but stops short of Third-space negotiation, identity reconstruction, and self-transformation (Interculturality).

Discussion

The findings of this textual analysis reveal a sophisticated but fundamentally defensive posture in the 2022 English Curriculum Standards. The document attempts a subtle balancing act: it seeks to provide students with the global signifier (the English language) while thoroughly protecting the local signified (Chinese cultural identity).

While this defensive strategy hits the policy target of building “Cultural Confidence”—effectively turning English class into a tool for national storytelling—it functions primarily to shield young learners from the identity fragmentation of globalization.

From a cultural-historical standpoint, however, this insulation carries a heavy developmental penalty. By systematically avoiding cross-cultural friction, the curriculum side-steps the internal crisis and self-transformation that Vygotsky saw as the very engine of cognitive growth.

To close this gap and move from a cross-cultural to a genuinely intercultural curriculum, subsequent iterations of the standard—and the localized syllabi developed from it—must integrate explicit mechanisms for self-transformation. This requires moving past static comparisons to embrace dynamic identity formation.

Conclusion

The 2022 Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards mark a major shift in China's educational policy by putting cultural awareness front and center. Yet from a Vygotskian perspective, the framework remains stubbornly cross-cultural. It treats different cultures as parallel, separate entities to be observed and compared from a distance, using English simply as a neutral tool to reinforce and broadcast a predetermined national identity.

The curriculum certainly pushes for cultural confidence and global awareness, but it stops short of being genuinely intercultural. It overlooks what actually happens during a cultural encounter—how identities shift and how meaning is negotiated in those spaces between. If primary English instruction is going to spark serious cognitive and social development, students can't just stare at the “Other” across a safe conceptual divide. Real cultural awareness requires the kind of difficult, unpredictable dialogue that alters the relationship entirely.

Future standards need to explicitly state that cultural encounters should reshape learners, rather than merely provide them with information. This requires shifting policy language to treat identity as something fluid and constantly negotiated. Crucially, the accompanying pedagogical guidelines must pin down what third-space mediation actually looks like in practice—illustrating how meaning is built in that middle ground where neither culture remains static.

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ADHD as Situated Knowledge: Gender, Difference, and Meaning-Making Among Chinese Women

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Abstract

Discussions about ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) have increased significantly on Chinese digital platforms in recent years, interestingly with female users showing far more interest than males. However, the prevailing perception of ADHD in China remains largely limited to mischievous young boys, and ADHD research continues to focus primarily on the medical aspects, And it doesn't pay extra attention to women. This study addresses this phenomenon, employing the theoretical framework of “situated knowledge” (Haraway) and “everyday practices” (De Certeau) to analyze how contemporary Chinese discourse on ADHD has been formed, and how ADHD as situated knowledge plays a role in Chinese women's negotiation of daily life. This study uses qualitative research methods, analyzing numerous posts on digital platforms by women who claim to have been diagnosed with ADHD, discussing lifestyles related to ADHD. It also incorporates semi-structured interviews and participant observation as qualitative fieldwork case studies to explore how contemporary Chinese cultural traditions, competing medical frameworks, and digital platform regulation intertwine and influence gender expectations. This paper finds that ADHD functions not only as a medical concept within a psychiatric framework but also as a discourse through which some women reinterpret their feelings of fatigue, helplessness, emotional distress, and social expectations. While limited, it also offers possibilities for negotiation in everyday life.

Keywords: ADHD, Chinese women, gender expectations, situated knowledge, everyday negotiation

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Introduction

In China, ADHD is often seen as being associated with naughty little boys, and adult women are rarely mentioned (Ju, 2022). However, it is worth noting that since 2021, there has been a rapid increase in internet searches for the term “ADHD” (Baidu index, 2025). Although there are fewer female Internet users than male in China, they search for “ADHD” much more frequently than men. Considering that this unusual trend may be related to women's traditional role as caregivers in the family, searching for children, but their keen attention to the term “adult ADHD” also goes beyond the explanation of motherhood alone. At the same time, although medical diagnoses remain not easy to gain, women are still increasingly using self-identification with ADHD to express their experiences and resist behavior stigmatizing. They actively share their ADHD experiences online, not only focused on medication but seek to understand themselves through the lens of ADHD and challenge traditional gender roles and social expectations (Lv, 2021). Ignoring these dynamics not only reinforces patriarchal norms but also obscures opportunities to understand the nuanced needs of the female ADHD group. Hence, this study focuses on the real-life experiences of contemporary Chinese women with ADHD, from a feminist perspective, with the aim of contributing to the development of situated knowledge theory by exploring its application in feminist activism. By integrating Chinese medical paradigms and feminist perspectives, the concept of ADHD as a “Western syndrome” is challenged, and the potential of ADHD women's narratives to reconstruct scientific and gender knowledge is emphasized.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

ADHD originated in Western medicine and has been studied for over two centuries. Today, the diagnostic criteria for ADHD follow DSM-5 and are defined through semi-structured interviews and tests. Treatment includes medication and behavioral modification as well as psychological care (Epstein & Loren, 2013). ADHD is characterized by symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity and/or inattention during childhood, resulting in significant life challenges (Barkley et al., 2007). Such as compared to typically developing peers, individuals with ADHD often experience higher rates of bullying, suicidal ideation, and are frequently comorbid with ASD, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, etc. (Faraone et al., 2021). The controversy over ADHD mainly comes from social constructivists questioning the validity of ADHD. It is usually focused on the misuse of medication and the overdiagnosis of children in some societies (Hinshaw & Scheffler, 2014). The medicinal industry has been accused of helping to create and promote the concept of ADHD to increase profits and market share. By suppressing the diversity of children, conceptualizing social problems as medical problems, and ultimately providing highly addictive drugs to teach ADHD children how to behave, the possibility of children and families using their own abilities to solve problems is further marginalized (Timimi & Taylor, 2004).

In recent years, research has begun to focus on the gender issue in ADHD. Arcia and Emily's research shows that adult women with ADHD report fewer problems than men, and adult women with ADHD have a relatively poorer self-perception than adult men (Arcia & Conners, 1998). Psychological research shows that women with ADHD are socialized to be silent and suffer in silence or at least be more silent than the typical male image (Solden, 2012). And the pressure of gender roles and the stigma felt by women with ADHD are common, the problems of inattention, disorganization, poor time management and poor task organization in women with ADHD cause stress for many women, in the absence of a better explanation, many women

blame their problems on personal failures, such as laziness and a lack of ability to work hard, which leads to a negative self-image (Holthe & Langvik, 2017).

Currently, the authoritative academic consensus on ADHD in China largely follows the Western medical framework, employing the DSM diagnostic criteria, treatment protocols, and understanding of the disorder (T. Wang et al., 2017). However, Western medicine is not the only approach in China. In contrast, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) offers a different perspective. In ancient TCM theory, ADHD was not specifically identified; symptoms like those of modern ADHD were largely attributed to an imbalance of yin and yang and dysfunction of the five internal organs. Modern Traditional Chinese Medicine has partially adopted the concept of ADHD, while also integrating treatment principles based on the balance of yin and yang (Su & Shao, 2024). In clinical practice, it often emphasizes that individuals should develop a healthy set of values and adjust their mindset toward the world (Xu, 2022), supplemented by therapies such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, or the Eight Brocades Kung Fu routine(Y. Wang & Luo, 2024). However, whether we are talking about Yin-Yang theory or herbal medicine, if we attribute ADHD symptoms solely to some kind of personal flaw or individual responsibility, the explanation mechanism may be different from that of Western medicine, but the gap in the recognition of gender differences in ADHD and the neglect of women’s experiences persists.

This study moves beyond the purely biomedical framework and adopts a social science perspective, examining ADHD within the broader contexts of knowledge production, power, and gender. According to Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988), knowledge is always partial, situated, localized, and limited, it does not arise nowhere. This concept enables us to recognize how knowledge is shaped by power, collective consciousness, and context. This theoretical framework of situated knowledge provides important support for the study of the topic of contemporary Chinese women's use of ADHD knowledge. ADHD knowledge is a foreign product for Chinese women, compare the situated knowledge from local, it is as well as another kind of situated knowledge. Some women in China learn about it, use it, reinterpret it based on their own personal experiences, expand its definition, and make it work for themselves, providing a brand-new possibility for women to actively participate in knowledge production and change the power structure.

Michel de Certeau's “The Practice of Everyday Life” is more concerned with how people creatively explore and reinterpret their environment within existing structures and systems (Michel de Certeau, 1984). De Certeau's theory emphasizes strategy and tactics. In his view, strategy belongs to the category of strong weapons that can control space, extending and clarifying boundaries, while tactics are weak weapons that depend on time, that have no spatial control, but can observe space and manipulate events piecemeal, subtly transforming them into opportunities and winning victories for the weak against the strong. Many everyday behaviors such as talking, reading, walking, shopping, cooking, etc. Linked to the research on women with ADHD, they are a multifaceted group, they cannot be understood simply from the perspective of victims, nor can they be reduced to consistent rebels. They are neither, yet they are all. They are more like the ordinary citizens of the city in De Certeau’s theory. They are aware of their dissatisfaction and the threats they faced, even if they don't direct say No. They use indirect tactics, which sometimes work and sometimes don't.

Methodology

To ensure diversity and representativeness, the study plans to include participants across multiple dimensions such as age, class, educational background, and urban-rural residency. Including 5–6 case studies, divided into 3 age groups: 20–30 years, 30–40years, and 40–50years, with 1–2 cases from each group. The ongoing qualitative fieldwork conducted since 2024, including one-on-one semi-structured interviews with women engaging with ADHD discourse, as well as periods of close everyday observation with selected participants. In the case study section of this research, the participants are primarily women from urban areas in China. It is worth noting that the study did not initially set out to specifically select women from urban areas; rather, the investigation revealed that most women currently reporting ADHD reside in urban areas. This finding also highlights, to some extent, the urban-rural and class disparities underlying the ADHD phenomenon.

This study also analyzed lively discussions on social media. This part involved discourse analysis of approximately 100 ADHD-related posts collected between 2023 and 2026, focusing on participants' real-life experiences rather than pathologizing the content. For example, it observed women's attitudes towards their ADHD identity and how they applied their understanding of ADHD in various situations, including family of origin, intimate relationships, career and education, personal development, and societal expectations. Thematic analysis categorized the content and identified recurring themes from the data. This study also examined official statistics and literature on ADHD in women, both domestically and internationally.

Findings and Discussion

This study argues that the application and acceptance of ADHD in the daily lives of contemporary Chinese women does not manifest as purely Western medical knowledge, but rather as situated knowledge. To understand it, it is necessary to examine the cultural frameworks used throughout Chinese history to define female difference.

Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology in China (Chou, 2013). For women, Confucianism reinforced their subordinate status within the family and society by extolling obedience and self-restraint as virtues (Gao, 2003). The dissemination of idealized concepts such as the “virtuous wife and good mother” standardized and reinforced traditional female roles (Liu, 2014). These idealized concepts confine the standards of “normal” womanhood to an extremely narrow range. In other words, women who fail to embody virtues such as self-restraint, composure, and self-sacrifice are subjected to moral pressure that justifies harsh judgment. These dynamic silences, marginalizes, and even punishes many women who refuse to conform. A notable example is that of Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机), a female poet from the Tang Dynasty. While her literary works are noteworthy, it is her sexual scandals that have gained widespread circulation. Many analyses from Jia‘s book contend that while Yu Xuanji was undeniably talented and held considerable significance in the annals of Chinese poetry, subsequent critics have selectively portrayed her as a prostitute, relishing the narrative of her perceived moral decline as she vied for the attention of men. Ironically, male poets associated with Yu Xuanji have generally received greater attention for their achievements while avoiding moral scrutiny, even when committing similar offenses, they have faced lighter punishments than Yu Xuanji (Jia, 2022, pp. 207–236). In Chinese folklore and literary narratives, there are lot of examples where women’s emotional intensity, autonomy, or nonconformity are repeatedly linked to danger, instability, or moral failings.

However, it is unfair to understand Confucian moral norms as the only cultural framework in ancient China. For example, Taoist thought was also widely circulated among the Chinese people in history. Concepts such as *Zi Ran* (自然, following one's own nature) and *Wu Wei* (无为, non-coercive action) framing individual temperament, rhythms, and differences as integral to the natural order rather than as defects to be corrected (Tzu & Lau, 1981). The well-known Daoist story of the "useless tree" illustrates this perspective: A giant tree called "Chū" (樗) was disliked by carpenters because its wood seemed "useless"—too knotty, twisted, or soft to be suitable for tools. Zhuangzi's student asked him if it was a pity. Zhuangzi countered that this very "uselessness" saved it. Because it was deemed useless, no one cut it down, allowing it to grow undisturbed and live a long life. Zhuangzi's perspective is simple yet incisive: What you deem useless might be the perfect life for me. Through the story of the useless tree, Zhuangzi points out that secular judgments of value often rely solely on usefulness—but useful to whom? From the tree's own perspective, it need not be useful. It can even gain freedom, safety, and the space to be itself precisely through its "uselessness" to humans (Morejón, 2014).

Nevertheless, Since the Han dynasty, Daoist philosophy has never occupied the core of the imperial "court" ideology, it remained outside the primary apparatus of state governance and the Confucian-dominated education system,as a result, its tolerance for individual difference lacked institutional support (Freiberg, 1977). even in folk contexts, Daoist-style acceptance often required women to exit mainstream gender roles. Becoming a female Daoist or shamans generally meant relinquishing the social positions of wife and mother and withdrawing from the family-based networks of authority and economy. In other words, the space for alternative interpretations of "difference" was made available only by relocating women outside the core spheres of social and reproductive labor (Despeux, 2000). Therefore, Daoist acceptance of "difference" also limited and conditional.

Thus, even before the advent of Western modern psychoanalysis and the DSM manual, and before the concept of ADHD emerged, China had its own way of categorizing women as "normal" or "abnormal." This classification was deeply rooted in a culture that had been passed down for thousands of years, forming its own moral system. The emergence of medical concepts such as ADHD has provided an interpretive framework distinct from traditional Chinese culture.

In recent years, posts and bloggers discussing ADHD have been popping up on major Chinese digital platforms, with many trending hashtags consistently racking up high view counts. For example, some women are open about identifying as having ADHD on their personal profiles, displaying it publicly much like MBTI types as a statement of personal identity. There are also many women who refer to themselves as "an ADHDer," using this identity to discuss their recent life experiences or challenges. Certain phrases have been identified as recurring themes, such as "Being diagnosed with ADHD has helped me finally stop self-blame," "So, I have ADHD, it's not my fault; our brains are just differently", or, "ADHD requires scaffolding help, so stop carrying all the things on your shoulder!" Those women engage with ADHD-related knowledge actively, and they are mostly concentrated in China's first-tier and/or second-tier cities, even though some of their families of origin come from rural areas. These women generally have higher levels of education, and a significant proportion have or have had good professional incomes. However, they all experienced varying degrees of self-doubt and life challenges before their ADHD diagnosis. Some sought a diagnosis after becoming mothers and realizing they could not adequately handle caregiving responsibilities, others considered it under immense work pressure, and still others decided to seek a diagnosis in the face of academic stress. They use the internet to learn more about ADHD, and at the same time, many

are creating new knowledge about ADHD through their own life experiences. For example, on Xiaohongshu (Rednote App), Many posts by women with ADHD also frequently relate to "ADHD study methods", "ADHD organization", "lifestyle", or "relaxation techniques".

Popular hashtags related to ADHD reflect the visibility and legitimacy of this topic as a subject for open discussion online. But it is important to note that platform algorithms play a key role in determining which ADHD-related narratives gain visibility. As research on the attention economy has pointed out, within the competitive landscape of the attention economy, platforms tend to prioritize content that aligns with the "emotional economy." Vlogs featuring lighthearted humor, self-deprecating banter, productivity tips, or visually appealing content often receive higher recommendation rates (Dai & Wang, 2023). This trend that aligns with discussions about ADHD: For example, content that is considered to fit the platform's preferences, such as "planting seeds" (种草, promoting consumption) or "being interesting," will have a high level of engagement, while content that calls for attention to systemic injustice or questions the authenticity of ADHD will have a hard time getting exposure. For example, a short video on Xiaohongshu titled "*ADHD Is a High-Dimensional Brain Trapped in a Low-Dimensional Reality*" received 13,000 likes, while a long-form article titled "*Why Women's ADHD Is Always Overlooked*" risks being buried. It's no wonder that even within the ADHD discourse, some people with severe symptoms condemn this trend of treating ADHD as the latest "fashion item" for taking up space that should belong to people with ADHD who are struggling to seek help, downplaying their suffering, and reducing their chances of getting substantial help.

Under this selective traffic-targeting logic of algorithms, ADHD traits such as inattention, forgetfulness, or disorganization have the potential to be redefined. For example, as quirky, interesting, or unique personal traits rather than medical "pathologies." This shift from "illness" to "identity" offers women the opportunity to explore reconfiguration their own narratives, In this process of reconstruction, a reexamination of gender issues has effectively unfolded. When women share their experiences with ADHD, they often weave in detail from their daily lives, for example, the exhaustion from meritocracy, the sense of helplessness in the face of the burdens of motherhood...However, if these stories were not discussed within the framework of ADHD, many of these details could easily be dismissed as "advocating for giving up," "much more individualism," "complaining," "laziness," or "stirring up emotions"—all of which are viewed as "negative energy" on the Chinese internet (Yang & Tang, 2018). It can be said that the ADHD discourse provides women with a space, though this space only exists when their narratives align with the platform's expectations regarding femininity and consumer culture.

Conclusion

The concept of ADHD, which is prevalent among contemporary Chinese women, is by no means merely a biomedical concept. By examining the construction of the "normal/abnormal" cultural framework in traditional Chinese culture, the contemporary context of coexisting traditional and Western medicine, how women use digital platforms to reinterpret ADHD knowledge, and how these platforms construct a localized discourse on ADHD, this study reveals that some contemporary Chinese women selectively employ ADHD discourse as situated knowledge in their daily life negotiations. It is worth emphasizing that This study does not view "female abnormality" as an early or primitive precursor to contemporary diagnostic categories but rather aims to explore how women who deviated from normative expectations were constructed on moral and cultural levels prior to the emergence of the biomedical framework. By examining the continuity of traditional theories and the coexistence of Western

and traditional Chinese medicine in China, we can better understand in contemporary China, biomedical knowledge regarding ADHD has neither fallen into a rootless void nor simply replaced indigenous cognitive frameworks, rather, it has become a hybrid and situated form of knowledge, engage and share via digital platforms, and use as tactics in everyday life negotiation sometimes. Participants in this study were primarily recruited from currently active female internet users, so this study does not attempt to encompass all ADHD-related experiences within China. Future research may further explore associated factors such as regional differences, class dynamics, and family structures.

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Negotiating Hiroshima's Cultural Memory Across Media: Comparative Analysis of Japanese Animation and French Cinema

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Abstract

Hiroshima has been remembered through documentary testimony, animation, and cinema. As a site of cultural memory, its meanings continue to be negotiated across different national, historical, and representational contexts. This paper investigates how Hiroshima as a site of cultural memory is linguistically constructed across Japanese animation and French cinema. Moving beyond visual-centric approaches in film and memory studies, it foregrounds language as a constitutive site of memory production, examining how dialogue, narrative voice, and discourse structure shape the representation of historical trauma. The study conducts a comparative analysis of *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), *In This Corner of the World* (2016), and *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). Drawing on frameworks from cultural memory studies, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, it examines language at micro (lexical choice, repetition, silence), meso (register, politeness, interactional dynamics), and macro (narrative voice, fragmentation, temporal structure) levels. Findings show that Japanese animation constructs war memory through embodied everyday speech, where repetition, politeness, and silence embed trauma within ordinary interaction. In contrast, French cinema articulates memory through fragmented and reflexive discourse, where repetition and narrative disruption highlight the instability of testimony and remembrance. Despite these differences, both traditions demonstrate that memory is actively produced through language. The paper argues that language is not a transparent medium of memory but a site where cultural memory is negotiated, reconstructed, and transmitted across cultures. This interdisciplinary approach contributes to film and linguistic studies by demonstrating how linguistic practices shape transnational representations of historical trauma and highlighting the importance of discourse analysis in visual media.

Keywords: postwar Japanese animation, war trauma, cultural/transnational memory, interdisciplinary media studies, discourse analysis

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Introduction

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 remains one of the most significant events in modern history and one of the most enduring symbols of cultural trauma. Beyond its historical reality, Hiroshima has become a powerful site of memory continuously reconstructed through literature, film, visual art, and documentary media. As subsequent generations become increasingly distant from direct wartime experience, media representations have assumed a crucial role in shaping how Hiroshima is remembered, interpreted, and transmitted. Hiroshima therefore functions not only as a historical event but also as a cultural construct whose meanings are repeatedly negotiated across different social, national, and media contexts. Documentary works such as *Atomic People* (Ishikawa, 2015) and *La face cachée d'Hiroshima* (Dechavanne, 2017) preserve survivor testimony and contribute to ongoing public engagement with the bombing, while fictional narratives continue to reinterpret its historical and emotional significance for new audiences.

Among the various forms of representation, Japanese animation and French cinema offer particularly illuminating perspectives on the construction of war memory. Although both engage with the legacy of Hiroshima and the broader trauma of World War II, they employ markedly different narrative and aesthetic strategies. Japanese animated films such as *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata, 1988) and *In This Corner of the World* (Katabuchi, 2016) foreground ordinary life and interpersonal relationships, embedding historical violence within the routines of everyday existence. In contrast, Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) approaches Hiroshima through fragmented narration, transnational encounters, and philosophical reflections on memory and forgetting. Together, these works provide a rich comparative corpus for examining how memory is constructed across media and cultural traditions.

Existing scholarship on Hiroshima in visual media has primarily emphasized issues of representation, trauma, affect, and narrative form. Studies of Japanese animation frequently focus on emotional engagement, pacifist discourse, and postwar identity formation (Anandhasayanam, 2025; Napier, 2005). Research on *Hiroshima mon amour* has similarly examined the relationship between personal memory and collective history, emphasizing the film's fragmented temporality and reflexive structure (Nora, 1989; Rancière, 2009). While these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of war memory, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of language in shaping these representations.

This omission is notable because memory is not merely communicated through language; it is actively structured by linguistic practices. Dialogue, narrative voice, repetition, silence, and interactional patterns do not simply express pre-existing memories. Rather, they contribute to the production of memory itself. The ways characters speak, remain silent, address one another, or fail to communicate all participate in the construction of historical meaning. Consequently, an examination of linguistic practices can reveal dimensions of memory that may remain obscured within predominantly visual approaches.

This study therefore investigates how language functions in the construction of Hiroshima as cultural memory across Japanese animation and French cinema. Rather than asking only how Hiroshima is represented, it examines how memory is linguistically mediated through discourse, interaction, and narrative organization. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between language, trauma, and temporality, as well as to the ways different

media establish distinct conditions under which memory becomes speakable, visible, or resistant to representation.

Three research questions guide this study:

1. How do Japanese animation and French cinema employ language and narrative voice to construct cultural memory?
2. How are trauma, emotion, and subjectivity articulated through linguistic features such as repetition, silence, register, and fragmentation?
3. In what ways do different linguistic practices reflect broader cultural approaches to memory, identity, and historical representation?

Drawing on cultural memory studies, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and film theory, this paper argues that language is not merely a vehicle through which memory is transmitted. Instead, language functions as a constitutive site where memory is produced, negotiated, and contested. Furthermore, Hiroshima emerges not simply as a historical reference point but as a temporal rupture that reshapes the linguistic conditions under which memory can be articulated. Through a comparative analysis of Japanese animation and French cinema, this study contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the relationship between language, media, and cultural memory.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that integrates cultural memory studies, media theory, and linguistic approaches to discourse. By placing language at the center of analysis, the framework moves beyond purely visual interpretations of cinema and animation and conceptualizes memory as a socially embedded and discursively constructed process.

Cultural Memory

The concept of cultural memory provides an essential foundation for understanding how societies remember historical events beyond the lifespan of direct witnesses. Halbwachs (1992) argues that memory is fundamentally social rather than individual. Individuals remember within socially structured frameworks that determine what can be recalled and how recollections are organized. Memory, therefore, is not a stable record of the past but a reconstruction shaped by present social conditions.

Building upon Halbwachs' work, Assmann (2011) distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory is maintained through everyday interpersonal interaction and generally extends across only a few generations. Cultural memory, by contrast, is preserved through symbolic forms such as texts, rituals, monuments, museums, and media. These cultural forms allow historical events to remain meaningful long after direct experience has disappeared.

Within this framework, Hiroshima can be understood as a prominent site of cultural memory. Its significance is continuously reproduced through representational practices that shape how historical trauma is understood by later generations. Films and animated works do not merely preserve historical knowledge; they actively participate in the ongoing reconstruction of memory by providing narrative frameworks through which the past becomes intelligible.

Hiroshima may also be understood as a *lieu de mémoire*, a symbolic site where collective remembrance is continuously negotiated (Nora, 1989).

Media, Narrative, and Memory

Although memory may be transmitted through multiple media forms, different media construct memory in distinct ways. Film and animation are particularly significant because they combine visual, auditory, and linguistic modes of communication. As multimodal forms, they offer complex mechanisms for representing experiences that may resist conventional narration.

Japanese animation frequently emphasizes everyday experience and embodied perception. Napier (2005) argues that anime often creates emotional engagement through intimate attention to ordinary life, enabling viewers to experience historical events through personal and affective perspectives. In war-related narratives, this strategy situates trauma within domestic spaces and interpersonal relationships rather than within military or political discourse.

French cinema, particularly *Hiroshima mon amour*, adopts a markedly different approach. Rather than presenting coherent historical narratives, the film disrupts temporal continuity through fragmented storytelling, repetition, and reflexive narration. Such strategies challenge assumptions that memory can be transparently represented and instead foreground the instability of recollection itself.

Nichols (2017) emphasizes that cinematic representations of historical events are never neutral reproductions of reality. Instead, they involve specific representational choices that shape how viewers understand the past. Memory is therefore not simply depicted by media but actively constructed through narrative and formal techniques.

Language, Discourse, and Trauma

At the center of this study lies a discourse-oriented understanding of language. Rather than treating language as a neutral medium of communication, discourse analysis conceptualizes language as a social practice through which meaning is produced and negotiated.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, linguistic choices index social identities and relationships. Features such as politeness, speech style, register, and forms of address position speakers within broader social structures. These linguistic resources are particularly significant in Japanese contexts, where speech styles frequently encode age, gender, and social hierarchy.

Narrative discourse also plays a crucial role in memory construction. Who speaks, from what perspective, and with what authority profoundly influences how historical experiences are represented. Memory is therefore not simply content being conveyed but a discursive process shaped by narrative organization and interactional dynamics.

Trauma theory further highlights the importance of linguistic disruption. Caruth (1996) argues that traumatic experiences often resist straightforward narration because they exceed conventional structures of understanding. As a result, trauma frequently manifests through repetition, fragmentation, silence, and discontinuity. Similarly, Sontag (2003) suggests that

representations of suffering reveal the limitations of language and image in communicating extreme experiences.

These insights are particularly relevant to Hiroshima-related narratives. The atomic bombing represents a form of historical violence that challenges conventional modes of representation. Consequently, linguistic instability, silence, and repetition become significant not because they fail to represent trauma, but because they reveal the conditions under which trauma becomes representable at all.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives support the central argument of this study: memory is not merely expressed through language but emerges through linguistic, visual, and temporal structures that shape how historical experience becomes meaningful. Language therefore functions not as a transparent medium of remembrance but as a critical site where memory is continually reconstructed and contested.

Memory is therefore understood as a discursive process rather than a stable repository of historical information.

Literature Review

Japanese Animation and War Memory

Japanese animation has long played a significant role in shaping postwar cultural memory, particularly in relation to World War II and its aftermath. Scholars have argued that anime provides a distinctive medium through which historical trauma can be represented, remembered, and transmitted across generations. Unlike conventional historical narratives that focus on military events or political actors, many animated works emphasize everyday experiences, personal relationships, and the emotional consequences of war (Napier, 2005). Beyond national contexts, Japanese animation has also circulated globally as a form of cultural exchange and memory transmission. Iwabuchi (2002) argues that Japanese popular culture plays an important role in transnational cultural flows, allowing local narratives to acquire broader international significance.

Within this context, Hiroshima-related animation contributes not only to Japanese postwar memory but also to global understandings of war and trauma. Among the most extensively studied examples is *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata, 1988), which has been widely recognized for its portrayal of civilian suffering and childhood vulnerability during wartime. Existing research frequently highlights the film's emotional intensity and its critique of war through the experiences of Seita and Setsuko. Rather than presenting large-scale military conflict, the film focuses on the gradual deterioration of ordinary life, encouraging viewers to engage with the human costs of war at an intimate level (Napier, 2005).

Similarly, *In This Corner of the World* (Katabuchi, 2016) has attracted scholarly attention for its depiction of domestic life during wartime Japan. Anandhasayanam (2025) argues that the film contributes to postwar memory by portraying everyday experiences that coexist with larger national narratives of conflict and loss. Through its emphasis on routine activities, family relationships, and local community life, the film demonstrates how historical trauma becomes embedded within ordinary social practices. Such representations challenge simplified understandings of wartime memory by highlighting the complex relationship between personal experience and collective remembrance.

Despite these important contributions, scholarship on Japanese animation has generally privileged visual aesthetics, emotional engagement, and ideological interpretation. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the role of language in shaping these representations. Dialogue, speech style, politeness strategies, and patterns of silence are often treated as secondary elements rather than as central mechanisms through which memory and identity are constructed. Consequently, there remains a need for research that examines how linguistic practices contribute to the formation of cultural memory within animated representations of war.

Hiroshima mon amour and Memory Studies

In contrast to Japanese animation, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959) occupies a central position within both memory studies and film theory. Since its release, the film has been widely discussed for its innovative narrative structure and its exploration of the relationship between personal memory and historical trauma. Rather than offering a straightforward account of Hiroshima, the film presents a fragmented narrative in which recollections, emotions, and historical events intersect in complex and often contradictory ways.

Scholars have frequently emphasized the film's disruption of linear temporality. Memory in *Hiroshima mon amour* is not presented as a stable recollection of the past but as a dynamic process in which past and present continually overlap. Nora (1989) identifies such disruptions as characteristic of modern memory cultures, where historical experience is increasingly mediated through symbolic forms rather than direct recollection. The film's shifting temporal structure thus reflects broader concerns regarding the instability of memory and the difficulty of representing traumatic events.

Another important area of scholarship concerns the ethics of representation. Rather than claiming to reproduce the reality of Hiroshima, the film repeatedly questions the possibility of fully understanding or depicting historical trauma. This concern is particularly evident in the recurring dialogue that challenges the authority of witnessing and memory. From this perspective, *Hiroshima mon amour* has often been interpreted as a meditation on the limitations of representation itself (Rancière, 2009).

Although language occupies a prominent role within many discussions of the film, it is frequently approached from philosophical or narratological perspectives rather than through systematic linguistic analysis. Existing studies have examined themes such as memory, testimony, and subjectivity, yet relatively little research has explored how specific linguistic features—including repetition, silence, pronoun use, and discourse organization—contribute to the construction of memory. This gap is particularly significant given the film's reliance on dialogue and monologue as primary narrative devices.

Language, Film, and the Construction of Memory

Research on language in film has developed across several interdisciplinary fields, including discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, narrative theory, and media studies. These approaches have demonstrated that language serves functions far beyond the transmission of information. Through dialogue, narrative voice, and interactional patterns, films construct social identities, emotional relationships, and ideological positions.

Discourse-oriented approaches emphasize that narrative meaning emerges through specific linguistic choices and communicative practices. Narrative voice, for example, shapes how events are interpreted by determining who speaks, from what position, and with what degree of authority. Similarly, repetition, hesitation, and silence can function as meaningful discourse features rather than merely stylistic devices. Such features are particularly relevant in representations of trauma, where experiences often resist coherent narration (Caruth, 1996).

Despite growing interest in language and media, relatively few studies have integrated linguistic analysis with cultural memory research. Few studies have systematically examined how linguistic practices contribute to the construction of Hiroshima as cultural memory.

Existing scholarship on Hiroshima-related films tends to focus either on visual representation or on philosophical interpretations of memory, leaving linguistic dimensions underexamined. Furthermore, comparative studies that investigate how language operates across different cultural and media contexts remain limited.

This study addresses these gaps by placing language at the center of analysis. By combining insights from cultural memory studies, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, it examines how linguistic practices contribute to the construction of Hiroshima as a site of cultural memory. Through a comparative analysis of Japanese animation and French cinema, the study seeks to demonstrate that memory is not merely represented through language but actively produced through linguistic and discursive processes.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach that combines discourse analysis, sociolinguistic analysis, and cultural memory studies. Rather than treating film and animation primarily as visual texts, the study conceptualizes them as multimodal discursive artifacts in which memory is constructed through the interaction of language, image, sound, and narrative structure. The primary objective is to investigate how Hiroshima as a site of cultural memory is linguistically produced across different media and cultural contexts.

Data Selection

The corpus consists of three films: *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata, 1988), *In This Corner of the World* (Katabuchi, 2016), and *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais, 1959). These works were selected because they represent influential cinematic engagements with wartime memory while employing distinct narrative and linguistic strategies.

The two Japanese animated films focus on everyday civilian experiences during wartime Japan, emphasizing family relationships, domestic life, and ordinary communication. In contrast, *Hiroshima mon amour* examines memory through fragmented narration, intercultural dialogue, and reflexive discourse. Together, these texts provide a productive basis for comparing how language contributes to the construction of cultural memory across Japanese animation and French cinema.

The analysis focuses on scenes associated with remembrance, loss, trauma, and interpersonal interaction. Particular attention is given to sequences characterized by repetition, silence, emotional tension, shifts in narrative perspective, and disruptions in communication. Since

the study is concerned with discourse functions rather than translation accuracy, the analysis prioritizes communicative patterns and narrative organization over detailed linguistic comparison between source and translated texts.

Analytical Framework

The study employs a three-level discourse-analytic framework consisting of micro-, meso-, and macro-level analysis. This framework allows memory to be examined as a linguistic and discursive process operating simultaneously at multiple levels of communication.

Micro-Level Analysis

The micro level focuses on lexical and interactional features within individual utterances. Particular attention is paid to repetition, lexical choice, pauses, silence, hesitation, and emotionally marked expressions. These features are analyzed as discursive resources through which memory and trauma become communicatively meaningful.

Repetition is examined not merely as a stylistic device but as a mechanism through which experiences are recalled, reinforced, or destabilized. Similarly, silence is treated as an active communicative strategy that contributes to the construction of meaning rather than as a simple absence of speech.

Meso-Level Analysis

The meso level investigates interactional dynamics between speakers. This includes forms of address, politeness strategies, turn-taking patterns, and the negotiation of social relationships through language.

Drawing on sociolinguistic perspectives, the analysis examines how communicative practices position speakers within broader social structures such as family relationships, gender roles, and cultural expectations. Memory is therefore understood not solely as an individual cognitive phenomenon but as a socially situated process emerging through interaction.

Macro-Level Analysis

The macro level focuses on broader discourse organization and narrative structure. This includes narrative voice, temporal organization, monologue, dialogue, fragmentation, and retrospective narration.

Particular attention is paid to the ways in which discourse structures shape the relationship between past and present. Memory is conceptualized as a narrative process in which historical experiences are continually reconstructed through acts of narration and interpretation. This level of analysis is especially important for understanding how different media traditions organize remembrance through distinct discursive forms.

Memory as Discursive Construction

The analytical framework is informed by the assumption that memory is not simply represented through language but actively produced within it. Following cultural memory theory (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992), memory is understood as a socially mediated

process rather than a fixed repository of historical information. At the same time, discourse analysis emphasizes that meaning emerges through communicative practices rather than existing independently of them.

Consequently, the study does not treat dialogue as evidence of pre-existing memories. Instead, it examines how linguistic practices—including repetition, silence, politeness, and narrative organization—participate in the construction of cultural memory itself. The focus is therefore placed on the processes through which remembrance becomes possible rather than on the factual accuracy of historical representation.

Analysis: Linguistic Constructions of Cultural Memory

Grave of the Fireflies: Repetition, Silence, and Child Language

Micro-Level Analysis: Repetition and Linguistic Simplicity

At the micro level, *Grave of the Fireflies* constructs memory through repetition and linguistic simplicity. Setsuko's speech is characterized by repeated address terms, recurring requests, and emotionally direct expressions. These repetitions perform more than a communicative function. They establish continuity within an increasingly unstable social environment and create discursive patterns through which emotional attachment is maintained.

The repeated use of Seita's name is particularly significant. Rather than merely identifying the interlocutor, it reinforces the sibling relationship that constitutes the emotional center of the narrative. Memory therefore emerges through recurring linguistic forms that preserve interpersonal bonds despite the progressive destruction of the surrounding world.

The film also employs simple lexical choices associated with childhood experience. Food, family members, and everyday objects dominate the children's vocabulary. Historical events rarely appear through abstract political terminology. Instead, war becomes meaningful through concrete linguistic references to hunger, shelter, and loss. This lexical restriction contributes to a perspective in which trauma is experienced rather than explicitly interpreted.

Silence functions as an equally important discourse feature. As the siblings' situation deteriorates, moments of verbal interaction become shorter and less frequent. Silence does not represent a lack of communication but rather serves as a discursive resource through which emotional suffering becomes perceptible. Trauma is therefore constructed not only through speech but also through the gradual reduction of speech.

Meso-Level Analysis: Sibling Interaction

At the meso level, memory is constructed through interactional dynamics between Seita and Setsuko. Their conversations are characterized by intimacy, cooperation, and emotional dependency. Address forms and conversational patterns continually reinforce familial relationships.

Unlike institutional discourse or official wartime narratives, the film privileges private interaction. Historical experience becomes accessible through interpersonal communication rather than public testimony. The sibling relationship functions as a communicative framework within which traumatic experiences are negotiated and understood.

The persistence of affectionate interaction despite increasingly severe circumstances further contributes to the construction of memory. Trauma appears not as an isolated event but as a condition that gradually transforms everyday communication.

Macro-Level Analysis: Narrative Voice and Retrospective Memory

At the macro level, the film employs retrospective narration that positions memory as a process of reconstruction. The audience encounters events through a narrative framework already marked by loss and death. This structure transforms ordinary conversations into retrospective sites of remembrance.

Language therefore operates across multiple temporal layers. Everyday speech belongs simultaneously to the present of the narrative and to a remembered past. Memory emerges through this interaction between lived experience and retrospective narration.

In This Corner of the World: Politeness and Everyday Memory

Micro-Level Analysis: Domestic Lexicon

Unlike *Grave of the Fireflies*, *In This Corner of the World* constructs memory through a domestic vocabulary centered on food preparation, household activities, and family relationships. Lexical choices associated with ordinary routines dominate the film's discourse.

This linguistic focus is significant because it locates historical experience within everyday life. The effects of war are registered through changes in ordinary language rather than through direct references to military events. Food-related vocabulary becomes increasingly associated with scarcity and adaptation, allowing trauma to emerge through shifts in everyday discourse.

Meso-Level Analysis: Politeness and Gendered Speech

The film's most distinctive sociolinguistic feature is its use of politeness and gendered speech styles. Suzu frequently employs deferential expressions and indirect forms characteristic of traditional feminine speech.

These linguistic practices index social relationships and cultural expectations. Politeness functions not simply as etiquette but as a communicative mechanism through which social order is maintained. As wartime conditions intensify, however, these patterns become increasingly strained.

The persistence of polite language during periods of crisis reveals how memory is embedded within social interaction. Historical trauma is not external to everyday communication but becomes integrated into existing communicative practices. Politeness therefore serves as a linguistic site where continuity and disruption coexist.

Macro-Level Analysis: Everyday Temporality

At the macro level, the film organizes memory through everyday temporality rather than dramatic historical events. Narrative progression is structured around routines, seasonal changes, and domestic activities.

This temporal organization shapes the linguistic construction of memory. Ordinary conversations gradually acquire retrospective significance because viewers recognize their proximity to future catastrophe. Memory is therefore produced through the interaction between everyday discourse and historical knowledge.

The film demonstrates how cultural memory may be constructed through continuity rather than rupture. Language preserves the texture of ordinary life while simultaneously registering its vulnerability.

Hiroshima mon amour: Fragmentation and Reflexive Memory

Micro-Level Analysis: Repetition and Pronouns

At the micro level, *Hiroshima mon amour* relies heavily on repetition. The recurring statement, "You saw nothing in Hiroshima," functions as a discourse marker that destabilizes claims to knowledge and testimony.

Unlike the repetition found in *Grave of the Fireflies*, which reinforces interpersonal attachment, repetition here undermines certainty. Each recurrence questions the possibility of fully understanding traumatic history.

Pronoun usage further contributes to this instability. References to "I," "you," and "we" shift throughout the narrative, producing ambiguity regarding agency, experience, and authority. Memory is constructed as relational and contested rather than individually possessed.

Meso-Level Analysis: Dialogic Conflict

At the meso level, communication is characterized by tension and contradiction. Dialogue rarely results in consensus or mutual understanding. Instead, conversational exchanges continually expose differences in perspective and experience.

The relationship between the French woman and the Japanese man functions as a site of intercultural negotiation. Communication remains possible, yet complete understanding remains unattainable. Memory is therefore constructed through interactional conflict rather than communicative harmony.

Macro-Level Analysis: Fragmented Narrative Structure

At the macro level, memory is produced through fragmentation and non-linear narration. Monologues, flashbacks, and temporal shifts disrupt chronological continuity.

This fragmented discourse reflects the instability of traumatic memory described by Caruth (1996). Past and present continually intersect, preventing memory from being organized into a coherent narrative.

The film thus constructs Hiroshima not as a stable historical object but as a discursive space where remembrance remains incomplete. Language repeatedly approaches trauma without fully resolving it, emphasizing the limitations of representation itself.

Analysis II: French Cinema

Monologue, Translingual Encounters, and the Instability of Memory

A distinctive feature of *Hiroshima mon amour* is its use of monologue and fragmented narration. Unlike the interaction-centered discourse of Japanese animation, the film frequently shifts into reflective speech that blurs the boundaries between memory, narration, and self-examination. The female protagonist's recollections of her German lover in Nevers emerge through discontinuous narrative fragments rather than chronological storytelling, presenting memory as an ongoing process of reinterpretation rather than a fixed record of the past.

This reflexive discourse highlights the inseparability of remembering and narrating. Memory becomes accessible only through language, yet language simultaneously reshapes what is remembered. As Nora (1989) suggests, modern memory is increasingly mediated through symbolic forms; in *Hiroshima mon amour*, the past exists only through incomplete and unstable acts of narration. The continual movement between present dialogue and remembered experience further disrupts temporal boundaries, positioning memory as an active force within present consciousness.

The film's transnational setting also foregrounds the limits of communication. The relationship between the French woman and the Japanese man brings together distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical experiences. Although communication remains possible, complete understanding is repeatedly shown to be unattainable. The memories of Hiroshima and Nevers intersect without fully merging, revealing both the possibilities and limitations of cross-cultural remembrance.

Ultimately, the film constructs memory through instability rather than continuity. Fragmentation, repetition, and reflexive narration expose the difficulties of representing traumatic history. Rather than preserving the past intact, language continually reconstructs it, demonstrating that memory remains a dynamic and contested process (Rancière, 2009).

Comparative Discussion

The comparison between Japanese animation and French cinema reveals fundamentally different linguistic logics of memory construction. In Japanese animation, language is grounded in everyday interaction, where memory is embedded within relational and embodied practices. In French cinema, language is fragmented and reflexive, foregrounding the instability of memory and the limits of representation.

These differences correspond to distinct temporal models of trauma. Japanese animation constructs trauma as a process of gradual erosion, while French cinema represents it as a sudden rupture. This temporal distinction is reflected in linguistic form, with the former emphasizing continuity and attenuation, and the latter emphasizing disruption and fragmentation.

Despite these differences, both traditions converge on a crucial insight: language is not merely a vehicle for memory but a constitutive site of its production. Memory does not exist independently of linguistic form; it is shaped by the structures and constraints of language.

This has important ethical implications. Both traditions resist the aestheticization of trauma, albeit through different strategies. French cinema does so through fragmentation and discontinuity, while Japanese animation does so through minimalism and the attenuation of spectacle. In both cases, representation foregrounds the limits of what can be said and shown.

Conclusion

This study has examined how language contributes to the construction of Hiroshima as cultural memory in Japanese animation and French cinema. The analysis addressed three primary research questions. First, it investigated how Japanese animation and French cinema employ language to construct cultural memory. The findings suggest that Japanese animated films tend to embed memory within everyday communication, emphasizing interpersonal relationships, domestic interactions, and routine linguistic practices. In contrast, *Hiroshima mon amour* constructs memory through fragmented discourse, reflexive narration, and the continual questioning of representational certainty. These distinct approaches reveal different cultural understandings of how historical experience can be remembered and communicated.

Second, the study examined how trauma is articulated through linguistic features such as repetition, silence, politeness, and fragmentation. Across the corpus, trauma emerges not simply through what is said but also through disruptions in communication. In the Japanese films, silence and communicative reduction reveal the gradual erosion of everyday life under wartime conditions. In *Hiroshima mon amour*, repetition and fragmentation expose the instability of memory and the difficulty of transforming traumatic experience into coherent narrative. These findings support trauma theorists' claims that extreme historical experiences often challenge conventional forms of linguistic representation (Caruth, 1996).

Third, the study explored how linguistic practices reflect broader cultural approaches to memory and historical representation. Japanese animation emphasizes continuity, embodiment, and the preservation of ordinary life, presenting memory as something lived through social relationships and everyday practices. French cinema, by contrast, foregrounds discontinuity, reflexivity, and temporal rupture, portraying memory as an unstable process that resists closure. Although these traditions differ significantly, both demonstrate that language plays a fundamental role in shaping how historical events become meaningful cultural memories.

The study contributes to existing scholarship in several ways. While previous research has often focused on visual aesthetics, historical representation, or philosophical interpretations of memory, this study places language at the center of analysis. By examining dialogue, silence, repetition, and narrative voice, it highlights the importance of linguistic practices in the production of cultural memory. The comparative approach demonstrates how different media traditions employ distinct discursive strategies to negotiate historical trauma.

More broadly, the findings suggest that Hiroshima should be understood not only as a historical event or symbolic site of memory but also as a discursive phenomenon continually reconstructed through acts of communication. Memory persists because it is repeatedly narrated and reinterpreted across contexts. Language therefore functions not merely as a vehicle for transmitting the past but as one of the primary mechanisms through which the past acquires meaning in the present.

Future research may expand this analysis by incorporating additional media forms, including documentaries, literary texts, digital storytelling platforms, and transnational adaptations of Hiroshima narratives. Comparative studies involving other histories of collective trauma may also provide further insight into the relationship between language, memory, and representation across cultural contexts. Such research would continue to illuminate the crucial role of discourse in shaping how societies remember, reinterpret, and engage with difficult pasts.

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

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI, free version) solely to assist in reducing the length of the manuscript (from approximately 7,700 words) and improving conciseness. The intellectual content, analysis, and arguments remain entirely the author's own.

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The *Loofah Soup* Phenomenon: Globalization, Media, and Changing Family Norms in China

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Abstract

A short video titled *Loofah Soup*, created by blogger @Lei Zi, has garnered 67,000 comments and nearly 1.3 million likes on Douyin (Chinese TikTok), triggering widespread resonance and imitation among Chinese families. Using this video as a case study, this research applies Fei Xiaotong's Differential Mode of Association, integrating perspectives from globalization and cross-cultural psychology to explore the core characteristics of intergenerational communication in contemporary Chinese families, the roots of intergenerational differences, and the formation of new family concepts. The study focuses on the first generation of parents raised after China's reform and opening-up and their Generation Z children, adopting a case study and textual analysis approach. Findings indicate that contemporary Chinese families still retain four core characteristics derived from the differential mode of association. However, the video's popularity has publicly exposed intergenerational conflicts, breaking the traditional norm that "family ugliness should not be publicized." Notably, globalization drives changes in family concepts, which represent cultural adjustments rather than a wholesale rejection of tradition. The study employs mediatization and cross-cultural psychology theories to explain how such videos facilitate modern transformation. This research innovatively combines Fei Xiaotong's classical sociological theory with the new media cultural phenomenon of short videos, transcending the textual limitations of traditional family studies by reflecting real family dynamics through public feedback. It provides a new theoretical perspective for interpreting intergenerational conflicts in contemporary Chinese families and offers practical insights for building modern family communication models based on equality and respect, thereby enriching interdisciplinary research in digital culture and family sociology.

Keywords: differential mode of association, globalization, mediatization, Chinese family, communication

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, short videos are far more than mere entertainment tools; they have become mediums that reflect social mentality and spark public discourse. The video *Loofah Soup*, created by blogger @Lei Zi, is a representative example. It depicts a typical family scene in which one performer plays multiple roles: a mother insists her child drink loofah soup, while the child expresses resistance and helplessness. This amplified portrayal of a minor family conflict has gained remarkable traction on Douyin—garnering nearly 1.3 million likes, over 60,000 comments, and countless imitations. This phenomenon indicates that family interaction patterns, once considered private and trivial, are now entering the realm of public discourse through new media.

This study uses the video as an entry point to examine the phenomenon through Fei Xiaotong's classic sociological framework of the Differential Mode of Association. Simultaneously, it incorporates the historical contexts of globalization and mediatization to explore the core traits of intergenerational interaction in contemporary Chinese families, the deep roots of intergenerational differences, and the generative mechanisms of new family concepts in the digital age. The study focuses on the interaction patterns between the first generation of parents raised after China's reform and opening-up and their Generation Z children. By applying classical theory to new media cultural phenomena, this research aims to transcend the limitations of traditional family studies that rely solely on textual analysis. Instead, it utilizes real public feedback to reflect family ecology, offering a new perspective for understanding intergenerational relationships in contemporary China with both theoretical innovation and practical significance.

Background

As one of China's largest and most influential short-video social media platforms, Douyin has evolved from a simple entertainment tool into a powerful disseminator that connects with society and expresses public sentiment. According to QuestMobile's annual report (2025), Douyin has nearly 600 million daily active users, covering diverse age groups, regions, and social classes. This makes it not only a core space for recording daily life and self-expression but also, through its algorithmic mechanisms, enables the cross-circle dissemination of diverse content with strong social mobilization and cultural shaping capabilities. This nationwide influence renders Douyin's content highly representative of mainstream culture.

Within Douyin's communication ecology, the sudden virality of amateur original content is one of the most vivid manifestations of its impact. Blogger @Lei Zi is a representative case, known for unique situational creations. @Lei Zi consistently produces one-person, multi-role family skits that restore real contradictions in family communication, forming a stable content style. The most representative video, *Loofah Soup*, went viral by combining Douyin's characteristic daily expression with realistic plot design and distinct character traits—such as a stubborn grandmother, an obstinate grandfather, a domineering mother, a father overly concerned with appearances, and a helpless son.

The dialogue excerpts, captured in Figures 1 through 4 below, serve as concrete textual evidence of the communicative patterns that define @Lei Zi's viral content. Figure 1 exemplifies the authoritative, top-down directive common in traditional family discourse, while Figure 2 illustrates the persistent, one-sided persuasion that characterizes intergenerational negotiations over everyday matters. The conversation in Figure 3 shifts to

pragmatic life planning, highlighting familial pressure on career choices, and Figure 4 extends this to societal expectations surrounding marriage timelines. Collectively, these texts logically demonstrate the core conflicts—over authority, autonomy, care, and life script—that @Lei Zi's skits dramatize. Their viral resonance on Douyin underscores how these specific, scripted interactions authentically mirror widespread tensions, transforming private family dialogues into a platform for public recognition and debate.

Figure 1

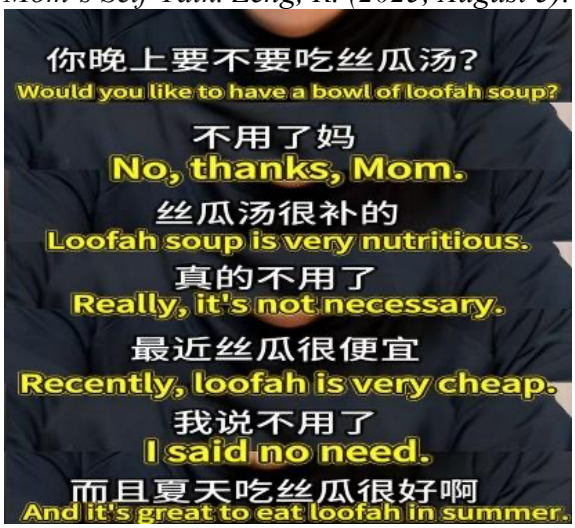
The Dialogue Between Mother and Son. From Zeng, R. (2025, August 5). The Loofah Soup series: Home is forever my? [Video]. Douyin.

Dialogue Text 1: Home is forever my? (Figure 1)

- Mother: From now on, when I show care for you, you should listen. Don't talk back. Isn't that being unfilial? No arguing. Do you understand?

Figure 2

Mom's Self-Talk. Zeng, R. (2025, August 5). The Loofah Soup [Video]. Douyin.



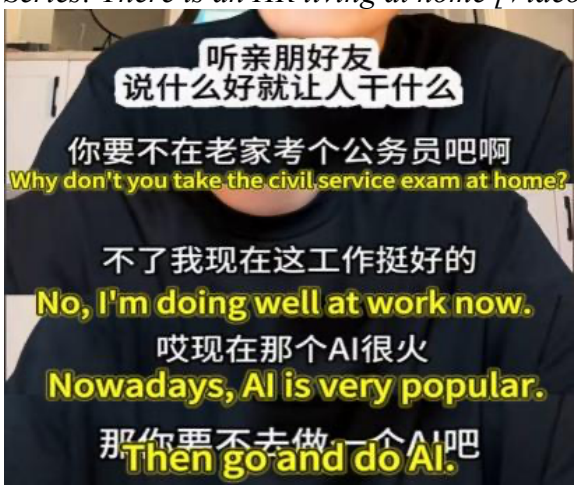
Dialogue Text 2: The Loofah Soup (Figure 2)

- Mother: Would you like some loofah soup tonight?
- Child: No, thank you, Mom.
- Mother: Loofah soup is very nourishing.
- Child: Really, it's not necessary.
- Mother: Loofah is quite cheap these days.

- Child: I said I don't want any.
- Mother: Besides, eating loofah in summer is really good for you.

Figure 3

Casual Work Suggestions From Family Members. Zeng, R. (2025, August 18). Loofah Soup Series: There is an HR living at home [Video]. Douyin.

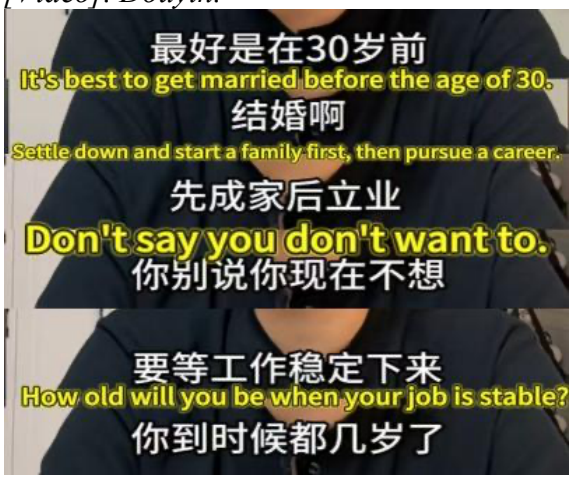


Dialogue Text 3: There is an HR living at home (Figure 3)

- Mother: Why don't you try taking the civil service exam back in our hometown?
- Child: No, I'm quite satisfied with my current job.
- Mother: Well, we listen to our friends say that AI is really hot right now. Why don't you go into AI?

Figure 4

The Pressure From Parents to Get Married. Zeng, R. (2025, November 6). The Loofah Soup Series: Keeping up with the times- my parents told me to get married by the time I'm thirty. [Video]. Douyin.



Dialogue Text 4: Keeping up with the times- my parents told me to get married by the time I'm thirty. (Figure 4)

- Mother: It's best to get married before you're 30. Start a family first, then build your career. Don't say you don't want to now. If you wait until your job is stable, how old will you be by then?

Methodology

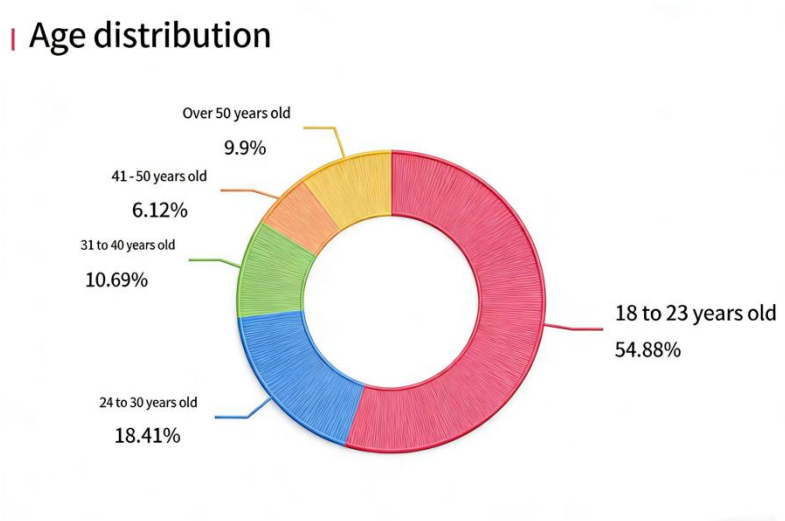
Research Approach

This research adopts quantitative analysis to systematically describe and compare aggregated and visualized user portrait data from the short-video platform. The core objective is to reveal the intergenerational communication characteristics of the audience engaging with blogger @Lei Zi's family sitcoms and, based on this, analyze the collision of social values reflected in the discussions triggered by the content. The research field selected is the official creator background of the HuiTun Data application, which provides standardized and de-identified macro fan portrait data, offering a reliable source for objective demographic measurement. Quantitative analysis is chosen because the study aims to accurately quantify the proportion and distribution of different intergenerational groups (e.g., Generation Z and their parents) within the core interactive audience, providing an empirical basis for subsequent discussions on intergenerational differences and modern tensions, rather than delving into individual subjective narratives.

Research Design

The core analysis focuses on the primary interaction and resonance groups of Douyin blogger @Lei Zi's video content. According to audience portraits provided by the HuiTun Data application, data analysis consciously centers on two generations with distinct historical coordinates in China's modernization process: the first generation of parents raised after reform and opening-up (born approximately between the late 1960s and early 1980s) and their Generation Z children (born approximately between the late 1990s and 2000s). As shown in Figure 5, over 73% of core interaction and resonance feedback comes from Generation Z users aged 18 to 30. These two generations are chosen due to their unique historical positions and value tensions in China's social modernization. Their interactions represent the collision and negotiation of significantly different social experiences and family ethics under the same roof.

Figure 5
Age Distribution of the Videos' Audience



All data materials used in the research are sourced from the follower analysis module in the official creator background of the HuiTun Data application. These materials consist of public aggregated statistical information generated by the platform and contain no personally

identifiable data. The specific data collected include age segments of the fan group (presented in pie charts and percentages).

Data collection was systematically conducted from September 30, 2025, to January 25, 2026. First, researchers logged into the official data analysis background of the HuiTun Data application via a legally authorized account. They then navigated to the follower analysis section for @Lei Zi. For exportable table data, the "Data Download" function in the background was used to obtain original files. For core indicators presented only in visual charts (e.g., age segment pie charts), system screenshot tools were employed for collection, and the accurate percentage values displayed in the charts were manually recorded. Finally, downloaded data tables were integrated with values extracted from screenshot records to construct a unified, verifiable structured dataset, archived and managed according to data dimensions and collection dates.

This study primarily uses descriptive statistical analysis to process and interpret the collected quantitative data. First, exported tables and screenshot records were integrated into a unified analysis table to ensure data consistency and accuracy. Then, frequencies and percentages for each core dimension were calculated and reported. For example, the proportion of Generation Z users (18–30 years old) in the core interactive group (> 73%) was accurately calculated and presented using charts. The distribution of other intergenerational groups and interest tags was also described. Subsequently, based on statistical results, data were interpreted within a clear intergenerational analysis framework (reform-and-opening-up-era parents vs. Generation Z children). The analysis examined how the audience structure revealed by the data provides a quantitative basis for understanding tensions between traditional inertia and modern adaptation, as well as collisions between authoritative roles and equality concepts.

Finally, the analysis explicitly acknowledges that all data are algorithmically generated representations by the platform. The results reveal audience structure from the platform's perspective. This limitation is an important aspect of understanding how digital platforms mediate social reality and is further reflected in the discussion section.

Ethical Considerations

The entire research process strictly adheres to ethical norms for digital society research. All analysis data are derived directly from highly aggregated statistical results provided by the platform's official background. The study does not involve crawling personal privacy information or acquiring non-public data. This operational process fully complies with China's Internet Information Service Management Measures provisions on data use and the user service agreements of relevant platforms, ensuring the research's compliance and ethical integrity.

Literature Review

Intergenerational communication in contemporary Chinese families has become a focal point in the era of digitalization and globalization, with short video phenomena like *Loofah Soup* manifesting as contradictions between traditional communication patterns and modern values. This section reviews relevant theories and empirical studies to lay a foundation for subsequent analysis.

The Differential Mode of Association (Fei, 1947) is a key theory from Fei Xiaotong's *From the Soil*, which systematically explains the unique family pattern in China as a core concept of

intergenerational communication. Fei described this mode as "concentric ripples that spread out when a stone is dropped into the water," contrasting it with Western family norms, which he likened to "a neatly bundled bundle of firewood." This theory provides a local framework for interpreting unique communication characteristics specific to Chinese families. Subsequent studies (e.g., Peking University Department of Sociology, 2019) confirmed the theory's modern adaptability, noting that while the "blood-based core circle" persists, its boundaries have contracted to nuclear families. However, existing research rarely links this traditional framework to digital media contexts.

Friedrich Krotz's Mediatization Theory (Krotz, 2009) offers a tool to interpret the impact of new media on younger generations' demands for family communication in China. This theory provides an ideological basis for the media dimensions (technical, aesthetic, institutional) presented in videos. It effectively explains how short videos reshape private family interactions and promote modern transformation, yet few studies have combined it with how media forms facilitate cultural transformation in intergenerational communication.

Existing studies exhibit three gaps: first, over-reliance on single theories, lacking synergy between traditional sociological and new media theories; second, insufficient attention to short video cases as manifestations of changing traditional Chinese family communication modes; third, inadequate analysis of how digital media break the tradition that "family ugliness should not be publicized." To address these gaps, this study integrates the Differential Mode of Association, Mediatization Theory, and cross-cultural psychology, using the *Loofah Soup* video as a case to explore the transformation of intergenerational communication in contemporary Chinese families.

Analysis

The Four Traits of Traditional Chinese Family Communication

The video exhibits a top-down communication mode and one-way authoritative output, rooted in Fei's (1947) illustration:

> Our pattern is not like a neatly bundled bundle of firewood, but rather like the concentric ripples that spread out when a stone is dropped into water. Each individual is at the center of the circle of influence that he exerts on others. Those who are within the circle's reach are connected.

The most important kinship relationships in Chinese society are characterized by these concentric ripples, leading to a hierarchical order based on ethical norms. Elders occupy the center of family power with greater decision-making authority, while the younger generation is expected to follow obedience as a core behavioral guideline.

"In the differential mode of association, the concepts of public and private are relative. From any position within the circle, looking inward can also be regarded as being public" (Fei, 1947). This excerpt highlights the ambiguity between public and private domains in Chinese families, resulting in a strong coupling of emotional transmission and benefit expression in family communication. Emotions and interests intertwine, making communication a mixed form blending expressive and instrumental ties. The differential mode determines that the Chinese family functions as a community managing matters beyond the individual, encompassing economic, political, and religious roles. In other words, the Chinese "home" is fundamentally

a business organization. Thus, communication frequently involves practical issues such as family responsibilities, resource allocation, and intergenerational assistance—including children's education, life planning, career choices, marriage, and childbirth.

> In this elastic network, the self is always at the center. This is not individualism but egoism. Individualism is a concept that applies to groups, where each member is equal and has certain rights that cannot be violated. Egoism, on the other hand, is centered on the self and extends outward in ever-widening circles of relationships. (Fei, 1947)

Regarding the distinction between individualism and this self-centered essence, a self-centered parental perspective dominates communication. This is not "selfishness" but a natural logic through which parents instill values in children via ethical extension "for the sake of others" and emotional binding through "circular responsibility."

> Confucius most emphasized the word 'Tui (推)' (push/extend), likening it to the spreading ripples when a stone is dropped into water. He first acknowledged the existence of the self, the self in 'Tui Ji Ji Ren (推己及人)' (extend oneself to others). Following the concentric circles of ethical relationships, one can then extend outward. From the self to the family, from the family to the state, from the state to all under heaven—this is a single path. (Fei, 1992)

Given this traditional pattern, parents might neglect children's individual needs, essentially treating children as extensions of themselves, believing that children following their values means "being responsible for oneself and the family."

The Theory's Adaptability and Communication Modes' Breakthrough

Fei (1947) stressed the elasticity and flexibility of the differential mode of association. As the sphere around the "self" expands and contracts, social relationships exhibit elasticity. This structural feature sustains vitality during the transition from tradition to modernity and enables boundary adjustments in response to environmental changes.

The formation of this mode is deeply intertwined with rural society's production methods and cultural traditions. Under the impact of urbanization, modern individualization, and egalitarian values, the younger generation's demand for "abolishing the outdated and retaining the beneficial" essentially aims to adapt the traditional family model to modern societal demands.

The beneficial aspects of traditional family characteristics are reflected in the family's role as an emotional and responsibility-based community, as well as a cornerstone of social stability, providing crucial support for family continuity and individual risk resistance (Zhou, 2019). These traits still meet core needs of modern families.

However, the four core communication traits in Chinese families identified in this research are often viewed negatively. Overemphasis on these characteristics has overlooked or even violated children's individual rights (e.g., personal rights, property rights, decision-making rights), causing emotional repression and psychological issues, becoming a major conflict point in modern individual awakening.

Beyond critiquing the four core traits through video form, the act of turning family conflicts into video content itself breaks traditional Chinese concepts stemming from the differential

mode of association. "Family ugliness should not be publicized" refers to private family affairs that should not be exposed publicly, essentially serving as a mechanism to safeguard family honor and face. Internal family conflicts were traditionally revealed only to core members within the family's concentric circles.

Due to traditional values, young Chinese often avoid disclosing family matters to non-relatives. This reflects the circular restriction on publicizing family secrets—discussion is permitted only within the core circle of the differential mode. Traditionally, exposing domestic conflicts to others is equated with lack of family discipline and filial impiety. Young people hesitate to complain about family conflicts on social media, confirming the intergenerational transmission of the taboo against revealing family secrets. However, digital media's rise has challenged this tradition. WeChat, China's most popular mobile social media app, integrates functions similar to *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *WhatsApp*, allowing users to share images and texts and interact via comments. The younger generation blocks family members on WeChat to selectively expose internal family conflicts externally for emotional release while avoiding family reprimand (Fang, 2019). Promoted by new media, this phenomenon has become a new strategy to challenge traditional family soft rules.

Using scene reenactment to depict conflicts is common in short video production. Many videos employ reenactments to achieve ridicule and satire by imitating conflicting parties. However, the value of content like *Loofah Soup* lies not in satirically consuming family conflicts but in the act of publicizing them, actively breaking the traditional psychological constraint of "family ugliness should not be publicized," overcoming underlying cultural resistance, and fundamentally representing young people's courage to break through the differential mode. This attempt at openness is also a micro manifestation of the elastic transformation of the differential mode of association in modern society.

Cross-Cultural Psychology of Globalization

Deep contradictions in contemporary Chinese family intergenerational communication stem from the collision of two heterogeneous cultural and psychological models: one rooted in local Confucian tradition's authoritative filial piety ethics, centered on differential patterns and ethical principles; the other, introduced through globalization via education, digital media, and transnational mobility, emphasizes personal autonomy, equality, dignity, emotional expression, and de-authoritarianization. The sharp contrast between these models constitutes the psychological basis of current family intergenerational interaction.

Cross-cultural psychology provides a key framework for understanding this collision and individual coping strategies. Berry's (2005) cultural adaptation theory notes that individuals adopt different strategies when exposed to different cultures. Faced with clashes between Chinese and Western family concepts, China's younger generation is not simply Westernizing or adhering to tradition but attempting to absorb and practice personal autonomy and equal dialogue (Western values) while maintaining family emotional connections (traditional values). This psychological integration drives changes in intergenerational communication patterns.

At the level of communication practice, Communication Accommodation Theory posits that effective communication requires both parties to adjust language styles to adapt to each other (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Influenced by Western family concepts, China's younger generation increasingly expects parents to reduce authoritative language (e.g., shifting from "you must..."

to "I suggest...") and demonstrate active listening to achieve bidirectional, mutually adaptable communication.

From family systems and personal development perspectives, Bowen's (1978) family systems theory suggests that healthy families are emotionally interconnected yet respect individual differentiation. The overly unidirectional and hierarchical communication in traditional Chinese models may inhibit individual differentiation and self-expression among younger generations. Introducing equal dialogue promotes healthier emotional flow and individual growth within the system. Rogers's (1951) humanistic psychology emphasizes unconditional positive regard for individual mental health. Western family concepts' emphasis on respecting children's independent experiences aligns more closely with this, whereas traditional models' conditional regard—linked to obedience and achievement—may impose psychological pressure on children, affecting their self-worth.

Thus, the widespread resonance of the *Loofah Soup* video is a concentrated embodiment of this cross-cultural psychological conflict in the digital public sphere. It vividly demonstrates that globalization brings not only external concept infusion but also younger generations' internal psychological expectations for family relationships. They use globally circulating discourse (e.g., personal boundaries, emotional manipulation) to reflect on traditional interaction scripts derived from the differential pattern. Their fundamental appeal is not to dismantle the family but to reconstruct a family framework that retains emotional connections while integrating equality and respect in a new cultural context.

Loofah Soup Video as a Method

Mediatization is a "meta-process" of society concurrent with globalization and individualization. Media logic is not merely a communication tool but also reshapes cultural mechanisms and interaction patterns (Krotz, 2009).

This theory emphasizes historical changes in media content and aesthetic forms. Mediatization fundamentally influences perception conditions, content, and patterns. The *Loofah Soup* video transforms real family conflicts into humorous content through dramatic performance, symbolic simplification, and entertaining visual design. It resonates with younger generations while avoiding direct criticism's sharpness, making modern demands more acceptable.

@Lei Zi played different family roles using exaggerated expressions and movements. This dramatic approach allows young viewers to intuitively perceive problems in traditional communication traits through amused yet genuine resonance, naturally conveying demands for equal dialogue. Fun designs like sound effect matching, script tags, and montage editing were also used. When children counter parents, background sound shifts to the card-playing sound effect from the game *Joyful Landlord*, comparing intergenerational preaching to game rounds. When elders collectively shift topics to children (e.g., marriage pressure, career choices), *Joyful Landlord*'s "Combo" sound effect combined with montage editing mocks elders' collective criticism.

Schulz (2004), following mediatization theory, proposed the concept of "accommodation" in mediatization processes. Decentralization is a natural outcome of accommodation, referring to the weakening or reconstruction of traditional centralized authoritative structures. New media's decentralization has broken traditional elderly dominance over discourse in Chinese families, making younger generations (bloggers, secondary creators, netizens) producers of family

culture, transforming private intergenerational conflicts into public discussion topics. Younger generations' modern demands thus break through family boundaries to gain broad attention.

As the *Loofah Soup* video went viral across platforms, it attracted coverage from mainstream Chinese media like Xinhua Net and Sohu, making younger generations' modern demands visible to wider audiences. Some elders, through watching videos and resonant comments, may reflect on their communication issues and confront children's demands, creating possibilities for desired communication.

The video utilizes the collaborative effect of technological, aesthetic, and institutional innovations to reveal core pathways through which new media redefine intergenerational communication.

Conclusion

This study selects the viral video *Loofah Soup* as a case to explore what traditional characteristics of Chinese family inter-generational communication it embodies and how it promotes transformation in contemporary family communication models.

It interprets this through applying the Differential Mode of Association Theory in modern contexts, alongside cross-cultural psychology and new media theory. By enriching research on the modern adaptability of Fei Xiaotong's Differential Mode of Association and combining it with short video new media cultural phenomena, the study transcends textual limitations of traditional family research. It employs a cross-disciplinary method integrating digital culture and family sociology. For young people, this study provides a rational perspective for handling family communication conflicts. For families and society, it suggests that respecting young people's demands for emotional expression while inheriting traditional family ethics is crucial for building harmonious intergenerational relationships in the digital age.

This study's limitation is its primary reliance on qualitative analysis of video content and existing literature, without quantitative research (e.g., questionnaires or interviews) to verify young people's and parents' attitudes toward the phenomenon, resulting in insufficient empirical support for some conclusions. Additionally, the study focuses mainly on specific age groups of parents and children, overlooking differences caused by important factors like region and economic status in Chinese family studies.

Future studies can expand research scope while noting diversity among Chinese families. More offline cases could be incorporated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate attitudes, motivations, and influencing factors across groups, enhancing research comprehensiveness.

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New Transportation and Its Impact on Clothing Styles of the 1920s to the 1930s

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Abstract

It is a familiar story that women's clothing in Japan changed over time, influenced by the changes in aesthetics, by social upheavals, and by designers and the fashion industry. Against this backdrop, my paper argues that it was transportation technology, such as buses and elevators, that changed the way working women dressed. The purpose of this paper is to show how the uniforms of working women were like in 1920s and how they were considered. The 1920s saw the birth of new careers for women: bus girls and elevator girls. In the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake, buses became the main form of ground transportation. They wore uniforms that included collared shirts, jackets, and skirts. They wore hats on their heads and purses at their waists, which became an icon of highly paid bus girls. Elevator girls in department stores wore uniforms that included not only black pumps but also pleated skirts and sweaters, which allowed easy movement as they had to operate the handle. Photographs from the period show that they did not wear jackets, unlike bus girls. Still, their relatively casual uniforms were regarded as modern. Based on archival materials such as drawings, photographs, and songs, this paper examines the complex relationship between transportation technology and women's fashion and shows how uniforms for working women informed the symbol of modern girls. In 1920s, women and children began to wear western clothes. This paper shows working women's Western style uniforms had the impact on the image of Moga.

Keywords: bus girls, elevator girls, Moga

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Introduction

In Japan, new transportation was introduced with the steam locomotive. The 1871 picture *Tokyo Yatsuyamashita Kaigan Jōkisha Tetsudo no Zu(Tokyo,Yatsuyama-Shita(Below)Seashore Car Railroad Picture)* depicts a steam locomotive and people around it. In the picture, a foreign woman is wearing a Western-style dress. Another picture, *Tokyo Ginza Renga Ishizukuri Hanei no Zu(Tokyo Ginza Brick House Prosperity, Picture*)from 1873, shows people in the city. In this image, women are wearing kimonos, but many men are wearing black military uniforms or trousers inside the train. As with the military uniform, modernization changed clothing styles, but new transportation such as steam locomotives also influenced clothing. In the picture *Yokohama Kaigan Tetsudo Jōkisha Zu(Yokohama Seashore Steam Locomotive Picture)*, men wear jackets and trousers, and a woman is shown wearing a Western-style dress. These images illustrate the transition from traditional kimono to Western clothing during modernization.

Men began wearing Western clothing in the early Meiji period. In Meiji period, the government was keen to adopt Western style clothing, because the traditional Japanese attire is regarded very ethnic, and to catch up the Western countries, they thought they need to adopt Western style Clothes. At first, it was worn mainly by military personnel and government officials. Western clothing was for official duties, while Japanese clothing was used at home. It gradually spread among Japanese men. Suits became standard for office workers and eventually became very common. Modernization also influenced steam locomotive conductors, and they adopted the Western style uniform. The conductors of steam locomotives also needed new workwear. Their clothing had to be strong and easy to wash because coal dust stained garments easily. For this reason, they wore uniforms which is durable for the work. In these pictures, people wear modern clothing. Especially men are shown wearing Western-style clothes. Women wear either kimono or dresses, so the transition in women's fashion was slower than that of men.

The Bus Girl: Popular but Demanding Job

Next, we will look at another example of transportation uniforms. In 1920, the first female bus conductors appeared, totaling 34 people. Their salary was 35 yen, which was considered very high at the time. Three years later, the Great Kanto Earthquake occurred. Because of the damage, the tram railroads were destroyed, and buses became the substitute form of transportation. As a result, female conductors became more common. In 1934, there were about 2,700 bus girls in Tokyo. Their uniforms had several styles. According to the song "Bus Girl in Tokyo," which sings, "Wearing a navy uniform, I am a bus girl in Tokyo," the uniform had a navy color, and other colors also existed according to articles of the time. During the Showa period, bus conductors were called "red-collar girls" or "white-collar girls" depending on their uniforms. Their uniforms included collared shirts, jackets, skirts, and hats. They also carried a large purse around their waist. In the 1920s, this outfit looked extremely modern to the people of that time.

The bus girls' work starts from the cleaning in the bus. And after that, they prepare for the ride. They wear bags, hats, and armband. And they prepare other things like tickets and money. In the interview of a book, the bus girls said the work was hard. They had to announce the bus stop, sell the tickets, and take care of the passengers. They had to remember the routes that bus drive. In some region, new factory or company is built in 3months or 6 months, so they had to know the exact place, because passengers ask the places. Although the job was very hard, the job was extremely popular at the time.

The Work of Elevator Girls and Their Uniform

In 1929, the first "elevator girls" began working at the Matsuzakaya Ueno department store. Their job was to operate the elevators according to customers' instructions. In the book of *For women Aspiring to become working women* in 1932, it tells about the elevator girls. It says,

> The elevator girl is extremely new profession for working women, but in the city, there must be hundreds of elevator girls around the country. As the ordinary people, we think the job is very dangerous. However, actually it is not, and the fact is, the job needs to go back and forth at 25 to 26 times in an hour in the building that is several tens of feet tall. It repeats around 5 hours, so it must be hard before getting used to the work. The salary and the other condition is almost the same as the department store employee.

The recruitment requirements were women aged 14 to 30 who had graduated from an ordinary elementary school or a higher elementary school. They were also required to have at least two guardians living in the city. Their salary was 80 sen per day for women who graduated from higher elementary school, and 1 yen 5 sen for women who graduated from girls' school.

In the book of Kawabata Yasunari's *Asakusa Kurenaidan (The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa)* the elevator in those days was like Makie of gold nashiji. And the book also tells the capacity of the elevator was 13 people. The elevator moved by using a handle operated by the elevator girl. If she turned the handle to the right, the elevator went up; if she turned it to the left, it went down. When the handle returned to the center, the elevator stopped. There was also a button near the foot, which she pressed when the elevator became full to notify customers. They will be able to handle the elevator about one week. Former workers said that the hardest part of the job was memorizing the floor numbers. Since they went up and down many times a day, they often forgot the numbers. Operating the elevator smoothly was also important for customer comfort; if they stopped too abruptly, the elevator would shake. Therefore, they needed skill to operate the elevator properly. Elevator girls remained employed until 2007, when the department store underwent a major renovation and the role was abolished.

The elevator girl's outfit was new and fresh for the people of that time. While most women normally wore kimono, elevator girls wore Western-style clothing. They wore skirts, shirts, sweaters, and black pumps. The uniform was considered sophisticated. Because the job was glamorous, department stores hired attractive women, making the job even more popular.

Their uniforms were relatively casual compared to other formal uniforms. Photographs from the period show that they did not wear jackets, likely because they worked indoors. Today we consider uniforms as formal clothing, but elevator girls wore comparatively casual attire. The work required easy movement, so they had to wear simple, easy-to-move clothing.

New Uniforms Related to New Transportation

New forms of transportation led to the creation of new uniforms. The conductors of steam locomotives, bus girls, and elevator girls all had their own uniforms designed specifically for their work. Because their jobs required freedom of movement, their uniforms were not traditional Japanese clothing like kimono. Instead, they wore Western-style clothing. We can see the influence of modernization in these uniforms. Valerie Steele said,

> In Taisho period(1912–1926) and the first ten years of Showa period (1926–1936), the modern Western style clothes became strongly connected to women, consumerism, and vacation. Individual, especially young people and working women in cities(bus guide, elevator girl, typist) gradually adopted Western style clothe, but it's not only for the uniform of the instructions of the profession, but the sign of the modernity and sophistication.

Men began wearing Western clothing in the early Meiji period, but women still wore kimono at that time. The modernization of women's fashion began around the 1920s. In the 1920s, modern women began to work outside home, which was a fresh and new phenomenon. These modern women were called "modern girls," or Moga in Japanese. The bus girl and the elevator girl were symbols of the Moga. Their Western-style uniforms were also new and exciting to people at the time. Their uniforms demonstrated how glamorous these jobs were.

The Spread of the Dressmaking Education

In 1904, the Singer Sewing Machine Company established the Singer Sewing Machine Girls' School. The company also began offering sewing machines on monthly installment plans, and the schools spread throughout the country. However, sewing machines did not become widespread immediately because Japanese women still wore kimono at that time. Nevertheless, the principal of the Singer Sewing Machine Girls' School, Rinko Hata, wrote in 1924 that recently more women and children had begun to wear Western clothing, and that the number was increasing. By the 1920s, dressmaking schools were being established widely.

The Two Symbols of Modern Girls: Bus Girls and Elevator Girls

The modern girls' uniforms were created during this period. The spread of dressmaking education relates directly to the Western-style clothing worn by modern girls. Their Western-style uniforms emerged in a period when more women and children were adopting Western dress, making the uniforms symbols of modernization and a new era. The modern girls, or Moga, worked in many different professions, and two of the most popular and modern occupations were the elevator girl and the bus girl. Their work required the symbol of official duties, so kimono was unsuitable. Therefore, uniforms were designed with shirts and skirts.

Bus girls' uniform was relatively close to suit. Their work was very demanding, and they worked from early morning until late at night. Their outfit became a symbol of the modern girl. New working women in urban areas needed modern uniforms, so uniforms were created specifically for bus girls. Elevator girls were also considered modern at the time. The Western style uniform is new and flesh, so the Moga style added the job's glamorous image. Their duties included operating the elevator and announce the floor's features, so their clothing needed to allow free movement and place minimal burden on the wearer.

And working women's uniform also had the role to distinguish customer and worker. Actually, in Ginza city in 1925, 33% men wear Japanese clothes, but about women, 99% women wear Japanese clothes. So, the uniform is a sign of working woman. For these reasons, they wore Western-style uniforms rather than kimono.

Modern Girls and the Typical Gender Role

In those days, women were expected to be a good mother, and respectable. In the magazine like *Fujin kurabu(Women's Club)*, we can see the articles about beauty hacks as well as home chores. And in the magazine, the article about pregnancy often appeared. It seems to say women needs to be beautiful, do home chores, and raise children. On the contrary, Moga was perceived as a deviation of a typical gender role. Moga was criticized because they are frivolous and just chasing the new fashion. Moreover, romantic scandal and sexual deviation are written in an exaggerate way. Because of these factors, their image of the sexual delinquency became stronger. Moga became the most sensational image in consumerism. On the other hand, they are partly accepted as a new worker and the progress of women who start to work.

Moga was the opposite to the articles like *Fujin kurabu(Women's Club)* which recommend women to be a good wife and a wise mother. The bus girl and the elevator girl regarded as sexual symbols which are called as "girl." In the city, the sexual aspect of Moga was exaggerate to attract customers. In the interview of the elevator girls, they said that the most dislike thing about their work is customers' bad behaviors. The elevator girl and the bus girl were both glamorous jobs, but they were caught in the middle of the pressure of a typical gender role and their image as sexual symbols.

Conclusion: New Uniforms as the Symbol of Sophistication

The steam locomotive conductor, the bus girl, and the elevator girl were all new occupations created by new forms of transportation. Their uniforms suited the needs of their respective jobs. These outfits were modern, sophisticated, and innovative for the period, and they were specially designed for each occupation. In the early Meiji period, men wore jackets and trousers for official occasions. By the 1920s, women and children gradually began wearing Western clothing as well. The bus girls and elevator girls adopted their uniforms during this time. Their uniforms symbolized modernization and it regarded sophisticated for these new occupations. Although the bus girl and the elevator girl were regarded sexual symbols, their uniform had the sign of workers in the period which women usually wear kimono. They were struggling with the misunderstanding of customers, but their new occupation related to new transportation created the uniform which made their jobs popular and glamorous. And Valerie Steele said, "Still now in Japan, from students and construction worker to office worker and office lady, everyone wears a uniform or something like a uniform, and it can be said Japan continued to be the 'society of uniform.'" So, she said there is a "society of uniform" in Japan. The culture of uniform is everywhere in daily life here until now, so the suits for the official duties and Modern girls' uniforms were the start of this situation in the present.

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Teaching Through the CARE² Model: Exploring How an Instructional Design Framework Can Shape International Learners' Experiences

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences provided by 943 international business learners from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India enrolled in three courses at a private institution in Denmark, examining how instructional design influences engagement, learning, and meaning-making. Using a basic interpretive qualitative research design, data were collected through a qualitative survey with open-ended questions and systematic classroom observations, capturing learners' reflections and real-time behaviors. The researchers approached the data from an etic perspective, while striving to honor participants' voices, focusing on both successes and challenges in international learning experiences. Data analysis employed a deductive thematic approach, guided by the Fujii & Perez CARE² framework, which emphasizes Culture, Collaboration, Agency, Agility, Relevance, Repetition, Engagement, and Evaluation. Findings indicate that learners in the CARE²-informed intervention group experienced culturally supportive environments, meaningful collaboration, opportunities for agency, relevant and repeated content, and high engagement reinforced by ongoing evaluation. Deductive analysis revealed the elements most salient to learners, demonstrating the critical value of learner-centered, culturally responsive instructional design in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: instructional design, culture, design and development model, multicultural learners, care2model

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Introduction

Instructional design is a subfield of education focused on creating systematic, research-informed learning experiences. Foundational models such as ADDIE, Dick and Carey, and Merrill's First Principles emphasize objective-driven instruction, structured sequencing, and assessment alignment to improve learning effectiveness (Branch & Varank, 2009; Dick et al., 2001; Merrill, 2007). However, these models were largely developed within Western educational contexts and often assume universal applicability, potentially overlooking the cultural dimensions that shape how international learners engage with instruction (Edmundson, 2007; Henderson, 2007). Cultural norms can influence communication, motivation, help-seeking, and academic performance, while international learners may also face challenges related to language, instructional expectations, and institutional power dynamics (Hofstede, 2021; Jones et al., 2020).

Scholars have increasingly emphasized culturally responsive pedagogy, including approaches that connect instruction to learners' cultural backgrounds and experiences (Howard, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although frameworks such as Culturally Sustaining Instructional Design and WisCom incorporate cultural responsiveness into instructional design (Gunawardena et al., 2018; Smith & Staudt Willet, 2023), these models do not fully integrate relational, evaluative, co-creative, and adaptive dimensions across the design process. In response, the Fujii and Perez CARE² model proposes a more holistic framework centered on eight constructs: culture, collaboration, agency, agility, relevance, repetition, engagement, and evaluation (Fujii & Perez, 2025). By integrating cultural and pedagogical dimensions throughout the design process, CARE² aims to support more inclusive and contextually aligned learning experiences for international and culturally diverse learners.

Guided by the CARE² framework, this study examined how international learners experienced culturally responsive instructional design compared to more traditional instructional approaches. Using a basic interpretive qualitative design, the study focused on how learners described and interpreted their experiences across three courses (Merriam et al., 2025). By foregrounding learner narratives, the study explored whether CARE²-related constructs emerged naturally within student reflections and how culturally responsive strategies shaped engagement, motivation, and overall learning experiences. The study was guided by the following research question: In what ways do international students, without direct prompting, describe the influence of culturally responsive instructional strategies (CARE²) on their learning experiences compared to groups not using culturally responsive strategies?

Methodology

This study uses a basic interpretive qualitative research design, which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific contexts (Merriam et al., 2025). This approach is well-suited for examining international students' learning experiences, as it prioritizes understanding the meanings participants assign to instructional design practices and course interactions (Ary et al., 2018). Basic interpretive research operates under the assumption that multiple perspectives exist and that each participant's experience is shaped by their unique context, background, and interactions (Merriam et al., 2025).

Research Setting & Participants

This study examined three learning groups taught by different instructors using identical course content. One group implemented the CARE² model, while the other two followed traditional instructional design approaches. Focusing on learners' experiences, the study explored how instructional design and pedagogy shaped engagement, understanding, and meaning-making through a participant-centered, interpretive analysis. Participants included N = 943 international learners from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India enrolled at a private business college in Denmark, allowing the study to capture both shared and distinct instructional experiences across the three courses.

Learning Group Details

There were three instructors involved in this study, each bringing a distinct background and teaching style to their respective learning sessions, despite using identical curriculum content (refer to Table 1).

Table 1
Learning Group Details

Group	Classroom Pedagogy	Learning Tools
Learning Group 1	Constructivist	LMS, Kahoot
Learning Group 2	Instructivist	LMS, Kahoot
Learning Group 3	Instructivist	LMS

Instruments & Data Collection

This study developed two instruments to examine learners' perceptions and experiences: a qualitative survey and classroom observations. To capture international learners' experiences across the three courses, a qualitative survey with open-ended questions was designed specifically for this study to elicit learners' perceptions, reflections, and interpretations of their educational experiences (Braun et al., 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam et al., 2025). Survey questions were reviewed by instructional design experts and faculty to ensure alignment with the study objectives, strengthen content validity, reduce ambiguity, and minimize leading language (Guest et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The final survey was administered near the end of the semester to allow learners to reflect on their overall experiences.

Although deductive qualitative studies often use direct prompting to elicit responses aligned with predefined constructs, this study intentionally combined a deductive analytical framework with indirect prompting during data collection (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Patton, 2015). Participants were not directly asked about CARE² constructs such as culture, collaboration, agency, agility, relevance, repetition, engagement, or evaluation. Instead, broad experiential questions invited learners to describe their experiences in their own terms, consistent with phenomenological and interpretative traditions that prioritize participant meaning-making (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith & Staudt Willet, 2023). This approach enabled the study to examine whether CARE²-related constructs emerged naturally in learner reflections, thereby

strengthening comparative interpretation and reducing construct-leading, response priming, and confirmatory bias during data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis Procedures & Rigor

The study employed a three-stage analytical process: machine learning–assisted preprocessing, human-led thematic analysis, and AI-supported validation. Preprocessing included text cleaning, normalization, tokenization, and automated dataset structuring. Following preprocessing, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework was used to examine the data across each CARE² dimension. AI-supported validation served as a secondary layer to refine the coding schema and improve internal consistency; however, all AI outputs were critically evaluated, and final interpretive decisions remained with the researchers to preserve contextual nuance and validity.

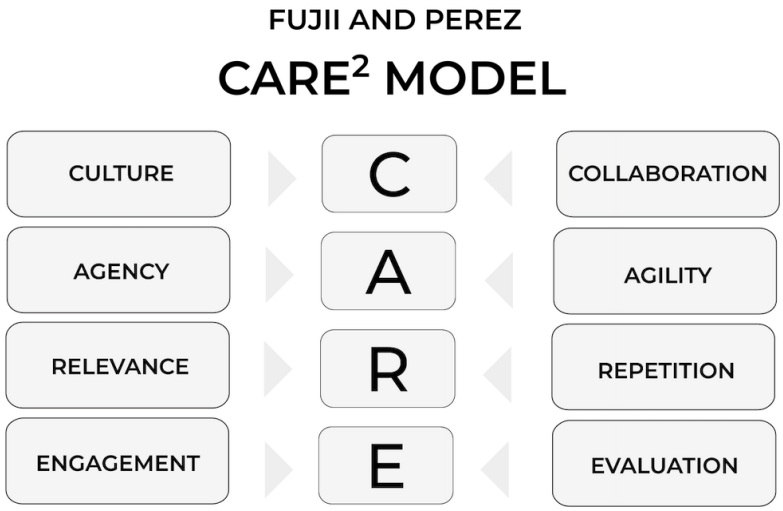
Conceptual Framework

The findings are presented narratively to highlight themes and sub-themes identified through the data analysis. Drawing on qualitative traditions that use metaphors to illuminate participant experiences (Perez, 2022; Smith et al., 2023), this study examined learners' perceptions through the Fujii and Perez CARE² model: Culture, Collaboration, Agency, Agility, Relevance, Repetition, Engagement, and Evaluation. Grounded in learning and instructional design theory, CARE² served as a flexible framework for understanding how instructional design decisions shaped learners' engagement, participation, and meaning-making across the three courses.

Table 2
CARE² Model Constructs

Construct	Details
Culture	This refers to the interconnections between home, host, and classroom environments that shape the classroom experience.
Collaboration	This refers to fostering learning through peer-to-peer teamwork and instructor support.
Agency	This refers to empowering learners to take ownership of their learning and actions.
Agility	This refers to the instructor's ability to adapt plans, strategies, and content in response to learner needs.
Relevance	This refers to the use of contextualized, culturally-relevant content that connects course materials to learners' home cultures to support real-world application.
Repetition	This refers to the use of sequential or spaced review to revisit key concepts over time to support longer-term knowledge retention.
Engagement	This refers to the use of interactive activities, tasks, interaction, and elements of humor or excitement to maintain learners' attention and promote active participation.
Evaluation	This refers to ongoing evaluation, feedback, and check-in to support and monitor learners' knowledge and needs, as well as formal, summative evaluation.

Figure 1
Fujii & Perez CARE² Model



Findings

The findings are sectioned by each of the CARE² Model constructs. Before presenting the findings by section, the following tables highlight the prevalence of comments for each group as well as the thematic interpretations by model dimension and learning group (refer to Table 3 and Table 4).

Table 3
CARE² Model Comment Mapping by Overall Prevalence and Learning Groups

Prevalence Rank	Model Dimensions	Total Comments	Total % Prevalence	LG1 Total Comments	LG2 Total Comments	LG3 Total Comments
1	Culture	295	48%	223	61	11
2	Evaluation	102	18%	82	0	20
3	Agility	66	8%	37	29	0
4	Engagement	59	6%	27	9	23
6	Collaboration	36	5%	18	9	9
5	Relevance	21	4%	21	0	0
7	Agency	12	3%	12	0	0
8	Repetition	7	1%	5	2	0

Table 4

CARE² Model Thematic Meaning Mapping by Learning Groups

Model Dimension	Groups	Themes	Details	Representative Quotes
Culture	Learning Group 1	Similar to Home Culture Learning	Some learners positioned their prior educational experiences as a lens for interpreting teaching practices.	*"Instructor used the same style of teaching as in my home country."*
		Language Fluency	Some learners emphasized language proficiency as an important element of effective teaching.	*"[Instructor name] is one of the best English speakers in [institution name]."*
		Classroom Culture	Broader classroom culture emerged in the data as a meaningful theme focused on the instructor and sense of welcomeness.	*"Our instructor has a good teaching demeanor and is also friendly and welcoming."*
	Learning Group 2	Different from Home Culture Learning	Some learners positioned their prior educational experiences as a lens for interpreting teaching practices.	*"The course and teaching methods are different here, and we are not clear about what to do."*
		Classroom Culture Dynamics	Learning challenges reflected learners' perceptions of the classroom culture and instructor demeanor.	*"[instructor name] should be more friendly to improve the learning."*
	Learning Group 3	Classroom Culture Dynamics	Learning challenges reflected learners' perceptions of the classroom culture and instructor demeanor.	*"The instructors' attitude makes it difficult to learn from them."*
Collaboration	Learning Group 1	Instructor Approachability	Some learners viewed their instructor's approachability as salient to their learning experience	*"[tutor name] is approachable and knowledgeable, but also kind, helpful and patient."*
		Welcoming Peer Experiences	Having welcoming and supportive peers was meaningful for some learners	*"I always love the group work because my team helped me with problems."*
	Learning Group 2	Instructor Support	Some leaders repeatedly highlighted the role of their instructor in providing in-class support.	*"The instructor helped us to find more information."*

	Learning Group 3	Instructor Support	Some learners indicated that they valued interaction and support from their instructor.	*"We got assistance with the content in the class, which was good."*
Agency	Learning Group 1	Learning Autonomy	Learners highlight their ability to focus on studying or working on the tasks they felt would help them the most in preparing for their assessment.	*"I like that we were always given choices in how we wanted to study or what we wanted to focus on to prep for the test."*
		Supporting Technology in the Classroom	Learners valued having agency in choosing technological devices to support their learning.	*"The instructor gave us options to either focus on the course learning management system and assessments using our computers or phones."*
	Learning Group 2	No data	None	None
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Agility	Learning Group 1	Timely and Adaptive Support	Some learners described the importance of receiving timely support to help with specific tasks.	*"I always got quick, clear answers, making it easier to understand."*
		Personalized Support	Some learners noted the personalized support the instructor provided, which they found meaningful.	*"I show my ongoing assessment to [instructor name] and they always helped me figure out the problems."*
	Learning Group 2	Timely Support	Some learners noted the instructor's timely and responsive support to address learners' immediate needs.	*"I got quick help and good suggestions for my situation."*
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Relevance	Learning Group 1	Real-World Examples	Some learners felt the learning sessions helped offer real-world practice.	*"Clear explanations and practical examples that relate to real-world business scenarios."*
		Domain-Relevent Examples	Some learners felt the learning sessions connected theory to what goes on in their field.	*"Especially appreciated the real-world examples and how they tied theory to practice."*
		Fun Activities	Some learners mentioned how they liked the gamified activities.	*"Learning all with the fun games like Kahoot made my semester more amazing."*

	Learning Group 2	No data	None	None
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Repetition	Learning Group 1	In-Class Review	Some learners highlighted the value they gained from revisiting key course concepts.	*"The class is a good way to recap the things we have learned."*
	Learning Group 2	Learning Reminders	Some learners valued reminders of what was learned previously.	*"Helped me to remind and revise me about what I learned."*
	Learning Group 3	No data	None	None
Engagement	Learning Group 1	Interesting Content	Some experiences were shaped by learner's interest in the content.	*"These sessions keep us interested and involved."*
		Interactive Classroom	Some learners highlighted how they valued classroom discussion.	*"Interactive discussions make the learning more engaging."*
		Safe-Space for Questions	A few learners described how the classroom was a safe space to engage and ask questions.	*"I feel comfortable asking questions in class."*
	Learning Group 2	Informative Content	Some learners described their experiences in response to the informative classroom content.	*"The content was taught in an interesting way."*
	Learning Group 3	Felt Heard	Some learners highlighted that they felt heard by their instructor.	*"I felt heard and supported."*
		Quantity of Learning	A few learners shared that they felt their learning experience was valuable because of the amount of learning.	*"I learned so many things."*
Evaluation	Learning Group 1	Helpful Instructor Feedback for Assessment	Some learners referenced the role of feedback in aiding their experiences.	*"Got assistance and feedback on the assessments."*
		Value Formative Assessment Technology	A few learners remarked on the technology used to support assessment prep.	*"I liked the Kahoot. It helped a lot for practicing."*
	Learning Group 2	No data	None	None

	Learning Group 3	Value Knowledge Gap Identification	A few learners highlighted that they felt the instructor helped them see where they were strong and weak in their knowledge.	*"I'm able to know about my weakness. It helps me to understand my assessment."*

Discussion

This section highlights the results and their interpretation by dimension. The results, overall, by the highest recorded prevalence by a single learning group show that among the eight dimensions, Culture was described in most detail by learners overall, followed by evaluation, agility, engagement, relevance, collaboration, agency, and lastly, repetition (refer to Table 3).

Culture and Collaboration

Clear differences emerged across the three learning groups regarding culture and collaboration. Learning Group 1 demonstrated strong cultural reflections, with learners describing welcoming instructional environments, supportive communication, and meaningful peer-to-peer and learner-to-instructor collaboration. In contrast, Learning Group 2 contained limited cultural reflections and mixed perceptions of the classroom climate, including instructor strictness and reduced approachability, as well as restricted collaboration due to "no talking" expectations. Learning Group 3 included little direct reflection on culture, although observational data suggested an authoritarian, discipline-focused environment with limited peer interaction and primarily instructor-led support.

Overall, the findings suggest that classroom culture is closely associated with collaborative learning opportunities. Learning Group 1, the most culturally supportive environment, also demonstrated the strongest collaboration, reinforcing sociocultural perspectives emphasizing the role of social interaction in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Conversely, Learning Groups 2 and 3 illustrated how restrictive or authoritarian classroom climates can suppress collaboration and participation (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). These findings indicate collaboration is more likely to flourish in instructional environments characterized by openness, interaction, and social support.

Agency and Agility

Patterns across the data revealed notable differences in learner agency and instructor agility. Learning Group 1 demonstrated strong learner agency, with observations showing learners had autonomy in how they engaged with technology and learning activities. This was paired with high instructional agility, as the instructor provided timely, adaptive support throughout the learning process. In contrast, Learning Groups 2 and 3 showed limited evidence of learner agency, suggesting more constrained instructional environments where learners may not have perceived themselves as active decision-makers or co-creators. Similarly, Learning Group 2 reflected moderate instructional agility through clarification and task-focused guidance, while Learning Group 3 showed little evidence of instructional responsiveness. Overall, the findings suggest that learner agency and instructional agility contribute positively to the learning environment. Learning Group 1's combination of learner choice and responsive instruction aligns with constructivist perspectives emphasizing autonomy and support in learning (Reeve, 2012). Conversely, the limited evidence of agency and agility in Learning Groups 2 and 3 suggests more instructor-controlled environments, supporting research that highlights the

importance of flexibility and learner ownership in shaping engagement and participation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Relevance and Repetition

Findings revealed clear differences between the intervention and control groups regarding relevance and repetition. Learners in Learning Group 1 described instruction as meaningful and relevant, emphasizing real-world applications, gamified activities, and interactive learning experiences that connected theory to practice. These strategies were reinforced through structured repetition, which learners reported strengthened their understanding, addressed learning gaps, and increased confidence. In contrast, learners in Learning Groups 2 and 3 made little to no reference to relevance, and repetition was minimal or absent across both groups. In addition, these findings align with constructivist, cognitive, and motivational learning theories. Authentic and real-world instructional contexts appeared to support meaning-making and learner engagement (Laur, 2013), while structured repetition reinforced understanding and retention (Ausubel, 2012). Together, the results suggest that integrating relevance and repetition can support more meaningful and lasting learning experiences.

Engagement and Evaluation

Findings related to engagement and evaluation further highlighted differences across the learning groups. Learning Group 1 demonstrated the strongest multidimensional engagement through interactive activities, supportive relationships, and a welcoming classroom environment. Learners also reported frequent feedback, formative assessment, and instructor guidance that supported progress monitoring and learning. In contrast, Learning Group 2 showed limited and inconsistent engagement with no references to evaluation, while Learning Group 3 reflected moderate engagement primarily through instructor-led interaction and minimal evaluation-related experiences. Additionally, these findings align with constructivist, sociocultural, and formative assessment theories, which emphasize active participation, relational support, and ongoing feedback in the learning process (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Kulasegaram & Rangachari, 2018; Polly et al., 2017). Overall, the results suggest that environments combining interactive engagement with systematic feedback may support more meaningful learning experiences.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on business students from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India at a single private college in Denmark; this limited scope hinders the generalizability of findings to other populations, disciplines, or institutional contexts. Second, the data in this study were relatively limited, as some learning groups had minimal or no reflections on key constructs, which constrained cross-group comparisons and the robustness of findings. Third, the reliance on self-reported survey data, with some classroom observations, may be influenced by social desirability or recall biases, and observations were sometimes sparse, reducing triangulation. Finally, data collection occurred at a single point near the end of the semester, providing only a snapshot of learner experiences and limiting understanding of how engagement, agency, or collaboration may have evolved over time. Collectively, these limitations highlight the need for caution in generalizing findings. It also highlights the need for future research to expand its scope, duration, and methodological triangulation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the value of using learner perspectives to examine learning experiences, particularly for international students navigating diverse instructional contexts. By combining rich qualitative data with a deductive analysis grounded in the CARE² model, the study highlighted which elements were most salient or top-of-mind for learners. This highlighted the importance of cultural responsiveness, collaboration, agency, relevance, repetition, engagement, and evaluation. Learners in the Learning Group 1 consistently reported meaningful engagement, authentic learning connections, and opportunities for autonomy that were largely absent in the control groups, demonstrating how thoughtfully designed instructional practices directly shape learner experiences. These findings emphasize that capturing learners' voices not only illuminates what matters most in the learning process but also provides actionable guidance for educators seeking to create inclusive, responsive, and meaningful learning environments. Ultimately, this research illustrates that leveraging learner perspectives through systematic, framework-informed analysis can reveal nuanced insights that drive pedagogical innovation and enhance educational outcomes for diverse student populations.

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

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used to proofread and refine the manuscript's language. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity.

The authors used OpenAI to simplify the initial research questions in the paper for the presentation, then used those same simplified questions back in the paper, so they were the same between the presentation and the paper.

Qualitative analyses were conducted through inter-coder review, with final themes generated based on coder agreement, and automated validation using OpenAI 5o to strengthen reliability. The quantitative data included two final assessments and post-unit surveys, capturing knowledge-based outcomes and learner perceptions.

The authors further declare that no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are original and derived from the appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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Knowing Through Matter: Material Practice and Cultural Epistemology

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Abstract

By examining how material practice generates forms of knowledge that emerge prior to, alongside, and beyond discursive representation, this paper challenges cultural frameworks in which knowledge is primarily understood as symbolic, linguistic, and transferable. Drawing from artistic research and process-based inquiry, it proposes material practice as a cultural site where knowledge is not merely acquired or applied, but actively produced through situated engagement. In this context, matter is not approached as a passive substrate but as a co-constitutive agent within epistemic formation. Knowing arises from irreversible interactions between bodily action, perception, and material response, rather than through symbolic instruction or explanation. Selected examples demonstrate how forms of understanding develop through continuous perceptual recalibration in response to evolving material conditions. Cases including ceramic transformation, Eduardo Chillida's Peine del Viento XV, and Joan Miró's Chicago illustrate how making operates through temporal adaptation, technical mediation, and ongoing negotiation with material conditions. By foregrounding material engagement as a form of situated cognition, the paper repositions artistic practice as a legitimate epistemic domain within contemporary artistic research.

Keywords: material practice, epistemic process, tacit knowledge, material engagement, situated knowledge

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Introduction

In recent decades, the so-called "material turn" within cultural studies and epistemology has challenged the long-standing prioritization of symbolic systems as primary carriers of knowledge. Within this shift, matter is no longer understood as a passive substrate shaped by human intention, but as an active participant in processes of meaning-making and knowledge production.

This paper contributes to this discussion by proposing that material practice itself functions as an epistemic process, through which understanding emerges from making and negotiating with materials. In this framework, knowledge is not external to practice but is constituted through it. The central questions guiding this research are: how does material engagement generate and transmit knowledge? More specifically, how do processes of making produce forms of understanding that resist full formalization within codified instruction? These questions are explored through selected examples drawn from sculptural and ceramic practice.

Figure 1
Clay Studies by Cao Chunsheng (曹春生), Sculptor and Professor at Jingdezhen Ceramic University

Source: Images courtesy of the artist.

Theoretical Framework

Recent approaches within artistic research, phenomenology, anthropology, and material culture studies have increasingly challenged the separation between thinking and making. Tim Ingold's notion of making as correspondence is particularly relevant in this context. For Ingold, skilled practice does not consist in imposing fixed forms onto passive matter, but in responding to continuously changing material conditions through iterative adjustment and attention. Knowledge therefore develops relationally, through ongoing engagement between practitioner, action, environment, and material process (Ingold, 2013). In this sense, both practitioner and material are continuously transformed in the course of interaction.

This perspective also resonates with John Dewey's understanding of experience as an active and transformative relation between perception and action. In Art as Experience, Dewey rejects rigid separations between thinking and doing, proposing instead that understanding emerges through continuous interaction with the conditions of practice itself (Dewey, 1934). Richard Sennett's writings on craftsmanship similarly emphasise the importance of repetition, correction, and material responsiveness in the development of skill. For Sennett, technical refinement is not merely mechanical reproduction, but a gradual process in which judgement and sensitivity become increasingly calibrated through practice (Sennett, 2008).

The paper also relates to Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge, particularly his proposition that "we know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 1966). Certain forms of material judgement, timing, and perceptual discrimination often resist complete verbalisation or codification, despite being fundamental to skilled artistic practice. Similarly, Juhani Pallasmaa argues that material engagement constitutes a fundamental condition of artistic and architectural thinking, where knowledge is formed, tested, and transmitted through practice itself (Pallasmaa, 2009).

More recent approaches, such as Lambros Malafouris' Material Engagement Theory, further reinforce the idea that cognition itself may emerge through material interaction rather than existing entirely prior to it. From this perspective, making is not simply the execution of thought, but part of the very process through which thought is formed and reorganised (Malafouris, 2013).

Figure 2

Ceramic Sequence. Process and Photographs by Olga Cuxart Oriol

Source: Photographs by the author. © Olga Cuxart Oriol, 2026.

Drawing on these perspectives, this paper argues that material practice generates forms of situated knowledge through irreversible interaction with evolving conditions. Rather than understanding making as the application of pre-existing knowledge to passive matter, the paper proposes material engagement as a continuous process of perceptual recalibration shaped by temporality, transformation, resistance, and technical adaptation. The clay transformations shown in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how materially distinct processes—ranging from additive sculptural formation to subtractive wheel-based calibration—require different forms of tactile judgement and responsiveness to ongoing change.

Material Practice as Epistemic Process

Building on this framework, material practice can be understood as an epistemic process grounded in continuous sensory and embodied interaction. Knowledge develops not only through conceptual reflection but through direct engagement with material transformations over time. This process is characterised by three interconnected but distinct dimensions: contingency, irreversibility, and situational judgement.

First, contingency refers to the inherent unpredictability embedded in material properties and responses. Because the outcome of an action depends on specific, often unpredictable, material characteristics, practitioners must remain perceptually responsive and adaptable throughout the process. Interaction, therefore, unfolds under conditions that cannot be fully predicted or controlled in advance.

Second, irreversibility concerns the unidirectional nature of transformations. Once an action is taken—such as firing clay or casting metal—it often cannot be undone, and each step irrevocably alters the material's state. This introduces a temporal dimension to knowledge, as understanding develops through sequences of irreversible transformations that continuously reshape subsequent conditions and future possibilities.

Third, situational judgement involves real-time decision-making in response to shifting circumstances. Rather than relying on predefined rules, practitioners must continuously evaluate and respond to unstable, evolving states of the material, adjusting their actions accordingly. This capacity for ongoing perceptual and technical adjustment is central to navigating these processes.

Figure 3
Bronze Casting Process

Source: Capa Esculturas.

Together, these dimensions position material practice as a form of knowing that operates through action. While contingency and irreversibility both address unpredictability, they highlight different facets of it. Collectively, they foreground an embodied, situated, and temporally aware understanding of practice, where understanding develops through lived engagement. Their interconnectedness underscores a nuanced epistemology that values responsiveness, temporality, and situated judgement as central to processes of making.

Material Transformation and Processual Knowledge

The epistemic character of material practice becomes particularly visible in ceramic processes and large-scale sculpture, where form cannot be fully separated from material behaviour, environmental conditions, and technical mediation. In such contexts, knowledge develops progressively through sustained interaction. This dynamic can be observed in ceramic firing,

where transformation continues beyond direct intervention. Under high temperatures, clay gradually softens, contracts, and reorganises structurally before reaching vitrification. During this stage, matter continues to transform inside the kiln, often beyond complete visual control. Small variations in humidity, thickness, support, or temperature distribution can significantly alter the final outcome. Therefore, timing and experience become essential components of making, requiring practitioners to work with conditions that remain in flux after the moment of action. These observations are informed by long-term engagement with porcelain and ceramic practices in Jingdezhen, China.

A comparable pattern can be observed in Eduardo Chillida's Peine del Viento XV (1977), where the final form was shaped through an ongoing process of negotiation between sculptural intent, technical constraints, and the demanding conditions of the coastal site itself. Due to its scale and weight, the sculpture could not be transported as a single unified form and required on-site assembly and welding in direct relation to the rock formation, as shown in Figure 4. Rather than functioning as secondary technical adjustments, these factors became constitutive of the work itself. The sculpture does not simply occupy the landscape but remains in dialogue with wind, salt, erosion, gravity, and structural resistance. Recent restoration work carried out around the site further demonstrates how environmental conditions continue to evolve and affect the sculpture long after its initial installation. In this sense, the work exemplifies how material interaction progressively reshapes the artwork over time, extending the epistemic dimension of creation beyond the moment of production.

Figure 4
Installation of Eduardo Chillida's Peine del Viento (1977), San Sebastián

Source: Museo Chillida-Leku.

A different but equally significant example can be observed in the development of Joan Miró's Chicago (1979). The transformation from a small-scale maquette into a monumental public sculpture involved multiple stages of reinterpretation across media, evolving technologies, and collaborative production methods. During the enlargement process, as illustrated in Figure 5, medical CT imaging technologies available at the time were adapted in order to translate the original form into enlarged coordinates, long before contemporary 3D scanning technologies became widely accessible. The final work also involved the collaboration of ceramic artist Joan Gardy Artigas, whose technical expertise played a fundamental role in translating Miró's formal language into large-scale sculpture. Here,

knowledge emerges not from isolated authorship, but through successive forms of technical mediation and collaboration across different stages of fabrication.

Figure 5

Successive Stages in the Production of Joan Miró's Chicago (1979): Maquette, CT Imaging, Fabrication Process, and Installed Sculpture.

Source: Composite image assembled from archival documentation.

All these examples demonstrate how practice does not simply apply pre-existing knowledge to matter. Understanding develops progressively through adjustment, responsiveness, and negotiation. In this context, material engagement functions less as a system of control than as a field of calibration, where action and transformation remain in continuous relation throughout the process.

Conclusion

This paper has articulated material practice as an epistemic process through which understanding develops. Rather than operating through fixed procedures or complete control, making unfolds in response to uncertainty, transformation, and the temporal conditions of practice itself. In this context, knowledge is formed not as detached abstraction, but through direct exposure to the constraints and adjustments that emerge from material interaction.

The examples discussed throughout the paper demonstrate how making functions as a situated form of inquiry in which perception, judgement, and technical action remain inseparable from the processes that generate understanding. Material practice therefore expands conventional approaches to knowledge within cultural and artistic research by foregrounding forms of awareness that cannot always be fully externalised through codified explanation alone.

At a moment increasingly shaped by accelerated technological mediation and disembodied forms of interaction, material engagement reaffirms the importance of attention, situated perception, and lived experience. In this sense, material practice not only produces objects, but cultivates forms of responsiveness through which practitioners remain connected to bodily experience, environmental conditions, and ongoing transformation unfolding over time. Recognising making as an epistemic domain therefore opens broader possibilities for understanding how knowledge is generated and experienced within contemporary cultural practice.

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Correlates of Longevity in Rural Eastern Europe in the 18–20th Centuries

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Abstract

Eastern-European peasants in the 18th–19th centuries rarely lived beyond the age of 50 years. However, some families and individuals did demonstrate considerable longevity. The current study focused on the influencing factors on the peasants' length of life. Following previous research, it was hypothesized that longevity was associated with a lower fertility and living in a marriage (being neither widow(er) nor unmarried). Statistical information on 1,986 Polish, Belorussian, Russian, and Ukrainian individuals was collected on the basis of church books and census data. Influencing factors on the length of life were scrutinized by means of univariate and multivariate statistical methods. A higher length of life was associated with moving from rural to urban areas, a lower number of children and siblings, a higher length of life of parents and the spouse, being neither twin nor orphan, a higher age of marriage and birth of the first child, survival until the foundation of the Soviet Union (on the territory of the former Russian Empire). To sum up, peasants who lived longer stem from families with a low fertility and also gave birth only to 1–2 children. They were supported by both parents at younger age and by their spouses at older age. They profited from a better healthcare system either by moving to urban areas or due to their survival until the introduction of large-scale vaccination programs in the 1920s–1930s in the Soviet Union. Living in a marriage into old age showed the highest predictive power for the longevity of both sexes.

Keywords: life expectancy, genealogy, length of life, Eastern Europe

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Introduction

Previous research found a number of influencing factors directly or indirectly associated with the life expectancy: diet, socioeconomic status, "life radius" (mobility), diseases, stress level, depression level, socialisation (Castruita et al., 2022), physical activity, smoking cessation, mid-day naps (Panagiotakos et al., 2011), and many more. Also, there were numerous contradicting findings regarding such factors as a number of children and age of child birth (Alter et al., 2007; Dribe, 2004). Most of data stem from the Western-European countries and refer to people born in the 20th century. Historical data are often based on the sources that can be considered well-preserved and comparatively reliable: genealogical sources on aristocratic families (often published as books), church books from (usually Western-European) regions that did not suffer considerable damage in wars. Very little evidence is available from Eastern-European regions, especially those that belonged to the former Russian Empire and now constitute territories of Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Many archives on the territory of the former Russian Empire, especially in its Western regions, suffered severe damage in numerous wars, especially in the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of church books and population censuses were lost in fire. Remaining documents are often in a very bad condition or hard to find because after the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 and of the Soviet Union in 1991 documentation on one village can be scattered among archives of several countries. For instance, documents on the village Pacewicze (now Belarus) that were analyzed for the current study can be found in the historical archives of Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, and Russia. Church books and population censuses on the village Mostowlany (now Poland) are not only scattered among archives in the same four countries but are also written in three languages: Russian, Latin, and Polish. Collection and processing of such documents is extremely time-consuming and costly. However, if only "convenient" Western-European samples are analyzed, this can lead to bias in the data on longevity research. Without samples from other parts of the world, it would remain unclear which findings can be generalized to other populations and which findings are valid only for Western Europeans or, more specifically, for certain nations or territories.

The current study is based on the data from a family tree, that is, on results of genealogical research. This means that all individuals in the sample are relatives. Calculations were carried out after all relevant documents in all relevant archives had been studied in detail. Gaps in the data that remain cannot be closed. For instance, almost all church books of the Russian Orthodox Church in the village Mostowlany were lost in fire in the 1980s. Respective branches of the family tree can be reconstructed only on the basis of (a) several population censuses, (b) church books of the Catholic Church (however, most inhabitants were not Catholics), (c) remaining church books of the Russian Orthodox Church (available only for several years). Fortunately, counter-examples do exist. Church books from the village Belenkoye (now Ukraine) are well-preserved and contain almost no gaps.

Of course, church books and population censuses do not provide any information on the most factors mentioned in the first paragraph: diet, stress level etc. They document dates of birth, marriage, and death. This reduces the scope of possible influencing factors on the length of life to those related to these three events. However, numerous other variables can be derived from these data: birth rank in the family, mean time span between birth of children, age of birth of the first or last child, number of siblings, of children, of marriages etc. The current study focused on these variables in search of possible influencing factors on the length of life in predominantly rural Eastern-European regions.

It goes without saying that the length of life in Europe, especially in the former Russian Empire, was very short in comparison with that in the 20th–21st centuries (Reshetnikov et al., 2019). The mortality was especially high among babies and children of what is now called pre-school age (Reshetnikov et al., 2019; Tymicki, 2009). However, some long-living individuals and families did exist (Cherkasov et al., 2021). Such individuals often enjoyed a very high social status in their communities and – fortunately for researchers – were prioritized in church books. Whereas the death of yet another baby was of little interest for priests, they did document deaths of many adults aged 60+ years. Generally, it should be taken into account that most priests did not document all births, marriages, and deaths. They were quite choosy and sometimes completely abandoned church books for weeks or months. Furthermore, a large majority of records in church books refers to births. After this very first record, many individuals do not re-appear in the documentation. Although some counter-examples exist, that is, people whose burial was recorded in church books but no information on birth or wedding can be found, especially in the data before 1850, such cases are comparatively rare. In most cases, priests tried to document as many births as possible but many of them did not care much about documenting weddings and deaths, especially if respective individuals had a low social status. Numerous gaps in the data can result in too low correlation coefficients and missing statistical significance in calculations. However, such limitations are unavoidable in work with the genealogical data.

To sum up, the current study focused on the statistical analysis regarding length of life of Eastern-European inhabitants of predominantly rural areas, including possible influencing factors on the life expectancy. All influencing factors were derived from records on the date of birth, marriage, and death.

Methods

Sample

The sample consists of 1,986 individuals who lived on the territory of the former Russian Empire in the 18th–20th centuries: 988 males (49.7%), 998 females (50.3%). The largest subgroups lived in the following regions:

- Kursk region (villages Pavlovka, Tazovo etc.), now Russia: 258 (13.0%),
- Grodno region (villages Pacewicze, Mostowlany etc.), now Belarus and Poland: 629 (31.7%),
- Zaporozhye region (villages Belenkoye, Marievka etc.), now Ukraine: 851 (42.2%).

Further 248 individuals (12.5%) were found in other regions. Not all individuals lived in villages: 44 lived in towns (2.2%), 164 in cities (8.3%), 1,778 in villages (89.5%), but even those who lived in towns and cities were the first or – very seldom – the second generation that moved from rural to urban areas.

Out of 1,986 individuals, 12 (0.6%) were born in the 17th century, 115 (5.8%) in the 18th century, 796 (40.1%) in the 19th century, and 960 (48.3%) in the 20th century. In 103 cases (5.2%), the century of birth remains unknown. Due to gaps in church books and legal restrictions, there is no information on the date of death of 1,275 individuals (64.2%) and no information on the date of marriage of 1,225 out of 1,700 adults (61.7%).

On average, adults from the sample had 3.6 children (span 0–14), 1.1 marriages (span 0–3), and length of life of 35.7 years (0–100). They married for the first time at the age of, on

average, 21.8 years (16–50), for the second time at the age of 26.8 years (18–38), and for the third time at the age of 34.7 years (23–38). Males became fathers for the first time at the age of, on average, 25.9 years (18–53), females at the age of 23.3 years (17–41). The last child was born, on average, at the age of 36.1 years (19–63) by males and 33.0 years (17–49) by females (sometimes the first child was also the last child).

Regarding the occupation, 898/1,986 individuals (45.2%) were peasants/farmers, 29 (1.5%) were workers, 74 (3.7%) had various other professions that can be considered non-intellectual (e.g., driver) and 58 (2.9%) professions that can be considered intellectual (e.g., engineer), 7 (0.4%) individuals were housewives, 5 (0.3%) professional soldiers, 286 (14.4%) died as children. Professions of 785 individuals (39.5%) remain unknown but the probability is high that most of them were peasants/farmers and some of them died in childhood but their death was not recorded in church books.

From the modern point of view, virtually all individuals in the sample lived under conditions of extreme poverty. Other negative factors that shortened their life expectancy were frequent outbreaks of infectious diseases (especially epidemic typhus), years of hunger, several wars (e.g., Napoleon's invasion in 1812, the First and Second World Wars), absence of medical care and many more.

The demographic data were taken predominantly from church books, but also from population censuses, private documents such as passports, lists of penitents, and documentation in civil registration offices. Also, several graveyards were visited to document years of life from gravestones. Gaps in the data can be explained by the following factors:

- church books missing for some years,
- records in church books predominantly on the date of birth, but not on marriage or death,
- bad condition of many church books,
- no information on most people who moved to other villages or towns/cities,
- no information on most people who lived after 1920s (due to legal restrictions),
- all church books end short after the Russian revolution (1917),
- old language with many contractions, ungrammatical forms, errors.

Data on births, marriages, and deaths were predominantly found in the following archives: National Historical Archives of Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporozhye, Odessa, and Kirovograd (all in Ukraine), Lithuanian National Historical Archive (Vilnius, Lithuania), Vrublevskis' Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (Vilnius, Lithuania), National Historical Archive of Belarus (Grodno, Belarus), National Historical Archive of Grodno Region (Grodno, Belarus), National Library of Belarus (Minsk, Belarus), National Archive of Tver Region (Tver, Russia), National Archive of Kursk Region (Kursk, Russia), Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents (Moscow, Russia), Russian Historical State Archive (St.-Petersburg, Russia), Arolsen Archives (Bad Arolsen, Germany). The latter archive provides documents on deaths in Germany during the Second World War.

Statistical Analyses

Possible influencing factors on the length of life were scrutinized by means of univariate and multivariate statistical methods.

First, Spearman's correlations were calculated between length of life in years and metrical or ordinal variables that can be considered possible influencing factors (e.g., number of children). Kruskal-Wallis *H* test was utilized to quantify differences in the length of life among regions. Mann-Whitney *U* test was the statistical method of choice for dichotomous influencing variables such as biological sex. The analyses were repeated for the dichotomized length of life: 18–79 years vs. 80–100 years. Thus, cases of exceptional longevity became a subject of additional analyses.

Among multivariate methods, classification trees (method "Exhaustive Chi-squared Automatic Interaction Detection") were utilized to depict hierarchies of influencing factors on the length of life as metrical (years) and dichotomized (18–79 vs. 80–100 years) dependent variables. The same factors entered a factor analysis (method: Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation) to find variables with the strongest predictive power for the length of life in years.

Influence of biological sex (as one of the most well-known factors) on the length of life was scrutinized in two logit-loglinear models. Such models allow only for a small number of variables. The first model was calculated to quantify the influence of factors "biological sex" and "widow/widower" on the dichotomization "length of life 18–79 vs. 80–100 years". The second model was calculated to differentiate between individuals who died as children vs. adults. Possible influencing factors were "biological sex", "very young (18–20 years) vs. relatively old fathers (40+ years)", and "(semi-)orphans or not" (many other models were tried out but did not deliver noteworthy results).

Results

The average length of life mentioned in the Methods (35.7 years) refers to the whole sample including children. Here, more detailed descriptive statistics are presented. Those who died as children lived on average 2.3 years (span 0–17), those who died as adults 58.4 years (18–100). Out of 286 children with known length of life, 208 died at the age of 0–2 years (72.7%) and 78 at the age of 3–17 years (27.3%); 116 children (40.6%) died in the first year of life. Out of 421 adults with known length of life, 197 lived for 65+ years (46.8%) and 69 for 80+ years (16.4%). Again, it should be emphasized that most people disappeared from church books after birth.

An average father lived for 58.6 years (25–97), an average mother for 63.0 years (19–100). Individuals were on average 26.9 years old when their fathers died (-1–67; the value "-1" means that the father died 9 months before the birth of his child) and 34.0 years old when their mothers died (0–72 years). An average mother lived for only 8.6 years (0–25) as mother-in-law and, thus, as a potential grandmother. An average father-in-law survived in this status for 10.8 years (0–39). However, it does not mean that men lived longer than women did. An average length of life of (adult) men constituted 54.8 years (18–97), and that of women 64.3 years (18–100).

Differences in the length of life of men and women are depicted in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows that (a) a lot of individuals of both sexes died as babies, especially males, (b) women lived longer than men. Figure 2 shows improvement of the life expectancy since the beginning of the 20th century, especially for men. Men born in the first quarter of the 20th century managed to achieve a higher length of life compared to women. However, this

finding should be considered preliminary because some individuals born in this time period are still alive or information on their death is not yet available due to legal restrictions.

Figure 1
Length of Life of Males and Females in Percent

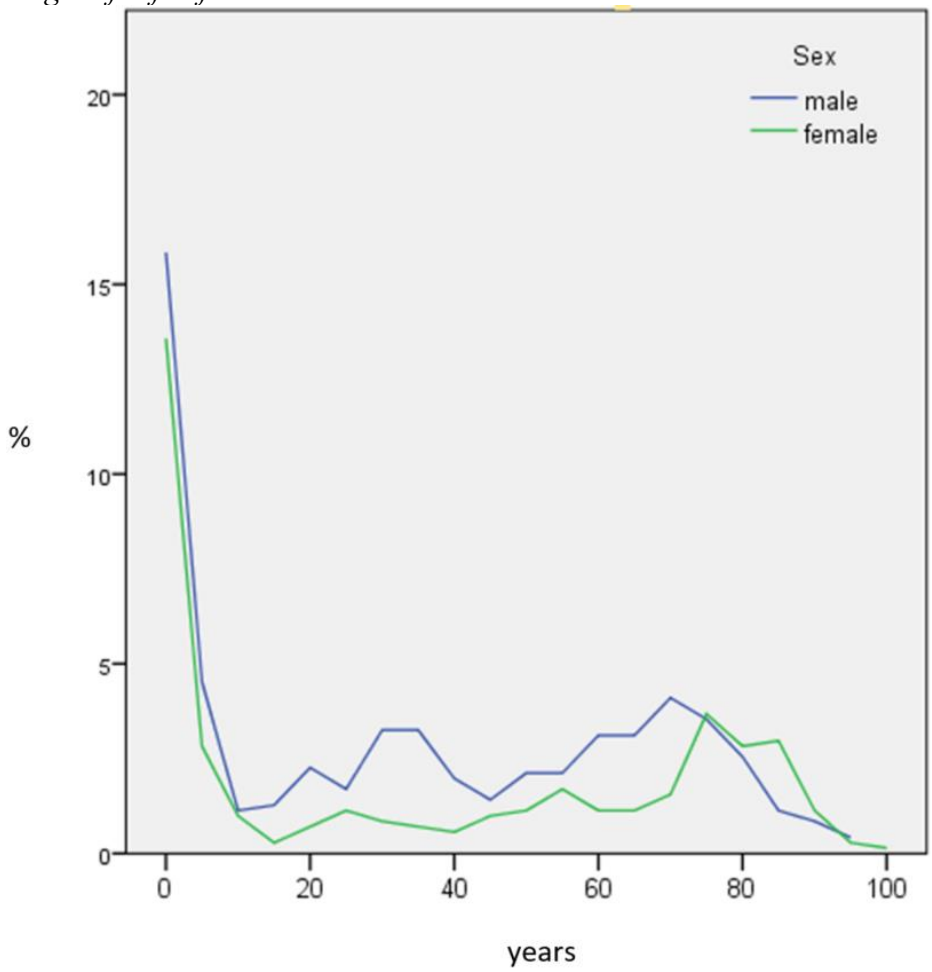
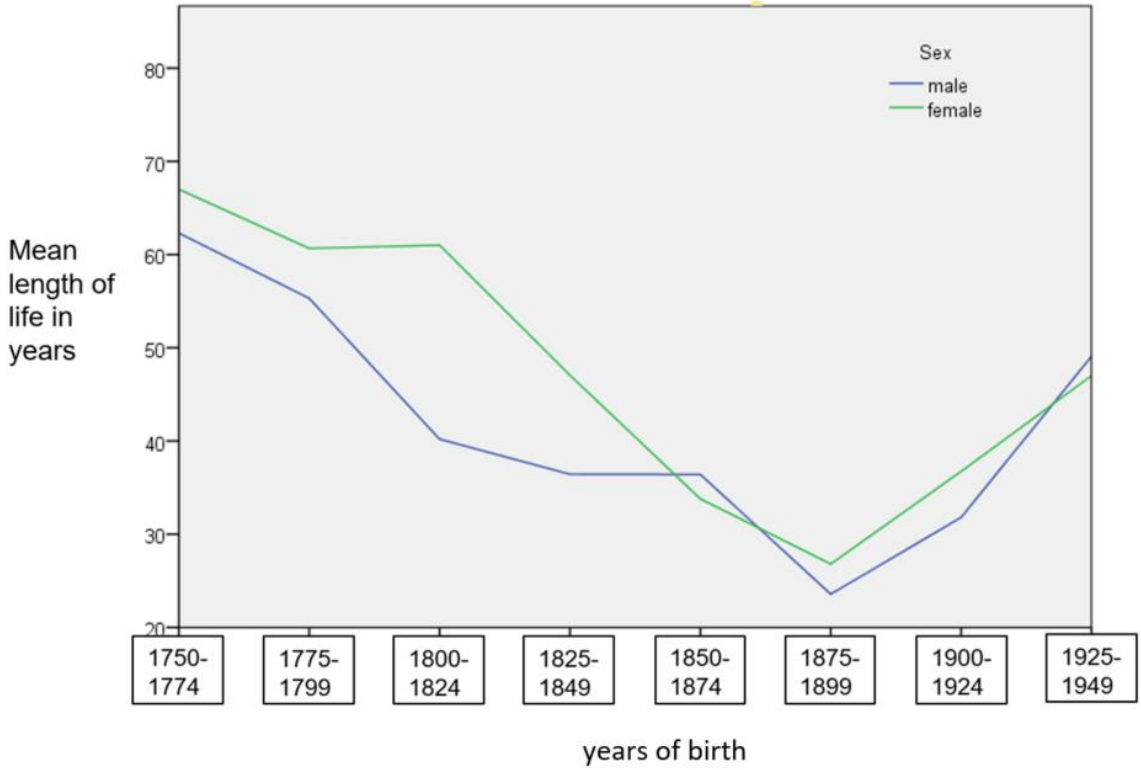


Figure 2
Historical Development of Life Expectancy of Males and Females (in Years)



Information on causes of death is fragmentary and available only for 411 individuals: 16/411 died "naturally" because of a high age (3.9%), 327 died from various illnesses or diseases (79.6%), 46 were murdered or fell in action during wars (11.2%), 14 died in accidents (3.4%), 4 died of hunger (1.0%), 4 mothers died after birth of a child (1.0%). Most frequent illnesses were tuberculosis (27), "sudden infant death" (61), and pneumonia (25). However, diagnoses appeared in church books only at the beginning of the 20th century. Up to the end of the 19th century, documentation of burials in church books was accompanied by comments such as "from stomach aches", "from head [aches]" or "from very painful ulcers".

People died somewhat more often in winter (163/580, 28.1%) than in other three seasons, especially compared to summer (133/580, 22.9%). January was the month with the highest percentage of deaths (57, 9.8%), June the month with the lowest percentage (47, 8.1%).

Spearman's correlations between length of life and possible influencing factors can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Factors Associated With a Higher Length of Life: Spearman's Correlations

Factors	*ρ*	*n*
Less siblings	-.157***	537
Higher length of life of the father	.146*	296
Higher length of life of the mother	.221**	242
Higher age at the time point of the first marriage	.203**	167
Spouse's higher age at the time point of the first marriage	.226**	165
Higher age when the father died	.116*	297
Higher age when the mother died	.221**	243
Higher length of life of the spouse	.277***	179
Higher age when the first child was born	.217***	295
Higher age when the last child was born	.190**	234
Higher number of children who survived until the age of 18 years	.197*	110
Longer mean time span between births of children (in years)	.257***	234
Longer time span between birth and baptism (in days)	.129*	293
Century in the middle of life (20th rather than 18th–19th)	.206***	707

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

According to the Kruskal-Wallis *H* test, regional differences regarding the length of life were statistically significant: $\chi^2_{(5)} = 26.3$, $p < .001$. Among other things, life expectancy in Grodno region was higher than that in Zaporozhye region.

Results of Mann-Whitney *U* tests are described in Table 2. It shows statistically significant factors associated with a shorter length of life. People whose lives were comparatively short, were twins, orphans, widows/widowers, they lived in rural areas, their jobs can be described as not intellectual, they belonged more often to the Russian Orthodox Church than to the Catholic Church, they were born before the foundation of the Soviet Union rather than in the Soviet Union, they had very young fathers. The most important factor was being a widow/widower, which supports findings in Table 1 where the highest correlation with the length of life was shown by the factor "length of life of the spouse".

Table 2
Dichotomous Conditions Associated With the Shorter Length of Life: Mann-Whitney U Tests

Conditions	*Z*	Yes: *M* (years)	No: *M* (years)	*n*
Twin	-3.38**	5.2	27.5	531
Orphan	-2.40*	30.5	42.2	252
Living in a rural area (in contrast to urban areas)	-7.55***	33.2	70.1	707
Not intellectual job (in contrast to intellectual jobs)	-3.66***	56.6	75.1	354
Russian Orthodox church (in contrast to the Catholic church)	-2.08*	33.3	45.3	399
Born before the Soviet Union (in contrast to those born in the Soviet Union)	-3.84***	33.4	47.9	707
Children of very young fathers (aged 18–20 years, compared to fathers aged 40+ years)	-2.78**	13.3	31.8	110
Widow/widower	-6.25***	57.0	74.5	177

Note. M = mean, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

In the classification tree with the length of life (in years) as dependent variable, the most important influencing factor was the number of children ($F(2, 704) = 298.69$, $p < .001$, $n = 707$):

- Individuals with 0–2 children lived on average 63.3 years ($n = 123$). Those with 3+ children lived on average 59.2 years ($n = 177$).
    - Among individuals with 0–2 children, the next influencing factor was age when the first child was born ($F(1, 121) = 11.91$, $p = .001$, $n = 123$). If this age was below 27 years, then the length of life was on average 58.9 years ($n = 72$). If this age was 27+ years, then the length of life amounted to 70.7 years ($n = 51$).
    - Among individuals with 3+ children, the next influencing factor was year of the first marriage ($F(1, 175) = 15.71$, $p < .001$, $n = 177$). If the individual married before 1911, then he or she lived on average 53.4 years ($n = 78$), and if later, then the length of life increased to 63.7 years ($n = 99$).
- For some individuals, there was no information on children. For this subgroup, the classification tree found one more influencing factor: century of birth ($F(1, 405) = 23.68$, $p < .001$, $n = 407$). Those who were born before the 20th century ($n = 192$) survived until the age of 10.6 years, that is, died as children. Those who were born in the 20th century lived longer: on average, 23.0 years ($n = 215$).
    - For those who died as children, the most important influencing factor on their length of life was the length of life of their mothers ($F(1, 190) = 8.17$, $p = .005$, $n = 192$). If mother survived up to the age of 47 years, then her child lived until the age of 4.4 years ($n = 54$). If mother lived longer than 47 years, then her child also lived longer, on average 13.1 years ($n = 138$).
    - Most of those born in the 20th century died in older age than those born in the previous centuries. For them, the classification tree found only the regional distribution as the relevant factor for the length of life ($F(1, 213) = 21.28$, $p < .001$, $n = 215$).

- Those born in the regions that now belong to Russia and Belarus lived on average 34.7 years (n = 80).
- Those born in the regions that now belong to the Ukraine lived on average 16.0 years (n = 135).

In the following analyses, two subgroups of adults were compared: those who lived for 18–79 years (n = 352) vs. those who lived for 80–100 years (n = 69). Table 3 shows factors that yielded significant results for these two subgroups in Mann-Whitney U tests. Individuals in the subgroup of 80–100-year-olds had older spouses at the time point of the first marriage, their spouses lived longer, the first child was born later, the mean time span between births of children was longer, and the total number of children was lower. All other univariate calculations yielded no significant results.

Table 3
Dichotomous Conditions Associated With the Length of Life 18–79 vs. 80–100 Years: Mann-Whitney U Tests

Conditions	***Z***	**18–79: *M* (years)**	**80–100: *M* (years)**	***n***
Age of the spouse at the 1st marriage	-2.65**	21.8	24.3	165
Length of life of the spouse	-2.66**	64.7	71.5	179
Age when the 1st child was born	-2.28*	24.8	26.6	295
Mean time span between births of children	-2.63**	3.4	4.5	234
Total number of children	-3.04**	4.2	2.9	300

Note. M = mean, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

In the classification tree with subgroups "18–79 vs. 80–100 years" as dependent variable, the most important influencing factor was, again, length of life of the spouse ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 34.0$, $p < .001$, $n = 421$):

- If the spouse did not survive up to the age of 75 years, then the individual reached the age of 80+ years only in 18.5% of cases (20/108).
- If the spouse survived up to the age of 75+ years, then the percentage of those in the subgroup 80–100 years was higher: 38.0% (27/71).
- If there was no information on the length of life of the spouse, then the most important influencing factor was the biological sex ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 11.1$, $p = .001$, $n = 242$):
  - Males achieved only seldom the age of 80+ years: 5.2% (9/173).
  - Females achieved this age much more often: 18.8% (13/69).

A factor analysis explained 67.4% of the variance and identified 7 components (correlations below .3 are not included in this description):

- Component 1: time span between the birth of the first child and of the last child (.889), age when the last child was born (.843), total number of children (.789), percentage of children who survived until the 18th birthday (.378),
- Component 2: age when the first child was born (.870), age of the first marriage (.808), age of the spouse at the first marriage (.458),
- Component 3: age of the mother when the child married (.938), age of the father when the child married (.936),

- Component 4: mean time span between births of children (.920),
- Component 5: age when mother died (.733), age when father died (.722),
- Component 6: time span between birth and baptism (.771), number of brothers and sisters (-.712),
- Component 7: length of life of the spouse (.744), one's own length of life (.694).

Only component 7 is of relevance for the present study. It shows that individuals' length of life correlates, first and foremost, with the length of life of their spouses. Indirectly, the same finding is reflected in the component 5: fathers died approximately at the same age when mothers died, that is, the time span between their deaths was usually quite short. All other components describe the way of life of peasants and deliver no additional information on their length of life. For instance, component 6 shows that parents who did not baptize their children immediately after birth, did not have many siblings (typical for Grodno region). Component 2 shows that the age of brides and bridegrooms at the time point of marriage was comparable, and if it was higher, then the age when the first child was born was also higher.

In the first logit-loglinear model (n = 177), widows/widowers (Z = -3.69, p < .001), especially widowers (Z = -2.16, p = .031) were at a higher risk of not surviving until the age of 80+ years. In the second logit-loglinear model (n = 150), individuals who died as children, and not as adults, were more often

- boys than girls (Z = -15.83, p < .001),
- children of very young fathers: 18–20 vs. 40+ years (Z = -13.88, p < .001),
- (semi-)orphans (Z = -12.83, p < .001),
- boys born to very young fathers (Z = -22.81, p < .001),
- male (semi-)orphans (Z = -17.76, p < .001),
- (semi-)orphans born to very young fathers (Z = -14.67, p < .001).

Discussion

Several factors were identified that contributed directly or indirectly to the higher length of life:

- less siblings and children (cf. Caselli & Luy, 2013; Dribe, 2004; Tabatabaie et al., 2011), that is, individuals with a higher length of life stem from families with few children and also gave birth to few children, which was very unusual for peasants,
- higher age when children were born (cf. Caselli & Luy, 2013; Tabatabaie et al., 2011): this finding supports the previous one, that is, people who lived longer gave birth to children comparatively late because they did not aim at a high fertility,
- older fathers (again, probably connected with the previous two factors): obviously, older fathers had a higher social status, income, and were more experienced, which made the survival of their children more probable,
- spouse was alive for longer time (cf. Alter et al., 2007; Dribe, 2004; Kaplan & Kronick, 2006; Manor & Eisenbach, 2003): mutual support extended the life expectancy and reduced the probability of depressions, among other things,
- better access to the healthcare system:
    - moving from rural to urban areas (Gagnon et al., 2009; Temby & Smith, 2014),
    - survival until the foundation of the Soviet Union (where large-scale vaccination programs were introduced, cf. Reshetnikov et al., 2019), year of

marriage short before the Russian Revolution (1917) in one of classification trees also belongs into this category,

- intellectual professions (cf. Caselli & Luy, 2013; Kashtanova et al., 2022): people with such professions lived in urban areas and had a better access to the public healthcare services,
- Possible biological or genetic factors (cf. Capri et al., 2006; Caselli & Luy, 2013):
    - both parents were alive for longer time (cf. Dutta et al., 2011): if both parents survived much longer than their peers, it can be assumed that their health or physical condition was above average and that their children were also comparatively healthy,
    - more survivors among children: again, if children in one family survived more often than children in other families, then it can be assumed that representatives of this family were comparatively healthy, maybe due to a lower number of mutations or due to other genetic factors,
- being neither twin (cf. Hammel & Gullickson, 2010; Tymicki, 2009) nor orphan (cf. Alter, 2007; Tymicki, 2009): in case of twins and orphans parental care was reduced to non-existent, which sometimes resulted in early deaths of children,
- longer time span between birth and baptism means that the child was not brought to the church immediately after birth and thus was protected at least for one or two days from cold weather, snow storms, and other unfavorable conditions that can put an end to the newborn's life (e.g., presence of infectious individuals in the church),
- regional differences (cf. Abdiraimova, 2025; Hammel & Gullickson, 2010): these can be related to such factors as access to medical services, food supply, geographical distribution of epidemics etc.,
- religion (cf. Kashtanova et al., 2022): being Catholic increased the life expectancy in comparison with the believers of the Russian Orthodox church, which, however, may reflect other variables (e.g., Catholics were more often free people, not serfs, and, thus, wealthier, with a better access to medical services etc.),
- being a woman (cf. Abdiraimova, 2025; Kashtanova et al., 2022; Tymicki, 2009): this is a well-known finding that reflects a lower number of mutations in women compared to men.

Interestingly, there were short time periods when men showed slightly higher length of life than women. However, it cannot be excluded that this phenomenon is a result of some anomalies in the documentation (e.g., gaps in church books). Before the 20th century, women had a much lower social status than men. Therefore, they disappeared from church books more often, that is, priests sometimes considered it not worth mentioning that a woman was buried. The same is relevant for babies: huge numbers of children disappeared from church books because deaths of babies occurred daily and were often considered not worth documenting. Many of these babies were buried not on graveyards but near houses of their parents. Only after the foundation of civil registration offices all births, marriages, and deaths were documented properly, but this information is available only for the 1920s because many people born in the 1930s and later are still alive. Thus, due to legal restrictions, gaps in the documentation of people who were born, married or died since 1930s can be closed only in the distant future. Missing data probably also explain why most influencing factors showed only very low predictive power for the length of life.

Some factors showed no associations with the length of life:

- ranking of the child birth in the family (the 1st, 2nd … last child in the family),
- time span between wedding and birth of the first child,

- born in a marriage vs. out of wedlock (but very few children were born out of wedlock),
- born during wars vs. times of peace (but very few children were born during wars),
- having young (18–20 or 18–25 years old) vs. older mothers (40+ years old).

Again, it can be assumed that most of these factors did not reach the level of statistical significance due to gaps in the data or too low sample sizes in respective subgroups.

Figure 2 shows one contra-intuitive finding that needs special attention. Although the life expectancy of people born in the 20th century improved in comparison with that of people born in the previous centuries (cf. Caselli & Luy, 2013; Tymicki, 2009), it does not presuppose that the life expectancy of individuals born in the 18th–19th centuries had always been short. According to Figure 2, the length of life decreased until the end of the 19th century. However, instead of believing in "good old times" when people reached Methuselah's age, this unexpected finding should be discussed in terms of limitations of the study. Church books were becoming more reliable in course of the 19th century and, therefore, the time period at the end of the 19th century was much better documented than earlier periods. It cannot be excluded that priests who lived and worked in the 18th century and in the first half of the 19th century tended to document deaths of individuals with a comparatively high social status. Taking into account that old people were seldom exceptions and indeed possessed this high social status, they had a higher priority in the documentation. Children and young adults were of less importance. Therefore, it appears probable that the decreasing life expectancy in the 19th century is an artefact that demonstrates the growing number of records on deaths of children and young adults.

Conclusion

To sum up, individuals with a higher length of life had some unusual sociodemographic characteristics: Whereas their peers tried to marry as early as possible and to give birth to as many children as possible, these individuals married later and had only few children. Also, they stem from families with few children. Furthermore, these individuals were lucky enough to be supported by both parents in their childhood (that is, did not become orphans) and by their spouses in the old age (did not become widows/widowers). Moving from rural to urban areas also contributed to a higher length of life. Some findings seem to point at a better health of these individuals and, thus, a certain genetic predisposition for a higher life expectancy (e.g., more survivors among children, higher length of life of both parents). Growing life expectancy in the 20th century can be linked, among other things, to large-scale vaccination programs in the 1920s–1930s as well as to free healthcare services in the Soviet Union.

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Hadrah Group Leader Strategy in Disseminating the Selawat Concert Model in Indonesia Through Digital Media

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Abstract

This article examines the strategies of hadrah group leaders in disseminating sholawat concert models in Indonesia via digital media, focusing on three central figures based on their popularity and most high followers in digital media: Habib Syech bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf (Ahbaabul Musthofa), Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf (Az-Zahir), and KH. Hafidzul Hakim Noer (Syubbanul Muslimin). Utilizing content analysis and theories of self-presentation and mediatization, the study identifies three primary strategies employed by these leaders to expand their religious influence. First, leaders utilize Instagram for self-presentation, employing consistent visual patterns—specifically signature close-up shots in religious attire—to cultivate a charismatic "idol image" and maintain a symbolic distance that fosters "idol worship" among followers. Second, they establish stage stardom through YouTube live broadcasts, positioning themselves as "religious superstars" within professionally managed, high-production concert environments that attract massive digital fandoms. Third, consistency is reinforced through weekly regular assemblies (rutinan), which are broadcast online to solidify their status as stable religious authorities.The research concludes that sholawat concerts have transitioned from traditional pesantren spaces into a contemporary Islamic culture industry driven by the logic of social media. By blending traditional spiritual values with celebrity performance and digital aesthetics, these leaders create a form of "networked religion" where spiritual authority is negotiated through intense visual interaction, making them strategic actors in Indonesia's modern religious ecosystem.

Keywords: sholawat concert, digital media, networked religion

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Introduction

Sholawat musical performances began to be popularized by Habib Syech in 1998 through the Ahbaabul Musthofa hadrah group. This concert model features colorful lighting, balanced sound systems, and a sequence of songs with almost no breaks, making it more akin to a popular music concert than a conventional religious gathering. At that time, religious music was divided between Sufi and popular styles, with figures like Haddad Alwi, Snada, and Rhoma Irama coloring the pop-religious realm. Previously, the group Bimbo was known for turning religious poetry into songs during the 1970s–1980s. Unlike them, hadrah developed locally in pesantren and communal village spaces, rarely appearing as a main performance outside those contexts. Habib Syech successfully brought hadrah into the public sphere with a modern package while still sourcing from traditional books like Al-Barzanji. Songs became the center of the performance, while sermons were only minor interludes. The popularity of Ahbaabul Musthofa prompted other pesantren hadrah groups to follow this pattern. Since 2010, a "franchise-based" system has begun to be implemented, and groups such as Syubbanul Muslimin, Az-Zahir, and others have risen to prominence through digital distribution on social media platforms and the active participation of fans in disseminating selawat concert content (Rohmanda & Budiman, 2025).

Habib Syech's official Instagram account regularly uploads concert recaps. Meanwhile, Syubbanul Muslimin and Az-Zahir conduct live broadcasts via YouTube for every performance. These three groups are the focus of this study due to their significant social media fandoms. The "Syekher Mania" (fans of Habib Syech) are influenced by his status as the founder and the franchise system. "Syubban Lovers" (fans of Syubbanul Muslimin) mostly consist of productive youths aged 15-20, influenced by the popularity of Gus Azmi, the group's vocalist. The Az-Zahir ensemble is led by Al Habib Ali Zainal Abidin bin Assegaf, whereas Syubbanul Muslimin is headed by KH. Hafidzul Hakiem Noer.

The closeness between the leader and the group is vital to the sholawat concert ecosystem. These leaders typically have pesantren as their home base, meaning they already possessed a mass following before their groups became popular. Research by Edmond J. and Rijal suggests that "barokah" (blessings) is the primary reason thousands attend these concerts. Through these concerts, the habib (descendant of the Prophet) acts as a medium between God and the congregation due to their direct bloodline to Prophet Muhammad. However, Tambunan and Simon (2022) explain this more rationally, stating that in the modern era, the centrality of a charismatic figure is no longer tied to any moral discourse but rather their ability to negotiate individual and communal interests. Dillon (2001) also argues that postmodern thought creates space for a plurality of meanings and interpretations, thereby shifting authority from religious institutions to individuals or smaller communities. In this context, religious leaders emerge as actors who possess considerable authority and autonomy (2014, pp. 3–6). Accordingly, these actors— namely, the leaders of hadrah groups—undoubtedly employ particular strategies in promoting and disseminating selawat concerts, which this article seeks to examine and explain.

Digital media has enlivened the sholawat ecosystem, with leaders using it as a strategy to spread their ideology. As Agha (2019) notes, these concerts are not just tradition preservation but the creation of contemporary Islam facilitated by social media. Campbell (2012) describes this as the "mediatization of religion", where digital media shapes how religion is understood and practiced, resulting in "networked religion", a concept that encompasses virtual spaces as sites of worship and community formation, participatory rather than hierarchical engagement, fluid and flexible religious identities, the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the profane,

and global connections among individuals and communities. This article examines more closely how Habib Syech, Al Habib Ali Zainal Abidin bin Assegaf, and KH. Hafidzul Hakim Noer navigate social media in disseminating a model of selawat concerts that extends beyond mere efforts at maintaining visibility or public presence.

Methods

The author conducted content analysis on the Instagram accounts of Habib Syech, Syubbanul Muslimin, and Az-Zahir. Patterns were analyzed using Goffman's Self-Presentation, Giddens' perspective on identity, and theories regarding stardom.

Results and Discussion

After exploring the content of the three accounts designated as study objects, I identified three strategies employed by the three hadrah group leaders. This pattern appears repeatedly and has become a template that is now characteristic of the sholawat concert community in Indonesia. The sources define these three specific strategies as follows:

Self-Presentation Through Instagram

The study analyzed the personal accounts of Habib Syech (@syaikhassegaf) and Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf (@bidin_segaf_assegaf). While KH. Hafidzul Hakiem Noer does not have a public personal account, the Syubbanul Muslimin group account (@syubbanulmuslimin) follows a similar pattern in displaying his figure. The use of these accounts refers more to personal branding than promoting the hadrah groups themselves.
The first post on the @syaikhassegaf account was uploaded in 2013, while the @bidin_segaf_assegaf account dates back to 2015. However, it is not certain that they actually activated their accounts in those specific years, because the "delete post" feature allows for the possibility that earlier posts were indeed deleted. The use of these accounts by these actors refers more to their personal branding rather than promoting their respective hadrah groups. I will discuss this further using examples of the posts I have selected.

Figure 1
Habib Syech's Post in 2020

Source: Instagram account @syaikhassegaf

Figure 2
Habib Bidin's Post in 2020

Source: Instagram account @bidin_segaf_assegaf

Until 2024, this style of figures still existed, as did in Syubbanul Muslimin's account.

Figure 3
Hafied Hakim in Syubbanul Muslimin Account, September 2021

Source: Instagram account @syubbanulmuslimin

Figure 4
Hafied Hakim in Syubbanul Muslimin Account, November 2022

Source: Instagram account @syubbanulmuslimin

Post styles emphasize close-up shots of the leaders on stage. The primary focus is their "self-demeanor"—wearing white religious attire (baju koko) and head coverings while holding a wired microphone—a signature look of sholawat concerts. This consistency creates a specific pattern used to build an "idol image". According to Giddens, identity is a "project" created to shape how others perceive an agent. Instagram serves as a pillar for this strategy, creating a boundary between the leader and fans that results in "idol worship" rather than simple parasocial relationships. Fans use the comment section to express admiration and awe (Masyaallah, Barakallah) toward a figure that appears distant from everyday life.

In the context of the self-persona displayed through close-up photos, the leaders of hadrah groups strive to engage in self-presentation. Self-presentation (Goffman, 1977) is an effort to project an image of oneself in response to external situational demands. This undertaking requires specific effort and attention from the individual.

The objectives of self-presentation vary widely, potentially including intimidating others, petitioning, ingratiating, self-promoting, or providing an example (role modeling). In practicing self-presentation, the three figures discussed in this article portray themselves as an agency, projecting an image characterized by power, competence, and intelligence. This relates to the discussion of the expression-impression relationship in social communication. When someone is present in the space of others, information about them is gathered and extracted as an impression. That person may attempt to employ (verbal) deception and/or pretenses (acts). When an individual is present before others arrive, they control their activities so that the resulting impression matches their desired outcome (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2014). Thus, the agency performs impression management. Through impression management, these leaders maintain the authority constructed in physical spaces and preserve it in digital spaces. This supports the idea that the power of a habib's charisma influences the masses to follow their activities.

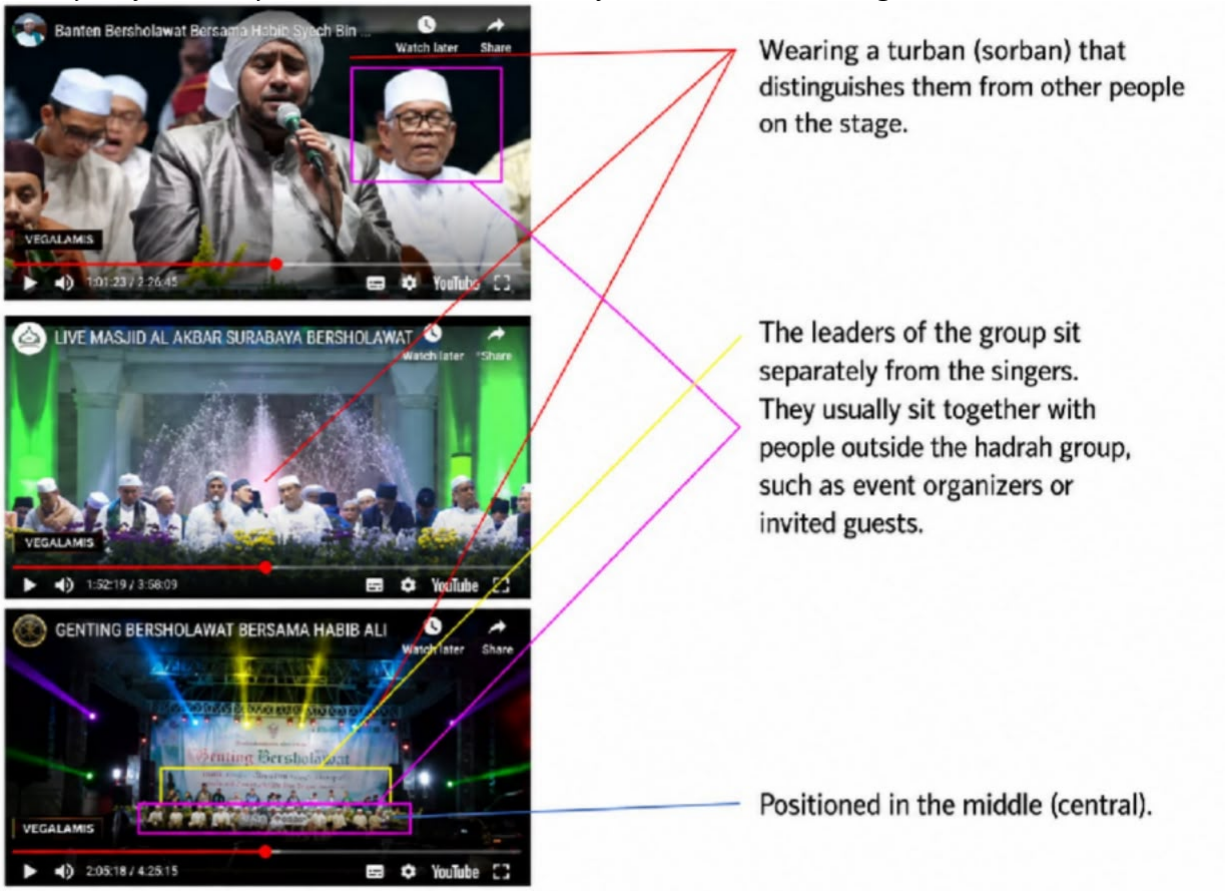
Introduction of Stage Style Through YouTube Live

Stage performances were observed through nine (9) YouTube videos from the three groups. The title of those videos are "Banten Bersholawat Bersama Habib Syech Bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf", "Magelang Bersholawat Bersama Habib Syech Bin Abdul Qadir Assegaf", "Wonogrio Bersholawat Bersama Syubbanul Muslimin", "Karangsari Bersholawat dalam Rangka Memperingati Tahun Baru Islam", "Genting Bersholawat Bersama Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf dan Majelis Az-Zahir", "Rocket Chicken Bersholawat Bersama Habib Syech bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf", "Darul Ehsan Bersholawat Bersama Majlis Syubbanul Muslimin", "Masjid Al Akbar Surabaya Bersholawat Majlis Syubbanul Muslimin", and "Azzahir Bersholawat bersama Habib Ali Zainal Abidin Assegaf Ponpes Al Fadlu 2 Kendal". These 2–3 hour videos show the entire concert from the MC's opening to the closing. A typical concert sequence includes:

1. Opening by the MC.
2. Quranic recitation (optional).
3. Welcoming the hadrah group.
4. The group takes their positions and begins playing rebana (percussion).
5. Glamorous lighting accompanies the songs.
6. The leader (Habib/KH) enters the stage during the song "Tola'al Badru", causing the audience to stand and cheer
7. The leader takes a central position.
8. Short sermons are given between songs.
9. The Mahalul Qiyam procession (standing to honor the Prophet's presence).
10. Closing with the national anthem, Indonesia Raya.

The entry during "Tola'al Badru" distinguishes the leaders from the rest of the group, making them "celebrity figures" and creating stardom. The stage is used to display greatness and superiority. Leaders often wear more striking clothing than the other performers and occupy a central, spotlighted position. Rose (1984) in Barry (1985) said that "*A common argument is that the stage is an actor's medium, in the sense that it is on the stage that the actor is best placed to realise his or her 'creative intentions' in character portrayal*".

Figure 5
The Style of Habib Syech, Habib Bidin, and Hafied Hakim on the Stage



Source: YouTube

The central position occupied by the three of them is also consistently applied. The difference in positioning between the hadrah group leader and the accompanists is sometimes very contrastive—distant in terms of physical space—and at times the accompanists do not receive a festive spotlight. In this regard, the three hadrah group leaders serve as the main actors. Their presence is the most crucial element. Mixion (1983) states that actors must be able to perform as convincingly as possible and maintain their character, ensuring all stage actions are believable even without being prompted.

This "religious superstar" phenomenon, as criticized by Rojek (2001), results from social democratization, the the decline of organized religion, and commodification of daily life. Organizers benefit from these concerts through brand promotions (e.g., Rocket Chicken) and business opportunities like tenant rentals. This stardom creates a fandom that views attending these grand concerts as a "need" to be met repeatedly, turning it into a culture industry.

Reinforcing Consistency Through Regular Assembly Live Streams

Beyond invited concerts, leaders use regular weekly assemblies (*rutinan*) as a dissemination strategy. These are usually smaller, held at a fixed location (e.g., Pekalongan for Az-Zahir, Surakarta for Ahbaabul Musthofa), and focus more on traditional readings and sermons.

However, digital branding remains prominent; YouTube titles for these sessions always highlight the leader's name (e.g., "Live Regular Assembly... with Habib Syech"). This

reinforces their legitimacy and ownership of the group. The author notes that the leaders are often highlighted so much that they seem separate from the group, even though they are a single entity. This centrality is essential to maintaining the "extraordinary" impression required to keep the audience as fans.

Figure 6
Rutinan Ahbaabul Musthofa, 2025

Source: YouTube.com/HabibSyechBinAbdulQadirAssegaf

Figure 7
Rutinan Azzahir, 2025

Source: YouTube.com/MajelisAzzahir

Figure 8
Rutinan Syubbanul Muslimin, 2025

Source: YouTube.com/SyubbanulMuslimin

I will provide an analogy: imagine Jade forms a dance group named J'dance. Jade and J'dance always dance together in a performance, whether it is one they organize themselves or when someone invites J'dance for a specific purpose. However, Jade always labels himself in every J'dance performance. Thus, mentioning J'dance alone seems insufficient to represent both J'dance and Jade in a single show, even though Jance would not perform without Jenny.

There are several reasons why Jade includes his name in every J'dance performance. It might be a subjective reason, as he founded J'dance on his own initiative. It could also be a regulatory reason within the J'dance team to ensure J'dance is invited more often or becomes more famous because Jade's name carries higher prestige. In the context of this discussion, the most likely reason is the centrality of the kiai (pesantren leader) in the management of Islamic boarding schools.

E.A. Shils, in "Charisma, Order and Status", explains that:

The charismatic quality of an individual as perceived by others, or himself [sic] lies in what is thought to be his connection with (including possession by or embedment in) some very central feature of man's existence and the cosmos in which he lives. The centrality, coupled with intensity, makes it extraordinary.

There must always be a central figure in the sholawat concert model who possesses more authority than the others, ensuring the "extraordinary" impression successfully influences the audience or the public to remain fans. The dissemination of the sholawat concert formula must always involve a charismatic actor. As S.N. Eisenstadt stated in the introduction to Max Weber's Charisma and Institution Building, charismatic appeal is particularly effective when the social order is uncertain, unstable, and ambiguous, and when a charismatic figure or group offers values, order, or stability to offset this. This social order is also maintained through weekly sessions, demonstrating consistency and an effort to preserve the sholawat concert model—at least on a small scale—which then encourages external parties to invite them for large-scale concerts.

Conclusion

The dissemination of sholawat concerts by leaders like Habib Syech, Habib Bidin, and KH. Hafidzul Hakim Noer reflects a deep transformation of religious practice in the digital era. They have formed a new da'wah landscape where digital media is not just a tool but a space where religious identity and spiritual authority are negotiated. Sholawat has shifted from traditional pesantren spaces to a digital aesthetic on Instagram and YouTube, utilizing the logic of the stage, celebrity, and intense visual interaction. Religion is no longer an “ivory tower” institution but appears in the language of popular culture familiar to the younger generation. Social media shapes a simultaneous religious experience: personal yet communal, local yet global, and spiritual yet visual. These strategies show that spiritual authority is now constructed within networked religion, making sholawat concerts part of a contemporary Islamic culture industry that adapts and negotiates within a media-influenced era.

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

The author declares that NotebookLM, an AI-powered research and synthesis collaborator, was used to translate, analyze, and extract deep insights from the original manuscript. The author further declares that, apart from NotebookLM, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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