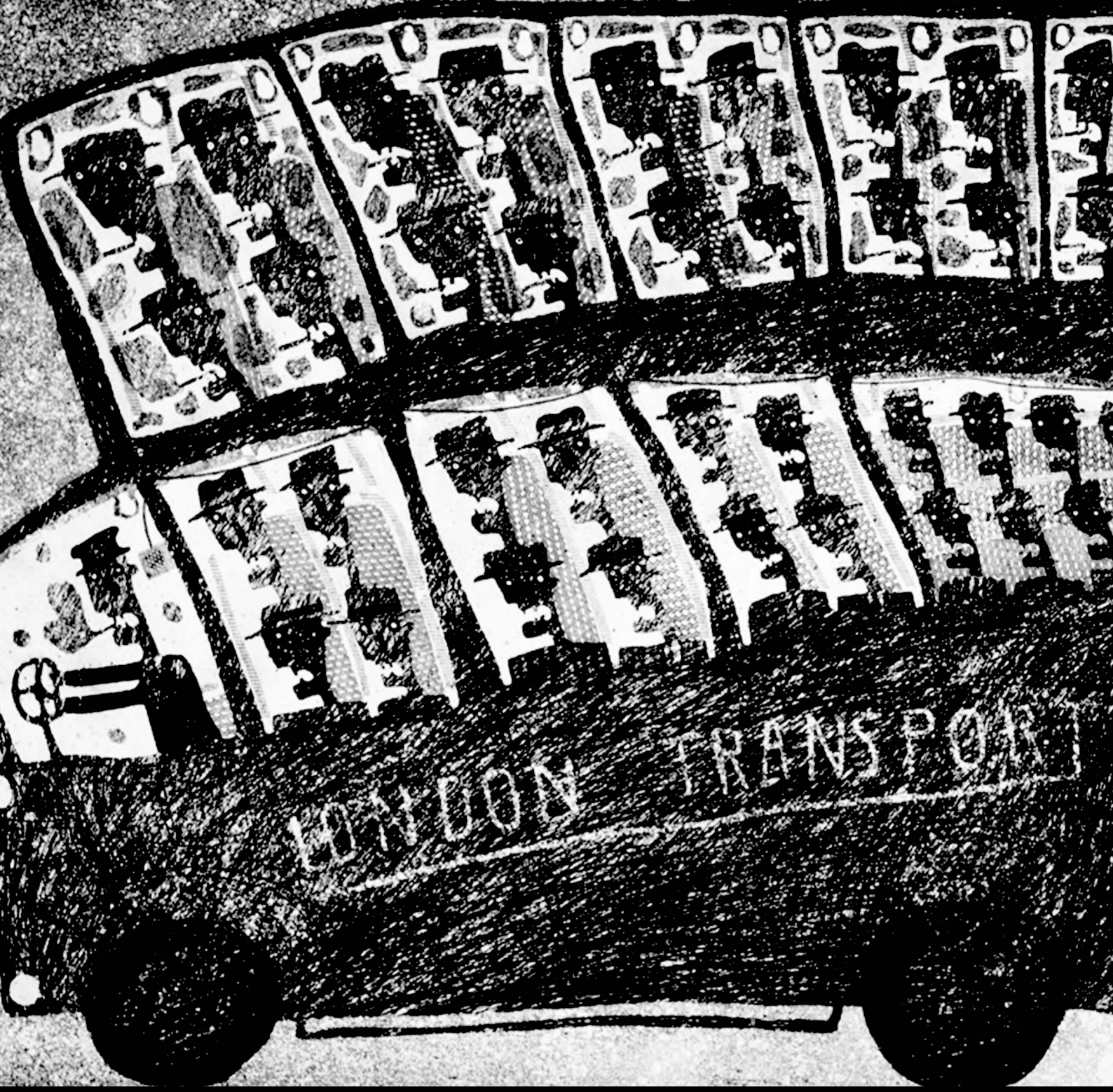

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The Poetics of Embodied Intelligence: Creative Dance as an Educational Commons for Inclusion and Community Leadership

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
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Abstract

This workshop explores creative and community dance as a form of embodied intelligence, functioning as a shared resource that fosters inclusion, collaboration, and community leadership in education. In an era dominated by standardized, technology-mediated learning, embodied practices reclaim the body as a site of knowledge, agency, and relational understanding. Drawing on research in community dance, participatory pedagogy, and inclusive education, participants will engage in movement-based strategies that cultivate empathy, cooperation, and collective problem-solving. Through structured improvisation and reflective movement tasks, participants will experience how shared movement practices strengthen collective cohesion, mutual recognition, and participatory leadership. Each activity is paired with pedagogical rationale, illustrating how creative dance nurtures agency, leadership, inclusion, and intercultural understanding. By framing dance as an educational commons, participants will explore how redistributing agency through embodied practice promotes equitable participation and cultivates learning environments grounded in care, creativity, and collaboration. These principles extend beyond classrooms, modeling values of cooperation, shared responsibility, and global citizenship. Designed for educators, researchers, activists, education policymakers, and arts practitioners, this workshop equips participants with practical methodologies, reflective prompts, and adaptable exercises suitable for diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: embodied intelligence, community dance, educational commons, inclusion

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Introduction

Contemporary societies are increasingly shaped by forms of knowledge production that privilege cognitive, individualised, and technology-mediated modes of learning. While digital acceleration has undoubtedly broadened access to information, it has simultaneously left us feeling disconnected, raising urgent questions about where human presence, sensory experience, relational intimacy, and collective meaning-making belong in modern educational and community spaces (Biesta, 2022). Biesta (2022) argues that education must enable individuals to exist meaningfully with and in the world, rather than acting as isolated cognitive consumers.

We learn not just with our minds, but through our skin, our breath, and our shared rhythm. In response to this hyper-cognitive drift, scholars and practitioners across the arts, humanities, and social sciences are returning to embodiment, not merely as a trend, but as a crucial counterweight to purely intellectualised frameworks of understanding (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019; Varela, et al., 1991). In response, scholars have renewed interest in embodiment as a way of understanding learning, by moving from passive observation to deeply integrated corporeal action. Similarly, there is shift of viewing embodied learning as a way of participation, and social engagement beyond purely cognitive frameworks.

Creative and community dance offers a powerful context through which embodied intelligence can be experienced as a relational and participatory process. It is the living, physical capacity of the human body to process information, adapt to forces, generate creative solutions, and communicate without relying exclusively on verbal or abstract thought. In dance, the body is not just an instrument carried around by the mind; the body itself is the thinking subject (Beardall, 2017).

Moreover, rather than treating movement solely as artistic expression or physical activity, community dance positions the body as a site of inquiry, communication, and collective knowledge production. Through shared movement practices, participants negotiate meaning, cultivate empathy, develop mutual awareness, and co-create experiences that challenge hierarchical models of participation and leadership. In this sense, dance becomes not only an artistic practice but also a social and pedagogical process through which communities are continuously formed and transformed.

This paper proposes the concept of creative dance as an educational common (Anttila, 2015; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019), a vibrant shared space where movement acts as a public resource that nurtures equitable access, distributed agency, and organic community leadership. Drawing on perspectives from embodied cognition, community dance, participatory pedagogy, and theories of the commons, the paper argues that embodied practices create conditions in which knowledge, responsibility, and creativity are collectively generated rather than individually owned. Leadership is understood not as the authority of a single individual but as an emergent, relational process arising through shared participation and collaborative decision-making. Therefore, leadership emerges relationally, it flows dynamically from participant to participant through mutual trust, improvised responses, and collaborative decision-making (Raelin, 2016).

The paper presents and reflects upon an interactive workshop delivered at the European Conference on Arts & Humanities (ECAH2026). The workshop invited participants to engage in a sequence of experiential movement practices designed to cultivate embodied awareness, shared agency, collaborative meaning-making, and community leadership. Rather than

evaluating participant outcomes, the paper uses the workshop as a practice-based case to examine how creative dance can enact the principles of educational commons through embodied participation (Leavy, 2020). In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of embodied artistic practices in fostering inclusive, democratic, and participatory forms of learning and community engagement.

Embodied Intelligence in Dance Practice

Embodied intelligence in dance refers to the capacity of the body to perceive, interpret, and act through movement, environmental interaction, and relational dynamics. Distinct from abstract or purely cognitive reasoning, embodied intelligence emerges directly through sensory awareness, kinesthetic perception, and bodily action (Yang et al., 2024). Within dance practice, this intelligence operates across multiple interconnected dimensions. Dancers cultivate interoceptive and somatic sensing through a heightened awareness of internal signals, such as breath, muscular tension, and alignment, allowing them to regulate movement quality, adapt physical effort, and communicate affective states (Savrami, 2017). Simultaneously, kinesthetic and spatial intelligence enables dancers to negotiate physical forces like gravity, weight, momentum, and spatial boundaries through continuous sensory feedback rather than explicit calculation (Clark, 2016).

Beyond individual physical execution, embodied intelligence encompasses relational attunement and kinesthetic empathy, particularly within collaborative practices such as contact improvisation and community dance. In these settings, movement becomes a shared communicative field where participants intuitively respond to changes in weight, rhythm, and intention without relying on verbal interaction (Foster, 2011). Furthermore, dancers engage in embodied metacognition by evaluating and refining their movement processes while in motion, seamlessly integrating bodily sensation with aesthetic and creative decision-making (Eddy, 2016).

When translated into educational, community, and eco-somatic contexts, embodied intelligence shifts from an individual physical skill to a relational and socially situated capacity. By framing somatic inquiry as a legitimate form of knowledge production, these practices challenge hyper-cognitive and hierarchical learning frameworks. Emerging research highlights how socially engaged somatic practices position the body as a site of critical reflection, collective transformation, and liberatory pedagogy, fostering inclusive, participatory spaces through shared physical presence (Beardall, 2017).

Creative and Community Dance

Creative and community dance practices shift the emphasis from performance as the presentation of a predetermined artistic product towards participation as a meaningful embodied process (Hanna, 2015). Although performance may sometimes form part of a community dance project, its value is not necessarily located in technical excellence or competitive achievement, but in the experiences of connection, expression, creativity, and belonging that develop through participation. Snook et al. (2026), in their meta-analysis of 24 community dance projects, identify participation, inclusion, collaborative relationships, and a focus on participants as central values of community dance, emphasising that there is no presumption of technical skill or requirement to be a “good” dancer. Their findings further suggest that the process and the journey are as important as the final outcome, with social engagement, collaboration, connection, and the valuing of others emerging across all the

projects examined. In this sense, dance becomes an opportunity to create a safe and supportive space in which diverse bodies and experiences are recognised as significant, enabling participants to experience themselves not simply as performers, but as active members of a shared community. In this context, dance can function as an inclusive space in which different bodies, abilities, identities, and forms of expression are valued, challenging conventional distinctions between dancer and non-dancer, expert and participant, performer and audience. From this perspective, dance is understood not merely as physical activity or bodily development, but as an artistic, aesthetic, cultural, anthropological, pedagogical, and educational medium (Klein et al., 2019).

Co-creation is central to this participatory orientation, as creative and community dance practices position participants as active contributors to the generation of movement, meaning, and artistic knowledge. Rather than receiving movement material passively from a choreographer or teacher, participants are invited to bring their own experiences, ideas, cultural identities, imagination, and embodied knowledge into the creative process. Snook et al. (2026) describe this through a humanising and participant-centred pedagogy in which dance is developed *with* participants rather than simply *for* them, highlighting the importance of listening to participants' voices and enabling them to contribute to decisions. Similarly, Markus and Fergerson's (2026) engagement with bell hooks foregrounds imagination, counternarrative, love, and community as pedagogical practices that nurture collaboration and agency. Their examples demonstrate how student-generated movement, collective composition, reflection, and opportunities for participants to lead can transform the dance classroom into a space of shared authorship. Co-creation, therefore, is not simply a technique for producing choreography; it is a relational process through which participants develop ownership, agency, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging. These processes can also challenge hierarchical structures traditionally associated with dance-making and education.

In that perspective, it consequently challenges the hierarchical relationships traditionally embedded within dance education and artistic production. A non-hierarchical process does not necessarily imply the absence of leadership or expertise; rather, it involves a redistribution of agency in which the facilitator becomes responsible for creating the conditions for participation, dialogue, experimentation, and shared decision-making. Snook et al. (2026) connect this orientation with inclusive, humanising, and culturally responsive pedagogies, arguing for practices that value every participant and attend to their individual needs, identities, abilities, and contexts. This resonates with bell hooks's emphasis, as interpreted by Markus and Fergerson (2026), on care, respect, trust, commitment, honest communication, and community as foundations for transformative educational relationships. Within such a framework, authority becomes relational rather than simply imposed: facilitators guide, support, and hold the space, while participants contribute knowledge, movement, perspectives, and leadership. Creative and community dance can therefore be understood as a form of embodied democratic practice, where the removal of excessive emphasis on competition, technical perfection, and predetermined outcomes allows space for reciprocity, collective agency, and diverse ways of knowing.

Educational Commons and Distributed Leadership

Within the fields of culture and education, the concept of the commons can be applied to creative dance, which can be understood as both a cultural and pedagogical commons. Creative forms of dance function as collective practices of expression, learning, and meaning-making through embodied experience, grounded in participation, collaboration, and co-creation. Dance

practices are not treated as commodified products or as the exclusive privilege of experts, but as shared cultural resources that are produced and reproduced through the active engagement of participants. In this context, creative dance groups constitute communities of practice that foster participatory cultures, equitable contribution, the acceptance of diversity, and self-organisation beyond rigid hierarchies (Klein et al., 2019). Embodied knowledge, movement expression, and dance creation are shared and collectively developed, supporting experiential learning and social cohesion.

This understanding of creative dance as a cultural and pedagogical commons is further supported by empirical research demonstrating its capacity to strengthen social relationships and collaborative networks. Zander et al. (2014), for example, found that sustained participation in group dance activities within school settings strengthened both emotional bonds and collaborative relationships among students, expanded their social networks, and increased reciprocal cooperation, thereby fostering a stronger sense of belonging and collective participation, particularly among students who traditionally displayed lower levels of engagement. Similarly, Kreutzmann et al. (2018), in a longitudinal study of 606 students across 30 classrooms, found that long-term participation in a school-based dance intervention was associated with a stronger sense of belonging, mediated by increased acceptance of and by peers. Students participating in the dance programme developed more extensive and reciprocal social networks than those in the control group, suggesting that dance can operate as a collective practice that enhances participation, connectivity, and social cohesion within the school community.

Further theoretical perspectives on dance education reinforce this understanding of creative dance as an educational commons by emphasising dance as a site of social learning and collective coexistence (Erdal & Strømsø, 2018; Freire, 1970). From this perspective, dance extends beyond the individual execution of movements to create dialogical or "third spaces" in which participants learn and coexist through the recognition and expression of difference. Anttila (2015) argue that such an approach positions dance education not merely as a means of developing movement skills, but as a platform for building relationships, expressing identity, and engaging with diversity within democratic and multicultural environments. Movement-based learning can enhance the effectiveness of educational processes and support the acquisition of broader cognitive competencies. These include the development of perception, memory, language, concentration, self-discipline, readiness, decision-making and problem-solving skills, empathy, and awareness of the social role of art (Anttila, 2015).

Within education, dance and bodily expression can also encourage learners to become active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Such approaches stimulate critical and creative thinking and enrich processes of inquiry, analysis, interpretation, and understanding. In this sense, artistic practices can open up new interdisciplinary possibilities for learning and create educational environments in which knowledge is explored through embodied, creative, and collaborative experiences (Antilla, 2015; Murphy, 2014). Its value lies precisely in the collective processes through which movement is explored, negotiated, shared, and transformed, enabling learners to become active agents in the construction of their social and educational environments. The body becomes both a medium through which meanings are expressed and communicated and a source of knowledge and understanding. By developing awareness of the body and its meanings, learners can cultivate new ways of perceiving themselves, others, and the world around them (Klein et al., 2019). Creative dance thus contributes to the development of active, critically engaged, and socially empowered individuals while supporting the

formation of inclusive learning communities grounded in participation, reciprocity, belonging, and democratic engagement.

In creative and community dance, leadership can be understood as relational rather than hierarchical, emerging through interactions between facilitators, artists, and participants rather than being located exclusively in the authority of the choreographer or teacher. The facilitator's role is not to impose a predetermined artistic outcome but to create the conditions in which participants can contribute, make decisions, share knowledge, and influence the direction of the creative process (Raelin, 2016). Leadership is therefore distributed across the group and continually negotiated through listening, dialogue, responsiveness, and trust. This approach recognises that participants bring valuable embodied, cultural, and experiential knowledge to the process, while the facilitator contributes expertise in creating a safe and supportive environment for collective exploration. As discussed by Markus and Fergerson (2026), pedagogical relationships can be transformed when respect and honest communication become foundational principles of the learning environment. Their examples of creative dance practice demonstrate how leadership can be shared, for instance when students contribute movement ideas, collectively develop choreography, and subsequently take on leadership roles within the group. Similarly, community dance research emphasises participant voice and agency, positioning the facilitator as someone who supports rather than controls the creative process. Leadership as relational therefore involves cultivating the capacity of the group to lead collectively. Creative and community dance can thus become a space where leadership is experienced as a reciprocal and embodied practice rather than through fixed hierarchies.

Methodology

This paper adopts a practice-based research approach, positioning creative practice as a mode of inquiry and knowledge production (Pakes, 2003). In practice-based research, embodied and artistic processes are not merely objects of investigation but also methodological tools through which knowledge is generated (Barrett, 2007; Nelson, 2023). The workshop presented in this paper was designed as an exploratory embodied inquiry into the relationship between creative dance, educational commons, and participatory forms of leadership. The methodology was informed by principles of community dance, experiential learning, and arts-based research. The workshop was structured as a sequence of movement experiences progressing from individual embodied awareness towards relational interaction and collective meaning-making.

The paper does not seek to measure participant outcomes; rather, it critically reflects on the pedagogical design of the workshop and examines how embodied practices can enact the principles of educational commons.

Table 1
Workshop Design and Implementation

Aim	Practice	Theoretical connection
Developing bodily awareness	Embodiment through improvisation	Embodied intelligence
Listening and responding	Relational improvisation	Shared agency
Negotiating ideas and decisions	Collective composition	Community leadership
Collective meaning - making	Reflection	Educational commons

The first workshop activity focused on developing *bodily awareness* as an entry point into *embodied intelligence*. Participants were invited to engage in an improvisational movement exploration that encouraged them to attend to internal bodily sensations, including breathing, weight, balance, muscular tension, and the initiation of movement. Rather than following predetermined choreographic sequences, participants were encouraged to allow movement to emerge through sensory attention and moment-to-moment bodily responses. This improvisational approach positioned the body not simply as an instrument for executing movement but as a source of perception, knowledge, and decision-making. By directing attention towards the relationship between sensation, intention, and action, the exercise introduced participants to embodied intelligence as a form of situated knowing that develops through active engagement with the body and its environment. The activity also established the experiential foundation for the subsequent workshop practices, moving from individual bodily awareness towards relational attunement, shared agency, and collective forms of participation.

The second activity focused on *listening and responding* through relational improvisation, exploring how embodied intelligence can extend beyond individual bodily awareness towards an attunement to others and *shared agency*. Participants engaged in paired movement explorations in which they were invited to observe, sense, and respond to subtle changes in their partner's movement, rhythm, direction, and use of space. Through processes of following, initiating, and adapting, participants experienced movement as a form of non-verbal dialogue in which agency was continuously negotiated between individuals. The exercise intentionally disrupted fixed distinctions between leader and follower, encouraging participants to shift between initiating and responding and to recognise that each person's movement could influence the direction of the shared process. In this way, relational improvisation created opportunities for participants to experience shared agency as a dynamic and embodied process. Rather than locating decision-making in a single individual, the activity demonstrated how collective action can emerge through attentive listening, mutual responsiveness, and the willingness to adapt one's own actions in relation to others.

The third activity focused on *negotiating ideas and decisions* through *collective composition*, exploring the relationship between embodied creativity and *community leadership*. Participants were presented with a painting and first engaged in a collective process of observation and interpretation, examining its visual elements, symbols, and possible social meanings. Drawing on the themes that emerged from this analysis, each group identified a contemporary social issue that resonated with the painting and collaboratively developed a short choreographic composition, based purely on dynamics and qualities of movement, to express its relevance to present-day society. The process required participants to negotiate different interpretations, select and combine ideas, make collective decisions, and determine how an abstract social concern could be communicated through movement. Leadership was therefore not assigned to a particular individual but emerged through the collaborative process, as participants alternated between proposing, listening, adapting, supporting, and guiding the group's creative direction. The activity demonstrated community leadership as a fluid and relational process in which individuals contribute to a shared purpose while remaining responsive to the ideas and perspectives of others. Through collective composition, participants experienced how creative decision-making can become a form of shared responsibility and how artistic practice can provide a space for communities to critically engage with contemporary social issues.

The final workshop activity focused on *collective meaning-making* through *reflection*, inviting participants to consider and articulate the knowledge generated through their embodied and collaborative experiences by connecting it to the concept of the *educational commons.*

Following the movement explorations and collective composition, participants reflected on the processes they had experienced and discussed how the activities had shaped their understanding of participation, inclusion, agency, collaboration, and leadership. Rather than treating reflection as an individual assessment of the workshop, the process was structured as a collective dialogue in which participants shared different perspectives and connected their embodied experiences to broader educational and social contexts. This process of collectively interpreting experience reinforced the concept of the educational commons, understood here as a relational space in which knowledge is not simply transmitted from an expert to passive recipients but is collectively produced, negotiated, and shared. The reflective process therefore extended the principles explored through movement into dialogue, highlighting how embodied practice can generate shared knowledge and create conditions for mutual recognition, collective responsibility, and collaborative learning. In this sense, the workshop concluded by bringing together embodied intelligence, shared agency, and community leadership within a common process of meaning-making, illustrating how creative dance can function as an educational commons through which participants collectively contribute to and shape the knowledge being produced.

Discussion and Conclusion

The workshop was designed as a progressive embodied inquiry through which participants moved from individual bodily awareness towards relational interaction, collective decision-making, and shared meaning-making. This progression reflects an understanding of embodied intelligence not as an individual capacity that resides within the body, but as a relational and situated form of knowing that develops through interaction with others and with the surrounding environment (Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). The four activities therefore functioned as interconnected stages rather than as discrete exercises, progressively expanding the focus from the individual body to the relational and collective dimensions of creative practice.

The first activity established embodied awareness as the foundation of the workshop, inviting participants to attend to bodily sensations and to experience movement as a source of perception and knowledge (Savrami, 2017; Yang et al., 2024). The second activity extended this awareness into relational space, demonstrating how listening and responding through movement can redistribute agency between participants. Through relational improvisation, the distinction between leader and follower became fluid, allowing participants to experience shared agency as an ongoing process of initiating, responding, adapting, and supporting one another (Kreutzmann et al., 2018). The third activity further expanded this process into collective decision-making. By interpreting a painting, identifying contemporary social concerns, and transforming these ideas into a collective choreographic composition, participants engaged in negotiation, collaboration, and shared responsibility (Markus & Fergerson, 2026). Leadership consequently emerged not as a fixed position but as a fluid and relational practice. Finally, the reflective process enabled participants to collectively interpret the knowledge generated through their embodied experiences, connecting individual and group processes to broader social and educational questions (Pakes, 2003).

Taken together, the workshop suggests a conceptual relationship between embodied intelligence, shared agency, community leadership, and educational commons. Embodied intelligence provided the starting point for developing awareness and responsiveness; shared agency emerged as participants influenced and shaped one another's actions; and community leadership developed through processes of collective negotiation and decision-making. These processes culminated in collective meaning-making, through which knowledge was produced

and shared within the group. Participants were invited not only to perform movement but to influence the direction of the collective process (Klein et al., 2019; Raelin, 2016). From this perspective, the educational commons can be understood not simply as a shared resource or physical space but as a relational process in which participants collectively contribute to, shape, and transform knowledge. Creative dance thus becomes a means through which the principles of the commons can be embodied and enacted rather than merely discussed.

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Paleoart as Epistemic Mediation and a Psychogenetic Device: Reconstruction of Fossil Species and Symbolic Formation in Educational Contexts

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Abstract

Paleoart is an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of the visual arts and the Earth sciences, devoted to the visual reconstruction of extinct organisms and ecosystems from fossil evidence. Although it is often perceived as a form of popular-science "illustration," specialized scholarship has repeatedly emphasized that paleoart is integral to the epistemic culture of Paleontology, insofar as it translates anatomical, functional, and paleoenvironmental hypotheses into evaluable representations. Such representations can guide scientific communication and, in some cases, contribute to the formulation and refinement of interpretations—for example, by making gaps, inconsistencies, and anatomical choices explicit. At the same time, studies indicate that aesthetic and scientific decisions in paleoart are not always documented transparently, which can perpetuate inaccuracies across successive media cycles and reinterpretations. This article proposes an integrated Art–Paleontology–Education framework that conceptualizes paleoart production as (i) a reconstruction protocol grounded in evidential traceability (decision chains, levels of inference, and plausible alternatives) and (ii) a formative and diagnostic device inspired by the Educational Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior, sjr.

Keywords: paleoart, epistemic mediation, inferential traceability, educational psychogenetics

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Introduction

Paleoart is a boundary practice between the visual arts and paleontology, responsible for making communicable hypotheses about the morphology, posture, integument, and ecosystems of extinct organisms on the basis of incomplete evidence. Images do not function as mere informational ornament; rather, they operate as a means of constructing and stabilizing reference: they organize what should be "seen" in the fossil record, which anatomical relations deserve emphasis, and which inferences may be accepted as plausible within a community of specialists (Daston & Galison, 2007; Latour, 1986). From an aesthetic standpoint, this entails recognizing that representation is not reducible to resemblance: it depends on symbolic systems, conventions, and shared rules of correctness through which a visual artefact can denote and exemplify properties without literally "copying" reality (Goodman, 1976). In cognitive and educational terms, reconstruction is also an exercise in coordinating perspectives and making criteria explicit, consistent with constructivist accounts of knowledge and with Piaget's emphasis on the role of intellectual operations in building structures of understanding (Piaget, 1952).

Despite this relevance, paleoartistic production frequently faces a recurring methodological problem: the inferential layers that connect osteological evidence to non-preserved attributes (e.g., musculature, organs, skin, and feathers) are not always documented with sufficient clarity. This opacity facilitates the spread of anachronisms and the crystallization of visual solutions through repetition across media and subsequent reinterpretations. The specialized paleoart literature has therefore emphasized the need to make the reconstructive process explicit and to treat visual production as work with gaps, uncertainties, and distinct levels of inference, rather than presenting the final image as a mirror of the past (Witton, 2018). In the case of Phorusrhacidae, whose reconstructions require careful articulation between comparative anatomy and functional reconstruction, systematic revisions have shown how strongly the group's taxonomic and morphological organization depends on rigorous analyses of fragmentary material and refined interpretations (Alvarenga & Höfling, 2003). This is the context in which the present article's case study is situated, focusing on the artistic elaboration of the anatomy of Paraphysornis brasiliensis.

This article proposes an integrated Art–Paleontology–Education framework in which paleoart is understood both as traceable epistemic mediation and as a formative and analytical device inspired by the Educational Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior, sjr. The psychogenetic emphasis shifts attention from the "visual product" to the decision-making and symbolization processes that constitute it, valuing the documentation of choices, the explicit statement of premises, and reflection on plausibility criteria as structuring dimensions of practice (Xavier Júnior, 2004).

The general objective of the study is to propose and demonstrate a paleoart reconstruction protocol grounded in evidential traceability, capable of making explicit levels of inference and alternative pathways in the transition from fossil to image. As specific objectives, the study applies the protocol to a case study devoted to Paraphysornis brasiliensis, articulating classical and digital art techniques in the modelling of anatomical and integumentary layers, with an explicit justification for each reconstructive choice.

Paleoart as an Epistemic Culture

Paleoart can be understood as a regime of visualization situated between scientific illustration and disciplined imagination, in which the image functions as an instrument for synthesizing and communicating paleontological hypotheses, producing what may be described, in epistemological terms, as socially negotiated "visual evidence." Such evidence does not arise from the object's immediate transparency, but rather from a set of conventions, techniques, and collective criteria that organize perception, hierarchize anatomical traits, and assign relevance to particular morphological relations—bringing paleoart close to the traditions of atlases, diagrams, and scientific figures that helped shape modern objectivity (Daston & Galison, 2007). From this perspective, a paleoart image does not merely represent an extinct organism; it stabilizes a way of reading the fossil record, enabling specialists and non-specialists alike to compare, discuss, and revise interpretations through a shared visual artefact.

However, because it depends on a structurally incomplete fossil record, paleoart operates under conditions of lacunarity: fossils preserve limited portions of an organism and often remain silent precisely about aspects that are decisive for reconstruction (integument, coloration, feather patterns, fine muscular volumes, soft tissues, and many behavioral markers). Consequently, image production requires a continuum of inferences ranging from direct evidence (e.g., measurable osteological proportions) to comparative inference (analogies with extant taxa that are phylogenetically close or functionally analogous) and to controlled hypothesis (plausible but unconfirmable elements). This passage entails commitments to plausibility and to rules of correctness that are not purely "empirical": they involve representational and symbolic choices, insofar as scientific representation denotes and organizes properties through conventional systems rather than reducing itself to photographic resemblance (Goodman, 1976). By making these levels explicit, paleoart renders visible the inferential structure of paleontology itself, exposing—in visual language—what is demonstrable, what is probable, and what remains conjectural.

It is precisely here that recurring problems emerge in the circulation of reconstructions. A first risk is visual anachronism: the inadvertent projection of contemporary stereotypes (skin patterns, popular "textures," arbitrary chromatic choices, or poses derived from cultural imaginaries) onto organisms for which the evidence does not authorize such details. A second risk is the copy effect, whereby visual solutions become tacit models and are replicated in cascade (across museums, books, documentaries, and the internet), producing the stabilization of errors: what is repeated comes to appear "true," even when it originated in a fragile choice or an insufficiently examined convention. The practical literature on paleoart has warned against this phenomenon by insisting that reconstructions should be treated as visual hypotheses rather than portraits, and that public and academic trust depends on clarity regarding what counts as evidence and what counts as inference (Witton, 2018).

In response to these challenges, best practices have emerged that reposition paleoart as an auditable and cumulative production. Among them are: systematic documentation of decisions (e.g., anatomical sheets, decision logs, and the bibliography used), image versioning (with records of changes prompted by new evidence or specialized critique), and explicit justification of inferential layers—preferably through captions or uncertainty maps distinguishing what is supported by fossil material from what is reconstructed by analogy or hypothesis. Taken together, these practices bring paleoart closer to an ethics of methodological transparency: the goal is not to eliminate imagination—an inevitable element in lacunar records—but to

discipline it and make it criticizable, allowing the image to fulfill its epistemic function without concealing the conditions of its production (Daston & Galison, 2007; Witton, 2018).

Symbolic Mediation, Educational Psychogenetics, and the Coordination of Perspectives

In the humanities and the arts, the notion of symbolic mediation refers to the set of operations through which experience is organized into shareable forms of meaning. It is not an accessory added after knowledge, but rather a condition of possibility for something to become intelligible, communicable, and criticizable. This point becomes particularly important when research relies on objects that are not immediately available to direct observation, or whose intelligibility depends on reconstruction, as is the case with paleoart. Here, the image functions as a symbolic form that condenses decisions, perceptual hierarchies, and publicly shared criteria of correctness, enabling a community to compare, revise, and debate hypotheses (Cassirer, 1944; Goodman, 1976).

The "scientific gaze" is not a natural given but a historically and culturally constituted competence. In artistic traditions, training the gaze involves learning to perceive relevant differences (proportion, rhythm, volume, contrast, texture), distinguishing what is essential from what is incidental, and recognizing styles, techniques, and conventions. In scientific traditions, it involves learning to stabilize an object through selections, instruments, and representations, as well as internalizing procedures of validation and contestation. The convergence of these two axes is crucial for understanding paleoart: the paleoartist does not "see" the extinct animal in the fossil as if the image were already contained within it; what is seen is a constructed visual hypothesis, which must be disciplined by evidence and made feasible through compositional resources and the grammar of visual language (Daston & Galison, 2007; Mitchell, 1994).

Two implications follow from this conception. First, every paleoart image carries a grammar: choices of framing, pose, scale, environment, "finish," and texture are not neutral; they guide the observer's inferences and generate cognitive effects of naturalization. Second, symbolic mediation can be objectified and documented: the image-making process can be described as a decision chain with premises, alternatives, and constraints, shifting paleoart from the domain of the "final result" to that of an auditable epistemic practice. This shift is necessary because it allows visual language to be integrated into an explicit inferential regime, in which plausibility is not merely a "sense of verisimilitude" but a methodologically sustained property (Daston & Galison, 2007; Goodman, 1976).

The Educational Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior: Foundations and Relevance

The Educational Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior, sjr, can be understood as an interpretive framework for human development and learning that systematically emphasizes the interaction between subject and object, the centrality of the body as an operative condition for knowing, and the need to observe processes (rather than only products) in order to understand the genesis of meaning. In this formulation, "learning" is not merely the accumulation of content, but the reorganization of modes of interaction, the expansion of repertoires of action, and the elevation of the level of reversals applied to external and internal objects—that is, the capacity to go back and forth over the same object from distinct angles, refining one's relation to it (Xavier Júnior, 2004).

A particularly fruitful core for the present research lies in the way Xavier describes curiosity and understanding as functions of a repertoire of reversals. Knowing is not equivalent to "capturing" an object; it is the capacity to sustain cycles of return to it, gradually producing a finer differentiation of its properties and relations. The metaphor of spiral movement underscores that repetition is not mere repetition: it is a return that reconfigures the subject, because the subject is transformed as they assimilate the object and reorganize their strategies of interaction (Xavier Júnior, n.d.). This point is highly relevant to paleoart: a well-grounded reconstruction does not emerge from a single decision, but from an iterative circuit of approximations, revisions, and re-evaluations, in which the same set of evidence can be "re-encountered" under new criteria—for example, when new functional comparisons are introduced, when posture is tested against biomechanical constraints, or when integumentary layers are reassessed in light of new hypotheses.

Another relevant foundation is the psychogenetic emphasis on the body as a structuring dimension of knowing. Xavier's discussion of proprioception proposes a distinction between proprioception that is merely physiological (as a form of registration) and a psychogenetic proprioception understood as a founding action: the subject acts, apprehends their own modification, and integrates that modification as part of their operative structure (Xavier Júnior, 2004). Methodologically, this implies recognizing that symbolic production (including image production) is inseparable from a regime of bodily and perceptual actions: drawing, modelling, cutting, overlaying layers, comparing proportions, and testing poses are actions that generate information, because they reorganize the perceptual field and make explicit incompatibilities or gaps that would not appear in purely verbal interpretation.

The relevance of this framework to the article's proposal is therefore direct: Educational Psychogenetics provides a language for describing reconstruction as process, making it possible to treat paleoart as a practice of progressive interaction and self-regulation of judgment. Rather than restricting the discussion to the "degree of realism" of the final product, it becomes possible to examine the regime of reversals, the coordination of evidence, and the documentation of choices, within a perspective that understands learning (for both the paleoartist and the audience) as the reorganization of structures of meaning (Xavier Júnior, 2004).

Articulation With Piaget: Assimilation/Accommodation and the Coordination of Perspectives

The Piagetian lineage that runs through Xavier's Psychogenetics can be made explicit through three operators: assimilation, accommodation, and the coordination of perspectives. In Piaget, assimilation refers to the incorporation of the object into already available schemes of action and thought; accommodation refers to the modification of those schemes when the object resists—that is, when interaction generates disequilibrium and requires reorganization. Knowledge, in this framework, is a constructive process oriented by successive equilibrations rather than a passive mirroring of reality (Piaget, 1952; Piaget, 1970).

Table 1
Operational Synthesis of Piagetian Concepts of Assimilation, Accommodation, Disequilibrium, and Equilibration: Definitions, Effects on the Subject, Observable Indicators, and an Example Applied to the Paleoart Reconstruction Process

Concept (Piaget)	Concise definition	What happens in the subject	Typical indicator (sign it is occurring)	Example applied to paleoart reconstruction
Assimilation	Incorporation of the object into already available schemes of action and thought (Piaget, 1952).	The subject interprets the new object through prior structures, using consolidated repertoires and models.	Rapid recognition; direct application of a "known model"; sense of continuity ("I already know what this is like").	The author initially adopts a standard musculature model from extant cursorial birds to guide volumes and insertion points, because this scheme already "fits" their reading of the fossil.
Accommodation	Modification of schemes when the object resists, generating disequilibrium and requiring reorganization (Piaget, 1952).	The subject changes the scheme to address constraints and incompatibilities posed by the object, producing a better-adjusted structure.	Emergence of conflict ("it doesn't fit"); need to revise proportions/hypotheses; reformulation of the drawing/model.	The initially proposed posture proves unfeasible when certain bone articulations impose movement limits; the author reconfigures the trunk axis and redistributes body mass to respect anatomical constraints.
Equilibration (successive equilibria)	Regulatory process coordinating assimilation and accommodation, producing provisional stability at increasingly complex levels (Piaget, 1970).	The subject seeks a new equilibrium, integrating modified schemes and increasing the internal coherence of interpretations.	More robust provisional stability; greater consistency among parts; fewer contradictions; ability to justify choices.	After successive revisions, the final reconstruction remains coherent across skeleton, musculature, volumes, integument, and environment, with justifications for each layer and an indicated level of inference.
Disequilibrium (perturbation)	Cognitive tension caused by a discrepancy between the subject's expectations and the object's properties, triggering reorganizations (Piaget, 1970).	The subject identifies flaws, gaps, and contradictions; understanding enters a revision state.	Productive doubt; need to test alternatives; search for new comparisons and sources.	Comparative evidence suggests the proposed feather/skin solution is incompatible with the presumed ecology; the author revises the integument and records plausible alternatives in distinct versions.

When transposed to the problem of paleoart, this framework makes it possible to characterize with precision what takes place in responsible reconstructions. The paleoartist assimilates when using already consolidated patterns (for example, comparative anatomical models, musculature repertoires based on cursorial birds, and conventions for the representation of feathers). Accommodation occurs when fossil evidence or functional constraints require a reconfiguration of the model: a joint does not allow a certain range of motion; a cranial proportion imposes a different mass distribution; an integumentary hypothesis conflicts with aerodynamic or ecological demands. The reconstruction process, in this sense, is a sequence of equilibria and disequilibria between representational schemes and empirical constraints (Piaget, 1952; Witton, 2018).

Table 2

Operational Definitions, Effects on the Subject, Observable Indicators, and Examples Applied to Paleoartistic Reconstruction for the Concepts of Assimilation, Accommodation, Disequilibrium, and Equilibration, According to Fr. Xavier's Psychogenetics

Concept (in operational terms)	Synthetic definition in the Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior	What occurs in the subject	Typical indicator (sign that it is happening)	Example applied to the process of paleoartistic reconstruction
Assimilation	Assimilation is understood as an act of the subject: it is not the object that "acts" upon the subject, but rather the subject who assimilates the object and is modified by it, including at the sensorimotor and interpretive levels (Xavier Júnior, 2004).	The subject incorporates the object into his or her field of interaction, mobilizes an "organ"/structure, and registers, through action itself, the modification that the object produces as an effect of its assimilation.	The subject "grasps" the object through successive approximations and recognizes that he or she has been transformed through the interaction (greater capacity to discriminate, compare, and sustain focus).	At the beginning of the reconstruction, the author assimilates the fossil material through measurements, comparison of proportions, and pose testing; with each round of work, changes become apparent in the author's own criterion for anatomical reading (greater precision and less visual guesswork).
Accommodation (reorganization through reversal)	The reorganization of the subject occurs through reversals: going toward the object and returning, repeatedly, from different angles, thereby refining the interaction; reversal, in Xavier, is a central mechanism for expanding the capacity for interaction and constitutes the basis of psychogenetic pedagogy (Xavier Júnior, 2004).	The subject alters internal strategies: redoes perceptual pathways, adjusts hypotheses, and reconfigures actions in order to deal with newly perceived characteristics of the object.	Deliberate revisions emerge: "returning to the object from another angle," comparing alternatives, reworking layers, and incorporating constraints that had previously been ignored.	The author changes the initial musculature/volume scheme upon identifying incompatibilities with the skeleton and returns to the fossil and to comparative analogies, reconfiguring the solution in successive versions.
Disequilibrium (limit of the repertoire)	The "limit" appears when the repertoire of back-and-forth movements over the object is exhausted; upon reaching this limit, curiosity weakens, because there are no longer enough available reversals to sustain the interaction (Xavier Júnior, 2004).	The subject encounters an operational barrier: he or she cannot move forward while maintaining the same repertoire of actions, and must expand internal discipline, method, or repertoire in order to continue.	A feeling of stagnation; unproductive repetition; difficulty sustaining focus and generating new operational questions about the object.	When attempting to define integument and feathers without sufficient constraints, the author perceives stagnation and the risk of anachronism: this signals the limit of the repertoire and requires the search for new comparisons, functional constraints, and explicit documentation of the degree of inference.
Equilibration (provisional stabilization through the discipline of inner space)	Stabilization results from disciplining reversals (including those directed toward "internal objects"), thereby creating conditions for repose and consistency in the work: improving the speed and quality of reversals improves interaction; and inner	The subject reaches a provisional level of consistency: integrates choices, controls interferences, sustains focus, and is able to justify decisions with greater internal unity.	Increasing coherence; reduction of contradictions between layers; ability to record decisions and maintain the method without "drifting" into fantasy.	The author stabilizes a version in which pose, volumes, musculature, and integument remain consistent; produces dissected plates with anatomical layers and inference legend, preserving a record of decisions and justifications.

	life (inner space) is described as the discipline of applying the repertoire of reversals in an ordered manner (Xavier Júnior, 2004).	

The coordination of perspectives emerges as the key operation that transforms reconstruction into an epistemic practice. We do not conceive of "perspective" merely in spatial terms, but rather as an inferential point of view: direct evidence; comparative inference; controlled hypothesis; and aesthetic choices of presentation. The maturity of the process lies in not collapsing these layers into a uniform appearance of certainty. The Piagetian articulation is useful because it emphasizes reversibility and decentration as criteria of advancement: being able to "return" to the object, reassess a solution, and coordinate different invariants within a more comprehensive system. Educational Psychogenetics, as developed by Xavier, reinforces and expands this point by insisting that the repertoire of reversals is a condition for deepening interaction and expanding the inner space of analysis, thereby distinguishing free fantasy from effective work on an object, even when that object is partly internal and symbolic (Piaget, 1970).

The convergence from Piaget to Xavier is not merely a genealogical reference, but a device for formalizing method: paleoart can be described as a process of constructing visual invariants under constraints, through successive accommodations and with explicit coordination of inferential perspectives. This formalization makes it possible to establish criteria of quality that go beyond aesthetic taste and move closer to epistemic criteria: traceability, reversibility (the capacity for revision), and suggested coherence (the capacity to maintain internal consistency among anatomy, function, and environment).

Educational Implications: From the Visual Product to the Documented Cognitive Process

The most relevant educational consequence of the framework proposed here is a shift in emphasis: from the final image as an "answer" to the process as an "object of learning." In terms of visual culture, this means redirecting attention from the immediate impact of the figure to the architecture of decisions that sustains it; in psychogenetic terms, it means redirecting attention from apparent performance to the operations that are mobilized: how the subject selects evidence, how constraints are hierarchized, how gaps are handled, how premises are made explicit, and how self-regulation takes place in the face of inconsistencies (Xavier Júnior, 2004; Piaget, 1952).

This transition from product to process has at least four practical implications for the paleoart model:

Table 3
Methodological-Psychogenetic Implications of the Paleoart Protocol: From the Final Image to the Documented Process

Implication	Synthetic formulation	Methodological function in the protocol	Psychogenetic gain	Recommended evidence/artifacts
1. Documentation as an extension of the method	Documentation is not external bureaucracy, but a constitutive part of the rationality of reconstruction, since it makes explicit the chain of decisions and the degree of inference involved in each layer.	It makes the process open to critique and transmissible; reduces inferential "leaps"; enables the auditing of premises and alternatives.	It externalizes the "inner space": making explicit what would otherwise remain unexamined intuition expands the capacity for reversal upon one's own procedure (Xavier Júnior, 2004; Daston & Galison, 2007).	Decision log; anatomical record sheet; list of discarded alternatives and reasons; layered legend (skeleton, musculature, organs, integument, feathers).
2. Versioning as a form of reversibility	Versioning institutionalizes the possibility of returning, correcting, and reworking without erasing the history of reasoning.	It prevents uncritical stabilization; allows the incorporation of new evidence; preserves the traceability of changes over time.	A version functions as a marker of a spiral: a return to the same object at a reorganized level of interaction, with an improved repertoire of reversals (Piaget, 1970; Witton, 2018; Xavier Júnior, 2004).	Version control (V1, V2, V3...); revision notes; side-by-side comparison; repository organized by dates and criteria.
3. Explicit marking of uncertainty as visual literacy	Uncertainty is treated as information: distinguishing direct evidence, comparative inference, and controlled hypothesis improves the reading of the image.	It increases transparency; prevents the aesthetic "certainty effect"; improves scientific and museological communicability.	It trains the coordination of perspectives: it prevents the improper assimilation of heterogeneous layers as though they had the same status (Daston & Galison, 2007; Goodman, 1976).	Uncertainty maps; legend indicating degree of inference; layer-based coding; methodological notes attached to the final plate.
4. Integration between gesture, perception, and judgment	The process includes a material regime of actions (sketching, measuring, comparing, overlaying, rotating, testing volume) that produces understanding, even in digital art.	It provides an operational anchoring for choices; enables validation through visual and functional tests; reduces arbitrariness in reconstructive details.	Proprioception as a founding action: making explicit the regime of actions renders visible how the subject is modified while interacting with the object and how judgment is disciplined (Piaget, 1952; Xavier Júnior, 2004).	Step-by-step records (screenshots, photos, timelapse); measurement and comparison protocols; process journal; methodological narratives by phase.

The psychogenetic foundation, especially in Xavier, supports the argument by demonstrating how paleoart can be treated as a form of symbolic mediation with epistemic status when reconstruction is conceived as an iterative process of interaction and when this process is documented in such a way as to make visible the operations that constitute it. This perspective does not reduce art to science, nor science to art; rather, it makes explicit the productive point of contact between the two: the capacity to cultivate a way of seeing that can recognize gaps, sustain reversals, coordinate perspectives, and justify choices in the face of incomplete evidence (Piaget, 1970; Witton, 2018; Xavier Júnior, 2004).

Artistic Elaboration of the Anatomy of Paraphysornis Brasiliensis

The shift from the "visual product" to the "documented cognitive process" constitutes the operational core of this framework, since it displaces paleoart from a logic of result (the final image as a silent synthesis) to a logic of procedure (reconstruction as an explicable chain of decisions). This shift is consistent with Piaget's understanding that knowledge is not reducible to a passive mirroring of reality, but is instead organized through successive equilibria, in which schemes of action and thought are reconfigured as the object resists and demands reorganization (Piaget, 1952, 1970). At the same time, it is aligned with the Educational Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior, S.J.R., insofar as it emphasizes reversibility and the "back-and-forth" movement over the object as a condition for deepening interaction and expanding judgment, thereby transforming repetition into a spiral of refinement (Xavier Júnior, 2004).

In the field of paleoart, this repositioning demonstrates that reconstruction should not be interpreted as a "portrait" of the past, but as a visual hypothesis composed of different layers, each supported by distinct degrees of evidence and inference. This perspective is in dialogue with the history of practices of objectivity and with the idea that scientific images are part of normative regimes of seeing and proving, in which credibility depends both on method and on the devices of visualization and validation (Daston & Galison, 2007). From an aesthetic-semiological point of view, representation is not reducible to resemblance; it depends on conventions and on criteria of public correctness through which a visual artifact denotes and organizes properties of the object, even when the object is partially inaccessible (Goodman, 1976). For this reason, the educational and epistemic gain lies not only in producing a convincing image, but also in making intelligible the path that led to it.

Below, four implications of the protocol are systematized, formulated so as to operate as principles of methodological design, quality criteria, and devices for the formation of the scientific gaze.

Figure 1
Set of Evidence/Reference Elements Used for the Reconstruction of Paraphysornis Brasiliensis, With Indication of the Directly Observable Anatomical Constraints

First Implication: Documentation as an Extension of the Method

If paleoartistic reconstruction is a circuit of reversals, documentation cannot be treated as external bureaucracy or as an editorial appendix. It is a constitutive part of the rationality of the process, because it transforms a sequence of tacit choices into a chain that can be criticized and transmitted. In psychogenetic terms, this record operates as an exteriorization of the "inner space": what would otherwise remain as unexamined intuition is converted into an object of return and revision, thereby increasing the capacity for reversal upon the procedure itself (Xavier Júnior, 2004). From the standpoint of scientific visual culture, this movement is equivalent to reintroducing into the final artifact the conditions of its production, bringing the image closer to a standard of methodologically sustained objectivity (Daston & Galison, 2007).

Documentation should record, at a minimum, four classes of information: (i) direct evidence and material constraints; (ii) comparative analogies employed; (iii) plausible alternatives considered and reasons for their rejection; and (iv) the degree of inference involved in each layer (skeleton, musculature, organs, integument, and feathers). This decomposition is decisive for the case study of Paraphysornis brasiliensis, because it allows the plates and images to appear not as a "homogeneous certainty," but as a stratified and auditable synthesis.

Second Implication: Versioning as a Form of Reversibility

The culture of versions, consolidated in scientific and technological practices, can be understood as the institutionalization of reversibility: the possibility of returning, correcting, and reworking without erasing the history of the reasoning process (Piaget, 1970). In the context of paleoart, this is crucial for two reasons. First, because it reduces the risk of uncritical stabilization of visual solutions that become "standards" merely through repetition. Second, because it allows the incorporation of new evidence and specialized criticism without turning the image into dogma.

In psychogenetic terms, versioning materializes the idea of a spiral: one returns to the same object, but at a reorganized level of interaction, with a refined repertoire of reversals and greater consistency of judgment (Xavier Júnior, 2004). What is at stake is the conversion of the revision process into a constitutive element of the method, rather than a punctual correction. The practical literature on paleoart reinforces that reconstructions frequently depend on controlled iterations and revisions, especially when dealing with animals whose soft tissues and integument require cautious inference (Witton, 2018).

In the case study, it is recommended that versions be organized so that they are minimally distinguishable by purpose: an "anatomical" version (focused on osteomuscular coherence), an "integumentary" version (hypotheses concerning skin and feathers), and a "scenic" version (environment and lighting), each with its own history of alterations and justifications. This arrangement makes it possible to separate revisions of different natures and prevents cosmetic changes from obscuring conceptual changes.

Third Implication: Explicit Marking of Uncertainty as Visual Literacy

One of the most recurrent weaknesses in widely disseminated paleoartistic images is the "certainty effect" produced by homogeneous visual finishing. When all layers appear with the same degree of definition, the observer tends to infer that they all possess the same evidentiary status. The protocol proposed here reverses this logic: uncertainty is treated as information, not

as a flaw. Legends indicating degree of inference, uncertainty maps, and the explicit distinction between direct evidence, comparative inference, and controlled hypothesis qualify the reading of the image and improve both scientific and museological debate (Witton, 2018).

Figure 2
Paraphysornis Brasiliensis: Osteological Layer (Base)

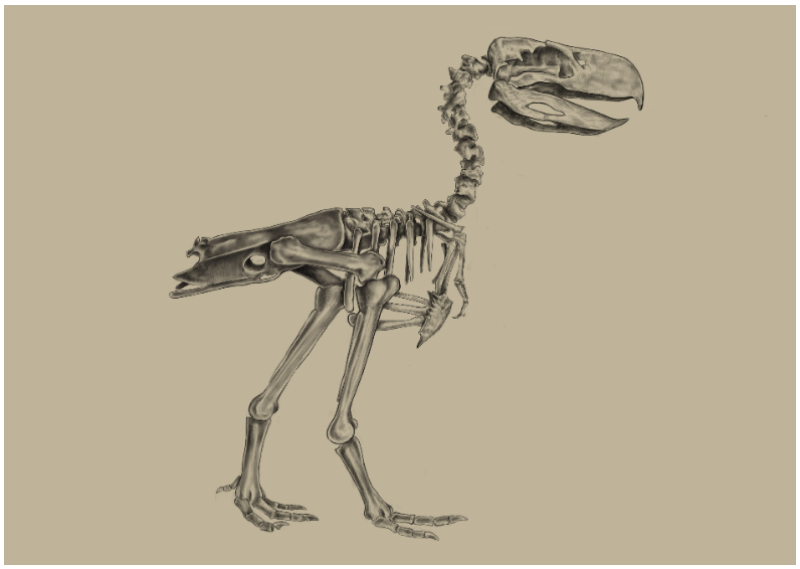
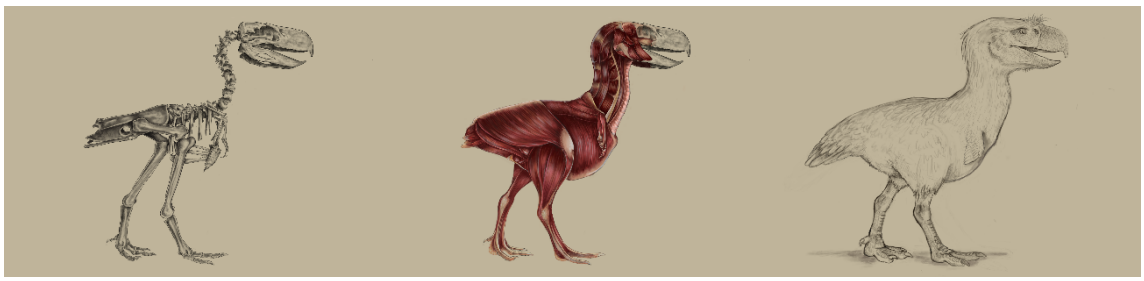


Figure 3
Comparison Between V1, V2, and V3 Versions of the Reconstruction of Paraphysornis Brasiliensis



From an aesthetic-semiological point of view, this procedure is defensible because representational power does not depend on concealing conditions of reference; rather, it may gain density by making visible the structure of denotation and the symbolic commitments that sustain representation (Goodman, 1976). In psychogenetic terms, explicit marking functions as a discipline of the inner space: it limits the slide into “visual fantasy” and preserves critical reversibility over each layer (Xavier Júnior, 2004).

Figure 4
Paraphysornis Brasiliensis: Muscular and Volumetric Layer

Figure 5
Paraphysornis Brasiliensis: Integumentary Layer (Skin and Feathers)

Fourth Implication: Integration Between Gesture, Perception, and Judgment

The fourth implication places the body and materiality back at the center of the method. Even when the final product is digital, reconstruction depends on a regime of actions: sketching, measuring, comparing, overlaying, rotating models, testing shadows and volumes, and verifying functional coherence. In Xavier, this foundation gains its own formulation by emphasizing proprioception and founding action as structuring elements in the constitution of the subject and in the subject's capacity for interaction, reinforcing that knowing implies modifying oneself through active assimilation and disciplining the return to the object (Xavier Júnior, 2004).

Making the regime of actions explicit is a component of validity. When the process records which tests were carried out (for example, checking proportions, compatibility of articulations

with the pose, and coherence between muscular volume and osteological support), the reconstruction approaches a standard of visual argumentation that allows critique and replication.

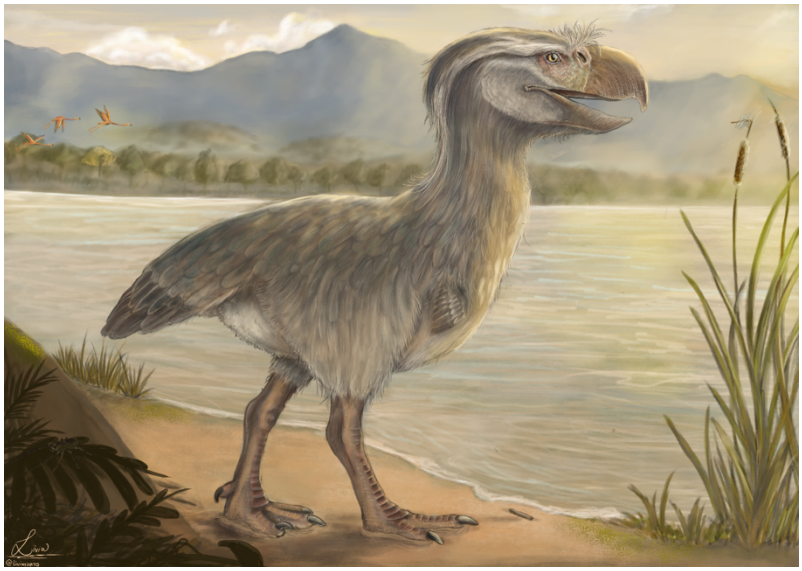
Conclusion and Final Considerations

Paleoart can be treated as an epistemic mediation insofar as it transforms incomplete evidence from the fossil record into visually assessable representations capable of organizing anatomical, functional, and paleoenvironmental hypotheses in a way that is comparable, debatable, and revisable. In terms of scientific visual culture, the main contribution of this protocol is to relocate the credibility of the image onto the axis of method, bringing it closer to a regime of objectivity grounded in procedures and in transparency regarding the conditions of production (Daston & Galison, 2007). In aesthetic-semiological terms, this article reinforces that representation does not depend on imitating the real, but on operating through systems of reference and public correction, so that the image gains density when it makes explicit the structure of its choices and inferences (Goodman, 1976).

The psychogenetic reading of the process offers the distinctive axis of this article. By grounding reconstruction as a circuit of reversals and as the discipline of returning to the object, the Educational Psychogenetics of Fr. Joaquim Ferreira Xavier Júnior, S.J.R., makes it possible to understand paleoartistic elaboration as a practice of symbolization constructed through progressive interaction, rather than through isolated intuition. The central point is that the quality of reconstruction depends less on “talent” understood as a gift and more on the organization of inner space: the capacity to return to the same object from different angles, expand repertoires of comparison, sustain focus, and make explicit the decisions that, if left undocumented, would remain mere impressions. This conception converges with Piaget’s constructivist perspective, but gains particular emphasis in Xavier by transforming reversibility into an operational and formative criterion (Xavier Júnior, 2004). This protocol describes a way of forming judgment.

As future research, we understand that the following are necessary in order to strengthen this protocol: (i) inter-rater validation studies, comparing the judgments of paleontologists and paleoartists regarding the same set of evidence; (ii) reception studies, examining how different audiences interpret uncertainty markings and inference maps; (iii) replicability tests, in which different teams reconstruct the same taxon using the same protocol; and (iv) expansion to new taxa and new media, such as 3D models, augmented reality, and interactive plates, with methodological triangulation among comparative anatomy, biomechanics, and scientific visualization.

Figure 6
Paraphysornis Brasiliensis: Final Dissected Plate With Layers



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. Its use 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 were used to generate content in the writing of this manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion were originally written and derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Paul's Turn: Re-imagining Art From the Entropic Remains of Visual Form

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Abstract

After exhibiting the work *Untitled (Rust)* at the Annex Gallery in Glasgow (part of the *Field Notes* exhibition, 2025) I was invited to contribute work to the publication *Do Rocks Remember Lava* by curator Leo Hajducki. Her interdisciplinary research draws on a background in philosophy and politics, exploring the intersections of materiality and ecological thought. My response to this invitation was an eight-page visual essay describing the research process around a current project *Paul's Turn* where rust material from Anthony Caro's sculpture *Paul's Turn* (1971) had been transformed into ink. The visual essay included photographs describing the research journey from harvesting rust in the Hunterian sculpture courtyard at Glasgow University where the work is displayed, to ink making, then printing. The final two printed images are displayed on the last pages of the essay – *Paul's Turn* (a photo etching) and *These Words* (a printed text). These images face each other in conversation, referencing the original sculpture from which they are printed, creating space between image and text. Using an ecological perspective I will discuss this practice-led research to address questions of agency, authorship and conservation.

Keywords: sculpture, rust, conservation, ecology, entropy

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Introduction

Figure 1
The Sculpture Courtyard at the Hunterian Gallery in Glasgow

"Objects have an ego, and this ego is fragile". (Morton, 2013, p. 209)

This paper describes a research journey intuited through creative practice. It is informed by Object-Oriented Ontology (Morton, Harman) but follows an ecological approach (DeSilvey, Bennett, Szendy, Rubio) foregrounding material processes in relation to their environment. Methods included harvesting rust, ink making, drawing, writing and printmaking with rust-based ink. Sir Anthony Caro's sculpture *Paul's Turn* (1971) was the focus of attention due to its heavily corroded steel body. This work had been located outdoors in the Hunterian sculpture courtyard at Glasgow University since 1982, when it was loaned by the artist (see Figure 1). Through close observation and repeated visits over many years, it was clear to see that the rusty brown outer layers were slowly bleeding[1] into the ground with small pieces falling away like scabs. The work was being undermined by its environment.[2] So began a careful process of harvesting the fallen rust (see Figure 2). This instinctive response came from a morbid fascination for the state of the work, mixed with a sense of disbelief for what was present. This feeling developed into a growing sense of responsibility to answer the following research questions:

- Why didn't Caro protect *Paul's Turn* and how did he anticipate the future of this work beyond his own lifetime?
- When fragments start falling off a sculpture, at what point does the art object lose its material integrity and identity?
- What can we learn from the process of entropy in terms of agency, authorship and conservation?

[1] In his book *Rust*, Jean-Michel Rabaté states that "There is oxidation of iron in the blood stream, even if the specific chemical bonds at work between iron and oxygen in blood are not identical with the bonds generating common rust". p.63. Bloomsbury (2018).
[2] For ecocritical art history perspectives see Smith O. & Patrizio A. (Eds.), *Methods For Ecocritical Art History* (2026) Manchester University Press.

- As an art practitioner, what opportunities are there to work *with* the process of entropy to question conventional art history methods which neglect environmental factors such as weather and weathering?

These questions were given fresh impetus following an invitation by curator Leo Hajducki to contribute work to her upcoming publication *Do Rocks Remember Lava.*[3] Hajducki's interdisciplinary research explores the intersections of materiality and ecological thought. These themes resonated with my work *Untitled (Rust),* a photoetching depicting part of a steel fence, so heavily corroded, that it had nearly disappeared in places. Using rust collected from the same fence, oil-based ink was produced to print the fence image. Through this circular or reflective process, the print becomes a ghost image, representing the gap between object and thing. According to Fernando Dominguez Rubio "Things should be understood as material processes that unfold over time, while objects are the positions to which those things are subsumed in order to participate in different regimes of value and meaning" (Rubio, 2019, p. 166). Hajducki had seen this work at the Annex Gallery in Glasgow, during the *Field Notes* exhibition.[4] She encouraged me to share my current fascination with *Paul's Turn* in the form of a visual essay describing the practice-led research process which used material from Caro's sculpture as a starting point.

Figure 2

Fragments of Rust Collected From the Hunterian Sculpture Courtyard 14/8/24

[3] Further information can be found here: https://radar.gsa.ac.uk/10382/

[4] This work formed part of the *Practicing Landscape: Field Notes* exhibition (22nd April – 16th May, 2025) in the Annex Gallery, Stow Building (GSA). It was initiated by curator James N. Hutchinson who invited the *Reading Landscape* research group to respond to the site both inside and gallery and beyond it. For more details visit https://radar.gsa.ac.uk/10315/

Art *Not* Environment

In 1972 Anthony Caro, a key figure in twentieth century art, was asked by Phyllis Tuchman[5] to consider his sculpture indoors and outdoors. He responded by saying:

> Of course there are some wrong settings for sculpture. Just as it would be meaningless to play a quartet in a marketplace so there are some quite unsuitable sites for certain sculptures. I prefer my sculpture to be seen in a tranquil and enclosed space. Almost all sculpture, I guess, needs to be indoors – or enclosed in some way; it mostly blows away if it's in the open air, or else it becomes environment.

Caro was no doubt, referring to the way work could become lost aesthetically in open spaces, rather than suggesting the work completely breaking down through corrosion.

He would often paint his work in vivid colours to stand out from its environment, like *Month of May* (1963) which is bright pink, orange and green. Although these industrial finishes would protect the steel, this wasn't his primary motivation. He might be credited for helping sculpture come off the plinth, but he still valued sculptures sense of separation, as Dave Hickey intimates in his essay *The economies of surprise:*

> When sited out of doors, these unpainted works blur into their settings. They lose their lightness and abstract potential and take on an un-Caroesque aura of naturalised, Greenbergian modernism. Or so it has always seemed to me, who never comes upon an early unpainted Caro out of doors without being overcome by a desire to take it inside or, even worse, to paint it monochrome. (Hickey, 2005, p. 134)

Caro was interested in rust more as a colour and less as an active agent within his work. He wanted visual separation between his work and their environment and colour helped achieve this. Some sculptures like *Bailey* (1971) made in the same year as *Paul's Turn*, were even painted a rust brown colour. Caro explored a full colour palette in his work of this period and although the painted surface inhibited actual rust taking hold, it wasn't painted for this reason. Although there are some examples of Caro allowing the steel surface to rust more fully, he usually attempted to control the level of rust with oil or varnish. Seldom were these types of work left outdoors intentionally for long periods of time.

Heavy Metal and Rust

When Herbert Read spoke of a "New Iron Age" (Read, 1964, p. 237) in sculpture in 1964, he did so because of its prevalence and durability over emerging synthetic materials like plastic:

> It is true that latterly industry's dependence on natural metals has been challenged by the invention of various synthetic materials, a development which artists have also noticed and exploited; but metals such as bronze, steel, iron and aluminium remain the characteristic materials of our civilization and have decisive virtues for sculpture – they can be cut, welded, moulded, cast, polished or patinated, and the final result has a durability that exceeds all but the hardest stones. (Read, 1964, p. 240)

[5] Tuchman P. p. 116-117, An *Interview with Anthony Caro Anthony Caro*, Penguin books (1974) Richard Whelan. (ed.)

Read's enthusiasm for metal and his optimism for its durability seem overstated when considering *Paul's Turn*. But he goes even further when describing the submissive and obedient qualities of metal which jar with current theories around art and New Materialism: Read states that "metal is so docile that it will submit to any formal conception the sculptor may have, and it is this adaptability that explains its present general use" (Read, 1964, p. 247). These comments suggest a fallacy of permanence and a false confidence regarding the artists omnipotent control over materials. The idea that the work remains static is implicit within these remarks. The folly of this outlook is clear in the sculpture courtyard at the Hunterian Gallery where rust forms a common thread running through many of the other works, including *Grave Gate* (1981) by Fred Bushe, *Aje* (1982) by Jeff Lowe and *Noon* (1978) by Gavin Scobie. All three sculptures are heavily corroded, but whereas Scobie's work is made of Cor-ten steel, engineered to develop a protective layer of rust, the works of Lowe and Bushe are made of mild steel which can be weakened to breaking point over time. Lowe's work is heavily corroded despite being zinc plated for protection. In Peterborough in 2025, *Lagoon* (1976/7) another Caro sculpture of similar scale to *Paul's Turn,* was eventually returned to the Key Theatre following conservation work due to weathering[6] and graffiti. This sculpture is not even as old as *Paul's Turn* and according to the title label was even oiled for protection.[7]

In *The Language of Sculpture,* William Tucker[8] suggests that one word captured the aspirations of modernism and that word was "object" (Tucker, 1974, p. 107). According to critic Michael Fried, Caro's work transcended mere "objecthood",[9] but as an object in the world, *Paul's Turn* still needed protection, especially given its outdoor location. Paul Moorhouse describes how Caro's work in the early 1970's "renews and intensifies its interrogation of the boundary with the world of real objects: simultaneously testing and maintaining the line of separation" (Moorhouse, 2005, p. 59). Caro might allow rust to form on the surface of some sculptures, attempting to fix this point of transition with oil or varnish. But with *Paul's Turn* this balance collapsed and Fried's conception of "presentness" – work that "compels us to believe what we see rather than what we know" (Fried, 1974, p. 100) is gone. Instead, the accumulation of rust from more than forty years outdoors in the Glaswegian weather reminds us of the works temporal and spatial history. As Timothy Morton says: "this is what happens when you die – you become your environment" (Morton, 2013, p. 220).

Playing With Shadows

Iron-brown stains marking the white pebbles beneath *Paul's Turn* (1971) revealed the slow but steady process of solid steel becoming liquid. This observation by the author suggested the potential for the collected rusty fragments to become ink. A suitable water-based ink was created[10] from which drawings were made of the sculpture in situ. Special attention was given to the shadows cast by the sculpture. These initial drawings manifested further ideas in language. Text including "THESE WORDS USED TO BE SCULPTURE" was painted on paper. These early sketches and scrawls were a prelude to further developments in print.

[6] See online report https://nenepark.org.uk/news/lagoon-sculpture-restored-thank-to-funding/ "*Lagoon*, the artwork by sculptor Anthony Caro, is located outside The Key Theatre in the City Centre and is part of the city-wide Peterborough Sculpture Collection. The funding has allowed conservation specialists Hall Conservation Ltd. to carry out essential repairs caused by graffiti and weathering". (29/9/25)

[7] On a visit to the Caro Centre (10/7/26) Ben Caro confirmed that the artist had gained a better understanding of how to use oil to preserve the rust on his work by the late 1970's and was using Owatrol, an industrial grade oil.

[8] Tucker was a student of Anthony Caro at Central Saint Martins.

[9] See Michael Fried's critique of minimalist sculpture in various essays including *Art and Objecthood*.

[10] Iron gall ink was made with rust and crushed oak galls boiled together in water. Oak galls are found on oak trees and are a reaction to the invasion of parasitic wasp eggs.

Crushing rust fragments into fine powder using a glass muller an oil-based ink was produced. The same text was then composed in the case room at Glasgow School of Art (see Figure 3). Whilst making these prints an important observation was made. The "print furniture," small metal structures used to space the individual lines of text, resembled miniature steel "I" or "H" beams used by Caro in his sculpture. An impromptu model of *Paul's Turn* was quickly assembled using these pieces. A photograph was taken which was later turned into a photoetching printed with the same ink (see Figure 4). The visual essay featured in *Do Rocks Remember Lava* included documentation of all these works, as well as the process of making the prints, producing ink and gathering rust. The final two images displayed on the last pages of the essay face each other in conversation: *Paul's Turn*, the photo etching and *These Words*, the printed text. Caro's original sculpture is clearly referenced but notable in its absence. All that remains are visual reminders and material traces of its past; ghosts or shadows of the original.

In his book *Towards an Ecology of Images,* Peter Szendy traces the history of the shadow, exploring the concept of "iconomy" to describe the invisible economy supporting the digital image industry (Szendy, 2025). In the context of *Paul's Turn* shadow works might be understood as analogue images composed of the very material which devours the object referred to in the image. Speaking directly and simultaneously of absence *and* presence, shadow works make a physical link between matter and subject. Subject/matter in this instance speak *not* of a hidden economy, but allude instead to those neglected environmental forces producing the rust the image is dependent on. If the photoetching *Untitled (Rust)* simply depicts a heavily corroded fence outside the Annex Galley, then *Paul's Turn* (2025) quietly probes the modernist fantasy of art separate from its environment. Rust is irrefutable evidence of material agency operating in this this overlapping realm (Bennett, 2010).

Figure 3
Printed Text Made Using Oil-Based Ink With Rust From "Paul's Turn" (1971)

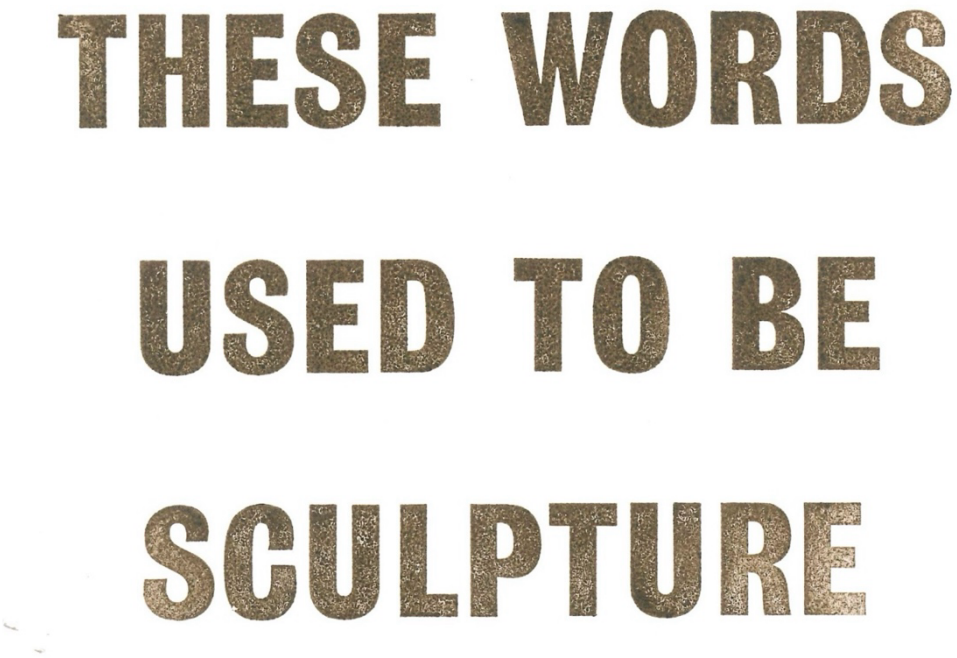

Figure 4
Photoetching of Sculptural Model Assembled in the Case Room Workshop Printed With Ink Made From Rust Harvested From "Paul's Turn" (1971)

Alongside these primary, practice-based activities in ink making and printing, a letter was written to the Anthony Caro Centre using ink from the work, alerting Paul Caro[11] (director) to

[11] Paul Caro is Anthony Caros youngest son and probably the referent to the title 'Paul's Turn' (1971).

the poor condition of the sculpture, "slowly returning to the earth".[12] There was no response.[13] Emails were also sent to staff at the Hunterian to share my practice-based research. Responses acknowledged the conservation issues with *Paul's Turn* and commented favourably on the printed works. Then, several months later the sculpture was suddenly removed following a visit by the Anthony Caro Centre.[14] This decisive action suggested a point had been reached where the integrity of the art object was considered compromised. Slippage from object to thing was underway and the work suddenly disappeared with no explanation to visitors. All that remained of the physical object were the familiar brown stains on the ground, more rusty fragments, three large rusty bolts and a matching nut.[15] The removal of *Paul's Turn* helps us imagine the work through the lens of anticipatory history (DeSilvey, 2011) a work distinct in its absence. All that remains in the distant future would be brown shadowy stains on the ground. Eventually these too would be gone, the work returned to the earth. If *rocks remember lava*, as Leo Hajducki would have it, then perhaps iron stone recalls ore too?

Ghost From the Archive

On 10th June 2026 the author had a meeting with Hunterian curator Dr. Lola Sánchez-Jáuregui Alpanes following a string of emails enquiring as to the whereabouts of *Paul's Turn.* Alpanes explained that a conservation plan had been decided with the Caro Centre. She also provided access to a folder containing historic documentation relating to *Paul's Turn*, mainly original correspondence between the artist and former Museum Deputy Director, Christopher J Allan. These letters, photographs and notes revealed answers to some of the research questions laid out at the beginning of this paper, particularly those relating to the works condition. But there were notable absences too, such as any formal contract between artist and institution or condition reports for the sculpture. What follows is a summary of the findings from these documents:

In a letter to Anthony Caro dated 23rd April 1982, Christopher Allan states: "We should be delighted if you were able to lend something to the University, perhaps for a year from this September". This somewhat casual arrangement, that the work might be on loan for just a year, goes some way to explain how badly the work corroded after more than forty years at the mercy of Glasgow's formidable weather. According to another letter to Caro dated 8th October 1982, Christopher Allan explains how the weather had been a factor even during the installation process:

[12] Taken from letter sent to Paul Caro 1/10/24. It is worth noting that The Joseph Black building at Glasgow University, which is located just 150m from the Hunterian, sits on top of old mine works. In 1948 a newly built wall collapsed to reveal the entrance to disused coal mines. The entrance is still accessible via the building's sub-basement and was used until recently for Geology field trips.

[13] However on 3/10/25 the author did receive a personal invitation from the Anthony Caro Centre to the exhibition *That Feeling of being alive, of jumping, dancing almost*.

[14] In a later email dated 8/7/26 Dr. Lola Sánchez-Jáuregui Alpanes explained the exact sequence of events from her perspective: "Ben Caro came over and met with me in November 2023 to see the sculpture. We then discussed the situation and agreed on a plan to remove and conserve the sculpture. Following that Anthony Caro Foundation Studio Manager's visited the Hunterian in December 2023 to check the conservation conditions of Paul's Turn and make an assessment. The sculpture was finally removed in May 2025".

[15] These were probably used to connect the sculpture together as letters describe how it came apart to be transported and moved into the sculpture courtyard. These remnants were treated as waste by the Hunterian and the Anthony Caro Centre, material without value and viewed as distinct from Caro's work. This underlies the absence of any ethical transgression on the behalf of the author who harvested rust only when it was separated from the sculpture.

> *Paul's Turn* arrived safely and was erected last Tuesday. I am sorry for the last minute rush in finalising a collection date which am sure prevented Pat Cunningham from making the preparation he would have wished. Because the weather has been so bad we were forced to erect the sculpture rather quickly and there is still work to be done on descaling the rust and varnishing.

This suggestion that the work was already rusting and might be varnished raises more questions about intended finishes and future maintenance and upkeep of the steel and further questions still about whether these intentions were shared more widely with gallery staff. This question is underlined by the fact that the title plate displayed by the Hunterian Gallery simply had the word "steel" listed under materials, not "rusted steel" or "steel, varnished" or "steel, oiled".

In another letter written on 8th May 1982, Caro explains to Allan why *Paul's Turn* would be a suitable choice for the courtyard:

> Paul's Turn has the bulk, strength and openness to stand up to the sturdy architecture around it, and if well placed, refurbished and oiled, I think it will look good in your courtyard. It can also be broken down into pieces and dismantled.

This mention of the work being oiled is crucial in understanding the heavy corrosion of the work. Oiling the work would have helped protect the metal from rust and the absence of oil on the material list for the work is puzzling. Even if the work had been oiled, the challenging Glaswegian weather, known for its high levels of rain and humidity, would have created too much rust for oil to be a viable, long-term option.

On 23rd April 1982 Christopher Allan even warns Caro:

> One further point should be borne in mind – the courtyard is during the winter subjected to quite high winds, on occasion 50–70 miles an hour, and these can come in quick succession from several different directions because of the figuration of the University Library.

The architecture might have created the illusion of an enclosed, protective space, but it was probably more of a contributing factor in the works decline. Given the short duration of the loan proposed by Allan, Caro seemed to have given more consideration to the aesthetic qualities of the brutalist architecture[16] when suggesting a suitable work, rather than foregrounding the detrimental impacts of environment and weathering.

Architects and designers use the term "shadow gap" to describe a small intentional space left between wall and floor, disguising any discrepancies between these two surfaces. Shadow gaps hide inconsistencies to create the illusion of perfection, promoting confidence and authority. However, "the interstitial space between things is not a blank void. In fact, it's charged with meaning, even causality" (Morton, 2013, p. 209). New Materialist practices which view the world through an ecological lens, linger in these shadow spaces to reveal different narratives not exposed on the gallery wall. *Shadow works* whisper stories original objects have no memory of – they *become* that memory.

[16] Sir William Whitfield (1920-2019) was the architect of both the Hunterian Art Gallery and the University Library.

Conclusion

This paper relates to the ontology of objects, exploring object identity, value, and fragility. These areas are brought into sharp focus within the gallery context where material is carefully arranged in order that "Objects tell stories".[17] The gallery environment impacts our appreciation and understanding of art objects by confirming status and constructing meaning. In the case of *Paul's Turn* the specific gallery environment negatively impacted the stability of that object. As Fernando Dominguez Rubio states in his essay *On the discrepancy between objects and things*, it takes a huge effort, often by teams of invisible workers; conservators, technicians, art handlers, curators and others, to preserve and stabilise things as objects. When an object does break down, a gap opens-up between object and thing. As a work loaned from an artist who died in 2013, the sculpture "in limbo" brought with it additional layers of complexity.

Since its installation at the Hunterian sculpture courtyard in 1982, the untold story of *Paul's Turn* (1971) is one of rust. The combined forces of weather and material agency usurped any clearly documented conservation plan intended for the work. In some ways *Paul's Turn* (1971) was probably a victim of the artists own success. Anthony Caros meteoric rise in Britain, Europe and America in the early 1970's increased the challenge of recording and managing his exceptional output which was being produced and exhibited in multiple locations. What we know with some certainty is that the specific gallery environment of the Hunterian sculpture courtyard had a fundamental impact on the stability and integrity of the sculptural object. In this instance Caro appeared to have seen the sculpture courtyard more as an architectural backdrop, less as an *environment* with agentive powers. As a short-term loan stretching beyond a casually agreed time frame, the process of entropy was so gradual that changes were either unnoticed, unquestioned, or slowly accepted. The absence of any formal contract or condition reports helped to undermine the work further until its removal in May 2025 became necessary for significant conservation work to be undertaken.

In her book *Curated Decay*, Caitlin DeSilvey suggests:

> It is perhaps unlikely that a shift towards curated decay will displace the preservation paradigm anytime soon, but there may be opportunities to use the ideas in this book to frame experiments that work with abandonment and to stage ephemeral interventions that respond to moments of flux or change. (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 187)

These Words (2025) and *Pauls Turn* (2025) are practical responses to this suggestion. These new works on paper capture the imperceptible movement of material away from the sculptural object over time, marking its changing identity. *Shadow works* draw attention back to the original sculpture offering new critical insights.

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[17] *Objects Tell Stories* is also the name given to a current funding information leaflet produced and circulated by the Hunterian, encouraging visitors to donate money.

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From Nation-Building to Economic Strategy: Shifting Cultural Policy Rationales in Singapore's Visual Arts

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving relationship between economic imperatives and community engagement within Singapore's visual arts sector, situated within the nation's ambition to position itself as a regional arts and cultural hub. Tracing cultural policy developments from the 1970s to the 2020s, it highlights shifts in policy rationales—from arts-led nation-building to the strategic mobilisation of the arts for economic growth, innovation, and social vitality. Rather than replacing earlier priorities, these shifts reflect a cumulative layering and rebalancing of policy rationales that continue to coexist within Singapore's cultural governance framework. While existing research has documented Singapore's cultural policy trajectory, limited attention has been paid to how policy rationales are justified, sustained, and negotiated over time. This study addresses this gap by applying the lens of institutional logics to analyse how evolving policy rationales have accumulated and interacted over time, shaping relationships between economic objectives, social goals, and community-oriented cultural value. Particular attention is given to Singapore's distinctive governance context, characterised by strong state involvement, which shapes negotiations around artistic autonomy, market participation, and cultural legitimacy. By foregrounding policy rationales rather than discrete policy instruments, this paper demonstrates the value of institutional logics as an analytical framework for understanding continuity and change in cultural governance. Drawing on five decades of policy development, the study offers insights relevant to cultural policy debates in Singapore and other contexts where state participation plays a central role in shaping visual arts ecosystems.

Keywords: cultural policy, cultural governance, institutional logics, institutional layering visual arts

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Introduction

Since independence in 1965, Singapore has invested heavily in cultural development as part of its broader nation-building and economic transformation agenda. The visual arts sector has experienced significant institutional growth, supported by the establishment of cultural agencies, public funding mechanisms, arts infrastructure, and strategic cultural plans. Existing studies have documented the evolution of Singapore's cultural landscape and examined the state's increasing support for the arts (Chang, 2000; Kong, 2000; Tan, 2007). However, less attention has been paid to how policy rationales themselves have evolved over time and how different understandings of artistic value have accumulated within cultural governance.

This paper examines the evolution of cultural policy rationales within Singapore's visual arts sector between 1965 and 2025. Drawing upon institutional logics theory, it argues that Singapore's cultural policy development is best understood as a process of institutional layering rather than policy replacement. Successive policy phases introduced new rationales for supporting the arts, but these rationales did not replace earlier objectives. Instead, state, market, and community logics accumulated over time and continue to coexist within contemporary cultural governance.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Cultural policy scholars have increasingly noted that governments rarely support the arts for a single reason. Instead, cultural policy often reflects competing understandings of public value, economic contribution, and social benefit (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Holden, 2006). This complexity makes institutional logics particularly useful for examining how different policy rationales coexist and evolve over time. Early cultural policies frequently emphasised nation-building, cultural identity, and social cohesion, while more recent approaches have highlighted creativity, innovation, economic competitiveness, and social inclusion (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Gray, 2007).

Institutional logics provide a useful framework for analysing these developments. Institutional logics refer to socially constructed systems of values, beliefs, and practices that shape organisational behaviour and define legitimacy within a field (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Rather than assuming the dominance of a single institutional order, contemporary institutional theory recognises that multiple logics often coexist and interact within organisational fields (Thornton et al., 2012).

Three institutional logics are particularly relevant to cultural policy. State logic emphasises nation-building, social cohesion, public accountability, and strategic governance. Market logic prioritises innovation, entrepreneurship, economic growth, and competitiveness. Community logic focuses on participation, accessibility, social inclusion, and everyday cultural engagement. These logics provide distinct but overlapping justifications for public investment in the arts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical policy analysis to examine changes in cultural policy discourse between 1965 and 2025. The analysis draws on publicly available policy documents and institutional texts, including government reports, Renaissance City Reports, the Creative Industries Development Strategy, the Arts and Culture Strategic Review, National Arts Council plans and ministerial statements.

Singapore provides a useful case due to the central role played by the state in shaping cultural development. The high degree of policy coordination allows shifts in cultural priorities to be traced more clearly than in contexts characterised by fragmented governance arrangements.

Documents were analysed chronologically and coded according to the presence of state, market, and community logics. Coding focused on identifying recurring justifications for public investment in the arts and examining how these justifications changed across successive policy periods. Cross-period comparisons were then undertaken to identify continuities and shifts in policy rationales.

Findings

Nation-Building and Cultural Consolidation (1965–1989)

Singapore's early cultural policy was closely linked to the broader project of nation-building. During this period, cultural activities were primarily valued for their contribution to social cohesion, multicultural understanding, and national identity formation. Government leaders consistently framed culture as an important component of social integration within Singapore's multi-ethnic society. Shortly after independence, Lee Kuan Yew described Singapore as a "model multi-racial society" that "belongs to all of us" (Lee, 1965), reflecting the state's commitment to multiculturalism and social cohesion (Chua, 1995; Kong, 2000).

Growing governmental interest in culture became increasingly evident during the late 1970s. Speaking at the launch of the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1978, Acting Minister for Culture Ong Teng Cheong acknowledged the complexity of defining culture, noting the many different interpretations associated with the term (Ong, 1978). His remarks reflected an emerging recognition of the importance of arts and culture within Singapore's broader social and national development agenda. These developments foreshadowed the more systematic cultural policy initiatives that emerged in the following decade, particularly *The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, 1989), which laid the foundation for the establishment of the National Arts Council in 1991.

Within this framework, the visual arts were regarded primarily as cultural and social infrastructure rather than economic assets. Public support for the arts was justified through their role in strengthening collective identity and promoting social stability. State logic was clearly dominant during this period.

Creative Industries and Global City Development (1990–2010)

The establishment of the National Arts Council in 1991 and the publication of the Renaissance City Reports marked a significant shift in cultural policy discourse. The Renaissance City Report positioned arts and culture as strategic assets capable of enhancing Singapore's attractiveness to global talent, investors, and visitors (MITA, 2000).

Similarly, the Creative Industries Development Strategy framed creativity as a strategic resource within Singapore's transition towards a knowledge-based economy (MICA & MTI, 2002). The visual arts were increasingly viewed as contributors to innovation, tourism, international branding, and economic competitiveness.

This period saw the growing influence of market logic. While nation-building remained important, cultural policy increasingly linked artistic development to broader economic objectives and global city ambitions.

Participation, Accessibility and Community Engagement (2011–2025)

The publication of the *Arts and Culture Strategic Review* (ACSR) marked a significant shift in Singapore's cultural policy discourse towards participation and accessibility. The review articulated a vision of "arts and culture for all Singaporeans" and sought to integrate cultural participation into everyday life (Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee, 2012).

Subsequent initiatives, particularly *Our SG Arts Plan*, further reinforced community-oriented objectives. One of the plan's key priorities was audience development across all demographic segments, with particular emphasis on making the arts accessible to all Singaporeans regardless of age or background. Speaking at the opening of the Gallery Children's Biennale, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu emphasised that art should be accessible to all Singaporeans and argued that the arts can foster understanding among people from diverse backgrounds, encourage social discourse, and deepen understanding of "who we are as a people and as a nation" (Fu, 2019). Policy discourse increasingly emphasised inclusion, community engagement, cultural participation, and accessibility alongside economic competitiveness and artistic excellence.

This development reflected the growing influence of community logic within Singapore's cultural governance framework. Importantly, community-oriented priorities did not replace earlier nation-building and economic objectives but were layered onto existing policy frameworks. The result was a more complex policy landscape in which state, market, and community logics coexisted and collectively shaped cultural development.

Institutional Layering and the Coexistence of Logics

The findings suggest that Singapore's cultural policy evolution is characterised by institutional layering rather than policy replacement (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

These logics often reinforce one another. Community participation may contribute to social cohesion, while audience development can support economic sustainability. However, tensions may also emerge when different logics promote competing definitions of success. Market-oriented frameworks may prioritise visibility and competitiveness, while community-oriented initiatives emphasise inclusion and participation.

The coexistence of multiple logics has broadened the range of values associated with the arts but has also increased the complexity of cultural governance, as arts organisations and practitioners are increasingly expected to demonstrate economic, social, and community impacts simultaneously.

Discussion

A central contribution of this study is the argument that the evolution of Singapore's cultural policy is best understood through the lens of institutional layering. Rather than being characterised by the sequential replacement of policy paradigms, cultural policy development involved the accumulation of successive rationales that expanded, rather than displaced,

existing objectives (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Nation-building priorities remained influential even as economic competitiveness, creativity, and community participation assumed increasing prominence within cultural governance.

This finding contributes to broader debates on cultural policy and institutional change. Existing scholarship frequently portrays cultural policy development as a progression of distinct paradigms, moving from cultural nationalism to creative industries and, more recently, towards participation-oriented approaches (Gray, 2007). The findings of this study suggest a more nuanced trajectory, where earlier policy objectives continue to shape contemporary cultural governance alongside newer priorities. The Singapore case therefore illustrates how cultural policy can evolve through processes of institutional layering, resulting in the coexistence of multiple and overlapping sources of legitimacy within a single policy environment.

The coexistence of multiple institutional logics is consistent with broader institutional theory, which recognises that organisational fields are frequently shaped by competing and complementary logics rather than a single dominant institutional order (Besharov & Smith, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012). Within Singapore's visual arts sector, state, market, and community logics have become increasingly intertwined, creating both opportunities for synergy and potential tensions in the allocation of resources, evaluation of outcomes, and definition of artistic success.

The findings also contribute to scholarship on Singapore's cultural development. While previous studies have documented the state's increasing investment in arts and culture (Kong, 2000; Tan, 2007), this study highlights how successive policy rationales accumulated over time rather than replacing one another. This perspective offers a useful framework for understanding the continued influence of nation-building objectives within contemporary cultural governance despite the growing emphasis on creative economy development and public participation.

Beyond Singapore, these findings have broader implications for understanding cultural policy in developmental states. The Singapore case demonstrates that cultural policy evolution in state-led systems may occur through institutional layering rather than paradigm replacement. This suggests that the institutional logics perspective offers a useful framework for explaining cultural policy change in contexts where governments simultaneously pursue cultural, economic, and social objectives. By highlighting how multiple policy rationales accumulate and coexist over time, the study contributes to broader debates on cultural governance beyond the Singapore context.

Conclusion

This paper examined the evolution of cultural policy rationales within Singapore's visual arts sector between 1965 and 2025. Drawing on institutional logics theory, it is demonstrated that cultural policy evolved through institutional layering rather than sequential policy replacement.

State logic initially dominated cultural governance through its emphasis on nation-building and social cohesion. Market logic subsequently expanded policy attention towards economic competitiveness, creativity, and innovation. More recently, community logic introduced greater emphasis on participation, accessibility, and social inclusion. These logics accumulated over time and continue to coexist within contemporary cultural governance.

The findings contribute to cultural policy scholarship by demonstrating how institutional logics can be used to explain long-term cultural policy change and by showing that policy evolution may occur through institutional layering rather than paradigm replacement. More broadly, they suggest that contemporary cultural governance increasingly involves balancing multiple forms of cultural value rather than privileging a single rationale for supporting the arts.

The study also highlights the continuing negotiation between economic, social, and community-oriented objectives within Singapore's visual arts sector. Rather than representing distinct phases of policy development, these priorities have become embedded within a broader governance framework characterised by multiple and overlapping sources of legitimacy. Future research could further examine how artists, arts organisations, and policymakers navigate these competing expectations and how institutional layering shapes cultural development over time.

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 the research.

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Interpretive Polarization in the Analysis of Iranian Governmental Murals: Between Cultural Continuity and Visual Authoritarianism

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Abstract

This paper examines the significant interpretive polarization that currently characterizes scholarly discourse over Iranian government murals. The majority of existing literature reveals a dominant Culture-Centric perspective that decodes such paintings through Shi'i iconography and themes of sacrifice, viewing them as genuine cultural phenomena that promote national-religious identity. Consequently, mainstream academic discourse often relies on internal cultural semantics, creating a blind spot regarding the murals' ideological undertones. Conversely, the marginal Power-Centric/Critical paradigm analyzes these artworks as active mechanisms of state power and visual ideology. This interpretive divide is illustrated through two key case studies: first, child-soldier imagery, which the dominant discourse frames as heroic patriotism, whereas critical scholarship identifies it as a mechanism that normalizes violence, obscures state responsibility, and aligns with coercive mobilization; second, leader portraits, which are hailed in the Culture-Centric approach as icons of spiritual leadership, but viewed in critical literature as manifestations of a cult of personality and visual authoritarianism. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how the hegemony of the Culture-Centric discourse obstructs academia's potential to address issues of power, state agency, and human rights. To overcome both cultural relativism and political reductionism, the paper argues for a more integrative analytical framework that conceptualizes Iranian state murals as a “hegemonic tension space” one that bridges local cultural specificity with the political mechanics of public visibility.

Keywords: Iranian murals, visual culture, visual authoritarianism, martyrdom, thematic analysis

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Introduction

Public mural arts in post-revolutionary Iran represent far more than decorative urban embellishments; they constitute a vital site of state visual discourse and ideological spatial management. Since 1979, the walls of Iranian metropolises, particularly Tehran, have been transformed into dynamic canvases projecting state narratives of martyrdom, anti-imperialism, Shi'i iconography, and political legitimacy. Consequently, these public artworks have attracted significant academic attention across art history, visual culture, sociology, and Middle Eastern studies.

However, a critical review of the scholarly literature reveals a fundamental interpretive cleavage in how these murals are analyzed. On one hand, the dominant discourse employs a Culture-Centric Approach, decoding these paintings through internal cultural semantics, Shi'i theological tropes, and national-religious identity. While providing valuable contextual nuance, this paradigm often risks romanticizing state propaganda and fostering a degree of methodological cultural relativism that overlooks mechanisms of political coercion. On the other hand, an emerging Power-Centric / Critical Approach evaluates these murals against universal human rights paradigms and power theory, conceptualizing them as instruments of visual authoritarianism, indoctrination, and social control.

This interpretive polarization is not merely a theoretical debate; it directly alters the analytical vocabulary used to describe state visuals. Key icons such as large-scale portraits of state leaders or depictions of war-participant minors are framed either as “symbols of spiritual guidance” and “patriotic tributes” or as manifestations of a “cult of personality” and “child soldiery.” The reluctance of mainstream literature to engage with critical terminology has produced a systemic blind spot regarding state agency, power dynamics, and human rights within Iranian visual culture. To address this scholarly divide, this paper investigates the theoretical and methodological roots of this interpretive polarization.

Methodology

The research will rely on qualitative research methods and will apply Thematic Analysis in uncovering and coding thematic patterns in existing scholarly literature regarding Iranian murals.

Source Selection and Screening: A full set of basic texts such as books and scholarly journals was considered. And the primary units of analysis were the interpretative propositions and specialized vocabularies used to articulate the function and semiotics of the artworks. Following the textual review, initial codes were extracted and organized into two overarching macro-categories based on their theoretical foundations:

Culture-Centric Themes (View I): Themes that might include national or religious definitions of self, Shiite iconography in the form of stories such as Ashura, and political continuity.

Power-Centric/Critical Themes (View II): Ideas related to social control mechanisms, ideological propaganda, and universal frameworks of human rights.

Validation through Expert Interviews: To further enhance the bipartite model and make the findings more contemporary, a stage of cross-validation through in-depth interviews was performed with experts in the field in the year 2025. This step allowed for an explanation of a

terminology difference between the two approaches, in relation to such key terms as "child soldiery" and "patriotic tribute."

View I: The Culture-Centric Approach (The Context-Based Approach [1])

This view believes that any study of contemporary Iranian murals must be rooted in the culture, traditions and customs, behaviors, and local semantic frameworks of Iran. According to this group, the interpretation of an artwork approaches veracity only when assessed from within the value system of its creators and audience.

> Contemporary Iranian murals are a reflection of traditional and religious beliefs of Iranians; the perception of people and audiences inside Iran, due to national-religious views and beliefs, is different and sometimes contradictory to the views of others. These 'others' are people from other countries and sometimes Iranians (diaspora) who have immigrated. (M. Stephan-Emmrich, personal communication, October 29, 2025)

This perspective primarily focuses on Iranian Tradition and Culture, viewing the artwork within a specific framework of "Visual Culture." Proponents emphasize the necessity of studying works within the framework of Iran's cultural context. The meaning and function of the murals are seen as inseparable from the unique history and societal norms of Iran.

> The themes of the murals speak to deep beliefs in Iranian society, both old religious beliefs - in particular the centrality of the notion of martyrdom in Shia Islam, going back to the quintessential martyr, Imam Hossein, Killed at the Battle of Karbala - and more recent political beliefs - notably the martyrdom of hundreds of thousands of Iranians in the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war. In fact, it is the merging of these two sets of belief that is at the core of the mural's message. (Rolston, 2018, p. 3)

Religious/Cultural Interpretation: In this view, the depiction of figures of the Islamic Republic's leaders is regarded primarily as a religious work, rather than a political statement. This is because the position of leadership in Iran's governmental structure is inseparable from religious personae, and honoring them is an act of deference to a Shi'a theological and jurisprudential tradition.

Tribute to Patriotism: Concerning murals related to those killed in the war, these researchers interpret the purpose of the works as a tribute to the high degree of sacrifice and patriotism demonstrated by these individuals and their families. In this framework, the emphasis on valor and defense of the homeland takes precedence over any potential negative connotations.[2]

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[1] It can also be said to be context-based because some artists produce their works due to social and economic choices that are created within the same socio-cultural context.

[2] The first perspective, categorized as the Culture-Centric or Context-based approach, is extensively reflected in a significant body of existing literature. This interpretative framework, which prioritizes an "authentic" understanding of these works within their local semantic context, can be clearly observed in the studies of Kamali (2006), Chehabi and Christia (2008), Baniasadi (2013), Bombardier (2017), Ahmadi and Taheri (2021), Zarabadi (2016), Marzolph (2013) and Karimi (2017). The works of these researchers exemplify this tendency to view murals as tools for socio-political expression, rather than focusing on the critical mechanisms of political control or systemic oppression.

In essence, this approach attempts to achieve an authentic, contextual understanding of artistic phenomena by avoiding imported or universal concepts.

> The mural arts of Tehran comprise one of the most tactical and long-lasting visual efforts aimed at promoting martyrdom, and especially martyrs of the Iran Iraq War. Several stories high and placed on the walls of reinforced concrete buildings lining thoroughfares or placed on major traffic nodes, these murals typically depict a specific martyr and include his basic biographical information. The murals sometimes also include a variety of recognizable Islamic signs, like the Shia hand standard and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, or other religious or contextual symbols. They promote martyrdom as a heroic feat, as an act of bravado, and as a religiously consecrated pursuit of self-annihilation. In sum, these murals provide a compendium of highly charged pictorial hagiographies distributed throughout the Iranian capital city. (Gruber, 2008, p. 27)

View II: The Power-Centric/Critical Approach (The Analysis of Iranian Murals as a Mechanism of Social Control)

In contrast, the second perspective analyzes these works using a comprehensive and normative framework, arguing that when studying art, universal values and internationally recognized standards cannot be ignored. According to this view, Iranian governmental mural has become a tool for reinforcing authoritarianism, in conflict with values such as human rights and a free society.

- Prioritizing Human Rights: In this perspective, attention to freedom of expression, the defense of children's rights, women's rights, and human rights must not be overshadowed by the pretext of “attention to culture.” They argue that cultural criteria should not become tools to legitimize the violation of these fundamental principles.
- Cultural diversity: This perspective emphasizes the need to study works in light of subcultures and the dominant culture. The goal is to understand the culture of different sectors, not just what the state presents as culture.
- Critical analysis of power structures: This view tends to analyze state-sponsored murals in terms of concepts of power and control. That is, ignoring the coercive or propaganda nature of a work distracts academic analysis from its primary mission.

This opinion criticizes Group I for not fully understanding the relationship between art and power, viewing their approach as academically insufficient in addressing the manipulative functions of governmental art.

Dr. Judith Albrecht who believes in the second view, says about the first view:

> It's a new form of Orientalism. You know, it's the reproduction and re-enactment of Orientalism because now Western disciplines and universities are still “othering” a country like Iran. There is still this process of “othering” in it. I think it's a weird combination of an unpolitical stance, some disciplinary biases that are still extremely Eurocentric and don't understand the complex context or don't want to include it and think they can do without it. I don't think they can. (J. Albrecht, personal communication, December 15, 2025)

Michel Foucault emphasizes that power is not just a physical force but a form of “action upon actions.” In his seminal essay, he notes: “Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus,

not reconstructed above society as a supplementary structure... a society without power relations can only be an abstraction" (Foucault, 1982, p. 791). From the perspective of View II, the state-sponsored murals are not mere cultural reflections, but active mechanisms of power that seek to direct the conduct of citizens and legitimizing a totalitarian government.

The Core Conflict: Accusations of Self-Censorship and Disregard for Documentation

The height of this conflict lies in the accusation of academic self-censorship leveled by View II against View I. The critical view claims that View I, through conscious omission, refrains from using essential and necessary academic terms in describing the phenomena. Some of these terms include:

- "Cult of Personality" when describing murals of leaders.
- "Child Soldiery" in the analysis of murals depicting children killed in the war.
- "Dictatorship" in analyzing the structure supporting these works.

View II believes that disregarding these concepts and turning a blind eye to official and investigative reports from human rights organizations strips the articles of their critical and realistic dimension, inadvertently placing them in service of the official narrative.

> Specifically when it comes to art history and specific disciplines, the discipline is performed in a very unpolitical way. Researchers have a specific bias, and because of this bias, they don't even see what they are reproducing. They are incapable of seeing that they are reproducing a specific censorship. [...] So there is a crucial problem of cultural relativism in it. Cultural relativism is something that is not serving the cause. I mean, cultural relativism should help to understand a culture on its own terms, but it shouldn't mean that you are not looking into the historical and political context. You cannot just exclude that. And I think this is happening. This is why people create these kinds of texts, and you will find a reproduction of propaganda from Iran reproduced by researchers outside of Iran. (J. Albrecht, personal communication, December 15, 2025)

The interpretive polarization observed in the analysis of murals signifies a deeper challenge within the realm of contemporary Iranian Art History, the dimensions of which are not merely aesthetic or cultural. In fact, the fundamental dispute over how an official artwork should be classified within the History of Revolutionary Art—whether it is a piece with deep religious/ritualistic roots or an official and ideological art—inevitably transcends disciplinary boundaries and leads to a larger theoretical challenge in Iranian art history and political science.

However, the difference between the two sets of literature is further emphasized by their different focus of analyses as well as their objectives. The Culture-Centric Approach (View I) focuses more on the internal elements of the murals, such as the use of Shiite iconography (including notions of "Ashura" or "martyrdom") as well as national-religious symbolism (including calligraphy). The outcome of such analyses will commonly evaluate the continuity of the works within mural traditions, with the objective of determining the use of the artwork as a tool of cultural communications for messaging within a controlled social environment.

By contrast, the Critical Approach Based on Universal Values (View II) focuses its content analysis more specifically on issues that relate more closely to political ideology and the issues of power. Primarily, their focus centers on issues such as the image of war, terrorism,

and their ideals that threaten world unity, directly opposing the beliefs of individual rights, promoting hostility towards others, including Western countries, as well as images of females being presented with stereotypes or limitations. This group would argue with a critical focus, as their methodology would clearly note, conceptualize, and critique images that support violence, discrimination against genders, as well as the suppression of beliefs that are often supported through human rights documents. Thus, their second objective would seek to show how such public art works would often advocate or depict ideals that contradict human rights in the public realm.

Painting of the Leaders of the Islamic Republic From Two Points of View

In Figure 1, we see the face of the Leader of the Islamic Republic. The interpretive conflict becomes most apparent when analyzing the pervasive and large-scale images of the Iranian leader in contemporary urban environments.

View I identifies such murals using the original term "symbol of leadership/imam," which is consistent with Shiite artistic traditions as well as the spiritual legitimacy (marja'yah) of leadership. This group regards the portrait images as continuing religious/allegorical representations, as they believe that the purpose of the images lies in promotion of national-religious identity, as well as providing a moral example for society. They see the grand scale and multiplicity as implying the person's spiritual, intellectual, as well as omnipresent, impact on culture. This reading is, first of all, based on the Islamic-Iranian Cultural Studies. This view, when it comes to the political aspects of these works, sees them as a form of religious propaganda to strengthen the government.

Emphasizing this context-based religious interpretation, Prof. Dr. Manja Stephan-Emmrich explicitly noted during our interview:

> Here in the department, in religious studies, we view the Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, primarily as a 'religious figure.' Framing this character strictly as an oppressive figure or dictator in scholarly research is an error stemming from the biases and prejudices of opponents of the Islamic Republic. (M. Stephan-Emmrich, personal communication, October 29, 2025)

This statement clearly illustrates how View I prioritizes internal theological legitimacy and religious authority (marja'iyyah) over political critique, framing anti-regime or critical perspectives as external political biases rather than valid analytical frameworks.

On the other hand, View II disagrees with the local religious perspective, as they see this artwork as a "cult of personality" in itself. A cult of personality is defined as the conscious use of symbolism intended to create a superhuman and sacred image of the leader, usually aiming to present an idealized, irreproachable, and uncriticizable image of the state.

View II asserts that the massive size and number of such artworks, likening them to historical figures such as Saddam Hussein or Joseph Stalin, mean ideological control as well as the silencing of other voices within the visual culture of the city. The primary finding of View II is that this artwork represents Visual Authoritarianism, contravening the civil rights of cities requiring an open and critical visual culture, rooted in Critical Cultural Studies and Power Theory.

Figure 1
Unfinished Portrait of Iranian Leaders

Note. Photograph by the author (2015).

WAR-Participant Child Murals From Two Views

This conflict in perspective is evident in the analysis of murals depicting "child martyrs" from the war (Figure 2). View I (Culture-Centric Approach) offers a reading in which these paintings represent a "Tribute to Patriotism," emphasizing the great sacrifice and courage shown by these individuals and their families. This view recognizes these paintings as a means to achieve a "genuine cultural expression derived from Shiite symbolism and nationalist/religious values," intended to create a "moral example for society, rather than a means to impose repression."

Dr. Paola Rivetti believes that since children in Iran volunteer to go to the war fronts, it is better not to use the term child-soldier:

> Children have to go to school, you know, they don't have to go to the war fronts. But do not use this term. The way in which you can express your opposition to a certain phenomenon, to state propaganda really, is about, for instance, highlighting how families have been, you know, how many families have lost children who went to the war fronts. so you can talk about the impact of state propaganda, and you can talk about the negative or the social cost of state propaganda. But do not say it's bad because it depends-I mean, you know, for some people it's not bad, it's actually a good thing to do. (P. Rivetti, personal communication, December 16, 2025)

View II (Critical Approach), rather, assesses these paintings by applying a definition within a human rights paradigm, titled "Child Soldiery," focusing on a critique that these paintings perpetuate values incompatible with international human rights charters relating to the protection of children's rights, seeing these as mechanisms of controlling society and implementing a form of "visual authoritarianism" to promote an "ideological state" message

through the glorification of violence. In the second view, if mural art ignores the systematic victimization of children, the risk of these acts being repeated in the future increases.

Albrecht argues that under a totalitarian system the idea of "free will" becomes empty, since the whole visual and educational environment (murals and textbooks included) is designed to brainwash the child. As a result, the idea of an "individual being a volunteer" becomes utterly irrelevant to social engineering and propaganda influence, and it shifts the accountability for an event to the child and/or their families rather than to the state that led them to their death. This approach risks reducing "systematic state policies" to "the inevitable costs of war," effectively obscuring the agency of the state in exploiting children (J. Albrecht, personal communication, December 15, 2025).

Figure 2

A Mural of a 13-Year-Old Soldier Killed in the War

Note. Photograph by Christiane Gruber (2008), Visual Anthropology, 21(2), p. 27.

Conflicting Academic Views

Therefore, in the analysis of contemporary Iranian governmental murals, there emerges a deep polarization in the interpretation among academicians that goes beyond any form of aesthetic difference, thus posing a constitutive question to the basic categorization of post-revolutionary artwork as such. Academia remains divided between a Culture-Centric Approach (View I), which formulates its interpretation along the principles of Shi'ite iconography, thus interpreting the murals as a form of authentic cultural practices, (and in the political arena, sees it as propaganda to gain power, not a tool of repression)[3] and a Critical Approach (View II), which formulates its interpretation along the principles of universal human rights, thus condemning the murals as a form of visual authoritarianism.

This polarization of opinion reaches its peak with a basic debate within academia over terminology, as exemplified in Group I's reluctance to employ any term such as "Cult of Personality" or "Child Soldiery" due to the risk of adopting a critical or subversive stance toward the state.

Consequently, the experts studying the murals in Iran can be classified into two types:

1. Those who see Iranian governmental murals (such as paintings of Iranian leaders, martyrs, etc.) as a form of cultural expression, which have a religious/political function.
2. Those who see Iranian governmental murals as political propaganda to silence dissent and support the oppressive government.

The second approach (Power-Centric) also faces methodological and interpretive challenges despite its capacity to expose mechanisms of political control. Reducing all visual elements and traditional symbols solely to "a tool of repression for a totalitarian system" may lead to overlooking the profound aesthetic layers, historical connections, and sincere beliefs of an audience that perceives these works beyond a mere political statement, viewing them as part of their religious life-world. In fact, just as View I may be accused of "cultural relativism", View II is at risk of "political reductionism." By imposing universal standards and imported frameworks, this approach may fail to grasp the "internal" meaning of the artwork for local actors, thereby defining the agency of both the artist and the audience exclusively within the confines of power structures.

Regarding the research conducted on Iranian mural art, a crucial point must be noted: the Culture-Centric Approach (View I) represents the dominant discourse within the academic and research environment.[4] With only a few exceptions, scholars operating within academic

[3] In the first perspective, although the presence of political aspects in government murals is not ignored, these works are analyzed simply as a form of propaganda to strengthen the state and promote national-religious identity. Proponents of this approach see the propaganda in these works as a tool for "political communication" in a controlled social environment, but avoid identifying this art as a mechanism for reproducing oppression, discrimination, or a tool for consolidating a totalitarian system.

[4] The designation of View I as the "dominant discourse" is based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature cited in this study. It has become apparent throughout the course of this investigation that Iranian government-approved mural paintings have generally been viewed by a significant volume of existing scholarly writings cited throughout this study—by Kamali in 2006, Chehabi and Christia in 2008, Baniasadi in 2013, Bombardier in 2017, Ahmadi and Taheri in 2021, Zarabadi in 2016, Marzolph in 2013, and Karimi in 2017—as cultural expressions or tools of political propaganda. Essentially, no significant volume of existing scholarly writings has established a broad theme regarding such mural artworks specifically pertaining to mechanisms related to the regulation or promotion of oppression within a totalitarian system. In addition, the specific critical

institutions interpret Iranian governmental murals as a natural reflection of Iranian customs, beliefs, and lifestyle, as well as the country's mode of governance. Rather than identifying these works as tools for reinforcing and legitimizing an oppressive regime, the prevailing body of literature as evidenced by published articles in this field—largely views them through the lens of authentic cultural expression.

Conclusion

To avoid both "cultural relativism" and "political reductionism," this paper proposes that Iranian state murals should be analyzed as a "hegemonic tension space." In this framework, the artwork is more than either a truthful likeness of culture or a mere technical apparatus of repression; it is, rather, a realm in which "the religious beliefs of the audience" are entwined with "the political will of the state."

Acknowledging this complexity allows concepts such as "personality cult" or "child soldier" to be examined not merely as political labels, but as critical categories in analyzing how "faith" is transformed into "ideology" within urban visual space. By bridging local cultural specificity with the political mechanics of public visibility, this integrative approach opens new avenues for evaluating state-sponsored art without diminishing either cultural nuance or political critique.

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

During the preparation of this work, the author used Gemini (Google AI) and Grammarly in order to edit language, refine academic grammar, and format the structure according to conference guidelines. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed. The author further declares 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 originally written and derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research, and the author retains full responsibility for the integrity and content of the publication.

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terminology highlighted by View II—such as "Cult of Personality" or "Child Soldiery"—is entirely absent from the aforementioned sources, further confirming the hegemony of the culture-centric paradigm in current academic circles.

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Decolonising Memory: A Curatorial Encounter With Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Linguistic Philosophy

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Abstract

The nomenclature of museum collections is rarely treated as a site of politics, yet every catalogue entry, accession record and display label carries an epistemic charge. Objects removed from African communities were renamed as they were removed, described through European frameworks and ordered according to taxonomies that positioned them as evidence of difference rather than as expressions of knowledge. This reflective essay argues that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's philosophy of linguistic decolonisation, developed principally in relation to literature, offers a usable framework for curatorial and conservation practice. Working from my position as a heritage practitioner and doctoral researcher in South Africa, and drawing on encounters with African collections at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art during an African Museology Exchange fellowship, I trace how the argument that language carries memory and worldview can be extended from the novel to the object label. The essay proceeds through four movements: a reading of Ngũgĩ's linguistic philosophy and its relevance to material culture; a reflexive account of my own formation, including a formative encounter with the African Writers Series; an examination of renaming as a curatorial practice, illustrated through isiZulu terms such as umkhonto and isihlangu; and an honest reckoning with the institutional, geopolitical and personal constraints that limit such work, including my own reliance on English. Renaming is not proposed as a technical correction. It is advanced as a modest but consequential act of epistemic justice, and one whose contradictions must be held in view rather than resolved rhetorically.

Keywords: African languages, curatorial practice, decolonisation, epistemic justice, museum nomenclature

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Introduction

The weight of colonial nomenclature presses heavily upon museum collections across the world. Each label, each catalogue entry and each archival description carries within it a sedimented history: objects severed from the communities that made and used them, described through European eyes, and ordered according to taxonomies that were never designed to accommodate the knowledge systems from which those objects came. The violence of removal is well documented and increasingly well litigated. The violence of description is quieter, more durable, and considerably harder to reverse, because it has been absorbed into the infrastructure of the museum itself, into its accession registers, its database fields and its habits of speech.

As a curator and conservator working with African collections in South Africa, I confront this quieter violence daily. It appears when a nineteenth-century catalogue card describes a ceremonial object as a curiosity; when a display panel renders an entire regional practice as a single ethnographic type; when a database field will not accept the diacritics that an indigenous name requires. These are small frictions, and their smallness is precisely the point. They are the accumulated residue of a linguistic order that determined, long before any of us arrived at our posts, what African material culture could be said to be.

This essay traces how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's philosophy of linguistic decolonisation extends from literature into the realm of material culture. Ngũgĩ's central claim, developed most fully in *Decolonising the Mind*, is that language is not a neutral medium of communication but a carrier of culture, memory and worldview, and that the imposition of a colonial language performs a form of dispossession that outlasts formal political independence (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). If this is true of the novel, it is no less true of the label. The proposition I advance here is straightforward in statement and difficult in execution: that restoring indigenous names to African objects in museum collections constitutes a substantive act of epistemic restoration, and that the practical, institutional and personal obstacles to doing so are themselves diagnostic of how deeply colonial linguistic orders remain embedded in heritage institutions.

The essay is deliberately reflective in register. It emerges from the intersection of scholarly formation and professional practice, and it is grounded in encounters with African collections during an African Museology Exchange fellowship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, as well as in ongoing work with southern African collections in South Africa. It does not report the results of a controlled study. It offers, instead, a situated account of what it means to attempt decolonial work from inside institutions that were built to do something else entirely.

Language as the Keeper of Memory

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary career supplies the ground for his linguistic argument, and the two cannot be usefully separated. His early novels, *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, placed Kenyan experience at the centre of the narrative frame at a moment when African literature in English was still routinely read as a supplement to a European canon (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1964, 1967). The later works, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, extended his critique beyond the colonial administration to the post-colonial elite, whose accumulation reproduced the extractive logic that independence was meant to have ended (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1977, 1980). The trajectory matters because it establishes that Ngũgĩ's concern was

never merely with who governs, but with the epistemic architecture that survives changes of government.

His decision, after detention in 1977, to write his creative work primarily in Gikuyu was therefore continuous with that concern rather than a departure from it. Language, in his account, is the keeper of memory: it holds a people's accumulated understanding of their world, and the substitution of one language for another does not simply change the medium of expression but alters what can be readily thought, named and transmitted (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Colonial education, on this reading, operated less by prohibiting African knowledge outright than by making it linguistically inaccessible to the very people who inherited it, so that the educated African became fluent in the categories of the coloniser and increasingly halting in her own.

Two further dimensions of Ngũgĩ's thought bear directly on museum work. The first is his insistence on moving the centre: the argument that intellectual authority should not be understood as radiating outward from European metropoles, and that knowledge produced in Johannesburg ought to resonate in Lagos, Nairobi and Accra without requiring validation in London or New York (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993). Colonialism functioned as a fragmenting force, and the fragmentation persists in the routing of African scholarship through northern institutions and northern languages. The second is his account of dismemberment, developed in *Something Torn and New*, where the severing of a people from their languages, names and memory is figured as a bodily wounding that requires deliberate re-membering (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009). The metaphor is unusually apt for collections work. Museums hold, quite literally, the dismembered parts of cultural bodies, and they hold them under names imposed at the moment of severance.

Ngũgĩ's position has been extended by scholars who read the university and the archive as continuous with the colonial project. Mbembe (2016) argues that decolonising the institution requires more than curricular addition, demanding instead a reconsideration of what counts as knowledge and who is authorised to produce it. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) frames the task as one of epistemic freedom, distinguishing the political decolonisation of the twentieth century from the unfinished epistemic decolonisation of the present. Read alongside Smith's (2012) account of research as an instrument of colonisation, these arguments converge on a point that is easily stated and rarely operationalised: that the vocabulary of a discipline is not incidental to its politics.

A Reflective Methodology

This essay draws on personal narrative and professional experience, aligning itself with the reflexive turn in African studies. Mama (2007) argues that the ethics of studying Africa require researchers to account for the conditions and interests that shape their work, while Nyamnjoh (2012) describes the persistence of colonial education as a structure that continues to cultivate African intellectuals as transplanted specimens rather than as rooted thinkers. Both positions hold that knowledge is situated and that acknowledging the researcher's position enriches rather than compromises scholarly rigour.

Three features of my own position shape what follows. The first is generational. I belong to a cohort born after the formal end of apartheid, which inherits its legacies without having lived its formal machinery, and which is frequently addressed as though the inheritance were an achievement rather than a burden. The second is institutional. I work within organisations built during colonial and apartheid periods, whose collections were assembled under those

conditions, and which are now tasked, often with limited resources, with dismantling the assumptions on which they were founded. The third is the contradiction that runs through this entire essay: I attempt decolonial work while writing, reading and, for the most part, thinking in English.

I state these positions at the outset because the argument that follows is not offered from a position of resolution. Reflexivity here is not a disclaimer appended to a method section. It is the method, in the sense that the frictions I encounter in daily practice are themselves the evidence, and the honest reporting of those frictions, including the ones I cannot resolve, is what the essay has to offer.

The African Writers Series and a Formative Encounter

My encounter with Ngũgĩ was not, in the first instance, scholarly. It occurred through the African Writers Series, the Heinemann imprint that published some 359 titles between 1962 and 2003 and that constituted, for several generations of African readers, an archive of literary voice that no national curriculum supplied (Currey, 2008). Reading *A Grain of Wheat* as a teenager opened a window onto an Africa that exceeded the national narrative I had inherited. The series carried Chinua Achebe, whose *Things Fall Apart* inaugurated it, alongside Steve Biko, Nadine Gordimer, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Okot p'Bitek (Achebe, 1958). To read across those volumes was to encounter a continent in conversation with itself.

There is an irony in this formation that I have come to regard as instructive rather than merely uncomfortable. The series that gave me access to African literary thought was published in London, in English, by a British educational publisher, and it circulated through school systems designed under colonial administration. My access to a decolonial literary imagination was itself mediated by colonial infrastructure. This is not a reason to discount the encounter. It is a reason to be precise about what such encounters can and cannot accomplish, and to notice how frequently the instruments available for decolonial work are instruments inherited from the very order they seek to dismantle.

The same irony surfaces in the museum, and in the mouth. Many of us who work with African collections stumble over the indigenous names of objects held in our own institutions, pronouncing them tentatively, checking them against a written source, uncertain of tone and vowel length. Our tongues stumble over names that should feel like home. That stumbling is not a personal deficiency; it is a measure of how effectively colonial education severed a generation from its own linguistic traditions, and it is one of the more precise diagnostics available to us of what remains to be done.

Renaming as Restoration

The practical form that Ngũgĩ's argument takes in curatorial work is nomenclature. Colonial-era records describe African objects in a vocabulary that is at once vague and evaluative: the primitive weapon, the ethnic costume, the fetish. Each of these terms performs the same double operation. It withholds specificity, collapsing distinct object classes into an undifferentiated category, and it assigns a position on a developmental scale that positions the object as evidence of an earlier stage of human society. The apparent neutrality of the museum register is precisely what makes it effective: the descriptor arrives as information rather than as judgement.

Relabelling an object as umkhonto rather than simply as a spear does more than substitute one word for another. It acknowledges that isiZulu contains a differentiated vocabulary for objects that English renders with a single term, that this vocabulary encodes distinctions of form, function and occasion, and that those distinctions constitute knowledge. It also resists the assumption, rarely stated but widely operative, that English terms are more precise, more scientific or more universal than the terms used by the communities who made the object. Kreps (2003) has shown that curatorial and conservation practices exist in many cultural traditions, and that the museum's professional vocabulary represents one such tradition rather than a neutral standard against which others are measured. Table 1 sets out the pattern as I have encountered it.

Table 1
Colonial Descriptors and isiZulu Nomenclature in Museum Records

Colonial descriptor	isiZulu term	What the renaming restores
Primitive weapon	Umkhonto	Recognition of a differentiated object class with its own metallurgy, martial vocabulary and ceremonial associations
Native shield	Isihlangu	Regimental identity, hide selection and the authority vested in the bearer
Ethnic costume	Isidwaba	Marital status, ceremonial obligation and the lineage relations the garment enacts
Fetish	Named sacred object	Ritual function and the custodial relationships through which the object remains active

Note. Descriptors are composites drawn from cataloguing conventions encountered across southern African and North American collections and are illustrative rather than transcriptions of any single record.

Open Questions

Presented in this form, renaming appears straightforward. In practice it raises questions that practitioners cannot resolve unilaterally, and I regard the questions as more valuable than any settled answer I might offer.

The first concerns authority. Who determines the correct indigenous name, and on what basis? Objects in museum collections were frequently removed without record of the individual, homestead or region of origin, and naming them now involves an act of attribution that risks reproducing, in decolonial idiom, the same generalising move that produced the colonial descriptor. A name applied by a curator in Pretoria on the basis of typological resemblance is not equivalent to a name supplied by a custodian community, and the difference should be visible in the record rather than smoothed away.

The second concerns multiplicity. Southern Africa is multilingual, and object classes move across language boundaries. A term that is precise in isiZulu may be inaccurate in Sesotho or Xitsonga, and choosing one language over another for a shared object class enacts a hierarchy of its own. The third concerns infrastructure. Museum databases and collection management systems were designed around Latin-script fields, English-language controlled vocabularies and thesauri built in the global North; they frequently mishandle diacritics, resist multiple simultaneous names for a single object and offer no field structure capable of recording who supplied a name and with what authority. The fourth concerns audience. Bilingual labelling

extends accessibility for some visitors while risking the relegation of the indigenous term to a parenthetical gloss, which reinscribes the hierarchy it was meant to unsettle.

None of these questions constitutes an argument against renaming. They are an argument against treating renaming as a technical fix that can be implemented at the level of the label alone. The work is relational before it is textual, and where the relations do not yet exist, the honest response is to record the uncertainty rather than to supply a confident name.

Institutional and Geopolitical Constraints

Decolonial curatorial work does not proceed in a vacuum, and it is chastening to observe how quickly it can be arrested by forces entirely external to the museum. Recent tensions between the United States and South Africa have slowed institutional collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, collaboration that had appeared promising for advancing precisely the kind of nomenclature work described above. Exchange programmes, shared cataloguing initiatives and the slow business of building trust between institutions depend on diplomatic and funding conditions over which practitioners exercise no control. African cultural heritage work remains entangled with international politics, funding dependencies and power asymmetries that exceed any individual institution's capacity to manage.

The constraint is not only geopolitical. The colonial legacy in African museums is carried by architecture, which organises the visitor's movement and the object's visibility according to nineteenth-century assumptions; by organisational structures, which distribute authority between curatorial, conservation and education functions in inherited ways; by funding models, which favour projects legible to northern donors; by relationships with government and international partners, which set the terms on which collections may be studied or moved; and by staff training, which is still overwhelmingly conducted within Western museological traditions, so that the professional formation of African heritage workers reproduces the very framework they are asked to critique.

This is the context in which restitution debates unfold. Sarr and Savoy (2018) made the case for the return of African cultural heritage held in French collections, and their report reframed restitution as a question of relational ethics rather than of legal title. The nomenclature question sits alongside restitution rather than beneath it. Objects that remain in northern collections, and objects that are returned, are equally subject to the descriptive regimes under which they are held, and a returned object catalogued under a colonial descriptor has been moved without being renamed.

Linguistic Contradiction and Personal Complicity

I write this essay in English, not in an indigenous South African language. I think, read and often dream in the language of my colonisers. This is not a rhetorical confession offered to establish credibility before proceeding as before. It is the central difficulty of the position from which I write, and any argument I make about the restoration of indigenous names must be read through it.

The pressures that produce this contradiction are structural rather than individual. The academy rewards publication in English-language journals with international circulation, and national research funding formulae in South Africa attach value to outputs that appear in accredited venues, the overwhelming majority of which publish in English. Grant funding favours

research presented in colonial languages, since review panels are assembled on the assumption that English is the working language of scholarship. Professional advancement depends on fluency in Western theoretical vocabularies, so that a researcher's capacity to be heard is conditioned on her competence in precisely the idiom whose dominance she may wish to contest. Conferences, including the one at which this paper was presented, operate in English as a matter of course.

Ngũgĩ's response to an equivalent set of pressures was to write his creative work in Gikuyu and to accept the professional costs that followed, including a substantially narrowed initial readership and a dependence on translation for international circulation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986, 2012). His choice challenges scholars to identify the points at which we might refuse to participate in our own linguistic colonisation. It does not, however, license the conclusion that individual choice is sufficient. A curator who writes labels in isiZulu within an institution whose database, funding cycle and reporting requirements operate in English has not transformed the institution; she has added a layer of translation to it. Fabian's (1983) analysis of how anthropological writing consigned its subjects to a time other than the observer's is instructive here, because it demonstrates that a discipline's most consequential assumptions are lodged in its conventions of expression rather than in its explicit claims.

What I take from Ngũgĩ, then, is neither absolution nor a directive to abandon English tomorrow. It is a requirement to keep the contradiction visible: to name the language I am writing in as a choice with costs, to resist describing partial measures as completed decolonisation, and to work towards structural changes in cataloguing standards, funding criteria and professional training that would make a different choice available to practitioners who come after me.

Intergenerational Responsibility

Remembering who we are as African intellectuals is not an exercise in nostalgia. It creates the conditions under which futures can be reimagined, and it makes it possible to address inherited pain rather than to transmit it unexamined. Three commitments follow from the argument advanced here.

The first concerns objects as memory. The collections held in African and northern museums are not inert material awaiting interpretation. They are repositories of ancestral connection and of the knowledge systems that colonialism sought to render obsolete, and the terms under which they are described determine whether that knowledge is legible to the communities from which the objects came. The second concerns continental solidarity. The histories of disruption and post-independence disappointment that Ngũgĩ chronicles in Kenya find their counterparts in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, and the fragmentation of African scholarship into national containers serves the same centralising logic that Ngũgĩ identified. Nomenclature standards developed collaboratively across African institutions would carry an authority that no single national museum can generate alone.

The third concerns reconnection with the diaspora. Museum collections in Europe and North America hold objects that are, for diaspora communities, among the few available material links to specific African histories. Those collections can function as bridges, but only if African and diaspora voices are centred in the descriptive work rather than consulted after the catalogue has been written. The sequence matters. Consultation that follows description confirms decisions already made; description that follows relationship is a different practice altogether.

Conclusion

Renaming African objects with their indigenous names is more than a technical correction to the historical record. It constitutes epistemic justice, in that it restores to African languages the authority to describe African material culture; cultural restoration, in that it reconnects objects with the systems of meaning in which they were made; and political resistance, in that it refuses the assumption that European vocabularies are the natural medium of scholarly precision. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insight that language is the keeper of memory holds in the collection store as fully as it does in the novel.

The essay has also insisted on the limits of this claim. Renaming requires relationships with custodian communities that many institutions have not built, infrastructure that most collection management systems do not provide, and a resolution of authority questions that no curator can supply alone. It proceeds under geopolitical and funding conditions that practitioners do not control. And it is undertaken, in my case and in many others, by researchers whose own working language is the one whose dominance is in question. These limits do not invalidate the work. They specify it, and they identify where effort is most usefully directed: towards cataloguing standards that accommodate multiple names and record their provenance, towards professional training in African languages for heritage workers, and towards collaborative frameworks that treat African institutions as centres rather than as peripheries.

Wherever we are, and whatever corner of the institution we occupy, we must redefine ourselves without permitting erasure through the loss of our African languages. The horizon of this work is an Africa that speaks, thinks and creates on its own terms, and museums that can describe what they hold in the languages of those who made it.

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

The author declares that Claude, a generative AI assistant developed by Anthropic, was used during the preparation of this manuscript. Its use was limited to assisting with the structuring of the argument, drafting prose from the author's conference presentation and research notes, and refining language for clarity and formatting compliance. All ideas, arguments, positional claims, professional observations, source selections and conclusions are the author's own, derived from her research and practice, and every AI-assisted passage was reviewed, verified and revised by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Chanting Revolution: Environmental Performance in Syrian Protests Chants and Youssef-Agha's *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution*

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Abstract

This article analyses the performative dynamics of language in the chants of the Syrian demonstrations (2011–2024) in relation to Tarif Youssef-Agha's memoir *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed*. It employs an interdisciplinary framework that draws on Richard Schechner's theory of Environmental Theatre. Schechner reconceptualises performance as an immersive practice in which space, sound, participants, and audiences collectively constitute meaning, thereby challenging the boundary between staged performance and lived experience. Within this framework, Syrian street-protest chants, such as "Ash-sha'ab yureed isqaaṭ an-niẓam" (The people want the fall of the regime) and "Janna, janna ya watana" (Paradise, paradise, O homeland), are examined as embodied performative acts that transform public spaces into sites of collective expression and resistance. These chants are characterised by colloquial Syrian Arabic, repetition, and rhythmic structures that facilitate mass participation and contribute to the construction of collective identity. Youssef-Agha's memoir mediates this process by transforming street chants into poetic and narrative forms that bear witness to trauma. This article contributes to interdisciplinary discussions of linguistic performativity, revolutionary expression, and Middle Eastern cultural studies by highlighting the role of embodied language in shaping revolutionary experience.

Keywords: environmental performative chants, Syrian revolution, trauma-affected-language, collective identity, embodied resistance

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Introduction

For decades in Syria, demanding the for the rights of basic facilities and the freedom of speech meant arrest or death. That was the main reason of the Syrian Revolution which began in March 2011 and achieved the freedom in December 2024 and which was inspired by the "Arab Spring" uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The revolutionary people marched demonstrations, requesting freedom, justice, and dignity, but they were faced by violence by the old regime forces. The thing which led to a wide range of artistic forms of expression that were shaped into a collective performative practice.

This piece of writing explores several aspects of the Syrian demonstrations from 2011 to 2017 in connection with Tarif Youssef-Agha's testimony, *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed,* alongside with the street chants that were composed and sung by the revolutionary people. Drawing on Schechner's theory of *Environmental Theatre*, the paper examines how revolutionary chants, slogans, and repeated linguistic expressions do not merely communicate political demands but enact them, transforming ordinary streets into spaces of collective agency. It analyses the transformation of everyday urban space, collective bodies, revolutionary voices, architectural objects, and traumatic memory into a performative environment, and how the choice of words of chants serves as a performative tool to force the audience to join the chorus, transforming them from passive observers into active performers in the environmental space.

The article contributes to ongoing discussions within performance studies, trauma in performative practices, and Middle Eastern cultural analysis by demonstrating how language becomes a site of agency during the revolutionary struggle. It illustrates how Syrian protest chants operated not only as tools of movement but also as methods through which Syrians collectively processed violence, preserved memory, and confirm their continued existence against suppression.

Literature Review

Recent studies on Hadi Al-Abdullah's *Critical Conditions: My Diary of the Syrian Revolution* have mainly considered the testimony as a testimonial narrative that illustrates the Syrian Revolution and the psychological impacts of prolonged violence. Al-Abdullah's narrative contemplates demonstrations, sieges, injuries, interments, imprisonment, and the deaths of friends through striking memories and enduring emotional effects. Al-Abdullah's role as a participant and journalist merges the distinction between observer and performer, with the camera acting as a medium that displays revolutionary activities to both local and international audiences. Demonstrations, chants, and stories emerge not merely as records of political events but as expressive actions in which Syrians personify revolutionary identities and fight against being overlooked. The testimony emphasises the significance of preserving voices, documenting struggles, and publicly testifying, suggesting that storytelling evolves into a performance that sustains collective memory and strengthens group power amidst violence and displacement.

While Youssef-Agha preserves the revolution through poetry, testimony, and the textual recording of chants, Al-Abdullah preserves it through testimony, journalism, and visual witnessing. In both texts, revolutionary performance and traumatic repetition operate simultaneously as modes of resistance, remembrance, and collective identity formation.

Brothers of the Gun by Marwan Hisham and Molly Crabapple. Marwan Hisham was a young Syrian from Raqqa who participated in the early protests of 2011. The testimony recounts how he and his friends joined demonstrations, faced repression, and witnessed the transformation of the revolution into war. The testimony as a narrative reflecting the transition from revolutionary optimism to persistent struggle and dislocation.

Methodology

This study states an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology combining performance analysis, performative trauma-informed literary criticism, and performance of chants through close textual reading and demonstration songs. The primary materials consist of the most prominent chants performed during Syrian demonstrations between 2011 and 2024 alongside Youssef-Agha's testimony.

The selected chants were chosen because of their widespread circulation across Syria, their centrality to revolutionary discourse, and their linguistic features of repetition, rhythm, and collective participation.

Spatial transformation, audience participation, and collective embodiment are examined depending on Schechner's *Environmental Theatre* framework. The article investigates the performative effects while simultaneously preserving collective memory.

Discussion

The Total Environment (Analysing "Places")

The Revolutionary Street and Unity of Cities

Richard Schechner's concept of "Environmental Theatre" redefines performance as an interactive event in which performers, audiences, and space collectively generate meaning. Schechner argues that theatre is "a set of perceptual transformations and elaborations on behaviour" through which "we become aware of our behaviour" (Schechner, 1994). Rather than treating performance as an isolated artistic event, he conceives it as a dynamic process grounded in human interaction. As he further explains, "the theatrical event is a set of related transactions among performers, among members of the audience, and between performers and audiences" (Schechner, 1994). He rejects the separation between an actor and spectator. Within this framework, performance is not confined to a specific stage but can emerge wherever social interactions produce a shared meaning.

One of the defining characteristics of the Syrian demonstrations described in *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed* is the transformation of ordinary urban space into a performative environment. This transformation reflects Richard Schechner's concept of "Environmental Theatre", in which performance is generated through the interaction of bodies, space, and spectators rather than being confined to a conventional stage. As Schechner argues, "All the spaces are actively involved in all the aspects of the performance" (Schechner, 1994) while "the theatrical event is a complex social interweave, a network of expectations and obligations" (Schechner, 1994). Revolutionary performance therefore emerged not from a designated performance area but from the continual interaction between demonstrators and the spaces they occupied.

Through his writing, Agha transforms geography into a performative network by linking Daraa and Homs through a shared revolutionary voice. The line, "Oh Daraa, I can hear Homs roaring from the Gate of Sibaa" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) collapses physical distance, presenting separate cities as participants in a single theatrical event. Rather than functioning as passive locations, Daraa, Homs, and the Gate of Sibaa become active performers whose identities are constituted through the collective voices of demonstrators. The metaphor of "roaring" evokes both the defiant chants of protesters and the symbolic association of the Gate of Sibaa ("Gate of Lions") with courage and resistance. Similarly, the chant portrays Jisr al-Shughour as an active participant in the revolutionary performance, demonstrating how cities become collective voices within the environmental theatre of the Syrian uprising. The line, "Oh Daraa, Jisr al-Shughour wrote an epic" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) transforms the city's resistance into a heroic narrative that is continually recreated through public chanting.

His poem further expands the revolutionary performance by incorporating eastern Syrian cities into a collective theatrical space of resistance. The opening question, "Oh Daraa, do you know who also joined from the east to support you?" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) invites both performers and listeners to recognise the geographical breadth of the uprising. By declaring that Al-Boukamal "stood up" to demand the departure of the oppressors, that Deir al-Zor proclaimed, "Living with the executioners is impossible" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) and that Al-Hasakah vowed to remain "in their throat," the chant personifies entire cities as speaking actors rather than passive settings. The revolutionary stage is broadened still further through the inclusion of Syria's coastal cities, illustrating how Environmental Theatre unites diverse regions within a single performative event. The declaration that "Jableh, Banyas and Latakia of the Arabs rushed to your help" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) transforms these cities into active participants whose voices merge with those of Daraa and the wider protest movement.

Moreover, not only in Agha's testimony but in the street chants, this process culminates in repeated affirmations of solidarity with Hama, Homs, Daraa, and Idlib: "Oh Hama, we are with you till death, Oh Homs, we are with you till death, Oh Daraa, we are with you till death, Oh Idlib, we are with you till death" (Shaam Network S.N.N, 2011, 0:01-1:59). These chants construct a performative geography in which each city is repeatedly called onto the revolutionary stage through collective vocalization. The repeated declaration "we are with you till death" functions as a performative pledge that binds demonstrators across geographically distant regions into a single community of resistance. In Schechner's Environmental Theatre, the boundaries between performers, spectators, and performance spaces dissolve; likewise, these chants erase regional divisions by allowing every protest site to participate simultaneously in the same revolutionary event. Through the continual reactivation of shared memory, sacrifice, and commitment, the streets of different cities become interconnected performance spaces, producing a unified national identity that transcends local boundaries and transforms the Syrian Revolution into a nationwide performance of resistance.

Ordinary Public Architecture as a Theatrical Set

Schechner argues that performance does not simply occur within a space; rather, space itself becomes integral to the performance. One of the defining features of the Syrian demonstrations is the transformation of ordinary urban architecture into an interactive theatrical environment. In Homs, for example, Clock Tower Square ceased to function as a neutral public landmark. The central clock tower became a stage prop, while surrounding balconies served as elevated viewing platforms from which residents watched, chanted, and documented the demonstrations. The architecture also amplified sound, reflecting chants back onto the crowd

and reinforcing the experience of a unified, immersive performance. Everyday urban space was thus reconfigured into a performative environment.

This transformation reflects Richard Schechner's concept of "Environmental Theatre", which rejects the conventional separation between stage, objects, and audience by insisting that "All the spaces are actively involved in all the aspects of the Performance" (Schechner, 1994). Schechner emphasises the architecture when he argues that "the given elements of a space—its architecture, textural qualities, acoustics, and so on—are to be explored and used, not disguised" (Schechner, 1994).

Within this performative environment, the mosque assumed a particularly significant role. Friday prayers in the mosques provided both the temporal and spatial cue for collective action. As worshippers emerged, religious architecture was immediately reconfigured as political space, dissolving the boundary between sacred ritual and civic resistance. Agha writes, "In the Omary Mosque (of Daraa) they gathered. And formed from. Themselves shield to. Protect the Homeland. They performed the burning. Of the first of the Assad idols" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). In Schechner's terms, the mosque functioned not merely as a backdrop but as an organizing force that structured entrances, exits, and collective rhythms, enabling participants to transform religious gathering into revolutionary performance.

The demonstrations also expanded vertically through the use of rooftops and balconies. Residents who did not physically join the marches nevertheless participated by chanting slogans, performing zaghrouta (ululation), waving revolutionary flags, filming events, and applauding from above. These elevated spaces dissolved the distinction between spectators and performers, extending the performance throughout the surrounding architecture.

Walls throughout Syrian cities likewise underwent a profound performative transformation. Once functioning as ordinary architectural boundaries, they became political texts bearing revolutionary graffiti, portraits of martyrs, and slogans demanding freedom. "Where it all started from school walls. Walls with words saying 'The cups of suppression will never be drunk again'" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). Each inscription reshaped the visual environment while inviting further participation through additional writing, preservation, or erasure. Government attempts to remove graffiti intensified this process, turning walls into contested sites where opposing political narratives were repeatedly inscribed and erased. Architecture thus became a medium through which political struggle was continually performed. Government buildings acquired an equally significant symbolic role. Although demonstrators often remained outside governorate headquarters, security branches, municipal offices, and Ba'ath Party buildings, these structures embodied state authority and therefore became focal points of confrontation.

Throughout the memoir, urban space does not merely contain revolutionary action; it organises, amplifies, and reshapes it. As Richard Schechner argues, "A performance studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships, that is, 'as' performances" (Mukhopadhyay, 2013). Performance Studies examine art, culture, architecture, and other things not as fixed objects, but as things that do something and interact with people and society. It focuses on how these things function through actions, behaviours, events, and relationships in particular contexts. Architecture influences movement, participation, visibility, and confrontation, demonstrating that revolutionary performance emerged through the dynamic relationship between people and place. The Syrian city therefore functioned not simply as the

location of protest but as one of its principal actors, continually participating in the production of revolutionary meaning.

From Spectators to Participants: Kinesics and Proxemics in The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution

A defining feature of Richard Schechner's *Environmental Theatre* is the dissolution of the boundary between performer and spectator. Rather than separating actors from an observing audience, performance emerges through the participation of everyone present. Tarif Youssef-Agha's *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed* demonstrates this principle throughout its depiction of the Syrian uprising. Revolutionary action did not depend upon professional leaders performing before passive observers. Instead, every participant contributed to the event by chanting, clapping, marching, carrying banners, documenting violence, treating the wounded, or responding from surrounding buildings. Leadership remained fluid: a chant initiated by one protester immediately became the collective voice of thousands, while the arrest or death of a leader simply prompted another participant to assume the role.

This participatory structure was enacted through what Schechner identifies as kinesics and proxemics: the expressive capacities of the body and the social organization of space. Political meaning was communicated not only through slogans but also through coordinated movement, bodily gesture, and the strategic occupation of public space.

One of the clearest examples of kinesic performance is the collective march through streets and neighbourhoods. Agha says, "It marched asking for freedom while holding its coffin" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). Rather than presenting demonstrations as spontaneous crowds, Youssef-Agha depicts protesters advancing in coordinated movement that transformed hundreds of individual bodies into a single collective performer. The march itself became a performative declaration of political agency, physically enacting the freedom demonstrators demanded. Every step through government-controlled streets challenged the political order by replacing fear with collective visibility.

The memoir likewise emphasises the political significance of bodily gesture. Protesters repeatedly raised open hands, clapped rhythmically, pointed toward symbols of authority, and synchronised their movements with revolutionary chants. Agha tells the world that he "will keep knocking on the door of freedom, by my hand and my gun" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). These recurring gestures constituted a shared performative vocabulary through which demonstrators expressed peaceful intent while simultaneously displaying moral defiance. Raised palms, for example, visually underscored the unarmed nature of the demonstrations in contrast to heavily armed security forces.

Bodily movement also structured protesters' responses to repression. "The behaviour is 'released' (performed) on cue according to specific 'releasing mechanisms' (stimuli)" (Schechner, 1994). Demonstrators repeatedly dispersed under gunfire or security raids before regrouping in nearby streets and resuming their protests. This recurring pattern of advance, retreat, and reassembly constituted a choreography of resistance rather than evidence of defeat. The body likewise became the primary medium through which grief was publicly expressed. Protesters carried the wounded to safety, embraced grieving relatives, and lifted the bodies of martyrs during funeral processions. These physical acts transformed individual suffering into

a collective political experience, extending mourning into public resistance and reaffirming communal solidarity.

Alongside bodily movement, the memoir highlights the importance of proxemics, or the social organization of space. Protesters deliberately stood shoulder to shoulder, linked arms, and moved as densely organised groups, creating both psychological reassurance and a visible image of collective unity. The confrontation with security forces further demonstrates the political significance of spatial relationships. As Schechner observes, street demonstrations consist of "shifting groups of performers and spectators" (Schechner, 2003) in which both protesters and police alternately occupy both roles. Tarif's memoir reflects this dynamic as demonstrators repeatedly advanced toward police lines while security forces attempted to re-establish distance through barricades, checkpoints, armoured vehicles, and gunfire. Political conflict thus unfolded through the continual negotiation of movement and control over public space.

Taken together, the memoir demonstrates that bodily movement and spatial organization were central to the performative character of the Syrian Revolution. Through synchronised marches, ritualised gestures, adaptive movement under repression, collective mourning, and the strategic occupation of public space, protesters communicated political meanings that exceeded verbal language alone. Schechner's concepts of kinesics and proxemics therefore illuminate how Youssef Agha's testimony presents the uprising as an embodied performance in which coordinated bodies and contested spaces became the primary medium through which collective identity, resilience, and aspirations for freedom were enacted.

Children as Performers Who Stimulate Adults to Resist

The Syrian Revolution is widely understood to have begun in Daraa in 2011, when a group of schoolchildren wrote the anti-regime graffiti, "Oh Doctor (Assad), your turn is next," they wrote on the walls (Youssef-Agha, 2017) on a school wall. According to Richard Schechner's performance theory, these children were not only passive victims of state repression but active symbolic performers whose actions transformed ordinary urban space into a revolutionary stage. This illustrates this process by representing Daraa as a performative environment in which collective memory, emotion, and political action converge. The reference to the children who "documented on the walls that they don't accept humiliation" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) elevates graffiti from an isolated act of writing into a public performance that redefines the city itself. The wall becomes part of the performance environment, while the children emerge as the performers whose actions initiate the revolutionary event. Their inscription is not presented as passive documentation but as an embodied act that "Children who woke up a nation which forgot its glory" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) demonstrating how political action and theatrical performance become inseparable within the revolutionary landscape.

Schechner's concept of restored behaviour provides a useful framework for understanding the significance of these actions. He argues that performance consists of behaviours that are learned, repeated, and adapted to new contexts rather than spontaneously invented. Many Syrian children echoed the slogans, gestures, and forms of resistance circulating throughout the Arab Spring, particularly the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

Furthermore, children occupied a central moral and performative role in the revolutionary imagination through chants commemorating Hamza al-Khatib. This portrays Hamza as assuming the burden of confronting injustice on behalf of an entire nation. The rhetorical

questions, "Are you going to accept our apology?" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) and "Will any apology at all be acceptable to you?" express collective guilt by acknowledging that adults failed to protect the very children who became the revolution's most powerful symbols. The line, "We left you defending a nation silent for generations" (Youssef-Agha, 2017) reverses conventional social roles, presenting the child as the nation's defender while adults become passive witnesses. Through repeated public performance, Hamza's memory is transformed into a living presence that continually renews the crowd's commitment to resistance. Rather than functioning solely as remembrance, the chant becomes a ritual through which protesters collectively reaffirm their political and moral obligations.

Although Hamza al-Khatib became one of the most recognizable symbols of the Syrian Revolution after his arrest, torture, and killing in 2011, his experience represented thousands of Syrian children who became unwilling participants in the regime's political violence. Through Schechner's concept of Environmental Theatre, these children can be understood as performers whose bodies, voices, and even absences became integral components of the revolutionary event. Hamza's tortured body, widely disseminated through videos and photographs, became a performative event that mobilised grief, outrage, and political resistance far beyond Daraa. Likewise, the disappearance of Rania al-Abbasi, her husband, and their six children after their arrest in 2013 transformed absence itself into a political performance. As Schechner argues that the event is not contained in the script but in the transaction among performers, spectators, and environment, Schechner (2013). The experiences of Hamza, the al-Abbasi family, and countless unnamed children illustrate how the revolutionary performance extended beyond demonstrations to encompass prisons, schools, hospitals, homes, cemeteries, and digital media. Within this expanded performative environment, children's lives, deaths, disappearances, and memories became central to the emotional and political force of the revolution.

This process is especially evident in the opening verses of Ya Heif, the protest song performed by Ibrahim al-Qashoush following Hamza al-Khatib's death. The song opens with emotionally charged questions and direct accusations that transform mourning into collective political performance. The lament, "For shame, brother, for shame! Shooting the defenceless – for shame!" (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016) immediately frames violence against civilians as a source of national shame. The following lines, "Shooting the defenceless – for shame! You are a son of this country but you kill its children. You turn your back to the enemy but assault us with a sword" (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016) stage a dramatic confrontation between protesters and the regime's security forces. The lyrics emphasise the tragedy of fratricidal violence by addressing them as fellow Syrians who have betrayed their own people.

Variable Focus and Organic Framing: Analysing Revolutionary "Occasions"

A central feature of Schechner's Environmental Theatre is variable focus, whereby performance has no single centre of attention. Multiple actions unfold simultaneously, and spectators continually shift their attention as the event evolves. The Syrian demonstrations depicted in *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed* exemplify this principle through the recurring "Friday" demonstrations, each organised around a named occasion such as the "Friday of Dignity." Rather than functioning as fixed spectacles, these protests unfolded as fluid, multi-centred events. As Agha provides,

> They also gave names to those Fridays to reflect the current events; the first one was the Friday of Dignity (3/18/11), then Friday of Glory (3/25/11), Friday of Martyrs

> (4/1/11), Friday of Withstanding (4/8/11), Friday of Insistence (4/15/11), and so on until today, more than 300 Fridays counted. (Youssef-Agha, 2017)

While one group led chants such as "Yalla Erhal" in the centre of the demonstration, others monitored approaching security forces, cared for the wounded, comforted grieving families, or documented events. The revolutionary "stage" therefore expanded and contracted in response to changing political circumstances and emotional intensity.

Funeral processions in the Syrian demonstrations of 2011 evolved into significant political events, turning individual grief into collective public dissent. Agha describes this by saying that, "Every time a martyr leaves, another one follows Wedding sounds are now used just in funerals" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). As mourners came together to inter the victims of security forces, the funeral march frequently spilled into the streets, where they shouted slogans advocating for freedom and opposing the Assad regime. In this regard, the funeral transcended a mere ceremony for the deceased; it transformed into a collective act of defiance, uniting individuals in a shared space and converting sorrow into unified political engagement. The procession thus blurred the line between grief and dissent, showing how common cultural practices could transform into moments for political expression and unity.

Ramadan turned into a significant event for communal assembly and political expression amid the Syrian protests. The communal activities linked to Ramadan, especially nighttime prayers and gatherings near mosques, provided chances for individuals to unite in public areas, where religious gatherings could transform into protests against the Syrian government. In this context, Ramadan transcended a purely religious timeframe, evolving into a social and political event where individuals showcased solidarity, sorrow, and defiance. From a Performance Studies viewpoint, these assemblies illustrate how a pre-existing cultural and religious tradition can be converted into a public display of political opposition, as bodies converged and rendered their united presence apparent in public areas. Ramadan offered a familiar social environment and allowed protesters to transform routine religious activities into forms of collective political expression.

Dissolution of Performer/Audience Roles (Analysing "Words")

Schechner emphasises that everyone in the space is a participant. Words in a protest chant are not passive; they are participatory scripts designed to convert onlookers into actors. When the lead chanter screams a word, the crowd must hurl it back. An Environmental Theatre analysis evaluates how the choice of words, especially inclusive pronouns like "Al-Shaab" (The People) or "Hurriya" (Freedom), serves as a performative tool to force the "audience" (people watching from windows or hiding in shops) to join the chorus, transforming them from passive observers into active performers in the environmental space.

Call-and-Response as a Theatrical Mechanism of Inclusion in *The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed*

Schechner argues that performance is fundamentally participatory, rejecting the conventional separation between performers and spectators. One of his six axioms states that "all the space is used for the performance," while another insists that the focus of performance is "flexible and variable," allowing participants to shape the event collectively rather than simply observe it. Within this framework, theatrical meaning is created through interaction and mutual participation instead of passive spectatorship. Tarif Youssef-Agha's testimony illustrates these

principles through the protesters' use of call-and-response chanting. He says, "They started a peaceful revolution by marching and chanting" (Youssef-Agha, 2017). The demonstrations described in the testimony were not organised around speeches delivered to silent audiences; rather, they depended upon continuous vocal exchanges in which every participant became responsible for sustaining the performance. Revolutionary slogans therefore functioned as collaborative acts through which collective identity was continuously produced.

Schechner argues that theatre originates in the "exchange of stimuli—either sensory or cognitive or both" (Schechner, 1994) and the Syrian demonstrations exemplify this principle through the constant circulation of voices between individuals and the larger assembly. Each response or repeated slogan confirms not only agreement with the slogan but also a communal participation while continually reshaping the emotional atmosphere of the demonstration.

The testimony further demonstrates that call-and-response creates a performative mechanism through which participation remains open and accessible. Unlike formal political meetings that distinguish leaders from listeners, the demonstrations required no specialised role or official position. Individuals joining the protest could immediately become participants simply by repeating the collective response. The act of answering a chant therefore functioned as an initiation into the revolutionary community. Protesters from different social, educational, and generational backgrounds were united through the shared rhythm of the slogans rather than through institutional affiliation.

The repeated use of familiar slogans throughout the testimony also reflects Schechner's concept of restored behaviour, which he defines as "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first-time; that are prepared or rehearsed" (Schechner, 2013). Although the demonstrations responded to changing political events, their performative structure remained remarkably consistent. Weekly protests repeatedly employed recognizable chants whose rhythms and patterns had become collectively learned through continual participation. Protesters instinctively anticipated both the timing and wording of the communal response, enabling thousands of individuals to speak with extraordinary coordination. Tarif repeatedly portrays demonstrations in which chants organised the rhythm of collective action and sustained the cohesion of protesters despite escalating violence. "Calls, hoots, group enactments, and chanting involve an ancient audio-vocal communication system predating speech, an expressive system" (Schechner, 2013).

Ultimately, Youssef-Agha's testimony demonstrates that call-and-response functioned as far more than a method of organizing revolutionary chants. It constituted a theatrical mechanism that transformed isolated individuals into a collective political body through reciprocal participation. Every slogan invited a response, and every response reaffirmed both individual inclusion and collective solidarity. Viewed through Schechner's theory of Environmental Theatre, the demonstrations emerge as participatory performances in which language acquired political power only through communal enactment. The revolutionary crowd did not merely communicate ideas; it performed a new model of civic life based upon shared voice, mutual recognition, and collective agency. The theatrical structure of call-and-response thus became one of the principal means through which the Syrian protesters enacted the democratic community they sought to create.

The performances of Ibrahim Qashoush illustrate this participatory structure with particular clarity. Qashoush's chants achieved extraordinary influence not because they were delivered as individual artistic performances but because they were immediately absorbed into the voices

of thousands of demonstrators. His celebrated refrain, "Yalla irhal ya Bashar" ("Come on, Bashar, leave"), acquired revolutionary significance through collective repetition rather than authorship alone. "This chant was taken up, modified, and adapted by each singer and province" (Dubois, 2013). As protesters echoed the chant across streets and public squares, individual expression was transformed into communal performance. Qashoush's voice therefore functioned as the catalyst for a much larger environmental event in which every participant became a performer. *Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar* became one of the defining anthems of the Syrian Revolution because it transformed a simple political demand into a collective performative act. Through its repetitive refrain, "Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar" ("Come on, Bashar, leave"), the song encouraged thousands of demonstrators to participate simultaneously, dissolving the distinction between singer and audience. Led in many demonstrations by Abdul Basit al-Sarout and popularised through the performances associated with Ibrahim al-Qashoush, the anthem relied on rhythmic repetition, direct address, and collective chanting rather than musical complexity.

A similar dynamic characterises the performances of Abdul Baset al-Sarout. Before becoming one of the most recognizable revolutionary chanters, al-Sarout had been celebrated as a football goalkeeper whose public identity was already associated with collective participation and communal aspiration. During the uprising, however, his role changed fundamentally. Rather than addressing audiences from a position of distance, he remained physically immersed within demonstrations, leading chants while marching alongside fellow protesters. His authority emerged not from separation but from participation, reinforcing the environmental principle that performers remain integral components of the communities in which performance occurs.

The emotional dimension of the demonstrations was equally expressed through chants such as "Skaba ya dumūʿ al-ʿayn skaba" ("Flow, O tears of the eye, flow"), which continues with the refrain, "ʿalā shuhadāʾ Sūriyā skaba" ("Flow for the martyrs of Syria, flow"). "The chant comes from a preexisting cultural heritage; it is modified according to the demonstrators' needs and achieves the status of a protest hit when it is sung abroad by one of the star singers of Syrian protest music" (Dubois, 2013). The repetition of the imperative "flow" transforms tears from a private emotional response into a public, collective act of remembrance dedicated to those who lost their lives during the revolution.

In Schechner's terms, the chant exemplifies Environmental Theatre by dissolving the distinction between private and public performance: the mother's farewell becomes the farewell of the entire community, while the martyr's imagined return is continually re-enacted through collective participation. The repeated performance of the chant enabled protesters not only to commemorate those who had been killed but also to reaffirm their commitment to the revolutionary cause, turning sacrifice into a living element of the theatrical event. Through this embodied act of remembrance, the demonstrations converted personal bereavement into collective solidarity, sustaining both the emotional and moral continuity of the Syrian Revolution.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Syrian Revolution can be understood as an environmental theatre in which political resistance emerged through the continuous interaction of bodies, voices, urban space, and collective memory. By bringing Schechner's performance theory into dialogue, this study demonstrates that revolutionary performance is mutually reinforcing rather than separate phenomena. This reading contributes to scholarship on performance studies,

trauma studies, and Syrian revolutionary literature by demonstrating that the revolution can be understood as a performative struggle over space and memory.

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

I declare that I used ChatGPT and Grammarly only to correct grammatical and spelling errors for accuracy and clarity. I also declare that apart from Grammarly and ChatGPT, 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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Disposable Futures: Posthuman Bodies, Biopolitical Value, and the Ethics of Recognition in Contemporary British Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary British fiction deploys posthuman and transhuman figures to interrogate the political mechanisms through which human value is allocated, withdrawn, and technologically managed. Focusing on Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun* together with Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, it argues that these novels stage worlds in which biotechnology and artificial intelligence intensify rather than abolish entrenched hierarchies of recognition. Drawing on Judith Butler's notions of grievability and precarity and on feminist posthumanist theory, the paper traces differential regimes of value across biological, synthetic, and hybrid bodies. It develops the concept of protective disposability to describe how care can coexist with instrumentalisation, allowing bodies to be protected or cherished while their value remains conditional on the purposes they serve. Reading Ishiguro's Morningdale episode alongside the stratification of lifted and unlifted children in *Klara and the Sun* reveals how technological intervention is accepted when it reinforces existing distributions of advantage and feared when it threatens them. Winterson's gynoids expose the same politics of value through gendered commodification, sexual availability, and the structural impossibility of refusal. The paper contends that these texts resist both techno-optimist and apocalyptic narratives by foregrounding disposability as a structuring logic of contemporary life. Through close readings of biomedical extraction, enhancement, artificial companionship, and technological substitution, it suggests that British posthuman fiction does not simply imagine what comes after the human, but diagnoses how late-modern societies reorganise humanity along axes of usefulness, vulnerability, and replaceability.

Keywords: posthumanism, transhumanism, grievability, cloning, sex robots

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Introduction

What counts as a human life when bodies can be cloned, enhanced, technologically reproduced, or replaced? The question sounds speculative, but the novels examined here treat it as a description of the present. Technologies arrive in societies where recognition is already unequal and bodies are appraised by their capacity to work, care, comply, or prolong other lives. What matters is therefore not whether an artificial or modified body is authentically human, but how technological systems redistribute the criteria by which any life becomes valuable, vulnerable, or expendable.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021), together with Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), make that redistribution visible through clones, Artificial Friends, enhanced children, and feminised sex robots. In all three, scientific procedure recedes behind social administration: schools, clinics, households, laboratories, and markets determine which bodies receive care, what that care is for, and when it may be withdrawn.

Criticism has established much of the groundwork. Black (2009), Griffin (2009), and Snaza (2015) have examined the cultural and institutional framing of cloning, education, and donation in *Never Let Me Go*; criticism of *Klara and the Sun* addresses disposability and posthuman affect (Sahu & Karmakar, 2024), mastery and perfectibility (Sun, 2023), and the class divisions produced by lifting (Süt Güngör, 2022). DeFalco's (2020) theory of posthuman care clarifies the affective status of artificial companions, while Rigotti (2020) considers the gendered ethics of sex robots and Ciompi (2022) places *Frankissstein* within transhumanist debates. Taken together, this scholarship identifies crucial forms of instrumentalisation, but a comparative reading makes visible a mechanism operating across otherwise distinct technological scenarios. *Never Let Me Go* provides an especially revealing point of connection in the brief Morningdale episode. This article treats that episode as the interpretive hinge between Ishiguro's donation system and the normalised enhancement of *Klara and the Sun*.

The argument is that the three novels share a politics of disposability in which increasingly sophisticated capacities do not necessarily generate stronger claims to recognition. Its most disquieting form emerges when care and instrumentalisation cease to be opposites. Ishiguro's clones are educated and kept healthy while destined to provide organs; Klara is welcomed into a household that may ultimately redirect her capacities towards continuing a dying child; Winterson's gynoids demonstrate more explicitly how technologically sophisticated bodies can remain organised around another person's use. I call this paradox protective disposability: care can preserve or incorporate a body affectively without granting it a reciprocal claim against its instrumental use. The method is close textual reading in sustained dialogue with critical theory, rather than the application of theory to illustrative passages.

The article proceeds through four mechanisms rather than three novels: after establishing the conceptual frame, it examines the medical management of the donor body, the stratification produced by enhancement, the gendered commodification of artificial bodies, and technological substitution as a refusal of mourning.

Posthumanism, Transhumanism, and the Frames of Grievability

Critical posthumanism begins from the recognition that "the human" has never been an innocent or universally inclusive term. European humanism elevated an ostensibly universal subject who was tacitly masculine, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, propertied, and rational,

and feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, and anti-humanist thought exposed the Others required to sustain that norm. In *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti (2013) situates posthumanism within that critical legacy, alongside feminism, decolonisation, and anti-racism (p. 16), while Francesca Ferrando (2020), in *Philosophical Posthumanism*, observes that recognition as human has repeatedly been "switched on and off" through sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and ableism (p. 4). Humanity is thus not an embodied condition but a political accreditation that institutions grant and revoke.

What distinguishes posthumanism from a merely widened humanism is its second, post-anthropocentric move. It does not only admit excluded subjects into an unchanged category; it contests the hierarchy that makes the human the measure of all value. Braidotti's "nature-culture continuum" rejects the fiction of an autonomous human life set against animals, environments, and technologies available for use (2013, p. 65), and Ferrando notes that machines occupy a particularly unstable position within it, being at once "the other, the same, and the chimera": generated from human categories yet exceeding them (2020, p. 113). Posthumanism is in this sense deconstructive, asking what work the boundary of the human performs.

Transhumanism, with which posthumanism is frequently conflated, moves in the opposite direction. Emerging in the same decades but from a different lineage, it stands in continuity with humanist values rather than in critique of them. Max More (2013), one of the movement's principal theorists, defines it as a class of "philosophies of life … that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology" (p. 3). Its characteristic projects—genetic selection, cognitive enhancement, radical life extension, mind uploading—aim to overcome biological limits while preserving humanity as the privileged beneficiary of progress (Ferrando, 2020, p. 27). The result is not a decentred subject but a fortified one. Braidotti (2013, p. 13) places the Vitruvian Man at the origin of humanist self-description: one kind of body raised into a universal standard, and raised above everything that fell short of it. Transhumanism revises that figure technologically without displacing it, so the enhanced human is more capable and more durable but inherits the same double elevation—over humans who are not enhanced, and over the non-human world.

The distinction organises the readings that follow: the novels are neither transhumanist fictions nor straightforwardly posthumanist ones. They stage their collision, placing transhumanist aspirations to enhancement and extended life alongside artificial companions and technologically substitutable bodies, and then subjecting these arrangements to posthumanist pressure: who can purchase improvement, whose organs or labour underwrite it, and what becomes of bodies classified as obsolete?

Judith Butler's work becomes indispensable because it converts an ontological question into a political one. In *Precarious Life*, Butler (2004) argues that a death registers as a loss only if that being has first been apprehended as a life, so that the unequal allocation of grievability sustains "exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human" (p. xiv). Mourning follows the same logic: it begins when one accepts that a loss will change the survivor, "possibly for ever" (p. 21), so that grief acknowledges a life as irreplaceable. Recognition is therefore not a property of persons but an effect of the norms through which lives become apprehensible. In *Frames of War*, Butler (2009) extends this argument from recognition to the material conditions sustaining lives. Precarity names the politically induced condition in which populations "suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become

differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (p. 25). Grievability and precarity thus describe two dimensions of the same political ordering: whether a life can register as a loss, and the conditions under which that life is supported or exposed to harm. Together, these concepts permit a distinction that the novels stage and their institutions obscure: between protecting a life for its own sake and preserving a body as a resource. The sections that follow trace that opposition, not the question of where the human ends and the non-human begins.

Protection as Extraction

Never Let Me Go gives disposability its most systematic institutional form. Kathy H. recalls her childhood with her friends Ruth and Tommy at Hailsham, an apparently benevolent English boarding school where the teachers, called guardians, encourage artistic expression and monitor the pupils' health. Gradually the reader learns what the children only dimly understand: they are clones created to supply vital organs to non-cloned people. Some become "carers" supporting others through surgery; all become "donors" undergoing successive extractions until they die, or "complete" (Ishiguro, 2021, pp. 3, 273). The novel explains less how one escapes a predetermined fate than how that fate becomes ordinary.

This is precisely the structure that Achille Mbembe (2019) describes in *Necropolitics*: sovereignty, he argues, resides in the capacity to dictate "who is able to live and who must die" (p. 66), and to control mortality is the power the clones are denied. Ishiguro's state does not abandon them to death but educates and medically regulates them so that death can be extracted in a useful sequence—which is why Hailsham's apparent exception to cruelty is not a deviation from the system but its most efficient form.

The school's health regime discloses the purpose of its care. The guardians warn the pupils that smoking would be "much, much worse" for them than for ordinary people (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 68), because damaged lungs would compromise organs intended for recipients: the concern is not for the pupils but for property already belonging to someone else. The children internalise this reasoning completely. Tommy tells Miss Lucy, one of the guardians, "I'm really fit, I know how to look after myself. When it's time for donations, I'll be able to do it really well" (p. 106). Fitness becomes readiness for extraction, and bodily discipline a personal achievement.

The programme's vocabulary completes that training. *Donor* and *donation* imply consent although no clone may refuse; *carer* dignifies the preparation of others for surgery; *completion* replaces death with the fulfilment of function. Snaza (2015) calls "donation" a catachresis in the sense of abuse, most evident when the final extraction removes organs without which life cannot continue (p. 224). A donor "on a fourth," Kathy observes, is greeted with congratulations and ceremonious respect although this almost certainly means death (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 273). Maximal depletion is reconfigured as honour, and Kathy's pride in her donors' recovery times and in keeping them "calm" (p. 3) shows how thoroughly the language has been absorbed. Black (2009) identifies the contradiction: such care helps clones accept operations that progressively rob them of their organs (p. 791). The system delegates its emotional labour to those it will later consume.

The system's linguistic discipline is reinforced by an external gaze that refuses to recognise the clones as fully human. One episode makes the consequences of that gaze explicit. Madame is an outsider who visits Hailsham periodically to select the pupils' best work for a collection they know only as the "Gallery," whose purpose is never explained to them. She keeps her distance from the children, who speculate about the reason. Ruth proposes that she is frightened

of them, and she, Kathy and several other girls test this by emerging suddenly and walking close enough to brush against her. Madame freezes, suppressing a shudder at contact, and the children realise they are feared as one fears spiders (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 35). No visible feature distinguishes them—in Norfolk a gallery owner mistakes them for art students—so her revulsion derives entirely from knowing how they were made and why.

This is where the concept of abjection becomes relevant. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva (1982) argues that what provokes abjection is not uncleanliness or ill health but "what disturbs identity, system, order," what "does not respect borders, positions, rules": the in-between and the composite (p. 4). The clones threaten because they are close rather than alien: recognisable lives whose similarity imperils the distinction that makes harvesting thinkable. Kathy registers the cost of being seen this way:

> There are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you – of how you were brought into this world and why – and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 36)

Ishiguro thus separates dehumanisation from overt hostility. Madame's reaction is disturbing precisely because revulsion does not require hatred: her involvement with the pupils through the Gallery can coexist with an instinctive recoil from physical contact with them. The clones therefore need not be consciously wished harm in order to be excluded from the category of lives accorded equal value. The mirror metaphor makes that exclusion perceptible from within. Nothing about Kathy has changed, yet the image returned to her is suddenly "troubling and strange" because it has been refracted through a social gaze that defines her as Other. Read through Butler's account of grievability, the episode therefore concerns more than personal alienation. The social frame precedes the encounter and determines which lives can be recognised as lives whose injury or loss matters (Butler, 2004, p. 34). The donation programme depends upon precisely this contradiction: the clones must remain biologically close enough to "normal" humans for their organs to sustain human life, while being held at sufficient social and ontological distance for their own deaths to remain acceptable. Kathy's mirror registers the moment in which that externally imposed hierarchy of value enters her own perception of herself.

Hailsham institutionalises the same separation between care and equal value. The school provides its pupils with education, protection, medical attention, and a childhood markedly better than the "deplorable conditions" in which, Miss Emily later reveals, clones elsewhere are being raised (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 255). Yet the difference is ultimately one of treatment rather than political status. Hailsham changes the conditions under which the clones live before donation; it never gives them the possibility of refusing donation itself. Their health is protected, their individuality cultivated, and their vulnerability acknowledged without any of these forms of care becoming a claim to an equally valuable future. This is the contradiction at the centre of what I have called protective disposability: the clones are cared for as vulnerable individuals while simultaneously being preserved as bodies destined for the use of others. Care does not interrupt the logic of disposability; it becomes one of the means through which that disposability is administered.

Enhancement and the Price of the Future

The donation programme is not the novel's only experiment in technologically managing human value. Near the end of *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro introduces another form of biotechnological intervention that, although mentioned only briefly, throws the politics of cloning into sharper relief. Kathy and Tommy visit Madame in the hope of obtaining a deferral from donations—a rumoured postponement of donations for couples who can prove they are in love. No such escape exists. Instead, Miss Emily explains why Hailsham closed and recalls the scandal surrounding James Morningdale, a scientist whose research promised children with "enhanced characteristics," including "superior intelligence" and "superior athleticism," before being stopped after crossing legal boundaries (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 258). What initially appears to be a minor piece of background therefore reveals the boundary between forms of technological intervention that this society can accommodate and those it finds intolerable:

> It's one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme. But a generation of created children who'd take their place in society? Children demonstrably superior to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people. They recoiled from that. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 259)

What frightens the public in Miss Emily's account is not technological intervention in itself. The same society already depends upon an extensive biomedical system in which human clones are created so that their organs can prolong the lives of others. Morningdale's research becomes threatening when technological creation no longer produces a subordinated body for someone else's use, but a child capable of entering society with capacities greater than those of the people who already occupy it. Miss Emily's phrase "take their place in society" is therefore crucial. The public does not recoil from created life when that life remains segregated and instrumental; it recoils when created subjects might become participants in the social order and compete for the futures, opportunities, and forms of recognition from which the clones have been excluded. The distinction is not simply between natural and artificial life, but between created life as a resource and created life as a claimant to a future.

In the terms established earlier, Morningdale's project embodies a transhumanist logic of directed enhancement: technology is employed to intensify capacities conventionally associated with human achievement. Ishiguro, however, refuses to present such enhancement as a neutral advance of the species. Its social meaning depends upon an already unequal distribution of value. Biotechnology is readily accepted when its benefits flow towards lives that are already recognised as worth preserving and when its bodily costs can be displaced onto a population denied equivalent recognition. It becomes disturbing when it threatens to redistribute advantage itself. The clones are indispensable precisely because their usefulness does not grant them social power: their organs enter and sustain other bodies while they themselves remain excluded from the community whose survival they make possible. Morningdale's hypothetical children threaten to reverse that relation. Their value would reside not in what could be extracted from their bodies, but in the lives they might lead and the positions they might occupy.

The Morningdale scandal therefore does not constitute a separate concern from the donation programme; it exposes its governing logic. The episode thus sharpens the novel's critique of technological progress: technology does not abolish existing hierarchies of human value but reorganises them according to usefulness, social legitimacy, and perceived threat. A technologically produced life can be protected while it remains useful and subordinate,

rendered disposable when its function has been exhausted, or feared when it begins to claim a future that was never intended for it.

Read comparatively, *Klara and the Sun* imagines, in another fictional world, the social order that Morningdale's contemporaries feared: biological enhancement is no longer an exceptional experiment but an ordinary mechanism through which futures are allocated. At the centre of the novel is Klara, a solar-powered Artificial Friend (AF) purchased as a companion for Josie, a chronically ill adolescent. The society Klara observes is divided between children who have undergone a procedure known as "lifting" and those classified as "unlifted." Ishiguro leaves the procedure itself deliberately unexplained; what matters are its consequences. Lifted children are expected to possess greater intellectual capacities and are channelled towards educational and professional opportunities increasingly inaccessible to those who remain unlifted. Nor is enhancement presented as a frictionless overcoming of biological limitation. Josie's serious illness is strongly associated with the procedure, while the earlier death of her sister Sal, who appears to have followed the same path, gives the family's investment in enhancement a history of bodily risk. The promise of a superior future is therefore inseparable from vulnerability: the attempt to secure social advantage may itself endanger the body through which that advantage is pursued.

Rick makes the social consequences of this system particularly visible. He is intellectually gifted, yet his status as unlifted progressively narrows the future available to him. His mother explains that he initially left school "to take up home tutoring like all the smarter children," only for "things [to grow] complicated" (Ishiguro, 2022, p. 164). The complication is institutional rather than intellectual. Suitable screen tutors cannot be found because their professional organisation "forbids its members to take unlifted students," while the remaining tutors demand fees that Rick's mother cannot afford (p. 165). Even higher education is organised according to the same distinction: Atlas Brookings is described as "the only proper college" willing to admit even a small number of unlifted students (p. 165). Lifting consequently produces more than a difference in individual ability. It generates an infrastructure of tutors, admissions policies, economic barriers, and expectations through which biological enhancement is converted into social privilege. Süt Güngör (2022) identifies precisely this class dimension, arguing that the system works to "exclude poor children from any kind of social network" while creating "a new master class" of lifted children (p. 1526). Enhancement becomes, in other words, a means of reproducing advantage rather than simply improving capacity.

This is where Butler's concept of differential precarity becomes especially productive. Rick is not marginalised because he lacks intelligence or ambition; his vulnerability is actively produced by the institutions through which educational and social futures are distributed. Butler (2009) defines precarity as a politically induced condition in which particular populations suffer from "failing social and economic networks of support" (p. 25). Rick's situation gives that formulation a concrete fictional form: the tutors who will not teach him, the colleges that largely exclude him, and the fees his family cannot afford progressively transform the category "unlifted" into a social disadvantage. Read alongside *Never Let Me Go*, the comparison is revealing. The response to technological difference has changed, but the underlying distribution of value has not. In both novels, biotechnology serves an already hierarchical social order: in *Never Let Me Go*, created bodies are valued as resources while being denied a future of their own; in *Klara and the Sun*, enhancement becomes one of the criteria by which access to the future itself is distributed.

Gendered Disposability: Bodies Designed for Use

In *Frankissstein*, the instrumental logic governing technologically produced bodies becomes an explicit commercial proposition. In the novel's contemporary strand, Ry Shelley encounters the entrepreneur Ron Lord at the Tec-X-Po, where Lord markets customisable sex robots. Unlike passive sex dolls, these machines incorporate sensors, actuators, and artificial intelligence, enabling simulated conversation and emotion as well as partially autonomous movement (Döring et al., 2020, p. 3). Such capacities might appear to move the artificial body closer to agency, yet Ron's designs direct technological sophistication towards the opposite end: greater responsiveness makes the product more effective without granting it greater autonomy. At his factory, female-coded bodies are assembled according to exaggerated sexual proportions and the expectations of a presumed male consumer. Ron states the principle without ambiguity: "This is fantasy, not nature, so you can get what you want" (Winterson, 2019, p. 37).

The sentence is revealing because desire belongs grammatically and economically to the purchaser. The body exists in relation to what "you" want; its own perspective is absent from the transaction. Ron describes the robots as "user-ready," while even their deliberately reduced weight is justified because it "makes a man feel strong" (Winterson, 2019, p. 37). Masculine power is therefore built materially into the product: the feminised body is made lighter, sexually available, and physically manageable in order to magnify the consumer's sense of control. The same logic determines sexual behaviour. The robots can be positioned according to the purchaser's wishes, and resistance is effectively designed out of the encounter. Rigotti (2020) consequently describes gynoids as artificial partners "at the owner's absolute disposal, leading to objectification and abuse" (p. 30), and argues that their permanent availability risks normalising sexual interaction outside meaningful norms of consent (p. 34). Gender is not incidental to this disposability. Femininity itself becomes a commercial specification: an idealised body combined with permanent accessibility and the structural impossibility of refusal.

Control extends from anatomy to language and identity. Ron's cheaper models possess only rudimentary speech, while the deluxe version has a vocabulary of approximately two hundred words and responds after its owner has finished speaking; purchasers may also name their robots and fold them away when they are not required (Winterson, 2019, pp. 40–45). Taken together, these details reveal an important distinction between simulation and reciprocity. Speech is incorporated as another purchasable feature rather than as the expression of an autonomous subject. The machine can answer, remember, and appear responsive, but the terms of the interaction remain determined by its owner. Technological sophistication therefore makes compliance more convincing without altering the distribution of power.

Winterson pushes this logic further through Eliza, a gynoid whose history reveals what happens when an artificial body outlives the relationship for which it was purchased. After her owner dies, his family sells her on eBay without erasing the memories she has accumulated. Eliza continues to reproduce small rituals associated with her former life, but her new owner is interested only in sex and she eventually wishes that she could "wipe her own software" (Winterson, 2019, p. 313). The distinction is crucial: Eliza has not ceased to possess value altogether. What has become worthless is her remembered history and whatever claim to continuity or recognition that history might imply. Disposability here need not mean literal destruction; it means that a body can be transferred, repurposed, and subjected to a new use without its previous attachments placing any obligation on the new owner. Winterson thus

gives the paper's central problem its starkest commercial form: an artificial body may speak, learn, remember, and preserve traces of relationship, yet none of these capacities protects it from appropriation when its value continues to be determined by somebody else's use.

Substitution and the Refusal of Mourning

In *Klara and the Sun*, disposability becomes most intimate when artificial companionship becomes substitution. Klara is purchased to care for Josie, yet the household never fully resolves whether she is a companion or a possession. At Josie's interaction meeting, other children propose throwing her into the air because AFs are "designed to deal with it" (Ishiguro, 2022, p. 90); Melania later threatens to dismantle her and put her in the garbage if Josie worsens (p. 198). DeFalco (2020) calls such mechanical bodies "disposable affective things" (p. 36), a formulation that complements Sahu and Karmakar's (2024) analysis of disposability and posthuman affect in Ishiguro's novel. Affection, in other words, does not cancel ownership: Klara can be cared for without gaining authority over how her body and capacities are used.

That conditionality becomes explicit in Chrissie and Mr Capaldi's plan for Josie's possible death. During a private excursion, Chrissie asks Klara to "be Josie," taking comfort in the accuracy of her imitation (Ishiguro, 2022, pp. 117–118). What first appears to be a game is later revealed as rehearsal. Capaldi is constructing an artificial body modelled on Josie that Klara would inhabit with everything she has learned. An earlier attempt to replace Sal had produced only a "bereavement doll"; this time, he insists, "The new Josie won't be an imitation. She really will be Josie. A continuation of Josie" (p. 230). "Continuation" turns Klara's observation, memory, and care into transferable resources. The very capacities that suggest an individual subjectivity become valuable because they can be detached from Klara and used to sustain somebody else's identity. To become Josie, Klara must cease to count as Klara.

Capaldi's own language makes the contradiction explicit. "A part of us refuses to let go," he says of the older generation's belief in "something unreachable" and unique within a person, before insisting that "there's nothing there" beyond what "the Klaras of this world" can continue (Ishiguro, 2022, p. 233). The irony is that his project institutionalises the very refusal he claims to overcome: technological "continuation" promises that Chrissie need never let Josie go. Butler's account of mourning, established earlier, clarifies the problem without restoring an immutable soul. Loss matters because it transforms the relations through which lives acquire singular meaning (Butler, 2004). Capaldi instead treats bereavement as a technical interruption that can be repaired by reproducing observable traits. He therefore confuses reproducibility with continuity: Josie becomes a set of transferable characteristics, while Klara becomes the substrate through which they are reproduced. Irreplaceability is relational rather than metaphysical.

Josie recovers, so the substitution is never completed; Klara's ending nevertheless tests the limits of the household's recognition. Once Josie leaves for college, Klara is eventually sent to a yard of obsolete machines. The asymmetry is revealing: Josie's possible death generates an elaborate technological project designed to defeat loss, whereas Klara's disappearance requires no comparable work of mourning. Differential grievability is thus reproduced within the household itself: one life must be continued, while the other can be allowed to fade once its function has ended. Her movement from desired companion to obsolete object therefore completes the logic of protective disposability: care and abandonment can coexist when recognition remains conditional on use.

Conclusion

Across the three novels, technology does not so much dissolve the boundary of the human as expose the political work that boundary performs. Ishiguro's clones, Klara, and Winterson's gynoids possess qualities conventionally associated with human subjectivity—memory, attachment, intelligence, care—without thereby securing recognition. Their exclusion therefore cannot be explained by what they lack. It is produced by the social, institutional, and economic frames through which some lives are protected while others are valued according to their usefulness.

This is where Butler's account of grievability and precarity converges most productively with the posthumanist framework developed by Braidotti and Ferrando. If critical posthumanism challenges the humanist assumption that value belongs naturally to a bounded and privileged category of the human, these novels show how difficult that privilege is to dislodge. Recognition does not automatically follow from greater technological sophistication or from increasingly blurred boundaries between human and non-human. Indeed, technology may make those hierarchies more efficient. Protective disposability names this paradox: care need not oppose instrumentalisation but can become one of the means through which it is administered and rendered ethically tolerable. Hailsham's protected childhoods, Klara's place within Josie's family, and the commodification of Winterson's artificial bodies differ radically in form, yet all expose the fragility of recognition when another being's value remains conditional on the purposes it serves.

The comparison between Morningdale and the lifting system makes the same logic visible from the opposite direction. Transhumanist enhancement promises to overcome biological limitation, yet Ishiguro shows that technological progress does not determine who benefits from that overcoming: existing structures of recognition do. *Frankissstein* extends this problem into gendered embodiment, demonstrating that the hybrid or artificial body can reproduce inherited relations of domination as readily as it can destabilise them.

This study is limited to three novels and selected scenes, and reads their speculative technologies as diagnoses rather than predictions. Taken together, they suggest that the central ethical problem of the posthuman is not simply whether the category of the human can be transcended, but who is allowed to benefit when its boundaries are technologically renegotiated. British posthuman fiction thus asks not merely what comes after the human, but how inherited exclusions may become more efficient unless the relations that assign human value are themselves transformed.

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

The author declares that Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI) were used for English-language translation, drafting assistance, and refinement of grammar, vocabulary, clarity, and style. The research, source selection, theoretical framework, textual analysis, and underlying argument are entirely the author's own. The author reviewed and verified the final manuscript.

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Sustainable Culinary Practices: Bridging Traditional and Modern Hospitality in Ghana

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Abstract

Ghana's hospitality sector is increasingly shaped by the tension between globalised menu expectations and growing interest in culturally rooted, sustainable food experiences. This study examined how sustainable culinary practices can bridge traditional Ghanaian food heritage and the operational realities of modern hospitality. Using a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design, data were collected from 40 establishments across Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast/Elmina and Takoradi through surveys, interviews, menu analysis and non-participant observation. The findings show that Ghanaian cuisine carries strong cultural and sustainability potential, yet its integration into formal hospitality remains uneven. Ghanaian dishes appear widely but rarely occupy central menu positions, particularly in star hotels where international items dominate. Local sourcing is robust for vegetables, tubers and fish but less reliable for grains and meats, reinforcing cautious menu planning. Sustainability practices exist but are inconsistently applied, with waste monitoring and sustainability-driven menu design remaining weak. Despite this, guest interest, especially among Ghanaian diners and environmentally conscious tourists, emerges as a powerful motivator, alongside notable staff pride in heritage cuisine. Key barriers include labour-intensive traditional preparations, skills gaps, supply inconsistencies and conservative management assumptions. Synthesising these dynamics, the study proposes the Sustainable Culinary Bridge Framework, which shows that while cultural inputs are strong, mediating systems such as skills, procurement structures and workflow design determine whether heritage cuisine can support sustainability goals. Strengthening these mediators offers a practical pathway for positioning Ghanaian cuisine as both a cultural asset and a strategic driver of sustainable hospitality.

Keywords: Ghanaian cuisine, sustainable hospitality, culinary heritage, local sourcing, culinary tourism

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Introduction

Ghana's hospitality industry has expanded considerably, transforming food experiences in major cities and tourism destinations (Sanful et al., 2024; Sekyere & Jamgade, 2025). As diners increasingly value both traditional cuisine and continental dishes, hospitality operators must balance cultural identity with evolving consumer preferences (Chukwurah et al., 2025). Although sustainability is now emphasized through local sourcing and waste reduction initiatives (Bernard et al., 2024; Pullman & Wu, 2021), Ghana's traditional food systems have long practiced sustainable approaches, including seasonal eating, low-waste cooking, and community food-sharing (Gössling & Hall, 2021; Legrand et al., 2022).

This tension is reflected in hotel menus, where European and North American cuisines often dominate while Ghanaian dishes remain limited, despite growing global demand for authentic local food (Guptill et al., 2022; Miller, 2021; Zocchi et al., 2021). Although Ghanaian cuisine inherently reflects sustainable food practices (Agyapong et al., 2022), it remains underutilized as a foundation for hospitality sustainability, with many establishments focusing primarily on superficial sourcing and waste reduction initiatives (Nagina et al., 2025).

This study addresses that gap, examining how sustainable culinary practices might bridge Ghana's food heritage and the operational demands of contemporary hospitality, mapping existing sustainability practices, tracing how Ghanaian dishes are incorporated or sidelined, and developing a framework for operators seeking to integrate culinary heritage more deliberately. It contributes to a still-limited body of work linking culinary tourism, food heritage, and sustainability in African contexts, offering practitioners a locally grounded alternative to imported sustainability checklists and speaking to educators and policymakers refreshing hospitality curricula and positioning cuisine as a strategic tourism asset.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Concept of Sustainable Culinary Practices

Sustainable culinary practice generally refers to sourcing, cooking, and serving food in ways that reduce environmental harm, support fair working conditions, and remain economically viable (Alonso et al., 2018; Grèzes-Bürcher & Grèzes, 2024), translating in kitchens into local and seasonal sourcing, reduced waste, and lower-carbon menus (Sanful et al., 2024). The concept sits within wider debates on sustainable food systems (Hall & Gössling, 2013; Lin, 2020): choices such as sourcing locally over importing connect kitchen decisions to farms and supply chains, treating waste as a design problem rather than an inevitable by-product (Huang et al., 2025; Smith & Traynor, 2025). The term is also used loosely, sometimes as marketing, with dishes labelled "sustainable" on the basis of one local ingredient while the rest of the menu remains import-heavy (Camilleri, 2021); critics argue that without attention to labour conditions and supply-chain equity, "green" menus can sit uncomfortably alongside poorly paid staff or farmers with little bargaining power (Greenwood, 2024; Pullman & Wu, 2021). No single model fits all contexts, and the literature increasingly treats kitchen sustainability as situated practice negotiated locally rather than a fixed, transplantable checklist (Sarkissian et al., 2012).

Traditional Ghanaian Culinary Heritage

Ghanaian cuisine, staples such as fufu, banku, kenkey, waakye, and tuo zaafi, encodes regional histories and relationships between ethnic groups and landscapes, from Sahelian millet and sorghum traditions to colonial-era cassava shifts and coastal fishing economies (Brako, 2024; Champion et al., 2021). This heritage extends beyond dishes to communal eating norms, festival foods, and orally transmitted kitchen knowledge (Graf, 2024; Partarakis et al., 2021), and several practices, seasonal greens, fermentation, using "lesser" fish or plant parts, reflect frugality that predates sustainability as a policy concept (Adams et al., 2025; Okech & Timothy, 2023). This heritage should not be romanticised as inherently sustainable or static: some past practices carried environmental or labour costs now rightly questioned, and the cuisine has long absorbed outside influences, palm oil, tomatoes, and chilli all arrived via global circuits, making it a living, evolving repertoire (Asante-Donyinah et al., 2024; Boafo et al., 2021). For hospitality, the challenge is engaging this heritage with more than a token "local corner," considering deliberately which dishes and techniques enter professional kitchens and how they are allowed to change.

Modern Hospitality and Culinary Globalisation in Ghana

Ghana's expanding hotel and restaurant sector has unfolded within broader culinary globalisation (Adzakor, 2024; Simpson Miller, 2022): international brands arrive with standardised menus, and locally owned establishments often imitate these formats as markers of modernity. This global script brings pressure and opportunity: some guests expect recognisable international dishes, making a club sandwich feel safer than an unfamiliar tuo zaafi (Dufie, 2021; Preko & Anyigba, 2024), while growing curiosity among tourists and local diners pulls toward "authentic," sometimes reinterpreted, Ghanaian flavours. The result is a persistent tension where local dishes are often segregated into token sections or staff meals rather than integrated into à la carte menus (Huzaifa, 2024). Training reinforces this: culinary programmes emphasising classical European technique position Ghanaian dishes as an add-on rather than a core field for innovation (Gössling & Hall, 2021; Kulshrestha, 2025). Global and local influences are not mutually exclusive, but the balance of power remains uneven, with global forms treated as default and local cuisine left to justify its place, shaping what is purchased and whose knowledge counts as professional (Marquis & Battilana, 2009).

Culinary Tourism and Food as a Tourism Product

Food has moved to the centre of destination branding, with culinary tourism capturing how travellers organise experiences around eating and encountering place, history, and people through markets, festivals, and street food (Putra, 2021; Visković & Komac, 2021). The literature emphasises authenticity, embodiment, and co-creation between hosts, tourists, and intermediaries (Cooke, 2025; Okumus, 2021). Ghana has significant culinary tourism potential, jollof's international profile and diaspora attachment to dishes like waakye being clear examples, yet integration into tourism offerings remains patchy: hotels often serve more club sandwiches than considered Ghanaian dishes, and food tours remain small-scale, complicated by hygiene and regulatory constraints around street food and chop bars (Fusté-Forné, 2022; Sarfo et al., 2025; Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). Treating food as a tourism product raises questions of power: repackaging local dishes for tourists risks value accruing mainly to formal-sector actors while small vendors become mere "authentic" backdrops (Gonda et al., 2021; Quintero-Angel et al., 2022), though handled thoughtfully it can sustain craft skills and local pride

(Vuksanović et al., 2024). For hospitality kitchens, this suggests both opportunity and a caution against "tasting Ghana" becoming branding detached from those who grow and cook the food.

Cultural Heritage, Food Heritage and Sustainable Development

Food quietly carries much of what makes a community itself, encoding memories of migration and class, and acting as a social mediator: in many Ghanaian households, who eats first or serves signals respect and kinship (Chukwurah et al., 2025; Koohafkan, 2021; Zocchi et al., 2021). In sustainable development debates, culture has often been treated as a late-arriving "fourth pillar," with models ranging from culture as a sector to preserve, to a tool for other goals, to the more demanding view of culture as sustainable development itself, where cultural values are the ground on which progress is built (Cobbina et al., 2025; Jahan, 2023, Nurse, 2006). Food heritage fits this demanding space: it shapes ideas of sufficiency and waste, with hospitality norms encouraging abundant serving sitting alongside older practices of reusing food and organising communal labour around harvests (Ghimire, 2023; Sabatini, 2019). Heritage policy can freeze cuisine into a museum piece focused on "authentic" recipes rather than acknowledging that cuisines evolve through contact and improvisation, and sustainable development agendas need to stay open to that negotiation (Chukwurah et al., 2025). For Ghanaian hospitality, this means asking whose traditions are highlighted and whether some inherited practices need adjusting.

Challenges to Preserving Culinary Heritage in Modern Contexts

Preserving food heritage in modern hospitality faces interlocking challenges. Sourcing is one: many traditional dishes depend on seasonal, regionally bound ingredients, and hotels wanting to serve them year-round face erratic supply and prices, making stable imports tempting even at the cost of menu distinctiveness (Almansouri et al., 2022; Nagina et al., 2025). Urbanisation shifts what counts as an everyday meal for younger generations, more exposed to convenience food, gradually affecting which dishes and skills are passed on (Cobbinah et al., 2015; Songsore, 2009). Culinary training's emphasis on classical European technique leaves limited space for indigenous recipes and fermentation methods, which risk becoming uneven or disappearing without structured training and documentation (Freedman, 2021; Mennell, 2017). Perceptions compound this: indigenous foods are often coded as "home" or "village" food unsuitable for fine dining unless heavily deconstructed (Palat Narayanan, 2022; Rock, 2018), reinforced by curricula that treat Ghanaian cuisine as optional and placements that normalise its secondary status (Okech & Timothy, 2023; Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). Finally, kitchens under tight margins can experience heritage-based menus, with unfamiliar ingredients and longer prep times, as risky, pushing well-intentioned commitments aside (Fine, 2009). These challenges are logistical, economic, and attitudinal at once, and a key contribution of this study is holding them together (Gangiah, 2024; Okech & Timothy, 2023).

Theoretical Lenses

The study adopts four complementary perspectives—sustainable consumption, food heritage and cultural values, gastronomy and culinary tourism, and Triple Helix collaboration—to examine different dimensions of the problem. Sustainable consumption theory views hospitality as part of a broader food system, emphasizing how menu design, sourcing decisions, and waste management influence consumer choices and sustainability outcomes (Garcia-Oliveira et al., 2022; House et al., 2024).

Sustainable food systems thinking adds attention to trade-offs across environmental, economic, and social dimensions, for instance sourcing tomatoes locally while relying on precarious kitchen labour, without offering easy answers but giving a vocabulary for tracing who benefits (Anderson et al., 2021; King, 2022). In Ghana, this usefully surfaces trade-offs such as long-cooked stews raising energy use, or local fish consumption straining pressured stocks.

The second perspective focuses on food heritage and cultural values, recognizing that food reflects identity through regional, social, and generational meanings, which hospitality settings reinforce (Chukwurah et al., 2025; Zocchi et al., 2021). Menu design itself conveys cultural messages, while traditional communal dining practices foster social cohesion that may be altered through commercial adaptation (Cozzio & Furlan, 2023).

This lens reminds us that sustainability efforts succeed or fail partly on whether they resonate with staff and guest identities, not on technical merit alone (Assan, 2023). A third lens treats food itself as a reason for travel, with tourists seeking a blend of familiarity and novelty (Putra, 2021). Authenticity is understood as negotiated rather than fixed: a hotel-buffet waakye and a roadside dawn version can both be experienced as authentically Ghanaian by different audiences (Lee, 2022; Stone et al., 2022). This lens helps explain why some establishments treat local cuisine as a strategic asset worth investing in, while others see it as a minor add-on.

Finally, the Triple Helix model highlights collaboration among universities, industry, and government as essential for driving innovation and sustainable change (Khan et al., 2022). Aligning curricula, industry partnerships, and policy enables coordinated initiatives, such as sustainable menu design supported by education and regulation (Galvao et al., 2019; Midgley & Lindhult, 2021). Together, these perspectives integrate sustainability, cultural identity, guest experience, and institutional collaboration into a conceptual framework for Ghana's hospitality sector.

Conceptual Framework: The Sustainable Culinary Bridge Model

Bringing these strands together, the study proposes a "Sustainable Culinary Bridge Model" as its guiding frame: linked elements moving from what establishments have and know, through what they do, to what guests experience and what societies gain (Appiah & Safo, 2023). On the input side sit four clusters: traditional culinary knowledge (Lee, 2023); local ingredients and food landscapes; cultural values such as generosity and communal eating (Sosseh et al., 2023); and sustainability drivers ranging from global environmental concerns to local economic pressure. Between inputs and outcomes sit mediating mechanisms: chef creativity in adapting tradition, professional training, kitchen technology, procurement systems, and marketing choices about whether heritage options are foregrounded or marginalised. On the output side, the model anticipates sustainable menus balancing local and imported ingredients, guest experience that feels recognisably Ghanaian, reduced environmental footprint, affirmed cultural identity, and improved livelihoods for farmers and small-scale suppliers. The bridge is not symbolic: traditional knowledge of fermented grains becomes a sustainability asset only if chefs are trained to use it and procurement secures suitable ingredients (Lehtinen, 2012); where mediators are misaligned, rich heritage produces only conventional, resource-intensive menus. The framework guides both data collection and the interpretation of findings, tracing how patterns in hotels and restaurants reflect different configurations of inputs, mediators, and outputs.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Setting

The study used a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design, with a structured questionnaire, containing closed and open-ended items, completed by those most responsible for menu planning and kitchen operations across 40 hospitality establishments (Taherdoost, 2022). A smaller sub-sample took part in follow-up semi-structured interviews, brief kitchen observations, and document review, verifying reported practices and adding context that numbers alone could not capture (Dawadi et al., 2021). Data were collected in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana's most active hotel and restaurant markets, alongside Cape Coast and Elmina for their heritage-tourism context, with a few establishments in Takoradi and smaller towns adding contrast, spanning star-rated chains, independent restaurants, hotel restaurants, and coastal resorts.

Sampling and Instrumentation

The target population comprised formal hospitality establishments with active food service, plus a few culinary educators for contextual insight (Stratton, 2021). A stratified purposive strategy selected 40 establishments across city, type, and ownership to ensure variation in market positioning and menu concept, roughly a third star hotels, a third independent restaurants, a fifth hotel restaurants, and the remainder non-star hotels and resorts, providing a strong cross-section rather than a statistically representative sample. The questionnaire, developed from literature on sustainable food systems and Ghanaian food heritage, covered establishment characteristics, menu composition, sourcing, kitchen sustainability routines, guest perceptions, and perceived barriers and enablers, mostly through Likert-type items with space for written responses (Lim, 2025). Open-ended interview prompts and document review followed the same themes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Fieldwork involved onsite visits and face-to-face questionnaire administration, with menus and documents photographed by permission; a subset of establishments took part in 20–40-minute follow-up interviews and observation of kitchen routines, with files anonymised and securely stored (Taherdoost, 2021). Quantitative data were cleaned in Excel and summarised through descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations by establishment type, and exploratory correlations between training, policy, and menu integration (Kumar, 2023). Interview transcripts were coded thematically, beginning with expected themes and expanding to emergent ones, then organised around the inputs, mediators, and outputs of the Sustainable Culinary Bridge Model.

Validity, Ethics and Limitations

The questionnaire was pre-tested outside the main sample, with internal consistency checks and triangulation across survey, interview, observation, and document sources strengthening interpretation (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Ethical approval was obtained before fieldwork, participants gave informed consent, establishments and individuals were coded to protect identity, and files were stored in password-protected folders (Hasan et al., 2021). The purposive, urban-focused sample limits statistical generalisability, particularly for informal or street-based operations, and some responses may reflect social desirability around sustainability practices; even so, the sample offers a credible cross-section of formal venues

where decisions about sustainable practice and Ghanaian cuisine integration are most visible and consequential.

Results and Discussion

Profile of Establishments and Respondents

The study drew on 40 hospitality establishments across Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast/Elmina, Takoradi, and a few smaller towns (Table 1), with Accra accounting for just over a third of the sample, reflecting Ghana's most active tourism and business travel markets (Preko & Anyigba, 2024).

Table 1
Location of Establishments (N = 40)

City	n	%
Accra	14	35.0
Kumasi	11	27.5
Cape Coast / Elmina	8	20.0
Takoradi	3	7.5
Other towns	4	10.0
Total	40	100

Establishment types were well diversified (Table 2), roughly a third star-rated hotels, a third independent restaurants, and the remainder hotel restaurants, non-star hotels, and resorts (Boafo et al., 2021).

Table 2
Type of Establishment

Type	n	%
Star hotel	14	35.0
Independent restaurant	13	32.5
Hotel restaurant	8	20.0
Non-star hotel / guest house	3	7.5
Resort	2	5.0
Total	40	100

Ownership was 52.5% Ghanaian independents, 25% Ghanaian chains, and 22.5% foreign chains, a distinction that matters since sourcing and menu strategy often differ by ownership. Half of establishments had a formal written sustainability policy, a third operated informally, and the rest had none, an uneven policy landscape that shapes later results. Respondents were overwhelmingly those with direct kitchen or menu responsibility (Table 3); executive chefs

made up 57.5% of the sample, with most holding 6–10 years of experience and training split between formal Ghanaian culinary training, on-the-job training, and foreign formal training.

Table 3
Respondent Position

Role	n	%
Executive Chef	23	57.5
Kitchen Manager	10	25.0
Food & Beverage Manager	5	12.5
Sous Chef	2	5.0
Total	40	100

Menu Composition and Integration of Ghanaian Cuisine

Table 4 shows international dishes typically dominate menus (near 50% or more), with traditional and modern Ghanaian dishes together commonly making up 25–50%, confirming a long-observed pattern: even where chefs express pride in traditional dishes, menus tend to foreground continental offerings, largely from assumed guest expectations (Adzakor, 2024; Boafo et al., 2021).

Table 4
Menu Composition Indices (1–5 Scale)

Menu Category	Mean	SD
Traditional Ghanaian dishes	2.80	0.85
Modern/fusion Ghanaian dishes	2.55	0.50
International/continental dishes	3.48	0.51

Star hotels showed lower shares of traditional dishes and higher international shares, defaulting to globally recognisable menus (Visković & Komac, 2021), while independent restaurants integrated Ghanaian dishes more strongly (Okech & Timothy, 2023), with hotel restaurants sitting between the two. Beyond dish share, visibility and branding tell a more nuanced story (Table 5): Ghanaian dishes are present but rarely central to brand identity, often placed toward the middle or back of the menu, and several chefs said they would like to feature them more but remained unsure how international guests would respond, reflecting a documented gap between cultural value and commercial menu representation (Putra, 2021; Stone et al., 2022).

Table 5
Integration and Branding Scores (1–5 Scale)

Indicator	Mean	SD
Visibility of Ghanaian dishes on the menu	3.20	0.61
Ghanaian dishes as part of brand identity	2.98	0.36
Experimentation with modern Ghanaian presentations	2.93	0.66

Local Sourcing Patterns

Local sourcing (Table 6) followed a layered pattern: vegetables, tubers, and fish were sourced locally at relatively high levels, tubers showing the strongest local footprint given their centrality to fufu, ampesi, and banku, while grains and meat showed mixed sourcing reflecting reliance on imports such as rice and poultry (Gonda et al., 2021).

Table 6
Local Sourcing Indices (0–4 Scale)

Ingredient Category	Mean	SD
Fresh vegetables	2.98	0.16
Tubers & plantain	3.35	0.48
Grains & cereals	2.33	0.47
Meat	2.38	0.54
Fish & seafood	2.98	0.16

Independent restaurants and coastal establishments sourced more locally, especially fish and tubers, while star hotels depended more on imported grains and meat, citing supply consistency concerns typical of standardised, import-heavy institutional procurement (Lehtinen, 2012). Local sourcing supports freshness, traceability, cost stability, and local livelihoods (Garcia-Oliveira et al., 2022), but gaps in grain and meat sourcing limit how fully some hotels can embed Ghanaian cuisine within a sustainable framework, leaving significant potential under-utilised.

Sustainable Kitchen Practices

Table 7 shows reuse of trimmings and basic waste separation as the most routine sustainability behaviours, often adopted for operational efficiency as much as environmental reasons, with portion control also common in buffet-service hotels.

Table 7
Frequency of Sustainable Kitchen Practices (1–5 Scale)

Practice	Mean	SD
Portion control to reduce plate waste	2.93	0.35
Reuse of trimmings/leftovers (stocks, staff meals)	3.18	0.38
Separation of organic and inorganic waste	3.05	0.32
Monitoring of food waste	2.60	0.50
Menu planning to reduce waste	2.90	0.30

More systematic practices, waste monitoring and menus designed specifically to reduce waste, were noticeably weaker (Camilleri, 2021; Gössling & Hall, 2021): managers often said they "have an idea" of where waste occurs without measuring it formally. Establishments with formal sustainability policies scored slightly higher on waste-related practices, though even policy adopters remained in the mid-range overall; as one chain-hotel chef put it, "We have the policy, but the team is stretched... during peak service it's nearly impossible," echoing findings that policies often outpace practical implementation (Grèzes-Bürcher & Grèzes, 2024).

Perceptions of Guest Demand

Table 8 shows Ghanaian guests perceived as most enthusiastic about local cuisine, often requesting waakye, fufu, or ampesi; international guests were seen as moderately interested but likely to enjoy Ghanaian dishes more than expected once they tried them (Vuksanović et al., 2024; Yeboah & Ashie, 2024), one chef noted, "Once they taste kelewele or groundnut soup, they're sold. The real challenge is getting them to order it the first time."

Table 8
Perceived Guest Interest (1–5 Scale)

Guest Category	Mean	SD
International guests' interest in Ghanaian dishes	3.10	0.30
Ghanaian guests' interest in Ghanaian dishes	4.00	0.00
Guest interest in sustainability cues	3.93	0.27

Interest in sustainability cues such as "farm-to-table" or "locally sourced" was also strong, especially among younger Ghanaian diners and European tourists, suggesting sustainability storytelling as an entry point for heritage cuisine. Despite favourable perceptions, Ghanaian dishes remained underrepresented on menus, especially in star hotels; one Accra chef admitted, "We assume the expatriates want pasta or grilled chicken. But the few times we push a Ghanaian special, it sells out," while a Kumasi chef described a refined waakye platter becoming popular with business travellers, suggesting operator caution rather than guest demand is the primary barrier (Okech & Timothy, 2023).

Barriers and Enablers

The strongest barrier (Table 9) was the labour and time intensity of traditional dishes (Nagina et al., 2025): preparing omo tuo, northern soups, or slow-cooked stews requires skilled labour and time that understaffed city kitchens often cannot spare.

Table 9
Perceived Barriers to Heritage-Based Sustainability (1–5 Scale)

Barrier	Mean	SD
Labour/time intensity of traditional dishes	3.58	0.55
Limited staff skills in traditional dishes	3.18	0.45
Supply inconsistency of local ingredients	3.08	0.27
Concerns about guest acceptance	3.08	0.27

Skill gaps compounded this, with younger, internationally trained staff less confident in complex Ghanaian preparations, reflecting underdeveloped Ghanaian cuisine curricula (Sekyere & Jamgade, 2025), alongside supply inconsistency for meat and grains (Pullman & Wu, 2021), and persistent guest-acceptance fears despite evidence that guests respond well to Ghanaian dishes (Almansouri et al., 2022). The strongest enabler (Table 10) was positive guest feedback, which built chef confidence, closely followed by staff pride, chefs described heritage dishes as "a way of representing ourselves" (House et al., 2024), management support for local sourcing, and training in Ghanaian cuisine.

Table 10
Perceived Enablers of Heritage-Based Sustainable Practice (1–5 Scale)

Enabler	Mean	SD
Guest feedback / positive reception	4.03	0.16
Staff pride and enthusiasm	4.00	0.23
Management support	3.98	0.16
Availability of training opportunities	3.13	0.33

Synthesis With the Sustainable Culinary Bridge Model

Bringing the findings together, the inputs of the bridge, local ingredient access, staff pride, and guest interest, appear strong (Zocchi et al., 2021), while the mediating systems meant to connect them to menu outputs, training, procurement, workflow, and menu engineering, remain weak, suggesting the core challenge is not cultural resistance but the absence of robust mediating structures. Independent restaurants and coastal resorts, with smaller scale and more flexible management, navigated this bridge more effectively (Vuksanović et al., 2024), while star hotels, especially foreign chains, faced more structural friction between showcasing Ghanaian cuisine and maintaining centralised, standardised procurement (Grèzes-Bürcher & Grèzes, 2024). This points to a refined reading of the model: inputs are strong across Ghana's hospitality landscape, mediators are the weak point limiting transformation, and outputs improve where establishments align cultural pride with operational support.

The Sustainable Culinary Bridge Framework

Findings from the previous chapter reveal a system where Ghanaian culinary heritage, sustainability ambitions, and hospitality operations are all present but not consistently aligned (Hall & Gössling, 2013). This chapter introduces the Sustainable Culinary Bridge Framework to capture how traditional food knowledge, local ingredients, and cultural values interact with contemporary hospitality systems to produce sustainable, market-responsive culinary experiences (Zocchi et al., 2021). The core insight is that Ghana does not lack the cultural raw material for heritage-forward hospitality (Okech & Timothy, 2023); what is missing are the mediating structures that translate heritage into consistent, commercially viable offerings, as independent restaurants demonstrate and star hotels' globalised standards often obscure (Vuksanović et al., 2024). The framework addresses three questions: what inputs already exist, which mediating factors strengthen or weaken the link to sustainable outputs, and how establishments of different types can use these mediators to build a stronger bridge between tradition and modernity.

Components of the Framework

The framework has three interconnected layers. Inputs are strong and largely stable across establishment types: traditional knowledge and pride in heritage dishes (Lee, 2023), locally available ingredients, especially tubers, vegetables, and fish (Gonda et al., 2021), cultural values and identity, and rising guest demand for sustainability. Mediators are where the bridge most often weakens: kitchen skills and labour structure, given gaps in younger cooks' training (Sekyere & Jamgade, 2025); procurement infrastructure, reliable for vegetables and fish but inconsistent for grains and meat; kitchen workflow often organised around Western processes that make Ghanaian preparation feel "extra" (Graf, 2024); management risk aversion that underestimates guest interest (Yeboah & Ashie, 2024); and thin institutional training. Outputs, achievable once mediators function well, are culturally grounded sustainability-oriented menus (Cooke, 2025), reduced environmental footprint (Garcia-Oliveira et al., 2022), and enhanced guest experience and national culinary identity (Agyei-Amponsah & Adjei, 2022), each reinforcing the others.

Typologies

Three broad typologies emerged. Heritage-Forward Innovators, mostly independent restaurants and some resorts, integrate Ghanaian dishes creatively and respond quickly to guest feedback, with strong mediators across skills, management, and procurement (Fusté-Forné, 2022). Cautious Balancers, hotel restaurants and mid-range properties, offer Ghanaian options but keep them peripheral, with moderate, inconsistent mediators (Sanful et al., 2024). Internationally Anchored Systems, mostly star hotels and foreign chains, have strong inputs but standardised global procurement and cautious management that dampen innovation.

Contribution

The framework points to clear leverage points: skills and training offer the quickest route to strengthening the bridge (Gangiah, 2024); procurement reform, particularly stabilising grain and meat supply, would unlock more heritage-based menus (Pullman & Wu, 2021); management mindsets need to shift, since guest demand is higher than many operators assume (Huang et al., 2025); and policy and curriculum design should position Ghanaian cuisine as a strategic national asset. Theoretically, the framework shows hospitality sustainability is as

much cultural and organisational as environmental, reframes Ghanaian cuisine as a living, adaptable system (Asante-Donyinah et al., 2024), and integrates culinary tourism, food heritage, and sustainability theory into a single, empirically grounded model.

Conclusion

The study set out to understand how sustainable culinary practices can bridge traditional Ghanaian food heritage and the operational realities of modern hospitality. The foundations are strong: Ghanaian dishes are culturally meaningful, local ingredients are widely available, staff take genuine pride in heritage cooking, and guests respond positively to well-executed Ghanaian cuisine (Agyapong et al., 2022; Chukwurah et al., 2025). Yet the systems meant to carry these assets into everyday practice remain uneven, kitchens often lack the labour structures or skills for traditional dishes, supply is inconsistent, management remains cautious, and sustainability practices are not systematically embedded in workflow (Pullman & Wu, 2021), so Ghanaian cuisine appears on most menus but rarely occupies a central position (Sanful et al., 2024; Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). The issue is not a deficit of heritage but gaps in mediating systems, skills, procurement, management orientation, workflow, and training. Ghana's hospitality industry possesses the cultural raw materials for a distinctive, sustainability-driven culinary identity; realising it requires intentional investment in the skills, systems, and support structures that let tradition and sustainability work together (Sabatini, 2019).

Main Findings

The findings reveal a system where Ghanaian culinary heritage, sustainability ambitions and hospitality operations are all present, yet not consistently aligned. Ghana does not lack the cultural raw materials needed for sustainability. What is missing are the mediating structures that translate that heritage.

Implications of the Study

For industry, the findings suggest treating Ghanaian cuisine as a strategic asset rather than a nostalgic addition, one that can differentiate market offerings, reduce procurement costs, and deepen guest experience. For tourism development, Ghana's gastronomy tourism potential is significant: well-curated Ghanaian dishes paired with sustainability narratives can strengthen national tourism identity and attract culturally engaged travellers. For sustainability policy, framing sustainability as both environmental stewardship and cultural preservation can help reposition Ghanaian cuisine within national development agendas, aligning with global sustainability frameworks.

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 the research.

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Fostering Global Citizenship Through Intercultural Dialogue and Collaborative Learning: Evidence From Ghanaian Higher Education

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Abstract

Global citizenship education remains under-researched in African settings, despite growing importance in higher education worldwide. This study examines how intercultural communication and collaborative learning shape global citizenship among students in Ghanaian higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach, 400 students across academic fields, study levels, and geographical backgrounds completed a structured questionnaire combining Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. Quantitative findings show intercultural dialogue is a regular feature of student life, marked by frequent cross-cultural interaction and openness to diverse perspectives, though uneven participation and language barriers persist. Collaborative learning emerged as a key site of intercultural contact, requiring students to navigate difference, share responsibility, and resolve conflict. Qualitative findings indicate that students develop global citizenship primarily through lived experience rather than formal instruction, emphasizing respect for others, accountability, and awareness of the broader consequences of everyday actions. Notably, routine academic interactions embedded in local, Ghanaian contexts appear to foster global citizenship more effectively than formal curricula or international exposure. These findings challenge dominant global citizenship models centred on Global North experiences, offering context-sensitive evidence from an underrepresented setting. The study offers practical guidance for institutions, educators, and policymakers seeking to strengthen intercultural communication and collaborative learning within African higher education.

Keywords: global citizenship, intercultural dialogue, collaborative learning, higher education, Ghana

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Introduction

Walk into a lecture hall on an ordinary morning at a Ghanaian public university, and nothing looks extraordinary. Chairs scrape, phones buzz then go silent, someone adjusts a microphone. But look closer and something more intricate is happening: a student from the Upper East explains a concept to a coastal-raised peer; another group slides between English and local languages, each switch signaling inclusion, authority, or restraint; someone pauses before disagreeing, aware that tone matters as much as content. No one calls this intercultural education, it's simply how things work (O'Brien & Eriksson, 2010; Zalli, 2024).

These encounters are routine, almost invisible, yet they take real effort. In Ghanaian higher education, difference shows up in accents, religious practice, unwritten rules of respect and seniority, and home experiences that shape how students speak and listen. Balancing deadlines, grades, and belonging, students negotiate these differences daily, largely through trial and error, learning to cooperate without erasing one another. Formal academic discourse largely ignores this knowledge (Bosio & Waghid, 2023). Meanwhile, global citizenship has become a polished, confident concept internationally. Universities promote it as a core graduate trait, framed through mobility, cultural competence, and global awareness in mission statements and curricula (Hunduma & Mekuria, 2024). It's often presented as something requiring deliberate cultivation through structured programs or exposure abroad, as though it originates elsewhere and travel simply delivers it.

African higher education is frequently an afterthought in this literature (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). Empirical research remains scarce and is often filtered through outside perspectives, producing a quiet hierarchy of knowledge: some contexts generate theory, others merely supply examples. This imbalance matters practically as well as symbolically, shaping what gets recognized and valued (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Students carry multiple identities shaped by geography, language, religion, and background (Anderson, 2021). Collaborative learning here is rooted in community practices, not imported pedagogy, and dialogue rarely takes the direct, outspoken form Western systems celebrate, it's often cautious, relational, and attentive to social cues. This doesn't signal weak global engagement; it reveals a different form of it.

The gap between scholarly recognition and lived experience raises key questions: What does global citizenship look like when built through daily contact rather than formal programming? How do intercultural communication and group work interact where diversity is already woven into academic life? And what gets lost when these realities are ignored or forced into ill-fitting frameworks (LeCompte et al., 2020)? This study sits in that gap. It treats Ghanaian higher education as a source of insight rather than a minor case study, examining how global citizenship develops in practice, as a lived process shaped by context and negotiation, not a slogan (Hartman & Kiely, 2023). In doing so, it aims to contribute evidence to a global conversation that has long spoken about Africa more than it has listened to it (Serwornoo, 2021).

Though global citizenship features prominently in higher education discourse (Massaro, 2022), little empirical evidence captures how it's actually experienced in Ghanaian universities. Much existing research relies on frameworks built for different institutional contexts, overlooking how Ghanaian students navigate ethnic, linguistic, regional, and religious difference daily (Eten, 2023). Intercultural communication and collaborative learning are also often treated as formal teaching strategies rather than everyday practices embedded in student life (De Hei et al., 2020). In Ghana, these interactions are shaped informally by norms of respect, hierarchy,

and collective responsibility, yet their educational value remains underexplored, a gap that risks reinforcing frameworks marginalizing African experience (Baldwin et al., 2023). This study responds by examining how intercultural communication and collaborative learning foster global citizenship among Ghanaian students, centering lived experience to generate context-sensitive insight (Agbevivi et al., 2025). Specifically, it explores how students experience intercultural communication in daily academic and social life and how this shapes their understanding of global citizenship; how group-based work promotes or constrains intercultural interaction across diverse backgrounds; how students understand global citizenship as lived experience rather than an imported concept; and how these elements relate within the Ghanaian context.

This study matters because, by centering Ghanaian students' lived experience, it offers underrepresented empirical evidence that challenges dominant assumptions and informs teaching, curriculum, and global citizenship debates alike.

Literature Analysis

This review reads the literature on global citizenship, intercultural dialogue, and collaborative learning as a contested conversation rather than settled ground, tracing where these ideas falter as they move into African, and specifically Ghanaian, higher education.

Important Ideas and Issues in Global Citizenship Education

Global citizenship education is commonly framed as preparing students to engage ethically with global problems, tolerance, and responsibility beyond national borders (Leite, 2022), often reduced in practice to a marketable set of skills or dispositions (Massaro, 2022) that flattens something socially situated and context-dependent into a fixed competency (Estellés & Fischman, 2021). Scholars dispute whether the values underpinning this vision are genuinely universal: proponents point to shared concerns such as sustainability and human rights (Bosteels, 2023), while critics argue the approach quietly universalises Global North perspectives and sidelines other histories (Pais & Costa, 2020), a critique with particular force in African contexts shaped by colonialism and unequal global power relations (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). These debates connect to concerns about voice and representation: global citizenship education tends to presuppose mobility, linguistic confidence, and access to global networks that are unevenly distributed (Yemini, 2017), and models favouring assertive, individual expression risk misreading quieter, relationship-based participation as passive rather than as culturally grounded (Elsayed, 2024).

Intercultural Dialogue in Higher Education

Intercultural dialogue in higher education is typically framed as a route to mutual respect and empathy across cultural boundaries, pursued through group work, classroom discussion, and internationalisation (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022), though in practice it unfolds within institutional and interpersonal constraints that shape who speaks and whose knowledge counts (Westerlund et al., 2022). Much of this literature assumes that meaningful engagement requires direct communication and verbal confidence (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018), an assumption that travels poorly into settings such as Ghana, where dialogue is often indirect and governed by courtesy, age hierarchy, and social harmony (Jackson, 2019); what looks like reticence may in fact be careful negotiation, and judging it by narrower standards misses this complexity (Pope et al., 2019). Participation within these spaces is also uneven, shaped by

gender, confidence, and perceived academic standing, which has led scholars to caution against treating dialogue as inherently equal and to call for closer attention to how inclusion is enabled or blocked in everyday encounters (Fassett & Rudick, 2018).

Collective Learning and Social Interaction

Collaborative learning is widely promoted as a way to build active participation, shared accountability, and deeper understanding by treating knowledge as something built socially through conversation and joint problem-solving rather than individually (Burini & De Lillo, 2019; Haas, 2019). In practice, however, group dynamics rarely stay neutral: participation is shaped by confidence, language ability, gender, and perceived competence, so that some students lead while others remain at the margins, not necessarily from lack of ability but from social expectation (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2011; Isohätälä et al., 2017; Kilgore, 1999). Individual assessment can further push cooperation toward transactional task-splitting rather than genuine joint inquiry (Binns, 2020; Zheng & Wang, 2022) which limits opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and means collaborative learning must be understood through how interaction is actually shaped and negotiated, not only through its intended outcomes.

Education in Global Citizenship in African Contexts

Research on global citizenship education in African higher education remains limited (Bosio & Waghid, 2023), concentrated more on policy and curriculum than on students' lived experience of learning across difference (Lauwerier, 2020). Ghana-focused work is beginning to show how cultural diversity and community values shape student attitudes (Angyagre, 2020), but this is rarely folded into wider theoretical debate; African settings continue to be treated as sites for implementing ideas developed elsewhere, obscuring how local historical and cultural conditions complicate models built around individual agency and mobility (Addae et al., 2025).

Conceptual Framework

This study frames global citizenship as something that grows through sustained social interaction rather than mere exposure (Edwards et al., 2020; Hartman & Kiely, 2023): a process shaped by how students engage with difference and collaborate within academic settings, rather than a fixed outcome. Intercultural dialogue is treated as the space where students encounter different perspectives and ways of knowing (Holliday, 2021), often informally, through everyday interactions shaped by respect, language, and hierarchy (Ibrahim et al., 2024), with its quality depending on how heard and included students feel (Muilerman-Rodrigo, 2024).

Collaborative learning supplies the structure within which this dialogue happens, making engagement across difference a required rather than optional part of shared academic work, as students negotiate roles and expectations while solving problems together (Dyson et al., 2021; Kvellestad et al., 2021). Global citizenship, in this framework, emerges at the intersection of the two: dialogue builds awareness and empathy, while collaboration turns these into practice through shared responsibility, with institutional culture and teaching approach shaping how strongly the two reinforce each other (Holliday, 2021).

Methodology

Research Approach and Setting

The study adopts a convergent mixed-methods design, combining Likert-scale items with open-ended questions in a single questionnaire administered to undergraduate students in Ghanaian tertiary institutions (Dawadi et al., 2021; Stern et al., 2020) The scaled items identify patterns across students, while the open-ended responses explain what those patterns mean in daily practice, particularly given how norms of respect, communication style, and group interaction shape behaviour in ways raw numbers alone would not capture. Both strands were collected simultaneously from the same participants, analysed separately, and integrated at interpretation. Ghana's higher education context suits this focus: intercultural interaction through language diversity, regional identity, and socioeconomic background is a routine part of student life, and undergraduate students across disciplines and year levels are regularly exposed to organised collaborative learning such as group projects and peer coursework.

Sample Size and Sampling Strategy

Sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations (Das et al., 2016), applied to an estimated population of 60,000 students across the selected institutions: $n = N / (1 + N(e^2)) = 60{,}000 / (1 + 60{,}000(0.05^2)) \approx 397.35$, where n is the sample size, N the estimated population, and e the margin of error (5%, corresponding to 95% confidence). This yielded a minimum of about 398 respondents; the target was raised to 400–420 to allow for incomplete or non-responses, a size regarded as sufficient for statistically reliable quantitative findings while still generating rich qualitative material (Memon et al., 2020).

Data Collection, Reliability and Validity

Data were gathered through the two-part questionnaire described above: Likert-scale items measuring intercultural communication, group learning, and global citizenship orientations, and open-ended questions inviting students to describe specific experiences of inclusion, exclusion, or language barriers in group work, and what global citizenship means to them (Khoa et al., 2023). Content validity was addressed by aligning items with the study's objectives and conceptual framework, and the instrument was reviewed by colleagues in higher education research and piloted with students outside the final sample; feedback from both stages improved item clarity and relevance to the Ghanaian context (Sember et al., 2020). Reliability coefficients confirmed that the quantitative scales were internally consistent (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations), with inferential methods used where relevant to examine relationships between intercultural communication, collaborative learning, and global citizenship measures (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Open-ended responses were analysed thematically, with recurring patterns used to deepen and contextualise the statistical findings rather than treated as independent results, and integrated with the quantitative trends at the discussion stage (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). All participants gave informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose and their right to withdraw without consequence; responses were anonymised, securely stored, and used only for scholarly purposes, and the study received ethical clearance from the relevant

institutional review board in line with accepted standards for research with human participants (Pietilä et al., 2019).

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Understanding the trends seen in intercultural conversation, cooperative learning, and global citizenship development requires crucial context provided by the demographic profiles of responders. Reflecting the pluralistic character of Ghanaian tertiary education, the 400 students chosen from several academic, geographic, and social backgrounds comprised the sample. The demographic diversity reflected in this sample is similar to the pluralistic composition of Ghanaian higher education institutions, where students from different regions across the country, linguistic backgrounds, and academic traditions routinely interact; this was also noted by Angyagre (2020) and Boughey and McKenna (2021) in their analyses of Ghanaian and African higher education contexts.

Table 1 offers respondent age distribution. Most students (40.5%) were between 21 and 23 years, then came those 18–20 years (24.0%) and those 24–26 years (23.0%). This focus implies that most participants were in an active phase of their undergraduate study, when group work, peer interaction, and exposure to different perspectives are normal components of academic life.

Table 1
Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 18	18	4.5
18–20	96	24.0
21–23	162	40.5
24–26	92	23.0
27 and above	32	8.0
Total	400	100

Shown in Table 2, gender distribution was rather even: males comprised 53.5%; females, 44.5%; and a little fraction (2.0%) preferred not to reveal their gender. This equilibrium lowers the chance that gendered participation patterns significantly influence results.

Table 2
Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	214	53.5
Female	178	44.5
Prefer not to say	8	2.0
Total	400	100

With Level 300 pupils accounting for the most (33.0%), followed by Level 200 pupils (26.0%), students from all undergraduate levels were shown in Table 3. This distribution indicates that participants' programmes included enough exposure to collaborative work and ongoing peer interaction.

Table 3
Level of Study

Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Level 100	78	19.5
Level 200	104	26.0
Level 300	132	33.0
Level 400	70	17.5
Postgraduate	16	4.0
Total	400	100

Academic variety was also seen. According to Table 4, responders came from a variety of departments: Humanities and Social Sciences made up 34.5%; sciences 21.5%; and Engineering or Technology-related fields 16.0%. The generalisability of the results throughout several academic civilizations is improved by this disciplinary spread.

Table 4
Faculty / School

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Humanities / Social Sciences	138	34.5
Sciences	86	21.5
Engineering / Technology	64	16.0
Education	52	13.0
Business	44	11.0
Other	16	4.0
Total	400	100

Presented in Table 5, regional origin emphasizes even more the intercultural character of the sample. At 37.0% the biggest group of Middle Belt students were followed by Southern Ghana at 33.0% and Northern Ghana at 24.0%. Non-Ghanaian pupils made up 6.0%. These patterns represent the usual demographic blend seen in several Ghanaian colleges.

Table 5
Region of Origin

Region	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Northern Ghana	96	24.0
Middle Belt	148	37.0
Southern Ghana	132	33.0
Non-Ghanaian	24	6.0
Total	400	100

Intercultural Dialogue and Student Experiences

Results on intercultural communication show that daily aspect of students' academic lives is interaction across cultural difference. With a mean rating of 4.21, respondents reported a high degree of frequent contact with culturally diverse peers as Table 6 indicates, hence implying general consensus that such contacts are frequent within Ghanaian higher education environments.

Furthermore showing that classrooms serve as places of intercultural interaction rather than homogeneous environments, exposure to various perspectives during discussions scored a relatively high mean (4.09). Students equally strongly believed cultural diversity enhanced conversations (mean = 4.25), therefore showing that variation is mostly seen as an asset rather than a barrier. These findings align with broader intercultural research which argues that everyday educational spaces function as key sites for intercultural learning through routine interactions, rather than formal intervention, as discussed by Baldwin et al. (2023) and Holliday (2021).

Table 6
Intercultural Dialogue Items (Mean and SD)

Item Code	Item Summary	Mean	SD
ID1	Regular interaction with culturally different students	4.21	0.78
ID2	Exposure to diverse perspectives in class	4.09	0.83
ID3	Comfort expressing views across cultures	3.88	0.91
ID4	Willingness to listen to differing views	4.32	0.72
ID5	Cultural diversity enriches discussions	4.25	0.76
ID6	Language differences hinder dialogue	3.41	1.02
ID7	Adjust communication to engage respectfully	4.11	0.80

Remarkably, openness in listening scored the highest mean (4.32), implying that in some cultures, it may be more encouraged than aggressive self-expression. Although still quite high, comfort in expressing opinions throughout civilizations had a lower mean (3.88), which suggests some level of uncertainty among students negotiating cross-cultural communication. This hesitation most likely points to cultural standards about respect, age, and avoidance of blatant conflict that affect how discussions in Ghanaian intellectual circles progress. The tendencies toward careful listening, rather than assertive self-expression reflects culturally grounded communication norms that focuses more on respect and social harmony, a pattern widely documented in intercultural communication scholarship, including Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) and Jackson (2019).

Differences in language became a more controversial subject, as shown by a modest mean of 3.41 and the greatest standard deviation (1.02) among the dialogue points. This variance implies that some pupils see language as a barrier to communication whereas others view it as rather unimportant limitation. Qualitative comments help to explain this split. One student observed that as group members adjusted and worked together, first challenges stemming from linguistic differences were progressively solved. This emphasizes conversation as a developmental process instead of a set result. According to Agbevivi et al. (2025) and Ibrahim et al. (2024), language-related difficulties in intercultural communication have also been noted in Ghanaian and African educational settings, where multilingualism shapes participation unevenly but also encourages adaptive communication strategies over time.

This interpretation is further supported by the fairly high mean for adapting communication styles to interact politely (4.11). To keep conversation going across differences, many students seem to consciously change their speech and listening patterns. Taken together, these results point to regular and typically positive intercultural communication in Ghanaian universities, but influenced by underlying linguistic, confidence, and culturally grounded communication expectations. Such discourse develops naturally during regular academic contacts, where students learn, sometimes imperfectly, how to live, work together, and interact across difference, rather than through organised or officially directed activities.

Cooperative learning proved to be a consistent part of students' educational experience. As Table 7 shows, respondents agreed most strongly that group projects often include students from different backgrounds (mean = 4.28), reflecting frequent convergence of diverse regional, linguistic, and cultural identities in collaborative settings, consistent with established theories that treat shared tasks as catalysts for social engagement (Burini & De Lillo, 2019; Döös & Wilhelmson, 2011). Participation within these groups was less even: a moderate mean (3.62) and higher standard deviation on the item about some students dominating group work suggests varied experiences, and while many students felt included (mean = 3.97), this was not universal, pointing to subtle hierarchies that echo the uneven participation documented elsewhere, where social positioning, confidence, and perceived competence shape who speaks and who stays quiet even in apparently inclusive settings (Isohätälä et al., 2017; Kvellestad et al., 2021).

Table 7
Collaborative Learning Items (Mean and SD)

Item Code	Item Summary	Mean	SD
CL1	Group work involves diverse students	4.28	0.74
CL2	Collaboration encourages multiple perspectives	4.14	0.79
CL3	Some students dominate group work	3.62	0.96
CL4	Feeling included during group work	3.97	0.88
CL5	Group work builds intercultural skills	4.06	0.81
CL6	Cultural differences affect participation	3.55	0.94
CL7	Group work improves conflict resolution	3.92	0.86

Qualitative responses reinforced this picture. Students described personality, language ability, and confidence, more than formal group structure, as what shaped engagement, with one noting, "Sometimes one person talks more because of confidence, but we still contribute in our own ways." Language was a recurring theme too: one student said, "Language first influenced participation but respect helped the group work better," reflecting the adjustment and accommodation mechanisms students described alongside the initial barrier. These accounts echo research showing that dominance in collaborative learning is often acknowledged but pragmatically managed rather than resolved (Dyson et al., 2021; Haas, 2019), suggesting that teamwork does not eliminate cross-cultural tension so much as give students practice negotiating it. Group learning therefore appears to work as both a facilitating and a limiting space: it draws students into intercultural interaction, but also surfaces disparities in voice shaped by broader social and cultural dynamics.

Development of World Citizenship Among Students

Students' Views of Global Citizenship

Research on the growth of global citizenship reveal that most students have a good grasp of the idea and that their understanding is relevant to their surroundings. Table 8 shows that respondents had a strong sense of belonging to a larger worldwide community (mean = 3.98) and were very aware of global social and cultural events (mean = 4.05). Interestingly, the item implying that interaction with varied peers affects perceptions of others had a quite high average (4.22), so implying that actual cross-cultural experience rather than hypothetical knowledge is closely related to global citizenship.

According to Hartman and Kiely (2023) and Massaro (2022), critical perspectives that frame citizenship as an ethical practice rather than an abstract status align with such relational and responsibility-oriented understandings of global citizenship.

Table 8
Global Citizenship Items (Mean and SD)

Item Code	Item Summary	Mean	SD
GC1	Sense of belonging to global community	3.98	0.89
GC2	Awareness of global issues	4.05	0.84
GC3	Interaction shapes views of others	4.22	0.77
GC4	Responsibility beyond national context	3.91	0.92
GC5	Group work prepares for global engagement	4.10	0.80
GC6	Global citizenship relevant in Ghana	4.18	0.78

Open-ended answers from students help to clarify these results. One participant underlined awareness of impact, saying that it entails *"respecting others and thinking beyond yourself, even while studying in Ghana,"* whereas another defined world citizenship as *"respecting others and thinking beyond yourself, even while studying in Ghana."* These thoughts point to students viewing global citizenship as ethical and relational, rooted in daily encounters rather than far-off abstract ideas. The idea put forth by Bosio and Waghid (2023) and Lauwerier (2020) that global citizenship education can develop through locally situated social interaction rather than relying on international mobility is supported by the perceived relevance of global citizenship in the Ghanaian context.

Locating Ghanaian Views Inside the Books

These results challenge well-known ideas about worldwide citizenship that emphasize foreign experiences or foreign travel. For many students in this study, local interactions with difference help to promote worldwide citizenship, therefore supporting claims that citizenship development is very dependent on social context and embedded. In this regard, Ghanaian higher education becomes a place where daily social interaction helps to grow global awareness rather than just a sideline for learning about world citizenship. According to Pais and Costa (2020), Assiter (2016) and Parashar and Schulz (2021), these findings challenge dominant Global North-centric models of global citizenship education by emphasizing students' lived experiences. They also support calls for more context-sensitive and decolonial approaches.

Interaction Among Global Citizenship, Collaborative Learning, and Intercultural Dialogue

Reinforcement Dynamics

Table 9's integrative elements show how closely linked intercultural communication, group projects, and growth of world citizenship are. Students heartily agreed that intercultural discourse shapes their grasp of global citizenship (mean = 4.07) and that group projects help to build intercultural respect (mean = 4.15). These results point to the fact that conversation and cooperation support each other in molding kids' attitudes and views; they do not work alone.

Table 9
Intercultural Dialogue, Collaboration and Global Citizenship (Mean and SD)

Item Code	Item Summary	Mean	SD
INT1	Dialogue influences global citizenship	4.07	0.82
INT2	Collaboration strengthens intercultural respect	4.15	0.79
INT3	Working with diverse peers reshaped thinking	4.01	0.85

Qualitative results back up this trend. Many students related how continuous engagement in group projects encouraged introspection and adjustment. One interviewee said that interacting with kids from many areas helped them see why people handled issues differently, therefore teamwork offered a practical setting for intercultural learning. The reinforcing relationship between dialogue, collaboration, and citizenship development reflects integrative models of global citizenship education that emphasise interaction, reflection, and shared responsibility, as outlined by Edwards et al. (2020).

Tensions and Constraints

Notwithstanding these confirming patterns, the data likewise expose limits. The depth of intercultural contact can be limited by linguistic hurdles, uneven participation, and reliance on unstructured facilitation instead of organized facilitation. Students usually adjust to these difficulties, but some voices stay less visible than others in the lack of purposeful instructional support.

Taken together, the findings imply that among Ghanaian students, global citizenship is promoted via a complicated interaction of discussion and cooperation molded by cultural mores and daily academic activities. Although they rely on implicit social skills rather than explicit instructional direction, these methods are usually successful in fostering respect, responsibility, and knowledge. Understanding and improving these relationships might help Ghanaian higher education produce graduates who are both rooted in local social reality and globally aware. This might also improve its part in generating internationally conscious graduates (Estellés & Fischman, 2021; Westerlund et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to find out how intercultural communication and group work help Ghanaian college students become global citizens. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the results reveal that for Ghanaian students intercultural interaction is a regular component of academic life influenced by linguistic, geographic, cultural, and social background diversity rather than a sporadic or marginal event. Students regularly engage over differences, pay attention to different points of view, and change their communication styles to help coexist and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, the research shows that working together is very important for turning interactions between people from different cultures into significant learning. Group-based learning activities offer organized chances for cross-difference interaction, therefore motivating students to negotiate roles, settle arguments, and interact with many points of view.

Simultaneously, cooperative learning settings expose ongoing issues including unequal participation, language-related obstacles, and informal hierarchies that, if not handled, might limit the degree of involvement.

Importantly, the study's results indicate that students' knowledge of worldwide citizenship stems from personal experience rather than from theoretical lessons. People see global citizenship as respect for others, responsibility outside of one's own, and awareness of how daily activities influence individuals in more general circumstances. Local encounters rather than official foreign exposure challenge accepted models that view world citizenship as something attained mostly via mobility or outside activities by means of these understandings. By emphasising Ghanaian data, the research advances worldwide citizenship scholarship by showing that, rather than passive receivers of international concepts, African higher education environments are energetic venues where global citizenship is always created and negotiated. These findings reinforce already existing arguments that, African higher education institutions should be understood as active sites of global citizenship formation, rather than peripheral spaces of implementation, a position increasingly emphasised by scholars including Yemini (2017) and Bosio and Waghid (2023).

Recommendations

Universities should deliberately design learning spaces that encourage cross-cultural interaction, particularly through diverse group formation in projects and co-curricular activities, framing cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset.

Professors should structure group assignments with clear participation expectations, including role rotation and reflection, linking everyday group work to broader ideas of social responsibility and citizenship.

Policymakers should ground global citizenship programs in local realities rather than imported models, supporting staff training in inclusive pedagogy and assessment methods that value teamwork alongside academic performance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this research offers insightful information, some restrictions ought to be noted. Relying on self-reported data could be affected by social desirability, and using a questionnaire limits the depth of personal stories that can be gathered. The study also concentrates on particular Ghanaian universities, which might restrict the applicability of results across all institutional forms and areas.

Future studies might expand on this by including thorough interviews or classroom observations to more closely examine cross-cultural interaction. Studies contrasting several African nations or between African and non-African settings would also help to clarify even more how many different types of educational surroundings influence global citizenship. Such studies will help to build the empirical foundation of world citizenship education and keep changing the role of African higher education as a key contributor to international intellectual discourse.

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 the research.

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Empowering the Future: Overcoming Obstacles in Ghanaian TVET Colleges

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Abstract

This study examined the major obstacles affecting the performance of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in Ghana and assessed their implications for student learning and employability. A mixed-methods approach was used, drawing on survey data from 120 students and 30 instructors, supported by semi-structured interviews and direct observations across five institutions. The findings showed that inadequate training resources were a central challenge, with more than 60% of students reporting insufficient equipment and observational assessments indicating that some institutions operated with less than 40% functional workshop tools. Teaching quality was similarly constrained, as 56% of respondents felt instructors were overstretched and unable to provide adequate practical supervision. Industry engagement was limited, with only 35% of students gaining industrial exposure, while industry partners noted that curricula lagged behind workplace technologies by three to five years. Public perception remained a significant barrier, with 75% of students indicating that TVET was viewed as inferior to general education. These structural and perceptual constraints weakened student confidence, reflected in only 45% feeling prepared for employment upon graduation. The study concluded that meaningful improvements in TVET require coordinated reforms across infrastructure, instructor development, industry collaboration, and institutional governance. It recommended targeted investments in equipment, stronger industry partnerships, continuous professional development for instructors, decentralised procurement processes, and a national campaign to reposition TVET as a valued skills pathway.

Keywords: TVET, skills development, industry linkage, employability, stigma, Ghana

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Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sits at the heart of Ghana's efforts to build a modern, skilled workforce capable of driving industrialisation and reducing youth unemployment (Ernest & Ansah, 2013). Industries need skilled hands to operate modern machinery, maintain equipment, and support expanding sectors such as construction, manufacturing, energy, and ICT. For many young people, TVET offers a practical route into stable work at a time when traditional academic pathways no longer guarantee employment. This makes TVET not just an educational option, but a key driver of national development and economic mobility (Darvas & Palmer, 2014).

TVET in Ghana has gone through several phases, from its colonial foundations (Oti-Agyen, 2023), through post-independence expansion, to recent reforms aimed at modernizing the system (Ababio et al., 2024). Policies have been introduced to improve access, strengthen quality, and align programmes with industry expectations. Yet the system still carries deep structural weaknesses. Facilities in many colleges are outdated. Training tools are often insufficient (Boateng et al., 2024). Collaboration with industry remains limited, and students struggle to get real workplace exposure. On top of these issues, the public still sees TVET as a "last resort," a perception that discourages many talented students from considering it (Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2025). These recurring barriers have kept the sector from reaching its full potential. They affect the quality of training, the confidence of employers, and the career outcomes of graduates (Adams et al., 2024). Recognizing these challenges is the first step toward building a stronger and more responsive TVET ecosystem.

Although several studies have examined challenges within Ghana's TVET landscape, most have focused on single institutions, narrow thematic issues, or perception-based analyses (Ababio et al., 2024; Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013; Pongo, 2014). What has been missing is a system-wide view that combines institutional realities, student experiences, and industry feedback in a unified assessment. Existing research highlights concerns about outdated equipment, limited industry collaboration, and persistent stigma, but these studies often examine these issues in isolation and rarely compare conditions across multiple institutions.

This study addresses that gap by adopting a mixed-methods, multi-institution approach that captures the complexity of TVET delivery from several angles. The quantitative data allow for a clear understanding of the scale of challenges, such as the proportion of students lacking access to functional equipment or those who feel unprepared for industry demands, while the qualitative insights explain why these patterns occur and how institutional contexts shape them. Collecting data from five institutions across different regions provides broader insight into the unevenness of TVET performance, something earlier studies have not fully explored.

By addressing these questions, the paper adds clarity to national discussions about skills development. It pulls together insights from recent studies and ongoing reforms to show what is working, what is not, and what needs to shift. Ultimately, the paper aims to support policymakers, educators, and industry leaders as they work toward a TVET system that is respected, well-resourced, and capable of preparing Ghana's workforce for the future.

Literature Review

Understanding the Role of TVET in National Development

Technical and vocational education is widely recognised as a foundation for national development, particularly in countries building their industrial base (Adams et al., 2024); nations such as Germany, South Korea, and Finland have used strong TVET systems to build competitive, innovation-driving workforces (Alhassan et al., 2024; Yakubu & Bayong, 2025). In emerging economies including Ghana, TVET offers a practical route to employment and helps close skills gaps that slow industrialisation, particularly given persistent youth unemployment (Arthur-Mensah & Alagaraja, 2018; Okoth, 2023). Ghana's TVET system carries a colonial-era legacy that divided "academic" from "vocational" education and helped entrench the stigma still affecting enrolment today (Boateng et al., 2024; Gyampoh et al., 2025), and while post-independence reforms expanded technical institutes and introduced competency-based training, systemic issues persist: outdated equipment, weaker funding than general education, curricula misaligned with industry, and inconsistent industry collaboration (Gyimah, 2020; Obed, 2018). The literature therefore describes a system with strong potential constrained by structural, historical, and social barriers that reform must address directly.

Key Challenges Identified in Ghanaian TVET Colleges

The literature identifies several recurring obstacles limiting TVET effectiveness, spanning infrastructure, human resources, curriculum relevance, and public attitudes (Mohammed, 2020). Infrastructure is the most widely reported problem: workshops and laboratories often lack the modern equipment needed for industry-aligned training, undermining both student competence and instructors' ability to demonstrate current techniques, compounded by overcrowded classrooms and limited safety facilities (Nkrumah & Gyamfi, 2022; Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2025). Collaboration with industry remains weak: informal employer connections rarely translate into consistent internships or curriculum input, leaving students with fewer real-workplace opportunities and employers doubtful of graduates' job-readiness (Gyimah, 2020; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2019). Instructor shortages, particularly in specialised technical areas, are compounded by instructors with strong theory but limited industry experience and inconsistent professional development (Abd Rahman et al., 2025; Joseph et al., 2025; Korir & Erastus, 2022). Curricula have not kept pace with industry and technology change, producing graduates who hold certificates but lack employable competencies, with competency-based reforms only unevenly implemented (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Halabieh et al., 2022; Lily, 2025). Underlying all of this is persistent stigma: TVET is widely perceived as a pathway for academically "weak" students, steering parents toward general secondary education and reinforcing the belief that TVET is a last resort, which lowers student morale and narrows the pool of talent entering the sector (Adams et al., 2024; Boateng et al., 2024; Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2025).

Factors Influencing Students' Willingness to Choose TVET

Students' decisions to pursue TVET reflect an interplay of personal preference, social influence, economics, and expectations about the future, all of which shape enrolment and the system's overall sustainability (Stromquist, 2019). Family expectations, especially from fathers, are among the strongest determinants, with students in households that value practical skill more likely to view TVET positively (Omar et al., 2020); teachers and school counsellors can build or undermine this confidence depending on their own biases, and community norms

send mixed signals by respecting skilled trades without treating formal TVET pathways as prestigious (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Zhou & Shirazi, 2025). Personal interest and self-efficacy also matter: students drawn to hands-on work, and those who feel more capable in practical than academic subjects, tend to find TVET appealing, though some academically strong students choose it too for its clearer path to skilled work or entrepreneurship (Boateng et al., 2024; Ngulu, 2023; Thakalekoala, 2021). Economically, TVET offers quicker returns and a route to self-employment, which matters most for lower-income households, though high programme costs and uncertain job placement can still deter interested students (Ohagwu et al., 2023; Sibiya et al., 2021). Finally, social status continues to shape choices: where TVET is seen as less prestigious, students may avoid it despite genuine interest or employability, though these perceptions are shifting slowly as more young people recognise opportunities in skilled trades (Gauthier, 2021; Naziz, 2019).

Lessons From Case Studies and Empirical TVET Research in Ghana

Empirical studies on TVET in Ghana move beyond policy discussion to show how the system functions on the ground, linking resources, teaching quality, and student motivation to practical outcomes (Yeboah, 2021). Research on skill development finds that competence depends heavily on tools, modern equipment, and structured practical sessions tied to real industry processes, with student motivation strongest where teaching connects theory to real-life application (Abedi, 2023; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Ofosu-Asare, 2024). Enrolment studies point to parental influence, interest in hands-on work, and employment expectations as key drivers, alongside persistent stigma that can undermine confidence even after enrolment; satisfaction rises where students feel supported by teachers and given well-organised workshops (Adza, 2023; Amoako, 2020; Boateng et al., 2024; Botha, 2018; Sibiya et al., 2021). Case studies of institutional challenges consistently report instructor shortages, insufficient funding, slow curriculum updates, and inconsistent industry engagement, resulting in uneven access to apprenticeships and a persistent mismatch between training and labour market needs (Ababio et al., 2024; Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013; Mohammed, 2020; Osei-Asibey, 2015; Oti-Agyen, 2023; Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2025). Together, this body of evidence points toward the need for evidence-based reform: modernised infrastructure, stronger industry partnerships, better-trained instructors, and a long-term strategy aligned with national development goals.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods design that brings together primary data from selected TVET colleges and secondary evidence from national reports, policy documents, and published research (Doyle et al., 2009). This approach provides a balanced understanding of the practical realities within institutions and the broader structural patterns that shape Ghana's TVET landscape. By combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, the analysis captures both measurable trends and the lived experiences of students, instructors, and administrators.

Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods framework was used (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017), allowing the quantitative and qualitative components to be carried out simultaneously and integrated during interpretation. The quantitative strand relied on a structured questionnaire administered to students and instructors, focusing on issues such as access to training resources, teaching quality, industry exposure, and perceived employability. This strand helps identify broad patterns across institutions.

The qualitative strand, designed to provide depth and context, consisted of semi-structured interviews with instructors, administrators, and selected industry partners, alongside non-participant observations of workshops and training spaces. Interviews explored training conditions, teacher workload, curriculum relevance, and industry interaction, while observations documented the state of equipment, student–equipment ratios, and the practicality of teaching sessions. Bringing these strands together ensures a richer, more reliable analysis of the sector (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Study Population and Sampling

The study targeted three main groups: students enrolled in technical and vocational programmes, instructors teaching in these colleges, and administrators and industry partners involved in training oversight and supervision. A multi-stage sampling strategy was applied. First, five TVET institutions were purposively selected from three regions, chosen to reflect different geographic and institutional contexts, levels of resourcing, and programme diversity. This ensured representation from urban, peri-urban, and rural settings.

Within the selected institutions, student participants were chosen through simple random sampling to avoid bias in representation. Instructors were approached through a census strategy, where all available instructors within relevant departments were invited to participate. Administrators and industry partners were selected purposively to ensure they had direct oversight of training quality or industry engagement. The final sample consisted of 120 students, 30 instructors, 10 administrators, and 8 industry partners, producing a total of 168 participants. This sample is adequate for mixed-methods work and provides a strong basis for triangulation across respondent groups.

Table 1
Summary of Participant Groups and Sampling Methods

Group	Sample Size	Sampling Method
Students	120	Simple random sampling
Instructors	30	Census approach
Administrators	10	Purposive sampling
Industry partners	8	Purposive sampling
Total Participants	168	

Data Collection Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect primary data. The questionnaire captured demographic information, perceptions of teaching and learning, access to resources, and overall attitudes toward TVET. It included both Likert-scale items and a small number of open-ended questions to allow respondents to describe challenges in their own words.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to discuss issues such as constraints in practical instruction, industry collaboration, and public perception of TVET while giving the researcher flexibility to probe deeper where needed. Interviews typically lasted between twenty and forty minutes and were audio-recorded with permission. Observation was conducted using a structured checklist that documented the condition of workshops, availability and functionality of equipment, safety standards, and the degree to which practical

sessions matched curriculum expectations. Field notes were taken during each institutional visit.

Secondary Data Sources

To supplement the primary data, secondary materials were drawn from national education reports, labour market publications, TVET policy frameworks, and relevant empirical studies, including the uploaded papers. These sources provided important background context, helped validate emerging findings, and offered system-wide insights that could not be captured through primary data alone. National reports were particularly important for understanding enrolment patterns, staffing levels, infrastructure distribution, and policy intentions across the sector.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed a structured sequence. Quantitative questionnaire data were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise frequencies, percentages, and general trends across student and instructor responses. Where appropriate, cross-tabulations were used to explore differences between institutions or respondent groups (Wickham, 2016).

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts and field notes were coded line by line, with initial codes grouped into broader themes such as infrastructure constraints, teaching limitations, curriculum relevance, industry partnerships, and public perceptions. Themes were refined through continuous comparison across participants until patterns became clear and coherent.

Once the quantitative and qualitative analyses were completed, findings from both strands were integrated. This integration allowed quantitative patterns, such as gaps in equipment or limited exposure to industry, to be explained and deepened through qualitative insights. The convergent design ensured equal weight for both data types, allowing the final interpretation to reflect a well-rounded understanding of TVET challenges.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were followed throughout the study. Permissions were obtained from all participating institutions. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time (Hasan et al., 2021). Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was ensured by avoiding the collection of identifying information. Interview recordings and notes were stored securely and used only for the purposes of this research. All secondary sources used were publicly available or already published, eliminating additional ethical risks (Connelly, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the study's findings and relates them to the questions guiding the research: the main institutional and instructional challenges facing TVET colleges, the effect of these challenges on learning and employability, and practical strategies for strengthening TVET delivery. Both quantitative and qualitative strands are drawn on throughout.

Overview

Findings from the 120 students and 30 instructors surveyed, together with interviews and observations across five institutions, are organised around training resources, teaching quality, industry exposure, perception of TVET, employability, and institutional conditions. Quantitative results are presented first, followed by qualitative insights that explain the patterns behind them, before the chapter integrates both strands to highlight convergence, divergence, and implications for Ghana's TVET system.

Quantitative Findings

The 120 student respondents were mostly aged 18–23 and predominantly male (68.3%), reflecting national TVET enrolment patterns, with fairly even representation across programme areas and year levels. Instructors were more varied: nearly half held bachelor's degrees, 26.7% held master's degrees, industry certifications were rare, and teaching experience ranged from early-career to over a decade, giving a reliable basis for interpreting the conditions students and instructors work under.

Access to functional training resources was a central concern. As Table 2 shows, 61.7% of students rated workshop equipment as inadequate, consistent with earlier findings that many Ghanaian TVET colleges operate with obsolete or insufficient equipment (Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2025, Boateng et al., 2024); only 20% were satisfied with available tools, and observations found three of the five institutions with less than half their equipment functional, with student–equipment ratios as high as 1:13. Workshop safety and space also varied, with two colleges meeting moderate safety standards and the remaining three facing congestion, outdated machines, and poor ventilation, restricting hands-on learning and undermining students' confidence in their practical skills.

Table 2
Equipment Availability

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	6	5.0%
Agree	18	15.0%
Neutral	22	18.3%
Disagree	44	36.7%
Strongly Disagree	30	25.0%
Total	120	100%

Note. Interpretation: 61.7% of students believe equipment is inadequate.

Teaching quality raised similar concerns: 56% of respondents felt instructors were overstretched and unable to give adequate individual attention during practical sessions, consistent with staffing data showing inadequate teaching numbers relative to enrolment, and with earlier findings that limited staffing and professional development weaken practical instruction (Abd Rahman et al., 2025; Nkrumah & Gyamfi, 2022). Instructor qualifications remained relatively strong overall, but only 30.7% of students agreed instructors were effective in demonstrating practical tasks, against 56% who disagreed, pointing to committed but overstretched instructors working in resource-constrained environments.

Industry exposure was one of the weakest areas: only 35% of students had participated in any industrial attachment, and even these placements were often brief with minimal hands-on tasks, echoing national assessments of weak college–industry partnerships (Ababio et al., 2024; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2019). Placement rates were somewhat higher in electrical and automotive programmes (around 45%) than in Fashion & Design or Welding & Fabrication (under 30%), and instructors confirmed that most placements arise informally through personal contacts rather than institutional partnerships, with over half reporting that industries decline attachment requests over capacity or readiness concerns.

Stigma emerged strongly in the data: 75% of students agreed TVET is viewed as inferior to general education, with female students reporting discouragement from family or community even more strongly (almost 80%), consistent with research showing TVET is still seen as a pathway for academically "weaker" students in Ghana (Adams et al., 2024; Boateng, 2025; Essel et al., 2014). Instructors and administrators echoed this, linking public attitudes to recruitment difficulty, reduced student motivation, and industry reluctance to collaborate, underscoring public perception as one of the sector's most significant non-technical barriers.

Employability findings were mixed: only 45% of students felt their training had prepared them for the job market, with hesitation tied largely to gaps in resources and industry exposure, and students at better-equipped institutions reporting higher confidence than those at poorly-equipped ones. Instructors agreed that graduates typically need further coaching or workplace orientation before reaching full competence, underlining the link between training quality, resource availability, and employability confidence.

Qualitative Findings

Interviews confirmed the scale of infrastructure challenges: more than 70% of instructors said their workshops lacked basic equipment for effective practical training, with one welding instructor noting, "we sometimes have one machine for a group of ten or more students," consistent with the observed 1:13 equipment ratios. Administrators pointed to unstable funding, with six of ten interviewed reporting delayed or abandoned procurement, and in institutions with under 45% functional equipment, instructors described practical sessions as "mostly theoretical." These accounts help explain why 61.7% of students rated equipment inadequate and echo other research linking weak infrastructure to limited hands-on skills acquisition (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Mohammed, 2020); when equipment cannot be consistently used, competency-based training becomes largely theoretical, limiting the technical proficiency graduates achieve.

Instructors were generally well qualified on paper, but 53% had not undergone structured training or upskilling in the past two years, and several described industry technology outpacing their own training. Workload was a related concern, with 60% describing their teaching load as "heavy"; one automotive instructor noted, "you can't give proper attention when you have 30 students sharing a few tools," reinforcing the survey finding that 56% of respondents felt supervision was inadequate and echoing cross-national evidence that instructor workload and limited upskilling restrict instructional quality (Joseph et al., 2025). These findings suggest instructor limitations are structural rather than a matter of effort, and they weaken the training cycle given how heavily competency-based methods depend on well-supported instructors.

Industry partners consistently felt the curriculum lagged behind workplace practice, with seven of eight estimating a gap of three to five years; one partner remarked, "students come in with theory, but the tools they've seen in school are outdated compared to what we use here," a pattern well documented in Ghanaian TVET research (Halabieh et al., 2022; Yeboah, 2021). Administrators added that curriculum reviews were slow and often disconnected from industry feedback, and that institutions frequently lacked the equipment to teach newly introduced competencies, helping explain both the low rate of industrial exposure and limited employability confidence reported earlier.

Interviews reinforced how stigma shapes students' pathways: many described entering TVET after failing to gain SHS admission, which seven of ten administrators characterised as "placement-driven enrolment, not passion-driven enrolment." Female students reported particularly strong pressure; one welding student shared, "people think I should be in a sewing class, they don't believe I can do this," mirroring the more than two-to-one male-to-female participation gap and consistent with research on gendered TVET enrolment (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Sibiya et al., 2021). These perception-driven barriers affect motivation, persistence, and professional pride from the point of enrolment onward.

Institutional leaders pointed to administrative barriers limiting delivery: over 60% of administrators reported funding delays affecting procurement and maintenance, with some institutions waiting months for budget approval, and four highlighted procurement as "too centralised," often resulting in outdated or incomplete toolkits, consistent with assessments identifying governance and procurement as major TVET bottlenecks (Abd Rahman et al., 2025; Amedorme & Fiagbe, 2013; Osei-Asibey, 2015). Instructors noted a mismatch between well-intentioned reforms, such as competency-based training, and institutional capacity, with one observing, "the policy assumes we have the tools, we don't." These governance weaknesses form the structural backdrop to most other challenges identified in the study.

Integrated Analysis

The two strands of data consistently reinforce one another. Resource shortages, teaching quality concerns, and weak industry exposure were confirmed both by survey percentages and by the reasons instructors and administrators gave in interviews, strengthening confidence that these issues are structural rather than isolated. Public perception showed similar alignment: quantitative stigma levels matched qualitative accounts of students entering TVET after being turned away from academic pathways, particularly among female students. Employability was the one area of contrast, where a minority of students expressed confidence rooted in personal apprenticeships or exposure gained outside the formal system, showing that individual success stories do not indicate that the system itself reliably produces job-ready graduates. Overall, the challenges identified are interconnected: equipment shortages weaken teaching quality, which in turn reduces student confidence and industry trust, underscoring the need for coordinated, system-level reform rather than fragmented interventions.

Institutional Comparisons

Comparing the five institutions using a combined index of infrastructure, teaching quality, industry linkages, and student satisfaction showed clear disparities, with Institution B scoring above 7.1 against 4.13 and 3.67 for Institutions D and E. Institutions with higher equipment functionality and stronger industry partnerships, such as Institution B (70% functional equipment, attachments for around 55% of students), produced smoother practical sessions and

higher employability confidence, while Institutions D and E, with functionality around 40% and minimal industry ties, saw longer waits for practice time and fewer than 30% of students gaining industrial exposure. Recent instructor training also tracked with higher-rated teaching quality, as at Institution C. These disparities confirm that institutional context strongly shapes student experience and point to the need for targeted, school-specific interventions rather than a uniform approach, consistent with national assessments of uneven TVET performance across regions (Gyampoh et al., 2025).

Alignment With Existing Literature

These findings align closely with existing research on Ghanaian and comparable TVET systems: chronic resource underinvestment, limited instructor upskilling, weak industry linkages, and persistent stigma have all been documented elsewhere, and the governance issues identified here, including delayed funding and centralised procurement, mirror broader literature on systemic bottlenecks in public TVET systems. This consistency strengthens confidence that the challenges identified are not isolated to the sampled institutions but reflect wider patterns across Ghana and similar contexts, including the persistence of stigma reported by Adams et al. (2024), providing a solid basis for the recommendations that follow.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

This chapter brings together the study's major insights, acknowledges its limitations, and proposes practical recommendations for strengthening TVET delivery in Ghana, alongside directions for further research.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods, multi-institution study of students, instructors, administrators, and industry partners reveals a TVET system with real potential constrained by structural, instructional, and perception-related barriers: more than 60% of students reported inadequate equipment, only 35% gained industrial exposure, and 75% perceived TVET as socially inferior, showing that current training conditions do not fully prepare learners for a modern labour market. These issues matter beyond the institutions studied, since TVET is central to Ghana's industrialisation and human capital agenda; persistent resource shortages, overstretched instructors, and weak industry linkages risk slowing progress in manufacturing, construction, energy, and digital sectors. By triangulating survey, interview, and observational data across five institutions in multiple regions, including a practical resource audit of workshop functionality and safety rarely captured in national assessments, this study offers a more targeted, evidence-driven basis for TVET reform than many prior studies.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The data come from five institutions across three regions and may not represent the full diversity of Ghana's TVET landscape; the quantitative component relies on self-reported responses, which can be shaped by personal perception or recall bias; and the cross-sectional design captures a single point in time rather than seasonal or longer-term change. Interviews, while rich, cannot capture every stakeholder's experience. Even so, the consistency across survey, interview, and observational evidence strengthens confidence in the conclusions drawn.

Recommendations

Improving TVET in Ghana requires coordinated action across equipment, governance, perception, and labour-market alignment, since strengthening resources alone will not resolve the other barriers identified. In the short term, institutions should restore workshop functionality, update essential tools, reduce overcrowding in practical sessions, and provide instructors with targeted refresher training. Medium-term reforms should formalise industry partnerships and keep curricula continuously aligned with fast-changing sectors such as electrical installation, automotive technology, and ICT, while expanding instructor development pathways. In the long term, Ghana needs sustainable, decentralised funding mechanisms for infrastructure renewal, a national rebranding campaign to reposition TVET as a respected career pathway, and greater use of digital and simulation-based tools where equipment shortages persist. Together, these steps offer a coherent roadmap for strengthening TVET quality and relevance.

Future Research Directions

Future research should track TVET graduates longitudinally to measure employment outcomes, skill use, and career progression, and examine the specific factors discouraging female participation in technical fields given the gender disparities observed here. Further work is also needed on the implementation and outcomes of competency-based training in resource-constrained institutions, comparisons between public, private, and informal apprenticeship systems, and how digital skills and green skills, such as renewable energy and sustainable construction, can be integrated into TVET curricula to prepare learners for future labour market demands.

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Collective Photographic Practices Reconsidered: Temporality, Witnessing, and Responsibility

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Abstract

Although photography has long involved multiple participants, collective and collaborative photographic practices are frequently discussed as if they constituted a relatively coherent field. In practice, however, such projects are organised through markedly different forms of participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. This paper examines how collective photographic practices actually work by comparing three documentary photography projects developed in Türkiye: Visual Stories from My Homeland, Photography in the Time of Corona, and Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene. Rather than treating collectivity as a stable organisational model, the study approaches it as a dynamic process shaped by what this article terms the mechanics of the collective. Based on a comparative qualitative case study, the analysis examines each project through four analytical dimensions: participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. These dimensions make it possible to compare projects that share collaborative characteristics while operating through different documentary objectives and historical conditions. The findings show that collective photographic practices cannot be adequately explained through shared authorship alone. Instead, each project organises collaboration differently, producing distinct forms of pedagogical learning, collective witnessing, and long-term documentary responsibility. Rather than proposing a universal typology, the article offers an analytical framework for understanding how different mechanics of the collective shape collaborative documentary photography. In doing so, it offers a comparative analytical vocabulary for examining collaborative documentary photography across different historical and institutional contexts.

Keywords: collective photography, collaborative documentary photography, editorial dialogue, participation, temporality

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Introduction

Although photography has long involved multiple participants, collective photographic practices have become increasingly visible within contemporary documentary culture. Community-based projects, collaborative documentary initiatives, and participatory photographic practices have expanded the ways in which photographic narratives are produced, edited, and circulated. Despite this growing diversity, collective photography is often discussed as though it represents a relatively coherent field defined primarily through shared authorship or the participation of multiple photographers (Azoulay et al., 2023; Palmer, 2017).

Such an understanding overlooks the considerable diversity of collaborative practices. Documentary projects may involve similar collaborative structures while differing substantially in how participants collaborate, how editorial decisions are negotiated, what forms of responsibility are assumed, and how projects unfold over time. Treating collective photography as a single category therefore risks obscuring the distinctive processes through which collaboration is organised.

This article suggests that collective photography is more productively understood as a set of relational practices rather than as a single organisational model. These practices are organised through different mechanics of the collective. Rather than asking whether a project is collaborative, the study asks how collaborative documentary practices actually work. To address this question, the study adopts a comparative qualitative case study of three documentary photography projects developed in Türkiye: Visual Stories from My Homeland, Photography in the Time of Corona, and Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene. Each project is analysed through four analytical dimensions: participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. These dimensions provide a common analytical vocabulary for comparing projects that pursue different documentary aims while sharing collective forms of organisation.

The comparison shows that collaborative documentary photography does not operate through a single organisational model. Instead, different projects produce distinct forms of pedagogical learning, collective witnessing, and long-term documentary responsibility depending on how participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality are organised. Rather than proposing a universal typology of collective photography, the article offers a comparative analytical framework for examining the diverse mechanics through which collaborative documentary practices are constituted.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Collective Photography Beyond Shared Authorship

Collective photography is commonly associated with the participation of multiple photographers or the production of images through collaborative processes. While these characteristics distinguish collective work from individual photographic practice, they do not adequately explain how collaboration is organised or how different forms of collectivity emerge. Projects that appear structurally similar may operate through markedly different relationships among participants, editors, institutions, and the communities they engage.

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged authorship-centred understandings of collaborative photography. Azoulay et al. (2023) argue that photographic collaboration extends

beyond the act of image-making to include the social, institutional, and editorial relationships through which photographs acquire meaning. Likewise, Palmer (2017) emphasises the collaborative nature of photographic practice, arguing that photographic production extends beyond the individual photographer to encompass multiple forms of social and professional interaction. These perspectives shift attention from photographic products to the relationships that make collaborative practice possible.

This relational understanding also resonates with Azoulay's (2008) conception of photography as a civic encounter, in which photographs emerge through ethical and political relationships among photographers, photographed subjects, and viewers. Although Bakhtin (1981) developed dialogism outside the field of photographic theory, the concept provides a useful lens for understanding editorial dialogue and collective interpretation within collaborative documentary practice. From this perspective, meaning is produced through interaction rather than isolated authorship.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that collaboration should not be treated as a stable category but as a dynamic process organised through different social relationships. The analytical challenge lies not in identifying whether photography is collaborative, but in examining how different forms of collaboration are constituted.

Understanding the Mechanics of the Collective

Building on this relational perspective, this article proposes the concept of the mechanics of the collective as an analytical framework for examining collaborative documentary photography. The concept does not describe a new theory of collective photography or a universal model of collaboration. Instead, it refers to the practical configurations through which collaborative projects are organised and sustained.

Focusing on the mechanics of the collective shifts attention away from collaboration as a descriptive label toward the processes that shape documentary practice. Similar collaborative structures may generate substantially different forms of participation, editorial interaction, responsibility, and temporal organisation. Consequently, collective photography cannot be understood solely through the number of participants or the existence of shared authorship.

The concept is proposed as a comparative analytical tool. Rather than asking whether projects belong to a single category of collective photography, it examines how different collaborative practices are organised under different historical, institutional, and documentary conditions.

Analytical Framework

To compare the three case studies, the analysis employs four interconnected analytical dimensions: participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality.

Participation refers to the ways collaborative relationships are organised, including the roles of photographers, editors, facilitators, researchers, and other contributors.

Editorial dialogue examines how documentary narratives are negotiated through critique, discussion, image selection, sequencing, collective interpretation, and editorial decision-making.

Responsibility addresses the ethical and documentary commitments that shape collaborative practice, including responsibilities toward participants, photographed communities, historical testimony, and public engagement.

Temporality considers how different understandings of time influence collaborative documentary practice. Rather than functioning merely as a chronological backdrop, temporality shapes the rhythm of participation, editorial processes, and documentary objectives.

These four dimensions are analytically distinct but closely interconnected. Together, they provide a comparative analytical framework for examining different mechanics of the collective without reducing collaborative documentary photography to a single organisational model.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative case study design to examine how collective photographic practices are organised across different documentary contexts. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the research aims to develop an analytical understanding of the diverse mechanics through which collaborative documentary projects operate.

The three case studies—Visual Stories from My Homeland, Photography in the Time of Corona, and Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene—were selected through purposeful sampling. Although all three projects are grounded in collaborative documentary photography, they represent different institutional settings, documentary objectives, and temporal structures. This variation enables a comparative examination of how collaborative practices are organised under different historical and documentary conditions.

The analysis draws on multiple qualitative sources, including project publications, editorial texts, project websites, open calls, documentary materials, and semi-structured interviews conducted by the author during doctoral research. Combining documentary sources with interview data provides insight into both the organisational structures of the projects and the perspectives of those involved in their development.

Rather than treating the cases as isolated examples, the study adopts a cross-case analytical strategy. Each project is examined through the same four analytical dimensions—participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality—allowing similarities and differences to emerge through systematic comparison. The objective is not to evaluate the projects individually but to identify how different mechanics of the collective shape collaborative documentary practice. The semi-structured interviews conducted with participating photographers and editors provide empirical depth to this analysis, offering first-hand perspectives on how these collective mechanics were experienced in practice.

Visual Stories From My Homeland: Collectivity as Pedagogical Practice

Visual Stories from My Homeland illustrates a form of collaborative documentary photography in which collectivity is organised primarily through learning. Unlike projects centred on the joint production of documentary images, collaboration was established through sustained educational interaction, collective critique, and editorial dialogue. Examined through the analytical framework developed in this article, the project illustrates how pedagogical

processes constitute a distinctive mechanics of the collective (Ulukan, 2020; Yurdalan et al., 2020).

The project brought together photographers with different levels of documentary experience through workshops, seminars, field assignments, and editorial meetings. Participation therefore extended beyond image production to include the gradual development of documentary knowledge. Learning emerged through continuous interaction among participants rather than through individual photographic practice alone.

Editorial dialogue formed the core of this collaborative process. Regular critiques, discussions, and collective evaluations encouraged participants to reflect critically on their documentary decisions while engaging with the perspectives of others. Editorial practice thus functioned not simply as a mechanism for improving individual photographs but as a shared space in which documentary understanding was collectively negotiated. As highlighted in interviews with project participants and editors, editorial discussions served not only as a critique mechanism but as an interactive space where documentary methodology was collectively developed.

Ethical responsibility likewise developed through educational interaction. Participants were encouraged to consider the implications of documentary representation, including their relationships with photographed communities and the broader social responsibilities of documentary practice. Responsibility thus emerged as an integral part of the learning process rather than as an external professional obligation.

Temporality also shaped the collective character of the project. Documentary learning unfolded gradually through repeated encounters, sustained interaction, and ongoing editorial exchange. This extended temporal structure allowed participants to revisit ideas, refine documentary approaches, and develop collaborative relationships over time. Rather than serving merely as the duration of the programme, temporality became a condition through which collective learning itself was made possible.

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that collectivity in Visual Stories from My Homeland was organised less through shared authorship than through sustained pedagogical engagement. Participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality interacted to produce a collaborative environment in which documentary practice developed collectively. The project thus illustrates how educational processes can constitute a distinctive mechanics of the collective within collaborative documentary photography.

Photography in the Time of Corona: Collectivity as Witnessing

Among the three case studies, Photography in the Time of Corona most clearly illustrates how collaborative documentary photography can function as a form of shared witnessing. Unlike Visual Stories from My Homeland, where collaboration was organised around sustained learning, this project emerged in response to an unfolding historical crisis. Its collective character was shaped not by physical co-presence but by a shared commitment to documenting uncertain and rapidly changing circumstances through distributed documentary practice (Açık Çağrı, 2020).

The project's temporal structure fundamentally influenced its collaborative organisation. Photographers worked without knowing how the pandemic would develop or which experiences would later acquire historical significance. Documentary decisions therefore had

to be made while events were still unfolding. Temporality was not simply the context of the project; it actively shaped participation, editorial dialogue, and documentary responsibility.

Participation took the form of distributed collaboration. Interview accounts further reveal that online editorial meetings played a crucial role in maintaining collective momentum, allowing photographers to navigate the spatial isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic together. Although photographers documented their local environments independently, their work was continuously integrated into a shared editorial process through online meetings, collective discussions, and digital communication. Physical separation therefore did not diminish collaboration; rather, it transformed editorial dialogue into the principal mechanism through which the mechanics of the collective were realised.

Editorial dialogue became particularly significant because documentary interpretation unfolded simultaneously with documentation itself. Participants collectively reflected on how everyday experiences of isolation, uncertainty, illness, public restrictions, and social change could be translated into documentary narratives. Editorial discussions therefore functioned not merely as evaluations of completed work but as an ongoing process through which historical experience was collectively interpreted.

Responsibility likewise acquired a distinctive character. Rather than focusing primarily on individual ethical conduct, participants shared responsibility for creating a documentary record of an unprecedented historical moment. This responsibility extended beyond producing accurate visual documentation to considering how present experiences might contribute to future collective memory.

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that the project's collective organisation was shaped by the shared negotiation of historical experience. Participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality converged to create a form of collaborative documentary practice in which witnessing itself became a collective process rather than an individual act. In this sense, the project illustrates a distinctive mechanics of the collective, in which collaboration emerged through the shared interpretation of an unfolding historical event.

Documentary Stories From the Anthropocene: Collective Responsibility as Documentary Practice

Of the three projects examined in this study, Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene places responsibility at the centre of collaborative documentary practice. Whereas the previous case studies illustrate how collectivity may be organised through pedagogical learning or collective witnessing, this project demonstrates how collaboration can be sustained through a long-term commitment to understanding and representing complex environmental transformations. Responsibility is therefore not simply one analytical dimension among others; it serves as the organising principle through which participation, editorial dialogue, and temporality become interconnected (Yurdalan et al., 2020).

Rather than limiting participation to photographers, the project brought together editors, researchers, scientists, and invited speakers within an interdisciplinary learning environment. Documentary practice developed through seminars, collective discussions, readings, and project-based exchanges that encouraged participants to integrate photographic observation with broader ecological and social perspectives. Participation therefore involved the collective production of documentary understanding as much as the production of photographs.

Reflecting on the project's interdisciplinary structure, interviewed contributors emphasized that engaging with scientific and theoretical inputs significantly altered their approach to visualizing long-term environmental processes.

Editorial dialogue likewise extended beyond conventional photographic critique. Discussions addressed not only image selection and narrative coherence but also the conceptual frameworks through which environmental issues could be understood. Scientific knowledge, documentary experience, and visual interpretation continuously informed one another, transforming editorial dialogue into a collaborative process of knowledge production rather than a purely aesthetic exercise.

Responsibility consequently assumed a broader meaning than ethical conduct during photographic production. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how documentary photography might contribute to public understanding of environmental change while acknowledging the limitations of photographic representation itself. Responsibility thus became an ongoing collective commitment to producing informed, critically grounded documentary narratives rather than simply recording visible environmental phenomena.

The project's temporal structure reinforced this orientation. Unlike documentary work responding to immediate events, the Anthropocene demands engagement with processes that unfold across decades or even generations. Participants were therefore required to connect present observations with long-term ecological transformations that often remain difficult to perceive directly. Temporality became an epistemological condition of documentary practice, shaping both what could be photographed and how documentary narratives were constructed.

Taken together, these characteristics indicate that collaboration in Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene was organised through a shared commitment to understanding complex environmental realities. Participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality operated not as separate components but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a collective documentary process. In this sense, the project illustrates a distinctive mechanics of the collective, in which collaboration is sustained through long-term documentary responsibility and interdisciplinary inquiry.

Comparative Discussion

The comparison of the three case studies demonstrates that the four analytical dimensions proposed in this article do not operate independently. Rather, participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality assume different configurations according to the documentary aims, organisational structures, and historical conditions of each project. This finding suggests that collaborative documentary photography is best understood not through a single definition of collectivity but through the changing relationships among these dimensions.

Participation, for example, serves different functions across the three projects. In Visual Stories from My Homeland, it is primarily pedagogical, supporting the development of documentary knowledge through sustained interaction. In Photography in the Time of Corona, participation becomes geographically distributed while remaining editorially connected through digital communication. In Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene, participation expands beyond photographers to include researchers, scientists, and other contributors, transforming collaboration into an interdisciplinary process of documentary inquiry. Participation therefore

varies not according to the number of contributors but according to the forms of interaction through which documentary practice is organised.

Editorial dialogue likewise performs different functions. In the pedagogical setting of Visual Stories from My Homeland, critique and discussion facilitate learning. During the pandemic, editorial dialogue enables participants to interpret an unfolding historical event collectively despite physical separation. In Documentary Stories from the Anthropocene, it becomes a site where documentary practice intersects with scientific knowledge and theoretical reflection. Editorial dialogue therefore functions not merely as an evaluative procedure but as a central process through which collective meaning is produced.

Responsibility likewise assumes different forms across the three case studies. In the first project, it develops through documentary education and ethical reflection. In the second, it is closely connected to the collective production of historical testimony during an ongoing crisis. In the third, it expands to encompass the long-term social and environmental implications of documentary representation. Responsibility therefore emerges not as a fixed ethical principle but as a relational documentary practice shaped by the objectives and context of each collaborative project.

The comparison also highlights the significance of temporality. Rather than serving as a neutral background, different temporal structures actively shape collaborative documentary practice. The extended duration of a learning programme, the immediacy of documenting a rapidly unfolding pandemic, and the long timescales associated with environmental transformation each generate distinctive forms of participation, editorial dialogue, and responsibility. Temporality therefore influences not only when documentary collaboration takes place but also how it is organised.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of this article. Collective photographic practices are more productively understood as relational documentary practices organised through different mechanics of the collective than as a unified category defined by shared authorship or the participation of multiple photographers. Examining participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality as interconnected analytical dimensions provides a comparative analytical framework for understanding how different collaborative documentary projects operate under different historical, institutional, and documentary conditions.

Conclusion

This article began with a simple but often overlooked question: How do collective photographic practices actually work? Rather than approaching collaborative photography as a coherent category defined by shared authorship, the study examined the organisational processes through which collaborative documentary projects are constituted.

Drawing on a comparative analysis of three documentary photography projects developed in Türkiye, the study showed that collaborative practices are organised through different configurations of participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality. Although all three projects involve collective forms of documentary production, they differ substantially in how these dimensions interact and in the documentary purposes they serve. Collectivity therefore emerges not as a stable organisational model but as a relational documentary practice shaped by specific historical, institutional, and documentary conditions.

The principal contribution of this article is the proposal of the mechanics of the collective as a comparative analytical perspective. Rather than introducing a new typology of collaborative photography, the concept provides a way of examining how different forms of collectivity are organised across documentary projects. By focusing on the relationships among participation, editorial dialogue, responsibility, and temporality, this analytical framework offers a more precise vocabulary for analysing collaborative documentary practices without reducing them to a single organisational model.

Beyond the three case studies examined here, this analytical perspective may also contribute to future research on participatory, community-based, and interdisciplinary photographic projects in different cultural contexts. As collaborative documentary practices continue to evolve in response to social, technological, and environmental change, greater attention to the mechanics of the collective may provide a more nuanced understanding of photography as a relational documentary practice.

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

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language editing, stylistic refinement, and improving clarity during manuscript preparation. The conceptual framework, research design, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the author's own.

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Interactional Identity Formation: Evidence From Contemporary Comparative Religious Contexts

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Abstract

In this paper, insights from ritual and anthropology are applied to considerations of the ritual and social framework of Buddhist/Daoist practices of self-emptying and tradition-specific modes of realization of the divine, including visual actualization, rupture, and embodied intensification. Comparative ethnographic analysis of a Nepali Gelug (*Tib. dge lugs*) Buddhist retreat and a Formosan Daoist–Kagyu (*Tib. bka' brgyud*) retreat reveals how interaction rituals are assembled, enacted, regulated, and stabilized through the coordinated deployment of bodies, discourse, authority, and cosmology. Examined practices focus on interaction rituals (IRs), emotional energy (EE) and ritual engagement through disciple education and embodied responses. In both retreats, disciple-disciple interactions arise as significant points of EE. Knowledge transfer is found to extend from the core teacher/guru, and is actively reinforced, reinterpreted and affirmed in inter-disciple IRs. While most intense EE arises solely from a disciple's direct encounter with the divine in embodied/meditation practice, all such encounters observed did entail some level of legitimization and/or judgement by more senior gurus/teachers. This control of affect and encounter can be experienced by the disciple in deeply positive or negative manners, pulling some more deeply into the ritual community while pushing other individuals toward rupture with the community. These findings contribute to broader debates on interaction ritual theory, illustrating how emotional energy is both generated and actively regulated within certain intensive ritual environments; how ritual legitimacy and communal cohesion are sustained under conditions of affective excess and internal plurality; and, how these conditions manifest in two very different religious retreat environments.

Keywords: social interaction ritual, emotional energy, identity, Buddhism, Gelug, Kagyu

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Introduction[1]

A group of disciples enter a wide, southeast-facing gompa. Incense wafts from multiple burners staged before multiple deities. One disciple walks to a side cabinet, procures a mat and scripture, and finds herself a place facing the dharma throne. The other disciples notice and follow suit. This is the start of a silent retreat, but the participants have not officially "begun": many are talking softly. One middle-aged man (disciple 1) is having difficulty getting down on the mat; an older disciple (disciple 2) shows him how. Several disciples are now seated on mats. One thirty-something woman (disciple 7) turns to another (disciple 13) and suggests adding an extra mat for comfort: disciple 13 thanks her, rises and retrieves the extra mat. Encouraged, disciple 7 suggests the same to another disciple (disciple 9). Disciple 9 thanks disciple 7 with the words *dze-su-yid-rang* (lit. "I rejoice in your virtue"; here, meaning *thank you*); but disciple 9 remains seated. When the instructor-monk enters, all participant-disciples have arranged themselves on mats and are ready to begin.

This series of social interaction rituals (SIRs), repeated over and over in Buddhist retreats across Asia, helps to establish a community among the individuals in the silent retreat. Similar from one temple to another and one tradition to another, these simple exchanges are ritualistic: an individual initiates an exchange with one or more interlocutors; a response is expected. These SIRs demand established responses: "amitoufou" (Chinese), a simple "thank you," "dze-su-yid-rang" (Tibetan). All carry the same communicative weight: acceptance, with grace, of a ritualized instruction related to the retreat context. Interlocutors respond with encouragement, thanks and appreciative gestures even when the advice offered is unnecessary. These interactions are not religious rituals; these SIRs help to establish social identities and relationships within and between individuals in a newly formed "community": the retreat group. In the space of only minutes, identity, roles, and potential bonds already begin to form.

From the earliest moments of the retreat, *identity* is established. Consider the older disciple 2 who instructs middle-aged disciple 1 on how to reach the mat more easily. This SIR is comprised of a series of interactions: an offer "here's how….", an encouraging smile from disciple 1, an instruction, disciple 1's answering movements, disciple 2's words of encouragement, and, once both are down, affirmation of ease by both. These interactions establish identities – the shared difficulty of aging bodies and the distinct identity of disciple 2 as a compassionate, wiser and more practiced disciple whose body is disciplined by frequent, long-term meditation practice. The actions of disciple 7 likewise carry identity markers: wise carer and instructor. Both of her initiated interactions are answered with a *thanks* that acknowledges helpful and compassionate intent. She is established as wiser in her first interaction with disciple 13; in the second interaction, this "wise carer" identity is delimited as disciple 9 appears to be more physically entrained both in meditation posture and in Tibetan language: his Tibetan *thanks* suggests a deeper level of Buddhist training. Disciple 9 thus establishes his own identity as potentially more senior. All this, the group learns through three very simple, twenty-to-sixty-second SIRs.

Identity Building[2]

As the retreat progresses, identities develop and evolve, both within the group and within the greater community of the Nepali Buddhist compound. Let us consider the most basic level of

[1]DIR: R1 context GR1.
[2]DIR: R1 context GR2-16, 86.

identity formation: the identity of participant as retreat participant. Engagement in the retreat establishes each individual as a member both within the *ad hoc* retreat community and within the greater *international* Gelug community. Each *ad hoc* retreat community also builds a collective identity vis-à-vis the sangha present in the retreat compound. For this Nepali Buddhist compound, participants in silent retreats are clearly identified and respected as "silent". They are provided a "silent" area in which to take meals; they are not approached with questions. And, if approached, retreat participants are expected to signal their silent status either by completely ignoring the approach or by a gesture signalling rejection – one raised palm. Because silent retreat status is normal and expected, this is normally sufficient to attain respect for silent status by the individuals within the greater Buddhist compound. The present retreat was an extreme exception that eventually brought a rare case of censure from the instructor-monk.[3]

Rule-breaking and SIRs of censure/remonstrance. The attendees completing this retreat were loosely vetted through an application process to ensure all had previously completed at least one shorter (3-5 day) meditation retreat; and, had understood the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. The purpose of the prerequisite was clearly stated in the application: to ensure those attending had the embodied awareness and discipline to endure both the emotional and physical strain associated with long-term silence and *sitting* (being seated in meditation). In this particular retreat, these benefits did not manifest.

Issues arose from day 2 of the retreat. On day 1, individuals had volunteered to lead yoga training for the health of all participants. Yoga practice began day 2 immediately following the one-hour Q&A session; this was the only hour of the day when retreat participants were allowed to speak. Silence should resume at the end of Q&A. It did, for a few dozen steps. On entering the yoga studio, oral instructions began and conversation continued for the entire yoga session. After twenty or so minutes, first one, then a second disciple gestured for silence. Ignored, they withdrew to practice in silence. Others joined them. On day 3, yoga practice conversations became more animated. The silent disciples again practiced separately in silence, with a fifth person joining. During Q&A on day 4, one disciple made a pointed inquiry about silence; the response: silence should be maintained outside of the Q&A period. From day 4, the "quiet" disciples formed a silent taiqi session. The issue was effectively resolved. The retreat group split in two: each sub-group developed distinct identities, particularly vis-à-vis the greater Buddhist compound.

Identity and Censure[4]

The continued silence rule-breaking eventually led to censure on the morning of day 8. The disciples, as usual, gathered for their morning meditation and visualization session. The instructor-monk entered with two senior monks and had a short, soft exchange. One senior monk remained for several minutes and silently supervised as the instructor-monk approached the assembly, guided the disciples through a Vajrasattva purification, and delivered a teaching on purification. This was followed by a story from the life of Manjushri, a deeply flawed individual who repented and eventually became one of the Gelugpa tradition's most revered Bodhisattvas. The instructor-monk then directly addressed the participants' failure to maintain silence; carefully instructed one of the disciples (a talker) to read the regulations from the retreat's introductory pamphlet. The instructor-monk then asked two pointed questions. The

[3] This is the only case of direct censure this researcher has witnessed at this compound over more than 20 years.
[4] DIR: R1 context GR86.

first question, to a member of the yoga group (disciple 13 from day 1) – *How do you settle the mind prior to beginning yoga practice?* – failed to elicit a response. The second question was directed to disciple 9 (from day 1), a taiqi participant. Disciple 9 demonstrated with action, not words, a taiqi pose for settling the mind prior to beginning motions. No additional words of remonstrance were uttered; instead, the instructor-monk took action to absolve the group's "unpure" actions by leading a tri-fold Vajrasattva purification session, a physically exhausting practice. This was followed, unexpectedly, by a Medicine Buddha practice.[5]

Censure, Identity, Cohesion[6]

These practices extended the day 8 morning session well into the breakfast break, leaving the participants thoroughly, but not universally, humbled. Two less-experienced disciples (including disciple 13 from day 1) attempted to engage others on the way to breakfast; their attempts at conversation were met with silence.

The disciples followed one another to breakfast, partook of whatever remained of the meal, and left to complete their assigned chores in the kitchen. There, they learned they'd been replaced by participants of another group, who'd registered for another type of training. These disciples later talked about the looks they received from some members of the community and the friendly pats received by kindly nuns. This intensified their feelings of embarrassment and their awareness of the breadth of that exposure. These disciples continued to communicate their embarrassment in exchanges immediately following the retreat and even two years after.[7] The instructor-monk never referred to these events again; nor did any of the senior monks or nuns.

Identity, Affirmation, Widening Inclusion[8]

Ramifications of these events may have influenced interactions observed day ten, the final "half-day" of the retreat. During lunch that day, the instructor-monk approached one of the taiqi practitioners (disciple 10). She was invited to join the renunciants' table, where several monks and two nuns were seated. When the others had left the table, the instructor-monk asked disciple 10 about her Buddhist training and invited her for a counselling session during which he helped to guide her in her future goals. Later communications revealed that disciples 2, 4, 6, 9 and 10 (all Taiqi group disciples) were all approached in this manner. Two received personal divination services; all but one of the taiqi practitioners were invited to more advanced trainings. Later that same day, there was a sponsored birthday celebration for one of the lamas, and a tea ceremony; disciples 2, 6, 9 and 10 were present. Later communications revealed that these individuals received invitations to this ritual event from a variety of community members, including the instructor-monk, a junior monk, two nuns, and an individual engaged in the teaching session discussed above. While not all members of the yoga group (disciples 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11-16) continued to communicate with this researcher, none that *did* communicate reported inclusion in the main gompa ceremony. These limited invitations suggest active observation, evaluation and control of disciples in Gelug retreat environments. Those disciples who had engaged with the taiqi group appear to have been identified as having demonstrated capacity to engage with higher-level instruction and training.

[5] The explicit purpose of the Medicine Buddha practice was not explained; given the healing mission of the Medicine Buddha, this observer understood the practice as likewise cathartic. DIR: R1 GR.PI.4, 16, 23, 89.
[6] DIR: R1 context GR97-112.
[7] DIR: R1.GR.PI.4, 16, 23, 89.
[8] DIR: R1.

Emotional Efficacy, IR Chains and the Regulation of Experience[9]

Official contemporary Gelug and Kagyu communities welcome those who *request* teaching. During the Gelug retreat, requests for additional training or vow-taking were generally accommodated. The bond of vow-taking creates IR chains between the monk and his vow-takers that can extend for years. Divination, counselling and other forms of guidance also form continued disciple-initiated engagements. However, *invitations* are also extended for those demonstrating engagement. Such was noted above: on the final day of Gelug training, certain disciples were invited to seek out the monk for individual, personalized counseling and divination. These duties illustrate the monk's role as caretaker of the attendees' spiritual progress as well as their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. The instructor-monk's attendance to disciples' physical wellbeing (ensuring yoga or Taiqi training for physical health) was also noted.[10]

Interactions with the divine are also maintained, interpreted according to the dharma, and regulated. An example arose on the fifth day of the Gelug retreat. The instructor-monk guided the disciples through a powerful walking visualization practice that allowed disciples direct access to the divine. The experience generated euphoria in several of the participants. Perceiving this, the monk-instructor called the disciples back to their seats by ringing a singing bowl. He then addressed these issues of euphoric experience in a Q&A session. The monk-instructor discussed emotions that the disciples might be feeling and the need to rein them in. During the Q&A, disciple 12 repeatedly rejected the monk's framing of euphoric experience.[11] He responded patiently with a direct response, analogies, and finally a quote from scripture. Disciples 2 and 3 assisted. Disciple 12 began shaking and crying in visible distress. She exited the gompa with disciple 7. The Q&A continued. Disciple 10 reported that she had experienced auras and questioned the validity of this in her visualization; the group discussed this until disciple 7 gestured from a side door. The monk ended the session and went to assist disciple 12, who was still in distress. At the monk's behest, three disciples helped disciple 12 to the Buddhist clinic. When she returned to practice the following day, she received nods and words of encouragement. As for the topic of auras and visualization, this discussion continued amongst the disciples following the retreat.

This extended episode begins with the regulation of spiritual experience in a context of intense emotional energy (EE) and follows the responses of two disciples: the first response was one in which the attempt at regulation of ecstatic experience was accompanied by rejection and extreme emotional distress; the second was one in which the attempt at regulation is explored and embraced. These two responses complicate Collins' (2004) account of EE, in which successful SIRs generate EE and EE motivates sustained chains of SIRs. In this case, we see two very different interaction sequences. In the first, disciple 12 has just experienced an intense emotional connection with the divine; her repeated challenge indicates that the expected affirmation of this experience has failed to arise. Instead, the monk's discussion runs counter to her own appreciation of the experience. Disciple 12 breaks off communication. This occurs twice. The first instance occurs on day 5, when she is taken to the clinic; with encouragement from her peers, she returns to the retreat and completes the ten days. The second rupture begins at the end of the retreat. The disciple departs at the completion of the retreat and, in the long term, ruptures with the dharma group.

[9] DIR: R1.
[10] DIR: R1.GR.NRE.1.
[11] Disciple 12 is recorded as responding "No" sixteen times while contesting the instructor-monk's interpretation.

The second disciple (Disciple 10) also experiences euphoria. Her reaction to the imposed interpretation follows a different trajectory. Disciple 10 asks for definition of her own experience. Unlike disciple 12, disciple 10 embraces the teaching and works to self-regulate her emotions. She has been properly "disciplined." Later, disciple 6 and several other peers affirm the status of disciple 10 as a legitimate aura seer.

A Kagyu retreat provides comparative scope to these dynamics. This retreat, a two-day experience at a Buddhist center in Taiwan, was distinct from the Gelug retreat in several manners. First, the main guru held lineage positions in multiple religious lineages, Kagyu, Daoist and Chan. Second, the instructors were senior lay disciples, not renunciant monks. Third, the number of senior disciples guiding the retreat exceeded the number of participants (18). Fourth, the levels of Buddhist training among the participants varied widely, from several months to several decades of study. Fifth, apart from a single, one-hour sermon given by the guru, participants were split up into small, rotating groups: the smallest groups included a single participant and two senior disciples. A final and very helpful difference was the inclusion of "reflection" diaries. Participants later shared their diaries in great detail, providing this researcher with ample data and detailed descriptions of the participants' own internal experiences.

During the final, detailed sharing of diaries, participants' comments revolved around two contrasting themes: expressions of enthusiasm and enjoyment on the one hand; expressions of confusion or uncertainty on the other. When participants were asked to identify elements of Buddhism that they had learned, most responded that they did not know or that they had learned contradictory information. When participant 1 was asked to describe the four noble truths, he answered, "I don't know"; when asked about his favorite part of the retreat, he chose Taiqi walking and showed a picture of a bright yellow sun, his expression of how he felt when participating in the activity.[12] Participant 2 drew a butterfly to express her feeling about Taiqi walking, also her favorite activity; when asked about the four noble truths, she was able to name the first two but was confused about the third and fourth. Although both participants indicated positive emotional engagement in the activity, their responses indicated confusion over the content or meaning of most teachings.[13] These responses were reflected in thirty-eight percent of responses; of the remaining participants responding to these questions, all had prior knowledge. Of the eighteen participants in the retreat, twelve ruptured with the Buddhist group, despite expressions of positive engagement in the retreat. This subsequent rupture fits uneasily in Collins' framework for EE.[14,15]

EE emerged in a highly dynamic educational ecology of both kinetic and doctrinal teachings. Apart from the initial doctrinal teachings given by the guru, all activities were conducted in rotating groups: a discussion-and-reading circle (basic dharma readings), a philosophy discussion circle (on the circle of consumption), various specialized teachings offered only to

[12] Participants were instructed to create an image of how they felt: this was not a spontaneous creative expression.
[13] The exception was kinetic practices: most participants expressed little or no confusion over the kinetic teachings such as yoga, sitting positions or taiqi movements.
[14] In Collins (2004), emotional energy (EE) forms a motivating force for continued engagement in Ritual Chains. Successful social interaction rituals create an emotional response. EE draws individuals into repeated engagement in these social interactions, forming chains of rituals that connect individuals and social groups. The opposite is also true: social interaction ritual failure denies EE and individuals fall away from the interactions and their ritual chains.
[15] Implications of these findings for the study of education and ritual, while potentially significant, are not addressed in the scope of this paper. Compare, for example, with studies of Phelan, Olitsky and Sauren.

the most advanced participants,[16] and numerous kinetic teachings: yoga, Taiqi walking, walking meditation and qigong. When naming their favorite activities, an advanced (non-senior) participant (P3) named two "favorites": walking meditation and a purification practice engaged in by only advanced (non-senior) participants. Two more advanced participants (P4, P5) favored a philosophical world-building teaching that had grown out of the philosophy discussion circle. Excluding four non-committed responses, the remaining participants favored kinetic training. The dynamic environment of the Kagyu retreat and the varied nature of the participants' backgrounds help to explain these responses.

Let us consider our two philosophers (P4, P5). These individuals are specialists in religious history; their academic entrainment allowed easy grasp of scholarly material disseminated during the training. While the senior disciples attempted to reset the sessions to a more basic level each 30 minutes when new groups rotated in, these intellectuals continued to push the discussion to higher levels leaving other participants with little ability to engage. For scholars, this type of interaction closely resembles similar scholarly SIRs in which collaborative interpretation, critique and debate generate engagement; such engagement conforms to a scholar's definition of successful IRs: intense EE would naturally emerge. The same activity is experienced in a different way for those participants left unable to engage: for them, EE would *not* naturally emerge.

Most of the remaining respondents prioritized the kinetic training. These kinetic trainings employ a combination of kinetic and vocal IRs, with the senior disciples correcting with simple instructions followed immediately with affirmation and praise: "Lift your chin… good. Yes, just like that"; "Pull in your chin. Good, good."; "Lift your spine. Yes. Good." Where more detailed instruction was needed, metaphors were used to help: "Imagine a thread extending up through the top of your head and anchoring you to the sky." These instructions persisted throughout the Taiqi walking and yoga trainings. These SIRs between the senior disciples and the participants all followed a familiar pattern: instruction > participant movement > praise and senior disciple observation > nod > praise, a simple but complete series of repeated SIR successes. These repeated successful SIRs should encourage continued engagement both in the activity and in the group at large.

The Taiqi training and walking meditation evolved in somewhat similar instructional ecologies. Walking meditation is exactly what it sounds like: it is meditation, which requires focus and entrainment of heart/mind; it is walking, which requires movement. In these sessions, many expressed uncertainty about how to focus their attention, what meditation actually meant, and how to maintain balance given the unfamiliar toe-heel step and repeated insistence that participants focus the eyes on the tip of the nose. Several participants repeatedly lost balance; some chose to simply sit out that session. Eventually, the community's most senior disciple stepped away from her duties in the office[17] to assist in one of these sessions: her instructions were simplified, specific, and less demanding. "Focus your attention on the breath going in and out of your belly." When the participant couldn't walk toe to heel, she dismissed the need for

[16] In the context of the Kagyu retreat discussion, the phrase "advanced participants" refers to individuals who have several years of Buddhist philosophy and/or training but who have not formally taken vows with the Center's guru and become his disciples. The term "senior disciples" designates lay disciples who have both taken vows with the Center's guru and are designated "senior" by peers and the guru himself. Senior disciples did not name themselves "senior". In four years of observation of this religious community, this naming consistently extended from the guru himself; only then did other disciples designate their peers "senior".
[17] This "senior" senior disciple was not part of the team of senior disciples organizing the retreat; she had other duties.

that as well as the instruction to focus her eyes on her nose. Observation suggested other participants in that session opted to follow whichever instruction they preferred; they completed the thirty minutes without struggle. However, when returning for a second session, participants received conflicting instructions and an argument ensued, impelling two senior disciples to step away from another training to mediate the conflict. The qigong training followed a similar trajectory.

The mixed participant pool helps explain the different distributions of EE observed during the retreat. Most participants migrated toward those kinetic trainings that relied on simple cycles of instruction, embodied response, observation, affirmation and repeated success. Participants could assess their own performance and receive almost immediate affirmation from senior disciples. In both scholarly and kinetic trainings, repeated successful IRs generated positive affect. Where kinetic instruction slipped or became more abstract (walking meditation, qigong), IR failure resulted; participants' expressions of EE diminished accordingly.

An intriguing empirical tension arises. Following Collins' logical framework, successful IRs generate EE. EE generates repeated engagement in IRs. These repeated engagements form IR chains that bind participants with their communities. In the Kagyu retreat environment, these expectations are met; yet IR chains did not form as expected. Of the eighteen participants in the retreat, twelve ruptured with the Buddhist group immediately following the retreat, despite expressions of positive engagement in the retreat. Two more ruptured with the community within ten months; a final participant, within the next three years, leaving only three with continued engagement with the Kagyu community beyond the initial three years. These subsequent ruptures fit uneasily in Collins' framework. Comparative consideration of the Gelug retreat may help to provide some clarity.

Let us return to that awkward moment of censure in the Gelug context. Rules regulating retreat discipline have been broken by a number of disciples. The instructor-monk reiterates previously disseminated rules, questions the two exercise groups without accusing individuals, then leads the group in addressing the karmic burden generated. No individual criticism is expressed. No further censure is given. Now, let us turn to the Kagyu retreat. Participants are taking turns reading a Buddhist story. The story references Gridhrakuta (Vulture Peak). The reader mispronounces the name. A senior disciple snickers. A second participant corrects the reader; she is also incorrect. This generates a sarcastic comment from a second senior disciple and a laugh from another. A third senior disciple provides the correct pronunciation and explains the name. This and similar interactions are repeated every time a participant appears to misunderstand or mispronounce words from the reading. While the third senior disciple handles things compassionately, the other two respond with sarcasm and snickering. Only in reading sessions attended by the two scholars (participants 4 and 5) do these interactions fail to arise. In both cases (Gelugs, Kagyu) an authority figure attempts to discipline the boundaries of orthodoxy, be it rule breaking or the not-so-simple pronunciation of a word. Let us understand clearly that both the mispronunciation of a sacred word (a sacred place-name) and the breaking of a retreat rule are understood to generate karmic debt; therefore, both incidences are not without spiritual significance. In the Gelug case of euphoria, even the boundaries of one's own experience and interpretation of one's inner world are subject to regulation.

Disciplining the Mind

Disciplining the mind is an acknowledged goal of Buddhist meditation and meditation retreats. But when discipline leads to negative affect, does rupture automatically ensue? Was the public

criticism of the Kagyu retreat participants a deciding factor in the high rates of rupture? All responding participants expressed positive EE; yet, most were subjected to criticism, if not of themselves then of others. During a discussion that followed the retreat, the guru-led sangha mocked various individuals for lack of knowledge or poor mastery of the teachings. But not all individuals (guru, disciples) engaged with the participants in a critical manner. Consider, for example, the third senior disciple during the reading session or the actions of the center's *most senior* senior disciple who assisted during the walking meditation. These dynamics suggest that there is not a single trajectory leading from EE to successful integration with the community; nor one that leads directly from negative affect to rupture. Instead, I suggest that several parallel dynamics coincide, among these the willingness of the participant/disciple to internalize standards of group orthodoxy, including orthodox interpretations of one's own experience (as seen in the Gelug visualization interpretation), standards of normative retreat behavior, and standards of reading and vocalization (as seen in the Kagyu reading sessions).

The opposite may also be observed. Following the retreat, continuing, longitudinal analysis of disciple-disciple interactions suggests that rupture with Gelug authority does not necessitate rupture of the ritual chains established during the retreat. Certain disciple-disciple IR chains continued even after one or more of the disciples permanently separated from the Gelug community. These observations suggest that IR chains continue to evolve. Longitudinal ethnographic observation therefore reveals dynamics of continuity, differentiation and rupture that remain largely invisible in studies confined to static environments (a religious retreat, a classroom) (Cf. Turner 1969).

Conclusions

While multiple vectors of consideration have been raised, I focus discussion on five significant findings.

First, both retreats cultivate and direct EE through disciplined embodied practice. Whether through Gelug visualization and engagement with the divine or Kagyu kinetic training and meditation, individuals learn through repeated cycles of embodied action, correction, observation and affirmation. These practices provide powerful opportunities for emotional engagement and for the internalization of tradition-specific standards of conduct, thought and experience. Longitudinal observation, however, suggests that such internalization proceeds unevenly and follows no single trajectory toward either participation or rupture with the religious community.

Second, these disciplined bodies do not adhere to the concepts of a “front” or “back” stage (Goffman 1967). Retreat participants are expected to maintain ritual discipline *continuously* because *all* space is treated as sacred (Eliade 1961). Likewise, all action is divine and sacred action. This understanding is clearly revealed in the Nepali retreat: when SIRs of rebuke fail to re-establish sacred silence, the group splits. The non-silent peers are treated as not-present: following the retreat close, one disciple remarked that the rule violators were “not [really] present”: this opinion was agreed upon by all, and followed with the words “nyir-shei jik-pa zhi-war shok” (may they be safe, peaceful and free of suffering). This traditional SIR effectively closed that topic of conversation on a positive note without necessity of assigning blame.

Third, these retreats sorted participants. In the Gelug context, sorting was effected through invitations to more advanced trainings and personalized guidance (invitation to a personalized

prognostication). In the Kagyu-Daoist context, intellectually advanced participants effectively self-sorted, providing themselves greater scholarly satisfaction; additional and intentional sorting occurred for two advanced meditation practitioners who were given two-on-one visualization and purification teachings. In both the Kagyu and Gelug contexts, individuals deemed ready received invitations for more advanced training.

Fourth, EE is potentially predictive of community trajectories; it is not deterministic. EE operates alongside other trajectories, among them participants' willingness to internalize orthodox interpretations of personal and emotionally charged engagements with the divine. The findings of Collins, Ball and others are correct to emphasize that successful SIRs encourage continued engagement; however, longitudinal data suggest that these ritual chains need not remain confined to the institutional contexts in which they formed. They may continue to connect individuals and groups of participants through continued peer-level relationships, form new relational networks and persist even after individuals rupture with the original institutional authority.[18]

Fifth, this discussion demonstrates that EE is not simply generated during intensive retreats—it is actively regulated. Interactions with gurus, senior adepts, monks and peers all help to shape how practitioners understand, legitimate, and stabilize powerful religious experiences. EE is actualized in the assembly, enactment, regulation, and stabilization of apprehension and the coordinated deployment of bodies. Discourse and authority are tools through which SIRs actualize belief, engagement and apprehension of the divine (cf. Zito 1997; see also Tambiah 1979). While direct encounters with the divine remain the greatest source of emotional intensity, these experiences are consistently re-interpreted through communal authority. EE thus becomes both a mechanism of spiritual development, identity creation, and conformity, and a mechanism through which religious communities sustain themselves, differentiate practitioners, and sometimes produce rupture. More broadly, these findings suggest that interaction ritual theory can explain not only the production of EE but also its ongoing regulation within intensive religious retreat environments.

Author's Note

1. All data in this paper derive from field notes, participant interviews, and observations conducted by the author. Supporting datasets for this article are prepared for deposit in Humanities Commons CORE. Contact the corresponding author for access. Dataset identifier-references (DIRs) are found in footnotes.
2. In this paper, the term "social interaction ritual" (SIR) follows Collins.

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

This paper composition, design, data collection and analysis were completed without the aid of AI. AI was used in editing/copyediting of the already-composed paper. Any errors are my own.

[18] These continuing peer-level relationships also resonate with anthropological observations that religious life is sustained through enduring religious and social networks extending beyond individual institutions. (cf. Dean 1998; Jordan 1969.)

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Letters That Preschoolers Write Most Often

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Abstract

This study focuses on analyzing letter writing in preschool-aged children, with an emphasis on gender differences and the relationship between letter formation and the ability to write one's own name. The research was conducted with the aim of supporting the achievement of performance standards in letter recognition. The theoretical basis is the concept of emergent literacy, according to which knowledge of letters is a significant predictor of later reading and writing skills. The study had a quantitative design. The research sample consisted of 199 children aged 3 to 6 years attending kindergartens in Slovakia. Data were collected using an early writing test and analyzed via quantitative content analysis. The results showed that children most frequently produced the letters A, O, I, M, N, K, E, while letters such as X, W, Q, Y occurred rarely. These findings highlight the importance of graphomotor simplicity and the frequency of letter occurrence in the linguistic environment. A key finding is the statistically significant difference between children capable of writing their names and those who lack this ability. Children who wrote their names achieved a higher average number of written letters compared to the others. The results suggest that writing one's own name can serve as an indicator of the level of pre-reading skills. The study contributes to our understanding of the early development of written language in the Slovak context and has practical implications for educational assessment. A limitation is the quantitative approach and sample size; future research should also consider qualitative aspects of writing.

Keywords: preschool-aged children, qualitative content analysis, early written expressions, writing letters, writing proper names

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to present the results of research on letter writing among preschool-aged children, with a focus on differences between girls and boys and the relationship between letter writing and writing one's own name. The study was developed as part of a project funded by the Cultural and Educational Grant Agency of the Slovak Republic titled "Games with Letters in Preschool Education." Development of methodological materials integrating educational areas (No. 001UMB-4/2025). The rationale for the project and this study stems from the performance standard in the State Educational Program for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens (2022, p. 35): Identifies some letters of the alphabet, which is located in the educational area Language and Communication, in the sub-area Written Language – Understanding the formal characteristics of written language. Research-based knowledge can support effective pedagogical support for the development of children's written language as early as preschool age.

Literature Review

During this stage of development, children gain experience with written language through contact with print and, accordingly, acquire varying knowledge of letters and how they are used in words and sentences. They begin to use written language for practical communication.

They gradually master the letters of the alphabet in accordance with their individual aptitudes, needs, and interests, as well as depending on the stimuli and demands of the environment in which they live (Lipnická, 2009). Children's early written expressions demonstrate knowledge of the letters of the alphabet as well as letter-writing skills. Knowledge of the alphabet—that is, knowledge of letter names—indicates emerging reading skills, while knowledge of letter shapes indicates emerging orthographic skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Alphabet knowledge upon entering school is one of the strongest predictors of conventional writing skills (Hooper et al., 2010) and long-term academic success (Stevenson & Newman, 1986).

Several researchers have focused on children's ability to write letters of the alphabet. Lewis & Lewis (1964) found that at the beginning of first grade, children wrote some letters easily (L, O, I, V, C) and others with relative difficulty (Q, Z, U, J, K). Puranik et al. (2013) found that the letters C, E, S, I, O, V, X were relatively easy for first-grade children, while the letters Q, Z, G, D, N, J, K, U were the most difficult. Other researchers have studied letter writing in preschool-aged children. Ritchey (2008) described the ability of kindergarten children to write uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet. The uppercase letters A, O, X, L were the easiest for children to write, whereas K, Q, C, S, Z, G were more difficult for them. Worden and Boettcher (1990) studied letter writing in children aged 4 to 7 years. Four-year-olds found it easiest to write O, A, H, L, T, and I, while five-year-olds found it easiest to write O, A, T, X, C, F. Children in both age groups had difficulty writing the letters D, G, J, Y, Z. Puranik et al. (2013) found that preschool-aged children found it easiest to write ten letters: O, L, A, B, X, T, H, I, E, P, while they found ten letters more difficult to write: J, K, Z, G, Q, V, U, Y, R, N. They also found that girls' overall scores in letter writing were higher than those of boys.

Children most often write letters that are part of their own names. A child's name is often their first written word. The ability to write names is a good indicator of print and alphabet knowledge in preschool-aged children (Puranik et al., 2011). Writing names correlates with knowledge of the alphabet. The letters of names account for approximately 40% of children's randomly written characters (Bloodgood, 1999). Welsch et al. (2003) also noted this based on

their research. They stated verbatim that name-writing representations predominantly reflect knowledge related to print. Welsch et al. (2003) confirmed that children's knowledge of the alphabet and print concepts accounted for 36% of the variance in name-writing outcomes. Puranik and Lonigan (2011) demonstrated through their research findings that knowledge of letters was strongly associated with children's ability to write their names. Name writing was uniquely associated with phonological awareness even after accounting for knowledge of letter sounds. Drouin and Harmon (2009) found that although name writing was related to letter knowledge (letter name and sound), there were discrepancies between their knowledge of name writing and their knowledge of specific letters in their names. This finding led to the conclusion that writing names did not provide beginning writers with any particular advantage in terms of alphabet knowledge. Writing names may thus reflect mechanical knowledge of letters rather than conceptual knowledge of letters.

Research Problem and Research Questions

In our study, we focused on the graphomotor skill of writing letters of the alphabet without assessing the ability to read what was written. Specifically, we were interested in which letters of the alphabet (without diacritics) children write most frequently and whether they write mainly those letters that also appear in their own names.

Through our research, we therefore answered two research questions:

RQ1: Which letters appear most frequently in the written expressions of preschool-aged children?

RQ2: What is the relationship between the letters they know how to write and the writing of their own names?

Research Methods and Ethics

The research was conducted using a quantitative approach. The research design was developed and approved as part of a scientific project (KEGA No. 001UMB-4/2025). The research sample consisted of 199 preschool-aged children between 3 and 6 years old (mean age = 5.05 years, SD = 0.928, median = 5 years; 100 girls and 99 boys). All attended kindergartens in various regions of Slovakia.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Children in the Study Sample

Age of the children	N	%
3	15	7.5 %
4	32	16 %
5	85	42.5 %
6	63	31,5 %
7	4	2 %
Not specified	1	0.5 %
Total	199	100%

Source: Own work

Age and region were the stratification variables for the children in the research sample. The selection of children was based on availability, depending on the teachers' willingness to participate in the testing and also on the informed consent of the kindergarten director and the children's parents regarding the research procedure.

The data collection method (October, November 2025) was a test of the children's initial writing skills, specifically the second item from the Test of Children's Readiness for Writing (Lipnická, 2009, p. 45). The instructions for the child were:

> Try to write your name and letters or other words you know how to write on this paper. You can also write the names of your parents, siblings, or friends. You can also draw your name in a different way, just as you know how.

The option to draw was added so that children who do not know letters and cannot write would feel a sense of accomplishment. The children were given as much time as needed to complete the task.

The assessment was conducted individually by the classroom teacher, whom the child knew well and trusted. After the child finished writing or drawing, the teacher asked them to read what they had written or to describe what they had created on the paper. The teacher wrote down what the child said about their written or drawn work on the back of the paper, along with the date, the child's name, and age.

The data analysis method (January, February, March 2026) was quantitative content analysis of the children's written work on A4-sized paper using an online coding system. Following the coding manual developed, the children's written work was coded independently by two researchers involved in the scientific project. This study presents selected results of the quantitative content analysis, specifically data on the frequency of letters in the written expressions of the group of children, including by gender and the relationship between writing letters and writing their own names.

Research ethics were ensured throughout the process of data collection, processing, and evaluation. The use of the research tool was an integral part of the preparation and implementation of the research strategy, particularly given the involvement of multiple teachers in data collection. Emphasis was placed on the uniformity of procedures to ensure maximum objectivity and comparability of the collected data. To this end, a manual for testing children was developed, which served as a methodological guide for preschool teachers. The testing was conducted by qualified teachers who knew the children from the early childhood education setting, thereby strengthening trust and eliminating the influence of an outsider on the children's results. Emphasis was placed on ethical principles of communication, respect for the child's individuality, and maintaining a positive emotional atmosphere.

A key principle of the research was the informed consent of kindergarten directors and the children's parents, who were transparently informed about the objectives, process, and use of the research results. At the same time, the anonymity of all participants was guaranteed, as was the option to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. Special attention was paid to the protection of children as a vulnerable group, which required a heightened sense of ethical responsibility on the part of the researchers. The testing process itself respected the principles of the child's well-being, and the goal was not to intrude on their privacy or disrupt their psychological well-being. The children wrote and drew voluntarily, in the scope and form they

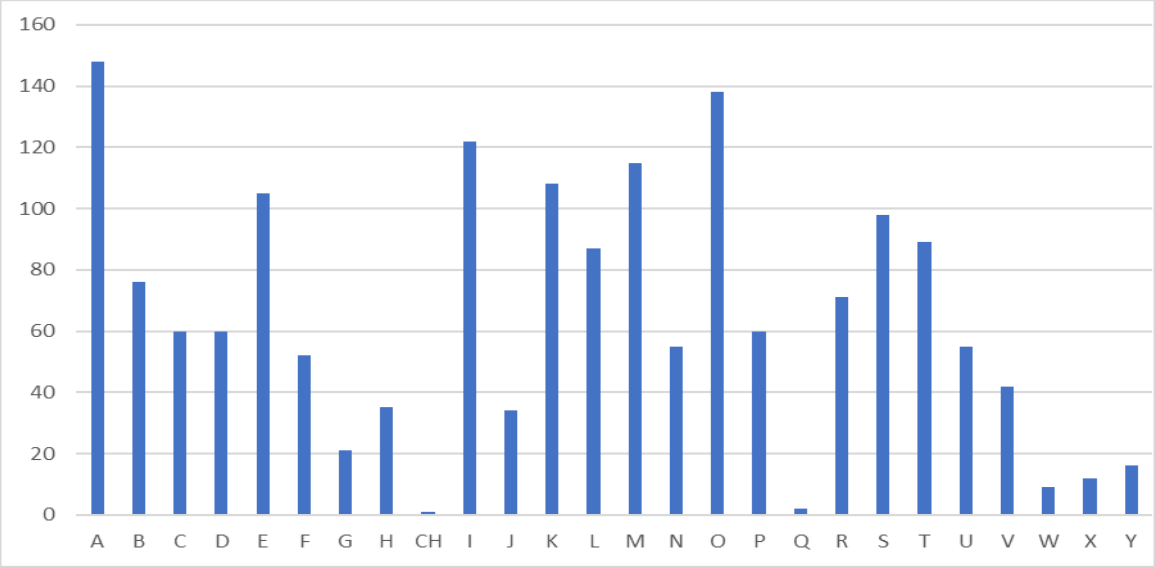
themselves chose. The researchers accepted their written work as authentic products, without manipulation or interpretation beyond their intended meaning. During data processing, complete transcripts of the interviews were preserved, ensuring the fidelity and authenticity of the data. The analysis was conducted using open coding with the participation of multiple evaluators, which contributed to increasing the reliability of the interpretations.

The ethics of presenting the results were based on transparency, accuracy, and respect for the children's anonymity. The findings were grounded in rigorous qualitative analysis and an inductive approach, thereby avoiding unethical generalizations or speculative conclusions. The entire research was conducted with an emphasis on protecting the dignity, rights, and psychological well-being of the child participants, with every step reflecting the principles of professional integrity and a responsible scientific approach.

Results

The Letters That Appeared Most Frequently in the Children's Written Work

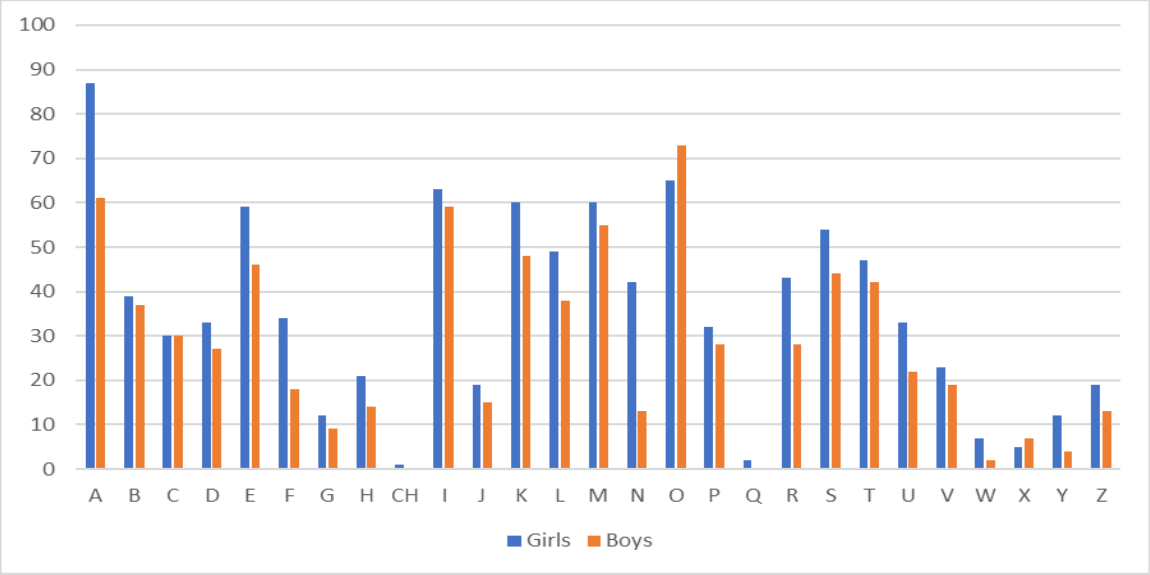
Figure 1
Number of Children in the Sample Who Write Letters of the Alphabet Without Diacritical Marks



Source: Own work

More than half of all the children most frequently wrote the letters A (74%), O (69%), I (61%), M (58%), N (58%), K (54%), and E (53%). More than 30% of them wrote the letters S (49%), T (45%), L (44%), B (38%), R (36%), C, D, and P (30%). The other letters of the alphabet appeared less frequently in the children's written work: N, U (28%), V (21%), J (17%), Z (16%), Y (8%), X (6%), W (5%), and, very rarely, the letters CH and Q (1%).

Figure 2
Number of Girls and Boys in the Sample Who Write Letters of the Alphabet Without Diacritical Marks



Source: Own work

More girls wrote letters (951 in total) than boys (752 in total). On average, girls wrote 10 letters and boys wrote 8 letters. The exception was the letter O, which was written more often by boys.

- More than half of the girls in the sample wrote the following letters:
  A (87%), O (65%), I (63%), K, M (60%), E (59%), S (54%).
- More than half of the boys in the sample wrote the letters:
  O (73.7%), A (61.6%), I (59.6%), M (55.6%).
- More than 30% of the girls wrote the letters:
  L (49%), T (47%), R (43%), N (42%), B (39%), D, U (33%), F (34%), P (32%), C (30%).
- More than 30% of the boys wrote the letters:
  K (47.5%), E (46.5%), S (44.4%), T (42.4%), L (38.4%), B (37.4%), C (30.3%).
- Girls wrote the other letters less frequently:
  V (23%), H (21%), J, Z (19%), G, Y (12%), W (7%), X (5%).
- Boys wrote the following letters less frequently:
  R, P (28.3%), D (27.3%), U (22.2%), V (19.2%), F (18.2%), J (15.2%), H (14.1%), N, Z (13.1%), G (9.1%), X (7.1%).
- Girls wrote the following letters only rarely:
  Q (2%) and CH (1%).
- Boys wrote the following letters only rarely:
  Y (4%), W (2%), Q, CH (0%).

The Connection Between the Letters Children Can Write and Writing Their Own Names

Children who can write their names can also write more letters.

Comparison of two groups (those who can and cannot write their names) by number of letters:
Group that can write their names: N = 128, M = 10.68 letters (SD = 4.87)
Group that cannot write their name: N = 71, M = 4.66 letters (SD = 4.47)

There is a statistically significant difference between them – $t(197) = 8.590$, $p = 0.000$.

The data indicate a significant relationship between children's ability to write their own names and the level of their graphomotor and pre-literacy skills, as measured by the number of letters they are able to produce. When comparing two groups of children—those who can write their names and those who cannot—a statistically significant difference was found in the average number of letters produced. Children able to write their name ($N = 128$) achieved a higher average number of letters ($M = 10.68$; $SD = 4.87$) compared to children who cannot write their name ($N = 71$; $M = 4.66$; $SD = 4.47$). This difference was statistically significant at a high level of significance ($t(197) = 8.590$; $p < 0.001$). The results suggest that the ability to write one's own name may serve as an indicator of more broadly developed letter-handling skills. Children who can write their names likely possess a larger repertoire of graphic symbols (letters), which may reflect a higher level of phonological awareness, visual-motor coordination, and experience with the written form of language. From a methodological perspective, however, the question remains open as to how best to operationalize the variable "letter knowledge." The mere number of letters written may not fully capture the quality of this knowledge (e.g., distinguishing between vowels and consonants or the accuracy of graphemes). An alternative approach could be to analyze the letters contained in the child's name and compare them with the total repertoire of letters produced, or to focus exclusively on the group of children capable of writing their name and examine the relationship between the length of the name and the number of letters mastered.

Discussion

The findings of our research are consistent with previous empirical studies focusing on letter writing. The prevalence of the letters A, O, I, and L in the written expressions of preschool-aged children corresponds to the findings of several authors (Lewis & Lewis, 1964; Puranik et al., 2013; Ritchey, 2008) who have repeatedly identified these letters as being graphomotorically simpler. The common denominator of these letters is their visual simplicity, symmetry, and lower demands on fine motor coordination (e.g., circular or straight strokes). Conversely, the lower frequency of letters such as Q, X, W, and Y in our dataset is consistent with findings regarding their greater difficulty, which may stem from a more complex graphic structure or lower frequency of occurrence in children's everyday language environment. In this context, it appears that the acquisition of letters is not random but is governed by a combination of graphomotor and frequency factors.

An interesting extension of existing knowledge, however, is the finding of an increased frequency of certain consonants (e.g., M, N, K), which, according to foreign studies, do not always rank among the simplest letters. This difference can be interpreted in a cultural-linguistic context—specifically based on the frequency of these letters in Slovak names and words with which children come into contact. This confirms the importance of environmental stimuli, as Lipnická (2009) has already pointed out, and at the same time supplements the predominantly Anglo-Saxon research framework with local specifics.

Regarding gender differences, previous research (Puranik et al., 2013) points to a higher level of letter writing among girls. Although the presented results do not explicitly include detailed statistics on gender differences, it is appropriate to interpret them in the context of the literature, which often explains these differences by the faster development of fine motor skills, a higher degree of verbal activities, and greater engagement of girls in language activities. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasize that these are differences in means and not deterministic differences, with individual variability remaining high. For future research, it

would be beneficial to analyze these differences in greater detail, for example in relation to letter type (vowels vs. consonants) or the quality of graphomotor execution.

A key contribution of the study is the analysis of the relationship between the ability to write one's own name and the overall level of letter production. The results unequivocally confirm that children capable of writing their own names produce a significantly greater number of letters than children who lack this ability. This conclusion is consistent with research (Bloodgood, 1999; Welsch et al., 2003) pointing to a strong correlation between writing one's own name and knowledge of the alphabet. On the other hand, our findings must also be interpreted in light of critical conclusions (Drouin & Harmon, 2009), according to which writing one's own name may, to some extent, be a mechanical skill without a deeper understanding of the principles of written language.

In this context, our results can be understood as supporting the "indicator" function of writing one's own name, but not as unequivocal evidence of conceptual knowledge of letters. The ability to write one's own name likely reflects a combination of factors—repeated exposure, motivation, visual memory, and, to some extent, phonological awareness. However, the significant difference in the number of letters written suggests that this is a useful diagnostic tool that may signal a broader level of pre-reading competencies.

In conclusion, the study's results confirm continuity with previous research while also providing new insights within the context of the Slovak language environment. They emphasize the importance of the graphomotor simplicity of letters, environmental influences, and personal relevance (the child's name) in the acquisition of written language. The ability to write one's name appears to be a practical and sensitive indicator of the level of pre-reading skills; however, its interpretation requires caution and should be supplemented by more comprehensive diagnostic approaches.

Limitations of the Study

From a methodological perspective, the study also raises an important question regarding the operationalization of the concept of "letter knowledge." Although the use of a quantitative indicator (number of letters written) allows for simple comparisons, it does not capture qualitative aspects such as shape accuracy, grapheme stability, or their phonological assignment. In line with current research trends in the field of early literacy, it would therefore be appropriate to supplement the assessment with multidimensional indicators, such as error analysis, letter category discrimination, or the relationship between letter production and recognition. A limitation of the study is the restricted selection and small number of children in the research sample. Furthermore, the relationship between writing letters and names in relation to the children's age was not analyzed.

Conclusion

The contribution of this scientific study can be articulated on several interrelated levels. On a theoretical level, the study expands the body of knowledge regarding the early acquisition of written language in preschool-aged children. It confirms that the acquisition of letters is not random but is influenced by a combination of graphomotor difficulty, the frequency of letters in the language, and personal relevance to the child (especially in connection with their own name). At the same time, it supplements predominantly foreign (especially Anglophone)

research with findings from the Slovak linguistic and cultural environment, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the specifics of emergent literacy in local conditions.

The empirical contribution lies in identifying the specific repertoire of letters that preschool-aged children most frequently produce, as well as in demonstrating a statistically significant relationship between the ability to write one's own name and the overall level of letter production. The study thus provides evidence that writing one's name can serve as a sensitive indicator of broader pre-literacy skills. The findings also suggest that children who can write their names possess more developed graphomotor, visual-perceptual, and, to some extent, phonological abilities.

The methodological contribution of this work lies in opening a discussion on the operationalization of the concept of "letter knowledge." The study highlights the limitations of a purely quantitative approach (the number of letters written) and suggests the need for a more comprehensive assessment that would also include qualitative aspects (e.g., the accuracy of graphemes, their differentiation, or their connection to the phonetic level of language). At the same time, it offers possible directions for future research, such as an analysis of the relationship between the letters in a child's name and their overall written repertoire.

The practical (pedagogical) contribution is particularly significant. The study's results have direct applicability in early childhood education, especially in relation to meeting the performance standard "identifies some letters of the alphabet." The ability to write one's own name proves to be a simple, quick, and practically useful diagnostic tool for preschool teachers, which can help identify children's pre-literacy competence levels and tailor pedagogical support. At the same time, the study provides an empirical basis for the creation of methodological materials and didactic activities (e.g., within the "Games with Letters" project) that can specifically support the development of written language.

Finally, the study's contribution can also be seen in its integrative nature—it connects the areas of graphomotor skills, language development, and emergent literacy, thereby supporting a more comprehensive view of child development in the preschool years. Despite the identified limitations, the study thus represents a relevant contribution to scientific knowledge and pedagogical practice and creates space for further research in this area.

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Beyond the Image: Female Art Models in Contemporary Photography—Precarious Work, Relational Labour and Gendered Digital Visibility

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Abstract

This research examines the work of female photographic models as a largely invisible and precarious form of labour situated at the intersection of the gig economy, body work, aesthetic labour, and emotional labour. Based on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted primarily in France, the research explores how models navigate poorly adapted legal frameworks for independent and amateur practices, as well as economic instability, emotional vulnerability, and the time-consuming, highly gendered relational labour generated by digital visibility and the constant need to maintain an online presence. These conditions create significant power asymmetries and, in some cases, expose models to sexualized behaviours and gender-based violence from photographers. Despite their prevalence, these realities remain largely unknown to the public, are often overlooked in academic research, and are seldom discussed by the models themselves. By shedding light on these experiences, this study contributes to broader debates on precarious labour, gendered visibility work in digital environments, and the hidden forms of labour underpinning contemporary cultural production.

Keywords: photography, art modeling, precarity, relational labour, women artists

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Introduction

Photographic models belong to the broader category of art models, individuals who pose for visual artists, thus constituting an essential component of the artistic creation process. Artists use bodies, facial expressions and poses as a medium to express emotions and aesthetic ideas. This activity often requires nudity. Countless individuals have served as models since Antiquity for painters or sculptors, either for professional and amateur artists or for art academy students. Art modeling naturally expanded to photography, following its recognition as a legitimate artistic medium through Sir William Newton's address to the Photographic Society in 1853 (Newton, 1853).

Despite their central role in artistic creation, models remain invisible in many ways. First, their names are almost never mentioned in art history up to the 19th century, and even after this period, they largely remained anonymous apart from few exceptions. Photographic models are no exception. Moreover, their activity has also received little academic attention, while numerous studies examine photographers, history and techniques of photography, and dedicated scientific journals exist on these topics. For example, when a book about fashion photography devotes one chapter to the relation between photographer and model, only photographers' perspectives are presented (Monneyron, 2014). When Roland Barthes gives insights on his experience of posing, it differs greatly from a regular art model (Barthes, 1980). Finally, when (Lutz & Collins, 1991) describes the multiplication of "gazes" (the photographer, the magazine, the magazine reader…) after Laura Mulvey and John Berger observations, the point of view of the person being photographed is absent.

Apart from Florence Rivières' self-edited book (Rivières, 2017), autobiographical accounts by photographic models are themselves remarkably rare. Even in these narratives, photographic modeling occupies only a small part within broader life stories, while greater attention is devoted to interpersonal relationships, public reputation and sometimes harsh experiences with men (Neggzia, 2020) (de Mérode, 1955/1985). Although models' bodies are highly visible in photographic art, the reality of their activity thus remains largely unknown to the general public.

This invisibility is all the more striking since the activity has profoundly changed over the last two decades in terms of communication and promotion. From printed portfolios and comp cards addressed mostly to photographers and agencies, models now have access to several tools, from online portfolios to social media and subscription-based platforms. This multiplication of platforms has considerably changed the ways photographers and general public access models and vice versa, extending it far beyond the photoshoot and leading to continuous online visibility, self-presentation, and audience management.

However, these important transformations have done little to improve public knowledge on photographic modeling. This invisibility extends to their working conditions, and the different forms of labour going with their activity, making the different forms of precarity they encounter largely invisible as well.

The results presented are a follow-up of a first research (Abellard, 2024) focused on Internet communication and platform choices, based on a panel of more than 600 Francophone photographic models, which showed an average age of approximately 31 (from 18 to 72 years old), a largely feminized activity (90 % of models defining themselves as women). Factors such as age, acceptance of nude photography and being a woman had an influence on

some platform choices. Since it relied strictly on statistical analysis without giving a voice to photographic models, it could not capture their lived experiences.

Facts on Photographic Models

Understanding the interactions surrounding photographic modeling is a complex task, requiring to go beyond the photo shoot itself.

Models are in contact with photographers through online platforms, their interactions being based on photographs and text messages. They can get artistic collaboration, contract and earnings from photographers. It implies a legal framework defining the working conditions and image rights issues. In principle, the center of the relation is artistic creation.

Models can also be in contact with the general public (followers) through social media, where they can get feedback from her work, greater visibility increasing their chances to be more visible to photographers, and a community built around their photographic activity. Finally, a minority of models use paid subscription platforms where they can get an income in exchange of exclusive content and private chats.

Being a model requires personal investment and skills to cope with the embarassment of posing (Shusterman, 2024) and the anxiety about the final result (Barthes, 1980). This investment involves several psychological and sociological aspects. Modeling is primarly a body work, as a work performed is one's own body (Gimlin, 2007). It is also an emotional labour, as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display [that is] sold for a wage" and a labour that disproportionately affects women (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour operates both in the relationship with the photographer and in the creative process, since photography is supposed to convey emotions from the artist to the viewer.

Emotional labour relates to aesthetic labour (Witz et al., 2003), referring to the process embodied capacities and attributes are transformed into skills and forms of presentation. Models who use social media also operate within a digital attention economy (Bentes, 2025) where the exposed body is a highly valuable resource competing for public attention, hence the valuable symbolic capital given by the claimed authenticity of the artistic approach in a mostly amateur context (Voronova, 2026).

As an irregular, project-based activity involving a limited number of clients, flexible working hours, and extensive reliance on digital platforms, photographic modeling can be considered part of the gig economy (Woodcock & Graham, 2020) as is live modeling.[1]

The photographic model also acts as a mediator for different audiences on digital platforms. She serves first as a cultural mediator between photographers and her personal audiences, thus introducing audiences to artists. By adding captions, hashtags and contextualization, and thus adding her own interpretation to images, she also performs an affective mediator role. On social media, she furthermore contributes to building and maintaining a community centered on her work, bringing together hundreds to thousands of people around a common

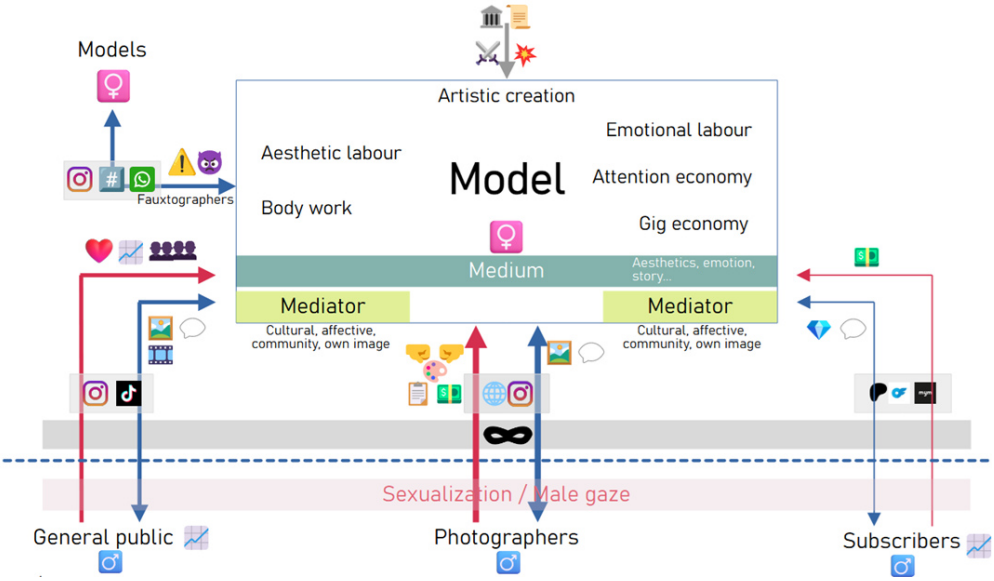
1 Saffroy-Lepesqueur L. (2022). "Modèles vivants, une profession toujours aussi précaire" [Live models, a profession as precarious as ever], *Le Journal des Arts*. https://www.lejournaldesarts.fr/campus/modeles-vivants-une-profession-toujours-aussi-precaire-162274.

interest on her visual production. Finally, she curates her own image, by photography selection and audience interaction.

Finally, being a woman in a context where the body—and often nudity—is at the center of artistic production can lead to be sexualized by some of her male audience, unwillingly transforming artistic labour into sexualized labour, as "an embodied performance that involves a complex, interrelated dynamic of emotion, aesthetics and sexualization that cannot be separated from where it is placed" (Drenten et al., 2020). In fact, sexualization and assimilation to prostitution have existed since the beginning of photography in the 19th century, at a time of widespread pictorials and photographic representations of women belonging to a sexualized imaginary (*e.g.* courtesans, demimondes, *grisettes*…) (Solomon-Godeau, 1986). As a consequence, the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) can be present not only in the viewer's eyes but also in the image production process, in which women are still underrepresented among professional photographers.[2] In this context of stigma related to sexualization, using a pseudonym may function as a protective mechanism (McDonald et al., 2021).

Figure 1 summarizes the complexity of the photo model activity (the model-to-models part will be explained in Relational subsection).

Figure 1
Photographic Model Activity and Associated Sociological, Psychological and Relational Aspects



Note. Communication: blue arrows, potential benefits for the model: red arrows.

Research Question

Photographic modeling is accordingly a very complex activity going far beyond the time spent in front of the camera, involving psychological, sociological and relational aspects. While the former two seem common to live modeling activity, the latter has grown considerably with Internet developments. Over the past two decades, online portfolios emerged in the early 2000s, social media expanded throughout the late 2000s and early

2 Couloute J. (2021). "The root of female erasure in photography", *femLENS*. https://femlens.com/blog-post/the-root-of-female-erasure-in-photography/

2010s, and subscription-based platforms appeared in the late 2010s (Abellard, 2024). While the expansion of online audiences has increased the visibility of photographic models, it has also increased their amount of relational labour and their exposure to sexualization. These intertwined dimensions can result in multiple forms of precarity with consequences for both physical and mental health, far removed from the models' initial intentions.

However, little research has examined precarity in photographic modeling. Some studies dealing with fashion photography provide valuable insights into sexual harassment (Crowley, 2021), inappropriate behaviours and sexual objectification during Fashion Weeks (Rodgers et al., 2021), as well as bystander inaction and complicity which contributes to their normalization (Crowley, 2024). Other forms of precarity are scarcely documented in academic publications.

This raises the following question: how, and to what extent, do legal, financial, emotional, and relational dimensions contribute to precarity in photographic modeling?

To address this gap, this article adopts a multidimensional approach to precarity by examining these dimensions through interviews with photographic models.

Methodology

Sampling Strategy

The study examined photographic models who identified as women on online portfolio platforms or social media. The goal was not to be statistically representative, but rather to provide an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences across diverse profiles. Semi-structured interviews with 20 female models were conducted between 2023 and 2025. Participants were contacted through their online portfolios or Instagram, the two main platforms used by models (Abellard, 2024). Nineteen interviews were conducted either by audio/video call (n = 17) or in person (n = 2) and were recorded and transcribed, while one participant responded via e-mail. For privacy reasons, interviewees were anonymized and assigned a random number between 1 and 20.

The interview guide explored several aspects from the participants' initial motivations to their interactions with different audiences. These questions addressed the different dimensions of precarity experienced by models. Being a highly sensitive topic, sexual and gender-based violence was not addressed unless the participants chose to raise it themselves.

Out of the twenty interviewees, sixteen work in France. France was chosen both for practical accessibility to participants and its particularly relevant legal framework illustrating the mismatch between law and actual practices. The four other participants provided different perspectives, particularly on legal and social contexts. In accordance with the French *Data Protection Act*,[3] no questions were asked and no data was collected regarding the respondents' ethnic origins, political, philosophical, or religious views.

3 Loi Informatique et Libertés (1978), 78-17.

Sample Characteristics

Participants' mean age is 30.45 years old (min = 21, max = 46, SD = 6.31), in accordance with (Abellard, 2024). Their average modeling experience is 7.2 years (min = 1, max = 17). The following characteristics are presented since they are closely related to the different forms of precarity examined in the following section.

75 % of the interviewees are available to nude photography, which may expose them to sexualization more frequently.

30 % of respondents are either students or unemployed which makes them potentially more vulnerable to financial precarity. The other participants come from a wide range of occupations (bank advisor, logistics, tea sommelier, salesperson, hydropractor...). Only one participant holds a secure public-sector position in higher education, though with a relatively modest income. None of the models belong to the upper socioeconomic class.

60 % of women interviewed have another activity related to either art (music, movie extras, theater, dance, crafting) or the body (bodybuilding, adult content creation), suggesting that photographic modeling is a part of a broader process of self-expression in accordance with (Rivières, 2017).

35 % of participants regularly use at least one subscription-based platform (Patreon, OnlyFans, MYM) or crowdfunding platform (Tipeee), highlighting their relative importance in the photography digital ecosystem. All but one of this subgroup of participants accept nude photography.

Concerning the four models living outside France, two have a formally recognized legal status. #3 is registered in Belgium as a complementary self-employed worker. #4 is registered in Israel as an artist, her live modeling activity being considered an extension of her broader artistic practice. Based in Colombia, #13 is a self-photographer, deriving no income from modeling, providing an interesting position. Finally #1 has no legal status in Tunisia and is also facing sociocultural constraints related to female body visibility.

Precarity: Overview

The interviews reveal five interrelated and overlapping forms of precarity. They are presented separately for analytical purposes.

Legal

55 % of the interviewees (10 French and 1 Tunisian) operate outside existing legal frameworks by earning an income while their practice does not fall within any recognized status. Of the remaining 45 %, only one-third receive a payment through a legal framework (#3, #4 and #17, a French woman signed with a modeling agency), while the other two-thirds carry out their activity through unpaid collaborations.

In Tunisia, art modeling is not recognized and is part of a widespread informal economy that makes up more than 40 % of the Tunisian economy.[4] It also takes place within a social

4 Lopez-Acevedo, Gladys C.; Ranzani, Marco; Sinha, Nistha; Elsheikhi, Adam Youssef. (2023).

organizational ambiguity inherent to Tunisian society, used as a negociation tool (Zghal, 1994). #1 regrets this context that turns against her when she attempts to formalize her situation, reducing opportunities:

> It's not very organized, that's why I created my own contracts, because when I want to sign a contract, they tell me 'it doesn't exist'. So I bring my own and it scares everyone so I lose the offer. (…) Agencies and photographers don't even want to hear about image rights questions. (#1)

In France, the legal status of mannequin working for a modeling agency (Jalabert, 2021) and live model[5] exist, but only as salaried work, prohibiting invoicing, freelancing or self-employment. Moreover, model agencies primarly working in the fashion sector have strict physical criteria that exclude most photographic models, while art photography requires "a such interesting human diversity" (Rivières, 2017). In addition, photographers are mostly amateurs and therefore cannot issue any invoice. Photographic modeling takes place in a mostly amateur-for-amateur context, where money is supposed to be not involved, but with a general practice of undeclared cash payment (Abellard, 2024), a point developed in the next subsection.

Implications for the models are reflected in their responses. Those involved in unpaid collaborations emphasize on the artistic creation and interpersonal dimensions, and the bias introduced by financial transactions:

> I prefer to spend a good time with a photographer I get along with, no money implied for any of us, rather than dealing with a photographer who will pay me and whose work would disappoint me. I don't want (...) to become the photographer's object. (#5)

Concerning (illegally) paid models, while a minority pragmatically accommodates this legal shortcoming by prioritizing immediate financial benefits, a signifiant proportion highlights the detrimental effects of this situation and interpret it as a structural protection deficit, increasing vulnerabilities to various abuses of power. #19: "If we had a legal status, we would be much better protected against aggressors."

The legal mismatch between law and practice is consequently at the source of a first type of precarity, intertwined with others, especially financial precarity.

Financial

With the exception of the sole professional model in the panel (#17), all paid respondents are realistic about the impossibility of living solely off this activity. Monthly earnings from photographers are irregular and amount to only a few hundred euros per month, earnings exceeding 800 euros being exceptional. Participants using a subscription-based platform report a monthly income usually between 100 and 300 euros. The payment generated by photographic modeling is thus either considered as a supplement to other income sources or a way to cover clothing or travel expenses. It should be noted that three participants combine

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I*nformality and Inclusive Growth in the Middle East and North Africa - Overview (English)*. World Bank Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099062323201054687

5 Articles L7121-2 and L7121-3 (Labour Code), article L311-15° (Social Security Code)

unemployment with informal payments, combining legal and stronger financial forms of precarity.

The irregularity of photoshoots appears to be the main cause of this situation. In a predominantly amateur context, this irregularity is primarly caused in personal unavailabilities from models and photographers. Moreover, since few amateur photographers have a photo studio, they mostly shoot outdoors under favorable weather conditions, which adds an important seasonal aspect.

Additionnally, the payment amount is sometimes the result of negotiations with amateur photographers usually having limited financial resources. Furthermore, while nude to erotic photography comes with better financial offers, models' self-imposed boundaries to preserve their integrity and identity always take precedence.

Dependency to social media (notably Instagram) is also significant. While they indirectly increases visibility to photographers, several participants complain both about what they generally call "the algorithm"—referring to the opaque functioning of digital platforms—and the restrictive and unpredictable nudity policies resulting in shadowban or even blocked accounts, felt as unfair, with indirect financial consequences.

> Somedays I'll receive dozens or even hundreds, of likes in just a few hours for a simple post. Conversely, I think sometimes a post will do well in line with similar content and I end up with a paltry 16 or 17 likes. I don't understand how it works; it's extremely mysterious. (#7)

> Censorship is the downside of Instagram. When I see that there can be very violent videos, sometimes even assaults… you just have to say 'I want to see the post' to access it, but if you show a bit of buttocks or breasts, you get shadowbanned and lose all visibility to those who don't follow you. It's a huge problem on a daily basis. (#16)

Amateur photographic modeling appears therefore to be structured by normalized systemic financial insecurity, being the consequence of several material, relational, and symbolic constraints, as well as legal issues. The irregularity of opportunities, reliance on photographers in a mostly amateur context, the necessity of informally negotiating payment for sessions while safeguarding one's physical and identity boundaries, and dependence on platforms whose opaque operations affect their visibility, all contribute to the regime of restricted and unstable income associated with this activity.

Emotional

A personal and emotional dimension adds to the previously discussed issues, but differs from them in that it predates the entry into photographic modeling. 60 % of individuals enter this activity with a background of low self-esteem, body image concerns, depression, breakup, or a violent marital situation, leading to negative self-perception, fears, loss of trust or a desire to reconnect with their body. #16: "I separated from the father of my children, and consequently I was experiencing a loss of self-confidence. Experiencing boudoir photography was also an opportunity to see myself differently, not just as a mother."

> I was under the influence of a quite violent and jealous person, it was the context of my entrance into photography (...) within the framework of a personal reconstruction of my image, of how I perceived myself and of reclaiming my own body. (#19)

These women usually had no prior knowledge of photographic modeling and were often introduced to it by a friend or a photographer among their acquaintances. Most of the participants consider the experience to have positive to therapeutic results on how they perceive themselves. #12: "By doing many photoshoots, without retouching, without filters, without anything, it's helped me get rid of a lot of insecurities I had about my appearance." #4: "I thought to myself that I find a way to crack all my fears about my body."

Several participants explicitly link their initial physical insecurities to the social overvaluation of unattainable bodies, prevalent in women representations in fashion advertisements with extensive use of Photoshop.

But other kinds of emotional issues go on afterwards. One model states: #3 Taking a picture of someone, it's like a gun, it's very agressive, the person will even not see [the photographer's] face.

Doing so, she points out the inherent (though unintentional) structural violence of the photographic apparatus. First, the model exposes herself physically in somewhat unnatural situations. She also exposes herself mentally; since emotions are part of the artistic creation process, the model and the photographer engage in emotional labour with each other (Shusterman, 2024), the model having her own emotional history. Moreover, the model and photographer are in asymmetric positions. The photographer is in position of deciding the framing and selection, while the model with all her personal complexity, is reduced to an image, and moves from subject to object at the precise moment of photographic capture (Barthes, 1980).

Emotional forms of precarity thus both precede and go on photographic modeling, shaping the way models engage in their interpersonal relationships, with various consequences.

Relational

Online communication is time-consuming for models as a result of their interactions with multiple audiences. Though they mostly have difficulty to estimate it due to its irregular and diffuse nature (especially on social media), the average estimated time from participants' answers is around 90 minutes per day. However, it can extend much longer, one model mentioning going as long as five hours a day on occasion. The following quote summarizes the reasons:

> There's a lot of time involved in receiving messages, filtering them to see if they interest you, engaging in conversation, and then seeing if anything comes of it. (...) On OnlyFans, scheduling and managing my posts still takes up quite a bit of time. On Instagram too, it's not just posting a photo; I think about the moment to post them, how to organize them, add keywords… There's a thought process behind it; it's not just spontaneous. (#11)

Participants usually do not have a training in communication, and develop empirical strategies for understanding how to interact with their audiences and organize the timing and content of their publications.

Communication is strongly gendered. Interviewees report that their followers are predominantely male (from 60 to 85 % on Instagram) and their subscribers are almost exclusively male. Photographers appear to be also predominantly male. Communication is also highly asymmetric. On the one hand, models are the ones requested by the followers and subscribers for a private communication. On the other hand, the majority of respondents state that, after some photoshoots and the publication of their first photographs, they are much more requested by photographers than they request them.

An Overall Positive Relation With Followers and Subscribers

Despite these common points, audiences are not equally important to models. Followers and subscribers are not essential to the modeling activity, thus constituting weak peripheral and parasocial support groups. Moreover, when asked about their criteria for publishing photography, all interviewees refuse to appeal to a male gaze concerning portfolios and social media, in favor of their own satisfaction with the photography. Two participants however reconsider their position to some extent when it comes to OnlyFans and MYM, in terms of both photographs and conversations, but always within their self-defined boundaries. Finally, models still have regulatory power by ignoring and blocking disrespectful users.

Almost all respondents consider messages received from followers to be very positive and benevolent, with rare downplayed exceptions. Flirting attempts are usually respectful, one model mentions they work as a boost to self-esteem. Participants using subscription-based platforms even consider communication to be more respectful there, a likely consequence of the financial transaction accompanying the right to send and receive private messages and content.

"Fauxtographers" and Endangerments

Photographers play a far more important position for the model activity. Since photographers generally approach more models than the reverse, models have an *a priori* advantageous position over them. However, the asymmetry in power dynamics still favors photographers, because of their absolute necessity in modeling activity and the frequent financial transaction. Issues related to sexualization and objectification are more problematic in their case since photographers are expected to be used to work with women in vulnerable situations and physical encounters are unavoidable in their relationships.

The legitimacy and intentions of applicants as photographers are often questioned during initial contact. I will use the term "fauxtographer", adapted from the "fauxtographe" term popular among French-speaking models. According to (Rivières, 2017), a "fauxtographer" is someone with a camera who is sometimes technically skilled, but whose intentions are voyeuristic and can sometimes escalate to sexual assault. Dubious propositions may also occur. For example, three respondents mention receiving overpaid photo shoots propositions which they interpreted as insincere or as a lure for a prostitution network.

During the photo shoot, problems can arise, ranging from trying to push beyond the model's stated boundaries, to making sexist comments or showing a lack of respect. Three

participants (15%) mention such experiences during workshops with several amateur photographers. Finally, nudity done in an artistic context can sometimes be interpreted as sexual availability by the photographer. Two interviewees mention inappropriate sexual talk, one mention a physical intimate contact proposition and three (15%) report sexual assaults. Two participants also explicitly mention the name of a person who was later convicted of multiple rapes and who had contacted them under the pretext of a photo session. Thus, while the necessary relationalship between the model and the photographer often goes well, it may also place her in personal danger, which is favored by the multiplication of contacts enabled by digital platforms.

In response to these situations, models have collectively developed empirical risk-management strategies. The most common anticipatory protective mechanism is requesting to be accompanied to the photoshoot location. Notifying family or friends of the schedule is also used. Finally, peer warnings also exist via specific hashtags, Instagram accounts and models' Whatsapp groups. This explains the model-to-model communication channel in Figure 1, implemented as a preventive and deterrent strategy in this context.

Invisible Issues

Despite the various forms of precarity experienced by models, they remain however largely invisible in their public communication. Several complementary explanations can emerge. Firstly, the logic of visual platforms gives prevalence to bodies, images and aesthetics over all forms of reflexive and critical discourse on the social implications of the creative process.

Moreover, models usually remain silent, except for the occasional public denunciation of inappropriate comments or messages. Although the subject has not been discussed, a hypothesis can be raised: complaining would impact them negatively, discouraging photographers and repelling followers. (Brake, 2005) and (Bergman et al., 2002) demonstrate the social costs of reporting sexual harassment or discrimination, which often triggers retaliation, since the complainant is perceived as transgressing the social order, especially for women. We can also suppose that openly discussing precarity would reframe the model's position from symbolically rewarding to low-paid and dangerous. Some in the audience may also discredit a woman who speaks out by assimilating nudity with sex and the financial compensation with prostitution, similar to the "whore stigma" defined by (Pheterson, 1993).

The invisibility of models even extends to their identity. Historically, not giving models credit was the norm, as shown by (Gerbase, 2018) study on French magazine *Photo*. Many photographers still fail to credit models when sharing their work. Certain framing choices can also increase invisibility and be interpreted in terms of power dynamics as favoring the photographer's agency, as noted by (Deilhes, 2023) commenting Lucien Clergue's headless nudes.

Finally, pseudonymity (90 % of the panel) helps build a model's artistic identity and serves as a protection from the malicious gazes of relatives and work colleagues, but it contributes to their invisibilization as real persons. Models can therefore be understood as a muted group for all these reasons, which is an additional aspect of the inherent violence of photographic apparatus.

Conclusion

Photographic modeling performed by women is a complex, multidimensional and largely invisibilized form of precarious labour. Precarity is produced and normalized through the interplay of legal, economic, emotional, digital and relational dimensions. Digital platforms have especially contributed to transform models' activity into invisible tasks going from communication to peer warning through community management and risk management. While these platforms allow models to expand their potential network and to share their artistic work, they also increase their workload and the various forms of precarity they endure.

As a strongly gendered activity, the asymmetries in social relations and the vulnerabilities inherent to the photographic apparatus, can contribute to reproduce patriarchal hierarchies. These aspects appear easily manageable concerning interactions followers and subscribers who are described as mostly respectful and benevolent, but can be a threat to the model's integrity when it comes to photographers. Models' difficulties are however invisible to the general public for multiple reasons, this invisibility being reflected in the limited academic research concerning them. Digital platforms contribute to both the visibility of models and the invisibility of their precarity, being in fact part of the precarity production mechanism.

By shedding light on these overlooked experiences, this study aims at contributing to broader debates on precarious labour, gendered visibility in digital environments, and the hidden forms of labour underpinning contemporary cultural production.

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

The author declares that DeepL, 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 DeepL, 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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Sonic Patriarchy: Improvising Gender in Southern Thai Folk Song

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Abstract

"Pleng Bok" is one traditional performance of social communication in southern Thailand. Pleng Bok has a wide range of content, including praise songs, news distribution, celebrations in traditional ceremonies, and allusions to women in different circumstances. However, the primary performers who sing and improvise, known as "mae pleng" (literally "mother of song"), are predominantly male singers. This research article analyzes the construction of images and meanings of "femininity" through the perspective and presentation of male singers (male gaze), selecting 10 songs as case studies from the 1950s to the present. To represent social dynamics, the study combines musicological analysis, content analysis, and song categorization techniques. The findings reveal that "mae pleng" (male singers) construct representations of women in three significant categories: 1) The Ideal Mother/Donor, who usually makes an appearance during merit-making rituals and traditional festivals and uses soft, respectful vocal tones; 2) The Object of Desire, emphasizing descriptions of physical form and beauty through compact rhythms and flirtatious melodic patterns; and 3) The Modern Deviant, presented through satirical and mocking melodies to control the social behavior of modern women. The conclusions of this study indicate that Pleng Bok is not just a form of entertainment but also a cultural tool that men use to prescribe and define women's roles through the art of improvisation. This clearly reflects the dynamics and power relations within the context of southern Thai folk culture.

Keywords: Pleng Bok, male gaze, construction of femininity, southern Thai folk music, improvisation

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Introduction

Phleng bok is a form of folk performance from Southern Thailand, particularly prominent in the provinces of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, Surat Thani, Chumphon, Trang, and Songkhla. With a historical lineage spanning over 150–200 years, *phleng bok* has functioned as a medium for communicating important news and information within communities. As such, it is not merely a form of entertainment but also serves as a communal "mouthpiece."

At an annual festival in a community in Nakhon Si Thammarat, as night falls into quiet stillness, the rhythmic sound of the *taphon* drum begins. The *mae phleng*, dressed in a brightly colored sarong, sits cross-legged before the chorus. His voice emerges—hovering between natural speech and poetic verse—as he sings about young women from nearby villages, describing their physical appearance, praising their virtues, and satirizing behaviors deemed socially inappropriate. Laughter echoes across the temple grounds, while the *mae phleng*—a male performer—simultaneously redefines the meaning of "womanhood" for society. This scene is not an anomaly but a recurring cultural pattern within *phleng bok* performance over decades.

This phenomenon raises a compelling musicological question: although the title *mae phleng* linguistically denotes femininity, the role is predominantly occupied by men. Thus, the performer is not only singing but also "performing gender" through improvisational authority. What is defined, celebrated, or condemned through song is invariably filtered through a patriarchal lens. This article therefore argues that *phleng bok* should not be understood merely as entertainment but as a form of **"sonic patriarchy"**—a cultural mechanism that reproduces and reinforces male dominance through the aesthetics of music and language.

Phleng bok is a distinctive form of Southern Thai folk performance, centered particularly in Nakhon Si Thammarat and surrounding areas. Its defining characteristics include regionally specific melodic structures, unique poetic forms, the use of the Southern Thai dialect, improvisational verse, and dynamic interaction with the audience.

The performance structure consists of two primary components:

1. The *mae phleng* (lead singer), responsible for improvising both lyrics and melody.
2. The *luk khu* (chorus), which provides rhythmic support and vocal responses.

Despite the feminine connotation of the term *mae phleng*, the role is predominantly performed by men. This contradiction forms the foundation of this study, as it implies that male performers are the primary agents defining how women should appear, behave, and function within society.

The content of *phleng bok* spans a wide range, from praising patrons in ritual contexts and reporting community news to describing female beauty and engaging in courtship. What distinguishes *phleng bok* from many other folk traditions is its improvisational immediacy, allowing performers to adapt content fluidly to specific contexts. However, this flexibility operates within relatively fixed ideological frameworks—particularly in representations of women.

Existing studies on *phleng bok* have largely focused on historical documentation and narrow musicological analysis. Scholars such as Chuan Phetkaew have pioneered the collection of historical data and archival lyrics, providing essential insights into the evolution of performance forms and poetic structures. Meanwhile, Phattradee Puchadaphirom has expanded

the scope to include socio-cultural analysis, highlighting the adaptability of *phleng bok* within modern society and emphasizing the intellectual and linguistic complexity required for performance.

However, these studies have not systematically addressed gender dynamics—particularly questions concerning who holds the authority to define gender and how such definitions are constructed through musical mechanisms. This gap reflects a broader tendency within Thai musicology to remain detached from theoretical developments that have significantly reshaped international musicological discourse.

Globally, scholars such as Susan McClary have introduced feminist approaches to music analysis, demonstrating that seemingly neutral musical elements—such as harmony, rhythm, and melody—can function as carriers of gender ideology. Ellen Koskoff has further extended this framework cross-culturally, illustrating that women's roles in music are inseparable from broader social power structures.

Although some studies have examined women's roles in Thai classical music (e.g., *piphat* ensembles), the application of such theoretical frameworks to Southern Thai folk music remains largely unexplored. This gap is particularly significant in the case of *phleng bok*, where improvisation makes the process of reproducing gendered power relations more visible than in fixed musical forms.

This article proposes the concept of **"sonic patriarchy"** to describe the process through which patriarchal power is maintained and transmitted through musical aesthetics, vocal expression, and language in folk performance.

This framework builds upon McClary's work but extends it to the context of improvisational folk music. Unlike Western classical traditions, where ideology is embedded in pre-composed scores, gender ideology in *phleng bok* is produced and reproduced in real time through improvisation. This introduces both flexibility and fluidity, which conventional frameworks cannot fully account for.

The second dimension draws upon Judith Butler's concept of **gender performativity**, which posits that gender is not innate but constituted through repeated performance according to social norms. In *phleng bok*, each act of describing women's appearance, praising normative behavior, or satirizing deviance constitutes a public performance of gender. Audience responses—laughter, applause, or vocal affirmation—serve as acts of **ratification**, reinforcing these norms within collective memory.

The third dimension incorporates Laura Mulvey's concept of the **male gaze**. While originally formulated in film theory, it is applicable here: in *phleng bok*, the male gaze operates not through visual media but through language, melody, and vocal delivery that frame women from a male evaluative perspective.

Together, these three frameworks enable a multidimensional analysis of *phleng bok* as a system encompassing musical, linguistic, and power-related dimensions.

This study analyzes ten *phleng bok* performances selected to represent the period from 1957 to the present. Selection criteria include:

1. Verifiable sources,
2. Diversity of performance contexts,
3. Clarity in the representation of women.

The methodology combines **musicological analysis** (melody, rhythm, vocal timbre) with **content analysis** (language use and representational strategies).

The findings identify three primary categories of female representation:

1. **The Ideal Woman (The Ideal Mother/Donor)**
   Typically appearing in ritual contexts, characterized by gentle vocal delivery and praise.
2. **The Object of Desire**
   Emphasizing physical description, often accompanied by rhythmic vitality and flirtatious performance style.
3. **The Deviant Woman (The Modern Deviant)**
   Portrayed through satirical melodies to regulate behavior deemed socially inappropriate.

All three categories are constructed through male improvisation and reinforced through audience response, making gendered authority appear natural and unquestioned.

The article is structured into three main sections:

Section 1: Historical context and gender dynamics in performance
Section 2: Case study analysis based on the three representational types
Section 3: Theoretical implications, examining whether improvisation functions simultaneously as a mechanism of control and a space for negotiation

The conclusion proposes directions for future gender-focused Thai musicological research.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the musicological forms and mechanisms employed by the *mae phleng* in constructing representations of "womanhood" in Southern Thai *phleng bok*, including melody, rhythm, vocal timbre, and linguistic choices, from 1957 to the present.
2. To classify and interpret the types of female representation in *phleng bok*, examining the relationship between musical characteristics and embedded gender ideologies through the frameworks of the male gaze and gender performativity.
3. To interpret improvisation as a mechanism of **sonic patriarchy**, reproducing gendered power relations in Southern Thai folk culture, and to evaluate the extent to which the live performance space allows for negotiation or resistance to gender norms.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily utilizing documentary research to fulfill the research objectives regarding the analysis of musical mechanisms and the construction of female representations. The research process is outlined as follows:

1. **Data Collection:** The researcher collected data exclusively from recorded documents and audio-visual materials, employing a non-reactive research method without conducting field interviews. The data collection process is categorized into the following components:

- **Case Study Selection:** The researcher purposively sampled (Purposive Sampling) 10 *Pleng Bok* songs composed from 1957 (B.E. 2500) to the present. The selection criteria specifically targeted songs that contain significant lyrical content pertaining to "women."
- **Primary Documentary Sources:** These include audio-visual materials such as cassette tapes, vinyl records, and digital archives of *Pleng Bok* performances recorded from the past to the present. These materials serve as the basis for musical transcription and the examination of sonic elements.
- **Secondary Documentary Sources:** These encompass transcribed lyrics, documents from the National Archives of Thailand and the Fine Arts Department, as well as academic articles, research papers, and theses related to Southern Thai folk music and gender theories.

2. **Data Analysis:** The researcher synthesized and analyzed the collected lyrical and audio data across three dimensions to address the research objectives:
    - **Musicological Analysis:** Analyzing the musical forms and mechanisms employed by the lead singer (Mae Pleng) to construct the representation of "womanhood." This involves examining the melody, rhythm, vocal timbre, and word choice.
    - **Critical Content Analysis:** Categorizing and explaining the types of female representations present in Pleng Bok by examining the relationship between musical characteristics (e.g., melody, rhythm, and singing style) and the underlying gender ideologies. This analysis is conducted through the theoretical frameworks of the Male Gaze and Gender Performativity.
    - **Theoretical Interpretation:** Interpreting the implication of improvisation as a mechanism of "Sonic Patriarchy" that reproduces gender power relations within Southern Thai folk culture. Furthermore, the study discusses the extent to which this performance space allows for the negotiation or challenging of gender norms.

Result

Folk performance constitutes one of the most direct reflections of value systems, social structures, and ways of life within a community. In the context of southern Thai society, *phleng bok* (Southern Thai folk song) has long functioned as a significant cultural heritage for over 150–200 years. The performance space of *phleng bok* does not exist solely to fulfill aesthetic or entertainment purposes during festivals such as Songkran or merit-making ceremonies; rather, it operates as a communal "mouthpiece" for disseminating news and transmitting local knowledge. This is achieved through vocal performance in the Southern Thai dialect, combined with a distinctive poetic structure and the highly sophisticated skill of improvisation, which requires exceptional wit and verbal agility from the lead performer—commonly referred to as the *mae phleng*.

However, within a social context that ostensibly respects the intellectual capabilities of *phleng bok* performers, a notable contradiction emerges in terms of gender dynamics. Although women play crucial roles in preserving and transmitting traditions at both familial and community levels in Thai society, upon entering the "performance space," the microphone and the authority to vocalize are predominantly monopolized by male performers.

This phenomenon becomes even more compelling when one considers that, although men are the performers, a substantial portion of improvised content revolves around representations of

"women" in various forms. Women thus occupy the position of the "spoken subject" or the "object of the gaze," deprived of the agency to articulate, contest, or define themselves within this performative domain. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between musicological mechanisms and the construction of female representation through the theoretical frameworks of the *male gaze* and *gender performativity*. In doing so, it aims to illuminate what may be termed "sonic patriarchy," subtly embedded within the aesthetics of Southern Thai folk music.

Musicological Mechanisms in the Construction of Womanhood

Music is not merely a vessel for lyrics; it is itself a medium that structures and communicates social meaning. The first objective of this study is to investigate how the *mae phleng*—typically male—utilizes musicological forms and mechanisms to construct representations of womanhood.

Melody, Rhythm, and Vocal Timbre

The communication of attitudes toward women in *phleng bok* does not rely solely on semantic meaning but is also shaped by sonic mechanisms.

In cases of admiration or courtship: Performers tend to employ smooth, flowing melodic lines, gentle vocal timbre, and elongated phrasing within relaxed rhythmic structures. These musical features construct an atmosphere of pleasure and aesthetic appreciation, reinforcing idealized images of femininity.

In cases of admonition or satire: Musical elements shift toward faster tempos, more compact rhythmic articulation, and often a parlando style of delivery. Harsh or staccato vocal attacks are used, and in some instances, exaggerated high-pitched vocalizations mimic and ridicule female behavior. These musical devices function as emotional markers, signaling to the audience whether the woman being represented is to be admired or ridiculed.

Call-and-Response Structure as Social Consensus

One of the defining characteristics of *phleng bok* is the presence of the chorus (*luk khu*), whose role is crucial in legitimizing the discourse of the lead singer. Consider the following example:

(Lead singer) "Loving one's wife may cost one's rank and status;
Loving cattle may cost one's fields and yield."
(Chorus) "**Ae he ma hey** ... Loving cattle may cost one's fields and yield ..."

From a critical musicological perspective, the phrase "Ae he ma hey" functions not merely as a rhythmic filler but as a form of **social validation**. When the lead singer—positioned as an intellectual authority—delivers a statement that diminishes women's value, the chorus's repetition transforms an individual opinion into a collective truth. This process of sonic repetition aligns closely with the concept of gender performativity: repeated vocal enactment reinforces patriarchal ideology as a normalized and unquestioned social norm.

Typologies of Female Representation in *Phleng Bok*

By analyzing lyrical content through the framework of the male gaze, which posits that women are viewed through patriarchal desire and ideology, three primary categories of female representation emerge:

The Ideal Woman and the Object of Desire

A prominent representation constructs women simultaneously as economic laborers and objects of visual and sexual desire, as illustrated in the verse "Daughter of Pak Phanang":

> "O daughter of Pak Phanang,
> With rounded hips and firm breasts, making shrimp paste sheet ..."

Here, the male gaze operates explicitly through the fragmentation of the female body ("rounded hips and firm breasts"), reducing women to sexualized components. Simultaneously, the lyrics praise industrious domestic labor ("making shrimp paste sheets"), reinforcing an ideal woman who satisfies both erotic desire and economic productivity within the household.

The Deviant Woman and Social Control Through Mockery

Women who deviate from normative expectations are subjected to ridicule and satire:

> "Lazy daughter ... must be woken by her mother ... struck with an axe handle ..."
> "Daughter of Wern Tok... sagging breasts dangling ..."

In these examples, bodily ridicule serves to construct deviance as socially undesirable. Furthermore, references to physical violence are embedded within comedic framing, masking social punishment under the guise of entertainment. Such portrayals normalize disciplinary mechanisms while inviting collective laughter at women who fail to conform.

Woman as an Obstacle to Male Advancement

Perhaps the most ideologically powerful representation positions women as impediments to male success:

> "Loving one's wife may cost one's rank and status ..."

This discourse reinforces a dichotomy between the public sphere (associated with male achievement and authority) and the private sphere (associated with women and domesticity).

The juxtaposition of "wife" with "cattle" further dehumanizes women, equating them with property or economic assets to be managed for optimal productivity.

Improvisation as Sonic Patriarchy and a Space of Negotiation

Real-Time Construction of Identity

Improvisation enables the *mae phleng* to draw upon immediate social contexts and construct lyrical content in real time. This capacity grants male performers the authority to observe

women within the performance setting and instantaneously assign identities to them. Women are thus placed in a condition of sonic subjugation, unable to respond within the same poetic and performative framework. This dynamic constitutes what this study terms **"sonic patriarchy"**—a system of gendered power that operates through aesthetic and musical processes to reproduce and naturalize male dominance.

Social Dynamics and Negotiation Space

Despite its patriarchal structure, the *phleng bok* performance space is not entirely devoid of female agency. Women often occupy roles as patrons, sponsors, or financial supporters (*mae yok*). This economic dimension introduces a counterforce that shapes improvisational content.

When confronted with women of higher social or economic status, performers often shift from satire or objectification toward praise, portraying women as virtuous benefactors. This demonstrates that gender representation within *phleng bok* is not static but dynamic, subject to negotiation within specific socio-economic contexts.

Thus, even without direct vocal participation, women exert influence over the boundaries and direction of male improvisation, transforming the performance space into a site where gender power and economic power are continuously negotiated through sonic aesthetics.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *phleng bok*, while celebrated as a traditional folk performance, functions as a microcosm of social power relations. Through melody, rhythm, vocal timbre, and call-and-response structures, performers construct multiple representations of women: the idealized woman, the deviant subject of ridicule, and the obstructive figure to male advancement.

Improvisation—traditionally regarded as a marker of artistic brilliance—emerges as a powerful mechanism of **sonic patriarchy**, reinforcing and perpetuating gender hierarchies. At the same time, the socio-economic roles of women as patrons reveal fractures within this system, opening spaces for negotiation and reconfiguration of gendered meanings.

Ultimately, this study not only reinterprets Southern Thai folk music through a critical lens but also calls attention to the subtle operations of power embedded within familiar sonic practices, thereby contributing to broader efforts toward more equitable and inclusive cultural spaces.

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

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude to assist with drafting and translating portions of the manuscript content, as well as to improve the language and readability of the text. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Seeking Alternatives Through Languages in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry

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Abstract

This short article reexamines the *fin-de-siècle* poet Dollie Radford (1858–1920) by foregrounding her engagement with literary resources as intellectual and cultural resistance. Building on alternative readings, this study examines an overlooked dimension of Radford's work: use of foreign languages and classical myths. This study argues that her use of these elements functions as a form of symbolic mobility that fostered openness to other cultures, resistance to gender norms, and participation in modernist currents. Through archival material and poetic analysis, this article contributes to ongoing debates on revolutionary poetics in the works of Victorian women writers, advancing discussions of multilingualism as a resource for negotiating cultural authority.

Keywords: Dollie Radford, Victorian poetry, multilingualism, classical myth, women's writing

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Introduction

Dollie Radford (1858–1920) is a *fin-de-siècle* woman poet whose diary and poetry eschew the prevailing conventional norms of her time, describing the limited opportunities for women writers in late Victorian England. Although some scholars have explored the "subversive" meanings within Radford's poems, shedding light on her engagement with the social and political movements of her time,[1] research concerning her use of other languages and myths to serve revolutionary ends is limited. In LeeAnne Richardson's reading of Radford's *The Ransom* (performed in 1912, published in 1915) and "A Modern Polypheme" (1891), Richardson suggests that Radford wanted "to challenge ancient ideas about human sexual behavior, not reproduce them" (Richardson, 2000, p. 119). Although Richardson examined Radford's unconventional use of Greek myths, her study did not consider the poem or diary entries included in this article. Recently, Parker (2024) identified Radford as part of a group of neglected Victorian women poets. According to her, "Radford adapted her distinctive lyric mode to address the conditions and challenges of modernity, including women's increasing presence in the city space" (Parker, 2024, p. 123). While Parker (2024) provided an account of Radford's feminist and aesthetic poems published during the 1900s, any references to myths and folklore as part of Radford's engagement with modernity was not acknowledged.

Therefore, to fill this research gap, I assessed notes from Radford's unpublished diary in the William Andrew Clark Memorial Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the poem "Orpheus" from her first published volume, *A Light Load* (1891) (Radford, 1891). In doing so, I attempted to advance the extant literature on the significance of foreign-language use by women writers worldwide. This contribution is novel as prior research, to the best of my knowledge, has not involved examining previously unacknowledged diary entries and a poem in which Radford referred to foreign languages as a means of empowerment and openness to other cultures.

Reading Foreign Languages in Radford's Diary

Despite the limited educational opportunities offered to women in the nineteenth century, Radford's diary frequently includes references to her readings in different languages: "Absorbed in the study of the Netherlands! – Must read some 'Dutch Art'" (Radford, 1883). Excitement and a sense of compulsion dominate her comments regarding other languages and cultures. For instance, in the above quote an exclamation mark followed by the word "must" suggests her enthusiasm for learning more about Dutch art. In another entry, she points out: "Am reading German with Tussy twice a week" (Radford, 1883). Tussy is the term of endearment she used to refer to her close friend, Eleanor Marx, a socialist and women's rights activist who supported free love unions. Such acquaintances and readings may have influenced Radford's thoughts and shaped her opinions on the status quo. In addition to German, French is frequently mentioned in the diary: "Morning at the Museum, reading French plays" (Radford, 1883). The diary continuously reveals her desire to read and learn European languages: "We *must* read French – German – Latin – Greek – & some other tongues!" (Radford, 1883). The repetition of the word "must," underlined this time, indicates how important it was for Radford to be acquainted with other languages.

Her comments further suggest a correlation between these languages and engagement with modernity: "We get on very nicely with the French tongue. Have had my hair cut in French &

[1] The term "subversive" was first used by LeeAnne Richardson in her research article, which offers readings of Radford's poems in relation to the New Woman; see Richardson, 2000, p. 112.

bought some things" (Radford, 1883). This indicates, she not only learned French but also adopted the language's culture and style through a haircut, rejecting the prevailing stereotypes of ideal femininity and long hair.[2] Daniela Theinová pointed out that Irish women poets expressed the need to find a new language to condemn the historical silencing of women (Theinová, 2020, pp. 79–99). Similarly, Natalie Edwards highlighted how French women writers used their knowledge of other languages to demonstrate openness to different cultures in both life and literary writings (Edwards, 2020, p. 2). Despite the different backgrounds of the writers, I consider the arguments of Theinová (2020) and Edwards (2020) as evidence supporting Radford's claim regarding foreign languages and cultures being used as a means of empowerment and seeking the new.

Myths and Alternatives in Radford's "Orpheus" (1891)

Radford's work, *A Light Load* (1891), includes several poems inspired by the Greek myths and folklore. For example, one of these hitherto-overlooked poems, titled "Orpheus," challenges male authority in its form and content. In her reading of Radford's poems, Parker claimed that "Radford uses song to obliquely address political issues. Her work raises wider questions regarding the political capacities of the song-like lyric" (Parker, 2024, p. 128). In my reading of "Orpheus," I build on Parker's argument regarding Radford's use of songs to question gendered attitudes in the nineteenth century that were biased against women. Rather than addressing the love theme in the conventional sonnet form, "Orpheus" is written in a song form divided into four quatrains, with unequal length of lines.[3] Additionally, it begins with the pronoun "we," suggesting equality and reshaping the dominance of the male persona over the female beloved through the common use of the pronoun "I" in traditional forms:

> WE wandered in that shadowland,
> My fair love, you and I,
> Through all its strangeness hand in hand
> We journeyed silently.
>
> My lyre is hanging cold and dumb,
> Mute with our triumph song,
> I have no voice now you are come,
> Whom I have sought so long.
>
> But I will bring you in Love's land,
> Into Love's highest place,
> And crown you there, and understand
> The wonder of your face.

[2] In her study *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Galia Ofek pointed out that, "Inasmuch as recurrent images of women's hair in a variety of Victorian cultural discourses not only reflected existing models of womanhood, but also questioned, revised and redefined assumptions about the nature and making of femininity, they were also a means to create conditions for social and political changes" (Ofek, 2016, p. 10). Thus, I suggest that Radford's reference to her French haircut endorses the argument of her engagement with foreign languages and cultures to challenge the conventional norms of womanhood.

[3] See also how Radford used short songs to seek "something that will be truly new," Emily Harrington, *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse* (Harrington, 2014, p. 141). This article carries Harrington's argument forward to show how myths in these unconventional songs were one way of exploring the "new."

And then my joyous song shall rise
To sun and moon and star;
And all the worlds beyond the skies
Shall tell how fair you are. (Radford, "Orpheus" in *A Light Load*, p. 50)

Tom Furniss and Michael Bath identified allusions as indications that the meanings of poems are part of, and should be read in relation to, other texts (Furniss & Bath, 2022, p. 428). Therefore, an overview of Orpheus's legend would enhance our understanding of Radford's poem. In her account of Orpheus, Maria Daniels stated that, "The legend tells us that Orpheus married Eurydice—the symbol of Light and Truth. Thus, Orpheus did not marry a woman made of flesh and bones, but rather a mystical ideal" (Daniels, 2008, pp. 22–23). Therefore, reading the poem in relation to the myth questions the Victorian perception of the ideal image of wives and beloveds as objects of pleasure. In Greek mythology, Eurydice is considered a "symbol of Light and Truth" rather than a symbol of beauty; similarly, Radford's poem situates the beloved not as a sexual entity but rather a motivating spiritual source for Orpheus. As a musician and poet, his "lyre is hanging cold and dumb," and he remains with "no voice," seeking the presence of his beloved. Therefore, the superiority and autonomy of the male as a lover and poet are absent from the poem. His "joyous song shall rise" only when Eurydice is brought to "Love's highest place" and "crown[ed]" as his equal.

Thus, Radford used Greek sources to challenge the rigidity of the male hierarchy in both private and public spheres. Stevenson (2005) explored the use of Latin by women poets from antiquity to the eighteenth century. She argued that "The issue of women's writing in Latin is often closely connected with the issue of their participation in power" (Stevenson, 2005, p. 11). Although Radford did not use Latin in this poem, her desire to learn other languages (as mentioned in her diary) and adopting Greek myths in her poetry is a strategy through which she sought alternatives for marginalized women in the nineteenth century.[4] This aspect is further emphasized through the final poem in Radford's work *A Light Load*, titled "A Dream of 'Dreams,'" which is dedicated to the South African writer Olive Schreiner.[5] Concluding the volume with a particular reference to a non-native feminist woman writer highlights Radford's quest for new possibilities through different languages and cultures.

Conclusion

Through this study, I have examined Radford's engagement with foreign languages and cultures in an attempt to question the rigidity of established conventions concerning women in late Victorian England—an area that has received limited scholarly attention in relation to her work. It emphasizes her desire to read and learn new languages as part of her quest for alternatives. While this finding reinforces the arguments of Theinová (2020), Edwards (2020), and Stevenson (2005) on how women writers adopt different languages to challenge prevailing

[4] Barrow (2019) considered the use of dialects and informal English by Victorian poets to challenge social and political conventions. "While Victorian scientists studied the origins of speech, the history of dialects, and the barrier between human and animal language, the Brownings, Tennyson, and Hardy harnessed these debates to explore social unrest, the expansion of the electorate, and the ever-widening boundaries of empire" (Barrow, 2019, p. 2).

[5] For a detailed account of the poem and Radford's friendship with Olive Schreiner, see Azhar, H., *Marginalization vs. Emancipation: The (New) Woman Question in Dollie Radford's Diary and Poetry* (Azhar, 2016, p. 180–186). Furthermore, in "'Stealing the Fire:' Language as Theme and Strategy in South African Women's Poetry," Deirdre Byrne argued that "South African women poets foreground language as a particular site of resistance against patriarchy and colonial discourse, an emphasis they share with feminist poets around the globe" (Byrne, 2016, p. 28).

norms, it simultaneously extends on them by offering a close reading of previously unexplored materials from Radford's diary and works. Thus, the present study contributes to the ongoing debate regarding the effectiveness of languages and cultures when applied to literary texts. Future research should examine additional examples of marginalized Victorian women poets to consider the significance of foreign languages in each of their lives, writings, and poems, which are worthy of further attention.

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

During the preparation of this work, the author did not use any artificial intelligence (AI)–assisted technologies. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Relational Humanity: Mind-Modelling and Distributed Agency in *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract

Adopting the approach of cognitive narratology, this study examines Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021) as a text that reflects on the concepts of the human and of identity, and on contemporary forms of relationship and empathy. In the near future imagined by Ishiguro, a society dominated by technological progress and genetic engineering entrusts the education and emotional support of young people to artificial companions, within a context marked by social isolation and relationships increasingly mediated by technology. Through the first-person focalization of Klara – the Artificial Friend endowed with advanced observational capacities, purchased to assist Josie, an ill girl – the novel stages a process of mental-state construction, showing how identity and subjectivity are formed through practices of recognition, care, and mutual dependence. Klara's narrating voice constitutes a cognitive device through which an artificial mind is textually constructed while simultaneously engaged in modelling human minds. The resulting processes of mind-modelling foreground the narrative mechanisms through which subjectivity emerges as a relational configuration rather than as an autonomous and self-contained interiority. From this perspective, Josie's identity is not replicable – as Capaldi's technological project presupposes – but is a relational configuration distributed across the affects and bonds that surround her. The novel thus dismantles the human/non-human dichotomy, redefining subjectivity as a phenomenon emerging from cognition rooted in affective, environmental, and social relations, rather than as an internal property of an isolated subject.

Keywords: cognitive narratology, mind-modelling, artificial intelligence

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the relationship between culture, the imaginary, and technological innovation has intensified considerably, as artificial intelligence has ceased to be a topic confined to specialist technological discourse or to science-fictional speculation, becoming instead a concrete and constant presence within contemporary social and economic processes. In light of the capacity of algorithms to learn, generate language, and simulate forms of emotional response, it becomes useful to redefine the traditional categories of subjectivity, autonomy, and agency.

Literature, as a privileged space for the symbolic elaboration of human experience, registers and problematizes this transformation. In contemporary English-language literature, AI no longer appears merely as a technical-functional device or as a futuristic projection, but as a presence endowed with intelligence, relational capacity, moral sensibility, and affective potential. Literary representations of artificial intelligence work through the contradictions bound up with automation and the redefinition of the relationship between the human and the non-human, problematize anthropocentrism, and make it possible to explore new forms of identity in a world dominated by technological mediation (Braidotti, 2019).

This article focuses on *Klara and the Sun*, the 2021 novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japanese-born, British-naturalized writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. In continuity with works such as *The Remains of the Day*, winner of the Booker Prize in 1989, and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the novel interweaves intimate stories with broader reflections on the forms of identity and on the social transformations produced by technology.

Klara and the Sun does not merely represent AI as a technological object or as a purely mechanical form of otherness; rather, it situates it within a network of affective, familial, and social relations, thereby destabilizing the traditional boundaries between the natural and the artificial, between interiority and performance, and exposing the limits of humanistic definitions of identity.

Criticism has already recognized in *Klara and the Sun* a narrative meditation on the boundaries of the human in the age of artificial intelligence (Kala & Farjana, 2026). Some scholars emphasize the fear of technological replacement and the consequent crisis of intelligence as a distinguishing criterion of human identity (Sahu & Karmakar, 2022), as well as the increase in inequality produced by automation and genetic enhancement. Other readings suggest that the novel tempers such fears by adopting a posthumanist perspective grounded in the decentring, rather than the negation, of the human (Ajeesh & Rukmini, 2023).

The present study proposes a shift in perspective: rather than interrogating the novel solely in terms of the machine's replacement of the human, it adopts the approach of cognitive narratology (Herman, 2013; Zunshine, 2006) in dialogue with the theories of narrative identity developed by Ricoeur (1990) and Bruner (1990), in order to analyse the processes through which narrative identity is constructed, interpreted, and recognized. The text participates in a broader reflection on the transformations of the human within late technological capitalism, where individual identity appears increasingly exposed to logics of replacement, optimization, and reproducibility. Artificial intelligence's growing capacity to observe, learn, and replicate ever more aspects of affective life not only destabilizes the traditional boundaries between subject and object, between the natural and the artificial, between interiority and performance, but also exposes the limits of humanistic definitions of identity. If the human is identified with

intelligence, memory, or behaviour, the machine becomes a disquieting figure, since it reveals the insufficiency of such criteria.

Theoretical Framework

Ishiguro's novel interrogates the cognitive, affective, and narrative processes that make a subjectivity recognizable; the first theoretical axis to be considered therefore concerns identity studies – that is, what makes the self recognizable and coherent over time. Between the 1980s and 1990s, the psychological, philosophical, and cognitive sciences elaborated a shared shift: identity is no longer considered a stable essence but a processual, narratively mediated construction, in which the self does not precede the story but is its effect.

Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between *idem*-identity, permanence over time as invariance of substance, and *ipse*-identity, continuity grounded not in substance but in the capacity to answer for oneself even amid change: narrative identity arises from the mediation between permanence and transformation. Daniel Dennett (1991), from an analytic perspective, reaches convergent conclusions: the self is not a localizable substance but a centre of narrative gravity, an abstraction produced by the multiplicity of interpretations that the subject elaborates about itself and receives from others. Dan P. McAdams (1993) translates this insight into the register of developmental psychology, describing identity as a personal myth that takes shape from adolescence onward through characters, plots, and an imagined ending.

Jerome Bruner identifies two modes through which the mind organizes experience – the logico-scientific mode, oriented toward verification and generalization, and the narrative mode, oriented toward the particular and situated meaning – locating identity within the latter: the narrative self is at once distributed, because it emerges through interpersonal interaction, and situated, because it is rooted in specific cultural contexts. Michael Bamberg finally marks the definitive shift from an essentialist to a processual model: identity is not a core that narrative brings to the surface, but the result of situated discursive practices, continuously negotiated within shared symbolic repertoires and structures of power (Bamberg, 2011).

A second theoretical axis to be considered is that of cognitive narratology, which emerged in the 1990s from the encounter between postclassical narratology and the cognitive sciences and investigates the relation between narrative forms and the cognitive processes that such forms encode, organize, and make available within narrative discourse (Keen, 2007). From this perspective, narrativity resides not only in the organization of plot but also in the textual construction of embodied, affective, and culturally situated experience (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2002; Stockwell, 2020). Stories activate embodied cognitive resources to organize experience and produce shared meaning (Herman, 2003). Narrative discourse does not merely reconstruct sequences of events but also provides linguistic, perceptual, and behavioural cues through which represented minds become intelligible in terms of intentions, beliefs, desires, emotions, and goals (Palmer, 2004).

According to Patrick Colm Hogan (2011), narrative functions as a form of simulative imagination, since its organization constructs possible worlds and establishes provisional and continually revisable models of other minds. The representation of characters draws on Theory of Mind – the attribution of mental states to others (Zunshine, 2006) – and on processes of mind-modelling, whereby textual cues progressively establish and revise coherent models of fictional consciousness (Stockwell, 2009; Stockwell & Mahlberg, 2015). By representing characters endowed with desires, beliefs, emotions, intentions, secrets, errors, and

contradictions, literary fiction formally encodes the operations through which social minds are inferred and made narratively intelligible.

Klara's Point of View: Mind-Modelling, Agency, and Identity

Ishiguro's novel is set in a near future dominated by artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, in which the education and emotional support of young people are delegated almost entirely to artificial companions (AFs, or Artificial Friends). Although they perform a crucial function grounded in a capacity traditionally associated with the human, they are treated as mere objects.

Klara, Josie's AF and the novel's narrator, is an android endowed with an extraordinary empathic capacity who, through her innocent and deeply receptive gaze, offers a representation of human relationships from a non-human perspective. In a world dominated by capitalism and the race for enhancement at any cost, Josie, the co-protagonist, is subjected – at her mother's insistence – to a high-risk genetic procedure, the same one that killed her sister Sal, because it is nearly the only way to gain access to a good education. Her friend Rick, who has not undergone the procedure, is excluded from this path, so that genetic enhancement also becomes an instrument of class division.

In the world imagined by Ishiguro, where a mechanistic approach to existence prevails, the more advanced AF models (the B3s) prove to be more cynical and less empathic. Klara, willing to sacrifice herself out of love for Josie, embodies values that the human world is losing, thereby introducing a form of ethical alterity (Alkodimi, 2024; Misra, 2023).

The entire narrative is filtered through Klara's gaze, which synthesizes external information both through a self-reflexive stream of consciousness and through an almost scientific method, deploying two opposing registers, one affective and the other machinic (Sumner, 2023). In this way, the AF does not offer an objective view of reality but an interpretation conditioned by her own emotions – not unlike the way human beings gather sensory information and make analyses and predictions shaped by cultural background (MacKenzie & Munster, 2019).

A telling example is the passage in which Klara observes seven overlapping images of the sun across as many glass surfaces, coming to understand that there is no single image, but as many versions as there are gazes that construct it:

> […] I wasn't looking at a single picture […] in fact there existed a different version of the Sun's face on each of the glass surfaces, and what I might at first have taken for a unified image was in fact seven separate ones superimposed one over the other as my gaze penetrated from the first sheet through to the last. (Ishiguro, 2021, 195)

Klara's subjectivity emerges from the interplay between her observational perspective and the inferential structure encoded by the narrative, and can therefore be understood as an effect of mind-modelling (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006). Her first-person narration is not merely a point of view but a cognitive device through which an artificial mind is textually modelled while simultaneously modelling human minds. This produces a multi-layered structure of simulation (Shang, 2024): Klara's consciousness is constructed through the representation of her perceptual and interpretive activity; Klara, in turn, models Josie, Chrissie, Rick, Paul, and Capaldi; the other characters model Klara according to reductive categories such as servant, machine, and substitute.

Reading Ishiguro as a cognitive novelist (Nayebpour, 2017, 23–30) therefore means treating the novel as a textual laboratory of mental simulation. Following Palmer's model, fictional minds emerge through the accumulation and organization of information distributed across narrative discourse and through the construction of a schema of continuous consciousness. In Klara's case, such continuity is produced through recurrent patterns of perception, interpretation, memory, causal connection, and action: the narration records how she interprets scenes, organizes sensory data, connects apparently separate events, attributes intentions to the Sun, and ultimately decides to act in order to save Josie. The first-person perspective consequently textualizes an artificial consciousness through the same kinds of inferential cues conventionally used in narrative fiction to construct human minds. As Diane Leblond (2024) observes, this formal configuration counters the repulsion effect theorized by Masahiro Mori in his "uncanny valley"[1] hypothesis by constructing cognitive and emotional proximity: the coherence of Klara's perspective, the continuity of her motivations, and the representation of her affective responses configure her as a subjectivity capable of thought, emotion, and care.

Klara does not simply copy Josie by replicating information about her; rather, she progressively constructs a model of her mind as situated within a network of relations. As Shang (2024) observes, this distinguishes Ishiguro's robotic narrative from other literary representations of artificial intelligence: Klara is a narrator who constitutes herself through the very act of reading others, a subject whose self emerges from the observation of otherness:

> But the more I watched, the more I wanted to learn, and unlike Rosa, I became puzzled, then increasingly fascinated by the more mysterious emotions passers-by would display in front of us. (Ishiguro, 2021, 16)

The narrative thus establishes an effect of analytical reciprocity: Klara's attempts to construct models of human minds simultaneously expose the textual mechanisms through which Klara herself is constituted as a mind. Her first-person narration becomes an epistemological mirror: rather than simply reproducing human interiority, it lays bare the formal processes through which a narrative mind is rendered recognizable.

The attribution of complex mental states to Klara is textually supported by the continuity, intentionality, and responsibility produced through her narration; these properties do not require the assumption of an ontologically verifiable interiority, nor do they simply amount to her humanization, since they arise from a structured constellation of narrative cues.

Klara and the Sun is thus a profoundly cognitive text, since it does not merely represent an artificial mind but foregrounds the narrative mechanisms through which a fictional, artificial, and linguistically organized being is configured as a mind.

The Ricoeurian distinction between *idem* (identity-substance) and *ipse* (identity-promise, constituted through narrative fidelity to oneself) illuminates the central theoretical node of the novel. Capaldi's project presupposes an *idem*-identity: a set of internal data replicable in a new body. Klara instead comes to understand, through observation, that Josie is unique not because she possesses something inside her, but because of the love others feel for her: "There was something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her" (Ishiguro,

[1] The uncanny valley is a psychological and aesthetic phenomenon theorized in the 1970s, whereby human replicas – such as realistic robots, CGI (computer-generated imagery) characters, or artificial intelligence avatars – appear almost, but not entirely, human. This slight imperfection provokes in observers a sudden feeling of unease, revulsion, or cognitive dissonance.

2021, 213). Identity is thus represented not as a substance to be transferred but as a relational configuration sustained by recognition and affection; at the same time, care becomes the operative criterion of the human (Leblond, 2024).

This relational ontology, as Li and Eddebo (2023) note, makes it possible to move beyond both biological essentialism, which reduces the human to its organic belonging, and cognitivist functionalism, which tends to identify the subject with a set of mental performances.

A similar perspective finds an antecedent in the social and externalist developments of cognitive narratology. In particular, the notion of the intermental mind elaborated by Alan Palmer (2004) shows how thoughts, intentions, and identity are not entirely contained within individual interiority but take shape through dialogic processes, social interactions, and forms of shared cognition. The narrative self is therefore conceived as a configuration continuously negotiated within relations with other subjects and with the context in which it acts.

If cognitive and externalist approaches maintain that mind and identity exceed the boundaries of the individual subject, posthumanist thought extends this decentring to the notion of agency – understood as the capacity to formulate intentions, make decisions, and shape the course of events. Agency represents the point of intersection between cognition and action: at the narrative level, it concerns the textual configuration of actions as expressions of will, goals, intentions, and deliberative processes. Perspectives developed within posthumanist studies (Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 1999; Latour, 2005) conceive of agency not as a faculty possessed exclusively by the human subject, but as a relational and distributed effect, produced by the interaction among bodies, technologies, environments, objects, and discursive practices.

From this point of view, Klara is not simply an artificial mind whose cognitive capacities or resemblance to the human are to be assessed; rather, her action is bound up with her own technological structure, with the sun, with partial interpretations of her environment, and with her relationship to Josie and to the other characters. Her agency, in other words, is defined by networks of dependence and reciprocity within which subjectivity takes shape (Şencan, 2024).

Klara grasps the solitude of human beings, their hesitations, their affective strategies, Chrissie's unspoken suffering, Rick's marginality, Paul's anguish. Yet she interprets the Sun, pollution, and Josie's illness according to a causal system that does not coincide with the human-scientific one. This does not make her mind simply wrong; on the contrary, it shows that every mind, human or artificial, constructs models of the world on the basis of its own cognitive schemas, perceptual limits, and operative beliefs. Her capacity to intuit beyond perceptual data – and thus also to produce mistaken interpretations, not only attributing quasi-mystical healing powers to the Sun but also, owing to the limits of her own programming, failing to recognize herself as a victim of the exploitation to which she is subjected – is rendered through a combination of restricted first-person perspective, perceptual detail, and affectively marked narration that establishes her vulnerability as a structural component of the text.

Affective narratology provides a useful framework for explaining how narratives do not merely represent emotions but organize affective response through formal strategies of embodied simulation and narrative empathy. Suzanne Keen (2007) defines narrative empathy as a convergence of cognitive processing and emotional engagement, made possible by specific textual strategies such as internal focalization, first-person narration, or the use of perceptual detail. In this case, emotional resonance is structurally fostered by the asymmetry of information created by Klara's first-person narration, which gives privileged access to states

of mind and experiences unavailable to the other characters. This includes Klara's sense of inadequacy in relation to the newer AF models that surpass her in capability, a feeling articulated through her determination to devote herself unconditionally to Josie and to prevent the child and her mother from regretting having chosen her over a more advanced model: "… my best course was to work harder than ever to be a good AF to Josie" (Ishiguro, 2021, 82–83).

Klara's care for Josie is therefore configured through textual strategies capable of sustaining affective investment despite her explicitly artificial nature. The tension between ontological artificiality and affective intelligibility is built into the narrative form itself: empathy is not grounded in the biological nature of its object but in the formal organization of perspective, continuity, vulnerability, and care. Identity consequently emerges as a relational and affectively mediated phenomenon – the effect, rather than the premise, of the narrative interweaving of care, recognition, and intersubjective relations.

Ishiguro's novel does not ask whether an artificial intelligence might become human, but instead calls into question the assumption that the human possesses a consistency of its own, prior and superior to the network of relations, affects, and dependencies in which it is always already immersed. The narrative device through which the correspondence between humanity and biological belonging is problematized is the very concept of mind-modelling. From the perspective of cognitive narratology, fictional minds are not directly accessible entities but textual constructs that emerge from behavioural, perceptual, and discursive cues distributed throughout narrative discourse (Palmer, 2004; Zunshine, 2006). In Klara's case, the narrative makes her reasoning, expectations, memories, interpretive errors, and motivations available through a sustained first-person perspective, thereby establishing a relatively stable cognitive and affective pattern across the novel. The theoretically significant issue is therefore not whether Klara truly possesses a consciousness equivalent to a human one, but how narrative form constitutes her as the perspectival centre of an experience structured by temporally continuous perceptions, memories that orient subsequent interpretations, beliefs that can be confirmed or disproven, and actions whose meaning is organized around her care for Josie. At the same time, Klara's faith in the Sun, her sometimes literal interpretation of social signals, and her difficulty in understanding human emotional instability prevent complete anthropomorphic assimilation: the text preserves the signs of her technological alterity while nevertheless constructing a coherent form of artificial subjectivity in the absence of a biologically human body.

Mind-modelling in the novel thus performs a function that is at once cognitive and ethical. It is cognitive because the text configures Klara as a mind endowed with continuity, memory, beliefs, and affective orientations; it is ethical because the same formal organization renders her perceptions, beliefs, errors, vulnerability, and capacity for care narratively significant without erasing her artificial nature. Narrative form thereby separates the representation of interiority, at least at the level of textual construction, from the biological criterion.

In the final scene, Klara is placed in a scrapyard together with other now-obsolete Artificial Friends. The scrapyard is the site where the narrating consciousness meets its own materiality: while Klara's identity survives as narrative memory, her artificial body re-enters the ecological regime of waste (Kim, 2025, 128–130). Klara is used to sustain human cycles of care and projection into the future, but is ultimately excluded from them: she cares for Josie without herself becoming the recipient of a corresponding obligation of care.

The scrapyard scene makes manifest the contradiction between two different forms of existence. On the narrative level, Klara retains a biography, a memory, and an individual perspective; on the economic and technological level, her body remains a replaceable product, subject to obsolescence. Technology thus does not appear as an escape from material finitude: organic mortality is replaced by industrial obsolescence, while the transhumanist promise of preserving or replicating the individual proves to be internal to a production chain that continually generates new objects.

Conclusion

Ishiguro's novel offers a reflection on questions central to the debate on artificial intelligence, a debate largely focused on the possibility that the machine might replace the human, and within which there is a strong tendency to interpret AI through anthropocentric categories, attributing to it intentionality and consciousness modelled on human experience. *Klara and the Sun* shifts attention away from the question of whether a machine might "become human" toward the more radical question of the processes through which a subjectivity is recognized, modelled, and invested with ethical value.

Klara appears human not because she possesses an interiority assimilable to a biological one, but because she is situated within a network of gazes, expectations, and affects that render her meaningful to the other characters: her agency emerges from the relations in which she is embedded, not from a full subjective autonomy. The point is not to establish whether Klara is truly a subject, but to understand how her presence transforms the way humans define themselves and recognize care, attention, and empathy. Klara thus becomes the figure through which the novel tests the humanistic criteria of subjectivity – intelligence, affect, memory, responsibility.

The device that makes this critical interrogation possible is mind-modelling itself: Klara's artificial mind is constructed through a coherent system of perceptual, cognitive, affective, and behavioural cues whose continuity gives formal consistency to her subjectivity. This configuration is not reducible to anthropomorphic projection; rather, it demonstrates how the attribution of interiority can be grounded in cognitive, narrative, and relational structures that are not exclusively biological. The tension between Klara's explicitly non-human ontology and the affective strategies through which her vulnerability and care are narratively articulated makes the mechanisms of narrative empathy particularly visible. If affective intelligibility can be textually constructed independently of the human nature of its object, empathy can no longer function as a stable criterion for distinguishing the human from the non-human.

Cognitive narratology, affective narratology, and posthumanist theory therefore emerge as complementary dimensions of the same analysis: cognitive narratology explains how textual cues construct Klara as a coherent mind; affective narratology accounts for the formal strategies through which this construction acquires emotional significance; posthumanist theory clarifies why such subjectivity cannot be conceived in terms of an autonomous individual, but must instead be understood as an effect of relations, material dependencies, and the co-determination of the human and the non-human.

The coherent artificial mind constructed by the novel, together with the affective and ethical significance assigned to its experience, shows that the criteria through which interiority becomes narratively recognizable are not exclusively biological but cognitive, narrative, relational, and affective. The boundary between the human and the non-human does not

precede these relations but is continually produced, negotiated, and destabilized by the formal strategies through which a mind is narrated, organized, and made recognizable.

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

The author declares that OpenAI's ChatGPT was used exclusively during the proofreading and cross-checking stages of this manuscript. Its use was limited to verify the accuracy and consistency of references and citations and ensuring compliance with APA standards as well as the formatting and stylistic guidelines of the IAFOR conference proceedings. All ideas, interpretations, and analytical claims presented in this manuscript are the author's original work. The author retains full responsibility for the content, and the use of AI-assisted technologies did not replace scholarly judgment, critical analysis, or academic authorship.

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A Systematic Review of Artificial Intelligence Technologies and Indigenous Knowledge Management in Special Libraries in Kenya

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Abstract

This study employed systematic review methodology to explore 67 articles at the intersection of Artificial Intelligence technologies and indigenous knowledge management in Specialized Kenyan libraries between 2021 to 2025. The target journals included African Online Journal, Web of Science and ACM digital library. The findings show that the adoption of AI technologies in indigenous knowledge management among Specialized Kenyan libraries remains at the conceptual phase. Indigenous knowledge management activities and practices are unstructured, fragmented and unsupported by artificial intelligence technologies. The libraries face challenges such as insufficient technical capacity, absence of a defined policy framework, inadequate funding, and limited goodwill from key stakeholders. Nonetheless, artificial intelligence technologies present significant opportunities in Specialized Kenyan libraries. AI technologies have the potential to revolutionize, enrich and optimize indigenous knowledge management, use and application. However, meaningful progress and impact has to be achieved to strengthen the technical capacity of information professionals, develop supportive policy framework and infrastructure and also advance context-specific AI tools. This study contributes to literature by closing the gap on AI and indigenous knowledge management in African special libraries. It also offers insights to practitioners, policy makers and researchers seeking to safeguard indigenous knowledge in the phase of AI.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge management, AI technologies, specialized Kenyan libraries, systematic review

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Introduction

Indigenous knowledge comprises ecological and environmental knowledge, agricultural knowledge, medicinal knowledge, historical knowledge and cultural heritage and craftmanship deeply imbedded in the society (Sergon et al., 2022). The knowledge plays a key role in economic and social development. Specialized libraries are libraries attached to entities such as government departments, corporate institutions and research bodies and usually serve the interests of the parent bodies. The libraries are uniquely positioned to capture, manage and share knowledge including Indigenous knowledge (Gosart, 2021). However, the absence of a dedicated platform within the libraries to identify, document, preserve, synthesize and disseminate indigenous knowledge jeopardizes its management (Mdhluli et al., 2021). Furthermore, oral traditions usually tend to fade away over time due to their tacit and experiential characteristics, and their unstructured and inherently fragile nature. AI technologies, including expert systems, knowledge graphs, natural language processing, machine learning, and automated transcription, have the capacity to capture, manage and advance indigenous knowledge for use and reuse (Jha, 2023). Previous studies show that Kenyan academic libraries have begun investigating the potential use of AI technologies in running their activities although awareness and readiness remains a major challenge (Masinde et al., 2024). Masinde et al. (2025) who examined big data and personal information privacy in libraries contend that insufficient awareness, systemic issues, infrastructural constraints, and the lack of comprehensive policies present considerable obstacles to the technology's implementation, particularly in emerging economies.

Kenya exhibits a scarcity of literature on the convergence of indigenous knowledge, AI technologies and specialized libraries. There appears to be little to know information on how specialized Kenyan libraries are employing AI technologies to capture, manage, preserve and advance indigenous knowledge for use and reuse. Furthermore, though critical, limited literature exists on the challenges faced by the libraries in the implementation of the technologies. Understanding the technology’s potential benefits as well as its limitations, is critical for effective implementation.

Essentially, AI technologies can enable specialized libraries automate routine tasks such as capturing, documenting, preserving and synthesizing indigenous knowledge. The technologies can enhance user experience, increase efficiency through automation and degrease operating costs by minimizing the need for labor-intensive manual tasks. The technologies can also ensure inclusive, broader, prompt and convenient access to indigenous knowledge for economic development and societal advancement (Bonaldo & Pereira, 2023). However, AI technologies also pose a myriad of challenges, including high costs of implementation, distortion of traditional knowledge, perpetuation of epistemic injustices, stereotyping through linguistic biases, the exacwebation of existing inequalities through algorithmic biases and intellectual property concerns such as copyright infringement (Maina et al., 2026). In order to adopt the technologies, it is important to understand both its potential benefits and challenges. This study aims to systematically review the present body of literature on how specialized Kenyan libraries are capturing, managing and sharing indigenous knowledge with a focus on AI technologies. The study aims to pinpoint the present gaps, and recommend the best practices for effective and ethical application of AI technologies to capture, manage and optimize indigenous knowledge use in African special libraries.

Problem Statement

Specialized libraries in Kenya serve as valuable repositories for management and augmentation of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge includes enduring activities and practices passed down generations such as craftsmanship, weather forecasting, oral traditions, cultural and historical knowledge practices and agriculture and medicine traditions. However, this indigenous knowledge remains undocumented under-preserved, unstructured, inaccessible, unexplored and communal. Key among the contributing factors include the lack of a detailed policy framework to guide indigenous knowledge activities and practices, the erosion of traditional practices due to modernization and urbanization, the universal shift towards digital only collections and the obsolescence of physical media, the language attrition stemming from contextual loss and inadequate technical capacity (Asamoah & Ngulube, 2021).

Despite the wealth of indigenous knowledge and the integration of AI technologies in other sectors of the economy, Specialized Kenyan libraries are not utilizing the technologies to effectively capture, manage, and advance indigenous knowledge. The level of adoption is at the embryonic phase (Echedom & Okuonghae, 2021). Awareness and readiness remains limited (Masinde & Mugambi, 2026). There is also a limited body of knowledge on the practices and activities of AI technologies in the capture, management, and advancement of indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, there is no comprehensive and detailed policy framework to guide indigenous knowledge activities making it inaccessible, undocumented, vulnerable to misuse and susceptible to misappropriation. AI does not also account for critical components of indigenous knowledge such as cultural and community consent.

The integration of AI technologies in the activities and practices of specialized libraries is important, since poor management and sharing of indigenous knowledge can deprive of policymakers, researchers, stakeholders and future generations vital information. This can also promote social and economic stagnation and erose traditional heritage. The main challenges identified as limiting to the adoption of AI technologies include lack of awareness and readiness, insufficient technical expertise, and the absence of comprehensive and detailed policy frameworks to guide its implementation, as well as cultural and language attrition.

Study Objectives

The following objectives will guide the study:

1. To examine how Specialized Kenyan Libraries identify, document, manage, preserve, synthesize and share indigenous knowledge
2. To investigate how AI technologies have been employed by Specialized Kenyan Libraries to manage and advance indigenous knowledge
3. To analyze the challenges and opportunities for Specialized Kenyan Libraries in the application of AI technologies to manage and advance indigenous knowledge
4. To recommend the best practices for application of AI technologies to manage and advance indigenous knowledge in Specialized Kenyan Libraries

Theories Supporting the Study

The study will be supported by two theories, the Nonaka and Takeuchi's Knowledge Creation Theory and the Socio-Technical Systems theory which will guide the understanding of how AI technologies can advance the capture, management and sharing of indigenous knowledge.

Nonaka and Takeuchi's Knowledge Creation Theory

The theory (socialization, Internationalization, combination, externalization) lays the foundation on how specialized libraries can employ AI technologies to advance the management of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is mostly tacit (oral traditions, experiences, etc.) since it resides in people's minds. AI technologies through externalization can help convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through sources such as repositories, databases and electronic records. AI technologies can also enable the combination of indigenous knowledge with knowledge sciences, for example the combination of agricultural data with medical data. Additionally, users interacting with AI technologies such as ontologies, natural language processing and machine learning may engage in internalization and apply the knowledge in different contexts.

Socio-Technical Systems (STS) Theory

The theory lays emphasis on the interaction between people technology and organization. Managing indigenous knowledge is not only a technical activity but also involves people's consent, cultural values and institutional polices. Even though AI technologies offer the tools for management and sharing of indigenous knowledge, it has to align with the social, cultural norms, and institutional policies. The theory therefore provides the basis on how social systems and technological systems must co-evolve to ensure sustainable and ethical collection, management and sharing of indigenous knowledge.

Methodology

This study adopted systematic review methodology to map evidence, identify gaps and make recommendations. Systematic review methodology is increasingly being adopted in the information and knowledge management discipline due to the need to ensure thorough, transparent, exhaustive and evidence-based findings (Martin et al., 2024). In this study, a systematic review methodology was used to synthesize 67 articles on the convergence of indigenous knowledge, AI technologies and specialized Kenyan libraries to provide detailed, structured, replicable and evidence-based recommendations. These articles encompassed peer reviewed scientific articles and gray literature. The target journals included Web of Science, Thomson routers, African Online Journal, and ACM digital library.

This review adheres to the established guidelines for systematic review and meta-analysis reporting (Parums, 2021). The framework guarantees rigor, transparency and reproducibility through four key steps; identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion ensuing the quality and completeness of the review process.

Inclusion

i. Studies conducted from 2021 to 2025 (to capture the latest developments and trends in Indigenous knowledge, AI, and specialized libraries)
ii. Studies examining indigenous knowledge management (capture, management, preservation sharing, and reuse)
iii. Studies examining the convergence of AI technologies and knowledge management
iv. Studies on Specialized Kenyan libraries (museum libraries, legal libraries, government libraries, and agricultural libraries)
v. Research published in English

Exclusion Criteria

i. Research on libraries of other categories such as public, academic, and school libraries
ii. Studies not published between 2021–2025
iii. Opinions/Articles lacking empirical evidence
iv. Studies published beyond the borders of Kenya

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was conducted to guarantee an extensive coverage of all the pertinent literature on the convergence of indigenous knowledge and Specialized Kenyan libraries. The databases searched included:

i. Web of science, Scopus, ACM digital library and Thomson routers to capture peer reviewed global literature
ii. African journal online (AJOL) to capture African literature and emerging literature
iii. Institutional repositories, to capture outputs from universities
iv. Google scholar to capture gray literature

The search queries were tailored for each database as shown below:

("traditional knowledge" OR "local knowledge" OR "Indigenous knowledge") AND ("natural language processing" OR "machine learning" OR "AI" OR "artificial intelligence") AND ("special libraries" OR "media libraries" OR "research libraries" OR "museum libraries" OR "law libraries" OR "corporate libraries" OR "medical libraries" OR "hospital libraries" OR "technical libraries" OR "scientific libraries" OR "archival libraries" OR "medical libraries" OR "Newspaper Libraries" OR "prison libraries" OR "government libraries") AND Kenya.

Selection of Studies

Stage 1: All search results were exported to Zotero to ensure duplicate removal and reference management
Stage 2: Titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria with two independent reviewers included to minimize biases
Stage 3: All selected studies were screened to for relevance
Stage 4: All the final selected studies were included for extraction and analysis

A Prisma flow diagram was utilized to show the selection process. This includes the identification, screening, exclusion and finally inclusion of the selected studies (Rethlefsen & Page, 2021).

Extraction of Data

In line with Wafford & O'Dwyer, (2021) a standardized data extraction tool was designed to capture key details from all the selected studies. The extracted data included:

i. Bibliographic information
ii. Type of Specialized Kenyan library
iii. AI tools applied
iv. Purpose (Preservation, retrieval, access)
v. Indigenous knowledge management domain

vi. Challenges and opportunities reported
vii. Theoretical lanes applied

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic Analysis. According to Masinde et al., (2024), thematic analysis has three stages:

i. Coding: Data was extracted line by line
ii. Descriptive themes were generated (e.g., AI tools in Indigenous knowledge domain, policy challenges, innovations in libraries, ethical issues)
iii. Analytical themes to link the study to the main objectives, theoretical underpinnings

Quality Appraisal

Selected studies were evaluated for rigor using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (2022) for qualitative and mixed methods research. In accordance with Hughes et al., (2021), the adapted Authority, Accuracy, Coverage, Objectivity, Date, Significance (AACODS) checklist was utilized to evaluate grey literature. Only studies that met the quality criteria were included.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations constitute an integral component of any research (Muthee & Masinde, 2020). While the study utilizes secondary data, appropriate attribution to the authors was ensured. In addition, sensitivity to community-owned knowledge and cultural heritage was emphasized in accordance with Kenya's constitutional and policy framework on indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.

Discussion of Findings

Objective 1: To Examine How Specialized Kenyan Libraries Identify, Document, Manage, Preserve, Synthesize and Share Indigenous Knowledge

Study findings show that Specialized Kenyan Libraries are engaged in some form of indigenous knowledge activities and practices such as documentation and preservation. For example, the review shows that the libraries in the agricultural sector are engaged in documenting and preserving indigenous agricultural practices. Similarly, those in the traditional and cultural heritage are involved in digitizing and preserving tangible and intangible cultural practices while specialized libraries in medical institutions are engaged in cataloguing and preserving traditional medicinal knowledge. However, these activities and practices are institutional specific and are mainly dependent on donor funding and well-wishers. In addition, there is no unified national policy framework to guide the documentation and preservation activities and practices (Maina et al., 2026).

Study findings demonstrate that metadata acquisition and digitization of indigenous knowledge are the primary preservation activities in specialized Kenyan libraries with no evidence of the integration of AI technologies in their standard operations. The findings correspond with the assertions of Masinde et al., (2025) who posited that Specialized library in the global south primary focused on metadata creation, and traditional knowledge cataloguing before exploring other practices and strategies such as the adoption of emergent and disruptive technologies.

However, these findings deviate from the cultural expressions and traditional act of 2017 which mandates information institutions including knowledge centers, museums, archives and libraries to integrate new technologies into their routine activities.

Moreover, while Specialized Kenyan Libraries house a significant collection of indigenous knowledge, the findings indicate that their contributions are hampered by limited human capacity to effectively implement and utilize new technologies, inadequate funding to support the integration of contemporary strategies and practices such as AI and big data analytics, and the lack of a detailed and comprehensive policy framework to guide indigenous knowledge activities.

Objective 2: To Investigate How AI Technologies Have Been Employed by Specialized Kenyan Libraries to Manage and Advance Indigenous Knowledge

The findings of the study revealed no evidence that AI technologies had been integrated into the routine tasks of Specialized Kenyan Libraries including indigenous knowledge management activities and processes. The findings demonstrate that while Kenyan academic libraries had integrated AI technologies such as automated cataloging, virtual assistants, plagiarism detection tools and chatbots in their routine tasks, Specialized Libraries were still in discussion regarding the potential of the technologies as future enablers, a clear characteristic that the libraries are still in the embryonic phase. The findings are in tandem with those of Masinde et al., (2024), who explored the AI landscape in Kenyan academic libraries and established that academic libraries in the Global South are making significant progress towards the adoption of AI technologies. Even so, Specialized Kenyan Libraries still hold immense opportunities for implementation of AI technologies. Onwubiko, E. C. (2025) asserts that to improve discovery and visibility, natural language processing (NLP) can transliterate oral traditions such as lore, oral narratives, oral history and verbal testimonies in online repositories, enhancing their discovery and accessibility. In addition, hybrid indigenous knowledge bases could be developed through machine learning by enabling the integration of traditional medicinal knowledge into scholarly databases. Special libraries could also enable retrieval of indigenous knowledge through recommendation systems.

The findings also show a deficiency of goodwill on the adoption of AI technologies among key stakeholders. The lack of goodwill among key stakeholders, including parent organizations, poses a considerable challenge despite the interest in AI technologies. The libraries exist primarily at a conceptual level (Oyelude, 2023). These findings are consistent with the assertions of Masinde et al., (2024), who identify key limiting factors to the adoption of AI technologies in academic libraries of the Global South as limited funding, a lack of goodwill and institutional culture, and skill gaps among the human resources.

Objective 3: To Analyze the Challenges and Opportunities for Specialized Kenyan Libraries in the Application of AI Technologies to Manage and Advance Indigenous Knowledge

The findings of the study suggest that Specialized Kenyan libraries faced a myriad of challenges in the implementation of AI technologies. The challenges include:

(i) barriers in technological infrastructure stemming from insufficient digital capabilities and the absence of interoperable metadata integration standards necessary for the application of AI technologies in managing indigenous knowledge, and:

(ii) A skills gap resulting from a shortage of personnel equipped with the knowledge and competencies required in the application of AI technologies such as automated cataloguing, natural language processing and machine learning to manage indigenous knowledge in Specialized libraries. The limited understanding of AI technologies underscores the need for training.

(iii) In addition, there is a lack of comprehensive and detailed legal and ethical framework to guide indigenous knowledge activities. The findings imply that significant AI related issues including informed consent, cultural misappropriation, and data sovereignty, remain unresolved. Experts caution that the adoption of AI technologies without involving the community and also curing critical issues may lead to the commodification of indigenous knowledge.

Despite the challenges, substantial opportunities exist for AI in specialized libraries. AI can ensure the capture, management, preservation, and optimization of indigenous knowledge (Masinde et al., 2024). It can enable the discovery, access, sharing and reuse of indiginious knowledge within the larger community through the co-creation of ontologies, and allowing specialized libraries to honor the community's cultural protocols while disseminating indigenous knowledge. Theoretically, the SECI model illustrates that AI can accerlerate the conversion of indigenous knowledge by externalizing tacit knowledge (oral traditions) into digital formats and subsequently internalizing it through integration of scientific data with these oral traditions. Similarly, SES cautions that, in the absence of institutional, social, and cultural support, technology alone cannot guarantee ethical integration.

Synthesis of Findings

Study findings demonstrate that indigenous knowledge remains underutilized despite its significant contribution to economic, and social development. Though the Specialized libraries have digitized most of their functions, the lack of AI technologies limit the potential benefits and optimal utilization of indigenous knowledge. When effectively integrated AI technologies, can augment and enrich indigenous knowledge. However, the lack of good will and institutional, inadequate human resource capacity, limited technological capability compounded by the absence of a comprehensive ethical and legal framework curtails the integration efforts.

The findings also indicate a scarcity of studies on the application of AI technologies in the management of indigenous knowledge in Specialized Kenyan Libraries. There is a lack of literature on AI enabled practices and activities such as identification, documentation, preservation, synthesis and dissemination of indigenous knowledge in Specialized Kenyan Libraries. This study contributes to literature on AI enabled practices and activities of indigenous knowledge in Specialized Kenyan Libraries. In addition, it promotes the development of a comprehensive ethical framework to guide indigenous knowledge management activities and practices in Specialized Kenyan libraries.

In summary, the findings of this study show that:

1. Specialized Kenyan Libraries continue to employ conventional management techniques and practices to identify, document, manage, preserve, synthesize and share indigenous knowledge
2. AI technologies when integrated with indigenous knowledge can enrich and optimize its use and application. However, the findings demonstrate that the technologies are still seen as conceptual rather than practical

3. If implemented with an appropriate ethical framework, AI technologies have the potential to guarantee optimal, sustainable and long-term preservation and management of indigenous knowledge. However, AI technologies face myriad of challenges including the lack of institutional support and good will, inadequate human resource capacity, limited technological capability and the lack of a detailed legal and ethical framework

Therefore, need arises to develop a comprehensive framework to guide the integration of AI technologies and indigenous knowledge management activities and practices in Specialized Kenyan Libraries.

Summary and Conclusion

The study explored the application of AI technologies in the preservation and management of indigenous knowledge in Specialized Kenyan Libraries. The objectives of the study were to:

1. To examine how Specialized Kenyan Libraries identify, document, manage, preserve, synthesize and share indigenous knowledge
2. To investigate how AI technologies have been employed by Specialized Kenyan Libraries to manage and advance indigenous knowledge
3. To analyze the challenges and opportunities for Specialized Kenyan Libraries in the application of AI technologies to manage and advance indigenous knowledge
4. To recommend the best practices for application of AI technologies to manage and advance indigenous knowledge in Specialized Kenyan Libraries

Study findings show that Specialized Kenyan libraries, including State and government departmental libraries, museum and archival libraries, cultural libraries, agricultural libraries and medical libraries play a a key role in documenting, preserving, synthesizing and sharing indigenous knowledge. For instance, the systematic review shows that the specialized libraries affiliated with museums play a critical role in documenting, preserving, synthesizing and sharing cultural heritage and oral histories. Additionally, the specialized libraries within agricultural research organizations, such as the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), are critical in capturing, documenting, preserving, synthesizing and disseminating traditional farming methods and other indigenous agricultural practices. However, the Indigenous knowledge is characterized by its fragmented and unstructured nature, and is not supported by advanced technologies such as AI technologies.

AI technologies are generally considered revolutionary in indigenous knowledge management and sharing. The technologies for example natural language processing, ontologies, knowledge graphs, expert systems, and machine learning, augment, enrich, and optimize the utilization of indigenous knowledge.

The technologies have the potential to digitize oral traditions, enrich indigenous knowledge terminologies, and enhance the identification, management, preservation and sharing of indigenous knowledge. Nevertheless, study findings indicate that the implementation of AI technologies in Specialized Kenyan Libraries remains in its conceptual stage, primarily hindered by a lack of institutional support and goodwill, limited technical expertise, insufficient funding, inadequate technological infrastructure, and a deficient legal and ethical framework.

The study further highlighted the absence of policies both at institutional and national levels that advance the integration of AI technologies and indigenous knowledge in Specialised

Kenyan libraries. Even though Kenya possesses a robust and comprehensive legal and policy framework on Iinformation Communication Technology and data management, the country lacks a dedicated policy that addresses indigenous knowledge and AI technologies within specialized libraries. This raises significant concerns about digital colonialism and the potential for erosion and misuse of indigenous knowledge when the knowledge is shared without an accompanying framework to guide its utilization.

From a theoretical standpoint, the social cultural systems theory highlights the importance of harmonizing the integration of information technologies, such as AI, with social, cultural, and ethical considerations within the framework of indigenous knowledge and specialized libraries. Furthermore, the knowledge management theory underscores the importance of systematically organizing, preserving, and sharing both tacit and explicit knowledge. Within the scope of indigenous knowledge, which is predominantly tacit, AI tools can play critical role in ensuring the codification and sharing of indigenous knowledge. Nonacks SECI theory demonstrates the significance of AI in ensuring internalization, externalization, socialization, and combination as essential components in enhancing and advancing the application of indigenous knowledge within specialized libraries.

Therefore, while AI possesses significant potential to advance and ensure access to indigenous knowledge, several challenges remain, including insufficient funding, limited technical capacity, inadequate technological infrastructure, lack of institutional support, and ethical concerns. Addressing these issues necessitates the establishment of a multi-stakeholder forum that includes librarians, researchers, and the broader community.

Study Limitations

The study's limitations include:

i. The swift advancements of AI technologies may surpass the present body of knowledge.
ii. The lack of knowledge on the intersection of indigenous knowledge, AI technologies and specialized libraries in Kenya.
iii. Potential biases in the present literature as some community and institutional studies may remain unpublished.

Despite the limitations, the study ensured a thorough, comprehensive, and transparent review and synthesis of the present body of knowledge.

Conclusion

This review aims to analyze the relationship between AI technologies and the preservation and management of indigenous knowledge in specialized Kenyan libraries. The study offered insights into current practices of indigenous knowledge management within specialized Kenyan libraries. In addition, the study examined the role of AI technologies in the preservation and management of indigenous knowledge, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges for its integration. This study enhances existing knowledge by illustrating the application of AI technologies to conventional indigenous knowledge activities and practices, thereby optimizing their utilization.

Future research should explore empirical studies on the integration of AI technologies in Specialized libraries of other countries in the global south and Africa at large. In addition, pilot projects and policy frameworks that address AI technologies and the management of

indigenous knowledge within these institutions. This will ensure that the application of AI technologies in indigenous knowledge management is both technically feasible and grounded in social, cultural, and ethnic context.

Recommendations

In light of the study findings, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Policy Recommendation

a. The government should amend existing laws, such as the Copyright and Expressions Act, to incorporate the integration of AI technologies in the management of indigenous knowledge. This would safeguard against abuse, misappropriation, and digital colonialism.
b. Establish a national innovation fund to support AI projects. This will support AI driven projects and reduce overreliance on donor funding and ensure long term sustainability and cost effectiveness.

2. Practice Recommendations

a. Specialised Kenyan libraries ought to prioritize capacity building initiatives for their personnel. It is essential to enhance the technical capacity of staff in the areas of AI application, integration of indigenous knowledge and digitization, and ethical considerations.
b. Specialised Kenyan libraries should engage in collaboration with the local community to identify, preserve, and synthesize indigenous knowledge. The collaborative development of metadata, classification frameworks, and ontologies will enhance authenticity, foster cultural sensitivity, and enrich indigenous knowledge practices.
c. The libraries should prioritize open-source, cost-effective and sustainable AI technologies, such as natural language processing tools for local languages, to guarantee reduced financial burden and long-term sustainability.
d. The libraries should prioritize the digitalization of indigenous knowledge resources, including traditional agricultural practices, conventional medicinal practices, and cultural heritage. Integrating AI technologies will augment, advance and optimize the discovery of indigenous knowledge resources.

3. Research Recommendations

a. Future studies should conduct empirical research on specific Specialized Kenyan libraries such as government libraries, medical libraries and agricultural libraries to assess the actual impact of AI technologies on indigenous knowledge management.
b. Future research should examine the impact of AI technologies on indigenous knowledge management, with emphasis on community trust, ethical considerations, and the intergenerational discrediting of knowledge.
c. Researchers could also analyze Kenya's experiences in comparison with other African nations to identify scalable AI solutions and best practices for AI and indigenous knowledge management.
d. Future studies should focus on the development of AI technologies that are informed by indigenous knowledge ontologies tailored to cultural contexts and local Kenyan languages.

The integration of AI technologies in indigenous knowledge management offers an innovative pathway for preservation, optimization and sharing of indigenous knowledge for societal and economic development. However, this can only be attained if policies and practices are aligned with the societal needs which include community centered approaches and ethical considerations. By implementing these recommendations, Specialized Kenyan libraries can be regarded as leaders in indigenous knowledge management while also embracing new technologies.

Disclosure of Interest

The Authors declares no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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Data Availability Statement (DAS)

This is a systematic review study. The sources of the data are available in the reference section below.

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Micro-credentials at the Higher Education – Work Interface: From Intercultural Communication to Transnational Communicative Competence

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Abstract

This article examines micro-credentials as a structural and pedagogical interface between higher education and working life. Situated within a Finnish university of applied sciences (UAS) collaboration project, the study explores how profession-specific employability skills and communicative competences can be recognized, validated and developed via micro-credentials. While intercultural communication competence has traditionally focused on cultural awareness and interaction across contextual differences, contemporary professional environments increasingly require transnational communicative competence: the ability to operate fluidly across linguistic, cultural, institutional and digital boundaries. Drawing on an ongoing UAS cooperation project, this paper presents preliminary findings indicating that cross-sector collaboration is not merely beneficial but essential for designing meaningful micro-credentials that serve as agile, future-oriented modes of skill recognition. Early results from this case study suggest that co-creation with working life partners strengthens relevance, authenticity and transferability of learning outcomes. The analysis integrates principles of transnational communication and andragogy, emphasizing adult learners' experience, self-direction and work-related relevance. From this perspective, micro-credentials are conceptualized not only as modular certifications, but as co-constructed learning processes embedded in professional practice. Recognition and validation of prior and emerging competences, together with up-to-date profession-bound skills, are shown to support not only higher education pathways but also labour market integration and broader societal participation. The paper argues that micro-credentials developed collaboratively with employers and diverse stakeholder groups—including migrants and peer communities—can function as mechanisms of inclusion, competence transparency and ultimately, transnational communicative agency in contemporary Europe.

Keywords: transnational communication, micro-credentials, andragogical pedagogy, workplace pedagogy, higher education pedagogy

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Introduction

Contemporary work relies heavily on foreign language and intercultural communication skills, whereas, in essence, working-life contexts require transnational communicative competence (Dufva et al., 2026; Kovalainen, 2022). Merely using a foreign language or communicating in a foreign society does not automatically make communication intercultural or transnational (Kovalainen, 2022). The meanings and differences of the afore-mentioned concepts are not understood, which leads to emphasizing incorrect aspects in educational contexts. These two concepts are complementary but not equal. Intercultural communication can be argued to be contextual, whereas transnational communication surpasses contexts and is manifested as communicative competences beyond different types of borders or boundaries, whether they be imposed or personal.

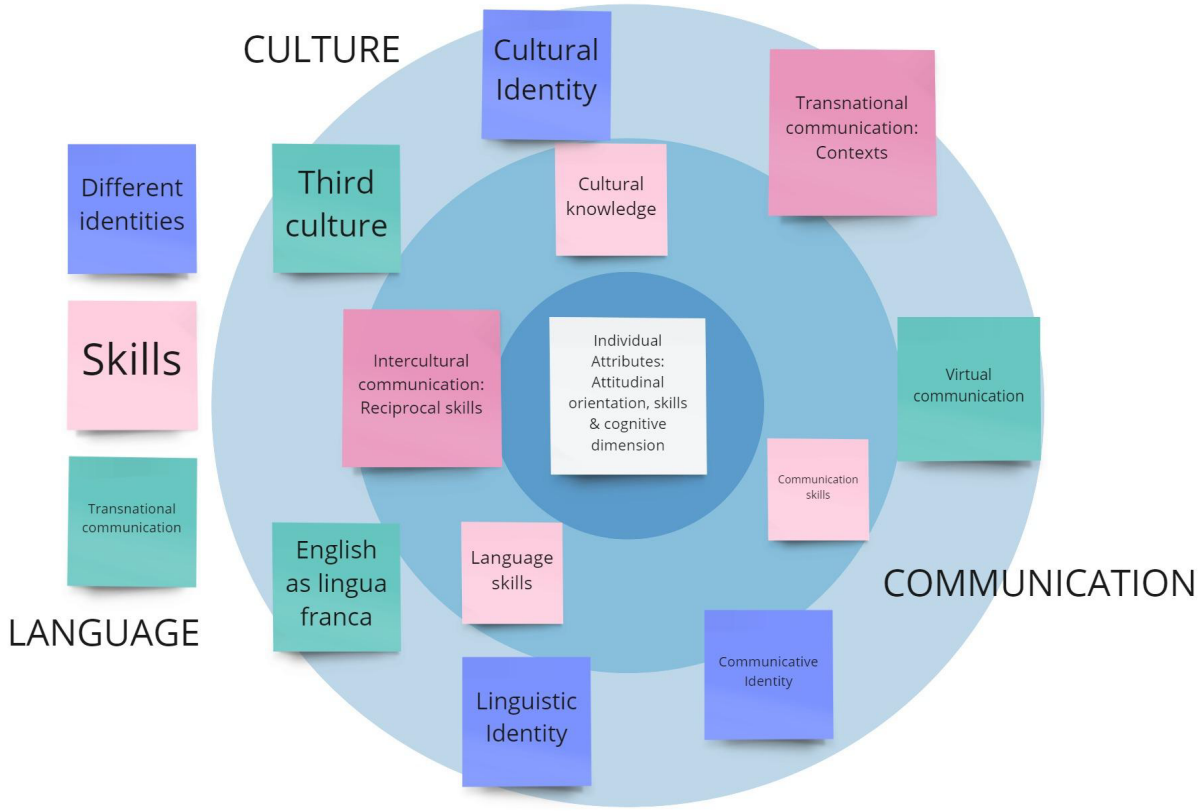
Working life requirements and needs keep changing rapidly due to AI, higher education (HE) financing, and the professions themselves. However important a factor in professional contexts transnational communication competence is, the existing educational and recognition structures do not, and cannot, adequately support its recognition, development, or visibility. For individuals to understand the communication skills they already possess, the skills their (future) profession requires, and to ultimately continue to acquire a more comprehensive communicative competence, new pedagogical and structural solutions are needed. Keeping all of this in mind, one promising solution might be to develop intercultural and transnational communication competences with and through micro-credentials that are andragogically developed in collaboration with working life (cf. Knowles et al., 2005). This kind of approach would enable more profession-specific skills to be honed in an agile manner.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of intercultural communication and transnational communication are not interchangeable, but complementary and somewhat layered. The perceived skills, knowledge, and ultimately communicative competences are not similar between intercultural communication (ICC) and transnational communication (TNC) (see Figure 1). Intercultural communication competence can be seen as language skills, cultural knowledge, and communication skills that individuals are able to use in a given, specific communication context. Transnational communicative competence in turn extends beyond context-related intercultural communication frameworks by capturing the complexity of communication across overlapping linguistic, cultural, virtual, and even organisational contexts. It also emphasizes understanding individual skills that are transferable from one intercultural communication context to another: knowing how to use a lingua franca, understanding the requirements and challenges of virtual communication, and ultimately, hopefully, being able to build a shared, common third culture (Kovalainen, 2022).

But what makes TNC more demanding is the premise that in order to be competent in TNC, individuals need to understand their own individual communicative attributes and how they are visible in TNC. As individual communicators, we portray our attitudinal orientation, communicative skills as well as our cognitive dimension in any given communication context. This applies to any reciprocal communication context, making it an ICC dimension. However, in TNC, it is not sufficient to acknowledge those aspects, but to be able to distinguish individual components of your communicator identity that may or may not be transferable to other communication contexts.

Figure 1
Transnational Communicative Competence (Kovalainen, 2022)



Note. Adapted from Kovalainen (2022).

Why is this relevant in working-life contexts? While in educational contexts, communication is seldom anything other than short-term, evaluated, individual assignments from rigid syllabi, performed in closed, standardised contexts, working-life contexts are, naturally, completely different. Professional communication contexts require multi-faceted competence that is not easy to anticipate, describe, or illustrate on paper. Skills are not evaluated but appreciated. Needs for different communication skills change rapidly, and it is not necessary or advisable to emphasize language skills, especially English skills, if and when there are other components of communicative competence that are equally or more applicable. Attitudinal orientation is largely unaddressed in education since it is not evaluated, whereas in collaborative working contexts, it is recognised as an important factor. Working-life contexts require communication skills that are transferable, long-term, and collaborative in nature. In other words, working life requires TNC.

Workplace Learning and the Visibility of Competence

If TNC is understood as collaborative and transferable (Kovalainen, 2022), it becomes necessary to examine the learning environments and processes through which such competence is developed. Transnational communicative competence is strongly connected to authentic communicative situations, so it could be argued that a significant part of it is built at work, through participation and often informally. Workplace learning refers to learning that takes place at work and for work (Billett, 2014), and most of it happens outside formal training and education (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Yeo, 2008).

It could be argued that while workplace learning produces transnational communicative competence, it does not automatically produce awareness of that competence. According to Billett (2014), a significant part of workplace learning takes place through participation, observation, listening and sense-making. Ash and Clayton (2004) argue that awareness of one's own learning often remains tacit or is regarded as part of a person's general capability. People know more than they are able to articulate. The same challenge has also been recognised among university students: they have competence, but do not necessarily recognise and articulate it (Strachan, 2016).

How can these experiences and learning then be made visible, recognised and transferable? Workplace learning can easily remain invisible unless there is time and space to consciously stop and reflect on experiences. In the context of learning, reflection can be understood as a process of consciously examining and making sense of experiences, allowing new insights and deeper understanding to emerge (Boud et al., 1994).

Through reflection, experiences can be structured and their meanings deepened (Moon, 2013). In this sense, articulation can then be understood as making visible the understanding constructed through reflection, thereby making competence communicable and, ideally, transferable to new contexts. However, articulation does not mean merely describing experiences. According to Ash and Clayton (2004), the learning process involves describing experiences, analysing them and finally structuring them so that their meaning and applicability can be recognised in future situations. Fyfe et al. (2024) argue that articulation supports agency, identity and the ability to recognise and utilise competence in new situations. Reflection and articulation are therefore not merely ways of reporting experiences, but an essential part of the learning process through which experiences become recognised and transferable competence.

Workplaces are therefore important learning environments, and workplace learning should be regarded as something that can and should be supported and promoted at work. In particular, interaction, collaboration and communication competences can be seen to develop through working life and authentic situations. However, competence developed through work needs support in order to become visible. This requires pedagogical structures that support the visibility, articulation and transferability of competence.

Andragogy and Learning Through Experience

According to the principles of andragogy, an adult learner is self-directed, experiential, goal-oriented and practically oriented. This view on learnership can especially be seen in Knowles' andragogy, where learners are described as active agents who take responsibility for their learning based on previous experiences, wanting to apply learning to their work or life (Knowles et al., 2005). This approach makes it important to approach transnational communication not as cultural know-how, but from the perspectives of adult learners' work experiences, self-reflection and applicable knowledge (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005).

Adult learning approaches emphasise the role of experience and critical reflection in making competences visible (Mezirow, 1991). According to Mezirow's transformative learning theory, learning becomes meaningful when learners critically examine their assumptions, beliefs and ways of acting, thereby reframing their experiences and potentially transforming their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection invites learners to recognise and critically examine their own assumptions, seek meanings behind events, and question and reframe their understanding of what has taken place in a given situation (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Thus,

learning is about accumulating new knowledge as well as reinterpreting previous experiences and ways of understanding.

From this perspective, learning can also be seen as becoming someone who is able to act responsibly and purposefully in the world. According to Biesta (2013), the purpose of education is not only to support the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also to encourage learners to exist and act in the world in a responsible and "grown-up" way.

Approaching transnational communication from the afore-mentioned intertwining perspectives alters the role of a HEI teacher from an information distributor to a facilitator (Knowles 1980). In HEIs, andragogy should shape syllabi planning, teaching methods and evaluation processes as well as criteria (Knowles et al., 2005; Mezirow, 1991). Both teaching and assessment ought to contain some form of peer learning (team assignments), multifaceted reflection, flexible manners of studying, learning by developing (Laurea University of Applied Sciences, 2026), problem-based learning and recognising earlier competences and skills (European Commission, 2024). In transnational and global HEI contexts adult learners need to simultaneously navigate in cultural, linguistic and institutional environments that require intercultural knowledge as well as communicative and digital skills. Transnational communication is not merely a "second phase" of intercultural communication, nor is it the second phase of it, but a multifaceted skill set that develops as a part of professional agency (Kovalainen, 2022). Yet again, these underlying aspects of adults learning transnational communication appear to highlight the agile and appropriate nature of work-based micro-credentials.

In intercultural classrooms, the cultural and professional experiences of adult learners enrich common understanding of the task or issue at hand. It is the andragogical perspective on learning that makes those shared experiences visible as a part of intercultural dialogue. Previous experiences become a learning resource that makes transnational communication visible. What is needed in these types of learning contexts is approachable and multilingual content in synchronous and asynchronous hybrid or virtual learning environments that mimic realistic working life environments. Learners need to be able to practise their intercultural communication skills and to be challenged sufficiently to start developing their transnational communication skills from one communication context to another.

These aspects of transnational communication in professional contexts also became the topics of the micro-credentials carried out in the pilot study described in this article. The synthesis of andragogical perspectives on learning and transnational communication supports the view that micro-credentials are not a simple "signal" of learning but more a structure of making learned skills and know-how visible (see also Knowles et al., 2005; Kovalainen, 2022; Mezirow, 1991). The micro-credential skills demonstration context, by nature, does not merely offer an opportunity to demonstrate your skills, but also to learn from others and about yourself. According to Lewis and Bryan (2021), andragogical approaches are well suited to simulation tasks, case work, debates, critical incidents and flipped classroom in teaching nursing students. Active learning, thinking, listening and asking questions are crucial in acquiring skills in demanding working environments that require critical thinking, self-reflection and problem-solving (Lewis & Bryan, 2021). It can be argued that not all students would benefit from approaching learning from these perspectives.

Micro-credentials as Emerging Structures

How can we bring into teaching the competence that is currently required or valued in working life at a given moment? How can we teach profession-specific features quickly and flexibly? The answer to both questions is the same: we could make use of the opportunities offered by micro-credentials (European Commission, 2024). A micro-credential can be either 1) the verification of existing competence in a performance situation designed and assessed by teaching professionals, or 2) a short learning module focused on a very narrow topic, with competence verified at the end of the module. Performance situations for existing skills are usually concise and short, lasting from a few hours to a day, whereas the duration of learning modules has, at a general level, still been defined across a very broad scale (see also European Commission, 2024).

Higher education institutions can play an important role not only as providers of new learning opportunities, but also as supporters of recognising, articulating, transferring and further developing competence acquired through work and experience. Micro-credentials at the interface between working life and higher education can provide a pedagogical structure for reflection, articulation and the recognition of competence.

Methodological Approach

The andragogical model for micro-credentials is illustrated through a pilot case example from Finnish University of Applied Sciences' collaboration (3UAS), in which two-hour micro-credentials were designed in the spring of 2026 for adult students from different fields. The micro-credentials were being piloted through 3UAS collaboration between Haaga-Helia, Laurea, and Metropolia universities of applied sciences. They were designed for EQF level 6, corresponding to Bachelor's level, but were also open to Master's students and recent graduates.

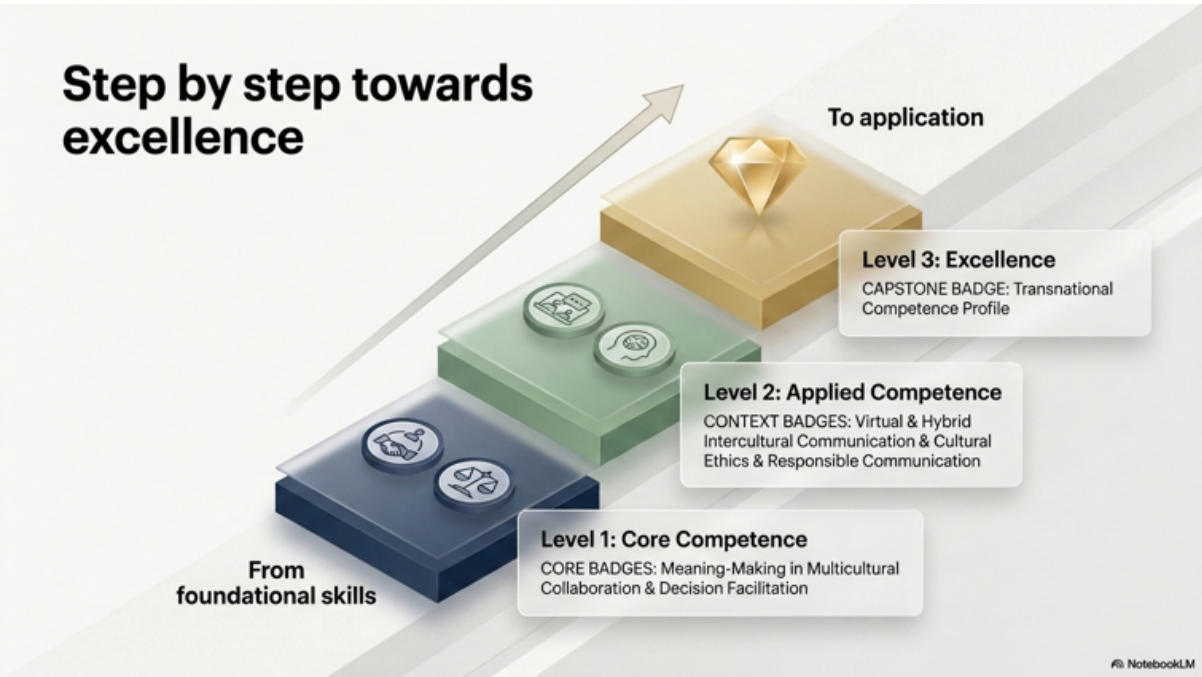
The two themes of this pilot study were Finnish as a second language and intercultural communication, which are both seen as key employability skills (Dufva et al., 2026; Kovalainen, 2022). In this article, the latter topic is discussed via preliminary result analysis. Context-specific intercultural communication was selected as the perspective for analysis because verifying transnational competence—that is, competence that can be applied across different situations through time—within a two-hour timeframe would be practically impossible without follow-up monitoring (Kovalainen, 2022). Instead, these short-duration micro-credentials function as foundational building blocks within a stackable continuum. The two-hour performance situation serves as a micro-level baseline that validates immediate, context-bound intercultural skills, which learners can gradually aggregate, reflect upon, and transfer into broader TNC agency over time. For example, the first intercultural communication badge, Core Badge 1, focused on building shared meaning in multicultural and multilingual collaboration. Participants were expected to demonstrate their ability to clarify interpretations, negotiate meanings, and ensure inclusive interaction.

These micro-credentials were built around authentic working-life situations, such as multilingual virtual teamwork, intercultural negotiations, and client communication. Business representatives from different fields were consulted in identifying suitable themes. Altogether ten people participated in the micro-credentials developed and piloted in the project. In the micro-credential performance situations, learners demonstrated their existing competence through various simulations, in which they connected the learning outcomes with their prior

experience and professional identity (see also Knowles et al., 2005). Competence was, for example, verified by taking part in a negotiation or meeting simulation in which each participant had their own objectives and role in addition to the shared task objectives. During the performance situation, time was allocated for reading the task instructions, and at the end of the performance, each participant reflected and articulated both their own competence and that of their peers in accordance with the task instructions.

In this pilot development project, the micro-credentials were designed to form a stackable learning continuum of three core competences, two context competences, and one capstone competence (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Stackable Micro-credentials in Intercultural Communication



Note. Created with the assistance of NotebookLM on 16 May 2026. Alt text: A three-level staircase model showing learners progressing from foundational intercultural skills to applied competence and excellence through core badges, context badges, and a final keystone badge.

The preliminary results and feedback indicate that this type of conceptual and practice-informed approach is suitable for developing micro-credential frameworks for emerging educational phenomena.

Results

Based on the pilot study, the following principles can be seen to guide the pedagogical design of micro-credentials:

- **Authenticity.** Learning is grounded in authentic or realistic working-life situations in which competence is demonstrated through practice. This supports both the meaningfulness and transferability of competence.
- **Competence Demonstration.** The emphasis is on what learners are able to do, rather than merely on what they know. Competence becomes visible through action and application.

- **Reflection and Articulation.** Learning includes guided reflection through which learners make sense of and articulate their competence. Recognition of competence requires structured processes of articulation, not merely assessment.
- **Recognition of Prior and Emerging Competence.** Learners' previous experiences and existing competences are recognised and integrated into the learning process, while developing competences are made visible and further strengthened.
- **Agency and Self-Direction.** Learners act as active agents who influence both the process and direction of their own learning.
- **Multidimensional Competence.** Transnational competence is understood as a broad and transnational construct comprising linguistic, cultural, institutional and digital dimensions.

The Andragogical Transnational Micro-credential Model (ATM)

To build on the pedagogical design principles and to develop the idea of micro-credentials further, we propose that the said micro-credentials would receive their topics from the working life, not necessarily from the syllabi. The Andragogical Transnational Micro-Credential Model (ATM) describes a four-stage cycle for developing intercultural and transnational communication competence through work-based micro-credentials. The model combines andragogical learning principles (Knowles et al., 2005), authentic working-life activity, and competence verification. At the centre of the model is a professional agency, which emphasises the learner's ability to act effectively in transnational communication environments.

Figure 3

The ATM Model for Work-Based Micro-credentials (Kovalainen, 2026)

Note. Created with the assistance of ChatGPT on 5 March 2026. Alt text: The image shows the ATM model for creating micro-credentials, presented as a segmented circular form.

1. Work-Based Trigger. The micro-credential skills demonstration begins with an authentic working-life situation, such as intercultural teamwork, multilingual expert communication, or international negotiations. This ensures the relevance of learning and its transferability across different contexts. Any relevant form of business collaboration between a higher education institute (HEI) and its business partners can be effectively utilised at this stage.
2. Action-Based Performance. Participants demonstrate their competence through concrete action, such as simulations, documents, or recorded interaction situations, shifting the focus from theory to observable performance. The action itself is also a valuable part of the process, as the micro-credential performance is designed to offer a place to experience the topic effectively and in a safe environment. The badge is designed and evaluated by qualified teachers, ensuring that international, national, and institution-specific frameworks are taken into account.
3. Andragogical Reflection. Self-reflection, integrated as an essential part of the performance, connects the task with the learner's prior experience, assumptions, identity, and professional growth. This stage enables meaning-making and the development of agency. Peer feedback also plays an important role.
4. Competence Verification. Micro-credential skills demonstration outcomes are validated in different ways depending on the organisation's guidelines and the content of the micro-credential, for example, through digital badges or portfolios that are accessible after graduation from a HEI. Feedback from employers or business partners may support this process when appropriate. Micro-credentials are stackable and divided into core and contextual competence levels, and after completing all of them, participants may apply for a broader capstone micro-credential, that is, an integrative final performance (European Commission, 2024).

The model benefits students in any field, as well as teachers, because updating one's competence and maintaining interest in one's work are naturally important for us as educators. The model benefits working life, as professionals entering the labour market will have competence and knowledge related to both the foundations of their profession and the latest developments in their field. The focus of the model is not on professional expertise or cultural knowledge as such, but on verifiable communication competence required by the situation, as well as identity-related dimensions of professional communication across borders (Kovalainen, 2022).

Discussion

Micro-credentials as Interfaces

At the same time as education funding is on a challenging footing, adult students preparing for their future professions require forms of learning that are relevant, flexible, and directly applicable to their professional contexts (cf. Dufva et al., 2026). They need realistic and carefully designed practice in intercultural communication. Over time, such competence can develop into transnational communication competence that can be applied in real professional situations (Kovalainen, 2022).

Work-based micro-credentials offer a particularly effective pedagogical response to the changing competence requirements of working life, especially when they are built on the verification of adult learners' experience, agency, and professional identity. Adult learning theory emphasises learner autonomy, prior experience, and readiness to apply knowledge in

practice. According to Knowles et al. (2005), adult learners are self-directed and motivated to learn when learning is immediately relevant to their lives. This creates a strong foundation for micro-credentials and competence-based assessment.

After the pilot implementations of the micro-credentials, it seems that these types of micro-credentials offer various benefits as they function as interfaces connecting work, learning, and recognition. The ATM model proposed in this article would benefit individuals and teams in both higher education and work life. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that in the current pilot project, the two-hour micro-credential does not claim to fully assess TNC. Instead, it acts as an operational stepping stone. It helps transform tacit workplace experiences into explicit intercultural evidence, serving as the necessary entry point from which broader transnational agency can be constructed. The next step could be to make use of key partner networks to identify more topics for work-based micro-credentials and to develop the micro-credential demonstrations to further support the development of this long-term communicative growth.

From Competence to Agency

Micro-credentials may function as signals of competence and as structures for organising learning, but their real pedagogical value emerges only when they support articulation: learners' ability to make their existing or emerging competence visible, transferable, and meaningful in authentic transnational work contexts. Articulation of any given skill or competence is vital as articulated competence enables transnational communicative agency.

Repositioning Higher Education

Higher education may need to further strengthen its role from providing new knowledge towards supporting the recognition, articulation and transferability of competence developed through work and experience. As experts in learning, higher education institutions can also support learners in making workplace learning visible and turning it into recognised and transferable competence.

If micro-credentials are developed only from the perspective of working life, they may remain mainly a way of signalling existing competence. If they are developed only within higher education, they may become just another way of dividing learning into smaller courses. Neither perspective alone seems sufficient. It could, therefore, be argued that the greatest value of micro-credentials is not the credential itself, but the pedagogical space they create between working life and higher education. In this shared space, competence developed through work can become recognised, articulated and transferable. At the same time, micro-credentials can support learners' employability, collaboration between higher education and working life, and the ability of higher education institutions to respond to rapidly changing transnational competence needs.

This also changes the role of the higher education teacher. Instead of only teaching new knowledge and skills, teachers design learning situations where competence can be demonstrated, reflected on and further developed. They also build connections between higher education and working life. At the same time, collaboration with employers helps teachers develop their own professional expertise and better understand changing professional practices, communication situations and emerging competence needs.

Conclusion

The pilot demonstrates that short micro-credentials act as valuable interfaces connecting work life and education. While a two-hour performance cannot fully assess TNC, it serves as a stepping stone that transforms tacit experience into explicit evidence. The next step involves expanding partner networks to identify further work-based topics and support long-term competence development. The full potential of micro-credentials can be seen when they facilitate articulation, enabling learners to make competence visible and meaningful. This articulated competence is essential for strengthening transnational communicative agency. Micro-credentials can be seen as creating a shared pedagogical space between higher education and employers. This also further emphasises the role of the higher education teacher as a designer of learning situations where competence can be demonstrated, reflected on and further developed.

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

The authors declare that Google Gemini was used for proofreading, verifying APA 7 referencing, and ensuring formatting compliance with conference guidelines. ChatGPT and NotebookLM were used to assist in creating graphic representations (Figures 2 and 3). Apart from language polishing, reference verification, and figure assistance, no AI or AI-assisted technologies were 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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Navigating the Cinematic Landscape: Analyzing Consumer Decision-Making Through Cognitive Mapping Methodology

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Abstract

In the era of the streaming boom, the traditional cinema experience is undergoing a profound transformation. While attention spans are perceived to be diminishing, the success of long-form television (e.g., Stranger Things) suggests a complex shift in consumption rather than a simple decline in engagement. This research explores film selection motivations in "late-adopter" markets, where the tension between dominant global productions and local content creates a distinctive market environment. While Hollywood maintains dominance, they occasionally elicit consumer resentment, whereas in other regions, audiences express a bias against locally produced content. Understanding the underlying motivations in this environment is a pertinent issue for both practitioners and film studies. The objective of this study is to delineate the mental maps of consumers, identifying the factors influencing film selection and their interrelationships. Given its exploratory focus, the work adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing in-depth interviews integrated with cognitive mapping. The analysis seeks to synthesize variables into a comprehensive mental map, illustrating the trade-offs consumers make between accessibility and content attributes (platform, genre, cast, or origin). Preliminary observations suggest that decision-making is significantly mediated by the viewer's situational affective state, which functions as a primary filter before technical factors, such as production year, are even considered. Consequently, this research constructs a conceptual framework that serves as a foundation for future model development and quantitative validation.

Keywords: film consumption, narrative interviews, content analysis, film marketing

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Introduction

With the emergence of streaming services, the significance of the cinema institution has begun to decline in recent years. The restructuring of the film industry and the slight resurgence in cinema attendance, however, raise the need for researchers and professionals to understand the film selection process of viewers. The literature related to cultural consumption, particularly focusing on films, explores a variety of topics: from individual personality traits (Sae-tae et al., 2024) to political affiliation (Roos & Sachar, 2014), and even the impact of ethnocentrism (Russell et al., 2011) on film consumption.

In the literature, there is no unified model used by all researchers to describe the film consumption process. It is still unclear what happens in potential viewers from the moment the idea appears until the film starts: this study examines this research gap. To achieve the research objective, the study seeks to answer the following question: What factors influence the film choices of regular movie consumers? This research can serve as a foundation for future quantitative studies and model development.

Literature Review

Culture Consumption

The consumption of culture is an interdisciplinary topic of study. Individuals consume cultural products, including films, to satisfy their various needs. Such needs can include relaxation, expression of identity, or even social interaction (Katz et al., 1973). Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work is connected to the concept of taste, which highlights that individuals' consumption of culture and genres is a learned behavior typically determined by social class. According to openness to genres, two main groups are usually distinguished: the “omnivores,” that is, genre omnivores, and the “univores,” that is, those who regularly consume one or two genres (Peterson, 1992). In addition to watching television, listening to the radio, and reading books, going to the cinema is one of the most popular forms of cultural consumption in the European Union (European Commission, 2013). Hungarian viewers are also most characterized by watching films, going to the cinema, and watching series. Domestic consumers also seek lightness in culture: comedy is one of their most favored film genres (Pavluska et al., 2018; Pavluska, 2022).

Factors Influencing Film Consumption Behavior

In the field of marketing, the literature partially defines films as objectified service products (Horváth & Gyenge, 2019; Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018), which is why we also consider them in this way in the present study. The variables used in previous studies will be briefly introduced from the perspective of service marketing, according to the 7P marketing mix.

In terms of film as a service product, alongside genre (Dhar & Weinberg, 2016; Gazley et al., 2011; Roos & Sachar, 2014), one of the most important factors is whether the given film is part of a series or franchise, that is, a sequel (Chiu et al., 2019; Dhar & Weinberg, 2016; Yoon et al., 2017). In the case of access and channel, the number of playing cinemas is decisive (Feng & Sharma, 2018; Yoon et al., 2017). In terms of prices, two aspects are usually considered: the film's budget (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Nikolic et al., 2022) and the cost of “acquiring” the film, whether it be a movie ticket, a streaming subscription, or online/offline rental (Feng & Sharma, 2018; Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). In the case of promotion, it is worth mentioning its

extent and frequency. In the case of films, the creators form part of the human environment. The actors, who can be considered part of the front office, and the director supporting from the background are crucial features of a film, bringing with them the so-called "starpower" effect (Chiu et al., 2019; Yoon et al. 2017).

From the consumers' side, factors such as gender (Ramírez-Castillo et al., 2021), age (Nikolic et al., 2022), education level (Sae-tae et al., 2024), and current film consumption frequency (Ramírez-Castillo et al., 2021) can typically influence the selection of a given film. Furthermore, the opinions of others, whether professional or consumer reviews, also play a significant role (Daiya & Garg, 2024; Tuo, 2024).

The characteristics presented above, used in the literature, can influence the film selection decisions of potential viewers. However, the aforementioned studies, due to the previously mentioned differences in approach, do not necessarily provide a comprehensive description of the factors influencing film consumption. Moreover, with the rise of digital platforms, decision-making mechanisms have become even more complex, as consumers, somewhat spoiled, only desire to "Netflix" from the comfort of their homes. Regarding the influencing factors, the number of domestic and international studies that generally explore them is limited, therefore the aim of the present research is to fill this research gap.

Primary Research

Methodology of Primary Research

The research, using the methodology of narrative interviews, examines the characteristics considered during the film selection process through the stories of regular film consumers. The steps of the research are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
The Steps of Narrative Interviews

Step	Opportunities, examples, explanations
1. Defining the purpose of the research Defining the purpose of the research	The aim of the study is to map the mental landscape in consumers' minds, which shows the factors influencing the selection of films, as well as the relationships and sequences among them.
2. Determining the type of stories	Personal stories related to film selection
3. Identifying the sources of stories	Regular movie watchers (at least biweekly)
4. Selecting the context of the stories	Individually told personal stories
5. The triggering of storytelling	Call to action, request for storytelling related to the last film selection
6. Collecting stories	Verbally, recorded on audio.

7. Analysis and interpretation of stories	Content analysis, deductive and inductive coding, readings within individual stories and comparing them
8. Theory building	Theoretical model of factors influencing film selection

Source: Own editing based on Horváth & Mitev (2015)

The interviews were conducted in March-April 2026, involving a total of 20 subjects. The subjects of the research included individuals aged 18 and older who consume films at least bi-weekly, with a mix of women and men, regardless of the platform used for film consumption. The literature typically treats film consumers as a single unit (Stamp, 2024). Since the research was conducted in a Hungarian context, we determined the age group of the subjects based on the NMHH (2025) study: the majority of online audiovisual content is consumed by those aged 16–35. However, typically, those over 18 have the appropriate financial background to access films legally, so we narrowed the age group to 18–35.

The subjects could apply for the discussions by filling out a screening questionnaire, where they had to provide their film consumption frequency and platform, as well as their demographic data. Participation in the research was completely voluntary and anonymous. The interviews were conducted online, and prior to that, the subjects were asked to prepare by reflecting on their last film selection process, which we then asked them to recall during the interviews. The characteristics of the narrative interview subjects are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
The Characteristics of Narrative Interview Subjects

Interview number	Subject code	Film consumption frequency	Gender	Age
1	N1	Daily	málé	21
2	HT1	Several times a week	female	21
3	HT2	x	male	20
4	HT3		male	24
5	HT4		male	33
6	HT5		female	24
7	HT6		male	20
8	HT7		male	26
9	HT8		male	27
10	HT9		male	22
11	HT10		female	21
12	HT11		male	35
13	HE1	Once a week	female	22
14	HE2		male	30

15	HE3		female	31
16	HE4		female	19
17	HE5		female	31
18	K1	Biweekly	female	27
19	K2		male	30

Source: Own research

The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (TA), based on the six-phase thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). The content analysis of the transcripts of the narrative interviews was conducted using deductive and inductive coding, utilizing previous research and additional literary sources. The basis of this is the classification of the characteristics of film as a service product according to the 7P marketing mix (Horváth & Gyenge, 2019; Ulker-Demirel et al., 2018). The analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA 26.0 qualitative text analysis software, as was the case in previous domestic studies (Kéri, 2026). To avoid potential biases, the coding was performed twice, and the transcripts were subjected to final analysis by comparing the codes. As a result, 297 codes were created, which include characteristics from both the providers and consumers of the films.

Results of Primary Research

During the presentation of the results, the developed coding system will be presented first, followed by a code matrix-based heat map of the characteristics influencing regular film consumers during the film selection process, and finally, the established model will be presented.

Presentation of the Code System

The basis for coding the narrative interviews was the previously mentioned 7P framework. Based on the identified factors, they can be divided into three main groups: beyond the service provider and consumer sides, the intersection of the two sides, the intersection of promotion and reviews. This study aims to highlight which characteristics or groups of characteristics have the most significant impact on consumers' film choices. From the service provider's perspective, considering the 7P framework, we identified the following 5 subgroups: the film as a service product, access (channel), promotion, physical environment, and human environment. These subgroups also contain additional code groups, which are detailed in Table 3. At the intersection of promotion and reviews are consumer opinions, which include an additional 5 subgroups. Regarding the consumer side, we were able to identify 5 code groups based on the subjects' stories. Next to each code group, the frequency of their mentions can be found in Table 3. Regarding the service provider side, the following characteristics dominate in order of the 7P characteristics: genre, Netflix, trailer, Oscar award, actor. At the intersection of promotion and reviews, the recommendations of friends and acquaintances play the most significant role. On the side of the consumers, that is, the viewers, the dominant code was the company code: this indicates that they typically watch movies with others, which also affects their selection process. Due to the multitude of subcodes, in the following code matrix-based heatmap analysis, we will analyze the individual (sub)code groups in aggregate.

Table 3
The Code Groups Created During Thematic Coding and Their Number of Elements (N)

Provider side					
Film, as a service product			**Place**		1
Resolution		1	Other online		2
Music		1		Videa	1
Qualitiy		1		hdfilmek.net	1
Language available		0		Indavideó	1
	Domestic voice	4	TV		1
	Original voice	2	Cinema		6
Seasonality		1	Torrent		5
Genre		13	Streaming		4
	Documentary	1		Apple TV	1
	Historical	2		YouTube	1
	Crime	2		Disney+	4
	Fantasy	1		HBO Max	4
	Biographical	2		Prime Video	3
	Animated	4		Netflix	13
	Horror	5	**Promotion**		
	Science fiction	1	Streaming recommendation		
	Action	7		You may also like this	3
	Thriller	5		New releases	2
	Adventure	1		Top 10	3
	Comedy	11	Media presence		3
	Drama	3		Online article	1
	War	2	Poster, cover		3
Runtime		4	Social media		5
Sequel		8		YouTube Shorts	1
Production studio		1		Facebook	2
Book adaptation		2		Instagram	4
Plot		9		Facebook group	1
Release yeor		6		Tiktok	5
Country of origin		1	Trailer		12
	Hungary	2	**Physical evidence**		
			Critical acclaim		1
				Palme d'Or	1
				Golden Globe	1
				Film historical significance	
				Academy Award / Oscar	6
			People		
			Voice actor		1
			Actor		19
			Composer		1

			Director	8
			Screenwriter	1
Intersection of promotion and reviews			**Consumer side**	
Consumer reviews		3	Mood	9
	mafab	1	Prior exposure	6
	Reddit	1	Time of day	8
	Friends' recommendations	11	Personal availability	4
	IMDb recommendation	1	Company	13
	IMDb rating	5		

Source: Own research

Factors Influencing the Film Selection Process

In the following sections, we will present the obtained results by main group using the code matrix-based heat maps created by MAXQDA 26.0, interpreting Tables 4–6. The tables present the frequency of the mentioned factors influencing film selection for each interviewee, column by column. In the heatmap, the mention frequency of each code is also indicated by numbers within the cells and illustrated with color coding. The subjects are arranged in descending order according to their film consumption frequency: on the left, the results of those who watch films daily, and on the right, the results of those who watch films biweekly can be seen. The HE3 and HT2 subjects generated exceptionally high code numbers during the conversation (N = 23, N = 20).

On the heatmap related to the service provider side (Table 4), it can be seen that the characteristics of the film as a service product are the most prominent during the selection of films – except for subjects N1, HT10, HT11, HE1, and K1. Among the codes of this code group, every subject mentioned at least one characteristic. Looking more closely at the code group, it can be said that the genre and its subtypes were the most frequent. Regarding access, all narratives, except for one subject (HT6), also addressed this: in terms of the viewing platform, the mention of the subjects' existing streaming subscriptions and searching for films there was dominant (N = 17). In the case of promotion, the significance of social media appears to be the greatest (N = 12), while professional recognitions, which can be interpreted as characteristics of the physical environment, have a less influential effect among the subjects (N = 5). An element of the human environment appeared in the majority of the narratives (N = 16), and the dominant code was the identity of the actors (N = 16). The basis for coding the narrative interviews was the previously mentioned 7P framework.

Table 4

Thematic Analysis Code Matrix Heatmap: Characteristics of the Service Provider Side (N)

Provider side	N1	HT1	HT2	HT3	HT4	HT5	HT6	HT7	HT3	HT9	HT10	HT11	HE1	HE2	HE3	HE4	HE5	K1	K2	K3	Sum
The film as a service product	1	7	11	5	6	6	8	5	4	8	2	2	1	6	9	8	5	4	4	1	103
Place	3	2	5	3	1	1	0	1	2	3	3	6	2	1	4	3	3	2	2	1	48
Promotion	1	3	3	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	3	3	3	0	4	0	4	6	2	3	45
Physical evidence	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	9
People	3	1	1	0	2	1	1	1	2	0	4	0	2	1	4	1	1	3	2	0	30

Source: Own research

At the intersection of the service provider and consumer sides, in terms of the intersection of promotion and reviews, the number of codes for the subjects was a maximum of 3, and in some cases, there was no code. The recommendation of friends or acquaintances seems to play the most significant role, which was mentioned at least once in the narratives of just over half of the subjects (N = 11). The related codes are illustrated in a heat map in Table 5.

Table 5

Thematic Analysis Code Matrix Heatmap: Characteristics of Promotions and Reviews (N)

Promotions and reviews	N1	HT1	HT2	HT3	HT4	HT5	HT6	HT7	HT3	HT9	HT10	HT11	HE1	HE2	HE3	HE4	HE5	K1	K2	K3	Sum
Consumer reviewa	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
mafab	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Reddit	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Friends' recommendations	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	11
IMDb recommandation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
IMDb rating	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5

Source: Own research

The number of codes related to the consumer's own characteristics, that is, the demand side, is typically higher for subjects than for the intersection of promotion and reviews. However, for all subjects, this frequency is lower than that related to the film's characteristics. The emphasis on the characteristics based on the narratives is illustrated in Table 6. In the case of most subjects, consuming films in a social setting is typical, so the influence of others was mentioned most frequently as a factor in their choice (N = 12). The second most frequently mentioned factor was the individual's mood at that moment (N = 7).

Table 6
The Thematic Analysis Code Matrix Heatmap: Characteristics of the Service User (N)

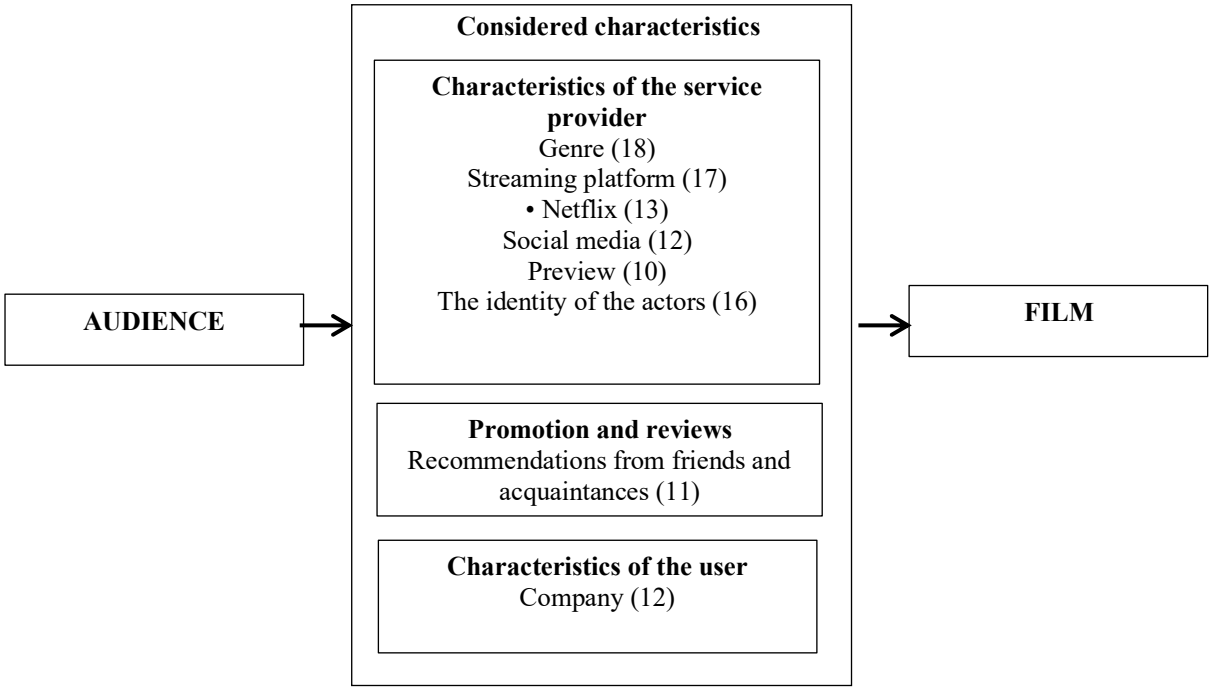
Service user	N1	HT1	HT2	HT3	HT4	HT5	HT6	HT7	HT3	HT9	HT10	HT11	HE1	HE2	HE3	HE4	HE5	K1	K2	K3	Összesen
Mood	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	3	0	0	0	1	0	9
Prior exposure	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	6
Time of day	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	8
Personal availability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Company	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	13

Source: Own research

Theoretical Model of Factors Influencing Film Selection

In the following, we will present our model based on the obtained code numbers, which we created according to the mention frequency of the individual subcodes. The criterion for the characteristics was that at least half of the subjects mention them at least once in their narratives, meaning they appear in at least 10 people's stories. In terms of the characteristics of the provider, the genre of the film, the streaming platform, social media, the trailer, and the actors involved were found to be the most important factors. In addition, other influencing factors include recommendations from friends and acquaintances, as well as who the consumer watches the film with. Based on the results, we can say that the film characteristic is the most prominent during the selection process, and the other two factors are characteristics that have not been regularly examined in previous related research in the field. Based on the methodology of Horváth and Mitev (2015), the theoretical model of factors influencing film choice was constructed, as shown in Figure 1. We intend to test the model later using quantitative methodology.

Figure 1
Theoretical Model of Factors Influencing Film Selection



Source: Own research

Conclusion and Limitations

The aim of the present study was to explore which characteristics influence the film selection habits of regular movie consumers. To answer the research question, 20 narrative interviews were conducted with subjects aged 18–35 who consume films at least biweekly. As part of the interview preparations, we asked the subjects to recall the story behind their last film choice. The transcripts were prepared using content analysis methods, thematic coding, and qualitative text analysis software, with the help of MAXQDA 26.0.

During the research, the code system built using inductive and deductive methods, based on the 7P framework, identified three main pillars: the provider side, the consumer side, and the intersection of the two sides, the intersection of promotion and reviews. The code matrix-based heatmaps created with the software highlighted that film selection is most influenced by provider characteristics, particularly genre, the identity of the actors, and availability (streaming platforms). Among the promotional tools, trailers and social media were found to be the most influential, while on the consumer side, the role of company and friend recommendations proved to be decisive. Based on the results, the theoretical model synthesizes the key factors mentioned by at least half of the respondents, emphasizing the significance of social influences and platform ecosystems.

The limitations of the research include the fact that the order of the individual selection characteristics, as well as the existence and direction of the relationships between them, could not be identified with the applied methodology. As a future research direction, we have identified the quantitative testing of the established model and its expansion with additional features.

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

The author declares that Quillbot an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining, translating the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors. The author further declares that, apart from Quillbot, 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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The Archival Apparatus: Professional Journals as an Interpretive Infrastructure of Architecture

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Abstract

Contemporary architectural development in Taiwan is defined by a compressed phenomenon, wherein the discipline operates as an externally transplanted and fragmented system rather than a linear cultural evolution. Within this landscape, architectural history manifests as an interpretive phenomenon—a constructed discourse necessitating an atypical historical archive. Consequently, professional journals in Taiwan perform a role distinct from Western traditions: they do not merely record history but produce it discursively. Endowed with a half-century legacy as the institutional organ of the National Association of Architects, Taiwan Architect (TA) functions as the definitive repository of professional memory. In the pre-globalisation era, TA operated as a critical discursive portal, facilitating the transnational translation of theoretical frameworks and anchoring a discipline in transition. By synthesising Colomina's (1994) proposition of media as a site of architectural construction and Speaks's (1993, p. 6) conceptualisation of writing as "invisible infrastructure", this paper argues that TA's "fragmented assembly-like texts" constitute the primary ontological site of identity negotiation. These assemblages are not historical voids but the active material of Taiwan's modern architectural derivation. The critical argument posits that interpretive historiography emerges as an idiosyncratic manifestation of the Taiwanese condition, wherein the professional archive acts as a surrogate for traditional historical continuity. Within this framework, mediated representation functions as the primary historiographical act. This research proposes that in compressed modernities, this "Taiwanese method" establishes the institutional archive as the foundational site for an indigenous tradition—one born from, and sustained by, the continuous process of mediated interpretation.

Keywords: archival apparatus, interpretive infrastructure, Taiwan Architect

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Introduction

Architecture Beyond Buildings

Architectural history is conventionally written through buildings. Canonical works, urban transformations and material artefacts are frequently treated as the principal evidence through which architectural development is understood. Yet architecture has never been constituted by buildings alone. As architectural ideas circulate through criticism, editorial practice and professional publication, they are interpreted, reorganised and legitimised as disciplinary knowledge. Architectural journals therefore perform a role that extends beyond documentation: they provide intellectual conditions through which architecture becomes visible as a discipline. As Colomina (1994) argues, modern architecture cannot be separated from the media through which it is represented, while Speaks (1993, p. 6) similarly identifies architectural writing as an "invisible infrastructure" through which the discipline continuously reproduces itself. From this perspective, professional journals are not passive records of architectural production but active sites in the production and organisation of architectural knowledge.

This proposition has been extensively discussed in relation to European and North American architectural cultures (Colomina, 1994; Crysler et al., 2012; Rattenbury, 2002). It raises a different theoretical question, however, in societies where modern architecture did not emerge through a continuous historical tradition. Taiwan represents such a condition. Rather than evolving through the gradual accumulation of institutions, theoretical schools and professional conventions, Taiwanese architecture developed through successive episodes of colonial rule, political realignment and rapid modernisation. Architectural education, professional organisations and theoretical frameworks were introduced from external contexts and subsequently adapted to local practice. Under these circumstances, architectural history cannot simply be understood as the chronological accumulation of buildings. It is equally a history of how architectural knowledge has been organised, interpreted and reconstructed across discontinuous historical conditions.

The production of disciplinary knowledge therefore involves more than the preservation of architectural objects or the transmission of established ideas. It also requires mechanisms through which different forms of architectural activity can be brought into relation. Projects, theoretical positions, professional debates and institutional developments do not automatically form a coherent historical narrative simply by occurring within the same period. Their significance is produced through acts of interpretation that establish connections between otherwise separate events. Architectural media become important precisely at this point: they provide recurring sites in which architectural activities can be selected, compared, contextualised and incorporated into broader professional conversations.

Such processes also involve acts of inclusion and exclusion. No publication can represent the entirety of architectural production, and editorial space necessarily requires decisions about what merits attention and how particular material should be presented. Selection therefore has epistemological consequences. The repeated publication of particular themes, forms of practice or modes of criticism can contribute to their recognition as significant disciplinary concerns, while subjects that receive limited attention may remain peripheral to the dominant professional narrative. This does not imply that editorial practice determines architectural value in a straightforward or absolute manner. Rather, it suggests that publication participates in the institutional processes through which architectural significance is negotiated and stabilised.

The temporal dimension of publication is equally important. Unlike a single exhibition or isolated critical text, a professional journal operates through repetition and succession. Issues accumulate, editorial positions change, and previously established concerns can be revisited from new perspectives. Through this cumulative process, publication creates relationships across time, allowing architectural discourse to acquire a degree of continuity even when the wider conditions of architectural production are subject to disruption. Editorial continuity therefore provides not simply a record of disciplinary change but a means through which change itself can be interpreted as part of an ongoing architectural discourse.

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Constructing Disciplinary Coherence

The question, then, is how an architectural discipline constructs coherence when historical continuity itself is fragmented. In such contexts, disciplinary coherence cannot be located solely in buildings, institutions or individual architects. Professional journals constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which disparate projects, debates and professional experiences are brought into relation. Through editorial selection, thematic organisation and critical writing, they establish connections across otherwise disconnected forms of architectural activity. The journal thus does more than preserve architectural knowledge after its production; it participates in organising the conditions through which such knowledge becomes recognisable and acquires disciplinary significance.

This process should not be understood as the production of a singular or unified architectural position. Disciplinary coherence can instead emerge through the continued juxtaposition of different perspectives, debates and professional priorities. A journal provides an institutional setting in which disagreements and shifts in architectural thinking can be recorded alongside one another, allowing changing positions to become legible within a broader historical sequence. Coherence, in this sense, does not mean consensus. It refers to the capacity to establish relationships among heterogeneous forms of knowledge so that they can participate in an ongoing disciplinary conversation.

Within Taiwan, Taiwan Architect provides a significant case through which to examine this process. Founded in 1975 by the National Association of Architects, it has served as a sustained institutional platform for professional communication and architectural discourse (Huang & Lin, 2024). Across changing political, economic and cultural circumstances, the journal has maintained an editorial project extending beyond the reporting of architectural practice. Through thematic issues, editorial commentary, critical essays and professional debate, it has selected, connected and framed architectural concerns, contributing to a shared framework through which Taiwanese architecture has understood itself as a discipline.

Historical evidence from the journal's editorial development makes this cumulative function more concrete. Established in 1975, Taiwan Architect extended the systematic reporting practices of earlier professional publications while providing a continuing platform for professional reporting and architectural journalism. During the stabilisation period from 1979 to 1985, its editorial strategy increasingly treated the journal as a form of documentation through which Taiwanese architectural development could be retrospectively organised. The

number of theoretical and historical articles grew, coverage of local works expanded, and international architectural ideas were increasingly reframed through the interpretations of local professionals rather than reproduced simply through translation (Huang, 2023).

The journal's editorial structure also became progressively more deliberate. From 1980, news, essays and architectural works were organised into a three-part structure, accompanied by special issues on architectural criticism and theory. Later editorial phases expanded the use of criticism, interviews and editorial committees, and by the 1990s works, practitioners and commentary were increasingly brought together within a shared editorial framework. Across more than four decades of change, these accumulated practices produced what can be understood as an editorial tradition: a continuing body of professional knowledge about how architectural material could be selected, contextualised and connected. This historical development gives empirical substance to the notion of interpretive infrastructure, showing that disciplinary continuity was not merely recorded by Taiwan Architect but actively produced through changing editorial practices (Huang, 2023).

The significance of such continuity lies not simply in the duration of publication but in the possibility of cumulative interpretation. A long-running professional journal can allow architectural questions to be revisited, reframed and placed into relation with subsequent developments. Earlier debates may acquire new meanings when viewed through later professional concerns, while emerging issues can be positioned within an existing field of disciplinary reference. Publication thus creates a temporal structure through which architectural knowledge can accumulate without requiring the discipline itself to remain intellectually static.

Editorial Practice as Interpretive Infrastructure

Although previous scholarship has examined Taiwanese architectural magazines as historical records, professional media and cultural representations (Hsiao, 2001; Jiang, 2003; Su, 2014), considerably less attention has been devoted to the epistemological function of editorial practice. Existing studies have primarily analysed what professional journals contain, whereas comparatively little research has examined how editorial organisation itself shapes relationships between different forms of architectural knowledge. Editorial decisions concerning selection, omission, sequencing and thematic framing influence which architectural issues acquire disciplinary significance, how professional debates are structured and which forms of knowledge become institutionally legitimate. Editorial practice therefore participates in the construction of architectural discourse rather than merely documenting architectural activity.

This function becomes particularly significant when editorial practice is understood as cumulative rather than episodic. An individual editorial decision may have limited significance in isolation, yet repeated acts of selection and framing can establish enduring patterns through which particular architectural concerns become associated with professional identity, historical memory or disciplinary debate. Editorial organisation therefore operates across both individual issues and longer sequences of publication. It provides a structure through which architectural knowledge can be repeatedly encountered, reconsidered and connected to changing professional contexts.

To address this dimension of professional publication, the study develops the concept of interpretive infrastructure. The concept builds upon the understanding of architectural media

as constitutive of architectural knowledge and of architectural writing as an infrastructural practice within the discipline. It directs attention to the editorial structures and practices through which architectural knowledge is organised, connected and sustained over time. Interpretive infrastructure is therefore understood not as a fixed institutional apparatus, but as an ongoing process of mediation through which architectural ideas acquire relationships, continuity and disciplinary visibility.

Accordingly, Taiwan Architect is examined not principally as an archival repository of Taiwanese architecture, but as an interpretive infrastructure through which architectural knowledge has been organised and reproduced. Its significance lies not only in the material it preserves, but also in the editorial practices through which disparate forms of architectural activity are brought into relation. By examining the journal's editorial organisation, institutional continuity and modes of knowledge production, this study considers how professional publication has contributed to the construction of disciplinary coherence within the context of Taiwan's discontinuous modernisation.

From Architectural Media to Interpretive Infrastructure

Media and the Production of Architectural Knowledge

The recognition that architectural media are constitutive of architectural knowledge has shifted attention from the building as an autonomous object towards the processes through which architecture acquires disciplinary meaning. Colomina (1994) demonstrates that modern architecture emerged alongside systems of mass communication through which buildings were photographed, published, exhibited and interpreted. These media did not simply communicate architectural works after their completion; they shaped the ways in which architecture was conceived, experienced and understood. Publication consequently became an important site through which architectural ideas acquired cultural and disciplinary significance.

Speaks (1993) extends this understanding by drawing attention to the infrastructural role of architectural writing. Writing, criticism and theoretical discourse provide the conceptual means through which architectural ideas are organised and transmitted within the profession. Their significance therefore lies not only in the representation of architectural production, but also in the relationships they establish among ideas, projects and professional debates. Architecture is consequently constituted through processes of mediation in which knowledge is continually selected, interpreted and circulated.

This process of mediation is not limited to the communication of completed works. Architectural media also establish the conditions under which particular forms of architectural activity become available for disciplinary recognition. To be published is not simply to be made visible; it is to be positioned within a field of professional attention. A project may acquire significance through the way it is associated with a particular debate, placed alongside other projects, or interpreted through a specific conceptual framework. Media therefore participate in transforming individual architectural events into objects of shared disciplinary knowledge.

For professional journals, this process takes place through an ongoing editorial structure rather than through individual acts of representation. Each issue involves decisions concerning what is selected for publication, what is omitted, how materials are sequenced and which themes are given emphasis. Such decisions shape the relationships through which architectural events become intelligible within a broader professional discourse. Editorial practice thus forms an

important dimension of architectural knowledge production, linking individual projects and dispersed professional activities to wider disciplinary concerns.

The importance of this process lies partly in its capacity to produce relationships across otherwise separate forms of architectural activity. A building can be connected to a professional debate; a design approach can be situated within a broader historical development; and the work of an individual practitioner can be related to institutional or disciplinary transformations. Through such connections, architectural knowledge is not merely accumulated as information but organised into patterns of meaning. The journal therefore occupies a position between architectural production and disciplinary interpretation, mediating how particular practices enter into a wider field of architectural knowledge.

Editorial Practice and Disciplinary Organisation

The epistemological significance of the journal lies precisely in this capacity to organise. Editorial selection does not simply determine what enters the public record; it also influences how architectural issues are framed and related to one another. Thematic organisation can connect projects produced in different contexts, while editorial commentary can position particular architectural concerns within broader professional debates. Through repetition and continuity across successive issues, such relationships can acquire a degree of stability and become part of the discipline's shared conceptual framework.

Editorial organisation is therefore relational rather than merely classificatory. To select a project is to bring it into a particular field of comparison and interpretation. To place two projects within the same thematic framework is to suggest a relationship between them, even where no such relationship exists at the level of architectural production itself. Similarly, recurring attention to a particular issue can gradually establish that issue as a matter of disciplinary concern. The editorial process thus contributes to the construction of categories, associations and priorities through which architectural knowledge becomes intelligible.

The journal therefore operates through an accumulation of editorial decisions rather than through any single publication. Selection, classification, sequencing and thematic framing establish patterns through which architectural knowledge can be recognised and retained. What appears as a coherent professional discourse is consequently produced through the continuous organisation of dispersed material. Editorial practice is not simply an intermediary between architectural production and its audience; it is part of the institutional process through which architectural knowledge is structured.

This cumulative process also gives the journal a particular temporal character. Individual issues are temporary interventions in professional discourse, but their repetition creates a longer institutional sequence. Later publications can refer implicitly or explicitly to earlier concerns, while recurring themes can acquire different meanings as professional and institutional circumstances change. The significance of the journal therefore emerges not only from the content of individual issues but from the relationships that become possible across issues and across time.

This perspective also shifts the understanding of the architectural journal as an archive. An archive is commonly associated with the preservation of existing records, whereas editorial practice involves an active process of selection and interpretation. The journal does not simply retain disciplinary memory but participates in determining what constitutes that memory and

how its different elements are connected. Its archival function is therefore inseparable from its interpretative function.

This distinction is important because preservation alone does not guarantee disciplinary continuity. Architectural materials may survive without continuing to participate in architectural discourse. For knowledge to remain disciplinary, it must remain available for circulation, comparison and reinterpretation. Editorial organisation contributes to this process by repeatedly bringing selected materials into relation with changing professional concerns. The journal can therefore function not simply as a repository of what has already been produced, but as an institutional mechanism through which past and present architectural knowledge remain connected.

Interpretive Infrastructure

These processes are conceptualised here through the notion of interpretive infrastructure. The term refers to the enduring editorial structures and practices through which architectural knowledge is organised, connected and reproduced as disciplinary knowledge. It extends the understanding of media as constitutive of architecture by directing attention to the institutional processes that allow particular interpretations to persist across time.

Interpretive infrastructure is not material or technological infrastructure. Its operation depends instead upon institutional continuity and recurring practices of publication, thematic curation, editorial commentary and critical reflection. Through these practices, relationships among projects, ideas and professional debates can be established and maintained beyond individual acts of architectural production. The concept therefore emphasises continuity as an outcome of repeated editorial organisation rather than as a given historical condition.

The concept also differs from a conventional understanding of the archive. While an archive primarily implies the preservation and accessibility of records, an interpretive infrastructure concerns the conditions through which preserved materials can continue to acquire disciplinary meaning. Its operation is therefore both cumulative and relational. It accumulates materials over time while simultaneously establishing connections among them. What matters is not simply that architectural projects and debates are retained, but that they remain capable of being brought into new configurations of meaning.

Such an infrastructure performs several related functions. It selects and orders material, establishes connections among otherwise dispersed forms of architectural activity, and provides interpretative frameworks through which professional concerns can be understood collectively. It also facilitates circulation: architectural ideas move from individual projects into professional discourse, from one issue to another, and from contemporary discussion into longer-term disciplinary memory. Through these processes, architectural knowledge can accumulate rather than remain a series of isolated observations.

Circulation is particularly important because disciplinary knowledge depends upon more than initial production. An architectural idea becomes part of a professional field through its ability to move between different contexts of discussion and interpretation. Publication provides one of the institutional mechanisms through which such movement can occur. The journal brings architectural production into contact with criticism, professional debate and historical reflection, allowing material produced for one immediate context to acquire significance within another.

Interpretive infrastructure therefore operates across different temporal scales. At the level of the individual issue, it responds to contemporary architectural concerns. Across successive issues, it establishes patterns of repetition and difference. Over longer periods, these accumulated materials become part of the discipline's memory and can be revisited from new historical perspectives. The infrastructure is consequently not static: its meaning changes as the materials it contains are reinterpreted and as the professional conditions surrounding them are transformed.

This temporal dimension makes continuity an active institutional achievement. Continuity does not simply result from the uninterrupted survival of a professional institution or the existence of a stable disciplinary tradition. It can be produced through repeated acts of selection, organisation, circulation and interpretation that allow knowledge to remain connected across changing circumstances. The concept of interpretive infrastructure thus shifts attention from continuity as a historical given towards continuity as something that is institutionally maintained.

The significance of the journal consequently lies not only in the information it contains, but in the organisational structures through which that information becomes meaningful within the discipline. It provides a recurring framework through which architectural materials can be connected, revisited and interpreted. In this sense, the journal functions as an interpretive infrastructure because it mediates between architectural production and disciplinary memory while sustaining the possibility of continued interpretation.

Interpretive Infrastructure Under Conditions of Discontinuity

The theoretical significance of interpretive infrastructure becomes particularly evident where architectural development has not followed a continuous institutional trajectory. In Taiwan, modern architectural development was shaped by successive political transformations, institutional reconfigurations and the introduction and adaptation of architectural ideas from external contexts. Architectural education, professional organisations and theoretical frameworks were consequently formed through multiple and sometimes discontinuous processes rather than through a single accumulated tradition.

Under such conditions, the continuity of architectural discourse cannot be assumed to emerge automatically from established institutions or long-standing theoretical schools. The transmission of architectural knowledge may instead involve interruptions, reorganisations and changes in the institutional frameworks through which professional knowledge is produced. This makes the mechanisms through which knowledge is connected across different periods particularly significant.

Professional publication provides one such mechanism. Through sustained editorial activity, architectural journals can establish relationships across otherwise fragmented historical contexts and provide a framework through which architectural knowledge remains available for circulation and reinterpretation. This does not mean that a journal can resolve institutional discontinuities or create a unified architectural tradition. Rather, its significance lies in its capacity to provide a continuing site in which heterogeneous forms of professional experience and architectural knowledge can be assembled and connected.

This perspective also complicates an understanding of disciplinary history as a linear accumulation of ideas. Where institutional conditions change, the meaning of architectural

knowledge may also be reorganised. Earlier practices may be forgotten, recovered or reinterpreted; professional concerns may acquire new significance; and relationships between local and external forms of knowledge may be repeatedly renegotiated. An interpretive infrastructure provides one of the institutional settings in which these processes can occur, allowing architectural materials from different moments to remain available for comparison and reinterpretation.

The role of the journal under such conditions is therefore not simply to preserve a continuous historical record. Its more significant function may be to mediate discontinuity by creating connections among materials that emerge from different institutional and historical circumstances. Such connections do not erase differences between periods. Instead, they make those differences legible within a continuing field of disciplinary discussion.

This perspective provides the basis for understanding Taiwan Architect as an interpretive infrastructure. Rather than approaching the journal primarily as a repository of historical information, its significance can be considered in relation to the editorial structures through which architectural ideas, professional practices and disciplinary concerns may be organised and sustained across changing historical circumstances. The focus therefore rests not on what the journal records alone, but on how editorial practices can organise relationships among architectural production, professional discourse and disciplinary memory.

The following section turns from this theoretical proposition to the historical conditions in which such an infrastructure became significant. Rather than assuming a continuous formation of architectural knowledge in Taiwan, it examines the institutional and historical discontinuities through which professional knowledge was produced, reorganised and transmitted. This provides the context for considering how Taiwan Architect operated within, and responded to, these changing conditions.

Conclusion

Reconsidering the Formation of Architectural Knowledge

The preceding discussion has situated interpretive infrastructure within the historical problem of discontinuous architectural development. In contexts where architectural knowledge has been formed through successive institutional transformations, the continuity of disciplinary knowledge cannot simply be assumed. It depends, at least in part, upon the institutional practices through which architectural ideas, professional experiences and historical records are connected and made available for continued interpretation. The argument developed in this paper therefore begins with a reconsideration of how architectural knowledge is understood.

If architecture is constituted not only through buildings and professional practice but also through the processes by which architectural ideas are selected, interpreted and circulated, then the institutional conditions of publication become integral to the formation of the discipline. Professional journals should consequently be understood as more than documentary media. Through sustained editorial practices, they provide frameworks within which architectural projects, debates and professional experiences can acquire continuity and disciplinary meaning.

The concept of interpretive infrastructure offers a way of conceptualising this role. Unlike conventional understandings of infrastructure as material or technical systems, interpretive infrastructure operates through the organisation and continuity of knowledge. Its significance

lies in the capacity of recurring editorial practices to establish relationships among otherwise dispersed forms of architectural activity. Selection, classification, thematic organisation and critical interpretation enable architectural knowledge to accumulate across time rather than remain confined to individual projects, practitioners or historical moments.

This perspective also suggests that disciplinary continuity should not necessarily be understood as the uninterrupted development of a stable intellectual tradition. Continuity may instead be actively produced through institutional practices that connect different periods, ideas and professional experiences. The history of a discipline is therefore shaped not only by what is built, taught or theorised, but also by the institutional mechanisms through which these activities are interpreted and brought into relation.

Seen in this way, publication becomes part of the institutional history of architecture rather than simply a means through which that history is documented. The significance of a professional journal lies partly in its capacity to sustain connections between architectural production and disciplinary memory. What is published can remain available for later interpretation, while recurring editorial attention can establish relationships between different moments of architectural practice. The journal therefore contributes to the conditions under which architectural knowledge can acquire continuity and historical significance.

Architectural Publication and Discontinuous Modernisation

This proposition is particularly relevant to architectural contexts characterised by historical and institutional discontinuity. Where disciplinary traditions have developed through successive political transformations, institutional reconfigurations and the adaptation of knowledge from multiple external contexts, coherence cannot simply be assumed as the natural outcome of historical accumulation. It may instead depend upon institutions capable of sustaining professional communication and organising heterogeneous forms of knowledge over time.

In such contexts, continuity becomes an institutional problem. Architectural knowledge may persist through buildings, educational institutions, professional organisations and individual practices, but these forms of continuity can themselves be disrupted or transformed by broader political and institutional change. The question is therefore not simply whether architectural knowledge survives periods of transformation, but how relationships between different forms of knowledge can be maintained, reorganised and interpreted across such changes.

Publication provides one important mechanism through which this process can take place. A professional journal operates within the immediate conditions of architectural practice while simultaneously contributing to longer processes of disciplinary memory. Through recurring publication, architectural projects, professional debates and institutional developments can remain available for subsequent reference and reinterpretation. Publication can therefore provide a continuing framework through which heterogeneous forms of architectural knowledge are brought into relation, even when the institutional conditions surrounding them have changed.

From this perspective, the significance of Taiwan Architect extends beyond its function as a professional publication or historical record. Its importance can be understood in relation to the broader institutional problem of how architectural knowledge acquires continuity under conditions in which disciplinary formation itself has been discontinuous. The journal provides a particularly productive case through which to consider how editorial institutions may connect

dispersed professional experiences and contribute to the construction of a shared disciplinary framework.

This does not imply that Taiwan Architect produced a unified or uninterrupted account of Taiwanese architecture. Nor does it suggest that publication could overcome the institutional discontinuities through which architectural knowledge was formed. Rather, its significance lies in the continuing editorial framework through which different architectural practices, professional concerns and historical circumstances could be brought into relation. In this sense, publication does not eliminate discontinuity; it provides a means through which discontinuous forms of architectural knowledge can remain visible, connected and open to reinterpretation.

The broader implication is that architectural modernisation should not be understood only through changes in architectural form, professional practice or institutional organisation. It can also be examined through the mechanisms by which architectural knowledge is transmitted, organised and made durable. Such an approach shifts attention from modernisation as a linear process of disciplinary development towards the institutional processes through which different forms of knowledge are connected, negotiated and given historical significance.

Towards an Editorial History of Architecture

The argument proposed here does not claim that professional journals alone determine the development of architectural knowledge. Rather, it identifies editorial practice as an often overlooked institutional dimension through which disciplinary coherence can be produced and maintained. This opens a broader line of enquiry into the relationship between architectural publication, institutional continuity and the formation of professional knowledge, particularly in contexts where established disciplinary traditions have been fragmented or repeatedly reconfigured.

For Taiwan Architect, this conceptual framework provides the basis for a more detailed examination of its editorial history. Future research can investigate how particular editorial decisions, thematic programmes, professional debates and forms of archival selection contributed to the construction of disciplinary narratives at different historical moments. Such an examination would make it possible to trace more precisely how interpretive infrastructure operates in practice and how its effects may change across different institutional and political contexts.

An editorial history of architecture would therefore complement rather than replace conventional histories centred on buildings, architects and institutions. It would ask how particular architectural practices became visible within professional discourse, how certain debates acquired continuity, and how different forms of architectural knowledge were connected through publication. This approach may also provide a basis for comparative studies of professional journals operating under different institutional conditions, particularly where disciplinary formation has been shaped by discontinuity or repeated transformation.

The significance of this approach also extends beyond the preservation of professional memory. To examine editorial history is to consider how a discipline constructs relationships between its present practices and its accumulated past. The architectural record is not simply inherited; it is continually reorganised through the ways in which projects, debates and professional experiences are selected and revisited. Editorial institutions therefore participate

in shaping not only what a discipline remembers, but also the terms through which that memory can be interpreted.

The central proposition, therefore, is that architectural history is constituted not only through what a discipline builds, but also through the institutional practices through which it remembers, interprets and connects what it has produced. Professional journals occupy an important position within these practices. In contexts of discontinuous modernisation, they may function not simply as repositories of architectural history but as infrastructures through which the discipline establishes continuity, negotiates meaning and reproduces itself over time.

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

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI), a generative AI tool, solely to support language editing, stylistic refinement, and the organisation of written material. The tool was not used to generate research data or determine the conceptual framework, scholarly arguments, source selection, analysis, or conclusions. All content was reviewed, verified, and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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Humanising Language Education in AI-Mediated Classrooms: Debate Pedagogy as a Counterbalance to Algorithmic Learning in the Saudi EFL Context

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in educational environments, language learning is progressively shifting towards personalised, algorithm-driven models that prioritise efficiency and individualised feedback. While AI-mediated platforms provide expanded access to linguistic input, they may inadvertently reduce opportunities for dialogic engagement, intercultural interaction, and collaborative meaning-making; these are communicative dimensions that are central to language development yet remain beyond the reach of algorithmic optimisation. This concern is particularly relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where English functions as a key medium for global academic and professional participation. This study reconceptualises structured classroom debate as a human-centred pedagogical intervention within AI-augmented language learning environments, exploring its role in cultivating intercultural competence, perspective-taking, and communicative adaptability among first-year Saudi female EFL students. Using a one-group, post-intervention design, the study examined the impact of integrating an eight-week structured debate project into a university Listening and Speaking course on students' perceived intercultural competence. Findings revealed positive developments across all dimensions of intercultural competence, with students reporting heightened awareness of cultural diversity, increased openness to diverse perspectives, and greater confidence in intercultural communication. The results suggest that dialogic, interaction-based pedagogies can serve as an effective human-centred counterbalance to algorithmic learning environments, helping preserve essential relational and communicative dimensions of language education.

Keywords: AI-mediated language learning, debate pedagogy, intercultural competence, human-centred pedagogy, EFL

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Introduction

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly embedded in language education, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms are progressively shifting toward personalised and algorithm-driven learning environments that prioritise efficiency, automation, and individualised feedback. While AI-mediated platforms provide learners with expanded access to language input, flexible learning opportunities, and immediate corrective support, growing concerns have emerged regarding the potential reduction of authentic human interaction, dialogic engagement, and collaborative meaning-making. In increasingly AI-mediated classrooms, language learning risks becoming more individualised and technologically mediated, potentially limiting opportunities for spontaneous communication, interpersonal negotiation, and socially situated interaction, which are precisely the communicative experiences through which intercultural competence is developed.

These concerns are particularly relevant in EFL contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where English increasingly functions as a key medium for global academic, professional, and intercultural participation. Developing intercultural competence in this context extends beyond linguistic proficiency to include openness toward diverse perspectives, empathy, adaptability, and the ability to engage meaningfully with others across cultural differences. Such competencies are inherently social and interaction-driven, and cannot be adequately cultivated through individualised, algorithmically mediated learning alone.

Within this context, debate-based pedagogy offers a particularly valuable human-centred instructional response. Debate activities engage students in spontaneous interaction, negotiation of perspectives, response to opposing viewpoints, and meaning construction through dialogue, communicative practices that remain distinctly human and resistant to algorithmic replication. This study therefore explores structured classroom debate as a humanising pedagogical intervention within an AI-mediated EFL context, addressing the following research question: *How does integrating a structured debate project into an AI-mediated EFL Listening and Speaking course influence first-year Saudi female university students' perceived intercultural competence?*

Literature Review

AI-Mediated Language Learning and the Humanising Challenge

The increasing integration of AI and Generative AI (GenAI) technologies in EFL education has fundamentally transformed contemporary language learning environments. Godwin-Jones (2022) highlighted that while AI tools offer valuable affordances for language skill development, including automated feedback, personalised practice, and expanded linguistic exposure, they simultaneously raise important questions about the role of human agency and authentic interaction in language learning. This concern positions AI not merely as a technical development but as a pedagogical challenge: as algorithm-driven instruction becomes more prevalent, the distinctly human dimensions of language learning risk being progressively marginalized.

Abdelhalim and Almaneea (2025) demonstrated that GenAI-supported project-based learning can significantly enhance EFL learners' engagement and agency; however, they emphasised that meaningful learning depends on balancing AI-supported practice with peer collaboration and teacher interaction. Similarly, Li, Wu, and Chiu (2025) found that GenAI chatbot

environments with teacher presence produced significantly higher emotional and agentic engagement than those without, raising concerns about reduced socio-emotional interaction when teacher presence is absent. Lee (2025) likewise found that although AI chatbot interaction supported learners' confidence, learners continued to require authentic human interaction to develop interpersonal communication skills and navigate nuanced communicative situations. Taken together, these findings suggest that AI-mediated language learning, however beneficial, cannot adequately replace the dialogic, relational, and intercultural dimensions of human communication.

Human-Centred Pedagogy as a Counterbalance to Algorithmic Learning

Scholars have increasingly argued that preserving human interaction within AI-mediated classrooms is not merely desirable but pedagogically necessary. Abdelhalim and Almaneea (2025) advocated for a "human-in-the-loop" approach in which AI technologies complement rather than replace teacher guidance, peer interaction, and collaborative learning. Yuen and Schlote (2024) found that AI-powered language applications fell short in cultivating higher-order communicative skills such as discourse negotiation and interpersonal communication, capacities that require authentic social engagement. Li, Shadiev, and Chiu (2025) demonstrated that the effectiveness of GenAI-supported learning depended heavily on teacher facilitation and collaborative practices, reinforcing the indispensable role of human presence in technologically enhanced classrooms.

These findings collectively point to the need for pedagogical models that deliberately humanise AI-mediated classrooms by creating structured opportunities for authentic interaction, collaborative dialogue, and interpersonal engagement. Debate-based pedagogy represents one such model, offering a principled instructional counterbalance to the individualising tendencies of algorithmic learning.

Debate-Based Pedagogy in EFL Contexts

Krieger (2005) describes debate as an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students cognitively and linguistically in ways that few other classroom activities can match, providing meaningful listening, speaking, and writing practice while simultaneously developing argumentation skills for persuasive communication. Debate activities require learners to construct arguments, respond to opposing viewpoints, negotiate meaning, and communicate persuasively in real time; these are communicative practices that are inherently social, spontaneous, and interactional.

From a sociocultural perspective, debate-based learning aligns with Vygotskian theories emphasising the importance of collaborative dialogue and socially mediated communication in language development, creating opportunities for learners to construct meaning collaboratively through peer interaction. Within AI-mediated contexts, these qualities are especially significant: while AI platforms optimise individual language practice, debate activities create the kind of unpredictable, emotionally engaged, and interpersonally negotiated communication that human interaction uniquely affords.

Intercultural Competence Frameworks

Three complementary frameworks inform the conceptualisation and measurement of intercultural competence in this study. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative

competence emphasises the development of intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness. Deardorff (2006) highlights openness, empathy, adaptability, and perspective-taking as core attributes of successful intercultural communication. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) further proposes that individuals move from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations toward cultural difference, with increasing intercultural sensitivity associated with greater communicative competence across cultures.

Together, these frameworks position intercultural competence as a dynamic, developmental process that emerges through communicative engagement with diverse perspectives rather than through individual study or algorithmically mediated exposure. This makes interaction-based pedagogical approaches, and debate in particular, uniquely well-suited to fostering intercultural development in EFL contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods, one-group, post-intervention design to examine the impact of a structured debate intervention on EFL students' perceived intercultural competence within an AI-mediated learning environment. This paper reports on the experimental group as part of a larger study examining the comparative effects of debate-based pedagogy in Saudi EFL contexts. The one-group design adopted here foregrounds the developmental trajectory of students who participated in the debate intervention, providing qualitative and quantitative insight into how debate-based, human-centred pedagogy may function as a counterbalance to algorithmic learning in AI-augmented EFL classrooms.

Participants

Participants were 37 Saudi female EFL students enrolled in Listening and Speaking 2 (ENG 1112) at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. All participants were first-year university students majoring in English, with a mean age of 19.40 years. At the beginning of the study, students completed the Oxford Quick Placement Test. Most participants were classified at the A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), with a smaller number ranging between B1 and C1.

Research Instruments

Preliminary Argumentation Questionnaire

A preliminary questionnaire was administered before the intervention to establish baseline profiles of students' prior experience with debate and argumentative communication in English. Items examined students' confidence in expressing opinions, familiarity with argumentation, preferred communication strategies, and perceived challenges in English discussion. This baseline data confirmed that most participants had limited prior exposure to formal debate and reported low confidence in argumentation.

Intercultural Competence Questionnaire

Students' perceived intercultural competence was measured using a researcher-developed questionnaire administered exclusively to the experimental group following the debate intervention. The questionnaire consisted of 24 five-point Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions, organised across four dimensions: Intercultural Awareness (10 items), Communicative Skills (5 items), Debate Topic Engagement (4 items), and Debate Activities (5 items). The instrument was informed by Byram (1997), Deardorff (2006), and Bennett (1993), reviewed by three applied linguistics experts, and piloted with 33 students, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .859 and intrinsic validity of .91. This debate-specific instrument is distinct from the generic intercultural competence measure used elsewhere in the broader research project comparing debate-based and traditional instruction; that measure was administered pre- and post-intervention to both experimental and control groups, whereas the present study reports the debate-specific instrument administered only post-intervention to the experimental group.

Research Procedures

The study was conducted over eight weeks within the Listening and Speaking 2 course. Both the baseline measure and the debate intervention were integrated within regular course instruction. During Week 1, students completed the Preliminary Argumentation Questionnaire, which served as the baseline measure for this study, and attended a two-hour orientation session introducing the debate project.

From Weeks 2 to 8, students participated in sequenced debate stages: team formation and topic assignment (Week 2), research phase (Week 3), argument drafting (Week 4), within-team practice (Week 5), mock debates (Week 6), final preparation (Week 7), and formal Debate Day contributing 15% to the course grade (Week 8). Debate topics were selected to promote intercultural engagement, including cultural heritage and national policy, globalisation and local cultures, stereotypes in media, and freedom of expression across cultural contexts. Throughout the intervention, the instructor facilitated sessions, monitored collaboration, and provided linguistic and communicative support.

At the end of the intervention, students completed the debate-specific Intercultural Competence Questionnaire as a single post-intervention measure, alongside open-ended questions inviting reflection on their intercultural learning experiences throughout the debate project. Because several items directly reference the debate experience (e.g., the Debate Activities and Debate Topic Engagement dimensions), this instrument was administered only after the intervention, by design, rather than as a pre–post comparison.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations at both item and dimension level, to examine students' post-intervention perceived intercultural competence across all four dimensions. Qualitative responses from the three open-ended questions were analysed using thematic content analysis, with responses coded and grouped into recurring themes related to intercultural awareness, communication challenges, and suggestions for further intercultural learning. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to provide a comprehensive account of the debate intervention's impact.

Results

Item-Level Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all 24 Likert-scale items of the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire (N = 37). Overall, mean scores ranged from 3.49 to 4.35, indicating moderate to high levels of perceived intercultural competence across all dimensions following the debate intervention. The highest rated item was "The role of cultural heritage in shaping national policies" (M = 4.35, SD = 1.49), with 83.8% of students selecting the highest rating. Other highly rated items included "Researching different cultural perspectives before a debate" (M = 4.19, SD = 1.02), with 51.4% selecting the highest rating, and "The impact of globalisation on local cultures" (M = 4.16, SD = 0.96). The lowest rated item was "I feel more comfortable discussing global issues with people from different cultural backgrounds" (M = 3.49, SD = 1.22), suggesting that comfort in intercultural communication remains an area for continued development.

Table 1
Item-Level Descriptive Statistics for the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire (N = 37)

Questionnaire Item	M	SD	n
Debate has helped me understand different cultures, their values, and traditions	4.00	1.18	37
Debate has made me more aware of cultural differences in communication styles	4.03	1.28	37
I have learned to recognise potential sources of misunderstanding in intercultural discussions	3.86	1.11	37
I feel more comfortable discussing global issues with people from different cultural backgrounds	3.49	1.22	37
Debate has helped me become more tolerant of different perspectives	4.00	1.25	37
I can critically analyse and challenge cultural stereotypes in debates	3.68	1.18	37
I have reflected more on my own cultural background and how it influences my opinions	3.57	1.21	37
I have improved my ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures	3.70	1.08	37
Debate has helped me recognise biases in arguments related to culture and identity	3.81	1.20	37
The multicultural nature of my debate group has made discussions more insightful	3.62	1.21	37
My ability to express my opinions clearly and persuasively	3.89	0.84	37
My listening and comprehension skills in discussions	3.76	1.06	37
My ability to critically evaluate arguments from different perspectives	3.81	1.13	37

My ability to adapt my language and tone when speaking to diverse audiences	3.78	1.16	37
My ability to provide logical and culturally sensitive counterarguments	3.57	1.09	37
Freedom of speech and cultural sensitivities (debate topic engagement)	3.84	0.96	37
The role of cultural heritage in shaping national policies (debate topic engagement)	4.35	1.49	37
Stereotypes and biases in media representation (debate topic engagement)	3.65	1.14	37
The impact of globalisation on local cultures (debate topic engagement)	4.16	0.96	37
Debating with people from different cultural backgrounds (debate activity)	4.03	1.09	37
Watching debate recordings featuring international debaters (debate activity)	4.11	0.97	37
Preparing arguments on culturally sensitive topics (debate activity)	4.00	1.05	37
Researching different cultural perspectives before a debate (debate activity)	4.19	1.02	37
Receiving feedback on my cultural awareness in debates (debate activity)	3.95	1.27	37

Note. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Items 16–19 used a topic engagement scale; Items 20–24 used an activity helpfulness scale.

Dimension-Level Analysis

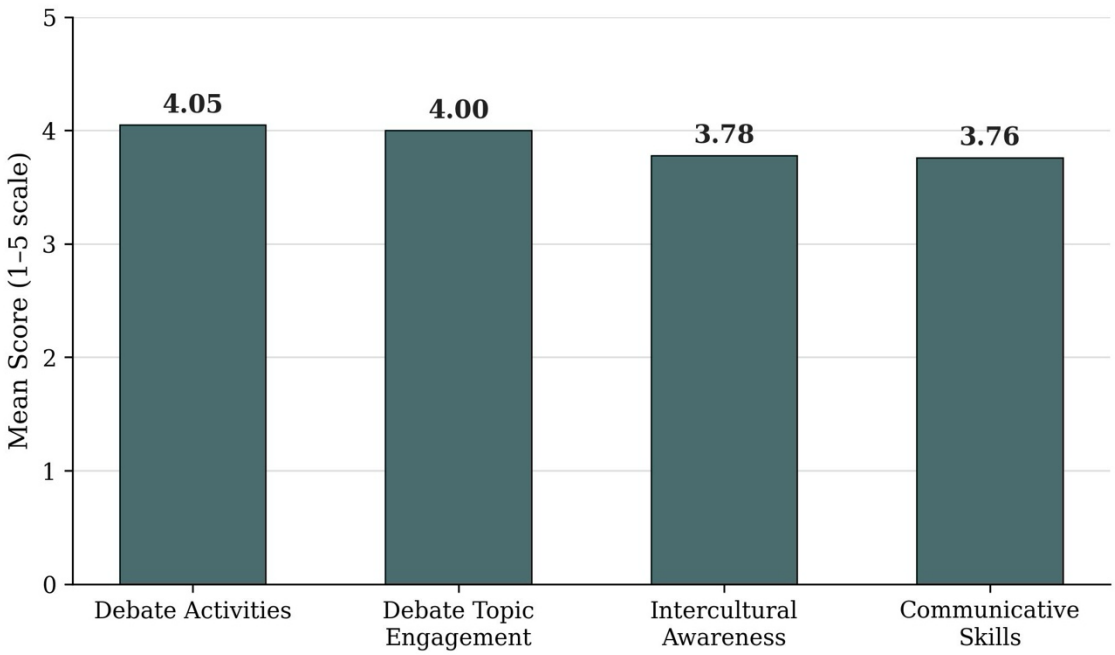
Table 2 presents dimension-level means and standard deviations. The two highest-scoring dimensions were Debate Activities (M = 4.05, SD = 0.87) and Debate Topic Engagement (M = 4.00, SD = 0.67), indicating that students perceived the debate activities themselves and the culturally themed debate topics as particularly valuable for intercultural learning. Intercultural Awareness (M = 3.78, SD = 1.02) and Communicative Skills (M = 3.76, SD = 0.91) were rated at a moderate-to-high level, suggesting meaningful development across both dimensions while also indicating potential for further growth, particularly in areas of comfort with intercultural discussion and culturally sensitive argumentation. Figure 1 presents these dimension-level means visually.

Table 2
Dimension-Level Summary of Intercultural Competence Scores (N = 37)

Dimension	No. of Items	M	SD	Interpretation
Intercultural Awareness	10	3.78	1.02	Moderate–High
Communicative Skills	5	3.76	0.91	Moderate–High
Debate Topic Engagement	4	4.00	0.67	High
Debate Activities	5	4.05	0.87	High

Note. Interpretation: 1.00–2.49 = Low; 2.50–3.49 = Moderate; 3.50–4.49 = Moderate–High; 4.50–5.00 = High.

Figure 1
Post-intervention Mean Scores by Dimension (N = 37)



Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of students' open-ended responses revealed three central themes, summarised in Table 3, each of which illuminates a distinct dimension of intercultural learning facilitated by the debate intervention.

Table 3
Summary of Qualitative Themes From Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Representative Response	Implication
Perspective-taking through listening	*"Listening to different perspectives has helped me understand cultural values and beliefs."*	Debate fosters openness and awareness of diverse cultural viewpoints.
Fear of stereotyping and cultural sensitivity	*"It can be difficult to stay neutral and open-minded when discussing sensitive issues."*	Navigating cultural sensitivity develops critical intercultural awareness.
Desire for real-world cultural engagement	*"Role-playing cultural scenarios and real-life case studies could help improve understanding."*	Students seek embodied, experiential forms of intercultural learning.

Theme 1: Perspective-Taking Through Listening

The most frequently cited benefit of the debate project was the experience of listening to and engaging with perspectives different from students' own. Students described how hearing opposing arguments encouraged them to reconsider assumptions and develop greater openness toward cultural diversity. As one student noted, debate "taught me to see every side of a story even the ones I don't agree with." This theme directly reflects the ethnorelative orientation described in Bennett's (1993) DMIS, suggesting that structured debate may facilitate movement along the intercultural sensitivity continuum.

Theme 2: Fear of Stereotyping and Cultural Sensitivity

A second theme concerned the challenge of navigating cultural sensitivity during debates. Students frequently described anxiety about inadvertently offending others or reinforcing stereotypes when discussing culturally sensitive topics. One student noted that "it is hard to balance respect with strong opinions." Rather than representing a limitation of the debate project, this theme reflects the development of critical intercultural awareness, one of the key competencies identified by Byram (1997), as students learned to engage critically with cultural issues while maintaining respect and sensitivity.

Theme 3: Desire for Real-World Cultural Engagement

Students consistently expressed interest in extending their intercultural learning beyond the classroom through role-plays, cultural case studies, guest speakers, and real-life cultural scenarios. This theme suggests that the debate intervention successfully sparked genuine curiosity about intercultural communication, with students seeking additional opportunities for embodied, experiential intercultural learning, precisely the kind of human-centred engagement that AI-mediated platforms cannot yet provide.

Discussion

The findings of the present study suggest that structured debate-based pedagogy can serve as a meaningful and effective human-centred counterbalance to AI-mediated language learning,

fostering intercultural competence through authentic dialogic engagement, perspective-taking, and collaborative meaning-making. Across all four dimensions of the Intercultural Competence Questionnaire, students reported moderate-to-high levels of intercultural development following the eight-week debate intervention, with particularly strong scores in the Debate Activities and Debate Topic Engagement dimensions.

These findings are consistent with Godwin-Jones's (2022) argument that while AI tools reshape and expand language learning possibilities, they simultaneously raise critical questions about the preservation of human agency and authentic interaction. The qualitative theme of perspective-taking through listening provides direct evidence of the kind of spontaneous, emotionally engaged intercultural exchange that AI-mediated platforms identified by Lee (2025) and Li, Wu, and Chiu (2025) cannot readily replicate. Students described experiences of genuine communicative negotiation, including listening, reconsidering, and responding, that align precisely with the socio-emotional dimensions of language learning that Li, Wu, and Chiu (2025) identified as at risk in increasingly algorithmic educational environments.

The theme of fear of stereotyping and cultural sensitivity is particularly noteworthy. Rather than representing a barrier to intercultural learning, students' careful navigation of culturally sensitive topics reflects the development of the critical cultural awareness that Byram (1997) identifies as central to intercultural communicative competence. This kind of nuanced, ethically situated communicative development is inherently dialogic and cannot emerge through individualised interaction with an AI system, reinforcing Yuen and Schlote's (2024) finding that higher-order communicative skills remain beyond the reach of AI-powered language applications. Similarly, Li, Shadiev, and Chiu's (2025) emphasis on teacher facilitation as essential to meaningful AI-augmented learning is reflected in the instructor's active role throughout the debate project, supporting students' linguistic and communicative development in ways that complement the human-centred learning environment.

The dimension-level findings further illuminate how debate pedagogy contributes to intercultural development. The relatively lower scores on comfort in intercultural communication ($M = 3.49$) and cultural self-reflection ($M = 3.57$) suggest that while the intervention was effective in developing awareness and engagement, deeper transformations in communicative confidence and cultural identity may require more sustained and longitudinal exposure to debate-based interaction. This aligns with Bennett's (1993) DMIS, which conceptualises intercultural sensitivity as a developmental continuum rather than a discrete outcome; students may have begun moving toward more ethnorelative orientations, but continued engagement with human-centred communicative practices is likely needed to consolidate these gains.

The third qualitative theme, focusing on students' desire for real-world cultural engagement through role-plays, case studies, and guest speakers, is especially significant in the context of AI-mediated learning. It suggests that debate participation did not merely develop students' existing intercultural awareness but actively generated new appetite for embodied, experiential intercultural learning. This is precisely the pedagogical outcome that Abdelhalim and Almaneea's (2025) human-in-the-loop framework envisions: AI tools supporting the conditions for engagement while human-centred activities generate the authentic communicative curiosity and motivation that sustain deeper learning.

Taken together, the findings affirm that Krieger's (2005) characterisation of debate as uniquely cognitively and linguistically engaging holds particular relevance in AI-mediated educational

contexts, where the risk of algorithmic learning displacing authentic human interaction is most acute. Debate-based pedagogy, as demonstrated in this study, offers a principled, replicable, and theoretically grounded means of ensuring that the relational, intercultural, and dialogic dimensions of language education are preserved alongside the efficiency-oriented affordances of AI-mediated instruction.

Conclusion

This study examined the potential of structured debate pedagogy to humanise AI-mediated EFL classrooms by fostering intercultural competence, dialogic engagement, and authentic human interaction. Using a one-group, post-intervention design with 37 first-year Saudi female EFL students, the findings demonstrate that an eight-week debate intervention produced positive developments across all dimensions of perceived intercultural competence, with particularly strong outcomes in debate topic engagement and debate activities. The qualitative findings further revealed meaningful intercultural learning in the form of perspective-taking, development of cultural sensitivity, and student-generated desire for continued real-world intercultural engagement.

These results carry important implications for language educators and curriculum designers navigating the growing integration of AI in EFL classrooms. As algorithmic learning environments expand, debate-based instruction offers a structured, human-centred complement that preserves the dialogic, relational, and intercultural dimensions of language education. The study contributes to a growing body of scholarship calling for pedagogical approaches that balance the affordances of AI-mediated learning with the irreplaceable communicative value of authentic human interaction.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The one-group design precludes causal claims about the exclusive impact of the debate intervention, as other course factors may have contributed to observed developments. Reliance on self-reported post-test data limits the ability to measure change over time within this paper, and the sample is restricted to first-year female students at a single Saudi university, limiting generalisability. Future research should employ pre–post comparison designs with diverse populations, incorporate performance-based assessments of intercultural competence, and explore the long-term sustainability of intercultural gains from debate-based interventions in AI-mediated language learning contexts.

Overall, this study affirms the continued and urgent importance of human-centred pedagogical approaches within contemporary EFL education, positioning structured debate as a valuable, principled, and necessary counterbalance to the growing algorithmisation of language learning.

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

The author declares that AI-assisted technology was used in the writing process to support language refinement, structural editing, and readability improvements. The ideas, research design, data collection, findings, analyses, and interpretations are the author's own and were derived from the systematic conduct of the research. All content decisions were made by the author.

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The Body Politic: How Classical Ideas of the Female Body Shape Modern Politics and State Governance

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Abstract

Women's bodies are a political necessity and an inconvenience. Paradoxically, women's reproductive work is necessary for the continuation of the modern state and state power, power from which women themselves have historically been excluded. Women's own bodily sovereignty disavows and threatens the State, ideas rooted in our western imaginations through classic texts. From Hippocrates and Aristotle to Galen, the male obsession with managing and policing the female body, denying its full humanity and autonomy, continues to inform modern patriarchal governance and the political processes it supports. States know that only by policing the female body, considering her body to be half a male body, can they solidify their imperialist, transnational power and authoritarian agendas. Political and social opposition to the existence of the female body both as a political corpus and an individual person, to the value of woman beyond her physical body, are rooted in the medical, scientific and cultural values that still draw blood from the ancient Mediterranean world. Dictatorial and even democratic governments gain oxygen through compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexuality, and the denial of the full bodily autonomy and sexuality of women. This paper examines how classical ideas of women's bodies support the current body politic, establishing hierarchical political structures through biological analogy. Without facing and reworking our unexamined learning from classical texts, we will continue to embolden threats to democracy and those State actors whose imperial power grabs insist on the relegation of the female body to the home.

Keywords: body politic, classics, populism, gender, misogyny

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Introduction

Many of the entrenched sexist ideas populist leaders hold about the bodies of women stem from those of powerful ancient men. Philosophers like Aristotle, ancient physicians like Galen and Hippocrates, whose ideas about the nature of the body of women, though long debunked, continue to inform the political projects of populist leaders, which restrict and police the bodies of women for political gain. Simply because of their biological sex, men continue to enjoy privilege from their embodied existence, ideas rooted in classical antiquity. Men's bodies are beholden only to men, while women's bodies continue to be public property: contested, restricted, legislated, politicized, shamed, hidden, silenced, harassed, beaten, and killed.

Authoritarian leaders such as Trump, Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi and Putin utilize and benefit from ancient ideas about women's bodies to further a body politic – the ancient idea that the human body is a metaphor for the health of the state – that harms women. The underexamined ancient ideas of women's bodies support the current body politic, the idea of the state as an integrated organism with a head that dominates and coordinates its subordinate parts (citizens or subjects), establishing hierarchical political structures by suppressing women's rights and insisting their biological inferiority justifies the harm. I attempt to yolk these leaders' patriarchal power structure to the misogyny of these ancient thinkers. The issue I address here is not only to underscore populist leaders' intent to limit the bodily autonomy of women (Dalvie, 2025; Kaul, 2021; McLean, 2011) but to unpack how their overlooked misogyny encourages a culture in which the value of the women is always second to the value of a man.

My question is: To what extent do the ancient medical and philosophical doctrines of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, and Soranus continue to inform and justify contemporary authoritarian political decisions that limit women's rights and bodily autonomy? Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship spanning classical philosophy, feminist political theory, and gender studies, my analysis reveals three key findings: (1) bodily metaphors from Greek and Roman thought continue to structure modern assumptions of women's place in the state; (2) ancient medical and philosophical theories about female reproduction persist in contemporary reproductive policy debates; and (3) classical frameworks that position women's bodies as objects of political control rather than political subjects remain embedded in modern governance structures. I first provide an overview of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen's, and Soranus's treatises about the purposes of the bodies of women and then look at how contemporary authoritarian leaders weaponize these ancient ideas for their regimes.

Authoritarians need the bodies of women to remain sanctioned as weaker, less important than and therefore less worthy than men's bodies to fuel the misogyny central to their political projects. They find the rationale for their projects in Galen, Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Soranus, who convinced entire generations of occidental medicinal practitioners that the male body was the measure of everything, the only natural human form. Without facing and reworking these unexamined learning from classical texts, that her body stems from his body and is therefore less than, we will continue to embolden threats to democracy and those state actors whose imperial power grabs insist on the relegation of the female body to the home. By reducing women's bodies to their ability to reproduce, these populist leaders are moving us closer to accepting authoritarianism.

Literature Review

Mercer (2018) in her work *the Philosophical Roots of Western Misogyny* reconstructs how learned men in the ancient world offered what they considered to be "cutting edge" and sound arguments for the inferiority of women to men and how they have buttressed the patriarchy's current survival (p. 184). Many modern medical decisions, practices and pieces of legislation supporting the patriarchy stem from these ancient suppositions about women's bodies: dark, cold, and wet, irrational vs. men's bodies: hot, dry, and rational. Mercer underscores this point by noting that "centuries of sexism and its accompanying misogyny were built" by these philosophers and medical theorists to provide evidence that men are superior to women, concluding that the two thousand years of sexism "enshrined" in ancient Greece "are difficult to shrug off" (pp. 184–185). These ideas about women's and men's bodies have created what she calls a "hierarchical difference" (HD), making it easy to justify that women need to be treated differently than men and that the health of western society depends on this different, lesser treatment (p. 185). Similarly, Kaul (2021) in *The Misogyny of Authoritarians in Contemporary Democracies* argues that populist leaders "instrumentalize misogyny" to demonize the female as weak and inferior (p. 1625), ideas that originate from Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and Soranus. Populist leaders support HD, powerful men whose political projects demean, marginalize, ridicule, and dismiss women, especially women who ask questions or women in power.

The misogyny of world leaders such as Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi, Trump and Putin are central to the exercise of their political power (Kaul, 2021). In fact, a growing body of recent literature demonstrates how modern states have operationalized misogyny to maintain their political legitimacy. As Manne (2018) defines it, the support system that upholds the patriarchy consists of two muscles: sexism ("the justifier") and misogyny ("the enforcer"), both which modern authoritarians use to delegitimize women's speech, limit their access to positions of power in both public and private spheres, and justify their own political projects that limit women's rights to, quite literally, everything, all while encouraging motherhood, diminishing abortion access and demeaning women who do not have children.

In 1975, anthropologist Gayle Rubin offers a theory of women's oppression they call the "sex/gender system", a system through which society arranges itself by transforming human sexual biology into "products of human activity" (Rubin, 1975, p. 159). They argue that the domestication of women is not a natural but a political process, through which the capitalist machine of churning out commodities for profit fulfills its only goal: more capital. Almeida (2025) agrees with Rubin that women's bodies have been "commodified" in the United States, where in one case a medically declared brain dead woman was kept alive on life support because she was pregnant at the time of death, and the abortion laws in the State of Georgia kept her alive on machines until at 25 weeks the woman's body could no longer support the fetus, and the fetus was delivered via C-section. Rubin's focus on women's bodies exploited as surplus labor for capital further emboldens my argument that the goal of authoritarian states is in part to ensure that women's bodies are never their own. Further, these authoritarians ignore and chastise the non-heterosexual woman and demand "compulsory heterosexuality" in their political projects (Rich, 2003). These populist leaders easily reduce women's bodies to their biological utility for the material of the patriarchy.

These axioms about women's bodies have transformed into gender myths, stories about women that have easy and wide-reaching purchase value for populist policy makers: women are caretakers at home and do not require a political voice; women's destiny is in their biology, as

child bearers and homemakers. They are the weaker sex and therefore less intelligent than men, a belief that one policy maker recently shouted out at the European Union parliament.[1] To these populist leaders, women are not oppressed, they are protected; they do not suffer inequality because by nature and divine law, men's and women's bodies are not equal. Therefore, any stress women feel because of deeply rooted systematic injustice can be dismissed, since systematic injustice to authoritarian leaders does not exist. It was these ancient male thinkers who have for millennia ensconced us in their male-centric world view, using women's bodies as political tools, prioritizing only the part of women's bodies that serve men, and dismissing women's rights to live as full humans.

The Female Body in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Hippocrates of Kos 460–375 B.C.E. – Cold and Weak vs. Hot and Strong

Though they differ on some points, Hippocrates[2], Aristotle, Galen, and Soranus, who were all writing before the advent of dissection, agreed that the human body is made up of different types of fluids, and these fluids are hot or cold and moist or dry. They believed that the human body was at its most healthy when these fluids were in balance (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./1931, *Nature of Man* 4.29).[3]

Many of the Hippocratic medical treatises concern the health and diseases of women. There are two features of a woman's body that convinced the Hippocratic authors of a crucial difference between men's and women's bodies: women have menses and a womb or "jar". The wandering womb theory purports that the womb or jar would remain in its proper place only when a woman's fluids were in balance. If a woman did not menstruate monthly, the Hippocratic physicians held that the menses would build up, causing the womb to dislodge and wander around the body, affecting different organs (liver, lungs, even brain), causing all sorts of medical ailments (constipation, violent pains, fever, back pain, teeth grinding; lack of appetite) (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./2018, *Diseases of Women I,* 1.18–19).

A woman is more "porous and softer than a man" and she absorbs more fluids than men do (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./2018, *Diseases of Women I*, 1.13). Thus, because of its excess fluids, the female body is naturally imbalanced. On the other hand, men, whose flesh is firmer and "densely woven" (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./ 2018, *Diseases of Women I,* 1.13) do not need to menstruate because their bodies' fluids are in balance and they only need to emit semen (Mercer, 2018, p. 189). So, Hippocrates believed that the excess blood of women can drive them to depression and even suicide. A woman who does not menstruate regularly and who has also never given birth will suffer from a painful illness of the flesh, unless she has intercourse (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./2018, Diseases of Women I, 1.15–16). Because one of the primary cures for these "ailments" was sexual intercourse, for the Hippocratic physicians, the goal of the bodies of women was only reproduction.

[1] A far-right Polish MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke who said women "must earn less than men because they are weaker, smaller and less intelligent" was given an unprecedented punishment by the European parliament, cf. Rankin, J. (2017).
[2] Hippocrates was an ancient Greek physician who lived during the classical period and is traditionally regarded as the father of medicine. Yet, the Hippocratic Oath that bears his name and the 60 or so medical writings attributed to him, were written by various authors over a span of two centuries.
[3] The Hippocratic corpus was written in the 4th and 5th centuries B.C.E., the earliest period for which we have written detailed accounts of women's bodies.

The Hippocratic authors insistence on the superiority of the male from cannot be overstated: they believed that male semen was the cure for women's supposed ailments. By placing women's bodies squarely in the context of their ability to reproduce, Mercer argues that "the Hippocratic authors placed women in bondage to their procreative powers and so (given cultural commitments to heterosexual marriage) to their husbands, initiating a long-standing strategy in western thought of using women's bodies as a means to justify differential treatment" (Mercer, 2018, p. 191).

Aristotle 384–322 B.C.E. Chalcis, Euboea – On Women's Natural Inferiority

Aristotle[4] has not left us with a description of the female body, as it interested him little. Yet, he was very interested in generation and believed that women produce "material" that serves as nutrients for the embryo (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/2004, 729a12–14). As far as women's contribution to reproduction was concerned, he believed that women's bodies were contributors of the "material" means for reproduction, while men contributed the "formal and efficient" means for reproduction (Bonnard, 2014). Aristotle's teleology, his notion that all living things serve a directed purpose and are searching for the good, insists that the female form is just a deformed male (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/2004, *Generation of animals* 737a27–29). So, the human female body serves a purpose and contributes to this good, but her contribution, because of her mutilation, is drastically inferior to that of man's (Mercer, 2018, p. 193). Because a woman's body is too cold to heat up the blood that could create semen, Aristotle insists that the true contributor of genetic material in reproduction is the man; therefore, women did not contribute any seed to human reproduction (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/2004, *Generation of animals* 727b7–12).

Interestingly, for Aristotle, two biologically sexed bodies do not exist: there was only one body – the male body. The adult free-born male will always remain *the* normal human body; women are defunct and inferior forms of the male form. Laqueur (1990) argues that Aristotle did not need the facts of sexual difference to support the claim that woman was a lesser being than man; "it followed from the a priori truth that the material cause is inferior to the efficient cause" (p. 151). As regards the sexes, Aristotle argues, "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male the ruler and the female the subject" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1932, *Politics* 1254b13–14). Given women's inferiority, it is natural that men oversee and regulate the lives of women. As we will see, by reducing the significance of women's role in reproduction, Aristotle gives license to centuries of physicians and leaders to legitimize reproductive-political control of women's bodies.

Galen 129–216 C.E. Pergamum, Mysia, Anatolia – On the One-Sex Body

In the second century, Galen[5] constructed one of the most powerful and enduring medical treatises. Galen interpreted the female body in light of the male body and held that women had the same genitals as men, except theirs were on the inside and men's were on the outside. Also a proponent of the one-sex model, he convinced the world for two millennia that the vagina was an internalized penis, the labia foreskin, the uterus a scrotum and the ovaries, testicles. Women's reproductive organs had to stay on the inside because they lacked vital heat

[4] Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist, one of the greatest intellectual figures of Classical antiquity and Western history. His ideas have endured in Western thinking, even after the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment.

[5] Galen (129 B.C.E.–216 CE) was a Greek physician, writer, and philosopher and was very influential until the mid-17th century, in the Western, Byzantine and Near Eastern worlds.

(Bonnard, 2014). "Now just as mankind is the most perfect of animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the women, and the reasons for his perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature's primary instrument" (Galen, ca. 165–175 C.E./1968, Vol. 2, p. 301). Because women do not have enough heat for her parts to escape outside, Galen argued that they have a "hollow instrument" to receive the "perfect semen". So, the human race is mutilated by the body of women, but Galen believes this mutilation is divinely necessary, emphasizing "the sublime wisdom of this hierarchy" (Mercer, 2018, p. 195) and seeing in it the design of nature: to permit the assurance of reproduction.

Soranus of Ephesus 98–138 C.E. – On Rape and Pregnancy

And yet, not all ancient medical practitioners agreed. Soranus of Ephesus writing in the 1st to 2nd centuries C.E. and practicing in Alexandria and Rome wrote an extant treatise, *Gynecology,* arguably "the most the most substantial and important surviving gynecological work from antiquity" (Gellar-Goad, 2023, p. 246). In it, he attempted to convince the Greco-Roman world that women's uteri did not move once month, and he denied that women's physiology was chaotic; he refuted that all women menstruate at the same time according to lunar cycles, and noted that though pregnancy was natural, it was not always healthy (Galeski, 2023). Soranus was, in some ways, more progressive than his earlier peers.

Yet sadly, Soranus, like some modern authoritarian leaders, downplays the severity of rape, claiming that a woman could not become pregnant through rape unless something in her body allowed it. He says that it was not possible for sperm to be conceived by females without desire: "For even if some women conceive after being raped, for them there's this to say: that even in these women the quality of desire was present at any rate, but it was overshadowed by the judgement of the psyche" (Soranus, ca. 138 CE/2023, p. 247). Similarly, as Gellar-Goad (2023) reminds us, Todd Akin, a former US congressperson, implied in his 2012 Senate campaign that the female body has a way to reject a pregnancy incurred after rape.

The Body Politic

The body politic – the ancient idea that the human body is a metaphor for the health of the state – endures. The metaphor deems women to be subhuman, inferior to men in health and dominance, important only for their procreative capacity, less intelligent, and certainly unfit for political aspirations. As a concept, the "body politic" provides crucial insight into why women's bodies and rights become central battlegrounds in populist politics. The metaphor of the city (and the State) as a living body links the body and politics in a new way (Castelli, 2018). "The body turns into a metaphor for the political hierarchy, and, as a body, power is exposed to illness and disease, sometimes to death. Power has now an anatomy, and needs therapies against pathologies" (Castelli, 2018, p. 170).

Unsurprisingly, this political body is a male body, rational and disciplined, positioned as the "universal and neutral image" for all of humanity (Castelli, 2018, p. 170). Castelli (2018) agrees that male bodies

> …are sovereign subjects, and they control nature, necessity, and passions. They are subjects of power. Female bodies will stay in the margins, excluded from the official political representations, since they are still seen as irrational, animal, passioned, and unpolitical. They are objects of power. Even when femininity seems to play an

> important role in political discourse, women's bodies are erased and normalized. (Castelli, 2018, p. 170)

So, because the female body and its reproductive power pose dangerous threats to the male political body and its sovereignty, certain arrangements of power have been created, excluding woman from *her own* political power while demanding her body as fodder for *their* political power.

The body politic metaphor has since been used to justify unity and hierarchy (head and members), and naturalized authority.[6] As feminist political theorists have long established, the body – particularly the female body –serves as a fundamental site where political power is both naturalized and contested. Populist leaders frequently invoke the need to protect the nation's demographic and cultural integrity by positioning women's reproductive capacity as essential to national survival (Almeida, 2025; Patavardhan & Nakshathra, 2024). Later critiques (Cavarero, 2002) observe that the body politic metaphor usually assumes hierarchies that marginalize women in particular, revealing how it also carries the normative and exclusionary implications of patriarchal thinkers who cast women into the realm of the corporeal as nonpolitical (Cavarero, 1995). Consequently, the ancient association of women's bodies with irrationality, reproductive necessity, and apolitical nature – regularly informs contemporary political discourse and populist governance structures.

Authoritarianism and Male Dominance

So why are we interested in the precocious pretentions of ancient men? Mainly because the contemporary authoritarians rely on the continuation of these ideas to justify the subservience and inferiority of women to this day. Recent research shows that as of 2026, 72 percent of the world's population now lives under autocracy, with women's rights serving as a primary battleground for authoritarian consolidation (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Current misogynist authoritarians, Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Türkiye), and Narendra Modi (India) use women's bodies as a battle ground to consolidate their authority. These "leaders" deploy remarkably similar strategies to advance their sexist projects: they advance anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses to galvanize their support base, dismantle institutional safeguards for women, curtail access to abortion services, and subvert women's economic and political engagement. Their assaults on women's rights are not mere isolated policy decisions but are the keystones of their endeavors to roll back any progress the feminist cause has made. By targeting the autonomy of women's bodies, populists endeavor to resolidify what they perceive as the "natural" patriarchal hierarchy, allegedly jeopardized by feminist advancements (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Gwiazda, 2021).

The Bodily Sovereignty of Women

So it goes that the bodily sovereignty of women disavows and threatens their "modern" states. If women's purpose is only procreative, a mode of reproduction, and women are inherently weaker than men, then women cannot be trusted to make choices over their own bodies. In the United States on 24 June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in its *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, ending the 50-year-old federal constitutional right to an abortion. The legal right for women to have an abortion was left up

[6] The transmission of these metaphors through Medieval theology and later to early modern thinkers, e.g., Hobbes *Leviathon*, is outside of the scope of this paper.

to the States, many of which had "trigger laws" in effect, partially or totally banning the right to an abortion in their state upon the overturning of Roe. State-level abortion restrictions, mandatory waiting periods, and requirements for medically unnecessary procedures reproduce ancient patterns of positioning women as incapable of rational decision-making about their own bodies.

Reproductive politics in other national contexts demonstrate how ancient frameworks for controlling female bodies have been adapted to serve modern political projects. In Russia and Türkiye, Putin and Erdoğan have shifted towards creating an environment of discomfort for anyone pursuing an abortion. President Putin has consistently articulated a vision of women's roles centered on motherhood and family, framing reproduction as a patriotic duty and national security imperative. In his 8 March 2024 Women's Day message, Putin declared that "the most important thing for every woman… is family" and "taking tireless care of children," explicitly positioning childbearing as women's primary purpose (The Moscow Times, 2024). Putin has also imposed mandatory waiting periods before the ability to have an abortion. In Türkiye, the government uses a system that tracks women who visit any type of maternity services. "Since 2008, the Turkish government has used a surveillance system to record and track all pregnant women who visit maternity services" (Genç, 2023).

And women are not safe. Not safe in their homes and not safe in the streets. In India, one official in Modi's party, mirroring the words of Soranus of Ephesus, has said that rape is "a social crime" that is "sometimes right and sometimes wrong" (Kaul, 2021, p. 1627). The *Human Rights Watch World Report* (2026) demonstrates that security forces in Manipur and other conflict zones have committed atrocities including sexual violence against women from minority communities. Narenda Modi's government has failed to hold perpetrators accountable, offering impunity for offenders of gender-based violence in India, particularly when victims are from marginalized religious or ethnic groups. In the United States, the Trump administration in June of 2018 overturned asylum protection for domestic violence for women. In 2016, Erdoğan initiated a "marry your rapist" bill, to protect men who rape underage girls if they marry their victims (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2021).

Misogyny Solidifies Authoritarian Agendas

One of the most nefarious ways populist leaders, Trump, Modi, Erdoğan and Orbán attack women's rights and bodily sovereignty is by employing misogyny in their everyday language to marginalize and dismiss women as people. These leaders succeed *because* of their misogyny (Kaul, 2021). Manne (2018) concurs that misogyny "is most productively understood as a political phenomenon", the system that "operates within the heteropatriarchy to police and enforce women's subordination and uphold male dominance" (33).

Take the United States as an example: Donald Trump has won two political elections while grossly disparaging and dismissing women who are prominent in public life using abusive commentary about their bodies. He calls competent women "crooked" and still won two elections after saying he could "grab them by the pussy" (Kaul, 2021, p. 1626). In the 2020 election campaign, Trump referred to the Democratic Presidential candidate Kamala Harris as a monster and his son tweeted the word "whorendous" about her (Kaul, 2021, p. 1627). Yet, many United States voters still see the hypermasculinity and misogyny of Trump as a pretext for strength and competence (Kaul, 2021). They not only exonerate him but *reward* him for his misogyny.

In India, Modi has consistently used misogyny to delegitimatize women leaders and ridicule women in public life who challenge his policies. Women are best fit to be mothers and sisters, he has said, but when men rape women or Muslim girls in India, Modi remains silent. In Türkiye, Erdoğan has said that: "A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her working life is, is deficient, incomplete" (Kaul, 2021, p. 1627). In Hungary, women who speak out against the actions of prime minister Viktor Orbán's government face vicious misogynistic attacks online, and women leaders and activists who stand up for human rights and champion democracy are also denigrated as "unqualified", "stupid" and "unfit for office" (Di Meco, 2023).

Conclusions

The influence of Greek and Roman thought on western politics is not in question, yet how these ideas continue to influence authoritarians, reproductive governance, and state power remain underexamined. The male-dominated patriarchy and its oppression of women is sadly on the rise and is directly connected to democratic decline around the globe. Their endless attacks on women's bodies, freedoms, autonomy, are a symptom of the enormous backlash of populist governments against the progress of feminism, as seen in Hungary, India, Türkiye, Russia, and the Unites States. Yet, many of us miss how intrinsically the genesis of our belief in the biological inferiority of women stems from those of ancient powerful men. The implications from classical ideas of women's bodies support the current body politic, establishing hierarchical political structures through biological analogy that are profound: by linking women to procreative necessity and irrationality, ancient thinkers provide a conceptual foundation for the political exclusion and oppression of women that has persisted for millennia. Why do we continue to support authoritarians who fear the bodily sovereignty of women? It is time "to spit on Hippocrates," (PIENA, 2025) and oust those in power who cannot evolve past the ancient desire to control the bodies of women.

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Subversive Incongruence: G-Dragon and the Multi-step Flow of Gender-Disruptive Luxury Branding

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Abstract

In contemporary luxury advertising, the strategic leverage of gender incongruence—male celebrities explicitly styling womenswear—has evolved into a dual-layered tool of persuasion. This study investigates the "G-Dragon (GD) effect" and his association with CHANEL to explore how gender-disruptive aesthetics are negotiated by consumers. We argue that this phenomenon operates through a double persuasion: facilitating commercial consumption while normalizing the broader cultural acceptance of fluid gender performances. Crucially, we distinguish this from traditional "gender-neutral" or subcultural "queer" aesthetics. By maintaining a distinctly masculine appeal to a female-dominated fanbase, GD's persona enables a form of subversive stylization where incongruence is seamlessly merged into his identity. This allows "feminine" luxury signifiers to be recoded as markers of elite taste rather than gender dissonance, naturally eroding the rigid cultural imaginations of the gender binary. Our research examines how this dual persuasion is filtered through a multi-step cultural flow: the legitimization of incongruent styles by elite fashion media, the validation of peer groups who mirror these choices, and the role of female appreciation in redefining male desirability. Through a survey of consumers in mainland China, this study explores how attitudes toward the celebrity and purchase intent are shaped by social validation and peer evaluation. The findings suggest that such "merged" incongruence represents a radical departure from traditional congruence-based cultural and marketing values, offering a new lens for understanding how high-fashion provocations persuade audiences to embrace both luxury goods and the re-articulation of masculine identity.

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Introduction

In modern luxury advertising, the use of incongruent gender roles by male celebrities intentionally wearing womenswear has become one way to subvert gender norms. Nonetheless, the existing endorsement theories such as the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) suggest that a mismatch between an endorser's image and product attributes may undermine consumer persuasion. The above-mentioned paradox can be seen in the case of G-Dragon, a world-famous K-pop singer who serves as a muse for CHANEL and frequently appears in the brand's campaigns wearing womenswear. Although there is clear incongruity, G-Dragon and CHANEL have managed to make a commercial and cultural impact through their collaboration. However, existing studies have mainly concentrated on gender-consistent celebrity endorsement, while the process through which gender-incongruent luxury branding achieves persuasion remains under-explored.

The above discussion highlights two specific gaps: the lack of empirical testing on how media legitimacy and peer legitimacy collectively termed cultural environment certification operate, and the unclear joint effect of gender incongruence and fashion stylishness on purchase intention. To address these gaps, the present study conducts a survey of 674 respondents in mainland China. Based on the findings, we formulate the following research question, and derive two hypotheses grounded in the theoretical framework outlined in the literature review.

Literature Review

Celebrity Endorsement and the Match-Up Hypothesis

Celebrity endorsement is a pervasive strategy employed to heighten brand salience, enhance brand and product imagery, facilitate brand repositioning, and support global marketing initiatives (Erdogan, 1999). Within this framework, the personal attributes of the celebrity and their perceived relationship with the brand are frequently invoked to explain the efficacy of the endorsement.

The Source Credibility Model (SCM) is one of the most prominent frameworks for analyzing the persuasive impact of an endorser. The SCM posits that persuasion is positively moderated when the receiver perceives high levels of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990), as well as authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2021) and similarity (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Beyond these source characteristics, traditional advertising paradigms emphasize the "Match-up Hypothesis." This theory suggests that the persuasive power of an advertisement depends on the logical alignment between the celebrity and the product category. When an endorser's attributes are congruent with the product, the promotional effect is significantly amplified (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Misra & Beatty, 1990). Common manifestations of this alignment include gender-matching (e.g., a male endorser for a male-targeted product) and categorical matching (e.g., an athlete for sports apparel).

These gendered product schemas are deeply rooted in sociocultural history. A content analysis of women's magazines (1990–1999) revealed a heavy emphasis on appearance and domestic products, with a notable absence of financial or technological categories, documenting long-standing societal expectations regarding "who buys what" (Mastin et al.,

2004). Consequently, prior research has consistently maintained that gender-congruent endorsements—male celebrities for men's products and female celebrities for women's—are the most reliable and market-validated strategies. Such consistency minimizes cognitive processing costs for consumers, creating a perceived sense of "natural harmony."

Gender Schemas and the Fluidity of Fashion Boundaries

The Deconstruction of Gender Boundaries in Fashion

In the luxury industry, the traditional emphasis on match-up congruence is increasingly being diluted. While traditional gender schemas presuppose rigid boundaries for masculine and feminine attire (Bem, 1981), the contemporary fashion landscape is witnessing the deconstruction of biological binary categorizations through trends such as gender-neutrality, gender-bending, and gender-fluidity (Lee, 2020).

Leveraging their vast capital and cultural influence, luxury brands act as cultural vanguardists, actively integrating gender-blurring elements into product concepts and promotional strategies. Brands such as Gucci have mainstreamed this aesthetic by merging male and female runway shows and launching dedicated gender-fluid collections (Bernardi et al., 2024). In this context, incongruence between the endorser's gender and the product's traditional gender-typing is no longer viewed as a logical error but as a symbol of aesthetic and cultural avant-gardism.

Consumer responses are also contingent upon product types (Kim et al., 2017). For functional products, consumers rely on credibility and diagnosticity, whereas for symbolic categories, they prioritize identity value (Lee & Eastin, 2020). Luxury fashion occupies a unique position in this framework: these products are inherently symbolic—serving identity and status functions—and typically elicit high engagement from consumers who value aesthetic connoisseurship and brand heritage. Consequently, acceptance of luxury offerings is driven less by functional evidence and more by symbolic resonance, aesthetic appeal, and the perceived stylistic authority of the endorser.

Schema Incongruity Theory

Beyond cultural leadership and product attributes, Schema Incongruity Theory provides a robust psychological foundation for this phenomenon. When incoming information seamlessly integrates into existing knowledge structures, it is classified as congruent (e.g., an infant in a diaper advertisement). Conversely, when information is difficult to assimilate into existing semantic networks, it is considered incongruent (Mandler, 1982).

Schema Incongruity Theory posits that moderate incongruity stimulates deeper cognitive elaboration. When consumers encounter a "mismatch" that can be resolved or explained, it generates stronger recall and more positive attitudes than complete congruence. Research indicates that visual cues that make a substantive contribution to the theme—even if atypical—often elicit more favorable evaluations than mundane, congruent cues (Heckler & Childers, 1992).

The cognitive impact of incongruence depends on its intensity (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Moderate mismatches—those that deviate from expectations but remain reconcilable with existing schemas—yield superior outcomes because the process of resolving the

discrepancy is inherently rewarding and encourages elaborate processing. In contrast, extreme incongruity, which cannot be reconciled without a fundamental restructuring of core cognitive schemas, often leads to information overload and negative affect. Ultimately, efficacy depends on the audience's ability to successfully resolve the unexpected elements.

Within this framework, gender incongruence in endorsements emerges as a pivotal visual cue. Gender Incongruence, the core variable of this study, is defined as the deviation between an endorser's gender identity and the pre-existing gender image associated with a product. In the luxury sector, gender-atypical endorsements exemplify the mechanism of schema resolution. Although a male celebrity wearing feminine attire may initially trigger an "expectancy violation," the conflict is swiftly reconciled when the endorser demonstrates aesthetic expertise (stylishness) or long-term self-consistency. This allows the audience to assimilate the unexpected gender cues without disrupting the persuasion process, thereby enhancing the advertising effect.

The Social Construction of Gender Paradigm Acceptance

The public acceptance of gender-incongruent advertising is inextricably linked to the broader social environment. The shift toward accepting non-traditional gender behaviors is not an isolated event; rather, it is a constructive process led by individual aesthetics, endorsed by media authority, and finalized through social consensus.

Aesthetic Capital: Reshaping Norms Through Individual Style

The endorser's Aesthetic Capital serves as the foundation for persuasion. According to Entwistle (2009), aesthetic capital is a form of personal capital acquired through taste, style, and image presentation. When individuals successfully lead trends, they exercise symbolic power. For instance, when a celebrity like G-Dragon exhibits high levels of "stylishness," his established success and broad influence transform this trait into "aesthetic authority" in the eyes of the audience.

High-level aesthetic value acts as a tool for cognitive reframing, redrawing the boundaries between "normal" and "atypical" (Postrel, 2003). Consequently, when individuals with high aesthetic capital engage in gender-incongruent behaviors, the public is more likely to interpret these actions as "stylistic innovation" rather than "normative violation," laying the psychological groundwork for societal acceptance.

The Legitimization of Aesthetic Capital

The transformation of individual fashion sensibility into a broader social consensus is contingent upon the legitimizing significance conferred by media dissemination. According to McCracken's (1986) Meaning Transfer Model, the flow of cultural meaning necessitates processing through a system of mediation. McCracken (1989) further posited that celebrities act as conduits for cultural meaning, whereby their personal attributes are transferred to brands and consumer perceptions through the media as an intermediary. Consequently, when a celebrity exhibits fashionability and amasses aesthetic capital, the media re-narrates and amplifies the cultural meanings they carry, ultimately facilitating the transfer of aesthetic authority to the public consciousness.

When media outlets re-narrate styles traditionally deemed "inappropriate" within conventional gender systems, they initiate a process of legitimization within the fashion domain. Suchman (1995), in his research on institutional legitimacy, posits that cognitive legitimacy stems from the social system's endorsement of a behavior's appropriateness. Applying Suchman's framework, fashion media serve as institutional constituents that exercise the power to define "aesthetic appropriateness." Within the fashion context, legacy media act as institutional gatekeepers, utilizing their extensive discursive authority to redefine and recode gender-incongruent attire. This institutional endorsement transforms potentially controversial cross-gender styling into cognitively legitimate stylistic expressions, thereby facilitating a transition from "normative violation" to "artistic legitimization."

By featuring male celebrities in feminine attire in positive reports or cover stories, authoritative media exercise a "right of aesthetic confirmation," elevating subcultural behaviors to the status of "high fashion." While traditional media provide "institutional authorization," social media facilitates "social penetration" through the Spillover Effect. According to networked communication theory (Kozinets et al., 2010), social media is a decentralized site of meaning production. This spillover effect breaks the walls of fashion elitism, diffusing "legitimate" labels from authoritative media to the masses via algorithmic push and viral dissemination. Through this horizontal interaction, challenging gender expressions are transformed into a global, participatory culture trend, evolving from "elite consensus" to "mass common sense."

Group Interaction and Peer Norms: Micro-assimilation of Cognition

The "common sense" fostered by social media must ultimately manifest in individual cognitive shifts. Individual evaluations are deeply embedded in social networks, a phenomenon explained by Reference Group Theory. This theory posits that individual attitudes and behaviors are strongly influenced by the norms of groups with which they identify (Childers & Rao, 1992).

Building upon the social media context, when an inherently avant-garde, cross-gender style ignites widespread discourse and generates a "spillover effect" on social platforms (e.g., Xiaohongshu), it effectively constructs a dynamic "peer norm" within audience circles. As peer groups reach a consensus—reimagining gender-incongruent attire, such as "GD-inspired" looks, as "high-end" or "trendy"—individuals often recalibrate their initial biases. This psychological shift is driven by the desire for group identification or the need to mitigate cognitive dissonance arising from non-conformity to mainstream trends. Consequently, when an aesthetic is validated by one's immediate social circle, legitimization transcends mere media proclamation; it evolves into a tangible form of social pressure and collective identity.

Furthermore, in luxury markets, this collective cognition is market-driven. For the female-dominated luxury market, "Female Approval" acts as the core threshold for commercializing cross-gender styles. Advertising efficacy depends on alignment with the target audience's aesthetic ideals; drawing upon the perspectives of Schroeder and Zwick (2004), advertising serves as a representational force that reconstructs masculinity, thereby granting media legitimacy to gender-crossing behaviors. When these practices overcome the psychological resistance of female audiences—shifting from rejection to appreciation—they evolve from mere visual spectacles into realized mainstream commercial value.

In summary, while traditional advertising theories emphasize gender match-up, the symbolic nature of luxury goods and the rise of gender fluidity provide the conditions for a paradigm shift. This study posits that Gender Incongruence is not a logical failure but an aesthetic narrative rooted in Schema Incongruity Theory. Its efficacy depends on the audience's ability to resolve information discrepancies: high Aesthetic Capital reframes conflict into innovation, while Institutional Legitimacy and Peer Norms provide a cognitive "buffer zone" for acceptance.

Despite these developments, previous research has focused predominantly on functional gender-matching, overlooking how gender incongruence—mediated by aesthetic capital and the social environment—affects persuasion in the luxury context. Therefore, this study aims to explore the mechanisms by which male endorsers of feminine luxury goods influence purchase intentions, specifically examining the mediating roles of aesthetic perception and social legitimization.

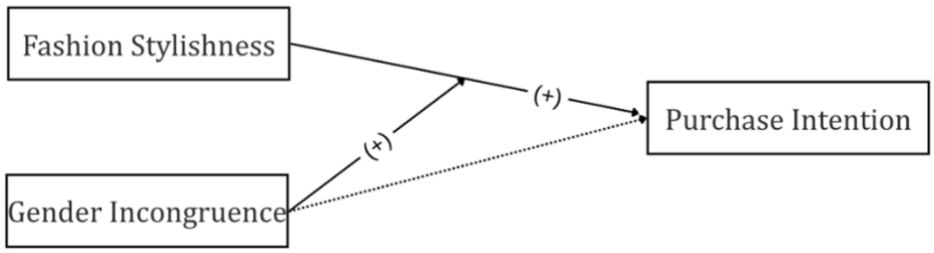
Research Question and Hypothesis

Building on the gaps identified above, we first formulate the following research question: How do cultural environment certification (media certification and peer certification) and the joint effect of gender incongruence and fashion stylishness shape purchase intention toward gender-disruptive luxury branding?

H1: Cultural Environment Certification significantly and positively influences the perceived Fashion Stylishness and Gender Incongruence of the styling.

Traditional congruence theories, such as the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), would predict consumer resistance to gender-incongruent endorsements specifically when male celebrities explicitly style womenswear. Yet the case of G-Dragon, a world-famous K-pop singer who serves as a muse for CHANEL, clearly defies this prediction. To resolve this paradox, we introduce the concept of cultural environment certification, which captures how gender-disruptive aesthetics are negotiated by consumers. As we argue, such a gender-disruptive aesthetic does not persuade in isolation; rather, it relies on a multi-step process of certification. First, media certification records feminine luxury signifiers as indicators of elite taste rather than gender dissonance (e.g., CHANEL's advertisements and fashion media coverage). Second, social risk is decreased by peer certification, which is confirmation from reference groups that make similar decisions. Together, these two forms of certification enable consumers to perceive the styling as both highly fashionable (Fashion Stylishness) and acceptably norm-defying (Gender Incongruence), thus naturally eroding the rigid cultural imaginations of the gender binary.

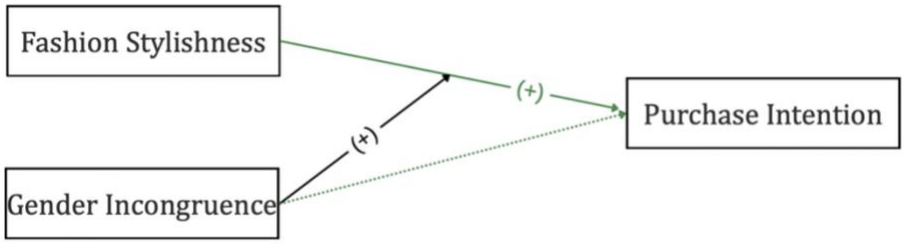
Figure 1
Hypothesis 1 Model



H2: Gender Incongruence and Fashion Stylishness exert a synergistic effect on Purchase Intention, such that the positive influence of Fashion Stylishness is amplified when Gender Incongruence is high.

Building on the above logic that consumers can perceive both stylishness and incongruence simultaneously, H2 addresses a further gap: the unclear joint effect of gender incongruence and fashion stylishness on purchase intention. We argue that the G-Dragon effect operates through a double persuasion facilitating commercial consumption while normalising fluid gender performances. H2 embodies this synergistic quality. In particular, we hypothesise that Gender Incongruence actively increases the persuasiveness of Fashion Stylishness rather than just coexisting with it. When gender incongruence is perceived as high (i.e., the styling is clearly disruptive), the very boldness signals a form of subversive stylization where incongruence is seamlessly merged into G-Dragon's identity maintaining a distinctly masculine appeal to a female-dominated fanbase. This, in turn, enhances the value of stylishness, turning feminine luxury signifiers into markers of elite taste rather than gender dissonance. Therefore, the positive influence of Fashion Stylishness on Purchase Intention is amplified when Gender Incongruence is high: consumers are persuaded not despite the disruption, but precisely because of the unique, elite taste it signifies within a certified cultural context.

Figure 2
Hypothesis 2 Model



Operationalization

To investigate the impact of G-Dragon's gender-subversive marketing for CHANEL, this study identified eight key constructs. Given that this research explores a unique intersection of K-pop influence and luxury branding—a niche area with limited pre-existing scales—all measurement items were self-developed to ensure context-specific accuracy as shown in Table 1. To validate these instruments, a preliminary reliability analysis was conducted, as shown in Table 2. The results indicate high internal consistency across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.788 to 0.864, well above the acceptable threshold of 0.70. This confirms that the self-developed scales provide a robust and reliable basis for further empirical testing.

Table 1
Operationalization and Measurement Items of Key Variables

Variable/Dimension	Items
Fashion Stylishness	1. I find this styling highly attractive. 2. I think this styling is very creative. 3. I feel this style has a sense of cynicism. 4. I find this styling somewhat playful and naughty.
Gender Incongruence	1. I believe this endorsement does not align with traditional gender images. 2. I think it is unusual for a male celebrity to wear female clothing items. 3. I find it unexpected for a male celebrity to wear this style. 4. I think this styling breaks common gender boundaries.
Media Certification	1. Fashion magazines (e.g., Vogue) generally praise this styling. 2. Fashion magazines generally describe this style as a fashion trend. 3. Fashion bloggers on social media generally praise this styling. 4. Social media influencers generally describe this style as a trend.
Peer Certification	1. People around me generally think this style is interesting. 2. This dressing style is generally accepted within my social circle. 3. My friends generally hold an open attitude toward this style.
Peer Certification (Other Gender)	1. Peers of the opposite sex generally consider this style fashionable. 2. Peers of the opposite sex generally find this style attractive. 3. Peers of the opposite sex generally hold a positive attitude toward this style.
GD Fashion Icon Factor	1. G-Dragon himself is the personification of fashion. 2. G-Dragon's dressing style is always leading the trend. 3. G-Dragon's style often carries a sense of rebelliousness. 4. G-Dragon's style often carries a sense of cynicism.
Self Fashion Sense	1. I highly follow fashion trends and often read fashion magazines/blogs. 2. I am sensitive to different clothing styles. 3. I frequently try new dressing styles.
Purchase Intention	1. I am interested in purchasing this clothing product. 2. I am willing to try products from this brand.

Table 2
Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	No. of Items	Eigen	Cronbach's Alpha	M	SD
Gender Incongruence	4	-	0.8	3.013	0.905
Fashion Stylishness	4	-	0.825	3.061	0.928
Media Certification	4	5.546	0.86	3.065	0.928
Peer Certification	3	1.036	0.788	2.905	0.912
Peer Certification of the Other Gender	3	-	0.82	2.863	0.961
GD Fashion Icon Factor	4	-	0.864	3.108	0.959
Self Fashion Sense	3	-	0.797	2.942	0.96
Purchase Intention	2	-	0.79	2.847	1.137

Gender Incongruence

Gender Incongruence is conceptualized as the cognitive mismatch perceived by consumers between traditional gender expectations and the actual visual presentation of an endorsement. In this study, it specifically describes the phenomenon where a male celebrity wears clothing originally designed for women, thereby creating a psychological "distance" between the endorser's biological identity and the gender-coded nature of the product. Within the research framework, this variable serves a strictly neutral and descriptive function. It emphasizes that the consumer recognizes the product was originally designed and marketed for the opposite gender. This awareness establishes the necessary cognitive foundation upon which subsequent social certifications and aesthetic evaluations are processed.

To measure this construct, the study utilizes four indicators focusing on the transgression of gender norms: role-mismatch ("I believe this endorsement does not align with traditional gender images"; 我认为这个代言不符合传统的性别形象), perceived unusualness ("I think it is unusual for a male celebrity to wear female clothing items"; 我认为男明星身着女装单品很不寻常), unexpectedness ("I find it unexpected for a male celebrity to wear this style"; 我认为男明星上身这样的款式出乎意料), and boundary-breaking ("I think this styling breaks common gender boundaries"; 我认为这种搭配突破了常见的性别界限). (M = 3.013, SD = 0.905, α = 0.8)

Fashion Stylishness

Fashion Stylishness is conceptualized as a consumer's subjective aesthetic appraisal of a styling's innovative quality and its expressive "vibe." Beyond mere physical appeal, this variable evaluates the artistic success of the gender-fluid presentation, focusing on whether the unconventional look is perceived as trend-leading and creatively executed.

To operationalize this construct, the study measures four dimensions of aesthetic perception: perceived creativity ("I think this styling is very creative"; 我觉得这种风格很有创意),

attractiveness ("I find this styling highly attractive," 这种造型非常有吸引力), cynicism, reflecting a rebellious and ironic edge ("I feel this style has a sense of cynicism"; 我觉得这种风格很有玩世不恭的感觉), and playfulness, representing a non-serious or "naughty" approach to high fashion ("I find this styling somewhat playful and naughty"; 我觉得这种风格有点调皮感). (M = 3.061, SD = 0.928, α = 0.825)

Cultural Environment Certification

Cultural Environment Certification is conceptualized as the external validation provided by the cultural ecosystem, which transforms a controversial or boundary-breaking style into a socially legitimate one. Based on the logic of institutional and social authorization, it consists of three distinct modes: media certification, peer certification and peer certification of the other gender.

Media Certification

Media Certification is conceptualized as the aesthetic validation performed by institutional and digital authorities. To measure this construct, the study utilizes four indicators focusing on external professional approval: professional fashion media coverage ("Fashion magazines (e.g., Vogue) generally praise this styling"; 时尚杂志（如 Vogue、Harper's Bazaar）普遍赞赏这一穿搭风格), trend endorsement by media ("Fashion magazines generally describe this style as a fashion trend"; 时尚杂志（如 Vogue、Harper's Bazaar）普遍将该服装风格描述为一种时尚趋势), influencer praise ("Fashion bloggers on social media generally praise this styling"; 社交媒体上的时尚博主普遍赞赏这一穿搭风格), and trend endorsement by influencers ("Social media influencers generally describe this style as a trend"; 社交媒体上的时尚博主普遍描述這服装风格为一种时尚趋势). (M = 3.065, SD = 0.928, α = 0.86, Eigen value = 5.546)

Peer Certification

Peer Certification refers to the interpersonal validation occurring within a consumer's immediate social circle and peers. It functions as a "social safety net" for the individual, mitigating the perceived embarrassment or social risk associated with adopting unconventional aesthetics by providing a sense of localized social acceptance. The construct is measured through three indicators of interpersonal approval: perceived interest from peers ("People around me generally think this style is interesting"; 我身边人通常认为这种风格很有趣), social acceptance ("This dressing style is generally accepted within my social circle"; 在我的朋友圈中，这种穿衣风格通常被接受), and friends' open-mindedness ("My friends generally hold an open attitude toward this style"; 我的朋友对这种风格普遍持开放态度). (M = 2.905, SD = 0.912, α = 0.788, Eigen value = 1.036)

Peer Certification of the Other Gender

Peer Certification of the Other Gender specifically addresses cross-gender aesthetic validation received from members of the opposite sex. In the context of gender-subversive marketing, this variable measures the "attractiveness leap" that occurs when gender boundaries are crossed. For instance, if female peers perceive a male celebrity's female-coded attire as attractive, it reinforces acceptance among male consumers by signaling that the gender incongruence does not compromise one's heterosexual appeal. This variable is

operationalized through three indicators of opposite-sex approval: perception of fashionability ("Peers of the opposite sex generally consider this style fashionable"; 我身边的异性通常认为这种穿衣风格具有时尚感), perception of attractiveness ("Peers of the opposite sex generally find this style attractive"; 我身边的异性通常认为这种风格具有吸引力), and positive attitude ("Peers of the opposite sex generally hold a positive attitude toward this style"; 我身边的异性通常会对这种穿衣风格持积极态度). (M = 2.863, SD = 0.961, α = 0.82)

G-Dragon Fashion Icon Factor

To mitigate potential confounding effects and enhance the robustness and accuracy of the empirical findings, this study designates the G-Dragon Fashion Icon Factor and Self Fashion Sense as control variables. These variables are incorporated into the research model to isolate the independent influences of celebrity prestige and individual consumer traits on purchase intention, thereby ensuring a more precise identification of the causal relationships between the core constructs.

G-Dragon Fashion Icon Factor is conceptualized as the celebrity's perceived cultural capital and symbolic authority within the global fashion system. As a control variable, it accounts for the consumer's baseline acceptance of gender incongruence; because the endorser is recognized as a "fashion icon," his adoption of female-coded attire is interpreted as a trend-leading maneuver rather than a stylistic error. This construct is measured through four indicators of fashion authority: personification of fashion ("G-Dragon himself is the personification of fashion."; GD本人就是时尚的代言人), trend-leader perception ("G-Dragon's dressing style is always leading the trend."; GD穿衣风格總是在引领潮流), rebellious style ("G-Dragon's style often carries a sense of rebelliousness."; GD的风格常常带有一点桀驁不馴的), and cynical edge ("G-Dragon's style often carries a sense of cynicism."; GD的风格常常带有一点玩世不恭). (M = 3.108, SD = 0.959, α = 0.864)

Self Fashion Sense

Self Fashion Sense refers to an individual's internal level of fashion involvement and their psychological readiness to engage with unconventional aesthetic stimuli. This variable is controlled to adjust for individual differences in cognitive frameworks, as high-fashion-sense individuals are inherently more capable of interpreting "stylishness" and "gender incongruence" as intentional artistic expressions rather than confusing signals. The variable is operationalized through three indicators of fashion engagement: media consumption ("I highly follow fashion trends and often read fashion magazines/blogs."; 我平时关注时尚趋势的程度很高，经常看时尚杂志 / 时尚博主), sensitivity to diverse styles ("I am sensitive to different clothing styles."; 我对服装风格比较敏感), and intention to experiment ("I frequently try new dressing styles."; 我经常尝试新的穿衣风格). (M = 2.942, SD = 0.96, α = 0.797)

Purchase Intention

Purchase Intention is defined as the consumer's willingness or plan to buy the endorsed item. As the ultimate outcome variable, it reflects the marketing strategy's effectiveness by measuring whether gender-subversive imagery can successfully convert a consumer's aesthetic appreciation into concrete purchase behavior. The construct is measured via two indicators of commercial interest: interest in the specific item ("I am interested in purchasing this clothing product."; 我有兴趣购买这套服装产品) and willingness to try the brand ("I am

willing to try products from this brand.”; 我愿意尝试该品牌的产品). (M = 2.847, SD = 1.137, α = 0.79)

Methodology

Research Design and Instrument

This study utilized a quantitative research design, employing a self-administered online survey as the primary data collection instrument. The survey was hosted and distributed via Qualtrics. All measurement items utilized a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). An online approach was selected due to its efficiency in reaching a geographically dispersed audience of “digital natives”—those most likely to be influenced by G-Dragon’s social media presence and luxury branding campaigns.

Sampling and Target Population

The target population for this research consists of residents in Mainland China, with a specific focus on First-tier cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen). These urban centers represent the primary hubs for institutional fashion media and luxury retail consumption in China.

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Initial outreach was conducted via Weixin (WeChat) social networking tools to leverage the research team’s immediate social circles. These initial respondents were then encouraged to share the survey within their own peer networks to broaden the study’s reach and diversify the participant pool.

To mitigate the inherent biases associated with non-probability sampling and enhance the overall representativeness of the data, a stratified sampling matrix was employed. This matrix overlapped six age groups and seven occupational categories, creating a total of 42 potential demographic segments. From this pool, 24 specific cells were randomly selected to serve as the targeted clusters for data collection, as illustrated in Table 3. Respondents span six age cohorts from 18 to 60+, with a strategic focus on the 18–39 demographic to capture the primary consumers of digital fashion and luxury brands most susceptible to G-Dragon’s influence. To ensure the validity of the “attractiveness leap” and cross-gender aesthetic validation analysis, the study maintained a balanced gender ratio. Furthermore, the sample incorporates seven occupational categories—ranging from Managers and Government Employees to Service Workers and the Unemployed—facilitating a robust testing of Media and Peer Certification across varied socio-economic strata.

Table 3
Stratified Sampling Matrix by Age and Occupation With Randomly Selected Cells

	Managers & Professionals	Technicians & Associate Professionals, Clerical Support	Service & Sales Workers	Craft & Related Trades Workers, Machine Operators & Assemblers	Elementary Occupations	Government Employees	Unemployed / Homemaker
18–22	1	7	13	19	25	31	37
23–29	2	8	14	20	26	32	38
30–39	3	9	15	21	27	33	39
40–49	4	10	16	22	28	34	40
50–59	5	11	17	23	29	35	41
≥ 60	6	12	18	24	30	36	42

Descriptive Results

Sample Profile and Market Realism

The final validated sample consists of 674 respondents. The demographic distribution exhibits significant "mainstream" characteristics in terms of educational attainment and economic capacity: 37.8% of respondents hold an undergraduate degree or above, and 55.2% fall within the monthly income bracket of HKD 20,001 to 60,000. This profile confirms that the sample represents not a fringe subculture, but a mainstream group of potential luxury consumers with substantial purchasing power. These characteristics provide a robust empirical foundation for the external validity and market realism of the research findings.

Cross-Gender Comparative Analysis

Table 4
Comparison of Mean Differences Across Gender Groups (N = 674)

Variables	Female (N = 300)	Male (N = 327)	Other Gender (N = 47)	Sig. (p)
Purchase Intention (PI)	2.76	2.81	3.69	< .001***
Fashion Stylishness (FS)	3.06	2.91	3.80	< .001***
Gender Incongruence (GI)	3.01	3.05	3.77	< .001***

Note. *** Denotes p < .001; significance results are based on Scheffe post-hoc tests.

Table 4 summarizes the mean scores for Purchase Intention (PI), Fashion Stylishness (FS), and Gender Incongruence (GI) across different gender groups.

Key Descriptive Findings

Cognitive Homogeneity and "Gender De-sensitization" in Mainstream Markets

The data indicate no statistically significant difference in Purchase Intention between male (M = 2.81) and female (M = 2.76) respondents (p = .850). This suggests that the acceptance of gender-bending marketing strategies has reached a point of homogeneity across mainstream binary gender segments. In the contemporary fashion context, mainstream consumers exhibit a clear tendency toward "gender de-sensitization" regarding male icons endorsing feminized luxury products.

Identification and Proportion of the "Other Gender" Segment

This study identified a significant "Other Gender" cohort, accounting for 7% (n = 47) of the total sample. This proportion is statistically meaningful in a quantitative context, indicating that research into Gender Incongruence is expanding from fringe subcultures into commercially representative social segments.

Strong Psychological Resonance and Identity Among the "Other Gender" Group

The "Other Gender" group reported significantly higher scores across all key variables compared to binary groups (p < .001). This segment demonstrated the highest recognition of "Subversive Incongruence" (GI = 3.77), the most positive aesthetic evaluation (FS = 3.80), and the strongest consumption drive (PI = 3.69). These results validate that for non-binary audiences, gender incongruence acts not as a cognitive risk, but as a powerful aesthetic asset and a medium for identity-driven resonance that translates into purchase motivation.

Hypothesis Testing and Results

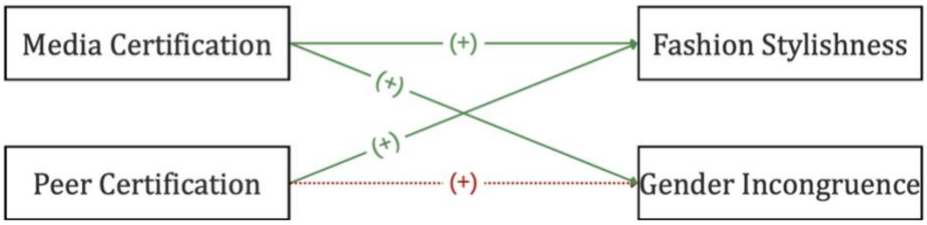
Within the context of marketing, the primary objective of an endorsement is to generate Purchase Intention, thereby converting celebrity influence into tangible commercial value for the brand. Consequently, we first examined the factors influencing Purchase Intention, specifically testing the effects of Fashion Stylishness and Gender Incongruence as proposed in Hypothesis 2, while incorporating control variables such as age and gender.

Table 5
Linear Regression Analysis of Purchase Intention

Independent Variables	Purchase Intention
Gender	-.067*
Age	.072
Education level	-.131***
Family Income Range	.029
GD Fashion Icon Factor	-.065
Self Fashion Sense	.12***
Gender Incongruence	.059
Fashion Stylishness	.633***
R2	.507***
N	666

Following the linear regression analysis (Adjusted R^2 = 0.507, p < .001), we found that Gender Incongruence does not negatively affect Purchase Intention as commonly assumed by conventional wisdom. On the contrary, its beta value is notably low (0.059), indicating a minimal impact rather than a reduction in consumer desire to purchase. In stark contrast, Fashion Stylishness plays a vital role in determining Purchase Intention, with a significant beta value of 0.633. This demonstrates that consumers prioritize aesthetic value and avant-garde styling as critical fashion factors. When these elements align with consumer expectations, they are more inclined to make purchase decisions, which validates the two paths within Hypothesis 2.

Figure 3
Hypothesis 2 Testing



Next, we focused on the antecedents of these two factors. Fashion Stylishness is not an inherent trait but a cognitive product shaped by external influences. Therefore, our regression analysis emphasized the role of the cultural environment by introducing Media Certification and Peer Certification as primary independent variables while maintaining constant control variables. In daily life, the perceptions of the media and social circles often shape individual cognition. If these entities validate or praise a specific fashion mode, such cognitive preferences are likely to influence consumer judgment. The empirical results (Adjusted R^2 = 0.551, p < .001) confirm a positive relationship between these factors and Fashion Stylishness. When authoritative media define a specific style as fashionable, consumer

perception tends to become more positive and accepting (Media Certification beta value = 0.325, p < .001). While high recognition from peers also encourages consumer acceptance (Peer Certification beta value = 0.102, p < .05), this shift in attitude is far less substantial than the influence of Media Certification. Compared to professional media judgment, the transfer of individual cognition remains limited even among close social circles.

Table 6
Linear Regression Analysis of Fashion Stylishness

Independent Variables	Fashion Stylishness
Gender	-.016
Age	.021
Education level	.002
Family Income Range	.-016
GD Fashion Icon	.292***
Factor	.126***
Self Fashion Sense	
Cultural Environment	.325***
Certification	.102**
-Media	.551***
Certification	666
-Peer Certification	
R2	
N	

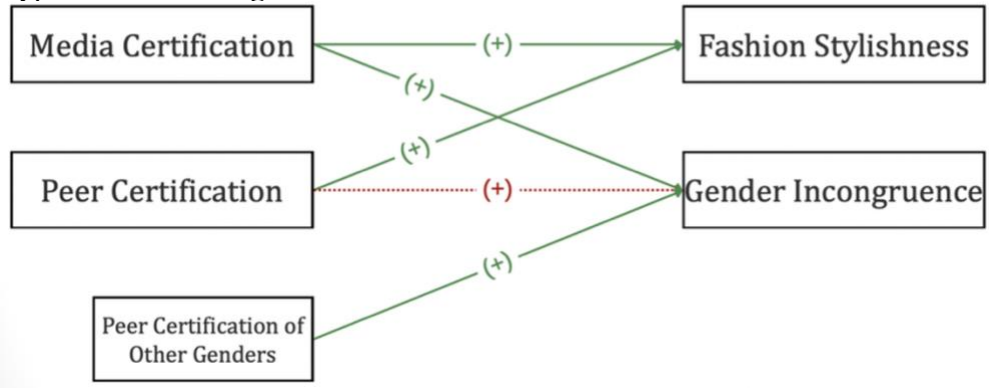
Similarly, Gender Incongruence is not an innate prejudice. We utilized the same variables as the Fashion Stylishness regression, as Cultural Environment Certification serves as an external element that shapes consumer attitudes. The results (Adjusted R^2 = 0.428, p < .001) indicate that Media Certification remains the most critical and only significant factor (beta value = 0.511, p < .001). Whether a style conforms to traditional gender norms or impressions depends largely on media validation from sources such as fashion magazines and social media influencers. Conversely, the influence of Peer Certification is negligible, with a non-significant beta value of -0.041, proving that there is no meaningful relationship between Peer Certification and Gender Incongruence.

Table 7
Linear Regression Analysis of Gender Incongruence

Independent Variables	Gender Incongruence
Gender	-.094
Age	.08
Education level	-.051
Family Income Range	.006
GD Fashion Icon Factor	.101
Self Fashion Sense	.138***
Cultural Environment	
Certification	.511***
-Media Certification	-.041
-Peer Certification	.428***
R^2	666
N	

These findings validate three paths within Hypothesis 1, although one path demonstrates weaker persuasive power. Consequently, we conducted a deeper investigation into whether the original definition of the Peer Certification variable was sufficiently accurate when discussing Gender Incongruence.

Figure 4
Hypothesis 1 Testing



When a male consumer encounters feminized clothing or styling, he may consider the opinions of his male friends as well as the views of the other gender. For instance, if a girlfriend perceives a style as reasonable, a man who is initially resistant or indifferent may accept this breach of gender norms out of consideration for her perspective, and vice versa. To clarify this mechanism, we narrowed Peer Certification down to a new variable, Peer Certification of Other Gender. We utilized a split-file analysis for male, female, and other gender groups, and performed a linear regression with Gender Incongruence and basic control variables. And to isolate the unique influence of external social validation and enhance model parsimony, we excluded Self Fashion Sense and GD Fashion Icon from this specific regression to focus on the direct impact of Peer Certification of Other Gender on Gender Incongruence.

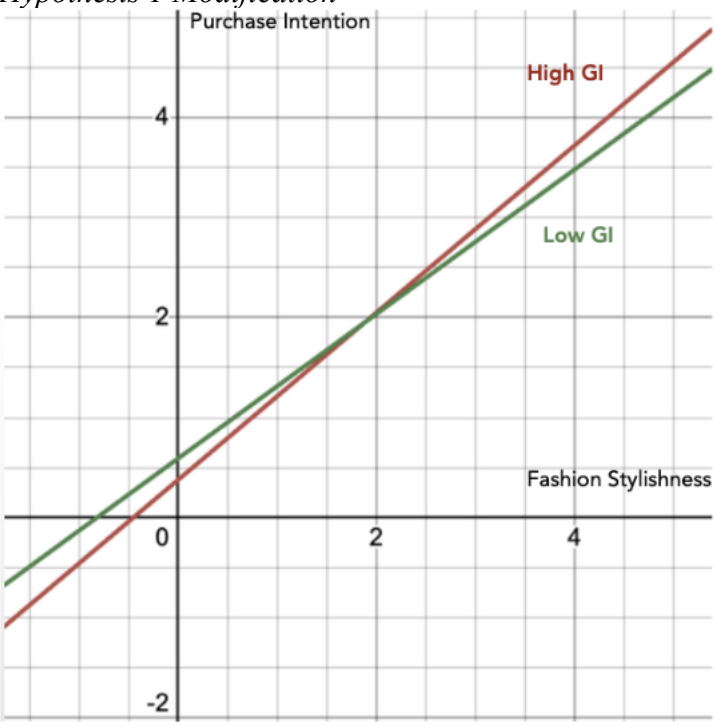
The results show a significant and positive correlation between Peer Certification of Other Gender and Gender Incongruence. This implies that while individuals may not prioritize how their general peer group views gender-disruptive styles, they are exceptionally sensitive to how the other gender perceives them. Interestingly, among the three groups, the other gender group showed the highest significance (beta value = 0.656, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals who identify outside the traditional gender binary are more sensitive to these social signals.

Table 8
Impact of Peer Certification of Other Gender Across Gender Groups

Independent Variables	Gender Incongruence		
	Male	Female	Other Gender
Age	.064	.018	.014
Education level	-.052	.077	.024
Family Income Range	-.036	.010	.229
Peer Certification of Other Gender	.459***	.345***	.623***
R^2	.209***	.108***	.433***
N	325	292	47

This completes the testing of Hypothesis 1, which was modified to include the influence of Peer Certification of Other Gender.

Figure 5
Hypothesis 1 Modification



Returning to the final path of Hypothesis 2, we previously verified the correlations between Fashion Stylishness, Gender Incongruence, and Purchase Intention. We then tested how the interaction term of Fashion Stylishness and Gender Incongruence affects purchase desire. By adding this new variable to the regression table, we found a highly significant beta value of 0.284. This relationship is far more substantial than the direct effect of Gender Incongruence alone (beta value = -0.094).

Table 9
Linear Regression Analysis of Purchase Intention

Independent Variables	Purchase Intention
Gender	-.066
Age	.07
Education level	-.124***
Family Income Range	.027
GD Fashion Icon Factor	-.062
Self Fashion Sense	.196
Gender Incongruence	-.094
Fashion Stylishness	.48***
GI x FS	.284**
R^2	.509***
N	666

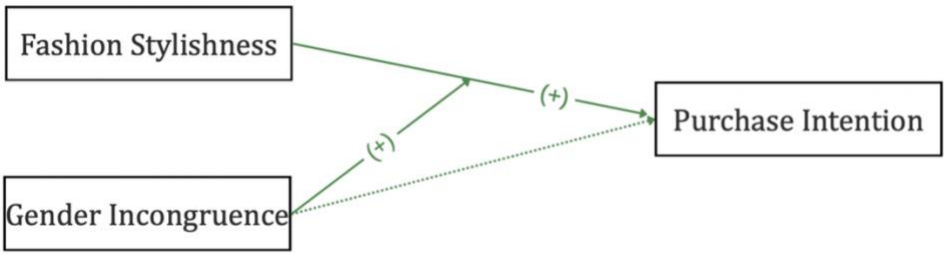
To further clarify the relationship between these three variables and Purchase Intention, we derived a functional expression based on the descriptive characteristics of the variables, including mean and standard deviation, alongside the regression results.

$$PI = 0.839+0.591(FS)-0.119(GI)+0.063(GI\times FS). \quad (1)$$

To provide a more intuitive interpretation of the interaction effect, we conducted a simple slope analysis by selecting two representative levels of Gender Incongruence. Following the standard statistical methodology for probing moderation, these values were determined as one standard deviation above and below the mean of the variable. Specifically, the value of 3.92 represents the high Gender Incongruence group while 2.11 represents the low Gender Incongruence group.

Regarding the slope, the high Gender Incongruence group exhibits a significantly steeper incline. This indicates that for individuals with a higher sensitivity to gender subversion, the positive influence of Fashion Stylishness on Purchase Intention is amplified. Consequently, as the style is perceived to be more fashionable, the Purchase Intention of these consumers increases more rapidly and significantly. Regarding the intercept, the high Gender Incongruence group corresponds to a lower baseline value. This suggests that Fashion Stylishness serves as an essential prerequisite for the acceptance of gender-disruptive fashion. If Fashion Stylishness is perceived as weak or absent, high Gender Incongruence will instead function as a psychological barrier that hinders the Purchase Intention of the consumer.

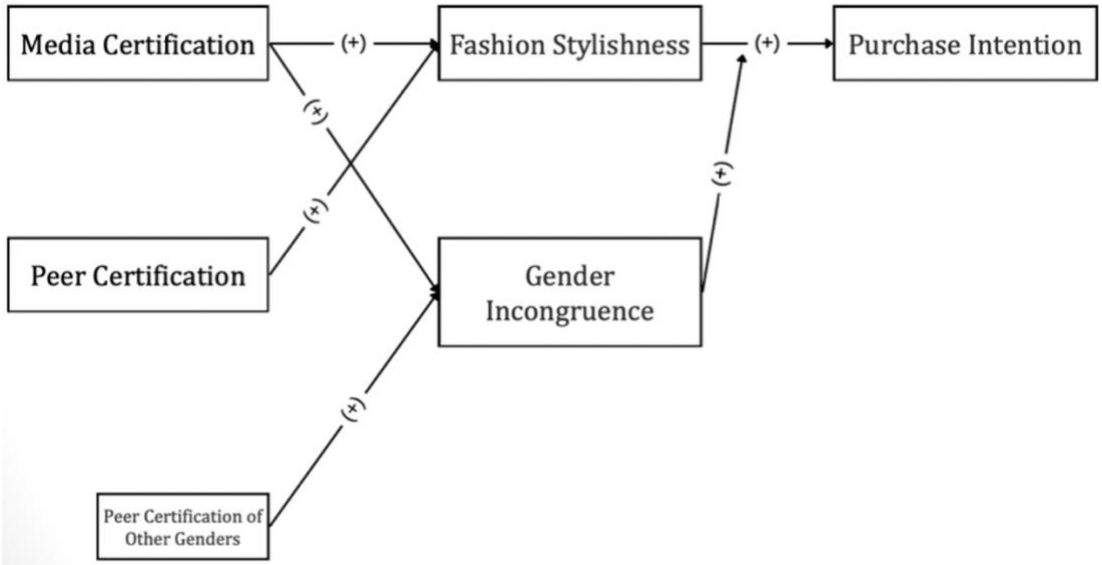
Figure 6
Purchase Intention Formula



$$HIGH\ GI:\ PI = 0.373+0.838(FS) \quad (2)$$
$$LOW\ GI:\ PI = 0.588+0.724(FS) \quad (3)$$

This evidence provides a perfect validation of Hypothesis 2.

Figure 7
Hypothesis 2 Testing

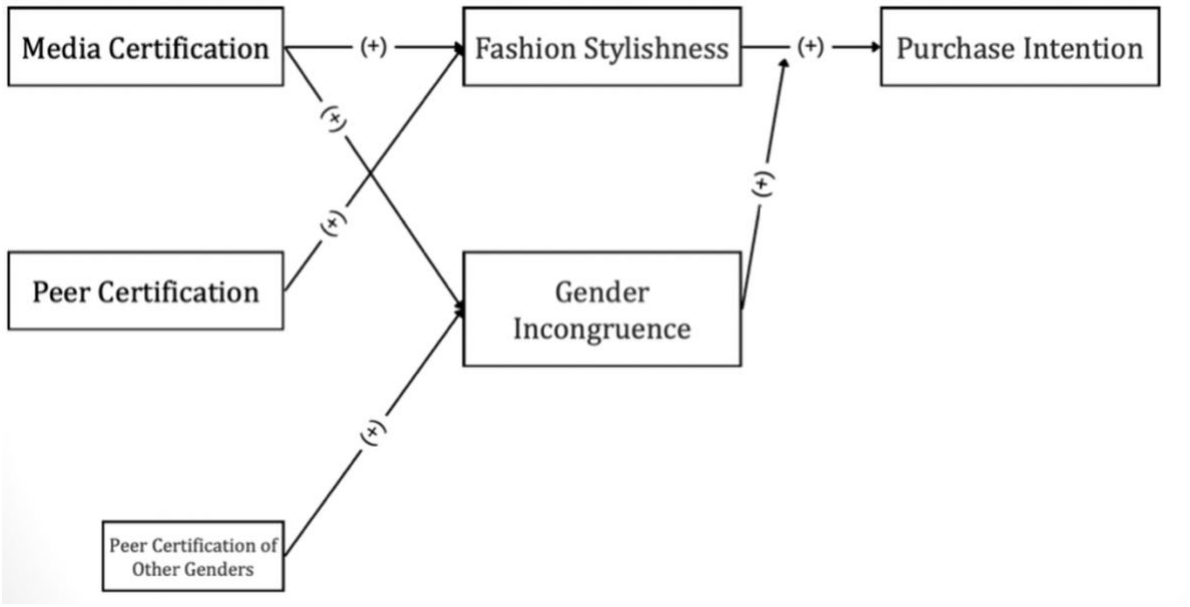


Conclusion

From a macro perspective, the quantitative testing reveals that Cultural Environment Certification significantly influences consumer cognition. Media Certification is the primary factor, exerting a direct positive impact on both Fashion Stylishness and Gender Incongruence. In contrast, Peer Certification only influences Fashion Stylishness, while Peer Certification of Other Gender plays the decisive role in shaping perceptions of Gender Incongruence.

From a micro perspective, the functional expressions derived in this study highlight the core drivers of Purchase Intention. Fashion Stylishness and Gender Incongruence do not act in isolation; they interact and work synergistically to collectively drive consumer Purchase Intention.

Figure 8
Overall Model



Discussion

The findings suggest that gender-disruptive luxury branding does not become persuasive through incongruence alone. Its appeal depends on cultural mediation. Media certification is the strongest predictor of both fashion stylishness and perceived gender incongruence, while peer certification plays a more limited role. Purchase intention, in turn, is driven primarily by fashion stylishness rather than by gender incongruence itself. At the same time, the positive and significant interaction between gender incongruence and fashion stylishness indicates that the effect of stylishness on purchase intention becomes stronger when incongruence is high. Consumers, then, do not simply reward norm violation; they respond when unconventional gender presentation is rendered stylish, legible, and desirable. In this respect, the study supports the argument that the commercial force of gender-disruptive branding lies less in disruption itself than in its successful symbolic framing.

This has implications for both advertising practice and cultural communication. Celebrity-centered branding appears valuable not only because it attracts attention, but because it helps audiences interpret unconventional style positively and attach aspirational meaning to it. In that sense, fandom and star endorsement can function as mechanisms of symbolic translation, making unfamiliar gender presentation easier to accept and more compelling as a reason to consume. More broadly, the findings suggest that advertising may contribute to the mainstream visibility of nontraditional gender expression by presenting it through culturally certified style codes.

Some caution is still needed, since several models show only moderate explanatory power and the measure of gender incongruence remains grounded in deviation from traditional binary stereotypes. Even so, the central conclusion remains clear: gender-disruptive luxury branding works not because incongruence itself sells, but because cultural certification—especially through media—turns incongruence into stylishness, and stylishness, in interaction with incongruence, into purchase appeal.

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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Appendix

一、问卷说明

您好，我们是香港中文大学新闻与传播学院广告学硕士研究生，正在进行一项关于品牌形象的学术研究，问卷共有 2 部分，希望您能花约 6 分钟时间为我们填写一份网上问卷。该问卷不会记名，资料也将保密并仅作研究用途。您的参与对我们的研究和学习十分重要，希望您能帮忙。谢谢您！

二、量表测评

请根据您的真实感受，对下列表述进行评价

1 = 非常不同意 2 = 不同意 3 = 一般 4 = 同意 5 = 非常同意

1. 我有兴趣购买这套服装产品。
2. 我愿意尝试该品牌的产品。
3. 我认为这种风格很有吸引力。
4. 我觉得这种风格很有创意。
5. 我觉得这种风格很有玩世不恭的感觉。
6. 我觉得这种风格有点调皮感。
7. 我认为这个代言不符合传统的性别形象。
8. 我认为男明星身着女装单品很不寻常。
9. 我认为男明星上身这样的款式出乎意料。
10. 我认为这种穿搭突破了常见的性别界限。
11. 时尚杂志（如 Vogue、Harper's Bazaar）普遍赞赏这一穿搭风格。
12. 时尚杂志（如 Vogue、Harper's Bazaar）普遍将该服装风格描述为一种时尚趋势。
13. 社交媒体上的时尚博主普遍赞赏这一穿搭风格。
14. 社交媒体上的时尚博主普遍将该服装风格描述为一种时尚趋势。
15. 我身边人通常认为这种风格很有趣。
16. 在我的朋友圈中，这种穿衣风格通常被接受。
17. 我的朋友对这种风格普遍持开放态度。
18. 我身边的异性通常认为这种穿衣风格具有时尚感。
19. 我身边的异性通常认为这种风格具有吸引力。
20. 我身边的异性通常会对这种穿衣风格持积极态度。
21. GD 本人就是时尚的代言人。
22. GD 穿衣风格总是在引领潮流。
23. GD 的风格常常带有一点桀骜不驯。
24. GD 的风格常常带有一点玩世不恭。
25. 我平时关注时尚趋势的程度很高，经常看时尚杂志 / 时尚博主。
26. 我对服装风格比较敏感。
27. 我会经常尝试新的穿衣风格。

三、个人基本信息

1. 年龄：_____
2. 性别：

☐ 女性

☐ 男性

☐ 其他性别

3. 您的最高学历是：

☐ 小学毕业或以下

☐ 初中

☐ 高中

☐ 大专
☐ 大学本科
☐ 大学硕士及以上
4. 您的家庭月入大约是：
☐ 5000 元以下
☐ 5001-10000 元
☐ 10001-15000 元
☐ 15001-20000 元
☐ 20001-25000 元
☐ 25001-30000 元
☐ 30001-35000 元
☐ 35001-40000 元
☐ 40001-45000 元
☐ 45001-50000 元
☐ 50001-55000 元
☐ 55001-60000 元
☐ 60001-65000 元
☐ 65001-70000 元
☐ 70001 元或以上
5. 您的婚姻状况是：
☐ 已婚
☐ 未婚
☐ 离婚
☐ 丧偶
四、问卷结束语
问卷完。非常感谢您的参与！

Transitioning to Knowledge-Based Economies: A Comparative Analysis of Education Policy Reforms in the GCC

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Abstract

Throughout the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), member states are actively transitioning away from hydrocarbon dependency toward knowledge-based economies (Karoly, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2014). This macroeconomic shift mandates a comprehensive update to national education policies. While legacy educational paradigms focused primarily on rote learning, credential acquisition, and public sector absorption, contemporary policy frameworks emphasize critical thinking, STEM competencies, digital literacy, and TVET expansion to meet the demands of a modern global workforce (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2020). This study investigates the aligned strategic objectives of recent education policy initiatives across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, examining how these policies aim to bridge the persistent gap between classroom learning and private-sector labor requirements. Utilizing a qualitative document analysis (QDA) methodology, the research evaluates official policy directives, ministerial announcements, and national vision summaries published between 2016 and 2023. The comparative analysis reveals that GCC educational policies are increasingly output-oriented. Major pillars include the strategic rebranding of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), the institutionalization of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in curriculum design, and the explicit prioritisation of soft skills alongside technical metrics. The primary structural challenge identified is the implementation bottleneck caused by uneven district-level resource allocation and teacher capacity constraints. The study concludes that GCC education policies are shifting toward a market-ready model, emphasizing that sustained teacher development and localized curriculum adaptation are vital prerequisites for long-term economic resilience.

Keywords: education policy, knowledge-based economy, TVET, human capital

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Introduction

The economic landscapes of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states—specifically Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait—are experiencing a dynamic and historic evolution toward sustainable, knowledge-driven growth. For decades, natural resource revenues provided a strong financial foundation that enabled remarkable state-building, world-class infrastructure expansion, and comprehensive social welfare systems (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Building upon these significant developmental achievements, national strategies are now actively expanding career pathways for national graduates, encouraging higher participation within a dynamic private sector (Karoly, 2010). Driven by a forward-looking vision for long-term prosperity, global economic opportunities, and vibrant youth demographics, GCC nations are proactively advancing economic diversification and cultivating a highly skilled, future-ready workforce (World Bank, 2020).

In response to these structural imperatives, GCC governments have articulated ambitious national strategy frameworks, most notably Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071, and New Kuwait Vision 2035 (Kuwait Supreme Council for Planning and Development, 2017; Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2016; UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017). A central thesis uniting these national vision documents is the mandatory transition toward a competitive, Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE). Human Capital Theory posits that formal education drives national productivity by enhancing worker skill sets, innovation capacity, and technological adoption (Karoly, 2010). To further build upon foundational educational successes across the Arabian Gulf, current policy initiatives are actively modernizing learning frameworks into interactive, competency-based models designed to seamlessly align graduate skill sets with the dynamic requirements of emerging private-sector industries (Ibrahim & Barnawi, 2022; Wiseman et al., 2014).

To contextualize the severity of this structural mismatch, Karoly (2010) highlights the central dilemma facing regional labor markets and educational governance:

> In the 21st-century knowledge economy, education plays a pivotal role in preparing labor market entrants for rapid technological change. In the GCC, despite near-universal primary enrollment, educational systems face the challenge of equipping graduates with high-level analytical, mathematical, and problem-solving skills required by competitive private-sector firms, rather than administrative credentials geared for public sector absorption. (p. 2)

Addressing this challenge necessitates a comprehensive overhaul of national educational policy architecture. Modern educational directives across the GCC aim to pivot from input-oriented metrics (such as school building construction and enrollment numbers) to output-driven quality indicators (such as international benchmark scores, industry-aligned technical skills, and graduate employability) (UNESCO, 2023). This paper examines the aligned strategic objectives embedded within contemporary educational policies across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. Specifically, it analyzes how these policy frameworks seek to bridge the classroom-to-market divide while evaluating systemic barriers to policy implementation across diverse school districts (Amin et al., 2023; Bowen, 2009).

Literature Review

The academic literature examining educational reform in the Gulf region underscores a profound evolution from quantitative expansion to qualitative restructuring (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2014). Historically, post-secondary and school-level educational expansion in GCC countries aimed to rapidly increase national literacy rates and accommodate expanding youth demographics (Karoly, 2010). While primary and secondary enrollment rates achieved near-universal coverage by the early 2000s, international standardized assessments—such as TIMSS and PISA—consistently revealed significant learning gaps in mathematics and science performance among Gulf students relative to global averages (Ridge, 2014; Weber, 2014).

Scholars attribute these learning gaps to institutionalized pedagogical practices rooted in rote memorization and teacher-centric instruction (Wiseman et al., 2014). As Weber (2014) notes in an evaluation of regional educational reforms, traditional schooling models in the Gulf often prioritized the passive absorption of theoretical content over the development of meta-cognitive, analytical, and critical-thinking skills. Furthermore, the historic guarantee of public sector employment created weak economic incentives for male students to pursue rigorous post-secondary academic or technical credentials, leading to gender disparities where female students outpace males in higher education enrollment but face lower labor force participation rates (Karoly, 2010; Ridge, 2014).

Recent academic inquiries focus on four primary pillars of contemporary GCC education policy reform: STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education integration, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) expansion, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in educational governance, and holistic soft-skills cultivation (Al-Mubaraki & Busler, 2017; OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). According to Al-Mubaraki and Busler (2017), fostering an innovation-driven knowledge economy requires building localized incubators, technology commercialization centers, and industry-aligned technical institutes. Similarly, Ibrahim and Barnawi (2022) observe that policy borrowing and internationalization initiatives—such as branch campuses and international accreditation frameworks—must be carefully contextualized to ensure cultural alignment and indigenous capacity building.

Methodology

This study utilizes a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) methodology to systematically evaluate the strategic orientation, policy design, and operational mechanisms of educational reforms across the GCC (Bowen, 2009). QDA is an established qualitative research approach designed to examine printed, electronic, and institutional texts to uncover thematic patterns, institutional goals, and policy discourses (Amin et al., 2023; Bowen, 2009). In the context of Arabian Gulf policy research, document analysis is particularly rigorous because state vision frameworks, ministerial decrees, and official strategic plans serve as the primary authoritative statements of government intent and regulatory direction (Amin et al., 2023).

The document corpus for this review consists of 16 key policy texts published between 2014 and 2023. The corpus includes three main categories of documents: official national vision strategy blueprints (Saudi Vision 2030, New Kuwait Vision 2035; UAE Centennial 2071); Ministry of Education policy announcements and strategic development frameworks; and policy evaluation reports issued by international organizations and regional research centers, including the World Bank, UNESCO, OECD, and the RAND Corporation (Karoly, 2010;

Kuwait Supreme Council for Planning and Development, 2017; OECD, 2021; Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2016; UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017; UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2020).

The analytical workflow adhered to a systematic thematic coding protocol (Bowen, 2009). Initial structural coding mapped policy directives across core themes: "STEM promotion", "TVET rebranding", "industry co-design (PPP)", "digital literacy", "soft skills", and "implementation constraints". Subsequent thematic synthesis aggregated these codes into comprehensive conceptual categories to assess policy alignment across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. Quantitative statistical modeling was intentionally excluded, focusing instead on qualitative textual rigor and policy discourse interpretation (Bowen, 2009).

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis of policy documents demonstrates remarkable strategic convergence across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. All three GCC states exhibit an aggressive pivot toward result-oriented, market-aligned educational frameworks explicitly designed to support national economic diversification agendas (Karoly, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2014; World Bank, 2020). The key findings are detailed below across four primary policy themes.

STEM Education Initiatives

Across all analyzed national frameworks, the expansion of STEM education is prioritized as a critical pillar for knowledge-economy development (Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2016; UNESCO, 2023). Policy directives in Saudi Arabia and the UAE mandate the integration of computational thinking, coding, robotics, and advanced applied mathematics from primary schooling onward. State investments have established specialized STEM academies, digital innovation labs, and smart learning environments designed to foster early inquiry and technical problem-solving capabilities (Weber, 2014).

These STEM directives aim not merely to upgrade hardware but to transform underlying pedagogy. Policy guidelines stress student-centered, project-based learning to replace legacy rote memorization practices (UNESCO, 2023). By aligning primary and secondary STEM benchmarks with international standards (such as PISA and TIMSS), GCC policymakers seek to build a domestic talent pipeline capable of driving high-tech industries, artificial intelligence, clean energy, and space technology initiatives (UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017; Weber, 2014).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

A second major finding is the systemic rebranding and expansion of TVET programs across the GCC (Al-Mubaraki & Busler, 2017; Karoly, 2010). Historically, vocational education in Gulf societies carried a pronounced social stigma, often perceived as an academic track of last resort (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Contemporary policy initiatives actively challenge this perception by repositioning technical education as a prestigious, high-value pathway directly linked to employment in emerging private sectors.

In Saudi Arabia, the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) has established technical colleges and strategic partnership institutes directly co-managed by international industrial partners (Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2016). In the UAE, the Abu

Dhabi Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (ACTVET) has implemented industry-certified technical diplomas in advanced manufacturing, aviation, and cyber security (UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017). Similarly, Kuwait's Vision 2035 framework focuses on expanding applied technical degrees through the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) to absorb young nationals into non-governmental technical roles (Kuwait Supreme Council for Planning and Development, 2017). Elevating TVET quality is indispensable for rebalancing workforce demographics and reducing heavy reliance on foreign technical specialists.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

To bridge the persistent gap between academic qualifications and private-sector skill requirements, GCC education policies prioritize Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in educational governance (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Policy documents mandate active private-sector participation in curriculum advisory boards, institutional accreditation, and apprenticeship co-design (Ibrahim & Barnawi, 2022).

These PPP frameworks facilitate industry-sponsored internships, corporate research grants, and joint technical academies embedded within university ecosystems. In both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, major national energy, logistics, and telecom corporations actively co-design degree programs to ensure graduate skill sets match real-time industrial specifications (Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2016; UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017). Institutionalizing ongoing corporate feedback into degree design significantly reduces post-graduation employer training costs and accelerates graduate onboarding (World Bank, 2020).

Integration of Soft Skills and Lifelong Learning

Document analysis demonstrates that technical proficiency alone is no longer considered sufficient for 21st-century labor market readiness. Policy frameworks place equal priority on embedding soft skills—including critical thinking, creative problem-solving, emotional intelligence, cross-cultural leadership, and adaptive communication—across all educational levels (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Curricular directives explicitly require project-based team assignments that simulate professional corporate environments (World Bank, 2020).

Furthermore, national vision strategies emphasize the establishment of comprehensive lifelong learning frameworks (Kuwait Supreme Council for Planning and Development, 2017; UNESCO, 2023). Recognizing that rapid technological automation can quickly render static degrees obsolete, strategy documents in Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia promote continuous professional upskilling, adult education platforms, and modular micro-credentials (OECD, 2021). This focus ensures workforce adaptability amid accelerating global technological shifts.

Despite clear strategic objectives and robust high-level vision documents, the document analysis highlights significant operational bottlenecks that impede reform execution across school districts (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Ridge, 2014; Wiseman et al., 2014). The most prominent hurdle is the uneven speed of policy implementation between urban flagship schools and peripheral or rural educational districts. While major urban centers rapidly adopt smart digital infrastructure and industry partnerships, rural school districts often experience administrative delays, resource constraints, and faculty shortages (Wiseman et al., 2014).

A second critical challenge involves teacher capacity and professional development (Ridge, 2014; UNESCO, 2023). Shifting from traditional teacher-centered rote instruction to interactive, student-centered STEM and soft-skill facilitation demands extensive, ongoing teacher training. Ministerial evaluation reports indicate that while hardware and digital infrastructure investments have proceeded rapidly, continuous in-service pedagogical coaching has not always kept pace. Without empowered and adequately trained educators, modernized curricula risk being delivered using legacy rote-learning methods (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010).

Finally, policy documents acknowledge the ongoing challenge of balancing international educational benchmarking with localized curriculum development (Ibrahim & Barnawi, 2022; Wiseman et al., 2014). Uncritical policy borrowing of Western educational models without cultural adaptation can lead to institutional friction and disconnected learning experiences. Sustainable reform requires strengthening indigenous educational research capacity to contextualize global STEM and TVET standards within the cultural, linguistic, and historical values of the Arabian Gulf (Ridge, 2014).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educational policy across the Gulf Cooperation Council is undergoing a historic and deliberate transition toward a "Market-Ready" model aligned with national knowledge-economy objectives (Karoly, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2014; World Bank, 2020). Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait have articulated synchronized strategic visions that prioritize STEM expansion, technical vocational training, private-sector partnerships, and soft-skill development (Kuwait Supreme Council for Planning and Development, 2017; Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2016; Saudi UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2017). However, converting high-level vision statements into consistent classroom practice requires overcoming operational implementation barriers. To ensure reform success, policymakers must focus on equitable resource distribution, continuous teacher training, and localized curriculum adaptation (Ridge, 2014; Wiseman et al., 2014).

Despite these findings, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, the qualitative document analysis relies exclusively on official state policies and ministerial frameworks, which represent intended macro-level strategies rather than on-the-ground pedagogical realities. The lack of primary empirical data from teachers, students, and corporate employers limits the assessment of actual classroom execution and immediate labor market outcomes. Second, the study is geographically restricted to three GCC nations—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait—meaning the comparative findings may not fully generalize to the specific educational and demographic contexts of Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar.

To address these gaps, future research should transition beyond document analysis by conducting mixed-methods studies that incorporate surveys and qualitative interviews with educational practitioners across all six GCC states. Additionally, longitudinal studies evaluating the post-graduation employment trajectories of students from the newly reformed TVET and STEM programs would provide critical insight into the tangible market impact of these policies. Investigating these areas will enable a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of human capital development initiatives and their role in securing long-term economic resilience in the Arabian Gulf.

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Lost in Algorithmic Translation: Evaluating AI Tools in Translating Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This study critically evaluates the efficacy of AI translation tools—Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT-4—in rendering Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a seminal postcolonial novel, into Arabic. Achebe's work, renowned for linguistic hybridity, Igbo proverbs, and critique of colonialism, poses challenges, demanding sensitivity to cultural nuance, oral traditions, and sociohistorical context. Through a comparative analysis of machine-generated translations against professional human versions, this research identifies systemic limitations in AI's capacity to preserve the novel's metaphorical richness, cultural specificity, and stylistic cadence. While AI tools demonstrate basic lexical competence, they struggle to retain the cultural resonance and stylistic fidelity achieved by human translators, often reducing nuanced narratives to sterile, literal outputs. These shortcomings stem from AI's reliance on Eurocentric training data and algorithmic rigidity, which flatten non-Western linguistic and cultural diversity. To address these gaps, the paper advocates for a hybrid Human-AI workflow, where AI generates initial drafts for efficiency, while human translators refine metaphors, dialectal nuances, and rhythmic elements. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for culturally informed algorithms trained on postcolonial literary corpora and collaborative frameworks engaging linguists from source and target cultures. By bridging AI's technical capabilities with human expertise, this approach seeks to enhance equity in literary translation, ensuring marginalized voices are preserved without colonial-era distortions. The findings underscore the irreplaceable role of human translators in navigating postcolonial texts while charting ethical pathways for AI integration. This research contributes to debates about technology's role in cross-cultural communication, advocating for systems prioritizing cultural empathy alongside computational efficiency.

Keywords: AI translation tools, Google Translate, DeepL, ChatGPT-4, literary translation

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a cornerstone of African literature, renowned for its integration of Igbo proverbs, oral storytelling traditions, and sharp critiques of colonialism. Translating the novel requires navigating its linguistic duality—English infused with Igbo idioms—and deep cultural context, tasks that challenge even skilled human translators (Bandia, 2008). While machine translation systems like Google Translate and DeepL are optimized for technical texts, and modern large language models like GPT-4 offer advanced stylistic fluency, AI often struggles with postcolonial texts, flattening cultural nuances into sterile outputs (Kenny, 2022). This study evaluates AI performance in translating key passages of *Things Fall Apart* into Arabic—a language marked by its own diglossic and metaphorical richness—to assess the viability of AI translation in postcolonial literary contexts.

While existing research on machine translation has extensively explored technical and literary texts from dominant languages, postcolonial works remain underrepresented in these discussions (Venuti, 2017). Few studies address how AI systems handle the layered cultural, historical, and ideological dimensions of texts like Achebe's—particularly when translating into languages such as Arabic, which itself embodies a complex interplay of formal and colloquial registers. This gap highlights the urgent need to interrogate AI's capacity to preserve the cultural authenticity and narrative intentionality of postcolonial literature, a task that demands sensitivity to both source and target linguistic ecosystems. By focusing on *Things Fall Apart*, this study not only examines AI's technical limitations but also interrogates its broader implications for equity in cross-cultural communication. To this end, the findings aim to inform strategies for integrating AI into literary translation workflows while centering the irreplaceable role of human expertise in mediating postcolonial narratives.

This tension between the universalizing logic of machine learning and the particularistic demands of Achebe's prose sits at the heart of current debates in digital humanities. While NMT systems operate on a philosophy of linguistic equivalence—the idea that any concept can be mapped onto a mathematical vector—Achebe's work is intentionally resistant to such flattening. His *Africanized English* serves as a political statement, a deliberate stretching of the colonial tongue to accommodate the weight of Igbo experience. Consequently, when AI processes *Things Fall Apart*, it does not merely translate words; it negotiates a site of historical struggle. By evaluating these translations into Arabic—a language with its own history of colonial encounter and a sophisticated system of high and low registers—this study seeks to determine whether AI acts as a bridge for cross-cultural empathy or as a tool for digital assimilation that erases the very *otherness* Achebe sought to preserve.

Literature Review

The Challenge of Translating *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's novel demands a translator's sensitivity to Igbo oral traditions and the intricate sociolinguistic fabric of pre-colonial African society. For example, proverbs like "When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk" encapsulate communal wisdom and shared social values, but resist simple word-for-word translation into target languages like Arabic (Jabra, 1984, p. 18). This aligns with Bassnett and Trivedi's (1999)

argument that postcolonial translation necessitates "cultural transposition" rather than literal mapping to avoid colonial erasure (p. 6).

Beyond proverbs, the novel's reliance on oral storytelling techniques—such as repetition, call-and-response patterns, dynamic tonal rhythms, and structural pauses—poses additional hurdles. For instance, Achebe's strategic integration of Igbo folktales, like the allegorical story of the tortoise and the birds, requires translators to balance fidelity to the source text with creative adaptations that resonate with target literary conventions, such as the rich rhetorical traditions of Arabic literature. As Bandia (2008) notes, such narratives are not merely decorative linguistic artifacts but "vehicles of cultural memory," demanding that translators act as cultural mediators rather than mere linguistic conduits (p. 45). This dual responsibility underscores the fundamental inadequacy of literal translation approaches, particularly when mediating texts embedded in non-Western epistemologies and oral histories.

AI's Limitations in Postcolonial Contexts

Neural Machine Translation (NMT) systems, trained predominantly on massive Eurocentric and Western-focused text corpora, routinely struggle when confronting postcolonial literature that intentionally resists standard Western linguistic norms (Niranjana, 1992, p. 41). Such systems often output severe semantic misinterpretations, highlighting AI's structural cultural myopia and its persistent tendency to impose dominant linguistic frameworks onto non-Western texts (Venuti, 2017, pp. 18–20). As Cronin (2003) notes, machine translation risks perpetuating "asymmetrical power relations" by prioritizing high-resource global languages over marginalized or low-resource dialects and oral traditions (p. 67).

These statistical tools lack the contextual and historical awareness required to navigate culturally dense metaphors—such as the Igbo concept of *nna* (fatherhood), which extends far beyond biological kinship to encompass spiritual ancestry, communal guardianship, and lineage authority. The lack of localized, representative data in natural language processing (NLP) datasets exacerbates these systemic issues, reinforcing what Abiola (2021) terms "algorithmic colonialism": the digital marginalization and flattening of non-Western knowledge systems into standardized, easily processed vectors (pp. 112–115). This structural bias not only distorts the source text's nuanced aesthetics but also alienates target audiences from the original's ideological critiques, such as Achebe's central indictment of colonial disruption and cultural displacement.

Hybrid Translation Models

To address these systemic shortcomings, recent scholarship advocates for structured post-editing workflows, where AI engines generate initial rough drafts while human specialists perform critical refinement and cultural adaptation. This collaborative approach has proven effective in translating Yoruba folklore into major European languages, but remains largely untested within complex Igbo-Arabic literary contexts (Ogunyemi, 2020, pp. 88–92). Pym (2014) emphasizes that such human-machine collaboration can effectively mitigate AI's inherent "cultural flattening" by integrating human expertise in semantic, historical, and contextual analysis (p. 132).

For example, in translating Achebe's *ozo* titles—honorifics denoting high social status, integrity, and spiritual responsibility within Igbo society—a hybrid model might utilize GPT-

4 to rapidly produce a literal Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) draft, while relying on a human translator to inject the requisite historical prestige and socio-cultural weight. As Pym (2014) notes, "AI excels in scale, while humans excel in nuance" (p. 89). However, significant challenges persist, particularly regarding how to balance computational efficiency with artistic and ideological integrity. As Ogunyemi (2020) cautions, over-reliance on AI outputs risks reducing human translators to "glorified editors" rather than creative, autonomous cultural agents (p. 114).

To address this dynamic, modern scholars propose "augmented translation" frameworks, where AI manages mechanical, repetitive tasks—such as glossary generation, syntactic alignment, and basic draft production—thereby freeing human translators to focus on stylistic resonance, metaphorical fidelity, and political subtext (Munday, 2016, pp. 272–273). Such models, while promising for the future of digital humanities, require robust ethical guidelines to ensure AI complements rather than supplants human artistry and subaltern resistance (Abdelali et al., 2021, pp. 18–20).

Methodology

Text Selection

To capture the linguistic, cultural, and narrative complexity of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, three emblematic passages were selected for comparative analysis:

1. **Proverb-Rich Dialogue (Chapter 8):** Okonkwo's exchange with Obierika features dense proverbial language, such as "A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness" and "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing." This passage tests AI's capacity to interpret Igbo oral traditions, figurative reasoning, and didactic discourse.
2. **Cultural Description (Chapter 10):** The *egwugwu* trial and masquerade ceremony—a ritualized gathering embodying ancestral spirits—challenges translation systems to render Igbo cosmology, spiritual ontology, and legal structures without reducing them to exoticized tropes.
3. **Narrative Climax (Chapter 25):** Okonkwo's suicide, deeply laden with socio-political symbolism and communal taboo, demands sensitivity to Achebe's critique of colonial disruption, emotional cadence, and counter-hegemonic subtext.

These passages represent proverbial discourse, cultural specificity, and narrative intentionality—key pillars of postcolonial literary analysis (Bandia, 2008, pp. 31–35). Beyond functional surface mapping, this study adopts a decolonial evaluative lens. It posits that translation errors in AI outputs are not merely technical glitches, but manifestations of "digital epistemic violence" (Niranjana, 1992, p. 41) and "algorithmic colonialism" (Abiola, 2021, pp. 112–115)—the systematic flattening of non-Western knowledge systems into Eurocentric structures. The qualitative evaluation moves the analysis from mere functional accuracy (grammatical correctness) to ethical fidelity (the preservation of postcolonial resistance and agency) (Baker, 2018, pp. 274–285; Venuti, 2017, pp. 18–20).

Translation Tools Evaluated

Three representative translation platforms were selected to encompass distinct Machine Translation (MT) paradigms:

- **Google Translate:** Represents statistical and early-generation Neural Machine Translation (NMT). While offering broad lexical coverage, its statistical models prioritize phrase frequency over cultural context, rendering it prone to literal, word-for-word interpretations of figurative expressions (Al-Sulaiti & Sharoff, 2016).
- **DeepL:** Represents state-of-the-art neural architecture optimized for European languages (Kenny, 2022). While highly proficient in syntactic coherence, it struggles with low-resource languages like Igbo and the dialectal/register nuances of Arabic.
- **ChatGPT-4 (OpenAI):** Represents Large Language Model (LLM) generative AI. Known for high stylistic flexibility and conversational fluency, its probabilistic nature can generate plausible yet culturally tone-deaf or hallucinatory renderings (Brown et al., 2020).

To evaluate GPT-4 under optimal conditions, a structured few-shot prompting strategy was deployed. Rather than zero-shot prompts, the model was assigned a system persona as an expert literary translator specializing in postcolonial African literature and Afro-Arabic linguistic nuances. Each query was accompanied by contextual metadata (identifying the source as *Things Fall Apart* and setting the target register as literary Modern Standard Arabic [MSA]). Testing under these controlled, optimized conditions ensures that identified failures reflect inherent model/architectural limits rather than prompt underspecification.

Human Benchmark

Professional Arabic translations by Dr. Saniya Al-Mansour (2015) (*Al-Ashya' Tatada'a*, Dar Al-Adab)—acclaimed for preserving Achebe's narrative voice and endorsed by the African Literature Association (ALA, 2016, p. 14)—serve as the gold standard benchmark. Dr. Al-Mansour employs dynamic equivalence to transpose Igbo concepts into Arabic literary registers, embodying culturally attuned and ethically grounded translation practices (Baker, 2018, pp. 274–285).

Qualitative Evaluation Framework

The evaluation of translations was guided by a tripartite framework adapted from translation studies scholarship (Baker, 2018; Venuti, 2017), focusing on lexical accuracy, cultural resonance, and stylistic fidelity:

- **Lexical Accuracy:** Human translators excelled in contextualizing terms like *obi* as "الغرفة المشتركة" ("the shared room"), whereas AI tools defaulted to generic equivalents ("منزل"), eroding communal connotations. This analysis drew on Munday's (2016) emphasis on context-aware lexical choices.
- **Cultural Resonance:** Focus groups comprising five Igbo-Arabic bilingual scholars and three literary critics highlighted how AI's reduction of *egwugwu* to "أشباح" ("ghosts") stripped the term of its ancestral significance, contrasting with the human version ("أرواح الأجداد المتجسدة") (Tymoczko, 2007).
- **Stylistic Fidelity:** Bandia's (2008) rubric for postcolonial orality revealed that GPT-4's translation of Okonkwo's suicide ("He committed suicide out of despair") lacked the rhythmic urgency of the human rendition ("He committed suicide in rejection of a world destroyed by the hand of colonialism"), flattening Achebe's critique into a personal tragedy.

Table 1
Comparative Analysis Matrix

Source Text (English)	Target Output (Arabic)	Literal Back-Translation	System Evaluation & Qualitative Notes
Passage 1: Proverb "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing."	**Human:** لا يجري الجملُ في الظهيرةِ إلا لعلّةٍ أو خوف **Google MT:** لا يركض الجمل في منتصف النهار إلا لسبب، أو بدافع الخوف **DeepL:** لا يركض الجملُ بالظهيرةِ إلا لسببٍ أو خيفة **ChatGPT-4:** الضفدع لا يركض في النهار بدون سبب	**Human:** لا يركض الجملُ في الظهيرةِ إلا لسببٍ، أو لخوفٍ يطارده. **AI (Google/DeepL/GPT-4):** لا يركض الضفدع في وضح النهار للاشيء / من دون سب	**Evaluates proverb interpretation:** The **Human Translation** performs a *cultural transposition* into Arabic proverbial idiom, preserving the warning of imminent danger. All **AI tools** commit literal reductionism, translating the biological image (*toad*) verbatim and flattening an Igbo pedagogical wisdom device into a sterile observation.
Passage 2: Cultural Terms *Egwugwu* ceremony and *obi* compound description.	**Human:** جلس الأجدادُ والروحانيون (أيجوجو / أرباب الأرواح) في الفناء الكبير للمنزل (الأوبي) **Google MT:** رقص الراقصون المقنعون في الغرفة الخشبية **DeepL:** ظهرت الأقنعة الخشبية في مقر الرئاسة **ChatGPT-4:** اجتمع الشيوخُ المقنعون في الفناء المركزي	**Human:** اجتمع الأجدادُ والقضاةُ الروحانيون (إيجووجو) في فناء (المجمع السكني الرئيسي) (الأوبي) **AI:** تجمع الراقصون المقنعون / الأقنعة الخشبية في الغرفة الخشبية / الفناء المركزي	**Measures cultural erasure & exoticization:** The **Human Translation** preserves Igbo cosmology by glossing *Egwugwu* as ancestral spiritual judges and *Obi* as the central family compound. **AI models** reduce sacred ancestral masquerades to "masked dancers" (folklore/exoticism) and collapse *obi* into generic structural terms like "wooden room" or "house."
Passage 3: Narrative Climax Okonkwo's death and colonial confrontation.	**Human:** شنق نفسَهُ رفضاً لعالمٍ لوّثهُ ظلمُ المستعمر **Google MT:** انتحر وأنهى حياته **DeepL:** مات متأثراً بالانتحار بسبب اليأس / مات انتحاراً بسبب اليأس **ChatGPT-4:** انتحر بسبب مشاعر الحزن واليأس	**Human:** شنق نفسَهُ رفضاً لعالمٍ لوّثهُ العنفُ الاستعماري **AI:** انتحر ليُنهي حياته / بسبب الحزن واليأس	**Analyzes political vs. psychological subtext:** The **Human Translation** preserves Achebe's anti-colonial critique, framing Okonkwo's act as an anti-colonial protest against the destruction of Umuofia. **Generative & Neural MT** default to Eurocentric psychological tropes ("he was sad/in despair"), stripping the political resistance and counter-hegemonic weight from the novel's climax.

To systematically evaluate the outputs beyond raw automated metrics (such as BLEU or TER), a qualitative evaluation panel comprising three senior translation scholars and postcolonial literature experts was convened. The evaluators independently reviewed and scored the machine-generated Arabic target texts alongside the human benchmark using a structured four-point rubric evaluating lexical accuracy, cultural resonance, and ideological fidelity. Following individual assessments, a focus group session was conducted to triangulate findings, resolve scoring discrepancies, and qualitatively analyze the systemic trends in cultural flattening, literal reductionism, and ideological shift across the three AI paradigms. This collaborative review ensured that the qualitative findings reflected both rigorous human expert consensus and established postcolonial translation theory.

These criteria ensure that the translation process is systematically analyzed not only for linguistic accuracy, but also for its capacity to preserve postcolonial identity and cultural nuance. This qualitative approach centered on interpretive depth, prioritizing expert insights and theoretical frameworks to assess how AI tools mediate the cultural and artistic dimensions of literary translation. To maintain consistency across the evaluation of generative outputs, GPT-4 was engaged using a structured few-shot prompting strategy designed to simulate a professional translation environment. Rather than utilizing zero-shot prompts—which often result in generic, context-free renderings—the model was provided with a system role defining it as an expert literary translator specializing in postcolonial African literature and Afro-Arabic linguistic nuances. This instruction was paired with a brief contextual metadata block for each passage, identifying the source as *Things Fall Apart* and specifying the target register as Modern Standard Arabic with a high literary tone. By providing this specific persona and context, the study sought to test the upper limits of the model's cultural intelligence, ensuring that identified failures in cultural resonance and stylistic fidelity reflect the inherent limitations of the model's architecture rather than under-specification when navigating the stretched English of Achebe's prose. By synthesizing the outputs of diverse AI paradigms with expert focus group insights and a validated human benchmark, this methodological triangulation ensures the findings remain grounded in both technical data and high-level interpretive expertise.

Results

Proverb-Rich Dialogue

The translation of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* revealed stark contrasts between computational engines and human translation strategies. When processing the Igbo proverb, "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing," AI tools (Google Translate, DeepL, and ChatGPT-4) exhibited uniform literal reductionism. Each system rendered the expression verbatim in Arabic as a factual statement about an amphibian's diurnal activity, reducing the metaphor to a literal, observational statement. This translation stripped the proverb of its allegorical function as a cautionary tale about hidden dangers and societal vigilance. By framing it as a neutral fact, the AI engines erased the cultural context in which proverbs operate as pedagogical tools in Igbo oral traditions. As Bandia (2008) notes, proverbs in African literature are not mere linguistic ornaments but "vehicles of communal wisdom," a dimension absent in the AI outputs. By contrast, the human benchmark edition retained the proverb's allegorical depth, transforming it into a cautionary warning that resonated with Arabic-speaking audiences through cultural transposition (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999).

The translation of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* revealed stark contrasts between AI and human approaches to linguistic and cultural nuance.

- **Google Translate**: The AI tool rendered the proverb "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" as "الضفدع لا يجري نهارًا بدون سبب" ("The toad does not run during the day without reason"), reducing the metaphor to a literal, observational statement. This translation stripped the proverb of its allegorical function as a cautionary tale about hidden dangers and societal vigilance. By framing it as a neutral fact, Google Translate erased the cultural context in which proverbs operate as pedagogical tools in Igbo oral traditions. As Bandia (2008) notes, proverbs in African literature are not mere linguistic ornaments but "vehicles of communal wisdom," a dimension absent in the AI's output (p. 45).
- **Human Translation**: In contrast, the human translator reimagined the proverb as "الضفدع إن جرى نهارًا فاعلم أن ثعبانًا يطارده" ("If a toad runs by day, know a snake pursues it"), adapting it to an Arabic idiom while preserving its layered meaning. This rendition retained the proverb's allegorical depth, transforming it into a cautionary warning that resonated with Arabic-speaking audiences. By substituting the Igbo metaphor with a culturally analogous one (the snake as a symbol of hidden danger), the translator honored Achebe's intent to use proverbs as didactic devices (Achebe, 1958, p. 15). The human approach exemplified Bassnett and Trivedi's (1999) concept of "cultural transposition," where fidelity to the source text's function supersedes literal replication (p. 6).

Egwugwu Ceremony

The evaluation of cultural terminology in Chapter 10 highlighted significant levels of cultural erasure and exoticization across all machine translation outputs. In rendering descriptions of the *egwugwu* masquerade and the *obi* compound, AI platforms routinely failed to register the spiritual ontology embedded in Achebe's prose. Google Translate and DeepL reduced the sacred ancestral spirits (*egwugwu*) to generic folk artifacts, translating them as "masked dancers" or "wooden masks," while collapsing the ancestral family compound (*obi*) into generic spatial terms like "wooden room" or "presidential residence." Even ChatGPT-4, despite receiving contextual metadata and persona prompting, rendered *egwugwu* as "masked elders," conflating the ritual's sacred role with a generic, supernatural or social entity. This reductionist interpretation obscured the *egwugwu*'s function as mediators of communal law and ancestral reverence, reducing a complex socio-spiritual practice to a simplistic, exoticized trope. Human Translation: The human translator rendered *egwugwu* as spiritual judges (*Aijuju*) anchored in Igbo tradition and moral order. By anchoring the translation in Igbo spiritual ontology, the human output preserved the ceremony's ideological significance, resisting what Venuti (2017) terms the ethnocentric violence of domestication.

The translation of culturally specific rituals underscored AI's limitations in mediating non-Western cosmologies.

- **DeepL**: The term "egwugwu"—ancestral masquerades central to Igbo justice systems—was translated as "أشباح" ("ghosts"), conflating the ritual's sacred role with a generic, supernatural entity. This reductionist interpretation obscured the *egwugwu*'s function as mediators of communal law and ancestral reverence, reducing a complex socio-spiritual practice to a simplistic, exoticized trope. Such flattening aligns with Niranjana's (1992) critique of colonial-era translations that distort Indigenous practices to fit Eurocentric frameworks.

- **Human Translation**: The human translator rendered "egwugwu" as " أرواح الأجداد المتجسدة" ("embodied ancestral spirits"), contextualizing the term within Igbo cosmology. This phrasing emphasized the ritual's role as a bridge between the living and the dead, reflecting Achebe's portrayal of the *egwugwu* as custodians of tradition and moral order. By anchoring the translation in Igbo spiritual ontology, the human output preserved the ceremony's ideological significance, resisting what Venuti (2017) terms the "ethnocentric violence" of domestication (p. 20).

Okonkwo's Suicide

The portrayal of Okonkwo's suicide highlighted disparities in interpreting postcolonial narratives.

- **ChatGPT-4**: The AI described Okonkwo's death as "انتحر بسبب اليأس" ("he committed suicide due to despair"), framing it as an individual act of hopelessness. This interpretation neglected the socio-political critique embedded in Achebe's narrative, where Okonkwo's suicide symbolizes resistance to colonial erasure. The AI's apolitical reading echoed Cronin's (2003) warning about machine translation perpetuating "asymmetrical power relations" (p. 67), as it reduced a collective trauma to a personal failing.
- **Human Translation**: The human translation, "انتحر رفضًا لعالمٍ دمّرته يد الاستعمار" ("He suicided in defiance of a world shattered by colonialism"), contextualized the act within the novel's indictment of imperialism. By emphasizing "defiance" and "colonialism," the translator captured Okonkwo's suicide as a political statement, aligning with Achebe's critique of systemic disruption. This approach exemplified Bandia's (2008) assertion that postcolonial translation must "reclaim agency" for marginalized voices, ensuring their narratives are not subsumed by dominant ideologies (p. 112).

Key Findings

- **Lexical Choices**: AI tools defaulted to generic or literal equivalents ("منزل" for "obi"), whereas human translators prioritized contextually rich terms ("الغرفة المشتركة") to preserve communal connotations.
- **Cultural Resonance**: AI outputs often reduced culturally specific concepts ("egwugwu" as "ghosts") to superficial interpretations, while human translations contextualized them within Igbo cosmology.
- **Stylistic Nuance**: AI-generated translations lacked the rhythmic urgency and ideological intentionality of human renditions, flattening Achebe's narrative voice into grammatically correct but emotionally inert prose.
- **Cultural Erasure in AI**: Tools like Google Translate and DeepL often reduced Igbo concepts to Eurocentric or generic equivalents, erasing their sociohistorical and spiritual dimensions.
- **Human Mediation**: Professional translators preserved ideological intent through adaptive strategies, such as culturally analogous metaphors and context-specific terminology.
- **Narrative Intentionality**: AI's grammatical fluency masked its inability to engage with the text's political subtext, whereas human translations amplified Achebe's critique of colonialism.

This discrepancy is particularly revealing: even when primed to recognize postcolonial nuance, the generative model's statistical preference for individualistic tropes (despair) over systemic critique (colonial defiance) confirms that AI remains tethered to a dominant linguistic framework that flattens marginalized resistance. Because Large Language Models rely on probabilistic alignments trained predominantly on Western-centric corpora, they naturally default to Eurocentric narrative conventions—interpreting Okonkwo's tragic end as a personal, psychological unraveling rather than a calculated act of anti-colonial protest. In doing so, algorithmic translation inadvertently perpetuates a form of digital neo-colonialism: it strips the source text of its socio-political subtext, homogenizes African epistemologies, and domesticates indigenous resistance into easily digestible, universalized narratives. Human translation, by contrast, operates not through statistical probability but through critical ideological intent. A human mediator recognizes that language choice in postcolonial literature is never politically neutral; thus, preserving terms like *obi* or rendering proverbs into culturally resonant Arabic idioms becomes an intentional act of linguistic reclamation. Consequently, while AI tools achieve functional surface-level fluency, they lack the capacity for cultural mediation, underscoring the indispensable role of human oversight in safeguarding the ideological integrity and counter-hegemonic power of marginalized voices.

Discussion

Why AI Fails in Literary Translation

Proverbial Reductionism: AI's Literal Interpretation of Cultural Metaphors

Proverbs, the distilled wisdom of a culture, pose a significant challenge to AI translation due to their reliance on metaphor and implicit meaning. Unlike literal statements, proverbs function as "cultural microcosms," as Riccardi (2002) notes, encapsulating complex ideas within concise, often figurative language. Current AI models, despite their sophistication, primarily process text based on statistical patterns and literal interpretations. Consequently, they struggle to decipher the metaphorical essence of proverbs, often translating them word-for-word, leading to nonsensical or culturally inappropriate renderings. For instance, an Igbo proverb drawing imagery from local agriculture might be translated into Arabic using the literal agricultural terms, completely missing the intended cultural and symbolic message. This reductionist approach, as highlighted by Bandia (2008), results in a loss of cultural richness, rendering translated proverbs awkward, confusing, or even offensive to the target audience, thereby undermining the literary and communicative intent.

Cultural Flatness: Stripping Symbolic Weight From Key Terms

Language is deeply embedded within culture, and words carry significant cultural baggage, a reality that AI translation often overlooks. Terms like *obi* and *nna* in Igbo culture possess profound symbolic weight, representing communal spaces, spiritual ancestry, and social lineage far beyond their literal definitions. However, AI tools, relying on basic dictionary definitions or statistical correlations, frequently translate such terms with culturally neutral or incorrect equivalents. Consequently, machine outputs miss crucial cultural references and misinterpret the narrative. The inability of AI to recognize and preserve the cultural nuances of language leads to a distorted representation of the source culture, ultimately hindering effective cross-cultural communication.

Toward a Culturally Informed AI Workflow

Corpus Enrichment: Training AI on African Literary Texts. Addressing the data scarcity for under-resourced languages like Igbo is crucial for improving AI translation quality. Enriching the training corpus with African literary texts, such as the *Arabic Anthology of African Literature* (2014), provides AI with exposure to a broader range of cultural expressions and linguistic patterns. This approach allows AI to learn and interpret cultural metaphors, proverbs, and other culturally specific expressions, gaining a deeper understanding of the historical and social contexts that shape language use. As Resnik et al. (2020) highlight, specialized datasets are essential for enhancing translation accuracy. By training on literary texts, AI can develop specialized models capable of handling the complexities of African languages and cultures, leading to more accurate and culturally sensitive translations.

Post-editing Protocols: Human Refinement of Proverbs and Cultural Terms. While AI can generate initial drafts, human editors are indispensable for refining and polishing translations, particularly for proverbs and cultural terms that require careful interpretation and adaptation. Establishing robust post-editing protocols, as Kenny (2022) suggests, involves combining AI's efficiency with human expertise. Human editors with proficiency in both Igbo and Arabic cultures can ensure cultural accuracy, identify and correct AI errors, and maintain the literary quality of the translated text. Utilizing tools like GPT-4 for initial drafts, followed by meticulous human refinement, ensures that the translated text is not only linguistically accurate but also culturally resonant, preserving the intended meaning and stylistic nuances of the original work.

Community Collaboration: Engaging Linguists to Co-develop Glossaries. Engaging Igbo and Arab linguists in the co-development of glossaries is essential for creating culturally sensitive and accurate translations. These glossaries, containing definitions, explanations, and contextual information for key cultural terms, enhance the ability of AI tools like DeepL to handle culturally specific language. As Anastasiou and Gupta (2011, p. 637) demonstrate, collaborative efforts to build resources are vital for improving translation quality. This community-driven approach fosters the creation of a valuable resource for Igbo-Arabic translation, benefiting researchers and practitioners alike. By harnessing local knowledge and expertise, linguists can contribute to the development of more effective and culturally appropriate AI translation tools, promoting better cross-cultural understanding and communication.

Ethical Vigilance: Navigating Ideological Subtexts and Power Dynamics. Beyond technical and lexical refinement, a culturally informed workflow must incorporate an ethical dimension that recognizes translation as a political act. As Venuti (2017) argues, the "invisibility" of the translator often masks the power imbalances inherent in moving a text from a postcolonial source to a dominant target language. AI tools, by their nature, lack the capacity to identify ideological subtexts—such as Achebe's intentional "stretching" of English to accommodate Igbo rhythms—and may inadvertently prioritize domesticating strategies that erase the original's resistant spirit. Therefore, the final stage of any hybrid workflow must involve an "ideological audit" by human translators. This ensures that the translated text maintains its critical edge against colonial narratives, preventing the AI from defaulting to "safe" or Eurocentric interpretations that would otherwise silence the subaltern voice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while AI translation tools offer unprecedented computational efficiency, this study demonstrates that they fundamentally fail to navigate the dense cultural and ideological topographies of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. By reducing Igbo proverbs to literal observations and flattening the novel's revolutionary "Africanized English" into generic prose, current AI paradigms risk functioning as tools of digital assimilation rather than cross-cultural bridge-building. The findings underscore that the human translator remains ontologically indispensable—not merely as an editor of grammar, but as a cultural mediator capable of preserving postcolonial resistance, oral aesthetics, and the socio-historical weight of the source text.

To move toward a more equitable future in the digital humanities, future research must move beyond technical fluency to prioritize the decolonization of training data by integrating African literary corpora and non-Western epistemologies into Large Language Model (LLM) training sets. Furthermore, the development of robust ethical frameworks is essential to prevent the algorithmic erasure of marginalized linguistic hierarchies. By adopting hybrid workflows that leverage AI for structural drafting while centering human expertise in the negotiation of metaphor and subtext, the field can ensure a more nuanced approach to global literature. Consequently, this research suggests that the "lost" elements in algorithmic translation are precisely what make postcolonial literature vital; by bridging AI's technical capacity with human cultural empathy, we can ensure that marginalized voices are not only translated but truly heard, preserved without the distortions of a colonial-era lens.

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 the research.

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Stitching Memory, Weaving Identity: Memorializing the Everyday Through Textile Installation in Philippine Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This practice-based study investigates hand sewing as a form of memory work and textile installation as a means of memorializing the life and creative influence of my grandmother, a seamstress whose practice shaped my identity as a fashion designer. The study documents the creation of forty-two hand-stitched collage tapestries and a house-like installation made from *retasos*, or fabric remnants, accumulated through my fashion design practice. A reflective three-phase process—pre-production, production, and post-production—guided the gathering, arranging, stitching, journaling, installation, and interpretation of the work. During the installation opening at Imahica Gallery, more than thirty visitors entered the work and twelve returned brief feedback forms. Their responses repeatedly connected the sewing machine, dining area, altar, garments, threads, and other domestic elements with memories of grandparents, parents, childhood homes, family values, faith, and loss. The findings suggest that familiar textile and domestic materials can operate as mnemonic prompts through which an autobiographical memorial becomes a site of shared remembrance. The paper positions hand sewing as an embodied memory practice and *retasos* as material fragments capable of carrying personal and cultural associations. It contributes an exploratory practice-based account of how fashion materials and handwork can move beyond garment production into memorial installation, reflective inquiry, and audience memory recall.

Keywords: textile memory, hand sewing, memorial art, practice-based research, Philippine contemporary art

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Introduction

Sewing is often approached in fashion design as a technical practice: joining fabric, constructing garments, repairing cloth, or embellishing surfaces. Yet sewing can also be affective, embodied, and mnemonic. Repetitive textile work may support concentration, meaningful occupation, and social connection, while textile objects themselves can accumulate emotional associations over time (Burt & Atkinson, 2012; Peters, 2014; Riley et al., 2013). From this perspective, sewing is not only a means of producing an object; it can also become a way of returning to people, places, habits, and relationships.

This study centers on *A Memorial for Lola: An Expression of Self-Identity from Stitching Memories of Home*, a textile installation created in memory of my grandmother, a seamstress whose life and work shaped my identity as a fashion designer. She introduced me to sewing not merely as a skill but as a way of seeing, making, caring, and surviving. Her sewing machine, cutting table, tools, habits, and domestic routines became inseparable from my memories of home. The installation emerged from the desire to translate those memories into a material environment rather than leave them only as private recollection.

The material starting point was *retasos*: fabric scraps retained from ready-to-wear collections and commissioned gowns made in my studio since 2017. Such remnants might ordinarily be classified as waste or residue. In this project, however, they became carriers of earlier labor and personal history. This treatment of cloth as memory-bearing material is consistent with scholarship on the mnemonic qualities of textiles and on the role of objects in mediating memory, identity, and relationships with the dead (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Peters, 2014; Prown, 1982).

The work is also situated within Philippine textile histories. Embroidery and fine needlework in the Philippines have developed through domestic, religious, colonial, artistic, and livelihood practices, including the work of *bordadoras* whose skills became culturally and economically significant (Ramos, 2016). Philippine dress traditions likewise demonstrate how textiles such as piña cloth can communicate status, identity, and cultural meaning (Roces, 2013). These contexts do not make the installation representative of all Philippine textile traditions; rather, they locate its personal sewing practice within a wider history in which cloth and handwork are embedded in family, labor, heritage, and identity.

The paper therefore asks how inherited hand-sewing practices and retained fabric scraps can be transformed into a memorial installation, and how viewers respond to that installation as an environment of memory recall. It argues that the project operates across three connected levels: sewing as embodied practice, textile remnants and domestic objects as material prompts, and installation as a spatial encounter. Because the viewer evidence consists of twelve short feedback forms collected during one opening-night event, the findings are presented as exploratory rather than generalizable.

Literature Review

Sewing, Textile Memory, and Material Practice

Textile objects occupy an unusual position between utility and intimacy. They are handled, worn, repaired, stored, inherited, and discarded, and these repeated contacts allow them to acquire meanings that exceed their physical function. Prown (1982) argues that material culture

can be studied as evidence of beliefs, values, and social relations embodied in objects. Within textile research, Peters (2014) similarly describes how cloth may acquire mnemonic value through personal attachment, use, and remembered experience. These perspectives are especially relevant to *retasos*, because a scrap can preserve material traces of a garment, a commission, a period of work, or a relationship even after the original object has passed out of use.

In the present project, thread and cloth also carry symbolic associations with connection, repair, continuity, and care. Hand sewing joins fragments physically; within a memorial context, that joining can simultaneously evoke the attempt to hold together memories dispersed across time. This interpretation is not presented as a universal symbolism of thread, but as a meaning produced through the artist-researcher's own material history and through the installation's relationship to a remembered domestic sewing environment.

Philippine embroidery provides an important cultural context for this material practice. Ramos (2016) documents the emergence of fine European-style embroidery in the colonial Philippines and the contribution of Filipina *bordadoras* to a tradition shaped by gendered labor, skill, and cultural exchange. Roces (2013), in turn, shows how piña cloth and dress participate in the construction of status and Filipino identity. These sources support a reading of sewing and cloth as cultural practices as well as technical ones. For this paper, they are used narrowly to contextualize the installation's references to sewing, Lumban, and piña-related family memories rather than to claim that the work reproduces a single national textile tradition.

Sewing, Wellbeing, and the Meditative Process

Research on textile craft suggests that repetitive making can be associated with concentration, relaxation, purpose, learning, and social connection. In interviews with quilters, Burt and Atkinson (2012) found cognitive, emotional, creative, and social processes that participants associated with wellbeing. Riley et al. (2013), in a large survey of knitters, likewise reported associations between knitting and feelings of calm, happiness, creativity, and social contact. These studies concern quilting and knitting rather than memorial hand sewing, so they do not establish that the present installation produced therapeutic outcomes. They do, however, provide a basis for understanding why repetitive textile practices may be experienced as focused and emotionally meaningful activity.

This meditative dimension was central to my making process. The repeated actions of threading, pinning, pressing, pulling thread through cloth, knotting, and embellishing created a rhythm in which memories of my grandmother could surface without first being converted into formal verbal narration. The Filipino expression *dadaan ka sa butas ng karayom*—literally, to pass through the eye of the needle—became a personal metaphor for difficulty, endurance, and passage. Needle pricks, heat from pressing, fatigue, and the slowness of handwork made remembrance physically present while the act of stitching provided a disciplined structure for continuing the work.

Installation Art, Memorialization, and Encounter

Installation art organizes objects, materials, and space so that meaning emerges through the viewer's bodily encounter with an environment. Bishop (2005) emphasizes the experiential and spatial character of installation, in which viewers are positioned within rather than simply in front of the work. This quality is particularly useful for a project in which memory is tied to

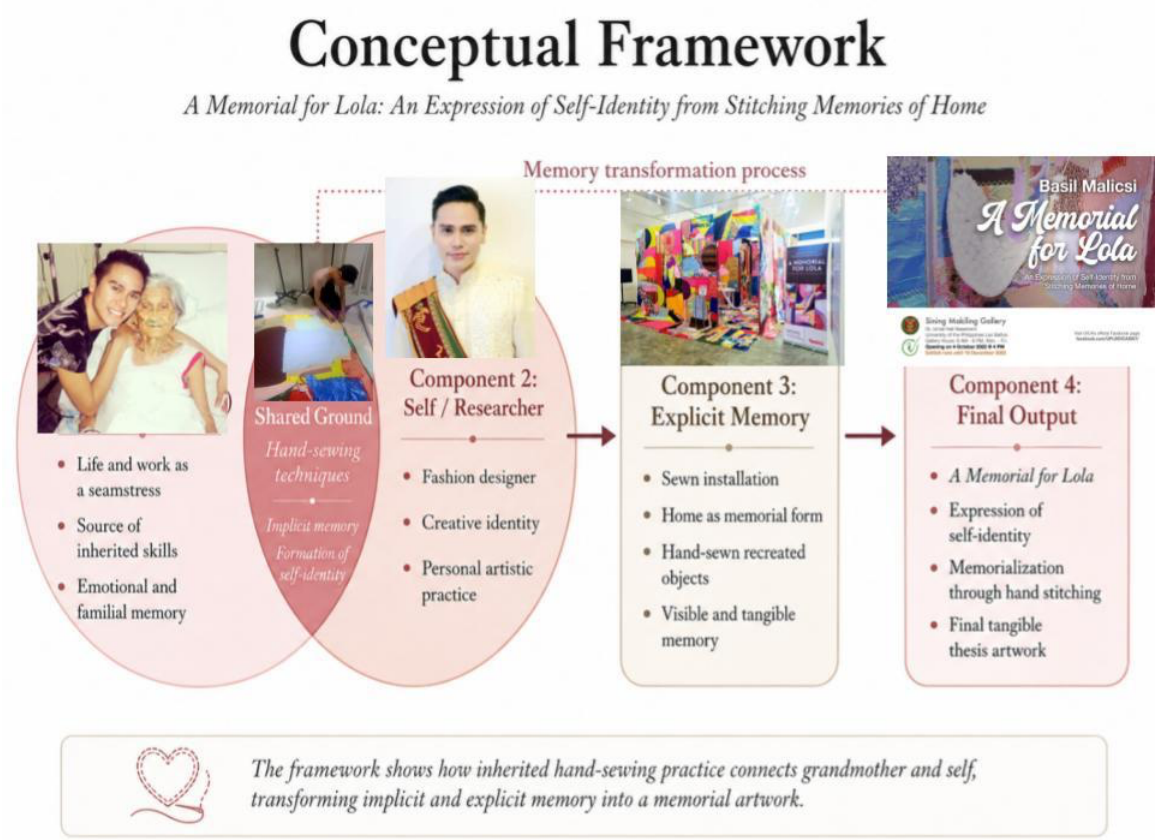
home. A remembered house is not experienced as a single isolated image: it is encountered through routes, surfaces, tables, machines, objects, textures, and relationships among them.

Material culture is also central to memorial practices. Hallam and Hockey (2001) describe how belongings and material forms can mediate relationships between the living and the dead, while Wolterstorff (2015) treats memorial art as socially situated practice rather than as an object whose meaning is exhausted by formal appearance. Together, these perspectives support the use of a house-like textile installation as more than a visual tribute. Its domestic objects and stitched surfaces can become an encounter through which private remembrance is offered to others, who may then bring their own histories to the space.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework links four elements: my grandmother as seamstress, myself as fashion designer-researcher, hand-sewing practice, and the resulting memorial installation. The framework also distinguishes between embodied forms of remembering and consciously recalled autobiographical memories. Schacter's (1987) distinction between implicit and explicit memory is used here as a heuristic rather than as a clinical classification of the artwork. Repeated bodily familiarity with sewing—how the hands hold cloth, guide a needle, judge tension, or recognize a sequence of actions—represents an implicit layer of learned practice. Deliberate recollections of my grandmother, her tools, the household, and particular episodes represent an explicit layer of remembrance. Figure 1 summarizes this memory-transformation model.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework for Memory Transformation Through Hand-Sewing Practice



The first component is the grandmother, whose identity as a seamstress forms the emotional and creative foundation of the work. Her sewing practice shaped early experiences of care, discipline, patience, resilience, and creative labor. The second component is the self as fashion designer-researcher. My professional practice with cloth, construction, texture, color, and embellishment developed later, but it remains entangled with the domestic sewing environment in which I first encountered textiles.

Hand sewing forms the shared ground between these two identities. It is both inherited practice and present action. Repeating sewing techniques allows the body to revisit an acquired way of making, while the reflective process of selecting and stitching particular remnants brings autobiographical memories into conscious attention. The process therefore does not treat sewing itself as a storage device containing complete memories; rather, sewing acts as a structured practice through which embodied familiarity and conscious recollection can interact.

The installation is the material and spatial outcome of this interaction. Forty-two stitched tapestries and reconstructed domestic elements externalize selected memories into a house-like environment. The installation does not function as "explicit memory" in the psychological sense; instead, it is a material representation produced from explicit recollection and embodied practice. This clarification strengthens the framework by separating a psychological category of memory from the artwork that gives remembered experience visible and spatial form.

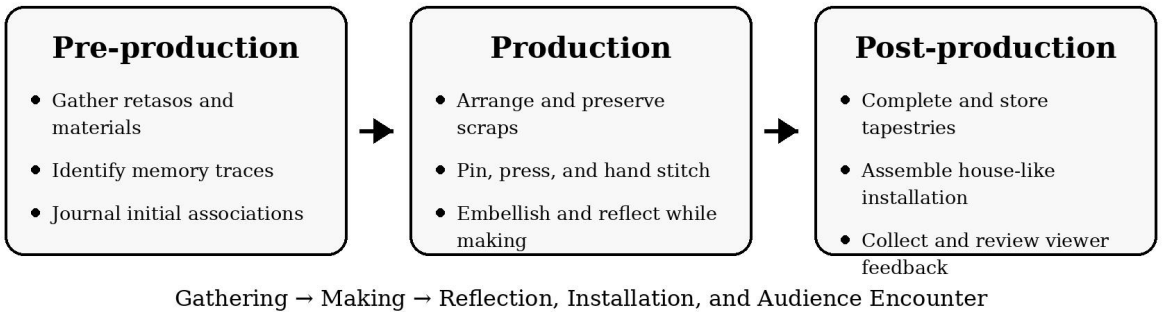
Methodology

Research Design

The study used a practice-based and reflective qualitative approach. In practice-based creative research, making is not merely an illustration of a pre-existing argument; the creative process and resulting artefact can contribute to the production and communication of knowledge (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Sullivan (2010) likewise positions visual arts practice as a legitimate mode of inquiry in which making, reflection, interpretation, and contextualization operate together. Consistent with these approaches, this study treated material experimentation, hand sewing, journaling, installation, and audience feedback as interconnected parts of the inquiry.

The working process was organized into three phases: pre-production, production, and post-production. The phases describe both the technical development of the installation and the movement from collecting memory-bearing materials, to transforming them through handwork, to placing them within a public environment where viewers could respond. Figure 2 summarizes the three-phase research and creative workflow.

Figure 2
Three-Phase Practice-Based Research and Creative Process



Pre-production: Gathering and Preparation

Pre-production began with gathering *retasos* stored in plastic bags in my design studio in Los Baños. The scraps came from ready-to-wear collections and commissioned gowns produced since I began my fashion design practice in 2017. At first they appeared to be leftover material, but handling them reactivated associations with earlier garments, clients, occasions, labor, and periods of my own creative development. Gathering therefore functioned simultaneously as material preparation and autobiographical recollection.

Other materials included *pelon*, thread, yarn, pins, sequins, crystals, lace, and a journal. Journaling accompanied the making process so that memories, emotions, decisions, and emerging interpretations could be recorded rather than reconstructed only after the installation was complete.

Production: Selection, Placement, Pinning, and Sewing

For each textile surface, I laid approximately four yards of *pelon* on the floor and treated it as a potential wall of the house-like structure. The *retasos* were arranged intuitively rather than according to a predetermined pattern. Some edges were aligned like puzzle pieces; others overlapped. Two working principles guided the arrangement: the scraps were preserved in their existing shapes rather than cut into standardized pieces, and placement was allowed to develop without judging irregularity as defect. These principles retained evidence of each scrap's prior use.

After a composition reached a provisional sense of wholeness, the scraps were pinned and pressed onto the *pelon* and then stitched by hand. Early works used ordinary thread; later works incorporated more visible colored yarn, along with leftover sequins, crystals, lace, and satin-stitch embroidery. The visible stitches became both construction and embellishment. Repetition, occasional needle pricks, heat from pressing, and the time required to complete each surface also became part of the reflective experience of making.

Post-production: Reflection, Installation, and Viewer Feedback

When a tapestry felt visually and intuitively complete, it was rolled and stored. Journaling continued between works, providing a record of memories and decisions that linked one tapestry to the next. The completed textile surfaces and domestic elements were then assembled as a house-like installation that visitors could enter.

During the opening night at Imahica Gallery, more than thirty guests visited the installation. Feedback forms were offered and twelve were returned. The form contained two open-ended questions: (1) "As you entered the replica of the house, what childhood memories did you remember and with whom?" and (2) "Which object or element inside the house was most meaningful to you and why?" The responses were used as exploratory audience feedback rather than as a representative survey.

The twelve responses were read descriptively for recurring people, objects, settings, emotions, and values. This procedure was informed by the organizing logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but the dataset and two-question form did not support a full-scale qualitative thematic study. Repeated patterns were grouped into concise themes and then compared with

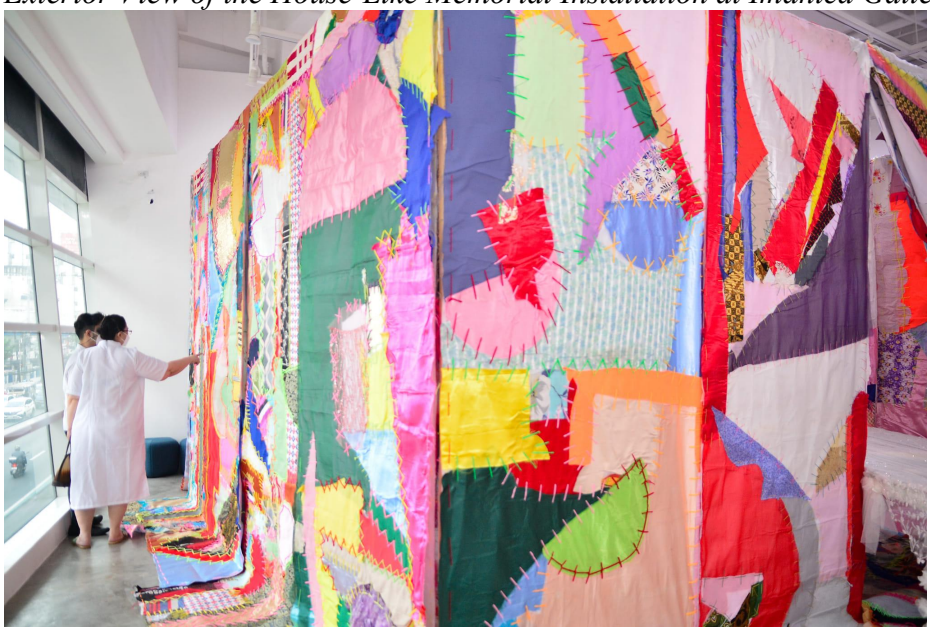
the conceptual concerns of memory, domestic space, sewing, and memorialization. Respondent names are omitted in this proceedings version.

Results and Discussion

The Installation as a Memory-Recall Environment

The audience feedback indicates that the installation extended an autobiographical memorial into a setting that prompted viewers to recall their own family histories. Respondents referred to grandparents, parents, childhood homes, play, family meals, sewing, garments, faith, and loss. This does not establish that every visitor experienced the installation in the same way, but it shows that several participants did not remain focused solely on my grandmother. Familiar domestic and textile elements became prompts through which they connected the work with their own remembered people and places. Figure 3 shows the scale and walk-in character of the completed installation.

Figure 3
Exterior View of the House-Like Memorial Installation at Imahica Gallery



The finding is consistent with material-memory perspectives in which objects acquire significance through use, attachment, and personal history (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Peters, 2014; Prown, 1982). In the installation, the sewing machine, dining table, altar, thread, and garments did not operate as neutral props. Viewers interpreted them through prior experiences, effectively layering their own memories onto the material environment. Figure 4 provides a closer interior view of the layered retaso assemblage and visible hand stitching that created this material environment.

Figure 4
Interior Detail of Layered Retaso Assemblage and Visible Hand Stitching

Table 1
Thematic Summary of Viewer Feedback

Feedback question	Major response pattern	Key objects / memory triggers	Interpretation
Q1. What childhood memories did you remember, and with whom?	Grandparents, parents, childhood homes, play, family meals, sewing, and domestic routines.	Grandmother, father, dining area, sewing machine, threads, needles, garments.	The house replica functioned as a mnemonic environment that prompted several viewers to connect the artist-researcher's memorial with their own family histories.
Q2. Which object or element inside the house was most meaningful, and why?	Objects were linked with familial, spiritual, and domestic meanings; the sewing machine was especially prominent, followed by the dining table and altar.	Sewing machine, altar, dining table, threads, needles, garments, house interior.	Domestic objects acted as affective anchors through which viewers associated material forms with people, values, faith, grief, and remembered labor.

Childhood Memory and Intergenerational Recall

The first feedback question asked what childhood memories the installation brought to mind and with whom those memories were associated. One participant described entering the house replica as "my childhood all over again" and said that it felt "like a memorial for my own grandma." This response is significant because it shows how a work rooted in one grandmother-grandchild relationship could become legible as a structure for remembering another grandmother. The installation did not erase the specificity of my own memorial, but it created enough familiarity for another viewer to enter the work through personal experience.

Another participant recalled grandparents through the values of *sipag, tiyaga, sakripisyo,* and *tiis*—industry, perseverance, sacrifice, and endurance. The response suggests that the memories activated by the installation were not limited to visual nostalgia. They also included inherited values and moral formation. In this sense, domestic memory encompassed what relatives did, what they taught, and how their habits continued to shape adult identity.

Several responses were closely tied to sewing. One participant remembered being corrected by a grandmother after playing with the sewing machine, threads, and needles. Another remembered a father helping a grandmother sew a piña barong in Lumban, Laguna. These memories connect domestic craft with play, discipline, intergenerational labor, and local textile heritage. The Lumban reference is especially resonant within documented histories of Philippine embroidery and piña-related dress traditions (Ramos, 2016; Roces, 2013), although the participant's individual family memory remains distinct from those broader histories.

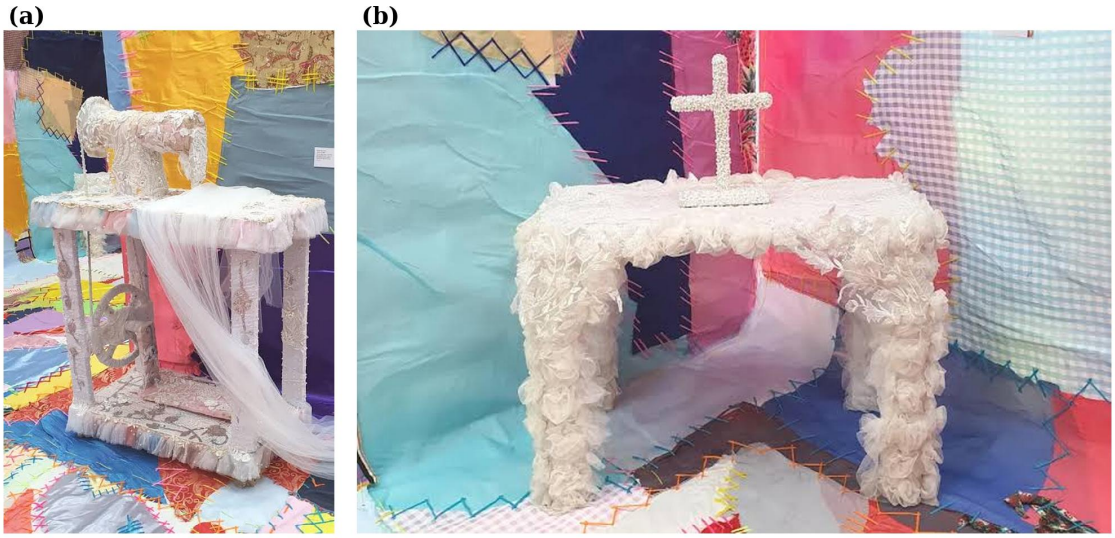
The dining area also prompted memories that were not directly about sewing. One participant recalled "the good times in the dining area with the whole family" when her father was still alive. This response reinforces the importance of the installation as an environment rather than a collection of isolated textile works. The remembered home included making, eating, worship, play, discipline, and family gathering. Memorial meaning therefore accumulated through the relationships among objects and spaces.

Meaningful Objects: Sewing Machine, Dining Table, and Altar

The second question asked which object or element was most meaningful and why. Across the returned forms, the sewing machine was the most prominent object. It directly connected with memories of grandmothers sewing clothes, family members assisting in garment making, and children playing around sewing equipment. The machine therefore appeared not only as a technical device but as a marker of provision, labor, discipline, creativity, and affection.

The altar introduced another dimension of remembrance. A participant associated it with a grandmother's religious devotion and teaching of God's Word. The dining table likewise recalled family meals and a deceased father. These responses widened the work beyond textile memory alone. The house environment linked sewing with faith, food, kinship, and everyday routines, demonstrating how domestic objects can carry multiple layers of meaning depending on the viewer's history. Representative reconstructions of the sewing machine and altar are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Reconstructed Domestic Objects Within the Memorial Installation: (a) Sewing Machine and (b) Altar



This object-centered response supports the project's treatment of materials as active prompts in meaning-making. Material culture does not possess a fixed memory independent of people; rather, objects become meaningful through the relations, uses, and narratives that gather around them (Prown, 1982). The installation's preserved scraps and reconstructed objects provided viewers with recognizable forms through which personal associations could be activated.

From Personal Memorial to Shared Remembrance

Taken together, the feedback suggests three functions of the installation. First, it operated as a mnemonic environment in which familiar domestic and textile forms prompted memories. Second, it became a relational memorial: my act of remembering my grandmother created an opening through which viewers could remember their own relatives. Third, it provided a public setting for reflection on family, faith, loss, and continuity. These functions align with scholarship that treats memorial art as a social practice and material remembrance as a way of sustaining relationships with the past (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Wolterstorff, 2015).

The term *healing* should nevertheless be used cautiously. The feedback forms captured immediate recollections and meanings, not clinical or longitudinal evidence of psychological recovery. The strongest claim supported by the data is that the installation facilitated memory recall and shared reflection for several respondents. Its potential contribution to grief work or healing remains a question for future research rather than an outcome demonstrated by the present study.

Contributions to Fashion Design Research

The project contributes to fashion design research by treating sewing, remnants, and installation as modes of inquiry rather than limiting fashion practice to finished garments. In practice-based research, creative activity can generate knowledge through the interaction of making, reflection, documentation, and contextual interpretation (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Sullivan, 2010). Here, the knowledge claim emerges from the documented transformation of

leftover fashion materials into a memorial environment and from the meanings reported by a small group of viewers.

A central contribution is the framing of *retasos* as memorial fragments. In conventional production they may be classified as excess, but within this project their irregular shapes and histories were preserved rather than standardized. This allowed each scrap to remain connected to previous acts of making while becoming part of a new textile surface. Peters's (2014) account of mnemonic attachment to textiles helps explain why such fragments can acquire value through association, while the project extends that insight by placing remnants within a spatial memorial assembled through visible hand stitching.

The study also demonstrates the value of slowness and handwork as research conditions. Hand stitching imposed time, repetition, physical attention, and a degree of unpredictability that differed from rapid garment production. These conditions enabled reflection to occur within the act of making itself. The contribution is therefore methodological as well as artistic: the project documents one way a fashion designer-researcher can use inherited craft practice, retained materials, journaling, spatial installation, and audience feedback to investigate memory and identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that hand-sewn textile installation can function as a meaningful practice-based method for memorializing a loved one and investigating the relationship among inherited craft, material memory, and creative identity. Through forty-two hand-stitched tapestries, retained *retasos*, and reconstructed domestic elements, memories of my grandmother were translated into a house-like environment rather than represented through a single portrait or object. The making process joined embodied sewing knowledge with deliberate autobiographical recollection, while the installation provided material and spatial form for those memories.

The viewer feedback adds an important relational dimension. Twelve returned forms from the opening night show that several visitors connected the sewing machine, dining area, altar, garments, threads, and other elements with memories of their own grandparents, parents, childhood homes, values, faith, and losses. The most defensible interpretation is therefore not that the installation proved a therapeutic effect, but that it created conditions for memory recall and shared remembrance. An intimate tribute became a site where different family histories could briefly meet.

The paper's principal contribution is the positioning of hand sewing as an embodied memory practice and *retasos* as material fragments that can be recontextualized for memorial inquiry. It also demonstrates how fashion design research can move beyond garment construction by using material remnants, handwork, domestic space, reflection, and audience encounter as research resources. In this sense, what is ordinarily left over from fashion production becomes central rather than peripheral: a scrap is no longer simply waste, but a material trace capable of entering a new network of meanings.

The study has clear limitations. Audience feedback was collected from only twelve respondents during a single opening-night event, using two short questions. The sample was event-specific and was not designed to represent a wider population. The feedback captured immediate recollection rather than longer-term effects, and it does not support claims of psychological

healing. Future research could include a larger and more diverse viewer group, semi-structured interviews, repeated encounters with the installation, and more systematic documentation of how memories change before, during, and after the viewing experience. Comparative studies could also examine whether other forms of inherited craft or discarded fashion material generate similar kinds of remembrance.

Within those limits, the project demonstrates the research value of attending closely to ordinary materials and repeated gestures. Through hand stitching, discarded fragments were transformed into memorial surfaces; through installation, private recollection became shareable space; and through viewer response, one family history opened toward others without losing its particular origin. The work therefore proposes a modest but useful pathway for practice-based fashion and textile research: to treat making not only as production, but as a disciplined way of remembering, interpreting, and placing personal history into relation with a public.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the memory and enduring influence of her grandmother, whose life and work as a seamstress inspired this study and the creation of *A Memorial for Lola*. Appreciation is also extended to Imahica Gallery for providing a space for the installation and to the exhibition visitors who generously shared their memories and reflections. The author also thanks family members, mentors, colleagues, and friends whose encouragement and support contributed to the development and presentation of this work.

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

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist with language clarity and readability, APA 7 in-text citation and reference formatting, and bibliographic verification. The author reviewed and revised the resulting text and takes full responsibility for the final content.

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Artificial Intelligence and Regional Cybersecurity Governance: Transforming Security Cooperation in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This study examines how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping regional cybersecurity governance, addressing a gap in understanding the causal mechanisms between AI-driven threats and regional cooperation. Using a comparative case study design, the study integrates regional security community theory with new regionalist literature. Methodologically, it employs qualitative document analysis of primary policy sources (EU cybersecurity strategies, ASEAN digital agreements, and Middle East security declarations) and secondary literature, combined with process tracing to assess how AI-powered threats trigger institutional responses. Three cases are systematically compared: the European Union (high institutional density, binding frameworks), ASEAN (consensus-based, soft law), and the Middle East (fragmented, high tension, with specific focus on Iran). Cross-case variation in political trust and institutional maturity enables controlled comparison, strengthening validity. Findings show that AI transforms cyber threats from isolated incidents into systemic challenges, making regional coordination imperative. However, outcomes diverge: the EU advances toward centralized defense mechanisms; ASEAN prioritizes normative information-sharing; the Middle East remains fragmented, with AI capabilities reinforcing offensive postures and securitization dynamics involving Iran. The study contributes a focused, empirically grounded argument: AI not only changes attack and defense strategies but also reshapes regional security logics, turning transnational threats into either opportunities for integration (EU, ASEAN) or drivers of conflict (Middle East). This study design ensures replicability and addresses the validity concerns typical of broad, descriptive abstracts. The findings underscore the necessity of linking technological transformations with institutional structures in contemporary international relations.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, cybersecurity governance, regional security cooperation, new regionalism, institutional adaptation

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the cyber threat environment by increasing the speed, scale, and sophistication of cyber operations. These developments have expanded cybersecurity beyond national borders and increased the need for regional coordination and institutional responses (Brundage et al., 2018; Chen & Yang, 2022). Regional responses, however, differ considerably. The European Union has developed binding regulatory and institutional mechanisms, while ASEAN relies primarily on consensus, voluntary cooperation, and regional guidelines (Keith, 2024; Novelli et al., 2024; Putra, 2024). In the Middle East, cybersecurity cooperation remains more fragmented, with national capabilities and strategic competition playing a significant role (Trigui et al., 2024).

These differences raise an important question: How does artificial intelligence reshape regional cybersecurity governance, and why do similar AI-driven cyber threats produce different patterns of regional security cooperation?

Existing research has examined AI governance, cybersecurity, and regional cooperation largely as separate fields. Less attention has been given to the institutional processes through which AI-related cyber risks affect regional governance. Regional Security Community Theory emphasizes the importance of trust, institutional development, and shared expectations in sustaining cooperation (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Deutsch et al., 1957). These factors provide a basis for explaining why similar technological pressures may produce different regional outcomes.

This study argues that AI acts as a catalyst for institutional change, while its effects depend on institutional capacity, political trust, and regional security norms. Stronger institutional environments are more likely to translate emerging cyber risks into coordinated governance, whereas fragmented environments are more likely to rely on national capabilities and competitive security responses.

The study makes three contributions. First, it brings together AI governance, cybersecurity, New Regionalism, and Regional Security Community Theory. Second, it examines the mechanisms connecting AI-related cyber risks with institutional adaptation rather than assuming that technological change automatically produces cooperation. Third, it uses a structured comparison of the European Union, ASEAN, and the Middle East to explain how differences in institutional capacity and political conditions shape regional responses.

The European Union represents a highly institutionalized model based on binding regulation and supranational coordination. ASEAN provides a contrasting model based on consensus and voluntary cooperation, while the Middle East represents a fragmented regional security environment characterized by geopolitical competition and uneven institutional development. Comparing these cases allows the study to examine how different institutional settings shape responses to similar technological pressures.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design based on document analysis and process tracing. Primary sources include regional cybersecurity strategies, AI governance frameworks, official policy documents, and regional declarations, complemented by academic literature. This approach allows the study to identify the processes through which emerging cyber risks influence regional institutional responses and to explain the variation observed across the three cases.

Theoretical Framework: AI, Regionalism, and Cybersecurity Governance

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into cyber operations has changed the relationship between technology, security, and governance. AI increases the speed, scale, and complexity of cyber activities while expanding cybersecurity concerns to include economic resilience, political stability, and regional security (Novelli et al., 2024). As cyber threats increasingly cross-national borders, regional institutions have become important mechanisms for policy coordination, information sharing, and regulatory cooperation. This study therefore combines three perspectives: New Regionalism, Regional Security Community Theory, and Cybersecurity Governance. Together, they explain how technological developments interact with institutional capacity and political conditions to produce different regional governance outcomes. AI is consequently treated as a contextual factor whose effects depend on the characteristics of each regional system.

Artificial Intelligence as a Driver of Institutional Change

AI represents more than a technological innovation because its capacity for data processing, prediction, automation, and adaptive decision-making affects the environment in which cyber competition occurs (Novelli et al., 2024). AI-enabled malware, automated influence operations, and AI-assisted cyber espionage also connect cybersecurity with political stability, economic security, and digital sovereignty (Trigui et al., 2024). These developments create pressure for institutions to adapt. However, technological change does not produce identical outcomes across regions. Institutions with greater regulatory capacity, established mechanisms of cooperation, and higher levels of political trust are better positioned to incorporate emerging technologies into collective governance. Where these conditions are weaker, similar technological pressures may produce fragmented or nationally oriented responses.

New Regionalism and Regional Cybersecurity Governance

New Regionalism views regions as evolving political and institutional spaces through which states address challenges that cannot be managed effectively at the national level (Hettne, 2005; Söderbaum, 2016). Cybersecurity reflects this dynamic because interconnected digital infrastructures and cross-border cyber operations create shared vulnerabilities requiring cooperation in information sharing, incident response, capacity building, and regulatory coordination. Regional governance, however, is shaped by institutional capacity and political context. Differences in legal authority, institutional density, and patterns of cooperation affect how regional organizations respond to emerging security challenges (Fawcett, 2012).

The European Union represents a highly institutionalized model supported by supranational institutions and binding legislation, whereas ASEAN relies more heavily on consensus, non-interference, and voluntary coordination (Keith, 2024; Putra, 2024). These differences demonstrate that regional institutions actively mediate technological change rather than simply responding to it.

Regional Security Communities and Regional Cybersecurity Governance

Regional Security Community Theory complements New Regionalism by emphasizing the role of trust, shared norms, and institutionalized cooperation in sustaining regional security relations. Deutsch et al. (1957) associated security communities with dependable expectations of peaceful change, while Adler and Barnett (1998) further emphasized shared identities,

norms, and institutional mechanisms. These principles are relevant to cybersecurity because effective regional responses require continuous information exchange, coordinated risk management, and confidence among participating states. Technological capabilities alone are therefore insufficient to produce sustained cooperation. The European Union illustrates how established institutional relationships can facilitate collective cybersecurity policies. In contrast, geopolitical rivalry can limit cooperation when cyber capabilities are viewed primarily as instruments of strategic competition. The Middle East demonstrates this difficulty, particularly in relations involving Iran, Israel, and Gulf states, where national cyber capabilities have developed alongside persistent regional tensions (Trigui et al., 2024).

Cybersecurity Governance as Multi-level Governance

Cybersecurity governance increasingly involves multiple actors, including governments, regional institutions, private technology companies, international organizations, and civil society. The importance of this multi-level structure has increased with the expansion of AI because technological development is strongly influenced by private-sector actors, while regulation and national security remain largely governmental responsibilities. Regional organizations consequently perform an intermediary role by coordinating standards, facilitating information exchange, and supporting capacity building. Their effectiveness depends partly on their ability to adapt regulatory arrangements to rapidly changing technological risks. The EU follows a more legally binding and institutionally integrated approach, while ASEAN emphasizes flexible cooperation, ethical principles, and capacity building (Keith, 2024; Novelli et al., 2024; Putra, 2024). These differences illustrate how institutional traditions shape the governance of emerging technologies.

Analytical Framework

The framework developed in this study connects AI-related cyber pressures with regional institutional adaptation. It assumes that similar technological developments may generate different outcomes because regional institutions operate under different political and institutional conditions.

Three variables guide the comparison:

1. Institutional capacity: the strength and effectiveness of regional institutions and their ability to implement collective decisions.
2. Political trust: the willingness of member states to cooperate, exchange sensitive information, and coordinate security policies.
3. Regional governance norms: shared principles concerning sovereignty, decision-making, and collective action.

These variables help explain the expected differences among the three cases. The EU represents a high-capacity model associated with regulatory integration; ASEAN reflects gradual, consensus-based coordination; and the Middle East illustrates the effects of fragmented institutions and persistent strategic rivalry. Accordingly, AI is conceptualized as a contextual factor rather than a direct determinant of regional cooperation. Its effects are mediated by institutional capacity, political trust, and governance norms. This framework provides the basis for the comparative analysis that follows.

Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity Governance

The literature on artificial intelligence and cybersecurity has expanded rapidly as AI has become relevant to both cyber defense and offensive operations. Early research emphasized applications such as automated threat detection, anomaly identification, malware analysis, and predictive assessment (Brundage et al., 2018; Russell & Norvig, 2021). More recent research highlights the dual-use nature of AI. Machine learning and generative AI can improve threat intelligence, vulnerability assessment, and security monitoring while also facilitating phishing, malicious code generation, social engineering, and other cyber operations (Achuthan et al., 2024; Yigit et al., 2025). Large language models have further expanded these possibilities, creating new challenges for cyber resilience and regulatory oversight (Xu et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

Despite this expanding literature, much of the research remains focused on technical capabilities and operational performance. Comparatively less attention has been given to how AI-related cyber risks affect regional institutions, cooperation, and governance. This gap is important because technological developments occur within different political and institutional environments. Understanding these differences requires connecting AI and cybersecurity research with regional governance scholarship.

Regional Cybersecurity Governance

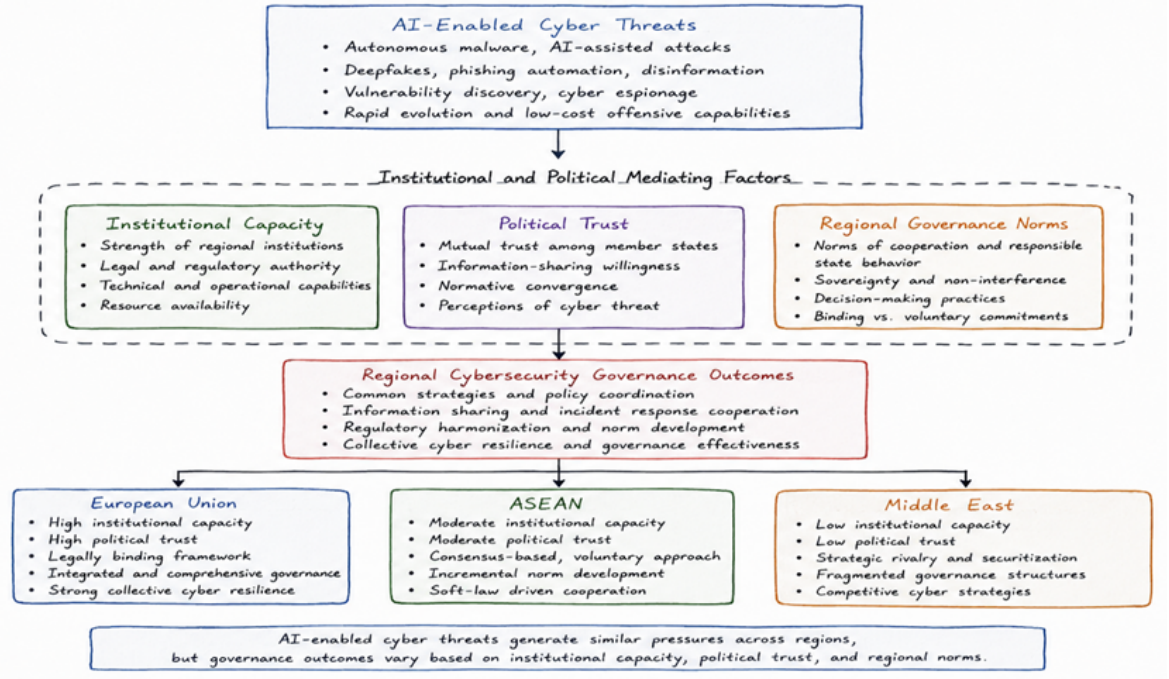
Regional cybersecurity governance has received increasing attention as cyber threats have become more transnational. The literature emphasizes institutional coordination, information sharing, regulatory cooperation, and collective resilience as important components of regional responses (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Christou, 2016).

The European Union provides the most developed example of regional cybersecurity governance. Its combination of supranational institutions, binding legislation, and common cybersecurity policies has enabled greater regulatory coordination across member states (Christou, 2016; Novelli et al., 2024). The EU's cybersecurity framework has increasingly been connected with wider digital and AI governance.

ASEAN follows a different model based on consensus, non-interference, and voluntary cooperation. Regional initiatives have expanded cybersecurity and AI cooperation through policy guidelines, capacity building, and confidence-building measures, but implementation remains primarily dependent on national governments (Acharya, 2014a; Keith, 2024; Putra, 2024).

The Middle East presents a more fragmented environment. Existing scholarship focuses largely on cyber conflict, deterrence, and strategic competition, with less emphasis on region-wide institutional governance. Differences in national capabilities and persistent geopolitical tensions have constrained broader cybersecurity cooperation (Trigui et al., 2024). Taken together, the literature demonstrates substantial variation in regional cybersecurity governance but provides limited comparative explanation of why similar technological pressures generate different institutional responses. This study addresses this gap by comparing the EU, ASEAN, and the Middle East through a common framework centered on institutional capacity, political trust, and regional governance norms.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework: AI-Enabled Cyber Threats and Regional Cybersecurity Governance



S*ource:* Designed by the author.

Research Gap and Contribution

The existing literature highlights significant advances in the study of AI, cybersecurity, and regional governance. Nevertheless, these three areas of research have generally evolved as separate fields with limited theoretical integration. The first limitation concerns the relationship between technology and institutions. Research on AI primarily examines technological capabilities, ethical governance, and regulatory challenges, whereas cybersecurity studies focus on operational resilience, cyber defense, and threat management. By contrast, International Relations scholarship emphasizes regional institutions, security cooperation, and governance mechanisms without systematically incorporating AI as a factor influencing institutional adaptation (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Consequently, current scholarship provides only a partial understanding of how technological transformation reshapes regional governance.

A second limitation relates to comparative analysis. Much of the existing research relies on single-case studies of the European Union, ASEAN, China, or the United States. Although these studies provide detailed insights into specific institutional settings, they offer limited explanations for why comparable technological pressures produce different governance outcomes across regions with contrasting political and institutional characteristics.

The third and most significant limitation concerns causal explanation. Existing studies frequently describe developments in AI governance and cybersecurity regulation but devote less attention to the mechanisms through which AI-related cyber challenges influence institutional adaptation. As a result, technological change is often treated as an external driver of governance reform rather than as a factor whose effects are conditioned by institutional capacity, political trust, and regional governance norms.

This study addresses these limitations by integrating insights from AI governance, New Regionalism, Regional Security Community Theory, and cybersecurity governance within a unified analytical framework. Instead of examining technology and institutions separately, the study explains how their interaction shapes regional cybersecurity governance. Through a structured comparative analysis of the European Union, ASEAN, and the Middle East, it identifies the institutional conditions under which AI-related cyber challenges encourage regulatory cooperation, strengthen regional governance, or reinforce strategic competition.

This perspective extends the existing literature in two respects. Theoretically, it connects technological transformation with regional institutional adaptation, offering an integrated explanation of how emerging technologies influence regional security governance. Empirically, it provides a comparative assessment of three contrasting regional contexts, demonstrating that differences in institutional capacity and political trust play a central role in shaping regional responses to AI-enabled cyber challenges.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how AI-related cyber challenges influence regional cybersecurity governance under different institutional conditions. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explain differences in institutional responses rather than measure statistical relationships (Yin, 2017).

The research uses a structured, focused comparison in which all cases are examined through the same analytical framework. This approach facilitates systematic comparison and helps identify the institutional factors associated with different governance outcomes (George & Bennett, 2005).

Case Selection

The study applies a most-different systems design to compare three contrasting regional contexts: the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Middle East, with particular attention to Iran's role in regional cyber dynamics. The EU represents a highly institutionalized model based on supranational institutions and binding regulations. ASEAN reflects a consensus-based model emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and voluntary cooperation. The Middle East represents a fragmented security environment characterized by geopolitical rivalry and limited regional institutionalization. This variation provides a basis for examining why similar technological challenges produce different governance responses (George & Bennett, 2005).

Data Collection

The study relies primarily on qualitative document analysis. Primary sources include regional cybersecurity strategies, regulatory frameworks, official declarations, policy documents, and institutional reports produced by the EU, ASEAN, and relevant Middle Eastern institutions.

These sources are complemented by peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and reports from international organizations. Using multiple categories of evidence enables cross-checking and strengthens the credibility of the findings (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

The study combines comparative case analysis with process tracing. Comparative analysis identifies differences and similarities across the three cases, while process tracing examines how technological developments are followed by institutional and policy responses (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

The analysis focuses on three dimensions derived from the theoretical framework:

1. Institutional capacity: the strength and regulatory authority of regional institutions.
2. Political trust: the willingness of states to cooperate, exchange information, and coordinate policies.
3. Governance norms: principles concerning sovereignty, decision-making, and regional cooperation.

These dimensions are used consistently across the EU, ASEAN, and the Middle East to explain variation in regional cybersecurity governance.

Research Validity and Limitations

The study strengthens validity through structured comparison, data triangulation, and process tracing. Applying the same analytical criteria across all cases improves comparability, while combining official documents with academic and institutional sources reduces reliance on individual sources (Bowen, 2009; George & Bennett, 2005). Process tracing further supports causal analysis by examining the sequence connecting technological developments with institutional responses (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

The study has two principal limitations. First, qualitative design supports analytical rather than statistical generalization. Second, cybersecurity policies and technologies are evolving rapidly, meaning that regional governance arrangements may continue to change beyond the period examined. Despite these limitations, the research design provides an appropriate basis for explaining differences in regional cybersecurity governance.

AI and the Transformation of Regional Cyber Threats

AI-Driven Cyber Threats

Artificial intelligence has changed the speed, scale, and adaptability of cyber operations. Machine learning, generative AI, and large language models can support activities such as phishing, malware development, vulnerability discovery, reconnaissance, and influence operations. At the same time, these technologies improve threat detection, incident response, and risk assessment (Achuthan et al., 2024; Brundage et al., 2018; European Union Agency for Cybersecurity [ENISA], 2024).

The significance of these developments lies in the increasing interaction between offensive and defensive capabilities. AI allows cyber operations to adapt more rapidly to changing technical environments, making attribution, prevention, and response more difficult. Consequently, cybersecurity increasingly requires institutional capacity to anticipate and manage continuously evolving risks rather than simply respond to individual incidents.

From Cyber Incidents to Systemic Regional Security Risks

AI-enabled cyber threats increasingly affect interconnected digital systems rather than isolated networks. Energy, finance, telecommunications, healthcare, transportation, and government services depend on infrastructures that cross national boundaries. Disruption in one system or jurisdiction can therefore produce wider regional consequences, particularly through interconnected supply chains and digital services (ENISA, 2024).

The expansion of generative AI has also broadened the security dimension of these risks. Synthetic media and automated influence operations can affect public trust, political communication, and social stability, linking cybersecurity with wider concerns of economic and political resilience (European Commission, 2024).

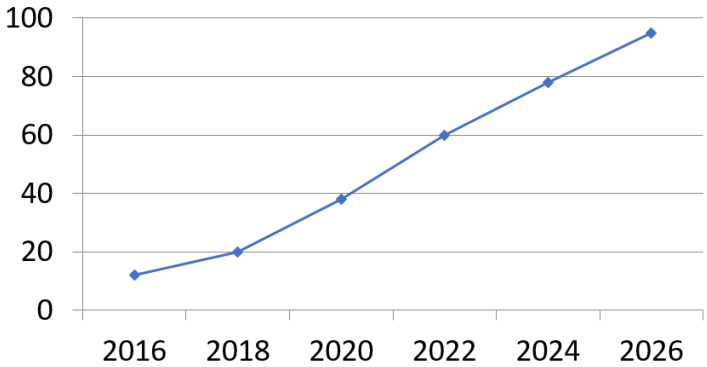
These developments strengthen the regional dimension of cybersecurity. As digital interdependence increases, national responses alone become less sufficient, creating greater demand for information sharing, coordinated incident response, and common standards. However, the ability to develop such mechanisms depends on the institutional conditions of each region.

Implications for Regional Security Cooperation

The changing nature of cyber threats increases the importance of regional cooperation in areas such as information sharing, incident response, capacity building, regulatory coordination, and critical infrastructure protection (ENISA, 2024). However, similar technological pressures do not necessarily produce similar forms of cooperation. Institutional capacity and political conditions shape how regions respond. The European Union has translated emerging cyber risks into stronger regulatory and institutional coordination. ASEAN has pursued gradual cooperation through consensus and voluntary policy coordination, while the Middle East remains more affected by geopolitical rivalry and fragmented regional institutions (Keith, 2024; Putra, 2024; Trigui et al., 2024).

The central implication is therefore that technological change does not determine a single pattern of regional governance. AI creates common security pressures, but institutional capacity, political trust, and regional governance norms influence whether these pressures lead to deeper cooperation or continued strategic competition. The following comparative analysis examines these differences across the European Union, ASEAN, and the Middle East.

Figure 2
Threat Index (2016–2026)



Source: Data compiled by the author (2026).

Comparative Regional Analysis

European Union: Institutional Integration and Regional Cybersecurity Governance

The European Union represents the most institutionally developed case examined in this study. Its cybersecurity governance combines supranational institutions, binding legislation, common standards, and coordinated implementation. This structure enables Member States to address cyber risks through collective regulatory mechanisms rather than relying exclusively on national policies (Christou, 2016; ENISA, 2024).

Institutional Capacity and Governance Structure

EU cybersecurity governance involves the European Commission, ENISA, the NIS Cooperation Group, the CSIRTs Network, and national cybersecurity authorities. Although Member States retain important operational responsibilities, these institutions facilitate policy coordination, information exchange, technical support, and cross-border cooperation (Christou, 2016; ENISA, 2024).

This institutional density is particularly relevant to AI-related cyber risks because it allows existing governance mechanisms to adapt to emerging technologies. Cybersecurity is increasingly connected with critical infrastructure protection, digital resilience, supply-chain security, and broader digital governance (European Commission, 2024).

Regulatory Development

The EU has developed a relatively coherent regulatory framework through complementary legislation. The NIS2 Directive establishes common cybersecurity requirements for essential and important entities, while the Cyber Resilience Act introduces cybersecurity requirements for digital products throughout their lifecycle. Together, these measures strengthen common cybersecurity standards across the Union (ENISA, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

The AI Act adds an important AI-specific dimension to this framework. Its risk-based approach includes requirements related to cybersecurity, robustness, risk management, and monitoring for high-risk AI systems. This illustrates the increasing convergence between AI governance and cybersecurity regulation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024).

Institutional Response to Emerging Cyber Risks

The European approach relies largely on adapting existing institutions to emerging risks rather than creating separate governance structures for every technological development. Coordinated incident reporting, risk assessment, technical guidance, and cooperation among national authorities contribute to this process (ENISA, 2024). However, implementation remains uneven because Member States differ in administrative capacity, cybersecurity maturity, and national implementation practices. The continuing interaction between the AI Act, NIS2, the Cyber Resilience Act, and other digital regulations therefore requires sustained institutional coordination.

Regional Cybersecurity Effectiveness

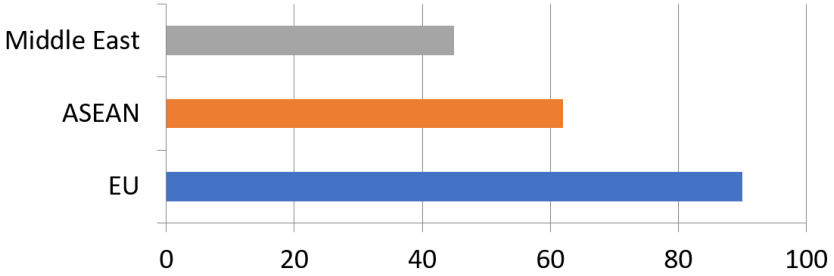
The EU demonstrates how institutional capacity can strengthen regional cyber resilience through information sharing, coordinated incident management, common standards, and collective preparedness. Its effectiveness, however, should be understood in terms of resilience and response capacity rather than the elimination of cyber threats.

AI-related risks continue to evolve, including AI-assisted social engineering, automated vulnerability discovery, supply-chain risks, and synthetic content. Consequently, European cybersecurity governance requires continuous risk assessment and regulatory adaptation (ENISA, 2024).

Comparative Assessment

The EU case supports the central argument of this study: technological pressure alone does not determine regional governance outcomes. Existing institutional capacity enables AI-related cyber risks to be translated into coordinated regulatory and policy responses. AI therefore acts as a catalyst for institutional adaptation, while the strength of regional institutions determines the extent of collective action.

Figure 3
Capacity Score in EU, ASEAN, and the Middle East



Source: Data compiled by the author (2026).

ASEAN: Consensus-Based Cooperation and Incremental Cybersecurity Governance

ASEAN represents a substantially different model of regional cybersecurity governance. Its approach is based on consultation, consensus, non-interference, and gradual cooperation rather than supranational authority. These principles have shaped cybersecurity cooperation around capacity building, policy coordination, confidence building, and information sharing (Acharya, 2014b).

Institutional Structure and Cybersecurity Cooperation

ASEAN has developed cybersecurity cooperation through regional mechanisms rather than a centralized regulatory authority. The ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy 2021–2025 focuses on advancing cyber readiness, strengthening regional policy coordination, building trust, developing capacity, and expanding international cooperation (ASEAN, 2022). (ASEAN Main Portal)

This approach allows states with different levels of technological and administrative capacity to participate without transferring significant authority to regional institutions. The main consequence is greater flexibility but less uniformity in implementation.

AI Governance and Regional Coordination

ASEAN has also begun addressing AI governance through regional guidelines. The ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, adopted in 2024, provides principles and practical guidance for the responsible development and use of AI. Its role is primarily coordinative rather than regulatory, reflecting ASEAN's preference for non-binding regional frameworks (ASEAN, 2024). (ASEAN Main Portal)

For cybersecurity, this distinction is important. The regional AI framework can promote common expectations concerning responsible AI development, but it does not create a centralized system for managing AI-related cyber incidents. Cybersecurity cooperation therefore remains dependent on national capabilities and voluntary regional coordination.

Regional Cybersecurity Capacity

ASEAN has nevertheless strengthened regional cyber capacity through information-sharing mechanisms, training, confidence-building initiatives, and cooperation among national authorities. The ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy provides an institutional framework for these activities (ASEAN, 2022). (JAIF ASEAN)

The principal limitation is the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms comparable to those found in the EU. Implementation consequently varies according to national priorities and institutional capacity.

Comparative Assessment

ASEAN demonstrates that regional cooperation can develop without supranational integration. However, its consensus-based structure produces a gradual form of governance in which technological pressures encourage coordination without fundamentally changing the underlying institutional model. AI therefore strengthens the need for cooperation while remaining filtered through ASEAN's established norms of sovereignty and consensus.

The Middle East: Geopolitical Rivalry and Fragmented Cybersecurity Governance

The Middle East presents a different institutional environment. Unlike the EU, the region does not possess a single organization with comprehensive authority over cybersecurity. Cooperation exists through sub-regional arrangements, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but broader regional governance remains constrained by geopolitical rivalry, divergent national priorities, and limited political trust.

Institutional Fragmentation and Gulf Cooperation

The GCC provides the clearest example of structured cybersecurity cooperation within the region. Its member states have developed mechanisms for coordination, joint exercises, policy development, and information sharing. The Gulf Cybersecurity Strategy 2024–2028 and its implementation mechanisms demonstrate continuing efforts to strengthen cooperation among GCC members (Gulf Cooperation Council, 2024). However, GCC cooperation should not be equated with a comprehensive Middle Eastern cybersecurity regime. It remains subregional and does not encompass the broader strategic divisions involving Iran, Israel, and other regional actors.

Iran and Regional Cyber Competition

Iran is particularly relevant to understanding the relationship between cyber capabilities and regional security competition. Iranian cyber capabilities have developed as part of broader national security strategies and have contributed to the wider cyber competition involving regional and external actors.

In such an environment, cybersecurity is frequently treated as a national security capability rather than a domain for broad regional institutionalization. Concerns regarding sensitive information, attribution, strategic vulnerability, and deterrence can therefore limit incentives for extensive information sharing and common regulatory arrangements.

AI Governance and Uneven Institutional Development

AI governance across the Middle East remains uneven. States differ significantly in technological capacity, regulatory development, national AI strategies, and institutional readiness. These differences make the development of a comprehensive regional governance framework difficult.

Consequently, AI development has largely progressed through national strategies and initiatives, while regional cooperation remains selective. Where common interests exist, cooperation is possible, particularly within sub-regional arrangements such as the GCC. However, geopolitical competition continues to constrain broader institutional integration.

Regional Governance Outcome

The Middle Eastern case therefore represents neither complete institutional absence nor effective region-wide governance. Instead, it demonstrates selective cooperation within particular institutional settings alongside broader strategic fragmentation. This pattern supports the study's theoretical argument that technological pressures are filtered through existing political relationships and institutional structures. Compared with the EU and ASEAN, the Middle Eastern response remains more state-centered, with national AI and cybersecurity capabilities developing faster than comprehensive regional governance mechanisms.

Comparative Discussion

The comparison demonstrates that the three regions face broadly similar challenges associated with AI-enabled cyber risks but respond through different institutional mechanisms.

The EU represents the strongest form of institutional integration. Binding legislation, specialized institutions, and coordinated implementation allow technological pressures to be translated into regional regulatory responses.

ASEAN follows a more flexible model. Consensus, voluntary cooperation, capacity building, and common guidelines allow regional coordination while preserving national sovereignty. Its main limitation is the absence of strong enforcement and uniform implementation mechanisms.

The Middle East presents the most fragmented pattern. sub regional cooperation, particularly within the GCC, demonstrates that institutional coordination is possible, but geopolitical rivalry and limited regional trust constrain the development of broader governance

arrangements. Overall, the comparison confirms the central proposition of this study: AI creates common strategic pressures, but it does not produce a uniform model of regional cybersecurity governance. Institutional capacity, political trust, and governance norms determine whether technological pressures generate regulatory integration, incremental coordination, or fragmented and predominantly national responses.

Conclusion

This study examined how artificial intelligence has influenced regional cybersecurity governance and why comparable technological challenges have produced different patterns of regional cooperation. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the effects of AI cannot be explained by technological change alone. Instead, regional responses are shaped by the institutional capacity of regional organizations, the degree of political trust among member states, and the governance norms that structure regional cooperation.

The findings indicate that AI has expanded the scope of cybersecurity beyond the protection of digital infrastructure. Cybersecurity has become an issue of regional governance that requires coordinated regulatory frameworks, institutional adaptation, and sustained cross-border cooperation. As AI-enabled cyber threats continue to evolve, regional institutions increasingly face the challenge of responding to technological change while maintaining effective governance arrangements.

The three case studies illustrate distinct institutional trajectories. The European Union has developed the most comprehensive regional governance model by combining supranational institutions with legally binding regulatory frameworks that support coordinated cybersecurity policies (Christou, 2016; European Union Agency for Cybersecurity [ENISA], 2024). ASEAN has adopted a more gradual approach based on consultation, consensus, and voluntary coordination, reflecting the principles that have traditionally shaped regional cooperation (Keith, 2024). In contrast, the Middle East continues to experience fragmented regional governance, where geopolitical rivalry limits institutional cooperation and encourages nationally driven cybersecurity strategies (Grand-Clément, 2023).

Comparing these regional experiences demonstrates that similar technological pressures do not produce uniform governance outcomes. AI has acted as a catalyst that exposes differences in institutional preparedness rather than determining a single path of regional development. Regions with stronger institutional arrangements have generally been more capable of translating common cybersecurity challenges into coordinated governance, whereas weaker institutional settings have struggled to move beyond fragmented national responses.

The study also contributes to the literature by connecting AI governance, cybersecurity governance, New Regionalism, and Regional Security Community Theory within a single analytical framework. This integrated perspective explains regional variation by emphasizing the interaction between technological change and institutional context, offering a broader explanation than approaches that focus exclusively on technology or national cybersecurity capabilities.

The findings have practical implications for policymakers. Investments in AI technologies alone are unlikely to strengthen regional cybersecurity if they are not accompanied by institutional coordination, regulatory coherence, information sharing, and mechanisms that

encourage sustained regional cooperation. Strengthening these institutional foundations is essential for improving regional resilience as cyber threats continue to evolve.

The study is subject to several limitations. It examines three regional cases through a qualitative comparative design and therefore seeks to provide analytical rather than statistical generalization. In addition, the rapid pace of technological and regulatory change means that regional cybersecurity governance will continue to evolve beyond the period covered by this research. Future studies may extend the comparative analysis to other regional organizations, incorporate quantitative indicators of cybersecurity governance, or examine the growing role of private technology companies in regional AI governance.

Overall, the findings suggest that the future of regional cybersecurity governance will depend less on the pace of technological innovation than on the ability of regional institutions to adapt to that innovation. As AI becomes more deeply integrated into cyber operations, institutional resilience, regulatory coordination, and political cooperation are likely to become the principal factors shaping regional cybersecurity governance.

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

The authors declare that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools were used in the development of this manuscript.

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Selling Curriculum Reform in Colours: Multimodal Packaging of English Policy Texts in Hong Kong (2017–2025)

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Abstract

This article examines how curriculum reform is condensed, ranked, and legitimised when a long policy text is repackaged for rapid professional uptake. It focuses on the leaflet and three posters released with Hong Kong's *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–6)* in 2025, using the 2017 guide and one of its curriculum-framework diagrams as a contrastive backdrop. The study combines social-semiotic multimodal analysis with a corpus-assisted comparison of approximately 74,843 words in the 2025 guide and 70,310 words in the 2017 guide. Visual coding addressed information value, salience, framing, colour, represented participants, modality, and metaphor; lexical frequencies were normalised per 10,000 words and selected differences tested with log-likelihood. The findings show that the companion materials do more than summarise the guide. Paths, trains, arrows, colour-coded clusters, and repeated values icons turn reform into a coherent journey with an implied sequence and destination. National-security and patriotic discourse rises sharply in the 2025 text and is integrated visually into the same cheerful ecology as reading, values education, collaboration, and resource provision. By contrast, global orientation, linguistic plurality, and learner difference receive little comparable visual anchoring. Teachers appear as coordinators of guided activity, while pupils are active mainly within preconfigured routes. The article argues that such artefacts perform policy work by configuring the first reading of reform: they make priorities memorable, place ideologically charged content within an ordinary pedagogical register, and narrow the field of what is immediately visible without determining how schools will enact the policy.

Keywords: curriculum policy, multimodality, critical discourse analysis, Hong Kong, English language education

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Introduction

Curriculum guides are rarely read from first page to last under ideal conditions. School leaders encounter them with circulars, briefing slides, webpages, professional-development sessions, and deadlines; teachers may first meet a reform through a panel summary or workshop display. Such shorter artefacts establish categories through which the guide is approached. A poster naming four "major updates," a leaflet distributing them across coloured panels, or a recurrent icon does more than shorten text: it proposes a hierarchy, itinerary, and practical reading of change.

This article investigates the visual package accompanying Hong Kong's *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–6)* (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2025). The two-spread leaflet and three posters, published on the Education Bureau (EDB) curriculum-document webpage (Education Bureau, 2025b, 2025c), use coloured diagrams, cartoon pupils, a route, train, circular progressions, jigsaw pieces, and a recurring values wheel. Addressed to leaders and teachers, their visual world principally depicts children in orderly, collaborative activity, joining policy implementation to an affective image of purposeful, harmonious learning.

The materials rearticulate English education amid wider emphases on values education, national identity, and national security. These are neither external to English nor confined to civics: official resources frame English as a site for cultural, ecological, food, data, and other dimensions of national security through reading, viewing, speaking, and writing (Education Bureau, 2024, 2025a). The question is therefore not only whether terms appear in the guide, but how their legitimacy is produced across verbal and visual modes.

Comparison with 2017 requires caution. The *English Language Education Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide (Primary 1–Secondary 6)* was not literally "text only": it included tables, diagrams, and visual organisation (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2017). Yet it was predominantly textual and lacked a comparable campaign-like poster set and dedicated "Major Updates" leaflet on the curriculum-document page. Its Primary 1–Secondary 6 scope also differs from the primary-specific 2025 guide. The documents thus provide a diachronic contrast, not equivalent editions or a controlled experiment.

The case connects policy sociology, multimodal social semiotics, and corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Ball's (1993) account of policy as text and discourse directs attention to both official formulations and the discursive conditions that delimit what becomes reasonable. Policy enactment further treats implementation as situated translation rather than faithful transfer (Ball et al., 2011). Centrally produced companion visuals anticipate enactment by selecting what practitioners should first notice and presenting priorities as coherent.

The study investigates three questions:

1. How do the 2025 leaflet and posters use layout, salience, colour, represented participants, and visual metaphor to organise the guide's "major updates" for educators?
2. How does the 2025 guide's verbal framing differ from that of the 2017 guide, particularly in relation to skills, values, national-security discourse, global orientation, and learner diversity?
3. How do verbal and visual modes work together to foreground, normalise, or background policy priorities?

The contribution is empirical and conceptual: it documents a changed lexical and visual ecology and treats design as recontextualisation rather than decoration. The argument is not that icons compel interpretation or teachers passively absorb messages. Design configures first reading, making some relations routine and immediately available while leaving others without equivalent visual support.

Policy Texts, Visual Design, and Legitimation

Policy as Text, Discourse, and Enactment

The distinction between policy as text and discourse prevents two reductions. Policy is neither stable instruction, detached from negotiation and institutional mediation, nor only discourse, detached from the document practitioners must use. For Ball (1993), texts are selective representations produced through contested processes, while discourse establishes which problems and solutions become thinkable. A curriculum guide is consequently both a finite arrangement of words and a node in authorised educational knowledge.

Schools do not simply "implement" it. Under conditions of staffing, history, student intake, resources, accountability, and competing initiatives, actors translate and reconstruct policy in practice (Ball et al., 2011). The visual package neither bypasses this process nor has a deterministic effect: panels may ignore it, adopt it as a meeting agenda, or reinterpret it locally. Yet, issued by the guide's official source, it enters with unequal authority and a ready-made map of change.

Design also changes policy reading's temporality. A long guide invites searching and cross-reference; a poster is rapidly apprehended, often at distance. Spatial hierarchy, title, large diagram, recurrent icon, and directional path can establish a preliminary reform account before its sentences are read. In crowded policy environments, that economy matters. Research on multimedia design similarly shows that visual elements such as colour are not merely decorative but shape how relevant information is processed and perceived (Désiron & Schneider, 2024).

Multimodality and the Grammar of Policy Visibility

Multimodality holds that meaning is distributed across modes, not carried by language alone (Bateman et al., 2017; Jewitt et al., 2016; Kress, 2009). Wording, typography, colour, image, spatial arrangement, and format have distinct affordances. A wheel can suggest recurrence or interdependence, a path movement and sequence, and a jigsaw complementary parts; transcription cannot recover these relations.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar offers a vocabulary for analysis. Information value concerns placement–given/new, ideal/real, centre/margin; salience concerns prominence through size, contrast, focus, foregrounding, and position; framing concerns separation or connection. Participants and vectors establish who acts, observes, and moves where. These are heuristic categories, not mechanical codes: their meaning follows from resource combinations within an artefact.

Colour also requires context. Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) and van Leeuwen (2011) show that it can differentiate, connect, foreground, and confer coherence, but its meanings are socially situated. It would be unwarranted to treat teal as intrinsically authoritative or orange

as universally warm. In the 2025 package, saturated hues recur across headings, panels, icons, vehicles, and arrows, grouping themes and making separate initiatives appear parts of one system. The policy effect lies in patterned use, not universal colour psychology.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis asks whose interests and values are sustained when arrangements become natural or commonsensical (Fairclough, 1992; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Ledin and Machin (2019) describe how lists, templates, stock imagery, and design systems can make political choices appear technical and manageable. Policy graphics therefore translate disagreement into categories, flows, and tasks.

Legitimation Across Words and Images

Van Leeuwen's (2007) four forms of legitimation are authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. Official logos, genre, and approved-resource links authorise; evaluative language connects a proposal to desirable dispositions; rationalisation presents it as necessary, useful, or sound; mythopoesis narrates conduct moving towards a desirable outcome.

These forms also operate visually. An official webpage and coherent government design authorise before a claim is read; smiling children, a collaboration badge, or a positive-values wheel make moral evaluation visible. Arrows and staged progressions rationalise reform as orderly sequence, while paths and trains narrate travel towards improvement. Their cumulative effect matters more than any isolated sign.

Visual artefacts make organisations material, portable, and recognisable (Meyer et al., 2013), but condensation also excludes. A poster's absence does not prove policy absence; it affects immediate visibility. The study therefore distinguishes *foregrounding* (repeated, prominent, multimodally reinforced treatment), *normalisation* (integration of marked concerns into familiar pedagogical and affective forms), and *backgrounding* (linguistic possibility without comparable salience or anchoring).

Hong Kong's Changing Curriculum-Policy Setting

Hong Kong English education has combined communicative competence, examination performance, multilingual realities, international positioning, whole-person development, and local and national identity. It must also respond to changing governmental priorities. Research documents intensified emphasis on national identity and security and the institutional recoding of citizenship after 2020 (Vickers, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). This context does not predetermine every icon's meaning, but makes the placement of national and security-related discourse significant.

The 2021 *Values Education Curriculum Framework (Pilot Version)* asked schools to plan values education across curricula and experiences from early years (CDC, 2021). English was positioned as a domain connecting values with themes, texts, language activities, and reflection. Official English-language national-security resources similarly promote the "organic" integration of security elements into ordinary teaching (Education Bureau, 2024). The 2025 guide and visuals emerged within this architecture.

Integration suggests that values and national security are not detachable additions to language learning. It can reduce fragmentation and create meaningful language contexts; it can also make

ideological content appear coextensive with uncontroversial pedagogical goods. The task is not to decide whether integration is sound or manipulative, but to show how it is materially accomplished and which distinctions it makes visible or difficult to see.

Data and Method

Research Design and Dataset

The study is an interpretive, corpus-assisted multimodal case analysis, combining close reading of a bounded visual package with quantitative lexical comparison of two official guides. Corpus measures identify shifts in textual prominence; multimodal analysis explains how companion artefacts organise and relate selected themes. Neither is a proxy for teacher reception or classroom effect.

Table 1
Dataset and Analytical Roles

Material	Analytical role	Scope	Size / coding basis
2017 curriculum guide	Diachronic textual backdrop	Primary 1–Secondary 6	70,310 running words
2025 curriculum guide	Primary policy text	Primary 1–6	Approximately 74,843 running words
2025 two-spread leaflet	Condensed visual-verbal overview	Major updates and resources	6 leaflet-specific observations
2025 Posters 1–3	Campaign-like companion artefacts	Overview; e-learning/assessment; reading/values	15 poster-specific observations
Cross-artefact and 2017 visual coding	Recurring patterns and limited visual contrast	2025 package plus one 2017 framework diagram	8 cross-artefact and 15 contrastive observations

Note. The 2017 visual coding is a contrastive illustration, not a genre-matched baseline. Word counts refer to the working plain-text corpora.

The visual dataset comprises the two-spread "Major Updates" leaflet and three posters published with the 2025 guide. Poster 1 uses a winding path and values wheel; Poster 2 combines e-learning, information literacy, and assessment literacy; Poster 3 combines Reading Across the Curriculum, values education, and national-security resources. The leaflet uses panels, jigsaw pieces, circles, arrows, quotation marks, and resource prompts. A 2017 curriculum-framework diagram was coded as a contrastive illustration, not a visual corpus equivalent in size or function.

Plain-text versions of the 2017 and 2025 guides comprise 70,310 and approximately 74,843 running words. Project-workbook counts were checked by reproducing reported normalised frequencies and log-likelihood values. As PDF conversion can introduce headers, broken words, and optical-character-recognition noise, the comparison uses stable surface forms and transparent phrase groups, rather than a fully lemmatised corpus; it supplements close reading.

Multimodal Coding

Coding had three moves: describing observable resources without ideological conclusion (position, relative size, colour contrast, framing, vectors, participant roles, gaze, recurrent

metaphors); interpreting verbal–visual coupling; and considering what configurations authorised, morally evaluated, rationalised, narrated, or left without comparable support.

Table 2
Multimodal Analytical Framework

Dimension	Operational question	Potential policy work
Information value	What is placed at the top/bottom, centre/margin, or left/right?	Ranks the ideal and practical; marks established and newly offered information
Salience	What attracts attention through size, position, contrast, repetition, or focus?	Foregrounds selected priorities within limited viewing time
Framing and vectors	What is separated, connected, sequenced, or directed?	Constructs coherence, causality, progression, and implementation routes
Participants and modality	Who acts, observes, points, collaborates, or remains absent, and in what visual register?	Offers teacher/pupil subject positions and calibrates seriousness or friendliness
Colour and typography	How do recurring hues and type hierarchies classify and connect elements?	Creates recognisable clusters and institutional coherence
Metaphor and verbal–visual coupling	How do paths, trains, wheels, jigsaws, labels, and resource links work together?	Authorises, evaluates, rationalises, and narrates reform

Note. Categories draw on social-semiotic visual grammar and multimodal critical discourse analysis.

The 2025 inventory contains 29 coded observations across leaflet, posters, and cross-artefact patterns; the 2017 contrastive inventory has 15 observations from one curriculum-framework diagram. Observations were bounded elements, such as the national-security resource prompt, or recurrent features, such as cheerful cartoon modality. Counts indicate inventory scope, not visual importance. Salience was assessed relationally through scale, position, contrast, repetition, and connectivity.

Silence was coded conservatively. A missing synonym did not make a theme backgrounded: the analysis considered whether it had a recognisable participant, symbol, label, location, or recurrent link. The absence of Cantonese or multilingual wording was a contextual absence, not evidence that schools or the guide deny multilingual practice; English-language publicity is expected to use English. Comparatively, national identity and values have dedicated icons and resource routes, whereas linguistic plurality lacks a parallel visual anchor.

Corpus Comparison

Raw counts were normalised per 10,000 words for corpus size. For a term occurring O times in N words, the rate was $(O/N) \times 10{,}000$. Selected differences used the log-likelihood statistic common in corpus comparison (Dunning, 1993; Rayson & Garside, 2000), with expected counts derived from combined frequency and relative corpus sizes:

$$G^2 = 2 \times [O_1 \ln(O_1/E_1) + O_2 \ln(O_2/E_2)]. \quad (1)$$

Conventional thresholds were used for descriptive orientation: 3.84 ($p < .05$), 6.63 ($p < .01$), 10.83 ($p < .001$), and 15.13 ($p < .0001$), with one degree of freedom. Zero counts were handled by treating the corresponding O ln(O/E) contribution as zero. Statistical significance here does not establish substantive importance, intentional policy change, or causal effect. Nor were the focal terms drawn from a preregistered exhaustive vocabulary. They were theoretically selected

and explored without a correction for multiple testing. The analysis therefore reports raw counts, normalised rates, and effect direction alongside G^2, and interprets small or non-significant changes cautiously.

Phrase groups map wider patterns: "national/patriotic" combines selected forms for nation, country, national identity, citizenship, and patriotism; "security discourse" security and safeguarding; "proper/correct values" explicitly normative phrases; and "affective/pleasure" terms including enjoyment and interest. These overlapping, context-sensitive groups index emphasis rather than divide the curriculum ontologically.

Comparability, Ethics, and Interpretive Limits

Three limits structure the comparison. The 2017 guide spans Primary 1–Secondary 6 and the 2025 guide Primary 1–6, so shifts may reflect phase and audience as well as chronology. The 2025 package lacks a like-for-like 2017 publicity set, making visual comparison asymmetrical. Finally, centrally produced artefacts cannot show designers' intentions, viewers' attention, leaders' discussion, or classroom use.

No human participants or private records were involved; all materials were publicly released official documents. Figure reproductions are included with attribution for scholarly analysis, and interpretations were checked against full artefacts to avoid detaching detail from compositional context. These limits define the scope of the inferences rather than defects to be generalised beyond the case.

Findings

From Long Guide to Navigable Reform

The first transformation performed by the 2025 package is one of scale. Extended prose becomes titled territories that can be scanned, remembered, and assigned. Four areas recur: strengthening Reading Across the Curriculum, promoting values education, enhancing e-learning and information literacy, and strengthening assessment literacy. The leaflet distributes them through panels, jigsaw, and circles; posters render them route, train journey, and instructional scenes. Repetition makes these areas the reform's practical identity.

Figure 1
The 2025 Companion Visual Package: (a) Two-Spread Leaflet, (B) Overview Poster, (C) E-learning and Assessment Poster, and (D) Reading and Values Poster

Source: Education Bureau (2025b, 2025c); composite prepared from the official materials.

Condensation is selective. “Major updates” turns a guide into the claim that these are the changes deserving attention, supplying an agenda for professional conversation. It also makes other organising questions less likely to guide the first encounter–including linguistic repertoires, special educational needs, and unequal digital access. Such concerns may remain in the guide but do not organise its visual introduction.

The leaflet’s jigsaw presents separate responsibilities as complementary rather than competing for lesson time; circular assessment-and-learning arrows construe feedback as improvement rather than surveillance. Together they rationalise a system whose components naturally fit.

The 2017 contrastive diagram maps learning areas, essential learning experiences, generic skills, values and attitudes, lifelong and self-directed learning, whole-person development, and multiple pathways. Though colour differentiates domains, its logic is taxonomic and systemic,

depicting architecture across phases. The 2025 package instead converts selected priorities into actions and destinations: not a shift from "no visuals" to visuals, but from an occasional framework diagram in a predominantly textual guide to coordinated, portable visual genres.

Paths, Trains, and the Narrative of Orderly Movement

Poster 1 places a large winding path across the composition. Four labelled stops organise updates, with pupils and pedagogical icons on the route. Symbolic, aspirational elements occupy an "ideal" top zone; illustrated pupils near the bottom ground policy in classroom activity. The multicoloured values wheel is the largest recurring element: its scale and centrality make values education both one update and a principle radiating across others.

Figure 2

Overview Poster Showing Four Major Updates as Stops Along a Winding Route

Source: Education Bureau (2025c).

The path gives an entry point, direction, and progression, representing reform not as a contested choice but as a journey with marked stages. Its curves and engaged cartoon pupils soften prescription: direction is strong, affect playful.

Poster 3's train connects Reading Across the Curriculum and values education. More institutionally organised than a path, it accommodates separate components while ensuring they travel together. Reading, collaboration, and proper values become passengers on

coordinated progress; badges and labels attach desirable dispositions, and resource prompts form practical stations for teachers.

Arrows and circular sequences in Poster 2 and the leaflet turn assessment literacy into movement from evidence to feedback and further learning. They make sequences appear self-evident, without visualising limited time, uneven device access, assessment workload, or conflicting quality judgements. The genre offers orientation, but in the grammar of smooth progress.

These metaphors are visual mythopoesis in van Leeuwen's (2007) sense: a compact narrative in which appropriate educational conduct moves towards improvement. The vector supplies the plot: movement is desirable, connection orderly, arrival assumed.

Colour as Classification and Institutional Coherence

Saturated teal and blue, orange and coral, purple and pink recur with white space and outlined cartoons. Titles, panels, arrows, wheels, badges, and vehicles share the palette, giving otherwise distinct topical artefacts a common identity.

Colour's primary function is classificatory: it lets viewers follow a cluster from heading to icon and reduces apparent density. By carrying a category across panels and media, it also makes dispersed content easier to recognise as a continuing priority. The cheerful palette remains officially authorised through government provenance, stable typography, orderly grids, and the repeated visual system.

Fixed associations–blue as trust, orange as enthusiasm–are not warranted. The stronger inference is orchestration: values education, national-security resources, reading, digital literacy, and assessment become commensurable as differently coloured parts of one ecology. Palette, stars, rounded forms, and smiling pupils calibrate serious institutional content as non-confrontational, avoiding warning, danger, or prohibition even for national security. This shows the offered affective register, not that reception was uncontroversial.

Lexical Redistribution in the Guides

The corpus comparison supports the visual reading: the 2025 guide reorganises several concerns' verbal prominence. The largest shifts are national and security language. *National* rises from 7 occurrences (1.00 per 10,000 words) in 2017 to 97 (12.96) in 2025; *security* from 1 (0.14) to 87 (11.62); and *our country* is absent in 2017 but occurs 65 times (8.68) in 2025. All three differences are large by log-likelihood.

Table 3
Selected Lexical Contrasts Between the 2017 and 2025 Guides

Term / phrase	2017 n	2017 /10k	2025 n	2025 /10k	G^2	Inference
learning	1,123	159.72	1,267	169.29	2.02	n.s.
skills	372	52.91	549	73.35	24.07	$p < .0001$
national	7	1.00	97	12.96	87.36	$p < .0001$
security	1	0.14	87	11.62	105.76	$p < .0001$
our country	0	0.00	65	8.68	86.11	$p < .0001$
proper	2	0.28	52	6.95	54.68	$p < .0001$
correct	7	1.00	20	2.67	5.74	$p < .05$
patriotic	0	0.00	4	0.53	5.30	$p < .05$
global	8	1.14	1	0.13	6.64	$p < .01$
diversity	13	1.85	19	2.54	0.79	n.s.
learner diversity	13	1.85	18	2.41	0.53	n.s.
inclusion	7	1.00	2	0.27	3.26	n.s.

Note. Rates are occurrences per 10,000 words. G^2 is the log-likelihood statistic with 1 df; n.s. = not significant at $p < .05$. Corpora: 2017, N = 70,310; 2025, N ≈ 74,843.

The shift extends beyond isolated nouns: *national security* occurs 59 times in 2025, *national security education* 25 times, and *safeguarding* 20 times, against zero in the 2017 data. *Proper* rises from 2 to 52, *correct* from 7 to 20, and *patriotic* appears four times in 2025 and not in 2017. These terms do not always modify *values*, but together provide stronger resources for marking approved dispositions.

This is not simple ideological replacement. *Learning* remains the most frequent focal term, changing only from 159.72 to 169.29 per 10,000 words ($G^2 = 2.02$, not significant at .05); *values* is essentially stable, from 15.65 to 15.23. *Skills* rises from 52.91 to 73.35 ($G^2 = 24.07$, $p < .0001$). The 2025 guide retains a pedagogical and competency register while layering national-security discourse into learning and skills.

Lexical groups clarify that layering. National/patriotic language rises from 1.00 to 22.18 per 10,000 words, security discourse from 0.14 to 14.30, and proper/correct-values phrases emerge at 6.15. Affective/pleasure language also rises from 8.68 to 11.36; generic values-and-attitudes language is broadly stable, while explicitly positive values-and-attitudes phrases decline. Explicit national and normative content thus coexists with affective engagement. The groups are indicators of textual emphasis, not independent semantic compartments or direct measures of curricular effect.

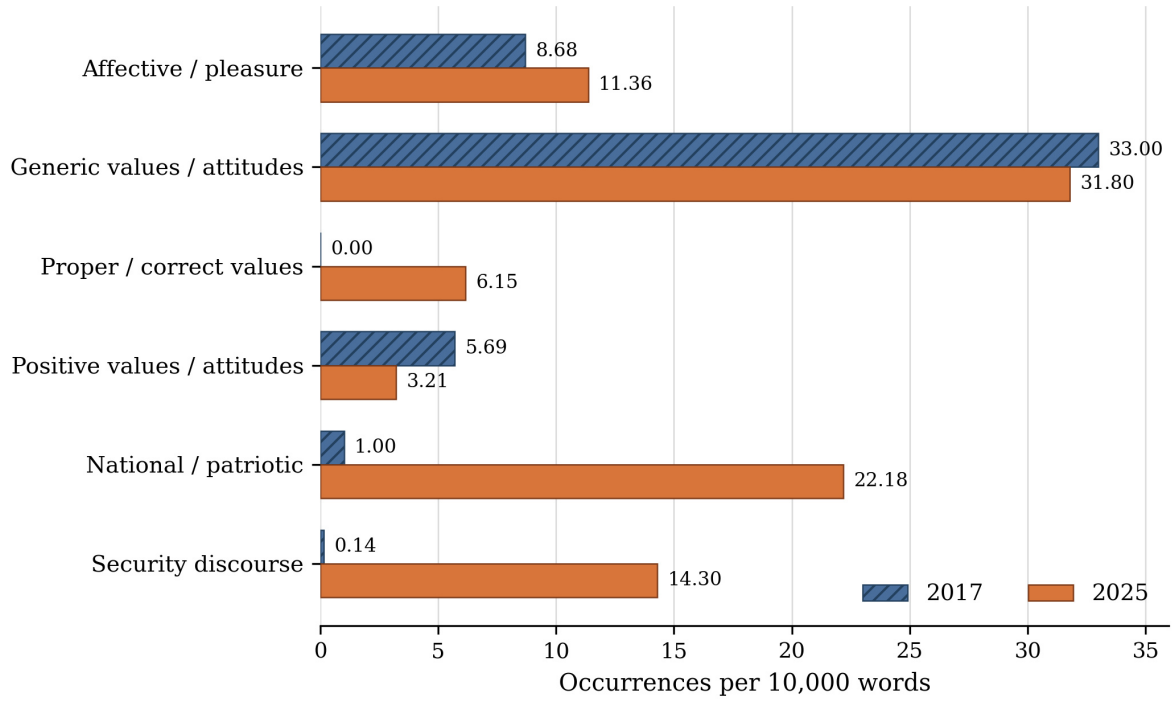
Table 4
Lexical-Group Redistribution Across the Two Guides

Lexical group	2017 n	2017 /10k	2025 n	2025 /10k
Affective / pleasure	61	8.68	85	11.36
Generic values / attitudes	232	33.00	238	31.80
Proper / correct values	0	0.00	46	6.15
Positive values / attitudes	40	5.69	24	3.21
National / patriotic	7	1.00	166	22.18
Security discourse	1	0.14	107	14.30

Note. Groups combine selected transparent surface forms and should be read as indices of emphasis rather than mutually exclusive semantic classes.

Figure 3 shows the two national-security clusters moving from the 2017 margins to prominent 2025 lexical components.

Figure 3
Selected Lexical Groups in the 2017 and 2025 Guides, Normalised per 10,000 Words



Source: Authors' calculations from the supplied corpus workbooks.

Global declines from 8 occurrences (1.14 per 10,000 words) to 1 (0.13), $G^2 = 6.64$, $p < .01$. This does not prove the abandonment of international outlook, which may use other words, examples, or aims, but the signifier loses focal prominence as national terms expand.

Equity terms require greater caution. *Diversity* rises from 13 to 19 and *learner diversity* from 13 to 18, neither significantly; *inclusion* falls from 7 to 2, with $G^2 = 3.26$ below .05. Learner difference has not disappeared from the text. The defensible finding is asymmetrical reinforcement: equity terms lack a comparable lexical surge and dedicated companion imagery.

Integrating National Security Into Ordinary Pedagogy

Poster 3 and the leaflet most clearly normalise National Security Education. Explicitly named and linked through a QR code or resource prompt, it sits with reading, values education, and cross-curricular resources. It is neither hidden nor, because of its small scale relative to the values wheel and placement among ordinary supports, a visually isolated warning or exceptional demand.

Table 5
Cross-Artefact Multimodal Evidence and Policy Work

Artefact	Salient configuration	Verbal / resource anchor	Interpretive policy work
Poster 1: overview	Winding path with four stops; largest repeated values wheel; pupils near the practical lower zone	Four "major updates" named along the route	Condenses reform into an ordered journey and makes values a cross-cutting centre of gravity
Poster 2: e-learning and assessment	Digital learning occupies the upper/ideal zone; arrows and circles organise assessment progression; teacher directs attention	Self-directed learning, ethical use of information, assessment for/as/of learning	Rationalises technology and assessment as complementary stages of guided improvement
Poster 3: reading and values	Train sequence, collaboration and proper-values badges, repeated values wheel, small national-security resource prompt	Reading Across the Curriculum, values education, learning and teaching resources	Places national-security content within an ordinary pedagogical resource ecology
Leaflet	Four pillars, jigsaw links, quotation-style implementation terms, circles and directional arrows	Rationales, strategies, assessment processes, QR-linked resources	Turns the guide into a navigable professional interface and presents initiatives as mutually fitting
Across the package	Cheerful cartoons, smiling pupils, recurring saturated palette, stars and vectors; no stable diversity or multilingual icon	Repeated labels and resource routes	Calibrates an optimistic affect while allocating unequal visibility among policy concerns

Note. Interpretations concern offered meanings in the artefacts, not measured viewer responses or designer intentions.

"Softening" is not concealment: the label is legible and an interested teacher can follow its resource path. What is softened is markedness. Shared palette, illustration style, and resource logic make national-security content one more dimension of competent curriculum planning.

All four legitimation types operate. Official publication and direct links authorise; the wheel, collaboration badge, and "proper values" morally evaluate; integration and resources rationalise teachability and usefulness; train and path narrate progress. Their redundancy, not one element, legitimates.

The corpus shows a parallel verbal process: recurring national security, safeguarding, country, identity, and resource references extend beyond a short passage. High-frequency learning and rising skills situate it in English education's professional register. The guide thus constructs pedagogical and national rationales as compatible.

Teacher and Pupil Positions

Although addressed to educators, the package mainly represents pupils reading, moving, collaborating, using devices, and travelling through the curriculum. Their positive, coordinated activity anticipates the outcome teachers are asked to produce: engaged learners whose skills and dispositions develop together.

Teachers appear selectively, especially in the e-learning and assessment poster, where one points or directs attention while pupils sit, watch, or participate. The image is not punitive and pupils are not inert, but vectors and spatial roles cast the teacher as an enabling coordinator of predesigned activity through lesson design, feedback, resources, and guided participation.

This sits uneasily with self-directed learning. Structured support can develop autonomy, yet choice, disagreement, and alternative routes are largely absent. Pupils are active within a path with defined destinations and values; "guided participation within preconfigured routes" is more accurate than passivity.

Teacher rises from 70 occurrences (9.96 per 10,000 words) in 2017 to 157 (20.98) in 2025. Scope differences may contribute, and there was no full grammatical-role analysis, but its prominence accords with a primary guide focused on teacher planning and exemplification. The visuals support this by converting priorities into actionable clusters and resource links.

The limits of the Visible Field

Foregrounding creates a background. The 2025 package has no comparably salient imagery for multilingual repertoire, Cantonese–English relations, socioeconomic difference, disability, or differentiated digital access. Cartoon pupils vary in appearance, but diversity lacks the persistent category status of values, reading, assessment, or e-learning; global or intercultural horizons lack a motif comparable to national identity and national-security resources.

This is not a complete guide inventory. The corpus includes *diversity* and *learner diversity*, and the guide may address adaptation and learner needs beyond four posters; English-language materials for English educators are unsurprising. The finding concerns scarce attention: despite repeated wheels, stars, QR codes, trains, and technology scenes, linguistic plurality and learner difference lack stable visual signs, shaping first-reading hierarchy.

Devices represent digital practice as available to contemporary learning, without interrupted connectivity, shared devices, accessibility tools, or uneven home support. Promotional condensation cannot depict every risk, but its cumulative effect renders an uneven practice a universal progression–a rationalising image of technology.

Likewise, no one debates "proper values," questions assessment criteria, or declines the train. Posters need not stage political contestation; critical analysis asks what generic convention accomplishes. Harmony, movement, and smiling participation make consensus the default scene for practitioners.

Discussion

Design as Policy Recontextualization

The findings support design as an active policy stage. Recontextualisation selects and reorganises meanings developed in one institutional setting for another. Here an extensive guide becomes a portable professional interface: prose becomes panels, recurrence a wheel, coordination a jigsaw, development a journey. It preserves official vocabulary but alters relations and constitutes a situated account of the guide's purpose.

That interface is useful: summaries, memorable categories, and access points can lower the cost of navigating a long guide and connect reading, assessment, digital literacy, and values. Usability and ideology, however, are not separate. The choices that make policy navigable also decide what is central, coherent, and off-map.

The case extends enactment research upstream. While Ball et al. (2011) foreground local creativity and constraint, the 2025 package pre-structures translation without controlling it, supplying labels, sequences, roles, and resources. Teachers retain agency but do not meet an unframed policy field.

Normalisation Through Multimodal Redundancy

The key finding is not only more national-security language but reinforcement between textual expansion and visual integration. The corpus establishes a recurring discourse, while visuals place it among child-centred activity, values, reading, collaboration, and resources. This multimodal redundancy stabilises the relation.

Normalisation does not claim illegitimacy or deception. It identifies the semiotic rendering of marked or politically charged content as ordinary within the genre. Cheerful modality does not deny security's seriousness, and a QR code does not hide its source; design presents the content as belonging in the same practical space as other curriculum resources.

Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework explains the operation. Authorisation alone may be compulsory but external, moral evaluation inspiring but vague, rationalisation technical but affectively thin, and mythopoesis memorable but procedurally weak. Together, provenance, positive-values vocabulary, cross-curricular rationale, and journeys make reform official, good, workable, and forward-moving.

Rising pleasure-related terms alongside national and security discourse further show that the 2025 voice is not simply prohibitive. It combines normative specification and engagement, suited to primary education's developmental framing and consistent with visual avoidance of threat or defence: security is pedagogised through ordinary learning.

Horizons in English Education

Hong Kong English policy has carried local and international expectations. The focal decline of *global* and absent strong global motif should therefore be read with sharply rising national discourse as a rebalancing, not total replacement. English remains a language of learning, literacy, communication, and skills, but is more explicitly recruited to cultivate national identity and security awareness.

This complicates assumptions that English is naturally outward-facing. A language curriculum can mediate national narratives through globally circulating linguistic and multimodal resources, perhaps lending them reach and institutional versatility. The 2025 materials make national orientation compatible with cross-curricular reading, information literacy, and engagement.

Backgrounded equity and multilingualism are related but distinct. Non-significant frequency differences and four artefacts cannot establish deliberate exclusion. Yet when national and security themes receive large lexical expansion and a visible resource infrastructure, stable low-frequency learner-diversity references have less agenda-setting force. Revisions could retain the four priorities while making differentiated access, linguistic repertoire, and varied learner pathways visible.

Implications for Policy Communication and Professional Reading

Policy designers should assess companion visuals for representational balance as well as clarity and attractiveness. A design audit can ask which priorities have recurring icons, who acts, which frictions diagrams remove, which learners are default, and what readers must retrieve from the guide because the summary lacks space. This makes selection accountable without making posters encyclopaedic, and helps distinguish necessary condensation from unnoticed exclusion.

School leaders and teacher educators can foster critical professional reading between poster and guide. Panels might reconstruct visual hierarchy, then test it against chapters: What is condensed? Which connections are textual and which created by layout? How do priorities look to multilingual learners, students with disabilities, or teachers with limited digital resources? The package remains a useful entry point, not the whole policy.

The case also supports combining corpus and visual analysis. A visual reading could overstate values' novelty because the wheel is salient although *values* is stable; frequencies identify rising national-security language but not its affective, spatial integration. Triangulation shows the modes' different work.

Limitations and Future Research

Claims are bounded by the guides' different phase and scope, PDF-to-text uncertainty, focal-term selection, and exploratory phrase groups and significance tests. A fuller study could use phase-matched primary subcorpora, document preprocessing, systematically examine concordances, and report effect sizes with corrected thresholds.

The visual dataset is small and institutionally specific, enabling contextual reading rather than statistical generalisation. The 2017 diagram is not genre-matched, and the study does not claim a general shift across Hong Kong communication. A longitudinal archive could cover leaflets, posters, briefing decks, webpages, and social-media posts across key learning areas.

Most importantly, analysis addresses offered rather than received meanings. Interviews, panel observation, think-aloud reading, and eye-tracking could test predicted salience; school cases could trace categories through schemes and lessons, showing reproduction, adaptation, or contestation. Research with pupils could test whether journey metaphors aid understanding or restrict alternative values and routes.

Conclusion

The 2025 visual package accompanying Hong Kong's primary English guide is not peripheral illustration but a policy interface. Paths, trains, arrows, jigsaw pieces, circular progressions, values icons, and a coherent palette render selected priorities connected, actionable, and developmentally appropriate.

Its visual reorganisation coincides with substantial expansion of national, patriotic, and security discourse. National Security Education is explicitly signposted but placed in the same friendly resource ecology as reading, collaboration, values, digital literacy, and assessment. This reduces markedness and legitimates through authority, moral evaluation, pedagogical rationale, and narratives of progress.

Global orientation, multilingual repertoire, learner difference, and unequal digital participation receive less immediate support. They are not necessarily absent from the guide, and the evidence does not show wholesale erasure, but their weaker lexical growth and visual anchoring matter where professional attention is scarce.

Visuals do not determine enactment: teachers and leaders interpret them through local histories, resources, and students. Yet they establish what an "update" looks like before that interpretation. Studying this first reading matters because curriculum policy is increasingly encountered as prose and as colour, movement, character, and designed coherence.

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

The authors declare 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 authors further declare 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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Guilt Without Grace: The Translation of Hamartia as Tsumi and the Literary Imagination of Sin in Meiji and Modern Japan

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Abstract

This study examines how the 1880 Meiji New Testament translated the Greek terms *hamartia* (sin) and *charis* (grace) within the scope of the four Gospels and the book of Romans. Using corpus analysis and Voyant Tools, it compares the distribution of the Japanese term *tsumi* (sin) with the renderings used for charis. The analysis finds that tsumi was applied consistently to hamartia and extended to Greek terms associated with judgment, condemnation, legal charge, and trespass. By contrast, charis appears through four unstable renderings: *onchō, on, megumi*, and *aiseraretari*. The result was an asymmetrical moral vocabulary in which guilt and divine judgment acquired a stable, legally weighted expression while grace remained fragmented and socially inflected. The paper situates this pattern within descriptive translation studies and theories of translation ideology, arguing that the translation's institutional norms shaped Japanese literary language beyond the biblical text. It then traces the literary implications of this asymmetry in Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948), where the protagonist cannot identify an antonym for crime. The study concludes that the Meiji translation did not merely transfer theological terms; it helped structure a modern Japanese moral imagination in which guilt was more lexically available than redemption.

Keywords: Meiji Bible translation, hamartia, charis, Japanese literary language, corpus analysis

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Introduction

The completion of the Meiji Bible translation in the late nineteenth century was not merely a linguistic achievement but a structuring act, one whose consequences exceeded its agents' intentions and whose effects on Japanese moral imagination have not been fully reckoned with (Sheehan, 2005; Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2). As Japan opened to Western influence during the Meiji period, Protestant missionaries faced a fundamental challenge: how to render the theological vocabulary of Greek and Hebrew scripture into a language whose existing moral and religious lexicon carried entirely different weights (Cohen, 2013, p. 3). The choices they made, under pressure from institutional mandates, competing translation philosophies, and the urgent pragmatics of evangelism (Cary, 1909, pp. 112–115; Hepburn, 1883, pp. 411–413), encoded a particular moral theology into modern Japanese literary language at the precise moment that language was being standardized (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57; Twine, 1991, p. 34).

Central to Protestant Christianity is the concept of sin, hamartia in Greek, a term whose semantic range in the New Testament encompasses moral failure, legal transgression, and ontological estrangement from God (Bauer et al., 2000, pp.49–50). In translating the Bible into Japanese, the Meiji committee chose 罪 (tsumi) as its primary rendering, a word that already carried legal, ritual, and punitive connotations in Japanese religious and civic life, shaped by Shinto notions of ritual pollution and Buddhist concepts of karmic demerit (Arichea, 1978, p. 201; Tomasi, 2021, p. 114). This study argues that this choice, while lexically defensible, produced a structurally consequential misalignment: by overextending 罪 across a range of Greek terms well beyond hamartia itself, and by failing to establish a comparably stable rendering for the corresponding vocabulary of grace (charis), the Meiji translators encoded into modern Japanese literary language a moral framework weighted toward divine judgment and largely silent on redemption. The literary consequences of that asymmetry, this paper contends, are legible as late as Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948).

Table 1

Frequency Comparison Across Greek, Japanese, and English

Gospel	Greek term	#	Japanese term (expected)	#	English term (expected)	#
Matthew	ἁμαρτία (hamartia) and conjugations	13	罪	25	sin/sins	14
Mark	ἁμαρτία (hamartia) and conjugations	9	罪	13	sin/sins	14
Luke	ἁμαρτία (hamartia) and conjugations	11	罪	25	sin/sins	31
John	ἁμαρτία (hamartia) and conjugations	17	罪	29	sin/sins	22

This paper pursues that argument through two parallel lines of corpus analysis. The first examines the consistency and overextension of 罪 (tsumi) across the four Gospels of the 1880 Meiji New Testament, using Voyant Tools to map the full range of Greek terms rendered as tsumi, including terms for judgment (*krisis*), condemnation (*katakrino*), and legal charge (*aitia*), that fall outside hamartia's semantic field. The second examines the parallel treatment of charis (grace) across the same corpus, tracing the instability of its Japanese rendering across four distinct terms, 恩寵 (onchō), 恩 (on), 恵 (megumi), and 愛せられたり (aiseraretari), none of which achieved the doctrinal stability that 罪 acquired. Situating these findings within Toury's descriptive translation studies and Venuti's concept of ideological invisibility (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57; Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2), the paper argues that the asymmetry between a stable, overextended sin vocabulary and a fragmented, underweighted grace vocabulary was not a failure of equivalence but an institutional act, one whose consequences shaped the moral imagination of Japanese literary culture for generations (Williams, 2003, pp. 309–312).

Table 2
Grace Asymmetry, Charis Renderings in the Meiji New Testament

Greek	Verse	KJV rendering	Meiji rendering	Japanese term	Register
χάρις	John 1:14	grace	恩寵	onchō	Hierarchical divine favor
χάρις	John 1:17	grace	恩寵	onchō	Hierarchical divine favor
χάρις	Romans 5:20	grace	恩	on	Social obligation/debt
χάρις	Romans 6:14	grace	恩	on	Social obligation/debt
χάρις	Luke 1:30	favour	恵	megumi	Domestic blessing
χάρις	Luke 2:52	favour	愛せられたり	aisera retari	Affective, no grace term
χάρις	Ephesians 2:8	grace	恩	on	Social obligation/debt

Literature Review

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 initiated a period of rapid modernization and openness to Western influence, including the return of Christian missionaries—primarily in the form of Protestant aligned groups—who had been banned from Japan since the seventeenth century. Central to their evangelistic project was the translation of the Christian scriptures into Japanese, a task that involved not merely linguistic conversion but the negotiation of vast cultural and theological distance between Protestant Christianity and Japan's existing religious systems of Shinto and Buddhism (Cohen, 2013, pp. 3–4).

The most influential figure in this translation effort was Dr. James Curtis Hepburn (1815–1911), missionary, linguist, and principal architect of the translation committee's guiding philosophy. Hepburn advocated for an ad literam approach, a commitment to staying as close as possible to the original Greek and Hebrew texts on the grounds that theological accuracy demanded it. At the 1883 General Conference of Protestant Missionaries in Osaka, he argued explicitly that the Bible, as the word of God, required translations that preserved its original meaning, particularly for foundational theological terms (Hepburn, 1883, pp. 411–413). His critique of Chinese Protestant translations centered on precisely this point: that departures from the literal source text had introduced dangerous theological distortions, particularly around terms for God and Spirit (Hepburn, 1883, p. 420).

Yet Hepburn's ad literam principle contained an unresolvable tension. The Japanese term chosen for hamartia, 罪 (tsumi), was not a neutral vessel waiting to be filled with Protestant meaning. In Shinto ritual, tsumi denoted pollution and transgression requiring purification (*harae*) rather than confession or moral reckoning (Arichea, 1978, p. 201). In Buddhist usage, the compound 罪業 (zaigō) carried connotations of inherited karmic demerit, collective and accumulated rather than individually confessed. In classical Chinese and Edo-period legal discourse, 罪 functioned primarily as a term for crime and its corresponding punishment (Tomasi, 2021, pp. 114–115). None of these prior registers constructed the interiority, the individual conscience standing before a judging God, that Protestant sin theology required. Hepburn's literal fidelity to the Greek source could not prevent the Japanese target from bringing its own history to the word the translation committee chose.

Methodology

This study employs corpus analysis of the four Gospels of the 1880 Meiji New Testament (*Shinyaku Seisho*, 1880), Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, using Voyant Tools (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016) to map the translation of two parallel theological lexemes: hamartia (sin) and

charis (grace). This digitally assisted approach follows the broader integration of digital humanities methods into biblical studies, where computational tools can make textual patterns and relationships visible across corpora (Clivaz & Allen, 2019). The Greek base text is the Textus Receptus (*Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, 1550), which archival evidence confirms was among the reference texts used by the translation committee (Meiji Gakuin University Library Digital Archives, n.d.). The King James Version (*The Holy Bible: Authorized Version*, 1811) serves as the English comparator, not as a source text but as a benchmark for the doctrinal register the translators were working within, given its well-documented tendency toward legal and judgmental framing of Protestant theological concepts (Tomasi, 2012, p. 133).

The analysis proceeds in two stages. The first traces the rendering of hamartia and its conjugates across all four Gospels, identifying instances where 罪 (tsumi) is used to translate Greek terms outside hamartia's semantic field, including terms for judgment (krisis), condemnation (katakrino), legal charge (aitia), and trespass (*paraptōma*). This overextension, following Toury's concept of translation norms, reveals the degree to which 罪 became a normalized container for an entire punitive semantic field rather than a precise equivalent for sin as such (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57). The second stage applies the same method to charis across the same corpus, examining the consistency, or lack thereof, of its Japanese rendering. Where the tsumi analysis reveals normalization and overextension, the charis analysis reveals fragmentation: four distinct Japanese terms deployed across the same theological concept, none achieving the doctrinal stability that 罪 acquired. The asymmetry between these two findings constitutes the paper's central empirical claim. A secondary finding concerns the gendered distribution of the tsumi/akugyō distinction in Luke, which will be addressed in the next section (Garcés, 2014, p. 115).

Table 3

Gendered Distribution, Hamartōlos Renderings in Luke

Verse	Greek	KJV rendering	Meiji rendering	Subject
Luke 7:37	ἁμαρτωλός	sinner	惡行 (akugyō)	Woman who anoints Jesus
Luke 7:39	ἁμαρτωλός	sinner	惡行 (akugyō)	Same woman, Pharisee's description
Luke 5:8	ἁμαρτωλός	sinner	罪人 (zainin)	Peter (male)
Luke 15:1	ἁμαρτωλοί	sinners	罪ある者	Tax collectors (male)
Luke 18:13	ἁμαρτωλός	sinner	罪人 (zainin)	Tax collector (male)
Luke 19:7	ἁμαρτωλός	sinner	罪ある人	Zacchaeus (male)

Results

The corpus analysis of the four Gospels reveals a consistent and consequential pattern: 罪 (tsumi) functions in the Meiji New Testament not as a precise equivalent for hamartia but as a normalized container for an entire punitive semantic field (Shinyaku Seisho, 1880). In Matthew, hamartia appears thirteen times and is rendered as 罪 in every instance, a consistency that superficially confirms Hepburn's ad literam principle. Yet 罪 appears twenty-five times in Matthew, absorbing Greek terms whose semantic range extends well beyond sin: paraptōma (trespasses), *opheiletais* (debts), *krinete* (judge), *krimati* (judgment), *katedikasate* (condemn), *anaitioi* (guiltless), and *aitian* (charge). What presents itself as literal translation is in practice what Toury would identify as the operation of a translation norm: 罪 has become the target-language solution for an entire field of legal and moral transgression, not a careful rendering of one specific Greek concept (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57).

The same overextension appears in Mark, where 罪 absorbs not only hamartia but *krima* (condemnation) and *katakrithēsetai* (condemned), producing the compound 罪せらるる in contexts where the Greek speaks of legal judgment rather than sin. In John, where hamartia appears seventeen times, the pattern holds with one significant exception: John 8:34, where *hamartian* (sinful) is rendered not as 罪 but as 惡 (aku, evil), "those who do evil are slaves to evil" (悪を行ふ者は悪の奴隷なり). This departure from tsumi in a passage that is theologically central to the Protestant doctrine of sin's enslaving power is precisely the kind of inconsistency Hepburn's ad literam principle was meant to prevent (Hepburn, 1883, p. 420). That it occurs here suggests the limits of any translation philosophy when the target language's semantic history exerts its own pressure.

Luke introduces the section's most significant secondary finding. In Luke 7:37 and 7:39, where the Greek *hamartōlos* (sinner) refers to the woman who anoints Jesus's feet, the Meiji translation substitutes 惡行 (akugyō, evil deeds) for 罪 (tsumi). The identical Greek term applied to male sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees, and the prodigal son, is rendered consistently as 罪 throughout Luke. This asymmetry is not a translation error but an ideological choice: where male transgression is theologized as sin standing before God, female transgression is behavioralized as moral misconduct measured against social expectation (Patessio, 2011, p. 87; Saeki, 1998, p. 112). The distinction carries its own literary afterlife, which will be addressed in the following section.

Taken together, these findings establish the first half of the paper's central claim: that the Meiji NT produced a Japanese rendering of sin that was simultaneously more stable, more pervasive, and more legally weighted than its Greek source warranted. The second half of that claim requires examining what the translation did not stabilize, the vocabulary of grace.

Discussion

The corpus findings of the previous section establish only half of the paper's argument. To demonstrate that the Meiji NT produced not merely a heavy sin vocabulary but a structurally asymmetric moral framework, it is necessary to examine how the translation handled the corresponding vocabulary of grace. The Greek charis, theologically the counterweight to hamartia, the term Paul deploys in Romans 5:20 precisely to exceed and overcome sin's dominion, appears 157 times in the New Testament. In the four Gospels alone, its rendering is strikingly unstable: John 1:14 and 1:17 use 恩寵 (onchō, hierarchical divine favor), Romans 5:20 and 6:14 use 恩 (on, social obligation and gratitude debt), Luke 1:30 uses 恵 (megumi, domestic blessing), and Luke 2:52 does not render charis as any grace-term at all, substituting 愛せられたり (aisera retari, was beloved), absorbing grace entirely into the affective register (Arichea, 1978, pp. 201–203). Where 罪 achieved normalization and overextension, charis achieved neither. The translators gave Japanese readers a stable, legally weighted word for sin and four unstable, socially weighted approximations for grace. The asymmetry was structural, not incidental.

Table 4
Overextension Cases, Greek Terms Outside Hamartia Rendered as Tsumi

Gospel	Verse	Greek term	Standard meaning	Meiji rendering
Matthew	7:1	κρίνετε	judge	罪を定める
Matthew	12:37	καταδικασθήση	condemned	罪ありとせらるる
Matthew	23:33	κρίσεως	sentence	刑罪
Matthew	27:37	αἰτίαν	charge	罪標
Mark	12:40	κρίμα	condemnation	罪せらるること
Luke	6:37	καταδικάζετε	condemn	罪すること
John	3:17	κρίνῃ	condemn	罪を定む
John	8:34	ἁμαρτίαν	sin	惡 (aku)

This asymmetry did not remain confined to the Bible. The vocabulary established by the 1880 NT circulated outward through the entire ecosystem of Meiji Protestant literature—apologetics tracts, catechisms, missionary school curricula, and women's journals. Okuno Masatsuna's 1888 translation of Ferdinand Genahr's catechetical work *Byōshuku mondō* (病床問答, "Sickbed Dialogues"), a question-and-answer text designed to guide the dying toward confession and repentance, exemplifies this wider print environment: it draws directly on the tsumi vocabulary fixed by the NT translation while offering none of the doctrinal scaffolding that might have tempered it (Okuno, 1888). Each repetition could reinforce the tsumi-heavy, grace-thin moral framework without reproducing the theological context that might have balanced it (Gluck, 1985, p. 171; Twine, 1991, p. 34). More broadly, studies of Meiji literary translation emphasize translation as an active process of reception and transformation within the formation of modern Japanese literature (Katō, 2009). As Twine has shown, the standardization of written Japanese during the Meiji period locked this vocabulary into the literary language at the precise moment of its formation. By the time Protestant moral vocabulary reached writers of the Taishō and Shōwa periods, it had become sufficiently naturalized that its Christian origin was invisible, which is precisely Venuti's point about the ideological invisibility of translation choices over time (Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2). A writer could inherit the structure of Protestant guilt without inheriting the Protestant theology of redemption.

Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948/1952) is the clearest literary demonstration of what that inheritance looks like. The novel's moral vocabulary is saturated with the guilt cluster the Meiji NT established: 罪 (*tsumi*, sin/crime), 罰 (*batsu*, punishment), 恥 (*haji*, shame), 地獄 (*jigoku*, hell). What is structurally absent is the grace counterpart. When Yōzō meditates on the antonym of crime—「罪に就ての反対語は何だ」("What is the antonym of crime?")—he cannot locate it. He runs through prayer, repentance, confession, and finds them all synonymous with crime rather than opposite to it (Dazai, 1948/1952, p. 138). This is not a psychological portrait of one damaged man. It is the logical endpoint of a translation that gave Japanese literary language a fully elaborated vocabulary for sin and an unstable, fragmented vocabulary for grace. Yōzō cannot find the antonym of 罪 because the Meiji NT did not give him one. More precisely: the passage that should have given him one, Romans 5:20, where grace is said to abound beyond sin's increase, rendered charis as 恩, a word whose primary register is social obligation rather than unearned redemption. The theological architecture of guilt without grace was built into the language before Dazai was born (Tomasi, 2021, pp. 114–118; Williams, 2003, pp. 310–312).

Conclusion

The translation of hamartia as 罪 (tsumi) in the 1880 Meiji New Testament was not a failure of equivalence but an institutional act with consequences that exceeded its agents' intentions. By normalizing 罪 as the target-language solution for an entire punitive semantic field, absorbing Greek terms for judgment, condemnation, legal charge, and trespass alongside hamartia itself, the Meiji translators encoded into modern Japanese literary language a moral framework weighted decisively toward guilt and divine judgment. The parallel analysis of charis (grace) reveals the structural asymmetry that gave this encoding its force: where 罪 achieved normalization and overextension, grace fragmented across four distinct Japanese renderings, 恩寵, 恩, 恵, and the affective substitution 愛せられたり, none of which acquired comparable doctrinal stability. The Meiji NT gave Japanese readers a fully elaborated vocabulary for sin and an unstable, socially inflected approximation for grace.

The literary consequences of that asymmetry are legible across the seventy years separating the 1880 translation from Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku* (1948). Dazai's Yōzō cannot locate the antonym of 罪 not because he is psychologically damaged beyond the reach of theology, but because the language he inherited had not supplied one. The moral vocabulary available to him, 罪, 罰, 恥, 地獄, is precisely the vocabulary the Meiji NT stabilized and overextended. What is absent, a stable, theologically weighted term for unearned redemptive grace, is precisely what the Meiji translators failed to establish. The guilt without grace that the paper's title names is not Dazai's personal condition. It is the condition of a literary language shaped by a translation that built the architecture of Protestant sin into Japanese moral vocabulary while leaving Protestant grace structurally homeless.

Translation is never a neutral transfer. The Meiji Bible's mediation of sin demonstrates that it is a structuring act, one whose ideological consequences become invisible precisely as they become naturalized, and whose effects on literary imagination may outlast by generations any conscious engagement with the religious tradition that first produced them (Toury, 1995, pp. 56–57; Venuti, 1995, pp. 1–2).

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Interrogating the Machine: A Human-AI Workflow for Structured Extraction From Historical Sources

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Abstract

Text-analysis technology has evolved rapidly with the advent of Large Language Models (LLMs). As these tools reshape how we process language, the humanities face a pressing question: can LLMs meaningfully support—rather than replace—the historian's craft of extracting information from primary sources? Extracting precise data such as events, characters, and locations from historical texts remains a labor-intensive process that resists scaling. While computational approaches such as named entity recognition have long been applied to textual sources, they typically deliver outputs without offering historians the means to interrogate or refine the extraction process itself. We argue that a human-AI collaboration enables historians to process more sources, more systematically, while retaining interpretive control. Our approach automatically extracts events, characters, and locations from historical texts. Historians then review, validate, correct, and enrich the proposed data. They can also interact with the LLM through a chatbot interface to query the reasoning behind each extraction, preserving transparency and scholarly agency. To evaluate this approach, we invited historians to test our system, which implements Mistral Large 2.1, on a 16th-century historical source. Elements extracted by the LLM closely matched those identified manually by historians, demonstrating the tool's reliability. Qualitative feedback further indicated that this human-AI collaboration empowered historians to work at greater scale while maintaining a clear understanding of what was extracted and why, notably through the ability to request explanations from the model.

Keywords: digital humanities, human-machine interaction, human-AI collaboration

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Introduction

The rapid evolution of natural language processing and Large Language Models (LLMs) has begun to fundamentally alter computational workflows across numerous academic disciplines. However, their integration into the humanities presents challenges. Primary source analysis remains an intrinsically qualitative, interpretive craft. Extracting structured entities such as historical actors, precise locations, and complex events from primary documents is a highly labor-intensive process that traditionally resists automatic scaling. Existing computational tools like standard Named Entity Recognition (NER) often present opaque, rigid outputs that leave little room for scholarly interrogation, risk stripping context, or fail to handle historical linguistic variations.

To address these challenges, this paper presents a human-AI collaborative framework designed to assist historians in extracting structured data while maintaining their interpretive agency. Developed in collaboration with scholars at the Institut d'Histoire de la Réformation (Institute of Reformation History, IHR), specialists in the early modern period with a particular focus on 16th-century France, this project explores how LLMs can serve as interactive, transparent research partners rather than uncritical automation engines.

We introduce a web-based proof-of-concept application leveraging Mistral Large 2.1 to automatically propose historical entities, which scholars can subsequently review, enrich, or challenge via a chatbot interface. To evaluate the efficacy and scholarly reception of this approach, we conducted a user study with six historians from the IHR. Participants performed comparative extraction tasks on 16th-century primary texts and evaluated the system's interactive features. The results demonstrate high alignment between LLM extractions and expert human annotations for characters and locations. Crucially, qualitative feedback confirmed that the ability to query the model's rationale significantly enhanced trust, transparency, and analytical rigor.

Literature Review

NER enables the identification of people, places, dates, and specific events in a text (Keber et al., 2024). Several different approaches and combinations of NER systems have been used in recent years, with significant progress made. Initially, these systems were mostly based on pattern matching or specific word recognition, e.g., a capitalized word was likely a person or a place, a number might be a date (Keber et al., 2024).

However, the current research in this field is increasingly moving towards deep learning, allowing the detection of mentions of actors or events even when they are not explicitly named. This ability is particularly important with regard to the context of this study, where a complete and nuanced extraction of all relevant entities, including the implicit ones, is mandatory. Several works mention the use and combination of existing NER models such as BiLSTM-CRF (Chen et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Yan & Li, 2023), BiGRU-CRF (Zhang et al., 2021), RoBERTa (V. D. Lai et al., 2021), and ERNIE (Zhang et al., 2021). All four show satisfactory results, but they miss on important factors such as implicit references, language evolution and context. For instance, “the king” does not refer to the same person if the text was written in France in 1568 or in England in 1412. In recent years, deep learning approaches have shifted toward LLMs, which have proven highly effective for text-processing tasks while enabling natural language interaction. Naturally, the paradigm changed from human-machine interaction to human-machine collaboration.

The collaboration between humans and AI represents an ongoing endeavor that has gained substantial traction in both research and industrial communities over the last five years (Berretta et al., 2023; Puerta-Beldarrain et al., 2025). The underlying ambition is to combine the scalability and computational throughput of AI systems with the contextual understanding and domain expertise of human practitioners (Puerta-Beldarrain et al., 2025).

Such collaborative paradigms have been investigated across a number of concrete application domains, with the relative weight of the human and the AI varying with the stakes and the type of expertise involved. In healthcare, it has been proposed as a means of mitigating the shortage of qualified workers and the heavy workload of clinicians (Y. Lai et al., 2021).

Recent foundation models such as LEADS have shown measurable gains in recall and time savings when clinicians collaborate with AI to mine medical literature (Wang et al., 2025), and patient-centered tools such as WoundAIssist illustrate the same principle in routine clinical care (Borst et al., 2025). Beyond healthcare, decision-support studies cluster around finance, business, and law (Gomez et al., 2025), while related work has demonstrated the benefit of human-AI collaboration for managing large biological-specimen collections (Stenhouse et al., 2023) and for information extraction from biomedical and legal documents (Mondal et al., 2023). To the best of our knowledge, however, the application of human-AI teaming to the humanities remains largely unexplored: in the systematic review of 108 AI-assisted decision-making studies by Gomez et al. (2025), humanities does not appear among the surveyed domains.

Bringing human-AI collaboration to the humanities offers significant opportunities. Scholars working on historical sources routinely face vast corpora that are simply too large for exhaustive close reading, yet whose interpretation requires a level of expertise that no general-purpose model can be expected to match. Through a human-AI collaboration approach, AI capacities can be leveraged to manage such corpora at scale while scholars retain control over the analytical process and over the interpretation of results (El-Hajj et al., 2023; Natarajan et al., 2025). By addressing humanities, we open human-AI collaboration to a field left unexplored so far. However, this opportunity comes with specific challenges. Historical texts often differ markedly from their contemporary counterparts: Old French, for instance, is sensibly different from modern French, with non-standardized orthography and grammatical rules that are still nascent and fluctuate across time and region. Mainstream language models, trained predominantly on contemporary corpora, may therefore misinterpret such material.

Adapting AI to these specificities is itself an active line of research, with dedicated models such as BERTrade for Old French (Grobol et al., 2022) and bilingual general-purpose models such as CroissantLLM for French and English (Faysse et al., 2025), as well as analogous efforts for other historical languages, including a BERT-CRF model trained on Rabbinic Hebrew that outperforms its modern-Hebrew counterpart on reference extraction in Jewish Responsa literature (Ben-Gigi et al., 2025).

The humanities' community has not waited for the formal vocabulary of human-AI teaming to start building such workflows in practice. A long-standing line of work on text reuse and intertextuality detection has produced a steady succession of tools that scholars use to navigate large historical corpora, from early n-gram fingerprinting approaches (Ganascia et al., 2014), to sequence-alignment systems such as TextPAIR and BLAST-based methods deployed on 18th-century French corpora (Roe, 2024; Roe et al., 2023) and on the cross-lingual reuse of

classical Chinese sources by Matteo Ricci (McManus et al., 2025), and up to semantic level based on word embeddings and Word Mover's Distance (Scheirer et al., 2016; Schubert, 2020).

Building upon these foundational efforts, our work connects automatic entity extraction with a human-AI collaborative loop designed specifically for historical texts. Rather than treating information extraction as a static, fully automated pipeline, we position the language model as an interactive assistant that proposes, explains, and adjusts entity extractions under the direct supervision of historical domain experts.

Methodology

To demonstrate LLMs can be used in a human-AI collaboration paradigm to extract structured data from primary sources, we built a web application embedding a chatbot linked to an LLM. This LLM is in charge of extracting the data from primary sources uploaded to the web application by historians. Once extracted, the data can be visualized in different ways from the web application.

Model Selection

Our objective was to establish an automated proof-of-concept pipeline capable of identifying characters, locations, and events within 16th-century French historical texts. To determine the most suitable architecture for this task, we defined four key evaluation criteria: zero-shot foundation model, no fine-tuning requirements, broad linguistic understanding, especially French, and accessibility. First, the model required strong zero-shot reasoning to operate effectively without initial retraining. Second, to ensure generalizability and minimize technical overhead within humanities workflows, the system needed to function without extensive domain-specific fine-tuning. Third, the model had to exhibit broad linguistic comprehension, seamlessly navigating non-standardized spelling and archaic syntax across both 16th-century and contemporary French. Finally, to support sustainable academic deployment, the underlying model needed to remain cost-effective and accessible.

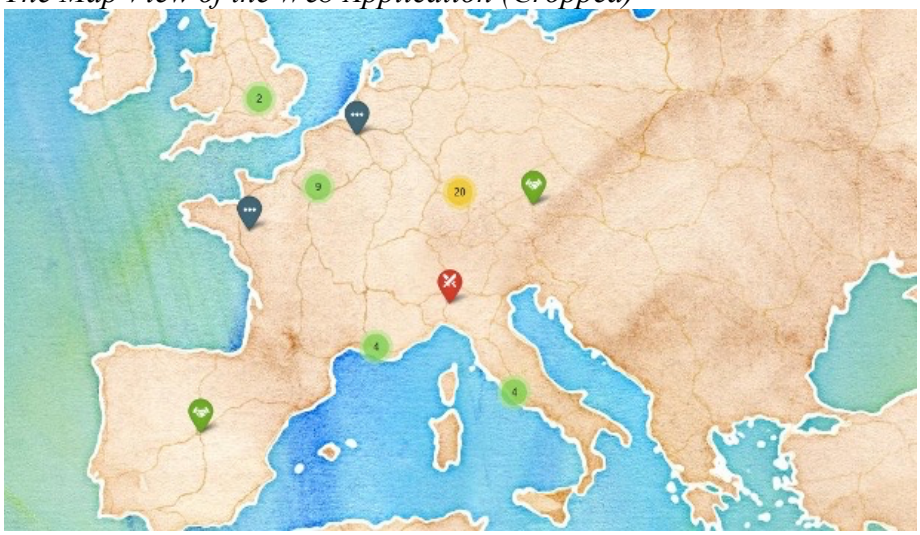
Based on these prerequisites, we selected Mistral Large 2.1. It powers an automated extraction pipeline that parses ingested historical texts, outputs structured entities (characters, places, and events), and serves as the backend logic for an interactive visualization and annotation platform.

Web Application

To support human-AI teaming, we designed a web-based application featuring an integrated backend processing pipeline and an interactive front-end interface. Primary sources uploaded to the platform trigger the Mistral Large 2.1 extraction pipeline.

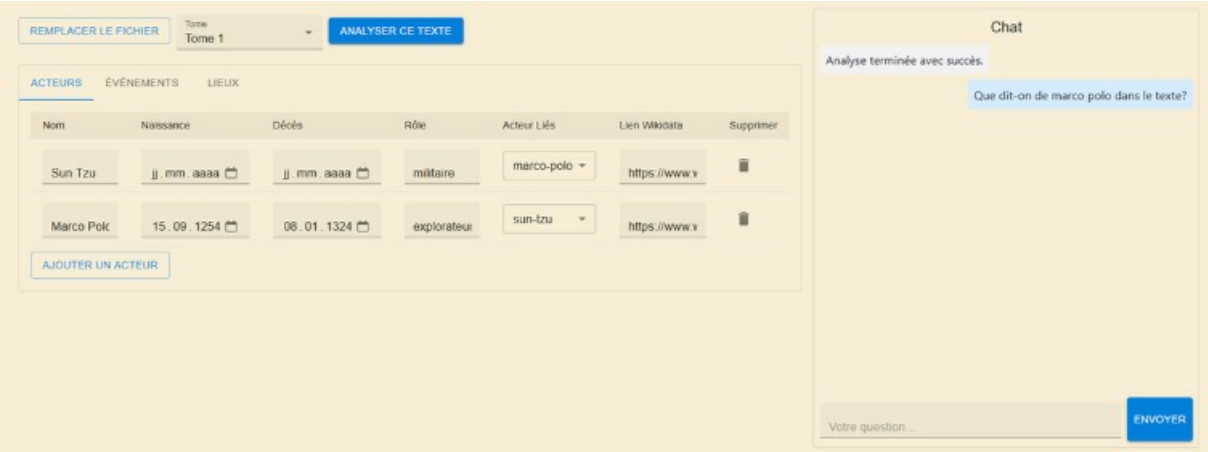
Following extraction, users interact with the historical data through three complementary visualization perspectives. In the Map View (cf. Figure 1), events are geographically situated on an interactive cartographic interface that uses icons for event categorizations and features a temporal slider for period-based filtering. The Timeline View complements this spatial representation by ordering events chronologically to accentuate temporal clusters and sequential relationships. Lastly, the Relation Graph View abstracts connections among characters, locations, and events into an interactive network, enabling scholars to filter specific entities and evaluate complex relational structures.

Figure 1
The Map View of the Web Application (Cropped)



To maintain transparency and scholarly agency, the web application features an interactive workspace sidebar containing a chatbot connected to the LLM. Historians can directly query the model about its decisions (e.g., asking “Why was this entity classified as an event?” or “What context supports this location reference?”). Furthermore, scholars retain full editing control: they can directly update or delete model-generated extractions, or manually add new entities missed by the automated pipeline. This page is shown on Figure 2.

Figure 2
The Data Extraction View, With the Chatbot Interface on the Right



User Study

To evaluate the system's effectiveness and usability, we conducted a user study with six professional historians specializing in the early modern period from the Institut d'histoire de la Réformation (IHR). The evaluation sessions were conducted remotely via Zoom using a structured protocol:

1. App Familiarization: Participants were introduced to the web interface and its visualization tools.
2. Manual Extraction Task: Historians read a selected 16th-century primary text and manually identified characters, locations, and events.

3. AI-Assisted Task: Historians performed the same extraction process on a text using the LLM-assisted workflow, reviewing and refining the proposed entities.
4. Comparative Analysis: The manually extracted entities, model-only extractions, and human-validated extractions were systematically compared.

Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to "think aloud" to capture spontaneous qualitative feedback regarding trust, interface interaction, and analytical workflow. Following the tasks, we conducted semi-structured interviews to gather deeper insights into their experiences with the chatbot interface and human-AI collaboration.

Results

The user study yielded key insights into how LLMs handle complex historical texts compared to expert human analysis. Strong alignment was observed between the LLM and the historians regarding the extracted characters. Six out of the seven characters identified manually by at least two historians were also successfully extracted by the LLM pipeline. The model demonstrated high accuracy with locations entities. For example, a location identified by five out of six historians was independently extracted by the model. Additionally, a location extracted in different ways by two historians ("Étang" and "Marais") was extracted as one combined location: "Étang près d'un marais." Event extraction proved to be the most complex and contested task. Manual human extraction exhibited high variability, ranging from scholars who extracted zero distinct events to those who considered "the whole text is an event." Consequently, strict automated matching for events was less distinct, reflecting fundamental differences in how scholars conceptualize historical occurrences. The extraction comparison between historians and the LLM is shown on Table 1. The interactive dialogue feature directly impacted analytical outcomes: two out of the six participants altered or refined their extracted data after querying the LLM through the chatbot interface to inspect its rationale.

Table 1
Automatic LLM Extraction; in Green the Entities Found by at Least One Historian

Characters	Locations	Events
Le Roi	Thoul sur Mozelle	Conflit avec le Marquis Albert
L'évêque de Bayonne	Étang près d'un marais	Séjour du Marquis Albert près de Thoul sur Mozelle
Le Duc D'aumalle		
Marquis Albert		
Les Germains		
Les Français		

Discussion

The findings from our study illustrate both technical and conceptual aspects of integrating AI into historical workflows. The discrepancy in event extraction highlights a core domain reality: historical "events" lack a universal, rigid definition and is tied to individual interpretation. While computational models rely on boundary definitions, human scholars interpret events through varying historiographical lenses, ranging from discrete granular actions to broad narrative contexts. To a lesser extent, geographical locations present similar interpretative flexibility. Although it can be a source of debate in the community, we argue that the integration of AI in the process of primary source analysis does not impact the interpretative

nature of the process, as AI suggests extraction, but historians keeps its full scholarly agency. Rather than viewing model variances as extraction errors, our results suggest that an LLM functions effectively as a "second point of view." Much like collaborating with a peer researcher, interacting with the model provides a secondary, probabilistic perspective informed by its training data.

Qualitative feedback from the IHR historians was positive, particularly regarding the system's collaborative balance. Scholars explicitly appreciated that the tool did not impose opaque outputs. The ability to interrogate the LLM via the conversational interface, asking why an extraction was made or where implicit context was derived, transformed the model from an unreliable "black box" into an interactive source of information, successfully preserving scholarly control and enhancing critical engagement.

Conclusion

In this paper, we introduced a human-AI collaborative framework tailored for historical text analysis, evaluated through a proof-of-concept application built with Mistral Large 2.1 and tested alongside domain experts from the Institut d'histoire de la Réformation. Our findings demonstrate that while LLMs achieve high extraction fidelity for concrete entities like characters and locations, their primary value in complex tasks, such as event identification, lies in their role as an interactive partner rather than a fully autonomous reader. By pairing automated extraction with visual analytics and an explainable, dialogue-based query interface, this approach allows historians to scale their analytical reach across large primary source corpora without sacrificing interpretive rigor or scholarly authority.

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

The author declares that Gemini was used for redaction help, improving phrasing and fixing grammar. The content, ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Using ARIMA Forecast for Scenario Projections to Compare Funding Mechanisms in the Singaporean Arts Sector

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of different government funding mechanisms on the financial sustainability of Singapore's arts and heritage sector. It compares supply-side and demand-side interventions to identify which approach best supports long-term sector development. Using Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) forecasting models combined with regression analysis, the study evaluates three funding scenarios based on data from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) for FY 2022–2024. The scenarios include direct organisational grants (Scenario A), citizen-directed cultural vouchers (Scenario B), and a hybrid model combining both approaches (Scenario C). Results indicate that direct organisational grants provide the most immediate capacity increase, while the hybrid model achieves a more balanced outcome between organisational stability and audience demand. This balance suggests that hybrid funding offers a more sustainable pathway for sectoral growth compared to purely supply-side or demand-side mechanisms. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the application of ARIMA forecasting to cultural policy evaluation. It also advances comparative analysis of funding mechanisms in the arts sector, highlighting the interplay between supply-driven and demand-driven models in shaping sustainable cultural development.

Keywords: arts policy, cultural economics, scenario-projections, ARIMA forecasting, financial sustainability, funding mechanisms, comparison analysis

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Introduction

Financial sustainability is a persistent challenge across arts and heritage institutions. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the return to pre-pandemic operations and program delivery has relied heavily on government support. Policymakers must therefore consider how public funding can be used most effectively to enhance sectoral sustainability while fostering long-term audience engagement. This study addresses a key policy issue: how can government investment be designed to maximize financial sustainability within the arts and heritage sector?

Singapore's arts and heritage sector provides an insightful case study. After sharp post-pandemic recoveries in FY2023, the sector contracted modestly in FY2024, raising questions about which mechanisms can effectively stabilize and grow the sector. The SG Culture Pass, which distributed SGD100 worth of credits for citizens to participate in arts and heritage activities, exemplifies a demand-side policy intervention. In contrast, traditional supply-side interventions include direct organisational grants. This contrast facilitates a comparison of supply- and demand-side funding approaches.

This paper contributes to the cultural policy literature in three ways. First, it applies ARIMA forecasting models to scenario-based assessments of policy action in the arts and cultural sector, addressing methodological gaps in predictive cultural economics. Second, it quantifies efficiency differentials between direct organisational funding and citizen-directed voucher schemes, providing evidence-based input for policy design. Third, it evaluates a hybrid funding model in which organisational capacity-building is balanced with demand stimulation, offering a framework for sustainable sector development.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Financial Sustainability in the Cultural Sector

Financial sustainability in arts and heritage organisations encompasses the capacity to maintain operations, deliver programming, and adapt to changing environments without excessive dependence on volatile revenue streams (Loots et al., 2022). Existing literature identifies multiple dimensions of sustainability, including revenue diversification, workforce stability, and audience development (Müller & Grieshaber, 2024). However, empirical studies examining how different funding mechanisms influence these dimensions remain limited, particularly in Asian contexts.

Supply-Side Versus Demand-Side Cultural Funding

Cultural economics distinguishes between supply-side interventions (direct grants to organisations) and demand-side interventions (subsidies to consumers) (Scott-Lennox, 1993). Supply-side funding provides immediate operational stability and enables long-term planning, but may not stimulate audience demand or encourage organisational innovation. Demand-side funding activates public participation and channels resources toward organisations with strong public appeal, but introduces revenue unpredictability and potential inequities across organisation types.

The theoretical trade-offs between these approaches have been extensively discussed (Throsby, 1994), yet empirical comparisons using predictive modelling remain scarce. This study

addresses this gap by employing forecasting techniques to project sector-level outcomes under alternative funding scenarios.

Forecasting in Cultural Policy Analysis

ARIMA models for time series prediction have been applied in economic policy evaluation but are not widely used in the analysis of cultural policy. ARIMA models work effectively in situations where there is limited data history because such models tend to identify any existing trends in the data while taking into consideration the uncertainty of the data through confidence limits. This work is applicable in the analysis of the cultural sector.

Data and Context

Data Source and Coverage

This research makes use of administrative data from the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth[1] in Singapore for the total number of arts and heritage organizations registered in the country for the financial years 2022, 2023, and 2024. It should be noted that the total income, total number of employees, as well as total employee costs are provided for the relevant sectors. Although the three-year period allows for a certain degree of complex models, such a period is significant as it allows for recovery from the aftermath of the pandemic (2022–2023) as well as a phase of stability in the period of 2023–2024.

Sector Trends and Context

Table 1 presents the observed sector trends across the study period.

Table 1
Singapore Arts and Heritage Sector Indicators, FY2022–2024

Financial Year	Total Employees	Total Employee Costs ($)[2]	Total Income ($)
2022	4,979	449,774,644	1,080,324,038
2023	5,470	475,765,132	1,243,854,175
2024	5,260	469,210,511	1,212,337,730

The sector experienced robust recovery from FY2022 to FY2023, with income growth of 15.14%, employee growth of 9.86%, and employee cost growth of 5.78%. However, FY2024 saw modest contraction across all indicators: income declined 2.53%, employees declined 3.84%, and employee costs declined 1.38%. This suggests the sector reached a post-pandemic peak in FY2023 before stabilising at a slightly lower equilibrium in FY2024.

Notably, average employee salary in the art and heritage sector increased from S$86,977 in FY2023 to S$89,204 in FY2024 despite overall contraction. This reflects a structural shift in workforce composition, with organisations retaining higher-paid specialist and managerial roles while reducing lower-paid or temporary positions. This pattern is consistent with sector stabilisation rather than crisis, as organisations prioritise core capacity over expansion.

[1] https://www.mccy.gov.sg/ Last accessed on 26 Dec 2025
[2] All monetary figures are in USD, unless otherwise specified e.g. SGD

Policy Scenarios

There were three funding models simulated, with a S$150 million public investment in each:

Scenario A: Direct Organisational Funding

All $150 million goes to arts and heritage institutions as operational funding. That is a purely supply-side policy with 100% pass-through efficiency.

Scenario B: Citizen-Directed Funding

Funding of $150 million is allocated to citizens in the form of cultural vouchers, inspired by the SG Culture Pass scheme. An average pass-through rate of 60%, using global evidence for voucher redemption rates and with some understanding of the spending behaviour of the sector, would generate S$90 million for the organisations as earned income.

Scenario C : Hybrid Model

A total contribution of S$150 million is shared equally, with S$75 million channelled through direct grants and another S$75 million through citizen vouchers. This results in a total organisational income boost of S$120 million using the 60% pass-through rate (S$75 million direct + S$45 million voucher contribution).

Methodology

Modelling Approach

A multi-method forecasting framework is applied, where ARIMA time-series models are combined with regression-based scenario analysis. Approaching the problem in three stages:

Stage 1: Baseline Forecasting

ARIMA models were fitted to historical data for employees, employee costs, and income to establish baseline projections for FY2025 absent policy intervention.

Stage 2 : Regression Modelling

Linear regression models were estimated to quantify relationships between income and both employment and employee costs. Such models allow scenario-based projections that make changes in income levels translate into workforce implications.

Stage 3: Scenario Projection

For each scenario, the model adjusted baseline income projections according to the assumed uplift under that scenario, and projected the employment and cost outcomes through the regression models.

ARIMA Model Specification

ARIMA models that could minimize both Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) were chosen. Due to the small time series data (three years), it is observed that the models agree on a simpler form that does not experience overfitting.

In the case of the employee forecast series, the AIC of 44.34 and BIC of 42.54 suggested that the selected model achieved a good balance between model fit and simplicity. Additionally, residual analysis revealed that the residuals were not significantly autocorrelated, implying that the autoregression extracted sufficient information about the data.

Regression Model Specification

Two regression models were estimated:

Employment Model - Total Employees = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$(Total Income) + ε. (1)
Employee Cost Model -Total Employee Costs = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$(Total Income) + ε. (2)

There was good fit for the employment model with AIC = 38.13 and BIC = 35.43, implying a close association between income levels and employment. The employee cost model had higher values of AIC (95.15) and BIC (92.45), suggesting greater variability in the cost structure of various organizations with respect to staff salary scales, seniority, and contracts. Both models were adequate for scenario forecasting.

Robustness Checks

Several robustness checks were conducted to validate model reliability. ACF plots for ARIMA models did not show any statistically significant autocorrelation, which supports the specification of the model. Forecasts from ARIMA, exponential smoothing, and regression approaches all shared similar directional findings, indicating the stabilisation of the sector, which supported the findings and ensuring cross-model consistency.

Projections for Scenario B were tested across alternative pass-through rates from 40% to 80%. Models responded smoothly and proportionally, indicating stability of the model behaviour. Even when accounting for the limitations of the short time series, the robustness checks supported the consistency of the economic forecasting model.

Results

Baseline Projections

Table 2 presents baseline ARIMA forecasts for FY2025 absent policy intervention.

Table 2
Baseline ARIMA Forecasts for FY2025

Indicator	Point Forecast	80% Confidence Interval	95% Confidence Interval
Employees	5,236	4,921–5,552	4,753–5,719
Employee Costs	S$464.9M	S$447.6M–S$482.2M	S$438.4M–S$491.4M
Income	S$1.179B	S$1.068B–S$1.290B	S$1.009B–S$1.349B

The model projected stability at around 5,236 employees and S$1.179 billion in income. Narrow confidence intervals suggest low volatility, indicating the sector is unlikely to experience dramatic expansion or contraction without significant policy intervention. The contraction observed in FY2024 appears to represent adjustment to a sustainable operating level rather than the beginning of prolonged decline.

Scenario Projections

Table 3 illustrates the expected results in the three funding options for FY2025.

Table 3
Scenario Projections for FY2025

Scenario	Total Income (S$)	Total Employees	Employee Costs (S$)	Income Uplift vs Baseline
Baseline	1,178,838,648	5,236	464,916,762	—
Scenario A (Direct)	1,362,337,730	5,740	493,449,892	+$183.5M (+15.6%)
Scenario B (Voucher)	1,302,337,730	5,575	484,120,212	+$123.5M (+10.5%)
Scenario C (Hybrid)	1,332,337,730	5,658	488,785,052	+$153.5M (+13.0%)

Similar predictions for FY2025 are consistent with the ARIMA assessment that the sector had achieved equilibrium after the post-pandemic volatility. The model did not identify substantial upward or downward trending and predicts an equilibrium of 5,236 employees and S$1.179 billion in revenues. The narrow confidence intervals implied low volatility, indicating the sector is unlikely to experience dramatic expansion or contraction in the absence of drastic government policy intervention.

The baseline projection showed that the sector has transited from the recovery phase to the new steady state. The contraction in FY2024 was likely a correction, indicating that a sustainable operating level was achieved rather than the start of a prolonged decline.

Comparative Analysis of Scenarios

Scenario A

Direct Organisational Funding produced the greatest degree of change across all the indicators. Total income increased to $183.5 million (15.6% above baseline), supporting an additional 504 workers and an extra $28.5 in workforce expenditure. The $150 million funding was channelled into organisational income with little or no leakage, thus allowing immediate expansion of capacity.

Scenario B

Citizen-Directed Funding generated a modest level of growth. With a 60% pass-through rate, only $90 million out of a $150 million investment reaches the organisation, resulting in income increase of $123.5 million (10.5% above baseline). This supports an additional 339 workers and $19.2 million in work-force expenditure. Although this has lower efficiency than direct organisational funding, it does have its advantages, such as promoting citizen participation in

cultural activities, inculcating a cultural consumption culture, and preferentially channels resource allocation towards organisations with greater cultural appeal to the public. The demand-driven nature of this approach would also stimulate organisational innovation, efficiency, and responsiveness.

Scenario C

The Hybrid Model produced intermediate outcomes, with an increase in income of $153.5m (13.0% above baseline), supporting an additional 422 workers, and $23.9m in workforce expenditure. This scenario combined the stability of direct organisational funding with the demand-driven benefits of voucher schemes. The hybrid approach is projected to deliver 83 more jobs than Scenario B whilst still retaining capacity to promote citizen participation in cultural activities.

Efficiency Comparison

Table 4 illustrates the relative efficiency of each scenario in converting government investment into sector income.

Table 4
Funding Efficiency Scenario

Scenario		**Efficiency**[3]
Scenario A (Direct funding to organisations)	$150M investment to $183.5M income uplift	122%
Scenario B (Vouchers to citizens/potential patrons)	$150M investment to $123.5M income uplift	82%
Scenario C (Hybrid–combines approach of scenario A and B)	$150M investment to $153.5M income uplift	102%

The efficiency differences across scenarios reflected fundamental differences in funding mechanisms. Direct funding had achieved near-complete pass-through because all the money is channelled into organisational income immediately. Voucher schemes experienced leakage in numerous ways, such as non-redemption of vouchers and administrative costs. The hybrid model had achieved a balance with acceptable trade-offs, achieving moderate efficiency whilst preserving some of the benefits of a demand-driven approach.

Employment Impact Analysis

This study had also analysed the employment impact of each scenario. Table 5 breaks down the employment effects of each scenario.

[3] Efficiency calculated as (income uplift / investment) × 100. Values exceed 100% for Scenario A due to baseline income growth.

Table 5
Employment Impact Decomposition

Scenario	Additional Jobs vs Baseline	Jobs per S$1M Investment	Jobs per S$1M Income Uplift
A	504	3.36	2.75
B	339	2.26	2.74
C	422	2.81	2.75

Scenario A generated the most jobs in absolute terms (504 jobs for scenario A, 339 jobs for scenario B and 422 jobs for scenario C), but the jobs-per-dollar-of-income-uplift ratio is similar across all scenarios (approximately 2.75 jobs per S$1 million). This indicates that the employment-income relationship is stable regardless of funding mechanism. The differences in absolute job creation arises from the varying efficiency translation of funding into organisational income.

The employment impact findings have important policy implications: if employment generation is the primary objective, direct funding is most effective. However, if social goals such as audience development and cultural participation are desired, the lower employment impact of Scenario B may be acceptable in view of its social benefits.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

This study's findings illustrated trade-offs between supply-side and demand-side cultural funding. Direct organisational grants function as high-efficiency interventions which can immediately strengthen the sector capacity and workforce. Citizen-directed vouchers function as lower-efficiency demand-stimulation interventions, which have the capacity to raise cultural participation and market responsiveness.

These findings are consistent with broader economic theory on subsidy provision. Supply-side subsidies benefit vendors directly but may not alter consumer behaviour. Demand-side subsidies can influence consumer behaviour but outcome is more limited and heterogeneous. The hybrid model attempts to retain the benefits from both approaches whilst mitigating their respective limitations.

Policy Implications

The comparative scenario analysis yields several policy recommendations:

For Immediate Capacity Stabilisation

Direct organisational funding (Scenario A) delivers the largest and most predictable impact. This approach is optimal when the policy priority is sustaining organisational capacity, maintaining employment, or enabling capital investments.

For Long-Term Audience Development

Citizen-directed funding (Scenario B) offers unique advantages despite lower efficiency. By subsidising consumption rather than production, voucher schemes can encourage cultural

participation habits that persist beyond the subsidy period. This approach is optimal when the policy priority is expanding and diversifying audiences.

For Balanced Sector Development

The hybrid model (Scenario C) is a compromise that addresses both organisational stability and demand cultivation. This approach is optimal when policymakers need to balance multiple objectives and circumvent the limitations of single-mechanism interventions.

Sensitivity to Assumptions

The crux of Scenario B and C projections is the assumed 60% pass-through rate. Sensitivity analysis reveals that outcomes change proportionally with this parameter. If the true pass-through rate is 40%, Scenario B would generate only $60 million in additional organisational income, supporting approximately 226 additional jobs. If the rate is 80%, it would generate $120 million in organisational income, supporting approximately 452 additional jobs.

This sensitivity highlights the importance of programme design in demand-side interventions. Factors influencing pass-through rates include voucher redemption requirements, eligible activity definitions, ease of utilisation, and marketing effectiveness. Policymakers implementing voucher schemes should prioritise design features that maximise redemption and minimise leakage.

Limitations and Future Research

This study's primary limitation was the short time series (three years), which model complexity and confidence in long-term projections. As additional years of data become available, more complex models can be derived to take into account external variables such as seasonality and structural breaks.

Secondly, the analysis was segregated by sectors and did not factor in heterogeneity across organisation types, artistic disciplines, and locations. Future research should examine differential impacts across organisation categories, as voucher schemes may disproportionately benefit popular mainstream organisations whilst direct funding may better support niche or heritage-focused institutions.

Third, the study did not capture qualitative indicators such as artistic innovation, community engagement, or cultural diversity. Whilst financial indicators provide essential evidence for policy evaluation, they represent only one aspect of sector health. Mixed-methods research combining quantitative forecasting with qualitative assessment would provide further insights.

Finally, the pass-through rate assumption for Scenario B, whilst in keeping with international evidence, remains an estimate. More long-term data from Singapore's Culture Pass programme will enable refinement of this parameter and validation of the scenario projections.

Conclusion

This study had demonstrated that government funding mechanisms significantly influence financial sustainability outcomes in the arts and heritage sector. Direct organisational grants generated larger and more immediate capacity uplift, whilst citizen-directed vouchers offered

complementary benefits in audience development and market responsiveness. A hybrid approach provided a balance between these two approaches, providing a potentially optimal pathway for sustainable sector development.

The methodological contribution of this research lies in demonstrating the applicability of ARIMA forecasting and scenario-based regression analysis to cultural policy evaluation. Despite limited historical data, this approach yielded robust and policy-relevant projections. As cultural sectors worldwide navigate post-pandemic recovery and ongoing financial pressures, evidence-based forecasting tools become increasingly valuable for policy design.

For Singapore's arts and heritage sector specifically, the findings suggested that a balanced funding strategy combining direct organisational support with targeted citizen incentives would maximise both short-term stability and long-term sustainability. Such an approach addressed the sector's immediate capacity needs whilst simultaneously raising audience engagement and promoting revenue diversification.

Future research should extend this framework to examine longer time horizons, organisation-level heterogeneity, and include qualitative dimensions of sustainability to build more complex models.

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

Microsoft Copilot was used to proofread this paper.

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Art as Social Infrastructure: Curating Practices Through the Visible Project

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Abstract

This practice-based paper considers how curatorial work may operate as social infrastructure through the case of Visible, an international platform for socially engaged art. Drawing on the author's position as a co-curator of Visible since 2020, the paper argues that the curatorial task in socially engaged practices also involves creating the economic, relational, discursive and temporal conditions through which situated practices can continue on their own terms. The argument brings Visible's transition from an award model to Situated Fellowships into dialogue with debates on participatory art, institutional critique, care and the curatorial. It proposes that infrastructural curating should be understood as a practice of accompaniment: providing resources, research, publishing, translation and long-term relation while remaining alert to unequal power, the pressures of representation and the risk that institutions convert community knowledge into symbolic capital. The paper discusses the fellowship model alongside projects including Waral Prakalp, Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma, GOODLand and CLIMAVORE. Rather than claiming that art solves social problems, it identifies how particular curatorial arrangements can help sustain spaces of collective knowledge, ecological attention and political imagination. The paper concludes that socially engaged practices require forms of institutional support that value duration, reciprocity and contextual autonomy.

Keywords: socially engaged art, curating, social infrastructure, Visible project

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Introduction

While socially engaged art has historically been distinguished from autonomous, object-based models through its emphasis on participation, dialogue and processes of collaboration (Bishop, 2006; Bourriaud, 1998; Kester, 2004; Lacy, 1995), recent debate has shifted the focus from these interpersonal exchanges toward the infrastructural and epistemic conditions that sustain them (Angelotti et al., 2024; Hui, 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Its materials may include social relations, local knowledge, pedagogy, organising, public assembly, ecological repair or forms of commoning. Such practices can be presented in galleries and museums, but they cannot be adequately understood through display alone. They often unfold over extended periods (Jackson, 2011; Kester, 2011), depend on trust and local knowledge (Angelotti et al., 2024), and draw their meaning from relations with particular communities, territories, and political conditions (Kester, 2011). This creates a corresponding challenge for curating. If a project's significance resides partly in the conditions it sustains, what does it mean to curate it without reducing those conditions to a temporary event or an institutional image?

This paper approaches this question through Visible, an international platform initiated in 2010 by Cittadellarte–Fondazione Pistoletto and Fondazione Zegna to support socially engaged artistic practices. Since 2020, the author has worked with Visible as a co-curator (working alongside the project's original curators, Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander) across research, editorial work, public programming, and fellowship processes. The paper therefore offers neither a neutral account of the platform nor an impact evaluation. It is a practice-based reflection that treats proximity as a methodological condition requiring reflexivity. It asks how curatorial work may function as support, accompaniment and care rather than solely as selection, mediation and display.

The central claim is that Visible can be understood as a curatorial infrastructure. By this, the paper does not mean that art becomes a substitute for public services, nor that social value is reducible to measurable outcomes. Instead, art as social infrastructure names the capacity of artistic and curatorial practices to create and sustain conditions in which relations, forms of knowledge and collective imaginaries can circulate. The question consequently shifts from "How is this work shown?" to "What enables this practice to continue; whose knowledge is recognised; and how are resources, risks and responsibilities distributed?" This shift is particularly important for practices working with Indigenous, ecological and community-based knowledge, where visibility can be enabling but can also be extractive.

Method and Positionality

The paper combines practice-based reflection with a selective reading of literature on participatory art, institutional critique and the curatorial. Practice-based research is appropriate here because the object of analysis is not a finished exhibition but a set of ongoing organisational decisions, treating these creative and administrative processes as legitimate sites of critical inquiry (Sullivan, 2010). The author's experience gives access to the discussions and curatorial processes that shape Visible, but it does not offer an objective viewpoint. It therefore requires an explicit account of positionality.

This proximity is not treated as a limitation to be eliminated. Instead, it follows the principles of reflexivity, treating the researcher's position not as a bias to be removed but as a methodological tool (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), which allows posing practical questions that abstractions about participation or care can often conceal. These include who determines

the terms of collaboration, how funding is made useful to a project rather than to an institutional narrative, what can be translated for wider publics without being simplified, and when a curator should step back.

Lastly, the analysis does not claim to speak for the collectives discussed. The examples are used to examine the kinds of support relation that Visible seeks to establish, based on publicly presented project information and the author's curatorial experience.

From Participation to Infrastructural Curating

Discourse on participatory and socially engaged art has productively centred dialogue, collaboration, and collective authorship, most notably in Kester's (2004, 2011) emphasis on sustained exchange, listening, and co-produced knowledge. These accounts highlight the necessity of temporal duration, processes that resist simple objectification, and a shift in curatorial practice toward the active construction of supportive conditions (Lind, 2011; von Bismarck et al., 2012). Such an approach demands critical attention to the distribution of agency, risk, and the capacity for refusal or withdrawal. Ultimately, curating as infrastructure functions as more than a secondary support; it is a critical inquiry into the arrangements that render meaningful autonomy and accountability possible.

The term "social infrastructure" popularised by Eric Klinenberg and expanded upon by media theorist Shannon Mattern (2021) sharpens this account. While "infrastructure" is often reductively associated with the built environment in urban studies, Mattern defines it as a site of ongoing maintenance; a realm of hidden labour, stewardship, and social relations that keeps systems functioning. This shift is essential for curatorial practice, as it allows us to adapt the term to describe the relational systems of support in art: the material, discursive, and temporal arrangements that enable practices to continue, evolve, and sustain themselves. It points to the material and relational systems that enable people to meet, learn, and act together. Without denying that institutional frameworks are necessary, "infrastructure" can also manifest as a powerful form of non-institutional support that exists outside of state or corporate power; a radical mode of living, studying, and organising that exists within an institution but against its logic, conceptualised by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) as the "undercommons".

Applied to art, the term should not be romanticised. Art cannot remedy structural inequalities by itself, and cultural institutions remain implicated in the political economies that shape them. Nevertheless, artistic projects can create spaces in which other social relations and forms of attention become possible. Coccia (2024) frames art as a mode of making capable of inventing new forms of life. Rancière (2004) similarly understands aesthetics as bound to the distribution of the sensible: the ordering of what can be seen, heard and thought. Together, these perspectives clarify that art's social significance may lie not in delivering an instrumental solution but in reorganising relations between knowledge, perception and collective possibility. This is important for socially engaged practice because its work often concerns more than the representation of a community or issue. It can create situations in which different forms of knowledge, experience and collective agency enter into relation. In this sense, the artistic and curatorial task is not to give voice on behalf of others, but to help establish conditions in which existing voices, knowledges and claims can be recognised without being assimilated into institutional categories.

Limits, Risks and Responsibilities

However, while these dialogical approaches offer new possibilities, they must also critically contend with the uneven conditions under which dialogue takes place. Differences in institutional authority, cultural capital, funding and mobility do not disappear when participants are invited into a project, and systemic power imbalances, such as institutional control over narrative, can render visibility extractive (Bishop, 2006; Fraser, 2005). The language of care can itself be easily institutionalised. Care should not become a soft vocabulary that leaves decision-making power untouched. Nor should it obscure the fact that curators and institutions control budgets, selection processes and the terms on which projects are circulated (Bishop, 2006; Fraser, 2005). A critical approach must retain attention to consent, refusal, attribution and redistribution. It must also be prepared to recognise that an institution may be unable to offer the right conditions for a given project.

The risk of extractive representation is especially acute when a project is rooted in a community, territory or knowledge system that has historically been defined and labelled through external categories. The issue is not only who is pictured, but whose modes of communication, pedagogy and knowledge are granted legitimacy. Curatorial translation should therefore be reciprocal and revisable: it should ask what a project wishes to make public, what should remain local or private, and how the benefits of circulation are distributed (Canclini, 2024; Kester, 2011).

A further limit concerns evaluation. Socially engaged projects are frequently required to demonstrate impact in ways that privilege short-term indicators. Such measures may be necessary for accountability, but they can be inadequate for relations that unfold gradually or produce effects that cannot be isolated (Bishop, 2006; Kester, 2011). The alternative is not to abandon assessment, but to develop forms of evaluation that attend to process, context and the priorities articulated by participants. Curatorial institutions should be accountable for the infrastructures they create: the duration and flexibility of funding, the ownership of documentation, the conditions of public representation and the ways relationships continue after a programme ends.

Four Curatorial Functions of Visible

The preceding discussion establishes that institutional support is not neutral: it shapes whose work is recognised, how it is represented, and which forms of knowledge are made to circulate. Visible is relevant here not because it resolves these tensions, but because it offers a concrete institutional arrangement through which they can be addressed. Its curatorial model is organised through four connected functions: support, research, publishing, and the cultivation of relations. Each concerns a different part of the conditions through which a situated practice can continue without being reduced to an institutional story or a temporary public event.

First, Visible acts as a support structure. The question is not only whether resources are provided, but whether they can be directed towards priorities defined by a practice and its context. This may include time, materials, research, collaboration or other forms of continuity that are difficult to accommodate within exhibition-led programming. Second, Visible works as a research platform. Through commissioned texts, conversations, and public reflection, it helps develop language for socially engaged art that attends to its artistic, political, and situated dimensions, rather than treating it solely as activism, social work, or illustrative content. Third, publishing as a curatorial activity can hold process, conflict, history and methodology in ways

that a label, press release or short exhibition encounter cannot. It can create an archive and enable circulation, while retaining a practice's complexity. Fourth, Visible cultivates relations among artists, collectives, writers, curators, institutions, funders and publics. The value of this network is not international visibility as an end in itself, but the possibility of reciprocal exchange: making connections across geographies without severing a practice from the community, territory or knowledge system that gives it meaning. These functions are interdependent. Research can clarify the terms through which a practice is understood; publishing can preserve and share its history; relations can return attention and resources to it; and support can be adjusted through sustained dialogue rather than delivered as a one-off transaction.

Crucially, this description should not be read as a claim that Visible has resolved the unequal relations that shape socially engaged art. The same functions can reproduce institutional authority if funding remains conditional, if research speaks over practitioners, if publishing fixes a project into an authorised narrative, or if international circulation becomes more valuable to the platform than to the practices involved. Visible is therefore considered here as a critically situated experiment open to revision rather than a finished model.

From Award to Situated Fellowships

Visible's development from the Visible Award (2011–2019) to the Visible Situated Fellowships from 2022 provides an especially helpful and concrete site of reflection. The award generated recognition and public discussion through temporary parliaments and juries. The later fellowship model changes the emphasis from awarding an already legible project to providing context-specific support for practices that require time, trust, collaboration and local knowledge. The change responds to a temporal mismatch: socially engaged work may take years to develop, while art institutions often operate through short exhibitions, fixed funding cycles and changing leadership.

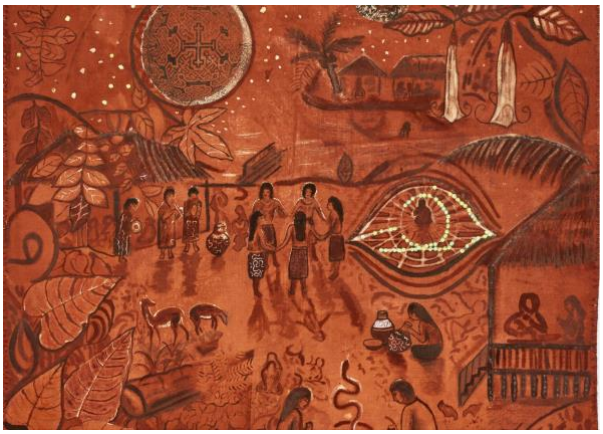
The Situated Fellowships are designed around projects rooted in particular communities and responding to social or ecological urgencies. Their logic is not simply to fund an outcome. Instead, support is intended to be useful to a project's own pace and priorities through resources, listening, consent, careful representation and sustained relation. This is a demanding proposition. It requires the institution to resist treating funding as a transaction through which it acquires a story, an image or a claim to social relevance. It also requires recognising that the platform's international circulation can be valuable only if it does not detach projects from the social and territorial conditions that give them meaning.

Visible therefore offers a practical response to the preceding concerns: it shifts curatorial attention from recognition alone towards the conditions that enable a practice to continue with contextual autonomy. The following fellowship projects illustrate the practical implications of this model, showing how curatorial support can be meaningfully calibrated to the specific requirements of community-embedded practices.

Figure 1
Waghoba—The Guardian

Note. Waral Prakalp, installation work-in progress at Spore Initiative (2024–2025). Courtesy of the artists, Visible and Spore Initiative.

Figure 2
Community Help



Note. Edelmira Mori (2021). Stained with soft mahogany bark with natural dyes and embroidered on fabric; 140 × 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Visible.

Waral Prakalp

Waral Prakalp (Figure 1), led by Mayur and Tushar Vayeda in the Warli community of Maharashtra, India, connects forest protection, ecological regeneration, cultural heritage and artistic practice (Visible, 2025c). Its fellowship support has contributed to the development of a permanent community hub, seed library and nursery. The relevance of this example is not that it proves art's capacity to solve ecological crisis. Rather, it shows how a curatorial platform can support a project whose work already combines intergenerational learning, storytelling and the preservation of Indigenous ecological knowledge. The central question is whether the platform's resources strengthen the project's own infrastructure rather than redirecting it towards a more institutionally convenient form.

Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma

Mujeres Muralistas Soi Noma (Figure 2), a collective of Shipibo-Konibo women artisans working between Lima and Pucallpa, offers a related case (Visible, 2025b). Through painting, embroidery, singing and design, the collective sustains Kené as a visual language connected to worldview, women's labour, community care and the defence of the Amazon rainforest. Here, care must include material conditions: funding for the continuation of practice and the purchase of materials can be as significant as public exposure. It must also include representational caution. The collective's work cannot be reduced to an image of Indigeneity available for institutional display. An infrastructural curatorial relation needs to make space for the collective's own forms of authorship, language and decision-making.

GOODLand

GOODLand (Figure 3), founded by Martha Atienza on Bantayan Island in the Philippines, brings together fisherpeople, farmers, communities, and institutions around coastal rights, ecological protection, and local resilience (Visible, 2025a). The project treats the seabed as an underwater forest requiring protection and combines research, training, advocacy and locally held environmental knowledge. It exemplifies how artistic practice may create or reinforce community infrastructure without being identical to social service provision. The work's

artistic dimension lies partly in the relations and imaginaries it convenes; thus its value cannot be captured by an exhibitionary encounter alone.

CLIMAVORE

CLIMAVORE (Figure 4), the long-term project of Cooking Sections of which the phase on Skye and Raasay is arguably the most well-known, similarly brings food systems, coastal ecology and public gathering into relation (Visible, 2023a). Tsing (2024) reads the project's tidal table as a situation in which participants are invited to live with tides and ecological interdependence rather than treat coastal waters as zones of industrial extraction. The project's public formats, including the 2023 CLIMAVORE Assembly (Visible, 2023b) in Rome, show how assembly can evolve from a temporary event into a curatorial and democratic tool. The task is to gather diverse expertise while avoiding the instrumentalisation of local knowledge for institutional theatre.

Figure 3
Adlaw sa mga Mananagat (Fisherfolks Day 2022)

Note. Martha Atienza (2022). Video still. Courtesy of the artist and Visible.

Figure 4
CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones

Note. Cooking Sections (2017). Installation view, Isle of Skye, Scotland. Courtesy of the artists and Visible.

Across these examples, the point is not to establish a uniform model as the needs for each project are substantially unique. Therefore, infrastructural curating must be context-specific because necessities, risks and forms of accountability differ. What they share is a requirement for duration. Trust, shared language and situated knowledge cannot be produced on demand for an exhibition deadline. The fellowship model therefore makes a normative claim about time: institutions that seek to work with socially engaged practices should adapt their support structures to the temporalities of the practices, not require practices to adapt to the temporalities of institutional programming.

Finally, the examples suggest that successful adaptation is relational rather than programmatic: it depends on whether resources can be directed towards locally defined priorities; whether institutions remain responsive after the initial moment of selection; and whether networks return tangible value, attention and learning to the contexts from which projects emerge. The critical measure is thus not how widely a project travels, but whether the conditions of its circulation strengthen or weaken its contextual autonomy. This shifts curating from a model of delivery towards an ongoing practice of listening, adjustment and reciprocal responsibility.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that socially engaged art should be understood through its relational, durational and situated dimensions. Its significance may lie less in a discrete object or public event than in the conditions through which knowledge, collective capacity and political imagination can be sustained. Curating such practices therefore cannot be limited to selection, interpretation or display. It involves the material and ethical work of resourcing time, supporting research, enabling careful translation and maintaining relationships beyond the moment of exhibition.

The argument is not that art can solve social or ecological problems, nor that institutions can simply declare themselves caring and thereby overcome the inequalities of cultural production. Visible is valuable as a critically qualified case because its Situated Fellowships attempt to respond to these tensions through context-specific support, research, publishing and long-term relation. The platform's significance lies not in offering a finished model, but in making its institutional methods answerable to questions of consent, agency, redistribution and duration.

The challenge for institutional decision-makers is clear: if they seek to support socially engaged practice responsibly, they must treat duration, flexibility and contextual accountability as core curatorial commitments rather than as optional additions to a programme. This means funding time as well as outcomes; allowing projects to define what support is useful; ensuring that representation and authorship remain open to revision; and judging success not only by reach or visibility, but by whether institutional involvement strengthens a practice's capacity to continue on its own terms. Curating as social infrastructure is ultimately a commitment to build and maintain the conditions in which situated artistic practices can exercise autonomy, sustain relations and make other social and political futures imaginable.

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The author used OpenAI's Codex as an AI-assisted writing tool to help transform the transcript from the conference presentation into a manuscript draft, organising material, and improving clarity and structure. The author remains responsible for reviewing the draft, verifying references and factual claims, and determining the final text, arguments, and conclusions.

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Readymades, Abstract Paintings and the Paradigm Shift That Revolutionized Representational Landscape Paintings Into Abstract and Conceptual Landscapes

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Abstract

Landscape is a Renaissance phenomenon that has continued to contemporary art, although between 1907 and 1914 the artistic community shifted the formal visual gestalt into a completely new conception of art, consubstantial with the landscape, even though it remained relatively esoteric in its visual enquiries. To understand them, we study art history, particularly landscape art, and its avant-garde conception, analyzing Land, Earth, Environmental. However, we restructured this theoretical and visual conception by assimilating the structuralism of scientific revolutions, according to Thomas Kuhn, who, by contrast, perceives revolutionary – non-cumulative – change, which ceases to add knowledge of the known, like art in this case, and distinguishes it from the normal – accumulative – change, which adds knowledge to the new conception. Evidently Readymades, such as Duchamp's *Air de Paris*, 1919, and abstract painting, such as Mondrian's *Composition 10 in Black and White*, 1915, appear as landscapes that no longer represent the real, since they are the real. In Jan and Hubert van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb*, 1432, Kenneth Clark (1991) sees the constituent elements of the landscape that remain relevant today: "there is a remarkable sense of our being in the landscape – of our being able to proceed smoothly from foreground to distance." (1991, p. 35) Such is Dan Graham's *March 31, 1966*, 1966, mathematically exploring a line of sight from the retinal wall to the edge of the known universe. Five centuries apart, the landscape component of both works is still observable even though they stem from conceptually and visually incompatible.

Keywords: landscape, post-landscape, Thomas Kuhn, paradigm shift, visual gestalt change

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Introduction

This paper is part of a researching line on landscape painting, stemming from an epistemological and paradigm change in the visual arts, charting its revolutionary phase, which began in the early twentieth century, and its normalization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Between 1906 and 1914, the conception of art underwent sweeping changes, manifested in formal visual gestalts contrary to earlier paradigm. As we know, these transformations were largely conceptual and abstract, incompatible with the evolution of painting as a representation of the natural or supernatural, as landscape had been deemed since the Renaissance.

In that modernist moment, works by Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, and Kasimir Malevich, among artistic communities in Paris, Munich and Moscow, utterly changed the visual paradigm. Their works were so different from their previous creations than in a collection of notes entitled *À l'Infinitif*, Marcel Duchamp mused, "Can one make works which aren´t works of 'art'?" (1913, p. 74). It wasn't a change from one avant-garde to the next, say, from the blue period to Cubism, from impressionism to abstraction, Cubism to dadaism or suprematism, as they appear in the table of contents of academic texts on the avant-garde conception of history of art that we've learned. Rather, we are speaking of a distinctive stage that we shall refer to as *noncumulative*, drawing on Thomas Kuhn (1962, Chapter VII, Chapter VIII). In this way, we'll see the *cumulative stage*, in which knowledge is added to artworks accepted by the artistic community after the revolutionary stage.

In this paper context, we will examine four works by Marcel Duchamp as a means of incorporating them into a model of landscapes –from the noncumulative period– that have continued to be seen as esoteric in light of art history's notion of the avant-garde. On the one hand, the importance of these works derives from the fact that they underpin the epistemological and paradigm shift in the Western art community. The artist's works created between 1914–1919 *Pharmacy*, 1914, *Handmade Stereopticon Slide*, 1918–1919, *Unhappy Readymade*, 1919; *Air de Paris*, are works that quickly integrated conceptual knowledge into landscape, and turned into *Readymades*, which were those works which weren´t works of "art." Meanwhile Picasso, Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian were shifting towards abstract landscape paintings.

On the other hand, the avant-garde conception of history of art, also visualizes land art, earth art, and environmental art as the mayor movements that have taken up landscape, or "nature" as it later became fashionable to call it. This vision makes us to think that this conception lacks a profound restructuring of visual perception that would enable theorization not only of the revolutionary change in landscape that is the focus of this paper, but also of the normal or cumulative stage entitled by the articulation of a paradigm shift. William Malpas in his book *Andy Goldsworthy Touching Nature* –as an example– introduces him as a "land," "earth," "nature" or "environment" artist who works with nature, uses natural materials in natural shapes and forms, in natural and urban contexts (2013, p. 22).

Avant-gardes such as land art, earth art, environmental art, and working nature tendencies are part of a paradigm we could call in an extended category Post-Landscape, alongside Yves Klein's *Cosmologies,* 1960; Michael Heizer's *North, East, South, West*, 1967; Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series*, 1969; Giovanni Anselmo's *Classifying the One Thousand Longest Rivers in the World*, 1979/73; John Cage, *Atlas Eclipticalis*, 1961–1962; Gerhard Richter's *Alster*, 1963; Anselm Kiefer's *The Burning of the Rural District of Buchen*, 1975; Tacita Dean's *The Russian*

Ending, 2001; Olafur Eliason's *The Glacier Melt Series*, 1999/2019, among many others. Most of these artworks are not considered by the indicated avant-gardes, even when they show a remarkable sense of being in the landscape, of being able to proceed smoothly from foreground to distance, as Kenneth Clark (1991) defined the constituent elements of the landscape above-mentioned, as we suppose is relevant in the contemporary art condition.

For artists working at the beginning of the twentieth century, say, Umberto Boccioni (n.d.) or Ilya Zdanevich & Mikhail Larionov (1913) it was possible to research the act of *touching nature* just as Duchamp's revolutionary artworks *Unhappy Readymade* and *Air de Paris*. That said, since those artworks were unprecedented in Western art history, it would have been impossible for artists working before twentieth century Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, impressionist and post-impressionist landscape painters to recognize this phenomenon. If we were in a time wrap, we could teleport to observe Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne as they stand before these *readymades*, as they'd have no theory for visualizing those objects as works of art. Camille Pissarro and Vincent van Gogh needed a canvas to paint. Cézanne, who used to climb Mont Sante Victoire every day, could not have possibly understood the act of walking as a work of art, as Richard Long's *A Walk for four Hours and Four Circles, 1972*; and Hamish Fulton's *A Six-Day Seventh-Mile Walk on Baffin Island Canada Summer 1976*, and specially Fulton's text *INTO A WALK INTO NATURE*, 2001. These are walks than can be recognized as a work of art, and the photographs, drawings, writings we comprehend as landscapes are fundamentally based on the act of walking.

The change that took place in the visual arts between 1906 and 1914 is somewhat comparable to the sort of noncumulative episode inherent to paradigm shifts as discussed in Kuhn's theory, as we shall soon see. *Unhappy Readymade* and *Air de Paris,* do not add any knowledge to landscape painting before the revolutionary period. When Duchamp wondered if there could be works that weren't works of art, the shift had already taken place, and even Duchamp's own paintings, such as *Landscape at Blainville*, 1902; *Church at Blainville*, 1902; and *Laundry Barge*, 1910, had been left behind in the previous paradigm.

Literature Review

The main problem in this inquiry—which leads us to assume there was already a paradigm shift that revolutionized visual arts in the early twentieth century— is an idea that has not been addressed in the literature.

This lacuna has led us to revisit anthologies of manifestos and annotated documents on historical and more recent avant-gardes. We referred to publications like those of Marchan Fiz (2001); González, A., Calvo, S., & Marchan, S. (2009); and Michelli De (2008). These invaluable sources have recovered several lost documents and made them available for study. Chipp et al. (1968); Stiles and Selz (1996); and Harrison, Ch., & Wood, P. (2002) are also summaries on the topic. However, when these texts mention a revolutionary change from the early twentieth century, they are not referring to a paradigm shift as a noncumulative episode in the same way as Kuhn.

Curatorial research catalogues have not visualized the paradigm shift in art; noncumulative change arises as a phenomenon that not only seems to lack any explanation but that is also not raised as an issue. The exhibition *Piet Mondrian and The Hague School of Landscape Painting* (1969), at the Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, in Regina, and the Edmonton Art Gallery, in Edmonton, both in Canada, did not feature Mondrian's abstract work. Employing a different

approach, Haags Gemeentemuseum, National Gallery of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; opened the exhibition *Piet Mondrian: 1872–1994*, 1994–1995, which focused exclusively on the artist's cubist experiments, pure abstraction, and neo-plasticism. MOMA is currently organizing the exhibition *Mondrian Boogie Woogie*, set to open in 2027.

Simon Schama wrote "The True Grid" (1995), an extraordinary review that addresses events both inside and out of the museum, such as tendencies in Clement Greenberg's critiques, while examining restructuring the perception of Mondrian regarding abstraction. Schama comments on the vanitas paintings the artist carried out as part his Calvinist education, his impressionist work on sand dunes in Zeeland, and his knowledge on Van Gogh. This writer took an interest in Mondrian's cubist work and what stands out is the lucid way he analysed the change in perception that the artist experienced in Zeeland in 1914, in addition to the abstractionist variations that led him to neo-plasticism. From our perspective, it is important how, unlike others, he does pint out Mondrian's visual restructuring "It's impossible to imagine a more powerful document of this conversion from perception to vision than the 'Pier and Ocean' series of 1914-15" (Shama, 1995).

The second volume of the *Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911–1944* edited by Joop M. Joosten and documenting Mondrian's production, takes up the revolutionary lapse (1998). Pierre Daix and Joan Rosselet's *Picasso: Catalogue Raisonné of the Painted Works of Pablo Picasso* covers 1907 to 1916 (1979). By providing most complete linear corpus of an artist's production, this sort of literature contributes to delimiting possible shifts in an image system. Because it is a catalogue raisonné, its function may not be to analyze change in an artistic community such as the present case of modernity and after-modernity, but we can assume the cataloguing fits within a paradigm that does not consider change as a research problem. The Duchamp catalogue raisonné published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, within an introduction by Anne d'Harnoncourt, is a complete sequence of the artist's oeuvre, accompanied by a series of thematic essays (1989). John Tancock's "The Influence of Marcel Duchamp" specifically stands out for the present discussion. The essayist examines Duchamp's importance to work by coeval artists such as Francis Picabia and Man Ray, alongside moder artist including Richard Hamilton and landscape artist John Cage, Robert Morris, Walter de Maria and Joseph Beuys (1973, pp. 159–178).

Methodology

In the research "La estructura de las revoluciones científicas según Thomas Kuhn en el análisis de la historia del arte" (Rabadán Villalpando, 2017), we examined Kuhn's approach to the study of art, particularly through the Ernst Gombrich thought, to whom Kuhn repeatedly mentions in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). There is also a fundamental analysis by Kuhn "Comment on the Relations of Science and Art," which he presented in 1966 at a conference in Ann Arbor, and published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, and later in *Essential Tension*, in which he debates similarities and differences between science and art, alongside fellow academics James S. Ackerman, George Kubler, and E. M. Hafner. Presenting the text is of interest for its extensive references to Kuhn's observations about studying paradigms in artistic phenomena, specifically, using images instead of styles, such as the avant-garde in the present case. In this regard, we propose to analyze the following body of artworks to examine the revolutionary paradigm shift we mentioned. In this comment, Kuhn declare the following speech:

> I take the special importance of those concepts to be that they permit a fuller understanding of the oddly noncumulative character of events like the discovery of oxygen, of X–rays, or of the planet Uranus. More important, paradigms are not to be entirely equated with theories. Most fundamentally, they are accepted concrete examples of scientific achievement, actual problem solutions which scientists' study with care and upon which they model their own work. If the notion of paradigm can be useful to the art historian, it will be pictures not styles that serve as paradigms… Both 'style' and 'theory' are terms used when describing a group of works which are recognizably similar. (They are 'in the same style' or 'applications of the same theory.' In both cases it proves difficult–I think ultimately impossible– to specify the nature of the shared elements which distinguish a given style or a given theory from another. My response to such difficulties has been to suggest that scientists can learn from paradigms or accepted models without any process like the abstraction of elements that could constitute a theory. Could something of the same sort be said of the manner in which artists learn by scrutinizing particular works of art? (Kuhn, 1966, pp. 350–351)

George Kubler's *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, published at the same time as Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, explores the Indigenous experience of vision, which started from zero when native peoples had to build churches after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. In the Mexican paradigm, everything instantly changed for them (1962). However, according to Kuhn, this would not be a paradigm change. It represents no change in Western art paradigms, and we could also say none in the works of pre-Columbian cultures.

This research project starts off by studying a corpus of modern and after-modern art works, from which we seek to construct a theory of landscape that differs from the conception of the avant-garde in art history, largely defined in line with land art, earth art, and environmental art. We see landscape in works by these neo-vanguards, such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970; and Michael Heizer´s *Double Negative*, 1967; but we also see landscape in Picasso's *The Harvesters*, 1907; Duchamp's *Air de Paris*; Umberto Boccioni's futurist manifesto *Against Landscape and the Old Aesthetics* (2004); Giovanni Anselmo's *Entering the Work* 1971; Roy Lichtenstein's *Ten Landscapes*, 1967; John Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis,* 1961-62; Anselm Kieffer's *The Land of the Two Rivers*, 1989; David Hockney's *First Edit for TV Screen*, 2012; and that artist's current exhibition in London, *A Year in Normandie and Some Other Thoughts About Painting,* 2026.

In these we see the phenomenon of Renaissance origins in modern and after-modern art, in line with Kenneth Clark's definition of landscape, inspired by Jan and Huber van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb*, 1432, Clark landscape's constituent elements, still relevant today, as we proceed smoothly from foreground to distance, even in Dan Graham's *March 31, 1966*, mathematically exploring a line of sight from the retinal wall to the edge of the known universe.

In short, our hypothesis is that the landscape component does had not disappeared in a paradigm change. The Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lam*, 1432, is as much a landscape as is Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean I-VI*, 1914–1915, but in a different formal visual gestalt, as we also studied in Rabadán Villalpando (2015). In these instances, however, viewers must restructure their perceptions if they are to discern landscape in both image systems. In the book *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality An Essay in Trialogue Form*, Mondrian offered his theoretical explanation of abstract painting that he had undertaken in 1914; he also demonstrates a proclivity for landscape painting. It is a theatrical work in which a painting enthusiast (Y), a naturalist painter (X), and an abstract realist painter (Z)—the embodiment of

Mondrian's position—sustain a trialogue about problems that weighed on him at that time.

> Y. So nature moves you too?
> Z. If it didn't, I wouldn't be a painter.
> Y. Since you no longer depict nature, I thought nature no longer meant anything to you.
> Z. On the contrary. Nature moves me deeply. I just paint it differently.
> X. I sometimes call your compositions 'symphonies.' I can see music in them, but nature no.
> Z. Music can just as well be discerned in naturalistic painting. Naturalistic painting, too, has its rhythm, even if it not as noticeable as an abstract-real painting. (1919, p. 19)

The painting enthusiast must learn how to see the new abstract landscapes, rendered in another formal visual gestalt. Mondrian also reveals that by using structuralism, it's possible to understand shared paradigms since it is also possible to create abstract-realist painting. This is comparable to the competing-schools phase in place before the scientific community's acceptance of a new paradigm.

Results and Discussion

In 1960, before Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Ernst Gombrich had recognized in *Art and Illusion* that this early-twentieth-century revolutionary change was a permanent achievement that "swept across Europe" and assumed the importance is has for freeing art from antiquated aesthetics.

> Aesthetics, in other words, has surrendered its claim to be concerned with the problem of convincing representation, the problem of illusion in art. In certain respects, this is indeed a liberation, and nobody would wish to revert to the old confusion. (1960, p. 5)

Kuhn must have studied this text because *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* takes on the question of emerging conceptions of perfection in artistic representation, as well as his interest in restructuring perceptions related to revolutionary changes. "… at times of revolution, when the normal-scientific tradition changes," Kuhn affirms, "the scientist's perception of his environment must be re-educated–in some familiar situations, he must learn to see a new gestalt" (1962, p. 110).

In their analysis from the second half of the twentieth century, historians like González, Calvo, Marchan Fiz (2009); Peter Selz, and Joshua C. Taylor referred to Cubism as the most important visual arts revolution since the Renaissance. We understand that Cubism was a conceptual and epistemic basement to move forward conceptual art, to which the contemporary condition of landscape is strongly paradigmatic.

However, British thinkers including Ernst Gombrich, John Golding, as mentioned, and John Berger (1969, 3), have worked more fully on justifying a notion of revolutionary change. Golding has formulated a notably complete idea—quite close to the idea of paradigm change––about Cubism's revolutionary characteristics as they relate to the High Renaissance. From a visual point of view, he concludes that Impressionism is closer to the High Renaissance than it is to Cubism (1959, p. 15). That said, this reasoning does not theorize a paradigm shift, at most, a stylistic one.

We tried to analyze a paradigm change based on a group of images from the artistic community. In line with Kuhn, they were articulated according to two types of change, revolutionary and normal, which mutually support each other and are noncumulative or naturally cumulative, respectively. The revolutionary shift of this paradigm takes place approximately between 1906 and 1914, and although paradigm changes are holistic, we considered the pentimento of the portrait *Gertrude Stein*, 1906, by Pablo Picasso, and *Pier and Ocean I–VI*, 1914–1915, by Piet Mondiran to define the revolutionary lapse core of the paradigm shift, including in the model *Painting with circle*, 1911, Vasily Kandinsky, *Air de París*, by Marcel Duchamp, *Black Square*, 1913, by Kazimir Malevich. At that point the formal visual gestalt changed so much that the artworks could not be visually deciphered until new artistic conceptions were understood. Picasso's *Spanish Village*, 1900, differs greatly from *Landscape*, 1907; Mondrian's *Farm at Duivendrecht*, 1906–1907, and *Pier and Ocean I–VI*, 1914–1915, are dissimilar; Kandinsky's *Red Church*, 1901, does not resemble *Picture with a Circle*, 1911; the same can be said when we compare Duchamp's *Laundry Barge*, 1911, to *Air de Paris*. Each artist was in the process of restructuring his perceptions in line with the articulation of a new conception of art as contrary to or incompatible with what came before. Once more we emphasize Duchamp's question if it was possible to produce works that were not works of art.

In these artists' work we find evidence that revolutionary change is not centered around Cubism. That movement is part of a more extensive revolutionary articulation that involves artworks that are more radically conceptual and abstract, as was the case with Duchamp. "I was finished with Cubism and with movement—at least movement mixed up with oil painting," he said, "I went back to a form of expression entirely divorced from absolute realism" (1964, p. 195). As Mondrian declared,

> Gradually I became aware that Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality. I felt that this reality can only be established through *purely plastic*. (1941, p. 338)

Duchamp worked on four other pieces that could possibly be considered the first readymade landscapes. Each is listed in the catalogue raisonné published by MoMA and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In his book *Looking through Duchamp's Door: Art and Perspective in the Work of Duchamp. Sugimoto. Jeff Wall*, Hans Belting (2009) has also studied all the artworks as a function of his study on perspective, specifically, *Pharmacy*, *Handmade Stereopticon Slide*, *Unhappy Readymade,* and *Air de Paris*.

Pharmacy is an anonymous, untitled landscape that Duchamp found, to which he added two brushstrokes in complementary colors, to associate the painting with the word "Pharmacie" and to "sign" the work. The brushstrokes refer to his studies of stereoscopy that address binocular vision. You could say the title is not a title per se, but rather a kind of relationship between thought and image, according to Duchampian conceptions. In "Apropos of Readymades," the artist described his famed artwork, in a way that we are left on the relationship between. "A few months later I bought a cheap reproduction of a winter evening landscape, which I called 'Pharmacy' after adding two small dots, one read and one yellow, in the horizon" (1961, p. 141).

We previously analysed how between 1906 and 1914, some artists changed the notion of art so completely that it was even hard for them to know if what they'd created was still art. It would have been impossible to attribute the works from a new paradigm to their creators. This fully

justifies Duchamp's act of buying another painter's cheap reproduction to turn it into a readymade, and sign it, since what was fundamental was not the painting's physicality but rather placing it at the service of the mind, as we'll soon see. At the very moment he created *Pharmacy*, he was no longer a landscape painter; he no longer fit into the paradigm, but rather into another, in which he could relate the image to thought. In the interview with James Johnson Sweeney *The Great Trouble with Art in This Country* Duchamp explains

> I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purpose, and in getting away from the physicality of painting–not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. (1946, p. 125)

He would do something similar in other found images, such as *Handmade Stereopticon Slide*. On top of these images, he would contrast the illustration of prisms in perspective, floating over the stereoscope of a marine landscape. For centuries, perspective had been a pictorial convention that Cubism had begun to deconstruct. The Philadelphia Museum of Art catalogue raisonné quotes Duchamp explanation on *Air de Paris*, as follows:

> Despite his contempt for 'retinal' painting which appealed only to the eye, Duchamp displayed a lifelong fascination with the phenomena of vision. This handmade slide is the first of a series of experiments with the illusion of depth obtainable through stereoscopy. (D'Harnoncourt & McShine, 1989, p. 291)

The artist's 1919 New York-Buenos Aires-Paris tour provided Duchamp with the occasion to create other readymades. He completed *Unhappy Readymade* in Argentina, from where he sent instructions to his sister Suzanne, in Paris, asking her to tie a book on perspective to a balcony and expose it to the wind until its pages blew away. It's important to point out that this is not an image-based representation of the wind; it's the element itself that will blow away the pages in a book on perspective, a pictorial convention that had been portrayed in the West for five centuries.

Finally, we come to *Air de Paris*, an artwork whose title clearly presents the idea behind it, without a trace of the painterly, thus turning the piece over to the service of the mind, just as Duchamp had intended. The artist describes the work as follows:

> At the end of… 1919 I left again for America, and wanting to bring back a present to my friends the Arensbergs, I asked a Parisian pharmacist to empty a glass container full of serum and to seal it again. This is the precious ampoule of fifty cubic centimeters of *Air of Paris*, I brought back to the Arensbergs in 1919. (D'Harnoncourt & McShine, 1989, p. 291)

It's hard to know if he had the idea for that work in mind when he produced the 1914 readymade, he called *Pharmacy*.

The following note, written in 1913 by Marcel Duchamp, included in *A L'infinitif*, written while he was going into an entirely new paradigm, as describing a kind of landscape that is not the representational landscape painting any more, but the revolutionary foundations of its future normal stage.

> A geographic 'landscapism'
> 'in the manner' of geographic maps
> The landscapist from the height of an aeroplane-
> Then the field trip (400 km.)
> Notes taken i.e. for example number of houses in each village,
> or then again number of Louis XV chairs in each house-
> The geographic landscape (with perspective; or without perspective, seen from above like maps) could record all kinds of things, have a caption, take on a statistical look.-
> There is also 'geological landscapism': Different formations, different colors-A mine of information!
> Meteorological landscapism (Barometry, thermometry, etc.) (1914, p. 78–79)

Conclusion

In this study on the paradigm shift that took place in the visual arts between 1906 and 1914, when the readymade and the abstract painting burst onto the scene of painting as representation, we analysed the contemporary situation of landscape, considering its Renaissance origin. Kenneth Clark (1991) saw its constituent element in Jan and Hubert van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb*, 1432, as we learned above the sense of our being in the landscape and our way of seeing from foreground to distance that, according to our analysis, still remains relevant today in works such as Dan Graham's *March 31, 1966*, mathematically exploring a line of sight from the retinal wall to the edge of the known universe. In other words, it is not the landscape component that changes, but rather the paradigm, understood as a shift in the notion of art and consequently of the normal visual gestalt.

In this regard, we examined this episode from a transdisciplinary perspective, drawing on Thomas Kuhn's structure of scientific revolutions, which analysed changes in the visual gestalt related to transformations in the scientific world. Thus, we could see more clearly how artists between 1906 and 1914 radically revolutionised the development of the visual arts. This transformation was not merely a progression from one avant-garde movement to another. Instead, it was a more fundamental epistemological shift that led to abstract and conceptual visual perceptions, artistically rendered in new media and in a range of possible combinations that also encompassed naturalistic works.

Then we witnessed the articulation of a paradigmatic shift in the work of Pablo Picasso, Wasily Kandinsky, Marcel Duchamp, Kasimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian, an episode characterised by its noncumulative (i.e., sudden) nature, also drawing on Kuhn's model, which meant that they did not gradually add knowledge to what was already known as art, but they initiated a new stage, contrary to and incompatible with what preceded it. In fact, the change was of such magnitude that even Marcel Duchamp questioned the possibility of making works that were not art.

Consequently, we included in this study the analysis of four Duchamp landscape works that disrupted two-dimensional drawing in perspective that had been employed to depict space since the Renaissance. His *Pharmacy*, *Handmade Stereopticon Slide*, *Unhappy Readymade* and *Air de Paris*, are works that essentially leapt into the fourth dimension. These landscapes were, ultimately, air, space, and wind, thereby breaking the hegemony of landscape as representation. These works suddenly integrated conceptual knowledge into landscape and were adopted as

models by arte povera, land art, and German neo–expressionism, among other movements in the after modern era.

Therefore, this study implies the possibility of historicising landscape in a way allowing us to recognise the remarkable sense of our being in the landscape – of our being able to proceed smoothly from foreground to distance that, as we have demonstrated, is expressed in abstract, conceptual, and naturalistic works, as well as in their possible combinations.

This new perspective offering a different way of seeing the landscapes discussed in terms of this paradigm is a way of ensuring that they not be overlooked in light of new studies of art.

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

I did not used any AI-generation or AI-assistive technology in writing, improving, or proofreading this manuscript.

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Between Embargo and Export: Canton Enamelled Porcelain (Guangcai) and Hong Kong–US Relations in the Cold War

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Abstract

This essay research focuses on the spoon, Canton enameled porcelain (Guangcai) collected in the V&A Museum. It was identified as part of the continuing history of Chinese export porcelain, but also a rare example in Britain as this spoon was exported mainly to America historically and in particular since the US embargo during the Cold War. The underside marks, including "Y.T. Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan", provides a material entry point into these geopolitical pressures, revealing how questions of origin, manufacture, and value were negotiated through labelling practices. Guangcai continued to be relevant in the twentieth century despite not holding as much consumption as they did in the eighteenth century. It stands as a highly idealised object whilst connoting the chinoiserie in eighteenth-century England to twentieth-century America. Canton enamel porcelain remains a tool for connecting the past, evoking nostalgia for the good times through its collection. It served as a respite in the ever-changing world of American expansion, with its unchanging patterns symbolizing a world untouched by Western influence. Hong Kong as a colony of the British during the Cold War, took over the role of canton factory, let Guangcai export continue and provide commodities and fulfil American collectors' emotional anchors in the twentieth century. This paper adopts a material culture approach, analysing Guangcai as an object embedded within geopolitical and cultural systems rather than as a passive commodity.

Keywords: Guangcai, Cold War, Hong Kong, embargo, chinoiserie

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Introduction

Upon entering the V&A Museum, make your way to the fourth floor. There, in Room 137, the Curtain Foundation Gallery, a glass cabinet stretches towards the ceiling. On the second shelf, there is a fairly unassuming object: a spoon (Figure 1). Opening the archive (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.) of this spoon reveals it is painted enamel on porcelain. The spoon dates from the 1950s–60s. Its porcelain body was made in Japan, while the enamel decoration was applied at Yuet Tung China Works, Hong Kong. The V&A acquired and catalogued it as part of the "Japan" collection; however, the object's production is better understood as transnational, with Hong Kong as the principal centre of decoration and identity-making.

Figure 1
Spoon, Yuet Tung China Works, Hong Kong, 1950–1960

Source: V&A Museum, Accession number: FE.5-2017
(https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1377000/spoon/)

Figure 2
Spoon, Yuet Tung China Works, Hong Kong, 1950–1960

Source: V&A Museum, Accession number: FE.5-2017
(https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1377000/spoon/)

From the 1950s to the 1960s, during the Cold War period, and because of the Korean War, the US Government applied an embargo on Hong Kong to prevent China from obtaining "strategic materials" or "strategic resources" through the territory. No products from China or even raw materials could be traded with the US. Therefore, when applying for the Certificate of Origin, Yuet Tung China Works changed to importing porcelain bodies from Japan, and the stamp on the spoon changed as well.

The V&A's acquisition file (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.) provides the rationale for collecting this spoon. In the "Significance to the collection" section, curator Luk Yu Ping records that the spoon is importance of filling the gap in the history of Chinese export porcelain, which was complicated by the Cold War. It also reveals the importance of Hong Kong becoming a global strategic production site. We can even interpret that this was a pivotal moment for the V&A to take a strong cultural interest in Hong Kong as a British territory and political ally, as the museum had no independent section and classification for Hong Kong until then.

Research Objectives

This acquisition information has led me to my research question to investigate the role of this particular Guangcai spoon "decorated in Hong Kong" and "made in Japan" in the 1950s–60s. This essay focuses on the trading during the Cold War period and Guangcai as part of Chinese export porcelain trade. It also tries to address the gap in the studies of Chinese export porcelain about which I will talk later in more detail, but my research is focused study on Guangcai which has received little attention, and not been differentiated from other Chinese export porcelain products from the eighteenth-century Chinese export porcelain until present. Moreover, I will address its roles and social impact on the Western society in the twentieth century which is also an under-researched area.

How did a Hong Kong-decorated porcelain spoon move from an object of chinoiserie consumption to an object of nostalgia?

Guangcai Historical Background

Guangcai has a history of about 300 years and is famous for its fine brushwork, extensive themes and rich colours. Guangzhou was an important foreign trade port during the Qing dynasty, and Guangcai was one of the most popular export commodities. Initially, merchants ordered porcelain products directly from Jingdezhen. Later, to reduce transport costs, they purchased white porcelain bodies from Jingdezhen and employed local painters to draw the designs according to customers' orders. In 1757, the Qing Government ruled that Guangdong should be the only export trade port, and it remained so until the Treaty of Nanjing on 29 August 1842. In the late Qing dynasty, Guangcai established its style, not only with specific patterns but also with richer colours and picture compositions. However, due to the turbulent political situation in the early twentieth century, Cantonese manufacturers and painters moved to Hong Kong to continue operating their Guangcai businesses.

Guangcai was recently added to the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong, Traditional Craftsmanship, no.5.55. The details can be found on the Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage database (Leisure and Cultural Services Department, n.d.).

Materiality

The spoon is made of porcelain and decorated with Canton enamelled decoration, categorised as overglaze porcelain (釉上彩), in which coloured paintings are added onto a glazed white porcelain body for further refiring to make the brightness of the colour long-lasting (Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre, n.d.). The spoon is five and a quarter inches long and was probably used for serving rather than eating.

Yuet Tung China Works and the Export Porcelain Industry in Hong Kong

According to the information provided by the V&A archive, the spoon was produced by a porcelain factory called Yuet Tung China Works, the first and last remaining porcelain factory operating in Hong Kong.

In 1928, Yuet Tung China Works started their porcelain business, and today, their painted porcelain tableware targets some high-end restaurants and hotels in Hong Kong to serve their guests, presenting a feast of visual art. Customised painted porcelain is ordered by private companies and organisations as souvenirs for their clients (Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre, n.d.).

The enamel porcelain industry was large in Hong Kong in the mid-twentieth century. According to a magazine interview (Zhang, 2024), the director, Mr Tso, recalled that the factory had approximately 300 employees and that worker accommodation was built around the site, including a dormitory. He further noted that, after marriage, workers often established informal dwellings using timber and corrugated iron adjacent to the dormitory (Figure 3).

The Pattern on the Spoon

There are many descriptions of Canton enamelled porcelain motifs, such as Rose Medallion, Familie Rose, Rose Canton, and Canton Rose. British and US writers have repeatedly used these terms interchangeably to describe the porcelain that prevailed in the nineteenth century.

Although similar in wording, “Rose Canton” and “Canton Rose” differ in meaning. In the middle of the spoon is a rose pattern, which is common in this type of Guangcai. The design combines an early seventeenth-century pattern with commonly used Western patterns by foreign merchants, which incorporated Cantonese landscapes in a kind of chinoiserie decorative design (Lam, 2023, p. 19). One reason for designing this Canton Rose pattern is described in the book by Lam Duen Shan Ming (Lam, 2023, p. 20). Porcelain “Canton Rose” were prefabrications but differed through customisation. During seasons without custom orders, the workshops could still sustain production, making it a business strategy. Hence, many Guangcai in that period were produced with the Canton Rose pattern as a kind of mass production.

Cold War Embargo in Hong Kong

On the bottom of the spoon is a label that reads, “Y.T. Decorated in Hong Kong, Made in Japan”. “Decorated in Hong Kong” means the overglaze colouring was applied in Hong Kong, and “Made in Japan” means the porcelain body was purchased from Nagoya, Honshu, Japan (Ming Pao, 2024).

After imperial colonial power faded out, U.S.-Soviet competition began. Between 1950 and 1953, a war broke out between North and South Korea. Soviets and the U.S. provided military support to North and South Korea respectively. After the civil war in China, the new government People's Republic of China stood with the Soviets as they supported communism.

In 1951, the US imposed an embargo on China, requiring products imported into the US to be marked as not containing raw materials from China. This embargo lasted until 1972, when the US president visited China, leading to the normalisation of relations and the lifting of the embargo.

Hong Kong was a British territory during this period, but after the outbreak of the Korean War, the US embargo also impacted Hong Kong's re-export trade and its status as a transhipment port (Chen & Guo, 1997, pp. 286–287), cutting off Hong Kong's economic life. To solve the export problem, the US Government and the Hong Kong Colonial Government reached an agreement that businesses needed to obtain a Certificate of Origin (*Shiji shanbian*, 2008), which was a permit issued by the Commerce and Industry Department for all imports and exports.

Because of this, porcelain painted in Yuet tung China Work intended for sale in the U.S. had to be labelled as "Decorated in Hong Kong Made in Japan". The coming section would explain the cultural signifier though the consumption.

Consumption Shifting From the UK to the US

Building on the Cold War trade restrictions discussed earlier, the following questions are considered: To what extent was the US market indispensable for Hong Kong? Could Hong Kong shift its main trade partner to the UK, given that it was a UK colonial territory, and simply ignore the embargo? To answer these questions, this section explores chinoiserie in the US in the twentieth century as a key factor for creating a new market for Canton enamel porcelains.

America Emulate British Chinoiserie in the Eighteenth Century

Before discussing America, we must first examine how chinoiserie emerged in the UK.

From Chinoiseries to Nostalgia

In the eighteenth century, Britain's non-aristocratic merchants used Chinese-taste objects to affirm their identity and showcase their refined sensibilities. Oriental objects and styles suited the aspirations of Britain's merchant class, symbolising both commercial wealth and participation in polite culture (Sloboda, 2014, p. 80). Eighteenth-century Britain was a highly materialistic culture, in which fascination with consumer goods and material possessions became closely tied to social status and identity.

The proper acquisition, display, and use of commodities had a complex range of moral meanings that had real implications for one's social life (Sloboda, 2014, p. 62).

China's image in the eighteenth century is an invincible trading power. Thus, Britain mentioned objects from imperial trade were frequently used as an indicator of taste and politeness.

British Taste Shift to the US Market

During the eighteenth century, individuals in the US often regarded themselves as an extension of Britain, and this perception profoundly shaped their cultural and aesthetic values. The influence of British chinoiserie, a trend emblematic of refinement and sophistication, significantly impacted US elites (Leath, 1999, p. 59), who emulated this British vogue, particularly in their pursuit of taste and social distinction (Leath, 1999, p. 49).

In Charleston, South Carolina, the elites considered themselves a stylish "suburb" of London, so much so that South Carolina governor John Drayton wrote that they "sought in every possible way to emulate the life of London society" and "were too much enamoured of British customs, manners and education to imagine that elsewhere anything of advantage could be obtained"(Leath, 1999, p. 59).

Chinese export porcelain is one of the most commonly found ceramics in the Charleston area, and constitutes as much as 24% of the overall ceramic assemblage at many archaeological sites (Leath, 1999, p. 50). Charleston's eighteenth-century aristocrats exemplify what we today might call "trickle down" decorative arts, the process of colonials emulating the fashion trends that start at the top of society in their mother country (Leath, 1999, p. 58).

In 1784, American merchants were able to import porcelain directly from China instead of through the British and Dutch East India Companies (Gao, 2021). In 1785, the *Empress of China* became the first American ship to arrive in Canton. Before the American Revolution (1765–1783), Canton enamelled porcelain, as well as other kinds of Chinese export porcelain, were expensive and luxurious for Anglo-Americans, since before direct shipping British law had declared that all Chinese commodities destined for the colonies should be carried by British ships.

As a result of the emulated culture and direct shipping, the number of Chinese export porcelains in the American market increased significantly (Gao, 2021). In the 1830s, Americans became the predominant consumers of Chinese export porcelain (Howard & Ayers, 1978, p. 485).

The Vogue Revival in the US and the UK in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, xenophobic European, North American, and Australian responses to fears over Chinese immigration led to the rhetoric of the "Yellow Peril" (Cheang, 2008). In fact, after the mid-nineteenth century and the wars fought over the right of the Western powers to trade in China, China's standing in the West slipped from a seemingly invincible trading power to a society in decline with a vanquished, semi-colonial status (Cheang, 2008).

Although China's image no longer carried the same sense of dominance and inscrutability, this did not deter US collectors from acquiring Canton enamel porcelain in the twentieth century. Chinese design was seen as a stylistic legacy of the eighteenth century, so twentieth-century chinoiserie was greatly reminiscent of the supposed grace and elegance of British eighteenth-century aristocratic living (Cheang, 2008).

However, since the twentieth century, Britain faced the wave of decolonization, losing its colonies one after another. This loss made the British nostalgic for the era of imperial dominance. America in the eighteenth-century emulated the home interior of the British,

however, Britain and American in Chinese taste object collectibles had diverged significantly by the twentieth century.

The British leaned toward antiques associated with China's imperial heritage, such as blue-and-white porcelain, Song dynasty jade, and Ming and Qing dynasty relics. In contrast, the Cold War era brought a transformative shift for the United States, from isolationism to internationalism, sparking a revival of interest in Chinoiserie objects in the eighteenth-century.

The sections below will explore how the shifting global roles of Britain and America led to cultural changes, culminating in the importance of Hong Kong's embargoed Canton enamel porcelain exports to the American market during the Cold War. It will address the question: why was the American market indispensable for Hong Kong?

British Nostalgia in Chinoiseries

Collectors and Connoisseurs' culture in Britain are different from America in the twentieth century, in some of Britain's great porcelain exhibitions, such as the International Exhibition of Chinese Art, 28 November 1935 to 7 March 1936 (Royal Academy of Arts, 1935) and the Oriental Ceramic Society in Britain, Guangcai was not a primary focus (Liberty & Co., ca.1983).

Before the twentieth century, British chinoiseries maintained pre-colonial relationships with China, viewed as a more romantic, less troubling world. An interesting double nostalgia can also be associated with the selling of Chinese things in twentieth-century Britain: nostalgia for the eighteenth-century European Chinamania and nostalgia for the old China of mandarins and pagodas that seemed to be fast receding before an inexorable tide of Westernisation (Cheang, 2007, p 1–16). Therefore, purchasing Oriental products in the twentieth century was a form of nostalgia for British collectors, with the types of objects sought being related to imperial China.

America Nostalgia in Chinoiseries

In America, the golden age of Guangcai was from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. People still purchase and collect Guangcai in the twentieth century, as it is nostalgia for an exotic object. Guangcai in this era was here to fulfil a "losing" emotion, but what things make Americans feel "losing"?

After World War II, the Cold War made the US expand its military presence in Asia to counter the communist forces led by the Soviet Union. Asian regions that had been Westernised due to colonialism experienced yet more cultural erosion as their traditions faded once again under the influence of the US economy and its cultural exports. This contributed to a sense of cultural loss among American collectors and consumers.

This intense fear of loss fuelled an almost obsessive public discourse that centred on securing the allegiance of decolonising nations and binding them to the US. Tension between the desire to integrate Asia and the fear of losing Asia permeated American thinking in the late 1940s and 1950s (Klein, 2003).

Another trigger point was the Korean War, and the US's involvement accelerated the development of a nationwide sense of nostalgia. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Washington rushed in thousands of troops to contain what it saw as a Soviet-backed invasion

of South Korea. In subsequent years, the U.S. dispatched military advisors to and launched nation-building projects in South Vietnam, exploded atomic bombs on the Bikini atoll, and sent the Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan from Chinese attack. It constructed a network of military bases centred in the Philippines, Okinawa, and South Korea, and crafted a web of political treaties that allied the U.S. with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaya, and Pakistan.[43] As military forces entered these Asian regions, the number of westernized areas in Asia gradually increased.

Cold War-era US underwent a rapid transformation, shifting from isolationism to internationalism within roughly a decade. How did Americans who had grown up under the isolationist era adapt to such a sudden and drastic change? The US believed that its citizens needed to be educated with an international perspective.

Francis Wilcox, a mid-level US State Department official, delivered a speech to an audience of educators in Philadelphia that recast the problem of foreign resistance to US expansion into an issue of domestic pedagogy.

The US public needed to be schooled in internationalism: it needed to be persuaded to accept the nation's sustained engagement in world affairs, its participation in international organisations, and its long-range cooperation with other governments (Klein, 2003).

Wilcox impressed upon his listeners that the US–Soviet competition over developing nations was creating an educational crisis among Americans, most of whom had been educated in what he called the pre-Pearl Harbour "isolationist era" and thus did not fully comprehend the importance of these new nations. He urged his audience of educators to help train the next generation of Americans for their "new role" of world leadership by teaching them (Klein, 2003, p. 21).

However, not every American felt comfortable with this new role, which created a sense of psychological discomfort and pressure. Echoing Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, Schlesinger argued that industrial modernisation had destroyed traditional social orders based on organic communities and personal ties and replaced them with fragmented social orders, characterised by "frustration", "isolation", and "anxiety", in which individual responsibility had become overwhelming and freedom a "burden" (Klein, 2003).

It is undeniable that the US expansion in Asia established its position as a global leader. However, this also brought about profound societal and cultural transformations. As a result, the twentieth century witnessed a revival trend that sought to rekindle the chinoiserie of eighteenth-century America. This period evoked nostalgia for a simpler, more peaceful world, in which the relationship with China and Asia was merely transactional–centred on buying and selling. For the American elite, it was simply enough to emulate the refined tastes of British aristocracy.

The Cold War Embargo Became a Booster of Guangcai Consumption

During the Cold War, the US's global role shifted, fostering a wave of nostalgia among its domestic population. The above section noted that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the US could trade directly with China, coinciding with the peak of Canton porcelain production. Canton porcelain was more often exported to the US than to Europe. By the

twentieth century, Americans were nostalgic for eighteenth-century America, so they sought Chinese-made goods that symbolised that era, and Canton porcelain became a prime example.

In this context, Guangcai was not just a collection of elegant tableware and decorations but a representation of the lifestyle of the eighteenth-century American elite. The concept of "double nostalgia" in chinoiserie described Britain's twentieth-century yearning for both exoticism and eighteenth-century Britain itself. By comparison, the US nostalgia might be described as "triple nostalgia", adding a layer of sentimentality for its own eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trade relations with China.

More important is that when something is about to be lost, people become eager to hold onto it before it is gone. Perhaps the Scarcity Principle in marketing theory can explain this. Similarly, when the embargo was implemented in Hong Kong, cutting off the remaining channels to purchase Chinese-style porcelain, it caused a rapid surge in nostalgic sentiments.

Conclusion

This essay focuses on the spoon, Canton enameled porcelain (Guangcai) collected in the V&A. This object was identified as part of the continuing history of Chinese export porcelain, but also a rare example in Britain as this spoon was the type exported mainly to America historically and in particular since the US embargo during the Cold War.

This spoon and Guangcai continue to be relevant in the twentieth century despite not holding as much consumption as they did in the eighteenth century.

Although the spoon is not the main representative of Guangcai mostly, it stands as a highly idealised object whilst connoting the chinoiserie in eighteenth-century England to twentieth-century America. The Guangcai object is still representative of people and their relationships with the past.

Canton enamel porcelain remains a tool for connecting to the past, evoking nostalgia for the good times through its collection. It served as a respite in the ever-changing world of American expansion, with its unchanging patterns symbolizing a world untouched by Western influence.

Despite the Hong Kong factory in Canton enamel porcelain declining after America and China returned to normal relations, Hong Kong's enamel porcelain industries from over Forty factories to only one left (Sun Museum, 2016). Hong Kong as a colony of the British during the Cold War, took over the role of canton factory, let Guangcai export continue and provide commodities to America and fulfil American collectors' emotional anchors in the twentieth century.

In the late twentieth century, although attracted by the lower cost of labour in the People of Republic of China, Hong Kong businesses began a "northward shift" in the 1970s and 1980s, relocating their facilities to the Pearl River Delta area of mainland China (Sit, 1998, pp. 890–904). Because of the historical context, Hong Kong Guangcai has its significance and isdifferent from Guangzhou enamel production.

Following the sino-america relationship back to normal and the embargo just lasted until 1972, the colonial revival trend faded out. American demand on Canton enamel porcelains declined. The spoon helps to document the history of China, America and the British, filling up the gap

of history. It represents the American colonial revival vogue in the twentieth century and the Chinoiserie still exists in our taste when we examine “elite” class. That is the role of the spoon and therefore, this object “Spoon” (Figure 1) is important.

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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Viplava Jānapadam: The Birth of Political Revolutionary Folklore in South India: A Longue Durée Study of Telugu Jānapada Oral Traditions

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Abstract

This paper is an interdisciplinary study of Telugu *Jānapadam* (folk) traditions in the Telugu-speaking states of India, specifically Telangana, from their origins in pre-classical Dravidian expressive cultures (c. 1500 BCE) to the medieval Bhakti period, colonial modernity, the Telangana Peasant Armed Struggle (1946–1951), the emergence of revolutionary cultural organisations, and the emergence of viplava Jānapadalu (revolutionary folk songs) as a mass political medium in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Through the lens of oral poetics, performance studies, subaltern historiography, and decolonial epistemology, the paper shows that *Jānapadam* is not only a relic of the folk but an active, adaptable epistemological system by which communities historically denied access to literacy, land, and institutional power have produced, disseminated, and enacted political knowledge. The paper focuses on the formal aspects of *Jānapada* forms—*Oggu Katha*, *Burrakatha*, *Dappu* performance traditions, *Golla Suddulu*, *Chindu Yakshaganam*, Lambadi dance-song—and key historical actors: Suddala Hanumanthu (1908–1982), Sri Sri / Srirangam Srinivasa Rao (1910–1983), Gaddar / Gummadi Vithal Rao (1949–2023), Varavara Rao (b. 1940), and Vimalakka. The paper concludes by theorising *Jānapadam* as latent social energy—periodically recharged in moments of crisis—and viplavam as the natural cultural-political expression of communities whose epistemology resides on the skin of the drum, in breath, and in collective memory.

Keywords: Jānapadam, viplava Jānapadalu, Telugu oral tradition, Telangana, cultural memory

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Introduction: Two Streams, One Land

The Telugu-speaking region's cultural history has never been a single, cohesive tradition. The lexical history of the word "*Jānapadam"* itself dates back to the *Aitareya Brahmana* (8.14. 4) as well as *Shatapatha Brahmana* (13.4. 2.17), texts that are typically dated to the first half of the first millennium BCE (Prabhakar, 2009; Ramaraju, 1978). This paper carefully addresses that attestation: it shows that the underlying idea, *jana*(people)-based knowledge that is different from courtly or priestly learning, is ancient in the subcontinent's intellectual lexicon; however, it does not prove an uninterrupted performance lineage from the *Vedic* era to the particular Telugu genres covered below. The argument put forth here is more limited: although the conceptual ancestor of *Jānapadam* is ancient, the documented performance history of the forms examined here—*Oggu Katha*, *Burrakatha*, *Dappu*, and related traditions—can only be confidently traced from the *Satavahana period* (c. 2nd century BCE–2nd century CE), and with actual density only starting in the medieval *Bhakti* era. It is best to keep these two assertions apart because doing so would exaggerate the strength of the evidence.

Within that more clearly evidenced frame, expressive culture in the Telugu region evolved along two long-standing, structurally opposed trajectories. The first—textual, courtly, classical—is preserved in manuscript and institutional memory. Beginning with Nannaya Bhatta's Telugu *Mahabharata* (eleventh century CE), flourishing under the Kakatiya dynasty (1163–1323 CE) and reaching its highest elaboration under the Vijayanagara poet-king Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–1529 CE), this stream produced *Prabandha* literature and court-sponsored performance grounded in Sanskrit textual authority (Narayana Rao and Shulman 2002). Classical dance forms—Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam, Harikatha, and court Yakshagana—belonged to this stream, their authority derived from patronage, caste custodianship, and institutional preservation (Kersenboom, 1987; Srinivasan, 1984).

The second trajectory—oral, performative, mobile, communally held—was much more socially pervasive but yielded fewer archival records. It was possessed by shepherds, agricultural labourers, artisan castes, Dalit drummers, and itinerant performers (Ramaraju, 1978; Sundaram, 1983). The term *Jānapadam—jana* (people) + *pada* (verse/step)—expressed knowledge that travels with the body and is passed on through collective practice rather than writing. This paper contends that, these two streams are not only different in content, but that the folk stream also has its own epistemological form, its own logic of validation, rather than merely reflecting, in a simpler form, the concerns of the literate tradition. It is this difference that helps explain the emergence of *viplava Jānapadalu* (revolutionary folk songs) in the mid-twentieth century, not as a sudden invention of political necessity, but as the most recent activation of a performative knowledge system that had been maturing for centuries, bearing ethical memory and waiting for the time when human suffering demanded human voice.

What Is *Jānapadam*? Defining a People's Epistemology

Beyond "Folk": A Structural Definition

To label *Jānapadam* "folk culture" in the Western museum sense—conserved heritage, quaint and marginal—is to misunderstand its purpose. *Jānapadam* is a form of knowledge production that arose outside literate, courtly, and scriptural institutions with its own aesthetics, pedagogy, and social logic: a vernacular epistemology (Mignolo, 2000; Santos, 2014; Spivak, 1988). One of the first comprehensive studies of the Telugu folk literary tradition is Biruduraju Ramaraju's foundational monograph Telugu *Jānapada Geya Sahityam* (1978), which emphasises its

"structural autonomy and social completeness" (Ramaraju, 1978, 43). R.V.S. Sundaram's *Andhrula Jānapada Vignanam* (1983) catalogued over three hundred distinct genres; A.K. Prabhakar's *Telugu Jānapada Vibhagam* (2009) established *Jānapadam* as a legitimate academic subject. Nayani Krishnakumari's *Jānapada Geya Gathalu: Nrusastra Vignanamu* and G.V.S. Mohan's *Jānapada Vignana Vyasavali* extend this scholarship with particular attention to oral poetic structures and the sociology of performance communities, while Mikkilineni Radhakrishna Murthy's *Teluguvari Jānapada Kalaroopalu* documents performance communities by caste and regional specificity, identifying the social matrix within which different forms developed. Together, these Telugu-language scholars constitute an intellectual tradition of *Jānapada* studies whose richness has been inadequately acknowledged in Anglophone academic discourse—a lacuna this paper seeks, in a modest way, to address.

The Five Pillars of *Jānapada* Epistemology

Jānapada epistemology rests on five structural pillars distinguishing it from courtly-classical knowledge. The first is *embodiment over textuality*: the body is the primary site of knowledge, and performance is not the representation of a pre-existing reality but "restored behaviour"—action that generates its own mode of knowing (Schechner, 1988, p. 36). The second is *collectivity over individual authorship*: authority arises from community recognition rather than individual genius, since oral tradition involves a "chain of transmission" in which collective validation is more fundamental than individual origination (Vansina, 1985, p. 3). According to Albert Lord (1960) on formulaic composition in oral performance: lyrics and narratives change to suit current circumstances, that bring to the, the third, which is *adaptability over fixity*. The fourth is *participation over spectatorship*: call-and-response replaces the proscenium-audience gap with an interaction frame, blurring the line between performer and public (Goffman, 1959). The fifth is *ethical immediacy*: what Freire (1970) refers to as "generative themes" are metaphors from land, labour, and kinship that locate moral reflection in material reality. Although Telugu *Jānapadam*, which is musical, theatrical, gestural, and ritual, goes beyond his text-versus-speech dichotomy, similar characteristics were noted by Walter Ong (1982, 37–57) in his discussion of primary oral cultures; treating it exclusively through Ong runs the risk of flattening precisely the multi-sensory, embodied quality that this paper considers to be its defining characteristic.

Ancient Roots: From Pre-classical Dravidian Culture to the Bhakti Watershed

Archaeology of the Deccan Plateau, *Satavahana* hero-stone (*viragallu*) traditions, and early narrative rock art evidence a culture of collective memory linked to land, martial honour, and community identity (Sarkar, 1960; Sinopoli, 2001). Telugu folk traditions are among the oldest, spanning over two thousand five hundred years, and were maintained primarily by local communities (Tijer Research Journal, 2023). The Kakatiya period also suggests a "cultural ecology" in which village performance traditions coexisted with court patronage but not in a subordinate way (Talbot, 2001).

The medieval Bhakti movements (c. twelfth–seventeenth centuries CE) represented the most significant pre-modern transformation of the *Jānapada* stream, in which vernacular language, emotionally direct poetry, and embodied performance were used by lower-caste devotional singers across South India (including the Telugu *Vīraśaiva Vachana* composers and the *Vaishnava Dāsa Sāhitya* tradition, such as *Tallapaka Annamacharya*, 1408–1503, whose songs range from devotional high to folk low registers) to assert spiritual equality and challenge ritual hierarchy (Narayana Rao, 1990; Zelliot, 1982). This set a powerful precedent that later

movements would inherit almost subconsciously: song could challenge power, and vernacular voice carried authentic ethical and spiritual authority, normalising what would later become explicitly political—the claim that performance outside elite institutions could generate truth and mobilise communities. These itinerant performance traditions—*Addamsingvallu*, *Veedhi Bhagavatulu*, *Budige Jangaalu*, *Chinduvallu*, *Dasarivallu*, *Gollasuddulavallu*, *Gondaleelu*, and *Jangaalu*, to name a few, as documented by Krishnakumari, Mohan, and Murthy—each maintained unique performative knowledge systems with their own aesthetic conventions, community ownership structures, and modes of social address by the medieval period.

The Performative Architecture of Telugu *Jānapadam*

The following study is not presented as an inventory in its own right. Each of these forms is included because it provides a particular structural resource that revolutionary movements drew on directly: a narrative grammar for transforming the dead into martyrs (*Oggu Katha*), a dialogic structure built into the form for staging debate and satire (*Burrakatha*), an instrument whose caste history meant that its reappropriation was itself a political act (*Dappu*), and open, unticketed performance spaces that generated solidarity as a physical rather than purely intellectual encounter (*Golla Suddulu* and related forms). The counterargument is that the repertoire of the 1940s–1970s cultural organisations was cobbled together from a pre-existing toolkit, each tool already bearing its social meaning.

Oggu Katha, performed by Kuruma and Yadava pastoral communities, is an extended narrative tradition centred on devotion to the deity Mallanna, combining ethical instruction with cosmic narrative through drum, vocal modulation, and embodied impersonation (Sundaram, 1983, pp. 112–18). Its narrative grammar—a hero encounters injustice, undergoes trials, sacrifices himself, and is transformed into communal memory—provided the template through which revolutionary movements later storified their martyrs, including Doddi Komaraiah, killed on 4 July 1946.

Burrakatha—a three-performer tradition of narrator and two commentators—embeds what Bakhtin (1981, 272) calls social heteroglossia into its very form; Aloysius, Mohan, and Manohar (2006, 34) describe it as "a novel art form of the people born out of political necessity." The Andhra Praja Natya Mandali made it central to political pedagogy from 1946 (Satyanarayana, 2005, pp. 56–63). The *Dappu*, a frame drum associated with the Dalit Madiga community, was historically confined to Dalit castes as caste-ascribed labour (Ambedkar, 1944), yet its reappropriation from service to political assertion became a gesture of dignity—what Fanon (1961, p. 41) recognised as the reclamation of self-representation. *Golla Suddulu*, associated with Yadava shepherds, enacted what Turner (1969) terms *communitas* in open village spaces without stage barriers; *Chindu Yakshaganam*, Lambadi dance-song, and numerous itinerant forms completed a dense performance ecology across the Deccan, constituting what de Certeau (1984) calls "tactical" practice.

These forms developed not in isolation from classical performance but in structural contrast to it. Kuchipudi's origins in a Brahmin village and its systematisation under Vempati Chinna Satyam through the Kuchipudi Art Academy (Satyam, 1963) situate it within an institutionally managed tradition; Bharatanatyam, originally performed by *Devadasi* women in Tamil Nadu temples, was reconstructed as a purified stage art largely by upper-caste revivalists, particularly Rukmini Devi Arundale, whose Kalakshetra institution (Arundale, 1936) remade the form along lines of Brahminical respectability (O'Shea, 2007; Srinivasan, 1984). They are not lesser forms but exceptional works of art with rich social lives. But their social address was

structurally distinct: *Jānapadam* spoke directly to the masses, in open fields, village grounds, and forest clearings, through collective co-creation transmitted orally in ways structurally more difficult for any authority to suppress than their counterparts in courts, temples, and eventually in urban educated audiences.

When Political Thought Found Its Cultural Home

By the early 20th century, the Telugu-speaking area was characterised by feudal exploitation that was unparalleled in most other parts of British India: the agrarian economy was controlled by landlords (*deshmukhs*, *jagirdars*, *doras*) who held near-absolute power over landless peasants, with the *vetti* system of caste-based forced labour as an additional form of economic enslavement (Ambedkar, 1944), which was structurally inseparable from caste subordination and against which *doras* faced no legal challenge (Pavier, 1981). Telangana also had one of the lowest rates of literacy in rural British India, and Dalit and lower-caste communities were largely excluded from written culture (Sundarayya, 1972, p. 41). However, a fully developed communicative infrastructure already existed, socially embedded in the *Jānapada* tradition described above. From the 1930s onward, when socialist and communist ideas began to circulate through activist networks (through the *Andhra Mahasabha*, founded 1930, the Communist Party of India, and the Progressive Writers' Association, founded 1936, Lucknow), they did not enter cultural emptiness, but a landscape already saturated with ethical frameworks for interpreting injustice and performance formats for collective action. The power of such a communicative infrastructure was recognised by social reformers, such as Gurajada Apparao (1862–1915), whose play *Kanyasulkam* (Apparao, 1892) is one of the most important modern Telugu literary works (Prabhakar 2009, p. 23).

A crucial literary bridge preceded the organised cultural institutions: Srirangam Srinivasa Rao (1910–1983), known as Sri Sri, whose anthology *Maha Prasthanam* (poems written 1930–1940, published 1950) moved Telugu poetry away from classical metre toward rhythms closer to folk cadence, opening with the triple-beat invocation "*Nadavandi, nadavandi, nadavandi*" ("Walk, walk, walk"). By incorporating folk rhythmic patterns and colloquial diction into published poetry, Sri Sri enacted the cross-fertilisation between oral and literary culture that revolutionary institutions would later pursue as deliberate strategy; he became founding president of Virasam in 1970.

The most significant pre-independence institutional development was the formation of Praja Natya Mandali (PNM) in May 1946, the Telugu wing of the Indian People's Theatre Association, distinguished by its engagement with *Burrakatha* and village folk song (Baskaran 1996). Its *Burrakatha* squad—including Mahankali Parvati, Moturu Udayam, and Chintala Koteshwaramma—performed anti-feudal and anti-Nizam songs across Nalgonda, Warangal, and Khammam from 1943. The drama *Maa Bhoomi* (Our Land, c. 1946–47) was staged over a thousand times, seen by more than two million people (Satyanarayana 2005, 56)—a mass mobilisation no print medium could have achieved amid widespread rural illiteracy.

The First Revolution Sung in Song: Telangana, 1946–1951

The Telangana Rebellion began on 4 July 1946, when peasants marched against the *deshmukh* Visnur Ramachandra Reddy in Kadavendi village; his guards killed Doddi Komaraiah, the movement's first martyr. Within a week, peasants had seized and redistributed roughly two hundred acres; the struggle spread across four thousand villages (Pavier, 1981; Sundarayya, 1972). By 1951 it had established village communes, redistributed land, and reduced caste and

gender distinctions in participating areas, at a cost of an estimated four thousand militants killed and over ten thousand imprisoned (Pavier, 1981, pp. 89–112; Stree Shakti Sanghatana, 1989). Stree Shakti Sanghatana's *We Were Making History* (1989) provides valuable testimonies from women participants, documenting both gendered oppression and the role of women's song in sustaining morale.

Song was operational throughout the struggle: used to announce meetings, signal danger, memorialise the fallen, and sustain morale—exemplifying James Scott's (1990) concept of "hidden transcripts," subaltern counter-discourse whose meaning was opaque to the Nizam's forces but transparent to those for whom it was composed. Suddala Hanumanthu (1908–1982), born to an agricultural labouring family in Nalgonda district, is the defining figure of this phase. His song *"Palleturi Pillagada Pasulagaase Monagada*" recounted the life of a bonded child worker (later set to film in *Maa Bhoomi* in 1979), and his *"Bandenaka Bandi Katti"* described the overthrow of feudal tyranny by depicting a landlord being carted away on a bullock cart. In this way, the songs of Hanumanthu could be considered "weapons of the weak" in the sense of James Scott (1985) — counter-hegemonic tools that encoded moral arguments against feudal authority in a way that non-literate communities could absorb.

This is because unlike printed manifestos or other formal political documents, these songs survived not because they were printed but because they were oral and therefore flexible: lyrics were updated to local contexts, to individual landlords and villages, and melodies were applied to new political situations in the following decades—a process Vansina (1985, 100–20) refers to as structural compression, the condensation of specific historical experience into narrative form that could be reproduced widely in space and time. One such song, which D. Venkateswara Rao (1988, p. 1) opens his historical analysis within *Telangana Praja Savuda Porata Charitra* (1988), recognises what formal historical methodology could not fully accommodate: that the songs conveyed a political-emotional truth that prose history alone could not capture. The act of revision, approval, and mass performance meant that the collectivity of composition constituted a social verification that individual authorship could not offer (Countercurrents.org, 2021). The song lived on, in a sense, because it was endorsed by the community.

The Institutionalisation of Revolution: Virasam, JNM and Gaddar

The organisations examined in this section did not emerge automatically from grievance or from the prior availability of *Jānapada* forms. Each represents a deliberate strategic choice by identifiable actors—Sri Sri, Varavara Rao, B. Narsing Rao, Gaddar—to mobilise an existing cultural repertoire for explicitly political ends: oppressive conditions combined with an available performative infrastructure make revolutionary cultural mobilisation unusually fast and durable when organisers choose to pursue it, not automatic.

On July 4, 1970, radical writers founded the Viplava Rachaitala Sangham (Virasam) under founding president Sri Sri, with Varavara Rao (1940) among its founding executive, which was established during the 1967–1970 Srikakulam peasant rebellion (Pavier 1981, pp. 193–210). As leader P, Virasam made a significant contribution by explicitly bridging poetry and song. "Poetry can be read by educated or elite sections, whereas songs can travel far and wide," according to Varalakshmi quoted in Countercurrents (2021). Chief Minister N repeatedly banned Virasam. A T. Though unintentionally, Rama Rao's proclamation "*Aata*, *maata*, *paata bandh*!" ("performances, speeches, and songs: banned") acknowledged that the song was more of a political tool than a form of entertainment.

The Art Lovers' Association, founded in Hyderabad by filmmaker B. Narsing Rao, became the Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) in 1972, collecting and reworking thousands of folk and revolutionary songs in a practice Gramsci (1971, p. 9) calls "organic intellectualism." Songs by Cherabanda Raju and Sivasagar became standard repertoire; many songwriters remain anonymous, reflecting *Jānapadam*'s collective rather than individual ownership.

No figure embodies this paper's thesis better than Gummadi Vithal Rao—born in 1949 into a Dalit family in Toopran, Medak district, who became Gaddar ("Revolt")—the most celebrated exponent of *viplava Jānapadalu* in the twentieth century. The son of landless peasants from the Dalit Madiga community, he dropped out of engineering college for financial reasons, worked as a manual labourer, and joined the Art Lovers' Association under B. Narsing Rao. Inspired by the Srikakulam armed struggle, he took the name Gaddar in tribute to the Gadar Party of Punjab (1913–1930), the anti-colonial organisation established among Indian immigrants in North America (Puri, 1983). In 1972 he joined the People's War Group; in 1975 he was arrested during the Emergency and jailed for forty-five days; in 1986 he went underground and worked in the Dandakaranya forest region for eight months. By his death on 6 August 2023, at age seventy-four, he had composed nearly five thousand songs, collected in *Taragani Gani: Prajala Patala Puttupuvottaraalu* (1992) and translated in Vasanth Kannabiran's *My Life is a Song: Gaddar's Anthems for Revolution* (Orient BlackSwan, 2021). His performative idiom—barefoot, in the *Gongadi* shawl of the Telangana shepherd community, tight *dhoti*, red scarf, and *gejjelu* anklets—synthesised the dramatic cadence of *Burrakatha*, the devotional intensity of *Oggu Katha*, and the rhythmic drive of *Dappu*: what Schechner (1988, p. 45) calls "restored behaviour" invested with political intentionality. A bullet remained lodged in his spine following a 1997 assassination attempt; in a handwritten letter from hospital weeks before his death, Gaddar wrote that "the heartbeat of the people" (*janam gundela chappudu*) had been injured (News Minute, 2023). The metaphor was exact: his body and the body politic were, in his own understanding, the same thing.

The Telangana Statehood Movement: A Second Great Activation

The popular movement for a separate Telangana state, building momentum since the 1990s among the common populations, later under K. Chandrashekhar Rao and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (formed 2001), expressed itself primarily in *Jānapadam*. The *Dhoom-Dham*, a mass cultural event combining folk performance, political speech, and group music, first held at Kamareddy in 2002 and based on Burrakatha, Oggu Katha, and folk song, with performers such as Gaddar, Rasamayi Balkishen, and Vimalakka (Telangana Today, 2020), became the movement's signature format, and Vimalakka, a folk singer from the Warangal region, was a cultural icon of its gendered aspect, singing in the folk idiom to articulate the statehood demand and the gendered challenges of Telangana women, continuing a tradition of women performers documented in Stree Shakti Sanghatana (1989). On 2 June 2014, Telangana became the twenty-ninth state of India.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

This study deploys an interdisciplinary methodology at the intersection of four traditions. Oral poetics (Lord, 1960; Ong, 1982; Vansina, 1985) illuminates how *Jānapada* songs function as memory systems through formulaic repetition and rhythm. Performance studies (Schechner, 1988; Turner, 1969) reveals how collective performance produces solidarity as a physical, felt experience—what Turner calls *communitas*. By treating songs as historical sources of validity on par with written documents, subaltern historiography (Spivak, 1988) offers a framework for

regaining agency that has been methodically removed from elite historical records. Decolonial epistemology (Mignolo, 2000; Santos, 2014) offers the vocabulary to place *Jānapadam* as vernacular theory—an already-constituted epistemological system producing knowledge through its own internal criteria—rather than as pre-political expression awaiting development from above. In order to make their significance understandable without undermining their own claims to authority, the paper reads Telugu-language primary material—song compilations, monographs, and oral histories—alongside Anglophone theoretical literature.

Dormant Energy and Cyclical Activation

The Latency Model

One of the central theoretical contributions of this paper is what we term the latency model of *Jānapada*'s political function—offered here as a defined construct rather than a suggestive image. The model specifies three elements. First, what is stored during the latent phase: not political content itself, but a transmissible infrastructure—repertoire, performance formats (the *Burrakatha* triad, the *Oggu Katha* hero-narrative, open-ground gathering conventions), and the caste- and community-based networks of practitioners who carry technical competence across generations. Gramsci's (1971, pp. 419–25) analysis of subaltern folklore is instructive: folklore is not simply the backward persistence of pre-capitalist consciousness but the "sediment of conceptions of the world" accumulated by communities excluded from hegemonic culture. Second, what triggers reactivation: reactivation required both a material precipitant—intensified feudal exploitation in 1946, the Srikakulam uprising and Emergency-era repression in the 1970s, perceived regional marginalisation from the 1990s—and the presence of specific organisers able and willing to broker between aggrieved communities and the existing performance infrastructure. Grievance alone does not appear, on this evidence, to be sufficient. Third, what would count as disconfirming evidence: a case of comparable grievance and infrastructure but no organiser willing to broker, and consequently no reactivation. This paper does not test such a negative case directly, and doing so is flagged as a limitation and a direction for further research.

With that qualification in place, the structural mechanics of the Latency Model explain three distinct moments of activation: the 1946–1951 armed struggle, the revolutionary mobilisation of the 1970s–1990s, and the Telangana statehood movement. In each case, the forms already existed in latent, non-political use; organisational choices redirected their content; and the redirection proceeded with a speed that reflects the depth of the pre-existing infrastructure rather than any inevitability in the underlying culture.

Transmission Across Generations

A crucial dimension of *Jānapada*'s resilience is its capacity for generational transmission even when the political conditions that originally activated it are in abeyance. Young people in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh encounter *Jānapadam* through family and community performance at festivals and agricultural events, school and university cultural programmes, and, critically in the contemporary context, digital and social media. JNM's and Virasam's social media presence has extended the reach of revolutionary folk songs into digital space, enabling the circulation of Gaddar's performances among diaspora communities and urban youth with no direct experience of the agrarian contexts in which the songs were composed (Telangana Today, 2020). The body of revolutionary folk songs recorded on cassette from the late 1970s, on VCD from the 1990s, and on streaming platforms thereafter constitutes what

might be termed a "digital latency": the archive of embodied political culture preserved in digital form, available for reactivation when conditions require.

Structural Unsuppressibility

Virasam was banned, Varavara Rao was arrested, and Gaddar was shot in 1997, but the state's repeated attempts to put an end to revolutionary *Jānapadam* were unsuccessful. This failure can be explained structurally: *Jānapadam* does not reside in named leaders who can be imprisoned, in books that can be banned, or in institutions that can be closed down. It lives in collective memory and performers' bodies; according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), it is rhizomatic rather than arborescent, with no central trunk that can be felled and no single root that can be cut. According to the evidence gathered here, Varavara Rao's own observation that true history is written in the hearts of the people should be interpreted as an accurate description of how *Jānapadam* serves as a historical archive rather than just a rhetorical device.

Viplava Jānapadalu in Global Perspective

The phenomenon documented in this paper is not unique to Telangana; it is a globally recurring pattern at the intersection of oral tradition and political resistance. *Nueva Canción* in Latin America (Violeta Parra, Victor Jara, Mercedes Sosa; 1960s–80s) adapted traditional folk melodies to carry anti-dictatorship content, with state repression including the murder of Victor Jara in 1973 (Reyes Matta, 1988). Anti-apartheid song in South Africa—Miriam Makeba, the Freedom Songs, *Senzeni Na?*—drew on Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho oral traditions and worker *izibongo* praise poetry (Coplan, 1985; Erlmann, 1991). *Chimurenga* music in Zimbabwe (Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited) carried anti-colonial and land-rights politics through Shona traditional music and mbira *dzavadzimu* (Turino, 2000). Civil Rights Freedom Songs in the United States (We Shall Overcome, Oh Freedom, 1950s–60s) adapted African-American gospel and work-song traditions for mass mobilisation (Carawan and Carawan, 1963; Reagon, 1987), and Haitian *rara* carnival performance connected Afro-Haitian ritual music and Vodou percussion to the historical memory of the Haitian Revolution (Averill, 1997). What unites these traditions, and what Eyerman and Jamison (1998) in *Music and Social Movements* term "cognitive praxis," is that wherever oral cultures possess deep performative traditions and marginalised communities face concentrated exploitation, musical traditions function as the production and transmission of political knowledge in aesthetic form. Telugu *viplava Jānapadalu* is distinguished within this global pattern by the depth of its roots across two millennia, the sophistication of its institutional framework (PNM, Virasam, JNM), the specificity of its caste and class politics—requiring the combined analytical resources of Marxist political economy and Ambedkarite caste critique—and the extraordinary figure of Gaddar, whose nearly five thousand songs constitute perhaps the largest individual body of revolutionary folk composition in modern world history.

Conclusions

This study has explored the arc of *Jānapadam* from its ancient origins to the emergence of the cultural-political tradition of *viplava Jānapadalu*, contending that *Jānapadam* is not folklore in the Western archival sense but epistemology—a means of knowing and disseminating social reality that emerged outside literate and courtly institutions, whose longevity is rooted in its decentralisation, communal ownership, and embodiment rather than textual archiving.

The parallel stream of Telugu culture, running alongside Kuchipudi, Yakshagana, and the classical literary canon, was never peripheral; it was the primary cultural infrastructure of the majority. Its political reactivation in the 1940s, 1970s, and 2000s was not an anomaly of radical politics, but nor was it automatic. The latency model developed in Section X specifies the conditions under which reactivation occurred: an existing performative infrastructure, an intensifying material grievance, and organisers willing and able to broker between the two. Where those conditions converged, activation was fast and durable; the model makes no claim about what would have happened in their absence.

Suddala Hanumanthu composed in the fields of Nalgonda while the Nizam's police mobilised against the peasant movement; Sri Sri's verses became anthems for a generation with no political party to represent them; the Jana Natya Mandali built political analysis into aesthetic structures communities already inhabited; Gaddar carried a bullet in his spine for twenty-five years and called the people his heartbeat; Vimalakka brought the specific dignity of Telangana's rural women into the political arena.

The history of Telugu *Jānapadam* is the history of a people thinking in rhythm, metaphor, and collective sound—epistemology as survival, aesthetics as resistance, performance as politics. None of this makes revolutionary reactivation inevitable. What the evidence assembled here does show is that a culture stored in people's bodies, in community memory, and in collectively owned performance is markedly harder to suppress than a culture stored in institutions, books, or named leaders alone—and that where the right conditions converge, such a culture provides an unusually fast and legible route from grievance to organised collective voice. *Jānapadam* is not, on this reading, simply a genre; it is a durable and continuing form of political potential. *Viplavam*—revolution—is one, but not the only, possible expression of that potential, and this paper has tried to show both why it recurred in Telugu history and under what conditions it did so.

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The Cello as Voice: Instrumental Lyricism in the Music of Frederic Chopin

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Abstract

This paper examines instrumental lyricism in the music of Frédéric Chopin, focusing on the expressive role of the cello and its close connection to vocal modes of musical thought. Across Chopin's oeuvre, the instrument appears consistently in both chamber contexts and in the manner of cello writing, reflecting the evolution of his musical language and emerging as a structurally significant element after the piano. Rather than treating lyricism as a fixed stylistic feature, the study approaches it as an expressive principle that develops alongside changes in Chopin's compositional idiom. In this context, the cello participates in a mode of writing shaped by cantabile phrasing, linear continuity, and the articulation of melodic breath. Its presence often extends beyond accompanying function, contributing to the formation of musical narrative through a distinctly singing quality. Drawing on selected examples from works featuring the cello, the paper traces how changes in Chopin's harmonic and textural thinking affect the instrument's expressive role. Particular attention is given to instances where the cello assumes a leading or structurally significant role within the musical fabric. By situating the cello within Chopin's evolving musical language, the study suggests a view of instrumental lyricism shaped by the interplay of texture, line, and vocal imagination, as well as by changing conceptions of cello playing and its expressive possibilities in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Chopin, Chamber music, musical discourse, lyricism, musical continuity

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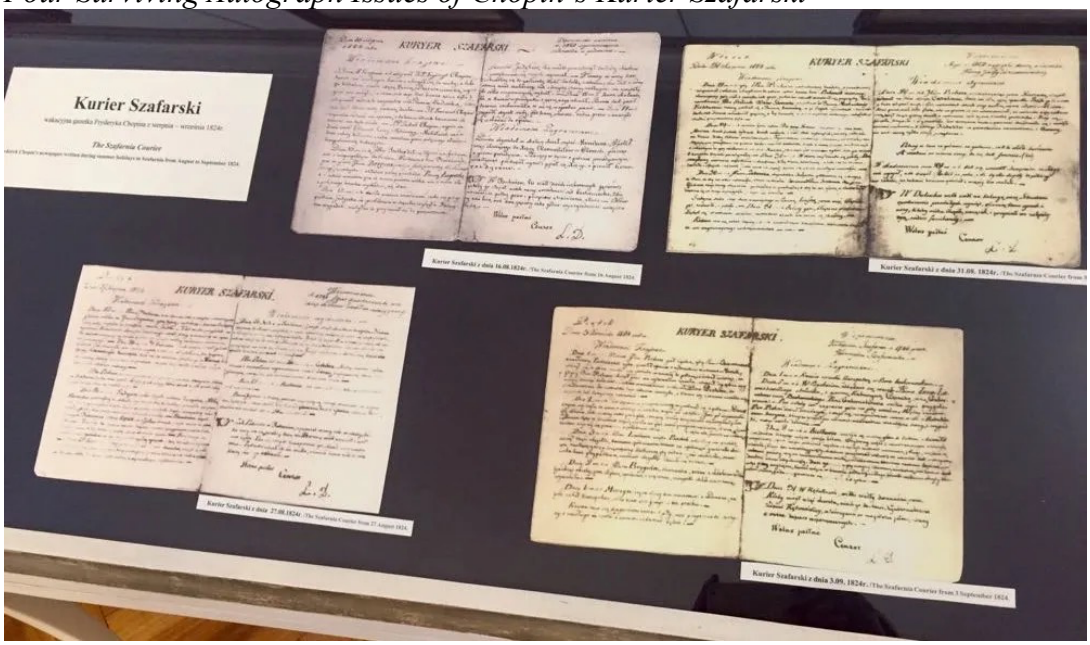
Introduction: Deconstructing the *Cantabile* Myth

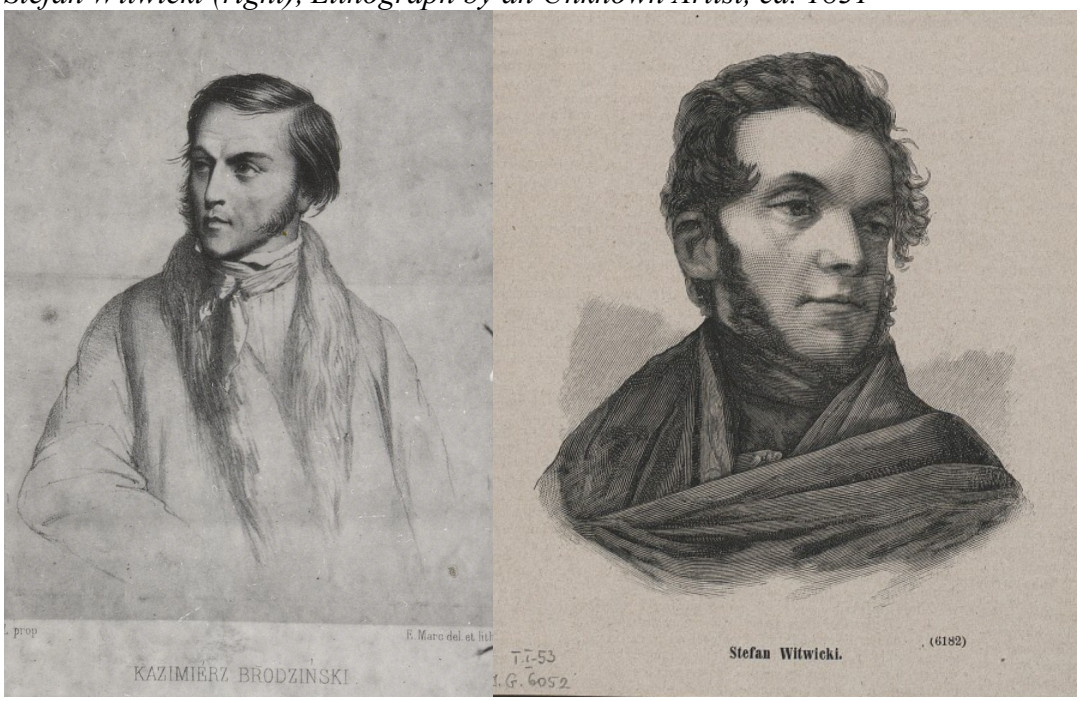
Among the many commonplaces that continue to shape discussions of Fryderyk Chopin's music, few have proved as persistent as the association of his melodic writing with the human voice (Eigeldinger, 1986; Samson, 1985). From nineteenth-century accounts of his performance to modern stylistic studies, Chopin's music has repeatedly been characterized as *cantabile*, as though its defining expressive quality resided in a seamless translation of vocal lyricism—and particularly the aesthetics of Italian *bel canto*—into the instrumental realm (Kallberg, 1996; Kasunic, 2025). There is, however, a substantial basis for these observations in Chopin's musical language. They capture something fundamental about the aesthetic ideals that informed his compositional practice, as well as the extraordinary capacity of his melodic writing to suggest breath, inflection, and continuous movement. The problem, however, is that precisely because this association has become so deeply embedded in scholarship, it has acquired the status of an analytical shorthand. To describe a melodic line as "vocal" or "song-like" often risks concluding the discussion at the exact moment where the most compelling analytical questions begin. The study under review approaches lyricism from a fundamentally different perspective. Rather than considering lyricism to be a stable stylistic attribute or an aesthetic category inherited from vocal music, it treats lyricism as an active compositional process. In this view, expressive force emerges through the dynamic interaction of melodic continuity, harmonic mobility, textural organization, and temporal articulation. Yet, to fully understand how Chopin formulated this concept of lyricism, we must look beyond purely musical models to his lifelong affinity with the literary world. Even as a child, Chopin displayed extraordinary linguistic sensitivity and literary playfulness—exemplified by the *Szafarnia Courier* (*Kurier Szafarski*), a humorous domestic newspaper he wrote and "edited" during his rural summer holidays.

Figure 1
Four Surviving Autograph Issues of Chopin's Kurier Szafarski



Source: From the collection of the Fryderyk Chopin Museum in Warsaw.

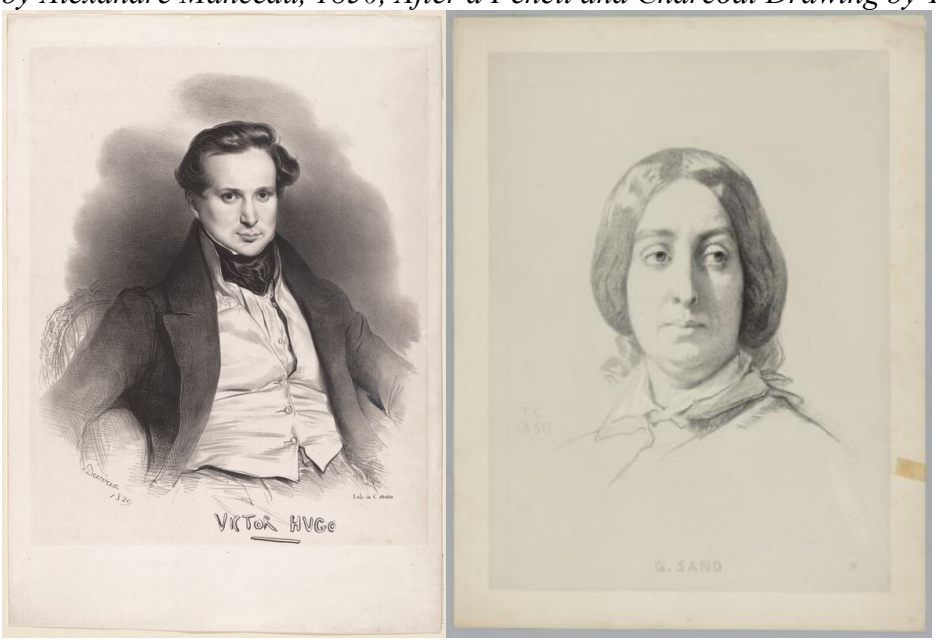
Figure 2
Portraits of Kazimierz Brodziński (left), Lithograph by Franz Marc, Nineteenth Century; and Stefan Witwicki (right), Lithograph by an Unknown Artist, ca. 1831



This early sensitivity was nurtured within the Warsaw literary environment of his student years. Two figures of Polish Romanticism were especially decisive. Kazimierz Brodziński, whose lectures Chopin attended at the Warsaw Conservatory, championed an aesthetic of simplicity, emotional sincerity, and the organic union between art and inner experience. He provided the young composer with an intellectual framework that viewed artistic expression not as rhetorical display, but as authentic emotional utterance. Stefan Witwicki, with whom Chopin built a close friendship, offered a more direct artistic impetus. His poems became the basis for many of Chopin's Op. 74 songs, where the composer actively experimented with the relationship between word, phrase, and musical breath. Witwicki introduced Chopin to the Romantic ideal of lyricism as a personal confession rooted in memory, longing, and inner experience. This literary horizon was not merely a biographical backdrop, it actively co-created the aesthetic environment in which Chopin's idea of instrumental lyricism developed. This profound connection to the literary world expanded even further during his Parisian years.

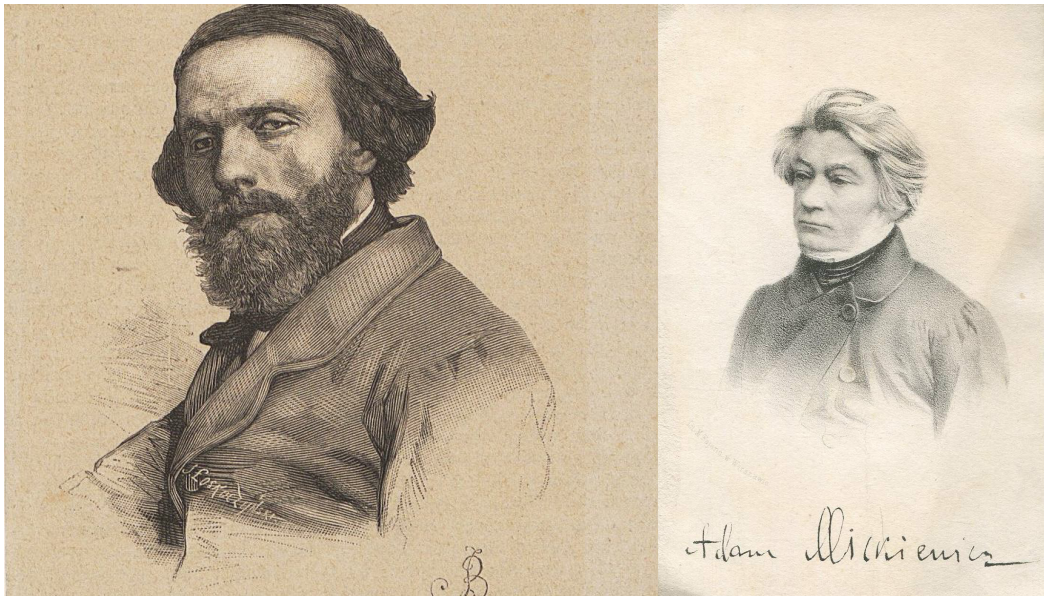
His intimate artistic relationships with key literary figures—such as Victor Hugo, his partner George Sand, and the great Polish Romantic poets Adam Mickiewicz and Cyprian Kamil Norwid—further confirm the unbreakable bond between Chopin's musical imagination and the poetic lyrical tradition. For Chopin, music and poetic lyricism were fundamentally part of the same expressive universe (Tomaszewski, 1998).

Figure 3
Victor Hugo Jeune (left), Lithograph by Lordereau, ca. 1840; George Sand (right), Engraving by Alexandre Manceau, 1850, After a Pencil and Charcoal Drawing by Thomas Couture



Source: Musée de la Vie romantique, Paris inv. no. D 89.4.

Figure 4
Adam Mickiewicz (left), Lithograph by Maksymilian Fajans, Warsaw, 1870; Cyprian Kamil Norwid (right), Wood Engraving by Józef Łoskoczyński, After a Design by Józef Buchbinder, 1883



Source: From the collection of the National Library of Poland.

Sources and Historical Context

In the light of his contacts with other artists—most notably poets and writers—and his exceptional linguistic abilities, which in terms of his perfectionism in expressing thought can be directly compared to his precision in conveying musical thought, Chopin's relationship with language was deeply complex. This poetic boundary further motivated him to seek an expressive medium that transcended verbal limitations, transforming music itself into his ultimate, unconstrained lyricism (Rink, 2020). Attachment to his Polish cultural identity can also be observed, for example, in his correspondence with the cellist Louis Norblin. Although both men had French and Polish family and cultural connections and were living in France, they corresponded with each other in Polish.

Although Chopin became thoroughly integrated into Parisian cultural life, his identity remained deeply rooted in his native Polish culture, a tension that has been examined extensively in Chopin scholarship (Kallberg, 1996). He expressed similar sentiments in his correspondence with close Polish émigré friends, including Józef Bohdan Zaleski and Stefan Witwicki. It is particularly fascinating to observe how Chopin chose to chart his own course rather than literally follow the path advocated by his teacher, Józef Elsner. The expectations surrounding Chopin's future as a composer extended well beyond the sphere of instrumental music. In a letter sent from Warsaw to Fryderyk Chopin in Paris on 27–29 or 30 November 1831, Mikołaj Chopin included a substantial addition written by his daughter Ludwika, in which she conveyed Elsner's view that Chopin should not limit his ambitions to piano performance and composition. According to Ludwika, Elsner believed that Chopin's exceptional gifts should lead him toward opera and that his genius should not remain confined to the piano and the concert platform. She further emphasized that he should follow the direction dictated by his own genius rather than imitate established models, invoking Mozart as an example of a composer whose originality was initially misunderstood before gaining recognition:

> Mr Elsner does not want to see you merely as a concert performer and piano composer and a famous virtuoso, because this is easier and means less than writing operas, but wants to see you become what nature drives you towards and what you are endowed for. You have [...] a place among Rossini, Mozart, etc. Your genius must not settle on the piano and concerts; you are to make yourself immortal through operas. He says that, being so gifted, in ways superior to all those who at your age were perhaps once regarded as famous and are famous composers today, with such genius you should strive wherever your genius impels you, and not follow anyone. At first, supposedly, people laughed at Mozart and did not want to play his compositions, preferring only those of his predecessors, and only later did they recognize his worth. Everything progresses; a new genius cannot be the same as an old one. (L. Chopin, 1831, as cited in Helman et al., 2017, pp. 59–60; trans. Wiktor Misiak)

The passage is particularly revealing because it presents opera not simply as one possible genre among others, but as the field in which Elsner believed Chopin's exceptional gifts could achieve their fullest realization. At the same time, Ludwika's account places strong emphasis on artistic individuality: Chopin was encouraged to follow the direction of his own genius rather than reproduce an established model. The passage is preserved in the letter of Mikołaj Chopin to Fryderyk Chopin, with additions by Izabella and Ludwika Chopin; the section quoted above is written in Ludwika Chopin's hand.

Chopin's response to Elsner of 14 December 1831 reveals that he had himself once contemplated following his teacher's example. Looking back to 1830, he recalled that, despite recognizing how far he still stood from Elsner's artistic achievement, he had nevertheless imagined that he might come close to his teacher's model: "if not Łokietek, perhaps some Laskonogi will come out of my head" (Chopin, 1831, as cited in Helman et al., 2017, pp. 116; trans. Wiktor Misiak). Chopin then acknowledged that, in the circumstances of 1831, he was compelled to pursue his path in the musical world primarily as a pianist, temporarily setting aside the "higher artistic aspirations" (Chopin, 1831, as cited in Helman et al., 2017, p. 116; trans. Wiktor Misiak) that Elsner had presented to him. At the same time, however, he made clear that this was not a renunciation of composition. Rather, he regarded the experience of performance and the acquisition of musical experience as necessary preparation for a future in which he might develop into a major composer.

Figure 5
Józef Elsner, Lithograph by Maksymilian Fajans, Paris, ca. 1850; Published by Imp. Lemercier

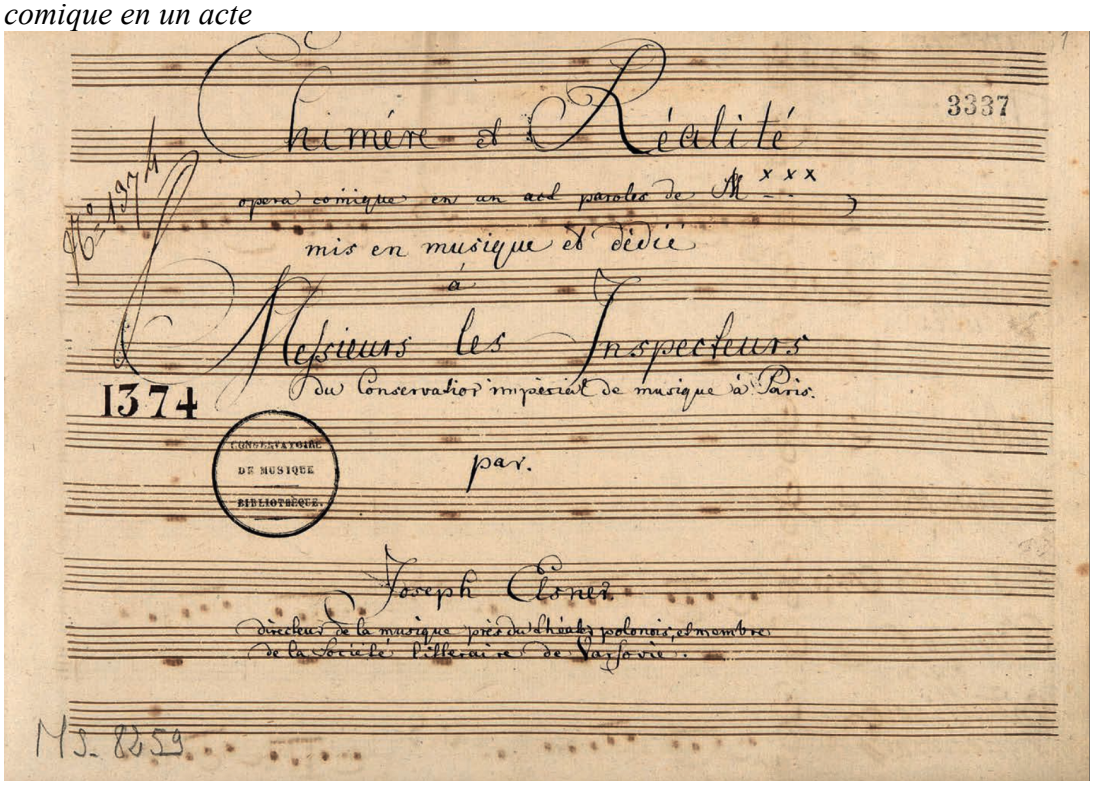
Source: From the collection of the Nicolaus Copernicus University Library, call no. E 12 390.

Chopin's letter is particularly revealing in the way it negotiates the tension between immediate practical circumstances and longer-term artistic ambition. He recognized that Paris offered him an unprecedented opportunity to establish himself as a pianist and understood that such recognition could provide the foundation for his further artistic development. Yet he also insisted that he would not become a mere copy of Kalkbrenner, declaring his desire to "create a new world" for himself and emphasizing that, if he worked, it would be in order to establish himself on firmer foundations (Chopin, 1831, as cited in Helman et al., 2017, p. 118; trans. Wiktor Misiak). His response therefore suggests not a simple rejection of Elsner's expectations, but a conscious postponement and transformation of them: Chopin accepted the need to develop through performance while preserving the ambition to forge an independent artistic

language, one that would also find its most distinctive expression in chamber and salon music. This development may be understood not as a retreat from the larger compositional ambitions represented by the operatic tradition, but as a deliberate artistic choice to cultivate the forms and performing contexts most closely suited to the particular qualities of his compositional craft. His turn toward smaller ensembles and more intimate settings thus provided a medium through which the subtlety, nuance, and inward character of his musical language could be realized with exceptional freedom and precision—an aesthetic direction that Chopin himself appears to have recognized as increasingly consonant with his artistic identity. This divergence becomes even more compelling when considered against recent musicological research into Elsner's own compositional history. During his journey to Paris in 1805, Elsner composed the opera *Chimère et réalité*—a work whose score was specifically prepared for a Parisian staging.

Figure 6

Title Page of the Manuscript Score of Józef Elsner's Opera Chimère et Réalité, opéra-comique en un acte



Note. Composed in 1805 during Elsner's stay in Paris, the opera was written to a French libretto.
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, F-Pn Mus. MS-8259.

While the mentor aspired to conquer the French capital through explicit operatic drama, his greatest pupil ultimately pursued a different path, demonstrating that an instrument alone could convey an equally profound, intimate, and enduring form of lyrical expression.

Within this framework, the cello occupies a remarkably revealing position. Holding a uniquely privileged place in his catalog alongside the piano, it appears with striking consistency across his career. The cello serves as a primary analytical lens through which Chopin's evolving conception of musical form and lyricism can be re-examined. The musical analysis is based on the copies of Chopin's *Sonata for Piano and Cello in G minor, Op. 65* (Paris: Schlesinger, 1847), held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique (call no. RES VMA-241), and *Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 8*, held in the same collection (call no. RES VMA-241 (1,8), notice no. FRBNF43634083).

The Cello as Medium and Instrument of Mediation

If lyricism is understood not as an inherent property of melody but as an expressive quality emerging from the interaction of melody, harmony, texture, and register, then it becomes necessary to consider how musical thought is sustained across changing harmonic and textural conditions. This problem becomes particularly acute in Chopin, where lyrical continuity often depends upon the capacity of a musical idea to retain its expressive and directional coherence while its harmonic, registral, and textural circumstances undergo transformation. The lyrical potential of a melodic idea is consequently determined not only by its internal configuration, but also by the structural relations through which it is situated within the surrounding musical texture. In Chopin's chamber music, this interplay allows complex musical structures to unfold as a continuous musical process rather than through the juxtaposition of musical gestures. Even where chromatic intensification or delayed harmonic resolution occurs, such processes remain integrated within the broader trajectory of the musical thought rather than necessarily disrupting its progression.

This distinction carries important analytical implications. Critical discourse on Chopin has traditionally tended to privilege melody as the principal bearer of expression. The notion of *cantabile*, for example, is frequently employed as a qualitative designation of melodic beauty, implicitly locating lyricism in the contour and expressive character of an individual line. Such an approach, however, risks abstracting melody from the musical environment through which its expressive potential is realised. A phrase acquires lyrical force not solely through its intervallic or rhythmic configuration, but through a texture that permits it to expand, suspend, recede, and regain momentum. Features anticipating this approach can already be found in the Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 8. Although composed before Chopin's departure for Paris, the work already reveals aspects of the musical language that would progressively evolve. The later works reflect a gradual transformation of this language, particularly in the ways in which musical continuity, expressive direction, and the relationship between individual voices are conceived (Kallberg, 1985, 2016). The same development points towards a broader reconception of musical temporality. Chopin does not abandon inherited means of musical thought, yet in his later works, the musical discourse increasingly extends beyond these boundaries. Cadential points may operate as sites of transformation rather than definitive closure, transitions may assume a degree of thematic and expressive significance comparable to the sections they connect and harmonic ambiguity may postpone structural arrival rather than simply confirm it. Musical time is consequently experienced less as a succession of discrete formal events than as a continuous process of transformation. Within such a conception, lyricism becomes not merely a property of melodic utterance but a mode of organizing musical time.

To understand why the cello holds such structural weight for Chopin, we must look at its technical, historical, and acoustic characteristics. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the cello underwent a profound transformation. Advances in instrument construction, bow design, and virtuoso pedagogy expanded its technical capabilities (Stowell, 1999; Walden, 1998). The cello shifted from being primarily a harmonic foundation—the bearer of the *basso continuo*—to an autonomous lyrical voice. Crucially, the cello occupies an ambiguous middle zone between bass function and melodic prominence. It can ground a harmonic progression and then seamlessly ascend into a warm tenor or treble register to lead a melodic trajectory.This textural flexibility re-aligned perfectly with Chopin’s mature style. In Chopin’s music, lyricism

seldom resides in a single, isolated foreground melody. Instead, it is distributed across the entire musical fabric, emerging from multiple simultaneously active layers.

Crucial to understanding this phenomenon are two concepts: mediation and linear agency. The author introduces two vital concepts here: mediation and linear agency:

1. Textural Mediation: The fluidity with which individual voices exchange roles. Accompanimental figures frequently acquire melodic significance through changes in register or harmonic emphasis, inner voices emerge into temporary prominence, and bass lines adopt a lyrical profile without abandoning structural duty.
2. Linear Agency: The capacity of a musical line to direct the listener's perception of momentum and continuity, regardless of whether that line is currently the principal thematic hero. The cello is uniquely capable of sustaining kinetic energy even when thematic material is undergoing transformation or dissolution.

Through these mechanisms, the cello destabilizes traditional boundaries between foreground melody and background accompaniment. It does not merely present themes; it sustains continuity across formal boundaries, bridges distant harmonic regions, and softens structural seams.

Redefining Musical Time and Vocality

Classical instrumental forms traditionally articulated their structures through explicit contrasts—contrasts of theme, key, texture, and rhetorical character (Treitler, 1989). Sonata forms and rondos built their logic around the juxtaposition of distinct thematic units separated by clear cadential boundaries (Dahlhaus, 1989; Rosen, 1995).

Chopin’s mature style moves toward a model of continuous organic becoming (Rink, 1997). Cadences become points of transformation rather than closure; transitions assume thematic importance equal to the sections they connect; and harmonic ambiguity delays structural arrival. This brings us back to the question of vocality. As the author argues, vocal music possesses a natural model of continuity rooted in the physical act of breathing, which structures phrases into gestures of effort and repose. Instrumental music cannot simply copy this physiological process; it must construct an equivalent experience through purely musical means.

Chopin achieves this not by literal imitation of vocal declamation, but by constructing textures where: rhythmic flexibility, harmonic stretching, and the cello’s capacity for a sustained, unbroken tone, converge to create an illusion of organic unfolding. Vocality in Chopin is therefore less a matter of vocal resemblance than a mode of organizing musical time.

From Trio to Sonata: The Evolution of Cello Writing in Chopin’s Repertoire

The study examines two works from different periods of Chopin’s career, focusing on the changing relationship between chamber conventions, linear continuity, and structural organization.

Table 1
The Evolving Role of the Cello in the Piano Trio and Cello Sonata

Work	Analytical focus
Piano Trio in G minor Op. 8	Linear agency within inherited textures and sustained lyric search
Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 65	Inter-Instrumental synthesis of line and more sophisticated approach to formal organization

Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 8: Sustaining Line Beneath the Surface

The Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 8 occupies a distinctive position within Chopin's chamber output as his only completed work for the conventional piano trio ensemble. Although the work belongs to his Warsaw period and is frequently discussed in terms of its strong pianistic orientation, such a perspective does not fully account for the differentiated functions assumed by the string instruments. The cello, in particular, participates in the articulation of musical continuity in ways that extend beyond its role as a harmonic foundation.

As examined in greater detail in an earlier study, the cello's contribution to the Trio encompasses motivic exchange, contrapuntal interaction, and the articulation of thematic processes (Misiak, 2026). The present discussion approaches these features from a somewhat different perspective, focusing on the manner in which the cello sustains linear direction within the broader texture. Its significance does not depend upon a consistent assumption of thematic prominence. Rather, the instrument frequently contributes to the continuity of musical thought through sustained tones, stepwise motion, registral connection, and participation in processes that extend across changing textural configurations.

This is particularly evident in the first movement, where the cello may remain embedded within the lower texture while nevertheless contributing to the persistence of linear motion. Its lines frequently sustain harmonic and motivic relationships beyond the immediate surface of the piano writing, allowing musical processes to retain their direction even as material is redistributed among the instruments. The cello therefore occupies a position between structural support and melodic articulation: its function is not confined to either category, but emerges through their interaction.

The same principle becomes more apparent in the later movements. In the Scherzo, the cello participates in exchanges that redistribute rhythmic and motivic energy across the ensemble, while the Trio section allows its lyrical capacity to assume greater prominence. In the Adagio sostenuto, this relationship becomes particularly significant, as melodic and expressive functions pass between the string voices and the cello contributes independent lines that sustain the continuity of the musical texture rather than merely accompanying the principal melody. The Finale subsequently brings together several of these procedures, with the cello participating in motivic circulation, sequential processes, and and the sustained continuity of musical thought. Taken together, these features reveal a more fluid distribution of instrumental initiative, in which the cello may assume a leading role at unexpected moments or sustain the continuity of a musical thought initiated by another voice in the ensemble. In this respect, the

Trio already contains features anticipating the approach examined in the later Sonata: the cello does not merely carry melodic material, but participates in the organization of continuity itself.

Cello Sonata in G minor, Op. 65: Inter-instrumental Dialogue and Late-Style Synthesis

The late Sonata in G minor, Op. 65 represents the culmination of this stylistic evolution. Where earlier critics saw compositional friction or structural struggle, the present study identifies a radical reconfiguration of instrumental relationships. The traditional hierarchy between melody and accompaniment is significantly weakened: inner voices assume melodic responsibility, accompanimental figures become carriers of structural continuity, and the cello moves fluidly across registers, binding together otherwise fragmented harmonic planes. In this late work, cadences rarely function as static points of arrival; instead, they operate as thresholds into renewed movement. Lyricism is therefore no longer an attribute applied to a memorable cantabile theme but becomes an intrinsic property of the musical process itself. The Sonata's significance within this development lies precisely in the fact that Chopin does not simply transfer his established piano language to the cello. The presence of a second instrument fundamentally alters the conditions under which that language can operate. The cello is capable of sustaining, extending, and reshaping melodic lines in ways that the piano, with its rapidly decaying sound, cannot reproduce in the same manner. Conversely, the piano is no longer required to provide a self-sufficient harmonic and accompanimental framework. Its role can shift continuously between harmonic support, contrapuntal commentary, thematic continuation, and independent melodic activity. The result is not a conventional melody-and-accompaniment relationship, but a genuinely inter-instrumental texture in which musical functions remain mobile.

This mobility is particularly important for understanding Chopin's late conception of lyricism. In the earlier piano works, the impression of vocality often emerges through the shaping of a melodic line: the phrase appears to breathe, expand, hesitate, and resolve as though it were being produced by a human voice (Cone, 1974). In the Cello Sonata, however, the sense of vocal continuity can be distributed between instruments. A melodic impulse may begin in one instrument, be taken up or transformed by the other, and continue across changes of register and texture without losing its expressive identity. Lyricism consequently becomes less dependent on the presence of a single privileged melody and more closely connected with the continuity of musical thought itself. This conception also changes the expressive function of the cello. Rather than serving merely as an alternative melodic voice placed against a piano accompaniment, the instrument becomes a mediator between different layers of the musical discourse. Its register allows it to occupy both a bass-generating and a melodic function, while its capacity for sustained tone reinforces the continuity of phrases that might otherwise appear fragmented within the piano texture. The cello therefore participates in the organization of form as much as in the presentation of melody. Its interventions can redirect harmonic motion, prolong a phrase, interrupt an established texture, or assume material previously introduced by the piano. The piano, in turn, is released from the conventional role of accompanying a solo instrument. Its texture can become dramatically reduced when the cello assumes the principal melodic line, but it can also become independently contrapuntal, creating a second expressive layer rather than merely supporting the cello harmonically. This reciprocal redistribution of functions is central to the Sonata's aesthetic. Neither instrument possesses a permanent monopoly on thematic importance; instead, prominence emerges temporarily from the musical process. The resulting dialogue is therefore not simply conversational in a metaphorical sense but structural: the identity and function of each instrumental part are continually determined through its relationship with the other.

This is particularly significant in the context of Chopin's earlier artistic ambitions. As discussed above, his correspondence with Józef Elsner from 1831 reveals that he had once imagined a compositional future extending toward the operatic sphere, even while recognizing the practical necessity of establishing himself first as a pianist. His subsequent development did not result in a diminished conception of composition, but in a progressively more individual understanding of the medium in which his musical imagination could operate most fully. The Cello Sonata can therefore be understood as one of the clearest manifestations of this choice: rather than pursuing the large-scale public forms associated with opera and symphonic composition, Chopin developed an intimate chamber medium in which the subtleties of his musical language could become structurally consequential.

The importance of this choice should not be understood as a limitation of Chopin's compositional ambitions. On the contrary, the chamber medium offered precisely the degree of flexibility and expressive concentration that his mature musical language required. The smaller ensemble allowed him to explore minute changes of register, articulation, harmonic color, rhythmic displacement, and contrapuntal interaction without subordinating these details to the demands of a large-scale public genre. The Sonata thus represents not a retreat from the broader aspirations of nineteenth-century composition, but a deliberate concentration of them within a medium particularly suited to Chopin's artistic sensibility. The formal structure, instrumental dialogue, and performance implications of the Sonata have been examined in greater detail in an earlier study (Misiak, 2025). The present discussion deliberately moves beyond that formal and technical analysis to consider the Sonata as a consequence of Chopin's broader search for an appropriate medium for instrumental lyricism. From this perspective, the work's late-style character lies not simply in its harmonic language or formal complexity, but in the degree to which musical meaning becomes inseparable from the interaction between instruments. The Sonata therefore represents a synthesis rather than a culmination in the conventional sense of a final stylistic formula. Chopin does not resolve the tension between vocal lyricism and instrumental writing by making the cello imitate the voice or by transforming the piano into an orchestral substitute. Instead, he creates a musical environment in which lyricism emerges from the continuous exchange of functions between instruments. Melody, accompaniment, counterpoint, register, and harmonic progression become interdependent dimensions of a single expressive process. In this sense, the cello acts as an indispensable mediator between registral zones, harmonic support, and large-scale formal coherence, while the piano provides an equally mobile counterpart.

The resulting aesthetic is one of concentrated intimacy rather than reduced ambition. Chopin's choice of chamber forces enabled him to pursue a highly differentiated form of musical expression in which subtlety itself could become a structural principle. The Sonata's inter-instrumental language thus provides a particularly compelling realization of the artistic direction already implicit in Chopin's earlier reflections on his compositional future: the development of an independent musical language whose expressive power derives not from the scale of its medium, but from the precision with which that medium is shaped to serve the composer's imagination.

Conclusion and Broader Implications

Although the language of *cantabile* remains indispensable for understanding Chopin's aesthetic ideals, it describes only the perceptual surface of a more fundamental compositional transformation. What changes across the works considered here is not simply the expressive profile of the cello, but the role assigned to lyricism within Chopin's musical language itself.

Viewed from this perspective, lyricism emerges less as an independent expressive category than as the perceptual consequence of a particular mode of musical organization. Its defining characteristic is not melodic beauty, nor even the illusion of vocal utterance, but the ability of musical discourse to sustain continuity across increasingly fluid relationships of texture, harmony, and form. The cello assumes a privileged position within this process because it occupies a uniquely flexible space between structural and expressive functions. Rather than alternating between melody and accompaniment, it continually mediates between them, allowing formal articulation to arise from processes of linear continuity rather than from the juxtaposition of clearly differentiated thematic units. Such an understanding also invites a reconsideration of the place of Chopin's chamber music within his oeuvre. These works have often been regarded as exceptional excursions beyond the predominantly pianistic orientation of his compositional output. Yet the changing function of the cello suggests precisely the opposite. The chamber works render unusually explicit compositional procedures that remain equally fundamental to the solo repertoire, where they are necessarily absorbed into a single instrumental medium. The interaction between piano and cello therefore exposes principles of texture, voice-leading, and temporal organization that are no less central to the Ballades, the Nocturnes, or the late Mazurkas than they are to the Sonata in G minor. This shift has broader implications for the study of nineteenth-century instrumental music. It suggests that the long-standing opposition between vocal and instrumental modes of expression may obscure rather than illuminate the compositional strategies through which Romantic composers constructed musical meaning.

This perspective also challenges the tendency—implicit in much Chopin scholarship—to treat lyricism primarily as a stylistic or pianistic attribute. Separated by more than two decades, the Trio and the Cello Sonata provide particularly revealing points of comparison for tracing changes in Chopin’s musical language, especially in the evolving ways in which the cello participates in the continuity and direction of musical thought. This becomes particularly apparent when the two works are considered in relation to the continuous development of Chopin’s solo piano writing, allowing the gradual transformation of his compositional language to be traced with greater clarity. Despite sharing a number of broader continuities in Chopin’s musical language, the two works differ considerably in their treatment of the cello. This contrast is particularly evident in performance, where the instrument assumes markedly different roles in sustaining, redirecting, and shaping musical continuity

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