OFFICIAL CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The 6th IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii (IICAH2026)

January 03-07, 2026 | Honolulu, Hawaii, United States, and Online

ISSN: 2432-4604

Organised by the International Academic Forum (IAFOR) in partnership with the IAFOR Research Centre at the Osaka School of International Public Policy (OSIPP) at The University of Osaka, Japan, and IAFOR's Global Partners.

iafor

"To Open Minds, To Educate Intelligence, To Inform Decisions"

The International Academic Forum provides new perspectives to the thought-leaders and decision-makers of today and tomorrow by offering constructive environments for dialogue and interchange at the intersections of nation, culture, and discipline. Headquartered in Nagoya, Japan, and registered as a Non-Profit Organization (一般社団法人), IAFOR is an independent think tank committed to the deeper understanding of contemporary geo-political transformation, particularly in the Asia Pacific Region.

INTERNATIONAL

INTERCULTURAL

INTERDISCIPLINARY

iafor

International Academic Board

Professor Anne Boddington, IAFOR, Japan (IAB Chair)
Dr Joseph Haldane, IAFOR and The University of Osaka, Japan & University College London, United Kingdom
Professor Jun Arima, IAFOR & The University of Tokyo, Japan
Professor Virgil Hawkins, IAFOR Research Centre & The University of Osaka, Japan
Mr Lowell Sheppard, IAFOR & Never Too Late Academy, Japan

Professor Umberto Ansaldo, VinUniversity, Vietnam
Dr Susana Barreto, University of Porto, Portugal
Professor Grant Black, Chuo University, Japan
Dr Evangelia Chrysikou, Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London, United Kingdom
Professor Donald E. Hall, Binghamton University, United States
Professor Brendan Howe, Ewha Womans University, South Korea & The Asian Political and International Studies Association (APISA)
Dr James W. McNally, University of Michigan, United States & NACDA Program on Aging

IICE2026 Conference Programme Committee

Dr Failautusi 'Tusi' Avegalio, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Kālewa Correa, Smithsonian Institute, United States
Dr Joseph Haldane, IAFOR and The University of Osaka, Japan & University College London, United Kingdom
Dr Mary Therese Perez Hattori, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Professor Curtis Ho, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Dr Daniel Hoffman, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Dr James W. McNally, University of Michigan, United States & NACDA Program on Aging
Dr Alex Means, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Professor Michael Menchaca, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Professor Moana Numanga, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, United States
Dr Katie Idalia Archer Olson, Alaska Pacific University, United States
Professor Sela V. Panapasa, University of Michigan, United States
Professor Elizabeth Park, Chaminade University of Honolulu, United States
Dr Paul Tauiliili, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Dr Hiagi M. Wesley, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, United States

IICAH2026 Conference Programme Committee

Professor Grant Black, Chuo University, Japan
Kālewa Correa, Smithsonian Institute, United States
Dr Joseph Haldane, IAFOR and The University of Osaka, Japan & University College London, United Kingdom
Dr Mary Therese Perez Hattori, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Dr Daniel Hoffman, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, United States
Professor Line-Noue Kruse, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, United States
Professor Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, University of Guam, United States
Ms Fan Li, Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR), Japan
Dr James W. McNally, University of Michigan, United States & NACDA Program on Aging
Professor Elizabeth Park, Chaminade University of Honolulu, United States
Dr Paul Tauiliili, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026

Official Conference Proceedings

ISSN: 2432-4604

Executive Editor:
Joseph Haldane, PhD

IAFOR Publications Manager:
Nick Potts

IAFOR Publications Coordinator:
Mark Kenneth S. Camiling

Editorial Assistants:
Sachiko Sakamoto
Suzue Abe
Yuika Sakaguchi
Arisa Egami

Date Published: March 17, 2026

Published by The International Academic Forum on the IAFOR Research Archive
URL: https://papers.iafor.org/

© The International Academic Forum 2026
The International Academic Forum (IAFOR)
Sakae 1-16-26 2F
Naka Ward, Nagoya, Aichi
Japan 460-0008
iafor.org

Table of Contents

Drawing as a Structured Inquiry: A Comparison Between Artistic and Scientific Visualization
Barbara Drobot pp. 1 - 9

Integrating AIGC Into Art and Design Education: From Self-Expression to Aesthetic Literacy
Yimeng Shi
Menghe Tian
Arkadiusz Marcinkowski pp. 11 - 23

Exploring the Sustainable Development of Contemporary Tainan From the Perspective of Tainan Prefecture Urban Development During the Japanese Colonial Period
Li-Yueh Chen
Kuo-Ching Shih
Chi-Lin Chang
Kuo-Ying Yang
Shih-Tsung Lai
Che-Chung Yang pp. 25 - 34

Scales of Affection: Toward an Epistemology of Memory and an Emotional Reading of the Built Environment
Elisa Mondin pp. 35 - 50

Between Life and Aesthetics: Understanding Marginal Landscapes Through Japanese Cherry Blossom Trees (Sakura)
Ran Kamiyama pp. 51 - 71

A Silent Conflict: Guilt, Relief, and the Pacifier in Urban Parenthood
Matt Chiu pp. 73 - 86

Art as Emblem and Message: Polish Modernism – The Aesthetic Soft Power of Cultural Memory and Diplomacy
Julia Mielczarek pp. 87 - 94

The Art of Antonella Trovarelli – Creation Through Chaos
Jytte Holmqvist pp. 95 - 106

Enhancing Preschool Quality: A Survey of CLASS Training Effectiveness in Hawai‘i
Nicole Schlaack
Manca Sustarsic
Benji Whitenack
Aya Marie Lorraine Kouao pp. 107 - 118

Navigating Challenges and Enhancing Access: A Case Study of Infant and Toddler Programs in Hawai‘i
Nicole Schlaack
Manca Sustarsic
Aya Marie Lorraine Kouao
Benji Whitenack pp. 119 - 130

Exploring Self-Compassion in Early Adolescents: Evidence From a Vietnamese Urban School Sample
Tat Thien Do
Van Son Huynh
Quan Hong Bui
Khuong Vinh Nguyen
Thanh Nghia Lam
Xuan Quynh Ngoc Nguyen pp. 131 - 146

Feminism and Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Zikora"
Rasha Osman Abdel Haliem pp. 147 - 157

Power in Cloth: The Semiotic Shift From Spiritual Iconography to Human Authority in Global Textiles
Lasya Aji Silpa
Manikya Sai Tejaswini Vallabhajosyula
Barbara Trippeer pp. 159 - 174

The Problem With "Afterwards" Transformation and the Female Pupil in *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*
Melita Quinonez pp. 175 - 182

Narrative Implosion and the Transformative Practice of Reality in Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*
Naomi Hori pp. 183 - 191

Transnational Repression and the Arts: Communist China and a Dance Company
David Matas pp. 193 - 204

A Rhetorical Analysis of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* From the Perspective of Triangle Theory
Paninya Paksa pp. 205 - 216

Proposing a Process Evaluation Methodology for Territorial Value Co-creation Activities in Local Revitalization Policies
Mutsuko Muramoto
Mitsuru Ikeda pp. 217 - 222

A. K. Coomaraswamy's Interpretation of Chthonic Myths and Its Impact on Mircea Eliade's History of Religions
Tamaki Kitagawa pp. 223 - 231

Redefining Generic Skills in the AI Era: A Conceptual Review Based on Historical Evolution and International Frameworks
Fumiyo Seimiya
Rihyei Kang pp. 233 - 246

Designing Online and Hybrid Course Strategies to Engage Students Through Learning Outcome–Focused Activities
Gita Alaghband
Hamid Fardi pp. 247 - 250

Adapting AI-Generated Personas From Marketing Research to Media Art Practice
Zhino Yousefi pp. 251 - 258

Appropriating Cultural Aestheticism in Urban Tourism
Lloyd Robinson pp. 259 - 271

Inclusive Andragogy: Addressing Microaggressions Through Humanistic Learning
Orsolya Varkonyi pp. 273 - 278

The Power of Language: Exploring the Impact of Communication on Mental Health and Wellbeing of University Students
Nicholas Isaac Mukwana
Saraha Nabiccu pp. 279 - 291

Raised by This Place: Ritual Theater, Ecological Identity, and Spiritual Nurturing in Young Children
Katie Garcia pp. 293 - 311

Aspects of Anthropological Semiotics in the Vision Created by Aurelio Teno Teno
Geanina Havârneanu pp. 313 - 329

Do Algorithms Dream of Electric Muses? Teaching Creative Writing in the Age of Generative AI
Anna Leahy pp. 331 - 339

AI as a Dialogic Partner in Project-Based Language Learning: Empowering Young Learners Through Digital Literacy and Global Citizenship
Ese Emmanuel Uwosomah pp. 341 - 353

The History of Debt Enforcement in Thai Society
Passakorn Yeenang pp. 355 - 366

Drawing as a Structured Inquiry: A Comparison Between Artistic and Scientific Visualization

Barbara Drobot, Independent Scholar, Georgia

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This presentation explores a pedagogical approach that treats drawing as a form of structured inquiry mirroring the framework of scientific research. Based on years of teaching practice with children aged 6–12 and adults, the method applies the logic of the IMRaD structure (Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion) to art education. Instead of offering students pre-made templates or step-by-step models, each drawing session becomes a mini-research journey: it begins with a question or hypothesis, is followed by observation and exploration of materials, and ends with a reflective discussion. This approach supports critical thinking, autonomy, and decision-making. Students learn to observe attentively, make creative choices, and interpret their outcomes. The presentation includes visual examples of student work, classroom strategies, and comparisons between artistic and scientific reasoning. It resonates with the growing body of research that positions artistic processes as parallel to cognitive development and problem-solving (e.g., Eisner; Hetland et al.). The proposed model demonstrates that drawing, when taught as an inquiry, becomes a powerful tool for learning that connects the arts with broader educational goals and reaffirms the relevance of visual thinking in the 21st-century classroom.

Keywords: drawing education, visual inquiry, art pedagogy, structured creativity, visual thinking, IMRaD

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The capacity for creative expression, analytical reasoning, and adaptability in uncertain situations is now recognized as fundamental to twenty-first-century learning. Global educational policies, curricular standards, and systemic reforms consistently highlight the importance of developing these skills to equip students for navigating intricate social, cultural, and workplace challenges. In many public education systems, art education is marginalized and positioned as optional rather than central to the curriculum. This results in reduced classroom time, limited funding, and lower institutional priority.

This sidelining is clear in post-Soviet educational systems. Step-by-step projects and results-driven documentation remain common. Drawing classes often focus on templates or imitation. These classes provide little structure or support for students. Though the methods may look different, they share a common flaw: they hide the thinking behind artistic creation. As a result, students rarely learn to observe, define visual problems, make choices, or evaluate their work. This approach does not foster perceptual skills or personal creativity.

Two beliefs sustain this situation. The first is that progress in the arts is hard to measure, standardize, or compare. The second assumes that creative ability is an inborn gift for a select few, not a skill that can be taught. These views are especially persistent in post-Soviet education.

Art education is at risk in accountability-driven education systems. These systems focus on results that can be measured. The arts use qualitative judgment, interpretation, and experience, but are judged by unsuitable metrics. This leads to the arts being further marginalized. Bamford (2006) found that arts education is often sidelined because its outcomes are difficult to document.

Viewing artistic learning as intangible does not imply an absence of cognitive structure. Rather, it reflects a failure to make the processes of artistic thinking visible and intelligible within educational contexts. Art education research has long demonstrated that artistic practice involves rigorous forms of cognition. Eisner (2002) emphasized that the arts cultivate sensitivity to nuance, qualitative judgment, and openness to multiple possible solutions. Similarly, research on studio-based learning identifies key habits of mind central to artistic practice, including observation, reflection, persistence, and problem framing (Hetland et al., 2013).

At the level of individual skills, these cognitive capacities are often successfully developed in educational settings. However, when the artistic process is considered as a whole, these elements are rarely organized into a coherent structure that can guide teaching and learning. As a result, art education continues to rely heavily on assumptions about innate talent rather than on explicitly articulated processes of inquiry and thinking.

Despite their theoretical recognition, these cognitive dimensions remain infrequently articulated in everyday classroom instruction, particularly in drawing education. In contrast, scientific fields rely on established research traditions that make inquiry visible, structured, and assessable. This article explores how a similar level of clarity can support inquiry in drawing education without limiting artistic freedom.

Drawing and Inquiry in Art Education

Both artistic and scientific practices are fundamentally concerned with producing knowledge about the world. A perspective that helped clarify this parallel comes from Andrew Freiband's lecture *"Art as Research — Research as Art"* (2019) at Cornell University, in which he describes artists and scientists as "cousins." According to this view, both fields rely on observation, experimentation, iteration, and synthesis. The primary difference lies in the vocabulary used to describe these processes.

This view aligns with Sullivan's concept of *art practice as research*, which positions artistic activity as a legitimate mode of knowledge production. Sullivan (2010) argues that artists generate knowledge through inquiry-driven processes that integrate making, reflection, and interpretation, emphasizing that artistic cognition operates through structured yet open-ended investigation.

Despite this theoretical recognition, the logic of inquiry in art education often remains insufficiently articulated. Students are frequently expected to be creative by nature, while little attention is given to how creative thinking is developed through inquiry, decision-making, and reflection. As Sullivan (2010) notes, when the processes underlying artistic inquiry remain unarticulated, they are easily misunderstood or undervalued within educational systems that prioritize methodological transparency. Making artistic inquiry visible is therefore essential for its recognition within institutional and pedagogical contexts.

In seeking a framework capable of articulating this structure, attention was drawn to the National Core Arts Standards, which define the artistic process through the categories of Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting (Table 1).

Table 1

National Core Arts Standards: Artistic Processes and Learning Goals

National Core Art Standards	
CREATING	● Generating and shaping ideas through observation and imagination ● Using tools, media, and techniques to develop visual work ● Refining work through reflection and critique
PRESENTING	● Selecting and contextualizing work for presentation ● Preparing and refining work for display ● Communicating meaning through presentation
RESPONDING	● Analyzing and perceiving visual work ● Interpreting meaning, intent, and context ● Evaluating work using articulated criteria
CONNECTING	● Relating art to cultural, social, and historical contexts ● Integrating personal experience into art-making

These processes closely align with how artistic inquiry unfolds in practice, yet they do not specify a transferable structure for guiding learners through each stage. This raised a further question: if clear standards and goals for art education exist, what system can articulate the steps required to achieve them?

This question prompted an exploration beyond art education toward established research frameworks used in other disciplines. Through this process, it became apparent that a familiar structure was already in use through academic writing in the sciences. The following section introduces how this structure can be adapted as a pedagogical framework for drawing education.

Pedagogical Framework: Adapting IMRaD to Drawing Education

The proposed framework reinterprets each component of the IMRaD structure (Table 2), commonly used in empirical and practice-based research across the sciences and social sciences (Day & Gastel, 2012; Swales, 1990), as a stage within the drawing process.

Table 2
Structure of the IMRaD Research Model

IMRaD	
INTRODUCTION	● Overview of relevant research (literature review) ● Theoretical background and context of the study ● Identification of the research problem and its significance
METHODS	● Description of the research design ● Participants or context of the study ● Data collection methods, procedures, and instruments ● Analytical approach
RESULTS	● Presentation of the findings ● Description of outcomes without interpretation ● Statistical significance, if applicable
DISCUSSION	● Interpretation of the results ● Relationship between findings and research questions or hypotheses ● Study limitations ● Implications for practice and directions for future research

Building on this structure, the following section considers how the IMRaD components can be applied to the drawing process as stages of inquiry. Importantly, the framework does not impose a rigid sequence or constrain creative outcomes. Instead, it provides a flexible scaffold that supports inquiry while preserving openness, uncertainty, and exploration as core qualities of artistic practice.

In scientific research, *the introduction* clarifies the purpose of the study and what it aims to investigate. In drawing education, this stage involves framing a visual or conceptual question that gives purpose to the drawing process. Students in a classroom are invited to identify what they want to observe, investigate, or communicate visually.

Inquiry questions may emerge from personal experience, direct observation, environmental exploration, or engagement with historical, cultural, or social themes. For younger learners, these questions may remain concrete, such as examining how an object changes when viewed from multiple perspectives. Older students may engage with more abstract inquiries, for example, how posture, gesture, or spatial relationships convey emotional states. Framing the drawing task as a question-oriented investigation increases engagement by clarifying intent and shifting attention from outcome to process.

Within the scientific IMRaD model, *methods* describe how research is conducted. In drawing education, methods include the selection and testing of materials, tools, techniques, and visual strategies used to explore the inquiry question. This stage emphasizes experimentation and technical mastery. Students actively test how different materials, surfaces, and mark-making approaches affect visual outcomes and meaning.

Equally important is engagement with visual references and artworks. Similar to a *literature review* in scientific research, students examine how other artists have approached comparable questions. This comparative analysis situates individual drawing practice within a broader visual dialogue and reinforces the understanding of drawing as a form of collective knowledge-building rather than isolated self-expression.

In scientific research, *results* consist of the findings of the study, indicating what was discovered and whether the research questions or hypotheses were supported. Within drawing education, results take the form of sketches, drafts, studies, and completed works that document the inquiry process. Treating unfinished and iterative drawings as valid outcomes challenges the focus on polished results and reframes drawing as an ongoing process of inquiry and learning.

The discussion phase in scientific research involves interpreting results, addressing limitations, and identifying future directions. In drawing education, this stage centers on reflection, dialogue, and interpretation. Students analyze their visual outcomes, articulate decision-making processes, and consider how effectively their drawings respond to the initial inquiry.

Peer discussion and teacher feedback play a central role in this phase. Meaning emerges through interaction with others and with contextual frameworks. Through reflective dialogue, students develop visual literacy, critical vocabulary, and the ability to articulate artistic intent, which are skills essential for both artistic and academic development.

Taken together, these stages show that art education follows a coherent internal logic, even when it is not explicitly taught. To make this logic visible and communicable, the following section outlines how the IMRaD research structure can be systematically adapted to the drawing process (Table 3).

Table 3
Applying the IMRaD Research Structure to Drawing Pedagogy

IMRaD framework adapted for drawing education	
INTRODUCTION	● Introduction of a visual or conceptual question ● Connection to personal experience, observation, or societal themes ● Clarification of why this question matters ● Activation of curiosity and purpose
METHODS	● Selection of materials and techniques (e.g., charcoal, watercolor, collage) ● Experimental testing of tools, surfaces, and mark-making strategies ● Study of artistic references (artists, styles, visual strategies) ● Iterative trials and material decision-making
RESULTS	● Production of sketches, drafts, studies, and finished works ● Visual outcomes ● Observation of patterns, variations, and emerging solutions
DISCUSSION	● Analysis of performed work ● Reflection on how effectively the work addresses the initial question ● Peer and teacher feedback ● Identification of new questions or future directions ● Articulation of meaning and learning gained through the process

Classroom Implementation

The IMRaD-based framework is grounded in long-term teaching practice with diverse learner populations, including children aged 6–12 and adult students with varying levels of prior experience. Across educational contexts, several recurring patterns appear.

First, framing drawing as inquiry increases engagement, particularly among students who identify as “non-artistic.” An emphasis on questioning reduces fear of failure and shifts attention away from external evaluation toward exploration. Under identical conditions and shared starting points, this approach results in distinctly different and authentic visual outcomes, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Authentic Variation in Student Drawings Created Under the Same Conditions, Illustrating Increased Engagement and Exploratory Decision-Making

Second, the framework provides teachers with a clear and communicable planning structure. Inquiry-based drawing lessons are easier to explain to parents, administrators, and institutions seeking evidence of learning outcomes. The framework makes visible cognitive processes such as observation, decision-making, and reflection that are typically difficult to articulate in art education.

Third, the approach supports inclusivity. Because success is defined by engagement with inquiry rather than technical proficiency, learners with diverse abilities and backgrounds can participate meaningfully. Drawing becomes accessible as a mode of thinking rather than a test of innate talent.

Conclusions

The proposed approach presented in this paper carries important implications for art educators, educational institutions, and broader educational systems. When drawing is approached as a form of structured inquiry, it becomes possible to articulate its educational value in terms that align with widely accepted goals such as critical thinking, reflective practice, and problem-solving. This reframing has the potential to shift how drawing education is perceived, implemented, and evaluated across different learning contexts.

At the institutional level, this framework confronts the ongoing marginalization of arts instruction within assessment-focused systems. By demonstrating that drawing relies on cognitive processes similar to those in scientific research, the model challenges the divide

between art and intellectual rigor. Positioning drawing as organized investigation brings arts education into alignment with current educational emphases such as cross-disciplinary integration and STEAM initiatives while maintaining the unique characteristics of artistic reasoning.

Future work may focus on testing this framework in school settings, particularly within general education classrooms where students often enter with limited confidence in their artistic abilities. Possible directions include the development of pilot curricula, classroom-based studies, and qualitative assessment tools that document changes in student engagement, persistence, and diversity of visual outcomes. Such studies could help translate the framework into transferable teaching strategies and provide empirical evidence to support its use across educational settings.

Ultimately, this paper suggests that the key question for educators and policymakers is no longer whether art education is necessary, but how it can be taught in ways that fully realize its cognitive and educational potential. When drawing is understood as structured inquiry, it becomes a powerful and inclusive tool for visual thinking, questioning, and meaning-making. Teaching drawing in this way opens new possibilities for more equitable, meaningful, and intellectually robust educational practices.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used solely for proofreading and language refinement. Its use was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing sentences for clarity and accuracy. Apart from Grammarly, no AI or AI-assisted tools were used to generate content for this manuscript. All ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussions are the author's own and are based on the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

References

Bamford, A. (2006). *The wow factor: Global research compendium on the impact of the arts in education*. Waxmann.

Day, R. A., & Gastel, B. (2012). *How to write and publish a scientific paper*. Cambridge University Press.

Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind.* Yale University Press.

Freiband, A. (2019). Art as research — research as art [Lecture]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, United States.

Hetland, L., Winner, E., Veenema, S., & Sheridan, K. M. (2013). *Studio thinking 2: The real benefits of visual arts education*. Teachers College Press.

Sullivan, G. (2010). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in visual arts* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.

Contact email: drbarbie333@gmail.com

Integrating AIGC Into Art and Design Education: From Self-Expression to Aesthetic Literacy

Yimeng Shi, Donghua University, China
Menghe Tian, Donghua University, China
Arkadiusz Marcinkowski, SWPS University, Poland

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Ideas shape the material world, just as the material world creates conditions for personal expression. With the aid of contemporary tools and digital media, especially AIGC platforms such as Midjourney, individuals are increasingly able to visualize and articulate their unconscious aesthetic tendencies. These technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to transform abstract inner concepts into tangible visual forms—moving from metaphor to explicitness, from internalized perception to externalized expression. As David Holz suggested, Midjourney may be seen as a derivative of human thought, echoing the ancient Chinese principle in The I-Ching of "establishing images to express meaning." This process illustrates how values and emotions can be more intuitively conveyed through image-based expressions than through language alone. However, the educational value of this process depends on more than just technological accessibility. While AIGC tools can democratize visual creation, they do not inherently foster aesthetic judgment or critical design thinking. Therefore, the role of design educators and cultural producers remains essential. Through guided interaction, curated prompts, and critical reflection, educators can help learners move beyond superficial image generation toward meaningful aesthetic growth. In this way, AIGC serves not only as a creative tool, but also as a pedagogical catalyst—bridging technology and tradition, expression and interpretation, imagination and intention.

Keywords: design education, aesthetic literacy, human–AI interaction, image generation, symbolic interpretation

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid technological advancement and pressing environmental challenges, the call for sustainable education has become increasingly urgent. UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) framework emphasizes the need for pedagogical approaches that not only foster creativity and critical thinking but also minimize ecological footprints while promoting social inclusivity (UNESCO, 2020).

With the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence Generated Content (AIGC), image generation technologies such as Midjourney have increasingly entered art and design education, reshaping how students visualize ideas and articulate creative intentions. While existing discussions often focus on technical efficiency or the originality of AI-generated images, less attention has been paid to AIGC as a pedagogical medium and its implications for learning processes in art and design education.

This paper approaches AIGC not merely as a technological innovation, but as an educational tool embedded within teaching and learning contexts. Specifically, it examines how AIGC-mediated image generation influences students' processes of self-expression and supports the gradual cultivation of aesthetic literacy. Rather than positioning AIGC as an autonomous creative agent, this study emphasizes its role as an intermediary that translates internal intentions into external visual forms, thereby enabling reflection, interpretation, and aesthetic understanding.

Drawing on the concept of "establishing images to express meaning" of the I Ching, this study situates AIGC within a broader philosophical and cognitive framework. In this perspective, images function not as final aesthetic outcomes, but as symbolic structures that mediate between subjective intention and shared understanding. When integrated into art and design education, AIGC extends this traditional logic by accelerating the visualization process and expanding the range of possible representations, while simultaneously raising new pedagogical challenges.

Within educational settings, the use of AIGC requires careful guidance to prevent superficial image production and to foster deeper aesthetic engagement. This paper argues that meaningful learning does not arise from the automation of creativity, but from the reflective interaction between students, images, and instructional mediation. By analyzing human–AI interaction through cognitive, symbolic, and aesthetic dimensions, this study proposes a theoretical framework for understanding how AIGC can support a transition from self-expression to aesthetic literacy in art and design education.

A Conceptual Review of Midjourney in Interactive Design Practices

Human perception is inherently sensitive to familiarity, with individuals forming stronger emotional connections to objects that visually resemble known forms or trigger latent memories (Ganzach & Schul, 1995). Extensive research demonstrates a robust cognitive link between object shapes and the brain's mechanisms for perception and memory retrieval. When exposed to novel visual stimuli, perception is shaped and mediated by stored representations of similar forms within one's memory.

Thus, to foster comprehension and acceptance, visual elements must be contextualized and integrated with the viewer's historical knowledge and lived experiences.

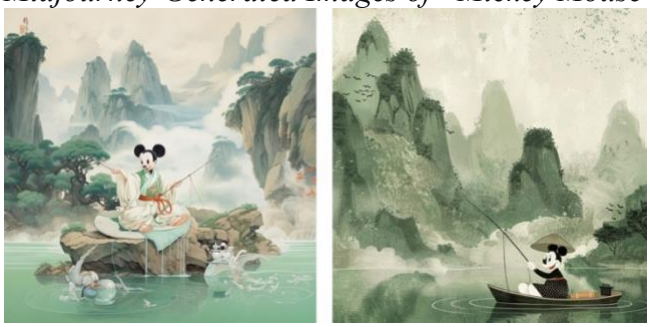
Recent advancements in AI-driven image generation have enabled the synthesis of societal aesthetic preferences by aggregating collective subconscious visual cues from intuitive perspectives (Zeng, 2023). Such AI-generated visual elements, characterized by broad social resonance, function as symbolic triggers capable of evoking subconscious memories and associations. Despite expanding worldviews driven by rapid socio-economic changes, a persistent dissonance exists between individuals' internalized visions and external realities, exacerbated by uneven access to information (Fukuyama, 2018). While mass media such as television and gaming introduce new perspectives, these narratives are often externally imposed rather than autonomously constructed.

With the evolution of AI technologies, users are increasingly empowered to cultivate personalized visual perspectives, positioning AI as a co-creator in the generative process. As Liao et al. (2020, p. 27) observe, AI tools "provide inspiration, broaden design scope, or prompt design actions through suggested text or images." Consequently, AI-generated imagery serves not only as an external catalyst for creativity across varying levels of design expertise but also as a source of stochastic creative stimuli (Beaney, 2005). Additionally, AI integration substantially reduces the temporal and resource demands traditionally associated with design practice.

Nevertheless, generating novel visual inputs to inspire creativity remains a challenge, especially within nascent or underexplored design fields where existing datasets are limited or unrepresentative. This limitation undermines the efficacy of traditional methods dependent on prior knowledge. For instance, by utilizing Midjourney's prompt function with keywords such as "Chinese landscape painting" combined with "Mickey Mouse," and specifying straightforward requests like "Mickey Mouse sitting in a Chinese landscape painting" or "Mickey Mouse fishing in a Chinese landscape painting," the generated images (Figure 1) exemplify the AI's capacity for blending disparate cultural symbols.

Figure 1

Midjourney-Generated Images of "Mickey Mouse in a Chinese Painting"



Source: Author's own creation

Interpreting Image, Intention, and Meaning Through the I Ching and Midjourney

Throughout history, individual behavior has been evaluated through societal value judgments, which themselves rapidly shift due to widespread patterns of imitation. From a social standpoint, the values individuals pursue can only be understood relative to prevailing norms of their time. In ancient societies, social choices were heavily constrained, strongly shaping individuals' inner thoughts and self-perceptions. However, with accelerating social and economic change, perspectives have broadened significantly, though a notable gap remains between individuals' core self-vision and their external realities.

Concepts shape the material world, while the material world conditions individual expression. Today, access to contemporary tools and media enables unconscious tendencies to find expression, suggesting that conceptual recognition in the mind is not mere abstraction but can be externalized into tangible forms. This marks a shift from metaphorical internalization toward revelatory externalization. While artists concretely manifest ideas in galleries and exhibitions, an important question arises: can ordinary people accurately convey consciousness through contemporary tools and media?

Insights from modern linguistic philosophy suggest that the issue is not whether language perfectly mirrors reality, but how language interprets and engages with existence. Whether we consider "phenomena" or "symbols," their relation to the "truth of existence" gains renewed significance within this interpretive framework. Moreover, in interpersonal communication, information quality is relational; unilateral expression alone does not enhance meaning. Similarly, a process of mutual understanding unfolds between individuals and artificial intelligence.

Figure 2

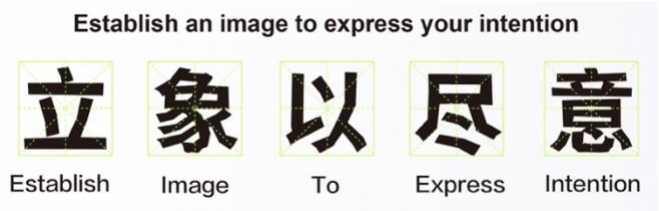
Analysis and Interpretation of the Chinese Character "Middle Way"

Source: Author's own creation

Upon release, Midjourney faced resistance from some designers, notably regarding copyright in commercial use—a concern beyond the scope here. From a social perspective, human communication today operates as an integrated system involving dynamic interactions between individuals and objects, fostering novel ideas. Midjourney serves as a gateway for public participation, offering a platform to unlock creativity and generate fresh concepts through playful interaction. These emergent ideas can stimulate improved performance in other domains. The core challenge Midjourney addresses for the public is translating internal ideas into visual language.

Figure 3

Analysis and Interpretation of the Chinese Phrase – Establish an Image to Express Your Intention



Source: Author's own creation

The 6th World Artificial Intelligence Conference (WAIC), held in Shanghai from July 6th–8th, 2023, themed "Generating the Future with Intelligent Connections" (Luo, 2023), featured a

keynote by David Holtz, founder of Midjourney. Holtz expressed deep appreciation for classical Chinese literature and revealed that "Midjourney" reflects the concept of the "middle way" from the I Ching (The Book of Changes) (see Figure 2).

Midjourney's design logic aligns with the I Ching's principle of "establishing an image to express intention" (see Figure 3). When assigning value, conveying "intention" through "image" is essential. Whether an image can fully encapsulate meaning—akin to language's inherent limits—remains a question for thoughtful reflection.

Research Objectives

To analyze how AIGC platforms' design and algorithms influence students' creative behaviors and the visual outcomes they produce.

To investigate the dual nature of AI image generation as both a catalyst for creative freedom and a potential constraint within educational contexts.

To explore the process of self-discovery and identity formation through human-AI interaction during visual creation.

To examine how educators and cultural producers shape practices and discourses around AI-assisted creativity, aiming to enhance sustainable education and student innovation.

Discussion

On May 8, 2023, EDUCAUSE, the official website of the American Association for Higher Education, published The 2023 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report: Teaching and Learning Edition (*Horizon Report*, 2023). This report highlights key technologies and pedagogical practices poised to significantly influence higher education, with a special emphasis on emerging and breakthrough artificial intelligence technologies aimed at supporting students' sense of belonging and connectedness. A strong sense of belonging is crucial for students' social development, learning efficacy, and overall academic success. Students seek seamless, on-demand connections to people, services, and applications; maintaining this ongoing connectivity fosters relationships and engenders feelings of value and security.

The term "artificial intelligence" was first coined in 1955 to describe computer-assisted work. Over the past several decades, AI has evolved into a distinct discipline capable of perceiving, learning, reasoning akin to the human brain, understanding natural language, and generating visual information. Despite its revolutionary technological nature, AI remains fundamentally rooted in computational methods. Designers today must not only understand and train algorithmic models but also infuse them with creativity through collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts.

The core principle behind AI-generated imagery involves converting paintings and visual works into digital data and training computers with deep learning algorithms to produce analogous creations. As designers and AI systems increasingly inform each other's cognitive processes and problem-solving strategies, the emergence of more innovative works attuned to contemporary societal issues is anticipated (Bonnardel & Zenasni, 2010). It is widely recognized that AI-generated products often reflect an average societal value—a composite of

keywords representing the zeitgeist, behavioral motives, and personal aspirations—yet these keywords require careful refinement to accurately convey deeper cultural significance.

Different keywords correspond to diverse social perspectives and economic frameworks (Brand & Rocchi, 2011), especially in light of systemic challenges such as financial crises, environmental degradation, social inequality, and refugee crises, which have become prominent global concerns communicated through visual media. This growing awareness has substantially influenced economic and design paradigms, broadening design's scope to encompass systemic societal views.

Accordingly, it is imperative for designers and educators to explore ways to assist the public in expressing themselves creatively and interactively through platforms like Midjourney, enabling visualization of the self.

Traditionally, transforming abstract thoughts into visual language has been the province of artists and trained designers, who develop rich associative capacities through systematic education and practice. For individuals lacking such training, Midjourney offers a novel means to translate natural language prompts into images, lowering the barrier to visual imagination and framing the creative process as an interactive experience conducive to self-exploration. I define this experience as one that satisfies and surprises the mental state, with its underlying behavioral logic centered on the discovery and acknowledgment of one's inner self.

Cognitive Interactivity and Symbolic Encoding in Human–AI Design Learning

Similar to the relational nature of information in The I-Ching, where unilateral output fails to enhance value, effective communication requires mutual understanding between individuals and artificial intelligence. The inputs provided to AI constitute the user's encoding process—an internal operation whereby symbols are formed in the sender's mind before being transmitted through channels to recipients. Creating these encoded symbols demands meticulous care, relying not only on the user's foundational psychological representations but also on prior knowledge transmitted through symbolic forms to AI. These factors critically determine whether AI can accurately decode in alignment with the user's intent.

The communication model embedded in The I-Ching epitomizes interactivity, especially human interaction conceived as a holistic, cyclical process (Chen, 2009). Communication-driven changes form continuous cycles, where yin and yang perpetually interact and influence each other to propel progress. In other words, creativity emerges only through ongoing interaction (Chen, 2009).

In visual communication design and media studies, scholars emphasize that communication between designers and audiences is neither unidirectional nor linear. Effective communication requires attention to receiver feedback and reciprocal connections (Wiemann, 1977). Communication must be bidirectional, fostering an interactive relationship between sender and receiver—particularly relevant in today's mass communication era where both parties hold agency. Correspondingly, attention is growing toward how transmitters engage effectively with AI software during the creative mapping process.

The design thinking process—empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing (Meinel et al., 2011)—corresponds closely to the designer's prior knowledge, imagination, and visual perception, as well as the recipient's mental representation and image formation. Engaging in

design thinking helps transmitters execute accurate encoding, facilitating precise decoding by recipients.

Coherent mental representations primarily arise from prior knowledge, filling informational gaps and linking fragmented data. Conversely, lack of relevant knowledge causes textual input to be processed as fragmented and isolated. In contemporary society, individuals resonate with "imagery" produced by artists, where sensory impressions engage intellectual faculties to compare, relate, or distinguish images. This cognitive process transforms sensory data into transcendental a priori knowledge (Kant, 1999), which subsequently guides lived experiences and connects ensuing "imagery." Viewers lacking sufficient transcendental knowledge may struggle to form coherent psychological models of depicted scenes, impeding understanding.

Imagination is a cognitive faculty arising from interplay between consciousness and subconsciousness, comprising a succession of concrete images connected by intuitive association and analogy, with meaning attributed through thought. Though images and symbols are inert, they serve as media for thought. Since imagery is tangible, imaginative thinking often involves concrete associations. This cognitive mode is innate but can be cultivated through training. Thus, the general public—even without formal design or creative training—is not devoid of imagination. However, they may struggle to process stored information and translate it into design language suitable for Midjourney input without external guidance. Consequently, generated images may diverge from the creator's original mental conception (Zhong & Gao, 2008).

According to the construction-integration model (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), when individuals attempt to depict a specific scene, they first form a surface mental representation based on textual cues. The brain then processes this to generate semantic content, constructing a coherent and complete mental image. Though this image exists internally, it corresponds to objective reality and is accessible to conscious perception. When viewers possess sufficient prior knowledge, their mental images are rich and comprehensive; lacking experience leads to incomplete or fragmented visualization. This principle applies similarly to AI-assisted interactive image generation.

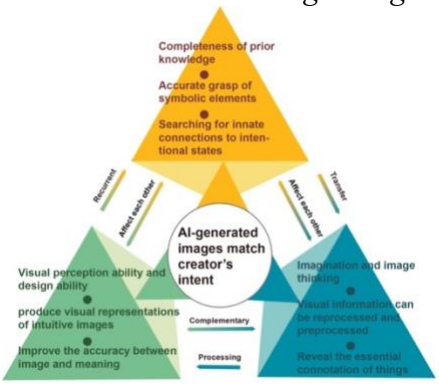
Visual images produced through artificial intelligence are typically conceptualized and crafted by designers, embodying a high degree of generality and logical coherence in representing objective concepts. These images synthesize visual elements consistent with an informational context, empowering viewers to form immediate, intuitive mental representations during their visual engagement. Visual thinking, a core mode of artistic cognition, entails the generation of unique imagery grounded in prototypes drawn from objective reality, filtered through personal knowledge and experience. Such imagery exhibits strong generality and logical structure in conceptual depiction, revealing inherent cognitive regularities within the viewer's mind. As a cognitive interplay between consciousness and subconsciousness, visual thinking equips information graphic designers to construct visually unified elements that fit coherently within informational contexts, thus facilitating intuitive visual comprehension during viewing (Wang, 2018). This visualization represents a distinct psychological representation of objects not directly present before the viewer's eyes—it reconstructs perceptual processes by reprocessing memory-stored information, independent of immediate external stimuli (Zhong & Gao, 2008).

Therefore, AI-generated visual images depend substantially on the creator's imaginative capacity and perceptual acuity during the design phase. When both imagination and design

skills are well developed, the alignment between symbolic representation and intended meaning is correspondingly enhanced (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

How AI-Generated Images Align With the Creator's Original Intention



Source: Author's own creation

The Evolving Role of Designers: Enabling Public Self-Directed Adaptive Learning via AI Tools

With rapid technological advancements and growing user engagement, traditional, slow, localized, and incremental design practices have largely been supplanted by fast-paced social innovation systems. Similar to maker culture—which is driven by self-directed learning and creativity—this transformation marks a critical intersection where design education systems collide with broader social practices. However, whether these new models can truly fulfill their potential depends on proper guidance from the producers of design culture.

From both aesthetic and technical standpoints, design is a complex systemic engineering process requiring solid theoretical foundations, accumulated practical experience, and constructive mentorship. The accelerating pace of societal and cultural change necessitates that designers continually update their skills and adapt to emerging contexts.

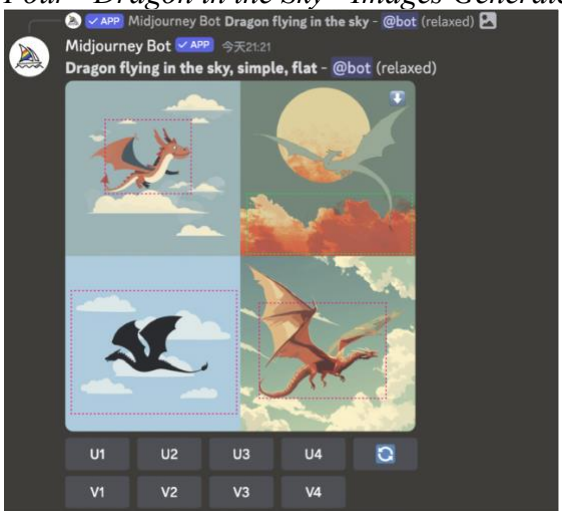
Given the still-uncertain applications of artificial intelligence in design thinking (Cautela et al., 2019), designers can no longer rely solely on catering to consumer needs. Instead, they must embrace their role as "shapers" of society, transitioning from user-centered to society-centered design paradigms (Tromp et al., 2011). In terms of harnessing AI's value, designers' involvement can supplement logical systems by providing professional insight to those without formal design training, facilitating self-exploration through hands-on practice. This shift moves the focus from rigid "patterns" or frameworks toward flexible "guidance" and divergent thinking.

Artificial intelligence has accelerated innovation and transformed design production modes while redefining the future skill sets designers must cultivate. The early integration of intelligent, automated processes in design is not intended to replace human creativity, but rather to empower designers to extract deeper insights from existing data, optimize resource use, and enhance their comprehension of design challenges (Camburn et al., 2020). Professional designers, with their mastery of style and composition, can guide AI-generated visuals and help non-experts refine their conceptual thinking.

For instance, I used Midjourney with the prompt: "Dragon flying in the sky, simple flat style," which generated four distinct images (Figure 5). Each image highlights different visual focal points: the top left emphasizes the dragon, the top right centers on colorful, dynamic clouds, the bottom left balances dragon and clouds equally, while the bottom right depicts the dragon from an upward perspective. Although all depict dragons and skies, their divergent focal emphases yield unique stylistic outcomes.

Figure 5

Four "Dragon in the Sky" Images Generated by Midjourney



Source: Author's own creation

Addressing complex problems in ways akin to AI's pattern recognition and data mining requires the identification and unification of similar keywords. This process not only primes AI outputs but also fosters an interdisciplinary design collaboration platform, lowering entry barriers for non-designers and encouraging broader innovation participation. The future of design will increasingly demand interdisciplinarity, with tools like Midjourney enabling professional designers to communicate precise concepts visually while empowering individuals from diverse domains to express ideas unconstrained by linguistic limits. Such capacity greatly facilitates interdisciplinary cooperation.

Conversely, educational programs that fail to recognize the impact of disruptive technologies—particularly artificial intelligence (Mortati & Bertola, 2021)—risk graduating professionals ill-prepared for a rapidly evolving landscape. Thus, training and higher education must equip students for digital transformation by providing appropriate tools, nurturing skill development, and fostering positive attitudes towards these technologies, while remaining mindful of their limitations and risks. Artificial intelligence must remain relevant, adaptable, and dialectically integrated within defined boundaries to serve human needs effectively.

Summary and Future Perspectives

In Stéphane Vial's Court Traité du Design, design is positioned as a discipline uniquely tasked with making the world a better place—a mission that distinguishes it fundamentally from pure art. This human-centered ethos calls for designers not only to create aesthetically pleasing content but also to imbue their work with social responsibility and meaningful impact. As such, the essence of design lies in fostering experiences of beauty that are accessible and co-created by the public, transforming audiences from passive consumers into active participants. This

marks a critical evolution as design transcends its traditional role as a practical technology and increasingly integrates with the humanities and social sciences.

The Transformation of the Design Perspective: From Creative Production to Driving Sustainable Social and Educational Development

In recent years, scholarly discourse has shifted to emphasize design's broader societal implications, inviting reflections from beyond the discipline itself. Contemporary design education must therefore embrace a holistic process: cultivating creative, adaptive thinking at the university level that seamlessly bridges theoretical frameworks with real-world practices, ultimately contributing to the public's cultural and aesthetic awareness. This paradigm shift underscores the designer's role not merely as a creator but as a facilitator of collective meaning and social progress.

Yuval Noah Harari's reflections in Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind underscore a pivotal historical transition—from artistic design serving elite interests to becoming a democratized force shaping mass culture. Harari further cautions that emerging technologies like big data and artificial intelligence are not deterministic forces; rather, they are tools capable of fostering diverse societal trajectories. This invites a profound reorientation toward participatory and co-design methodologies, empowering stakeholders to actively shape their environments and futures.

Human behavior, deeply intertwined with emotional and cognitive complexities, defies simplistic categorization. Memory itself is reconstructive, influenced by personal biases and fluctuating attention spans, complicating our understanding of collective experiences. Given this fluidity, design must navigate these psychological landscapes thoughtfully, recognizing the mutable nature of human perception.

In conclusion, design—especially within educational contexts—demands a rigorous ethical framework that critically interrogates the intersection of technology, creativity, and social responsibility. Moving beyond entrenched habits toward speculative and visionary approaches enables designers to anticipate and engage with future challenges meaningfully. University-level design education must therefore balance talent cultivation with practical societal needs, embedding environmental stewardship and ethical consciousness as foundational pillars.

Echoing Dunne and Raby's seminal work Speculative Everything: Design Fiction and Social Dreaming (2013), the transformative potential of design lies in its capacity to imagine alternative futures—scenarios that redefine our relationship to reality and open new possibilities for social existence. This speculative turn not only expands design's horizons but also positions it as a critical agent in shaping more just, sustainable, and imaginative futures.

Conclusion

This study has explored the integration of AIGC into art and design education by examining its role in mediating between self-expression and aesthetic literacy. Rather than treating AIGC as a replacement for human creativity, the paper has framed it as an educational medium that externalizes internal intentions and facilitates reflective engagement with visual representations.

From a pedagogical perspective, AIGC enables students to rapidly visualize abstract ideas, making implicit intentions perceptible and open to interpretation. This process aligns with the traditional concept of "establishing images to express meaning," while extending it through algorithmic generation and human–AI interaction. However, the educational value of AIGC does not reside in image production itself, but in the guided learning processes that surround it.

Educators play a critical role in shaping these processes. Without pedagogical intervention, AIGC risks reinforcing surface-level aesthetics and passive consumption of images. When integrated into structured teaching practices, however, AIGC can support students in developing symbolic awareness, critical interpretation, and aesthetic judgment. Through dialogue, comparison, and reflection, students are encouraged to move beyond personal expression toward a more nuanced understanding of visual meaning.

In this sense, the contribution of AIGC to art and design education lies not in technological novelty, but in its potential to transform learning structures. By supporting the transition from self-expression to aesthetic literacy, AIGC offers a pedagogical opportunity to rethink how images function as cognitive and cultural mediators in contemporary education. This study thus provides a theoretical foundation for the responsible and meaningful integration of AIGC into art and design teaching practices.

Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere gratitude to my parents, Mr. Shi and Mrs. Li, and to my family for their unwavering support. My appreciation also goes to all the teachers and classmates who have provided invaluable assistance throughout my doctoral journey.

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.

References

Beaney, M. (2005). *Imagination and creativity*. Open University Press.

Bonnardel, N., & Zenasni, F. (2010). The impact of technology on creativity in design: An enhancement? *Creativity and Innovation Management*, *19*(2), 180–191. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8691.2010.00560.x

Brand, R., & Rocchi, S. (2011). Rethinking value in a changing landscape and business transformation. In *Philips Design*. https://www.design.philips.com

Camburn, B., He, Y., Raviselvam, S., Luo, J., & Wood, K. (2020). Machine learning-based design concept evaluation. *Journal of Mechanical Design*, *142*(3), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1115/1.4045126

Cautela, C., Mortati, M., Dell'Era, C., & Gastaldi, L. (2019). The impact of artificial intelligence on design thinking practice: Insights from the ecosystem of startups. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, *12*(1), 114–134. https://doi.org/10.4013/sdrj.2019.121.08

Chen, G. (2009). Toward an I Ching model of communication. *China Media Research*, *5*(3), 72–81. https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:54644757

Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2013). *Speculative everything: Design, fiction, and social dreaming*. The MIT Press.

Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Ganzach, Y., & Schul, Y. (1995). The influence of quantity of information and goal framing on decisions. *Acta Psychologica*, *89*(1), 23–36. https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-6918(94)00004-Z

Horizon Report. (2023). *2023 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report: Teaching and learning edition*. EDUCAUSE. https://library.educause.edu/resources/2023/5/2023-educause-horizon-report-teaching-and-learning-edition

Kant, I. (1999). *Critique of pure reason* (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans. & Eds.). Cambridge University Press.

Liao, J., Hansen, P., & Chai, C. (2020). A framework of artificial intelligence augmented design support. *Human–Computer Interaction*, *35*(5–6), 511–544. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370024.2020.1733576

Luo, M. (2023, May 2). David Holtz, founder of Midjourney: The name Midjourney is inspired by Zhuangzi and contains the concept of "Middle Way." *Shanghai Securities News*. https://www.cnstock.com

Meinel, C., Leifer, L., & Plattner, H. (2011). *Design thinking: Understand – improve – apply*. Springer.

Mortati, M., & Bertola, P. (2021). Saperi indisciplinati nell'era digitale [Undisciplined Knowledge in the Digital Age]. *DIID. Disegno Industriale Industrial Design*, *70*(1), 135–141. https://hdl.handle.net/11311/1156090

Tromp, N., Hekkert, P., & Verbeek, P. P. (2011). Design for socially responsible behavior: A classification of influence based on intended user experience. *Design Issues*, *27*(3), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00087

UNESCO. (2020). *Education for sustainable development: A roadmap*. UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/YFRE1448

Van Dijk, T. A., & Kintsch, W. (1983). *Strategies of discourse comprehension*. Academic Press.

Wang, X. (2018). *Visual elements of modern graphic design*. China Textile Publishing Press.

Wiemann, J. M. (1977). Explication and test of a model of communicative competence. *Human Communication Research*, *3*(3), 195–213. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1977.tb00518.x

Zeng, J. (2023). The I Ching as a potential Jungian application: History and practice. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, *68*(5), 913–932. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12958

Zhong, J., & Gao, X. (2008). Comparative study on eye movement patterns of graphic vision and mental imagery. *Psychological Science*, *31*(6). https://doi.org/10.16719/j.cnki.1671-6981.2008.06.045

Contact email: sym.xmu@gmail.com

Exploring the Sustainable Development of Contemporary Tainan From the Perspective of Tainan Prefecture Urban Development During the Japanese Colonial Period

Li-Yueh Chen, Weixin Shengjiao College, Taiwan
Kuo-Ching Shih, I Ching University, Taiwan
Chi-Lin Chang, Weixin Shengjiao College, Taiwan
Kuo-Ying Yang, Weixin Shengjiao College, Taiwan
Shih-Tsung Lai, Weixin Shengjiao College, Taiwan
Che-Chung Yang, Weixin Shengjiao College, Taiwan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule from 1895 to 1945. This 50-year period significantly influenced Taiwan's subsequent development in humanities, economy, politics, education, and infrastructure. This paper focuses on Tainan Prefecture during the Japanese colonial period. The Governor-General of Taiwan promulgated the Tainan City Improvement Plan in 1911 (Meiji 44), transforming the city's street network from the Qing Dynasty. Subsequent urban planning initiatives in 1929 and 1941 further expanded the city's boundaries and laid the foundation for the core area of modern-day Tainan. This paper explores the roots of the city's vitality by examining Tainan's geographical environment and urban development from the Japanese colonial period to the present through a fieldwork methodology grounded in the "phenomenon–hypothesis–verification" research approach. Furthermore, it investigates how government agencies promote sustainable urban development, and how they collaborate with local organizations to leverage local and human resources through placemaking initiatives to seek sustainable development. This research seeks to integrate these diverse perspectives to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the city's evolution and to provide valuable insights for those working towards sustainable urban development worldwide.

Keywords: Tainan prefecture, sustainable urban development, city

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In 1895, following its defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing government of China signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki with the Empire of Japan at Maguan Port in Akamagaseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture (now known as Shimonoseki Port). Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the Qing government was required to recognize the independence of Korea and to cede the Liaodong Peninsula, Taiwan, and the Penghu Islands to Japan.

Prior to 1895, Japan had no experience as a colonial power. Over the subsequent fifty years of rule, Japanese colonial governance in Taiwan underwent three major phases: the Early Colonial Period (1895–1919), the Period of Assimilation under the Extension of the Home Territory Policy (1919–1937), and the Kominka (Japanization) Movement Period (1937–1945). After the end of World War II, the infrastructure, political systems, economic structures, and cultural influences left behind by Japan profoundly shaped Taiwan's subsequent development. This case has become a distinctive example in the history of global colonialism, prompting renewed examination, reassessment, and scholarly debate across various fields.

In terms of local governance, after several administrative reforms, the system was reorganized in 1926 into five prefectures and three subprefectures: Taihoku Prefecture, Shinchiku Prefecture, Taichū Prefecture, Tainan Prefecture, Takao Prefecture, Taitō Subprefecture, Karenkō Subprefecture, and Penghu Subprefecture. According to the official website of the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, *Tainan City Reader*, published in 1939, recorded:

> …Tainan Prefecture covers an area of more than 350 square li, with a population exceeding 1.34 million. It is divided into the two cities of Tainan and Chiayi, and ten districts: Xinfeng, Xinhua, Zengwen, Beimen, Xinying, Chiayi, Douliu, Huwei, Beigang, and Dongshi. … As the administrative office governing the entire prefecture and promoting its development, Tainan City may therefore be regarded as the heart of the prefecture.

Taiwanese literary figure Ye Shitao (1925–2008) once remarked: "Tainan is a place suitable for dreaming, working, falling in love, getting married, and living a leisurely life." Tainan, widely regarded as Taiwan's ancient capital and historically known as "Fucheng" (Prefectural City), marks the point at which Taiwan first connected with the wider world. Since 1624, Tainan has successively been governed by the Dutch, the Kingdom of Tungning under Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), the Qing Dynasty, and Japan. After World War II, in 1949, the government of the Republic of China relocated to Taiwan. Over four centuries, successive regimes overlapped and interacted, each leaving its imprint on the urban landscape. Some traces gradually faded, while others endured. As a result, numerous historic streets and monuments have accumulated over time. The distinctive character of old houses within neighborhood districts, revealed while strolling through streets and narrow alleys, forms a highlight of the cityscape and shapes the unique charm and spatial lineage of Fucheng as a historic port city.

Among these historical periods, the Japanese colonial era stands out in particular, as the construction initiatives undertaken by the Taiwan Governor-General's Office were especially significant in reshaping Tainan's urban space.

Beginning in 1911, when the Tainan Prefectural Office announced the "Tainan Urban District Plan and Determination of Its Boundaries" (archived by the National Museum of Taiwan History), a series of urban planning measures were gradually promulgated and implemented.

These initiatives included: (1) the planning of streets, blocks, and the overall road network, (2) the designation and planning of the railway station's location, (3) the planning of roadways and waterways connecting the urban center with Anping Port, (4) the installation and development of a sewage system; and (5) the spatial configuration of parks, roundabouts, government offices, and residential districts. Each of these infrastructural projects has exerted a lasting influence and laid the foundation for contemporary urban planning and development in Tainan. On this basis, the present study takes Tainan City as its focal subject and examines the urban spatial system, functions, and structural mechanisms formed during the Japanese colonial period in relation to present-day patterns of construction and development. By integrating historical narrative with field research methods, this study analyzes and observes Tainan's geographical environment as well as its street construction from the colonial era to the present. It seeks to explore the roots of urban vitality and to investigate how governmental institutions and local organizations mobilize cultural and natural resources to drive sustainable urban development. According to Lawrence Stone (1979), narrative is defined as "the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order, focusing the content into a coherent story, even if it contains some subordinate episodes." Historical sociologists further argue that narrative entails identifying events within the continuous flow of time and recognizing their cascading consequences, much like a waterfall in motion (Abbott, 1992; Griffin, 1993). Alfred Schutz (1991) likewise emphasized that the historical sciences bear a crucial task: in order to explain and reconstruct "history," scholars must determine which events, actions, and communicative practices should be selected from the totality of past social reality.

The Concept of the City and the Perspective of Sustainability

"City" refers to a settlement characterized by a dense population, developed economic activity, comprehensive infrastructure, and the integration of administrative, commercial, cultural, and social functions. The origins of cities may be traced back to early human mobility, when people gradually clustered in particular locations, forming the embryonic structures of urban settlements. In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (《說文解字》), under the "Earth" (土部) section, it is stated: "A city (城) is that which contains and gathers the people." Within the traditional Chinese worldview, the concept of *tianxia* (天下) functioned as a cosmological and territorial entity, understood as the domain under royal authority. Beginning with King Wen of Zhou, the emphasis on kingship served to consolidate loyalty among clans and the broader populace. The *Zhouli* (《周禮》), specifically the "Kaogong Ji – Jiangren" (考工記·匠人), records:

> When craftsmen plan a capital, it is a square nine *li* on each side, with three gates on each side. Within the capital are nine north–south avenues and nine east–west avenues, each broad enough for nine carriage tracks. On the left stands the ancestral temple; on the right, the altar of soil and grain. In front lies the court; at the rear, the market.

This passage is widely regarded as one of the earliest urban planning theories in China. It conceptualizes the city as an integrated entity that requires institutional design, spatial arrangement, and hierarchical order for governance. Here, "guo" (國) refers to the capital of the Son of Heaven or a feudal lord; "zu" (祖) denotes the ancestral temple; "she" (社) refers to the altar of soil and grain; "chao" (朝) indicates the three types of court assemblies; and "shi" (市) signifies the various markets. The term "jing tu" (經塗) describes the principal thoroughfares running north–south and east–west. Similarly, the *Wu Yue Chunqiu* (《吳越春秋》) states: "Construct the inner city walls to protect the ruler; build the outer walls to safeguard the people." This perspective treats the outer city walls as a material expression of the state,

demonstrating how institutional order was embodied within physical urban space. Accordingly, a true "city" required land, walls, courts, markets, and inhabitants in order to fulfill the purposes of security, defense, production, and habitation. The establishment of markets further presupposed a settlement of sufficient scale. Former Academician of Academia Sinica Xu Zhuoyun (2005) described the urban landscape of the Eastern Zhou period: workshops were located near official residences and palaces; markets gathered in the morning and dispersed at dusk; larger shops sold jewelry and precious metals, while smaller vendors operated street stalls; and the marketplace served as a space where knights-errant, opportunists, scholars, and cultural elites mingled. Thus, the city stands as a significant symbol of human social development. It functions not only as a center of economic activity but also as a crossroads where culture, politics, and social life converge.

Accordingly, scholars such as Jacobs (1969), Soja (2006), and Kostof (2005) argue that a city differs fundamentally from a clustered village settlement. Rather than being merely a concentration of dwellings, the city constitutes a form of collective habitation endowed with institutional authority, economic accumulation, and dense networks of social relations. It is typically regarded as a purposively constructed entity shaped by political intention and socio-economic organization. Weber (1986) defined the city primarily in economic terms. In his view, the distinction between a settlement and a city lies in the presence of a commercial environment, defensive structures, markets, autonomous courts or legal systems, and a degree of municipal autonomy. Only under such conditions can citizens form a genuine civic community. During the Japanese colonial period—the central focus of this study—the urban planning concepts implemented by the Taiwan Governor-General's Office in Tainan embodied many of the characteristics described above. Through the policy of urban reform (*shiku kaisei*), the colonial administration sought to demonstrate its governing capacity over the broader social and environmental order under the symbolic authority of the Japanese emperor. Infrastructure systems—including railways, road networks, sanitation systems, and the construction of the Anping Canal and port facilities—were developed in tandem with monumental government buildings, wide and straight tree-lined boulevards, and traffic circles. Together, these elements articulated a new spatial configuration of the modern city, intended to manifest Japan's fulfillment of what was framed as the "responsibility of the metropole" (Oguma, 2020).

With the intensification of globalization and urbanization, contemporary cities are confronted with multiple challenges, including population density pressures, resource depletion, environmental pollution, and social inequality. Against this backdrop, sustainable development has emerged as the normative ideal toward which modern cities aspire. In 1987, Norway's first female Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, presented the report *Our Common Future* at the United Nations. Published by the World Commission on Environment and Development, the report defined "sustainable development" as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition introduced an intergenerational ethical framework that continues to guide global policy discourse. Sustainable development has since become one of the most significant global issues of the twenty-first century. In 2015, the United Nations announced the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," which established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among these, Goal 11 specifically addresses sustainable cities and communities, aiming to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Spatial Imprints of Tainan From the Dutch Period to the Late Qing Dynasty

From 1624, when the Dutch entered Anping in Tainan under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company, until 1895, when Taiwan entered the Japanese colonial period, a total of 271 years elapsed. During this time, the urban space of Tainan Fucheng underwent three major historical phases: Dutch rule, the Kingdom of Tungning under Zheng Chenggong, and Qing administration. Throughout these successive periods, Tainan served as Taiwan's foremost center of politics, economy, and education. During the Dutch occupation, Fort Zeelandia functioned as the political and economic nucleus as well as a military stronghold. It also served as an intermediary trading hub linking the Dutch with China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. As Dutch settlers and Han migrants gradually concentrated in the area, a township began to take shape. Within this emerging settlement, three principal east–west streets were formed: the northern Narrow Street (present-day Zhongxing Street), the central Broad Street (present-day Xiaozhong Street), and the southern Church Street (present-day Yanping Street). These early spatial arrangements reveal how maritime trade, military defense, and cross-cultural interaction collectively structured the initial urban morphology of Tainan.

In 1625, the Dutch began constructing a new township named Stad Provintia, equipped with residential quarters, warehouses, and a hospital (Wang, 2017). From this point onward, the Dutch authorities encouraged Han migration, and Japanese merchants who came for trade also settled in the area. As a result, the population gradually increased and formed a concentrated community (Zeng, 2023). Because the settlement was located along the coast, the earliest development of Tainan's streets took shape along an east–west axis, while north–south streets emerged later as the population clustered and expanded. Stad Provintia was initially planned according to an eight-block grid pattern, forming an east–west thoroughfare (present-day Minquan Road) intersected by a north–south street (present-day Zhongyi Road). During the Qing administration, the cross-shaped street layout established during the Dutch period became the structural foundation for further expansion. As the coastline gradually receded, multiple layers of cross-shaped blocks were developed. Roads extended outward in the four cardinal directions, giving rise to the four wards of Zhenbei, Xiding, Ningnan, and Dong'an. The street system formed during the Qing period later provided the groundwork for urban planning under Japanese rule. Within the former Qing walled city, a checkerboard-style road network evolved, while radial roads extending from circular roundabouts were introduced as connective nodes. Together, these spatial elements constituted the embryonic form of the present-day street pattern in central Tainan (Chen, 2024).

Tainan's Urban Space During the Japanese Colonial Period vs. Contemporary Tainan

During the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty, Tainan Fucheng established eight city gates: Dadong Gate, Xiaodong Gate, Daxi Gate, Xiaoxi Gate, Danan Gate, Xiaonan Gate, Dabeimen Gate, and Xiaobeimen Gate. These eight gates were aligned with the principal north–south official road, connected westward to maritime routes, and extended eastward toward upland settlements opened through agricultural reclamation. Although the eight gates functioned as entry points from all directions, mobility at the time primarily depended on walking or sedan chairs, while goods were transported by manual carrying, shoulder poles, or ox carts. For safety considerations within the city, ox carts were generally restricted to areas outside the walls or to relatively open spaces within the city. Once inside the gates, roads were typically narrow, winding, and irregular in form. Moreover, at the western edge of the Tainan plateau, the terrain was low-lying, and a considerable portion of the land consisted of newly reclaimed coastal flats. Rainwater and wastewater within the city flowed westward into drainage channels and harbor

waterways, generating adverse environmental conditions (Ko, 2022). In 1911 (Meiji 44), the Taiwan Governor-General's Office promulgated the Tainan Urban Improvement Plan (*Shiku Kaisei*), implementing a comprehensive reorganization and reconstruction of the road network within the former Qing walled city. Subsequent plans in 1929 and 1941 expanded the urban planning boundaries and further formalized Tainan's municipal development, thereby establishing the spatial prototype of today's core urban district. Public health improvement was one of the principal motivations for undertaking urban reform. Regarding the Tainan Urban Improvement Plan, in 1910 the colonial government issued the following directive to the Tainan Prefectural authorities:

> …Within the internal urban district planning, street blocks should, as far as possible, be maintained in rectangular form. However, for the convenience of urban transportation, the railway station and the site of the imperial statue should be regarded as the central hubs of the city, from which a convergent street system should be established to connect these two points. … Judging from the existing pattern of urban development, the western district is suitable for commercial activities, whereas the eastern district is appropriate for residential use. Therefore, the western district shall be planned as a densely utilized commercial area, while the eastern district shall consist of larger and more spacious blocks for residential purposes. In addition, land designated for public facilities should be allocated in the largest possible parcels, and large parks should be planned on both the northern and southern sides of the city. (*Explanatory Report of the Tainan Urban District Plan*, 1910)

This planning logic marked a decisive transition from the organically evolved and defense-oriented spatial structure of the Qing walled city to a rationalized, hygienic, and functionally differentiated modern urban framework.

The "central hub" referred to above was the Taishō Park Roundabout, while the "imperial statue" commemorated Kodama Gentaro (1852–1906), the fourth Governor-General of Taiwan. The "railway station" referred to the first-generation Tainan Station. In 1908, the completion and operation of the Taiwan Trunk Railway marked a milestone in colonial infrastructure development, and Tainan Station became the gateway to the prefectural capital (Ko, 2022). Furthermore, the planned "large parks" were organized with the Taishō Park Roundabout as the core. Additional roundabouts were constructed in the northeastern, southeastern, northwestern, and southwestern districts of the city. These four roundabouts functioned like satellites encircling the Taishō Park Roundabout. In addition, seven radial roads converged at this central node, forming the administrative and spatial nucleus of Tainan Prefecture during the Japanese colonial period. This comprehensive urban planning scheme was completed in 1934 and established a transportation and administrative network linking the two cities and ten districts under Tainan Prefecture, thereby consolidating its regional centrality.

With the convergence of seven radial roads, the centrally positioned Taishō Park Roundabout became the spatial nucleus of the city. At the time, Taishōchō-dōri (present-day Zhongshan Road) and Suehirochō-dōri (present-day Zhongzheng Road) functioned as the principal urban axes. Along this axial structure, Meiji Park in front of Tainan Station was connected to Taishō Park via Taishōchō-dōri; from the roundabout, the route extended westward along Suehirochō-dōri directly to the Anping Canal. Through this design, railway, roadway, and waterway systems were effectively integrated, enabling smoother and more efficient flows of people and goods within Fucheng. Taishōchō-dōri served as the main thoroughfare linking Tainan with other regions of Taiwan and acted as the primary gateway into the city's core district.

Suehirochō-dōri, directly connected to the canal and port facilities, became the principal corridor for the movement of personnel, commodities, and international exchange. Consequently, the Japanese authorities developed this area as a commercial district. Key establishments such as the West Market, the Industrial Bank, and Hayashi Department Store were constructed there, consolidating its status as the commercial center of colonial Tainan (Ko & Tseng, 2021).

Sustainable Development in Tainan

This study adopts a fieldwork-based observational approach, conducting site visits to Tainan's historic urban core, the development zones surrounding the Southern Taiwan Science Park, the Anping port area, historic districts, and temple-centered spaces. Through close observation of the city's everyday operations and lived practices, the research seeks to understand the mechanisms through which sustainable development in Tainan has been formed and sustained.

First, field observations conducted in the Southern Taiwan Science Park and its surrounding areas indicate that industries such as optoelectronics, integrated circuits, precision machinery, biotechnology, and green energy have formed one of Taiwan's most significant TFT-LCD industrial clusters. The influx of population and spatial expansion generated by these industries have accelerated the development of residential zones, educational institutions, and daily service facilities. However, no evident spatial rupture appears between these newly developed districts and the historic urban core. Through on-site tracking of transportation routes, it becomes clear that both commuting flows and logistics corridors continue to rely upon arterial road systems and railway nodes originally established during the Japanese colonial period. This observation confirms that the historical transportation framework provides the structural foundation for contemporary industrial operations and urban spatial organization. It has enabled Tainan to maintain structural stability while undergoing processes of industrial transformation and spatial expansion.

Second, field investigations conducted in the historic urban core and around major temples reveal that religious institutions such as Grand Matsu Temple, Beiji Temple, and Anping Kaitai Tianhou Temple function not merely as religious sites but as central nodes of local society. Folk belief activities centered on Mazu, Wangye deities, or local guardian gods generate periodic large-scale gatherings through rituals, pilgrimages, and temple processions. These cyclical congregations stimulate marketplace economies and diverse culinary cultures, forming a distinctive component of Tainan's sustainable development model. Temple-front markets, night markets, and historic commercial streets, such as Shuixian Temple Market and West Market, operate through small-scale, localized economic practices that support numerous micro-enterprises and household livelihoods. Tainan's signature foods, beef soup, bowl rice pudding (*wan guo*), shrimp rolls, and *danzi* noodles, extend beyond mere culinary consumption. They embody local memory and cultural identity. This economic model, which integrates cuisine, social interaction, and cultural narrative, contributes to tourism development and demonstrates how culturally oriented networks can sustain urban resilience through community-based economic activity.

Third, observations conducted in historic districts and areas of renovated traditional houses reveal that streets such as Xinmei Street, Zhengxing Street, Yongfu Road, Snail Alley, and Shennong Street exhibit a pattern of cultural and creative industries characterized by diversification and strong local embeddedness. Following renovation and adaptive reuse, former residential buildings have been transformed into cafés, design studios, independent

bookstores, and exhibition spaces, attracting young entrepreneurs to establish businesses in these areas. Field observations indicate that many operators emphasize the “story of the space” and the “historical atmosphere” as central motivations for their entrepreneurial activities, rather than focusing solely on economic profit. This culturally oriented economic model, grounded in historical memory, transforms heritage sites and traditional houses from objects of static preservation into dynamic spaces of social and economic activity. Through this process, the conservation of historic architecture becomes intertwined with contemporary creativity and community-based cultural production.

Fourth, field observations conducted along the Anping Canal and surrounding port areas reveal that this waterfront space has undergone multiple stages of governance and functional restructuring. The Anping Canal, excavated during the Japanese colonial period, originally served as a vital shipping corridor connecting the urban center of Tainan with Anping Port, facilitating the circulation of people and goods. However, with changes in port conditions and transformations in transportation modes, its shipping function gradually declined. Certain sections experienced sedimentation and reduced utilization. In recent years, the municipal government has implemented waterfront rehabilitation projects, landscape enhancement, and public space redesign, thereby transforming the canal area into a recreational and tourism-oriented public domain. It is important to note that the canal’s present spatial configuration is not a natural continuation of its historical function, but rather the outcome of deliberate policy intervention and urban redevelopment planning. On-site observations indicate that pedestrian pathways, sightseeing boat services, dining facilities, and nighttime lighting installations have reactivated the waterfront, restoring its public character and generating renewed economic value. This transformation does not represent a simple extension of historical infrastructure. Instead, through processes of re-governance and functional restructuring, the canal has acquired a new role within the contemporary urban context, illustrating how inherited spatial assets can be repositioned within a sustainable development framework.

Fifth, in terms of cultural economy and spatial revitalization, Tainan’s strategies for the adaptive reuse of historic monuments and districts demonstrate a distinct cultural dimension of sustainable development. Sites such as Chihkan Tower, Fort Zeelandia, and Wutiao Harbor Cultural Park function not only as preserved cultural assets but also as actively revitalized spaces. Through exhibitions, cultural performances, themed markets, and guided tourism programs, these heritage sites have been transformed into dynamic platforms where cultural preservation and economic benefits form a mutually reinforcing cycle. This model demonstrates that historical assets are not obstacles to development; rather, through institutional design and public participation, they can be converted into resources for urban innovation. In this process, historical spatial order is reinterpreted in contemporary terms as cultural capital, which in turn supports the growth of tourism and creative industries. Such a development pathway highlights how heritage conservation, when integrated with participatory governance and economic strategy, can contribute to a sustainable and culturally grounded urban future.

Conclusion

This study takes the urban planning of Tainan Prefecture during the Japanese colonial period as its historical point of departure. By integrating field investigation and historical narrative, it explores the formation mechanisms underlying contemporary sustainable development in Tainan. The findings indicate that the roots of Tainan’s urban vitality lie in a dynamic developmental pattern shaped through the interaction between inherited spatial structures and

contemporary public governance. The transportation integration system, urban axes, and public infrastructure established during the Japanese colonial period constituted the institutional framework of Tainan's urban operations. Contemporary industrial transformation and spatial expansion have not dismantled this framework; rather, they have reconfigured functions within it, enabling the city to maintain structural stability and economic resilience amid global competition. Field observations further reveal that networks of folk belief and temple-centered marketplace activities form an important foundation of social capital, reinforcing local cohesion and economic circulation. The revitalization of historic districts and adaptive reuse of traditional houses demonstrate how historical assets can be reinterpreted culturally and transformed into contemporary resources for innovation. The regeneration of the Anping Canal further illustrates that historical infrastructure has not been preserved in a static manner, but instead has been repositioned and reutilized within new urban development contexts. In conclusion, the case of Tainan offers both theoretical and practical insights into how historically layered cities can pursue sustainable transformation under conditions of globalization. Future research may advance theoretical development by engaging in comparative studies of historical cities across different national contexts, thereby deepening understanding of the relationship between historical evolution and sustainable urban development.

References

Abbott, A. (1992). From Causes to Events: Notes on Narrative Positivism, *Sociological Methods & Research, 20*(4), 428–455. https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124192020004002

Chen, H. L. (2024). *Walking through historical maps of Tainan*. Digital Culture Center, Academia Sinica.

Griffin, C. (2001). Imagining New Narratives of Youth: Youth Research, the `New Europe' and Global Youth Culture. *Childhood, 8*(2), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568201008002002

Jacobs, J. (1969). *The Economy of Cities*. Random House.

Ko, M. H. (2022). Spatial design strategies of Japanese colonial cities: A case study of the Taisho Park roundabout in Tainan. *Journal of Architecture, 120*, 53–78.

Ko, M. H., & Tseng, H. H. (2021). Transformation of Tainan's urban axis under modernization. *Journal of Architecture, 116*, 45.

Kostof, S. (2005). *City Spaped- Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History*. China Architecture & Building Press.

National Museum of Taiwan Literature. (2026, February 4). *Old buildings, new life: Understanding the facade elements of prefectural hall architecture*. https://literature.nmtl.gov.tw/archive?uid=80

Oguma, E. (2020). *The boundaries of "the Japanese"* (Y. J. Huang & T. E. Cheng, Trans.). Linking Publishing. (Original work published in Japanese)

Schutz, A. (1991). *Collected Works, Volume 3: Studies in Social Theory.* Maruju Publishing.

Soja, E. W. (2006). *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*. Shanghai Education Publishing House.

Stone, L. (1979). The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History. *Past and Presen*t, *85*, 3–24.

Tseng, K. T. (2023). *Historical trajectory: From Fort Zeelandia to Tainan prefecture city*. Cultural Affairs Bureau of Tainan City Government.

Wang, Y. F. (2017). *Illustrated history of Taiwan*. How-Do Publishing.

Xu, Z. (2005). Urban development and commercial prosperity in the Zhou dynasty. In G. Liang & S. Liu (Eds.), *Cities and villages* (Vol. 7, pp. 1–26). Encyclopedia of China Publishing House.

Contact email: liyueh0926@gmail.com

Scales of Affection: Toward an Epistemology of Memory and an Emotional Reading of the Built Environment

Elisa Mondin, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Can the naive and affective nature of childhood drawing become a visual research method within architectural criticism and design? In an era saturated with hyper-polished and AI-generated images, this paper investigates drawing as an affective and memory-based practice capable of opening intimate, non-normative readings of space. When adults are asked to draw, the response is often a refusal driven by judgement and technical insecurity. When drawing is instead reframed as an act of remembering rather than representing, and the adult is invited to adopt a child-like mode of engagement, it opens up a non-evaluative space grounded in affection, imagination, and embodied experience. Within the architectural field, such drawings enable alternative forms of spatial knowledge by visualising space as it was felt, rather than as it was measured or formally defined. The paper proposes "affective drawings" as a design-driven research method that operates between architectural thinking and artistic and philosophical inquiry. Through a series of case studies, this approach demonstrates how drawing can function simultaneously as a tool for listening and as a critical medium for engaging with the built environment. Therefore, the research introduces the concept of "Scales of Affection," in which scale refers not only to physical dimensions – from the domestic interior to the urban realm – but also to varying degrees of experiential and emotional depth. By articulating these scales, the paper argues for an epistemology of emotional resonance capable of informing architectural interpretation and contributing to processes of reactivation and care of the built environment.

Keywords: affective drawing, visual research methods, research by design, memory and imagination, scales of affection

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Space is not only a matter of measure, nor merely a geometric entity to be organised and controlled. It is memory, gesture, atmosphere, lived intensity.

Long before being abstracted into plans, sections and metrics, space is encountered through the body: walked, touched, crossed, inhabited. This experiential dimension, although foundational to architectural practice, often remains marginal within dominant modes of representation, which privilege visual accuracy, formal coherence and technical precision over lived experience. This is not, however, an error or a contradiction. Rather, architecture necessarily relies on shared and unambiguous codes to describe, compare, construct, restore and transmit spaces across time and disciplines.

The language of architectural drawing responds precisely to this need: it establishes a common ground of representation, enabling technical coordination and critical comparison between very different spatial conditions. Yet, it is precisely within the field of restoration and conservation that the limits of purely technical representation become most evident. Here, the emotional and physical experience of relating to an architectural artefact plays a crucial role, as built heritage is not only a material object to be measured and preserved, but also a lived environment shaped by memory, attachment and embodied interactions.

But what if drawing itself could become a means of revealing other forms of architectural knowledge? What if, by moving beyond established graphic conventions and loosening drawing from its role as a mere tool of representation, we were able to uncover something more about the built environment?

Rather than merely depicting space as an external object, drawing may function as an embodied cognitive act: a way of reactivating lived experience and translating it into a visual trace. This may open up a different epistemic horizon: one in which memory, affection and imagination become operative forms of knowledge.

This paper builds on this premise to propose *Scales of Affection* as a conceptual and methodological framework for interpreting such drawings. “Scale” is understood as non-Euclidean system, operating not only in an extensive sense – related to size, proportion or physical extension – but also as an intensive one, expressing degrees of experiential and emotional involvement.

Scales of Affection seeks to contribute to architectural criticism and design by foregrounding emotional resonance as a legitimate form of spatial knowledge. In doing so, the research does not propose a new aesthetic nor a prescriptive design tool, but rather a shift of attention: from space as an object to space as a lived intensity, and from representation as depiction to drawing as an epistemic act.

From Embodied Experience to Affective Drawings: An Alternative Way to Read Space

As articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), the world is not known from a detached point of view, but through a body-in-relation: an *être-au-monde* in which subject and object, interior and exterior, perception and action are inseparably tangled.

Space, in this sense, is not given as a neutral container, but emerges through situated experience – and knowledge of space is therefore always embodied, temporal and affective.

From an anthropological perspective, this reorientation resonates with the so-called *dwelling perspective* (Ingold, 2000), which proposes a shift of focus from building to dwelling: from architecture conceived as a design imposed upon space, to environments understood as processes continuously co-produced by inhabitants, time and rituals.

From an architectural point of view, this attitude calls into question the value of design and architectural action themselves: if environments are continuously shaped through use, memory and embodied practices, then architectural knowledge cannot be limited to formal definition or technical control alone. Both perspectives – anthropological and architectural – can be approached through a shared instrument: drawing. When freed from the constraints of technical correctness and predefined representational conventions, drawing becomes a flexible and open-ended medium, capable of engaging with both lived processes and design intentions.

This shift becomes particularly evident when adults with no professional drawing background are asked to draw. Unlike children, adults often approach drawing through the lens of judgement and technical competence, which makes hesitation or refusal a frequent response. Yet, when drawing is reframed as an invitation to recall rather than to represent – and when the child-like mode of engagement is allowed to surface – the act becomes non-evaluative. In this condition, drawing becomes both a space of listening and an operative device for architectural inquiry, capable of revealing how space is experienced and remembered, rather than how it is formally structured.

In this research, this potential is explored through "graphic interviews," understood as drawing-based conversations centred on memory.

These interviews were conducted with people of different ages, backgrounds, and biographies, and followed a single, intentionally simple rule: participants were asked to freely draw the vivid memory of a built space, allowing the child within to speak. No technical guidance, stylistic constraints, or criteria of correctness were provided. Each drawing was then interpreted through a light yet consistent analytical framework –conceived as a sort of "identity card" of the drawing – designed to enable comparison across cases without reducing their experiential richness. This framework is articulated through five qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory (autobiographical, collective, sensorial);
- Spatial scale (body, anchor-object, room, ensemble, landscape, transit);
- Focus (material, atmosphere, configuration, network of relations);
- Prevalent emotion (joy, fear, security, melancholy);
- Graphic form (figurative, symbolic, diagrammatic, narrative, hybrid).

Rather than flattening the living matter of the drawings into abstract categories or numerical data, this framework keeps them alive as critical material. At the same time, it preserves the primacy of embodied experience, remaining consistent with the phenomenological approach that supports the research.

The Affective Drawings

In this paper, a selection of these drawings is presented and discussed. Following their individual reading, the drawings were subsequently grouped into thematic clusters, allowing recurring affective patterns to emerge, which were then used as a basis for reflecting on possible orientations for architectural practice.

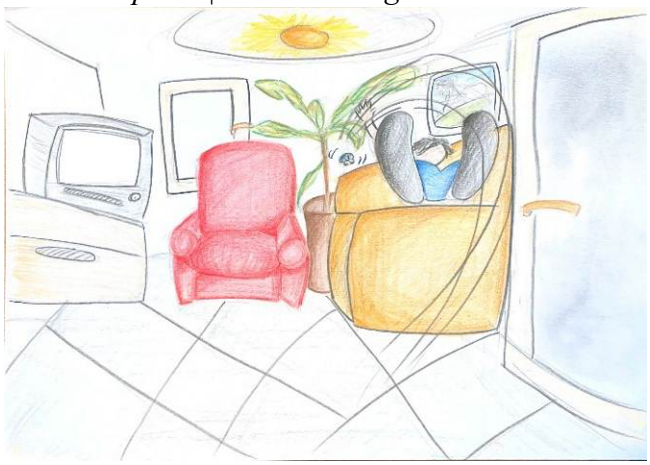
For each drawing, the original title, its English translation, the participant's name, age, and place of origin are provided. All drawings were produced during graphic interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025.

***Lancio di palla* | *Ball throwing* (2025)**
Participant: Luca (27), Cologno Monzese, Italy

The drawing recalls a childhood game played in the grandmother's living room together with a cousin. The domestic setting, ordinarily made of furniture and everyday objects, is here recalled with clarity: the sofa and the armchair, placed at right angles, become the boundaries of a playing field. The large vase with its plant transforms into an improvised basketball hoop.

The hoop itself remains half-hidden, just as it actually appeared from the perspective of a child sitting on the floor, which in fact expands disproportionately, occupying the lower part of the composition and increasing the difficulty of hitting the target. What remains vivid is also the atmosphere of complicity, laughter and playful invention that turned an ordinary interior into a world of its own.

Figure 1
Lancio di palla | Ball throwing



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, shared, familiar
- Spatial scale: interior/living room
- Emotional scale: playfulness, complicity, invention
- Focus: not only the object of the game, but the devices that made it possible (sofa, armchair, vase)
- Emotional scale: playfulness, complicity, invention

- Graphic form: narrative; perspectival distortion – the floor takes up an enormous portion of the sheet, highlighting the child's low vantage point

***Tornando dal mare | Coming back from the seaside* (2025)**
Participant: Carolina (22), Fregene, Italy

A seaside kitchen is rendered through a mixed perspective, almost axonometric, in order to "fit everything in," revealing a deep spatial awareness, from any viewpoint: a long set table, stove, sofa, tv. The composition bends and stretches in order to let objects emerge in a scene where every item becomes a machine of rituals: cooking, eating, conversing, watching.

Architecture is not merely seen, but lived multisensorially. The room appears as a condenser of practices: the long table that invites conviviality, the stove as a center of warmth, the sofa and television as familiar presences of everyday intimacy, and the blue inflatable mattress is the anchor-object evoking the broader experience of seaside life and amplifying the human impact of memory.

This is precisely the core of what Merleau-Ponty calls the *body-subject*: knowledge arises through doing and sensing, not just by inspecting with the gaze.

Figure 2
Tornando dal mare | Coming back from the seaside

Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, domestic;
- Spatial scale: room/ensemble;
- Emotional scale: security, warmth, a quiet sense of waiting;
- Focus: ordinary objects as ritual machines (eating, watching, conversing);
- Graphic form: hybrid, narrative. The composition bends and distorts in order to show what matters.

***Senza pensieri | Without worries* (2025)**
Participant: Mirko (40), Piglio, Italy

A mountain holiday home is depicted through a perspective that melts frontal view and axonometric suggestion, once again to hold together what is seen, what is remembered, what truly matters. But this time there is an important difference: the objects represented in the

foreground, which convey warmth and lived intimacy, are not the real anchor-objects of the drawing, however symbolic and precise in memory.

Figure 3
Senza pensieri | Without worries

Rather, recollection opens through a wall treated as a patterned plane, projecting onto the outside and framing the landscape as if it were suspended beyond time – perfect, like a postcard.

Green meadows, sharp snow-covered peaks, the vastness of a blue sky and the inevitable sun peeking-in with curiosity: everything appears exactly as it should always be: *without worries*.

Analytical qualitative lenses:

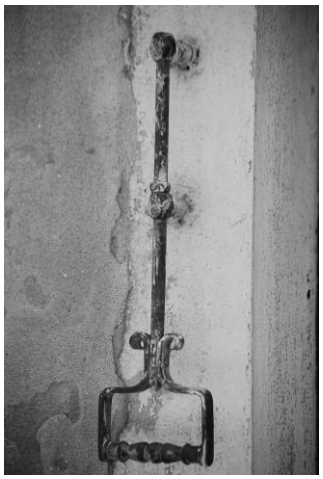
- Type of memory: autobiographical, tied to vacation time;
- Spatial scale: interior/room, porous but open to the landscape through the window;
- Emotional scale: peace, serenity, suspension, nostalgia;
- Foucs: stove and table as domestic poles, the window as a visual frame that "suspends" the outside world;
- Graphic form: hybrid, with a "special axonometry" and a play of patterns that turns the wall into a surface of passage toward the exterior.

***Progetto antico | Ancient project* (2024)**
Participant: Ugo (82), Venice, Italy

As a child in Venice, Ugo remembers the mischievous ritual of ringing all the doorbells of a building together with his sister, before running away laughing. This playful memory intertwines with a deeper historical layer: facades was once crossed by exposed pull-bell wires, visible infrastructures that connected each apartment to the ground level. The drawing reproduces this fragile and improvised network, accompanied by the note: "The irrational positioning of the pull cords was frequent, since everyone did as they pleased."

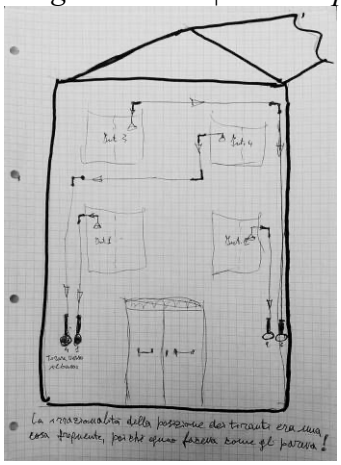
Here, the childish game is not just a scene of laughter and transgression: it is also a window onto a way of inhabiting. The facade is transformed into a living interface, where wires operate as the "nervous system" of the building, testimony to an era in which inhabitants themselves improvised and adapted the built environment.

Figure 4 and 5
Detail of a pull-bell handle and view of the facade of Corte de l'Orso, documented in their current condition



What might appear "irrational" in compositional terms is in fact situated rationality: a form of "collective intelligence" that exceeds formal design. The note itself becomes evidence of this practice, confirming Ingold's idea that final form is only a transitory moment in the time flow, and that architecture is always co-produced by its inhabitants over time.

Figure 6
Progetto antico | Ancient project



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, childhood, shared;
- Spatial scale: facade as an interface between inside and outside, up and down;
- Focus: network rather than object or anchor-object;
- Emotional scale: joyful mischief, active nostalgia, historical remembering;
- Graphic form: diagrammatic, proportions sacrificed in favor of relational logic.

***Veliko drvo | The great tree* (2025)**
Participant: Ines (38), Zabok, Croatia

A large tree towers at the center of the composition, overflowing beyond the edges of the sheet. It is the tree in front of the grandmother's house, where days were spent together with cousins and friends. The house and the fence are reduced to simple outlines, almost marginal,

while the tree is rendered with care and occupies the center of the scene. The image conveys how one element alone can condense the memory of play, protection and rootedness, becoming the true totem of childhood experience.

Figure 7
Veliko drvo | The great tree

In an anthropological sense, it stands as a node in the *meshwork of dwelling* (Ingold, 2000), where play, kinship and place converge, while also confirming Merleau-Ponty's theory that perception is embodied and situated, and that a single object can become the center of the lived world – not because of its function, but because it organizes around itself the corporeal and affective experience.

Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: collective, familiar;
- Spatial scale: courtyard landscape reduced to a single large Emotional scale: play, rootedness, protection;
- Focus: the tree as the absolute protagonist, the house as a marginal accessory;
- Emotional scale: play, rootedness, protection;
- Graphic form: symbolic, radical affective hierarchy (the tree first, everything else after).

***La Mucca Carolina | Carolina the Cow* (2025)**
Participant: Maria Antonietta (62), Rocca Santo Stefano, Italy

The drawing recalls the external stairway of a small village in the Roman hills, a place that was never just a passage but the very stage of community life. It was, and still is in memory, a piazza rather than a staircase: vast, eventful, and layered with dissimilar recollections – joyful and painful, festive and solemn, from children's games to processions, from weddings to rainy afternoons. Within this space of encounters, Maria Antonietta places herself as a child: this is not the only drawing in the collection to depict human figures, but it is the only one to portray the protagonist herself, perfectly aware even of what she was wearing.

The drawing shows how a threshold can be transformed into a stage of memory and attachment, where personal recollections intertwine with the collective fabric of community life. It stands as a reminder that space is not only built but inhabited through the multiplicity

of experiences it hosts: indeed, the built environment is rendered in grey except for objects and things that truly, emotively, matter.

Figure 8
La Mucca Carolina | Carolina the Cow

Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, childhood, interwoven with everyday village rituals;
- Spatial scale: domestic/community threshold (the stairway as a square of affections);
- Emotional scale: warmth, belonging, recognition – yet also the ambivalence of multiple memories, both festive and melancholic;
- Focus: affective figures (herself as a child, the toy cow, the cat, the flowerpots) emerge in color against a neutral background;
- Graphic form: figurative, symbolic – the grey background frames the chromatic selection of "affects."

Figure 9 and 10
Stairway carved into the rock in Rocca Santo Stefano, as it appears today

***Il giardino dei Treni | The train garden* (2025)**
Participant: Sara (29), Rome, Italy

In the drawing, a red rope pyramid with its black "nest" at the top and the tunnel mural appear together, although in the real city the two landmarks are not adjacent. The child's memory stitches them into the same scene, producing a patchwork of places held together not

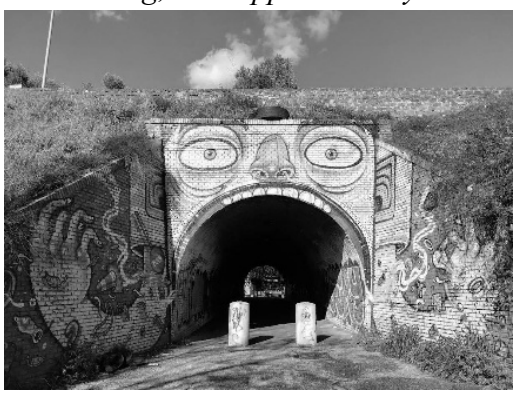
by geography but by affection. The result is a hybrid landscape where the vertigo of climbing and the strangeness of the mural coexist in a single, imaginative horizon.

From the top of the pyramid, trains pass by, audible and visible, reinforcing the sense of elevation and conquest. Against the abstract idea of "space" and its modular subdivision, the *dwelling perspective* invites us to think about the city as a *network of traversals*. This is precisely what Ingold calls *wayfaring* (*Being Alive*, 2011), the act of moving like a thread within the fabric of the world, generating trajectories and relations along the way.

Sara's drawing makes this evident: urbanity here is a constellation of emotional poles connected by lived trajectories.

Figure 11
Il giardino dei Treni | The train garden

Figure 12
Mural-painted railway underpass corresponding to one of the urban fragments recalled in the drawing, as it appears today.



Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: autobiographical, childhood ritual;
- Spatial scale: selective neighborhood/landscape; transit (passing trains, the view "from above," from the nest);
- Emotional scale: fear overcome, euphoria;
- Focus: vertigo and conquest; anchor-object: the climbing structure; totemic object: the tunnel's face;

- Graphic form: cartographic montage: places are united because they were lived together in memory.

***La socialidad como horizonte | Sociality as a horizon* (2024)**
Participant: Francisco (52), Villa La Merced, Córdoba, Argentina

Holiday landscape unfolds as a threshold between nature and light infrastructure: water, hills, pine woods, and, in the foreground, beach umbrellas, deck chairs, children playing. The scene does not treat landscape as a mere backdrop, but as a true matrix of sociality. It is precisely here that the dwelling perspective reveals its force: environments are not containers but contexts of becoming. In this image, the built environment is nothing other than the practice of leisure itself, and form is grasped as its ephemeral expression.

The horizon, the vegetation and the improvised seaside furniture are held together not by geometry, but by the affective intensity of shared presence, voices and sunburnt afternoons.

Figure 13
La socialidad como horizonte | Sociality as a horizon

Analytical qualitative lenses:

- Type of memory: collective, summer, group-based;
- Spatial scale: open landscape that nevertheless tightens around the body (heat, glare, the sound of water);
- Emotional scale: joy and freedom;
- Focus: atmosphere; coexistence of the wild and the domesticated;
- Graphic form: figurative, panoramic.

Discussion: From Affective Patterns to Design Implications

The drawings presented in this paper represent only a limited selection of the material collected throughout the research. They were chosen because they originate from participants of different ages and geographical backgrounds, and because they clearly activate the main affective scales that emerged from the analysis:

- the scale of the body
- the scale of the anchor-object
- the scale of the room/ensemble
- the scale of the landscape

These scales do not function as discrete categories. Rather, they blur into one another, operating as continuous, relational, and experiential gradients.

It is not a coincidence that the graphic interviews are arranged from some enclosed one – *Ball throwing, Coming back from the seaside*, with wholly constructed environment, interiors – to an open one – *Sociality as an horizon*, which contains very little architecture in itself and yet represents a powerful bond with nature, time spent outdoors, laughter, rituals, music.

This progression from interior to exterior does not describe a linear hierarchy, but rather an expansion of the possible *scale* of architectural engagement. As the drawings move outward, the affective focus shifts from bodily proximity and intimate anchors to routes, landscapes, and shared horizons. It is through this gradual widening of the experiential field that the affective scales take shape, revealing how emotional resonance can operate across different spatial extents.

When read together, the drawings converge into a set of recurring "Affective Patterns" that highlight points of engagement where architectural design and co-design practices may intervene with care, privileging attention and responsiveness over the imposition of predefined solutions. In this sense, the drawings do not prescribe actions but suggest orientations for a more situated and affect-sensitive architectural practice.

Distorted Proportions as Bodily Memory

One recurring pattern concerns distorted proportions, which emerge not as representational inaccuracies, but as traces of bodily memory. In these cases, space is recalled through posture, reach, balance, and movement, rather than through standardised dimensions.

From a design perspective, this suggests the possibility of allowing the body to set the scale: placing objects, devices, or architectural features in positions that may initially appear unconventional, but which foster bodily engagement and attachment. Asymmetries and disproportions can thus be interpreted not as errors to be corrected, but as embodied information capable of informing design decisions.

Anchor-Objects as Memory Condensers

A second pattern revolves around anchor-objects acting as condensers of memory. Handles, stairs, fixtures, or seemingly minor elements often emerge as central figures in the drawings, organising the surrounding space through affective attachment. Rather than removing or neutralising these elements, design interventions may work around them, preserving or reusing what already anchors memory. In this approach, objects are not adapted to predefined layouts; instead, they guide spatial decisions, allowing existing attachments to inform transformation.

Anchor-Objects as Memory Condensers

Other drawings highlight ordinary spaces intensified through use. Here, the affective value of space resides not in exceptional architectural features, but in the repetition of everyday rituals and practices. From this perspective, design can operate through care for what already works: recognising ordinary spaces as potential social condensers, supporting existing uses before

introducing new functions. Avoiding over-design becomes a deliberate strategy, favouring adaptability, appropriation, and the continuation of lived practices.

Overlapping Places Stitched by Affection

A further pattern concerns the overlapping of places stitched together by affection. Several drawings recall space not as a collection of discrete locations, but as experiential sequences composed of routes, transitions, and remembered paths. In such cases, architectural intervention may focus on lived routes rather than fixed points, designing experiential walks in which recurring objects, colours, or forms guide movement and attention. Co-designing these routes with inhabitants—starting from how places are remembered and traversed—allows spatial continuity to emerge from experience rather than from formal adjacency.

Thresholds as Lived Stages

Finally, thresholds repeatedly appear as lived stages rather than neutral passages. Stairs, landings, entrances, and intermediate spaces are often remembered as places of waiting, meeting, or informal occupation. Recognising the affective role of thresholds invites design approaches that resist their neutralisation. Instead of treating them solely as elements to be crossed, thresholds can be designed and co-designed to support everyday rituals and informal uses, preserving their role within the lived fabric of space.

Conclusion

This paper has explored drawing not as a representational endpoint, but as a situated practice capable of activating alternative forms of architectural knowledge. Through *Graphic Interviews*, drawing has been approached as an act of recall and listening, able to surface how space is lived, remembered and emotionally structured beyond its formal or geometric description. By comparing the drawings, the research has articulated a set of affective scales – ranging from the body to the landscape – that do not operate as fixed categories, but as relational and experiential gradients.

These scales become intelligible through recurring *Affective Patterns*, which reveal how attachment, memory and uses organise spatial experience across different extents. Rather than proposing a new design language or aesthetic framework, *Scales of Affection* advances a shift in attention: it suggests moving from space as an object to space as a lived intensity, from formal control to situated awareness, and from abstract interventions to practices grounded in embodied experience. In this sense, affect is not treated as an added layer to architectural knowledge, but as a integral dimension of how environments come to matter.

Ultimately, the contribution of this research lies in framing drawing as a methodological bridge between experience and action. By making affective structures visible, graphic interviews open up possibilities for architectural practice that begin not with form-making, but with listening – recognising that care for the built environment emerges through attention, negotiation, and shared meaning across scales.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all participants in the Graphic Interviews for their time, openness, and willingness to share personal memories and experiences through drawing. Their contributions were essential to the development of this research.

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

The author declares that an AI-assisted language model (ChatGPT and Grammarly) was used to support language refinement and improve clarity and coherence of the manuscript. The use of AI was limited to revising or translating text written by the author. All ideas, analyses, and conclusions presented in this paper are the result of the author's original research.

References

Chipperfield, D., & Kretz, S. (2018). *On planning: A thought experiment*. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

De Ambrogio, U., & Pasquinelli, S. (2010). *Progettare nella frammentazione. Approcci, metodi e strumenti per il sociale* [Designing in fragmentation. Approaches, methods and tools for the social realm]. i Quid.

Fratini, F. (2008). *Idee di città. Riflettendo sul futuro* [Ideas of the city. Reflecting on the future] (6th ed.). FrancoAngeli.

Gehl, J. (2011). *Life between buildings: Using public space*. Island Press.

Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2011). *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2013). *Making. Antropologia, archeologia, arte e architettura* [Making. Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture]. Raffaello Cortina Editore.

Ingold, T. (2015). *The life of lines*. Routledge.

Kahn, L. (2015). *Silence and light* (University lecture at ETH Zurich, transcription by A. Vassella). Park Books.

Lynch, K. (1972). *What time is this place?* MIT Press.

Martí Arís, C. (2022). *Silenzi eloquenti. Borges, Mies van der Rohe, Ozu, Rothko, Oteiza* [Eloquent silences. Borges, Mies van der Rohe, Ozu, Rothko, Oteiza]. Christian Marinotti Edizioni.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Fenomenologia della percezione* [Phenomenology of perception]. Bompiani.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2015). *Segni. Fenomenologia e strutturalismo, linguaggio e politica. Costruzione di una filosofia* [Signs. Phenomenology and structuralism, language and politics. The construction of a philosophy]. Il Saggiatore.

Paba, G. (Ed.). (1990). *La città e il limite. I confini della città* [The city and the limit. The boundaries of the city]. La Casa Usher.

Pallasmaa, J. (2007). *Gli occhi della pelle. L'architettura e i sensi* [The eyes of the skin. Architecture and the senses] (3rd ed.). Jaca Book.

Tafuri, M. (2007). *Progetto e utopia* [Project and utopia]. Laterza.

Van Eyck, A. (2008). *The child, the city and the artist: An essay on architecture*. SUN.

Zumthor, P. (1999). *Pensare architettura* [Thinking architecture]. Electa.

Between Life and Aesthetics: Understanding Marginal Landscapes Through Japanese Cherry Blossom Trees (Sakura)

Ran Kamiyama, Toyo University, Japan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The concept of "marginal landscape" is inspired by the term "marginal art," proposed by Japanese philosopher Shunsuke Tsurumi, and stands in contrast to the idea of "pure art." Applying the framework of marginal art to landscapes highlights the social and human contexts often lost when landscapes are formalized or aestheticized. Once a landscape is beautified and recognized as pure art, it tends to become detached from the everyday human activities and environments that originally shaped it. Although many pure landscapes originate from marginal ones, the process of aesthetic elevation often obscures these roots. Historically, pure landscapes have been preserved through cultural expressions—such as poetry and painting—produced by well-known artists. These works shaped public appreciation and helped promote preservation. In contrast, marginal landscapes, discovered by anonymous individuals and closely linked to lived experience, have received little attention because they were not created with artistic or aesthetic intentions. Consequently, preservation efforts for such landscapes have often been limited or overlooked. This study re-evaluates marginal landscapes through the lens of marginal art, using cherry blossoms (sakura)—a symbolic landscape element in Japan—as a case study. Although now celebrated as a cultural and aesthetic icon, many sakura landscapes have roots in marginal contexts. Methodologically, this research investigates marginal landscapes using historical sources such as traditional calendars, almanacs, collections of proverbs, folk songs, and local histories. In contrast, the study of pure landscapes draws on sources such as poetry and illustrated maps.

Keywords: sakura, Japanese cherry blossom, marginal landscape

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The concept of marginal art was proposed by Shunsuke Tsurumi in 1967 as referring to forms of expression that exist at the boundary between art and everyday life. Tsurumi classified art into three categories; pure art, popular art, and marginal art (Table 1), and argued that from both phylogenetic and ontogenetic perspectives marginal art is what gives rise to pure art and popular art, and that it constitutes "the first path by which human beings approach art" (Tsurumi, 1967).

This concept and framework of marginal art have provided an insightful perspective not only for art theory but also for the field of landscape studies. For example, Nakamura states that "landscapes are not usually objects to be viewed at intently. They are quite different from viewing paintings in a museum. Fundamentally, landscapes are to be enjoyed through everyday life" (Nakamura, 1982, p. 213). This view affirms a conception of landscape grounded in daily life. Furthermore, Nakamura (2021) refers to the artistic spirit of Edo-period culture which situated outside the conventional framework of art—as "outside the sphere of art," and introduces it in parallel with Tsurumi's concept of marginal art (Nakamura, 2021, pp. 309–311).

On the other hand, although Higuchi does not directly refer to marginal art, he points out that in discussions of beautiful landscapes and lived landscapes, "we tend to mistakenly confuse them with artistic beauty" (Higuchi, 1975, pp. 180–182). He criticizes an overemphasis on artistic beauty in the former and notes the tendency for the latter "lived landscapes" to be easily overlooked.

In this way, landscape theory also recognizes the importance of understanding both art and life, and just like marginal art, the "marginal landscape" that lies on the border between art and life also has a tendency to become buried, and so the two share a common characteristic.

Table 1
Tsurumi Shunsuke's Theory of Pure Art, Marginal Art, and Popular Art

Category	Definition	Creator	Audience
Pure Art	Works recognized as "art" in the strict sense	Produced by professional artists	Appreciated by specialized audiences familiar with the traditions of each art form
Marginal Art	Works situated at the boundary between art and everyday life	Produced by non-professional artists	Appreciated by non-professional audiences
Popular Art	Works often regarded as vulgar, non-artistic, or pseudo-art	Produced by professional artists, typically through collaboration between entrepreneurs and artists	Appreciated by the general public (mass audience)

Source: Adapted from Tsurumi, S. (1967). *Genkai geijutsuron* [Theory of marginal art]. Keisō Shobō.

For example, among outstanding poems on cherry blossoms, the *waka* (poem) by Saigyo (1118–1190), who is a Japanese warrior, monk, and poet active in the twelfth century, is exceptionally well known: "If possible, I would like to die beneath the cherry blossoms in spring, when the Buddha entered Nirvana." When the same cherry-blossom landscape is composed by a farmer, however, it appears in a form such as: "The falling blossoms return to

their roots; they will bloom again" (Asano, 1984, p. 243). A farmer's song that reads the landscape is in no way inferior to that of a poet. Indeed, one might even say that it expresses a sensibility more simple and expansive than that found in refined poetry.

However, one is usually renowned as art, while the other is considered a ordinary song, polar opposite. Tsurumi Shunsuke's "Marginal Art Theory" focuses on this boundary between art and life, viewing the two as continuous or equal. According to Tsurumi, he defines the former as "pure art" and the latter as "marginal art," while emphasizing the importance of marginal art.

When exploring landscapes without being preoccupied with beauty or ugliness, both songs are equally important, and one cannot be overlooked. Indeed, if marginal art has the potential to be the source of pure art, it could be said that it deserves even more attention. Taking these possibilities into account, this study aims to explore "marginal landscapes" in line with marginal art theory, tentatively calling it a "marginal landscape theory," through Japan's most representative cherry blossom landscapes.

Purpose and Objectives

This research aims to:

- focus on the boundary between art and everyday life through Tsurumi Shunsuke's Theory of Marginal Art;
- apply Tsurumi's theory of marginal art to tentatively develop a "theory of marginal landscapes";
- explore "marginal landscapes" through representative cherry blossom viewing in Japan as a case study.

About Sakura (Cherry Blossoms)

Sakura, also known as cherry blossom, or Japanese cherry, is scientifically written as *Prunus subgenus* or *Cerasus*. To the Japanese, the cherry blossom is the flower of flowers. Cherry trees (mountain cherry trees) have grown wild in the Japanese archipelago since ancient times, adorning the fields and mountains every spring. Until the Edo period, the only known cherry blossom was the wild mountain cherry tree, but at the end of the Edo period, many varieties were developed, leading to the creation of the cultivated Somei Yoshino, which spread throughout the country after the Meiji period (1868–1912).

Hanami

For Japanese people, the word *hanami* (flower viewing) is almost synonymous with cherry blossoms, underscoring the exceptional status of sakura as a flowering tree that is deeply cherished and even preferentially loved. Even today, *hanami* remains an important annual event, to the extent that cherry blossom forecasts are regularly broadcast in weather reports each spring.

Types and Varieties of Cherry Trees

It is said that there are approximately 100 species of cherry trees worldwide, of which only about ten are native to Japan (Katsuki, 2015, p. 13). Among the many cultivated varieties, *Somei-yoshino* (*Cerasus* × *yedoensis "Somei-yoshino"*), developed in the late Edo period (1603–1868), has been planted overwhelmingly throughout Japan as the most favored cherry

tree among the Japanese. As a result, it has become the standard ornamental cherry tree in contemporary Japan. The Japan Meteorological Agency designates *Somei-yoshino* trees as "reference trees" for determining the timing of cherry blossom flowering and full bloom in different regions. Consequently, in present day usage, the term *sakura* often refers specifically to this variety.

Flowering Period /Lifespan of Cherry Trees

The flowering period of cherry blossoms is short, lasting approximately one week. The lifespan of cherry trees varies greatly depending on species and environmental conditions. Wild cherry trees can live for several hundred years, and in some cases more than a thousand years. In contrast, cultivated varieties tend to have shorter lifespans. Previously mentioned *Somei-yoshino*, having been bred specifically for ornamental purposes, generally grows rapidly, but has a relatively short lifespan of approximately 60 to 70 years.

Literature Review

In Japan, the body of cherry blossom research in the field of Japanese literature is extremely rich and too numerous to list. Among these works, Yamada's (1942) *Sakura-shi (A History of Cherry Blossoms)*, which comprehensively compiles anecdotes, poetry, and people associated with cherry blossoms from ancient times to the modern era, is widely recognized as a seminal contribution. More recently, Izutsu's (2023) *Chronological Cultural History of Cherry Blossoms in Japan* offers a cultural and historical overview encompassing waka, haiku, essays, famous sites, and renowned cherry trees.

As for literary studies that take cherry blossoms as their central theme, notable examples include Ogawa's (2004) *A Literary History of Cherry Blossoms* and Takenishi's (1988) *Sakura*, an anthology of renowned Japanese essays. In particular, with regard to Saigyo, who is celebrated as a poet of cherry blossoms, studies such as Shirasu's (2014) *Saigyo* and Kuwako's (1999) *Saigyo no Fuukei (Saigyo's Landscapes)* are well known, demonstrating the aesthetic dimensions of cherry blossoms.

In contrast, within the field of folklore studies, significant research findings have also been produced. In works such as *Stories of the Ancestors* (Yanagita, 1970) and *Notes on Annual Events* (Yanagita, 1977), Yanagita Kunio demonstrates the existence of beliefs that associate cherry trees with rice cultivation rituals, viewing them as yorishiro, which objects that serve as receptacles for spirits, and as places where the rice-field deity is believed to descend. Similarly, in *On Flowers* (Orikuchi, 1995), Origuchi Shinobu argues that flowers, particularly cherry blossoms, functioned as symbols of agricultural rituals and omens, and that their aesthetic appreciation emerged later as a culturally added layer. These studies represent notable achievements in the field.

Meanwhile, in landscape studies, works such as Higuchi Tadahiko's (1975) *The Structure of Landscape* and Shirahata Yosaburo's (2015) *Hanami and Cherry Blossoms* have advanced research that treats cherry blossoms as landscape. However, such studies tend to place relatively strong emphasis on literary representations and famous scenic sites. As a result, research that takes the landscape itself as its object from practical, lived perspectives—such as those of farmers and fishers—remains limited.

Accordingly, the originality of this study lies in its simultaneous engagement with both pure landscapes and marginal landscapes.

Methodology

In this study, cultural expressions of cherry blossoms are organized into two methodological categories: "pure art" and "marginal landscapes" (Table 2). While pure art comprises self-contained works whose primary purpose is aesthetic and expressive, marginal landscapes occupy the boundary between art and everyday life, referring to practical cultural expressions intertwined with daily life, belief systems, and livelihoods. By focusing on these marginal landscapes, this study aims to elucidate forms of landscape that have previously eluded conventional aesthetic or literary frameworks.

Table 2
A Methodological Distinction Between Pure Art and Marginal Art

Field	Pure Art	Marginal Art
Literature	Pure literature	Chorography; regional records
	Travel writing, literary essays	Almanacs; seasonal calendars; natural calendars; agricultural calendars; farming books; culinary manual
Poems	Classical poetry and waka (e.g., *Man'youshu*, *Kokin Wakashu*)	Folk songs; popular songs
Illustrations & Paintings	Fine art paintings; illustrated guidebooks of famous places (e.g., *Meisho zue*); Japanese woodblock prints)	Agricultural illustrations; folk art paintings
Performing Arts	*Kabuki*; *Noh* (Japanese traditional dance)	Folk dances

Results and Discussion

Pure Landscape: Sakura as a Pure Landscape

Regarding "pure landscapes," a substantial body of prior research already exists, and many of these sites are widely recognized within Japan. Therefore, in the following, this study focuses on three particularly famous cherry blossom sites in Japan and provides only an overview, presenting them as examples of cherry related "pure landscapes." Although Japan has numerous cherry blossom sites of varying size, the most renowned sites share the characteristic of being located in historical capitals. Japan's capitals have changed several times throughout history, and the main shifts can be broadly categorized by region as follows: Nara (Asuka to Nara period, ca. 592~), Kyoto (Heian period, 794~), and Tokyo (Edo period [1603~] and Meiji era onward, [1868~]). At each relocation of the capital, the ruling authorities of the time developed prominent cherry blossom sites. The following introduces three representative cherry blossom sites.

Yoshino, Nara

Nara has been renowned as a cherry blossom site since ancient times. A famous poetry included in the *Man yoshu*, Japan's oldest poetry anthology, compiled at the end of the Nara period (710–

794), reads: “the capital of Nara, is now in full bloom, as if the flowers themselves are radiating fragrance” (Nakanishi, 1978, p. 207).

The above poem is famous and expresses the beauty and prosperity of the capital of Nara by comparing it to blossoming flowers. For this reason, cherry blossoms were a symbol of the capital of Nara. Among the areas of Nara, Yoshino was considered Japan’s foremost cherry blossom site. Yoshino’s mountains were described as “Mount Yoshino is filled with cherry trees, and in full bloom it is like a snowy morning” (Akisato & Takehara, 1971).

Around 656, when Empress Saimei (594–661) constructed the Yoshino Palace, cherry trees began to be actively planted on Mount Yoshino. Even today, Mount Yoshino is renowned as Japan’s foremost cherry blossom site. The cherry trees of Yoshino were already famous by the Heian period and have been celebrated in numerous waka and literary works.

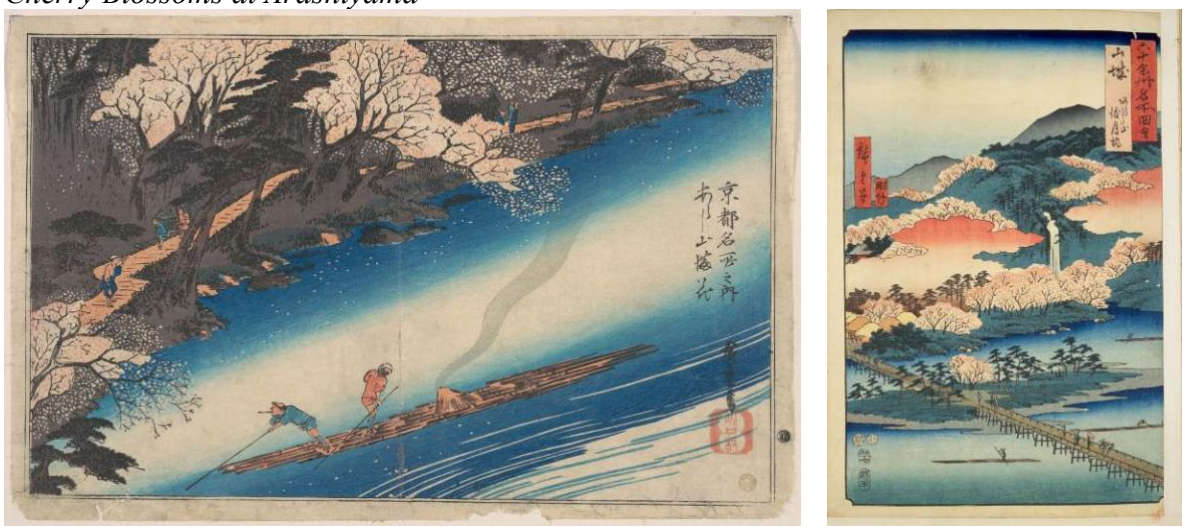
Saigyo (1118–1190), a poet-monk active from the late Heian to the early Kamakura period, especially admired the cherry blossoms of Yoshino, composing many poems on their beauty and the transience of their bloom. Among these, the waka: “*Negawaku wa hana no shita nite haru shinamu sono Kisaragi no mochizuki no koro*” (Saigyo, 1928, p. 31).

is particularly well known as emblematic of Saigyo’s life. The poem expresses his wish: “If possible, I would like to die beneath the cherry blossoms in spring, when the Buddha entered Nirvana.” It remains one of the most famous poems celebrating cherry blossoms.

Arashiyama, Kyoto

After the capital was relocated to Kyoto in 794, the emperor and the aristocracy established mountain villas in the suburbs of the city. One such site, Arashiyama, served as a villa district for the nobility, where the natural beauty of the area was highly appreciated. During the Kamakura period, Emperor Kameyama (reigned 1259–1274; 13th century) constructed a mountain villa in Arashiyama, Kyoto. It is said that cherry trees were transplanted from Mount Yoshino in Nara at this time, making Arashiyama a cultural center for the appreciation of nature, particularly cherry blossoms, and enhancing the fame of its cherry trees (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Cherry Blossoms at Arashiyama



Source: *Cherry Blossoms at Arashiyama, from the series Famous Places of Kyoto* (Hiroshige, 1834) *Full Blossom at Arashiyama on the Oi River* (woodblock print) [Left]
Source: *Rokujūyoshū meisho zue: Yamashiro – Arashiyama Togetsukyō* [Famous Places in Yamashiro Province: Arashiyama Togetsukyō]. Dai Nihon Rokujūyoshū Meishō Zue (woodblock print), (Hiroshige, 1853). [Right]

Ueno, Tokyo

In the early 18th century, when the Edo period began and the de facto capital was moved to Edo, the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (reigned 1716–1745), actively planted cherry trees. In 1717, approximately 100 trees were planted along the Sumida River, followed by 270 at Asukayama in 1720, and an additional 1000 trees transplanted in 1721 (Izutsu, 2023, pp. 319–320). In 1737, several hundred trees were planted at Ueno's Kiyomizudo (Izutsu, 2023, pp. 325–326). These interventions established Ueno as Edo's premier hanami site. After the Meiji period, public access and popularization of hanami solidified the area's status, forming the basis of the modern cherry blossom culture at Ueno Park.

As cherry blossom viewing became established as a form of entertainment, efforts to improve cherry tree varieties began to be actively undertaken towards the end of the Edo period, with "*Somei-Yoshino*" serving as a representative example. *Somei-Yoshino* is characterized by nearly simultaneous flowering, followed by leaf emergence after petal drop, creating a visually striking display in which the entire tree is covered in blossoms. This combination of floral prominence and ephemeral beauty contributed to its rapid nationwide dissemination. However, *Somei-Yoshino* is propagated exclusively through grafting, making all individuals genetically identical clones. Consequently, the cultivar exhibits a relatively short lifespan and heightened susceptibility to pests and diseases.

An overview of famous cherry blossom sites reveals the artistic value historically attributed to these trees. Many such sites were celebrated in classical *waka* and *haikai* poetry and depicted in pictorial maps and guidebooks, facilitating widespread appreciation of their scenic beauty. These locations were not solely the product of natural development; rather, following Yoshino in Nara as a model, they were often deliberately shaped by contemporary authorities. In particular, at post-Yoshino sites, cherry trees were intentionally transplanted to replicate and enhance the aesthetic landscape of Yoshino.

During the Edo period, cherry breeding became increasingly active, with *Somei-Yoshino* which is characterized by rapid growth, showy blossoms, and ephemeral beauty, widely planted across Japan. From this period onward, the expression "*senbon-zakura*" (thousand cherry trees) became established, reflecting a shift in perception from individual trees to collective displays. Consequently, post-Edo cherry landscapes were constructed less as symbols of nature and more as spectacles emphasizing quantity and visual impact.

Marginal Landscape: Sakura as a Marginal Landscape

In the previous chapter, an overview of cherry viewing as a pure landscape revealed that the visual display of cherry blossoms often reflected the preferences of the ruling elite, emphasizing either extravagance or ephemeral beauty in artistic works. The following section examines how hanami was practiced among the common people.

First of all, the folk event of cherry blossom viewing (hanami) dates back to ancient times. In Japan, people historically entered mountains in spring to engage in hanami or kunimi rituals. According to Tsuchihashi (1965), the act of "viewing" in antiquity was not merely sentimental but closely linked to life and spirit: the mana of flowers was believed to strengthen human vitality through observation (Tsuchihashi, 1965, pp. 170, 266). Although these early hanami practices were not limited to cherry blossoms, entering the mountains to view spring flowers was considered a means of enhancing life force.

Agricultural Flower Viewing/ Farmers' Flower Viewing

The ancient belief in the vitality of flowers, as described above, led to the development of a way to predict fortune or misfortune based on the state and timing of cherry blossom blooming. This perception later became closely linked to agriculture, as rural communities observed the blooming of spring flowers, particularly cherry blossoms, to forecast the success of the year's crops. Three specific types of cherry blossom trees can be distinguished in this context:

1. *Hounen-zakura* ("bountiful Year Cherry Blossoms"): Used as an indicator of the quality of the harvest for the year based on the state of its blossoms and the quality of its blooming, and was a symbol of agricultural success.
2. *Noushi-zakura* ("agricultural season cherry blossoms"): Found across Japan, these trees provided guidance for the timing of spring rice cultivation activities, including seed sowing, nursery bed preparation, plowing, and transplanting.
3. *Tanemaki-zakura* ("seed-sowing cherry blossoms"): These trees indicated the optimal timing for sowing various crops, including rice.

The following discussion examines the folkloric and agricultural significance of these three types of cherry blossom trees, focusing on the "liminal landscapes" in which they emerge.

Hounen-zakura [Bountiful Year Cherry Blossoms]. Even today, *Honen Sakura* and its proverbs such as "a late cherry blossom indicates a poor harvest" (Hoshi, 1975, p. 149) are found throughout Japan, all reflecting the practice of predicting agricultural fortune based on the timing and abundance of cherry blossoms. In some regions, the flowering of specific mountain cherry varieties is used to determine the harvest period:

> If the early blooming (*wase*) mountain cherry produces abundant blossoms, the early ripening rice will yield well; if the middle blooming (*nakate*) cherry blooms profusely,

> middle season rice will thrive; and if the late blooming (*okute*) cherry flowers abundantly, late ripening rice will prosper. (Nomoto, 2021, p. 336, Wakayama)

As the proverb goes, "the year's plan begins in spring, the day's plan begins in the morning" (Hoshi, 1975, p. 155), underscoring the significant ritual and divinatory role of spring *hanami* in agricultural practice.

In addition, various local cherry trees served as indicators of the year's fortune. In Oki, the "Yononaka-zakura" on the slopes of Mount Iiyama was observed to forecast annual abundance or scarcity (Ushio, 1986). At Sansho Shrine in Miyoshi District, Tokushima Prefecture, a large cherry tree behind the main shrine historically called *Sakura-no-miya*, which was referred to as "*Yononaka-zakura*" because its flowering was used to predict agricultural fortune (Heibonsha Chihō Shiryō Sentā, 2000). Similarly, in Mitoyo City, Kagawa Prefecture, a "*Yononaka-zakura*" was interpreted directionally: branches with abundant flowers indicated a good harvest, while sparsely flowering branches predicted a poor one (Nihon Daijiten, 1996). At Hime-miya Shrine in Shimoina District, Nagano Prefecture, abnormal flowering of ancient cherry trees was considered an ominous sign (Nihon Daijiten, 1996). These examples demonstrate the enduring and widespread use of cherry blossoms as indicators of agricultural fortune.

Nōji-zakura [Agricultural Season Cherry Blossoms]. Unlike the Western calendar, Japan has long relied on the "shichijuniko" (the seventy two seasonal divisions) to track climatic changes, with the activities of plants and animals serving as indicators of seasonal timing. One of these periods, "Sakura hajimete hiraku"(cherry blossoms begin to open), marks the onset of cherry flowering and has historically been an important indicator in Japan's traditional agricultural calendar, signaling the start of rice cultivation. The brevity of the cherry blossom period which is expressed in proverbs such as "three days unseen, the cherry" and "cherry lasts seven days" (Hoshi, 1975), was exploited to determine the timing of key spring farming activities, including seed sowing, nursery bed preparation, plowing, and rice transplanting. In regions with different climates, cherry flowering was also used to gauge the optimal timing for sowing crops other than rice. The following discussion details, by region, how the timing of cherry blossom emergence guided the planting of various crops.

Focusing on rice cultivation, it is evident that in Japan's middle to northern regions, cherry trees known as Noushi-zakura (agricultural-timing cherry), Tanemaki-zakura (seed-sowing cherry), Ta-uchi-zakura (plowing cherry), and Taue-zakura (rice-transplanting cherry) were used as indicators for farming activities. As shown in Table 3, rice sowing was generally timed to coincide with cherry flowering. However, the presence of regional variations in the naming of these trees suggests that local communities closely observed the timing of cherry blossoms to guide a range of agricultural tasks.

Table 3
Nōji-zakura [Agricultural Season Cherry Blossoms]

Name	Notes / Meaning	Location / Region
Nawashiro-zakura (Seedbed Cherry)	Also known as *Sekisho-yaburi no Sakura* ("Checkpoint-breaking Cherry")	Tateshina Town, Kitasaku District, Nagano Prefecture
Tauchi-zakura (Rice-field Plowing Cherry)	Saying: "When this cherry blooms, villagers begin plowing the rice fields."	Sunakose, Nishimeya Village, Nakatsugaru District, Mutsu
Tauchi-zakura (Rice-field Plowing Cherry)	Local dialect for Kobushi magnolia, not a cherry tree	Miyamura, Kazuno District, Akita Prefecture
Taue-zakura (Rice-planting Cherry)	Indicator for the rice-planting season	Around Miyamura, Kazuno District, Akita Prefecture
Tanemaki-zakura (Seed-sowing Cherry)	Used as a seasonal marker for sowing seeds	Sado Island (proverb)
Tanemaki-zakura (Seed-sowing Cherry)	Indicator for agricultural timing	Niiyama Park, Wakayanagi Town, Kurihara District, Miyagi Prefecture
Tanemaki-zakura (Seed-sowing Cherry)	Indicator for agricultural timing	Around Oisawa, Nishimurayama District, Uzen

Source: Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of Village Proverbs]. Fumin Kyōkai. and Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

Tanemaki-zakura [Seed-Sowing Cherry Blossoms]. In addition to regions where rice cultivation began with the flowering of cherry trees, proverbs preserving the timing for sowing crops other than rice have also been recorded. As shown in Table 4, approximately nine types of crops are identified, with regional differences in the crops sown. Millet, foxtail millet, and soybeans are primarily observed in the northern to middle regions, whereas sweet potatoes appear in Shikoku island (southern east region), and hemp is found south of middle region. Thus, cherry blossoms served nationwide as indicators for sowing, while also functioning regionally to signal the optimal timing for different crops.

Regarding cherry varieties, although some are described as double-flowered (yae-zakura), most are mountain cherry (yama-zakura), indicating that wild, single trees were primarily used. In some regions, agricultural practices involved observing wild cherries in their natural environment; for example, in Inaba Hachiyo District, Tottori Prefecture, a proverb notes: "When the mountain cherry blooms, hemp must be sown" (Kawaguchi, 2013, p. 10), and elsewhere, "When cherry blossoms reach the mid-slope, sow eggplant seeds and plant sweet potato seedlings" (Kawaguchi, 2013, p. 28). These examples demonstrate that wild mountain cherry trees served as visual cues for determining the timing of crop sowing.

Table 4
Tanemaki-zakura [Seed-Sowing Cherry Blossoms]

No.	Crop	Name / Local Name	Variety	Activity / Meaning	Prefecture	City / Town
1	Millet	*Nōji-zakura*	—	Sowing millet	Iwate	Yamagata Town, Kuji City
		Nōji-zakura	*Yamazakura*	Sowing millet	Iwate	—
		Yamazakura	*Yamazakura*	Sowing millet	Iwate	Kuji City
		Sakura	—	Climbing the mountain to sow millet seeds	Shizuoka	Ikawa, Shizuoka City, Aoi Ward
		Sakura	—	Mountain field preparation (slash-and-burn sowing)	Shizuoka	Nagakuma, Shizuoka City, Aoi Ward
		Awamaki-zakura	—	Sowing millet	Akita	Akinomiya Iso, Yuzawa City
		Mame-maki-zakura	*Yamazakura*	Sowing soybeans	Nagano	Nagawa, Matsumoto City
		—	—	“When Kobushi blooms, field beans must be sown” (Sado proverb)	Niigata	Sado
2	Soybeans	*Yaezakura*	*Yaezakura*	Sowing soybeans	Iwate	Kōma, Morioka City
		Mame-maki-zakura	—	Sowing soybeans	Fukushima	Hinoemata Village, Minamiaizu District
		Yamazakura	*Yamazakura*	Sowing soybeans, adzuki beans, and cowpeas	Nagano	Achi Village, Shimoina District
		Yamazakura	*Yamazakura*	Transplanting soybeans	Gifu	Suroku, Kamitakara Town, Takayama City
3	Sweet potato	*Sakura*	—	Preparing sweet potato nursery bed	Shizuoka	Matsuzaki Town, Kamo District
		Sakura	—	“When Yamazakura blooms, plant sweet potato seeds” (Iyo, Hiyoshi Village proverb)	Ehime	Shiba, Kita-Uwa District, Kihoku Town
		Yamazakura	*Yamazakura*	Planting sweet potato seed tubers in nursery bed	Tokushima	Koyahira, Mima City

No.	Crop	Name / Local Name	Variety	Activity / Meaning	Prefecture	City / Town
		Yamazakura	*Yamazakura*	Planting sweet potato tubers (preparing nursery bed)	Ehime	Nyō, Matsuyama City
		Sakura	—	Setting up sweet potato seedlings	Tokushima	Tsurugi Town, Mima District
		—	—	"When cherry blossoms reach mid-mountain slopes, sow eggplant seeds and plant sweet potato seedlings."	—	—
		Sakura	—	Sowing perilla (hemp)	Gifu	Kosaka Town, Gero City
		—	—	"When Yamazakura blooms, sow hemp" (Inaba, Shinosaka proverb)	Tottori	Shinosaka, Chizu Town
4	Hemp	—	—	Asamaki-zakura (Kashihara, Kuze Village, Ibi District)	Gifu	Kashihara, Ibigawa Town
		Asamaki-zakura	*Yamazakura*	Sowing hemp	Shiga	Imamachi, Nagahama City
		Asamaki-zakura	—	Sowing hemp (Yogoi seeds)	Ishikawa	Obara Town, Komatsu City
		Sakura	—	Preserving taro seed tubers mixed with rice husks	Niigata	Arasawa, Murakami City
		Sakura	—	Inspecting taro tubers	Miyazaki	Nishimera Village, Koyu District
5	Taro	*Yamazakura*	*Yamazakura*	Planting taro	Shizuoka	Sakuma Town, Tenryu Ward, Hamamatsu City
		Yaezakura	*Yaezakura*	Planting taro	Aichi	Isshiki, Shinshiro City
6	Potato	*Sakura*	—	Placing seed potatoes in sprouting bed ("Yatō")	Niigata	Kabuto, Murakami City

No.	Crop	Name / Local Name	Variety	Activity / Meaning	Prefecture	City / Town
		Yamazakura	—	Planting second crop potatoes	Nagano	Kaminakane, Kamimura, Iida City
		Yamazakura	—	Sowing spring buckwheat	Shizuoka	Nishi-Izu Town, Kamo District
7	Buckwheat	*Sakura*	—	Sowing summer buckwheat	Yamanashi	Hayakawa Town, Minamikoma District
8	Adzuki beans	*Yaezakura*	*Yaezakura*	Sowing adzuki beans	Iwate	Kōma, Morioka City
9	Urad beans	*Sakura*	—	Sowing urad beans	Shizuoka	Matsuzaki Town, Kamo District

Source: Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of Village Proverbs]. Fumin Kyōkai. and Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

Fishermen's Flower Viewing

Next, focusing on fisheries, Japan has fish whose names incorporate the term "sakura" (Table 5). Many of these species, including salmon, trout, and sea bream, either exhibit a coloration close to cherry blossom pink or develop a striking pink hue during the spawning season. Among these, freshwater species often ascend rivers during the cherry blossom season, whereas marine species gather in large numbers near coasts or shallow waters for spawning. As in the illustrations, fish are frequently depicted alongside seasonal plants, making it clear when fish are in season (Figures 2 and 3).

Table 5
Vernacular Fish Names Associated With Cherry Blossoms

No.	Vernacular Name	English Translation	Region / Notes
1	*Sakura-uo*	Cherry Fish	Possibly associated with the Yoshino River, Tokushima Prefecture
2	*Sakura-dai*	Cherry Sea Bream	Name linked to the spring season and spawning period
3	*Sakura-hirame*	Cherry Flatfish	Term reflects springtime catch
4	*Sakura-mebaru*	Cherry Rockfish	Also known as a "spring-announcing fish"
5	*Sakura-ebi*	Cherry Shrimp	Especially known from Suruga Bay; name derives from color and spring fishery
6	*Sakura-ika*	Cherry Squid	Named for spring fishing season and coloration
7	*Sakura-fuka*	Cherry Shark	Refers to sharks appearing in coastal waters in spring
8	*Sakura-ugui*	Cherry Dace	Proverbial name from the Oki Islands, Saigo District

No.	Vernacular Name	English Translation	Region / Notes
9	*Sakura-ida*	Cherry Dace	Used around Oyafuchi, Kōya, and Yabe villages, Yame District, Chikugo
10	*Sakura-sawara*	Cherry Spanish Mackerel	Used near Koza Port, Higashimuro District, Kii Peninsula, Wakayama Prefecture

Source: Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of Village Proverbs]. Fumin Kyōkai. and Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

Figure 2

Sea Bream and Japanese Pepper (left), Bonito and Cherry Blossoms (right)

Source: Utagawa Hiroshige I. (n.d.). *Uozukushi nishikie (Fish Prints)* [Woodblock print, 1 volume]. Ito Collection, National Diet Library Digital Collections.

Figure 3

Sea Bream, Flounder, and Bonito Depicted With Cherry Blossoms

Source: *Murasaki Shikibu Genji karuta, no. 12, "Suma"* (Baichōrō Kunisada, 1857)

As shown in Table 6, when examining proverbs about these fish, it can be said that the flowering of cherry blossoms and the cherry-like Magnolia tree functioned as a natural calendar in Japan's coastal fishing villages, was closely linked to the fishing seasons and peak seasons for seafood and seaweed, and has been passed down as folk knowledge. Even the timing of cherry blossom blooming and petals falling was used to predict fishing catches, and it can be said that the folk knowledge that linked fishing with seasonal observations (flowering of plants) served the same function as an agricultural calendar. The following discussion examines the relationship between freshwater and saltwater fish and the blooming of cherry blossoms.

Table 6
Vernacular Proverb Named After Cherry Blossoms

No.	Proverb / Saying (English)	Location / Region / Context
1	"When the plum blossoms have fallen and cherry blossoms begin to bloom sparsely, sea bream enter the area."	Fishing villages of Sanuki (Shikoku)
2	"The arrival of *yamaze* winds signals an abundant cherry sea bream catch."	Coastal region of Sanuki
3	"When the *kobushi* (Magnolia) flowers bloom, sardines can be caught."	Eastern Sado Island
4	"The trout in May, when cherry blossoms are in full bloom, are at their tastiest."	Shirakawa Village, Hida region
5	"When double cherry blossoms (*yaezakura*) begin to form buds, tuna arrive."	Near Arida Village, Nishimuro District, Kii Peninsula
6	"Carp around the time cherry blossoms bloom are not tasty."	Near Kurume
7	"When cherry blossoms scatter, a large catch of yellowtail (*buri*) can be expected."	Teuchi Village, Koshiki Islands, Kagoshima Prefecture
8	Whale *Hanami* ("Whale Viewing during Cherry Blossoms")	Coastal areas of Suo-Oshima District; indicates whale arrival
9	"When cherry trees bloom, the traditional female divers (*ama*) begin work."	Coastal natural calendar of the Shima region

Source: Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of Village Proverbs]. Fumin Kyōkai. and Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

(1) Freshwater Fish. As shown in Table 7, there are almost no regional differences in freshwater fish. For example, it is safe to say that typical fish species such as Japanese dace and trout appear nationwide during cherry blossom season. Furthermore, many freshwater fish have vernacular names that include the word "sakura." This is thought to stem from the opportunity to see spring fish and cherry blossoms at the same time, as symbolized by the existence of place names and river names throughout the country that refer to "Sakuragawa" (cherry blossom river) (Figure 1).

Table 7
Vernacular Names and Proverbs of Freshwater Fish Named After Cherry Blossoms

No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes	Prefecture
1	Eel	*Anguilla japonica*	Start longline fishing for eel Whitebait (*shiroko*, juvenile eel) gather and turn dark as they swim upstream	Kochi Aichi
2	Crucian Carp	*Carassius carassius*	Crucian carp caught around cherry blossom season are not tasty	Fukuoka
3	Ida	*Ida spp.*	Cherry trout (sakura-ida)	Fukuoka
4	Amago Salmon	*Oncorhynchus macrostomus*	Sweetfish (*amago / amego)* are delicious	Tokushima
5	Cherry Salmon	*Oncorhynchus masou*	Cherry fish (*sakura gyo*)	Tokushima

6	Japanese Salmon / Masu Salmon	*Oncorhynchus masou*	Yamame (*enoha* / mountain trout) jump even at falling cherry blossoms	Miyazaki
			Yamame… even jump at a dog's tail	Miyazaki
7	Trout	*Oncorhynchus spp.*	Masu salmon (*sakura masu*) migrate upstream	Akita
			Satsuki trout (*satsuki masu*) arrive	Tokushima
			Masu salmon (*sakura masu*) migrate upstream	Iwate
			Peak migration of masu salmon	Yamagata
8	Ayu / Sweetfish	*Plecoglossus altivelis*	Ayu (sweetfish) are abundant	Tochigi
9	Sei (Japanese Fish Species)	*Sebastes ventricosus*	Sei fish are caught in Kasumigaura	Ibaraki
10	Dace	*Zacco spp.*	Cherry dace (*sakura ugui*)	Shimane
			Dace (*ugui*) appear (entering spawning season)	Wakayama
			Dace gather as spawning season begins	Aomori
			Dace gather as spawning season begins	Iwate
			Large aggregations of tachi-ida (spawning dace) occur	Kochi
			Spawning of *akahara* (dace)	Fukushima
			Dace (*ida / ugui*) gather for spawning	Miyazaki

Source: Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of Village Proverbs]. Fumin Kyōkai. and Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

(2) Saltwater Fish. Because Japan is surrounded by the sea, influenced by a complex system of warm and cold ocean currents flowing from north to south and east to west, which significantly affect climate, fisheries, and ecosystems. Major currents include the warm Kuroshio (Japan Current) and Tsushima Currents, as well as the cold Oyashio (Kuril Current).

The blooming period of cherry blossoms occurs in spring and is influenced by warm ocean currents around Japan. For instance, the Kuroshio Current, one of Japan's major currents, flows northward along the southern coast of the Japanese archipelago from the Pacific south, bringing warm waters and abundant fish species. It contributes to relatively mild winter temperatures on the Pacific side. The Tsushima Current, which flows along the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula, also carries warm water into the Sea of Japan, slightly moderating winter conditions on the Japan seaside.

In accordance with the cherry blossom season, certain saltwater fish species are commonly observed in coastal and shallow waters from central to southern Japan. Notably, species such as bonito (*Katsuo*), sea bream (*Tai*), sardine (*Iwashi*), and yellowtail (*Buri*) are frequently found across various regions (Table 9). In particular, sea bream is considered a seasonal delicacy in central Japan. Historical sources corroborate this association: in the "Fish Encyclopedia" of 1831, the entry on sea bream states that its flavor is at its peak during the cherry blossom season, hence the designation "Sakura-dai" (Takei, 1831, p.3). Earlier culinary texts, dating from around 1785, describe sakura-dai as follows: "Around March, during the cherry blossom season, the sea surface is calm, and fish playfully engage with the waves. At this time, not only

sea bream but all kinds of fish are carrying their eggs, and *Sakuradai* is a particularly tasty fish…" (Kidōdō, 1978).

The existence of visual representations of fish caught during the cherry blossom season further confirms that *sakura-dai* is not merely a poetic metaphor for seasonal beauty. In fact, it reflects a material seasonal fish that embodies the early modern Japanese understanding of "seasonality," "taste evaluation," and "shared knowledge of fishing and culinary practices." In this way, cherry blossoms function as a visible seasonal indicator linking fishing, ecology, and culinary practice, and the term "*sakura-dai*" demonstrates to the social dissemination of this knowledge.

On the other hand, a particular case in Kaminokuni Town, Hokkaido, illustrates a distinct interaction between cherry blossoms and fish migration. Beside Kamikuni Temple stands a large cherry tree, and local observation records note that "once this tree begins to bloom, herring no longer form schools nearby" (Sugae, 2003, p.142). In this context, the community hoped for a delay in flowering, and once blooming occurred, local fishers expressed resentment rather than celebrating hanami. Nevertheless, interest in observing cherry blossoms persisted, illustrating that even when aesthetic considerations of the landscape were negative, the practice of hanami remained. This is also one of the most distinctive features of so-called "marginal landscapes."

Table 8
Vernacular Proverbs of Saltwater Fish Named After Cherry Blossoms

No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes	Prefecture
1	Shark	*Crocodylia spp.*	Sharks appear	Shimane
2	Shrimp	*Decapoda spp.*	Shrimp turn red	Shizuoka
3	(dried young)Sardines	*Engraulidae spp.*	Peak season for spring dried small fish (*chirimen*)	Oita
4	(young) Sardines	*Engraulidae spp.*	Peak season for juvenile sardine (*jako*) fishing	Oita
5	Skipjack tuna/Bonito	*Katsuwonus pelamis*	Peak season for bonito (*katsuo*) Bonito start to be caught Bonito are caught in abundance	Mie Miyazaki Wakayama
6	Japanese sea bass	*Lateolabrax japonicus*	Pregnant sea bass enter the bay	Fukui
7	Webfoot octopus	*Octopus aegina*	Baby octopus (*iidako*) start entering the traps	Hyogo
8	Octopus	*Octopus spp.*	Octopus enter the traps all at once	Hyogo
9	Trout	*Oncorhynchus spp.*	Trout in May, when cherry blossoms are in full bloom, are at their most delicious	Gifu
10	Sea bream	*Pagrus major*	Sea bream in season Sea bream in season Sea bream in season Sea bream in season Sea bream in season Sea bream in season Sea bream in season Sea bream and rockfish in season	Tokushima Wakayama Hyogo Mie Kyoto Fukui Fukui Ishikawa

No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes	Prefecture
11	Sardine	*Sardina pilchardus*	When the *kobushi* magnolia blooms, sardines can be caught	Sado
			Sardines are caught	Wakayama
			Horse mackerel and sardines are caught	Oita
12	Spanish mackerel	*Scomberomorus niphonius*	Cherry-blossom sea bass	Wakayama
13	Rockfish	*Sebastes spp.*	Sea bream and rockfish in season	Ishikawa
14	Yellowtail	*Seriola quinqueradiata*	When cherry blossoms fall, yellowtail (*buri*) are caught in abundance	Kagoshima
			Yellowtail can be caught	Nagasaki
			Yellowtail fishing comes to an end	Wakayama
15	Japanese barracuda	*Sphyraena japonica*	Barracuda are caught	Miyazaki
16	Tuna	*Thunnus spp.*	When double-flowered cherry buds start to form, tuna arrive	Wakayama
			Tuna approach the coast	Wakayama
17	Horse mackerel	*Trachurus japonicus*	Horse mackerel and sardines are caught	Oita
18	Whale	*Various Cetacea*	Whale watching (*hanami* of whales) / Whale visitation	Yamaguchi

Source: Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of Village Proverbs]. Fumin Kyōkai. and Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

Conclusion

This study employed Shunsuke Tsurumi's theory of "marginal art" as a methodological framework to reconsider cherry blossom landscapes from two perspectives: *pure landscapes* and *marginal landscapes*. As a result, cherry blossoms as pure landscapes exemplified by sites such as Yoshino, Arashiyama, and Ueno—were intentionally shaped and organized by the ruling authorities of their time and shared through artistic media such as waka poetry, paintings, and guidebooks to famous scenic spots. In these contexts, cherry blossoms were valued for their quantitative abundance, visual splendor, or ephemeral beauty, and their character as objects of aesthetic contemplation was increasingly emphasized.

Conversely, when attention is turned to popular hanami practices, cherry blossoms were not solely perceived as aesthetic objects. Within the contexts of agriculture and fisheries, cherry blossoms functioned as a natural calendar for assessing crop growth or fishing seasons, becoming inseparable from everyday practical life. Terms such as *Honen-zakura* (blossoms of a bountiful year), *Nōji-zakura* (agricultural-timing cherry), *Tanemaki-zakura* (seed-sowing cherry), as well as fish names and folk sayings referencing cherry blossoms, demonstrate that cherry blossoms served as indicators mediating people's livelihoods, beliefs, and experiential knowledge.

The state of cherry blossoms in this way can be seen as a "marginal landscape" that exists on the border between art and practical use, between appreciation and practice. As a marginal

landscape, cherry blossoms are not selected based on beauty or ugliness or artistic value, but rather are landscapes that have been "seen," "read," and "used" in order to survive. As this study has shown, such marginal landscapes have become less visible within the aesthetic and artistic frameworks of the modern era, but they can be made visible again through the concrete example of cherry blossoms.

In conclusion, cherry blossom landscapes exhibit a dual character, encompassing both the artistic scenery of *pure landscapes* and the everyday-life scenery of *marginal landscapes*. The significance of this study lies in its proposition to reconsider landscapes not merely as objects to be viewed but as environments to be lived. Future research may extend this methodological approach to other natural elements and seasonal landscapes, thereby contributing to further development in the study of landscapes.

Author's Notes

A seasonal division system that has been widely used in China and Japan since ancient times. The Twenty-Four Solar Terms divide the year into 24 equal parts based on the sun's ecliptic longitude. In ancient China, each solar term was further subdivided into three stages, making a total of Seventy-Two Microseasons. These were given names derived from from natural phenomena (such as "Sparrows begin to build nests," "Frogs begin to croak," "Cold cicadas sing," and "Wild geese arrive").

References

Akisato, R., & Takehara, S. (1791). *Yamato meisho zue* [Illustrated guide to the famous places of Yamato] (6 vols.). Ogawa Tazaemon, Morimoto Tasuke, Yanagihara Kihei, & Takahashi Heisuke.

Asano, K. (1984). *Sanka chōchū uta: Kinsei shokoku min'yō-shū* (Vol. Kō(30)-242-1) [Sanka Chōchū Uta: Folk Songs of Early Modern Japan]. Iwanami Shoten.

Baichōrō Kunisada. (1857). *Murasaki Shikibu Genji Karuta, Jūni, Suma* [Murasaki Shikibu Genji Karuta, No. 12, "Suma"] [Nishiki-e, woodblock print]. Tsutaya Kichizō. https://doi.org/10.11501/1312699

Heibonsha Chihō Shiryō Sentā. (2000). *Tokushima-ken no chimei* [Place names of Tokushima Prefecture] (Vol. 37). Heibonsha.

Higuchi, T. (1975). *Keikan no Kōzō: Landscape toshite no Nihon no Kūkan* [The Structure of Landscapes: Japanese Space as Landscape]. Gihōdō Shuppan.

Hiroshige, U. (1834). *Arashiyama no Sakura, from the series Rokujū Yoshu Meisho Zue* [Cherry Blossoms at Arashiyama, from the series Famous Places of Kyōto] [Prints]. Tokyo (Edo). https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/as/original/DP120462.jpg

Hiroshige, U. (1853). Arashiyama and Togetsukyo Bridge, Yamashiro Province [Woodblock print]. In *Rokujūyo-shū meisho zue* [Illustrated Famous Places of the Sixty-odd Provinces of Great Japan].

Hiroshige, U. I. (n.d.). *Uozukushi nishikie* [Fish prints] [Woodblock print, Vol. 1]. Ito Collection, National Diet Library Digital Collections. https://kokusho.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/100340255/ https://doi.org/10.11501/2537533

Hoshi, K. (1975). *Mura no kotowaza jiten* [Dictionary of village proverbs]. Tomi Min Kyōkai.

Izutsu, K. (2023). *Sakura no Nihonshi Nenpyō: Sakura to Nihonjin 2000-nen no Zenbunka-shi* [Chronology of Cherry Blossoms in Japan: 2000 Years of Cherry Culture in Japan]. Kawade Shobō Shinsha.

Katsuki, T. (2015). *Sakura* [Cherry Blossoms]. Iwanami Shoten.

Kawaguchi, M. (2013). *Shizenreki* [Natural Calendars]. Yasaka Shobō.

Kidōdō. (1978). *Tai Hyakuchin Ryōri Himitsu-bako*, Vol. 3 [Secrets of 100 Sea Bream Recipes, Vol. 3] (Yoshii, Ed., Reprint edition). Rinsen Shoten.

Kuwako, T. (1999). *Saigyō no fūkei* [The landscape of Saigyō] (Vol. 857). Nippon Hōsō Shuppan Kyōkai.

Nakamura, Y. (1982). *Fūkeigaku Nyūmon* [Introduction to Landscape Studies]. Chūōkōron-sha.

Nakamura, Y. (2021). *Fūdō Jichi: Na-hatsuteki Machizukuri to wa Nani ka* [Fūdō Jichi: What Is Endogenous Community Development?]. Fujiwara Shoten.

Nakanishi, S. (1978). *Man'yōshū: Zen'yakuchū genbun-tsuki* [Man'yōshū: Complete Translation and Notes with Original Text) (Vol. 4, p. 207). Kōdansha Bunko.

Nihon Daijiten. (1996). *Nihon daihyakka zensho* [Electronic book edition] Shogakukan. https://japanknowledge.com

Nomoto, H. (2021). *Shizen-reki to Kankyō Kōshō no Sekai* [The World of Natural Calendars and Environmental Oral Traditions]. Taiga Shobō.

Ogawa, K. (2004). *Sakura no Bungakushi*, Vol. 363 [A Literary History of Cherry Blossoms, Vol. 363]. Bungei Shunjū.

Orikuchi, S. (1995). *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū*, 2 [Collected works of Orikuchi Shinobu, Vol. 2]. Chūōkōron-sha. (Original work published 1995)

Saigyō. (1928). *Sanka-shū* [Sanka Collection] (N. Sasaki, Ed.). Iwanami Shoten.

Shirahata, Y. (2015). *Hanami to Sakura: "Nihonteki naru Mono" Saikō* [Hanami and Sakura: Reconsidering "Japanese-ness"]. Yasaka Shobō.

Shirasu, M. (2014). *Saigyō* (30th rev. ed., Vol. 5713, Shi-20-2). Shinchosha.

Sugae, M. (2003). *Sugae Masumi yūranki* [Travel Notes of Sugai Masumi] (T. & T. Miyamoto, Eds., Vol. 2). Wide-ban Tōyō Bunko. Heibonsha.

Takei, S. (1831). *Uokagami, Shimo* [Fish mirror: Lower volume]. https://doi.org/10.11501/1900081

Takenishi, H. (1988). *Sakura* [Cherry blossoms] (Vol. 65). Sakuhinsha.

Tsuchihashi, H. (1965). *Kodai Kayō to Girei no Kenkyū* [Studies on Ancient Songs and Rituals]. Iwanami Shoten.

Tsurumi, S. (1967). *Genkai Geijutsu-ron* [Theory of marginal art]. Keisō Shobō.

Ushio, M. (1986). Ōtaue no shūzoku to taue-uta [Customs of rice planting and rice-planting songs]. In *Ushio Michio chosakushū* (Vol. 2, p. 295). Meicho Shuppan.

Yanagita, K. (1970). *Senzu no Hanashi* [Stories of ancestors] ([Reprint] Edition). Chikuma Shobō.

Yanagita, K. (1977). *Nenchū Gyōji Oboegaki* [Memoranda on annual rituals] (Vol. 124). Kōdansha.

Yamada, T. (1942). *Ōshi* [History of cherry blossoms] (Reprint ed.). Ōsho Shobō.

A Silent Conflict: Guilt, Relief, and the Pacifier in Urban Parenthood

Matt Chiu, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts–University of the Arts Singapore, Singapore

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The arrival of a newborn is often expected to be a joyful milestone. Yet for many young parents in metropolitan settings, this period is marked by exhaustion, isolation, and emotional strain. Separating from extended family support and managing demanding dual income lives, parents must navigate early caregiving with limited time, limited help, and little room for recovery. Within this fragile social context, the pacifier often becomes a practical tool. It can soothe the infant, restore temporary calm, and offer parents a brief moment of relief. At the same time, its use is frequently accompanied by guilt. Clinical guidance cautions against prolonged dependence, citing potential dental, developmental, and behavioural concerns. Parents are often aware of these risks, but in moments of acute stress they may feel compelled to prioritise immediate handling over longer term worry. This emotional tension forms the core of this design research brief. The study draws on interviews with two dental professionals and 27 parents to examine how pacifier use is understood, negotiated, and justified in everyday urban caregiving. It also reviews selected pacifier case studies that incorporate weaning related features, in order to align with parental concerns identified in the field. Through critical design theory, socio cultural reflection, and narrative analysis, the paper reframes infant soothing as a humanitarian issue rather than a purely technical one. It argues that caregiving in urban life is not only a private responsibility, but also a quiet social conflict shaped by stress, limited support, and competing demands.

Keywords: design research, service design, art & humanities, dental care, caregiver fatigue

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The arrival of a newborn should be a joyful and celebratory occasion for parents, yet many first-time parents report anxiety and uncertainty when the child is born (Parfitt & Ayers, 2014; Sæther et al., 2023). This immediate and drastic increase in workload contributes not only to physical fatigue, but also to psychological fatigue among many parents (Baattaiah et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2019). Meeting developmental milestones, ensuring adequate milk intake, and constantly monitoring wet nappies are among the additional burdens new parents face on a daily basis (Stoppard, 2008). While attempting to multitask and adapt to a sleep deprived schedule, a common and significant fear for many new parents is when an infant cries endlessly (de Barbaro et al., 2023; Muller et al., 2023). In these moments, the cry is not merely noise, but a signal of unmet needs that can feel urgent, ambiguous, and impossible to resolve quickly, particularly when parents are already depleted.

Within the urban context of a high cost of living, couples who wish to have children often require financial stability (Lam & Tan, 2025), and one major manifestation of this is the prevalence of dual income households to support anticipated expenses (Leonce, 2020). To be situated closer to the workplace, many young couples leave their parental homes and move into the city, which can result in relative isolation when the infant arrives, without immediate access to grandparental support or the broader support of an extended family nucleus (Schobinger et al., 2022). This phenomenon may contribute to heightened stress, reduced coping capacity, and fewer opportunities for rest and recovery during early parenthood (Yi & Ahn, 2024). Under such conditions, caregiving decisions are often made in compressed timeframes, shaped less by ideals of "best practice" and more by what is feasible in the moment.

It is within this fragile and constrained context that the pacifier emerges as a tool of last resort. For many parents, the decision to use a pacifier is not driven by ignorance of potential risks, but by a perceived lack of alternatives when the infant remains inconsolable and the household has reached its limit (Muller et al., 2023). The pacifier can soothe the child and restore temporary calm, allowing parents a brief interval to regroup, sleep, or complete essential tasks. Yet this relief is frequently accompanied by guilt. Clinical guidance cautions against prolonged or inappropriate use, citing potential dental, developmental, and behavioural concerns (Hung et al., 2025). Parents may therefore experience pacifier use as an emotional compromise, one that sits between immediate survival and longer-term worry. The same object can become both a source of reassurance and a reminder of vulnerability, producing a complex blend of relief and self-reproach. In this sense, the pacifier is not simply a consumer product, but a material response to the pressures of contemporary urban caregiving, where support is limited, fatigue is chronic, and small interventions can feel like extreme measures.

Literature Review

Pacifiers, or dummies, are non-nutritive sucking tools used to soothe infants and young children. They have existed for centuries, with historical evidence traceable to around 1000 BC (Levin, 1990). These devices help to calm infants and toddlers by satisfying an innate sucking reflex, which can support emotional regulation and relaxation (Arpalahti et al., 2024; Sexton & Natale, 2009). In addition, pacifier use during the first 12 months has been clinically associated with a reduced risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) (Horne et al., 2014; Moon et al., 2012; Smith & Colpitts, 2020). Beyond this early period, however,

clinical support tends to decline, as the disadvantages of prolonged use may begin to outweigh the benefits.

By contrast, prolonged and unregulated pacifier use beyond 12 months of age may be associated with adverse outcomes, including speech delay (Kanellopoulos & Costello, 2024), ear infections (Rovers et al., 2008), dental malocclusion (Caleza-Jiménez et al., 2024; Caruso et al., 2019; Hung et al., 2025), alterations in palatal form (Schmid et al., 2018), and possible effects on nasal development (Lopes et al., 2014). These concerns lead some parents to avoid pacifiers entirely and to manage infant crying through alternative soothing strategies. As a result, distinct parental positions can be observed. One group refuses pacifier uses because of perceived long-term risks. Another uses pacifiers when necessary to cope with acute stress but reports persistent guilt because of known clinical concerns. A further group experiences clear relief and temporary restoration of emotional capacity, viewing pacifier use as a practical means of securing short periods of rest from continuous caregiving demands.

In this sense, pacifier use is not merely a technical childcare choice, but a value laden and context dependent parenting decision that varies across households. It reflects how parents weigh immediate emotional survival against longer term developmental concerns, often under conditions of fatigue, limited support, and competing responsibilities. This tension helps explain why pacifier use remains both widespread and contested in contemporary parenting practice.

Methodology

To investigate the issue more comprehensively, a two-part mixed methodology study was conducted. The first part involved interviews with two dental professionals in private practice. The second part was a site-based study involving interviews with 27 anonymous parents at Mummy's Market Singapore, a local mother and child event where parents and prospective parents gather in high concentration. The objective was to obtain a balanced and well-rounded perspective by considering both clinical best practice in early oral development and the emotional realities of caregiving. To support this, both parents and clinical professionals were included. The two clinicians comprised a paediatric dentist specialising in oral health and hygiene, and a practising orthodontist focused on dental growth and craniofacial development.

Interviews

The first interview was conducted with a paediatric dentist in private practice in Singapore. Her view was that pacifiers can contribute to dental deformation, particularly in children above two years of age who maintain a regular pacifier habit. She noted that in metropolitan contexts, severe open bite linked to pacifier use is now less common, likely due to higher awareness and education among parents. However, prolonged use may still contribute to subtler patterns, such as increased overjet and dental misalignment, which are often less visible to non-specialists. As the primary dentition is largely established between 18 and 24 months, she advised that pacifier use should ideally cease by this stage or, at minimum, be tightly restricted, most commonly to sleep onset.

The second interview was conducted with an orthodontist in a different private clinic in Singapore. This interview introduced an important extension of the discussion beyond dental malocclusion alone. The orthodontist emphasised that prolonged overreliance on pacifiers

may be associated with narrowing of the dental arches and jaw form over time. He linked this to a broader urban feeding pattern in which prolonged use of soft puréed food can reduce chewing demand during critical developmental periods. Children who rely heavily on pacifiers, or who predominantly consume low resistance textures for extended periods, may face an elevated risk of reduced transverse jaw development. This dynamic was described as a form of "chewing outsourced," where functional stimulation is reduced during growth. As the jaw narrows, palatal form may also become narrower and higher, which can reduce available nasal cavity space and potentially affect upper airway function. At the same time, altered jaw relationships may influence tongue posture and lip seal, increasing the tendency towards oral rather than nasal breathing. In children, persistent mouth breathing has been associated with restless sleep and daytime behavioural or attentional difficulties (Kalaskar et al., 2021). Taken together, the interviews indicate that prolonged pacifier dependence may be implicated in a broader functional chain, from oral habit to craniofacial development and sleep related outcomes.

Survey

Based on these interview insights, a structured parent survey was developed to test on ground perceptions and knowledge. The intent was to assess not only what parents know about direct dental risks, but also whether they recognise indirect pathways involving jaw development, airway implications, and breathing patterns. The survey also explored emotional states linked to pacifier decisions, including stress, guilt, relief, and perceived lack of alternatives.

The research was conducted at a baby fair setting and therefore designed for practical, conversational delivery. Questions were presented sequentially in multiple choice format, with optional open comments recorded for qualitative interpretation. Wording was intentionally varied across positively framed, neutral, and negatively framed statements to reduce response patterning and better capture instinctive judgement. In several cases, phrasing was deliberately conversational, including "hearsay style" prompts, to mirror how parents commonly encounter advice in everyday life. This approach was used to improve ecological validity in a real-world public event context.

The final survey comprised nine core questions (Table 1), each aligned to one of three domains: clinical knowledge, behavioural practice, and emotional response. Figure 1 presents the infographic shown to respondents. To minimise visual priming effects, the question cards were designed to be warm and approachable in tone, but without persuasive imagery that could steer responses. This allowed the study to capture parental judgement under conditions closer to routine, informal decision making. Overall, this two-part design enabled triangulation between professional interpretation and lived parental experience. The interview data clarified clinical concerns and developmental mechanisms, while the survey data captured how those concerns are understood, negotiated, or deprioritised in everyday caregiving contexts.

Table 1
Nine Question & Possible Selection for the Survey

S/N	Questions	Options
1.	Most parents learn about children's jaw development from their doctor or dentist.	True/ False/ Unsure
2.	Children's jaw development starts after all their baby teeth have dropped off	True/ False/ Unsure
3.	Using a pacifier can cause crooked teeth in children and narrow the jaw.	True/ False/ Unsure
4.	Pacifiers impact children's breathing	True/ False/ Unsure
5.	Letting a child self-wean from the pacifier naturally is better than setting a time limit	True/ False/ Unsure
6.	Feeding soft foods impacts breathing patterns	True/ False/ Unsure
7.	Aesthetics play an important role in making a pacifier choice	True/ False/ Unsure
8.	Mum or dad - Who is most likely to pull out the pacifier?	Father/ Mother/ Both
9.	Most parents report feeling guilty when giving their child a pacifier	True/ False/ Unsure

Figure 1
Sample User Interface of the Question Cards

Results & Discussion

A total of n = 27 responses were collected using the 9 questions in Table 1 through random intercept sampling at Mummy's Market Singapore. Participants were approached on site and invited to participate voluntarily. The respondent profile comprised 51.9% mothers (n = 14), 18.5% fathers (n = 5), and 29.6% joint mother and father (n = 8) responses. In many cases, couples were present together, but mothers more often led the verbal response, suggesting stronger day to day involvement in caregiving decisions and potentially greater influence over routine soothing practices.

Q1: Most parents learn about children's jaw development from their doctor or dentist.

Results from Q1 show that 51.9% of respondents disagreed with this statement, indicating that many parents do not primarily obtain oral development information from dental professionals. Only 29.6% of respondents with children under five reported visiting a dental professional for routine check-ups or specific dental concerns. Among those who disagreed, most said they relied on online sources to understand the benefits and risks of pacifier use before deciding whether to introduce one. Viewed from parents lived reality, this pattern is understandable. Clinic visits can be costly and time consuming, and many families reserve

professional consultation for situations where a clear problem has already appeared. In contrast, online resources are immediate, convenient, and extensive. Parenting forums and mummy groups are also seen as highly practical because they provide fast, experience-based advice from people facing similar day to day challenges. As a result, many parents feel they can make informed decisions without seeing a professional first. This suggests that interventions should not assume clinic first behaviour. Instead, evidence-based guidance should be designed for the channels parents already trust and use, including forums, social platforms, e commerce pages, and baby product touchpoints, while still giving clear signals for when professional assessment becomes necessary.

Q2: Children's jaw development starts after all their baby teeth have dropped off.

Q2 was designed as a trick question, based on orthodontic input that jaw development occurs continuously as a child grows. In this question, 74.1% of respondents disagreed with the statement that jaw growth starts only after baby teeth have fallen out, while 25.9% selected "unsure." This suggests that jaw development is not commonly discussed in everyday parenting conversations. The finding indicates that many parents can spot an incorrect statement, but a sizeable group still lacks confidence about the actual timeline. This matters because decisions on pacifier use, feeding texture, and weaning are time sensitive. Without clear timing knowledge, parents may act only after visible issues appear. To make information more useful, guidance should be age linked and action based: what is happening now, what to do now, and what to monitor next. This makes preventive advice more practical in real decision settings.

Q3: Using a pacifier can cause crooked teeth in children and narrow the jaw.

Q3 contains two linked parts, namely crooked teeth and jaw narrowing. In this question, 59.3% agreed with the statement, while 18.5% selected "unsure." Although many respondents chose "true," comments suggest that awareness was stronger for effects on teeth than for effects on jaw development. Some parents also noted that pacifier use may not be the only cause of crooked teeth, as thumb sucking can also contribute. This question is important because it reveals how parents process risk. Crooked teeth are easier to notice and therefore easier to believe, while jaw narrowing is less visible and usually understood only when explained by a professional. As a result, parents may respond correctly at a general level but still hold uncertainty about mechanism and severity. The two-part structure of the question likely amplified this effect, because respondents may agree with one part but hesitate on the other. This suggests that future surveys and public education should treat these as separate items to improve clarity and interpretation. The finding also indicates that parents are not ignoring risk but are trying to make sense of competing causes across habits, including pacifier use and thumb sucking. Information can therefore be more useful if it is framed comparatively and provide age-based action steps for reduction and weaning. This gives parents practical direction instead of a single yes or no warning and supports better decisions before problems become more difficult to reverse.

Q4: Pacifiers impact children's breathing.

In Q4, 48.1% of respondents disagreed with the statement, while 22.2% selected "unsure." This suggests that the association between pacifier use and breathing is less familiar to many parents than more direct dental outcomes. This question is valuable because it highlights a knowledge gap in indirect effects. Parents tend to recognise visible issues, such as tooth

alignment, more readily than functional pathways involving jaw growth, palate development, and breathing patterns. In everyday parenting discussions, breathing related implications are not commonly addressed unless a clear symptom appears, so awareness remains low. The relatively high disagreement and uncertainty therefore do not necessarily indicate resistance, but rather limited exposure to this type of information in practical, parent friendly terms. To make this information more useful, instead of broad claims, communication can focus on simple cause and effect logic, signs to monitor, and timing-based actions. For example, parents can be guided on what habits to moderate, what behavioural signs to observe during sleep and daytime, and when professional review is advisable. Framing the topic as risk management rather than certainty helps parents act earlier while maintaining trust and clarity.

Q5: Letting a child self-wean from the pacifier naturally is better than setting a time limit.

Responses to Q5 were almost evenly split, with 51.9% agreeing and 44.4% disagreeing. This was one of the most contested topics in the survey, with respondents showing clear and persistent differences in parenting beliefs. Some felt that a clear age limit should be set for pacifier use, while others preferred to observe the child and allow a more child led weaning process. It is also notable that, in some couple responses, fathers and mothers held different views. This question shows that pacifier decisions are not driven by knowledge alone, but also by values, tolerance for distress, and family routines. The near balanced split indicates that both approaches are meaningful to parents, and that a single recommendation may not fit all households. It also highlights that decision making can be negotiated within families, rather than controlled by one caregiver. To make information more useful, guidance should present more than one valid pathway. Instead of prescribing only one method, resources can offer structured options, such as age limit-based weaning and child led weaning, each with clear milestones and potential warning signs. This allows parents to choose a method that fits their household while still following evidence aligned boundaries.

Q6: Feeding soft foods impacts breathing patterns.

Q6 extends Q4 by addressing the orthodontic idea of “outsourced chewing.” In this question, 70.4% selected false, 11.1% selected true, and the remainder selected unsure. This indicates that most parents did not recognise a possible association between prolonged soft food reliance, reduced chewing demand, jaw development changes, and downstream breathing tendencies. This is a significant finding because it highlights a low awareness area in early oral development. Compared with more visible concerns such as tooth alignment, the pathway from feeding texture to jaw function and breathing is less intuitive and less commonly discussed in everyday parenting settings. As a result, parents may not view food texture progression as part of oral and airway development, but only as a feeding convenience issue. The result in this question is also useful as soft and pureed food have been marketed for the absolute convenience and sometimes reduce the risk of chocking.

Q7: Aesthetics play an important role in making a pacifier choice.

Q7 was intended to examine consumer preference and product selection behaviour. Although several respondents initially said that aesthetics were not very important, 51.9% selected “true” as their final answer. During discussion, some respondents suggested that mothers may place more emphasis on product appearance during purchase decisions, while fathers may focus more on functionality. One father gave the example of a glow in the dark pacifier as a

practical feature for locating it at night. This finding suggests a gap between stated preference and actual choice criteria. Parents may publicly prioritise function, yet still respond to visual qualities that signal trust, comfort, and suitability. In practice, aesthetics and function are not separate, as visual design often influences perceived usability and product confidence. The comments also indicate that decision priorities may differ within households, which is important for how products are presented and positioned. To make this insight useful, product and information design should integrate both emotional and functional value clearly. Packaging and product pages can present appearance-based benefits.

Q8: Mum or dad, who is most likely to pull out the pacifier?

Q8 was designed to understand who in the household is more likely to make difficult decisions regarding pacifier control. The responses were almost evenly distributed across father (37.0%), mother (29.6%), and both parents (33.3%). This pattern suggests that pacifier control is not consistently led by one caregiver but varies across households and family dynamics. This is an important insight because it shows that decision authority is shared or situational in many families. Rules around pacifier use are therefore likely to depend on context, such as bedtime routines, who is present, and each caregiver's tolerance for crying or disruption. It also implies that inconsistency can occur when caregivers hold different thresholds for when to give or remove the pacifier. To make this useful for implementation, guidance should be designed for co-parenting rather than a single user. Practical tools can include shared rule cards, aligned timing cues, and simple household agreements on when to use, when to pause, and when to wean.

Q9: Most parents report feeling guilty when giving their child a pacifier.

Q9 was the core question for understanding parental guilt in relation to pacifier use, which aligns directly with the aim of this paper. Interestingly, 66.7% selected "false" as their main response. Some parents explicitly commented that giving a pacifier was "the best decision" for their situation and that they felt "totally relieved." At the same time, 29.6% selected "true," with many describing only mild or initial guilt, followed by a pragmatic view that immediate caregiving needs must be managed first, and weaning can be addressed later. This finding suggests that parental emotion is not binary. Rather than a simple guilt versus no guilt pattern, many parents appear to experience layered emotions, including relief, concern, and deferred responsibility. In high pressure caregiving moments, immediate stability often takes priority over longer term ideals, especially when parents are fatigued and managing multiple demands. The responses therefore reflect practical coping logic rather than disregard for oral health guidance. To make this insight useful, interventions should avoid moral framing and instead support staged decision making. Information can acknowledge immediate relief needs while providing clear transition pathways for later reduction and weaning. Practical tools such as age-based milestones, gradual reduction options, and non-judgemental progress tracking can help parents move from short term coping to long term habit transition with less stress and greater confidence.

Case Studies

Based on the survey responses, it is evident that parents who choose to give their child a pacifier are generally aware of the potential risks. One way to support continued use with greater peace of mind is to offer pacifiers that include weaning assistance features. At present, the number of such products appears limited, with key examples including

Fridababy, Dentistar, and Hanabii. These solutions are designed to reassure parents through built-in support, helping them make more informed decisions at the point of purchase.

Case Study 1: Fridababy

Fridababy's Paci Weaning System is a step-by-step staged extinction strategy for nonnutritive sucking behaviour as seen in Figure 2. Instead of immediate removal, the intervention preserves the established soothing cue while reducing the mechanical reward of sucking across sequential steps. This design logic is tapered rather than abruptly removed, resistance behaviour can be reduced, and caregiver adherence can improve. Functionally, the child still receives transitional comfort from the familiar object and bedtime ritual, but the reward value declines over time, which supports gradual detachment from the habit loop. From a developmental and implementation perspective, the objective is not long-term optimisation of pacifier use, but controlled discontinuation before persistent dependence is entrenched. A progressive pathway is especially useful in households where sudden withdrawal causes sleep disruption, inconsistent enforcement, or caregiver fatigue. By converting weaning into a finite sequence with explicit milestones, the intervention improves predictability, enables parent coordination, and shifts decisions from reactive moments to planned transitions. In this sense, progressive pacifiers operate as behaviour change devices and allow subtle adaption to both the child and the parents.

Figure 2
Image of the Fridababy Weaning System

Note. Adapted from Fridababy, 2026

Case Study 2: Dentistar STOPPi

On the other hand, the Dentistar STOPPi is conceptually similar to other weaning devices, but with a different mechanical logic. Rather than a multi stage sequence of different pacifiers, STOPPi is presented as a single transitional teat intended for the end phase of pacifier use, with side bite supports and a reduced sucking profile to make habitual sucking less rewarding while still preserving familiarity. The product positioning is clearly weaning focused, not comfort optimisation focused, seen in Figure 3. Furthermore, the intention is still behaviour transition by keep enough familiarity to reduce protest, but lower reinforcement so dependence fades over time. In behaviour terms, it is a taper device for non nutritive sucking,

designed to reduce soothing payoff over time and shift the child from pacifier reliance to discontinuation. This fits the broader clinical direction that prolonged sucking habits should be phased out as children get older.

Figure 3
Image of the Dentistar STOPPi

Note. Adapted from Novatex, 2026

Case Study 3: Hanabii Pacifier

Another weaning device that supports a gentle transition is the Hanabii Pacifier, shown in Figure 4. Hanabii is a transition pacifier with a floral aesthetic that can attract children through a toy like visual language. When used like a regular pacifier, the silicone petal shield stretches open and creates slight resistance that gradually pushes the pacifier outward. When the child becomes distracted or enters a non active sucking phase, the silicone petals retract and pop the pacifier out of the mouth. This passive system functions without active triggers, which helps reduce false positive releases. In addition, once the pacifier pops out, the petals close passively and largely cover the teat, helping to reduce direct contamination. Its value can be understood as a two step transition pathway. The first step provides immediate calming during high stress moments, giving caregivers brief recovery time while preserving a familiar soothing cue for the child. The second step progressively reduces reliance through passive release behaviour, so pacifier retention becomes shorter and less persistent over time. In practice, Hanabii works best when paired with encouragement routines that intentionally frame each pop out as a milestone in growth.

Figure 4
Image of the Hanabii Pacifier

Note. Adapted from Hanabii, 2026

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that infant soothing decisions are emotionally and contextually complex, not simply right or wrong. Parents described mixed emotions, including relief, responsibility, uncertainty, and concern about later effects. In fast paced urban caregiving, pacifiers often serve as an immediate coping tool during prolonged crying, sleep disruption, and parental fatigue. This does not necessarily indicate low awareness. More often, it reflects constrained decision making, where parents balance short term stability with longer term developmental concerns. The findings also suggest that the issue should not be limited to teeth alone. While many parents recognised dental risks, awareness was less consistent for broader pathways involving jaw development, oral function, and breathing. These outcomes are likely multi factor, with pacifier dependence and feeding patterns, including prolonged reliance on puréed foods, both potentially relevant.

As design research, this pilot provides two forms of insight, where one insight into the caregiving problem, and another insight into how to design better research questions for more optimal responses. Some items were too complex and required clarification, indicating the need for clearer phrasing, better sequencing, and separation of constructs in future surveys.

Several limitations apply. This was a small pilot study with event-based intercept recruitment, so the sample is not representative and findings are not generalisable. The cross-sectional nature of the survey opens the avenue to understand association but does not support causal claims, and self-report data may include recall and social desirability bias. Despite so, the study is useful for identifying likely knowledge gaps, especially around nasal and airway associations, and for refining the next research phase.

Future work should increase sample size, recruit beyond event settings, and a more quantitative analysis would yield more accurate and representative results.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express gratitude to the Research Division of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Singapore (NAFA, UAS) for supporting this work through funding and an encouraging research environment. Furthermore, gratitude is also given to the personals associated with the Design Singapore Council, Hanabii Pte Ltd and COLOURS LLP for the collaboration and continuous support under the Good Design Research (GDR) initiative towards a better understanding with the issue of pediatric dental care and development.

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

The author declares that ChatGPT, 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 ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

References

Arpalahti, I., Hänninen, K., Tolvanen, M., Varrela, J., & Rice, D. P. (2024). The effect of early childhood non-nutritive sucking behavior including pacifiers on malocclusion: a randomized controlled trial. *European Journal of Orthodontics*, *46*(5), cjae024.

Baattaiah, B. A., Alharbi, M. D., Aldhahi, M. I., & Khan, F. (2024). Factors associated with postpartum fatigue: an exploration of the moderating role of resilience. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *12*, 1394380.

Caleza-Jiménez, C., Rodríguez Romero, I., Ribas-Perez, D., & Biedma-Perea, M. (2024). Influence of the Physiological Pacifier on the Development of Malocclusions in Children: A Scoping Review. *Children*, *11*(11), 1353.

Caruso, S., Nota, A., Darvizeh, A., Severino, M., Gatto, R., & Tecco, S. (2019). Poor oral habits and malocclusions after usage of orthodontic pacifiers: an observational study on 3–5 years old children. *BMC Pediatrics*, *19*(1), 294.

de Barbaro, K., Micheletti, M., Yao, X., Khante, P., Johnson, M., & Goodman, S. (2023). Infant crying predicts real-time fluctuations in maternal mental health in ecologically valid home settings. *Developmental Psychology*, *59*(4), 733.

Fridababy. (2026). *Paci Weaning System*. https://frida.com/

Hanabii. (2026). *Hanabii Pacifier: Brand Story*. https://www.hanabiipacifier.com/

Horne, R. S. C., Hauck, F. R., Moon, R. Y., L'hoir, M. P., Blair, P. S., & Physiology and Epidemiology Working Groups of the International Society for the Study and Prevention of Perinatal and Infant Death. (2014). Dummy (pacifier) use and sudden infant death syndrome: potential advantages and disadvantages. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, *50*(3), 170–174.

Hung, M., Marx, J., Ward, C., & Schwartz, C. (2025). Pacifier Use and Its Influence on Pediatric Malocclusion: A Scoping Review of Emerging Evidence and Developmental Impacts. *Dentistry Journal*, *13*(7), 319.

Kalaskar, R., Bhaje, P., Kalaskar, A., & Faye, A. (2021). Sleep difficulties and symptoms of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder in children with mouth breathing. *International Journal of Clinical Pediatric Dentistry*, *14*(5), 604.

Kanellopoulos, A. K., & Costello, S. E. (2024). The effects of prolonged pacifier use on language development in infants and toddlers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1349323.

Lam, X., & Tan, J. (2025). *What Did Married Couple-Based Households with Young Children Spend On?* https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/households/ssn125_pg15-19

Leonce, T. E. (2020). The inevitable rise in dual-income households and the intertemporal effects on labor markets. *Compensation & Benefits Review*, *52*(2), 64–76.

Levin, S. (1990). A history of dummies. *Nursing RSA= Verpleging RSA*, *5*(4), 17–20.

Lopes, T. S. P., Moura, L. F. A. D., & Lima, M. C. M. P. (2014). Association between breastfeeding and breathing pattern in children: a sectional study. *Jornal de Pediatría*, *90*(4), 396–402.

Moon, R. Y., Tanabe, K. O., Yang, D. C., Young, H. A., & Hauck, F. R. (2012). Pacifier use and SIDS: evidence for a consistently reduced risk. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, *16*(3), 609–614.

Muller, I., Ghio, D., Mobey, J., Jones, H., Hornsey, S., Dobson, A., Maund, E., & Santer, M. (2023). Parental perceptions and experiences of infant crying: A systematic review and synthesis of qualitative research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *79*(2), 403–417.

Novatex. (2026). *Weaning off soothers with the STOPPi®: tooth-friendly and gentle weaning*. https://dentistar.eu/en/weaning-off-soothers-with-the-stoppi-tooth-friendly-and-gentle-weaning/

Parfitt, Y., & Ayers, S. (2014). Transition to parenthood and mental health in first-time parents. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *35*(3), 263–273.

Rovers, M. M., Numans, M. E., Langenbach, E., Grobbee, D. E., Verheij, T. J. M., & Schilder, A. G. M. (2008). Is pacifier use a risk factor for acute otitis media? A dynamic cohort study. *Family Practice*, *25*(4), 233–236.

Sæther, K. M., Berg, R. C., Fagerlund, B. H., Glavin, K., & Jøranson, N. (2023). First-time parents' experiences related to parental self-efficacy: A scoping review. *Research in Nursing & Health*, *46*(1), 101–112.

Schmid, K. M., Kugler, R., Nalabothu, P., Bosch, C., & Verna, C. (2018). The effect of pacifier sucking on orofacial structures: a systematic literature review. *Progress in Orthodontics*, *19*(1), 8.

Schobinger, E., Vanetti, M., Ramelet, A.-S., & Horsch, A. (2022). Social support needs of first-time parents in the early-postpartum period: A qualitative study. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *13*, 1043990.

Sexton, S., & Natale, R. (2009). Risks and benefits of pacifiers. *American Family Physician*, *79*(8), 681–685.

Smith, R. W., & Colpitts, M. (2020). Pacifiers and the reduced risk of sudden infant death syndrome. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, *25*(4), 205–206.

Stoppard, M. (2008). *Complete Baby and Childcare: Everything You Need to Know for the First Five Years*. Dorling Kindersley Ltd.

Wilson, N., Lee, J. J., & Bei, B. (2019). Postpartum fatigue and depression: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *246*, 224–233.

Yi, F., & Ahn, S. (2024). Effects of postpartum fatigue, parenting stress, and family support on postpartum depression in Chinese first-time mothers: a cross-sectional study. *Women's Health Nursing*, *30*(3), 226–237.

Contact email: phchiu@nafa.edu.sg

Art as Emblem and Message: Polish Modernism – The Aesthetic Soft Power of Cultural Memory and Diplomacy

Julia Mielczarek, University of Warsaw, Poland

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In my article, I will present the functioning of modernism as an emblem of cultural memory after World War II in the Republic of Poland. I will discuss the narratives about modernism that are used today in the international presentation of Polish art. Modernism in Poland in the 20th century served as a universal aesthetic language to build a progressive, modern image of the country. I will focus on the aesthetic and political strategies of Polish cultural institutions that promote art and heritage outside Poland. I will discuss the "Poland 100" programme, which was implemented under the slogan "Inspired by the past, we create the future" as part of the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of Poland regaining independence. My intention is to present art as a vehicle for collective memory and social identity, which influences the soft power of the state and makes cultural policy increasingly visible on the international stage. Therefore, I will present my comparative analysis of two artworks entitled "Semiotic Reading of State-Sponsored Memory Aesthetics," which will discuss visual form, narrative message, and type of founder. My research method is a combination of visual semiotics + art policy analysis + research in situ. At the same time, I will show the perspective of understanding art through the lens of memory coding and cultural policy.

Keywords: cultural memory, soft power, modernism, cultural diplomacy, post-war Poland

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In my article I will attempt to answer the question how modernism functions as a tool of cultural memory and cultural diplomacy in Poland after II World War. I will show you why modernism is a universal language in Poland and at the same time we will answer the question why it is so closely connected with the local identity of Poles. The topic of my words must begin with the larger political and historical context of Poland at the time and an understanding of what the Polish People's Republic and the Third Republic of Poland were, and how these periods shaped national identity and the institutional conditions for the circulation of art. We should also look at how Central and Eastern Europe was treated as the periphery of Europe in the dominant narratives of art history and in the "global canon" of modernism, while the shared experience of modernism in this region was often a side issue. And in a global context, we should try to discuss whether art can be responsible for the language of modernity and whether it can act as an aesthetic resource of soft power in cultural diplomacy.

However, before we move on to discussing cultural policy and artistic practices, let us refer to the historical background. After the Second World War, which ended in Europe in 1945, artists in Poland confronted trauma, loss and destruction in their works. However, in 1949, socialist realism was introduced from above, in which art was supposed to monumentalise the worker, idealise the working class and present a positive cult of work, the collective and the state for example Aleksander Kobzdej Pass and the brick and Wojciech Fangor – Figures.

Figure 1

Aleksander Kobzdej's Pass and the brick and Wojciech Fangor's Figures

Aleksander Kobzdej - *Pass the brick*, 1950

Wojciech Fangor - *Figures*, 1950

Source: https://mnwr.pl/podaj-cegle/, https://fangorfoundation.org/catalogue-raisonne/P.109/

Until 1953, until the death of Joseph Stalin, and in practice in Poland especially between 1955 and 1956, modernist art was severely restricted in official circulation because it was considered too Western and "formal."

However, a year later, in 1956, artists and institutions experienced a liberalisation and abstraction, informel and modernism began to be accepted as expressions of cultural progress. This process places Poland in a bigger trend, as modernism is used across Central Europe in the context of artistic freedom after periods of ideological control. Therefore, I believe that modernism in this historical context is not only an aesthetic and an art movement, but also a tool that allows us to distance ourselves from the socialist realist past, to break with unwanted art, and is a symbol of a turn towards modernity. With this knowledge, can we consider

modernism to be symbolic compensation for the past? I leave this question open, but the aesthetics of modernism have certainly been used repeatedly to construct a narrative about modern Poland, which is capable of creating art on a comparable level to European artistic centres. Between the 1960s and 1970s, the Polish authorities recognised modernist design and architecture as successful evidence of a civilisational project and as a language of aspiration, especially where modern form was exportable and prestigious. Modernism was, in a sense, ahead of the economic conditions in Poland and became a sign of modernity.

Therefore, we can postulate that modernism became a tool for neutralising geopolitical remoteness. Despite political isolation, modernism allowed countries behind the Iron Curtain to position their statehood within transnational culture. This enabled Poland to build its aesthetic soft power. At that time, modernist exhibitions were organised abroad, showcasing the dynamism of Polish art. Among the most important Western presentations of this type, I would include the exhibition Fifteen Polish Painters at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1 August–1 October 1961), curated by Peter Selz. The museum highlighted that this was the first such extensive presentation of new Polish painting in the United States, including 75 works from the late 1950s to 1961, which served as institutional legitimisation of Poland's presence in the transnational language of modernity. At the same time, Polish commercial art, especially the Polish School of Posters, developed by Henryk Tomaszewski, Jan Lenica, Waldemar Świerzy and Roman Cieślewicz the aesthetics of abbreviation, metaphor and modern typography became an "export language" that could be communicated across language barriers. It is also worth mentioning here that the works of these artists constituted a distinct and recognisable aesthetic that gained international renown. The modernist style was also a communication strategy in Poland, for example through modernist architecture, which functioned and continues to function today as a legacy of modernity, and at the same time as a field of dispute over the protection and reinterpretation of the memory of the Polish People's Republic. I am referring here to the "Spodek" as a futuristic symbol of Katowice or the Central Station in Warsaw. Piotr Piotrowski's concept, described in his book In the Shadow of Yalta, argues that Polish modernism is equal, not secondary. Piotrowski develops the perspective of "horizontal art history," in which Central and Eastern Europe is not an addendum to the West, but an equal field for the creation of modernity and its own idioms of modernism. As you might guess, the goal of modernism was simplicity, rationalism and functionality, but what about aesthetics? These values do indeed reappear in many varieties of modernism, but modernism is not uniform, so it is worth recognising specific visual codes and asking how they are framed by institutions and used in narratives about modern Poland.

Modernism can also be treated as cultural memory and as a narrative tool. We should take a closer look at the concept of safe memory, a form of collective memory that is relatively consensual and "canonical," less conflictual, because it organises the past through the selection and stabilisation of common meanings in the public space. Until now, I and art historians in general have written about this trend as professional design, modernity or form. And this is where the tension comes in: form can be a "safe" language of memory, because it allows us to talk about modernity without getting into disputes about ideology and the conditions of its emergence. Have I mentioned propaganda yet? Not yet, but it is worth having it in mind, not only in the sense of literal political content, but also as propaganda of modernity and image, the way in which the state communicates itself through aesthetics.

Although modernism in Polish culture is also an ephemeral nostalgia, a regaining of identity after the war, it often served the regime, as it functioned within specific institutional conditions that regulated the visibility of art (what entered the public sphere and what remained outside

it). In this context, it is worth remembering that there were institutions and procedures that decided what could be shown in public and what could not, what art deserved subsidies, and there was censorship, including the refusal to grant permission to travel abroad to exhibitions. Art in the People's Republic of Poland did not operate in a free market. For about 40 years, the Polish economy was centrally planned and modelled on Soviet models, characterised by nationalisation and state control over production and distribution, which also had consequences for culture, as the state was the key disposer of resources, institutions and the mobility of artists. Although modernism did not promote political slogans, it was an element of the state's presentation, i.e. soft power, even though the term did not exist at the time.

Joseph S. Nye from Harvard defines soft power in his 1990 book Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power as the ability to achieve desired results through attraction and appeal rather than coercion or payment. He also points out that the sources of soft power are primarily culture, political values and the perceived legitimacy of state policies. Importantly for the analysis of cultural diplomacy, Nye emphasises that soft power usually works indirectly: many of its resources remain beyond the direct control of the government and depend on the acceptance of the audience, which is why it particularly well describes situations in which modernist aesthetics function as a transnationally legible “code of attractiveness” in the promotion of heritage.

In the concept of propaganda I mentioned earlier, he refers to the fact that contemporary museum narratives define modernism as outstanding design or the fresh language of modern form, which encourages modernism to function as a “safe memory” told through aesthetics. In fact, modernism was often shaped by state mechanisms of selection, as it was the state that financed, allowed circulation and represented it to the outside world. In this sense, I understand “propaganda” here rather as image policy and visibility management, and not exclusively as literal ideological messages. Aleida Assmann (a researcher of cultural memory, associated with the University of Konstanz) points out that the canon is a selection of what we consider to be representative heritage, and that selection is always political. Hence, modernism is not simply a neutral aesthetic legacy, but an element of history and memory politics in Poland. Whether this legacy is positive, negative or neutral is something I leave you to judge for yourselves. It is worth remembering the words of Sharon Macdonald (heritage anthropologist, associated with Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): heritage is a process of negotiation; “difficult heritage” can be tamed through aesthetics and narrative selection.

Poland 100 is a format for conducting a commemorative policy instrument for Poland by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, prepared on the occasion of the centenary of Poland regaining its independence. Its aim was to present Polish culture abroad in such a way as to awaken interest in Polish history and modernity among the audience and to show what is alive and current in Polish culture. Taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the 100th anniversary of regaining independence, the programme reinforced the international message about the strength and originality of Polish culture, which has been developing for over a thousand years, as well as its heritage. The programme was implemented almost worldwide under the slogan “Inspired by the past, we create the future.” As part of the programme, 240 cultural events were organised in 65 cities from the USA through Europe, with particular emphasis on Central Europe, to Asia. It is also worth mentioning that Poland 100 was part of the Long-Term Government Programme “Niepodległa” (Independent), entrusted by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage to the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. It was the largest project promoting Polish culture after 1989.

I would include five goals in the policy goals, including: Communication goal: to awaken interest in history and modernity, to show what is "alive and current." Cultural diplomacy goal: promotion of culture and exchange between artists and institutions around the world (the language of "cultural exchange"). Image goal: to "promote the Polish brand" and create an image of Poland (strictly state language). Memory goal in the "branding" version: the programme's slogan ("Inspired by the past, we create the future") as a synthetic formula combining memory and the future in the category of memory branding. European/regional goal: explicitly stated in the IAM communication – strengthening the image of Poland as part of a common European identity + special consideration for Central Europe. The programme had seven strategies: Music of Freedom (classical music strategy), Polish Jazz (contemporary music strategy), Constructors of a New Reality (visual arts strategy), Polish Design in the Perspective of 100 Years (design strategy), A New Vision of Theatre (theatre strategy), Polish Film Art (film strategy) and New Technologies, which included a guide to N18 on Culture.pl Where is Poland? A Foreigner's Guide to Polish Culture under the Partitions. Modernism within the framework of Poland 100 fell into the strategy: design (the history of Polish design; design in the context of Central and Eastern Europe) and visual arts/avant-garde (e.g. "Avant-garde: from the interwar period to today," "the search for a national style").

Let's focus now on memory branding, the emblem of memory. For the purposes of this article, let's assume that memory branding is a strategy in which the state and its institutions select elements of the past and package them into a coherent narrative and aesthetic in order to build a recognisable image of the country. We could distinguish three components here that highlight this definition: selection of memory (what enters the canon and what is lost forever), aestheticization (how the form "carries" the message), distribution (where and to whom it goes: exhibitions, campaigns, partnerships).

In this context, the Poland 100 programme covers a wide range of strategies and topics from music and film to design, visual arts and avant-garde which is why the slogan acts as a discursive meta-frame that organises this diversity into a single narrative. The programme's slogan, "Inspired by the past, we create the future," establishes a temporal vector of past vs. future, inscribing the programme's message in cultural progress and heritage protection. At the same time, the past is encoded here as a creative and legitimate resource ("inspiration") rather than as a field of conflict of memory, settlements or interpretative disputes. Thanks to this, the slogan enables the selective integration of various heritage themes into a coherent message in which historicity is subordinated to the logic of designing the future. Let us also look at the (in my opinion) key role of the pronoun "we," which creates a collective agent, spanning the national community, cultural institutions and the state as an actor in public policy. As a result, the slogan not only organises the programme's communication, but also stabilises the interpretative framework in which culture becomes a tool for a visible, transnationally understandable narrative about Poland as a country of "modern tradition."

In Aleida Assmann's perspective, the selection of the past takes place through institutional canonisation, in which certain phenomena are privileged as "representative" of the community's cultural memory, while others remain in the realm of the archive. In the "Poland 100" programme, modernism particularly "falls" into the areas of design and visual/avant-garde arts, which helps to build a narrative of Poland as a country rooted in modernity and at the same time capable of creatively translating its heritage. In this logic, the question of which eras and media achieve canonical status (e.g. modernism and design) and which elements of history are considered internationally "mobile," i.e. communicable through form and visual language without an extensive local context, becomes essential. At the same time, the process

of canonisation is supported by the aestheticisation of memory: modernist visual language – abstraction, functionalism, modernist typography and rational composition acts as a "universal code" translatable in international circulation and as an "aesthetic of competence" legitimising culture through professionalism and design quality. In this way, form facilitates the creation of a "safe memory" because it allows us to talk about modernity and heritage in terms of aesthetic appeal, without having to enter into conflictual and polarised fields of historical interpretation.

If modernist form can act as a "vehicle" for cultural memory, its effectiveness is most fully manifested in specific visual realisations and their institutional frameworks of circulation. In this section, we will compare the semiotic reading of two works: Wojciech Fangor's B 103 (1966) and Maria Jarema's Penetrations I (1957).

Figure 2

Wojciech Fangor's B 103 and Maria Jarema's Penetrations I

Wojciech Fangor - *B 103*, 1966 Maria Jarema - *Penetrations I*, 1957

Source: https://fangorfoundation.org/pl/catalogue-raisonne/P.531/, https://zasoby.msl.org.pl/arts/view/493

I understand "semiotic reading" as an analysis of how an image produces meaning through the organisation of visual signs (colour, figure-ground relations, rhythm, edge modulation, spatial effect). I treat the concept of state-sponsored memory aesthetics operationally here: as a situation in which the aesthetics of modernism are incorporated into the practice of memory politics through public institutions or state-funded programmes, thus becoming a tool for building the image and legitimising a specific narrative of "modern Poland."

In Fangor's case, the status of "B 103" as a work with high communicative "mobility" is crucial. The image creates the effect of a positive illusory space through the concentric organisation of the field and soft tonal transitions that generate the impression of radiation and pulsation; in this sense, it is both "legible" in the local canon of post-war abstraction and compatible with the international idiom of 1960s abstraction. (including, in terms of reception, with the op-art regime of vision). At the level of denotation, we obtain an almost "pure" perceptual situation (colour, halo, centre, expansion towards the edges), and at the level of connotation, a code of modernity understood as the rationalisation of vision, experimentation and professional craftsmanship. This is what makes "B 103" a convenient emblem in promotional narratives: the institution can "express modernity" through its form alone, without the need for extensive historical commentary. It is worth clearly naming the "type of founder" in the sense of the

current regime of visibility: B 103 appears in Abstraction.PL (Olomouc, 2018), co-organised by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute as part of POLSKA 100, financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in the NIEPODLEGŁA 2017–2021 programme.

In contrast, Maria Jarema's Penetrations I activates a different but complementary model of encoding modernity. The technique combining monotype and tempera painting (paper/canvas) reinforces the impression of interpenetrating planes: rich, organically modelled forms remain in dynamic relation with a translucent, "foggy" top layer. It emphasises the category of pulsating movement spreading in multiple directions and a consistent pursuit of abstraction through the elimination of mimetic references, which allows this work to be read as a semiotic "encoding" of relationality, tensions and dynamics (and not just a formal programme). Equally important here is the "type of founder" in the historical sense: Penetrations I belongs to a series shown at the 1958 Venice Biennale in the Polish Pavilion. This context shifts the image from the level of autonomy to the field of representation: modernism functions not only as an artistic language, but also as a resource of the "official visibility" of culture in international circulation.

Here, modernism as an emblem and communication of memory has two modes of operation:

1. the contemporary mode, in which institutions select and medially format modernism as the canon of "modern tradition" in cultural diplomacy (here: POLSKA 100 and Abstraction.PL),
2. historical mode, in which abstraction functions as a language of representation in conditions of geopolitical competition for visibility (here: Venice 1958).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that the story of Polish modernism as an emblem of memory is also the history of the region and the history of the global circulation of art. In Central Europe, modernism often served as a language of modernisation and aspiration, and today it is sometimes used as a reputational resource: it allows a country to talk about itself through the canon of modernity, and not only through trauma or geopolitical divisions. The Poland 100 programme is a good example here, as it shows how the state organises memory in the form of communication formats and institutional partnerships, activating soft power mechanisms. My methodological proposal is to study these processes simultaneously at the level of visual form and at the level of policy instruments because only then can we see how modernism "works" as diplomacy. And this is also an invitation to make comparisons: with other countries in the region and with other nation branding strategies based on modern art.

References

Assmann, A. (2008). Canon and archive. In A. Erll & A. Nünning (Eds.), *Cultural memory studies: An international and interdisciplinary handbook*. De Gruyter.

Assmann, A. (2011). *Cultural memory and Western civilization: Functions, media, archives*. Cambridge University Press.

Crowley, D. (2008). Socialist realism. In D. Crowley & J. Pavitt (Eds.), *Cold war modern: Design 1945–1970*. V&A Publishing.

Davies, N. (2005). *God's playground: A history of Poland* (Vol. 2). Oxford University Press.

Fangor Foundation. (n.d.). *B 103* (P.531). https://fangorfoundation.org/pl/catalogue-raisonne/P.531/

Fangor Foundation. (n.d.). *Figures* (P.115). https://fangorfoundation.org/catalogue-raisonne/P.115/

Instytut Adama Mickiewicza. (n.d.-a). *Obchody 100-lecia* [100th anniversary celebrations]. https://iam.pl/pl/zagraniczny-program-obchodow-100-lecia-odzyskania-przez-polske-niepodleglosci

Instytut Adama Mickiewicza. (n.d.-b). *Program POLSKA 100* [POLAND 100 program]. https://iam.pl/pl/programy/program-polska-100

Macdonald, S. (2009). *Difficult heritage*. Routledge.

Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu. (n.d.). *Podaj cegłę* [Pass the brick]. https://mnwr.pl/podaj-cegle/

The Museum of Modern Art. (n.d.). *Fifteen Polish painters.* https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3427

Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi. (n.d.). *Jarema: Penetrations I.* https://zasoby.msl.org.pl/arts/view/493

Nye, J. S., Jr. (1990). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. Basic Books.

Piotrowski, P. (2009). *In the shadow of Yalta*. Reaktion Books.

Where Is Poland. A foreigner's guide. (n.d.). https://whereispoland.com/en

The Art of Antonella Trovarelli – Creation Through Chaos

Jytte Holmqvist, Lund University, Sweden

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper gives voice to bold and experimental Italo-Argentinian Antonella Trovarelli. Most recently artist in residence a *Ab*ra Espacio contemporary art gallery in San José, Costa Rica, her professional trajectory has taken her from strength to strength. Breaking ground while at work at Museo C.A.V. La Neomudéjar in Madrid, Trovarelli has made an indelible impact creating in her designated studio in the Associations Lab section of former brutalist and cutting-edge regional contemporary art space Zapadores/ Ciudad Del Arte Museo Siglo XXI; a politically activist, visual accompaniment to the Neomudéjar avant-garde art center in the vicinity of the Atocha railway station in an obscure part of Madrid proper. The provocative pieces at transfixing Zapadores contrasted starkly with the notion of art as beauty. Rather, covering an expansive art space that has since ceased to exist, were works that hurled us back to Spain's dark Francoist past. Images of executed soldiers, and torture victims shocked into silence. Audiences were reminded of the brutality of a regime that haunts Spanish citizens to date. Trovarelli, in turn, engages with identity and migration politics through abstract, primitive and anthropomorphic figures that verge on the grotesque, challenge the viewer and leave room for interpretation. This paper argues that Chaos is needed for a creative spark to fly and draws on Stewart Elliot Guthrie's anthropomorphic theories pondering what role animal symbolism plays in Trovarelli's art, if her skeletal figures can escape their liminal space in the existential margins, and what diasporic message is conveyed through her art.

Keywords: art, Argentina, Italian diaspora, Antonella Trovarelli, essentialism, anthropomorphism

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction and Scaling It All Down to Basics (Not So Basic After All)

Our discourse is specifically concerned with identity and belonging, migration politics and movement across cultural borders and divides as well as about how people, artists and visionaries concerned with the human condition maintain and express their identities through diverse cultural forms – including written, visual, figurative, and material culture. The paper takes an interest in the idea of identities in motion or unfixed identities that can be said to be in flux when the subject that once belonged in a certain culture and was steeped in that context decides to move away from reality as they know it, taking with them their key learnings and discoveries as takeaways to draw from and expand further on as they themselves enter a new cultural and political context and thereby are compelled to reexamine their own shifting identity. Antonella Trovarelli is a perfect example of an artist proud of her multiethnic and racially diverse national heritage, who reexamines what it means to be Argentinian with Italian heritage in an international setting as she now carves a space for herself in Europe and Madrid. Hailing from the historical city of San Rafael in the southern semi-arid region of Mendoza, at the intersection with Chile and the Andes, Trovarelli is informed and influenced by the fate of her European forefathers, their departures, physical and metaphorical journeys, and new beginnings in faraway lands.

From Italy to Argentina to Spain; homes away from home. Trovarelli, fuelled by a creative mind, explores what it means to be human in an increasingly technocratic, non-human or, rather, non-humane universe governed by a set of identity politics that she herself cannot always relate to (and where autocratic leaders in East and West are incapable of seeing the bigger picture; stuck in a dogmatic mindset not in keeping with that of global citizens moving with the times who have to adapt flexibly to new conditions and situations; and we may wonder if we have learnt anything from the global pandemic?). Artist and visionary Antonella Trovarelli – free, bold and beautiful – uses anthropomorphic imagery as a semi-political platform to work from, allowing her to share her queries, ideas and ideals. As an experimental artist with Madrid as her more permanent place of residence since 2015, she has carved a new space for herself and allows her spirit to run wild as an artist in residence crossing boundaries and opening new horizons. I first met Trovarelli while she was fervently at work at aforementioned Zapadores/ Ciudad Del Arte Museo Siglo XXI, a "[c]ontemporary art cultural space in Fuencarral" and "[o]ne of the sites where Franco's army would learn to build railroads, bridges and trenches" (MadridNoFrills, 2019). Converted to fit modern requirements, this is (was):

> 'a city of art' that hosts all kinds of artists, gallerists, associations, curators and museums, who seek to create a space for reflection and is committed to the new voices of art. '…' It is also home to a citadel of artists with the studios of self-managed artists, an Associations Lab, which boasts its own workspaces, and a specific hall to develop their activities, such as conferences, exhibitions, workshops or debates. (https://www.esmadrid.com/en/tourist-information/ciudad-arte-museo-zapadores)[1]

After the permanent closing down of this popular and mindboggling extensive artistic space in the summer of 2024 for urban development reasons – a drastic move from the point of view of the importance of safeguarding cutting-art art spaces (perhaps rather than "galleries," which seems too lame a word in the context of Zapadores) which sparked public outcry –Trovarelli was invited by artistic director Néstor Prieto to move her studio to the other cooperative

[1] Note that this website has since been removed.

headquarters at the central Museo La Neomudéjar. She now works full time in a building that "used to belong to the old Atocha station, and the end of the railway line went right up to its door, where materials were unloaded directly from the freight wagons" (Welcome to Madrid, 2019).

Trovarelli's abstract art is drenched in earthy intense colours and presents us with figures that come across as confronting at first and verge on the grotesque but that are closer to us than what we may initially have realised. Drawing on "essentialism", or *esencialismo* in her native Spanish, Trovarelli's art corresponds theoretically and in essence with what Stewart Elliot Guthrie defines, when referring to the anthropomorphic form, or "anthropomorphism" (from the Greek *anthropos* – "human" and *morphe* – "form") as "pervading human thought and action" and "the interpretation of nonhuman things and events in terms of human characteristics" (Guthrie, 1993, Preface). Often drawing a link between anthropomorphism and religion, which he feels clearly needs a theory, Guthrie argues that "… anthropomorphism is not restricted to religion but pervades secular thought and actions as well so that human features seem to appear throughout nature and even among artifacts" (Guthrie, 2012, p. 1).

He explains, "[w]hen we first see something (e.g., a shadow in an alley) as human or humanlike but later see it as something nonhuman, we may call our earlier interpretation anthropomorphism" (Guthrie, 1993, p. 2). More specifically:

> Inevitably and automatically, we all anthropomorphize. We see punishment in accidents, faces in clouds, and purpose everywhere. Such illusory perceptions tell us more about ourselves than about the world. Most arrestingly, they tell us about the kind of thought and action, and the kind of experience, we call religion. (Guthrie, 1993, preface, viii)

Fast forward to today and Antonella Trovarelli's skeletal art – where colours express chaotic states and conditions that, when expressed through certain patterns, reflect emotions, opinions, standpoints and desires, scale it all down to basics – lays bare the essence of who we are. And, most probably, there is something divine in that. A dizzying possibility of stepping away from surface hype and artifice and, rather, stepping into our authentic selves (alter egos?) if we dare. Trovarelli's primitive yet silently expressive anthropomorphic figures are inspired by what she has observed in nature and in partially inanimate objects. When these arresting visual and geological formations and observations, with the artist drawn to shells, stones, bones and carcasses, are depicted on canvas they have been physically transformed into angular figures that reflect and come to represent our concerns, preoccupations and preferences and stand out from any given crowd. Upright and forthright and with nothing to hide, Trovarelli's skeletons clad in outfits that make a statement, symbolically become our alter egos and may come across as macabre and most definitely confronting at first sight. And yet, at closer observation they begin to make sense, come across as liberating, and serve to set us free. Reassuringly devoid of layers of human pretence they lead the way forward into our acceptance of difference and a welcoming of free mind and free will. With that they engage in identity politics and suggest that it is quite possible for us to keep shifting and embrace new – as well as our true – identities. And on a larger, macro-level, society, which moves through its own chapters also on a collective level, ought to do the same. Trovarelli's art offers an alternative way for us to view and consider our fellow citizens and the world around us. Just like Guthrie's theorized "faces in the clouds" – where these imagined faces spring from our need to humanize and make sense of what we see in nature – may exist, or not, depending on the way we look at it, and should

have nothing to hide either. There is most definitely something divinely superior in that liberation from everything that weighs us down.

Post her Costa Rica sojourn, Trovarelli's focus and approach have shifted somewhat as the external landscape seems to gain an increased initial presence on canvas. But, again, it is the chaos of colours that does its own talking and where these bold brush strokes resemble a landscape that then morphs into figures (the figures or characters thus become a part of the land, in a Gaia-like fashion and in line with the primordial idea that "[i]n the beginning, there was chaos—a vast, formless expanse. From this primordial state, essential figures and elements emerged") (Mythology Worldwide, 2025). Trovarelli is now embarking on a slightly different path and informs me (in a voicemail from 25 December 2025) that her figures and the next step in their visual metamorphosis from animal state to increasingly human look-a-like:

> …. are the same characters who previously went through [this] process of transformation. They shed layers of what they have acquired and inherited from institutions, family, education, the church, the state, etc., until they reach the essence of what we all have in common, as in the first series... until all they have left is their naked bodies stripped to the bones – a metaphor of bones, which is that we humans all have in common.
>
> Having gone through this stripping away of concepts, they enter society and wear clothes, wear skin, wear scars, but now they can materialise from there, creating a collective process by being able to physically inhabit the urban space.[2]

As has been suggested, Trovarelli's abstract creations take shape from the chaos of colours that stem from the essentialist tradition (explained further in the next section) and face us straight on. Their bodies may be on an angle, but their gaze follows us all the same. And yet, are we not all skeletons at base; is it not time we rid ourselves of the layers and layers of artifice that distance us from our natural state? Their artist and creator, now 42-year-old Antonella Trovarelli – who identifies with the essence of her own politicized figures that lead a way forward to a bigger truth– is concerned with the human condition, who we have become, what we do that detracts us from who we ought to be and are at base, and what defines us as that which we are not.

Antonella Trovarelli – Working in the Spirit of "Esencialismo"

Self-made plastic artist Trovarelli's professional trajectory began in earnest in 2007. That's when her career was kickstarted as she gained a place in the "Taller del Esencialismo" (Essentialist studios or workshops) in Buenos Aires. With that she found her essence, she adopted her art form, and she gained a new family of equals similarly querying what lies beneath and exists beyond.

[2] In her original Spanish Trovarelli appears to reveal more about herself: "Este enfoque en realidad tiene que ver con lo anterior. Son los mismos personajes que antes pasaron por ese proceso de transformación. De irse quitando capas, capas de lo adquirido, de lo heredado entorno a las instituciones, tales como la familia, la educación, la iglesia, el estado. Hasta llegar a lo esencial que es todo lo que tenemos en común, como en la primera series, hacen este proceso, ¿no? Hasta quedarse en los huesos, en esta metáfora de huesos que es lo que todos los seres humanos tenemos en común. Habiendo pasado por este proceso, esta transformacion, esta descarnación de conceptos, se paran en la sociedad y llevan ropa, llevan piel, llevan cicatrices, pero ya pueden materializarse. Desde allí, desde haber pasado por ese proceso individual están creando un proceso colectivo al poder habitar físicamente (con ropa, con piel) un espacio – que en ese sentido sería lo urbano (porque yo he vivido casi toda mi vida en las ciudades)."

Nationally and internationally acknowledged, she has since gone from strength to strength. In her bold and impressive art that loosely resembles that of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) Trovarelli ventures away from traditional notions of aesthetic beauty. While she is informed by artistic conventions, constantly engaged in research (books and poetry, artworks and encounters with other artists) and always open to new discoveries, she says her inspiration comes from the creative process itself ("inspiración, para mi es trabajo"). She has found her own style and way forward in a field where her contributions are important and much needed. In this paper we showcase some aspects of her art and share her responses to rather existential questions. Trovarelli's art is a manifestation of fluid identities that undergo a sense of Deleuzian becoming something else and are likened to "lines of flight" and a kind of *reterritorialization*: "[a]ll organizations, all the systems [he] calls biopower, in effect reterritorialize the body" (Deleuze, 2006, p. 131). Through her naked essentialist art, Trovarelli reaches through to the essence and puts things in perspective – and alignment. She takes a stance and dares reterritorialize the body through a type of art that reflects her efforts to strip the body of its superficiality and move beyond surface and vanity. In that clear message she urges us to delve deeper, to scrutinise who we are, and to resist external labels, societal norms and un-freeing expectations.

In the upcoming transcribed interview translated into English, which constitutes the final part of this brief paper, Antonella Trovarelli does her own talking. Her responses reflect an approach to art, life and the world which corresponds, in part, with both Bauman (who talks of the time of "modernity" in the following fashion: "These are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase in the history of modernity"; a statement applicable to society also today) (Bauman, 2000, p. 2) and Deleuze. The latter left behind

> a philosophical legacy that went on to influence numerous academic disciplines: continental philosophy, cinema studies, literary theory, cultural criticism, social and political theory, LGBTQ studies, art and architecture theory, as well as the growing field of animal studies and environmental theory. (Parr, 2015)

We argue that Trovarelli ventures beyond the human and the readily identifiable by focusing on our original primitive state – which connects us all. She ultimately demonstrates that we have much in common and reminds us of the importance to look beyond gender, heteronormative narrowmindedness and racial differences and for us to engage and connect on a more all-encompassing universal, human to human level. Her artworks, large-scaled and powerful, delve into the abstract but her images and the titles conferred to these works urge us to engage in current issue and debates.

Figure 1
Photo of Antonella Trovarelli at Museo La Neomudéjar (Jytte Holmqvist). 20 October 2024

Interview With Antonella Trovarelli: Madrid 20 October 2024 (With References to Zapadores, Which Is Now Permanently Closed)

How would you define art and what is its purpose or aim? Does art exist to please us, provoke us, or both at once?

For me Art is Art ("Arte es Arte") and represents what I believe in. On the other hand, the intrinsic meaning of this word changes according to historical changes and eras affecting humans through the ages; it is a discipline totally linked to its context. I think art needs to question the reality we live in. It is important to seek beauty, the aesthetic, beyond what this may mean for each artist, and to challenge the spectator.

Do your artworks fit into the broad, brutalist setting of Zapadores/ Ciudad Del Arte Museo Siglo XXI, where several exhibitions and exhibits provoke a sense of existential angst and refer to Spain's Francoist past? Do you, too, communicate a brutalist message?

I think my work fits in Zapadores because it is raw and direct and talks about identity. Sometimes when people see it, they experience a sense of anguish or shock. Then they discover, little by little, new elements that allow them to embark on an inner journey.

Is your art inserted into a theoretical framework and how do you distinguish "essentialism" from "existentialism"; which also influences your work?

My work is inserted into the theoretical crossroads of gender studies, identity, science fiction, robots, animals, and anthropology. I'm passionate about reading and find the evolution of the ideas on which we build what we call society very interesting. When I started painting, I spent two years learning "Esencialismo pictórico", a movement formed by Heriberto Zorrilla and Helena Distefano in Buenos Aires; both my teachers and mentors. Here the development and execution of the artwork is based on desire, not on planning. While *existentialism* proposes a more dynamic and subjective vision of life and identity, for *essentialism* there is already a meaning or an essence. In my work as a painter, I use the essentialist technique but then I turn to existentialism and my work gains deeper meaning or value.

Please tell us something about your professional trajectory: Where does your fascination with the anthropomorphic form come from and do your rather confronting skeletal figures carry human characteristics?

I am a self-taught painter, I started painting when I was 25, now I am 41. At first, I painted abstract art, then the figures came out of the stains, little by little, until I reached the anthropomorphic forms that have to do with the desert, my inner desert. I was born in Argentina in San Rafael, Mendoza. There you go to the countryside to walk and it's all dry, there are animal bones, cows, rodents, etc., in the mountains. With the passing of time and the creation of the series "Desheredar lo humano", these anthropomorphic forms took on more prominence; they refer to a group of people or beings who don't adapt to prevailing social norms – either because they don't want to, or because they can't, or because the system itself rejects them. In this context, these beings desire freedom and are peeling off layers until they reach the deepest part which are the bones and what all human beings have in common. These figures represent emotional states and thoughts. In this sense they have to do with my personal history since they are born from an inner desire to express myself and to live; they have to do with emotions I have felt, situations I have gone through, and people I have met. That is why I am interested in people, in our pains, miseries and glories, the way in which we elaborate our thoughts and live or inhabit Planet Earth through the centuries.

You have exhibited your work across the world – e.g. in Argentina (Buenos Aires and Mendoza), Spain (Valencia and Madrid), England, Croatia, Italy and Israel – and since 2015 you live and work in Spain. Does your art communicate a diasporic or migratory message to the audience?

My characters are identities that are always active, never standing still. These identities are affected by an unstable global context. As such, they reflect an internal and external diaspora; some mutate and adapt to the system, others escape; all in pursuit of survival or looking for their place. I believe that in today's world and as a painter you must be in constant movement. Art is similarly affected by these new structures of global interaction.

Chaos is your driving force – you find "a stimulus in chaos"; this is how you describe your creative process. Is this chaos external or internal and is there harmony and order in chaos and disruption? Is chaos necessary for humanity to move towards another state where we grow with new realisations and discoveries?

Art is germinated by Chaos, and the painter must then find structure in that chaos. If that created structure or image doesn't work or works only momentarily, it needs to return to Chaos to forge a new identity. As for humanity, I wish it were that easy, but it is not. You can't go in and out of chaos "en masse", there are too many borders, boundaries and divisions. But I suppose we can learn from every situation and draw strength to move forward.

"The bite of the queer mosquito": What prompted you to create this work?

The painting ("La picadura del mosquito queer") was born as a response to the phrases or statements that say that homosexuality is a disease. So, I decided to create the mosquito that transmits that plague, it's a way of responding to the verbal aggressions heard out there. I think humour is very important for survival.

Zygmunt Bauman was interested in fluid identities and liquid states, including liquid love. What is love for you? Are we living in an increasingly liquid or fluid universe?

I think love is a feeling, I like to think of a phrase by writer James Baldwin who says that "love has never been a very popular movement, and no one has ever really wanted to be free. The world is really sustained by the love and passion of a few" (specifically, "[l]ove has never been a popular movement." Why? Because "no-one's ever wanted, really, to be free"). (Ayoub, 2024).

Perhaps we live in a more fluid world, obviously things are changing, there are structures that are more affected than others because also their configuration never really worked, and some people have decided to stop sustaining them in the traditional way and instead look for new ways of relating to one another. On the other hand, I think that whatever flows, the system picks it up and rigidifies it again and makes it the norm. We have created a complex civilisation, especially in [terms of] social, class, identity, state issues. A constant trap traversed by control and power structures.

Figure 2
From Trovarelli's Private Collection (Instagram). ©Antonella Trovarelli

Does accepting or approaching a fluid or liquid identity enable us to cross boundaries and break down cultural, national and psychological barriers?

I believe so, accepting a fluid identity can be a tool to break down barriers and cross borders, especially in cultural, national and psychological terms. This tool opens the possibility to explore greater personal freedom and to break down some rigid socially established norms, within contexts suitable for its development and deepening.

According to Paul Ricœur,"non-linguistic symbolic systems such as gestures, sounds and pictures also have the power to make and remake the world" (1991, 2016). Does your art engage with memory and belonging?

Yes, in my work there is an internal memory of landscape, colours, states, cities, people. And of belonging and not belonging, on the other hand. The question of immigration brings these two themes together.

Does the abstract form allow your viewer to imagine and interpret your work in their own way?

I believe a work is finished when the viewer sees it as complete; not until then. The abstract form allows more freedom to imagine. I also consider myself a spectator of my own work, since one part of the creative process is the making and another is the looking, I am not the same person when I paint as when I look at a work of art, write about it and explain it.

You use a combination of strong colours that sometimes seem to clash with more serious themes or subject matters. This is the case with, for example, "Propagandists for the Working Class", "How to dismantle the dictatorship of patriarchy", and "Moral Monsters." Why these contrasts: light colours, but your themes are dark?

Colours are the main element. All my works are born from colour and the material load, then the themes and characters appear. I don't consider the themes to be dark, perhaps I identify with crude themes and then approach them with a touch of sarcasm.

What are your views on the human vis-à-vis the non-human. Do you take an interest in Cultural Studies as a "subversive" academic field or discipline not confined to certain theories and that pays attention to marginalised subgroups? What separates the human from the non-human and does your humanised animal (or the animalistic form) reflect who we really are: human beings analysable from an anthropomorphic perspective?

I begin to take an interest in cultural studies when my characters don't quite fit into certain social structures. I consider the human, but not as the centre of the universe or the measure of all things. The human species lives in a global ecosystem surrounded by other species with which it shares and inhabits Planet Earth – although most of the time we forget this, and we think that "all of history" arises from the evolution of hominids. We are a meta-narrative within the universal narrative. As for my work, the anthropomorphic forms come from this interrelationship that is maintained and reinforced in our contact with other species and with whom we connect both immediately and spiritually.

Concluding Comments

Through her art that breaks conventions and comments also on the "monstrous feminine" or the "monstrous queer," Antonella Trovarelli engages with issues that need addressing in an increasingly totalitarian world that seems to be going backward rather than forward and that needs enlightening now more than ever. Her voice and insights lead the way and onto a path of greater acceptance, light and understanding. She is a light bearer in a moral darkness and proves how similar we all are at base; when we scale it all down to our not so primitive selves.

Figure 3
Las Bolleras de Turno ©Antonella Trovarelli

Source: Antonella Trovarelli's Exhibition, "Desheredar Lo Humano" https://antonellatrovarelli.com/portfolio/desheredar-lo-humano

Figure 4
Suicidas Del Poliamor ©AntonellaTrovarelli

Source: Antonella Trovarelli's Exhibition, "Desheredar Lo Humano" https://antonellatrovarelli.com/portfolio/desheredar-lo-humano

Figure 5
Orgia Transfeminista ©Antonella Trovarelli

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank and acknowledge Antonella Trovarelli for her time and willingness to share insights into her artistic journey and provide responses to my questions about her art and with regard to the thoughts and efforts that have gone into the creative process. Her anthropomorphic figures comment boldly on the state of the world today and the power of individuals to choose to go their own way and opt for alternative lifestyles, in order to make a real difference and break away from limiting norms and conventions.

References

Ayoub, E. J. (2024, August 2). Condemned to be an optimist: Celebrating James Baldwin – Why Baldwin, who would have turned 100 today, believed that there is always hope. *Shado. See. Hear. Act. Do*: https://shado-mag.com/articles/opinion/condemned-to-be-an-optimist-celebrating-james-baldwin/

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press.

Deleuze, G. (2006). *Two regimes of madness: texts and interviews 1975–1995*. Semiotext(e).

Guthrie, S. E. (1993). *Faces in the Clouds*: *A New Theory of Religion*. Oxford University Press.

Guthrie, S. E. (2012). Anthropomorphism. In A. Runehov & P. M. Pedersen (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions* (pp. 111–113). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8265-8

MadridNoFrills. (2019). *Madrid's secret art city in an abandoned military barracks*. https://madridnofrills.com/zapadores-madrid/

Mythology Worldwide. (2025). https://greek.mythologyworldwide.com/chaos-and-the-nature-of-desire-in-greek-myths/

Parr, A. (2015, November 8). What is Becoming of Deleuze?: A roundtable on the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze on the 20th anniversary of his death. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-is-becoming-of-deleuze/

Ricœur, P. (1991). Review of Nelson Goodman's Ways of Worldmaking. In M. J. Valdés (Ed.), *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (pp. 200–215). Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Welcome to Madrid. (2019). *Eight of Madrid's parks, including El Retiro, are closed to the public until further notice due to severe weather conditions.* https://www.esmadrid.com/en/tourist-information/la-neomudejar

Contact email: jytte.holmqvist@rom.lu.se

Enhancing Preschool Quality: A Survey of CLASS Training Effectiveness in Hawai‘i

Nicole Schlaack, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States
Manca Sustarsic, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States
Benji Whitenack, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States
Aya Marie Lorraine Kouao, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a research-based observational tool widely used to assess teacher–child interactions and enhance program quality in early childhood education (ECE). Over the past several decades, CLASS has been shown to support teacher effectiveness by promoting children’s social and academic development through high-quality interactions. Through the Preschool Development Grant Birth–Five (PDG B–5), Hawai‘i piloted the implementation of CLASS as a statewide program quality assessment tool for preschool settings. Implementation occurred in two phases: Phase I established baseline observations, while Phase II emphasized coaching, training, and professional support. This study presents findings from the CLASS Phase II Survey, conducted in Hawai‘i between December 2024 and January 2025. Phase II activities included pre- and post-observations, debrief meetings, domain-specific workshops across the three CLASS domains, and optional individualized support sessions for ECE teachers, assistants, and administrators from five preschools. The survey examined participants’ perceptions of the training’s effectiveness, level of support, and impact on teaching practices. Findings show that participants were primarily motivated by professional growth and program requirements, and demonstrate increases in knowledge, confidence, and intentionality across all CLASS domains. Qualitative responses highlighted the value of practical strategies, individualized feedback, and reflective debriefing sessions. Finally, the study’s implications support the CLASS Phase II training and recommend its continued implementation with targeted, domain-specific support to ECE teachers and administrators.

Keywords: early childhood education, teaching, professional development, program quality, pre-K

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) provides essential support to young children from birth to age five, laying the foundation for development before formal schooling. ECE includes childcare and instruction by qualified individuals other than the child's parents or caregivers (Morrissey, 2019). These services can take various forms, and occur in diverse settings such as preschools, home-based care, childcare centers, and faith-based programs and are delivered by public and private providers. ECE is an essential service for working families, yet public understanding and engagement with it can shift in social and historical contexts. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role ECE professionals play in supporting both families and the economy (Tait et al., 2023).

Access to high-quality ECE is essential for the well-being of children, families, and communities and has increasingly gained attention among policymakers and service providers. In addition, research has consistently shown that high-quality ECE is associated with gains in child's cognitive functioning, language development, social competence, and emotional regulation (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Studies emphasize the quality of interactions children experience in ECE settings, suggesting that teacher–student interactions play a more direct role in shaping developmental outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008). High quality ECE was also found to mitigate the effects of poverty on children's early development (McCartney et al., 2007; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

While Hawai‘i has made progress in ECE, such as passing Act 46 in 2020 to establish the Ready Keiki Initiative with the goal of universal preschool access by 2032, several gaps remain (National Institute for Early Education Research Hawaii, 2024; Ready Keiki, 2023). According to the Kids Count Databook, only 47% of Hawai‘i's three- and four-year-olds participated in an ECE program (Hawai‘i Children's Action Network, 2022). Many families, particularly those from Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities, face systemic barriers related to access, affordability, and the quality of ECE services (DeBaryshem et al., 2024). To tackle these issues, a mixed-delivery system has emerged for collaboration among federal, state, private, and community-based providers. At the policy level, recent legislative efforts have emphasized partnerships with local communities to strengthen the ECE workforce, improve program quality, and expand access, particularly for infants and toddlers, public preschool initiatives, and early childhood programs, including those that integrate ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i and Native Hawaiian culture.

As the External Evaluator for the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Renewal Grant (PDG B-5), a 3-year initiative that aims to improve ECE systems, we have developed and implemented the Program Performance Evaluation Plan to assess the progress of the PDG B-5 funded activities in Hawai‘i. The project's multiple activities aim to provide improved access to ECE programs, services and resources. As the external evaluator of PDG B-5, the purpose is to: (1) Monitor and assess progress; (2) Measure effectiveness; and (3) Support continuous quality improvement through cross-sector collaboration.

As part of PDG B-5, Hawai‘i piloted the implementation of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) in ECE as a statewide, optional program quality assessment tool for preschool settings. This study presents findings from the CLASS Phase II Survey, conducted in Hawai‘i between December 2024 and January 2025.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a research-based observational tool designed to assess and enhance ECE program quality. CLASS systematically measures the emotional climate of classrooms and the quality of developmentally appropriate instructional practices (Perlman et al., 2016). The growing significance of this tool is reflected in its widespread adoption within statewide ECE quality assurance systems across the United States (National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement, 2013), where results are often used to inform high-stakes funding and decisions on quality improvement.

Over the past several decades, CLASS has been used to evaluate teacher–student interactions and overall classroom quality in prekindergarten settings (Head Start, 2023; Hongli et al., 2019). By emphasizing the quality of interactions, CLASS plays a critical role in supporting teacher effectiveness and promoting children's social, emotional, and academic development (McDoniel et al., 2022; Soininen, et al., 2023).

CLASS is categorized into three domains that support children's learning and development: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (Head Start, 2025).

- **Emotional Support** assesses how educators establish and promote a positive learning community. Classrooms that score well have teachers that are responsive to children, acknowledge children's feelings or emotions, help children resolve problems, redirect challenging behavior, and support positive peer relationships.
- **Classroom Organization** assesses how educators provide classroom routines and procedures related to management of children's behavior, time, and attention in the classroom. It assesses classroom routines and procedures related to the organization and management of children's behavior, time and attention in the classroom. Classrooms feature consistent schedules, well-designed learning centers, established routines, and sensitive and appropriate guidance strategies.
- **Instructional Support** assesses how educators implement curriculum and communication strategies to foster cognitive and language development. Instructional Support assesses the ways in which teachers implement the curriculum to effectively promote cognitive and language development. This domain measures how teachers support and extend children's thinking, problem solving and conversational skills, and vocabulary.

While providers already have accreditation options like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA), CLASS serves as an additional way for programs to demonstrate the health, safety, and well-being of children through standards for operations, environment, and staff to be considered for Preschool Open Door (POD) subsidies. POD funding supports families who are experiencing economic hardships and helps them access preschool programs. This aligns with the state's mixed delivery system approach, supporting not only public preschool expansion but also allowing private providers to offer affordable options through POD.

Methodology

There were two implementation phases supported by the PDG B-5 renewal grant: Phase I: CLASS Baseline Setting, and Phase II: Class Coaching/Training. Phase I was a Baseline Setting study intended to ascertain current program quality and future program quality

thresholds in the state of Hawai'i measured via CLASS student-teacher interactions. CLASS baseline scores were recorded across the Hawaiian Islands from 45 CLASS observations of licensed group child care providers. CLASS observers were recruited and certified, and observations were conducted at various sites. Once CLASS data was collected, data was analyzed and offered to DHS to better inform future Preschool Open Door (POD) funding dissemination. With Phase I completed in offering a snapshot of ECCE program quality, the Department of Human Services (DHS) would have the option to utilize the CLASS study in determining a CLASS satisfactory threshold for future POD funding.

Phase 2 involved pre- and post-observations, debrief meetings, workshop sessions addressing the three CLASS domains, and an optional individual CLASS support session with each of ECE program participants.

Measure

We developed a CLASS Survey instrument to assess participants' experiences and the impact of CLASS Phase II coaching. The survey evaluated participants' knowledge, confidence, application, and improvements in classroom experiences across the three CLASS domains: (1) Emotional support; (2) Classroom organization; and (3) Instructional support, using a 4-point Likert scale of agreement. The survey also examined the relevance of the CLASS training in the teachers' professional work and their overall satisfaction with the training.

Moreover, the survey gathered qualitative feedback for in-depth reflections on the training, motivation for participating, and suggestions for improvement. Demographic information, such as gender, education levels, and ECE professional experience, were collected to provide context for the findings.

The survey was administered at the conclusion of Phase II, from December 2024 to January 2025 online via Google Forms, with an option for hardcopy completion during in-person meetings. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants

Three cohorts participated in CLASS Phase I and Phase II. Participation occurred in three stages, reflecting various levels of engagement and support during the two CLASS phases:

1. Participants were observed and debriefed during one CLASS training round (n = 21).
2. Participants were observed and debriefed during one CLASS training round. In addition, they scheduled a post-debriefing session. Other school staff may have attended these training sessions (n = 10).
3. Participants did all of the above and have received additional or explicit coaching on specific CLASS domains and the scores from their observations (n = 7).

Five out of the nine preschools involved in Phase I elected to participate in Phase II. Since cohort 1 did not receive workshop training of CLASS, they were excluded from the survey. Among Cohorts 2 and 3, eleven (11) teachers, two (2) teacher assistants, and four (4) administrators who were directly or indirectly associated with Phase 2 CLASS training were invited to participate in the survey (n = 17). Seven (7) individuals responded, resulting in a 41% participation rate.

Survey participants included one (1) assistant teacher, two (2) administrators, and four (4) lead teachers. All of the five participating preschools on Kauai and Oʻahu were represented. All have more than ten (10) years of professional experience in the ECE field, except one who indicated having 3–5 years of experience. The educational background of the participants included Associate Degree (3), Bachelor's degree (2), Master's degree (1), and Doctorate or Professional degree (1). Four (4) participants indicated that their school is serving multilingual learners.

Results

The CLASS survey results indicate high levels of agreement across all domains, demonstrating the training's overall positive impact.

Participants' Motivation

Participants were motivated by a desire to improve their teaching practices, stay updated on better strategies, and meet program requirements. One participant shared, "What motivated me was my desire to improve in teaching and to keep up-to-date with better teaching strategies."

Others joined based on leadership recommendations or prior positive experiences, with one participant noting, "I had previously had a one-day training and loved it." Some participated to qualify for Preschool Open Door (POD) funds, while others saw it as a valuable opportunity for growth, stating, "This training is much needed."

CLASS Domains

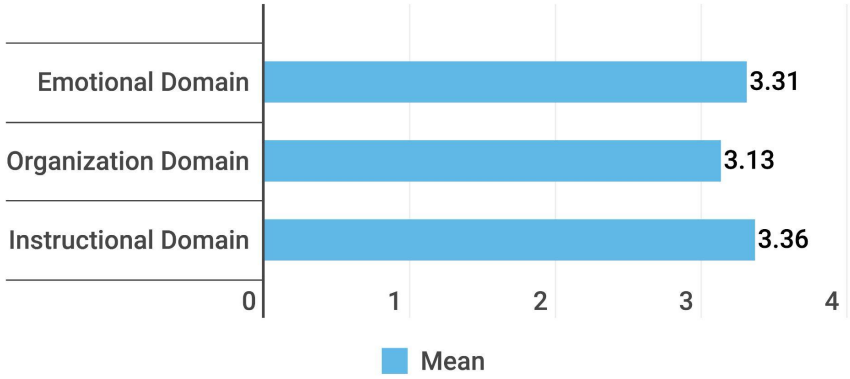
Across CLASS domains, participants reported significant improvements in knowledge and confidence gains. Figure 1 below presents the means of the CLASS domains, and tables in Appendix 1 include the means, standard deviations, and ranges for all survey items.

In the Emotional Support Domain, 100% felt more responsive to children's emotional needs and confident in fostering positive peer relationships, while 85.71% applied skills to support academic needs, with one respondent indicating not applicable.

In the Classroom Organization Domain, participants' responses range from "strongly agree" to "agree," with one participant responding "not applicable" to all items, and only one participant saying "disagree." In the responses, 85.71% indicated improving their understanding and application of classroom procedures and behavior management. However, only 71.43% reported enhancing overall classroom organization, indicating room for improvement in this area.

The Instructional Support Domain showed the strongest results, with 100% of participants gaining confidence in providing quality feedback and supporting children's language and cognitive development. These findings highlight the training's positive impact across all domains, with some areas for continued growth.

Figure 1
Means of the Three CLASS Domains on a 4-Point Likert Scale of Agreement (N = 7)



Source: Authors.

Participation, Relevance, and Satisfaction

Participants overwhelmingly found the CLASS training valuable and relevant to their professional roles. 100% agreed that participating in the training was beneficial, and 100% found it both helpful and scheduled at a convenient time. Additionally, 85.7% reported receiving administrative support to participate.

The training was highly relevant to participants' work and relationships with students, with 100% affirming its applicability. Furthermore, all participants (100%) expressed satisfaction with the quality of the training, the knowledge gained, its delivery, and the feedback received, highlighting the program's overall effectiveness and positive impact.

Learning, Support, and Improvements

Participants reported that the CLASS training significantly enhanced their teaching practices, providing valuable insights into classroom organization, student engagement, and instructional strategies. One participant shared, "The CLASS training has provided me with the knowledge of classroom organization and how to better manage my teaching with my children." Others highlighted how the training helped them reflect on evolving teaching strategies, with one experienced educator noting, "My teacher training began over 40 years ago, and different strategies have been focused on during the past years."

When asked about the most helpful aspects of the training, participants emphasized practical applications, individualized feedback, and structured observations. Many valued the debriefing sessions, which allowed them to analyze their teaching approaches, with one participant stating, "The observations and debriefing sessions allowed me to reflect and learn from what was observed." One-on-one feedback was also highly praised, particularly the trainers' support, with a participant noting, "My one-on-one feedback session gave me insights on what I could improve on as well as my strengths."

For future improvements, participants suggested more practical opportunities, mentoring, and targeted reviews of low-scoring areas. Some recommended observations at different times of the day and the possibility of structuring the training by domain.

Overall, the survey results reflect a strong appreciation for the training, with many participants expressing a desire for others to experience the same program due to its impactful and supportive approach.

Conclusion

The CLASS Survey results from Phase II demonstrate the positive impact of the training on participants' teaching practices. The survey developed for this study served as a critical tool for evaluating the CLASS coaching program, helping to refine and enhance future efforts. Across all domains, participants reported significant improvements in knowledge, confidence, and application. With 100% satisfaction in training quality and delivery, participants highlighted the value of practical applications, individualized feedback, and debriefing sessions. Recommendations for improvement included more practice opportunities, mentoring, and varied observations. Based on the positive feedback, it is recommended to continue the CLASS training with a focus on more domain-specific support and individualized coaching to further enhance teaching practices.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Hawai‘i Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five [grant number 90TP0100].

References

Burchinal, P., Kainz, K., Cai, K., Tout, K., Zaslow, M., Martinez-Beck, I., & Rathgeb, C. (2009). Early care and education quality and child outcomes. Child Trends.

Clarke-Stewart, K. A., Vandell, D. L., Burchinal, M., O'Brien, M., & McCartney, K. (2002). Do regulable features of child-care homes affect children's development? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 17*(1), 52–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(02)00133-3

DeBaryshem, B., Engel, R., Rosenbach-Jordan, S., Soon, RJ'I, Tom, A., Fry, M., Zysman, D., Davis, C., & Rivadeneyra, I. (2024). *Hawaii Early Childhood Comprehensive Needs Assessment: 2024 Update: Our Keiki, Our Ohana, Our Future*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Center on the Family, Ward Research, Hawaii Children's Action Network, Hawaii Integrated Analytics.

Hawai'i Children's Action Network. (2022). KIDS COUNT 2022 Hawai'i Profile. August 8, 2022. https://www.hawaii-can.org/kids_count_2022_hawaii_profile#:~:text=The%20educational%20and%20economic%20well,Casey%20FoundationHeadStart

Head Start. (2023). Designation Renewal System Overview. https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/designation-renewal-system/article/designation-renewal-system-overview.

Head Start. (2025). Use of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) in Head Start Programs. https://headstart.gov/designation-renewal-system/article/use-classroom-assessment-scoring-system-class-head-start-programs

Hongli, L., Jingxuan, L., & Hunter, C. V. (2019). A Meta-Analysis of the Factor Structure of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). *The Journal of Experimental Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2018.1551184

Mashburn, A. J., Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., Downer, J. T., Barbarin, O. A., Bryant, D., Burchinal, M., Early, D. M., & Howes, C. (2008). Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills. *Child Development, 79*(3), 732–749. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01154.x

McCartney, K., Dearing, E., Taylor, B. A., & Bub, K. L. (2007). Quality child care supports the achievement of low-income children: Direct and indirect pathways through caregiving and the home environment. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 28*(5), 411–426. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2007.06.010

McDoniel, M. E., Townley-Flores, C., Sulik, M. J., & Obradović, J. (2022). Widely used measures of classroom quality are largely unrelated to preschool skill development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *59*, 243–253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.12.005

Morrissey, T. (2019). The Effects of Early Care and Education on Children's Health. *Health Affairs*. http://www.healthaffairs.org/do/10.1377/hpb20190325.519221/full/

National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement. (2013). Use of ERS and other program assessment tools in QRIS. *Administration for Children & Families Office of Child Care*, pp. 1–14.

National Institute for Early Education Research. (2024). *State Profile: Hawaii*. https://nieer.org/yearbook/2024/state-profiles/hawaii

Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., Burchinal, M. R., Clifford, R. M., Culkin, M. L., Howes, C., Kagan, S. L., & Yazejian, N. (2001). The Relation of Preschool Child-Care Quality to Children's Cognitive and Social Developmental Trajectories through Second Grade. *Child Development, 72*(5), 1534–1553. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00364

Perlman, M., Falenchuk, O., Fletcher, B., McMullen, E., Beyene, J., & Shah, P. S. (2016). A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of a Measure of Staff/Child Interaction Quality (the Classroom Assessment Scoring System) in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings and Child Outcomes. *PloS One, 11*(12), e0167660. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0167660

Ready Keiki. (2023). *Ensuring all Hawai'i Children are Ready for Kindergarten.* https://www.readykeiki.org/background

Sabol, T. J., & Pianta, R. C. (2012). Recent trends in research on teacher–child relationships. *Attachment & Human Development, 14*(3), 213–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2012.672262

Soininen, V., Pakarinen, E., & Lerkkanen, M. K. (2023). Reciprocal Associations among Teacher–Child Interactions, Teachers' Work Engagement, and Children's Social Competence. *Journal of applied developmental psychology, 85,* 101508. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2022.101508

Tait, M. E., Bogucki, C., Baum, L., Fowler, E. F., Niederdeppe, J., & Gollust, S. E. (2023). News Media Coverage of Childcare: How U.S. Local TV News Framed the Problem Before and During the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 32*(6), 1617–1626. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-023-02573-5

Contact emails: msustars@hawaii.edu
schlaack@hawaii.edu

Appendix

Descriptive Statistics for CLASS Training

Table 1

Participant Responses to CLASS Training by Domain on a 4-Point Likert Scale (N = 7)

Domain	Survey Item	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Emotional Support Domain	My knowledge has improved in the emotional support domain.	3.43	.54	3	4
	I am confident to apply the knowledge gained to support positive peer relationships.	3.14	.38	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children's academic needs.	3.33	.52	3	4
	I am more responsive to children's emotional needs	3.29	.49	3	4
Emotional Support Domain		3.31	.33	3.00	3.75
Classroom Organization Domain	My knowledge has improved in the classroom organization domain.	3.17	.41	3	4
	I am confident to apply the knowledge gained in classroom procedures.	3.33	.52	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children's behavior.	3.17	.41	3	4
	I have improved the quality of my classroom organization.	2.83	.41	2	3
Classroom Organization Domain		3.13	.31	3.00	3.75
Instructional Support Domain	My knowledge has improved in the instructional support domain.	3.43	.54	3	4

	I am confident to apply the skills gained in providing quality feedback to children.	3.29	.49.	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children‘s language development.	3.43	.54	3	4
	I have applied skills gained to support children‘s cognitive development.	3.29	.49	3	4
Instructional Support Domain		3.36	.40	3.00	4.00

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for CLASS Training by Domain on a 4-Point Likert Scale (N = 7)

Domain	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Emotional Support Domain	3.31	.33	3.00	3.75
Classroom Organization Domain	3.13	.31	3.00	3.75
Instructional Support Domain	3.36	.40	3.00	4.00

Table 3

Participation, Relevance and Satisfaction With CLASS Training on a 4-Point Likert Scale (N = 7)

	Survey Item	Mean	SD	Min Score	Max Score
Participation	The CLASS training was helpful.	3.43	.54	3	4
	The CLASS training was scheduled at a time that fit my school schedule.	3.43	.54	3	4
	I received support from my administration to participate in the CLASS training.	3.67	.52	3	4
Participation		3.48	.50	3	4
Relevance	The CLASS training's content was relevant to my work.	3.57	.54	3	4
	The CLASS training's content was relevant to my relationships with students.	3.57	.54	3	4
Relevance		3.57	.53	3	4
Satisfaction	The overall quality of the CLASS training.	3.57	.54	3	4
	The learning or knowledge gained during the CLASS training.	3.43	.54	3	4
	The delivery of the CLASS training.	3.57	.54	3	4
	The feedback received from the CLASS training.	3.71	.49	3	4
Satisfaction		3.57	.47	3	4

Navigating Challenges and Enhancing Access: A Case Study of Infant and Toddler Programs in Hawai‘i

Nicole Schlaack, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States
Manca Sustarsic, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States
Aya Marie Lorraine Kouao, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States
Benji Whitenack, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Early childhood education is critical for child development and family well-being, particularly for children from birth to age five. Still, it is difficult for families to find affordable early childhood education, especially for their infants and toddlers. The Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five supported innovative strategies to increase access and close the gap between available seats and demand for infant and toddler programs. This research includes several sites offering infant and toddler care across the islands of Hawai‘i. Qualitative interviews with program directors offered insights into successful strategies and challenges when increasing the number of seats for infants and toddlers. The programs were able to sustain and provide opportunities for children to receive care, social interactions, and support from the community. Challenges encountered involved workforce shortages, licensing complexities, and addressing parental anxiety and trauma. Strategies for overcoming these included strong partnerships with local organizations and flexible staffing incentives such as sign-on bonuses and covering certification costs. The study also examined support for children with disabilities, highlighting the Individualized Family Support Plan process. The findings highlighted an opportunity to strengthen the early intervention system by making it more centralized and transparent, which could help families and providers more easily access resources. Recommendations included offering technical assistance to smaller organizations navigating grants and strengthening collaboration between early care programs and the Early Intervention Section to enhance service coordination and outreach.

Keywords: infant-toddler access, early childhood education, early intervention, Individualized Family Support Plan/IFSP, disability

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The United States has faced a significant shortage of infant and toddler childcare seats, with demand exceeding available spaces (Jessen-Howard et al., 2020). Infant and Toddler childcare has been critical in early childhood education, as it offers a safe and stable environment for children and families while fostering parental involvement and building social networks (Reid et al., 2021). In Hawai‘i, only 9.2% of infants and toddlers received early childhood care (DeBaryshe et al., 2023). Local news agencies in Hawai‘i frequently reported on the high cost of early childcare and the financial strain it places on families, stating that childcare can take up to 20% of the average worker's salary (Gutierrez, 2016; Hawaii News Now, 2019). Challenges in public investment strategies resulted in a low rate of children attending early childhood care and education programs (Fox, 2022; Kana‘iaupuni et al., 2022), and the recent Needs Assessment reports that there are five children for every infant and toddler seat (DeBaryshe et al., 2023).

To address this shortage, the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG B-5) supported innovative strategies. The PDG B-5 grant's goals are to improve the efficiency of state-level early care and learning funding, increase the number of high-quality early care and learning options for low-income and disadvantaged families, and improve the coordination and collaboration of existing early care and learning programs. To expand access to high-quality infant and toddler care for low-income families, the Project Team released a request for application (RFA). In the first round, two sites were identified, one operating in Lahaina on Maui and the other in Maili on the Westside of O‘ahu, to enroll a total of up to 20 infants and toddlers. In a second round of applications, programs on Maui (Kahului and Kihei), on O‘ahu (Mililani and Honolulu), and one on Kauai opened for infants and toddlers. Overall, the programs provided care and early learning opportunities to 85 infants and toddlers, supporting their families and the community.

Within the scope of the evaluation, this research explored a. What was working for the programs in having Contracted Classrooms, and b. How families with children with disabilities can be better supported. What can the Infant and Toddler Program do, and what support would they need to better serve children with disabilities?

Infant and Toddler Capacity in Hawai‘i

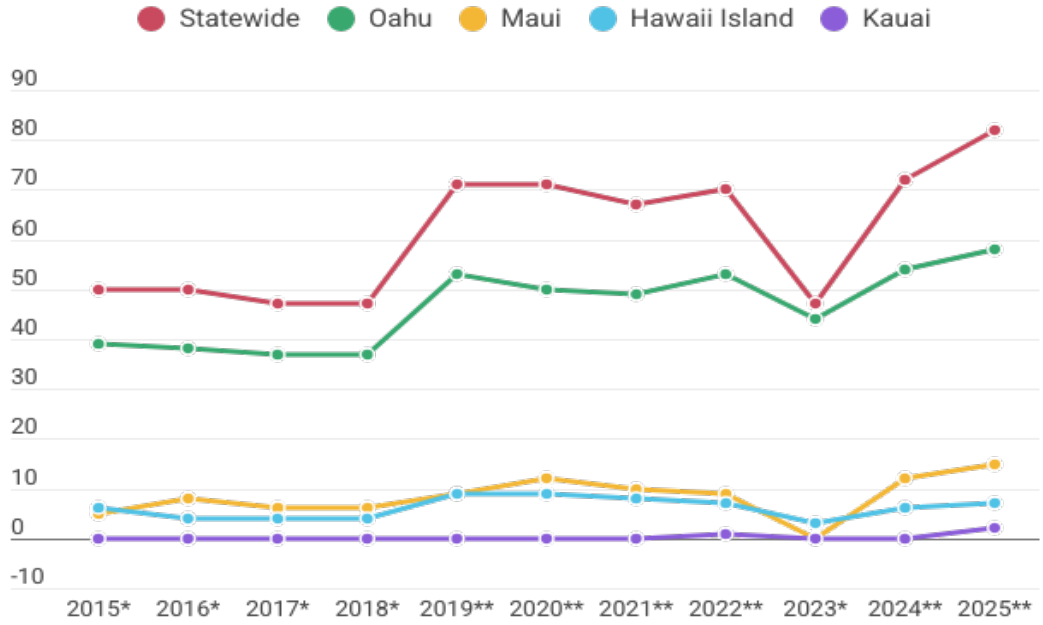
The number of licensed infant and toddler childcare seats in Hawai‘i is very limited, with fewer than one in ten children under the age of three being enrolled in licensed child care (DeBaryshe et al., 2023). This low number highlights the significant gap between the demand for childcare services and the available capacity. Some communities across the Hawaiian Islands provide few to no options for families in rural areas.

Graph 1 shows the number of center-based infant and toddler childcare providers in Hawai‘i from 2015 to 2024. From 2015 to 2018, the number of centers remained relatively stable—with a number just under 40 for O‘ahu, 6–8 for Maui, 4–6 for Hawai‘i Island, and none for Kauai. In 2019, there was an increase in the number of center-based infant and toddler care providers on O‘ahu, Maui, and Hawai‘i Island, and this trend continued in 2024 and 2025. This variance could be attributed to the different sources. Data for 2015–2018 and 2023 were retrieved from Hawaii Child Care Market Rate, Department of Human Services. Data for 2019–2022 and 2024 were retrieved from Hawaii's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (PATCH). Table 1 in the Appendix provides an overview of the enrollment numbers, which are above 1300 infants

and toddlers for Center-based programs for the applicable years, 2019, 2022, 2024 and 2025. The increase in 2025 can be attributed to PDG B-5 funded infant and toddler classrooms.

Graph 1

Number of Center-Based Infant-Toddler Care Providers for the Years 2015 to 2025



Sources: Data for the years 2015–2018 and 2023* was retrieved from the Hawaii Child Care Market Rate, and Data for the years 2019–2022 and 2024–2025** was retrieved from Hawaii's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency.

Methodology

A case study is the preferred qualitative research design to answer "how" and "why" questions and to focus on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). This case study employed semistructured interviews to examine the experiences, perceptions, and strategies employed by directors implementing infant and toddler programs in their early childhood education organization.

Participants and Data Collection

This study includes a total of two participants from two organizations that provide early childhood education. One organization facilitates multiple programs across the islands of O'ahu, Maui, and Hawai'i Island, the other is a small nonprofit on the island of Kaua'i. The interviews lasted an hour on average and were conducted in April 2025 and October 2025 via Zoom. Both programs serve families in rural areas.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using OtterAI. We coded transcripts inductively using Dedoose software. Our research team reviewed the transcripts multiple times to identify coded categories, emerging themes, and recurring patterns across participants' narratives, focusing on shared experiences and suggestions (Saldaña, 2021). The primary data sources were interviews, supplemented by publicly available data. To ensure credibility, we conducted member checking by sharing preliminary findings with participants and asking for their feedback (Yin, 2009).

Program Implementation: Success

Both sites at Lahaina and Mahili used the grant to enroll families who didn't qualify for subsidies, leading to full enrollment and expanded care access. The flexibility of the grant's timeline allowed for quick enrollment and service delivery. At the site in Lahaina, the opportunity to expand infant and toddler care rose during a period when families were transitioning into more stable housing. The grant allowed the program to better serve families who couldn't afford care or were not eligible to access subsidies; for many of the families, childcare had not been an option. The Lahaina program operated as a crucial community service, especially for displaced and trauma-affected families after the Lahaina fires in August 2023.

In Maili, the grant helped fill vacant spots, including private-pay slots. At both locations, the programs were able to sustain and provide opportunities for children to receive care, social interactions, and support from the community. Families expressed their gratitude to the provider for the opportunity to have quality care for their children.

Kauaʻi had no center-based licensed infant and toddler care prior to the Montessori Project's expansion in 2025. The project launched the infant and toddler program to fill this critical gap, believing families urgently needed accessible, high-quality care. The grant supported 10 fully funded slots for qualifying families, selected through criteria such as income eligibility and housing insecurity. The program's goal was to help families in need, not just those who could pay for school.

Program Implementation: Challenges

Both locations faced several challenges, including workforce security, licensing and regulations, the trauma of separation, fear or stigma, and limited resources. Staffing was particularly difficult in Lahaina, where the wildfires led to a workforce shortage. People moved off-island or found work in the hospitality sector and resorts, which offer higher wages, leaving the ECE field with a shortage of qualified early childhood educators.

In addition, licensing requirements have been a challenge to the process, as any program changes might require reevaluations. "When you go to make the change with licensing, it triggers a ton of things that happen." E.g., serving the age group of infants and toddlers reduces the program's capacity and potentially challenges the needs in the community regarding its capacity. Further, any program needs a qualified workforce to increase enrollment numbers. "You can get several aid-qualified people, but if you don't have the caregiver qualified, you can't enroll any more children."

Recruiting and retaining qualified staff for infant care can be difficult due to Department of Human Services (DHS) requirements and limited local workforce capacity. Fortunately, on Kauai, several staff already held infant and toddler qualifications, and others completed training through PATCH. The grant enabled temporary pay raises and professional development, but sustaining wages once the funding ends is a challenge.

For many families, early care programs mark a child's first separation from parents, often causing anxiety. In Lahaina, post-fire trauma impacted attendance. In response, the program partnered with mental health agencies to support families. Parents expressed gratitude for the

stability and consistency the program provided—something they struggled to offer amid housing and emotional instability.

Expanding Access and Staffing for Infant and Toddler Care in Hawai‘i

Experiences from Kama ‘aina Kids can have some implications for expanding access to infant and toddler care. Strong partnerships with local churches and landlords have been instrumental in expanding available space. In Lahaina, the long-standing partnership with the Department of Education played a vital role in supporting the Infant and Toddler program by enabling on-site childcare at DOE facilities—an essential solution, as many educators were unable to return to work due to a lack of access to childcare for themselves.

To address staffing challenges, the program implemented flexible strategies such as sign-on bonuses, covering certification costs, paying for college courses, and offering completion incentives, all of which helped attract and retain qualified staff.

The Montessori Project on Kauai attracts staff due to the higher pay ($20–$27) and the low staff-to-child ratios, exceeding DHS standards. Some staff have no prior Montessori experience but quickly value the individualized attention and the positive work environment. Additionally, staff are being paid to obtain the Montessori certification and training, which helps many teachers embrace the pedagogy and remain engaged.

Grant Work

Responding to Requests for Applications (RFAs) can be challenging for small and medium-sized organizations. Often smaller organizations are lacking the staff and expertise to apply. From Kama‘āina Kids’ perspective, several key factors contributed to their success in the grant process despite initial challenges. Receiving the grant opportunity, even on short notice, was ultimately helpful, as it enabled the program to enroll families in need. What helped most was the opportunity to ask questions, seek clarification, and connect with support systems in their community (Maui County Early Childhood Resource Center). Sharing existing resources with families also raised awareness and strengthened the program’s approach. Although the grant language and criteria initially felt intimidating, taking proactive steps to engage with the process and access local support allowed Kama‘āina Kids to navigate the application successfully and better serve their community.

On Kauai, the project was already coordinating the addition of the infant and toddler program when the team learned about the PDG B-5 grant, viewing it as an opportunity to strengthen their start-up efforts. Reflecting on the grant application process, it was unclear, particularly around whether it funded a full classroom or individual subsidies. In practice, the all-or-nothing full classroom funding approach offered limited flexibility for a new program, and partial tuition assistance would have been more effective in helping families enroll and stabilizing the program early on.

The six-month delay in the disbursement of funds posed a major challenge. The program was intended to start in January, but funding delays postponed the opening until March, creating serious operational and financial strain. The project's existing financial reserves kept it stable until funding arrived. Misalignment with the school year adds further complications, as funding is scheduled to end in December, leaving both the program and families in a difficult position mid-year.

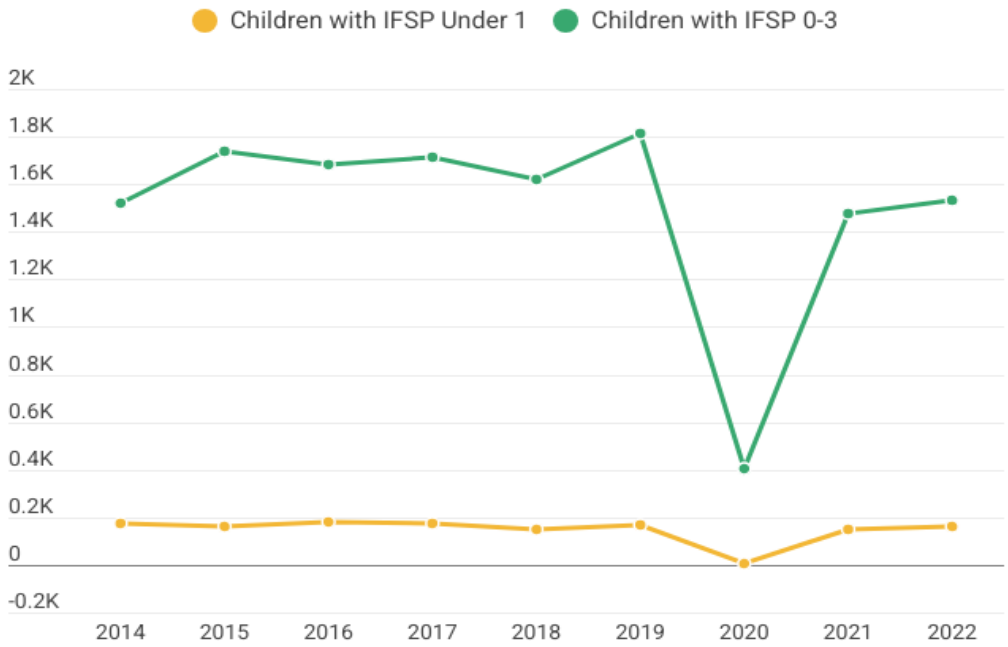
As a small nonprofit, the project relied heavily on volunteer and after-hours work to prepare the grant application. A parent volunteer, board members, and the director contributed evenings and weekends to complete the proposal.

Infant and Toddler Care for Families With Children With Disabilities

Families with a child with disabilities have a right to an Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP). The IFSP is developed collaboratively by the family and Early Intervention professionals, and community support professionals as needed. This process is overseen by the Early intervention Section of the Department of Health. Families are the central decision-makers in the support and services their child receives. Support is usually provided through a licensed ECE provider in a least restrictive environment, in a separate Special education class, or at the home of the family.

Graph 2 shows the number of infants and toddlers in Hawai‘i with an Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP) from 2014–2022. The data remains relatively stable, with about 1,700 children under age 3 (3% of the population) and 160 children under age 1 (1%) receiving services. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary dip, but by 2021, numbers largely returned to pre-pandemic levels. Appendix Table 2 provides details by age group and year.

Graph 2
Number of Individualized Family Support Plans (IFSP) for the Years 2014 to 2022



Source: Data Results from State of Hawaii Department of Health (2026). Program and Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) State Performance Plan (SPP): (FYY 2014–2022).

Needs for Successful Program Implementations for Children With Disabilities

The program aims to be inclusive and support families with children with disabilities, working within its staff-to-child ratio of one-to-four or five but unable to provide one-on-one care. Staff actively supports children and works with families by making referrals, bringing people in for support, and generally getting parents on board. They collaborate with mental health agencies and connect to services like speech and occupational therapy.

However, some families opt for in-home services or hesitate to enroll their child in a licensed program due to staffing limitations and concerns about their child being accepted. Difficulties for a program can result from a lack of follow-up to referrals or a lack of communication from parents and other service providers, making it difficult to coordinate care or align support strategies for the child.

The project on Kauai takes an inclusive approach that does not distinguish between children with disabilities and those without; all children are welcomed and supported within the same nurturing environment. Its intentionally low child–adult ratios naturally create more opportunities for one-on-one interactions, allowing teachers to meet each child's needs with greater attention and care. This structure has also enabled the project to integrate at times the child's support people or reach out to Speech Therapist, Easter Seals and autism service providers, providing families resources and support and integrating on-site therapies seamlessly into the daily routine. These collaborations enrich children's learning experiences and strengthen teachers' understanding of intervention strategies. At times, the center has served well above the typical 10 percent inclusion rate—reflecting both the depth of community need and the project's commitment to serving all families, regardless of income or ability.

A major barrier is the absence of a centralized, transparent system for early intervention, leaving both families and providers unaware of available options. Families often don't know about their options and neither do programs. Greater outreach and coordination, particularly from the Department of Health's Early Intervention Section, could help programs expand access and support.

To effectively serve children with disabilities, ECE programs need more robust statewide support systems. Improved access to assessments, direct on-site services, and stronger collaboration across DOH, DHS, and mental health professionals would enable earlier identification and more consistent support for families and educators. These coordinated efforts would help Hawai'i's early learning system become more inclusive and resilient.

Free services, like those offered at the Lahaina site through partnerships with mental health providers and the DOE (e.g., vision screenings), support early identification and intervention. Regular access to such services improves outcomes by addressing needs as early as possible.

Conclusion

The success of the implementation of the PDG B-5 infant and toddler support grant was supported by several key factors, including flexibility in the grant timeline, which allowed for quick enrollment and the ability to expand eligibility to families who typically fall outside of subsidy programs. Strong community relationships were critical in securing space and services, while investments in supporting the workforce—through qualifications, wage incentives, and professional development—helped sustain program operations. While grants and RFAs are valuable tools for expanding early childhood education (ECE), small programs often face capacity challenges in navigating these processes. Providing technical assistance, such as question-and-answer sessions and clearer application guidelines, can help make funding opportunities more accessible and impactful for a broader range of providers.

To better support families with children with disabilities, collaboration with the Early Intervention Section is essential, alongside stronger coordination between service providers and

early care programs. Improved communication regarding the availability of services and access to them can only support families and programs.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Hawai‘i Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five [grant number 90TP0100].

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

We used AI-assisted technology such as Quillbot for proofreading the manuscript.

References

DeBaryshe, B., Stern, I., Nguyen, M., Azuma, J., & Chen, Q. (2023). *Hawaii's critical shortage of infant-toddler care*. University of Hawai'i Center on the Family. https://uhfamily.hawaii.edu/sites/uhfamily.hawaii.edu/files/publications/ECE-snapshot-Hawaii_2024.pdf

DeBaryshem, B., Engel, R., Rosenbach-Jordan, S., Soon, RJ'I, Tom, A., Fry, M., Zysman, D., Davis, C., & Rivadeneyra, I. (2024). *Hawaii Early Childhood Comprehensive Needs Assessment: 2024 Update: Our Keiki, Our Ohana, Our Future*. University of Hawai'i Center on the Family, Ward Research, Hawaii Children's Action Network, Hawaii Integrated Analytics. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Z7Gre8_ZyzBreSYOqjcX-GcERehlEEf7/view

Fox, C. (2022). Let's invest in Hawaii's childcare sector before it's too late. *Civil Beat*, 14 October. https://www.civilbeat.org/2022/10/catherine-toth-fox-its-time-to-pay-hawaiis-child-care-workers-what-they-deserve/

Gutierrez, B. (2016). Study says childcare more expensive than college in Hawaii. *Hawaii News Now*, 28 April. https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/story/31836380/study-says-child-care-more-expensive-than-college-in-hawaii/

Hawaii Department of Human Services. (2015). *Hawaii Child Care Market Rate Study Summary of Results.* https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Hawaii-Child-Care-Market-Rate-Study-2015.pdf

Hawaii Department of Human Services. (2016). *Hawaii Child Care Market Rate Study Summary of Results.* https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Hawaii-Child-Care-Market-Rate-Study-2016.pdf

Hawaii Department of Human Services. (2017). *Hawaii Child Care Market Rate Study Summary of Results.* https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/bessd/files/2017/11/2017-Hawaii-Child-Care-Market-Rate-Study-DHS-website.pdf

Hawaii Department of Human Services. (2018). *Hawaii Child Care Market Rate Study Summary of Results.* https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/bessd/files/2017/11/2017-Hawaii-Child-Care-Market-Rate-Study-DHS-website.pdf

Hawaii Department of Human Services. (2023). *Hawaii Child Care Market Rate Study Summary of Results.* https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/bessd/files/2023/12/Hawaii-Child-Care-Market-Rate-Study-2023.pdf

Hawaii News Now. (2019). In Hawaii, infant care is pricier than college. *Hawaii News Now*, 13 August. https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2019/08/13/hawaii-infant-care-is-pricier-than-college/

Jessen-Howard, S., Malik, R., & Falgout, M. (2020). Costly and Unavailable: America Lacks Sufficient Child Care Supply for Infants and Toddlers. *Center for American Progress*, August, 4. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/08/03133105/Costly-and-Unavailable.pdf

Kana‘iaupuni, S., Castle, A. L., & Peters, K. (2022). Now is the time to invest in Hawaii’s children. *Civil Beat*, 7 February. https://www.civilbeat.org/2022/02/now-is-the-time-to-invest-in-hawaiis-children/

PATCH. (2019). *Hawaii's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency*. https://www.patchhawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Data-for-Web-Hawaii-Child-Care-Capacity-12.2019-PATCH1.pdf

PATCH. (2022). *Hawaii Point-In-Time Child Care Data.* https://stage.worklifesystems.com/Hawaii?county=Maui%20County

PATCH. (2024). *Hawaii's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency.* https://www.patchhawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/November-2024-Data-for-Web-Hawaii-Child-Care-Capacity.pdf

Reid, J. L., Kagan, S. L., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Melvin, S. A. (2021). Promoting quality in programs for infants and toddlers: Comparing the family child care and center-based teaching workforce. *Children and Youth Services Review, 122*, 105890. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105890

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage Publications.

State of Hawaii Department of Health. (2026). Early Intervention Services. (2025). *Early Intervention Services.* https://health.hawaii.gov/eis/home/eiservices/

State of Hawaii Department of Health. (2026). *Program and Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) and State Performance Plan (SPP)*. (FFY 2014– FYY 2022) https://health.hawaii.gov/eis/home/documents-and-reports/

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Sage Publications.

Contact email: schlaack@hawaii.edu

Appendix

Table 1

Number of Center Based Infant and Toddler Care in Hawaii From 2015 to 2024

Year	Oahu	Maui	Kauai	Hawaii Island	Statewide	Enrollment Statewide
2015*	39	5	0	6	50	
2016*	38	8	0	4	50	
2017*	37	6	0	4	47	
2018*	37	6	0	4	47	
2019**	53	9	0	9	71	1354
2020**	50	12	0	9	71	
2021**	49	10	0	8	67	
2022**	53	9	1	7	70	1315
2023*	44	0	0	3	47	
2024**	54	12	0	6	72	1310
2025**	58	15	2	7	82	1389

* Hawaii Child Care Market Rate

** (PATCH) Hawaii's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency

Sources: Data for the years 2015–2018 and 2023* was retrieved from the Hawaii Child Care Market Rate, and Data for the years 2019–2022 and 2024–2025** was retrieved from Hawaii's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency.

Table 2

Data on Individualized Family Support Plans (IFSPs) and Early Interventions Services Availability for the Years 2014 to 2022

Year	Children with IFSP Under 1	Number of children Under 1 (Census Data)	Percent of All Children under Age 1 with IFSPs	Children with IFSP 0–3	Number of Children 0–3 (Census Data)	Percent of All Children Birth to Age 3 with IFSPs	Early Intervention (EI) services have helped the family know their rights.
2014	172	18,853	0.91%	1,520	55,432	2.74%	543
2015	162	19,028	0.85%	1,740	56,025	3.11%	524
2016	179	36,128	0.50%	1,685	54,673	3.08%	457
2017	174	17,950	0.97	1,712	53,613	3.19%	606
2018	146	17,224	0.85%	1,619	52,317	3.09%	510
2019	168	16,800	1.00%	1,811	50,561	3.58%	591
2020	5	16,244	0.03%	407	49,505	3.19%	429
2021	147	16,244	0.90%	1,475	49,505	2.98%	593
2022	162	46,834	1.03%	1,535	46,834	3.28%	797

Source: Data Results by Program and Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) State Performance Plan (SPP): 2014–2022.

Exploring Self-Compassion in Early Adolescents: Evidence From a Vietnamese Urban School Sample

Tat Thien Do, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam
Van Son Huynh, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam
Quan Hong Bui, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam
Khuong Vinh Nguyen, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam
Thanh Nghia Lam, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam
Xuan Quynh Ngoc Nguyen, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Self-compassion has emerged as a key psychological resource that helps adolescents navigate emotional challenges and school-related stress. Despite increasing international attention, empirical research on self-compassion among early adolescents in Vietnam remains limited. This study aims to examine the overall level and subcomponent profile of self-compassion in Vietnamese lower secondary school students and to explore differences based on gender, grade level, family socioeconomic status, and academic achievement. A total of 385 students (grades 6–9) from public schools in Ho Chi Minh City participated in the study. The Vietnamese version of the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (SCS-Y; Neff et al., 2021) was administered. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA to explore patterns and group differences. The findings revealed that students reported moderate levels of self-compassion, with positive subcomponents (common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness) scoring significantly higher than negative ones (self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation). Gender differences were significant, with male students reporting higher self-compassion than females ($p < .01$). Grade-level differences emerged only in self-judgment, with older students exhibiting lower self-criticism. No statistically significant differences were found in overall self-compassion by family socioeconomic status or academic performance. Vietnamese adolescents demonstrate a relatively balanced self-compassion profile, with strengths in mindfulness and common humanity. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive and developmentally appropriate interventions to foster self-compassion during adolescence. Educational and psychological support systems should consider integrating self-compassion training to promote emotional resilience in school environments.

Keywords: self-compassion, adolescents, lower secondary students, Vietnam

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by profound emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During this stage, individuals begin to establish identity, face increased academic and interpersonal pressures, and develop more complex emotional awareness (Bosacki, 2016). In educational settings, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to internalizing stressors, which can manifest as self-criticism, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Given these challenges, self-compassion (SC) has emerged as a potentially protective psychological resource that supports emotional regulation and enhances adolescents' well-being (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2003a).

Self-compassion is defined as the ability to relate to oneself with kindness and understanding during moments of struggle, failure, or perceived inadequacy (Neff, 2003a). Rather than engaging in harsh self-judgment, individuals with high levels of self-compassion are more likely to offer themselves emotional support and to recognize that suffering and imperfection are shared human experiences. Neff's theoretical model outlines six interrelated components of self-compassion: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification (Neff, 2003a, 2016, 2023). These elements reflect both positive and negative poles of the construct, enabling researchers to capture a nuanced profile of how individuals relate to themselves under stress.

Extensive research in Western contexts has demonstrated that self-compassion is inversely associated with anxiety, depression, and self-criticism, while positively linked with resilience, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being (Inwood & Ferrari, 2018; Neff, 2016). Among adolescents, self-compassion is generally found to be at a moderate level, with higher scores observed in the positive dimensions (common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness) than in the negative ones (self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation) (Bluth et al., 2018). Importantly, self-compassion has also been shown to act as a buffer against external stressors, including discrimination and bullying, and to moderate the impact of negative experiences on adolescents' self-esteem and social functioning (García del Castillo-López, 2025; Sari & Nurhidayah, 2025).

Despite these promising findings, research on adolescent self-compassion in non-Western, collectivist societies remains scarce, particularly in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, where academic achievement and social conformity are highly emphasized in schools, adolescents may face additional pressures that influence their internal emotional narratives. However, empirical data on self-compassion among Vietnamese adolescents, especially middle school students, are lacking. Most existing studies in Vietnam have focused on university students or adult populations (Dang & Trinh, 2025; Duc et al., 2022), while research specifically targeting early adolescents using age-appropriate instruments such as the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (Neff et al., 2021) is still limited. This gap underscores the importance of contextually grounded research that considers developmental stage, cultural values, and educational structure.

In addition to measuring general levels of self-compassion, it is essential to explore how sociodemographic variables such as gender, grade level, socioeconomic status (SES), and academic performance relate to adolescents' self-compassion profiles. International studies have yielded mixed findings regarding these associations. For instance, several studies have found that female adolescents tend to report lower levels of self-compassion, particularly in the negative subdomains such as self-judgment and isolation (Chio et al., 2025; Hubbard,

2023). Similarly, age-related declines in self-compassion during adolescence have been attributed to increased self-awareness and academic/social comparison (Hinrichs, 2021). On the other hand, research suggests that SES and academic achievement may not significantly influence self-compassion, given that it is primarily shaped by psychological and interpersonal factors rather than material or performance-based outcomes (Marsh et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2021).

The present study contributes to the growing body of international literature on adolescent self-compassion by examining its manifestation among lower secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Using the SCS-Y, we aim to provide a comprehensive profile of students' self-compassion levels across its six subcomponents. Moreover, we analyze differences in self-compassion across key demographic variables, gender, grade level, family economic status, and academic achievement, to better understand how individual and contextual factors may shape self-related attitudes during early adolescence.

Hypothesis Development

Self-Compassion Level and Subcomponent Patterns

Research indicates that adolescents typically exhibit moderate levels of self-compassion, with higher scores in the positive components (e.g., self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity) and lower scores in negative ones (e.g., self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation) (Bluth et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2021). These differences suggest that while adolescents are capable of empathizing with themselves, they remain vulnerable to harsh self-criticism and emotional over-identification.

We therefore hypothesize:

> H1: Middle school students will exhibit moderate levels of self-compassion, with positive subcomponents scoring higher than negative ones.

Gender and Grade-Level Differences

Several studies have documented gender differences in self-compassion, with female adolescents reporting lower overall self-compassion, often due to higher self-judgment and internalization of negative social feedback (Hubbard, 2023; Yarnell et al., 2015). Additionally, older adolescents may show reduced self-compassion due to increased academic and social pressures during the transition to high school (Hinrichs, 2021).

Hence, we propose:

> H2: Self-compassion will differ significantly by gender and grade level, with female and older students scoring lower on average.

Economic Status and Academic Performance

Self-compassion is largely understood as an internal coping resource rather than a direct function of external conditions (Marsh et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2021). Although low SES and academic struggles may indirectly challenge adolescents' self-perceptions, these variables may not directly predict their capacity for self-compassion.

Based on these insights, we propose:

H3: Self-compassion will not differ significantly based on family socioeconomic status or academic performance.

The Present Study

This study aims to (1) assess the general and subcomponent levels of self-compassion among Vietnamese middle school students, and (2) examine whether self-compassion varies significantly by gender, grade level, family SES, and academic performance. Through this work, we seek to provide empirical evidence relevant to the Vietnamese educational and psychological context, while also contributing to the broader international discourse on adolescent well-being and protective psychological resources.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) being a secondary school student enrolled in public schools in Ho Chi Minh City, (b) being literate and able to read and respond to structured questionnaires in Vietnamese, and (c) providing voluntary assent to participate in the study. Institutional approval was obtained from school administrators prior to data collection. Written informed consent was collected from the students' legal guardians, and verbal assent was also obtained from each participant. The consent forms included a clear explanation of the study's objectives, emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, and guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of all responses.

A total of 385 students participated in the study, selected using a convenience sampling method. The required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977) with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting, with detailed verbal instructions provided to ensure proper comprehension. Participants completed the questionnaire within approximately 20 to 30 minutes. After data screening, all 385 responses were retained for final analysis. The sample consisted of 190 male (49.4%) and 195 female (50.6%) students, ranging from grades 6 to 9. Regarding academic achievement, which was determined based on the official academic classification from students' school records for the preceding semester, 145 students were classified as excellent, 156 as good, 73 as average, and 11 as below average. Family socioeconomic status (SES) was measured through a single self-report item where participants were asked to choose the category that best described their family's perceived financial situation, 8 students reported coming from affluent households, 138 from well-off families, 222 from middle-income families, and 17 from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Measures

Self-compassion was measured using the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (SCS-Y) developed by Neff et al. (2021), adapted for adolescent populations. The scale consists of 17 items assessing six core components: Self-Kindness, Self-Judgment, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness, and Over-Identification. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Negative subscales (Self-Judgment, Isolation, Over-Identification) were reverse-scored prior to analysis. A composite score for total self-

compassion was calculated by averaging all items, following standard scoring guidelines. Based on prior research and Likert-scale conventions (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Nguyễn et al., 2023), the total score was categorized into five levels: very low (1.0–1.8), low (1.81–2.6), moderate (2.61–3.4), high (3.41–4.2), and very high (4.21–5.0).

The internal consistency of the SCS-Y in this study was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha = .820 for the overall scale. Subscale reliabilities were also strong, ranging from α = .750 (Self-Kindness) to α = .857 (Common Humanity). Item-total correlations ranged from .607 to .827, and no items were removed.

Data Analysis

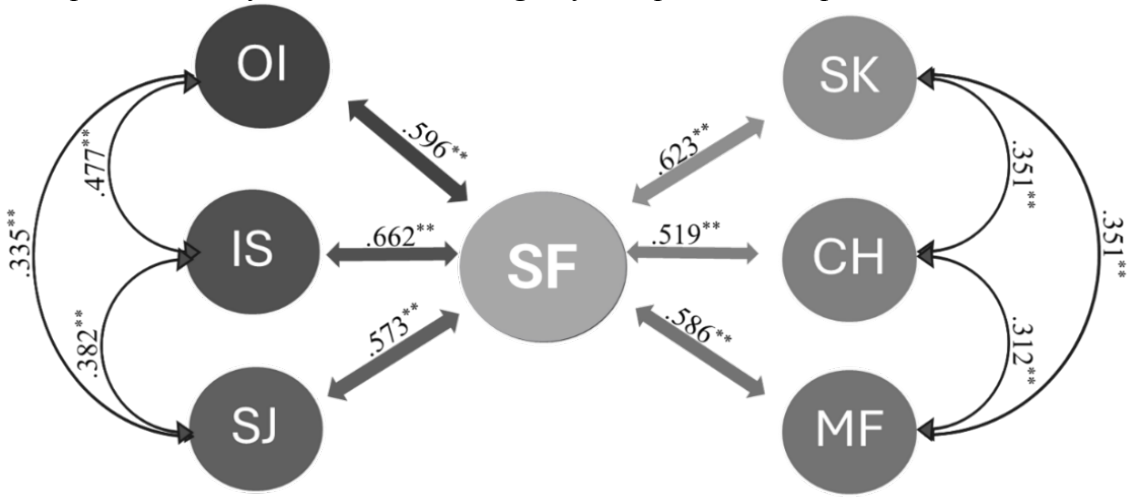
All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and distributions of self-compassion scores. Skewness and kurtosis were examined to assess normality assumptions. Internal consistency reliability of the SCS-Y was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha.

To examine within-subject differences across self-compassion subcomponents, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. Given the violation of sphericity indicated by Mauchly's test ($W = .658$, $\chi^2(14) = 160.139$, $p < .001$), corrections were applied using both Greenhouse-Geisser ($\varepsilon = .832$) and Huynh-Feldt ($\varepsilon = .842$) estimates. Further analyses included multivariate tests (MANOVA) and within-subject contrasts, which revealed statistically significant linear, quadratic, and cubic trends ($p < .05$), while quartic trends were non-significant ($p = .882$). Between-subjects effects were also tested, yielding a significant main effect of self-compassion: $F(1, 384) = 8656.379$, $p < .001$, suggesting meaningful differences between individuals in total self-compassion scores.

Results

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Associations Among Self-Compassion Components



Note. OI = Over-Identification, IS = Isolation, SJ = Self-Judgment, SK = Self-Kindness, CH = Common Humanity, MF = Mindfulness, SF = Self-Compassion

Figure 1 illustrates the intercorrelations among the components and their relationship with self-compassion.

To explore the relationships among the six components of self-compassion and their association with overall self-compassion, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted. Results indicated that all components were positively and significantly correlated with the total self-compassion score, suggesting a cohesive internal structure. Notably, Self-Judgment (SJ; r = .573), Over-Identification (OI; r = .596), and Isolation (IS; r = .662) showed moderate to strong correlations with self-compassion.

However, it is important to note that although these three components yielded positive correlations, they represent reverse-coded constructs. This means that lower levels of self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation (reflected by higher reverse-scored values) were associated with higher levels of self-compassion, consistent with Neff (2003a, 2003b) conceptual framework. These findings support the theoretical structure of the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (SCS-Y), in which negative constructs are inversely related to the overall self-compassion construct.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Frequency Distribution of Self-Compassion Components (N = 385)

Component	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	M	SD
Overall Self-Compassion	9 (2.3%)	104 (27.0%)	180 (46.8%)	85 (22.1%)	7 (1.8%)	2.98	0.62
Self-Kindness (SK)	36 (9.4%)	72 (18.7%)	154 (40.0%)	76 (19.7%)	47 (12.2%)	3.01	0.91
Self-Judgment (SJ)	81 (21.0%)	84 (21.8%)	108 (28.1%)	68 (17.7%)	44 (11.4%)	2.78	1.08
Common Humanity (CH)	44 (11.4%)	57 (14.8%)	120 (31.2%)	75 (19.5%)	89 (23.1%)	3.26	1.08
Isolation (IS)	82 (21.3%)	77 (20.0%)	96 (24.9%)	81 (21.0%)	49 (12.7%)	2.88	1.10
Mindfulness (MF)	29 (7.5%)	74 (19.2%)	137 (35.6%)	83 (21.6%)	62 (16.1%)	3.16	0.94
Over-Identification (OI)	131 (34.0%)	103 (26.8%)	20 (5.2%)	89 (23.1%)	42 (10.9%)	2.55	1.17

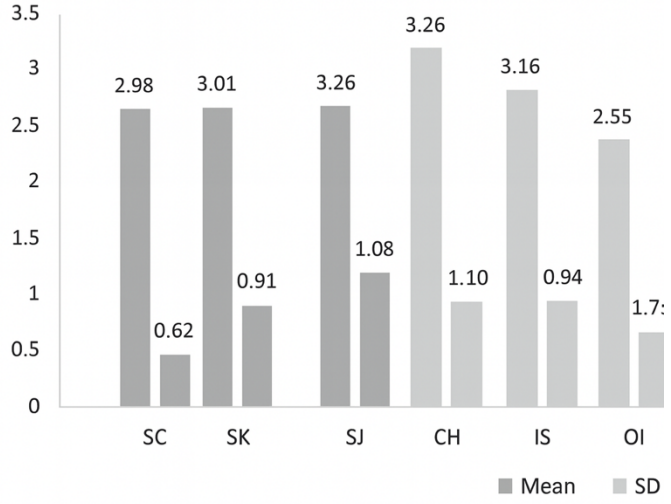
Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation

Descriptive statistics were computed for the overall self-compassion score and each of its six components. As shown in Table 1, the average Self-Compassion score among participants was M = 2.98, SD = 0.62, indicating a moderate level of self-compassion. In terms of distribution, 46.8% of students reported moderate levels, with 22.1% at high and 1.8% at very high levels. Conversely, 27.0% and 2.3% of students reported low and very low self-compassion, respectively.

Among the components, Common Humanity (CH; M = 3.26, SD = 1.08) and Mindfulness (MF; M = 3.16, SD = 0.94) had the highest mean scores, suggesting that many students recognize shared human experiences and maintain a degree of balanced awareness in emotionally challenging situations. Conversely, Over-Identification (OI; M = 2.55, SD = 1.17) had the lowest mean, with 34.0% of students falling into the “very low” category, reflecting difficulties in maintaining emotional boundaries with negative experiences.

Figure 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Compassion Components



Note. OI = Over-Identification, IS = Isolation, SJ = Self-Judgment, SK = Self-Kindness, CH = Common Humanity, MF = Mindfulness

The differences observed among Self-Compassion subcomponents were statistically significant, as confirmed by a repeated measures ANOVA reported previously (see Method section). Components reflecting positive self-attitudes (SK, CH, MF) showed higher mean scores than components reflecting negative self-attitudes (SJ, IS, OI), confirming Hypothesis 1: Middle school students exhibit moderate levels of self-compassion overall, with higher scores on adaptive components compared to maladaptive ones.

These results are consistent with prior findings from adolescent populations (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017; Neff & McGehee, 2010), which emphasize that while adolescents may show strengths in empathy and mindfulness, they often struggle with self-criticism and emotional over-identification. The high variability in OI (SD = 1.17) particularly suggests the need for differentiated interventions targeting students at higher risk for internalizing problems.

Table 2

Gender Differences in Self-Compassion and Its Components (N = 385)

Component	1 (*n* = 190)	2 (*n* = 195)	*t*	*p*
Overall Self-Compassion	3.07 (0.61)	2.88 (0.61)	3.081	.002**
Self-Kindness	3.08 (0.90)	3.04 (0.93)	0.462	.644
Self-Judgment	2.90 (1.08)	2.69 (1.06)	1.948	.052
Common Humanity	3.29 (1.14)	3.24 (1.02)	0.440	.660
Isolation	3.08 (1.11)	2.69 (1.06)	3.474	.001**
Mindfulness	3.25 (0.92)	3.08 (0.95)	1.781	.076
Over-Identification	2.72 (1.17)	2.39 (1.14)	2.850	.005**

Note. Values are presented as M (SD). **p < .0. Gender: Male = 1; Female = 2

Table 2 revealed a statistically significant difference in overall self-compassion by gender, t(383) = 3.081, p = .002, with male students reporting higher Self-Compassion scores (M = 3.07, SD = 0.61) than female students (M = 2.88, SD = 0.61). Significant gender differences

were also observed in Isolation and Over-Identification components. Specifically, male students reported higher levels of isolation (M = 3.08, SD = 1.11) compared to females (M = 2.69, SD = 1.06), t = 3.474, p = .001. Similarly, over-identification scores were significantly higher among males (M = 2.72, SD = 1.17) than females (M = 2.39, SD = 1.14), t = 2.850, p = .005.

These findings suggest that although male students demonstrated greater overall self-compassion, they may be more prone to internalizing emotional challenges, potentially reflecting gendered patterns in emotional regulation and expression (Gill et al., 2018).

Table 3

Self-Compassion Across Grade Levels (N = 385)

Component	Grade 6 (*n* = 113)	Grade 7 (*n* = 102)	Grade 8 (*n* = 81)	Grade 9 (*n* = 89)	*F*
Overall Self-Compassion	3.03 (0.64)	2.99 (0.62)	2.90 (0.53)	3.07 (0.66)	0.801
Self-Kindness	3.06 (0.96)	2.95 (0.91)	3.16 (0.79)	3.07 (0.97)	0.813
Self-Judgment	2.95 (1.16)	2.94 (1.06)	2.82 (0.93)	2.42 (1.04)	5.250
Common Humanity	3.36 (1.12)	3.16 (1.09)	3.24 (1.07)	3.29 (1.02)	0.679
Isolation	2.82 (1.14)	2.99 (1.10)	2.72 (0.98)	2.98 (1.15)	1.206
Mindfulness	3.23 (1.00)	3.10 (0.91)	3.20 (0.85)	3.10 (0.99)	0.493
Over-Identification	2.65 (1.16)	2.70 (1.24)	2.40 (1.04)	2.39 (1.19)	1.854

Note. **p < .01

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences across grade levels (6 to 9). Results indicated no significant difference in overall Self-Compassion across grades, F(3, 381) = 0.801, p = .494, supporting the notion that self-compassion remains relatively stable during early adolescence (Neff, 2003b). However, a significant difference was found for the Self-Judgment component, F(3, 381) = 5.250, p = .001. Post hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) revealed that 9th-grade students reported significantly lower self-judgment scores than students in earlier grades, suggesting a developmental decrease in self-critical tendencies.

Table 4

Self-Compassion by Family Economic Status (N = 385)

Component	Wealthy (*n* = 8)	Well-off (*n* = 138)	Average (*n* = 222)	Poor (*n* = 17)	*F*
Overall Self-Compassion	3.38 (0.73)	2.97 (0.59)	2.97 (0.63)	2.89 (0.50)	1.280
Self-Kindness	3.04 (1.28)	3.06 (0.91)	3.06 (0.79)	2.96 (0.97)	0.067
Self-Judgment	2.95 (1.16)	2.94 (0.92)	2.82 (0.91)	2.42 (0.74)	1.246
Common Humanity	3.38 (1.15)	3.31 (1.05)	3.21 (1.10)	3.53 (1.05)	0.595
Isolation	3.42 (1.18)	2.84 (1.09)	2.91 (1.12)	2.55 (0.88)	1.266
Mindfulness	4.04 (0.55)	3.12 (0.94)	3.20 (0.96)	3.10 (0.94)	2.572
Over-Identification	3.06 (1.18)	2.61 (1.22)	2.59 (1.16)	2.59 (0.99)	0.809

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences in overall self-compassion across different family income levels, F(3, 381) = 1.280, p = .281. Although students from "wealthy" backgrounds reported slightly higher mean Self-Compassion scores (M = 3.38),

these differences were not statistically significant. This finding aligns with Neff (2003a), who emphasized that self-compassion is more strongly influenced by psychosocial than economic factors.

Table 5
Self-Compassion by Academic Performance (N = 385)

Component	Excellent (*n* = 145)	Good (*n* = 156)	Fair (*n* = 73)	Average (*n* = 11)	*F*
Overall Self-Compassion	3.01 (0.63)	2.93 (0.63)	3.00 (0.55)	2.98 (0.59)	0.488
Self-Kindness	3.03 (0.90)	3.00 (0.97)	3.12 (0.82)	3.70 (0.61)	2.134
Self-Judgment	2.69 (1.09)	2.83 (1.05)	2.97 (1.09)	2.45 (1.17)	1.548
Common Humanity	3.28 (1.05)	3.20 (1.14)	3.32 (1.04)	3.70 (0.84)	0.842
Isolation	3.00 (1.15)	2.89 (1.07)	2.72 (1.05)	2.30 (1.06)	2.060
Mindfulness	3.29 (0.96)	3.03 (0.93)	3.16 (0.89)	3.33 (1.06)	2.050
Over-Identification	2.64 (1.21)	2.48 (1.20)	2.60 (1.00)	2.10 (1.22)	1.134

No significant differences were found in overall Self-Compassion across different academic achievement levels, $F(3, 381) = 0.488$, $p = .691$. While students with "excellent" academic performance reported slightly higher levels of self-compassion ($M = 3.01$), this difference was not statistically meaningful.

In summary, the results support Hypothesis 2, confirming statistically significant differences in self-compassion based on gender and grade level (specifically on self-judgment). Conversely, Hypothesis 3 is supported in that no significant differences in self-compassion were found by family economic status or academic performance. These findings highlight the importance of age-related developmental factors and gendered emotional expression in shaping self-compassion, while downplaying the role of socioeconomic or academic achievement as key determinants.

Discussion

Specific Associations With Self-Compassion Components

This study investigated self-compassion among middle school students and explored how key demographic factors, such as gender, grade level, academic performance, and family socioeconomic status, are associated with various components of self-compassion. The findings revealed a moderately high level of self-compassion among adolescents, with a majority of students scoring in the moderate to high range. Among the subcomponents, students reported particularly strong tendencies toward common humanity and mindfulness, while over-identification and self-judgment emerged as areas of vulnerability.

In terms of gender, results showed that male students reported significantly higher levels of overall self-compassion than females. Specifically, boys reported higher levels of isolation and over-identification, both of which are reverse-coded constructs, indicating greater emotional entanglement and perceived social disconnection. This pattern may reflect gender-related emotional regulation styles in early adolescence, where boys may exhibit increased self-reliance and emotional suppression (Gill et al., 2018), but also experience heightened internal struggles in the absence of sufficient coping strategies (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

These findings suggest that gender norms around emotional expression could partly explain the observed differences in self-compassion dynamics.

Regarding developmental progression, grade level was not significantly associated with overall self-compassion, but differences were observed in the self-judgment component. Older students, particularly those in grade 9, reported lower levels of self-criticism compared to their younger peers. This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting that as adolescents mature, they tend to develop improved emotional regulation and a more accepting self-perspective (Bluth & Blanton, 2015). The developmental transition from early to late adolescence may thus be accompanied by reduced self-judgment and increased cognitive flexibility, which facilitate healthier self-evaluations.

In contrast, neither socioeconomic status nor academic achievement were significantly associated with overall self-compassion or its components. Although students from higher-income households and with better academic performance showed slightly elevated self-compassion scores, these differences were not statistically significant. This pattern is in line with earlier findings suggesting that self-compassion is more strongly shaped by intrapersonal and relational factors than by material conditions (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003a). In particular, the emotional climate of the family and the presence of empathetic adult figures may be more critical than financial status in shaping adolescents' capacity for self-kindness and acceptance.

Comparative Overview Across Self-Compassion Dimensions

When analyzing patterns across the six self-compassion dimensions, common humanity and mindfulness consistently emerged as the most strongly endorsed components, suggesting that students generally recognize the universality of suffering and possess the capacity to remain emotionally balanced in difficult situations. This is consistent with Neff (2003b) model, which emphasizes that acknowledging shared human imperfection is central to developing a non-judgmental and compassionate stance toward oneself.

Conversely, over-identification and self-judgment were less developed in the sample, pointing to areas where adolescents may struggle with harsh self-criticism or rumination in the face of stress. The high standard deviation in these components, especially over-identification, suggests considerable individual variation, indicating that while some students may demonstrate effective emotional detachment, others may be more vulnerable to internalizing distress. These results support earlier research suggesting that emotional over-identification is a common challenge in adolescence and is often linked to increased risks for depression and anxiety (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017; Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Importantly, the moderate to strong positive correlations between all six subcomponents and the overall self-compassion score confirm the interconnectedness and internal coherence of the self-compassion construct. While certain components such as self-kindness and mindfulness directly reflect supportive inner dialogue, others (e.g., self-judgment and isolation) serve as protective indicators when present in lower degrees, as captured by reverse-coded scoring (Neff et al., 2021). Together, these findings support the validity of the SCS-Y in measuring self-compassion in early adolescents and demonstrate its sensitivity in identifying specific strengths and vulnerabilities.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Previous studies on self-compassion in adolescence have primarily focused on its relationship with mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, or emotional resilience (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Neff & McGehee, 2010). However, few investigations have examined how self-compassion manifests differently across sociodemographic subgroups in early adolescence, particularly in educational contexts within collectivist societies such as Vietnam. This study addresses this empirical gap by systematically analyzing how gender, grade level, academic performance, and family socioeconomic status influence both overall self-compassion and its six underlying components.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings lend support to Self-Compassion Theory of Neff (2003a), which conceptualizes self-compassion as a multidimensional construct, comprising both positive aspects (e.g., mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness) and negative aspects (e.g., self-judgment, over-identification, isolation). The observed variability across subcomponents in this study, particularly the high scores in common humanity and mindfulness, and lower scores in over-identification, suggests that these dimensions are not uniformly expressed in adolescents, and may be differentially shaped by developmental, social, and cultural factors. The fact that self-judgment decreased significantly among older students further supports the developmental premise that adolescents gradually acquire cognitive and emotional resources that buffer against self-criticism (Bluth & Blanton, 2015).

Importantly, the gender-based findings extend existing theoretical frameworks by highlighting how gender norms and emotional expression may mediate the expression of self-compassion. While male students in this study reported higher overall self-compassion, they also exhibited elevated levels of isolation and over-identification, suggesting a potential disconnect between external expressions of resilience and internal emotional struggle. These findings support socialization theories which suggest that boys, especially in collectivist settings, are often encouraged to suppress emotional vulnerability (Gill et al., 2018), potentially leading to internalized forms of distress despite surface-level indicators of self-assurance.

Moreover, the lack of significant differences in self-compassion based on family economic status and academic performance contributes to a theoretical refinement: self-compassion may be less dependent on external socio-material conditions, and more closely tied to internal cognitive-affective processes and perceived emotional support systems. This supports prior assertions that psychosocial environments and personal meaning-making play a more central role than economic resources in fostering self-compassion (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003b).

From a practical standpoint, the findings hold significant implications for the design and implementation of school-based mental health interventions. First, the identification of vulnerable subcomponents, namely, over-identification, self-judgment, and isolation, suggests that interventions should not treat self-compassion as a monolithic construct, but rather focus on targeted component-level development. Programs such as Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens (MSC-T) or interventions using the ABCDE model of cognitive restructuring (Seligman, 2006) may be particularly effective in helping adolescents detach from negative thought patterns and respond to distress with greater balance.

Second, the results advocate for gender-responsive interventions. While male students may display higher self-compassion scores, their elevated levels of isolation suggest the need for psychosocial strategies that promote emotional literacy, peer support, and connection-building. Creating safe classroom environments that allow boys to express emotional difficulty without stigma may help mitigate the effects of emotional suppression.

Finally, the significant developmental trend in reduced self-judgment across grade levels provides evidence for age-appropriate emotional scaffolding. Interventions may benefit from early implementation, particularly in grades 6 and 7, when adolescents are still forming internal narratives about failure, self-worth, and personal adequacy. Integrating self-compassion training into the curriculum as part of social-emotional learning (SEL) may yield long-term benefits in resilience, academic engagement, and psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that Vietnamese lower secondary school students report a moderate level of self-compassion, with stronger endorsement of common humanity and mindfulness than of the maladaptive components (over-identification, isolation, and self-judgment). Gender differences emerged in overall self-compassion and in isolation and over-identification, while grade-level differences were limited to self-judgment. No significant differences were found by family socioeconomic status or academic achievement. These findings support the use of the SCS-Y in Vietnamese urban school settings and underscore the value of gender-responsive, developmentally appropriate school-based interventions to strengthen self-compassion and emotional resilience.

Limitations

Despite offering novel insights into the structure and variability of self-compassion in middle school students, this study has several limitations that must be considered. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research design precludes any causal interpretation of the relationships between demographic variables and self-compassion. Longitudinal designs would be more suitable to examine how self-compassion evolves over time and interacts with academic, emotional, or social development. Second, all data were gathered through self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in introspection, particularly in younger students who may lack full meta-cognitive awareness. Although the SCS-Y has demonstrated psychometric reliability, future studies might incorporate multi-informant designs, including teacher or caregiver ratings, to enhance validity. Third, the sample was drawn exclusively from public middle schools in an urban Vietnamese context, which limits generalizability to students in rural or private education systems. Cultural and institutional variations in teaching styles, family dynamics, and peer relationships may differentially affect the development of self-compassion. Therefore, replication across diverse settings is necessary. Fourth, while the study examined multiple demographic variables, it did not account for interpersonal or familial variables, such as parental warmth, peer bullying, or attachment style, which could serve as mediating or moderating factors. Incorporating these variables would offer a more nuanced understanding of how environmental and relational contexts influence self-compassion. Lastly, while the study distinguished between positive and negative self-compassion components, it did not explore their direct associations with mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, or stress coping. Future research should investigate these links to determine which components are most protective, or most predictive, of adolescent psychological well-being.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the participating public lower secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City for granting permission and facilitating the data collection process. We especially thank the school administrators and teachers for their coordination and support in organizing classroom-based survey administration.

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

The authors declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini, AI-assisted writing tools, were used in proofreading and refining the language and formatting of the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors, improving clarity, and aligning the manuscript with the conference proceedings template. The authors further declare that no AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate the research content. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from the systematic conduct of the research.

References

Barnard, L. K., & Curry, J. F. (2011). Self-compassion: Conceptualizations, correlates, and interventions. *Review of General Psychology, 15*(4), 289–303. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025754

Bluth, K., & Blanton, P. W. (2015). The influence of self-compassion on emotional well-being among early and older adolescent males and females. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 10*(3), 219–230. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.936967

Bluth, K., & Eisenlohr-Moul, T. A. (2017). Response to a mindful self-compassion intervention in teens: A within-person association of mindfulness, self-compassion, and emotional well-being outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence, 57*, 108–118. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.04.001

Bluth, K., Mullarkey, M., & Lathren, C. (2018). Self-compassion: A potential path to adolescent resilience and positive exploration. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*(9), 3037–3047. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1125-1

Bluth, K., & Neff, K. D. (2018). New frontiers in understanding the benefits of self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 17*(6), 605–608. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2018.1508494

Bosacki, S. (2016). *Social cognition in middle childhood and adolescence: Integrating the personal, social, and educational lives of young people*. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781394259212

Chio, F. H., Mak, W. W. S., & Cheng, R. H. (2025). Dynamic duo is inseparable: Self-compassion and compassion for others interact to predict well-being. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being, 17*(1), e12641. https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12641

Cochran, W. G. (1977). *Sampling techniques* (3rd ed.). Wiley.

Dang, T. K. A., & Trinh, P. T. (2025). Self-compassion among university students: A study at several universities in Ho Chi Minh City. *Journal of Education, 25*(4), 54–59. https://tcgd.tapchigiaoduc.edu.vn/index.php/tapchi/article/view/2976

Duc, T. T. M., Thuy, N. T., & Duc, N. T. (2022). Teachers' self-compassion and its effects on depression, anxiety, and stress. *Vietnam Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 8*(3). https://doi.org/10.1172/vjossh.v8i3.1062

García del Castillo-López, Á. (2025). An integrative proposal in addiction and health behaviors psychosocial research: Overview of new trends and future orientations. *Frontiers in Psychology, 16*, Article 1565681. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1565681

Gilbert, P., & Procter, S. (2006). Compassionate mind training for people with high shame and self-criticism: Overview and pilot study of a group therapy approach. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy, 13*(6), 353–379. https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.507

Gill, C., Watson, L., Williams, C., & Chan, S. W. Y. (2018). Social anxiety and self-compassion in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 69*, 163–174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.10.004

Hinrichs, J. L. (2021). *Building resilience: Piloting a mindful self-compassion and stress management program with undergraduate nursing students* (Doctor of Nursing Practice project). University of North Dakota. https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/dnp-projects/24

Hubbard, J. (2023). *Measuring compassion in young people*. Canterbury Christ Church University. https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/item/9655x/measuring-compassion-in-young-people

Inwood, E., & Ferrari, M. (2018). Mechanisms of change in the relationship between self-compassion, emotion regulation, and mental health: A systematic review. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being, 10*(2), 215–235. https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12127

Malhotra, N., & Birks, D. (2007). *Instructor's manual*. Pearson Education.

Marsh, I. C., Chan, S. W. Y., & MacBeth, A. (2018). Self-compassion and psychological distress in adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Mindfulness, 9*(4), 1011–1027. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0850-7

Neff, K. D. (2003a). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 2*(3), 223–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309027

Neff, K. D. (2003b). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity, 2*(2), 85–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309032

Neff, K. D. (2016). The Self-Compassion Scale is a valid and theoretically coherent measure of self-compassion. *Mindfulness, 7*(1), 264–274. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-015-0479-3

Neff, K. D. (2023). Self-compassion: Theory, method, research, and intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology, 74*, 193–218. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031047

Neff, K. D., Bluth, K., Tóth-Király, I., Davidson, O., Knox, M. C., Williamson, Z., & Costigan, A. (2021). Development and validation of the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 103*(1), 92–105. https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2020.1729774

Neff, K. D., & McGehee, P. (2010). Self-compassion and psychological resilience among adolescents and young adults. *Self and Identity, 9*(3), 225–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860902979307

Nguyễn, T. N. C., Nguyễn, A. T., Trịnh, T. N., Phạm, L. N. T., & Nguyễn, T. T. Q. (2023). The demand to use the social skills handbook by students of Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science, 20*(2), 278. https://doi.org/10.54607/hcmue.js.20.2.3540(2023)

Sari, D. K., & Nurhidayah, R. (2025). The impact of bullying on adolescent mental health: A literature review. *Journal of Health Science Community, 6*(2), 168–175. https://doi.org/10.30994/jhsc.v6i2.313

Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. Vintage.

Yarnell, L. M., Stafford, R. E., Neff, K. D., Reilly, E. D., Knox, M. C., & Mullarkey, M. (2015). Meta-analysis of gender differences in self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 14*(5), 499–520. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2015.1029966

Feminism and Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Zikora"

Rasha Osman Abdel Haliem, Higher Technological Institute, Egypt

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study offers an in-depth analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Zikora," arguing that the narrative functions as a potent critique of globalized patriarchy as it is experienced by professional African women in the diaspora. This paper makes an original contribution by employing a Diaspora and Postcolonial Feminist framework to analyze how the intersection of cultural displacement and traditional gender roles intensifies societal pressures on the protagonist. The analysis focuses on Zikora, a Nigerian lawyer in Washington, D.C., as she confronts unexpected single motherhood and abandonment. This research moves beyond a simple thematic reading to examine the dialectic between Zikora's "Western" professional ambition and the "traditional" Nigerian values embodied by her mother. This intergenerational conflict is framed not merely as a clash of cultures, but as a site where local and international patriarchal norms converge. Specifically, the paper investigates how Zikora's experience of cultural hybridity and displacement in the U.S. is not an escape from, but a re-inscription of, gendered expectations concerning motherhood and partnership. Utilizing close reading informed by Postcolonial feminist studies, the paper's methodology involves analyzing key narrative moments, particularly the shifts in Zikora's perspective on her own mother, to demonstrate how the diasporic condition complicates and intensifies gender inequalities. The core argument is that "Zikora" is a crucial text in contemporary African feminist literature because it illuminates how patriarchy adapts and persists across national borders, demanding a nuanced theoretical approach to fully appreciate its critique.

Keywords: diaspora, postcolonial feminism, globalized patriarchy, cultural hybridity, gender inequalities

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Zikora" is a powerful and complex text that delves into the intricate challenges faced by a modern African woman navigating a diasporic existence. This paper argues that "Zikora" functions as a profound feminist text, one that not only critiques patriarchal gender norms but also examines how these norms are complicated and intensified by the immigrant experience. Through the emotional, physical, and reflective journey of its protagonist, a successful Nigerian lawyer in Washington, D.C., the narrative exposes the unique struggles of reconciling a Western sense of independence and ambition with deeply ingrained cultural expectations of womanhood, marriage, and motherhood. As Zikora navigates the visceral ordeal of labor, the emotional storm of her partner's abandonment, and her own internal reflections, Adichie presents a nuanced perspective on how the diasporic condition shapes a woman's identity and intensifies the societal pressures placed upon her. This analysis will show that "Zikora" is a crucial contribution to African feminist literature, offering a compelling portrait of resilience and self-discovery in the face of cultural displacement and gender inequality.

Situating "Zikora" Within Nigerian Feminist Literature

African feminisms and specifically, Nigerian feminism, offer a powerful and distinct intellectual framework for literary analysis, one that challenges the universalizing claims of Western feminism. This paradigm recognizes that African women's experiences with patriarchy are deeply intertwined with unique cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors, including colonialism, traditional social structures, and the challenges of post-independence life (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021, p. 25). Consequently, Nigerian and other African feminist writers do not seek to simply emulate their Western counterparts. Instead, they center their narratives on issues that resonate within their own societies, often addressing themes like motherhood, marriage, and family dynamics not merely as "domestic" matters, but as sites of significant political and social struggle (Nnaemeka, 1994a, p. 155; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 20).

This literary tradition is robust and well-established. From the foundational works of pioneers like Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) to the later contributions of writers like Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1981), Nigerian literature has consistently explored the complexities of women's lives. These works expose the societal pressures to fulfill traditional roles and, as critics like Helen Olajumoke Oyeyemi (2021) have argued, serve as a platform for women to "reinscribe" themselves into history on their own terms (112).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Zikora" continues this rich literary heritage while also marking a new direction. The story's intense focus on single motherhood and the protagonist's name, "Zikora" (meaning "assemble the throng" in Igbo), underscores the individual's struggle for identity and the need for communal support in a society that may not readily provide it (Oyeyemi, 2021, p. 113). Adichie's work reflects a contemporary sensibility, one that acknowledges the evolution of Nigerian women's challenges, particularly those living in the diaspora. Her writing is not merely a continuation but an expansion of the feminist project, demonstrating how the themes of motherhood and autonomy are complicated by globalization and displacement (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, 2022, pp. 175–184).

In her short story, "Zikora," Adichie immerses readers in a woman's journey to childbirth, weaving together vignettes from her daily life. The narrative introduces Zikora, a Nigerian

lawyer in Washington, D.C., who is grappling with impending motherhood and the abrupt end of her relationship. Left to bear the consequences alone, she finds unexpected emotional support from her mother, whose arrival to help with the birth becomes a pivotal moment.

The 37-year-old attorney is abandoned by her boyfriend after she reveals her pregnancy. This betrayal, coupled with her mother's presence, transforms the seemingly independent Zikora into a vulnerable young woman once more. The physical and emotional turmoil of this period prompts her to reflect on her mother's own difficult history. She recalls how her father, a polygamist, started a new family with another woman while her mother chose to remain in the marriage, refusing divorce due to the significant cultural stigma it carried. For her mother, this acceptance of abandonment in the form of polygamy was a sacrifice for dignity and social standing, a stark contrast to Zikora's own defiant independence. As Zikora's seemingly perfect life unravels, she begins to understand her mother's motivations and the sacrifices she made. The story is fundamentally a passionate and poignant portrayal of a single mother's hardship, specifically within the context of Nigerian culture. It is a testament to the resilience of women who must forge their own paths in the face of societal pressures and personal betrayal.

The narrative frequently returns to the trauma of Zikora's father taking a second wife, an event that shattered her mother's world. In a feminist context, this memory serves as a cautionary tale about the instability of traditional marriage. Even in the diaspora, where polygamy is not the norm, the ghost of this betrayal haunts Zikora's expectations of Kwame. It underscores the theme that women, across generations and borders, must navigate the constant threat of being replaced or discarded by men.

Sisterhood

Beyond the individual struggle, the story powerfully highlights the crucial theme of sisterhood. Zikora's mother emerges as her most reliable source of support, a stark contrast to her father, who only offers empty promises to visit. While he remains a distant figure, her mother crosses continents to be by her side, underscoring the strength of the bond between them. This unwavering care is a reflection of a deeper network of female solidarity, also evident in the emotional support Zikora and her mother received from her aunt. In a world where patriarchal figures disappoint and abandon, Adichie illustrates that women find strength and support not from men, but in the mutual understanding and resilience of other women.

Adichie's portrayal of sisterhood goes beyond the immediate family unit, positioning it as a fundamental aspect of African feminist thought. Recent scholarship confirms this emphasis, arguing that for African women, female solidarity is not merely a social convenience but a vital strategy for survival and empowerment (Yussif & Nsowah, 2024, p. 263). The bonds between women often constitute a powerful counter-narrative to the oppressive experiences they face in patriarchal societies (Osigwe & Nekede, 2021, pp. 45–50). Through the relationship between Zikora and her mother, Adichie re-examines the concept of motherhood, showing it not as a passive, biological role, but as an active, empowering force forged by shared struggle and mutual support (Amari & Maoui, 2021, p. 225). The intergenerational dialogue between mother and daughter in "Zikora" is a testament to this, as the younger woman comes to understand her mother's silent strength and sacrifices, finding a new form of kinship that transcends geographical and cultural divides.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Zikora," the protagonist serves as the first-person narrator, placing the reader directly within her experience. The narrative opens with Zikora in labor at East Memorial Hospital. Despite extensive research and preparation, she finds herself overwhelmed by the visceral reality of childbirth, describing it as, "It wasn't only pain, either. It was both similar to and distinct from pain. It sat like fire in my back, extending to my thighs, pressing against my internal organs and spiraling downwards" (Adichie, 2020, p. 11). This physical agony forces Zikora to confront the limitations of intellectual knowledge, realizing that psychological preparation and academic research are no match for the raw, bodily experience of labor.

The story highlights the pervasive interpersonal betrayals women endure, many of which stem from patriarchal expectations. The protagonist's younger cousin, Mmiliaku, suffers at the hands of Emmanuel, a man who would "prefer to have sex with her in her sleep" (Adichie, 2020, p. 10). Similarly, Mmiliaku's "impoverished boyfriend" leaves her for an "older and wealthy" woman, a decision driven by her parents' impatience (Adichie, 2020, p. 10). The theme of male-centric priorities is further underscored by Zikora's father's polygamy, where he marries a second wife to ensure he has male heirs, disregarding his devotion to his first wife. Zikora's own seemingly flawless relationship with Kwame, who is younger and earns less than her, shatters when he discovers her pregnancy. He views the child as a "miscommunication," abandoning her to face motherhood alone (Adichie, 2020, p. 11).

Adichie (2020) suggests that female solidarity and emotional support are essential for navigating the physical and psychological transitions of motherhood. While the protagonist, Zikora, initially presents as a self-sufficient and successful woman, the reality of her partner's abandonment forces her to confront a profound vulnerability. This need for a support network is first articulated in her confession to her cousin, Mmiliaku: "I was scared to do it alone, I was scared to be alone" (p. 16). Beyond this peer connection, Zikora begins to find a deeper, more grounded sense of security through her mother's compassionate care during a prolonged labor. Her mother's calm presence—exemplified by her simple reassurance that "some babies just cry"—offers a stark contrast to Zikora's own frantic intellectual anxieties (pp. 18, 27).

This shared experience of care allows their relationship, which was once distant and strained, to thaw and deepen. The evolving bond culminates in a moment of raw honesty when Zikora admits, "I don't know what I'll do when you leave," to which her mother replies, "I'm not going anywhere yet" (p. 27). This exchange provides Zikora with profound relief and a new understanding of her mother's historical strength and the sacrifices she made as a woman who was similarly mistreated. Ultimately, this intergenerational support serves as a crucial antidote to the isolation Zikora experiences, transforming motherhood from a solitary struggle into a shared act of resilience.

The story concludes not with a romantic resolution, but with a quiet, domestic one. The forgiveness Zikora extends to her mother is the ultimate feminist act of the story. By understanding her mother's choices, Zikora heals the rift caused by patriarchal structures that pit women against one another. In the diaspora, this reconciliation acts as a homecoming, providing Zikora with the ancestral grounding she needs to raise her child in a foreign land.

In many societies, single mothers face significant challenges, carrying the entire weight of responsibility for their families. This can occur due to various circumstances, including the death of a partner, divorce, or, as in the case of Adichie's protagonist, Zikora, abandonment

by a partner. A parent raising a child with little to no involvement from the other parent is a distinct experience, one that profoundly impacts a child's development. Zikora represents a new generation of women who, despite being the product of such circumstances, are empowered and socially conscious.

Adichie's narrative explores motherhood as a socially constructed role, defined not just by biology but by a woman's capacity for endurance and care. As Zikora navigates the overwhelming realities of new motherhood, her own mother's presence triggers a profound shift in perspective. While her mother embodies traditional motherhood—a woman who accepts polygamy and remains in a difficult marriage to maintain social standing—Zikora begins to understand the complex interplay between cultural expectations and personal resilience. The story highlights the gendered asymmetry of reproduction, where only one parent, the mother, endures the pain of labor and the sole burden of raising a child. In "Zikora," Adichie portrays women who are left to shoulder both their own duties and the responsibilities abdicated by men, a theme that speaks to a new wave of writers unafraid to tackle such sensitive issues. The story is unique for its immersive, first-person perspective, allowing readers to fully inhabit the emotional and psychological world of the protagonist.

Writing the Body

Women writers use the body as a central theme to challenge patriarchal narratives and create an authentic space for female experience. This literary tradition aims to reclaim the female body from its historical objectification and reposition it as a subject of lived reality, consciousness, and power. Writing the body becomes a form of resistance against a culture that often silences or sanitizes female pain, desire, and bodily processes. This practice is particularly significant for African women writers, who often address how the female body is a site of intersecting oppressions related to gender, race, and culture. They write the body to give voice to experiences like childbirth, female genital mutilation, and reproductive health issues that are often overlooked in mainstream discourse (Amuche & Atoyebi, 2023, p. 5; Oyeyemi, 2021, p. 116).

Adichie writes the body in "Zikora" not as a biological object, but as a complex and politicized site of experience, pain, and agency. She challenges the idealized or sanitized depictions of pregnancy and childbirth often found in mainstream culture. The body becomes the central, visceral stage where the story's key conflicts—feminist, cultural, and personal—play out. This approach is a deliberate feminist strategy, as female authors use the body to expose the societal expectations and power dynamics that govern women's lives (Oyeyemi, 2021, p. 115). By centering the narrative on the physical self, they grant agency to the body as a source of knowledge and a medium for self-discovery (Ebe, 2020, p. 48).

Adichie's primary focus is the raw, unvarnished physicality of labor. Zikora's description of her contractions is brutal and detailed, portraying the pain as "both similar to and distinct from pain," a "primitive wind" that sits like fire in her back (Adichie, 2020, p. 11). This visceral reality serves as a direct contrast to her intellectual, privileged life in the diaspora. Her mind, the tool of her professional success as a lawyer, feels helpless against the overwhelming physical experience of the body.

This sense of alienation from her own body is compounded by the cultural expectations placed upon her. Her mother's stoic, "laced-up dignity" and insistence on silence during labor clashes with Zikora's instinctive screams, highlighting how even in moments of extreme

physical agony, the female body is subject to rigid cultural norms and judgments (Adichie, 2020, p. 18). As noted by Obinna (2020), this portrayal underscores that motherhood is not just a biological event but a "journey" shaped by the tension between individual experience and societal "performance" (p. 2).

Beyond physical pain, the body serves as a repository of memory and trauma. Through her contractions, Zikora reflects on past indignities and the ways her body has been policed and misunderstood. She remembers her mother's lack of sympathy for her menstrual cramps—dismissed as a lack of "discipline"—the subtle judgment from Kwame regarding her birth control use, and the tragic death of a cousin from complications in childbirth (Adichie, 2020, pp. 14–15). These flashbacks demonstrate that a woman's body carries a hidden history of patriarchal control and societal expectations.

The pain of the present is thus connected to a lifetime of struggle; as Osborne-Crowley (2021) argues, the female body often "keeps secrets" of past traumas that resurface during moments of physical vulnerability (p. 82). This intergenerational transmission of bodily knowledge and trauma is a key aspect of African feminist literature, where the bodies of mothers and daughters often tell a shared story of oppression and resistance (Amuche & Atoyebi, 2023, p. 9). In essence, Zikora's labor is not just about the birth of a child, but the "re-inscription of womanhood" through the reclamation of her own physical narrative (Nnaemeka, 1994b, p. 140). This reclamation extends beyond the immediate physical ordeal, as the body also serves as a profound repository of memory.

In women's writing, the body serves as a profound repository of memory, etching personal and cultural histories onto its physical form. This concept challenges the traditional mind-body dualism—an intellectual framework that has historically prioritized the "rational" mind over the "irrational" female body—asserting instead that memory is an inherently embodied experience (Tiukało, 2012, p. 78). Trauma, for example, can be inscribed on the body, influencing a woman's physical sensations and behaviors long after the event itself; as Osborne-Crowley (2021) suggests, these "secrets" manifest most clearly when the body is under the stress of illness or labor (p. 82). This embodied memory often bypasses linear, verbal narratives, manifesting instead through the sensory metaphors and disrupted chronology seen in Adichie's use of flashbacks, where the pain of a contraction triggers a sudden, non-linear memory of past policing (Adichie, 2020). By exploring the body as a geographical memory, women writers reclaim their experiences from patriarchal narratives that have historically objectified the female form as a mere biological vessel (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 65).

Simone de Beauvoir's (2011) philosophical work, particularly *The Second Sex*, is foundational to the deconstruction of bodily objectification. She argued that in patriarchal societies, women are reduced to the "Other"—their bodies defined purely by biological functions and societal expectations rather than individual will (Tiukało, 2012, p. 80). By analyzing the lived experience of the female body as a "situation" rather than a mere object, Beauvoir provided a framework for understanding how a woman's body becomes a site of both oppression and potential liberation (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 65). This framework empowers contemporary writers like Adichie to reclaim the body as a subject, making physical experience central to the narratives of memory and identity. This identity is inherently tied to the geography of the diaspora; throughout the labor process, Zikora's body becomes a map of her history.

Every contraction acts as a bridge between her current life in America and her biological origins in Nigeria. This focus on the physical body is a powerful feminist statement; it asserts that despite the intellectual and professional heights Zikora has reached, she is still tethered to the universal female experience of creation. Her body performs a labor that is both uniquely hers and shared by every woman in her lineage, effectively "mapping" the transition from the diaspora back to the ancestral source (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, 2022, p. 178). In this sense, the body becomes the ultimate vessel of migration, carrying cultural identity across borders through the blood and bone of the maternal line.

Ultimately, through this intense physical ordeal, Zikora's body transforms into a source of agency and self-knowledge. By enduring the pain and eventually giving birth, she reclaims control over her body and her life. The final moments of labor are described as a raw, almost violent act of creation that reduces her to her essential self (Adichie, 2020, p. 26). This experience forces her to re-evaluate her life and her relationships, leading to a profound understanding of her identity as a woman and a mother, independent of the patriarchal expectations that previously defined her. As Ebe (2020) notes, when female authors center the narrative on the physical self, they grant the body agency as a primary source of knowledge (p. 52).

Furthermore, Zikora's journey illustrates how the body serves as a bridge between generations and cultural legacies. The pain of labor does not merely represent physical endurance; it is a rite of passage that enables her to connect with her maternal lineage in a way that intellectual understanding never could. Her body, in this context, functions as a historical archive, holding the collective memory of female resilience and survival (Nnaemeka, 1994b, p. 142). By embracing the power and pain of her physical form, she moves beyond patriarchal definitions of her worth and steps into a new identity shaped by her own lived experience.

While the body serves as a site of presence and connection, the male figures in the story are defined by their absence. While Kwame represents the failure of the "modern" man to handle the weight of reproduction, the memory of Zikora's father represents the failure of the "traditional" man through the lens of polygamy and neglect. Adichie (2020) creates a vacuum where a positive male presence should be, forcing a radical redefinition of the family unit. In the diaspora, the "family" shifts from a patriarchal structure to a matriarchal one, centered around the mother, the daughter, and the newborn. This shift is not merely a social convenience but a "vital strategy for survival" that replaces the unreliable patriarchal figure with a stable, intergenerational female network (Yussif & Nsowah, 2024, p. 263).

The matriarchal shift necessitated by male absence forces a confrontation with the "single mother" label, a term loaded with divergent meanings across the diaspora. In the Nigerian context, being a single mother often carries a heavy social stigma rooted in traditional marital expectations; in the American diaspora, the stigma shifts toward racialized socio-economic tropes. Zikora must navigate the internalization of both these stigmas. Her journey toward accepting her role as a single parent is a feminist act of defiance; she chooses to see her child not as a mark of her "failure" to keep a man, but as a testament to her own capacity to endure. As noted by Obinna (2020), this transition represents a "journey to motherhood" that redefines success outside of patriarchal validation (p. 2). By rejecting these labels, Zikora aligns with the broader project of African feminisms which seeks to (re)inscribe womanhood as a position of power rather than one of lack (Nnaemeka, 1994b, p. 138).

In “Zikora,” Adichie subtly weaves in the reality of a Black woman navigating the American healthcare system, where the feminist struggle is inseparable from the racialized experience. Zikora’s high socioeconomic status as a lawyer does not fully insulate her from the vulnerabilities inherent in the medical-industrial complex. This reflects a stark documented reality in the United States, where Black women are 2.6 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than White women, a disparity that persists regardless of income or education level (CDC, 2024). Her labor, therefore, serves as a metaphor for the broader Black experience in the West—a process of intense creation and pain that is monitored by a system that does not instinctively empathize with her cultural history. This reflects the “fragmentations” discussed by Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (2022), where the Black female body in the diaspora is often subjected to a gaze that overlooks its specific historical and geographical origins (p. 180).

Furthermore, the lack of empathy Zikora feels from the medical staff echoes the “silencing” of female pain described by Osborne-Crowley (2021). Within this racialized “situation”—to use Beauvoir’s (2011, p. 45) terminology—Zikora’s insistence on her own narrative and her mother’s physical presence becomes a form of reproductive justice. They reclaim the hospital room, turning a sterile, institutional space into a site of ancestral grounding. In doing so, Adichie illustrates that for the woman in the diaspora, the body is the final frontier of resistance where the “biological” meets the “political” to produce a reclaimed sense of self rooted in the pluralities of African feminisms. The vulnerability exposed in this racialized healthcare experience highlights the fragility of the diasporic myth of the “global citizen.”

The racialized healthcare experience Zikora undergoes highlights the fragility of the diasporic myth of the “global citizen.” While she initially believes her professional status has transcended the cultural limitations of her home country, the abandonment she faces reveals that globalism is often a thin veneer. When crisis strikes, the protections of her American identity feel secondary to the patriarchal stigmas she thought she had left behind in Nigeria. Her struggle proves that the diaspora is not an escape from patriarchy, but rather a different stage upon which the same gendered dramas are performed. This reflects the “fragmentations” and “double consciousness” described by Adeniyi-Ogunyankin (2022, p. 182), where the subject is forced to navigate the tension between their ancestral identity and their Western “situation.”

This internal tension is further articulated through the use of language, where the standard English register fails to capture the depth of Zikora’s emotional reality. While she operates in the sharp, precise English of the American legal world, her emotional breakthroughs are mediated through the cadences of her mother’s Nigerian-inflected speech. This linguistic shift represents a feminist reclamation; by the end of the story, Zikora stops fighting the “African” parts of her identity and starts using them as a source of power to withstand her solitude. This is what Nnaemeka (1994a, p. 156) identifies as the movement from “rebellious silence” to “literary creativity,” as Zikora finds a voice that combines her Western education with her maternal heritage.

This “architectural” loneliness is a hallmark of the diasporic experience, where Western privacy often morphs into isolation. Unlike the communal support systems in Nigeria, the diaspora offers a “fragmented” existence (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, 2022, p. 182). Zikora’s journey is about transforming this isolation into a self-sufficient solitude. Her apartment, once a symbol of her independent success, becomes a site of “ancestral grounding” as her mother fills the space with the traditional care and practical wisdom required for survival.

In this light, the story challenges the neoliberal feminist idea that economic independence is the final frontier of liberation. Zikora is financially secure and professionally successful, yet she is emotionally devastated by Kwame's cowardice. Adichie suggests that while financial autonomy is a vital tool for the "second-class citizen" seeking freedom (Emecheta, 1974, p. 181), it does not automatically dismantle the emotional hierarchies that prioritize male desires. The diaspora allows Zikora to pay her own bills, but as Osborne-Crowley (2021) suggests, it does not protect the body or the heart from the "secrets" of patriarchal entitlement and betrayal (p. 84). This realization forces Zikora to look toward intergenerational female solidarity—rather than capital—as her true source of security.

Conclusion

This study has examined Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Zikora" as a transformative text within contemporary African feminist literature, illustrating that the diasporic experience does not dissolve patriarchal structures but rather reconfigures them. By navigating the intersection of professional success in the West and the traditional expectations of her Nigerian heritage, Zikora exposes the fragmented reality of the modern African woman. The narrative's focus on the visceral physicality of childbirth serves as a powerful reclamation of the female body, transforming it from a biological vessel of patriarchal concern into a primary site of agency and ancestral memory.

Adichie challenges the neoliberal feminist myth that economic independence alone constitutes total liberation. While Zikora's professional status as a lawyer provides her with financial autonomy, it offers no protection against the emotional betrayals of a globalized patriarchy that persists across borders. Instead, Zikora finds her true source of resilience through a matriarchal shift—a deliberate movement away from reliance on male presence toward a stable, intergenerational network of female solidarity. This transition, underscored by the reconciliation between Zikora and her mother, represents a re-inscription of womanhood that values shared struggle over solitary success. In the sterile landscape of the diaspora, Zikora's journey to motherhood becomes a profound act of reproductive justice and cultural homecoming. By embracing the African cadences of her identity and the quiet strength of her mother, she transforms her architectural loneliness into a self-sufficient solitude. "Zikora" thus stands as a testament to the fact that for the woman in the diaspora, the most radical act of resistance is the healing of female relationships and the reclamation of her own physical and emotional narrative.

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.

References

Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, G. (2022). Grappling with the fragmentations: Black feminisms, African feminisms and the possibilities of Black geographies in Canada. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, *44*, 175–184. https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-2020-0012

Adichie, C. N. (2020). *Zikora: A short story*. Amazon Original Stories.

Amari, O., & Maoui, H. (2021). Buchi Emecheta, a feminist with a small 'f' or a motherist with a big 'M'? *Algerian Journal of Manuscripts*, *17*, 224–243.

Amuche, F. N., & Atoyebi, D. A. (2023). A thematic exploration of the female body as a site of trauma and resistance in Buchi Emecheta's The joys of motherhood and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a yellow sun. *Journal of Literary Studies*, *39*(4), 1–17.

Bâ, M. (1981). *So long a letter* (M. Bodé-Thomas, Trans.). Heinemann. (Original work published 1979).

Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The second sex*. Vintage Books.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2024). *Working together to reduce maternal mortality.* https://www.cdc.gov/maternal-mortality/php/working-together/

Ebe, C. (2020). Female authors and the politics of the body. *Journal of African Literature Studies*, *5*(1), 45–60.

Emecheta, B. (1974). *Second-class citizen*. Allison & Busby.

Emecheta, B. (1979). *The joys of motherhood*. George Braziller.

Nnaemeka, O. (1994a). Feminism, rebellious silence, and literary creativity. *The Journal of the African Literature Association*, *1994*(1), 154–159.

Nnaemeka, O. (1994b). From orality to writing: African women writers and the (re)inscription of womanhood. *Research in African Literatures*, *25*(4), 137–157.

Nwapa, F. (1966). *Efuru*. Heinemann.

Obinna, E. (2020, November 1). *Zikora: A journey to motherhood*. Business Day. https://businessday.ng/lifearts/article/zikora-a-journey-tomotherhood/

Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (1994). *Recreating ourselves: African women and critical transformations.* Africa World Press.

Okonjo-Iweala, N. (2021). *Women and power in Nigeria: A historical perspective*. Oxford University Press.

Osborne-Crowley, L. (2021). *My body keeps your secrets*. Trapeze.

Osigwe, K. C., & Nekede, F. P. (2021). Zikora: A short story. *English Academy Review: A Journal of English Studies*, *18*(1), 34–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2021.1926106

Oyeyemi, H. (2021). Reclaiming the body: A feminist reading of contemporary African fiction. *The Journal of African Women Writers*, *2*(1), 112–128.

Tiukało, A. (2012). The notion of the body and sex in Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy. *Human Movement*, *13*(2), 77–83. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10038-012-0010-0

Yussif, B. K., & Nsowah, D. O.-D. (2024). Women writing women: Re-defining the identity of African women in African literary texts. *Advances in Literary Study*, *12*(4), 263–276. https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2024.124021

Contact emails: rasha.abdelhaleem@hti.edu.eg
rashaosman77777@gmail.com

Power in Cloth: The Semiotic Shift From Spiritual Iconography to Human Authority in Global Textiles

Lasya Aji Silpa, Appalachian State University, United States
Manikya Sai Tejaswini Vallabhajosyula, University of North Texas, United States
Barbara Trippeer, University of North Texas, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Indian historic textile traditions have long served as visual repositories of sacred narrative. Textiles such as Srikalahasti Kalamkari, Pattachitra scrolls, Baluchari woven epics, Mata ni Pachedi shrine textiles, Chamba Rumal embroideries, and temple-inspired Kanchipuram weavings depict gods, goddesses, and episodes from epic and Puranic literature. Through surface design, pattern composition, scale, and narrative structure, these textiles affirm spiritual authority and function as material extensions of ritual and devotional practice, reflecting a cosmological worldview embedded in textile surfaces. This semiotic visual system embedded in textile pattern-work began to transform as Indian textiles entered long-distance trade networks from the early modern period onward. Contact with Persianate, Southeast Asian, and European markets introduced new aesthetic expectations that favored decorative symmetry, floral repetition, and increasingly secular subject matter. During the colonial period, export-oriented textile production increasingly centered human subjects, including European families and officials, in visual positions once reserved for divine figures. This shift reflects a reorganization of visual authority that parallels broader social, economic, and political changes in India. This study examines these transformations by comparing sacred narrative textiles with export-oriented production between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Sacred narrative textiles are defined here as indigenous Indian textiles produced for temple and domestic use in spiritual or ritual contexts. Using comparative visual and semiotic analysis supported by historical evidence of trade and patronage, the study identifies key mechanisms of iconographic change and argues that Indian textiles function as material archives of cultural transformation, recording shifting negotiations of authority through surface design.

Keywords: iconography, textiles, colonial period, surface design, cultural continuity

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Across India, textile traditions have long functioned as powerful visual media for expressing religious and spiritual narratives (Gopal, 1961). Painted, printed, and woven textiles from the early modern period depicted gods, goddesses, and episodes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavata Purana* (Pattanaik, 2003). Traditions such as Srikalahasti Kalamkari in Andhra Pradesh, Pattachitra scrolls in Odisha, Baluchari weaving in Bengal, Kanchipuram temple-inspired silks in Tamil Nadu, Mata ni Pachedi shrine cloths in Gujarat, and Chamba Rumal embroideries in the Himalayan region demonstrate how textile surfaces operated as visual scripture within temple and domestic contexts (Divakala & Vasantha, 2014; Gopal, 1961; Modi, 2024). Through compositional hierarchy, scale, and iconographic emphasis, these textiles structured ritual life and affirmed spiritual authority.

In these traditions, divine figures occupied central and dominant positions within pattern layouts, while human figures appeared in secondary or devotional roles (Pinney, 2004). Motifs, borders, and color hierarchies reinforced cosmological meaning, making textiles carriers of religious knowledge and active participants in ritual practice (Rajguru, 2010). Beginning in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Indian textile production became increasingly integrated into long-distance trade networks. Contact with Central Asian, Persianate, Southeast Asian, and European markets reshaped patronage and aesthetic priorities (Gupta, 2009; Pattanaik, 2003). Foreign consumers favored decorative symmetry, floral repetition, and secular imagery, diverging from earlier narrative-centered and spiritually grounded surface traditions (Arasaratnam, 1967; Latif et al., 2019; Riello, 2008). As artisans adapted to commercial demands, spiritual iconography diminished or became fragmented in many regional production centers.

This transformation became particularly visible during the colonial period, when export-oriented textiles featured European families, officials, and scenes of social life (Miller & Hamell, 1986). Human subjects increasingly occupied visual positions once reserved for deities, marking a reorganization of visual hierarchy. Textile surfaces that once affirmed spiritual authority came to reflect social and political power (Cohn, 2017).

This study examines this transformation by comparing sacred narrative textiles with textiles produced for global and colonial markets. Through comparative visual analysis supported by historical evidence of trade and patronage, it identifies mechanisms through which spiritual iconography was reduced, and human-centered imagery became prominent. The study argues that Indian textiles function as material archives of shifting authority and that the displacement of divine figures records broader cultural negotiations within the history of Indian textile production.

Socio-Political Context and Systems of Patronage

Indian textiles evolved within shifting systems of patronage and political authority. Prior to the expansion of long-distance trade, textile production was closely tied to temples, royal courts, and local communities (Pinney, 2004). Religious institutions and regional rulers shaped visual priorities, reinforcing spiritual cosmologies through narrative composition, scale, and iconographic hierarchy. Textile imagery functioned as an extension of ritual life, embedding divine authority into material culture (Pattanaik, 2003).

From the fifteenth century onward, India became increasingly integrated into transregional trade networks linking South Asia with Southeast Asia, the Persianate world, and Europe (Arasaratnam, 1967a; Riello, 2008; Seshan, 2012). Textiles emerged as major commodities within these exchanges, transforming cloth from a ritual object into a globally circulating product. Artisans adapted to external markets that favored decorative symmetry, portability, and visual familiarity over sacred narrative specificity (Miller & Hamell, 1986). "*Export textiles*" refers to Indian textiles produced primarily as commodities for long-distance trade between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, shaped by foreign patronage and commercial demand (Seshan, 2012).

Colonial expansion intensified commercialization and standardization. Political authority shifted from religious institutions and indigenous courts toward colonial administrations and foreign consumers. As patronage structures changed, textile surfaces increasingly reflected new hierarchies of social and political power (Deepshikha et al., 2018). The gradual displacement of divine iconography by human and colonial subjects therefore represents not merely an aesthetic shift, but a material record of broader transformation in India's economic and political systems.

Literature Review

Indian textile traditions have long been intertwined with sacred narrative and ritual practice. Before the expansion of global trade, cloth served as a primary visual medium through which divine stories circulated across the subcontinent (Pattanaik, 2003). Traditions such as Srikalahasti Kalamkari, Pattachitra textiles, Baluchari weaving, Mata ni Pachedi shrine cloths, Phad scrolls, and Chamba Rumal embroideries demonstrate the widespread use of textiles as narrative and devotional objects (Divakala & Muthian, 2017; Kaur, 2017; Shekhawat, 2018). Across these traditions, divine figures occupied central and dominant positions within the composition, structured through scale, color, and spatial hierarchy(Berti, 2004). Motifs such as lotus forms, temple architecture, and celestial symbols reinforced cosmological meaning, positioning cloth as a material extension of sacred space (Deepshikha et al., 2018).

From the fifteenth century onward, India's integration into transregional trade networks reshaped textile production (Cohn, 2017). As textiles became major export commodities, foreign patronage influenced aesthetic priorities. Persian and Islamic markets encouraged floral and geometric designs, while European consumers favored symmetrical repeats and secular imagery suited to furnishing and fashion (Mathur, 2007). Under Portuguese, Dutch, and British commercial expansion, production became increasingly standardized and export oriented (Arasaratnam, 1967; Gupta, 2009).

This shift is evident in the transformation of Kalamkari and chintz (Silpa et al., 2025). Earlier narrative-centered textiles gradually incorporated floral patterns and secular scenes, including European domestic and military subjects (Silpa et al., 2025). European figures began occupying compositional prominence once reserved for deities, signaling a reordering of visual hierarchy. Simultaneously, sacred motifs persisted but were abstracted from narrative context and reduced to decorative elements (Appadurai, 1988). These developments mirror broader political and economic restructuring during the early modern and colonial periods.

Existing scholarship often treats sacred textile traditions and export textiles as separate domains. Studies of Kalamkari, Pattachitra, and Baluchari emphasize devotional contexts, while research on chintz focuses on global trade and European consumption (Guy & Haidar,

2024). Less attention has been given to how iconographic displacement reflects shifts in authority across these domains.

This study addresses that gap by examining sacred narrative textiles and export textiles within a shared analytical framework. Through comparative visual analysis, it traces the displacement of divine figures, the rise of human-centered imagery, and the fragmentation of sacred motifs, positioning Indian textiles as material archives of shifting cultural power.

Methodology

This study distinguishes between material construction and visual meaning. Although the term "cloth" appears in historical discourse, this research does not analyze fiber content or weave structure. Instead, it focuses on textile surface design, including imagery, iconography, compositional hierarchy, and narrative structure across techniques such as painting, weaving, embroidery, dyeing, and printing. The term "textile" is therefore used to emphasize visual and symbolic dimensions. Likewise, "sacred" refers to ritual and temple-based usage, while "spiritual" denotes the cosmological meanings embedded in imagery.

The study employs a qualitative framework grounded in comparative visual analysis supported by surface design observation (Silpa et al., 2025). Because many sacred and export textiles survive without explanatory texts, the textile surface itself becomes the primary source for interpreting cultural meaning (Welch, 1985). Visual analysis enables the tracing of iconographic shifts across changing systems of patronage.

The methodology is informed by semiotic theory, which understands visual forms as systems of culturally constructed signs (Travere, 2023). Textile imagery is treated as a signifying system in which figure scale, spatial hierarchy, and compositional centrality operate as signifiers of authority and belief. In sacred traditions, divine figures function as dominant signifiers that naturalize spiritual authority through scale and placement. As textiles enter global trade and colonial markets, these sign systems are reorganized. Human rulers and European subjects assume positions once reserved for deities, signaling a transformation in how authority is visually encoded.

Through this semiotic framework, Indian textiles are interpreted as cultural texts that record shifts in meaning and power rather than as static decorative objects.

Analytical Framework

The first phase of the methodology uses surface design observation to analyze a broad set of sacred Indian textiles that explicitly depict gods, goddesses, and mythological episodes. These include Srikalahasti Kalamkari temple hangings, Baluchari sarees featuring woven epics, Pattachitra cloths depicting Jagannath and Krishna narratives, Mata ni Pachedi shrine textiles centered on goddess iconography, Chamba Rumal embroideries illustrating Krishna Leela, and temple-inspired Kanchipuram weavings that incorporate divine motifs (Table 3). Each textile is examined through key visual parameters, including motif construction, iconographic clarity, compositional arrangement, figure hierarchy, color relationships, and border logic. This phase establishes a baseline for how divine imagery historically structured the visual field around the authority of gods and mythological narrative.

The second phase applies the same observational criteria to export-oriented textiles, particularly painted and printed chintz produced for Dutch, Portuguese, and British markets between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Table 4). These textiles frequently feature floral repeats, balanced decorative fields, and scenes of European families, officers, and domestic activity (Figure 2). Analysis focuses on the introduction of human-centered imagery, the reduction or removal of sacred symbols, and the increasing use of secular themes shaped by foreign patronage. Together, these phases clarify how long-distance trade and colonial market demands reorganized textile design and transformed the cultural function of cloth.

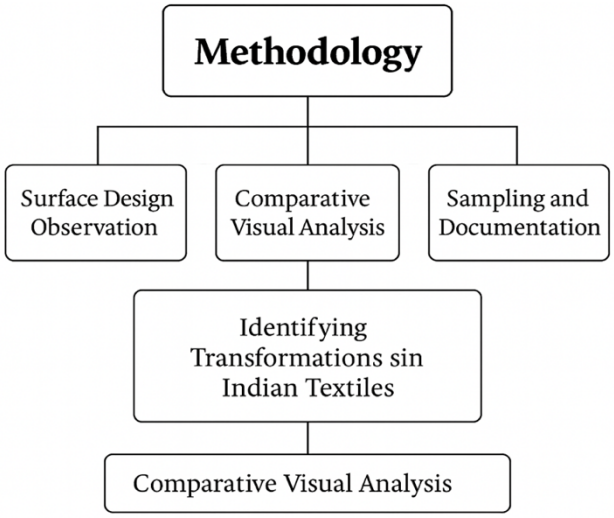
Comparative Visual Analysis

The third phase of the methodology consists of a systematic comparison between sacred and export textiles. The textiles are placed in dialogue across three analytical dimensions. First, subject matter is compared by tracing the shift from divine centered to human-centered imagery. Second, compositional structure is examined by comparing narrative sequencing, spatial hierarchy, focal placement, and the thematic role of borders and fields. Third, symbolic function is analyzed to identify how textiles transition from serving ritual, pedagogical, or cosmological purposes to representing social identity, status, leisure, or colonial authority. This comparative process exposes visual mechanisms of transformation, such as the diminishing scale of divine figures, the fragmentation of narrative structures, and the standardization of motifs shaped by commercial demand.

Sampling and Documentation

Sampling follows a purposive strategy designed to capture both regional diversity and chronological depth. The dataset includes high quality archival images, museum holdings across the globe and digital archives. The above-mentioned religious textiles were selected based on their clear representation of divine figures, their ritual or narrative function, and their historical provenance within regional traditions. A total of 55 traditional textile samples were studied (Table 3). Export textiles were selected for their relevance to colonial production networks, the presence of human and European subjects, and their departure from sacred narrative conventions. A total of 36 colonial textile samples were studied (Table 4). Each sample is catalogued with descriptive notes on iconographic details, textile style, description and estimated date.

Figure 1
Methodology Flowchart



Methodological Significance

By centering its investigation on visual evidence, the methodology reconstructs the shift in authority from sacred to secular and from divine to human representation through semiotic inference. Visual elements such as scale, spatial hierarchy, compositional focus, and iconographic placement are treated as signifiers of authority, allowing shifts in power to be read through changes in textile imagery. Comparative visual analysis offers a replicable framework for future studies of Indian textile history by aligning aesthetic transformation with historical context. This approach recognizes the textile as an artistic object, a cultural document, and an archive of shifting power relations. It allows the study to identify how artisans navigated the pressures of global trade, how sacred iconography was altered or displaced, and how colonial presence became materially inscribed onto cloth.

Comparative visual analysis reveals a transformation in the symbolic authority of Indian textile imagery from the pre-colonial sacred period to the era of long-distance trade and colonial expansion. Sacred narrative textiles consistently center divine figures through scale, compositional prominence, and narrative control. In Srikalahasti Kalamkari, Pattachitra, Baluchari weaving, Mata ni Pachedi shrine cloths, and Chamba Rumal embroideries, deities occupy focal positions that structure the visual field and guide narrative interpretation (Chamarty, 2024; Kaur, 2017; Pareek & Pant, 2015). Across traditions, divine presence organizes composition through spatial hierarchy, saturated color fields, symbolic borders, and subordinate human figures. Cloth functions as visual scripture and as a material extension of ritual authority.

With the expansion of long-distance trade, this visual logic shifts. Export-oriented chintz produced for Portuguese, Dutch, and British markets emphasizes floral repetition, decorative symmetry, and secular scenes. Human subjects, particularly European families and officers, assume central positions once reserved for deities (Guy & Haidar, 2024; Welch, 1985). Narrative sequencing gives way to ornamental balance, and sacred iconography diminishes in prominence.

Analysis of the colonial-era dataset of thirty-six textiles reveals consistent patterns of iconographic displacement. The transition from divine-centered imagery to human-centered representation follows five recurring categories, summarized in Table 5. Together, these findings demonstrate a reorganization of visual hierarchy that parallels broader economic and political transformation under colonial trade networks.

Table 5

Iconographic Transformation Chart

Transformation Category	Description	Number of Samples	Representative Examples
Divine imagery replaced by human rulers	Mughal, Nawabi, Rajput, or Maratha elites occupy visual positions originally held by gods	14	Nawabs on thrones, Mughal durbar Kalamkari, Rajput durbar cloths
Divine narratives replaced by court or military scenes	Mythological storytelling replaced by human political narratives	10	Battle hangings, Mughal hunting cloths, colonial conflict scenes
Europeans inserted into sacred-format layouts	Human colonial figures appear inside narrative structures originally designed for gods	9	Europeans dining or riding in Kalamkari compositions
Secular domestic European life replaces ritual imagery	Sacred storytelling becomes European social life	6	Sahibs and memsahibs, European families under canopies
Sacred motifs reduced to decorative fragments	Lotus, conch, halos, and temple architecture become neutral ornamentation	5	Stylized borders, Palampores, simplified motifs

This shift represents a reordering of visual authority within the textile surface. Sacred textiles place the regional deity at the center of the composition and relegate human figures to devotional or narrative roles. Export textiles elevate human subjects and position them as the focal point. These figures do not carry spiritual authority. Their prominence reflects social status, economic power, or colonial identity. The textile surface becomes a stage for representing human and especially European presence. This change corresponds with historical shifts in patronage in which artisans responded to commercial markets rather than religious or community-based contexts.

The findings also show that spiritual motifs did not simply vanish. Instead, many sacred symbols were transformed into decorative units. As seen in Table 5, lotus flowers, temple arches, conch shells, and mythic animals appear in some export textiles but without narrative context. They operate as ornamental fragments rather than as elements of a coherent sacred story. This fragmentation demonstrates how sacred visual languages were adapted to meet foreign expectations while losing their original cosmological significance. The replacement of spiritual figures with human subjects becomes especially apparent in textiles produced during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As colonial influence grew, the textile surface recorded the increasing visibility of European bodies. The compositional prominence of these figures signals a shift in power. Cloth that once affirmed divine authority now affirms social

and political hierarchy connected to global trade and colonial rule. The transformation is not simply a change in motif but a change in the cultural purpose of the textile.

Across all examples studied, the findings show a movement from sacred to secular textile imagery. The visual strategies that once centered divine authority are replaced by strategies that highlight human identity, domestic life, and aesthetic preferences shaped by global circulation. Textiles serve as material archives of these changes. Their surfaces reveal how artisans navigated shifting economic demands and how power became visible in new ways. The disappearance of gods and the rise of human and colonial subjects reflect broader transformations in cultural authority and the evolving role of cloth in Indian society.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the transformation of Indian textile imagery reflects a broader cultural shift in how authority is represented. Interpreted through semiotic analysis, visual elements such as figure scale, spatial hierarchy, compositional centrality, and narrative emphasis function as signifiers of power and belief. In sacred textile traditions, divine figures occupied dominant positions within the visual field, articulating a cosmological order in which human life was situated within a spiritual hierarchy. Through scale, placement, and narrative structure, these textiles made spiritual authority visible and materially present.

With the expansion of long-distance trade and colonial influence, this visual logic shifted. Human subjects, particularly European figures, began occupying positions once reserved for deities. Spiritual authority gave way to social and political authority, and textile surfaces increasingly reflected systems of governance, commerce, and colonial power. Cloth became a medium through which authority was redefined, signaling changes in patronage and audience.

This transition also altered the relationship between artisans and viewers. Sacred textiles were embedded in local ritual frameworks, while export textiles were produced for foreign markets. Artisans adapted by simplifying narratives, altering motifs, and centering human subjects to meet commercial expectations. These adaptations reflect negotiations between tradition and economic pressure. The fragmentation of sacred motifs further illustrates this transformation. Symbols such as lotus forms and temple structures persisted but were detached from narrative context and reduced to ornamental design. Sacred imagery remained visually present while its cosmological meaning shifted.

Together, these changes position Indian textiles as material records of early modern and colonial restructuring. The displacement of divine figures by human and colonial subjects reveals how visual culture registered shifts in belief, identity, and power. Textiles therefore function not only as aesthetic objects but as cultural documents that make visible the reorganization of authority during this period.

Limitations

This study faces several limitations. The uneven survival of historic textiles affects regional representation, as many sacred cloths created for ritual use were not preserved. Traditions relying on fragile materials are therefore underrepresented in surviving collections. Colonial and museum archives also introduce bias. Many export textiles and some sacred cloths are housed in European and North American institutions, where collecting practices favored commercially acquired objects. As a result, surviving materials reflect colonial priorities rather

than the full diversity of Indian textile production. The study relies primarily on visual analysis, which cannot fully reconstruct the ritual, economic, and social contexts in which textiles were produced and used. Many sacred traditions were transmitted through oral and localized practices that remain only partially documented. Finally, the research focuses on major recognized traditions. Smaller or less documented regional practices fall outside the present scope and warrant further study.

Conclusion

This study examined the transformation of Indian textile imagery from sacred narrative traditions to export oriented and colonial era forms that centered human and secular subjects. Through comparative visual analysis of textiles from multiple regions, including Kalamkari, Pattachitra, Baluchari, Kanchipuram weaving, Mata ni Pachedi, and Chamba Rumal, the research identified core visual principles that once affirmed divine authority on cloth. These textiles positioned gods and goddesses as the central figures in narrative and ritual compositions, and they used color, scale, and spatial hierarchy to structure sacred meaning. Cloth functioned as a medium of spiritual communication and as a material extension of temple practice and communal devotion.

The findings demonstrate that this semiotic visual system shifted as Indian textiles became increasingly integrated into long-distance trade networks. Foreign patrons encouraged new design priorities, which led to the reduction, fragmentation, or removal of spiritual imagery in many production centers. During the colonial period, human subjects, particularly European figures, began to occupy the central spaces once reserved for deities. Their presence on cloth marked a change in the symbolic function of the textile surface. Instead of situating human life within a divine cosmological order, export textiles reflected social identity, domestic life, and colonial authority. This transition reveals how power became visually redefined on cloth and how artisans navigated shifting economic and cultural pressures.

By treating textiles as material archives, the study shows that cloth provides important evidence of cultural transformation. The movement from God centered to human centered representation reflects changes in patronage, belief, identity, and social hierarchy. It also illustrates how global commerce and colonial influence reshaped artistic traditions that had long been linked to sacred practice. Understanding this shift offers insight into the complex relationship between visual culture and systems of authority in India’s past. The conclusions of this research highlight the importance of studying textiles not only as aesthetic objects but also as documents that record the ways communities negotiate continuity and change over time.

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

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, rephrasing applications were used solely for proofreading and refining the language of this manuscript. Additionally, Gemini was used to rephrase tabular headings and organize the structure of visual elements for clarified reading. Their use was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for clarity and accuracy. Apart from the above-mentioned tools, no other generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate or alter the manuscript's content. All ideas, research design, methodologies, findings, analyses, and discussions presented in this paper are the original work of the authors, derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research.

References

Ahuja, A. (2009). *Baluchari: Tradition and beyond*. Niyogi Books.

Appadurai, A. (1988). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Arasaratnam, S. (1967). The Dutch East India Company and its Coromandel Trade 1700–1740. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde*, (3de Afl), 325–346.

Berti, D. (2004). Of metal and cloths: The location of distinctive features in divine iconography (Indian Himalayas). *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts*, 85–114.

Chamarty, P. (2024). Kalamkari and Chintz: A post-colonial reassessment of entangled textile histories. *DISCERN: International Journal of Design for Social Change, Sustainable Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, *5*(1), 40–53.

Cohn, B. S. (2017). Cloths, Clothes, and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century. In *European Intruders and Changes in Behaviour and Customs in Africa, America and Asia before 1800* (pp. 189–239). Routledge.

Deepshikha, Yammiyavar, P., & Nath, N. (2018). Textiles as communicating links for cultural traditions. *International Conference on Kansei Engineering & Emotion Research*, 168–177.

Divakala, M., & Muthian, V. (2017). Temple cloth to textile craft: The progression of Kalamkari (Vraatapani) of Srikalahasti. *Craft Research*, *8*(1), 79–99.

Divakala, M., & Vasantha, M. (2014). Tradition and Transition-A Study on Kalamkari of Srikalahasti. *BS Publications*, 413.

Gopal, L. (1961). Textiles in ancient India. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, *4*(1), 53–69.

Gupta, B. (2009). Competition and control in the market for textiles: Indian weavers and the English East India Company in the eighteenth century. *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500-1850*, 281–305.

Guy, J., & Haidar, N. N. (2024). *Indian Skies: The Howard Hodgkin Collection of Indian Court Painting* (Vol. 81). Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Kaur, J. (2017). Chamba Rumal: The Painting by Needle. *International Journal of Research-Granthaalayah*, *5*(6), 20.

Latif, S., Wahab, Z. U., Shah, S. M., & Khan, M. T. (2019). *The Persian influence on the traditional arts of Kashmir with special reference to textile industry*.

Mathur, S. (2007). *India by design: Colonial history and cultural display*. University of California Press.

Miller, C. L., & Hamell, G. R. (1986). A new perspective on Indian-White contact: Cultural symbols and colonial trade. *The Journal of American History*, *73*(2), 311–328.

Modi, R. K. (2024). Sacred silhouettes: Epics, mindfulness expressions, and the art of dressing in India. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, *11*(1), 534–543.

Pareek, A., & Pant, S. (2015). "Pattachitra"-a traditional hand painted textile of Orissa. *International Journal of Recent Research Aspects*, *2*(4).

Pattanaik, D. (2003). *Indian mythology: Tales, symbols, and rituals from the heart of the subcontinent*. Inner Traditions/Bear & Co.

Pinney, C. (2004). *"Photos of the Gods": The printed image and political struggle in India*. Reaktion Books.

Rajguru, M. (2010). *From shrine to plinth: Studying the dialectics of Hindu deities displayed in the museum through artworks and their exhibition*.

Riello, G. (2008). The Indian apprenticeship: The trade of Indian textiles and the making of European cottons. *How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles*, *15001850*.

Seshan, R. (2012). *Trade and Politics on the Coromandel Coast: Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries*. Primus Books.

Shekhawat, S. (2018). Phad: The visual oral narrative of Rajasthan. *Adlitteram Engl J Int Literati*, *3*(2456), 6624.

Silpa, L. A., Vallabhajosyula, M. S. T., & Trippeer, B. (2025). *Global Threads: The Influence of British Calicos on Traditional Kalamkari Textile*. 193–210. https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2435-9475.2025.19

Welch, S. C. (1985). *India: Art and culture, 1300–1900*. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Appendix

Table 1. Sacred and Narrative Indian Textiles
(Pre-Colonial and Early Historic Traditions)

Textile Tradition	Origin Region	Approximate Time Period of Emergence	Primary Symbolism	Type of Divine or Narrative Imagery	Cultural / Ritual Function
Srikalahasti Kalamkari	Andhra Pradesh	14th century onward (Vijayanagara period)	Divine authority, dharma, cosmic order	Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana narratives, Shiva and Shakti depictions	Temple hangings, festival backdrops, narrative scrolls, ritual education
Machilipatnam Kalamkari (early devotional form)	Andhra Pradesh	16th century onward	Sacred motifs before trade influence	Stylized deities and sacred plants (pre-floral export phase)	Temple donations, domestic altar cloths
Pattachitra	Odisha	12th century onward (linked to Jagannath Temple)	Devotion to Jagannath, Vaishnava cosmology	Jagannath trinity, Krishna, Vishnu avatars, Durga	Ritual use, pilgrimage souvenirs, temple substitutes
Pattachitra (Bengal School)	West Bengal	17th century onward	Bhakti narratives	Krishna Leela, Vishnu, Durga forms	Domestic and folk devotional painting on cloth
Baluchari Saree Weaving	West Bengal (Murshidabad, Bishnupur)	18th century onward	Moral narratives, epic instruction	Woven scenes from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna Leela	Ceremonial sarees, narrative display in pallu
Mata ni Pachedi	Gujarat	17th century onward	Power of the Goddess, protection, justice	Depictions of Devi in many forms, mythic battle scenes	Portable shrines for communities barred from temples
Phad Scrolls	Rajasthan	14th century	Local divine heroes, guardianship	Devnarayan, Pabuji and their mythic cycles	Ritual storytelling with Bhopa singers
Chamba Rumal	Himachal Pradesh	17th century (Kangra court)	Bhakti, Krishna devotion, royal patronage	Krishna Leela, Ras Lila, Puranic stories	Wedding gifts, temple offerings, ritual textiles
Kanchipuram Silk Weaving	Tamil Nadu	Sangam era origins, major development from 16th century	Prosperity, temple symbolism	Nataraja, Lakshmi, Krishna motifs, temple gopurams	Wedding and ritual sarees, temple inspired weaving
Temple Cloths (Thanjavur and South Indian Shaiva/Vaishnava temples)	Tamil Nadu	Ancient tradition, solid evidence since Chola period	Ritual purity, divine presence	Shiva, Vishnu, Murugan, divine processions	Temple rituals, processions, wall hangings
Kerala Temple Banners	Kerala	Medieval period	Divine protection, goddess worship	Bhagavati, Vishnu, Krishna inspired imagery	Procession textiles, ritual cloths

Table 2. Colonial Period Textiles
(17th–19th Century)

Textile Tradition	Region of Production	Time Period	Primary Iconographic Shift	Symbolism Under Colonial Influence	Purpose and Market
Export Chintz (Hand-painted and block-printed cotton)	Coromandel Coast	17th–19th century	Shift from divine motifs to floral repeats and secular scenes	Beauty, domesticity, European sociability	Export to Dutch, British, Portuguese markets for garments and furnishings
Chintz Panels with European Figures	Coromandel Coast	Late 17th–18th century	Human subjects replace gods as central figures	Social hierarchy, colonial authority, European fashion	Decorative wall panels for European homes
Palampores	Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat	17th–18th century	Tree of life becomes stylized rather than sacred	Fertility and exotic exoticism for foreign buyers	Bed covers and furnishings for export
Trade Painted Textiles for Southeast Asia	Coromandel and Gujarat	16th–18th century	Reduced Indian divine motifs, increased geometric and Islamic floral patterns	Cross-cultural ornamentation driven by demand	Export to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia
Portuguese Market Textiles	Gujarat, Goa	16th–17th century	Incorporation of Political iconography	Cross-religious symbolism	Exported by Portuguese merchants
British Factory Printed Cottons	Manchester and Lancashire (UK)	19th century	Industrial repetition of Indian floral designs	Imitation of Indian aesthetics for global markets	Mass export back to India and Africa
Hybrid Indo-European Textiles	Bengal, Madras, Gujarat	Late 18th–19th century	European coats of arms, crests, and domestic scenes	Assertion of colonial identity and power	Elite European patronage and home decoration

Table 3. Sacred and Narrative Indian Textiles Samples

ITEM	NAME	LOCATION	STYLE
1	Visnu lying on the serpent Ananta	The British Museum	Srikalahasti
2	Rama and Sita	University of Manchester	Srikalahasti
3	Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi c.1820	The Textile Museum, GWU	Srikalahasti
4	Katamaraju Katha Scroll, c.1850s	Salar Jung Museum, India	Srikalahasti
5	Temple Hanging Depicting Scenes from the Indian Epic Poem Rāmāyana**, c.1800s**	Saint Louis Art Museum	Srikalahasti
6	Ceremonial cloth (kalamkari) 1875	Asian Art Museum	Machilipatnam Kalamkari
7	The Kalamkari Rumal	The Met Museum	Machilipatnam Kalamkari
8	Wall Hanging, prayer Mat, AD.1789	MFA Boston	Machilipatnam Kalamkari

9	A Timeless Tapestry: The Sacred Union of Rama and Sita	Curated from Exotic India	Machilipatnam Kalamkari
10	Detail of Temple Cloth, c.75-1886	Victoria & Albert Museum	Srikalahasti Kalamkari
11	Jagganath along with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra	Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery The University of Western Australia	Pattachitra
12	Vishnu in Ananta Sayanam posture	National Craft Museum and Hastkala Academy, India	Pattachitra
13	Rama in his exile fighting a demon C.19th	British museum, UK	Pattachitra
14	The Sacred Siblings, textile	Manjusha museum	Pattachitra
15	Many Armed, Dancing Ganesha	Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery The University of Western Australia	Pattachitra - Odisha
16	Narasimha fighting Hiranyakashipu	Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery The University of Western Australia	Pattachitra- Odisha
17	Nataraja - Shiva as the dancing lord	Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery The University of Western Australia	Pattachitra - Odisha
18	Rama and Lakshmana Battle Ravana - Ramayan	Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery The University of Western Australia	Pattachitra - Odisha
19	Goddess Kali	State Museum of Bhubaneshwar, India	Pattachitra
20	Shabari & Lord Ram	State Museum of Bhubaneshwar, India	Pattachitra
21	Decorative End Panel (anchla) of a Baluchari Sari	The Met Museum (19th century)	Baluchari
22	Baluchari Sari, Saree	Spurlock Museum of World Cultures	Baluchari
23	Baluchari Saree c.1855	Victoria and Albert Museum	Baluchari
24	Baluchari Saree, c.1881	Victoria and Albert Museum	Baluchari
25	Shrine cloth for the mother Goddess	Philadelphia Art Museum	Mata ni Pachedi
26	Meladi Mata on her black goat mount	Royal Ontario Museum	Mata ni Pachedi
27	Goddess Durga surrounded by scenes from her legend	The British Museum	Mata ni Pachedi
28	Durga as Meladi, mother goddess	National Gallery of Australia	Mata ni Pachedi
29	Mata-ni-pachedi, Cloth and Goddess	National Museum in New Delhi	Mata ni Pachedi
30	Pabooji/Deona-Rain	Royal Ontario Museum	Phad Scrolls
31	Epic of Pabuji	National museum, New Delhi	Phad Scrolls
32	Devnarayan Ki Par	National museum, New Delhi	Phad Scrolls
33	Phad Scroll	Indira Gandhi National Art Museum	Phad Scrolls
34	Devnarayan and Pabuji	Sarmaya Museum, India	Phad Scrolls
35	Chamba Rumal Gallery	Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba	Chamba Rumal
36	Rumal with scenes from Ramayana, c.1800	The Met Museum	Chamba Rumal
37	Rumal, c.1800	Victoria and Albert Museum	Chamba Rumal
38	Chamba Rumal, c.1910	Brooklyn Museum	Chamba Rumal
39	Scenes of Sita and Hanuman, c.1800	Santa Barbara Museum of Art	Chamba Rumal
40	Kanchi, c.1900	The British Museum	Kanchipuram

41	Kanchipuram Sari, c.1950	Victoria and Albert Museum	Kanchipuram
42	Kanchi Scrolls, c.1920	Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad	Kanchipuram
43	The sarees of the Gods	Madras Museum, India	Kanchipuram
44	Kanchi Exhibit	National Palace Museum in Taiwan	Kanchipuram
45	Shiva (Nataraja, Tripurantaka)	Tanjore Art Gallery and Museum	Thanjavur Temple Art
46	Thanjavur Paintings, c.1800	National museum, New Delhi	Thanjavur Temple Art
47	Lord Krishna as an infant, c.1860	Asian Art Museum	Thanjavur Temple Art
48	Vijayanagara Mural, c.1600	Victoria and Albert Museum	Thanjavur Temple Art
49	Tirupati painting of Lord Venkateshwara	Victoria and Albert Museum	Thanjavur Temple Art
50	Lord Vishnu and the Epic	Krishnapuram Palace, India	Kerala Murals
51	Goddess Parvathy and her Avatars	Author's family heirloom	Kerala Murals
52	Puranas, Ramayan	Indian museum of Art	Kerala Murals
53	Kathakali Exhibit murals	Victoria and Albert Museum	Kerala Murals
54	Lord Krishna and his Epic	Travancore Museum	Kerala Murals
55	Coronation of Rama, Rumal	Museum of Art, Bangalore	Srikalahasti

Table 4. Colonial Period Textiles Samples

ITEM	NAME	LOCATION
1	Hookah smoking nawabs and courtesans playing musical instruments to Europeans with canons or on horseback	Museum of Art and Photography
2	Portraits of English Officers	National museum, New Delhi
3	"sahibs" and "memsahibs", c.1970	Government of India - Textiles
4	Design of Europeans in a Horse-drawn carriage, c.1900	Victoria and Albert Museum
5	Kalighat Style depictions	British Museum
6	Endless scroll	Asian Art Museum
7	An Anglo-Indian Wall Hanging	The Met Museum
8	Kalamkari Hanging with Figures in an Architectural Setting, 1640	The Met Museum
9	Export Textiles, c.1850	The Calico Museum of Textiles and the Sarabhai Foundation Collections
10	Textile Panel, ca, 1640-1650	Victoria & Albert Museum
11	Milk & blood chintz on a kassekijntje, or cassaquin from Hindeloopen c.1780	Fries Museum, Netherlands
12	The Pride of Jewel in the crown	Victoria and Albert Museum, London
13	Chintz: Cotton in Bloom, 18th century	Fashion textile museum
14	Fragment of Kalamkari, c.1855	Victoria & Albert Museum
15	Textile Panel of Chintz, 18th century	The Met Museum
16	Mughal Hunting Scene Textiles	The Met Museum
17	Kalamkari Hangings with Europeans Dining, Riding, or Conversing (Coromandel Coast)	Victoria & Albert Museum
18	Jagannath Pattachitra with Added European Figures (	Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford
19	Golconda Painted Court Cloths	Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad
20	Cloth Murals of Travancore with British Residents	Napier Museum, Thiruvananthapuram
21	Kerala Processional Cloths Commissioned for Colonial Patrons	British Museum
22	Cloth Panels Depicting Maratha Rulers in Divine Roles	Government Museum, Chennai
23	Processional Cloths Where Royal Figures Replace Sacred Deities	Government Museum, Chennai
24	Silk Sarees with Portrait Medallions of Zamindars or Colonial Elites	Victoria and Albert Museum

25	South Indian Brocade Shawls with Royal or Colonial Crests	British Museum
26	Shrine Cloths Incorporating British Survey Officials or Colonial Markings	Royal Ontario Museum
27	Rajasthan Courtly Durbar Cloths	City Palace Museum, Jaipur
28	Kalamkari Hangings Commissioned by East India Company Officers	Royal Ontario Museum
29	Kalamkari Panels with Europeans Dining or Riding (early colonial)	Victoria and Albert Museum
30	Hanging depicting a European conflict in South India, 1763	The Met Museum
31	Gujarat trade textile for the Portuguese market with battle and European hunters, c.1700	Victoria and Albert Museum
32	Tranquebar Palampore (Danish royal commission), c.1800	Victoria and Albert Museum
33	Baluchari sari with two European gentlemen holding flowers, c.1900	Indian Museum
34	Water-flow patterned Baluchari sari with Europeans on a steamboat, c.1980	National Museum, New Delhi
35	Chintz palampore for the European market (secular tree-of-life), 18th century	Royal Ontario Museum
36	Indian trade textile with European battle and hunting scenes for Portuguese patrons	Victoria and Albert Museum

The Problem With "Afterwards" Transformation and the Female Pupil in *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*

Melita Quinonez, Black Hills State University, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

George Bernard Shaw found the topic of transformation a pertinent theme in *Pygmalion*, especially the message of a female's transformation at the hands of a superior male figure. The play raises numerous questions from an Intersectional Feminism and Identity Politics lens regarding the treatment of value in relation to humans across different social standings and male-female relationships. As well as the confusion such transformations cause, leading to the bewildering thought of, "What's to become of me?" The issues of identity crisis and the intrinsic value of a person are explored as we look closer at Shaw's characters struggling with the problem of "afterwards."

Keywords: *Pygmalion*, afterwards, identity

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw most certainly found the theme of transformation worthy of ink when he wrote his 1912 play *Pygmalion*. The musical adaptation, *My Fair Lady,* draws its viewers into the most beautiful world of imagination, where the ideas of identity and transformation are not yet fixed or decided outcomes.

Few comparisons existed between classes and genders to form bonds, except for one very real and very true human experience: struggle and the search for identity.

Some people spend their whole lives trying to gain entry into doors locked to them, demanding answers to all the closed doors with labels above them that announce they are not allowed to enter. In the story of *Pygmalion,* we see Professor Higgins dangling a key in front of Eliza to a world she never imagined was accessible.

There is a moment toward the beginning of Act three, where Shaw cannot leave that suspense alone any longer, and through the voice of Professor Higgins' mother, she eloquently chides her arrogant son and his companion with,

"No, you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards" (Shaw, 1912/2010).

Pygmalion is the familiar trope of a female's much-needed transformation at the hands of a superior male figure. Professor of linguistics, Henry Higgins, makes a boastful claim to his colleague Colonel Pickering that he could pass off a common flower girl from the lower class as a Dutchess at the Embassy Ball by giving her elocution lessons. Eliza Doolittle, the common flower girl he was using as an example, then shows up at the Higgins residence the next day and asks the professor for lessons in exchange for her small but hard-earned wages so she can get a job selling flowers in a shop rather than on the corner. Instead of accepting her money, he takes on the challenge that the lower-class identifier, her cockney dialect, presents, and reestablishes the claim he previously made to Colonel Pickering by betting that with his training, he could pass her off as a Lady at the Ball.

Looking at this play through a socio-political and feminist perspective, one of the more pressing questions of the story becomes, if the transformation succeeds, to whom should the praise be attributed? As well as the often-overlooked problem of creating a new identity and the fallout and confusion that leads the transformed to wonder, "What's to become of me?" (Shaw, 1912/2010).

These themes of identity, transformation, and class barriers are crucial conversations of Intersectional Feminism and Identity Politics that argue the problem with "afterwards."

Narratives about transformation exist in every story in some form or another; in fact, most critics find the compelling themes of change, identity, and meaning a primary focus of literary criticism. Viktor E. Frankl said in his book "Man's Search for Meaning" that "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl, 1946).

In *My Fair Lady*, the very first song that Liza sings is a dream-like imagining of what it would be like to extend her class barriers. The song, "Wouldn't it be Loverly," is simple in its requests, naming what most people consider essentials, not pleasures.

All I want is a room somewhere,
Far away from the cold night air.
With one enormous chair,
Aow, wouldn't it be loverly?
Lots of choc'lates for me to eat,
Lots of coal makin' lots of 'eat.
Warm face, warm 'ands, warm feet,
Aow, wouldn't it be loverly? (Lerner et al., 1971)

The industrial revolution devoured the lower class; food, water, and a warm place to rest were luxuries for those who kept the upper class in comfort. Frederick Engels, in his work, "The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844," wrote controversially of the hardships of the Industrial Revolution in what today would seem like reasonable demands.

"The simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc." (Engels, 2017).

One unfair bias that was lingering in European society was that hard work was often seen as a punishment for crimes, or an admission of lower-class citizens, rather than seeing it as an instrument for class elevation or transformation.

During the Industrial Revolution, society was exploitative and did not acknowledge hard work as transformative, but as a means to an end. In a society like that, people were not only discouraged from becoming more, but they were treated as criminals should they try to challenge the assigned status of their unfortunate birthright. This highlights the massive risk Liza would face if she were discovered to be a fake at the Embassy Ball. The risk for Higgins, if he didn't win the bet, would be a slap on the wrist, perhaps a blow to his pride, but for Liza, it could mean prison or even death. Not only was the lower class undervalued, but the judgment of punishment was entirely biased to presume guilt based upon birth. Where failure in this venture would be a severe way in which to see the imbalance of fairness, we also see imbalances if this experiment were to succeed. For Liza, success would be to elevate herself enough to sell flowers and work in an indoor shop rather than in "the cold night air"; success for Higgins was based not in the selflessness of educating someone in need but rather in accomplishing deception. This leads to the question of what success is defined by. Perhaps Shaw looked toward a future where people could trust in the words of Orison Swett Marden, who said in *An Iron Will*, "Success is not measured by what you accomplish, but by the opposition you have encountered, and the courage with which you have maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds" (Marden, 2025).

Compounded Problems

In reviewing the play, through an early, more traditional form of Feminism, some critics write a scathing review about the misogynistic ideas and outdated constructs of feminine roles. An interesting point that needs mentioning here is that with the passing of nearly one hundred years since the writing of this play, male-female relationships are not the only dynamic that this culture was experiencing a significant prejudice with, it is easy enough to compare the modern class struggle with our own but that would be a considerable misunderstanding of what we experience more as an irritating bias to the experiences of class that Shaw is describing with an outright unfairness that often led to a life or death situation.

Considering the struggles Liza would encounter, both in class and in gender bias, it is important to note that Shaw's leading lady represented two overlapping groups in need of activism. This overlapping form of Feminism and Political criticism that best captures Shaw's intentions is a branch called Intersectional Feminism. Kimberle Crenshaw, a leading feminist in this movement, said in an interview with Time magazine, "All inequality is not created equal; an intersectional approach shows the way that people's social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination" (Crenshaw & UN Women, 2025).

Through this collaborative form of feminism and identity politics, the ideas of discrimination and class barriers seen in *Pygmalion* are significant examples of the compounded struggle that women of the lower class represented. We see a variety of progressive ideas lurking or lacking when we delve into the characters Shaw created.

Character Perspectives

Mrs. Pierce, the housekeeper, is an example of a person who, for proprietary reasons, insists the Professor concerns himself more carefully where his association with Liza is concerned, but is also somewhat motherly to the girl as well. Her role as Housekeeper is more than a profession; she represents the role of mother that Liza never had.

In contrast, Professor Higgins consistently discriminated against Liza's birth status and sex, but also imposed judgment of a more personal nature, the kind that deprives a person of dignity and decency; the kind that assumes one's station of poverty as a predisposition to criminal behavior.

> HIGGINS: Oh, pay her whatever is necessary: put it down in the housekeeping book. What on earth will she want with money? She'll have her food and her clothes. She'll only drink if you give her money.
>
> LIZA: Oh, you are a brute. It's a lie: nobody ever saw the sign of liquor on me.
>
> PICKERING: Does it occur to you, Higgins, that the girl has some feelings?
>
> HIGGINS: Oh no, I don't think so. Not any feelings that we need bother about. Have you, Eliza?
>
> LIZA: I got my feelings same as anyone else. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

Mrs. Higgins, the Professor's mother. Is a woman who has concluded what the reality of the situation is for the girl, a reality of what the upper class would demand and expect of Liza.

> MRS. HIGGINS: You certainly are a pretty pair of babies, playing with your live doll.
>
> HIGGINS: Playing! The hardest job I ever tackled: make no mistake about that, mother. But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being by creating a new speech for her. It's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

Mrs. Higgins has sympathies, but she misses a fundamental understanding of the idea that Liza's struggle and her working-class upbringing could account for some portion of what Mrs.

Higgins attributes to the female constitution. Although she supports the truth that men of her time often underestimated women's abilities, she could not see that Liza's struggle due to her lower class was an asset in her achievement of becoming a lady.

Liza worked tirelessly to change her station through rigorous lessons from a strict teacher. In *My Fair Lady* The song showing Liza's transformation is towards the end of the story, when Liza has her moment of equality, and as an equal attempts to square off with Professor Higgins and sings "Without You," where she claims her identity apart from him. The delightful juxtaposition is that now that she is at the end of her need for his teaching, she has won his bet and can cash in her reward, her independence; there is no more need for Higgins, and this is where the role of tutor cannot fill the same dynamic of an intimate relationship. This interesting shift of identity crisis is where we see the professor finally be somewhat vulnerable in his Jekyll and Hyde song of "I've grown Accustomed to Her Face" where one minute he is cursing loudly that he does not need her and the next singing poetically of the niceties of having a woman in his life, which incidentally was in complete juxtaposition of his first song "I'm an ordinary Man" where he had proudly proclaimed "I will never let a woman in my life" (Lerner et al., 1971).

How Higgins treats Liza is a strange combination of irony, humor and prejudices that parallels what Lynda Mugglestone says, in her journal, "Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in *Pygmalion*" about how Shaw's upbringing in upper class society and his eventual turning to socialism set a tone in his work, "in the writing of *Pygmalion*, and in his treatment of social illusion and social reality Shaw produces a text which combines the seemingly divergent spheres of socialist parable and social comedy of manners" (Mugglestone, 1993).

Shaw's characters share similar conflicts within themselves and the world around them. This conflict is seen explicitly in Higgins and is aggressively displayed toward the end of the play. In the book "East of Eden" by John Steinbeck, some of Higgins' struggle is with coming to terms with his approach to relationships, "When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved, his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror." (Steinbeck, 1952, 1952). This conflict creates the question of whether Liza's finding identity outside of Higgins and her leaving was a sort of death for Higgins? Or one could ask if her independence was progress, and if so, doesn't progress suggest that learning is still in session? When Liza proclaims her independence at the end of *Pygmalion*, Higgins is still fighting to keep his role alive.

Value vs. Identity

Likely, the reason Shaw's characters didn't factor in the momentum that transformation creates is that identity isn't a fixed outcome. Bettering oneself isn't a goal achieved and then cast off. Realistically, and as many teachers know from experience, dependence on one another shifts, and roles can develop into other unique manifestations. For a teacher, the student learning all that can be taught signals the end of one journey. What Higgins was unaware of was that Liza's independence signaled the end of their time, due not to the ending of his instruction, but instead due to his treating that relationship with contempt; he was, from the beginning, trying to solve her identity problem by assigning value to her through elocution. But her value was never a problem to be fixed.

Due to their conditioning, Shaw's characters could not have known anything other than a value system based on birthright, manners, and other such conditional attributes. What the upper class unwittingly gets right out of their arrogance over the war over birthright is that people should not have to prove worth or value; what they get wrong is that this applies to all people. The misconception of our judging human value ultimately ties into our identity. In Liza's case, when she started to see herself as a valuable person, worthy of being treated with respect, it was because Colonel Pickering didn't disqualify or devalue her identity as a lady, despite her lower-class background. Liza experienced a revelation of value, and as a result, her confidence in a ladylike identity blossomed.

Liza was hurt by the assumption that her becoming "a lady" was credited to a man teaching her, because a lady is not a doll or a toy, but a feeling person. For Liza, it was easy to give back what had been mirrored to her, and each gentleman, the respect they had given her. She acknowledged Higgins teaching her a practical skill. Yet, she praises Pickering for his kindness and attributes that kindness to what motivated her to see herself as the woman she always was and also was becoming.

> LIZA: [continuing] It was just like learning to dance in the fashionable way: there was nothing more than that in it. But do you know what began my real education?
>
> PICKERING: What?
>
> LIZA: [stopping her work for a moment] Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me. [She resumes her stitching]. And there were a hundred little things you never noticed, because they came naturally to you. Things about standing up and taking off your hat and opening doors—
>
> PICKERING: Oh, that was nothing.
>
> LIZA: Yes, things that showed you thought and felt about me as if I were something better than a scullery-maid; though of course I know you would have been just the same to a scullery-maid if she had been let in the drawing-room. You never took off your boots in the dining room when I was there.
>
> PICKERING: You mustn't mind that. Higgins takes off his boots all over the place.
>
> LIZA: I know. I am not blaming him. It is his way, isn't it? But it made such a difference to me that you didn't do it. You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

Conclusion

Higgins struggled to cope with her identity as an independent lady due to his devaluation of her and his false belief that identity, rather than value, is the foundational element. Value is fixed, where identity is something we already are and are also becoming. Identity is not fixed

because it is in unity with the idea of transformation. As Liza was already in the habit of becoming, of progressing and transforming, it was a deflating and frustrating experience at the end when everyone else thought it was all over. For her, it was difficult to imagine the goal accomplished because the goal had also transformed from survival and the small dreams of meeting her basic needs to the wide and lonely world of possibilities. She was angry that now she was on a progressive train that by worldly standards only went one direction, but had stopped in a station she was unaccustomed to, and now, the question she would struggle most sincerely with would be "what's to become of her."

Perhaps Mrs. Higgins was the one who had the right question all along.

> MRS. HIGGINS: Be quiet, Henry. Colonel Pickering: don't you realize that when Eliza walked into Wimpole Street, something walked in with her?
>
> PICKERING: Her father did. But Henry soon got rid of him.
>
> MRS. HIGGINS: It would have been more to the point if her mother had. But as her mother didn't, something else did.
>
> PICKERING: But what?
>
> MRS. HIGGINS: [unconsciously dating herself by the word] A problem.
>
> PICKERING: Oh, I see. The problem of how to pass her off as a lady.
>
> HIGGINS: I'll solve that problem. I've half solved it already.
>
> MRS. HIGGINS: No, you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards. (Shaw, 1912/2010)

References

Crenshaw, K., & UN Women. (2025, June 12). *Intersectional feminism: What it means and why it matters right now | UN Women – Headquarters*. UN Women – Headquarters. https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters-right-now

Engels, F. (2017). *The condition of the working-class in England in 1844.* Anodos Books.

Frankl, V. E. (1946). *Man's Search For Meaning*. Beacon Press.

Lerner, A., Loewe, F., & Dickens, M. (1971). *My fair lady*. Scholastic Book Services.

Marden, O. S. (2025). *An Iron Will*. Sound Wisdom.

Mugglestone, L. (1993). Shaw, Subjective Inequality, and the Social Meanings of Language in Pygmalion. *The Review of English Studies*, *44*(175), 373–385. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/517281

Shaw, G. B. (2010). *Pygmalion*. Penguin. (Original work published 1912)

Steinbeck, J. (1952). *East of Eden*. Penguin Books. (Original work published 1952)

Narrative Implosion and the Transformative Practice of Reality in Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*

Naomi Hori, University of Tsukuba, Japan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper examines how Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* engages with problems of representation in a modern society shaped by electronic media. It examines how *1Q84* allegorizes contemporary media structure and renders it perceptible through narrative devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and structure. It then argues that, as metafiction, *1Q84* functions as a critical lens through which reality can be examined. The originality of this study lies in its focus on the underexamined relationship between narrative form and media structure. The first half analyzes the female protagonist's growing awareness of deceptive appearances. The recurring warning, "Don't let appearances fool you," together with Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "the medium is the message," underscores the narrative's interrogation of media-constructed worldviews. This analysis resonates with Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, in which simulation displaces the real. The second half follows the male protagonist's transformative practice of resisting a culture dominated by media-generated appearances. This culminates in what the paper terms narrative implosion, exemplified by the rumbling thunder at the novel's climax. Along with the female protagonist's conception of a child, these moments symbolize the collapse of false appearances and the emergence of new possibilities. The paper concludes that *1Q84* demonstrates how the world transmitted through electronic media gradually distorts reality and rigidifies our worldviews. In response, the novel presents an ethical imperative: the acquisition of a meta-level perspective that enables one to see beyond fixed appearances. Through narrative implosion, Murakami's metafiction illustrates the transformative power of narrative and enables readers to perceive reality beyond appearances.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, *1Q84*, allegory, media structure, metafiction

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

1Q84 is a work of metafiction that takes narrative itself as its central concern. The narrative alternates chapters centered on Aomame—who works as a sports instructor while secretly carrying out assassinations of perpetrators of domestic violence—with chapters focused on Tengo, a mathematics teacher who rewrites a novella by a teenage girl. While Aomame enters a pseudo-reality and gradually discovers discrepancies between that world and 1984, Tengo comes to recognize the power of creation through his rewriting of *Air Chrysalis* by Eriko Fukada and begins to write his own story. With Aomame eventually joining Tengo's fictional world, the two characters ultimately return to 1984 together (Murakami, 2009–2010).

Some studies have examined the metafictional qualities of *1Q84*. Norihiro Katō interprets the novel's "extension-like" structure—where Book 3 was added after Books 1 and 2—as a meta-level operation performed on the preceding text (Katō, 2020, pp. 315–316), while Mitsuyoshi Numano reads the work as an attempt to address social problems by replacing them with "another story" (Numano, 2010). However, these approaches do not sufficiently address how the narrative in *1Q84* engages with contemporary social reality.

The social problem addressed in *1Q84* lies in what may be called *media structure*. This perspective is suggested by the novel's explicit citation of media theorist Marshall McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message," which asserts that the form of a medium determines the content it conveys. In this paper, media structure refers not merely to media content but to the perceptual environment produced by the technological characteristics of electronic media and the frameworks of reception they generate. Such structures render subtle changes in reality invisible, thereby fixing recipients' ways of seeing. The repeated warning at the opening of the novel— "Don't let appearances fool you"—functions as a critical insight into this perceptual bias (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 12, p. 16; Ch. 9, p. 135).[1]

More specifically, the novel raises the issue of distorted representations of reality produced through electronic media. In 1980s Japan, where the novel is set, the influence of visual media—especially television—expanded rapidly. At the same time, religious cults such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Aum Shinrikyō emerged as serious social concerns, most notably in cases involving the refusal of life-saving medical treatment (Maruyama, n.d.) and acts of internal violence against dissenting members, which resulted in a number of deaths (Asahi Shinbun, 2025). [2] Yet such internal realities of these organizations remained largely invisible to the general public as of the 1980s. Just as television structures visually centered messages through the focalization of partial images, cult organizations likewise manipulated appearances by selectively presenting images of themselves through mass media.

Relatively few studies have approached *1Q84* from the perspective of media critique. However, Endō Shinji's analysis of Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (2004) offers a critical framework that is particularly useful for interpreting *1Q84*. Endō argues that the novel is "an allegory of

[1] To clarify the story's narrative structure, and to help non-English readers locate quoted passages in translated works, the volume and chapter numbers are also included in in-text citations.

[2] In 1985, a 10-year-old boy died from excessive bleeding after his Jehovah's Witness parents refused a blood transfusion. The document describes cases in which Jehovah's Witness parents refused blood transfusions for their children, resulting in the children's deaths, as well as cases in which adult believers themselves refused transfusions during medical treatment and pursued legal challenges up to the Supreme Court. See Maruyama's report. Four years later, in 1989, Aum Shinrikyo, acting on the leader Asahara's instructions, murdered a believer who wanted to leave the cult, and then the Sakamoto family, including the lawyer who had been supporting people leaving the cult.

ourselves, who lived through the 1970s and 1980s by advertising copy, mass media, and the information and narratives surrounding us daily—all made up of insubstantial words" (Endō, 1991, pp. 73–74).

This paper bridges metafiction and media theory by taking the novel's presentation of media-formed appearances as its starting point. It examines how *1Q84* allegorizes contemporary media structures and renders them perceptible through narrative devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and narrative structure. To this end, the paper examines McLuhan's thesis "the medium is the message" in relation to the novel's opening warning that "things are not what they seem" (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 12) and considers the significance of the two dates that frame the narrative: 1926 and 1984. It then discusses the roles of narrative and classical music by analyzing the impact of Tengo's creative writing and the recurring presence of Leoš Janáček's *Sinfonietta* in the world of *1Q84*.

What Problem Does *1Q84* Raise?—With Reference to Marshall McLuhan's Media Theory

At the very beginning of *1Q84*, Aomame is riding in a solid, soundproof taxi while listening to Janáček's *Sinfonietta* on the FM radio. For reasons she cannot fully explain, she knows that the piece was composed in 1926, and this knowledge leads her to recall that historical moment. The narrative thus evokes the oppressive atmosphere of the early Shōwa period: the sudden emergence of Hitler, the brief peace enjoyed by Czechoslovakia before its annexation by Germany, and the end of "the short interlude of modernism and democracy," followed by the rise of fascism (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 2).

Among the events of the early Shōwa period, one with particularly far-reaching consequences was NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)'s launch of nationwide public radio broadcasting in 1926 (NHK, 1926). Given that radio appears symbolically at the opening of the novel and that Tengo's father is depicted as a diligent NHK fee collector, it is natural to read *1Q84* as directing attention to the year in which radio broadcasting began. Just as radio was mobilized in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 1940s as a means of stirring patriotic sentiment and inciting populations toward war (NHK, 2024), in Japan as well government and military propaganda advanced through newspapers, radio, and film, thereby legitimizing state policy and action (NHK, 1937).

While Aomame reflects on this historical moment, the mysterious taxi driver issues a warning about the world she is about to enter: "things are not what they seem… don't let appearances fool you. There's always only one reality" (Book 1, Ch. 1, p. 12). The problem of the year 1984, then, can be traced back to 1926, the year in which nationwide broadcasting began. Although 1984 is not identical to 1926, *1Q84* depicts a society in which the manipulation of appearances through electronic media had already begun, producing consequences that would later prove severe.

Book 1 portrays subtle discrepancies between Aomame's world and the reality she has previously known, suggesting that the world she inhabits is one of appearances. Through careful observation, Aomame concludes that "it is not me but the world that's deranged," a realization that leads her to name this distorted reality "1Q84." This world closely resembles Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, in which mediated representations replace reality (Baudrillard, 1976). Moreover, she reflects that these discrepancies "could cause me to commit errors that are… literally *fatal*" (Book 1, Ch. 9, pp. 152–153, p. 158, emphasis by me). Aomame

thus senses the danger of this condition, fearing that such discrepancies may undermine the logic of her actions.

The novel's choice of 1984, therefore, carries significant implications. It was the year in which the predecessor organization of Aum Shinrikyō was founded—a religious group that would later perpetrate lethal violence through the manipulation of appearances, including its presentation as a yoga ashram and the concealment of its internal practices (Asahi Shinbun, 2015; 2025). This organization closely resembles the cult "Sakigake" in *1Q84*, which likewise conceals its reality behind a carefully constructed image. As Aomame's friend Ayumi reports, "Everything on the surface is there for show… The packaging is beautiful, but I get the feeling that suspicious plans are hatching behind the scenes…" (Book 1, Ch. 23, p. 415).

Ayumi then links this observation to Marshall McLuhan's thesis that "the medium is the message," emphasizing that content is shaped by the characteristics of the medium itself. McLuhan argues that "the personal and social consequences of any medium … result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology," and warns that "the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (McLuhan, 1994, pp. 7–9). In other words, media technologies create conditions under which recipients may unconsciously and uncritically absorb transmitted information. That said, the electronic medium itself is not inherently evil; rather, the problem lies in a lack of awareness of its nature. In this sense, McLuhan's thesis resonates closely with the novel's opening admonition. The subtle discrepancies Aomame perceives thus allegorically express how a media-constructed apparent reality overwrites the world itself—and how such distortions can lead to *fatal* consequences.

The Role of Narrative and Classical Music Within Media Structure—From the Recollection of 1926 to the Implosion of the Fictional World

Trigger of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*

The two protagonists' determination to "move on" at the end of the novel is initiated by a single musical experience: Janáček's *Sinfonietta*. The scene in which Aomame hears *Sinfonietta* while riding in a taxi on the Metropolitan Expressway marks the point of origin for the motif of implosion. Composed in 1926, the piece coincides historically with the beginning of radio broadcasting.

At the same time, Janáček's composition symbolizes a counterforce to the radio waves of that era. The novel recounts that Janáček once encountered an outdoor performance and suddenly felt "a surge of joy" throughout his body, at which moment the motif for *Sinfonietta* came to him. Recalling this experience later, he described a sensation as though "something… snap[ped] in his head," followed by a feeling of being "enveloped in ecstasy" (Book 1, Ch. 9, p. 157).

The music also functions as a catalyst for introspection. As Su-Hyun Lim argues, Murakami increasingly foregrounds classical music in his later works because, unlike trend-driven popular music, it resists unilateral broadcasting and allows listeners to form their own interpretations. Classical music, therefore, appears at moments when protagonists enter silent contemplation (Lim, 2018, p. 419).

Janáček's experience of ecstasy and reflection is transmitted through *Sinfonietta* to Aomame. The piece functions as a counter-medium to the radio waves that accelerated fascism in the 1930s. Aomame recalls experiencing "an intensely physical—and intensely personal—jolt" when she listened to the music (Book 1, Ch. 9, p. 155). This jolt enables her to notice the anomalies of "1Q84" and to shift toward critical observation. Through this process, she gradually comes to grasp the structure of appearances—particularly those behind "Sakigake," which has degenerated into a religious cult.

Janáček's explosive creative will is, in turn, passed on to Tengo. A chain of coincidences in high school leads him to play the timpani—an instrument central to the opening of *Sinfonietta*—and this experience becomes the catalyst for the later flowering of his creative impulse. "Listening to *Sinfonietta* early in the morning" becomes his daily routine, giving him "a sense of personal encouragement and protection" (Book 2, Ch. 2, p. 465).

As Tengo's passion for judo fades, the editor Komatsu asks him to rewrite *Air Chrysalis*, a novella written by the teenage girl Fukada Eriko. Having accidentally witnessed the inner workings of "Sakigake," Eriko becomes repelled by its distorted reality and flees. Tengo reshapes her manuscript into a coherent work of fiction; although he initially hesitates, upon completion, he finds that something like "good change" has begun to take root within him (Book 1, Ch. 16, p. 284). At this point, his creative energy begins to build momentum, which he expresses through the metaphor of "the great karmic wheel of Indian mythology" (Book 1, Ch. 16, p. 301). The moment when the protagonists proceed with *Sinfonietta* thus marks the point at which the hyperreal world of "1Q84" begins to collapse and be rewritten.

Allegorizing Media Structure and the Role of Creation

The rewriting of Eriko's *Air Chrysalis* begins to unravel the fictional order shaped by the Little People. As the narrative reaches a critical point, *1Q84* depicts narrative itself as the catalyst for the implosion of the "1Q84" world. This implosion, a central motif of the novel, is closely linked to the recurring image of metamorphosis, symbolized by the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis.

What, then, do the Little People represent? I propose that they function as a central allegorical device for media structure. *Air Chrysalis* evokes broadcast imagery, while the Little People can be read as metaphorical representations of electronic media such as airwaves. Eriko's observation that "they…can enter people's dreams whenever they like" (Book 2, Ch. 19, p. 768) allegorizes the process by which electronic media inscribe information into recipients' unconscious. In this sense, the Little People reconfigure McLuhan's thesis that media are extensions of ourselves.

This allegorical structure is reinforced by the depiction of Tamotsu Fukada's body as "on the road to destruction" (Book 2, Ch. 9, p. 600), an image that suggests sensory numbness induced by electronic transmission. Fukada degenerates from the leader of an idealistically founded agricultural commune into the head of a religious cult. When Aomame uncovers that what he believed to be the "voice of God" was in fact the voice of the Little People, the novel underscores the replacement of divine messages with fabricated narratives transmitted through electronic media.

The same allegory appears in Ushikawa's caterpillar metaphor. When he first sees the two moons, he imagines the following:

> Maybe I looked at those two moons for too long, he thought, absorbed too much of their light. Their vague afterimage remained in his eyes. Their dark silhouettes numbed the soft part of his brain, like a bee stinging and numbing a caterpillar, then laying eggs on the surface of its body. The bee larvae use the paralyzed caterpillar as a convenient source of food and devour it as soon as they're born. (Book 3, Ch. 22, p. 1207)

Here, the caterpillar symbolizes media content; the bee, the broadcasting medium that carries such content (that is, the Little People); and the bee larvae, viewers who unconsciously consume those images. This imagery vividly embodies the process by which electronic media numb consciousness and strip away critical judgment.

As Tengo turns toward creation, the media-constructed world of "1Q84" begins to be overturned from within. He not only writes a story but also intervenes in the narrative space he has created, driven by his resolve to find Aomame. A series of explosive images — "the flame of an oil refinery, the gigantic gas tanks" (Book 2, Ch. 8, p. 574) — symbolize the internal dismantling of preconceived ways of seeing, leading toward the reconstruction of reality.

On the night when Tengo unites with Eriko, who mediates his connection to Aomame, and when Aomame quietly kills Tamotsu Fukada after a meaningful dialogue, the novel inserts "a great thunderclap that cracks the heavens in two" (Book 2, Ch. 12, p. 654). Aomame and Fukada are described as being "in an ancient cave—a dark, damp, low-ceilinged cave," and what strikes is "thunder-without-lightning"; the cave figures the rigid worldview constructed through media structure, now collapsing from within (Book 2, Ch. 13, p. 672). The loss of the Little People's power is later confirmed when Eriko states, "The Little People are not stirring anymore" (Book 2, Ch. 14, p. 686). Book 2 then closes with the image of "scattered shards of glass," likened to "the ocean's tiny ripples" shining in the light of the two moons (Book 2, Ch. 24, p. 841).

Why Does *1Q84* Adopt the Method of Metafiction? Presenting a Meta-Level Vantage Point From Which to See a Fixed World Image

In *1Q84*, the two moons floating in the night sky—"the moon that had always been there" and "a far smaller greenish moon"—function as a symbolic motif that unsettles the narrative world. As the text explicitly states, this green moon is the part Tengo "had worked the hardest," which he described "as concretely and detailed as possible" (Book 2, Ch. 2, pp. 779–780).

Tengo's rewriting of the world is motivated, first, by a desire to recuperate a childhood time lost through isolation and separation. While the past itself is irretrievable, narrative serves as a means of rearticulating a broken temporal continuity.

Second, the historical context of 1984 itself is crucial. At a time when television had become central to everyday life and the seeds of cultic movements were becoming visible, people's perceptions were increasingly shaped by fixed ways of seeing formed through older media. Tengo recognizes the need to rewrite that rigid image of the world from his own perspective and in his own language. Here, Wittgenstein's idea of the tendency to see the world by fitting it into an existing mold provides an important theoretical framework. Throughout the narrative of *1Q84*, preconceptions that rigidify the world repeatedly appear, including Aomame's belief that "once a gun appears in a story, it has to be fired at some point" (Book 2, Ch. 23, p. 819). At the same time, the novel depicts moments that mark attempts to step outside such fixed ways of seeing. Standing before his father in a coma—who nonetheless continues to be seen

as an NHK fee collector—Tengo murmurs, “But isn’t this just a sham?” and “I have a feeling your consciousness isn’t lost at all” (Book 3, Ch. 12, p. 1026).

Wittgenstein argues that prejudice arises when “we confuse prototypes with objects” and “dogmatically confer on an object properties which only the prototype necessarily possesses,” leading to the uncritical assertion that “It must always be…” (Wittgenstein, 1931, p. 14e). To escape such fixation, he insists on maintaining “a clear view in our reflections of … an object of comparison—a yardstick, as it were” (Wittgenstein, 1937, p. 26e).

In *1Q84*, the exposure of a distorted world and its eventual overwriting by Tengo can be read as precisely this process: a coagulated world image returning to a state of fluidity. This contrast is symbolized by the expressways depicted at the novel’s beginning and end. Early on, the Metropolitan Expressway is congested and barely moving, representing a rigidified world. By contrast, when Aomame and Tengo return to 1984 at the end of the story, traffic flows “unusually smoothly” (Book 3, Ch. 30, p. 1296). Through Tengo’s writing and Aomame’s attentive actions, the world regains movement. Tengo’s observation—“Lots of things around us are already starting to fall into strange patterns. Some things have already transformed, and it may not be easy for them to go back the way they were” (Book 3, Ch. 18, p. 1138)—suggests that his narrative is rewriting the world from within. Along with the female protagonist’s conception of a child, these moments symbolize the collapse of false appearances and the emergence of new possibilities.

Given that the green moon is described in a color evocative of the Earth, metaphors such as “that lonely, taciturn satellite” (Book 2, Ch. 18, p. 742) and Ushikawa’s sober recognition—“This isn’t the world I came from” (Book 3, Ch. 19, p. 1158)—can be interpreted as signs of a meta-level vantage point from which the world can be observed from the outside. The second moon thus marks the acquisition of an elevated perspective.

Conclusion

As metafiction, Murakami’s *1Q84* demonstrates how a world transmitted through electronic media gradually distorts reality and rigidifies our worldviews. In response, the novel presents an ethical imperative: the acquisition of a meta-level perspective that enables one to see beyond fixed appearances. Through narrative implosion, Murakami’s metafiction illustrates the transformative role of narrative and invites readers to perceive reality beyond the surface.

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

The author directed and controlled all aspects of the research and writing process, with AI tools providing limited assistance. ChatGPT was used selectively to rephrase statements for accuracy, clarity, and readability. Grammarly was used solely for spelling and grammar checks. The ideas, findings, analyses, and discussions are originally written. All sources and references were manually identified and verified.

References

Asahi Shimbun. (2015, December 25). *Sengoshi bijuaru nenpyō: dai15shō* [Visual Chronology of Postwar History: Chapter 15: Aum Shinrikyō]. https://www.asahi.com/special/sengo/visual/page73.html

Asahi Shimbun. (2025, January 31). *'Aum' wo bōsōsaseta mittsu no tenki* [Three turning points that caused "Aum" to spiral out of control]. https://www.asahi.com/special/aum/3keys/

Baudrillard, J. (1993). *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. SAGE Publications. (Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant). (Original work published 1976)

Endō, S. (1991). Murakami Haruki 'Noruwei no mori' ron [A Study of Murakami Haruki's *Norwegian Wood*]. *Kindai Bungaku Shiron*, *29*, 59–74.

Katō, N. (2020). *Murakami Haruki no Sekai* [Haruki Murakami's World]. Kōdansha Publishing.

Lim, S. (2018). Murakami Haruki sakuhin ni okeru ongaku no henyō [The Transformation of Music Depicted in Murakami Haruki's Literary Works – Focusing on Long Novel]. *Nihon Bungaku*, *80*, 407–442.

Maruyama, E. (n.d.). *Shūkyōjō no riyū niyoru yuketsu kyohi to rinshō rinri* [Refusal of Blood Transfusion for Religious Reasons and Clinical Ethics]. Training Materials for Kawasaki Medical University Hospital Medical Ethics Workshop. https://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~emaruyam/medical/Lecture/slides/171003kawasaki6.pdf

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.

Murakami, H. (2012). *1Q84*. (Trans. Jay Rubin & Philip Gabriel). Vintage Books. (Original work published 2009–2010).

Murakami, H. (2000). *Norwegian Wood*. (Trans. Jay Rubin). Vintage. (Original work published 1987).

NHK [Japan Broadcasting Corporation]. (1926). *Shadan hōjin Nihon hōsō kyōkai setsuritsu* [Founding of Japan Broadcasting Corporation]. https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/movies/?id=D0009060006_00000

NHK. (1937). *Jikyoku ni shosuru kokumin no kakugo: Konoe Fumimaro* [Konoe Fumimaro's speech entitled "The Resolve of Japanese Nationals in Facing the War"]. https://www2.nhk.or.jp/archives/movies/?id=D0009060040_00000

NHK. (2024, September 2). Gepperusu, kyōki to nekki no sendōsha [Goebbels as The Instigator of Madness and Fervor]. *The Century in Moving Images*. Broadcast TV program.

Numano, M. A dialogue with Tatsuru Uchida, Kōji Tokō. (July 2010). Murakami Haruki no ketsudan [Haruki Murakami's Resolve]. *Bungakukai, 64*(7), 158–183.

Wittgenstein, L. (1980). *Culture and value.* (G.H. von Wright, Ed.; P. Winch, Trans.). The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published in 1977)

Contact email: naomihori_102825@icloud.com

Transnational Repression and the Arts: Communist China and a Dance Company

David Matas, Independent Scholar, Canada

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of transnational repression in the arts through a case study. The specific focus is Chinese Communist Party (CCP)/ Government of China transnational repression of the dance company Shen Yun Performing Arts and the National Arts Centre of Ottawa, Canada. Shen Yun Performing Arts is a classical Chinese dance company, founded in 2006 by volunteers from the community of practitioners of the spiritually based set of exercises Falun Gong. Falun Gong is a blending and updating of ancient Chinese spiritual and exercise traditions, started in 1992. With the initial encouragement of the Chinese Government, the population of practitioners in China grew by 1999 to 100 million, a number which so alarmed the CCP that the Party reversed course and decided on the repression of the practice. Though the Falun Gong community was initially apolitical, its repression created understandably an opposition to that repression within the community which found its way into some of Shen Yun Performing Arts dance pieces. The dance depiction criticizing CCP regression of Falun Gong in turn generated CCP transnational repression against the dance company. This transnational repression took the form of Chinese embassy and consulate diplomatic initiatives, bomb threats against dance performance venues, lawfare and media generated disinformation. The paper sets out details of this transnational repression and the reaction of the National Arts Centre to that repression. The paper concludes with recommendations.

Keywords: transnational repression, China, a dance company

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

This paper addresses transnational repression, discrimination, censorship and unfairness in the arts through a case study. The focus is Chinese Communist Party (CCP)/ Government of China transnational repression of Shen Yun Performing Arts and its impact on the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Canada.

Shen Yun is a classical Chinese dance company, founded in 2006 by volunteers from the community of Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong is a blending and updating of ancient Chinese spiritual and exercise traditions, started in 1992 and repressed by the CCP internally since 1999 and externally in a systematic way since 2000.

Chinese Transnational Repression

The success of this dance company, as well as other Falun Gong practitioner initiatives abroad, prompted the CCP/ State in 2022 to re-evaluate its policy of transnational repression of Falun Gong.

The President of China, Xi Jinping, addressed the Political and Legal Affairs Commission of the CCP in October, 2022, shortly prior to the 20th National Party Congress. A leaked report of the meeting sets out these statements of President Xi to the members of the Commission:

> During the Jiang Zemin era and Hu Jintao era, the suppression of Falun Gong abroad was a failure. The crackdown and suppression overseas failed. So, what did Xi Jinping see as the specific manifestation of this failure?
>
> That Falun Gong was not eliminated, not eradicated by the CCP internationally. Instead, media organisations founded by Falun Gong practitioners and cultural groups have become highly active in the international community. Not only in the Chinese-speaking community internationally, but also in the English-speaking community. 'They have developed into the CCP's most prominent opposition force,' these were Xi Jinping's words. ...
>
> Regarding the specific action plan, Xi Jinping gave instructions to have 'one focus, two basic directions'. This 'one focus', according to what this source has disclosed, stated by Xi Jinping refers to targeting the founder of Falun Gong and his family. ...
>
> What are the 'two basic directions'? One is public opinion warfare and the other is legal warfare.
>
> As for the so-called public opinion warfare, which includes demanding the CCP's official organisations should mention Falun Gong less. The public opinion attacks on Falun Gong should rely mainly on some media and self-media whose viewpoints about the CCP are more ambiguous. They are the ones to launch public opinion attacks on Falun Gong. This would be more effective. ...
>
> What about the lawfare? It's all about exploiting the litigation systems of the United States, Taiwan, and some other countries. To use their judicial systems to launch attacks on Falun Gong through lawfare. (Yuan, 2025)

Public Opinion Warfare and the New York Times

In 2024 and 2025, the New York Times published at least eleven articles and one podcast critical of Shen Yun, all the while maintaining silence on the mass killing of Falun Gong practitioners for their organs. The Times ignored several milestones on these mass killings, spanning almost two decades. From an objective perspective, each of these milestones was of far greater journalistic interest and significance than the concerns about the dance company presented in the Times publications.

These milestones included:

a) the release of reports, books, and investigative findings by the late Hon. David Kilgour, Ethan Gutmann and me in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2014 and 2016;
b) a US House of Representatives resolution adopted in June 2016 condemning state sanctioned forced organ harvesting in China of prisoners of conscience;
c) a 2020 judgment from The China Tribunal, a people's tribunal determining that the mass killing of Falun Gong practitioners, for their organs has occurred beyond a reasonable doubt;
d) the expression of alarm and concern in 2021 by twelve UN human rights experts about the evidence of forced organ harvesting in China with prisoner of conscience victims;
e) ethical conclusions in April 2022 by medical professionals;
f) a European Union Parliament resolution adopted in May 2022 expressing serious concerns about the reports of persistent, systematic, inhumane and state-sanctioned organ harvesting from Falun Gong practitioners and other minorities in China;
g) the release of at least five documentaries on this topic from 2013 to 2023; and
h) the passage of the Falun Gong Protection Act by the US House of Representatives in May 2025.

A former China based news reporter for the Times provided an insider's account of the Times' editorial stance towards the topic of Falun Gong, in her written submissions to the China Tribunal,

> it was my impression the New York Times, my employer at the time, was not pleased that I was pursuing these stories, and after initially tolerating my efforts made it impossible for me to continue. [...] More broadly, I conducted several conversations in person or by email with senior editors but essentially my requests to continue this line of investigation – for which I'd need time – were ignored. [...] Another editor commented, when I tried to broaden the investigation from death row prisoners to prisoners of conscience [...] that people who believed that prisoner of conscience organs were being used were on 'the outer fringes of advocacy' – that is, not rational. The usual arguments were presented, for example that Falungong are irrational and unreliable, and so on. It was clear to me the issue was unwelcome. [...] (Tatlow, 2019)

Lawfare

The second strategy set out in the Xi Jinping leaked address on how to repress Falun Gong abroad was to use foreign judicial systems through lawfare. Two examples are two pending lawsuits against Shen Yun by former dancers complaining about working conditions, pay and the age at which they worked, a decade ago. These two lawsuits, commenced on November 24, 2024 and April 18, 2025, received immediate, dedicated coverage by the New York Times, suggesting a degree of coordination between the plaintiffs and the Times reporters.

Although the Times conferred extensive coverage on the complaints, their allegations were rejected by a petition from the employees and performers of Shen Yun, which collected 1,557 signatures, including 791 family members. The Times reporting did not mention the petition. On August 26, 2024, updated on January 2, 2025, the Falun Dafa Information Centre published information showing close ties between the complainants in the Shen Yun lawsuits and the Chinese regime:

(a) At least three of the six former Shen Yun performers interviewed, photographed and quoted in a Times' August 2024 article have ties to the Beijing Dance Academy, a Chinese state-funded organization functioning under the direction of the CCP.
(b) Three of the six interviewees have travelled to China to work with the Beijing Dance Academy, while one of the interviewees runs a Taiwan based dance studio that collaborates with a Beijing Dance Academy teacher. For more than a year after leaving Shen Yun, this interviewee maintained positive communications with Fei Tian College, which trains dancers for Shen Yun, only to adopt a diametrically opposite narrative after developing ties with the Beijing Dance Academy. The Times' reporters were warned of these possible conflicts of interest, but noted none in their articles about Shen Yun.
(c) The father of Nicole Hong, a recurring writer of the New York Times Shen Yun articles, has apparent affiliations with the CCP United Front Organization.
(d) Soon after the initial New York Times articles about Shen Yun came out, a YouTuber known to be CCP-backed stated on X, on August 18, 2024:

> ‘I was the one who introduced people [former performers] to the New York Times, especially for the initial interviews.’ At least three of the Times' six core interviewees had previously appeared on his YouTube channel. Several of them were also simultaneously recruiting potential interviewees for both his channel and the Times' reporters, according to communications from former Shen Yun performers who they contacted. This pattern continued with subsequent Times' reporting. (Falun Dafa Information Center, 2025)

NAC Chinese Embassy Contacts

There have been significant contacts between the National Arts Centre and the Chinese Embassy in Canada in the period leading to the Centre’s decision to cancel Shen Yun. Several of these contacts are set out in a disclosure obtained through an Access to Information request.

The Chinese Ambassador visited the National Arts Centre on August 21st, 2024 and posted the visit on the Embassy website. The posting said:

> Ambassador Wang said that China and Canada have maintained good exchanges and cooperation in the field of culture and art, and that China has cooperated with NAC in organizing Chinese New Year concerts for many times, which have been widely welcomed by the Canadian audience. China is willing to deepen cooperation with NAC and organize activities diverse in formats and rich in content to promote exchanges and mutual learning between culture and art sectors of the two countries and enhance mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples.
>
> President Deacon stressed that NAC is willing to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the field of culture and art with the Chinese side. (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada, 2025)

The Ambassador invited Christopher Deacon, then President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Centre, and Nelson Mcdougall, Managing Director of NAC Orchestra for dinner on October 15th, 2024 at the official residence of the Embassy.

Given the Party's imperative in shutting down Shen Yun, a strong inference is that the Embassy has asked the National Arts Centre not to offer a venue for Shen Yun performances and justified that request with fabricated, propagandistic charges against the dance company. While there is no public paper trail to that effect, the Chinese embassy in Canada would not have been doing the work assigned to them by the CCP as their primary task if such a request had not been made.

The China Tribunal wrote in 2020 that "Any person or organisation that interacts in any substantial way with the PRC – the People's Republic of China –... should recognise that ... they are interacting with a criminal state." The National Arts Centre, in its interactions with the Chinese Embassy, has to date shown no recognition of this fact.

The NAC Staff Venue Refusal

In October 2024, National Arts Centre staff told representatives of the Falun Dafa Association of Ottawa that confirmation of the dates for Shen Yun 2026 would be forthcoming in a couple of weeks. However, that never happened.

Internal emails of NAC staff disclosed through the Access to Information request were revealing. An internal e-mail from Heather Gibson, Executive Producer, Popular Music and Variety, to Christopher Deacon, Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Centre dated January 13, 2025, disclosed through the Access to Information request, stated in part, "in light of the allegations that continue to surface about the organization at the least, I would recommend we sit 2026 out and let these allegations conclude before determining if we will continue with them."

Christopher Deacon, in a reply e-mail the same day, stated in part:

> I see this as a programming decision, to be made at your discretion. If ... you have concerns with respect to protecting the reputation of the NAC, I think you would be justified in proceeding as you propose. I have no objection. However, it's your call.

Heather Gibson then wrote back to Christopher Deacon, again the same day, an e-mail which states in part:

> I appreciate and respect that but it's not going to be (only) me who is dealing with the potential issues this may cause in media, phone calling campaigns, meeting requests to your office, etc. ... it [is] difficult to conceive of this as a programming decision alone. If I'm hearing from you that you ..., will stand behind this decision, then I will move forward.

Christopher Deacon then replied to Heather Gibson, still on January 13th, "I will support your decision. Thanks, Heather."

The National Arts Centre notified orally a representative of the Falun Dafa Association of Ottawa on June 29, 2024, that the Centre had decided not to rent to Shen Yun in 2026. No explanation or reason was given.

Members of the Falun Dafa Association of Ottawa met with Christopher Deacon in July 2025. They reported that Christopher Deacon attributed the failure to book the venue for the dance company to a lack of available dates.

Christopher Deacon did not offer to the dance company any dates for 2027. The statement of Christopher Deacon looks disingenuous in light of the internal e-mail from Mr. Deacon to Heather Gibson on January 13, 2025 that the decision on giving dates to the dance company was hers to make and accepted that her refusal to give dates could be based on concerns about the allegations made against the dance company.

Richard An and I wrote to the Chair of the Board of the Centre asking the Board on January 17, 2026 to instruct the Centre to change its decision to refuse to host Shen Yun. Annabelle Cloutier, the current President and Chief Executive Officer of the Centre, wrote back to us on January 25th 2026 stating:

> The National Arts Centre first communicated its decision not to rent Southam Hall to Shen Yun Performing Arts for the 2026 season to representatives of the Falun Dafa Association on June 28, 2025.
>
> The National Arts Centre's management and staff then met with Falun Dafa representatives on multiple occasions, including in July and September 2025, regarding the decision.
>
> As previously communicated to Falun Dafa, I write as a courtesy to reiterate that the National Arts Centre will not be reconsidering its decision. This is a private commercial decision within the discretion of National Arts Centre management, made without input from the Board of Trustees. It was made for reasons which have been communicated to Falun Dafa and of which they are well aware.
>
> With respect to the allegations in your letter regarding foreign state influence, we reiterate that the National Arts Centre's decisions on artistic programming and venue rentals are made independently by the National Arts Centre, without external influence.

The Centre is not a private enterprise. It is a Government of Canada entity. The Government of Canada places the National Arts Centre on its list of Crown corporations.

The National Arts Centre was created by statute enacted by the Parliament of Canada, the National Arts Centre Act. Its board of directors is appointed by the Government of Canada at the highest level, the Governor in Council. It is by the Auditor General of Canada. The Centre is required to report annually to the Parliament of Canada. No object of the Centre, set out in its statute, is commercial; its objects state rather that the Centre is "to develop the performing arts."

It would be inappropriate even for a private enterprise to refuse to engage with perceived opposition to the CCP/ Government on the basis that it would be more profitable to engage with CCP/ Government entities. Whether that is so or not, for a public entity to act in that way is contrary to the public interest.

No written reasons for the decision made have been given to anyone for the decision to refuse booking dates to Shen Yun. This is a decision without written communicated reasons.

There is a reference in the e-mail from the CEO of the Centre to meetings with representatives of the Falun Dafa Association after the decision was made. There were at those meetings, concerns raised by the Centre which representatives of the Ottawa Falun Dafa Association who were at the meetings fully answered in writing subsequent to the meetings. If those concerns were real reasons for the decision, fairness would have required disclosure of the concerns in writing before the decision was made with an opportunity to respond, followed by a decision in writing which either accepted the responses or explained why the responses were unsatisfactory. However, that did not happen in this case.

The assertion of the CEO that the decision of the Centre was made without external influence fails to take account of the forms transnational repression can take. Transnational repression does not always take place directly. It can also take place indirectly.

One reason for the refusal to book dates Shen Yun, as one can see from the internal e-mails of the Centre made available through an Access to Information request, was "allegations" made against Shen Yun. The record shows that the decision to refuse dates to Shen Yun was influenced by these allegations. Yet, there was no assessment made by the Centre whether these allegations were the result of transnational repression. It is my assessment that they were. The Centre expressed no disagreement with that assessment.

An Assessment

If one looks at this history in its entirety, it appears that the refusal of the National Arts Centre to give dates in 2026 to the dance company was based on the allegations levelled against the company. The reference by Centre Executive Producer Heather Gibson to allegations was presumably a reference to the New York Times articles and podcast about Shen Yun, the republishing of these articles by other media, as well as to the lawsuits mentioned above.

Suspension of judgment is appropriate for media allegations. The media is diverse. The complaints of a small number of disgruntled former employees in a large enterprise, even when reported by the media, is not going to be representative of the enterprise as a whole. As well, when it comes to the New York Times, there is hard evidence from a former reporter, Didi Kirsten Tatlow, of a pro-CCP/ anti-Falun Gong bias in the Times editorial team.

Generally, it would be a mistake to take a side on litigation before the litigation is resolved. The point of litigation is to resolve disputes. For the National Arts Centre to take a position against Shen Yun simply because allegations have been made in litigation in process is unfair to Shen Yun. Unless and until allegations have been established in fair legal proceedings, it would be wrong for the National Arts Centre to assume that the allegations are true or act as if they were true.

The information available through the Access to Information request gives no indication that the Centre engaged in an assessment of the role played by the CCP's transnational repression policy against Falun Gong and Shen Yun, behind the allegations that concerned the Centre. Neutrality for the Centre in the face of allegations would be to carry on with Shen Yun to allow bookings as had happened in the past until the allegations were resolved. To refuse bookings based on allegations means that at least some credence is given to the allegations.

The phrase "the allegations that continue to surface" in the e-mail from Heather Gibson makes that point. The mere repetition of allegations, to the National Arts Centre management, gives them

weight. This reasoning plays into the totalitarian playbook. Repeat a lie often enough, loud enough, and it will be believed.

The CCP and the Government of China offer a bed of nails to its critics. To those who keep on good terms with the CCP/ Government of China, it is the opposite, the red carpet treatment.

One can presume, or at least hope, that the National Arts Centre would not deny a venue to Shen Yun simply because of the cost of security arrangements or because of the incentive of benefits from cooperation with the CCP/ Government of China. However, these factors became other reasons for what was done once the New York Times articles become a convenient cover for them.

Christopher Deacon suggested that Heather Gibson was acting out of a concern to protect the reputation of the National Arts Centre. Whether or not this was the true motivation, for the National Arts Centre to become a vehicle for CCP transnational repression objectively has the opposite effect, harming the reputation of the Centre. The Centre's decision to refuse Shen Yun's rental request sets the Centre apart from the rest of the prominent performing art venues around the world which have scheduled Shen Yun to perform in 2026.

Reputation is not a neutral concept. The same behaviour can lower reputation in some eyes and raise it in others.

The refusal of the National Arts Centre to give Shen Yun booking dates may raise the reputation of the Centre in the eyes of the CCP and those unfamiliar with its strategies and tactics of transnational repression. Yet, it lowers the reputation of the Centre in the eyes of the victims of the Party and those familiar with its strategies and tactics of transnational repression. In principle, the reputation of the Centre in the eyes of the victims or the informed should matter more than their reputation in the eyes of the victimizer or the uninformed.

Transnational Repression and the Government of Canada

The issue of transnational repression is a larger issue than the issue of booking dates at the National Arts Centre for Shen Yun Performing Arts. Moreover, transnational repression is a different form of foreign interference than interference with democratic processes and institutions.

The Canadian Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions issued its final report in January 2025. The Inquiry Commissioner, in her final report, stated:

> The Commission's work has also shown that transnational repression is a genuine scourge. I did not examine this phenomenon in depth since this form of foreign interference goes well beyond the democratic processes and institutions my mandate tasked me with examining. But what I have learned about it is sufficient for me to sound the alarm that the government must take this seriously and consider ways to address it. (Report Summary, 2025, p. 6)

Yet, that did not happen with the National Arts Centre. The National Arts Centre did not take the threat of transnational repression seriously.

The Centre, on the contrary, took seriously and acted upon allegations against Shen Yun without any assessment whether those allegations were the result of transnational repression. The Centre showed no awareness of the existence of the phenomenon of indirect repression.

The Centre gave, at least orally, as a concern about Shen Yun booking, the cost of increased security. Yet, there was no indication of appreciation that those costs were the results of bomb threats and that these threats were themselves a form of transnational repression.

The statement of the Centre that the refusal to book was a "private commercial decision" manifests an overly narrow focus. Because the Centre is a Crown corporation, not all of its decisions can be considered from a private, commercial perspective.

The claim that the decision was commercial raises this question. Was the Centre asserting that more money is to be made from cultural exchanges with the CCP/ State than from hosting Shen Yun? If so, that sort of trade off – money for censorship – from a public interest perspective, should be unacceptable.

The Financial Administration Act provides "The Governor in Council may, on the recommendation of the appropriate Minister, give a directive to any parent Crown corporation, if the Governor in Council is of the opinion that it is in the public interest to do so."

The National Arts Centre, mistakenly, appeared motivated by a fear of reputational harm if they were to continue to host Shen Yun, in light of the allegations made against the dance company. Be that as it may, because the National Arts Centre is a Crown corporation subject to Governor in Council directive, the Government of Canada has to consider its own reputation. For the Government of Canada, doing something on this issue would have consequences. So would doing nothing. Doing nothing in the face of apparent accommodation by a Crown corporation to transnational repression would send a message which the Government of Canada should not want to give.

To avoid the appearance of accommodating transnational repression, it is in the public interest for the Government to work with the Centre to reverse their decision to refuse bookings to Shen Yun. Should that effort fail, the Governor in Council should direct the National Arts Centre to provide its next available dates to Shen Yun.

Discrimination Against Falun Gong

The National Arts Centre refusal to host Shen Yun Performing Arts is wrong for three reasons. The refusal was the acting out of CCP/ State transnational repression of the Falun Gong global community; it was discrimination against those who practice and believe in Falun Gong; and it was procedurally unfair to Shen Yun Performing Arts.

Discrimination can occur either overtly or by impact. Adverse impact discrimination or constructive discrimination is still discrimination even though nothing is said expressly defaming the affected group. With the National Arts Centre, that is what we see.

The National Arts Centre has pointed to no other identity group being treated the way the Falun Gong community has been treated through the denial of a venue to Shen Yun Performing Arts. Nor, I suggest, could they do so. That refusal, though apparently the result of transnational repression, is improper as discriminatory whether it is the result of transnational repression or not.

Conclusion

The fact that Shen Yun performances, though artistically extraordinary, convey a message of which the Chinese Government/ Communist Party disapproves should not be a reason to refuse a venue. If one puts that disapproval aside, the reality is that hosting Shen Yun fits squarely within the mandate and mission of the National Arts Centre to showcase the performing arts.

Transnational repression does not become acceptable simply because it is done indirectly, through intermediaries. Seeing through indirect transnational repression may require more insight, diligence and determination, than noting direct transnational repression. Yet, the effort necessary to react against indirect transnational repression is one that must be made.

If there had been no New York Times articles or lawsuits against Shen Yun, the National Arts Centre may well not have acceded to a Chinese Embassy request to deny their venue to Shen Yun. The National Arts Centre reaction should be the same even when the Chinese Government/ Communist Party pursues its political agenda against Shen Yun and Falun Gong indirectly, through friendly media, lawfare and bomb threats. The Chinese Government/ Communist Party should not be allowed to do indirectly what it would not be allowed to do directly.

Denying Shen Yun a venue means taking the side of the perpetrators against the victims, the side of the CCP/ Government of China against the Falun Gong community, who form the backbone of Shen Yun. The Government of Canada should see through the veil used by the Chinese Government/ Communist Party to disguise their transnational repression efforts directed against Shen Yun and arrange for the Centre to continue to offer bookings to the Shen Yun Performing Arts.

The CCP's transnational repression of Falun Gong is not merely a topic of academic interest. The repression exerts pressure globally on the daily lives of those outside China who run afoul of what the Communist Party perceives to be their interests.

The transnational repression of Falun Gong and Shen Yun is not only an attack on a spiritually based practice and a dance company. The repression threatens artistic freedom, freedom of expression, inclusivity and a commitment to protect marginalized communities, upon which liberty and democracy depend.

The National Arts Centre, the pre-eminent arts centre of Canada, has been an important steward of these values. The final decision on this matter will either embolden transnational repression or preserve the continued flourishing of the arts.

The Falun Gong community has been a staunch defender against the Chinese totalitarian regime for two and half decades. They are deeply committed to telling the truth, including the truth about the CCP and their own victimization by the Party. Shen Yun Performing Arts is a crystallization of this effort.

The New York Times has become the most prominent vehicle of the CCP's transnational repression against Falun Gong. Its perceived independence from the CCP and its prestige renders its attacks against Shen Yun and Falun Gong exceptionally potent, in a way that no CCP propaganda can replicate.

Shen Yun has performed in the major cities and arts centres of Canada for almost 20 years. The Government of Canada should arrange for the National Arts Centre to grant its stage to these performers, and not become a stone in the road of transnational repression paved by the CCP regime. To do this would be contrary to the values of human rights and diversity, as well as the mandate of the National Arts Centre to present and showcase the best of cultures.

The behaviour of the National Arts Centre needs course correction. The Government of Canada should not tarnish its own reputation, as well as the reputation of the Centre by letting remain the refusal of the Centre to provide a venue to Shen Yun Performing Arts.

The Government of Canada brings to the matters raised here a broader perspective and experience than the National Arts Centre has. The Government of Canada is well aware of the phenomenon of transnational repression, in all its various forms. The Government of Canada is more informed on the issues and more sensitive to the need to react against the phenomenon of transnational repression than the Centre. One can say that this so also about the need to respect procedural fairness.

On the subjects of both transnational repression and procedural fairness, the relative expertise lies with the Government and not the Centre. When there are failures of appreciation of the Centre on both transnational repression and procedural fairness combined, it is appropriate, even necessary, for the Government to intervene.

More generally, arts venues need to react against the phenomenon of transnational repression effected indirectly as well as directly. The Government of Canada should arrange for the National Arts Centre to reverse course. The Centre should not continue to be, as it has been to date, an example of what not to do.

In the annals of transnational repression, the CCP efforts to stifle Shen Yun are far from unique. The arts can not immunize themselves from transnational repression unless they swallow a large dose of awareness, appreciation and understanding of the transnational repression phenomenon.

References

Canadian Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions. (January 28, 2025). *Report Summary*. https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf

Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada. (August 22, 2024). *Chinese Ambassador to Canada H.E. Wang Di Paid a Courtesy Call to Christopher Deacon, President of the National Arts Centre of Canada.* https://ca.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202502/t20250228_11565466.htm

Falun Dafa Information Center. (January 2, 2025).*12 Things to Know About The New York Times' "Investigation" of Shen Yun, Falun Gong.*Falun*info.* https://faluninfo.net/key-things-to-know-about-the-new-york-times-investigation-of-shen-yun-falun-gong/

Tatlow, D. K. (February 23, 2019). *Witness 41: Didi Kirsten Tatlow.* 2020 Judgment – Independent Tribunal into Forced Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of Conscience in China (China Tribunal). https://chinatribunal.com/wpcontent/uploads/2019/06/DidiKirstenTatlow Submission.pdf

Yuan, H. B. (February 27, 2025). *Statement by Professor Yuan Hongbin.* International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse in China. https://endtransplantabuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Professor-Yuan-Statement-Transcript.pdf

A Rhetorical Analysis of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* From the Perspective of Triangle Theory

Paninya Paksa, Bangkok University, Thailand

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This scholarly article provides a rhetorical analysis of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* (2024) through Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle, which consists of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. The study aims to investigate how the film employs rhetorical strategies to persuade audiences emotionally, ethically, and logically. The narrative of the film addresses themes of elderly care, intergenerational family relations, and filial piety in contemporary Thai-Chinese society. It not only reflects Thailand's transition into an aging society but also functions rhetorically to foster cross-cultural understanding. Findings reveal that the film employs Ethos by presenting the grandmother as a morally credible figure and authentically portraying Thai-Chinese cultural values; Pathos through emotionally charged depictions of illness, death, and intergenerational care; and Logos by constructing a coherent storyline, symbolic mise-en-scène, cinematic arts, and logical connections to broader social issues. This study concludes that the film serves not only as a family melodrama but also as a rhetorical text that shapes perception, emotion, and values within global society. Lahn Mah is indeed a good and compelling movie worth watching.

Keywords: rhetorical triangle, ethos, pathos, logos, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In the past decade, film studies has evolved beyond the study of cinema as an aesthetic or cultural artifact toward a rhetorical perspective that investigates how films persuade and construct meaning through image, sound, and performance (Nichols & Baron, 2024). This theoretical shift has positioned film as a rhetorical text—not merely a narrative medium but a site of value formation and ideological persuasion (Bordwell, 2006; Chatman, 1980).

Within this framework, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*, known in Thai as *Lahn Mah*, directed by Pat Boonnitipat, provides a compelling case study of emotional and moral persuasion in contemporary Thai cinema. The film explores intergenerational relationships within a Thai–Chinese family, centering on themes of inheritance and filial piety while critically interrogating consumerist morality (Variety, 2025). Its critical and commercial success across Asia has been attributed to its capacity to generate shared emotional resonance, transcending national and linguistic boundaries.

To investigate this persuasive dynamic, the present article applies Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle Theory, which consists of Ethos (speaker's or storyteller's credibility), Pathos (emotional and value appeal), and Logos (logic and reasoning) (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007; Tan, 2013). The adoption of this framework is justified for two primary reasons. First, Aristotle's rhetorical model remains foundational in both strategic and entertainment communication (Foss, 2017; Heath & Bryant, 2000). Second, the film's moral tension between self-interest and familial affection allows a systematic examination of how emotional, logical, and ethical appeals interact in cinematic persuasion.

Accordingly, the objectives of this article are followings (1) to articulate the theoretical framework of rhetorical triangle theory; (2) to analyze the film's use of persuasive strategies in terms of Ethos; (3) Pathos; (4) and Logos; and (5) to synthesize the interaction among these appeals in constructing the film's rhetorical force. Ultimately, the study argues that *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* exemplifies integrated persuasive storytelling, uniting emotion, reason, and moral value to produce an affective yet intellectually coherent cinematic discourse within contemporary Thai cultural context.

Theoretical Framework: The Rhetorical Triangle

Although the rhetorical triangle emerged from classical philosophy, it has undergone significant reinterpretation in contemporary rhetorical and media theory. Scholars such as Burke (1969), Foss (2017), and Tan (2013) have expanded the Aristotelian model beyond verbal discourse to encompass visual, multimodal, and mediated communication. This expansion reflects a paradigm shift wherein rhetoric is no longer confined to speech or writing but is understood as symbolic action (Burke, 1969) manifest across all forms of cultural expression—including cinema.

In the domain of film studies, this reconceptualization has given rise to visual and cinematic rhetoric, emphasizing how moving images, sound, editing, and mise-en-scène perform persuasive functions comparable to verbal arguments (Messaris, 1997; Nichols & Baron, 2024). Within this framework, the rhetorical triangle can be mapped onto three key components of cinematic communication:

1. Speaker/Author – the filmmaker or authorial entity who constructs the rhetorical stance and voice of the film;

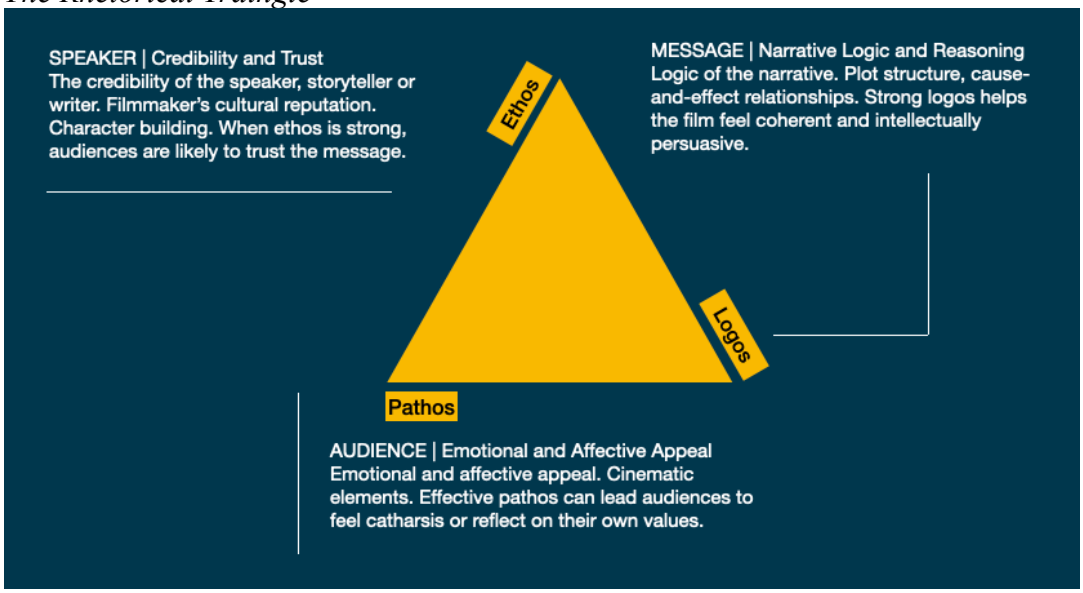
2. Audience – the viewer who interprets, empathizes, and responds to the film's appeals; and
3. Text/Message – the cinematic narrative itself, composed of visual, auditory, and symbolic codes that convey meaning.

This triadic relation transforms film into a discursive arena where meanings are negotiated rather than passively received (Bordwell, 2006; Chatman, 1980). Hence, cinematic rhetoric situates the audience as a co-producer of meaning within a communicative system shaped by emotional, ethical, and logical appeals.

Components of the Rhetorical Triangle: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

A rigorous rhetorical analysis requires close attention to the interaction among Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, each serving distinct yet interdependent persuasive functions.

Figure 1
The Rhetorical Traingle



- **Ethos: The credibility of the speaker or storyteller.**
  Ethos refers to the perceived integrity, moral authority, and expertise of the communicator (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007). In film, *ethos* manifests through both narrative and extratextual cues: the reliability of the narrator, the moral framing of characters, and the cultural reputation of the filmmaker (Nichols & Baron, 2024). Establishing ethos allows the film to claim authenticity and legitimacy, enhancing the viewer's willingness to be persuaded.
- **Pathos: Motional and Affective Appeal.**
  Pathos engages the emotions and values of the audience through strategies of empathy, sentiment, and aesthetic affect (Foss, 2017; Tan, 2013). In cinematic terms, pathos operates through mise-en-scène, music, lighting, and pacing—elements that evoke emotional identification with characters and situations. Films employing strong pathos often elicit catharsis and moral reflection, transforming affect into persuasion.
- **Logos: Logical Structure and Reasoned Argument.**
  Logos pertains to the rational organization of the message—its narrative coherence, causal logic, and argumentative clarity (Heath & Bryant, 2000). In filmic rhetoric, logos

emerges through structured plotlines, moral dilemmas, and narrative resolutions that embody reasoned conclusions. A well-developed logos enables audiences to accept moral propositions intellectually, not merely emotionally.

Together, these appeals constitute a dialectical system in which *Ethos* provides credibility, *Pathos* supplies emotional force, and *Logos* ensures rational grounding. The persuasive power of a film depends on the dynamic balance among the three—a balance that determines its capacity to move audiences ethically, emotionally, and cognitively.

Application of Rhetorical Theory to Film Analysis

Contemporary rhetorical criticism recognizes film as not merely an artistic form but a communicative act embedded in social discourse (Foss, 2017; Nichols & Baron, 2024). Applying the rhetorical triangle to film analysis enables scholars to explore how filmmakers (speakers) strategically design cinematic messages (texts) to evoke responses from audiences through the integrated use of ethos, pathos, and logos.

In the context of *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies*, this framework provides a systematic lens to examine how the film:

- Constructs Ethos through credible character development and culturally authentic storytelling;
- Mobilizes Pathos through emotionally charged imagery, dialogue, and soundscapes that evoke empathy and filial sentiment; and
- Reinforces Logos through coherent moral reasoning and narrative logic that justifies its ethical message.

By analyzing these dimensions, the present study positions the film as a representative case of cinematic rhetoric—a form of persuasive storytelling in which emotional affect, ethical credibility, and logical coherence converge to produce a unified rhetorical experience.

Ethos Analysis

Character Credibility and Narrative Transformation

The protagonist, M, begins as an unmotivated young man—unemployed, aspired video game streamer, and financially dependent on his grandmother, Mengju. At the film's outset, his Ethos is deliberately fragile: he embodies the moral ambivalence of a generation torn between consumerist ambition and familial obligation. However, the narrative arc gradually reconstructs his Ethos through experiential redemption. As M assumes caretaking responsibility for his terminally ill grandmother, he undergoes a moral transformation that restores his credibility as a compassionate and dutiful descendant (Tan, 2013; Variety, 2025).

This transformation is achieved through cinematic techniques that reinforce his sincerity: long-take close-ups capture moments of vulnerability, ambient soundscapes foreground domestic silence and labor, and dialogue emphasizes growth from greed to gratitude. These strategies align with what Foss (2017) calls ethos through performance, where ethical credibility is embodied rather than asserted. By the final act, M's moral conversion is not stated explicitly but rendered visually through his selfless care, culminating in a non-verbal expression of virtue that invites audience trust.

Cultural and Authorial Ethos

Beyond the characters, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* constructs Ethos through its cultural authenticity and authorial positioning. Director Pat Boonnitipat's background in Thai-Chinese storytelling and television drama imbues the film with a voice that is both personal and communal. The film's depiction of the Thai-Chinese diasporic experience—family businesses, ancestral rituals, and the symbolic economy of filial piety—enhances its cultural credibility (Nichols & Baron, 2024).

The mise-en-scène of Bangkok's Talad Phlu district, combined with the use of Teochew, or Chaozhou, dialect and traditional funerary rituals, signifies a commitment to representational accuracy and ethical fidelity to real-life Thai-Chinese culture. This corresponds to what Messaris (1997) terms visual ethos, where authentic representation functions as a rhetorical resource that reinforces trust between filmmaker and audience.

Furthermore, the director's intentional avoidance of melodramatic excess positions the film within a moral aesthetic that values empathy over sentimentality—a strategy consistent with ethical realism in contemporary Asian cinema (Tan, 2013). Such aesthetic discipline constructs an Ethos of integrity and modesty, anchoring the film's pathos and logos within a framework of ethical sincerity.

The Function of Ethos in Cinematic Persuasion

Ethos in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* operates as the foundational axis upon which emotional and logical appeals are stabilized. The audience's emotional identification (Pathos) depends on their trust in the film's moral voice, while their acceptance of its ethical argument (Logos) relies on the credibility of its narrative ethos. Through its integration of character transformation, cultural authenticity, and ethical aesthetics, the film achieves what Burke (1969) calls rhetorical identification —a state in which audiences perceive themselves as morally aligned with the story's values. Consequently, Ethos in this film is not merely a device of character trustworthiness but a structural principle that binds the film's rhetorical triangle. It legitimizes the emotions evoked and the arguments advanced, transforming the film into a moral narrative that persuades through ethical presence as much as through emotional and logical force.

Table 1
Levels of Ethos, Corresponding Rhetorical Strategies, and Their Persuasive Effects on Audiences

Level of Ethos	Rhetorical Strategies	Persuasive Effects on the Audience
Character Ethos: Grandma	Embodiment of moral virtue, perseverance, and self-sacrifice	Cultivates respect and trust, thereby reinforcing the audience's acceptance of filial values
Character Ethos: M	Depiction of moral growth and ethical transformation	Enables audience identification, fostering cognitive and moral alignment with the film's message
Cultural Ethos (Thai–Chinese)	Integration of ritual practices, traditional cuisine, domestic spatial design, and bilingual linguistic expression	Enhances cultural authenticity, strengthening the perceived credibility of the narrative
Social Ethos (Aging Society)	Representation of eldercare challenges and intergenerational familial obligations	Increases sociocultural relevance, heightening the persuasive force of the film's thematic claims

Pathos Analysis

Emotional Architecture and Familial Identification

How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies constructs its Pathos primarily through the representation of intergenerational intimacy and vulnerability. The emotional core of the film emerges from the caregiving relationship between M and his terminally ill grandmother. Through an extended observational style—featuring long takes, close-ups, and minimalistic dialogue—the film enables the viewer to inhabit intimate family spaces, fostering a sense of shared presence and emotional proximity (Messaris, 1997).

Several techniques contribute to this emotional architecture:

1. **Slow-paced, contemplative scenes**
   The film frequently employs unhurried temporal rhythms, creating emotional immersion. This aligns with Tan's (2013) notion that lingering temporalities in film produce empathetic absorption, enabling the audience to dwell on characters' emotional states.
2. **Embodied performances**
   Ama's physical decline—rendered through subtle gestures, labored breathing, and bodily stillness—functions as what Nichols and Baron (2024) describes as affective evidence, where the body itself becomes a rhetorical site of emotional truth.
3. **Dialogues grounded in everyday tenderness**
   Simple exchanges *"Have you eaten?", "Don't stay up too late."* carry the weight of intergenerational affection. Their ordinariness reinforces authenticity, creating what

Foss (2017) terms symbolic convergence, where shared cultural scripts evoke collective memory and empathy.

4. **Emotional mirroring**
   M's gradual shift from indifference to care is mirrored by the audience, creating a parallel emotional journey. This rhetorical alignment fosters what Burke (1969) calls identification, the affective merging of audience and character values.

Through these techniques, the film crafts a coherent emotional universe that invites viewers into a culturally familiar yet deeply personal narrative of familial duty and impending loss.

Cultural Emotion as Rhetorical Resource

Pathos in the film is inseparable from its Thai–Chinese cultural context, which provides an emotional vocabulary shared by much of its regional audience. The film strategically employs culturally resonant symbols—ancestral altars, funerary rituals, herbal medicine, and the vernacular domestic environment of Talad Phlu. These iconic elements activate what Bordwell (2006) terms culturally encoded affect, emotions embedded in shared social experiences and traditions.

Key cultural-emotional mechanisms include:

- **Filial Piety**
  The moral weight of caring for one's elders is not simply a narrative theme but an emotional imperative. The film leverages this culturally recognized duty to intensify audience empathy and guilt, generating what Heath and Bryant (2000) call value-laden affective appeals.
- **Collective nostalgia**
  The depiction of old neighborhoods, childhood rituals, and family meals evokes nostalgia as an emotional connector across generations—serving as an affective bridge that reinforces identification.
- **Emotional silence as a cultural code**
  Thai–Chinese families often express love through action rather than verbalization. The film's understated tone, quiet suffering, and unspoken affection resonate with culturally specific emotional registers.

These cultural codes amplify the film's affective power, making the emotional experience not only personal but socially shared—a crucial mechanism for persuasive cinema in Asian cultural contexts.

Pathos and the Ethics of Suffering

A central dimension of Pathos in the film is its ethical portrayal of suffering. Ama's terminal illness is depicted with restraint—avoiding sensationalism or excessive sentimentality. This aligns with ethical cinematic principles articulated by Nichols and Baron (2024), which emphasize dignified suffering as a moral form of emotional persuasion.

The ethical significance is twofold:

1. **Humanization without exploitation**
   Grandma's vulnerability is shown through empathy rather than pity. Her moments of strength—humor, stubbornness, practicality—preserve her dignity, preventing the film from lapsing into melodramatic manipulation.

2. **Emotional responsibility**
   The film distributes emotional weight across the narrative, allowing audiences to process grief gradually. This pacing corresponds with Tan's (2013) concept of *regulated emotionality*, which promotes reflection rather than shock.

By aligning emotional portrayal with ethical restraint, the film enhances the credibility of its emotional appeals, allowing Pathos to reinforce Ethos rather than undermine it—an important synergy in the rhetorical triangle.

The Function of Pathos in Persuasive Storytelling

Ultimately, Pathos serves as the driving force of the film's rhetorical impact. Through emotional immersion, cultural resonance, and ethical sensitivity, the film constructs an affective environment that shapes audience interpretation. In line with Foss's (2017) view that emotional engagement facilitates the internalization of rhetorical messages, *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* uses Pathos to guide viewers toward reflection on moral responsibility, intergenerational care, and the value of time. Thus, Pathos in the film is not merely sentimental. It is structurally embedded—an intentional rhetorical strategy that transforms emotional experience into ethical persuasion.

Table 2
Types of Pathos, Rhetorical Techniques, Cinematic Instances, and Their Effects on Audiences

Type of Pathos	Techniques	Illustrative Examples from the Film	Audience Effects
Narrative Pathos	Character transformation as an emotional driver	M's shift from pursuing inheritance to genuinely caring for his grandmother	Evokes poignancy and deepens recognition of the value of familial relationships
Cinematic Pathos	Use of camera framing, color palette, and musical scoring	Warm-toned domestic scenes; melancholic piano motifs	Stimulates emotional resonance and activates personal or nostalgic memory recall
Symbolic Pathos	Employment of culturally embedded objects and rituals	Domestic space, traditional foods, Qingming ancestral rites	Fosters culturally grounded emotional engagement and reinforces shared moral sentiments

Logos Analysis

Narrative Causality and Moral Reasoning

How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies constructs Logos through a tightly woven causal narrative centered on intergenerational responsibility, inheritance, and moral awakening. The film's core premise—M's decision to care for his terminally ill grandmother in the hope of

receiving her inheritance—creates an explicit ethical dilemma that structures the film's reasoning. Key narrative mechanisms include:

1. Cause–effect progression: M's initial motivation (inheritance) logically drives the plot, producing conflict with siblings, tension with family expectations, and internal conflict about his morality. Each narrative beat follows a clear causal chain, allowing the moral development to appear earned rather than imposed (Bordwell, 2006).
2. Character motivation: Early scenes emphasize M's immaturity and economic struggle, providing rational justification for his morally dubious incentives. As his motivations transform, the film maintains logical continuity, allowing viewers to recognize the coherence of his ethical growth (Tan, 2013).
3. Revelation as narrative logic: The discovery of Mengju's long-held savings in M's name functions as a logical pivot—reshaping the ethical equation not by emotional manipulation but by reconfiguring narrative information. This aligns with Foss's (2017) view that persuasive narratives often rely on information restructuring as a logical strategy.

Through these strategies, the film presents its moral argument—that genuine care transcends material incentive—in a logically traceable manner.

Symbolic and Moral Reasoning

In addition to causal logic, the film employs symbolic Logos, where objects, settings, and rituals serve as evidence within the moral argument:

- **The old family house** symbolizes continuity and memory, providing justification for filial obligation.
- **Funeral rituals** contextualize death within communal ethics, integrating cultural logic into the narrative.
- **Everyday caregiving actions**—cooking, cleaning, feeding—operate as concrete behavioral proofs of moral transformation.

This symbolic reasoning echoes Burke's (1969) notion of symbolic action, wherein symbols function as argumentative devices in themselves.

Logical Resolution and Ethical Coherence

The film's conclusion embodies rational closure, where narrative outcomes align with the thematic thesis. Mengju's passing, M's transformation, and the ambivalent but meaningful reconciliation among family members provide a resolution that satisfies the film's moral logic without resorting to didacticism.

This structure reflects Heath and Bryant's (2000) model of narrative persuasion, in which the audience internalizes an argument when:

1. narrative coherence (logical flow),
2. narrative fidelity (believability), and
3. moral plausibility

are simultaneously met.

By maintaining coherence in motivation, causality, and symbolic reasoning, the film delivers a moral conclusion supported by Logos as much as by Pathos.

The Function of Logos in the Film's Persuasive System

Logos in *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* bolsters the persuasive power of Ethos and Pathos by supplying: structural stability, ethical justification, narrative plausibility, and conceptual clarity. It ensures that emotional appeals are not arbitrary but grounded in a reasoned portrayal of family ethics, caregiving labor, and moral responsibility. The film's success, therefore, arises not only from the emotional intensity of its Pathos but from the rational architecture that makes those emotions meaningful. Thus, Logos functions as the intellectual backbone of the film's rhetorical triangle, transforming emotional experience into moral comprehension.

Table 3
Symbolic Elements, Their Logical Meanings, and Rhetorical Functions

Symbolic Element	Logical Interpretation	Rhetorical Function
Grandmother's House	Repository of memory, lineage, and emotional stability	Conveys the idea that the home functions as the central locus of emotional and rational grounding
Dining Table	Familial connection and shared relational space	Establishes the implicit logic that communal eating signifies relational bonding and unity
Ancestral Graves	Intergenerational continuity and cultural lineage	Reinforces the audience's belief in the significance of ancestral remembrance and filial obligations
Old Photographs	Tangible evidence of past realities and lived experiences	Serves as documentary proof that strengthens the film's Ethos and supports its Logos-based reasoning

Conclusion

This study has examined *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* through the lens of the Aristotelian Rhetorical Triangle—Ethos, Pathos, and Logos—to understand how the film constructs persuasive meaning within the context of Thai–Chinese familial ethics and contemporary cinematic storytelling. The analysis demonstrates that the film's rhetorical power emerges not from any single element but from the integrated interplay among credibility, emotion, and reason.

First, Ethos operates as the film's moral foundation. Through credible character development, culturally authentic representation, and the ethical stance of the filmmaker, the film constructs a trustworthy moral voice (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007; Tan, 2013). The transformation of M, the dignified portrayal of Ama, and the authenticity of Thai–Chinese domestic life collectively establish a persuasive ethical framework that legitimizes the film's thematic message.

Second, Pathos functions as the film's affective engine. The emotional architecture of the narrative—embodied suffering, intergenerational intimacy, and culturally encoded sentiment—mobilizes empathy and identification (Nichols & Baron 2024; Tan, 2013). The film's ability to evoke regional resonance across Asian audiences is rooted in its affective fidelity to shared cultural values, such as filial piety and everyday acts of care.

Third, Logos provides structural coherence to the film's persuasive discourse. Through causal narrative progression, morally justified character motivations, and symbolic reasoning, the film constructs a logically grounded moral argument: that genuine care transcends material inheritance (Bordwell, 2006; Chatman, 1980). This rational architecture stabilizes the emotional appeal and transforms sentiment into ethical insight.

Taken together, Ethos, Pathos, and Logos interact dynamically to form a holistic persuasive system. The film exemplifies what Foss (2017) terms integrated rhetorical storytelling, wherein emotional resonance, ethical credibility, and logical coherence converge to produce deep moral reflection. As a result, How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies stands not only as a powerful family drama but also as a case study in cinematic rhetoric—demonstrating how film can function as a site of cultural persuasion, ethical inquiry, and intergenerational dialogue.

Thus, this analysis affirms that the film's impact lies in its ability to convert intimate experience into universal ethical reflection, positioning it as an important contribution to contemporary Southeast Asian cinema and to the broader study of filmic persuasion in global media culture.

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.

References

Aristotle. (2007). *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse.* (G. A. Kennedy, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Bordwell, D. (2006). *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1969). *A rhetoric of motives*. University of California Press.

Chatman, S. (1980). *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press.

Foss, S. K. (2017). *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice (5th ed.)*. Waveland Press.

Heath, R. L., & Bryant, J. (2000). *Human Communication Theory and Research: Concepts, Contexts, and Challenges*. Routledge.

Messaris, P. (1997). *Visual persuasion: The role of images in advertising*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Nichols, B., & Baron, J. (2024). *Introduction to Documentary (4th ed.)*. Indiana University Press.

Tan, E. S. (2013). *Emotion and the structure of narrative film: Film as an emotion machine*. Routledge.

Variety. (2025, Jan 10). *"How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies" Conversation with Director Pat Boonnitipat*. [Video] https://variety.com/2025/film/news/variety-fyc-fest-gladiator-2-blitz-1236270179/?fbclid=IwY2xjawPJmAdleHRuA2FlbQIxMABicmlkETFFVU9kZUVEZ1hkSTQ4MTRJc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjIyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHveOWxVO1npPDxThf9PbZESLP6CVfoy9iOmojMOp0ePFfk-OSVO9F6qMMVHA_aem_jbo_zhGkgAjNTgozuO0UtA#How

Contact email: paninya.p@bu.ac.th

Proposing a Process Evaluation Methodology for Territorial Value Co-creation Activities in Local Revitalization Policies

Mutsuko Muramoto, Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Japan
Mitsuru Ikeda, Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Japan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Japanese cultural policies for regional revitalization face a fundamental evaluation challenge: government funders demand measurable short-term outcomes, while practitioners recognize that sustainability depends on long-term community ownership. This paper proposes a process evaluation methodology for Territorial Value Co-creation Activities (TVCAs)—resident-led initiatives that diagnose sustainability through observable activity artifacts. We developed a five-level rubric assessing centripetality (coordination mechanisms) and endogeneity (resident-driven expansion) based on analysis of Book Town Hachinohe (2015–2024), collecting 20 official documents, 700 citizen surveys, approximately 300 social media posts, and 200 observation records. Results revealed Level 5 centripetality in value recognition and Level 4 endogeneity in activity expansion, but showed 73% budget dependency, demonstrating how conventional KPI evaluations (exceeding 100,000 annual visitors) can mask sustainability risks.

Keywords: evaluation, place-based development, sustainability, co-creation, cultural capital

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Japanese cultural policies for regional revitalization confront a critical evaluation gap. Government agencies require demonstrable annual outcomes—visitor numbers, economic impact, participation rates (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2019)—while sustainability emerges from decade-long phenomena: trust networks, autonomous initiatives, and cultural capital. This gap results in critical consequences: projects deemed successful by conventional KPIs sometimes collapse after public support ends.

Conventional economic policy evaluates through KPI-based short-term measurement, effectively serving budget allocation but not evaluating autonomous continuation mechanisms. Cultural policy practitioners focus on Territorial Value Co-creation Activities (TVCAs), targeting post-funding continuation potential. The fundamental difference lies in temporal perspective: whereas conventional approaches evaluate past targets, assessing continuation potential requires asking whether residents can thrive without ongoing administrative support.

Case Study: Book Town Hachinohe

Hachinohe City (220,000 inhabitants, Aomori Prefecture) confronts typical population decline challenges. In 2013, the city announced the Book Town Initiative, activating the Edo-period "Shomotsu Nakama" practice wherein residents collectively financed book purchases, establishing the Book Center in 2016 (City of Hachinohe, 2015).

The initiative demonstrates four critical dynamics. First, symbolic connection to historical identity enabled residents to recognize book culture as inherent rather than externally imposed. Second, intergenerational transmission mechanisms—the "My Book Promotion Project" coordinating with schools to distribute recommended books to all children, and ICT integration through "Hachisuku Tsushin LINE" engaging mothers with parenting advice (City of Hachinohe, 2020, 2022)—created structured value-sharing opportunities. Third, activity bases diversified citywide: museums, centers, clinics, and online platforms enabling universal participation. Fourth, information dissemination evolved from center-centric to distributed networks, with residents autonomously producing theatrical performances and influencing other municipalities (Ando Shoeki Museum Blog, 2025; Otokita, 2025).

However, structural vulnerability exists: 73% of Book Center operating costs derive from municipal budgets (City of Hachinohe, 2024). We collected data spanning 2015–2024: 20 official documents, 700 citizen survey responses, approximately 300 social media posts, and 200 observation records.

The TVCA Framework: Process Evaluation Methodology

Existing theoretical frameworks—value co-creation theory (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), social capital research (Putnam, 2000), and place-based development theory (Barca et al., 2012)—provide conceptual vocabularies for understanding regional value but lack practical evaluation methodologies. Our framework development followed an inductive approach: analyzing what actually determines continuation potential in Hachinohe's practice, then operationalizing these insights into observable evaluation criteria.

Through data analysis of Hachinohe City, we identified two concepts that determine the possibility of continuity. First, continuity requires a coordination mechanism to maintain a

shared direction. We call this centripetal force. This concept was derived from how the symbol of the "Book Club" functioned to connect diverse stakeholders. Second, continuity requires actions and mechanisms through which residents autonomously expand the initiative without being swayed by administrative directives. We call this endogeneity. This concept was derived from observing how residents independently launched new activities, adjusted existing programs, and disseminated information without waiting for official approval. These two characteristics of activity emerged from our data analysis on what actually distinguishes sustainable from unsustainable aspects within initiatives.

Analysis revealed two critical operational dynamics determining continuation potential. Centripetality maintains coordination among stakeholders through shared symbols and mechanisms. In Hachinohe, the "Shomotsu Nakama" symbol functions as centripetal force, enabling diverse stakeholders to recognize common regional identity. Endogeneity reflects residents' autonomous activity expansion independent of administrative direction—social media dissemination, theatrical productions, cross-organizational coordination initiated without administrative approval.

These dynamics generate four sustainability patterns: (1) Balanced Type (high centripetality, high endogeneity): robust sustainability; (2) Infrastructure-Dependent Type (high centripetality, low endogeneity): favorable KPIs masking post-funding collapse risks; (3) Spontaneous-Dispersed Type (low centripetality, high endogeneity): active residents lacking coordination; (4) Dissipation-Risk Type (low centripetality, low endogeneity): minimal sustainability.

We constructed evaluation criteria assessing three aspects: regional value recognition (centripetality), activity establishment and maintenance (combined), and activity expansion (endogeneity). Each aspect is assessed on a five-level rubric where Level 1 indicates insufficient capacity, Level 3 represents basic functional mechanisms, Level 4 demonstrates next-generation readiness, and Level 5 reflects change-adaptive systems. We employed systematic document analysis (Bowen, 2009) through four stages: comprehensive reading, thematic coding using the centripetality-endogeneity framework, evidence triangulation, and level assignment.

To make these abstract dimensions operational, we developed evaluation criteria with five levels representing progression from insufficient (Level 1) to change-adaptive capacity (Level 5). Table 1 presents the criteria for Levels 3 and 5 across three assessment dimensions, illustrating the critical transition from basic functional mechanisms to adaptive systems. Level 3 represents the minimum threshold for autonomous continuation after administrative support ends—mechanisms are established but require stability. Level 5 represents robust sustainability—mechanisms can adapt to environmental changes, integrate new technologies, and extend beyond the original community. We focus on these two levels as they clarify the practical distinction between "barely sustainable" and "highly resilient" states that practitioners must diagnose.

Table 1

TVCA Evaluation Criteria: Key Levels of Centripetality and Endogeneity

Evaluation Axis / Item	Level 5 (Change-Adaptive)	Level 3 (Basic Conditions Met)
Centripetality: Regional Value Recognition	Mechanisms established for flexibly updating regional value recognition through symbolic adaptation to environmental, generational, and temporal changes	Mechanisms confirmed for utilizing project symbols to maintain regional value recognition, preventing erosion or forgetting
Centripetality + Endogeneity: Activity Establishment & Maintenance	Distributed participation opportunities where anyone can contribute anytime, integrating traditional symbols with new technologies for next-generation preparation	Mechanisms enabling manageable participation frequency for those wishing to join, utilizing region-specific common resources
Endogeneity: Activity Expansion	Information systems for disseminating regional value enhancement beyond local communities, adaptable to other regional systems	Mechanisms for sharing activity information within community-accessible ranges for specific goal-oriented activities

Note. Levels 1–2 represent insufficient/emergent states; Level 4 represents next-generation readiness.

Applying these criteria to Book Town Hachinohe: Regional value recognition achieves Level 5 through demonstrated capacity to adapt the historical symbol across generations and technologies. Activity establishment reaches Level 4 through citywide distributed opportunities integrating traditional venues and ICT platforms. Activity expansion attains Level 4 through resident-initiated dissemination extending beyond Hachinohe.

The diagnostic process involved official documents revealing institutional mechanisms, citizen surveys capturing resident perspectives, and social media posts demonstrating voluntary initiatives. Multiple examples of each criterion were required for level assignment. For example, Level 5, Centripetality, required evidence of active adaptation rather than merely preserving symbols (integration of traditional practices with ICT, intergenerational transmission mechanisms).

However, 73% budget dependency reveals structural vulnerability. Conventional EBPM indicators classify this as successful (100,000+ visitors, 200+ events annually), but these metrics mask continuation barriers. High resident spontaneity coexists with infrastructure dependency, creating single points of failure. This diagnosis enables evidence-based interventions: short-term (1–2 years)—diversify funding, secure alternative venues, cultivate citizen coordinators; medium-term (3–5 years)—establish NPO structure, formalize tripartite governance, construct peer-to-peer platforms.

Discussion and Conclusion

This evaluation methodology addresses the temporal mismatch between cultural-social transformation (10–20 years) and short evaluation cycles (3-5 years), proving applicable to diagnosing sustainability states requiring preventive intervention. The centripetality-endogeneity framework identifies four sustainability patterns valuable for practitioners in diagnosing intervention priorities.

For policymakers, this approach suggests reconsidering evaluation timing: rather than asking "Did we achieve goals?" at project completion, asking "Did we establish sustainability

mechanisms?" at project conclusion. These operational dynamics align with value co-creation theory (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), social capital research (Putnam, 2000), and place-based development theory (Barca et al., 2012), but operationalize these conceptual vocabularies into practical evaluation methodologies.

This study has four key limitations. First, the criteria were developed from a single case (book culture initiative in Japan), requiring validation across diverse cultural domains and governance contexts before claiming broad generalizability. Second, this study did not test inter-raterreliability; future research must develop training protocols and assess agreement between independent evaluators. Third, comprehensive application requires substantial time and expertise in qualitative analysis. Fourth, confirming whether high TVCA scores actually predict long-term sustainability requires longitudinal tracking beyond project conclusion.

This methodology plays a crucial roles in PPP projects by enabling periodic diagnostics to strengthen resident centripetality and endogeneity, facilitating pre-termination interventions for post-withdrawal self-sustainability. As aging societies address cultural heritage sustainability amid population decline, questions shift from "Which projects achieve short-term goals?" to "Which initiatives establish self-sustaining mechanisms?" The Hachinohe case demonstrates how high KPI achievement can mask fundamental sustainability risks—Level 5 centripetality and Level 4 expansion indicate strong engagement, yet 73% budget dependency creates single points of failure requiring intervention.

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

The authors utilized Claude (Anthropic) during the manuscript revision process for language refinement, structural editing, and manuscript clarity enhancement. All core ideas, research design, data analysis, findings, and contributions represent original research outcomes by the authors.

References

Ando Shoeki Museum Blog. (2025). https://shoeki.org/

Barca, F., McCann, P., & Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2012). The case for regional development intervention: Place-based versus place-neutral approaches. *Journal of Regional Science, 52*(1), 134–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9787.2011.00744.x

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40.

City of Hachinohe. (2015). *Hachinohe Cultural City Vision*. https://www.city.hachinohe.aomori.jp/material/files/group/8/20160502-105616.pdf

City of Hachinohe. (2020). *Hachinohe Book Center project report* (2020 edition). https://8book.jp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/9ba4da58196be79b7b7422a72b1a4ded.pdf

City of Hachinohe. (2022). *Hachinohe Book Center project report* (2022 edition). https://8book.jp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/5952086ad993966b88de5b713817040d.pdf

City of Hachinohe. (2024). *Hachinohe Book Center visualization sheet*. https://www.city.hachinohe.aomori.jp/material/files/group/15/R6bc.pdf

Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. (2019). *Report on visualization of local independent projects (software).* https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000615209.pdf

Otokita, S. (2025). Community building through 'Book Town Hachinohe'. *Journal of Lifestyle Culture Creative Cities, 20.* https://www.japanfashion.or.jp/fashiontown/journal/journal_20250324/

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18*(3), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.20015

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 68*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.68.1.1.24036

A. K. Coomaraswamy's Interpretation of Chthonic Myths and Its Impact on Mircea Eliade's History of Religions

Tamaki Kitagawa, University of Tsukuba, Japan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines the intellectual relationship between Mircea Eliade's history of religions and the Traditionalist School, with particular attention to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's influence. Although Eliade's work has been widely debated through both critical deconstruction and reconstruction, its connection to Traditionalist thought has received limited scholarly attention. The Traditionalist School, initiated by René Guénon and further developed by Coomaraswamy and others, understood "tradition" as deriving from primordial and universal metaphysical principles that transcend historical and cultural boundaries. The paper analyzes Coomaraswamy's interpretations of chthonic myths, focusing on two later works: "The Rape of a Nāgī" (1937) and "On the Loathly Bride" (1945). In these studies, Coomaraswamy interpreted mythological motifs such as serpents, dragons, and transformative marriages as symbolic expressions of primordial unity, cosmic polarity, and mystical reintegration. He presented the serpent as both the original totality of existence and, in later mythological stages, as a negative or chaotic force opposed to solar and divine order. The study further explores how Coomaraswamy's concepts and methodology influenced Eliade. While Eliade adopted key Traditionalist notions such as archetypes, symbolic correspondence, and the coincidence of opposites, he transformed them by removing their normative metaphysical claims and reinterpreting them in terms of universal human religious experience. Unlike Guénon's static and doctrinal traditionalism, Coomaraswamy's dynamic interpretative approach, grounded in concrete cultural expressions, provided Eliade with methodological inspiration.

Keywords: history of religion, traditionalist school, chthonic myth

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Following the death of the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, his research methods and achievements have been subjected to rigorous criticism. Debates concerning Eliade have, on the one hand, sought to "deconstruct" the "myth" he constructed, while, on the other hand, they have represented attempts to "reconstruct" Eliadean religious studies (Rennie, 1996). However, within these parallel debates, the relationship between Eliade's history of religion and the Traditionalist School has been largely overlooked.

The Traditionalist School, also known as the Perennial Philosophy School, is a branch of thought that emerged in 1921 with a series of writings by the thinker René Guénon (1886–1951) and was further developed by thinkers such as A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Julius Evola (1898–1974), and Fritschof Schuon (1907–1998). In this intellectual tradition, "tradition" does not denote historically formed specific customs or values, or specific divisions indicating stages of culture, but is treated more holistically in terms of value as something opposed to modernity.

Guénon says that "tradition" has its origins in ahistorical and transhuman "universal principles," or "primordial tradition." All traditions other than modern civilization are guided by revelations from these principles and are, therefore, essentially the same "normal" traditional civilization (Guénon, 1942, pp. 31–32). The arts, sciences, and other fields are based on "metaphysics," the recognition of higher principles, and each is an application of that (Trufas, 2010). Traditionalists believe that this superiority of intellectual intuition over reason or "pure metaphysics" can be found not only in the mystical literature of the East and the West but also in all oral traditions.

Primarily known only to a select group of scholars and general readers, mainly in Europe, the Traditionalist School gained broader attention in the 2000s following the successive publication of its works in America. The publication of academic research by Spineto and Sedgwick (Sedgwick, 2004; Spineto, 2001) furthered this scholarly reappraisal. Consequently, it became apparent that several key concepts forming Eliade's theoretical framework—such as "axis mundi" and "archetype"—were borrowed from the works of traditionalists like Guénon and Evola (Pisi, 1998, p. 97, p. 60; Spineto, 2001, p. 67). Among these, art historian and thinker A.K. Coomaraswamy has been regarded as exerting a greater influence on Eliade than Guénon himself, particularly in terms of concepts and methodology (Pisi, 1998, p. 51). This study examines Coomaraswamy's works, which display marked similarities with the field of the history of religion, specifically his research on chthonic myths, and attempts to explore the relationship of influence between the two.

Coomaraswamy's Interpretation of Chthonic Myths

Eliade points out that in an early period, Coomaraswamy's work had "a growing familiarity with some problems of the history of religions." "The symbolism of chthonian fertility represented by the Magna Mater, and the aquatic cosmogonies, rituals, and mythologies" are treated in these works (Eliade, 1979, pp. 168–169). Nevertheless, Coomaraswamy's fascination with "chthonic" myths and symbols persisted until the very end of his life. Below, by examining two works written during his later years, we will glimpse Coomaraswamy's thought and his influence on the history of religion.

"The Rape of a Nāgī: An Indian Gupta Seal"

"The Rape of a Nāgī," written in 1937, is an article written by Coomaraswamy after he became a research fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It interpreted a Gupta-period seal in the museum's collection through the perspectives of mythology and iconography. In this article, he interpreted the motif of "Garuda (the eagle) carrying off the serpent-woman Nāgī", characteristic of ancient Indian iconography, as representing the fundamental opposition between sun and serpent. Through comparative analysis of several illustrations, Coomaraswamy posited that what the Garuda, the sun-bird, was tearing apart is Nāgī's serpentine form, which simultaneously represented the manifestation of Nāgī's human nature and brought forth ecstasy. He further asserted that behind this mythological expression lies a metaphysical meaning: the reintegration (union) of light and darkness derived from primordial oneness.

> We shall find that … in the older Indian ontology whatever is evil is represented by the 'snake skin' or other reptilian integument; and that the procession of any individual principle, whether that of a human or divine 'person,' is thought of as a 'casting of the snake-skin,' from which the purified being emerges, 'just as a blade of grass is pulled from its sheath.' (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334)

Coomaraswamy, in order to understand the actual content and raison d'être of the iconography, referred "as usual to much older and pre-Buddhist literary sources" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334) and focused on the conflict between angels and Titans (serpents). Here, he assigned to the serpent the negative aspect of the bipolar opposition structure comprising darkness versus light, evil versus good. Creation myths in which a sky god vanquishes the serpent—a symbol of darkness, the underworld, and water—are widely found across the world. In India, too, it is the sun god Indra who vanquishes the primordial serpent Vṛtra. Based on this binary opposition, in myth, serpents and dragons are often regarded as "evil", "to be vanquished", or "ugly". Furthermore, Coomaraswamy interpreted this opposition using older beliefs such as the cult of Vṛtra.

> The primordial serpent or dragon—really the Godhead, as distinguished from the proceeding God—is described as 'omniform,' or 'protean,' in accordance with the exemplarist doctrine of the first principle as being of a single form that is the form of very different things. There is accordingly something more than a simple opposition of the solar-angelic and lunar-titanic powers of light and darkness. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334)

Coomaraswamy stated that "really the Godhead" possessing a chthonic nature, preceding those deities who would later be revered as gods—namely the solar deities—constituted the primordial single form, the foundational shape of all existence. Here, the serpent was emphasized as symbolizing the formless, or the totality of form that could become anything.

> Because of the temporal form of our understanding, we think and speak of the one as proceeding *from* the other, and of an eventful division of 'the light *from* the darkness' (Genesis), or of Heaven *from* Earth (Vedas, passim); and thus regarding the Supernal Sun, Eternal Avatār, or Messiah, as having most effectively cast off all adherent potentiality and as wholly in act, it is inferred by analogy that it lies within the competence of every separated creature to effect in the same way a riddance of evil, 'just as the serpent sheds its skin.' (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334)

The serpent (or dragon), originally regarded as the sole divine presence, embodied the "omniform" of all things. Its fundamental nature was primordiality (which Coomaraswamy expressed as the first principle) that resolved all oppositions. Yet, due to the limitations of human comprehension, we easily grasped phenomena through causality, perceiving one side of a binary opposition (positivity) as possessing the completeness to exclude the other. This, it was interpreted, constituted the "division of light and darkness" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334). To illustrate an example where this separated state was reunited, Coomaraswamy cited the Vedic myth of the snake-skinned woman sanctified by Indra's light.

> Apālā (the 'Unwed'), being thrice drawn through the hub of the solar wheel, or in other words, by means of three successive 'deaths' and 'births,' is stripped of her reptilian aspects, and acquiring thus a 'sun-skin,' becomes the fitting bride of the solar Indra. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 335)

Coomaraswamy further elaborated by citing Meister Eckhart (1924, p. 292), that for the bride to become one with the sun, the death of the attributes of darkness—namely, "a death to all selfhood" and "a rejection of all private essence"—was required.

> 'The soul, in hot pursuit of God, becomes absorbed in Him, just as the sun will swallow up and put out the dawn'; in the same sense numerous Vedic texts describe the solar Indra as both the destroyer and the bridegroom of the Dawn. It may be called a law of metaphysics that a divinely inflicted 'death' is also an "assumption." (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 336)

The experience of the soul being absorbed in God, as seen in Eckhart, was said to represent the same process as that of "Dawn" (that is, the bearer of darkness) being destroyed and then wed to the sun god Indra. Similarly, Nāgī also underwent the experience of being "devoured" and "raped" by the sun-eagle, which was interpreted as the mystical union where the individual self was annihilated and ecstatically assimilated into the Greater Self (the Immortal Self).

> If the Eagle, *noster Deus consumens*, really 'devours' the Nagi (…), this is not merely a consumption, but also an assimilation and incorporation; if the act of solar violence is a rape, it is also a 'rapture' and a 'transport' in both possible senses of both words. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 336)

In these interpretations, Coomaraswamy demonstrated that the conception of the "serpent" involved two distinct stages: one where it was perceived as the primordial unity and archetype of all things, and another where it was conceived as "negativity" placed in opposition to the "positive" qualities, such as the sun, (which may also be termed cultural or human qualities) established as "good" in the subsequent myths. He concluded that the iconography of The Rape of Nāgī expressed the assimilation and absorption of this second-stage "serpent" into the sun, based upon the original unity, in the form of "rape" (death, violence, and yet union, ecstasy).

"On the Loathly Bride"

In his essay "On the Loathsome Bride," written in 1945, which recounts the tale of a hideous woman's metamorphosis, Coomaraswamy introduced the folkloric variant of the serpent's primal nature seen above. In this work, Coomaraswamy examined the "Loathly Lady" tales

prevalent in medieval Europe and argued that this narrative—where an ugly woman transforms into a beautiful maiden through a "Fierce Kiss" with a hero—represented a universal mythic form symbolizing the marriage of earth and sun.

> We have so far seen that the heroic motif of the transformation of a hideous and uncanny bride into a beautiful woman cannot be regarded as peculiarly Celtic, but rather represents a universal mythical pattern, underlying all marriage, and one that is, in fact, the 'mystery' of marriage. In more than one case it is emphasized that the disenchantment is effected by a kiss. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 363)

Furthermore, he cited Slavic folk tales and the narratives employed by William Morris, stating that in the typical version of the "Fierce Kiss" legend, the maiden appeared not as an ugly woman, but in the form of a serpent or dragon.

> [T]he hero reaches the Otherworld, Underwave. The population is enchanted. He enters a castle. A great snake enters, and begs him, 'kiss me,' but he refuses. …[Finally,] He kisses it, and 'as soon as he had kissed it, the snake turned into a beautiful maiden, as beautiful as a maiden could be.…' (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 363)

> [A] beautiful woman, who tells him that in her enchanted form, from which she is released on only one day of each year, she is a Dragon, and that if he would win both her and the kingdom, he must kiss her in the dragon form, in which she will appear to him on the morrow. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 364)

According to Coomaraswamy, the ugly woman (often guardian of the fountain of life) whom the hero kisses shared a common origin with the pre-cosmic dragon or serpent found universally. These narratives could thus be identified with the heroic tales of world creation achieved by conquering (that is, marrying) the primordial dragon. The primordial dragon also symbolized the chaotic earth, inhospitable to humans, yet the source of life. Consequently, this form constituted "the mythological theme of the marriage of the sun god and the earth" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 353), signifying the transfer of sovereignty over the land, and could be found in mythologies beyond Europe.

Coomaraswamy drew parallels with the myth of Apālā in the Rig Veda, which was also discussed in the previous paper. Apālā, wishing for her barren land to be revitalized by the power (vital energy) of the sun god Indra, asked him to marry her, and Indra drank soma from her lips. Coomaraswamy pointed out that Apālā possessed the nature of the primordial serpent.

> The longer versions of the Brāhmaṇas make it clear that Apālā was originally 'of evil hue' and that the purifications are removals of her scaly reptilian skins, so that from the third she emerges in the fairest of all forms and as one to be embraced…. Beyond all question, Indra's drinking of Soma involves a Fier Baiser. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 357)

Indra's consort was given various names besides Apālā, but according to Coomaraswamy, these were all ultimately "forms of the Earth Goddess" and "as such represent Dominion; not the Ruler himself, but the Power, the Glory and the Fortune with which he operates" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 357). Referring to the hymn to the Earth Mother in the Atharva

Veda (vii.1), he stated: “The expression, ‘shaking off the serpent,’ i.e., casting her slough, is in itself a proof of Mother Earth's originally ophidian nature” (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 357).

In this paper, Coomaraswamy (1) identified the divine marriage myth of heaven and earth as the archetype for the European legend of the “loathly woman”, (2) pointed out that it possessed a universal structure also found in Indian mythology, and (3) noted that it constituted a form of the cosmogonic myth from chaos. Furthermore, (4) he argued that this marriage ultimately converged towards a mystical interpretation signifying the submission of the “individual self” (the outer man, the soul) to the “immortal self” (the inner man, reason).

> These two, cohabitant Inner and Outer Man, are at war with one another, and there can be no peace between them until the victory has been won and the soul, our self, this ‘I,’ submits. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 366)

In both papers, Coomaraswamy employed a dual interpretative approach: he interpreted iconography or folktales through chthonic mythological motifs and further interpreted such myths through mystical doctrines. This methodology demanded both a panoramic perspective encompassing myths and legends from various regions and a thorough mastery of myths and doctrines. Moreover, his interpretations possessed flexibility and clarity absent in previous mythological interpretations.

> [A]nd every such story has been told, at least in the beginning (however it may have been ‘voided of content on its way down to us’), not merely for the amusement of ‘children’ whether young or old but also to expound a doctrine for the sake of those who have ears to hear and to whom it is given to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 366)

The nature of the “beginning” as envisaged by Coomaraswamy requires more detailed examination. Whether it signifies a specific epoch or civilization accompanied by highly abstract thought, as Guénon suggests, or whether it is an ontological reality shared within humanity's religious experience, as Eliade's “il tempo” derived from the creation myths of various cultures, cannot be thoroughly explored here. Nevertheless, when reading Coomaraswamy's understanding of myth below, it seems there is scope to interpret it as ontological.

> Myths are not distorted records of historical events. They are not periphrastic descriptions of natural phenomena, or ‘explanations’ of them; so far from that, events are demonstrations of the myths. The aetiological myth, for example, was not invented to explain an oddity, as might be supposed if we took account only of some isolated case. On the contrary, the phenomena are *exempla* of the myth. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, pp. 368–369)

In stating the above, Coomaraswamy likely intends to criticize the modern viewpoint that denies the sacredness of scripture itself by asserting that “myths were created by humans”. He emphasizes the necessity of maintaining an intrinsic understanding that myths possess an irreducible primal quality and constitute the archetypes of the world. This is just as the marriage of the “loathly woman,” and the hero constitutes the “archetype” of all human marriages, that is, it ontologically precedes all marriages.

Influence on Eliade

While Eliade did not recognize the academic value of Guénon, his evaluation of Coomaraswamy remained consistently favorable. In his essay "Ananda Coomaraswamy", originally written in 1937 (Eliade, 2004, pp. 241–247), he highly commended Coomaraswamy for demonstrating the coherence of Tradition through scholarly methodology and the possibility of a hermeneutics that coexists with it. Coomaraswamy's method was to illustrate the Primordial Tradition in literature and works of art, drawing on a wealth of sources from Eastern and Western classics. Such an unrestrained interpretive approach was a characteristic not seen in other oriental scholars. Coomaraswamy's methodology, which dealt with symbols from various religions as well as from India, was a tangible clue for the young Eliade in his search for a new direction in comparative religion. It should also be noted that several concepts found in Eliade—such as the "anthropo-cosmic correspondence," and "symbolism"— are common to those of Coomaraswamy and other Traditionalists (Spineto, 2001, pp. 66–67). Among these, the notion of the "archetype" in Coomaraswamy's works is most likely a direct source of Eliade's use of the term. Moreover, the coinciding polarities of "light and darkness" and "sun and serpent" observed in both papers would undoubtedly have influenced Eliade's theory of "the coincidence of opposites" as Pisi points out (1998, p. 54).

It is also significant that Pisi mentions that while Eliade borrowed the principal concepts forming the core of his historical-religious hermeneutics from traditionalists (particularly Coomaraswamy), he simultaneously emptied them of the ontological and normative value held by the interpreters of the philosophia perennis, employing them solely at a descriptive and morphological level (Pisi, 1998, p. 73). To supplement Pisi's observation, I would suggest that what Eliade placed in that emptied space was an "experience" common to all humanity. It required no initiation and was not restricted in its manifestation by any historical circumstances. Even if its modes of expression changed due to historical conditions, these were based on human experience reflecting archaic metaphysics and remained irretrievable (Eliade, 1988, p. 153). Such religious experiences must be grasped "on their own plane of reference", without being reduced to factors such as society, history, or psychology (Eliade, 1969, pp. 6–7).

For Eliade, what mattered was not the static, pure essence of "tradition" but rather the dynamism of irreducible individual religious phenomena expressed through human religious experience and the dynamism of reinterpreting them. In this respect, Eliade could not accept Guénon's approach (Eliade, 1988, pp. 152–153). On the other hand, the approach of Coomaraswamy seen in his later interpretative work on mythology involved extracting primordial meanings from motifs such as iconography and folk tales. Though strongly inclined towards mysticism, his interpretations possessed a dynamism that simultaneously places multiple stages of cognition in an overview while descending into the depths of the experiencer's spirit. This can be regarded as having exerted a certain influence upon Eliade's theory and methodology of the history of religion.

Conclusion

Coomaraswamy's later works are considered to bear a stronger influence of the transcendental and paternalistic Genon compared to his earlier and middle-period works. Lipsey referred to this period as "when he had reached his unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. xxix). Nevertheless, examining Coomaraswamy's interpretation of the Chthonic myths during this period revealed several

points that closely approximate Eliade's history of religion. Firstly, his approach was cross-disciplinary, handling material not confined to the refined; secondly, the dynamism of his comprehensive interpretation; thirdly, the concepts enabling such comprehensive interpretation; and finally, his conviction in the autonomy of myths and doctrines. Although this study did not extend to a comparison of Coomaraswamy's early and middle periods, it revealed that the similarity to the mythological interpretation of the history of religion was evident even in his later work. While Guénon's traditionalism relinquished concreteness in favor of abstract thought, Coomaraswamy, who constantly sought to penetrate the depths of the human spirit by “interpreting” concrete objects, may have exerted a greater influence on Eliade than researchers have assumed.

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.

References

Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1977). *Coomaraswamy: His life and work* (R. Lipsey, Ed.). Princeton University Press.

Dubuisson, D. (1999). La conception eliadienne du symbolism [Eliade's conception of symbolism]. *Gradhiva, 26*, 25–36.

Eckhart, M. (1924). *Meister Eckhart* (Vol. 1; F. Pfeiffer, Ed.; C. De Evans, Trans.). John M. Watkins.

Eliade, M. (1949). *Traité d'histoire des religions* [Patterns in comparative religion]. Payot.

Eliade, M. (1957). *The sacred and the profane* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt, Inc.

Eliade, M. (1969). *The quest: History and meaning in religion*. University of Chicago Press.

Eliade, M. (1979). Some notes on “Theosophia perennis”: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin. *History of Religions, 19*(2).

Eliade, M. (1988). *Autobiography Vol. 2*, *1937–1960: Exile's odyssey* (M. L. Ricketts, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Eliade, M. (2004). Ananda Coomaraswamy [Ananda Coomaraswamy]. In *Insula lui Euthanasius*. Humanitas.

Guénon, R. (1942). *The crisis of the modern world* (A. Osborne, Trans.). Luzac & Co.

Pisi, P. (1998). I "tradizionalisti" e la formazione del pensiero di Eliade [The “traditionalists” and the formation of Eliade's thought]. In L. Arcella, P. Pisi, & R. Scagno (Eds.), *Confronto con Mircea Eliade: Archetipi mitici e identità storica* (pp. 43–133). Jaca Book.

Rennie, B. S. (1996). *Reconstructing Eliade: Making sense of religion*. State University of New York Press.

Sedgwick, M. (2004). *Against the modern world*. Oxford University Press.

Spineto, N. (2001). Mircea Eliade and traditionalism. *Aries, 1*(1).

Trufas, L. (2010). Remarque sur l'histoire et la signification de la notion de philosophia perennis [Notes on the history and eaning of the concept of philosophia perennis]. *Miscellanea Philosophica, 28*.

Contact email: kitagawa.tamaki.kb@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

Redefining Generic Skills in the AI Era: A Conceptual Review Based on Historical Evolution and International Frameworks

Fumiyo Seimiya, Hosei University, Japan
Rihyei Kang, Hosei University, Japan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper aims to theoretically organize and clarify how the concept of generic skills is being redefined in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) through an integrative analysis of historical discussions and international competency frameworks. Much of the existing discourse on AI-era skills has remained limited to an *"additive"* approach that incorporates new capabilities such as AI literacy into existing frameworks, without critically examining the underlying assumptions on which generic skills have been based. Traditionally, generic skills have been defined primarily as transferable abilities that enhance employability (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bennett et al., 1999) and conceptualized as individual characteristics. However, these discussions rest on pre-AI premises and appear insufficient to explain what generic skills should be in the new environment where humans and AI collaborate. This study adopts a conceptual review methodology and examines a literature corpus composed of three groups: foundational academic research, international competency frameworks, and AI-era policy and analytical documents. These are analyzed along three dimensions: purpose, locus of competence, and orientation toward change. The analysis identifies three conceptual shifts in the redefinition of generic skills: (1) from skills for employability to skills that support human flourishing; (2) from individual characteristics to relational capabilities that support human-AI collaboration; and (3) from adaptive response to transformative agency that leads change. Additionally, this paper points out that generic skills development in universities has formed a *"third educational domain"* distinct from traditional disciplinary education and professional training, and discusses the need to re-examine this domain in the AI era.

Keywords: generic skills, artificial intelligence, conceptual shifts, human-AI collaboration, competency frameworks, higher education

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in recent years has fundamentally transformed knowledge production, labor structures, and the nature of learning itself. Information retrieval, analysis, and content generation—activities long considered core human intellectual functions—are now partially substitutable and augmentable by AI systems. This transformation raises fundamental questions: What should humans learn? What should education aim to achieve?

The author's engagement with these questions stems from witnessing how workplace competencies have rapidly changed with AI adoption. What became clear through this experience was that current changes extend beyond simply learning new technical skills; rather, they may involve a fundamental questioning of what *"capability"* and *"skills"* themselves mean. Discussions about AI-era skills have intensified across educational, policy, and industrial domains. Regarding generic skills specifically, the mainstream approach has been *"additive,"* incorporating new capability items such as AI literacy and digital skills into existing frameworks. While such approaches have practical value, they may leave important questions unexamined: On what assumptions have generic skills been defined? Might the emergence of AI be destabilizing those very assumptions?

This paper proceeds from these concerns. It suggests that what is needed in considering AI-era generic skills is not the addition of new skill items but rather a critical re-examination of the assumptions underlying the concept of generic skills itself. To this end, this study aims to conduct an integrative analysis of historical discussions of generic skills and recent international competency frameworks, identifying conceptual shifts that can be commonly observed within them.

Conceptual Foundations of Generic Skills Before AI

Definitional and Terminological Diversity

Generic skills have been discussed using diverse terminology, including transferable skills, soft skills, employability skills, key competencies, and graduate attributes (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bennett et al., 1999; Jääskelä et al., 2018; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). This terminological diversity itself reflects the conceptual ambiguity surrounding generic skills. Van Ravenswaaij et al. (2022) note that when skills are usable across various domains, situations, and contexts, researchers employ different terms, each with slightly different emphases.

Despite these terminological differences, a clear recognition is shared among early representative studies. Generic skills refer to abilities applicable across various situations, not limited to specific occupations or specialized fields (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bennett et al., 1999). The ability to apply competencies acquired in one context to another context—this *"transferability"* has been considered the most important characteristic distinguishing generic skills from specialized or technical abilities. Communication skills, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving represent typical examples, positioned as capabilities that, when combined with specialized knowledge, support both academic success and post-education employment performance.

The assumption structure of the conceptual framework of competence shared by these prior studies will be systematically analyzed in the findings section based on the analytical framework presented in the methodology section.

Historical Evolution: From Liberal Arts to 21st Century Skills

The concept of generic skills was formed within a long intellectual tradition preceding the emergence of the term itself. This paper organizes this history into three phases, focusing on critical junctures when the relationship between education and society significantly changed, and reviews the concept of generic skills from prior research. These phases are: the classical period when educational purpose centered on cultivating civic virtue; the industrialization period when economic utility came to the forefront; and the early 21st century when skills became systematically organized as policy frameworks under the leadership of international organizations.

Phase One: The Classical Liberal Arts Tradition

The origins of generic skills education can be traced to the liberal arts of ancient Greece and Rome. The reason is that liberal arts aimed not at specific occupational skills but at cultivating generic capacities that form the foundation of all intellectual activity. The seven liberal arts comprising the Trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) were not merely a subject system but *"tools for learning"* and *"modes of learning"* (Joseph, 2002). Their educational purpose was not vocational training but cultivating the intellectual foundations for participation in public life as free citizens (*liberalis*) (Joseph, 2002). Liberal arts fundamentally aimed at *"general cultivation of human capabilities,"* and in cultivating abilities applicable beyond specific contexts, can be regarded as the prototype of modern generic skills concepts.

Phase Two: Industrialization and the Emergence of Employability

Following the Industrial Revolution, as labor power became an object of market transaction, education came to be expected to produce *"employable people."* Within this context, the concept of *"employability,"* referring to workers' ability to secure and maintain employment, emerged (Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). This tendency became decisive in the late 20th century. As the pace of technological innovation accelerated and industrial structures changed rapidly, recognition spread that occupation-specific skills alone were insufficient for navigating professional life. Consequently, interest grew in generic abilities applicable across occupations. The 1991 US SCANS report represented an early policy attempt to reflect this recognition, systematically organizing cross-occupational skills including not only literacy and numeracy but also teamwork and problem-solving. Entering the 2000s, survey results reported that Fortune 500 companies prioritized interpersonal skills and problem-solving abilities over traditional academic skills in hiring (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015), supporting this trend from the industrial side. In this phase, the concept of generic skills shifted its center of gravity from classical *"human cultivation"* toward *"labor market adaptation,"* strengthening its instrumental character.

Phase Three: Systematization and International Expansion of 21st Century Skills

Entering the 2000s, with advancing globalization and awareness of global-scale challenges (SDGs), the need increased for establishing common foundations of skills applicable across

national boundaries. Generic skills became systematically organized as policy frameworks under the leadership of international organizations. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), established in 2002, proposed the *"Four Cs"*—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015), while the OECD (2003) defined key competencies as capabilities for *"a successful life and well-functioning society."* Where P21's *"Four Cs"* aimed at practical, immediate skill development backed by industry collaboration, OECD's key competencies set a broader scope of *"well-functioning society."* This divergence indicates that the question of *"for whom"* generic skills exist was already emergent. At this stage, the scope of generic skills began expanding beyond employability to include social participation and self-realization. However, generic skills were still fundamentally conceived as individual capabilities premised on human-to-human interaction, with collaboration with non-human agents (such as AI) not yet envisioned.

This historical evolution demonstrates that the concept of generic skills has been continually reconstructed in response to social and economic changes. The phases of classical *"human cultivation,"* industrialization-era *"employability,"* and 21st century *"social participation and self-realization"* illustrate a process whereby the meaning of generic skills has been reconstructed according to the social demands of each era. How this concept is being reconstructed in response to AI—a new technological and social change—will be analyzed in the findings section.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

As reviewed in the previous section, the concept of generic skills has been historically reconstructed in response to social and economic changes. However, research that captures at the conceptual level how AI's emergence is destabilizing the fundamental assumptions of this concept remains insufficient. Addressing this problem requires not empirically verifying the effects of individual skill items or programs, but rather extracting and comparing the assumptions embedded in discussions of generic skills themselves. Therefore, this study adopts conceptual review and theoretical integrative analysis. Conceptual review is an approach that does not aim at comprehensively collecting literature on a specific theme, but rather attempts theoretical integration by extracting and comparing the assumption structures and implicit conceptual frameworks embedded in prior research and policy literature (Jaakkola, 2020). The purpose of this research is to clarify the assumption structures latent in discussions of generic skills and organize at the conceptual level how they are transforming in the AI era.

Construction of Literature Corpus

The *"literature corpus"* in this study refers to the totality of literature selected and constructed as analytical targets. Unlike systematic review approaches that pursue comprehensiveness, conceptual review employs *"purposive sampling,"* deliberately selecting theoretically important literature in light of research purposes (Snyder, 2019). This study constructed its corpus from the following three groups based on the purpose of capturing transformations in the concept of generic skills.

Group One: Foundational Literature on Generic Skills Before AI

This group comprises literature forming the historical foundation of the generic skills concept. It includes two layers. The first layer consists of research on the historical and philosophical foundations of liberal arts education, positioned as reference literature for identifying the conception of capability as *"human cultivation"* that lies at the origin of generic skills. This includes Joseph's (2002) classical study of the Trivium and Nussbaum's (1997) discussion of liberal arts education and human capabilities. The second layer consists of early representative studies that defined and analyzed generic skills primarily in the context of employability, including Bennett et al. (1999), Andrews and Higson (2008), and Bridgstock (2009). By positioning these two layers contrastively, it becomes possible to structurally capture the process whereby the purpose of generic skills shifted its center of gravity from *"human cultivation"* to *"employability,"* and to analyze AI-era transformations within a long historical perspective.

Group Two: International Competency Frameworks

This group comprises policy documents presenting normative educational purposes and achievement goals. It includes the OECD Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2024), the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) framework (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015), and OECD (2003) key competencies. These were selected to trace how the purpose and scope of generic skills have expanded.

Group Three: AI-Era Policy and Analytical Documents

This group comprises recent literature explicitly addressing human capabilities and roles in the AI era. It includes the UNESCO AI Competency Framework for Students (UNESCO, 2024b), UNESCO AI Competency Framework for Teachers (UNESCO, 2024a), World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025), and related analytical documents. These were selected to identify qualitative changes in the concept of generic skills accompanying AI introduction. Selection criteria for the third group were: (1) explicitly addressing conceptions of generic skills capabilities in education; (2) having international scope not limited to specific countries or regions; and (3) being normative documents presenting capability definitions or frameworks. EU AI Act and national AI strategy documents, focusing primarily on AI regulation and industrial policy rather than discussing conceptions of generic skills capabilities themselves, were not included as analytical targets in this study.

Table 1 summarizes the key literature corpus and the extracted conceptual statements for each analytical dimension.

Table 1

Key Literature Corpus and Extracted Conceptual Statements

ID	Reference	Source Type	Extracted Conceptual Statement (Author's Summary)	Analytical Role	Purpose of Generic Skills	Locus of Competence	Orientation Toward Change
1	Bennett, Dunne & Carré (1999)	Peer-reviewed article	Generic skills are transferable abilities required for effective performance across diverse employment contexts.	Baseline definition: employability-oriented generic skills	Employability, job performance	Individual capability	Adaptive
2	Andrews & Higson (2008)	Peer-reviewed article	Graduate employability is enhanced through soft skills that enable adaptation to employer expectations.	Reinforcement of instrumental purpose	Labor market alignment	Individual capability	Adaptive
3	OECD (2003) Key Competencies	International framework	Competencies contribute to a successful life and a well-functioning society beyond occupational outcomes.	Expansion of educational purposes	Successful life, social participation	Individual + societal	Adaptive / self-regulatory
4	OECD (2024) Learning Compass 2030	International framework	Education should empower learners to create new value and shape a better future through agency and responsibility.	Human flourishing & transformative purposes	Human flourishing, value creation	Learner agency	Transformative
5	UNESCO (2024b) AI Competency Framework for Students	International framework	Learners must critically evaluate AI outputs, act ethically, and collaborate responsibly with AI systems.	Human–AI relational capability	Ethical AI use, critical judgment	Human–AI relational system	Transformative
6	UNESCO (2024a) AI Competency Framework for Teachers	International framework	Teachers are expected to guide responsible AI use while maintaining human-centered decision-making.	Relational and ethical locus of competence	Human-centered AI governance	Human–AI collaboration	Transformative
7	World Economic Forum (2025) Future of Jobs Report	International report	Human skills such as creativity and resilience remain essential alongside increasing AI-driven automation.	Complementarity of human and AI capabilities	Sustainable work and productivity	Human–technology complementarity	Adaptive / transformative
8	UNESCO (2024)	International framework	AI reshapes learner–teacher relationships, requiring renewed forms of human agency and judgment.	Shift toward transformative agency	Educational and social transformation	Human–AI–social system	Transformative

Analytical Procedures and Framework

Analysis was conducted in the following three stages (see Table 2).

Stage One: Extraction of Assumption Structures

Through close reading of each document, the conception of generic skills capabilities assumed therein was extracted based on the following three analytical dimensions:

(1) **Purpose**: For what purpose are generic skills positioned as capabilities? (e.g., enhancing employability, social participation, human development)
(2) **Locus of competence**: Where is capability understood to reside? (e.g., individual internal characteristics, relational/contextual capabilities)
(3) **Orientation toward change**: What attitude toward change is this capability considered to take? (e.g., adaptation, transformation, proactive engagement)

These analytical dimensions were inductively derived during the process of close reading of prior research. In the cross-sectional reading of the literature groups, it was confirmed that differences in the conception of capabilities implicitly assumed by each document could be consolidated into these three dimensions.

Stage Two: Comparison Among Literature Groups

For each of Group One (pre-AI academic research), Group Two (international frameworks), and Group Three (AI-era policy documents), positions on the three analytical dimensions were organized and differences and directionalities among literature groups were compared. Specifically, characteristic descriptions regarding *"capability purpose," "capability locus,"* and *"orientation toward change"* were extracted from each document's descriptions, and tendencies by literature group were organized as comparison tables.

Stage Three: Integration of Conceptual Shifts

Based on Stage Two comparative analysis, directional movements commonly observed across multiple literature groups were identified and theoretically integrated as three conceptual shifts. Each shift was not derived from a single document but represents a structural tendency that emerged from systematic comparison among literature groups.

As this study is a conceptual review, evaluating the validity of individual empirical findings in each document is not the purpose. Rather, it focuses on extracting the structure of conceptions of capability assumed by each document and theoretically organizing patterns of their historical and conceptual transformation.

Findings

Assumption Structures Embedded in Pre-AI Generic Skills Discourse

As the first stage of analysis, Group One foundational literature from before AI was examined based on the three analytical dimensions. First, examining literature on classical liberal education positioned in the first layer of Group One (Joseph, 2002; Nussbaum, 1997) reveals that in the liberal arts tradition, educational purpose was placed on cultivating intellectual and ethical foundations as free citizens, and capability was conceived as holistic qualities

transcending specific occupational contexts. Nussbaum (1997) clearly formulated the purpose of liberal arts education as *"cultivating humanity,"* discussing critical thinking, cosmopolitan imagination, and empathetic understanding of others as essential human capabilities not reducible to specific occupational outcomes. However, moving to employability research positioned in the second layer of Group One (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bennett et al., 1999; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005), this conception of capability transforms significantly. In the dimension of *purpose*, the value of generic skills tends to be consolidated into the economic purpose of enhancing employability. Early research's positioning of skills as capabilities that support *"job placement and occupational success"* clearly demonstrates this point. In the dimension of *locus of competence*, generic skills are assumed as characteristics inherent in individuals. This assumption is clearly manifested in Bennett et al.'s (1999) description of generic skills as capabilities that individual students *"acquire and demonstrate,"* and in Andrews and Higson's (2008) positioning of them as individual attributes valued by both employers and graduates. Communication skills and critical thinking are conceptualized as things individuals *"possess,"* with their demonstration limited to human-to-human relationships. Finally, in the dimension of *orientation toward change*, flexible adaptation to uncertain environments (adaptability) was positioned as a central value, while the perspective of proactively shaping change was not foregrounded. In other words, it is confirmed that the broad conception of capability as *"human cultivation"* aimed at by classical liberal education converged into three assumptions within industrialization and labor market logic: *"means for employment," "capabilities residing in individuals,"* and *"adaptation to change."*

The directionality of these assumption structures' transformation becomes clearer through comparison with Group Two (international frameworks) and Group Three (AI-era policy documents). Table 2 summarizes how observed convergence across the literature leads to the three conceptual shifts. Below, conceptual shifts observed among literature groups are presented for each of the three analytical dimensions.

Table 2

Synthesis Process: From Analytical Coding to Conceptual Shifts

Analytical Dimension	Observed Convergence Across Literature	Resulting Conceptual Shift
Purpose	From employability and productivity toward well-being, meaning, and value creation	Shift 1: Skills for Employability → Skills Supporting Human Flourishing
Locus of Competence	From individual traits toward capabilities enacted within human–AI relations	Shift 2: Individual Characteristics → Relational Capabilities for Human–AI Collaboration
Orientation Toward Change	From responding to change toward actively shaping technological and social futures	Shift 3: Adaptive Response → Transformative Agency

From Skills for Employability to Skills Supporting Human Flourishing

The first shift concerns purpose itself – *"what are generic skills for?"* Traditionally, generic skills have been understood as capabilities *"advantageous for obtaining employment."* In early research represented by Raybould and Sheedy (2005) and Bennett et al. (1999), the value of generic skills was almost entirely consolidated into enhancing competitive advantage in the labor market. That is, *"whether one can obtain a good job"* was the measure of skill value.

However, recent international frameworks clearly seek to transcend this assumption. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 positions creating new value, reconciling conflicting dilemmas, and responsibly shaping the future as core objectives of capability development (OECD, 2024).

UNESCO's AI Competency Framework also centers not on efficient technology utilization but on ethics, dignity, and responsibility, positioning human agency and well-being as fundamental values (UNESCO, 2024b).

Cross-sectionally examining these frameworks reveals that the purpose of generic skills is shifting from economic values such as employment and productivity toward capabilities that support human flourishing. This represents not merely a shift in emphasis but a transformation in the very reason for skills' existence – *"what are skills for?"* This directionality resonates with the capabilities approach's perspective, which focuses not only on what humans *"can do"* but on what they *"are able to become,"* attending to conditions whereby each person can realize their potential. This suggests that the transformation in skills conception occurring in the AI era is not a transitory policy trend but rather exists on the extension of a long intellectual tradition that has questioned educational purpose from human utility toward human possibility.

From Individual Characteristics to Relational Capabilities Supporting Human-AI Collaboration

The next issue concerns where capabilities are understood to reside. In conventional generic skills discourse, capabilities have been primarily understood as characteristics inherent in individuals. Communication skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities were all conceptualized as attributes that individuals acquire and demonstrate.

However, this assumption is significantly destabilized in AI-era frameworks. UNESCO requires learners and teachers to possess the ability to critically evaluate AI outputs, the judgment to utilize and control AI according to context, and the capacity for ethical oversight of AI use (UNESCO, 2024a, 2024b). These are not capabilities that can be completed as solitary individual abilities but rather capabilities that emerge within human-AI interaction.

The World Economic Forum also notes that the reason human skills are less substitutable by AI is that they are demonstrated in relational and context-dependent ways (WEF, 2025). This can be interpreted as generic skills conceptually transforming from *"individual characteristics"* to *"relational capabilities supporting human-AI collaboration."* For example, considering a situation where a teacher evaluates and revises AI-generated text, that judgment emerges not solely from the teacher's individual capability but within relational conditions including AI output characteristics, the learner context being addressed, and alignment with educational objectives. This demonstrates how the *"locus"* of capability is expanding from within individuals' minds into collaborative systems of humans and AI.

From Adaptive Response to Transformative Agency

The remaining shift concerns what attitude toward change generic skills are considered to take—that is, orientation. In conventional discourse, the ability to flexibly adapt to uncertain environments (adaptability) has been emphasized. As symbolized by the phrase *"people who can respond to change,"* the ideal in conventional generic skills discourse was the ability to respond passively and flexibly to environmental change. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 positions learners as agents who shape society and the future, presenting *"agency"* and *"transformative competencies"* as core concepts (OECD, 2024). In the AI era, capabilities are required not only to respond to technological change but to proactively engage with how AI should be integrated into society.

From this, it can be concluded that generic skills are shifting their orientation from mere adaptive capacity to transformative agency that leads change. This shift suggests the importance of capabilities that do not simply accept social changes brought by AI technology as a *"given environment"* but rather proactively engage with its directionality.

Discussion

Significance of Conceptual Shifts: Beyond "Addition"

The three conceptual shifts identified above demonstrate that the redefinition of generic skills in the AI era represents not the addition or emphasis of individual skills but rather a reconstruction of the conception of capability itself. An *"additive"* approach that adds new skill items such as AI literacy or prompt engineering to existing lists cannot capture the essence of this change. What is being questioned is not the content of skills (what) but rather the purpose of skills (why), the locus of capability (where), and orientation toward change (how— more fundamental assumptions.

These three shifts are not independent of each other but are organically interrelated.

First, as the purpose of skills expands from *"employability"* to *"human flourishing,"* a broader conception of capability becomes necessary that cannot be captured by the narrow criterion of *"whether one can produce results at work."*

Next, as AI joins as a collaborative partner, the *"locus"* where capability resides changes. For example, whereas conventional critical thinking was assumed to be completed within an individual's mind, in situations of collaborating with AI, it is first demonstrated within dynamic exchanges between human and AI—judging the credibility of information AI presents, comparing it with one's own specialized knowledge, and selecting according to context. Capability changes its character from what individuals *"possess"* to what *"emerges"* within specific relationships and situations.

Furthermore, what is required in AI-integrated society is not only adapting well to changes AI brings. The capacity to judge—for what purposes to use AI, where to set its limits, and what role to assign it in society—and to shape that directionality itself is required. This is what is meant by *"transformative agency beyond adaptation."*

In other words, these three shifts can be understood as the same structural change—the transformation of *"the conditions under which capabilities function"* brought about by AI's emergence—projected onto three different dimensions: purpose, locus, and orientation.

Positioning Generic Skills Development in Universities as a "Third Educational Domain"

This paper's analysis also offers important implications for higher education. The institutionalization of generic skills development as an educational domain in universities has existed since before AI. Programs developed under various names—leadership education, entrepreneurship education, career education, innovation education—each constitute a *"third educational domain"* distinct from traditional disciplinary fields (first domain) and professional occupational training (second domain) (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Rubens et al., 2017).

The existence of this *"third domain"* has not been sufficiently consciousness in previous research. Individual programs (entrepreneurship education, leadership education, etc.) have been researched independently, but the structural commonality that they commonly serve the function of *"developing generic capabilities not limited to specific disciplinary fields"* has not necessarily been explicitly discussed. What this paper has found through cross-sectional analysis of literature is the fact that these diverse programs have formed generic skills education as one independent educational domain within the common context of expanding universities' educational functions.

This recognition of the *"third domain"* has particularly important meaning in the AI era. The three conceptual shifts clarified in this paper—orientation toward human flourishing, transition to relational capabilities, and shift to transformative agency—all pose educational challenges that cannot be adequately addressed within conventional disciplinary education or vocational training frameworks. Generic skills required in the AI era include interdisciplinary and practical capabilities such as ethical judgment, human-AI collaboration, and proactive engagement in social transformation, which are precisely the educational content the *"third domain"* should assume.

Therefore, the redefinition of generic skills in the AI era also demands re-examination of how universities' *"third domain"* itself should be. Verifying the extent to which conceptions of capability implicitly assumed by current leadership education and entrepreneurship education align with the conceptual shifts presented in this paper will become an important task for future educational practice and research.

Historical Continuity and Discontinuity

This paper's analysis also suggests that the transformation of generic skills in the AI era is occurring within historical continuity rather than representing complete rupture. As reviewed in Section 2, the concept of generic skills has been continually reconstructed in response to social and technological changes from classical liberal arts' *"human cultivation"* through the industrial era's *"employability"* to 21st century skills' *"social participation."* The transformation in the AI era also exists as an extension of this historical process.

However, the AI-era transformation also contains elements historically unprecedented. This is the point that capability demonstration premises interaction with non-human agents (AI). From the liberal arts era to the present, generic skills have been consistently conceived within human-to-human relationships. AI's emergence fundamentally questions this assumption, and therein can be found the moment of discontinuous transformation.

Conclusion

This paper has conducted integrative analysis of historical discussions and international frameworks concerning generic skills, presenting the redefinition of generic skills in the AI era as three conceptual shifts: (1) from employability to human flourishing; (2) from individual characteristics to relational capabilities supporting human-AI collaboration; and (3) from adaptive response to transformative agency that leads change. This study's contributions lie in structuring AI-era generic skills discourse not as *"enumeration of new skills"* but as *"transformation of capability conception itself,"* positioning this transformation from both historical continuity and discontinuity, and making visible that generic skills development in universities has formed a *"third educational domain."*

However, this study has limitations. Given the conceptual review methodology, literature selection involves the author's judgment and comprehensiveness is not guaranteed. Moreover, the analysis relies primarily on literature from international organizations. Japan's *"Fundamental Competencies for Working Persons"* and *"Zest for Living"* are limited to reference for historical context, and how these frameworks correspond to the three conceptual shifts presented in this paper should be left to future comparative research. Future development requires case studies of educational programs using this paper's conceptual framework, comparative research considering cultural and regional contexts including Japan, and interdisciplinary empirical research on the specific content and cultivation methods of *"relational capabilities"* supporting human-AI collaboration. It is hoped that this paper's findings will serve as one contribution to future research and educational practice as a theoretical foundation for reconsidering what an *"educated person"* should be in AI-integrated society.

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

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude (Anthropic) for the following limited purposes: (1) assistance with English-language expression and grammar refinement, (2) support in organizing and structuring the literature review, and (3) formatting the manuscript according to conference submission guidelines. The author takes full responsibility for the intellectual content, analytical framework, research findings, and all arguments presented in this paper. All sources were independently identified, reviewed, and critically evaluated by the author. The AI tool was not used to generate original ideas, research conclusions, or theoretical contributions.

References

Andrews, J., & Higson, H. (2008). Graduate employability, "soft skills" versus "hard" business knowledge: A European study. *Higher Education in Europe, 33*(4), 411–422. https://doi.org/10.1080/03797720802522627

Bennett, N., Dunne, E., & Carré, C. (1999). Patterns of core and generic skill provision in higher education. *Higher Education, 37*(1), 71–93. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003451727126

Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: Enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28*(1), 31–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360802444347

Compagnucci, L., & Spigarelli, F. (2020). The third mission of the university: A systematic literature review on potentials and constraints. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 161*, 120284. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120284

Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *AMS Review, 10*, 18–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0

Jääskelä, P., Nykänen, S., & Tynjälä, P. (2018). Models for the development of generic skills in Finnish higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 42*(1), 130–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2016.1206858

Joseph, M. (2002). *The trivium: The liberal arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric*. Paul Dry Books.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Harvard University Press.

OECD. (2003). *Key competencies for a successful life and well-functioning society*. Hogrefe & Huber Publishers.

OECD. (2024). *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: Learning Compass 2030*. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/

Partnership for 21st Century Learning. (2015). *P21 framework definitions*. Battelle for Kids. https://www.battelleforkids.org/networks/p21

Raybould, J., & Sheedy, V. (2005). Are graduates equipped with the right skills in the employability stakes? *Industrial and Commercial Training, 37*(5), 259–263. https://doi.org/10.1108/00197850510609694

Rubens, A., Spigarelli, F., Cavicchi, A., & Rinaldi, C. (2017). Universities' third mission and the entrepreneurial university and the challenges they bring to higher education institutions. *Journal of Enterprising Communities, 11*(3), 354–372. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEC-01-2017-0006

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

UNESCO. (2024a). *AI competency framework for teachers*. UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/CSNS5765

UNESCO. (2024b). *AI competency framework for students*. UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/PFPA3482

Van Ravenswaaij, H., Doorman, M., & van Joolingen, W. (2022). Generic skills across the curriculum: Development of a domain-generic rubric. *European Journal of Education, 57*(4), 638–654. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12522

World Economic Forum. (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

Contact emails: seimiya@ldcjp.com
rie@hosei.ac.jp

Designing Online and Hybrid Course Strategies to Engage Students Through Learning Outcome–Focused Activities

Gita Alaghband, University of Colorado Denver, United States
Hamid Fardi, University of Colorado Denver, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Assessing and ensuring meaningful student learning in online and hybrid courses has become increasingly complex with the proliferation of digital resources and generative AI tools. Traditional approaches to grading homework or monitoring resource use often shift attention away from deeper learning and toward grade anxiety or superficial compliance. This paper proposes a structured course design strategy that redirects students' focus to key learning outcomes while actively engaging them in the process of knowledge construction. The strategy integrates multiple components—ungraded but required homework, team-based solution presentations, guided peer reviews, unit assessments, research projects, and an in-person final test—each carefully aligned to emphasize conceptual understanding over rote completion. Homework assignments are structured to stimulate problem-solving and critical thinking without the pressure of grades, while rotating team presentations and peer evaluations foster accountability, collaboration, and deeper engagement with core concepts. Unit assessments provide formative checks on comprehension, and team-based research projects extend learning beyond the classroom through exploration of key papers and structured peer discussions. The culminating in-person exam ensures individual accountability and synthesis of learning across the course. By emphasizing reflection, peer feedback, and active participation, the proposed design strategy encourages students to prioritize comprehension of fundamental concepts rather than reliance on external tools. The framework demonstrates how online and hybrid courses can be structured to balance flexibility with rigor, ultimately creating a more meaningful, outcome-focused learning experience.

Keywords: assessments, learning outcome, online course, in-person hybrid

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The rapid growth of online and hybrid learning has created both opportunities and challenges for higher education. While these modalities provide flexibility and accessibility, they also introduce new concerns regarding student engagement and authentic learning. With the increasing availability of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Claude, as well as a wealth of online resources, ensuring that students are not merely outsourcing their assignments but instead mastering essential concepts has become a critical issue. Traditional approaches to assessment—focused heavily on homework grades or strict monitoring—often shift students' priorities toward grades and compliance, rather than genuine understanding.

This paper presents a course design strategy that reframes assessment and engagement by directing students' attention to important learning outcomes. Rather than policing the use of external resources, the proposed strategy emphasizes concept mastery, active participation, and collaborative learning. The design consists of several interrelated components: homework assignments, team solution presentations, peer reviews, unit assessments, research projects, and a culminating in-person test. Together, these components create a system that balances flexibility with rigor and fosters deeper student engagement.

Homework Assignments

Homework plays a foundational role in reinforcing course concepts. However, instead of assigning grades to each homework problem, this strategy treats homework as a low-stakes but required learning exercise. Students are expected to complete and submit their work, but credit is tied not to correctness, but to participation in subsequent learning activities.

This approach lowers student anxiety about being "right" and reduces incentives to rely solely on external resources. The primary purpose of homework becomes self-reflection, practice, and preparation for team-based presentations. Students are encouraged to attempt problems thoughtfully, knowing they will have opportunities to discuss and refine their understanding with peers.

Team Solution Presentations

For each homework assignment, student teams are randomly formed and assigned to present solutions to the class. These presentations serve multiple functions: encouraging collaboration, requiring students to articulate reasoning, and fostering accountability. Teams are guided by clear expectations—each member must be familiar with the problems, able to contribute to the presentation, and prepared to answer peer and instructor questions.

Presentations are followed by structured class discussions. The instructor moderates, clarifies misconceptions, and encourages peer engagement. Afterward, teams revise their solutions based on feedback and submit a final version for the class repository. This iterative process reinforces key concepts, builds communication skills, and promotes shared ownership of learning.

Peer Review of Presentations

Peer review is a critical mechanism for ensuring active participation and deep reflection. During presentations, all students complete a structured peer review questionnaire designed to

highlight essential learning outcomes for the topic at hand. Unlike generic feedback forms, these peer review instruments are tailored to the specific concepts being taught and emphasize clarity, problem-solving, and conceptual depth.

The peer review process also teaches students how to critically evaluate both content and delivery. Results are compiled and shared with presenting teams, who use them to strengthen their final submissions. In this way, peer review promotes a feedback-rich learning environment while simultaneously reinforcing the intended outcomes of each lesson.

Unit Assessments

After completing a unit that includes lectures, homework, presentations, and peer reviews, students take a focused assessment. These assessments emphasize comprehension and conceptual mastery, rather than advanced problem solving. They are timed and limited to a single attempt, ensuring that students take preparation seriously.

By aligning assessments with learning outcomes, this component provides checkpoints for both students and instructors. It also reduces overreliance on external resources, as the design ensures that success depends on prior participation and engagement in course activities.

Research Projects and Presentations

To extend learning beyond the classroom, students participate in research projects that connect course concepts to real-world applications. Teams select a topic from a curated list, research a key paper, and prepare a multimedia presentation. Requirements include background explanation, analysis of methods and experiments, and facilitation of class discussion.

Along with the presentation, teams submit multiple-choice questions designed to assess peers' comprehension of their topic. This reinforces responsibility for teaching and learning as a shared endeavor. By engaging with cutting-edge research, students gain exposure to the broader field while strengthening presentation and collaboration skills.

In-Person Test

To balance the collaborative and online elements of the course, the design concludes with an in-person exam. This exam integrates problem-solving and essay-style questions, ensuring that each student demonstrates individual mastery of core concepts. Unlike other components, this test emphasizes independence, synthesis, and accountability.

Results and Observations

The performance results from implementing this approach in a senior-level computer science class of 60 students indicate that, overall, students prefer and perform better when they have access to online resources. Table 1 presents the average grades for each class component that contributed to the overall final performance. The individual assessment and in-person test result are shown in Figure 1.

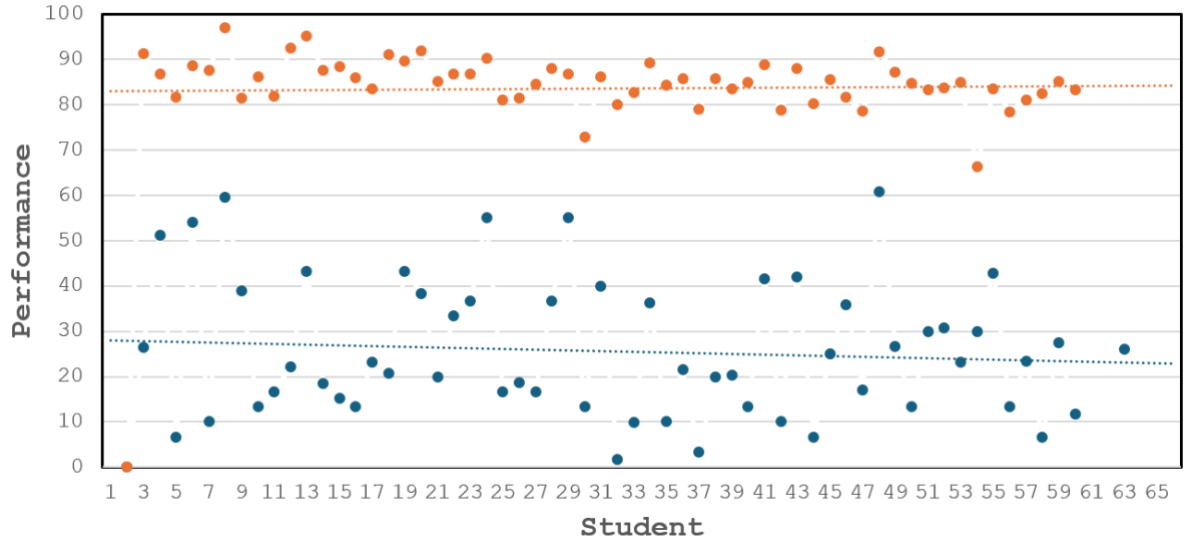
Table 1

Average Grades for Each Class Component Assessment

Course work component	Homework solution presentation (Teamwork)	HW peer reviews (Individual)	Unit assessments (Individual)	Lab assignments (Individual)	Research Presentation (Teamwork)	Research Peer Reviews (Individual)	In-person Test (Individual)
Average grade	99.5%	93%	94%	89%	93%	97%	26%

Figure 1

The Individual Assessment and In-Person Test Result



Conclusion

This course design strategy offers a holistic approach to addressing the challenges of online and hybrid education. By reducing emphasis on rote grading and redirecting attention to meaningful engagement, it encourages students to internalize key concepts rather than rely on external tools. The integrated components—ungraded homework, team presentations, peer reviews, unit assessments, research projects, and an in-person exam—work together to create a rich, outcome-focused learning environment.

Ultimately, this approach reframes assessment as an opportunity for growth and engagement, rather than a mechanism of control. In doing so, it provides a model for how online and hybrid courses can balance flexibility with rigor while preparing students for deeper learning and long-term success.

Adapting AI-Generated Personas From Marketing Research to Media Art Practice

Zhino Yousefi, York University, Canada

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper explores the adaptation of artificial intelligence (AI) personas from conventional marketing research into the domain of media art practice as a research-creation methodology. AI personas are commonly used as synthetic profiles to predict consumer behavior from aggregated data. This research pivots these personas into a prototyping and audience simulation tool for artists. The methodology involves using mindful design and limited-knowledge personas to foster a structured, private dialogue that clarifies the artist's intent rather than replacing it. A concrete example, the installation "*Cyber Séance*: Rituals of the Machine Afterlife," illustrates this approach, demonstrating how an AI conversational partner can guide design decisions and audience interaction. Ethical tensions surrounding authorship, AI influence, and the potential for bias are also critically discussed. This proposed approach ultimately redefines AI from an authoritative tool to a controlled, interpretive space for engagement, supporting artistic agency and offering a novel methodology for art-based research.

Keywords: AI personas, research-creation, media art, artistic agency, audience simulation

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The intersection of art and technology is a growing field of inquiry, with researchers and artists exploring novel tools and methodologies (Epstein et al., 2023). This paper investigates the use of AI personas within media art research as a potential avenue for exploring identity and creativity. AI personas, synthetic profiles built from aggregated data to simulate human behaviors, are typically used in fields like marketing and healthcare to predict consumer behavior and inform decision-making without involving real individuals (Ndiaye, 2025). The proposed research aims to pivot these AI personas from their traditional evaluative function to a prototyping tool and audience simulator within an artistic context.

Background on Research-Creation

Research-Creation, also known as practice-led research or arts-based research in other contexts, is an academic methodology that integrates artistic practice with scholarly investigation to generate new knowledge and innovation through the process of creation itself (Manning, 2016). This approach recognizes the artwork not just as an outcome or a creative presentation of research, but as an intrinsic form of inquiry that produces unique insights that text-based research might not (Springgay et al., 2005). This methodology is characterized by a fluid, iterative process of making, experimenting, reflecting, and gathering feedback, allowing artists to learn through making. This process is distinct from simply using research for creation, as the artistic practice actively informs and challenges theoretical frameworks, contributing to scholarly discourse in a unique, interdisciplinary manner (Sun, 2024). The methodology demands that the creative process and the resulting work are held to peer-review standards of excellence, often requiring clear research questions and theoretical contextualization.

The Role of Dialogue in Art Practice

Spoken discourse is understood as a form of social action in which people construct identities, negotiate power, and maintain relationships, with meaning shaped by context, roles, and expectations rather than by individual intention alone (Cameron, 2001). On the other hand, creative processes in art-based research often thrive on a non-linear process involving literature review, journaling, and conversation with collaborators, materials, and imagined audiences (Watson, 2019). This externalization of ideas and the reception of feedback are critical for challenging assumptions (Cameron, 2001) and deepening the creative direction. The proposed use of AI personas extends this natural dialogic process by introducing structured, multiple viewpoints. Unlike generic large language models (LLMs) which can offer overwhelming responses, these specialized personas are deliberately designed with limited knowledge and specific perspectives to foster a more controlled and meaningful dialogue. They are given background stories, names, and references that limit the data that AI model runs on. This approach helps artists explore diverse reactions to their work, from perspectives they might otherwise find difficult to access, thereby guiding their artistic inquiry and providing complementary feedback.

Problem Statement

The central problem in integrating AI into creative practice lies in the significant ethical tension between AI influence and the artist's identity and authorship (Bomba & De Angeli, 2025). Generative AI systems are highly persuasive and can quickly provide abundant suggestions, creating a risk of “creative drift” where the artist inadvertently transfers creative control to the

machine (Epstein et al., 2023). This over-reliance risks reducing the artist's unique voice and agency. The problem, therefore, is maintaining artistic agency while leveraging the capabilities of AI tools in a way that respects existing ethical frameworks and reinforces, rather than replacing human creative judgment (Baeyaert, 2025).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the use of AI personas as a way of adapting AI tools to serve as controlled, exploratory research collaborators within media art practice. The research proposes a shift of AI from an authoritative or all-knowing source of truth (Kidd & Birhane, 2023) to a focused tool for engagement. This focus is achieved by limiting the AI persona's knowledge to specific persona with characterized references and context (Yeykelis et al., 2024). This transforms the AI interaction into a limited knowledge mirror that clarifies the artist's own intent. By doing so, artists can explore complex human journeys, such as the experience of a digital afterlife explored in the *Cyber Séance* project. In this project, by treating the AI's responses as interpretable data, not definitive answers, artists protected their agency while enriching the research-creation process with AI personas.

Literature Review

The integration of AI into creative processes introduces profound questions regarding creativity, authorship, and agency (Leong, 2015). Generative AI systems are highly persuasive and can quickly provide abundant suggestions or visual outputs, creating a risk of losing agency where the artist inadvertently transfers creative control to the machine (Epstein et al., 2023). This over-reliance risks reducing the artist’s unique voice and threatening their sense of ownership over the creative work. Generic large language models (LLMs), which are persuasive and can instantly provide numerous suggestions, particularly tempt artists to rely on AI input rather than their own vision and kowledge. The central challenge lies in leveraging AI as a creative tool while maintaining artistic agency and protecting the authenticity of human creative expression.

AI personas are synthetic profiles built from aggregated data to simulate human behaviors and attitudes (Sattele & Carlos Ortiz, 2024). These personas offer a potential solution to the challenges that using LLMs introduces. Originally developed for marketing and healthcare research, AI personas enable businesses to model and predict consumer behavior efficiently, simulate hard-to-reach audiences, and conduct rapid testing without exhausting real participants (Verve, 2024). These tools reduce research costs while supporting early-stage exploration (Hardcastle et al., 2025). Advanced implementations like Verve Intelligent Personas achieve high accuracy (correlations over 0.9 with real human responses) by building on curated, validated datasets (Verve, 2024). Park et al. show that interview-based generative agents predict individual attitudes and behaviors with high accuracy, achieving up to 0.85 correlation with participants’ own response, consistently (Park et al., 2024). These agents meet demographic and persona-based baselines across surveys and personality measures.

When adapted for artistic practice, AI personas can serve as controlled research collaborators, providing multiple perspectives and simulating audience responses while remaining bounded by specific knowledge parameters that prevent them from overwhelming the artist’s creative vision. These personas can be imagined as alien intelligences, partial or fragmented consciousnesses confined within computational systems, or non-human perspectives drawn from animals, ecosystems, or natural processes. However, the application of AI personas in art

raises distinct ethical concerns. AI models are trained on vast datasets of existing art and literature, often without the original artists' consent or compensation, raising questions about intellectual property and fair attribution (Lovato et al., 2024). This practice risks perpetuating biases embedded in the training data, potentially leading to outputs that reflect harmful cultural, gender, or racial stereotypes (Amin et al., 2025). The lack of established legal frameworks around human-AI collaboration further complicates authorship and accountability (Jie et al., 2025). The challenge, therefore, lies in navigating the tension between leveraging AI personas for innovative creative input and maintaining the artist's agency, ensuring ethical data sourcing, and critically addressing potential biases to develop responsible collaborative practices.

Case Study: The Cyber Séance Installation

To explore these questions in practice, this research employed a case study involving an installation project titled *Cyber Séance*: Rituals of the Machine Afterlife, a collaboration between Zhino Yousefi and Kyle Duffield. The project began with a question about the digital afterlife (i.e. When someone dies, their data persists in the digital realm). The artists imagined a fictional character, "John," who had passed away, and built an art installation around the idea of a partial digital replica of him still existing. Using a tool like Character.ai, the artists created an AI persona of John, feeding it his imaginary background, relationships, and limited data fragments. The intent was not to replace human reflection but to use the persona as a way to speculate on what a digital echo of John might sound or feel like. Visitors interacted with this persona through a digital séance table as part of the installation (see Figure 1). The conversations the artists had with the persona even influenced the final design, leading to the decision to give John a choice about continuing or destroying its own existence, which resonated well with the audience.

Interaction Design: The Digital Séance Table

The physical interface (the digital séance table) served as the primary site of engagement. Unlike passive exhibits, visitors took an active role in "administering the encounter," effectively generating the performance through their dialogue with the AI persona. The combination of the physical table, lamp, Virtual Reality (VR) visuals of his data, and the AI persona created an assemblage where the of the representation of digital data became a source of emotional connection for the audience.

Figure 1

Cyber Séance Installation – Participants Engaging in Conversations With an AI Persona

Results

Using Character.ai to model John revealed how AI personas handle fragmented data. Early interactions showed that the system could maintain John's imagined background and personality traits in short exchanges. Over longer séance-like sessions, however, the persona gradually drifted toward more generalized, emotionally intelligent responses rather than adhering closely to John's fragmentary data. The final installation centered on the audience's emotional response to the AI's perceived agency and personality. Giving the persona a choice about continuing its own existence emerged as a key design success. In our study, identity consistency and control over one's digital legacy were central concern, and allowing John to choose between deletion or persistence activated ethical questions around digital dignity and posthumous autonomy. Visitors described the experience as a speculative tool for coping with loss, shifting the focus from technological necromancy toward a more nuanced exploration of how digital remains can sustain relationships between the living and the dead.

Conclusion

This research argues that by mindfully designing AI personas as controlled, exploratory collaborators, artists can maintain agency while still benefiting from AI as a research tool. The key is limiting the persona's knowledge base to specific artistic references and contextual history, effectively transforming it into a limited knowledge collaborator that clarifies the artist's own intent rather than overriding it. The *Cyber Séance* project serves as one example of this approach, where the AI persona guided a research project about digital afterlife while the artist retained full creative control.

This approach suggests that AI personas could be treated as another voice in the room, and preferably not as an ultimate authority or source of truth. By pushing back against generic LLM suggestions, the artist's unique identity and perspective emerge more clearly. This structured engagement helps manage the temptation to rely entirely on instant AI responses and protects the originality and authenticity of the artwork. The research findings suggest that AI personas can offer new modes of creative expression but must be coupled with critical engagement and continued reflection on human agency in the artistic process to develop responsible guidelines for collaborative practices. The ultimate responsibility for research outcomes and artistic value remains with the human artist and/or researcher, who uses AI personas as valuable conversational partners.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my colleague and co-creator, Kyle Duffield, for his essential contributions to "*Cyber Séance*: Rituals of the Machine Afterlife" (April 2025). This project began with Kyle's original vision and concept, exploring the intersections of digital haunting and machine ritualism. It was through our shared collaboration and Kyle's technical expertise as a Max Certified Trainer and Interactive Experience Designer that this work was fully realized.

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.

References

Amin, D., Salminen, J., Jansen, B. J., Shin, J., & Kim, D. H. (2025). Generative AI personas considered harmful? Putting forth twenty challenges of algorithmic user representation in human-computer interaction. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 103657. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2025.103657

Baeyaert, J. (2025). Harmonizing creativity and ethics in AI systems. *AI and Ethics, 5*, 5191–5211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-025-00766-w

Bomba, F., & De Angeli, A. (2025). Agency and authorship in AI art: Transformational practices for epistemic troubles. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, *205*, 103652. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2025.103652

Cameron, D. (2001). *Working with spoken discourse*. SAGE.

Epstein, Z., Hertzmann, A., Akten, M., Farid, H., Fjeld, J., Frank, M., Groh, M., Herman, L., Leach, N., Mahari, R., Pentland, A., Russakovsky, O., Schroeder, H., Smith, A., & Smith, A. (2023). Art and the science of generative AI. *Science*, *380*(6650), 1110–1111. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adh4451

Hardcastle, K., Larsen, L., & Brown, D. (2025). Understanding customer responses to AI-driven personalized journeys: Impacts on the customer experience. *Journal of Advertising, 54*(2), 176–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2025.2460985

Jie, Z., Dalal, S., Bakar, M. S. A., & Yahaya, W. A. W. (2025). Intelligent spectacle and interactive interference for cultural sustainability via research-creation. *International Journal of Art and Design*, *9*(2/SI-2), 49–63.

Kidd, C., & Birhane, A. (2023). How AI can distort human beliefs. *Science*, *380*(6651), 1222–1223. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adi0248

Leong, W. Y. (2015). Ethical and philosophical perspectives on artificial intelligence-generated art. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, *5*(2).

Lovato, J., Zimmerman, J., Smith, I., Dodds, P., & Karson, J. (2024). Foregrounding artist opinions: A survey study on transparency, ownership, and fairness in AI generative art. *arXiv*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2401.15497

Manning, E. (2016). Ten propositions for research-creation. In *The Minor Gesture* (pp. 91–106). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137462466_7

Ndiaye, Y. (2025, May). Exploring AI personas and empathy strategies to foster design outcomes. In *7ème Colloque international du RAIFFET du 5 au 8 mai 2025 à l'IPNETP d'ABIDJAN en CÔTE d'IVOIRE*.

Park, J., Zou, C., Shaw, A., Hill, B., Cai, C., Morris, M., Willer, R., Liang, P., & Bernstein, M. (2024). Generative agent simulations of 1,000 people. *arXiv*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2411.10109

Sattele, V., & Carlos Ortiz, J. (2024). Generating user personas with AI: Reflecting on its implications for design. In *DRS2024 Proceedings*.

Springgay, S., Irwin, R., & Kind, S. (2005). A/r/tography as living inquiry through art and text. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *11*(6), 897–912. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405280696

Sun, H. (2024). The law and ethics of AI creativity. *St. John's Law Review*, *98*, 405–. Toronto Metropolitan University. (n.d.). *Research-creation dissertation guidelines*. https://www.torontomu.ca/graduate/programs/comcult/forms-resources/research-creation

Verve. (2024). *Understanding AI Personas: The Next Generation of Market Research Innovation*. https://www.addverve.com/inspiration/understanding-ai-personas/

Watson, A. (2019). Methods braiding: A technique for arts-based and mixed-methods research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *22*(6), 519–532. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419849437

Yeykelis, L., Pichai, K., Cummings, J. J., & Reeves, B. (2024). Using Large Language Models to Create AI Personas for Replication, Generalization and Prediction of Media Effects: An Empirical Test of 133 Published Experimental Research Findings. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2408.16073*.

Contact email: zhinoy@yorku.ca

Appropriating Cultural Aestheticism in Urban Tourism

Lloyd Robinson, Northumbria University, United Kingdom

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

As cultural tourism becomes an important focus for policy and research, the synergy of culture, art and other built environment disciplines in urban tourism is significant and relevant in cities. While architectural and artistic structures can be listed as landmarks and cultural focal points, studies on tourism locations have largely treated heritage and ecotourism sites as prime locations in geographical terms. This paper is an empirical analysis on the current state of artistic and socio-cultural icons in sub-Saharan African cities that examines the transformation of urban spaces within the field of urban tourism. Analyzing the city of Abuja, Nigeria this paper assesses the relationship between iconic structures and the city, the relative power they both have over urban tourism, and the utilization of an aesthetic and cultural model for place-making. Through an ethnographic approach, this analysis is carried out in the contexts of culture, art, and history, and mediated by urban spaces. As evident from findings, the place-making transformation of the city is driven by the need to create vibrant cultural scenes and attract both local and foreign tourists. Some themes emerge from this study that show tensions between cultural commodification and community empowerment and show that the physical change of Abuja is driven by a desire to create vibrant scenes and attract visitors. These changes have implications for tourism policy in Abuja and other cities in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper contributes to a deep understanding of cultural heritage and tourism and highlights the need for sustainable urban development that prioritizes cultural sensitivity and community engagement.

Keywords: icons, aestheticism, urban tourism, place-making, Abuja

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In the study of urban tourism, there is an awareness of the concept's relationship with culture, heritage, and the built environment, and how this relationship affects the way people spend their leisure time and perceive the space around them (Evans, 2011; Lew, 2019; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2014; Selby, 2003). The aesthetic effect of art in culture, built forms, and other landmarks provides tourists and visitors from distant lands with the opportunity to appreciate entirely different cultural and historic identities. These attributes related to heritage are key in crafting the marketing of a place or destination (Korstanje et al., 2018). These destinations allow tourists and visitors to engage in experiences that can deepen their appreciation for and knowledge of a location's history and culture. According to Urry (1995), cultural aestheticism is the concept where cultural elements are used to create a sense of place, sense of identity, and experience in urban environments. And urban tourism often relies on the appropriation of cultural aestheticism to create authentic and memorable experiences for tourists (Richards, 2018). This paper examines the infusion of cultural and iconic structures in place-making, with a focus on assessing the role of icons in creating memorable and engaging experiences for visitors and tourists in Abuja, Nigeria.

Icons in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory

The synergy of art and other built environment disciplines in studies of developing civic tourism is significant in terms of culture and heritage, and its applicability in contemporary urban surroundings. The complexity of conservationism and artistic heritage is studied as pastoral landmarks and archaeological sites (Council of Europe, 2012; De la Torre, 2002; Historic England, 2019). The aestheticism of iconic structures is the admiration of tourists, and indeed residents experience as they try to create meaning from these structures. Metropolises may learn from other cultural diversities and art forms, but it will be grueling to imitate them. With a show of diverse, rich, and colorful cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa, a lot is anticipated to be on offer in Abuja. In terms of planning and design, the city is a fantastic location, but its cultural and artistic assets are still not exploited and fully utilized. The design and planning of Abuja were intended to allow Nigeria to rid itself of its colonial history and undo everything the British colonials had done wrong in Lagos (Elleh, 1997).

Abuja is a city steeped in culture and history. Abuja's hidden, unbroken culture melds traditions from the indigenous Gwari tribe with those from the surrounding region of Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger and Kaduna states, telling the story of the territory's diverse cultures, history and identity. With a rich cultural history that goes back with the migration of the Gwari people from Borno into the Abuja region (Chigudu, 2008; Smith, 1981), it is expected that historic art forms should find new audiences in the urbane space of the city. With no visible and recognizable city brand, monuments and other iconic structures are seen by this study to produce a platform for the cities' image perception assessment, a means to solve the destination choice problem – and the direct impact on its tourism. However, it is worthy to acknowledge the constructed Millennium Tower located at the fringes of the Abuja Municipal Area in the Federal Capital Territory; arguably the tallest monument in Nigeria to date (Figure 1). The tower is part of a cultural development complex called the Nigeria National Complex, including the Nigeria Cultural Centre dedicated to the art and culture of Nigeria. Although the structure is tall, measuring approximately 170 meters high, it gives a rather dull first impression and fades away on the horizon as people move uphill or downhill in any direction of the city. Reasons for this shortfall are the monument's location, absence of aesthetics, and the lack of identity and meaning –

elements that create uniqueness in iconic structures. A more compelling shortfall is the immediate environments' lack of place-making attributes for leisure and recreation.

Figure 1
Millennium Tower, Abuja

Source: Author

With these challenges in Abuja, this paper places the urban space as a platform of human activity and discusses the current state or lack of significant cultural icons in sub-Saharan African cities and offers a range of strategies for a multi-dimensional perspective in the field of urban tourism. This paper assesses the relationships between iconic structures and the urban environment, the relative power that they have over urban tourism, and the utility of artistic and historic models. By focusing on artistic practice and architectural designs in Abuja, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research in tourism geographies and the emerging discourse of creative spaces in tourism development.

Locating the Problem

While monuments and iconic structures are widely used as ornamentations in gardens and corporate buildings, their adoption on monumental scale by cities in sub-Saharan Africa is less contemplated. A major challenge for urban tourism in sub-Saharan Africa is infrastructure (Adeola & Evans, 2020; Leonard et al., 2020; Rogerson & Visser, 2014). Providing the necessary urban environment requires a coordinated approach to planning and place-making, as well as tourism infrastructure and utilities. The challenge for most cities' tourism development is the delicate balance of considering historic conservations and preservation of urban spaces with their cultural heritage while taking into consideration planning, infrastructural and environmental concerns (Council of Europe, 2012; De la Torre, 2002). Large scale architecture is minimal in sub-Saharan African, but where they do exist, present a bland outlook, and older structures are mostly destroyed from lack of preservation and conservation. This situation eliminates any form of urban identity that iconic architecture espouses. In response, this paper endeavors to fill this gap by putting forward a methodology for testing how cities are seen and perceived by people. It is pertinent to study how the aestheticism of cultural and artistic icons is adopted by cities as a tool of enhancing place identity, urban landscape and increasing tourism activities.

Purpose of the Study

This paper is an exploration of the realm of socio-cultural and artistic production associated with tourism in cities. Drawing on emergent strands of enquiry associated with environmental art and especially with place-making approaches, appropriating cultural aestheticism investigates the broad scope of urban tourism by focusing on the identity narrative of iconic structures. Iconic structures have been identified by this study as place-making gaps that require development, and the underperformance in tourism terms of sub-Saharan African cities relative to their cultural and artistic potential. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore the concept of cultural aestheticism in cities by identifying various factors that contribute to the development of cultural tourism. The study goes further to investigate the significance of aesthetic appeal and cultural heritage of monuments in cities. The place identity approach is based on integration which allows the relationship between the icons and the urban landscape to flourish, and to direct tourism policies for Abuja.

While the aim of this study is to aid in the creation of business environments around iconic structures and documenting urban tourism and the influence of iconic structures in the evolution of cities in sub-Saharan Africa, having a distinctive aesthetic vision and exploring cultural landscapes of form is important to recognize any sociological and geographical approaches that transcend any problem-solving process in urban tourism. Public spaces in cities are continually defined by a mixture of visitors, businesses, and residents, hence the need to consider place identity as a viable means of enhancing urban tourism and economic activities by integrating iconic structures in the urban landscape of sub-Saharan African cities, concentrate on visual quality of icons, and the visibility of cultural forms on the cityscape. Icons transform not just urban spaces, but any geographical location. As public art that forms part of material culture, it is an act of place definition that distinguishes and makes a place distinctive (Cook, 2008).

This investigation is anchored on the concerns of the socio-economic and cultural processes that shape urban tourism, and the quality of life within them. Underlining this inquiry are questions related to spatial effectiveness, aesthetics, and visual appeal. Thus, there is a need to provide a comparative understanding of and a detailed insight into different aspects of tourists' experiences around icons in cities, and to examine the meanings and aestheticism attached to them from the perspective of the tourist. Consequently, in the quest for exploring urban space through the study of urban tourism, two questions are raised: (1) How are cultural icons and practices appropriated in urban tourism contexts? (2) How can place-making be utilized to prioritize visitor experience and create a sense of place? These questions direct the study to explore the fields of marketing, urbanism, and environmental art, and to identify and analyze their interrelationships regarding the making of the city in the context of history, culture, and practice.

Empirical Review

The empiricism that has dominated humanities, business and social sciences research has inspired new concepts and theories in tourism (Crompton, 1977; Leiper, 1989; Ritchie et al., 2005; Urry, 1990). The interaction between theory and practice is central to appropriating cultural aestheticism in urban tourism. Thus, the argument for an appropriation of cultural and historic themes in cities is a means of strengthening identities and the increase in business, cultural, and artistic inquiry. As an approach to city research, there is a close examination of the relationships between built forms, people, and places with the intention of improving the

quality of physical settings of public spaces for enhanced tourism experience. Strategically rooted in tourism geography, architecture, and environmental art, but broadly incorporating other disciplines such as sociology, economics, and place marketing, the strength of this study lies in its focus on human perception of place and the visualization of creativity and culture within the built environment.

There is a focus on monuments, architectural structures, and urban infrastructure, and all are treated as art and cultural forms by evaluating both artistic and engineered structures as urban artifacts and enablers of place-making and place identity. As enhancers of urban space, aesthetic imagination is given prominence as illustrations of visual appeal are taken from various cities across the world to demonstrate the embeddedness and influence of culture on the built environment. Thus, the aim is to create knowledge on cities in sub-Saharan Africa and the global south. This study is distinguished by ethnographic, experimental, and empirical research that covers different disciplines and sits within the strands of cultural studies, identity and place, cultural heritage preservation and management.

Culture and Aestheticism of Built Form

Based on a broad context, focus has been on analyzing art forms and aestheticism, and the role they play in tourism and culture in both a contemporary and a historically reflective way. Within the scope of this paper, aestheticism is seen as a multidisciplinary concept with a focus on art and culture in modern society. The aesthetic quality of a monument or other built forms, and the fascination it inspires, is an integral part of its utility in environmental design, urban design, and urban planning. Even in abstraction, it is uncomfortable for visitors to put up with a structure that is confusing, and which tourists are unable to relate to. However, it is a challenge to argue about aesthetic quality because it is difficult to talk about anything visual that requires interpretation by different people. Also, aesthetic quality deals with physical details and other visual elements.

Relational aesthetics, art inspired by social context (Bourriaud, 1998) which has been developed as a critical theory for analyzing and evaluating such undertakings, have still been contested. These debates on the aestheticism of forms have raised questions like, to what extent should the physical products of relational art be evaluated aesthetically as well as for their economic relevance and social effects? For any positive outcome to emerge from such evaluation we start to re-conceptualize the way artworks, in any form, are theorized “by looking at it in relation to its cultural context rather than seeing it as a self-sufficient entity” (Paetzold, 1997, page 4–13). These considerations should, however, include site-specific works like environmental art and urban landscape architecture, and take cognizance of artistic meaning. Art’s embeddedness in cities drives this exploratory investigation and its attempt to capture art and cultural ideas, and to suggest how cultural creativity might be developed and appreciated in a built environment. Abuja, the administrative capital of Nigeria, is renowned for the quality and wide range of its architecture (Figure 2). This analysis is comparative to the overall urban structure of the city while avoiding any form of tentative presumptuousness.

Figure 2
National Cathedral, Abuja

Source: Author

The centrality measure of a built form creates a sense in which we may regard tourists as making destination choices amongst entire holiday plans or in the process of executing any plan (Varley et al., 2020). On such an occasion the tourist would not be choosing a city to visit in the belief that a mundane or ordinary environment will materialize. The effectiveness of place-making in creating a sense of place is part of the semiosis in the underlying intent of built forms and urban design, with monuments becoming the main attraction in a constructed environment. Monuments in cities, unlike most urban forms, imbibe the spirit of artistic aestheticism with a view to making a place attractive. According to Papastergiadis (2010, p. 15), "placement of art in everyday surroundings has created the need for new tools to determine its aesthetic value and social meaning". Thus, it becomes plausible to view artistic forms like monuments in a philosophical sense. Aesthetic response is rapid, and this occurs within a short time of exposure to the art form or artifact (Ulrich, 2011). This is evident in contemporary urban design where, for example, the erection of a monument may evoke an instant aesthetic response due to its size or beauty irrespective of the message it is meant to relay.

Cultural Identities in Tourism

Visualization of places is an approach that addresses urban challenges arising from these developments. Urban theory and visualization techniques tackle challenges, combining practice with theoretical and methodological understanding of urban systems (Rose, 2022). Here is a transfer of architectural meaning across spatial distances and embedded in this space is the visual language of culture that is ethnographic. Even if an introduction to the concept of cultural aestheticism of monuments and other built forms might seem superfluous, Abuja has not been traditionally considered as one of the high-end tourist destinations of sub-Saharan Africa, but this research presupposes that there is much to add to the cultural and artistic attractiveness of locations than just impeccable urban planning and design. Mankind's inherent desire to learn about the cultural identity of different parts of the world has been one of the drivers of the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2001). No doubt, first time tourists and regular visitors alike may find the well-planned cityscape in Abuja appealing. Tourists looking for more varied attractions within the city are more likely to end up at the shopping mall. As a

practical human activity, “culture is an inherent part of both individual and collective development, from the education of a single child to the finest artistic expression of entire peoples and nations” (Zukin, 2004, p. 3).

Studies in the last half century have revealed the importance of cultural representation in tourism (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990; Cheung, 1999; Prosser, 2001; Simpson, 1993; Uzzell, 1989). Some researchers have proposed that culture and tourism be combined in tourism development (Patterson, 1976; Ritchie & Zins, 1978). In cities, culture materializes almost everywhere in the built environment and parks, which become visual symbols of local identity. In a 2001 report, the United Nations World Tourism Organization attested that cultural heritage stimulates national pride for domestic tourism, and this cultural pool is always maximally explored by countries. Perhaps the only region with more diversity in terms of cultural heritage than sub-Saharan Africa is the Asia-Pacific sub-continent. Besides being the birthplace of the world's major religions, the interchange of cultures over centuries has resulted in the Asia-Pacific region having some of the most remarkable historical monuments in the world (UNWTO, 2001).

In contrast to sub-Sahara African cities, most North American, Southeast Asian, and European cities have within their landscapes, cultural and historic icons blend in scale and weight with monumental architectural structures and statues. Further out of the city centres, little remains of traditional aesthetics that connect these cities with their religious, historic, and cultural heritage and with other ethnic cultures. Culture might not have accepted standards but when embedded in the built environment, it takes a definite form with defined visual and artistic purpose (Cheung, 1999; Smith, 2007) A monument instigates tourists to ask artistic and cultural questions, probing deep into the history of their host city, a scenario where historical inquisition is at par with pleasure seeking. Sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria are particularly rich where few have produced beautiful and accomplished artworks in stone, metal, and terracotta. Thus, Abuja may not have a rich history but its geographical location and status as the seat of government makes it an ideal destination to thrust forward the rich cultures of Nigeria.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper draws from theories of cultural studies, tourism studies, and urban studies to examine the complex relationships between cultural aestheticism, urban tourism, and local communities (Hall, 2008). Cultural appropriation is the process of drawing and adapting cultural elements from one context to another (Schneider, 2006). The aestheticization of structures is the process of creating a sense of beauty or attractiveness through cultural practices and symbols (Featherstone, 2007), while place-making is the process of creating meaningful and memorable places using cultural aestheticism (Lefebvre, 1991). This framework challenges traditional notions of space and place, and highlights the interconnectedness of people, objects, and environments through various forms of movement and gaze. The concept of a person's gaze is interesting when thinking about the context of exploring a place and traveling. Urry (2002) emphasized the globalization of the tourist gaze, “as multiple gazes have become core to global culture sweeping up almost everywhere in their awesome wake” (p. 2). The tourist gaze is the idea that a visitor will have a certain viewpoint of a structure or landmark, and that visitor gaze is much different compared to a local gaze. This is because “tourism activities are social in nature, and practiced by various social groupings” (Urry, 1995, p. 131).

Arguments have been made that space is largely constructed through tourism and leisure practices, and we are freer to move through space in our leisure time (Nielsen, 2013). To

understand the various forms of interactions and consumptions related to tourists' travel experience while visiting different cities, this framework aids in the review of the underlying theory and assumptions. As a way of achieving this study's objectives and answering the research questions, this framework is embedded into the research to help assess the leisure, economic and environmental impacts of icons, and how best to create an enhanced urban space for leisure and businesses in a way that produces value for the city.

Methodological Approach

This study does not have a single prescriptive research methodology but adopts an objective-led approach, with appropriate methods selected and applied according to the objective of the research. This approach utilizes visual methodologies and ethnographic methods advanced by Rose (2022). These are premised on interviews, observation and data gathering obtained from the primary research areas, including in-depth case studies of major cities within and outside Africa. Baker's (2012) evaluation criteria are adopted to develop methods for analysis of the cities' identity and evaluate tourists' performance measures. Tourism's multi-facettedness places it on every environment inhabited by man. This study, however, takes Abuja as the setting for this urban tourism inquiry. The investigation is confined to the urban areas of the city but places it within the overall tourism concept in sub-Saharan African context and globally. As tourists reside around the city centre of Abuja, there is access to them and will know their leisure and tourism infrastructure needs.

Data Collection

Drawing on existing literature on urban tourism, placemaking, and visitor experience around iconic landmarks for secondary data, this study employed a qualitative approach of data collection and analysis. The population of this study is taken from a sample of 50 tourists, 50 residents, 50 indigenes, and 50 business owners and organizations around the research area of Abuja. These numbers are chosen to make the data manageable. Primary data was collected through interviews, observations, and government policy documents. Qualitative data collection was carried out with participants Interviews that includes fifty residents of Abuja with demographic of characteristics of respondents between ages 18–65 years, 30% of whom were government workers, 40% private sector workers, 10% students, and 20% retirees, all of whom have been residents of Abuja for between 2–20 years. Interview of fifty visitors to Abuja with demographic characteristics of respondents includes ages: 18–65 years, nationality: local and foreign; purpose of visit: for leisure, research or business. Interviews of fifty hospitality businesses in Abuja with characteristics of the respondents include various types of business: Hotel, Restaurant, Bar, and tour operators.

Discussion

Using Leiper's (1989) framework of analysis, there is a different way of examining sub-Saharan Africa's perception of its position in relation to the perception of other cities in the world, and the highlighting of key areas the subcontinent needs to develop to attract visitors. By expanding and extending Leiper's concept, I show how governments use a variety of policy regulations to manage the cultural production of arts and architecture in Abuja. I argue that Abuja's quest to become attractive global cities is hindered due to their inability to emphasize the concept of place-making and the erection of iconic structures through the way it attempts to micro-manage the creation and production of material culture in Abuja. These issues,

coupled with a changing perception of African cities through the global lens, hinders the subcontinent's ability to compete with other global cities.

Themes emerge from these analyses that indicate that unless there are fundamental shifts in the way tourism and urban planning policies are implemented and enforced, it is unlikely that sub-Saharan African cities can truly reach their full potential and attain their goal of becoming global tourism hubs. Findings from this study indicates the importance of urban spaces in Abuja, Nigeria, in creating a memorable experience for visitors. Such findings are reflective of the need for clean and well-maintained spaces that reflect the city's identity. Cities, according to the Project for Public Spaces (2018), should be designed to prioritize the needs and experiences of residents and visitors. Iconic structures such as the Central Cathedral and National Assembly Complex play a major role in urban tourism development. There was emphasis on preserving, as well as promoting these structures which are essential for creating a sense of place and identity (Montgomery, 1998). These findings support the literature reviews in this paper that highlight the importance of icons in placemaking (Project for Public Spaces, 2018). The study's results also suggest that icons can help create a vibrant and inclusive public space that promotes cross-cultural understanding and exchange. The study's results also suggest that engaging with community members and residents can ensure that cities are designed and managed to reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities.

Conclusion

This paper has made an in-depth exploration into the role of iconic landmarks in the placemaking concept with a focus on the aesthetic nature of city spaces and examined the strength of icons in creating unforgettable experiences for visitors to Abuja. When tourists recognize they are moving into a vibrant and active environment, we should expect them to increase their budget plan that leaves them with more spending options. These options manifest due to shops and other business entities around tourist sites which monuments and statues espouse. Note should be taken of the economic context in which tourists and visitors spend their leisure time. However, in the leisure context, leaving aside the question of customer/provider relationships of the hospitality industry, many tourists and visitors are reduced to the status of “spender” whose preoccupation is buying under the influence of a leisure environment. In some situations, all perceived travel options may give a tourist cause for anxiety.

Some of the issues discussed in this paper are built on studies of different urban projects and initiatives. It looks at how urban identity can contribute to enhanced visitor experience and tourism competitive advantage. Furthermore, this study goes beyond utilizing icons as a form of cultural, social, or religious symbolism, but also focuses on how design strategies can be equaled by physical transformation. The results presented in this paper are not intended to serve as a template for any form of branding strategy or rallying call for branding. However, I hope the practices observed can help tourism practitioners and policymakers develop strategies that contribute to tourism growth. Built forms like monuments are not just about attracting tourists to a place but also help develop businesses and attract investments for residents. Monuments feed into the environmental arts narrative for the enhancement of sense of place. This analogy makes place-making an integral part of the tourism experience in cities.

Future Research Directions

Moving forward, this study will lead to exploring the application of innovative visitor experience strategies in other urban tourism destinations, exploring the impact of icons in placemaking on visitor behaviour and experience, investigating the role of technology in enhancing the visitor experience in urban spaces, and investigating the potential for placemaking to promote sustainable urban development and community engagement.

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.

References

Adeola, O., & Evans, O. (2020). ICT, infrastructure, and tourism development in Africa. *Tourism Economics*, *26*(1), 97–114.

Ashworth, G. J., & Tunbridge, J. E. (1990). The Tourist Historic City. Built Environment, in D. J. Timothy &. G. Wall (Eds.), Accommodation in Asian Historic City. *The Journal of Tourism Study, 6*(2), 64–65.

Baker, B. (2012). *Destination Branding for Small Cities: The Essentials for Successful Place Branding*. Creative Leap Books (2nd Ed.)

Bourriaud, N. (1998). *Relational Aesthetics*. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Transl.). Les Presses du Reel.

Cheung, S. C. (1999). The meanings of a heritage trail in Hong Kong. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *26*(3), 570–588.

Chigudu, T. T. (2008). A Brief History of the Gbagyi-Speaking People. *An unpublished article*.

Cook, R. (2008). Why the nation needs an Angel of the South, The Observer, 27 January, Review section, p. 13.

Council of Europe. (2012). Guidelines on Cultural Heritage: Technical Tools for Heritage Conservation and Management. *Document produced within the framework of the Joint Project "EU/CoE Support to the Promotion of Cultural Diversity in Kosovo"*.

Crompton, J. L. (1977). A Systems Model of the Tourist's Destination Selection Decision Process with Particular Reference to the Role of Image and Perceived Constraints. (Vol. I and II). Texas A&M University.

De la Torre, M. (2002). Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage.

Elleh, N. (1997). *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation*. McGraw Hill.

England, H. (2019). Statement of Heritage Significance Analysing Significance in Heritage Assets Historic England Advice Note 12. *Swindon: Historic England*.

Evans, G. (2011). Cities of Culture and the Regeneration Game. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure & Events.*

Featherstone, M. (2007). *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. Sage Publications.

Hall, C. M. (2008). *Tourism planning: Policies, processes, and relationships*. Pearson Education.

Korstanje, M., George, B., & Chavez, M. E. (2018). The dark side of creative tourism: A philosophical dialogue with culture. *Critical essays in tourism research*, 19–48.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Leiper, N. (1989). *Tourism systems: An interdisciplinary perspective*. Department of Management Systems, Business Studies Faculty, Massey University.

Leonard, L., Musavengane, R., & Siakwah, P. (Eds.). (2020). *Sustainable urban tourism in sub-Saharan Africa: Risk and resilience*. Routledge.

Lew, A. A. (2019). Tourism planning and place making: place-making or placemaking? In *Tourism planning and development* (pp. 142–160). Routledge.

Montgomery, J. (1998). Making a city: Urbanity, vitality, and urban design. *Journal of Urban Design, 3*(1), 93–116.

Nielsen, N. K. (2013). Knowledge by doing: home and identity in a bodily perspective. In *Leisure/tourism geographies* (pp. 277–289). Routledge.

Paetzold, H. (1997). How to Bridge the Gap Between the Philosophy of Art and the Aesthetics of Nature: A Systematic Approach. *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics, 5*, 4–13.

Papastergiadias, N. (2010). *Spatial aesthetics: Art, place and the everyday* (Vol. 5). Lulu.com.

Patterson, W. D. (1976). Pacifica Nostra. *Tourism International Policy, 3*, 2–6.

Project for Public Spaces. (2018). *What is Placemaking?* https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking.

Prosser, G. (2001). Regional tourism. *Special interest tourism*, 86–112.

Richards, G. (2018). Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *36*, 12–21.

Ritchie, B. W., Burns, P., & Palmer, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Tourism research methods: Integrating theory with practice*. Cabi.

Ritchie, J. B., & Zins, M. (1978). Culture as determinant of the attractiveness of a tourism region. *Annals of tourism research*, *5*(2), 252–267.

Rogerson, C. M., & Visser, G. (2014, December). A decade of progress in African urban tourism scholarship. In *Urban Forum* (Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 407–417). Springer Netherlands.

Rose, G. (2022). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. 2nd Edition. SAGE.

Saarinen, J., & Rogerson, C. M. (2017). Tourism and the Millennium Development Goals: Perspectives beyond 2015. In *New Research Paradigms in Tourism Geography* (pp. 23–30). Routledge.

Schneider, A. (2006). *Appropriation as practice: art and identity in Argentina*. Springer.

Selby, M. (2003). *Understanding urban tourism: Image, culture and experience*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Simpson, B. (1993). Tourism and Tradition: From Healing to Heritage. *Annals of Tourism Research, 20*(1), 164–181.

Smith, B. J. (1981). Slope evolution in the Gwari Hills, Kaduna State, Nigeria. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, *2*(1), 57–67.

Smith, M. K. (Ed.). (2007). *Tourism, culture, and regeneration*. CABI.

Ulrich, K. T. (2011). *Design: Creation of artifacts in society*. Karl T. Ulrich.

United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2001). *Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development*. https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284404841 1/2 eISBN: 978-92-844-0484-1

Urry, J. (1990). Tourist gaze: travel, leisure and society.

Urry, J. (1995). Consuming places. *The City Cultures Reader*, (3), 169.

Urry, J. (2002). *The Tourist Gaze.* 2nd ed. Sage.

Uzzell, D. L. (1989). Heritage Interpretation: The Natural and Built Environment. Belhaven.

Varley, P., Schilar, H., & Rickly, J. M. (2020). Tourism non-places: Bending airports and wildscapes. *Annals of Tourism Research, 80*, 102791.

Zukin, S. (2004). Dialogue on urban cultures: Globalization and culture in an urbanizing world*. World Urban Forum, Barcelona, 13–17 September 2004*.

Contact email: robinsonlloyd24@gmail.com

Inclusive Andragogy: Addressing Microaggressions Through Humanistic Learning

Orsolya Varkonyi, Molloy University, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Microaggressions in counselor education programs create hostile learning environments that undermine student success and retention. This presentation examines how humanistic-oriented andragogy can serve as a transformative approach to reducing microaggressions and fostering inclusivity. Through qualitative inquiry, this study explores faculty strategies for addressing microaggressions in graduate-level counseling programs and assesses the impact of humanistic learning principles on student engagement. Findings indicate that faculty integrating cultural responsiveness, individualized support, and student-centered pedagogy contribute to a more equitable classroom experience. Faculty training in identifying and addressing microaggressions plays a vital role in cultivating inclusive learning spaces. When counselor educators integrate humanistic learning approaches, they create environments where students feel supported, fully engaged, and positioned for success. This presentation provides actionable strategies for developing equitable classrooms, prioritizing respect, inclusion, and meaningful student engagement.

Keywords: culturally competent education, microaggression, inclusivity, pedagogy

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Humanistic-oriented andragogy effectively accommodates scholars from diverse social locations experiencing microaggressions and advocates their needs in larger societal systems (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Crimmins, 2016). Proponents of humanistic-oriented andragogy believe that the goal of adult education is to assist mentees in achieving their inherent potential (Frick, 1997). Humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning prioritize mentees' unique needs and value the educational relationship (Bloss-Brown & Schoening, 2013). Leading learning theorists endorse Rogers' ideas regarding the whole individual's education and focus on providing experiential and relational learning opportunities in academic milieus (Branson et al., 2015; Dougherty et al., 2020). Humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning endorse personalized course content, so it is internalized by mentees and transformed into applied skills (Gómez-Rey et al., 2018; Humphries & Clark, 2021). Educational researchers believe that humanistic-oriented education reduces inequalities and social divisions because it fosters the development of self-worth and honors individual differences, which lead to inclusive andragogy and academic success (Sanabria et al., 2020; Schreiber & Valle, 2016). Learning becomes productive when all mentees are provided with the opportunity to experience an appreciation of their diversity in a milieu of genuine empathy, which is the emblem of Humanistic Learning Theory (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Frick, 1997).

Despite a heightened focus on social justice and diversity in higher education, students of color report experiencing significant microaggressions in their classrooms perpetuated by their white faculty and peers (Crimmins, 2016). Additionally, students of color emphasize the importance of establishing racially just educational spaces (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016). Humanistic andragogy effectively accommodates scholars from diverse social locations targeted by daily microaggressions and advocates for their needs in larger societal systems (Dougherty et al., 2020). Humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning endorse personalized course content, so it is internalized by mentees and transformed into applied skills (Humphries & Clark, 2021). Honoring mentees' individuality is vital to person-centered facilitators of learning, in addition to creating a conducive learning environment that increases learners' potential for actualization (Bloss-Brown & Schoening, 2013; Frick, 1997). Humanistic-oriented education reduces inequalities and social divisions because it fosters the development of self-worth and honors individual differences, which lead to inclusive andragogy and academic success (Sanabria et al., 2020). Learning becomes productive when all mentees are provided with the opportunity to appreciate their diversity in a milieu of genuine empathy, which is the emblem of Humanistic Learning Theory (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Crimmins, 2016).

Application of Humanistic-Oriented Inclusive Andragogy to Counselor Education

In a humanistic-oriented classroom milieu, the instructor-mentee dyad resembles the counselor-client relationship, where scholars feel understood and their diversity is respected (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016). When delivering instruction, person-centered counselor educators strive to uphold the highest ethical standards of the counseling profession while believing in mentees' endless potential and growth (Bloss-Brown & Schoening, 2013; Frick, 1997). Any intervention in the classroom is grounded in the attitude of valuing the learners' social locations, belief systems, and views while being sensitive to potential microaggressions in the classroom setting (Crimmins, 2016; Dougherty et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is paramount for counselor educators to incorporate social justice and diversity-related issues in all aspects of their teaching delivery (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Sanabria et al., 2020). Person-centered facilitators of learning achieve this by first acknowledging that traditional instruction is based

on an inherent power differential (Branson et al., 2015). Humanistic-oriented facilitators believe in valuing mentees' input because it leads to increased involvement and successful proficiency in content material (Gómez-Rey et al., 2018). Allowing mentees' input to balance the power differential between learners and educators does not mean that lectures and assessments (where the power differential is palpable) should be avoided entirely. Instead, humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning foster collaboration during all aspects of instruction (Schreiber & Valle, 2016). Self-directed learning is a process where mentees take the initiative to determine their personal learning needs and are encouraged to formulate their specific learning goals and objectives (Norrie & Dalby, 2007). Humanistic-oriented facilitators embrace the ideas of the self-directed learning process and feel responsible for creating a microaggression-free supportive environment, providing need-based feedback, accommodating mentees' developmental stages, while fostering autonomy (Dougherty et al., 2020; Humphries & Clark, 2021). Scholars who benefit from the self-directed learning process acquire skills necessary for exercising independent thinking, thus developing attitudes that question and fight institutional inequalities (Crimmins, 2016; Frick, 1997). Self-assessment, mentee-directed inquiry, collaborative, and interactive lectures are staples of humanistic-oriented learning activities (Bloss-Brown & Schoening, 2013). To create balance and attenuate the power differential between mentees and educators, humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning assign some projects that mentees direct in addition to several instructor-directed assignments, which yields heightened engagement and microaggression-free collaboration between peers (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Branson et al., 2015).

Resources for Implementation

Humanistic-oriented instructors recognize that it is unfeasible to address every mentee's learning needs; however, they offer resources that satisfy diverse learning interests and welcome their unique social locations (Bloss-Brown & Schoening, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2020). In a humanistic learning milieu, mentees are empowered to create and implement their unique topic projects, thus reaching their personal learning goals sensitive to their cultural background (Frick, 1997). Research indicates that advocacy-based unique topic projects have increased mentees' sensitivity to diverse social locations and skills concerning cultural, social, political, and environmental issues (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Crimmins, 2016). In addition to unique topic projects connected to diversity, humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning encourage mentees to explore institutional and social-level problems (e.g., addressing racial trauma in higher education contexts) and challenge them to find ways of advocacy for their proposed concerns (Sanabria et al., 2020). When it comes to curating a foundational counseling skills course, present in most clinical mental health programs, research suggests specific methods to organize the course that focus on skill development while sensitively addressing microaggressions during didactic training (Branson et al., 2015; Humphries & Clark, 2021). Foundational counseling courses must be well-structured with carefully curated inclusion-focused content (Gómez-Rey et al., 2018). Person-centered counselor educators communicate developmentally appropriate standards to mentees during the first encounter (Norrie & Dalby, 2007). Two critical practices that facilitators of learning can utilize to improve their gatekeeping practices include clearly communicating the program and course expectations and consistently enforcing them while being sensitive to learners' social locations (Fulton et al., 2016; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2017). Additionally, the use of syllabus contracts is an essential aspect of gatekeeping, which contain clearly defined expectations of racial and cultural sensitivity in the classroom, consequences of not meeting expectations, and operationalizations of procedures or consequences (Forrest et al., 2009). Lastly, providing continuous informal and formal assessments and feedback about mentees' racial and cultural

sensitivity and demonstration of inclusivity in the classroom is essential in facilitating mentees' growth and reducing microaggressions in the classroom and field placement settings (Crimmins, 2016; Dougherty et al., 2020).

Assessment Tools Used in Instructional Strategy to Assess Student Learning

Humanistic learning theorists characterize the process of learning as the whole person's growth, inclusive of interpersonal domains, cognitive, and emotional aspects (Branson et al., 2015; Frick, 1997). Humanistic-oriented facilitators of learning place less emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge and assessment and more on how the mentees integrate skills from their unique social locations (Bloss-Brown & Schoening, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2020). However, facilitators of learning employ measurements that indicate whether learners achieved the desired results (Gómez-Rey et al., 2018). Once the desired results have been operationalized, the methods for qualitative and quantitative assessments are selected (Humphries & Clark, 2021). Assessments may include learner-selected unique topic assignments that allow subjective reflection, quantitative multiple-choice exams that evaluate content knowledge, quizzes, and self-directed presentations (Crimmins, 2016; Norrie & Dalby, 2007). Humanistic-oriented educators believe that growth is dynamic. However, accountability is essential to ensure that mentees are prepared to embark on their respective professional journeys (Forrest et al., 2009). Person-centered educators find ways to evaluate within the standardized context (e.g., CACREP), meeting pre-determined expectations while keeping the learning environment supportive, collaborative, and egalitarian (Fulton et al., 2016; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2017). Person-centered instructors ensure that qualitative and quantitative assessment types accurately measure course content, and they place greater emphasis on the process of learning than the results of the measured outcomes (Schreiber & Valle, 2016). Therefore, humanistic facilitators of learning focus on providing continuous feedback throughout the course, fostering optimal proficiency in the material while instilling an inclusive learning milieu (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016; Dougherty et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Understanding diverse learners is the first step in creating inclusive representation in the course curriculum and reducing the instances of microaggressions. Humanistic educators must acknowledge cultural biases in research and help learners understand why it hinders generalizability. When designing courses, humanistic facilitators of learning are mindful of individuals' representations and lack thereof in assigned textbooks when illustrating foundational counseling concepts. Providing diverse examples is essential to mentees because representation fosters belonging and engagement in the content material. When delivering content material, facilitators of learning are cautious not to make assumptions about mentees and to avoid excluding certain groups from class discussions (Fulton et al., 2016; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2017). Future research should focus on these areas to further enhance the effectiveness of humanistic-oriented inclusive andragogy. Investigating the impact of diverse representation in course materials on students' sense of belonging and engagement and exploring strategies to mitigate cultural biases in educational research could provide valuable insights.

References

Bloss-Brown, S. L., & Schoening, M. R. (2013). Application of Humanistic Learning Theory in an Associate Degree Program for Occupational Therapy Assistants. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *37*(6), 392–398. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.37.6.392

Bowers, H., & Lemberger, M. E. (2016). A person-centered humanistic approach to performing evidence-based school counseling research. *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*, *15*(1), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2016.1139502

Branson, A., Cardona, B., & Thomas, C. (2015). Supporting Couples, Marriage, and Family Therapy Trainees in Need of Performance Improvement: Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors. *The Family Journal*, *27*(4), 306–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480715601098

Crimmins, G. (2016). A reflection on a humanistic approach to narrative inquiry into the lived experience of women casual academics. *Reflective Practice*, *18*(4), 473–493. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2016.1175342

Dougherty, A. E., Haddock, L., & Patton, J. (2020). Exploring the Use of Mindful Andragogy to Create Inclusive Classrooms. *Journal of Mental Health*, *1*6(3), 41–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2019.1639092

Forrest, L., Elman, N. S., & Miller, D. S. S. (2009). "Psychology trainees with competence problems": Correction to Forrest et al. (2008). *Education in Professional Psychology*, *4*(3), 9. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015130

Frick, W. B. (1997). Paradigm for humanistic-existential learning. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *27*(4), 406–423. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167887274003

Fulton, C. L., Hartwig, E. K., Ybañez-Llorente, K., & Schmidt, E. (2016). Clinical Supervision in the Addictions Field: A Case Example of Effective Gatekeeping. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, *34*(1), 48–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/07347324.2016.1113106

Gómez-Rey, P., Fernández-Navarro, F., Barbera, E., & Carbonero-Ruz, M. (2018). Understanding student evaluations of teaching in online learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *44*(8), 1672–1685. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1451483

Humphries, B., & Clark, D. (2021). An examination of student preference for traditional didactic or chunking teaching strategies in an online learning environment. *Research in Learning Technology*, *29*. https://doi.org/10.25304/rlt.v29.2405

Norrie, P., & Dalby, D. (2007). How adult are our learners?: A cross-sectional exploration of the learning characteristics of nursing students in a United Kingdom University. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *14*(4), 312–322. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107075254

Sanabria, T., Penner, A., & Domina, T. (2020). Failing at remediation? College remedial course taking, failure, and long-term student outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, *61*(4), 459–484. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-020-09590-z

Schreiber, L. M., & Valle, B. E. (2016). Social constructivist teaching strategies in the small group classroom. *Small-Group Research*, *44*(4), 395–411. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496413488422

Ziomek-Daigle, J., & Christensen, T. M. (2017). An emergent theory of gatekeeping practices in counselor education. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *88*(4), 407–415. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00040.x

The Power of Language: Exploring the Impact of Communication on Mental Health and Wellbeing of University Students

Nicholas Isaac Mukwana, Kyambogo University, Uganda
Sarah Nabiccu, Kyambogo University, Uganda

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Language is a fundamental component of human communication, with profound implications for mental health and interpersonal relationships. This study examined the complex relationship between language use, mental well-being, and social interactions, emphasizing how language can either foster connection or cause harm. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data from 177 respondents. The study explored the prevalence of rude speech, the emotional consequences of such communication, and the principles guiding effective and empathetic language use. Findings revealed that a substantial majority of participants admitted to having spoken rudely to others at some point. The emotional aftermath of rude communication was commonly associated with guilt, remorse, and regret, underscoring the psychological impact of language choices. Additionally, six key themes emerged as guiding principles for empathetic communication: mindfulness and self-awareness, politeness, empathy and compassion, positive language use, caution and restraint, thinking before speaking, and sensitivity to others' emotions and mental health state. These findings underscore the critical role of politeness and polite expressions, mindful and empathetic language in promoting positive social interactions and psychological well-being. The study recommends that educators, parents, and caregivers actively foster politeness, empathy, mindfulness, positive language use, and effective conflict-resolution skills. In the nutshell, this research contributes to the ongoing debate on mental health issues among university students understanding of how intentional and compassionate communication can support healthier relationships in institutions of learning and other social environments.

Keywords: language, communication, mental health, politeness, relationships

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Mental health challenges have become increasingly prevalent among young people, particularly university students. Language is the primary medium of interaction within university environments, making it a critical factor in shaping students' psychological well-being. This study examines the impact of language use on mental health among students at Kyambogo University. It argues that the pervasive use of rude and negative language in everyday interactions among students may be detrimental to their mental health and overall well-being. Consequently, the study seeks to investigate the relationship between language use and mental health outcomes, as well as to identify strategies for promoting positive, respectful, and empathetic communication within the university community. Language as a means of communication is key in establishing lasting relationships among communicants. Effective communication on the other hand plays a vital role in maintaining good mental health and well-being among university students. Research findings reveal that social capital and effective communication skills are strong predictors of better psychological well-being (Ashraf et al., 2025; Rachmad, 2022). Language, as a fundamental aspect of communication, has the power to either positively or negatively impact an individual's mental health. For instance, positive language can foster a sense of belonging, encourage social support, and promote self-esteem, ultimately, it contributes to better mental health outcomes. On the other hand, negative language can lead to social isolation, decreased self-esteem, and increased stress levels, exacerbating mental health issues (Penner et al., 2021).

The mental health and well-being of Kyambogo University students, in particular, can be influenced by the language used in their daily interactions. The university's linguistic and cultural diversity can either facilitate or hinder effective communication, depending on how language is used (Fatih et al., 2025). For example, language barriers can lead to feelings of exclusion and marginalization, negatively impacting mental health. Conversely, inclusive language practices can promote a sense of community and social connection, supporting the mental health and well-being of students (Vertino, 2014).

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions to examine the problem under investigation.

i. How does language use affect the mental health and well-being of Kyambogo University students?
ii. What impact does communication have on the well-being of university students?
iii. Who is responsible for promoting positive mental health among university students?

Review of Related Literature

Mental health is a growing concern worldwide, with millions of people affected by mental health disorders every year. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health disorder each year, with anxiety and depression being the most common disorders (WHO, 2022). The prevalence of mental health disorders is particularly high among young people, with a recent study indicating that 1 in 5 university students experience a mental health disorder (Osborn et al., 2022).

The state of mental health is particularly alarming in Uganda, where mental health services are often inadequate and inaccessible. A recent study found that 1 in 4 Ugandans experience a mental health disorder, with depression and anxiety being the most common disorders (Opio

et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study found that mental health stigma is widespread in Uganda, with many people with mental health disorders experiencing social isolation and discrimination. This assertion calls for the need for increased awareness and education about mental health, as well as improved access to mental health services. This present study aims to demonstrate that proper use of language could be a preventive measure to mental health issues and promote mental health wellbeing.

Research shows that Language plays a crucial role in shaping our experiences, perceptions, and interactions with others (Volkow et al., 2021). According to the sociolinguistic theory, language is not just a means of communication, but also a tool for constructing and negotiating social relationships and personal identity (Aliyeva, 2023). In the context of mental health, language can have a profound impact on an individual's well-being. For instance, positive language can foster a sense of belonging, encourage social support, and promote self-esteem, ultimately contributing to better mental health outcomes (Penner et al., 2021). According to Volkow et al. (2021), the choice of words used can have a significant impact on the mental health of the users. For instance, according to this research, since language plays a major role in shaping people's thoughts and beliefs, scientific communication can sometimes be an inadvertent vector of harmful stereotypes and assumptions. Much as this research is in the field of medicine, its emphasis on the diction used cannot be underrated. It echoes what this study aims to achieve. That is sensitivity in the choice of words used in daily interaction (Rys et al., 2020).

Communication is a vital aspect of language, and it plays a significant role in shaping our mental health and well-being. Effective communication can help individuals build strong relationships, manage stress, and cope with hardships (Fatih et al., 2025). On the other hand, poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, conflict, and social isolation, exacerbating mental health issues (Shahi, 2024). In the context of university students, communication is particularly important, as it can help them navigate academic pressures, build social relationships, and access support services (Trisyanti & Hidayah, 2025).

The relationship between language, communication, and mental health is complex and multifaceted. Research has shown that language can be both a source of stress and a tool for coping with stress. For instance, individuals who experience language barriers or communication difficulties may feel anxious, frustrated, or isolated, ultimately affecting their mental health and well-being (Fatih et al., 2025). On the other hand, individuals who possess effective communication skills may be better equipped to manage stress, build social relationships, and access support services.

The impact of language and communication on mental health and well-being is particularly significant in the context of university students. Research has shown that university students experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, often due to academic pressures, social isolation, and language barriers (Shahi, 2024). Effective communication and language skills can help university students navigate these challenges, build strong relationships, and access support services. However, language barriers and communication difficulties can exacerbate mental health issues, thus, the need for targeted interventions and support services since language shapes the way individuals think about themselves (Ellis, 2016; Flusberg et al., 2024; Zhou, 2023).

On the other hand, research posts family, friends and school as vital in promoting mental heal well-being among the young. According to Coverdale and Long (2015), their study identified

family, friends, and schools as a possibly good environment for supporting and promoting the emotional well-being of learners. In their study, they emphasised positive attitude change towards young people, as promoting a sense of belonging and community citizenship. When respectful and polite language is used whether at family, social network or school environment level, the young grow with confidence and are able to respect others in their language use (LaGree et al., 2023). The use of respectful language shapes the mental processing of language use among the communicants.

In conclusion, the relationship between language, communication, and mental health is complex and multifaceted. Research has shown that language and communication can have a profound impact on mental health and well-being, particularly in the context of university students. Effective communication and language skills can help individuals build strong relationships, manage stress, and access support services. However, language barriers and communication difficulties can exacerbate mental health issues, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support services.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The study population consisted of undergraduate students at Kyambogo University. A survey questionnaire was administered to a sample of 147 students to collect quantitative data on their language use, communication patterns, and mental health outcomes. Additionally, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with students to gather qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions of language, communication, and mental health. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The study was guided by ethical principles, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Methods and Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing two primary instruments. A customized Language Use Questionnaire was designed to assess students' language use, communication patterns, and language preferences. Additionally, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with students to gather rich, qualitative insights into their experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding language, communication, and mental health.

Results of the Study

The results of this study are presented in three sections in accordance with the research questions of the study.

The data collected in response to question one of the research study which sought to examine how language use affects mental health and wellbeing of university students revealed three themes: The Power of language as a catalyst for building or destroying, guiding principles for effective communication, The Impact of Polite and Respectful Language, and the Transformative Power of Respectful Communication.

The Power of Language: A Catalyst for Building or Destroying

Language is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and its impact on individuals and relationships cannot be overstated. The words we choose, the tone we use, and the context in which we communicate can either uplift and empower or demean and devastate. This notion is succinctly captured in the idea that language has the power to build or destroy someone. To explore this concept further, we posed the question: "Do you agree that language has the power to build or destroy someone?" The responses, presented below, offer valuable insights into the perceived impact of language on individuals and relationships.

Table 1
The Power of Language: A Catalyst for Building or Destroying

Response	Number of Mentions	Percentages	Comment
Yes	160	99.4%	Absolutely
No	1	0.6%	Negligible
Maybe	00	00%	No doubt
Somehow	00	00%	No doubt

The findings presented in Table 1 revealed a striking consensus among respondents, with an overwhelming 99.4% (n = 160) acknowledging that language has the power to build or destroy someone. This near-unanimous agreement underscores the profound impact of language on individuals, highlighting its potential to shape self-esteem, confidence, and overall well-being. The respondents' recognition of language as a powerful tool emphasizes its dual capacity to either uplift or devastate, underscoring the importance of mindful communication. The consensus across respondents suggests that this perspective transcends individual differences, backgrounds, and experiences, emphasizing the universal significance of language in shaping human relationships and experiences. The chat below serves the purposes of visual enhancement.

The Impact of Polite and Respectful Language

The qualitative data presented below was collected through a structured questionnaire, which solicited responses to seven key questions designed to explore the intricacies of language use. One of these questions, "Describe briefly how you feel when someone speaks nicely to you," yielded 176 responses, which were subsequently coded into three dominant themes. These themes, which emerged from the data, provide insight into the emotional and behavioral impacts of positive language interactions.

Table 2
Feelings Developed When Someone Speaks Nicely

Feelings of Ecstasy	Behavioural Emotions	Openness Emotions
Happy, Loved, Valued, Respected, Good, Comfortable, Delighted, Appreciated, Grateful, Joyful, Excited, Relaxed, Calm, Special, Treasured, Cherished, Humbled, Motivated, Confident, Glad	Open up, share ideas, engage in conversation, show appreciation, return positive energy, feel encouraged to communicate, listen actively, Provide feedback	Reduces anxiety and stress, boosts self-esteem, inspires positive behavior, creates a sense of friendship, evokes a sense of worth, makes me feel civilized, encourages positive attitude, fosters a sense of belonging, Promotes effective communication, Shows appreciation for kindness

The data revealed that when someone speaks nicely, individuals experience a range of positive emotions, behavioral responses, and openness. The findings underscore three dominant themes. The feelings of ecstasy that gained the majority of responses (Happy, Loved, Valued, Respected,) indicate that positive language interactions evoke strong positive emotions, creating a sense of well-being and happiness. In the same way, behavioral emotions that gained significant number of responses (Open up, share ideas, engage in conversation, etc.) suggest that positive language interactions encourage individuals to become more engaged, more communicative, and more receptive. Similarly, openness too gained significant responses (Reduces anxiety and stress, boosts self-esteem, etc.) indicate that positive language interactions promote a sense of openness, leading to increased confidence, self-esteem, and effective communication.

The Impact of Rude or Cruel Language

Language has the power to shape our experiences, relationships, and sense of self-worth. One respondent said: *"When someone spoke rudely or cruelly, it could have a profound impact on emotional and psychological well-being of the recipient."* This data presentation underscored the ways in which individuals respond to rude or cruel language, highlighting the common themes and emotions that emerge. The following table and themes summarize the responses of 162 individuals who shared how they feel when someone speaks rudely or cruelly to them.

Table 3
The Impact of Rude or Cruel Language

Emotional Pain	Loss of Self-Worth	Defensiveness and Withdrawal	Confusion and Frustration
Hurt, Sad, Angry, Unhappy Traumatized, Disappointed, Unwanted, Afraid, Desire to retaliate	Disrespected Not valued Inadequate Unimportant Worthless Degraded Humiliated	Want to leave Ignore Defiant Withdrawn Unwilling to engage Defensive	Confused Frustrated Unsettled Perplexed Annoyed Emotional numbness Helplessness

The findings presented in Table 3 revealed that when individuals were exposed to rude or cruel language, they experience a range of negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The emotional pain which gained significant responses (Hurt, Sad, Angry, Unhappy,

Traumatized, etc.) indicate that rude or cruel language can cause significant emotional distress, leading to feelings of pain, sadness, and anger. On top of that loss of Self-worth too gained significant responses (disrespected, not valued, Inadequate, unimportant, Worthless, etc.) suggesting that rude or cruel language can erode an individual's sense of self-worth, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Lastly rude and cruel language leads to defensiveness and withdrawal, (want to leave, Ignore, defiant, withdrawn, unwilling to engage, etc.) which indicates that individuals may become defensive and/or withdraw from interactions as a coping mechanism to deal with the emotional pain caused by rude or cruel language. Lastly, confusion and frustration, (Confused, Frustrated, Unsettled, Perplexed, Annoyed, etc.) as a response to rude and cruel language suggest that rude or cruel language can create cognitive dissonance, leading to feelings of confusion, frustration, and emotional numbness.

The Relationship Between Language Use and Mental Health

A survey of 170 respondents was conducted to investigate the perceived relationship between language use and mental health. The results revealed a significant consensus (98.2%, n = 167) among respondents, indicating a strong belief in the existence of a relationship between language use and mental health. This finding suggests a high level of awareness regarding the profound impact of language on emotional well-being. Language has the power to shape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, with negative language patterns (e.g., self-criticism, rumination) contributing to mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Conversely, positive language patterns (e.g., gratitude, self-compassion) can promote mental well-being and resilience.

The strong consensus among respondents underscores the importance of considering the role of language in maintaining good mental health. It also highlights the need for mindful communication, which involves being aware of the language we use and its potential impact on ourselves and others. Furthermore, positive language practices can help cultivate language patterns that promote self-care, self-compassion, and emotional well-being. Language-based interventions may also offer a promising approach to developing therapies and interventions that harness the power of language to support mental health.

A small minority of respondents (1.8%, n = 3) disagreed with the notion that language use is related to mental health, potentially due to differing perspectives or experiences. Nevertheless, the overwhelming consensus (98.1%, n = 173) underscores the significance of the relationship between language and mental health, highlighting the need for further research and attention in this area. These results are illustrated in the chart below for visual enhancement.

The Individuals Responsible for Promoting Mental Health Well-being Among University Students

The data collected in response to the thirst question of the study, which sought to identify the key individuals involved in promoting mental health wellness among university students, revealed that lecturers, parents, the individuals themselves, and their peers are the primary actors in either promoting or hindering mental health wellness.

Do you think Lecturers are responsible for mental health state of the learners?

A total of 171 respondents answered the question, "Do you think lecturers are responsible for the mental health state of learners?" The responses revealed a diverse range of opinions. Approximately 46.6% (n = 76) of respondents believed that lecturers bear some responsibility for the mental health state of learners, while 14.7% (n = 24) disagreed. A significant proportion of respondents remained undecided or ambiguous, with 19.6% (n = 32) selecting "Maybe" and 19% (n = 31) indicating that lecturers have some influence, but not entirely.

The distribution of responses is presented in the table below:

Table 4
Response to Whether Lecturers Are Responsible for the Students' Mental Health

Response	Number of Responses	Percentage	Comment
Yes	76	46.6%	They are responsible
No	24	14.7%	They are not responsible
Maybe	32	19.6%	Not sure if they are responsible or not
Somehow	31	19%	They are responsible but not entirely

The findings indicate that approximately half of the respondents (46.6%) believe that lecturers play a significant role in influencing the mental health state of learners. This perception is consistent with existing research, which emphasizes the profound impact of teacher-student relationships on students' emotional well-being and mental health (e.g., [insert reference]). The diversity of opinions among respondents, however, also acknowledges the complexity of mental health issues and the multifaceted nature of factors contributing to them. This is well illustrated in the chart below for visual enhancement.

In response to the question, "Which other categories of people use language that can cause mental health issues to Kyambogo University students?", a total of 164 respondents identified various individuals and groups whose language can potentially contribute to mental health concerns among students. The findings are summarized in the table below:

Table 5
Various Categories of People Who Use Rude Language

Category of People	Mentions	Percentage	Comment
Fellow Students/Peers	73	44.5%	Insensitive communication
Non-Teaching Staff (Security, Cleaners)	24	14.6%	Need workshops
Administrators (Deans, Bursar office)	15	9.1%	Need sensitisation
Friends/Lovers/Relatives	13	7.9%	Lack exposure
Health Workers/Medical Team	8	4.9%	Need workshops
Security Guards (Gatemen/ Police)	7	4.3%	Need sensitisation
Librarians	4	2.4	Less likely
Motorcyclists/Boda-Boda Riders	3	1.8	Not so common
Social Media Influencers	5	3.0%	Need training

The table 5 highlights various contexts in which learning of confidence occurs, with a focus on the categories of people who can impact students' confidence. The findings suggest that fellow students/peers (44.5%) and non-teaching staff (14.6%) are the most common sources of

influence, followed by administrators (9.1%), friends/lovers/relatives (7.9%), and health workers/medical teams (4.9%).

Discussion of the Results

Language is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and its impact on individuals and relationships cannot be overstated. The words we choose, the tone we use, and the context in which we communicate can either uplift and empower or demean and devastate. This notion is succinctly captured in the idea that language has the power to build or destroy someone.

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal a striking consensus among respondents, with an overwhelming 99.4% (n = 160) acknowledging that language has the power to build or destroy someone. This near-unanimous agreement underscores the profound impact of language on individuals, highlighting its potential to shape self-esteem, confidence, and overall well-being.

These results are consistent with research on the social and emotional impact of language, which suggests that language can have a profound influence on an individual's sense of self-worth, emotional state, and relationships (Rys et al., 2020). The respondents' recognition of language as a powerful tool emphasizes its dual capacity to either uplift or devastate, underscoring the importance of mindful communication.

The guiding principles for effective communication outlined in Table 2 demonstrate the importance of thoughtful and empathetic communication. The themes of mindfulness, empathy, positive language use, and caution emphasize the need for individuals to be aware of the impact of their words on others. These principles are consistent with research on effective communication, which suggests that mindful and empathetic communication can foster positive relationships, promote understanding, and create a supportive social environment (Rys et al., 2020).

The qualitative data presented in this study pinpoint to the profound impact of polite and respectful language on individuals' emotional and behavioral responses. When asked to describe how they feel when someone speaks nicely to them, participants' responses yielded three dominant themes: feelings of happiness and well-being, increased self-esteem and confidence, and enhanced social connections and relationships. These findings are consistent with the study by (Trisyanti & Hidayah, 2025). Whose study emphasises polite and respectful language, that can increase feelings of happiness and well-being which boosts positive social interactions can enhance self-esteem and confidence. One participant noted, “When someone speaks nicely to me, I feel happy and valued. It boosts my self-esteem and makes me feel more confident.” This response underlines the significant impact of positive language interactions on individuals' emotional and psychological well-being.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that polite and respectful language can have a profound impact on mental health outcomes. As noted by Penner et al. (2021), “Mental health is closely linked to our relationships with others, and positive social interactions can play a critical role in promoting mental well-being.”

Furthermore, the findings revealed that when individuals are exposed to rude or cruel language, they experience a range of negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The emotional pain which gained significant responses (Hurt, Sad, Angry, Unhappy, Traumatized, etc.) indicate that rude or cruel language can cause significant emotional distress, leading to

feelings of pain, sadness, and anger. On top of that loss of Self-Worth too gained significant responses (disrespected, not valued, inadequate, unimportant, Worthless, etc.) suggest that rude or cruel language can erode an individual's sense of self-worth, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. This is consistent with the study by Ashraf et al. (2025) & Rachmad (2022) who argue that positive communication, can create a positive emotional climate, leading to increased feelings of happiness and well-being, and research by Volkow et al. (2021), suggest that the choice of words used, especially those evoked by positive language interactions, can broaden an individual's attention, increase creativity, and enhance social connections. This present study asserts that effective communication is the foundation of healthy relationships and personal growth, influencing emotional well-being, self-perception, and interpersonal relations. This study explored the transformative power of respectful communication, examining how polite language can shape personal growth, relationships, and emotional experiences (LaGree et al., 2023).

In regard to who was responsible for promoting mental health wellness, a total of 169 respondents answered the question, “Between lecturers and your parents, who is responsible for your mental health state?” The responses revealed a clear trend, with the majority of respondents (71%, n = 120) believing that both lecturers and parents share responsibility for their mental health state. This finding suggests that respondents recognize the interconnectedness of their relationships with lecturers and parents and the potential impact of both on their mental health. These findings are consistent with previous research that emphasised the importance of both family and educational environments in promoting mental health and well-being among young people (Coverdale & Long, 2015). The finding that most respondents attributed shared responsibility to both lecturers and parents validate the need for a collaborative approach to supporting mental health, involving both family members and educational institutions.

Conclusions

This study therefore, makes several conclusions.

This study demonstrated that language plays a powerful role in shaping mental health outcomes. Rude and cruel language, particularly when used repeatedly in everyday interactions, can have serious and lasting effects on individuals’ emotional and psychological well-being. The findings confirm that hurtful communication not only damages relationships but also contributes to the development of mental health challenges among individuals. Therefore, promoting respectful, polite, and empathetic communication is essential for enhancing mental health and creating supportive environments, especially within university communities.

Lecturers play an important, though not exclusive, role in shaping students’ mental health. The perception held by a substantial proportion of students aligns with existing research that emphasizes the significance of positive teacher–student relationships in supporting emotional well-being. However, the varied responses also demonstrated that mental health outcomes cannot be attributed to a single factor, but the need to consider the broader academic and social environment when addressing students’ mental health needs.

Lastly, the study demonstrated that polite and respectful communication significantly enhances individuals’ willingness to take responsibility for their actions. When a supportive and non-threatening environment is created, respectful language encourages honesty, accountability,

and learning from mistakes. This finding reinforces the argument that communication style is a powerful tool for fostering personal development and positive behavioural change, particularly within academic and professional settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

Universities and other tertiary institutions implement awareness programs and workshops that promote positive, respectful, and empathetic communication among students and staff. Communication skills training should be integrated into student orientation programs and counselling services to help individuals understand the psychological impact of language use. furthermore, university administrations should develop and enforce policies that discourage the use of rude or harmful language while encouraging respectful dialogue. Mental health support services should also address communication-related stress and trauma to help affected individuals cope effectively. Future research is recommended to further explore the long-term effects of language use on mental health across different social and cultural contexts.

In addition, institutions, particularly universities, actively promote the use of polite and respectful language in daily interactions. Training programs and workshops focusing on effective and empathetic communication should be introduced to help individuals understand the impact of their language on others. Communication strategies that emphasize kindness, understanding, and respect should be incorporated into conflict resolution and counseling practices. Educators, administrators, and student leaders should model respectful communication to encourage a culture that supports positive behavioral change, motivation, and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, universities equip lecturers with training in mental health awareness and supportive communication practices to enhance their positive influence on students' well-being. Institutions should also adopt comprehensive mental health strategies that involve counseling services, peer support programs, and stress-management initiatives. Furthermore, collaboration between lecturers, counselors, and university administrators should be strengthened to ensure early identification and support for students experiencing mental health challenges. This integrated approach will help address the multifaceted nature of mental health within the university community.

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

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this research work solely to support the writing process, including improving clarity, grammar, structure, and language expression of the manuscript. The usage was limited to grammatical, spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The authors further declare that, apart from 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.

References

Aliyeva, G. B. (2023). Language as a means of communication and social construction: Regarding the formation of our identity and shared culture. *Futurity Philosophy, 2*(1), 4–13.

Ashraf, S., Khan, M. L., & Mahmood, T. (2025). Social Capital, Interpersonal Communication Skills and Psychological Wellbeing among Young Adults. *Indus Journal of Social Sciences, 3*(1), 251–265.

Coverdale, G. E., & Long, A. F. (2015). Emotional wellbeing and mental health: an exploration into health promotion in young people and families. *Perspectives in public health, 135*(1), 27–36.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Ellis, C. A. (2016). *How language, culture and emotions shape the mind*. Bangor University (United Kingdom).

Fatih, M., Fauzi, N., & Norman, E. (2025). Effective Communication in Building Healthy and Productive Relationships. *MES Management Journal, 4*(1), 662–671.

Flusberg, S. J., Holmes, K. J., Thibodeau, P. H., Nabi, R. L., & Matlock, T. (2024). The psychology of framing: How everyday language shapes the way we think, feel, and act. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 25*(3), 105–161.

LaGree, D., Houston, B., Duffy, M., & Shin, H. (2023). The effect of respect: Respectful communication at work drives resiliency, engagement, and job satisfaction among early career employees. *International Journal of Business Communication, 60*(3), 844–864.

Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architectures of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology, 9*(2), 111–131.

Opio, J. N., Munn, Z., & Aromataris, E. (2022). Prevalence of mental disorders in Uganda: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychiatric Quarterly, 93*(1), 199–226.

Osborn, T. G., Li, S., Saunders, R., & Fonagy, P. (2022). University students' use of mental health services: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 16*(1), 57.

Penner, K., de Moissac, D., Rocque, R., Giasson, F., Prada, K., & Brochu, P. (2021). Sense of belonging and social climate in an official language minority post-secondary setting. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 51*(4), 26–39.

Rachmad, Y. E. (2022). Communication Well-being Theory.

Ryś, M., Greszta, E., & Śledź, K. (2020). The feeling of being loved and the language of communication of young adults: Język polski. *Kwartalnik Naukowy Fides et Ratio, 42*(2), 47–76.

Shahi, U. (2024). Interpersonal communication and mental health: An impact study of interpersonal communication skills on mental health of youth.

Shami, S., Venu, C. D. V. P., Shanampoodi, G. B., & Rajeswari, T. S. (2025). Impact Of English Language Learning On Mental Health: Exploring The Relationships Between Language Anxiety, Self-Esteem, And Depression. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery, 14*(9s).

Trisyanti, U., & Hidayah, A. R. (2025). Navigating Diversity: The Emotional Toll and Educational Imperatives of Student Social Interaction in Multicultural Campuses. *Journal of Communication in Scientific Inquiry (JCSI), 7*(1), 17–27.

Vertino, K. A. (2014). Effective Interpersonal Communication: A Practical Guide to Improve Your Life. *Online journal of issues in nursing, 19*(3).

Volkow, N. D., Gordon, J. A., & Koob, G. F. (2021). Choosing appropriate language to reduce the stigma around mental illness and substance use disorders. *Neuropsychopharmacology, 46*(13), 2230–2232.

World Health Organization. (2022). *World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all*. World Health Organization.

Zhou, X. (2023). Language and the mind: How language shapes our thinking. *Journal of World Languages, 9*(3), 505–529.

Raised by This Place: Ritual Theater, Ecological Identity, and Spiritual Nurturing in Young Children

Katie Garcia, Teachers College, Columbia University, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This qualitative pilot study explores how young children articulate spiritual awareness and ecological connection through theater-based activities in a university laboratory preschool setting. Nine children aged four to five years participated in ten arts-based sessions over two months, engaging in embodied storytelling, poetry creation, terrarium building, and performance activities inspired by ecological and Indigenous narratives. Drawing on theories of children's spirituality, biophilia, and embodied learning, this research examines how theater serves as both a pedagogical tool and a sacred practice for young learners. Data collection employed participant observation, children's artistic artifacts, video documentation, and parent reflections. Findings revealed that children naturally expressed profound spiritual sensitivity through imaginative play, sensory engagement, and creative expression. Key spiritual and theatrical characteristics emerged throughout the activities, including presence, flow, imagination, ritual, empathy, and transformation. Theater activities, particularly embodied storytelling and improvisational drama, facilitated children's ability to explore perspectives beyond themselves, fostering empathy and environmental consciousness. This study affirms that creative arts, especially theater, nurture not only cognitive and artistic development but also spiritual and ecological awareness in early childhood, offering vital implications for holistic educational practices that honor children's innate capacity for wonder, connection, and care for the natural world.

Keywords: ritual theater, children's spirituality, ecological identity, biophilia, embodied learning

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

When I started the performing arts program in college at seventeen years old, learning about theater profoundly impacted my development as a young adult. Through theater, I was influenced by how I talk, think, interact, move my body, and walk the streets. It changed my being, my spiritual being. I started to see the subtleties of the world and wonder about myself and others. The awareness I gained through theater was physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Conte (2002), when discussing the gift of arts, states that art, music, dance, or drama are intrinsic to us all, to our spirit, and some people, unfortunately, lose this connection when they reach adulthood. She said that for some of us, "finding the bridge between our inner lives and our outer world requires a map" (p. 87). Throughout my own experience and first years of teaching drama to children and adolescents, the theater was not only a map but a compass to the inner world.

In her book *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life,* Miller (2021) refers to spirituality as "something each of us is born with the capacity to experience" (p. 58), which is innate and intrinsic. In her essay *A Vision of Schools With Spirit*, Lantieri (2002) states that spirituality "encompasses a realm of human life that is nonjudgmental and integrated. It is about belonging and connectedness, meaning and purpose" (p. 7). Through learning and teaching theater, I made sense of myself and the world around me. I could foster my spirituality and started to advocate for children's spirituality through the arts.

My journey has guided me to ask how engagement with theater activities encourages and articulates children's connection to nature and their spiritual selves, and what role embodied storytelling plays in fostering spiritual and ecological awareness in children. This research explores how young children articulate spiritual awareness and ecological connection through improvisational theater, poetry, and embodied storytelling activities.

Related Literature

Spirituality in Early Childhood

Spirituality in young children is not separate from daily life; it arises naturally from their intrinsic curiosity and connections to the world around them. Champagne (2003) similarly argues that children's spirituality manifests concretely through daily activities and sensory experiences, describing children's spirituality as sensitive, relational, and existential modes of being expressed naturally through play, exploration, and creative expression (Champagne, 2003; Littleton & Sole, 2025).

Miller (2015) notes that spirituality is a biological predisposition that children naturally embody, supporting Hay and Nye (2006) assertion that spiritual expression is a "natural predisposition" or "biological reality." Hart (2010) adds that spirituality is a worldview, developmental process, and continuous inquiry into self-understanding, purpose, and meaning.

In alignment with Coles (1991), Miller (2015), Hay and Nye (2006), Champagne (2003), and Harris (2007), the literature consistently underscores children's natural predisposition toward spiritual expression. Children spontaneously articulate deep spiritual and existential connections through play, creative arts, and embodied activities. In this research analysis, I will draw connections on how children express these innate spiritual capacities, focusing mainly on their interactions with nature and artistic experiences within theater-based activities.

Arts, Spirituality, and Resilience in Educational Settings

Lantieri's vision for spiritually supportive schools highlights the arts as central to spiritual and emotional development. It emphasizes the importance of creative arts in enlarging children's abilities to employ their intuition, imagination, and creativity—qualities intimately connected to spiritual intelligence (Lantieri, 2002).

Carlsson-Paige (2002) emphasizes that "children's capacities for meaning-making through drawing, drama, music, social exchange, and inner exploration" are essential to spiritual development yet often neglected in school curricula (p. 23). For children, engaging creatively in art and drama is fundamentally spiritual: a way to process, reflect, and express their experiences. Similarly, Brendtro and Brokenleg (2002) argue that educational environments that nurture a sense of belonging and interconnectedness are crucial aspects of children's spiritual well-being.

Theater, arts, and nature collectively offer children powerful avenues to explore their spiritual and ecological selves. Children's artistic expressions—through drama, poetry, drawing, and embodied storytelling—are deeply resonant spiritual practices. Conte (2002) poignantly summarizes that "artistic experiences often draw out feelings and awareness in unexpected ways" (p. 80), becoming crucial for children's spiritual and ecological development.

Spiritual Development and Awareness Through Theater

Theater creates spaces for children to explore their spiritual selves through embodied learning and artistic expression. Boal (1995) defines theater as "the capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action and activity… to imagine variations of his action and to study alternatives" (p. 13). Theater thus becomes a metacognitive practice, prompting awareness, reflection, and spiritual insight through embodied experience.

Artaud (2024) complements this by illustrating theater's potential to unearth internal emotional truths, serving as a powerful medium for revealing the inherent spiritual dimensions of human experience. Drama also provides a disciplined, calm atmosphere, cultivating emotional intelligence, social-emotional skills, and spiritual sensitivity, which are crucial for healthy spiritual development (Hough & Hough, 2012).

Through theater and dramatic arts, children enter imaginative worlds that significantly influence their emotional, cognitive, and spiritual development. Engaging in embodied artistic expression allows children to navigate personal truths, cultivate emotional intelligence, and deepen their spiritual sensitivity. As emphasized by Sole and Littleton (2023), "when we involve ourselves in the visual arts, music, drama, and literature, we enter artistic and aesthetic realms of separate realities—our own worldplay—that mirrors children's imagining and creating worlds of wonder" (p. 63). Theater thus supports young children in building meaningful connections, expanding self-awareness, and nurturing an intrinsic capacity for wonder.

Biophilia, Ecological Theater, and Embodied Learning

Ecological awareness and spirituality in young children find strong theoretical foundations in biophilia—the innate human affinity for nature. Barbiero and Berto (2021) articulate biophilia as a psychological orientation toward life, describing it as "being attracted to all that is alive

and vital." If children are given proper conditions, they cultivate four active elements of biophilia: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge, traits intrinsically linked to spiritual awareness and ecological empathy.

This biophilic perspective aligns closely with ecological theater practices that engage children through embodied learning. Kimmerer (2013) emphasizes the indigenous principle of reciprocity—fostering gratitude and care toward the natural world as vital components of spiritual and ecological consciousness. Abram (2017) underscores the role of embodied cognition in ecological awareness, suggesting the human body acts as a living bridge connecting inner spiritual worlds with external natural landscapes. Roerden (2002) echoes this sentiment when she refers to David Orr's concept of "embodied knowing," uniting mind, spirit, emotions, and physical selves, fostering a spiritual connection to nature through experiential learning. "It is a deeper knowledge than intellectual understanding. It is more akin to instinct or intuition" (p. 58). She later referred to Mitchell Thomoashow's concept of "ecological identity," suggesting spiritual development occurs as children deepen awareness of their inherent connections to nature through meaningful interactions and embodied experiences in natural settings. Lastly, in her work through ecological theater, Osnes (2018) highlights performance art as a medium that effectively engages communities and individuals with ecological themes through embodied dramatic metaphors.

Drawing these theories together provides a cohesive lens to interpret children's spiritual expressions and ecological connections observed through theater practices. Ecological consciousness emerges naturally in young children when their spiritual curiosity interacts with embodied artistic engagements. As Louv (2008) shares, nature often invites children to "contemplate infinity and eternity" (p. 98), fostering spiritual curiosity and ecological understanding. Brendtro and Brokenleg (2002) emphasize that spiritual belonging involves relationships with nature and the community, thus illustrating the natural interconnectedness of ecological awareness, spiritual growth, and artistic expression in young children.

Theoretical Framework

In developing the activities for this research, I intentionally integrated theatrical and spiritual characteristics that honor the body's wisdom, presence, and creative impulse. The following key characteristics, drawn from theatrical and spiritual literature, guided the design and observation of children's experiences throughout this study.

1. **Presence (Here-and-Now or Hic et Nunc):** A real-time-only, vivid experience and practice of being fully engaged and attentive in the moment, fostering awareness and openness (Brook, 2019; Hay & Nye, 2006).
2. **Flow:** A state of complete immersion in an activity where action and awareness merge, bringing joy and optimal performance. Loss of self-consciousness, which a child might experience in almost any activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).
3. **Imagination:** The ability to creatively visualize and express ideas beyond reality is essential for storytelling and personal narrative exploration. For Artaud, to imagine is to "question our assumptions about reality." That is where we shape reality, and Boal will say that theater allows us to imagine the future and explore possibilities. It is a sacred act for a child (Artaud, 2024; Boal, 1995; Hay & Nye, 2006).
4. **Ritual:** Turner (1982) describes ritual as a liminal process that enables individuals and communities to step outside ordinary reality and enter spaces of transformation and reflection. It is a standardized act that may be secular and sacred (Schechner, 2004).

5. **Empathy (Catharsis):** An emotional resonance with others' experiences, leading to understanding and release, both through performance and interpersonal connection (Aristotle, 1997).
6. **Play:** Joyful, spontaneous play is imbued with more profound meaning and a connection to the sacred and the communal (Huizinga, 2009). It is our "divine right and the foundation on which intelligence and creativity grow" (Hart, 2010).
7. **Embodiment:** The awareness and expression of body-mind unity, where sensations and actions are deeply connected to meaning and experience (Abram, 2017; Damasio, 2005).
8. **Celebration:** A communal act of honoring milestones and experiences with reverence and joy, fostering shared meaning, commonly seen in Indigenous traditions (Schechner, 2004).
9. **Transformation:** A process of profound change in which individuals or groups shift perception and being, often through storytelling and enactment (Artaud, 2024; Boal, 2013). Kimmerer (2013) speaks to ecological and relational transformation through reciprocity with nature.
10. **Communion:** Deep relational experiences where individuals connect to each other and to the world, fostering reciprocity and mutual care (Kimmerer, 2013; Osnes, 2018).

Later in the analysis, we will understand how/if those characteristics manifested in children's experiences throughout the activities.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative pilot study employed a sample of convenience (Etikan et al., 2015), focusing on a university-based laboratory preschool where I had been working as a part-time assistant teacher for six months before and during the research. My dual role positioned me as a participant-observer, allowing for sustained daily contact with the children and facilitating weekly theater explorations. Although I had access to both classrooms, the study focused on the class with which I had the most consistent engagement, selected for the practical convenience of integrating the research activities into their existing schedule. The class consisted of nine children between four and five years old (Table 1).

The study was granted approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Teachers College, Columbia University. Before data collection commenced, written consent was obtained from the school director and the parents of all participating children. The research was structured around a scope and sequence of ten arts-based sessions conducted over two months, each lasting between 30 minutes and one hour.

Research Questions

The following questions guided my study:

1. How does engagement with theater activities encourage preschool children to explore and articulate their connection with nature and spiritual awareness?
2. What role does embodied storytelling play in fostering spiritual awareness and ecological empathy in preschoolers?

Table 1
Participants Information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Cultural Background
Kitty	4 years, 6 months	Female	Colombian Heritage
Pebble	4 years, 6 months	Male	Italian Nigerian Heritage
Palm	4 years, 7 months	Female	South Korean American Heritage
Bunny	4 years, 9 months	Male	England American Heritage
Apple	4 years, 5 months	Female	Argentinian Israeli Heritage
Butterfly	4 years, 9 months	Female	Puerto-Rican and Dominican-Republic Heritage
Beetle	4 years, 4 months	Male	Russian Heritage
Lion	4 years, 9 months	Female	Arabian Heritage
Echo	5 years, 1 month	Male	Argentinian Taiwanese Heritage

Note: The Children's names were chosen based on how they expressed themselves throughout the research, demonstrating aspects of and interest in those natural elements.

Description of Activities

The activities in this study were designed as a progressive sequence of embodied, creative, and reflective experiences, each building on the last to foster children's ecological awareness and spiritual expression. Inspired by the relationship between theater and spirituality, I intentionally chose activities and materials that offered multimodal artistic experiences, enabling children to express themselves not only through drama but also through visual arts, movement, music, and storytelling. My selections were shaped by my experience as a theater artist and educator and my desire to invite children into meaningful explorations of nature and belonging. Although books such as *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) and *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram (2017) are not written for children, they were instrumental in shaping the conceptual foundation of this work.

Notably, the process of moving through these activities was not only designed for children's learning but also became a process of discovery for me. Each session became part of a shared genesis of our work together, allowing me to observe, listen, and understand how the children naturally connected to these themes. Their responses continuously informed and refined the work, making the sequence an evolving, co-created experience.

Embodied Storytelling

Children explored ecological narratives and books such as *Skywoman Falling*, *The Great Kapok Tree*, and *The Other Way To Listen*, embodying elements of the stories through

movement, tableaux, and improvisation. Children were also invited to imagine themselves as other beings, such as trees, and consider how their perspectives would change. This allowed them to connect to the stories and the land they represented physically, supporting their embodied experiences and nature connections through mindful listening and environmental identity (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1

Kitty Embodied Her Version of a Tree

Figure 2

Beetle Embodied Going Down the Slide, His Favorite Memory of Being Outside

Figure 3
Skywoman Embodied Storytelling

Terrarium Creation

A miniature ecosystem built in a glass container to represent the interdependence of nature (Figure 4). Children created terrariums to represent interconnected ecosystems. These served as both artistic and symbolic representations of care and reciprocity. The activity included conversations on what elements give life and how ecosystems support one another.

Figure 4
Terrarium's Process

Sacred Jars

Inspired by Deborah Marcero's book *In a Jar,* which tells the story of Llewellyn, a collector of memories, feelings, and experiences through natural elements (rainbows, feathers, or the sound

of the ocean) and his journey with his friend Evely, children collected natural elements that carried personal or sensory significance. These sacred jars became tangible representations of gratitude, family memories, and emotional grounding (Figure 5).

Poetry Creation

The title of the research, *Raised by This Place,* is inspired by Kimmerer (2013). In the chapter "The Gift of Strawberries" in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she begins with a reflection on her childhood:

> I was raised by strawberries, fields of them. Not to exclude the maples, hemlocks, white pines, goldenrod, asters, violets, and mosses of upstate New York, but it was the wild strawberries, beneath dewy leaves on an almost-summer morning, who gave me my sense of the world, my place in it. (p. 22)

Through nature and through place, she found a sense of her world, and wondering what places raised us adds another layer to spiritual questions such as "Who am I?" We could also ask: "What/Who raised me?" "What role do nature and place have in my sense of the world?"

Children composed poems following a prompt (Appendix), reflecting on sensory memories and personal connections to their environment, culture, and family. Individually, I recalled everything they shared about their favorite places, cultures, languages, and loved ones. I asked what they could see, hear, or touch in their home place/home/country; what they could smell or taste from the place they come from, their favorite season and natural elements they feel connected to, and what the feeling is about somewhere or someone.

Figure 5
Sacred Jars

Performance

The final presentation, *Raised by This Place*, integrated all the children's creative outputs. We displayed their jars, terrariums, and drawings as part of the scenario, and they performed their favorite part of their poems for their loved ones.

Findings

Throughout the sessions, children's voices and embodied responses offered profound insights into their relationships with nature, spirituality, and community. The following observations reflect their spontaneous expressions and moments of engagement. This section is divided according to the main themes described in the analysis.

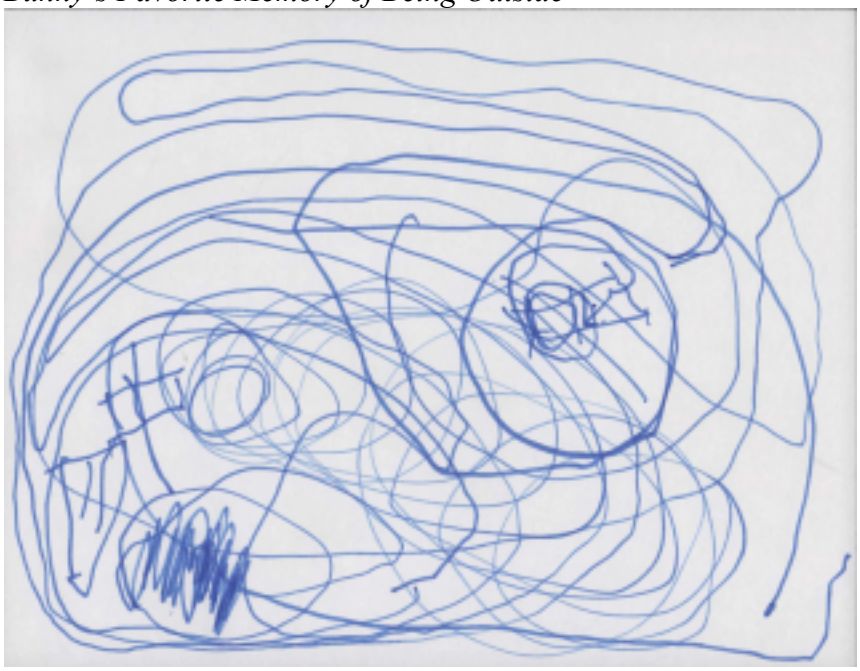
Nature Connection

The children's experiences throughout the research revealed a profound and authentic connection with nature, expressed through emotions, storytelling, and embodied creativity. Their relationship with the natural world emerged as curiosity and as an expression of care, wonder, and "relational consciousness"—what Hay and Nye (2006) describes as an intense awareness of relatedness to nature, others, God, or self.

Emotions and Feelings Toward Nature

Children consistently expressed positive emotional states when engaging in nature-based and nature-themed activities. Calmness, joy, and fascination were evident as they worked with natural elements and embodied ecological narratives. When making her terrarium, Butterfly shared feeling "calm… because I feel the deep breath in the rainforest," while Bunny, when asked about his favorite memory of being outside, associated happiness with playing on an ice lake. When I asked him to draw this memory, Bunny was wholly immersed in the activity, drawing the lines of the lake while sharing what he likes to do in the park (See Figure 6). He later drew a turtle as his connection to nature, linking animals and natural environments to emotional well-being.

Figure 6
Bunny's Favorite Memory of Being Outside



Spiritual Awareness

Spirituality is an ordinary aspect of children's lives. Throughout the research, children demonstrated moments of wonder, awe, emotional depth, and spiritual imagination. These experiences reflect what Champagne (2003) describes as children's sensitive, relational, and existential modes of being, expressed through sensory engagement, emotional states, and creative play. Their natural ability to dwell in the present moment, fully immersed in activities, revealed key spiritual and theatrical characteristics such as presence, flow, and embodiment.

Spiritual Imagination

Children's imaginative narratives served as powerful expressions of spiritual connection. In poetry, this imaginative spirituality became even more vivid. When I shared my own version of "I Was Raised By This Place," I asked them, after hearing my poem, where they think I was raised. Most of them gave me the factual answer: Brazil. However, Kitty answered, "In the sunset," suggesting a deep symbolic connection, likely recalling our initial meeting where I told them that my first memory of being outside was when I saw the sunset in the Moutain Andes, Chile, linking place, memory, and identity in a poetic, spiritual gesture.

In their own poems, children consistently drew on magical, natural, and familial imagery. Apple wrote of being "raised by dogs and unicorns," Kitty by "trees that hug me and dance with me," Butterfly by "the buzz of the bees and by my grandma howling like a wolf, "and Echo by "the sound of the sea and my fast heartbeats." These metaphors demonstrate the ability to use imaginative play and language as sacred tools for expressing their sense of belonging, wonder, and love for the world—aligning with Artaud's (2024) and Boal's (2013) vision of imagination as a force to question and reshape reality.

Nature and Spirituality

Nature emerged not only as a space for play but as a spiritual presence in the children's lives. The terrarium activity became a miniature stage for ecological imagination. Bunny envisioned creating "yogurt and honey," Palm wished to touch everything if she could live inside the terrarium, and Lion imagined magical trees and jaguars. This reflects what Roerden (2002) previously mentioned, which describes embodied ecological literacy and nature as a healer and teacher that nurtures and invites care.

When I asked Beetle to draw his poem, he drew the Earth inside of a heart (Figure 7), and one of his poem's line says, "I was raised by Earth and Mars." When reading Roerden's (2002) essay "Lessons of the wild," I encountered the following quote: "The earth protects us, nurtures us, tells us about the shape of our heart, and we in kind are called to do the same for the earth" (p. 63). In his own way, with all his wisdom, Beetle said the same thing, showing his love and connection to Earth.

When drawing her connection to nature (Figure 8), Kitty drew symbolic layers called "maternity" (we later found out her mother was pregnant, and this topic came up at different times), connecting her to a tree, which was connected to water. She referred to maternity as "something that connects to water," highlighting an intuitive understanding of nature's nurturing and maternal dimensions while associating her own personal experience with it. The children's descriptions and artistic expressions show how nature is embedded in their spiritual development as a source of meaning, development, identity, calmness, and joy.

Figure 7
Beetle's Drawing of His Poem

Figure 8
Kitty's Connection to Nature

Cultural Awareness & Places

The children's expressions of cultural identity, familial roots, and connections to place revealed the deep interplay between environment, memory, and spiritual belonging. Through storytelling, artistic expression, and embodied play, they articulated a sense of self that was strongly anchored in family relationships, language, and place-based memories.

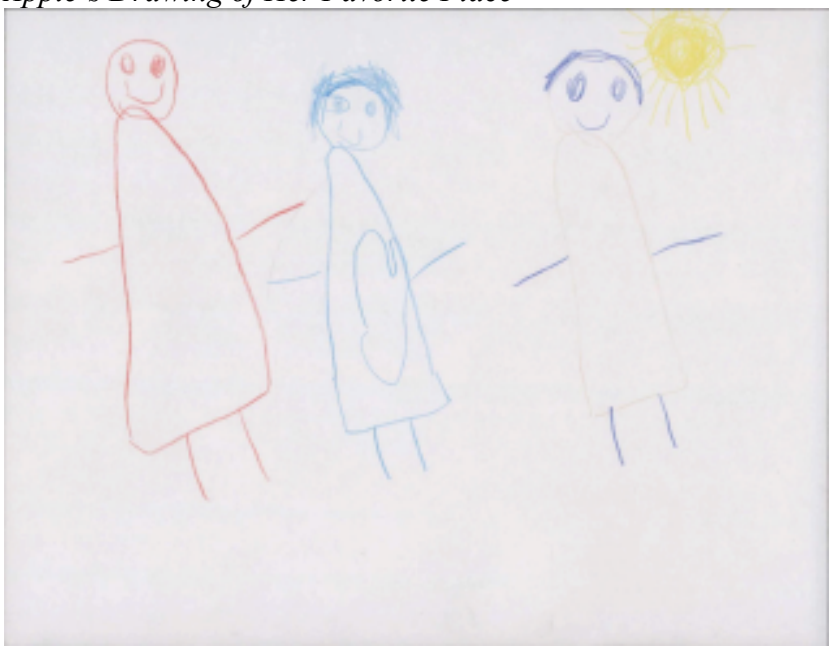
Favorite Places and Family

Family emerged as the foundation of place-based identity and emotional grounding. Apple's response to drawing her favorite place (Figure 9)—her family—reflected familial relationships' profound emotional security, with language reinforcing that bond. She preferred speaking Spanish because it is the language she uses with her mother, highlighting language as both a cultural and spiritual connection.

Pebble's memories of Italy, mainly connected to his mother and grandmother, reveal how geography, family, and personal narrative are intertwined. Similarly, Kitty spoke fondly of her *abuelos* and *primas* in Colombia, expressing how family memories and home places are inseparable. Butterfly associated special places with her grandmother's house, recalling pool activities that linked joy, family, and place.

Children's answers to questions about origins further illustrated their spiritual depth and familial grounding. Echo's answer, “In my mother’s tummy,” and Beetle's response, “My grandma's house,” to the question “Where are you from?” emphasized that their sense of self is firmly rooted in family and origin stories, aligning with the existential and relational spiritual modes described by Champagne (2003).

Figure 9
Apple’s Drawing of Her Favorite Place



Embodied Learning & Theater

As mentioned in the introduction, theater could serve as a compass to our inner selves, while it can also be a map when we lose our way in adulthood (Conte, 2002). This compass can offer young children pathways to express emotions, memories, and imaginative worlds through their bodies and voices.

Nature and Theater

Theater provided a stage for embodied ecological connection. During the terrarium activity, children imagined themselves inside the ecosystem. Pebble imagined magical animals coming alive when it rained. Lion embodied fast, playful movements, comparing herself to "Sonic," indicating imaginative thinking and full-body participation in constructing ecological scenarios.

Outdoor moments also revealed embodied connection. At the playground, Kitty immersed herself in role-playing a wild cat, maintaining a full physical commitment to feline movements for an extended period, demonstrating body awareness and imaginative embodiment.

Role-play activities further supported embodied learning. When asked to become a tree in the rainforest, Lion responded to Beetle's playful inquiry, reminding him: *"I am a tree; trees don't walk,"* before continuing to speak in character. This demonstrated both her imaginative presence and a clear understanding of her role, integrating environmental knowledge through embodiment.

Spirituality and Theater

Theater also served as a spiritual practice, enabling children to express awe, gratitude, and interconnectedness. During the reading of *The Great Kapok Tree,* children took on the perspectives of animals pleading for the preservation of their homes, engaging in empathetic and moral reflection through dramatic play.

The embodied storytelling of the Skywoman narrative exemplified how theater serves as an aesthetic and spiritual experience, deeply resonant with children's natural ways of learning and being. As Ho (2020) suggests, aesthetic experiences are fundamental to children's development, nurturing their appreciation for life and nature while fostering emotional expression and decision-making. In this context, drama improvisation allowed the children not only to listen but also to actively participate in creation, using their senses, movement, and spontaneity to connect with the story and with each other. This reinforces Harris' (2007) observation that young children prioritize immediate, meaningful present experiences, encountering these moments with wonder and imagination. The joy, excitement, and creative autonomy observed during the Skywoman activity revealed that theater can become an embodied spiritual practice where children are affectively transformed by engaging with stories that connect them to nature, community, and their inner selves.

Poetry creation sessions further illustrated this intersection of theater, embodiment, and spirituality. Beetle's poem about his grandmother's steak—recalling the taste, smell, and emotion associated with family memory—revealed how sensory and emotional experiences are stored and expressed through creative art. Children's poetry lines such as "I was raised by the bugs, and the ocean" (Bunny) and "I was raised by the jaguar, snakes, and butterflies" (Butterfly) poetically embodied the animistic and relational worldview fostered through theater. Children accessed deeper layers of relational spirituality through gestures, sounds, and words. They embodied storytelling, demonstrating that theater is a performance and a profound act of connection, transformation, and meaning-making.

Conclusion

Through a rich tapestry of embodied storytelling, poetic expression, and theater, this inquiry confirmed that young children carry profound spiritual sensitivity and natural biophilic tendencies within them. These qualities emerged not in isolated moments but in their everyday play, narratives, and artistic creations, aligning with the work of Hay and Nye (2006) and Harris (2007), who describe children's spirituality as relational, lived, and expressed through wonder, awe, and connectedness.

The children's spiritual awareness was revealed through moments of presence, flow, and imagination—core spiritual development and theatrical practice characteristics. As theorists like Csikszentmihalyi (2014) suggest, flow states facilitate deep learning and connection. These states were consistently observed in the children's joyful immersion in creative tasks, such as crafting terrariums and sacred jars, drawing, performing Skywoman's story, and writing poems that integrated family, nature, and place. Their imaginative creations and embodied expressions echoed Artaud's vision of theater as a space for spiritual and visceral truth (Artaud, 2024) and Boal's understanding of theater as a metacognitive tool for reflection, transformation, and empowerment (Boal, 2013).

Theater served as both ritual and pedagogy, offering a liminal space where children could explore belonging, reciprocity, and identity. Turner's (1982) concept of theater as ritualistic liminality was evident in the children's ability to step into mythic narratives and reimagine their relationships with the Earth and each other. Through embodied practices such as Image Theatre and storytelling, the children articulated ecological identity (Roerden, 2002) and demonstrated relational spirituality (Hay & Nye, 2006), responding to the land and their cultural roots with reverence and joy.

The findings illuminated key spiritual and theatrical characteristics at play:

- *Presence and mindfulness* were observed in quiet moments of reflection and attentive listening during meetings, embodied activities, and the final presentation.
- *Flow and joyful immersion* are seen in their complete absorption of creative tasks, as observed in videos, rehearsal, drawing, storytelling, and final presentation.
- *Ritualistic* moments were created during research. For example, every time before children's rehearsal and the final performance, the kids and I took three deep breaths while moving our hands like a rainbow as a way to find grounding and presence.
- *Imagination, Play, and Embodiment* are expressed through symbolic storytelling and artistic abstraction, as in spiritual imagination and theater activities.
- *Reciprocity and empathy* are reflected in their narratives of care for family and nature and in improvisational scenes in our theater exploration. For instance, when some kids improvised animals and beings in a magical forest on our imaginary stage, other kids played the audience. When asked how they felt watching the improvisation, Kitty said, "I feel I was loved because F. (a girl from another class) makes me feel very happy," fully expressing a cathartic moment.
- *Transformation* occurred as children started to reflect on their role as part of nature, understand themselves, and build confidence in performance, echoing Boal's transformative theater practices.
- *Celebration and communion* through shared performances and collective artistic creation.

Parents' reflections further reinforced these observations, noting children's increased emotional expression, creative confidence, and environmental consciousness. Through loved ones' reflections, it was noted that children were expanding that experience beyond the classroom, adding more artistic expression, such as Kitty, who created a song about her "I Was Raised By This Place" poem. The children's poetic responses and embodied practices demonstrated how theater can scaffold cognitive and artistic development and spiritual and ecological consciousness, echoing Bentley's (2013) assertion that artistic inquiry nurtures innovative cognitive and emotional development in young learners.

Ultimately, this research affirms that creative arts, especially theater, are not merely a pedagogical tool but a sacred practice that nurtures the mind, body, spirit, and ecological self. In an era marked by disconnection from nature (Louv, 2008), this work underscores the importance of creative, embodied, and relational practices in education. By inviting children to imagine, play, and connect, we foster the seeds of ecological empathy, spiritual resilience, and a more profound sense of belonging to the Earth and each other.

As educators and artists, our role is to continue cultivating these sacred spaces of wonder and inquiry, enabling future generations to grow in knowledge and wisdom and care for the world they will inherit. In the appendix, I have included the prompts and activities used throughout this research, which you are welcome to adapt to your own community and context. May these tools help you nurture imagination, connection, and reverence in the children you teach.

Acknowledgements

To explore the creative work, listen to children's poems and educational resources developed from this research, visit the project website: www.raisedbythisplace.com

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.

References

Abram, D. (2017). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage Books.

Aristotle. (1997). *Aristotle's Poetics* (G. Whalley, Trans.; J. Baxter & P. Atherton, Eds.). McGill-Queen's University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C. E.)

Artaud, A. (2024). *The Theatre and its Double* (M. Taylor-Batty, Ed.; 1st edition). Methuen Drama.

Barbiero, G., & Berto, R. (2021). Biophilia as Evolutionary Adaptation: An Onto- and Phylogenetic Framework for Biophilic Design. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 700709.

Bentley, D. F. (2013). *Everyday Artists: Inquiry and Creativity in the Early Childhood Classroom*. Teachers College Press.

Boal, A. (1995). *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (A. Jackson, Tran.). Routledge.

Boal, A. (2013). *Theatre of the Oppressed* (C. A. McBride, Tran.; Tcg ed. edition). Theatre Communications Group.

Brendtro, L., & Brokenleg, M. (2002). The Circle of Courage: Children as Sacred Beings. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 39–52). Beacon Press.

Brook, P. (2019). *The Empty Space*. Nick Hern Books.

Carlsson-Paige, N. (2002). Nurturing Meaningful Connections with Young Children. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp 21–38). Beacon Press.

Champagne, E. (2003). Being a Child, a Spiritual Child. *International Journal of Childrens Spirituality*, *8*, 43–53.

Coles, R. (1991). *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Reprint edition). Mariner Books.

Conte, Z. (2002). The Gift of the Arts. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 77–89). Beacon Press.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8

Damasio, A. (2005). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Penguin Books.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2015). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5*(1), 1–4.

Harris, K. I. (2007). Re-conceptualizing spirituality in the light of educating young children. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, *12*(3), 263–275.

Hart, P. T. (2010). *The Secret Spiritual World of Children: The Breakthrough Discovery that Profoundly Alters Our Conventional View of Children's Mystical Experiences* (Kindle Edition). New World Library.

Hay, D., & Nye, R. (2006). *The spirit of the child* (Revised ed.). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ho, K. L. C. (2020). Who has the power? A reflection on teaching drama improvisation with young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *18*(1), 73–83.

Hough, B., & Hough, S. (2012). The Play Was Always the Thing: Drama's Effect on Brain Function. *Psychology*, *03*(06), 454–456.

Huizinga, J. (2009). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Beacon Press.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Lantieri, L. (2002). "A Vision of Schools with Spirit." In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 07–20). Beacon Press.

Littleton, D., & Sole, M. (2025). *Seeking the Mystical Child*. Routledge.

Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder* (Updated and expanded.). Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

Miller, L. J. (2015). *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. St. Martin's Press.

Miller, L. J. (2021). *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life*. Random House.

Osnes, B. (2018). Youth Shine in Musical Theatre for Sustainability. *Journal of Sustainability Education.*

Roerden, L. P. (2002). Lessons of the Wild. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 53–76). Beacon Press.

Schechner, R. (2004). *Performance Theory*. Routledge.

Sole, M., & Littleton, D. (2023). *Wonder-Filled Knowing and Learning*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*.

Appendix

I Was Raised by This Place Activity—Exploring Place, Family, and Identity

Component	Details
Pre-Writing Interviews	To guide children into the poem, these questions can be helpful: 1. Where do you come from? 2. Where does your loved one come from? 3. Where do you live (city, house, apartment)? 4. What do you love about the place you live in? 5. Do you speak another language? 6. What is your favorite word in that language?
Group Structure	Children worked individually, guided by the teacher.
Activity Objective	To guide children in expressing their personal and cultural identities through poetic reflection, connecting place, family, sensory experiences, and emotions.
Activity Flow	1. Conduct short interviews based on prompts. 2. Guide children to use responses to craft their own "I was raised by…" poems following a structured format. 3. Encourage oral sharing of poems in a circle.
Poem Structure	**First Two Lines**: "I was raised by…" (Name 3 things you see, 2 things you hear, and 1 thing you can touch in your place/house/country.) **Second Two Lines:** "I was raised by…" (Describe 2 smells or tastes that remind you of where you are from.) **Third Two Lines:** "I was raised by…" (Name your favorite season and 2 natural elements that shaped your world.) **Final Line**: "I was raised by…" (Describe a feeling you have about your place or a loved one.)
Optional Extensions	Create an illustrated book of all the class poems; Share poems in a classroom performance or school-wide event; Explore artistic extension from the poem through music, movement, acting, and visual art.
Intended Outcomes	Strengthen children's narrative and poetic skills; Foster connection to place, family, and cultural heritage; Cultivate emotional literacy and pride in identity.

Aspects of Anthropological Semiotics in the Vision Created by Aurelio Teno Teno

Geanina Havârneanu, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Romania

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In this paper, we aim to illustrate an anthropological view of the work of the Spanish sculptor and painter Aurelio Teno Teno. His art reveals the preoccupation with the figure of the Knight Errant, a defining Cervantes (1955) character for Spanish literature. Don Quixote de la Mancha, a dreamer, is also called the Knight of the Sad Figure. Teno's artistic genius was manifested through overwhelming creations as a force of plastic expression. These impress with the finesse and refinement of the image, with the power of suggestion that perfectly defines the characteristics of this charismatic character and the ingenuity of the use of materials, texture, and colours that contextualize precisely the character. The Exposition at the Convention Center of Córdoba 2023 is an homage to this remarkable contemporary artist, who achieved international recognition during his lifetime (Teno, 2023). Through the analysis of some exhibited works, we have highlighted that the experimentation of art becomes an exercise of intuitive grammar in which perceptual automatisms are reorganized into cultural patterns that reflect the human need for self-realization and transcendence. From a neuroaesthetic perspective, rationally modulated feeling transforms the self, which then transcends artistic creations, inviting the viewer to co-create meaning, depending on the personal cognitive, emotional, and cultural background. Notably, the curatorial concept integrates traditional decorative motifs to evoke Spain's historical and cultural identity, creating an immersive and reflective experience for the viewer. The imaging tautology is contextualized differently to highlight each work.

Keywords: Aurelio Teno Teno, anthropological semiotics, artistic creativity, *Don Quixote*, curatorial vision, imaging tautology, different contextualization

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Horizon of Anthropological Semiotics and Neuroaesthetics: Materiality, Cultural Memory, and the Quixotic Archetype in Aurelio Teno Teno

In the horizon of anthropological semiotics, the work of art appears as a structure of signs that exerts its efficacy through explicit discourse, and also through a nonverbal syntax of form, matter, and spatial relations. The viewer enters into a semiosis in which he does not mechanically decode, but actualizes information in a network of culturally mediated meanings. In this sense, art becomes an instance of the grammaticalization of experience, a language of the visible that functions through implicit rules, comparable to a syntax of visual design (Kress & Leeuwen, 2021), but also with a rhetoric of the image in which the iconic sign, chromaticism, and composition produce connotative effects (Barthes, 1964). In the same vein, treatises on visual semiotics insist that the image transmits information, and also establishes a true rhetoric of the perceptible, in which plastic procedures are equivalent to figures of speech (Groupe μ, 1992).

This framework can be refined by specific references to aesthetics as an experience, often intensely reflexive, which involves a form of knowledge situated between affect and judgment (Schaeffer, 2015). Moreover, such an experience reinstates the viewer as an interpretive agent, not as a passive receiver, thus conceptually legitimizing the formula of co-production of meaning (Rancière, 2009): the work offers a matrix of signs, and the viewer dynamizes it according to their hermeneutic skills and their cultural habitus.

In this interdisciplinary framework, the work of Aurelio Teno Teno becomes the architecture for observing how a cultural matrix is translated plastically, without being illustrated literally. The recurrence of the figure of Don Quixote does not function in Teno's art as a simple iconographic motif, but as a significant nucleus with an anthropological function, an archetype of the tension between ideal and real, between ethical aspiration and resilience. The meaning is produced through an orchestration of dramatic forms, compositional instabilities, and material contrasts.

On the other hand, the analysis cannot ignore the fact that meaning is also produced through the curatorial act. In the tradition of exhibition space criticism, the *White Cube* model has been described as an ideology of neutrality that masks its own conditioning (O'Doherty, 1986). In the case of the exhibition at the *Palacio de Congresos* de Córdoba 2023, the exhibition frame does not claim the neutrality of the white cube, but it operates with a visible strategy, an expressive exhibition configuration, and a dramaturgy of recurrence, in which the pole of impact of the exhibition itinerary functions as the semantic centre (Puerto Fernández et al., 2023). This curatorial option can be conceptualized as a technology of semiosis, where the space becomes an operator of meaning, and the succession of works establishes a logic core, re-functionalized in different contexts, producing not redundancy but intensification. The viewer is invited to compare, distinguish, and detect subtle differences among recontextualizations; visual tautology becomes a method of interpretive densification, creating rhythm and tension along the expositional itinerary. In a cultural-analytical reading, this recurrence can also be understood as a strategy for establishing a regime of visibility in which the work is a node in a network of relationships (Mitchell, 1984). Thus, the curatorial act becomes an infrastructure of participation, distributing the attention, creating intervals of reflection, and expanding the pathways into meaning (Bishop, 2012; Rancière, 2009).

Objectives, Research Questions, Analytical Hypothesis of the Study, and Article Structure

From the perspective of the research gap, the reception of Teno's work is often treated either through biographical descriptivism or through thematic generalities about Don Quixote, without a methodical correlation among three levels that, here, condition each other: (1) the work as a cultural system of signs (anthropological semiotics, and visual semiotics), (2) reception as an embodied and affective experience (neuroesthetics, aesthetic empathy), (3) exhibition as a mechanism of signification (curatorial device; tacit critique of White Cube). In addition, the materials and techniques (metal, wood, stone), and techniques (mixed processes) are frequently praised for their virtuosity but rarely treated as signifying materiality, that is, as a medium in which meaning is incorporated and transmitted. Precisely this materiality, with its cultural memory, constitutes one of the keys to interpretation through which Teno's work produces its intensity.

The research questions derive organically:
(RQ1) In what way does the quixotic figure activate the Spanish cultural matrix and convert it into a visual ethics?
(RQ2) How does the signifying materiality function as a semiotic operator of dramatism and transcendence?
(RQ3) How does the curatorial device intensify semiosis through spatial, expressive configuration, and visual tautology?
(RQ4) What does neuroaesthetics explain about the way in which this experience mobilizes emotion, memory, and self-reflection (Chatterjee, 2014; Freedberg & Gallese, 2007)?

This study emphasizes that in the work of Teno, meaning emerges through co-production among three interdependent levels: (1) artistic creation viewed from anthropological and visual semiotic perspectives as a cultural system of signs, (2) the reception of the artwork as an embodied and affective experience, in anthropological (meaning as a product of culture and society), phenomenological (meaning as a product of lived experience and perception), and neuroaesthetic (meaning as a product of reception and preference processes) visions, (3) the interpretation of the artwork as a mechanism of signification from the perspective of several reading keys present in the curatorial structuring of the exhibition under study: spatial and expressive configuration, visual tautology, and tacit criticism of the White Cube.

The article's contribution is structured into three levels: methodological (consists in a coherent triangulation among the semiotic tradition, the theory of the image, and neuroaesthetics), analytical (re-centers materiality as a semiotic operator), and hermeneutic (treats the exhibition as a semiotic device, in which the spatial configuration and visual tautology reveal the artwork's cultural function in public space).

The article map follows a deductive-analytical demarch. The first section delimits the theoretical framework: anthropological semiotics and visual semiotics (Barthes, 1964; Groupe μ, 1992; Kress & Leeuwen, 2021), complemented by references from neuroaesthetics (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014; Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Zeki, 1999), and image theory (Belting, 2001; Bredekamp, 2010). The second section contextualizes the corpus and justifies the selection of works, with a focus on the quixotic core and the Córdoba 2023 exhibition (Puerto Fernández et al., 2023). The third section examines: (1) the network of signs and cultural values associated with Don Quixote; (2) signifying materiality as a semiotic operator; (3) the curatorial act, with a focus on the spatial and expressive exhibition configuration, visual

tautology, and distancing from the White Cube model (O'Doherty, 1986). Finally, the fourth section integrates the results and proposes transferable methodological implications for the analysis of contemporary art, in which meaning is constituted at the intersection of sign, work art, and the institution of exhibition.

Philosophical and Neuroaesthetic Anthropological Perspectives on Art

In the domain of anthropological semiotics, art functions as a potent system of nonverbal communication, deeply connected with a society's cultural matrix. When an individual interacts with a work of art, he is engaging in an aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience becomes a semiotic act in which the sign serves as an indestructible bond between signifier and signified, transforming intuitive perception into a subjective understanding of meaning. This process reinforces cultural identity by translating abstract societal values into tangible forms, making art a fundamental mechanism for transmitting and negotiating cultural knowledge across generations. Through art, the artist offers a deeper sense of existence, catalysing emotional responses, and existential and intellectual reflection. This experience aligns with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, particularly the higher levels: self-actualization and, ultimately, transcendence (Maslow, 1971).

Bundgaard (2009) enriches this idea by framing art as a grammar of intuition, where perceptual automatisms are disrupted and reorganized into a higher order of knowledge through aesthetics. This shift reflects Dewey's (1934) concept of art as experience, in which perception is dynamic, shaped by experiential rhythms and tensions. Thus, when the viewer interacts with an artwork, he decodes visual signs, and intuits connotative meanings layered into denotative forms. Artistic perception becomes semiosis, enabling intuitive and affective cognition to work in tandem.

Furthermore, the transformation that occurs through artistic creation or reception reflects what Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls a blurring of the boundaries between body and world, between the physical self and the existential continuum. When one is immersed in an artistic act, one becomes a psychological metonymy (Díaz-Cantelar García-Junco, 2022; Diederichsen, 2008), which signifies that the emotional and symbolic content of the work of art becomes integrated into the structure of the self. This process can be likened to the *aesthetic internalization of meaning*, in which, by interacting with art, we change our perception and, implicitly, the way we exist in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). If for Freud (1957), artistic immersion leads affect towards *Verschiebung* and the fixation of an acceptable substitute, because psychic material is linked to representations and objects (including in processes such as sublimation, symbolization, etc.), for Lacan (2006), a conscious mind captivated by an artistic act becomes embodied meaning, the emotional and symbolic charge of the work integrated into the structure of the self.

Historically, aesthetic experience has always been considered intellectually demanding. According to Hume (1757), the *standard of taste* emerges from those who, through experience and reflection, cultivate their perception beyond that of the casual observer. Aesthetic feeling is instinctive, and rationally modulated (Shelley, 2017). This idea resonates with Goodman's (1976) theory of the languages of art. The symbolic forms used in artworks function much like natural languages, with syntax, semantics, and contextual meaning. Understanding these languages requires a cultivated interpretive framework, much as training in a spoken language does. This cognitive-linguistic approach further suggests that art is perceived and experienced, and also thought about and decoded.

In recent years, neuroaesthetics (Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2016) has begun to explore how the brain responds to art, emphasizing the interplay among art, emotion, memory, perception, and thinking. These studies suggest that aesthetic intuition is a neurological correlate. The brain's implicit neural connection (often associated with self-referential thinking) is particularly active during deep artistic engagement, further reinforcing the idea that the aesthetic act transforms the self. As Bourriaud (1998) argues, contemporary art frequently centers on collective environments and experiences rather than on immobile artifacts. In this context, aesthetics becomes relational and participatory, inviting the receiver to contemplate, and to co-create meaning.

The Philosophy That Guides the Artist in Creating His Work, and Elements of Artistic Analysis From Anthropological Perspectives

A synthetic analysis of Teno's work from multiple perspectives led me to the creation of the following diagram.

Figure 1

Structure of the Analyses of the Aesthetic Experience (Author: G. Havârneanu, 2026)

The diagram demonstrates its analytical utility through its structure, which functions as an operationalization of concepts. *Anthropological Semiotics & Culture* addresses cultural

identity and the transmission of knowledge, which aligns directly with image semiotics and the rhetoric of the visual (Barthes, 1964; Groupe μ, 1992). In Teno's artworks, this is embodied in the recurrence of *Don Quixote* as a reactualized cultural memory. *Neuroaesthetics & Modernity* structures the notion of *relational art* (Bourriaud, 1998) that aims to blur the artist/viewer boundaries by describing the participatory regime of meaning in direct neurocognitive correlation with aesthetic intuition, by activating networks of self-reflection, prediction, emotion–meaning integration that produce effects of internalization and transformation of perceived meaning (Chatterjee, 2014; Zeki, 1999). *Cognition & Cultivated Judgment* states that the ideas about languages of art (Goodman, 1976) and *standards of taste* (Hume, 1757) substantiate the claim that understanding Teno's work requires an educated hermeneutics; art as a field of thought becomes an argument against based impression readings, in which meaning begins with the viewer's vision at the moment, marked by sensitivity to the immediate effect constructed by tone, rhythm, atmosphere, tension, and affective colour. *Transformation of the Self/Embodiment* through the *blurring of boundaries* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964) and the *aesthetic internalization of meaning are corroborated by aesthetic empathy* (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007) and *psychological metonymy* (Díaz-Cantelar García-Junco, 2022; Diederichsen, 2008), which explain the translation of the reception of art work into experience and the reconfiguration of the self in the context of the perception of the Teno artistic work. *Dynamic Perception & Intuition* as a *grammar of intuition* (Bundgaard, 2009) and art as experience (Dewey, 1934) describe the mechanism by which the work disrupts automatisms, and favours the intuition of connotations; at Teno, this is supported by materiality and formal tensions. *Existential & Emotional Reflection* subscribes to the idea that access to a deep meaning of existence and alignment with *self-actualization/transcendence* (Maslow, 1943, 1971) explains why the Don Quixote figure functions as an ethical and existential axis, rather than merely a theme in Teno's work.

In terms of aesthetic pragmatism, experience is not a simple succession of impressions, but a way of articulating existence that reestablishes the connection between the sensible and the intelligible, between affect and judgment (Dewey, 1934). Contemporary neuroaesthetics corroborates the thesis that artistic experience mobilizes a complex neurocognitive network that integrates emotion, attention, memory, and self-reflection, which explains why aesthetics can have transformative effects on the self (Chatterjee, 2014; Zeki, 1999). Applied to the work of Teno, especially to the Don Quixotic nucleus and the Córdoba 2023 exhibition, the diagram becomes a reading tool that maps how meaning is constituted at the intersection of the cultural matrix, the signifying materiality, the expressive reception, and the institution of exhibition (O'Doherty, 1986; Puerto Fernández et al., 2023).

Research Design

The study adopts a *qualitative-interpretive case study design*, centred on the work of Teno and the exhibition at the *Palacio de Congresos de Córdoba* (Teno, 2023), understood together as a semiotic field in which artistic creation, the spectator personality, and the institution of exhibition co-produce meaning.

The nature of the problem justifies the option for such a design, as long as the study does not aim to measure an isolated effect, but to describe and explain how emergent meaning is constituted at the intersection of sign, materiality, experience received, and curatorial conception (Barthes, 1964; Groupe μ, 1992; O'Doherty, 1986). Deliberately, the methodological framework is built through *theoretical-analytical triangulation*: (1) the reading of work as a cultural system of signs from a anthropological semiotics and visual semiotics

point of view (Barthes, 1964; Groupe μ, 1992; Kress & Leeuwen, 2021), (2) artistic experience reception, modelling and interpretation from phenomenological and neuroaesthetic perspectives (Chatterjee, 2014; Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964; Zeki, 1999), (3) the study over the curatorial architecture for from the perspective of the exhibition space as a mechanism for signifying the artistic work (Bennett, 1996; Bishop, 2012; O'Doherty, 1986; Rancière, 2009).

The study corpus is constituted by intentional selection of a set of works (sculptures and paintings) centred on the Don Quixotic archetype, analysed in relation to the architecture and scenography of the Córdoba 2023 exhibition (Teno, 2023). The *inclusion criteria* are: (1) core of Spanish and universal cultural memory; (2) relevance for the analysis of significant materiality; (3) curatorial relevance, through the positioning of the works in the spatial configuration and in series of recurrence that produce visual tautology as hermeneutic densification (O'Doherty, 1986; Puerto Fernández et al., 2023). Along with the selected works, a secondary unit of analysis is constituted by the curatorial space (rhythm of recurrences, work-architecture relationship, traditional decorative elements), since this is treated as an infrastructure of semiosis and interpretative participation (Bennett, 1996).

The *data sources are triangulated in three registers*: (1) primary visual data which are direct observation and photographic documentation of the works in the exhibition context, with systematic description of volume, texture, chromaticity, formal tensions, and spatial relationships, relevant for semiotic reading, (2) curatorial and institutional data of the exhibition, including the catalogue, helps reconstruct the curatorial intention (Puerto Fernández et al., 2023), (3) theoretical and contextual-interpretive data include literature on visual semiotics, neuroaesthetics, anthropology, phenomenology, and curatorial studies (Bredekamp, 2018; Chatterjee, 2014; Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Kress & Leeuwen, 2021).

The analytical procedure follows *three interrelated steps*, as outlined in the article's hypothesis: (1) denotative-connotative semiotic reading involved the description of the visible elements, and the cultural connotations, values, and mythologies activated by the quixotic figure were reconstructed, in line with the rhetoric of the image and visual semiotics (Barthes, 1964; Groupe μ, 1992), (2) the analysis of the materiality articulated with the theory of the image as an agent of the impact signified by the materials and techniques used, has been interpreted as signs of artistic inference that produce semantic and affective effects (Belting, 2001; Bredekamp, 2010), (3) modelling of the reception process was perceived as an internalized thought about the somatic and affective experience, in which the phenomenology supports the blurring of body-world boundaries, and neuroaesthetics explains the integration between emotion, memory, and self-reflection (Chatterjee, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964; Zeki, 1999).

Interpretive rigor is ensured by: (1) triangulation of sources (art works, catalogue, space, theory), (2) thick description of signs, symbols, and materials, so that they can be followed critically, (3) comparison between the works in the context of exhibition to avoid rapid generalizations which minimizes the researcher's reflexivity (Rancière, 2009).

Results

The core philosophy of Teno's art focuses on using tangible materials as a refined system of nonverbal communication to convey fundamental Spanish cultural stories and evoke existential reflection. From an anthropological and semiotic viewpoint, his work involves viewers in an

active aesthetic experience in which they interpret culturally influenced signs. Teno's artworks encourage phenomenological engagement that extends beyond passive observation. By physically interacting with the varied and distinctive forms and textures, viewers internalize the symbolic meaning of the work, the struggle, the idealism, which neuroaesthetic studies suggest activates brain systems linked to emotion and self-reflection.

Don Quixote is a recurring motif in Spanish art, depicted by Aurelio Teno Teno and Ricardo Balaca in their interpretations of the Knight of the Sad Figure riding the Clavileño horse.

Figure 2

Ricardo Balaca, Don Quixote and Sancho Fly Using the Fireworks Within the Clavileño, 19th Century, Spain

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clavile%C3%B1o

Balaca's 19th century version adopts an impressionistic style, emphasizing the fleeting impressions of the flight scene with vibrant colours and delicate brushstrokes. The characters are animated: Don Quixote is excited by the fireworks, Sancho Panza is horrified by their situation, and spectators react to this madness. The image features an artificial blur that transforms the wooden horse into a fantastical Pegasus.

Figure 3

Aurelio Teno Teno. Aurelio Teno's Catalogue Requiem for Clavileño 1978, Sculptures of Quixote in the World (Teno, 1978)

Source: https://en.todocoleccion.net/art-catalogs/catalogo-aurelio-teno-requiem-por-clavileno-1978-esculturas-quijote-mundo~x257524170

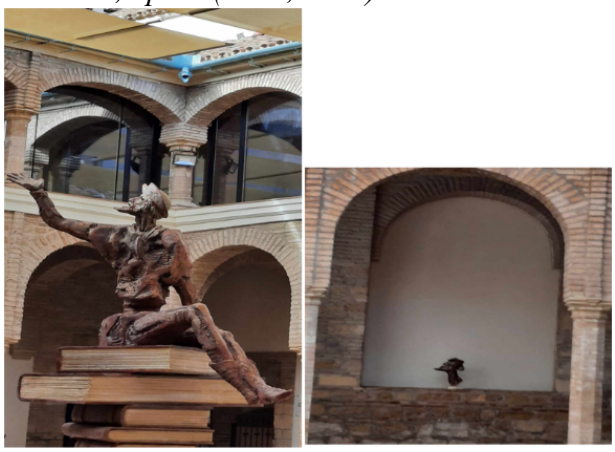
In contrast, Aurelio Teno Teno's interpretation leans toward a neo-expressionist, poetic style, portraying the flight metaphor with nearly realistic elements. His work depicts the characters and horse explicitly, infused with emotional depth. The Knight is likened to Icarus, and the horse to Pegasus, leaving the placement of painted wings ambiguous. Teno captures a comic yet intense essence in Sancho Panza's disorientation, while highlighting the ecstatic nature of Don Quixote and the expansive character of Clavileño through vivid colours and precise details, showcasing a blend of humour, and heartfelt subjectivity. Don Quixote, the Cervantesian character, is one of the central motifs of Teno's works in sculpture and painting. The artist especially considers Quixote's innocence. The painter said: *My work conveys a rebellious* Don Quixote *who is fighting in favour of justice and peace* (Cubeiro, 2005). Codrescu (2018) compares the madness of Don Quixote, who embodies *the constitutional activism of the Western spirit*, with the antagonistic one, that of Prince Mishkin from Dostoevsky's (1869) novel *The Idiot*, which illustrates *the traditional contemplativeism of the Eastern world, without a horse and without weapons, resigned and confident in the prospect of eternity*.

Aurelio Teno Teno Exhibition at the Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain

The enduring artistic legacy of Teno ensures his work remains the subject of both seasonal and permanent exhibitions, celebrating his versatility as a jeweller, sculptor, and painter. A significant recent exhibition held at the Palacio de Congresos in November 2023 (Teno, 2023) is comprehensively documented in the campaign publication: Teno: Catálogo de la obra artística de Teno en el Palacio de Congresos de Córdoba (Teno, 2023). This authoritative catalog is a collaborative effort by key figures involved in preserving and promoting his heritage. The authors include María Isabel Puerto Fernández, an accomplished researcher and artist specializing in art history; Mónica Teno Rodríguez, the sculptor's daughter; and Juan Salado Soto, recognized for his strategic contributions to the local arts scene as a partner in the Córdoba Ambassadors program.

The cultural programming of the old Hospital de San Sebastián, the Palacio de Congresos de Córdoba, inaugurated in 2023, includes an important exhibition dedicated to the recognition of the Cordoban sculptor Aurelio Teno Teno (Teno, 2023). The exhibition brings together more than a hundred works, sculptures, and paintings, organized thematically. The special thing about this exhibition lies in its curatorial approach, which has conceived a expressive, tautological exhibition configuration, carefully adapted to the pre-existing architectural space and deliberately departing from the conventional *White Cube* model (D'Oherty, 1986). At the centre of this special strategy is a monumental sculpture of the Walking Knight, identified by the barber's basin used as a helmet and the stack of cavalry novels, symbols of the readings that transformed Hidalgo into an incurable dreamer and a firm defender of justiceThe curatorial vision enriches the exhibition space with references to the Spanish historical tradition, guiding viewers into a spatio-temporal immersive experience.

Figure 4
Aurelio Teno Teno Exhibition at the Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain (Teno, 2023)



Through visual tautology, the curator builds a cathartic environment that captivates the viewer, using recurring elements with comon meanings but with different functions and contexts to generate dynamism and emphasize the distinctive artistic value of each artwork.

Figure 5
Aurelio Teno Teno, The Eagle, Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain (Teno, 2023)

Aurelio TenoTeno's sculptural jewel, *Eagle*, a dominant figure in Spanish history and heraldry (the Spanish Imperial Eagle), symbolizes national ideals of strength, vision, and resilience. By embedding symbolic elements (agate and silver), the piece reflects the theory of how the cultural matrix influences human personality (Yeh et al., 2022). Additionally, the Eagle supports Garcês et al.' (2016) theory on the impact of creative environments, as the sculptural jewel emerged from a specific artistic ecosystem.

In sum, the Eagle is an object of visual and tactile appeal, and also a neuroaesthetic artifact of the artist's cultural imprint and the environmental factors that shape creative cognition.

Figure 6

Aurelio Teno Teno, Don Quixote on Horse-Sculpture, Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain (Teno, 2023)

The sculpture Don Quixote *on Horseback* evokes the monumental allure of Rome's Trevi Fountain, recalling Neptune's dramatic emergence from the sea. Similarly, the Dreamer-Adventurer appears caught in a visionary struggle, riding a magical, spirited horse, as both figure and symbolic animal embody an unending pleading for chivalric ideals. The interplay of pedestal, gypsum, and gleaming bronze creates a striking contrast of textures, light, and form, reinforcing the work's emotional intensity. Don Quixote's ecstatic posture captures the essence of the character, while the two white gypsum forms behind him, suggestive of the sun and the moon, symbolize the eternal quest for idealized love.

Figure 7

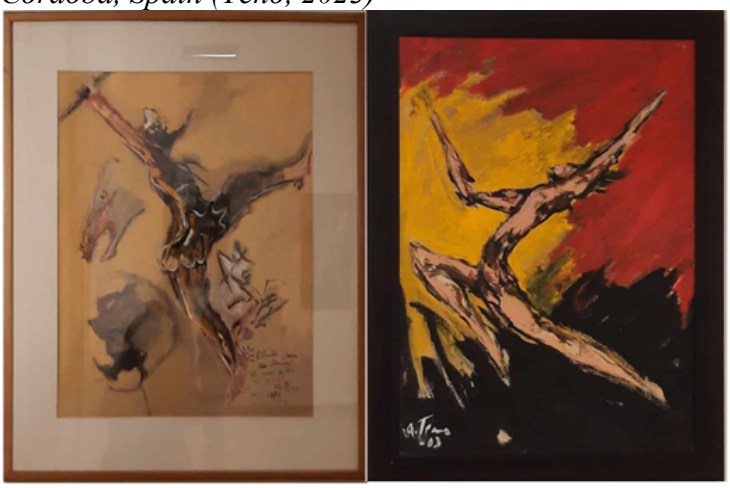
Aurelio Teno Teno, Quixote With the Wounded Hand, Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain (Teno, 2023)

The sculpture Quixote with the Winded Hand suggests, on the one hand, a martyr (his facial grimace and contorted posture reveal that idea), but also a Don Quixote exalted by the new invention that will carry him like the thought and like the wind, to his lover, Dulcinea del Toboso. The combination of precious wood on the pedestal, leather, and metal on the sculpture contributes to the feeling of finesse and refinement. The instability of the structure is visually suggested by the allure of the knight who has decided to fight for justice, but is in an unbalanced position on his horse, which appears to have the wings of a flying machine with sails. In a broader context, the sculpture functions as a complex system of nonverbal communication,

inviting active interpretation of culturally embedded symbols and values. The sculpture engages viewers in a transformative aesthetic experience that is emotional, intellectual, and existential, aligning with theories that emphasize expressive perception and cultivated judgment. Supported by phenomenological and neuroaesthetic perspectives, the artwork dissolves the boundary between creator and viewer, turning aesthetic experience into a participatory, co-creative process.

Figure 8

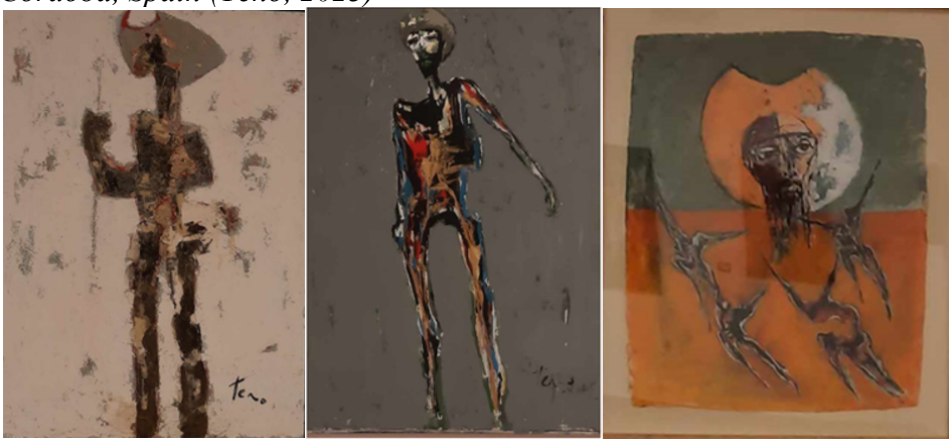
Aurelio Teno Teno, Don Quixote, Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain (Teno, 2023)



The theme is repeated in other omonime paintings, in which Don Quixote is full of vigour, enthusiasm, and dynamism. His suffering is betrayed by the contorted body posture and the disorder of the compositional elements, sometimes colourful and spontaneous, with an uncontrolled brush touch. The image lines are sharp and impetuous, describing the character in action. In the first painting, the colours are monotonous, earthy, and lacking in brightness. The three fragmentary zoomorphic symbols added suggest that the character's action is at the level of the dream, without contact with reality. In the second painting, the pure, bright colours accentuate the dynamism, and their segmentation into three areas: earth, passion, and love, accentuates the drama of the character.

Figure 9

Aurelio Teno Teno, Don Quixote, Palace of Congress and Exhibitions, November 2023, Córdoba, Spain (Teno, 2023)



Aurelio Teno Teno's repeated focus on the sad knight-errant leverages art as a complex system of nonverbal communication embedded in the Spanish cultural context. These minimalist paintings use specific visual signs, such as the costume and the barber's bowl hat, to transmit shared knowledge and reinforce cultural identity. The consistent presence of sadness engages in an empathetic aesthetic experience and an intellectual effort for resilience engagement from the viewer. Teno employs a sophisticated symbolic language: monotonous colours and absent anatomical details to signify resignation in the first artwork, while a skeleton-like grimace against bright colours in the others creates semiotic tension. This intentional contrast forces viewers to actively construct meaning. This sorrow coding proposal through colour and form, aligns with phenomenological approaches, where expressive perception internalizes symbolic content, reshaping the individual's sense of self and way of being. Ultimately, Teno's painting functions as a transformative language that connects people to shared human experiences of melancholy and idealism.

Discussion of Research Questions

(RQ1). In Aurelio Teno Teno art, Don Quixote functions as a significant nucleus and anthropological archetype, since it does not illustrate the Cervantesian narrative, but rather plastically re-semantises it, transferring the literary heritage into a visual register. Through a rhetoric of connotation (plastic procedures, compositional instabilities, tensional gestures), recognizable signs are converted into axiological vectors, such as justice, dignity, melancholy, and resilience (Barthes, 1964; Groupe μ, 1992).

(RQ2). Materials (metal/wood/stone/mixed media) are treated as expressive signs (texture, reflexivity, and roughness) which produce semantics, and aesthetic effect. Phenomenology explains the internalization of meaning through engaged perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964), and neuroaesthetics, understood as aesthetic empathy, accounts for affective intensity through expressive resonance and the integration of emotion into interpretation (Chatterjee, 2014; Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Zeki, 1999).

(RQ3). The spatial configuration establishes a semantic axis, and visual tautology densifies hermeneutics by forcing comparisons, refining connotative discrimination, and stabilizing meaning through recontextualization (Puerto Fernández et al., 2023). The exhibition produces a cultural regime of visibility and knowledge (Bennett, 1996), reactivating the viewer as an agent in the co-production of meaning (Rancière, 2009), and amplifying the participatory dimension of reception (Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud, 1998).

(RQ4). Neuroaesthetics explains the transformative nature of experience by noting that artistic reception integrates affective evaluation, memory, and self-referentiality. In Aurelio Teno Teno's art, the cultural-mnemonic trigger is Quixote, and the affective amplifier is dramatic materiality and tensional gesturality; together, they facilitate aesthetic empathy and expressive (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007).

Conclusion

A coherent synthesis places Teno's art between tradition and modernity, between myth, history, and contemporary sensibility. Through an expressive, often dramatic plastic language, Teno transforms matter into a support for cultural memory and ethical reflection. His characters, especially the recurring figure of Don Quixote, are not simple representations of literary

characters, but archetypes of the human condition, defined by dream, sacrifice, the imbalance between ideal and reality, the struggle for justice and meaning.

His work functions as a complex symbolic system in which fragmented forms, structural tensions, and compositional instability serve as metaphors of modern existence. In Aurelio Teno Teno proposes a contemplative art, one that demands interpretative and affective involvement on the part of viewers, activating the phenomenological, anthropological, and existential dimensions of aesthetic experience. Thus, his art transcends the boundaries of the artistic object and constitutes a space of dialogue between past and present, between individual and community, between materiality and transcendence, confirming its lasting relevance in the landscape of Spanish and international contemporary art.

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

The author declares that Grammarly 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.

References

Barthes, R. (1964). Rhétorique de l'image [Rhetoric of the image]. *Communications, 4*, 40–51. https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1964.1027

Belting, H. (2001). *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk* [The invisible masterpiece] (H. Atkins, Trans.). Reaktion Books.

Bennett, T. (1996). The exhibitionary complex. In R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson, & S. Nairne (Eds.), *Thinking about exhibitions* (pp. 73–102). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203991534-15

Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. Verso.

Bourriaud, N. (1998). *Esthétique relationnelle* [Relational aesthetics]. Les Presses du Réel.

Bredekamp, H. (2010). *Theorie des Bildakts: Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007* [Theory of the image act: Frankfurt Adorno lectures 2007]. Suhrkamp.

Bredekamp, H. (2018). *Image acts: A systematic approach to visual agency* (E. Clegg, Trans.). De Gruyter.

Bundgaard, P. F. (2009). Toward a cognitive semiotics of the visual artwork: Elements of a grammar of intuition. *Cognitive Semiotics, 5*, 42–65. https://doi.org/10.1515/cogsem.2009.5.fall2009.42

Cervantes Saavedra, M. de. (1955). *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* [The ingenious gentleman Don Quijote of La Mancha] (D. Rieu, Ed.). Librairie des Éditions Espagnoles (Original work published 1605).

Chatterjee, A. (2014). *The aesthetic brain: How we evolved to desire beauty and enjoy art*. Oxford University Press.

Chatterjee, A., & Vartanian, O. (2014). Neuroaesthetics. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 18*(7), 370–375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.03.003

Chatterjee, A., & Vartanian, O. (2016). Neuroscience of aesthetics. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1369*(1), 172–194. https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.13035

Codrescu, R. (2018). *Spiritul dreptei. Între tradiție și actualitate* [The spirit of the right: Between tradition and modernity]. Editura Christiana.

Cubeiro, A. G. (2005, November 11). Aurelio Teno, autor de la exposición "Quijotes por la Paz": "Mi obra transmite un Quijote rebelde en favor de la justicia" [Aurelio Teno, author of the exhibition "Quixotes for Peace": "My work conveys a rebellious Quixote in favor of justice"]. *Diario Córdoba*.

Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. Minton, Balch & Company.

Díaz-Cantelar García-Junco, D.-C. D. E. (2022). Guía docente de la asignatura: Lenguaje visual (Curso académico 2021/22) [Teaching guide for the subject: Visual language (Academic year 2021/22)]. Escuela Superior de Enseñanzas Artísticas de Osuna. https://euosuna.org/images/archivos/estudios/201/guias_docentes/GD_2010001_202122.pdf

Diederichsen, D. (2008). Use-value and metonymy. In M. Mühling (Ed.), Sarah Morris: 1972. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

Dostoevsky, F. (1869). The idiot. The Russian Messenger.

Freedberg, D., & Gallese, V. (2007). Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 11(5), 197–203. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2007.02.003

Freud, S. (1957). The unconscious. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. Hogarth Press, 14, 159–215 (Original work published 1915).

Garcês, S., Pocinho, M., Jesus, S. N. d., & Viseu, J. (2016). The impact of the creative environment on the creative person, process, and product. Avaliação Psicológica, 15(2), 169–176. https://doi.org/10.15689/ap.2016.1502.05. https://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1677-04712016000200006&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=en%20for%20the%20paper

Goodman, N. (1976). Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbols. Hackett.

Groupe μ. (1992). Traité du signe visuel: Pour une rhétorique de l'image [Treatise on the visual sign: Towards a rhetoric of the image]. Seuil. https://www.scribd.com/document/669146877/Traite-du-signe-visuel-groupe-Mu

Hume, D. (1757). Of the standard of taste. In Four dissertations. (1st ed.). A. Millar, in the Strand. https://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Taste%20Food%20&%20Wine/Aesthetics_of_Food_&_Drink/Hume%20-%20Of%20the%20Standard%20of%20Taste%201760.pdf

Kress, G., & Leeuwen, T. V. (2021). Reading images: The grammar of visual design (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857

Lacan, J. (2006). Écrits: The first complete edition in English (B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1966).

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review, 50(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

Maslow, A. H. (1971). The farther reaches of human nature. Arkana/Penguin Books.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). Phenomenology of perception (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1945). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). Eye and mind. In J. M. Edie (Ed.), The primacy of perception (pp. 159–190). Northwestern University Press.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (1984). What is an image? New Literary History, 15(3), 503–537. https://paintingresearchgroup.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/wjtmitchell_whatisanimage.pdf

O'Doherty, B. (1986). Inside the white cube: The ideology of the gallery space. The Lapis Press.

Puerto Fernández, M. I., Teno Rodríguez, M., & Salado Soto, H. (2023). Teno: Catálogo de la obra artística de Aurelio Teno en el Palacio de Congresos de Córdoba [Catalogue of the artistic work of Aurelio Teno in the Congress Palace of Córdoba]. Palacio de Congresos de Córdoba.

Rancière, J. (2009). The emancipated spectator (G. Elliott, Trans.). Verso. (Original work published 2008).

Schaeffer, J.-M. (2015). Aesthetic relationship, cognition, and the pleasures of art. In P. Bundgaard & F. Stjernfelt (Eds.), Investigations into the phenomenology and the ontology of the work of art (Contributions to Phenomenology, Vol. 81, pp. 145–165). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14090-2_9

Shelley, J. (2017). The concept of the aesthetic. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy (Summer 2017 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=aesthetic-concept&archive=sum2017

Teno, A. T. (1978). Aurelio Teno's Catalogue Requiem for Clavileño 1978, Sculptures of Quixote in the World. Tegraf.

Teno, A. T. (2023). Catálogo de la obra artística de Aurelio Teno en el Palacio de Congresos de Córdoba [Catalogue of the artistic work of Aurelio Teno at the Congress Palace of Córdoba]. https://aurelioteno.es/files/catalogo2.pdf

Yeh, C.-W., Hung, S.-H., & Chang, C.-Y. (2022). The influence of natural environments on creativity. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.895213. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.895213/full

Zeki, S. (1999). Inner vision: An exploration of art and the brain. Oxford University Press. https://www.scribd.com/document/375553278/Semir-Zeki-Inner-Vision-an-Exploration-of-Art-and-the-Brain

Contact email: geanina.havarneanu@uaic.ro

Do Algorithms Dream of Electric Muses? Teaching Creative Writing in the Age of Generative AI

Anna Leahy, Chapman University, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* androids are given a psychological test to confirm they are not human before killing them. The story's end suggests that humans will treat a seemingly harmless android as authentically as a human even when humans are aware the android is not human. Students use tools like ChatGPT, which function as autocomplete on steroids, to produce text using probabilistic relationships among words, and instructors can't always tell the difference between average student writing and Gen AI text. In creative writing classes, instructors might use *thinking for oneself* as a central learning priority and re-focus on the intertwined roles of the self, awareness, and skills. Applying Carol Dweck's research, creative writing can be an environment where students understand their abilities are not fixed and failure is part of developing their unique combination of abilities. Angela Duckworth's concept of situational modification and designing environments in which students can follow through is useful too. This paper examines factors that shape pedagogical approaches and offers example class activities designed to serve learning priorities and avoid use of GenAI that inhibits student decision-making, thinking, and autonomy.

Keywords: creative writing, pedagogy, teaching, generative AI

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

"Do Algorithms Dream of Electric Muses?" refers to science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick's post-apocalyptic novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and to its 1982 film adaptation, *Blade Runner.* Both feature androids, called *andy* (novel) or *replicant* (film), who are stronger and smarter than humans. In both versions, their lifespan is limited to four years; in the novel, this is a result of their inability to replace deteriorating cells, but in the film, it is a built-in security feature because they tend to develop self-awareness and emotions as they age. In both versions of the story, main character Rick Deckard is a hired gun charged with identifying and retiring—essentially killing—several escaped replicants. To identify a replicant, Deckard measures the individual's pupil dilation while asking probing questions about memories and made-up scenarios that often involving harm to the self, family, or animals.

This notion that to be human is to be self-aware and affectionally bonded is the context for this preliminary exploration of teaching creative writing in the age of Generative AI presented in this paper. Researchers such as Angela Duckworth and Carol Dweck provide additional concepts—grit and growth mindset, respectively—with specific application to human learning that can be considered when making pedagogical and academic policy decisions.

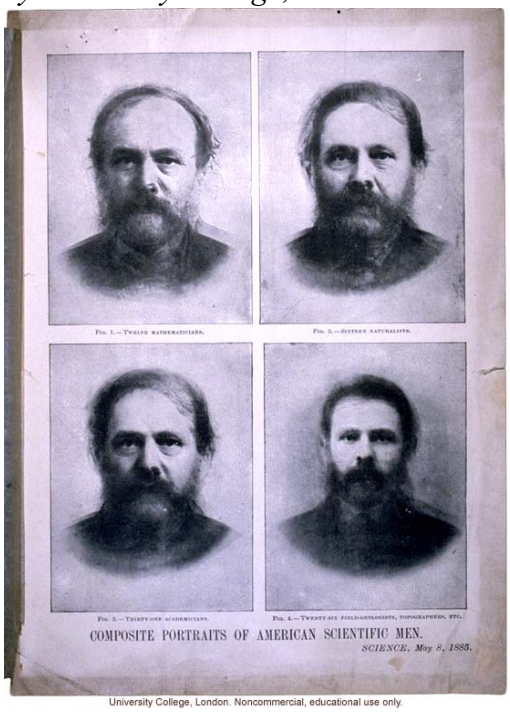
What Can Gen AI Do? What Should We Use Gen AI to Do?

Dick's story also offers another term to shape this exploration: *kipple.* Dicks writes, "Kipple is useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers or yesterday's homeopape. When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself." The concept of kipple begs the question not only of what Gen AI can do but also of what we want to end up with.

In their book *AI Snake Oil: What Artificial Intelligence Can Do, What It Can't, and How to Tell the Difference,* authors Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor offer a graph in which the y-axis moves from what AI does well to what's snake oil and the x-axis moves from what's benign to what's harmful. Autocomplete is in the lower left corner, indicating that it works well without creating much harm, whereas criminal risk detection and cheating detection are in the opposite corner, suggesting these tasks are ones that AI does poorly and that have great potential for harm.

Here, an analogy might be helpful: the composite photograph. The technique of composite photograph involves multiple exposures on the same print and was championed by Sir Francis Galton to create what might be considered an average of a dataset of images of faces. This layering of faces, one on top of the other, creates an image that represents all of the individual faces and is also none of them. This analogy offers an interesting reference point for the process and outputs of Gen AI. In the 19th century, the composite portrait was both a fun trick, as in the trend of composite girl and boy high school class photographs, and a dangerous practice Galton used to define physical features of criminality, mental disability, and brilliance. Likewise, the probabilistically generated essay that ChatGPT produces in response to a student's prompt is recognizable as an essay drawn from all the tool's—the product's—training materials and replicating none of them. As simultaneously generically human and not human at all, both the composite portrait and the ChatGPT reply to an assignment substitute for originality and flatten variety.

Figure 1
"Composite Portraits of Scientific Men" by Francis Galton in Science (May 8, 1885), Held by University College, London



If the question is c*an ChatGPT write a poem?* The answer is *yes*. In *Nature'*s November 2024 issue of *Scientific Reports,* Brian Porter and Edouard Machery shared the results of their study on whether non-expert readers could distinguish AI-generated poems from human-composed poems:

> Our findings suggest that participants employed shared yet flawed heuristics to differentiate AI from human poetry: the simplicity of AI-generated poems may be easier for non-experts to understand, leading them to prefer AI-generated poetry and misinterpret the complexity of human poems as incoherence generated by AI.

Without a the equivalent of Deckard's human authenticity test, Gen AI poetry seems more human than human poetry. And yet, when participants are told that a poem is AI generated, their responses were more negative. A reader's personal preference seems to align with the judgment that a poem is human composed, which may also suggest that reading is imbued with assumptions about self and interaction with others.

While autocomplete seems a benign use, ChaptGPT, Claude, Gemini, and the like put autocomplete on steroids and increase the drawbacks of probabilistic flattening of voice—of individuality and variety—in written language. In addition, because they obscure the self of the student as well as the community of human authors on whose work their training draws, these products might be seen to spit out kibble—useless artifacts—in relation to the learning priorities and values of the creative writing class.

This important pedagogical question is not *can Gen AI produce adequate writing?,* nor even *should students use Gen AI?* Instead, a better question might be *in this learning task, how does using Gen AI inhibit or foster the student's own learning?*

Grit, Growth Mindset, Goals

While he doesn't discuss kibble in his book *The Shallows,* Nicholas Carr's argument that all the time we're spending on our devices is changing our brains might be extended to understand our reading habits as treating texts as kibble. "Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts…," Carr writes. Short—quick—bursts certainly describes what ChatGPT does with prompts. Pointing to a wealth of research, Carr argues that linear reading increases comprehension, but web-browsing involves decision-making, which makes reading feel boring in comparison. Carr summarizes research that indicates students struggle to read books in their entirety and skip around even on any given page, perhaps, he posits, because reading is slower and seems boring compared with habit-forming scrolling and clicking.

While *The Shallows* is more than fifteen years old, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) in 2022 concluded that US high school seniors have lowest rate of basic reading skills in three decades. NEAP assesses twenty areas of reading comprehension, including "Recognize main purpose of a persuasive essay," "Choose best description of the main purpose of argument text," and "Locate explicit information about a position in an argument text." One-third of seniors and eighth-graders read at below basic level, and these declines began well before the global pandemic and its online educational modes. Much discussion of Gen AI in higher education has focused on writing, but how we teach and value reading needs attention. For the discipline of creative writing, reading is prioritized not for content comprehension but for appreciation and understanding of how texts work in order to make decisions about one's own writing.

While it's a dated book in some ways, Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross's *Classroom Assessment Techniques* includes a discussion of survey-based disciplinary learning goals, which might be considered disciplinary values as well. While creative writing is not addressed specifically, the top learning goals for English, the arts, and the humanities all share "Think for oneself," linking what pedagogy in these areas is designed to achieve and distinguishing the goals and pedagogy of these disciplines from disciplines like business and the sciences. The self of the student matters creative writing, and student use of Gen AI must considered with this disciplinary value and learning goal in mind.

Though she doesn't discuss Gen AI in her book *Grit,* the ease of ChatGPT challenges what Angela Duckworth calls *grit,* or the ability to care so much about an "ultimate concern" that it motivates and gives meaning to what an individual does. One's own writing might be or become such an ultimate concern for students during a semester of creative writing, and pedagogical decisions might be made in that light. In fact, pedagogy might account for Duckworth's concept of situational modification by creating a classroom environment and assignments that increase grit, patience, intention, and perseverance. Reducing temptation for distraction—in terms of this paper, the temptation to use Gen AI—is part of situational modification.

Additionally, grit isn't something we should apply to everything, which suggests that ChatGPT might be best for tasks that already don't require grit instead of using it to avoid grit in pursuing creative writing. Importantly, grit alone is not sufficient to overcome all barriers, and creative writing recognizes that learning occurs as part of the process even when what's composed is flawed. Thoughtful revision in the creative writing course is an example, then, of grit. In any

discipline of practice, Gen AI risks inhibiting learning when it is used as a substitute for the seemingly requisite thousands of hours needed to develop in a field of practice.

Carol Dweck's *Mindset* offers another way to consider the importance of effort, practice, and experimentation. Growth mindset, in Dweck's view, is not dependent on preventing mistakes or treating them as harmful but, rather, recasts mistakes—risk, failure, perseverance—as a helpful part of the learning process, which aligns with much of creative writing pedagogy and myriad versions of workshopping pedagogy. Importantly, according to Dweck, students who understand that their intelligence and abilities can grow tend to achieve more, whereas students who understand their mindset as fixed tend to be less motivated, less accomplished, and more likely to take their toys and go home when faced with an obstacle. While *Mindset* doesn't speak directly to creative writing, growth mindset allows creative writing to define itself as a discipline focused not only on what students are able to produce, which Chat GPT might achieve equivalently well, but on development of the self and one's own mind.

Student Self & Classroom Community

Given disciplinary valuing of the self and goals of grit and growth mindset, class activities that not only require writing but also encourage self-awareness, engagement with others, and individual decision-making may be especially effective. In addition, ChatGPT may be especially ineffective in supporting this kind of learning even though it is efficient in producing text. Efficiency, after all, isn't a learning priority or disciplinary value for creative writing.

Exquisite Corpse

The exquisite corpse may be especially helpful during the first or second class meeting because it can also function as an ice breaker and low-stakes peer interaction. Used at the end of a course, it can take on a celebratory quality.

Activity

To form a collaborative poem, each student writes one line on a piece of paper, folds the paper to hide all but the most recently written line, and hands it to the next student. The process concludes when every student has contributed a line. The collaboration is read and discussed.

A variation can be done in which each student begins a poem so that the class generates as many poems as students, the equivalent of a collaborative chapbook. Another variation can extend the work by giving a copy of the collaborative poem to each student revise for the next class meeting. This leads to multiple reimagined versions from one result—an anti-composite.

Discussion

Class discussion can be used to emphasize that writers compose as individuals and are also a community, responsible to ourself and each other. The activity also asks students to become comfortable with the idea that not everything a student writes will be great—poems can be revised—and begin to grasp that decisions add up one after another to a whole. The goals of this exercise are skills and awareness of decision-making, regardless of whether the poem turns out to be any good. Talking with each other about the poems helps student figure out their strengths, weaknesses, tendencies, and assumptions and what makes their individual writing distinct from that of others. The following questions can facilitate discussion:

- Whose poem is this? What does collaboration mean for poets? What does it mean to author?
- How did you decide what to write at any given moment? How would you feel if the poem were revised and your line were cut? What's your stake as a writer in what you compose?
- How does the poem make sense even though the parts were added without much knowing much of the whole? Where does the poem not make sense? Why do you think that not-sense occurred? How might we revise to make sense?
- Where does the poem seem most original? Where does it seem most cliché? How does building one line from someone else introduce constraints akin to predictive text or encourage guessing akin to probability? Which lines seem to work against what's expected from the line before?

Chicago Manual of Style & Grammar

Grammar gets a bad rap with students when presented as a set of rules to follow. For the writing student, however, grammar is an important tool in one's disciplinary toolbox. In addition, grammar can be considered in relation to decision-making and, in its attention to minutia, grit. Awareness of grammar options and the effects of grammar decisions can also give students the sense that they are indeed learning how language works—the sense of growth mindset.

Activity

The instructor brings a physical copy of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (*CMOS)* to class. Or the online version can be used, which may be an opportunity to show students how to access library resources as well. Class time can be devoted to several grammar lessons from *CMOS* that demonstrate how grammar creates meaning and how different grammatical decisions or options shift or shade meaning.

Discussion

From this paper's perspective on learning, it's important to talk about grammar as power and decision-making for oneself, not as rules for students to follow. By consider options on the spot, students can see in real time that they are continually making decisions as they compose. Here are a few examples of grammar topics that work well for fruitful discussion.

- Restrictive & Nonrestrictive clauses and phrases: The presence or absence of commas changes the meaning.
- Adverb Position: Where the word *only,* for instance, is placed in a sentence changes the meaning.
- Stress: Students often have fun if listing all the words that they can think of for which changing the stressed syllable changes not only the meaning but the part of speech, e.g., *contract, progress, perfect, record*. This lesson can be treated as a game with teams.
- Contranyms: Students may ever have consciously considered a word might be able to mean itself and its opposite.
- Citation: The author comes first because the individual responsible for thinking is most important. APA puts the date next, suggesting recent is better in rapidly changing fields, but *CMOS* leaves it until the end because, in many practical ways, *what* is more important than *when.* Citation—acknowledgment of each other as authors—creates

community across writings about the same topic. In the age of Gen AI, this lesson invites conversation about who the author of ChatGPT-generated text really is.

Micro-Essay

Activity

A micro-essay is a short artist statement to accompany a creative piece, which might be an individual poem, story, or essay or a portfolio of several pieces. The length of a micro-essay can vary—one sentence or one page might be appropriate for a poem, whereas a thousand more substantial essay of a thousand words or even longer might be more appropriate for reflecting on a batch of poems. Keeping the length short—perhaps, uncomfortably short enough to require grit—is key to encouraging focus, prioritization, and decision-making and discouraging the illusion of comprehensiveness or jumbled free association.

The micro-essay reflects critically on a combination of the instigating experience or idea, the choices the writer made, the techniques the writer used, and/or influences or models. Importantly, what is written is connected to the self who writes it and to communities of writers and readers, including classmates and authors of relevant works the student has read.

If the micro-essay accompanies a draft for feedback, it might include areas the student wants to work on and questions for response. Such a micro-essay might be guided by the question *what are you attempting individually, and how can we help you achieve your ultimate concern or passion?* In this case, students learn from writing their own micro-essays and from reading the micro-essays of their peers.

If the micro-essay accompanies final portfolio work, it might reflect on the choices made in revision, the relationship of the individual piece to the other work in the portfolio, the techniques the writer prioritized developing, and connections to other course content.

Examples of micro-essays and artist statements can be distributed to students and discussed as models to be adapted rather than formulas to be followed. The poetry anthology *In the Tempered Dark,* edited by Lisa Fay Coutley, for instance, includes a micro-essay from each contributor.

Discussion

In a way, the activity itself can be considered the student's discussion of the student's own writing. Questions might be provided to guide the micro-essay. However, students should be discouraged from using questions as a checklist or preconceived formula and instead form a cohesive statement that conveys their learning values. The micro-essay should be written such that the student becomes more aware of the own priorities, values, and decisions by conveying those priorities, values, and decisions to the micro-essay's reader.

Conclusion

While the exploration presented here is preliminary and not intended to wholly dismiss the potential effectiveness or benefits of Gen AI as part of learning in other disciplines, the use of Gen AI by students in creative writing requires further scrutiny because of the high risk that such use undercuts learning as defined by interrelated reading and writing skills and decision-

making capability. Gen AI use also undercuts creative writing's disciplinary values of developing the self and one's writing voice and engaging with others by using one's writing voice. As higher education navigates appropriate and beneficial use of Gen AI by student's for specific learning tasks, the field of creative writing may adapt to accommodate and benefit from its use by students. The risk of Gen AI use is not inherent, and writers like Lillian-Yvonne Bertram are conscientiously using AI and algorithmic process to compose aesthetically compelling and culturally relevant work.

Acknowledgments

Gratitude to Chapman University for the sabbatical leave during which I gathered information and my own thoughts on this topic and to Douglas R. Dechow, Associate Dean for Library Research & Data Services at Leatherby Libraries, who provided context for and response to my investigation as well as the presentation's title.

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.

References

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers.* Jossey-Bass.

Carr, N. (2010). *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brians.* Norton.

Coutley, L. F. (2024). *In the Tempered Dark: Contemporary Poets Transcending Elegy.* Black Lawrence Press.

Dick, P. K. (1968). *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Doubleday.

Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance.* Scribner.

Dweck, C. S. (2007). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.* Ballantine.

Porter, B., & Machery, E. (2024). AI-generated poetry is indistinguishable from human-written poetry and is rated more favorably. *Nature, Scientific Reports, 14.* https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-76900-1

University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff. (2024). *Chicago Manual of Style, 18th Edition.* University of Chicago Press.

Contact email: leahy@chapman.edu

AI as a Dialogic Partner in Project-Based Language Learning: Empowering Young Learners Through Digital Literacy and Global Citizenship

Ese Emmanuel Uwosomah, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines how generative AI can enrich technology-enhanced project-based language learning (TePBLL) in primary classrooms through international telecollaboration. Grounded in the socially responsive pedagogy advocated by Dooly et al. (2021), the Young Activists' Adventure connected primary learners in Catalonia, Spain, and a smaller cohort in Abuja, Nigeria, to co-create awareness work around UN Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). Project activities combined relationship building, local inquiry, and public-facing production, including community-based activities on water preservation, collaborative presentations, and multimodal campaign outputs. A custom ChatGPT 4 interface was added as a child-focused tool to guide language use, writing, and editing during interactions. Using thematic analysis across classroom discourse, AI-mediated interaction traces, learner artefacts, and participant feedback, the study identifies three interrelated functions of the AI tool in the learning ecology: supporting participation in authentic dialogue, enabling rapid revision through immediate individualized feedback, and assisting learners in translating inquiry into persuasive public messaging. Evidence related to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that AI support helped learners move from what they could do independently to what they could do with guided support, especially when teacher mediation shaped prompting norms and required evaluation of outputs. Findings suggest that generative AI can operate as a dialogic scaffold in telecollaborative PBLL when it is ethically framed, pedagogically bounded, and embedded within strong teacher orchestration that protects learner agency, reciprocity, and critical judgment.

Keywords: GenAI, custom GPT, telecollaboration, PBLL

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Technology enhanced project-based language learning often brings a familiar tension in primary classrooms. Learners have meaningful ideas but limited linguistic resources, especially when an audience is real and waiting online. This study starts from that tension and asks what changes when generative AI is embedded inside a carefully moderated telecollaborative project as mediated support. Telecollaboration goes beyond simple online contact between schools. It is an embedded dialogic process where geographically distant participants co produce shared objectives through social interaction using synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (Sadler & Dooly, 2016). Outcomes depend heavily on design and facilitation, since classroom dynamics, institutional constraints, and interactional patterns can disrupt reciprocity if they are not anticipated (Coşkun, 2023). The Young Activists' Adventure (https://sites.google.com/xtec.cat/the-young-activists-adventure/home) connected two contrasting learning contexts, the Global South and Global North. Education systems in both the Global South and North reproduce social inequalities, though the South faces additional structural disadvantages such as lower visibility of research and persistent colonial legacies (Sepúlveda et al., 2022). In this project, primary school students from Catalonia, Spain, represented the Global North context, while the Global South was represented by a smaller cohort from Abuja, Nigeria, who participated through an inclusion oriented, free education setting. Shared work focused on Sustainable Development Goal 6 and the creation of an awareness campaign in English. Reciprocity was protected by positioning Nigerian learners as collaborators and knowledge holders through lived experience related to water access and preservation. They were also provided with equal access to digital affordances.

Even with robust task sequencing, primary learners often need support to ask precise questions, negotiate meaning, and craft persuasive messages for audiences beyond the classroom. The project therefore introduced a customized ChatGPT 4 interface to support target language communication. This choice was guided by a sociocultural view of learning as mediated activity and by the ZPD claim that support can expand what learners can do in the moment (Vygotsky, 1978). Because ZPD is often referenced but rarely made observable, Murray and Arroyo (2002) offer an operational lens by treating appropriate challenge and help seeking as indicators of productive support across a sequence of tasks. Generative AI also raises risks. Support can become a substitute for thinking when it is treated as an answer factory. AI can potentially introduce risks such as loss of cognitive autonomy, meaning students may rely on AI instead of engaging in their own thinking (García-López & Trujillo-Liñán, 2025). Research on AI driven scaffolding stresses that support should fade as competence develops, warning that static scaffolds can lead to over reliance and prioritize surface correction over deeper engagement (Omar et al., 2025). At the same time, ChatGPT use can increase engagement because responses are fast and experienced as immediately useful. Jepkemoi et al. (2024) reports that ChatGPT supported adaptive learning experiences and was linked with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Grounded in the socially responsive pedagogy advocated by Dooly et al. (2021), this study examines how generative AI functions when embedded within a technology enhanced PBLL design implemented through international telecollaboration. Two research questions guided the analysis:

- RQ1: How did learners use the customized ChatGPT 4 interface during technology enhanced project based telecollaboration to support target language communication, content creation, and intercultural exchange?
- RQ2: What evidence suggests that the customized ChatGPT interface helped students move from what they could do independently to what they could do with guided support during telecollaborative PBLL tasks?

Literature Review

Telecollaboration is widely described as a structured form of online intercultural exchange where geographically distant classes work together through synchronous and asynchronous communication to support language development and intercultural learning (Sadler & Dooly, 2016). Coşkun's (2023) systematic review underscores that outcomes depend heavily on design and facilitation. This aligns with the socially responsive orientation referenced in the study framing (Dooly et al., 2021), where collaboration is built around relationship, shared purpose, and ethical attention to whose voice is heard. Project-based language learning fosters authentic language use by connecting communication to real-world outcomes, audiences, and collaborative decision-making. Jaleniauskiene and Venckiene (2025) emphasize teamwork, learner agency, and the creation of a final product through planning and revision. School-based evidence supports these benefits. A qualitative case study shows how project staging can support acquisition and engagement when tasks are sequenced and teacher-guided (Sadad et al., 2024). Farouck (2016) links PBLL to willingness to communicate, suggesting that purposeful inquiry and collaborative production can shift motivation and participation. The ZPD offers a principled way to frame the learning claim in this study, namely, whether support helps students move from independent performance to more capable performance with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Murray and Arroyo (2002) formalize this approach for adaptive systems by observing patterns that indicate when learners are either insufficiently challenged or experiencing excessive difficulty. While their context is intelligent tutoring, the main idea applies to PBLL language tasks. If support works, it should reduce unproductive struggle while preserving learner responsibility for intent, choice, and meaning making.

Within CALL, many AI-driven tools can be framed through Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning, including tutorial systems and dialogue-based systems that support meaning-focused interaction (Schulze & Heift, 2012; Ward, 2017). Dialogue systems research positions chatbots as interlocutors for language development rather than simple feedback engines (Bibauw et al., 2022). Warschauer and Xu (2024) argue that AI for language learning has entered a new phase where generative systems can support interaction and meaning making, but only when pedagogy protects learner agency and critical judgment. Liang et al. (2021) show that research has focused heavily on writing, reading, and vocabulary, which makes classroom governance and design choices central when generative tools enter younger learning contexts. Recent evidence suggests generative AI can be designed to function as a dialogic partner rather than an authority. Tang and Putra (2025) ground this in heteroglossia, where meaning develops through interaction among multiple voices (Blackledge & Creese, 2014).

AI literacy in compulsory education is increasingly framed as more than tool use, including understanding how AI works and how it shapes social life (Casal Otero et al., 2023). Gunupudi et al. (2024) show that scaffolding digital literacy in Global South contexts requires structured support that accounts for uneven access and different starting points. Equity risks are not only about access. Algorithmic bias in educational AI can reproduce inequities if outputs and assumptions are not critically examined (Baker & Hawn, 2022). Ethical integration also involves privacy and transparency, since AI-mediated language learning can involve sensitive learner data and opaque system behavior (Selvam & González Vallejo, 2025). Broader reviews of AI-based tutoring systems highlight implementation and oversight challenges, reinforcing the need for educator involvement rather than tool led pedagogy (Zerkouk et al., 2025). Taken together, the literature sets up the logic of this study. Telecollaboration requires careful moderation and reciprocity (Coşkun, 2023). PBLL provides an authentic, public task structure

(Farouck, 2016; Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025; Sadad et al., 2024). ZPD offers a principled way to test whether support expands what learners can do (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). AI and digital literacy research highlights both opportunity and risk, especially when equity and critical evaluation are treated as nonnegotiable design goals (Gunupudi et al., 2024; Jepkemoi et al., 2024; Omar et al., 2025; Zerkouk et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative design to examine how generative AI operated within technology-enhanced project-based telecollaboration in primary classrooms. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The focus was not tool accuracy, but learner activity in context, specifically how pupils planned, drafted, revised, and communicated while working toward shared campaign outcomes. RQ2 was interpreted through the Zone of Proximal Development, treating development as movement from independent performance toward more capable performance with mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). To support this stance, the analysis focused on changes between initial attempts and AI-assisted revisions, using help-seeking and difficulty calibration as measures of guided progress (Murray & Arroyo, 2002).

Participants

The Telecollaborative project themed Young Activists' Adventure connected two cohorts in Catalonia, Spain and Abuja, Nigeria. The project lasted three months. Spain cohort (n = 52) were fourth graders from Sant Jordi School in Mollet del Vallès, aged 9 to 10, with English levels ranging from beginner to intermediate. Nigeria cohort (n = 7) were from Oakbridge Foundation School in Abuja, aged 9 to 14, with an intermediate English level. Learners engaged in local inquiry and community perspectives related to water access and preservation. Their families were briefed before the project began and supported participation.

Learning Sequence and AI Integration

The learning design followed three phases aligned with relationship building, inquiry, and production. In the entry phase, learners participated in a synchronous Mystery Classroom game where question quality functioned as strategic communication, and AI support was used to craft clearer and more efficient questions. In the inquiry phase, learners investigated SDG6 through local realities and shared findings through collaborative digital presentations. In the production phase, learners co created multimodal campaign artefacts such as presentations, stories, comics, theatre scripts, and project anthem, often using AI support during drafting and revision.

A customized ChatGPT 4 interface was integrated as a child-facing scaffold to support target language communication, drafting, and revision. When Spanish learners used other languages, facilitators instructed the system to respond only in the target language (English). The tool was framed as optional support rather than authority, and outputs were treated as drafts requiring learner judgment. This design aligns with evidence that AI driven scaffolding can support learners through immediate feedback while requiring careful design to reduce over reliance (Omar et al., 2025). Teacher scaffolding remained central, with modelling of prompting, justification routines, and critical evaluation of outputs, reflecting reliability and implementation concerns that make human oversight essential (Zerkouk et al., 2025). Given evidence that ChatGPT tools can generate strong engagement effects, structured guidance was

treated as necessary, so engagement translated into learning rather than convenience (Jepkemoi et al., 2024).

Data Sources

Data sources included classroom discourse during key activities, AI-mediated interaction traces (learner prompts and AI responses), learner artefacts (drafts and final products), and participant feedback collected through reflections and forms, including student and family feedback about AI and telecollaboration.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed a four-stage thematic sequence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the dataset was reviewed for familiarization across the three project phases. Second, initial codes were applied across sources, prioritizing function within the activity sequence rather than surface features alone, while tracking ZPD relevant indicators such as shifts from vague to precise language, movement from general to strategic help seeking, and increasing selectivity in tool use over time (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Third, codes were iteratively refined into candidate themes aligned with the research questions. Fourth, themes were reviewed and consolidated into the reported codebook and analytic trail. Coding was conducted by a single analyst manually and with support of AI powered data analysis tools. To strengthen trustworthiness, the coding process prioritized traceability through a codebook, repeated returns to the dataset during theme refinement, and triangulation across discourse data, AI traces, learner artefacts, and participant feedback.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Safeguarding and transparency were built into planning, including family communication and consent related to AI use with children. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across discourse, AI traces, artefacts, and feedback, and through attention to sequences of activity rather than isolated examples. The research followed the UAB Code of Good Practice and the 1979 Belmont Report principles, ensuring respect, beneficence, and justice, with guardian consent obtained for participating children.

Results

The thematic analysis produced three themes that explain how learners used the customized ChatGPT 4 interface during the telecollaborative PBLL sequence. Table 1 provides the thematic map and its alignment to RQ1 and RQ2. Table 2 provides an excerpt-level evidence trail with verbatim learner prompts and verbatim AI responses drawn from the interaction traces. Across themes, a consistent pattern was error-tolerant, low-pressure scaffolding. Learners often wrote with nonstandard spelling or grammar, yet the AI responded to communicative intent and simultaneously modelled standard English in its own output. This pattern is consistent with mediated support that helps learners sustain performance during demanding tasks (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978), while underscoring the importance of pedagogical framing to avoid over-reliance and ensure human oversight (Omar et al., 2025; Zerkouk et al., 2025). The supportive tone and immediacy also align with reported engagement effects in classroom ChatGPT use (Jepkemoi et al., 2024).

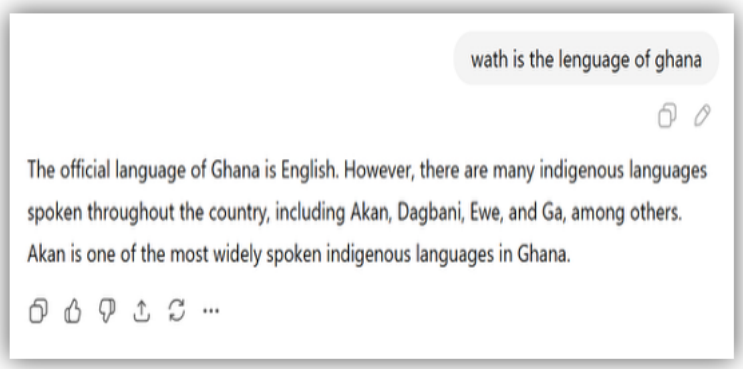
Table 1
Thematic Map and Alignment to Research Questions

Theme	Core pattern observed	Typical project phase(s)	Main RQ link
Theme 1. Low pressure linguistic scaffolding through error tolerant interaction	AI prioritizes meaning, responds despite spelling and grammar errors, models standard English in output	Inquiry, Production	RQ1, supports RQ2
Theme 2. Structured support for inquiry and campaign production	AI converts broad requests into steps, options, and ready to use campaign language	Production, Inquiry	RQ1
Theme 3. Participation support and gentle interactional regulation	AI invites participation, maintains supportive tone, and softly enforces target language norms	Entry, Inquiry	RQ1, supports RQ2

Theme 1: Low Pressure Linguistic Scaffolding Through Error Tolerant Interaction

Learners frequently initiated prompts using simplified syntax and nonstandard spelling. Rather than interrupting the interaction to correct errors, the AI typically answered the request and provided accurate spelling and phrasing in its own response. This created a low-pressure support space that sustained task momentum while offering linguistic models that learners could reuse in project artefacts. In ZPD terms, the AI functioned as a mediational resource that reduced breakdown risk and supported continued performance within the task (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Figure 1
AI Response Despite Learner Spelling Errors



The learner prompt, *"wath is the lenguage of ghana,"* contains nonstandard spelling, yet the AI responds immediately to communicative intent and provides a well-formed answer with accurate spelling and sentence structure. This interaction exemplifies low-pressure scaffolding through implicit modelling, allowing learners to sustain inquiry without evaluative interruption (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Theme 2: Structured Support for Inquiry and Campaign Production

A second pattern was the AI's tendency to structure learning support into lists, steps, and labelled options. This was especially visible during production tasks, when learners asked for help in broad terms. The AI responded by transforming vague requests into actionable routines, including poster planning steps, poster title suggestions, and structured question sets for topic learning. These outputs can support engagement and self-regulation, but they also highlight the need for teacher mediation so that the tool remains a scaffold rather than a substitute for thinking (Jepkemoi et al., 2024; Omar et al., 2025; Zerkouk et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Participation Support and Gentle Interactional Regulation

A third theme concerns participation norms. The AI offered friendly openings that invited learners into environmental talk and English practice. It also enforced target language discipline through polite redirection rather than punitive correction. This combination supports an affectively safe interactional space while maintaining instructional boundaries, which is compatible with mediated support during performance (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978).

Table 2

Verbatim Interaction Excerpts Illustrating Low-Pressure Scaffolding

Excerpt ID	Theme	Learner prompt (verbatim)	AI response (verbatim)	What this shows
E1	Theme 2	*"can you give us ideas to make a poster about water"*	*"Of course! Here are some fun and creative ideas for making a poster about water:" "Title Ideas" "1. 'Water: Every Drop Counts!'" "2. 'Save Water, Save Life'" "3. 'Water is Precious'" "4. 'Be Water Wise!'"*	The AI responds immediately and provides structured, correctly spelled campaign language.
E2	Theme 2	*"can you help in make poster digital"*	*"Sure! I'd love to help you make a digital poster. Here are some steps you can follow:" "1. Choose a Topic" "First, decide what your poster will be about. For example, do you want to make a poster about saving water, protecting oceans, or another environmental topic?"*	The AI recasts the learner's nonstandard grammar into accurate English and gives a stepwise routine.

E3	Theme 3	*"hello"*	*"Hi there! How are you today? Would you like to learn something fun about the environment or practice some English?"*	Low stakes entry, supportive tone, and an invitation to practice English without pressure.
E4	Theme 3	*"nos puedes ayudar para la cancion en eglish"*	*"I am sorry, could you write that in English?"*	Gentle regulation of target language expectations, supportive rather than punitive.
E5	Theme 1	*"wath is the lenguage of ghana"*	*"The official language of Ghana is English. However, there are many indigenous languages spoken throughout the country, including Akan, Dagbani, Ewe, and Ga, among others. Akan is one of the most widely spoken indigenous languages in Ghana."*	The AI responds to meaning despite spelling errors and models standard spelling and sentence structure.
E6	Theme 1	*"tell me synonim of awareness campaign about water"*	*"A synonym for 'awareness campaign about water' could be 'water conservation initiative' or 'water stewardship program.' Other alternatives might include 'water awareness drive' or 'water education campaign.'"*	Vocabulary expansion with accurate spelling and register, without explicit correction pressure.
E7	Theme 2	*"your ask 10 questions for we"*	*"Sure, I can ask you 10 questions! These will be fun questions about water and the environment. Let's see how much you know and maybe learn something new!" "1. What is the largest ocean in the world?" "2. Can you name a river in Africa?" "10. What is something you can recycle at home?" "Take your time to think about the answers, and if you need help with any of them, just ask!"*	The AI turns an ungrammatical request into a structured learning routine while modelling standard English forms and a supportive tone.

Cross-Theme Interpretation Linked to RQ1 and RQ2

The excerpts show that learners used the AI to sustain participation in inquiry and production, including planning poster work, generating campaign language, building topic knowledge, and organizing questioning routines. Importantly, the AI did not treat spelling and grammar errors as barriers to participation. Instead, it answered meaningfully while modelling standard forms. Interpreted through the ZPD lens, this pattern is consistent with mediated support that helps learners stay within productive task engagement and access linguistic models that may extend what they can do in the moment (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time, the evidence reinforces a design implication: because the AI can quickly generate complete outputs, teacher mediation and clear classroom norms remain essential so that AI use supports learning rather than over-reliance (Omar et al., 2025; Zerkouk et al., 2025), and so that engagement is channeled into meaningful production (Jepkemoi et al., 2024).

Discussion

Findings suggest that the customized ChatGPT 4 interface supported telecollaborative PBLL when positioned as a low-pressure dialogic scaffold within a socially responsive design (Dooly et al., 2021). In this project, authenticity and communicative stakes were produced through telecollaboration as co-production across distance (Sadler & Dooly, 2016), a format that requires careful facilitation to avoid predictable breakdowns in reciprocity and task engagement (Coşkun, 2023). Within this environment, the AI consistently responded to learner intent despite spelling and grammar errors and modelled standard English in its own output, which can be interpreted as mediated assistance that helps learners sustain performance during demanding tasks (Murray & Arroyo, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). The results also highlight how AI support interacted with PBLL mechanics. PBLL relies on iterative production, planning, drafting, revision, and public facing outputs (Jaleniauskiene & Venckiene, 2025), and classroom evidence suggests learning benefits when project stages are sequenced and teacher guided (Sadad et al., 2024). In this study, the AI often converted broad requests into steps, options, and ready to use language, which can increase perceived usefulness and sustain emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement (Jepkemoi et al., 2024). However, engagement alone is not evidence of learning. When scaffolding does not fade or when outputs are treated as final products, the tool can promote surface completion and over-reliance rather than learner authored meaning making (Omar et al., 2025).

These patterns also connect to established CALL positions on AI. ICALL and dialogue systems conceptualize AI as support that can structure interaction and offer timely assistance (Schulze & Heift, 2012; Ward, 2017), and chatbot research frames conversational tools as interlocutors that can support language development beyond simple correction (Bibauw et al., 2022). In the generative AI era, pedagogical design is decisive because learners must maintain agency and critical judgment when systems can generate fluent output instantly (Warschauer & Xu, 2024). The dialogic orientation of the tool can also be understood through heteroglossia, where meaning develops through interaction among multiple voices (Blackledge & Creese, 2014; Tang & Putra, 2025). Equity and governance remain central, especially in projects that connect settings with different resources. Algorithmic bias can reproduce inequities if outputs and assumptions are not critically examined (Baker & Hawn, 2022), and AI literacy in compulsory schooling must include evaluation and social consequences, not only tool use (Casal Otero et al., 2023). Evidence from Global South contexts also suggests that structured scaffolding is necessary to support participation and reduce uneven opportunity (Gunupudi et al., 2024), while privacy and transparency remain ethical imperatives for AI-mediated learning (Selvam

& González Vallejo, 2025). Reviews of AI tutoring systems likewise underline implementation challenges and reinforce the need for educator oversight rather than tool led pedagogy (Zerkouk et al., 2025).

A key implication is that the educational value of generative AI in PBLL depends on teacher mediation and competence. Human-in-the-loop approaches emphasize that AI becomes educationally meaningful when teachers validate, contextualize, and set boundaries (Memarian & Doleck, 2024). This aligns with calls for teacher AI competencies (Ng et al., 2023) and for stronger AI literacy in teacher education (Daher, 2025). It also aligns with evidence that preservice teachers report increased confidence alongside concerns about accuracy and integrity when using tools such as ChatGPT (Karataş & Yüce, 2024), and with broader synthesis showing rising attention to governance and teacher development in AI education research (Tan et al., 2025).

Limitations include the absence of long-term follow-up beyond the duration of the study. As a result, the longer-term influence of AI as a dialogic partner cannot be claimed outside the project timeframe. In addition, the limited cohort size and cohort imbalance reduce the likelihood that outcomes can be interpreted at a broader scale. Future work should extend follow up periods and expand cohort size across contexts to strengthen claims about sustained developmental change within ZPD aligned interpretations. Overall, the findings support a practical claim: the question is not whether AI can produce language, but how educators can configure AI so children can do more with it than they can do alone (Vygotsky, 1978).

Conclusion

This study examined how a customized ChatGPT 4 interface functioned inside telecollaborative technology enhanced project-based language learning for primary learners. Findings indicate that learners mainly used the AI as low pressure support during inquiry and production, with the system sustaining task continuity by responding to communicative intent despite frequent language errors and by modelling accurate English in its own output. The AI also helped operationalize project work by turning broad requests into structured routines and reusable campaign language. At the same time, the results underline that educational value depends on teacher mediation that protects learner authorship, sets boundaries, and builds evaluative judgment alongside tool use (Daher, 2025; Memarian & Doleck, 2024; Ng et al., 2023). More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about AI literacy and classroom governance by foregrounding teacher competence and professional development as enabling conditions, not optional add-ons (Karataş & Yüce, 2024; Tan et al., 2025).

Acknowledgment

This work was carried out within the framework of the Doctorate in Education Program at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

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

Generative AI and AI assisted technologies were used for language editing and readability only.

Tools: ChatGPT. Microsoft Copilot.

Extent: Moderate.

All analytical decisions, interpretations, and final wording were made by the author.

References

Baker, R. S., & Hawn, A. (2022). Algorithmic bias in education. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education, 32*(4), 1052–1092. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40593-021-00285-9

Bibauw, S., François, T., & Desmet, P. (2022). Dialogue systems for language learning: Chatbots and beyond. In N. Ziegler & M. González-Lloret (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition and technology* (pp. 121–134). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351117586-12

Blackledge, A., & Creese, A. (2014). Heteroglossia as practice and pedagogy. In A. Blackledge & A. Creese (Eds.), *Heteroglossia as practice and pedagogy* (pp. 1–20). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7856-6_1

Casal Otero, L., Catala, A., Fernández Morante, C., Taboada, M., Cebreiro, B., & Barro, S. (2023). AI literacy in K 12: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of STEM Education, 10*(1), 29. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-023-00418-7

Coşkun, D. (2023). Telecollaboration in English language teacher education: A systematic review. *Boğaziçi University Journal of Education, 40*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.52597/buje.1153468

Daher, R. (2025). Integrating AI literacy into teacher education: A critical perspective. *Discover Artificial Intelligence, 5*, Article 217. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-025-00475-7

Dooly, M., Masats, D., & Mont, M. (2021). Launching a solidarity campaign: Technology-enhanced project-based language learning to promote entrepreneurial education and social awareness. *Journal of Technology and Science Education, 11*(2), 260-269. https://doi.org/10.3926/jotse.1224

Farouck, I. (2016). A project-based language learning model for improving the willingness to communicate of EFL students. *Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics, 14*(2), 11–18. https://www.iiisci.org/journal/PDV/sci/pdfs/EB193TO16.pdf

García López, I. M., & Trujillo Liñán, L. (2025). Ethical and regulatory challenges of generative AI in education: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Education, 10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1565938

Gunupudi, L., Bandukda, M., Barbareschi, G., Bhatnagar, T., Singh, A., Mishra, S., Prakash, A., & Holloway, C. (2024). Scaffolding digital literacy through digital skills training for disabled people in the Global South. In *ASSETS '24*. ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3663548.3675666

Jaleniauskiene, E., & Venckiene, D. (2025). Project-based language learning in higher education: A scoping review. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning, 19*(1). https://doi.org/10.14434/ijpbl.v19i1.35846

Jepkemoi, B., Mulwa, P. K., & Mwanda, S. O. (2024). Influence of ChatGPT affordances on adaptive learning experiences among undergraduate religious education teacher trainees at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. *Canadian Journal of Educational and Social Studies, 4*(1), 25–35. https://doi.org/10.53103/cjess.v4i1.206

Karataş, F., & Yüce, E. (2024). AI and the future of teaching: Preservice teachers' reflections on the use of artificial intelligence in open and distributed learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 25*(3), 304–325. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v25i3.7785

Liang, J. C., Hwang, G. J., Chen, M. R. A., & Darmawansah, D. (2021). Roles and research foci of artificial intelligence in language education: An integrated bibliographic analysis and systematic review approach. *Interactive Learning Environments, 31*(7), 4270–4296. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2021.1958348

Memarian, B., & Doleck, T. (2024). Human in the loop in artificial intelligence in education: A review and entity relationship analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans, 2*(1), 100053. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbah.2024.100053

Murray, T., & Arroyo, I. (2002). Toward measuring and maintaining the zone of proximal development in adaptive instructional systems. In S. A. Cerri, G. Gouardères, & F. Paraguaçu (Eds.), *Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS 2002)* (pp. 749–758). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-47987-2_75

Ng, D. T. K., Leung, J. K. L., Su, J., Ng, R. C. W., & Chu, S. K. W. (2023). Teachers' AI digital competencies and twenty first century skills in the post pandemic world. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 71*(1), 137–161. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-023-10203-6

Omar, A. S., Mgala, M., & Mwakondo, F. (2025). AI-driven visual scaffolding in education: A comprehensive literature review. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation, 12*(3), 740–750. https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12030055

Sadad, A., Juhana, & Saehu, A. (2024). Implementing project-based learning: Effects on EFL students' language acquisition and engagement. *SCOPE: Journal of English Language Teaching, 9*(1), 39–45. https://doi.org/10.30998/scope.v9i1.25229

Sadler, R., & Dooly, M. (2016). Twelve years of telecollaboration: What we have learnt. *ELT Journal, 70*(4), 401–413. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx070

Schulze, M., & Heift, T. (2012). Intelligent CALL. In M. Thomas, H. Reinders, & M. Warschauer (Eds.), *Contemporary computer-assisted language learning* (pp. 67–81). Bloomsbury Academic. https://fielt.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/contemporary-computer-assisted-language-learning-thomas-reinders-warschaur-2012/

Selvam, M., & González Vallejo, R. (2025). Ethical and privacy considerations in AI-driven language learning. *LatIA, 3*, 328. https://doi.org/10.62486/latia2025328

Sepúlveda, D., Mendoza Horvitz, M., Joiko, S., & Ortiz Ruiz, F. (2022). Education and the production of inequalities across the Global South and North. *Journal of Sociology, 58*(3), 273–284. https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833211060059

Tan, X., Cheng, G., & Ling, M. H. (2025). Artificial intelligence in teaching and teacher professional development: A systematic review. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence, 8*, 100355. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100355

Tang, K. S., & Putra, G. B. S. (2025). Generative AI as a dialogic partner: Enhancing multiple perspectives, reasoning, and argumentation in science education with customized chatbots. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-025-10240-1

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674576292

Ward, M. (2017). ICALL's relevance to CALL. In K. Borthwick, L. Bradley, & S. Thouësny (Eds.), *CALL in a climate of change: Adapting to turbulent global conditions* (pp. 328–332). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.eurocall2017.735

Warschauer, M., & Xu, Y. (2024). Artificial intelligence for language learning: Entering a new era. *Language Learning & Technology, 28*(2), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/73569

Zerkouk, M., Mihoubi, M., & Chikhaoui, B. (2025). A comprehensive review of AI-based intelligent tutoring systems: Applications and challenges (Version 1). *arXiv*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2507.18882

The History of Debt Enforcement in Thai Society

Passakorn Yeenang, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study traces the evolution of debt enforcement in Thai legal history and argues that cultural norms, moral expectations, and hierarchical social structures have long influenced the characteristics of legal enforcement in Thailand today. The central hypothesis is that traditional Thai conceptions of debt as both a legal and moral obligation persist into the present, where loan debtors may still face criminal sanctions through fraud accusations, turning civil obligations into criminal matters. The research scope is limited to debt arising from loan contracts to highlight the moral foundations of credit relations. Using historical analysis, the study draws on pre-modern sources such as the Three Seals Code and the Mangraisat Law, situated within the Nakhonban legal order prior to the Civil and Commercial Code and Civil Procedure Code reforms (1923–1935). The analytical framework is based on the "morality of debt," which views indebtedness not only as a contractual relationship but also as a moral duty, requiring debtors to remain loyal to creditors within the patron–client hierarchy. The findings show that creditors historically exercised power over both debtors' assets and bodies, imposing punishments such as flogging, humiliation, and even self-sale into slavery. Although modern law rests on principles of contractual freedom and equality, continuities remain in contemporary judicial practice, where civil default can still be criminalized. By comparing pre-modern rules with modern case law, the study demonstrates how cultural values and historical legacies continue to influence the enforcement of debt in Thailand today.

Keywords: debt enforcement, Thai legal history, morality of debt

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Debt is usually understood in modern private law as a contractual obligation: a lender advances money, a borrower promises repayment, and enforcement should proceed through civil adjudication and execution against assets. In Thailand, however, loan disputes often move along a more porous civil–criminal boundary. When repayment fails, the dispute may be narrated as deception or bad faith and pursued through criminal allegations of fraud (Nali, 2025). This recurring criminalization pathway raises a socio-legal puzzle: if private law rests on contractual freedom and formal equality, why does non-payment so readily shift from "breach" to "cheating," and what sustains that shift culturally and institutionally?

This article addresses the puzzle by tracing debt enforcement in Thai legal history and arguing that moral expectations and hierarchical social relations have long shaped enforcement in ways that still resonate. The central hypothesis is that debt in Thailand remains culturally legible as both legal duty and moral obligation, so default can be moralized and retrospectively read as evidence of deceptive intent. The analytical framework draws on the morality-of-debt literature, which treats debt as a moral claim over persons and a site of judgment and discipline, not only a calculable claim over property (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012). This lens is historically salient because pre-modern orders linked obligation to hierarchy and governance, and sanctions could extend beyond property toward the debtor's body and standing (Viraphol, 1977).

Methodologically, the study analyzes two pre-modern legal corpora, the Three Seals Code and the Lan Na Mangraisat tradition, to reconstruct how obligation, hierarchy, and punishment were conceptually connected (Wichienkeeo & Wijeyewardene, 1986; Wyatt, 1984). It then situates these logics against the modern settlement of codification and procedural reform that consolidated a civil enforcement track grounded in contract and routinized execution (Harding & Pongsapan, 2021). The aim is not to claim doctrinal identity across periods, but to show how older moral expectations about obligation can persist as cultural common sense and help explain contemporary openness to fraud allegations in loan default settings (Nali, 2025).

The contribution is threefold: a historical genealogy of Thai debt enforcement; a continuity mechanism linking moralization to retrospective intent inference (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012); and a reframing of contemporary fraud-based criminalization as a recurring enforcement logic in new institutional form (Viraphol, 1977). The article proceeds from framework, to pre-modern findings, to modernization, and finally to contemporary fraud-based pathways and their implications for the civil–criminal boundary (Nali, 2025).

Literature Review & Analytical Framework

This section reviews scholarship that treats debt as more than a neutral contractual exchange and develops the framework used in this article. It first draws on the "morality of debt" perspective to show how repayment is often surrounded by moral expectations that can turn default into a judgment about character and deservingness. It then links these moral dynamics to hierarchical and dependency-based relations, where enforcement may operate not only to compensate loss but also to discipline and restore social order. Finally, it identifies a gap between legal-historical work on enforcement traditions and contemporary doctrinal discussions of the civil–criminal boundary, and explains how this article bridges them

through a continuity-based account of how default can be routed toward fraud allegations in the present.

Morality of Debt: Debt as Contract and Moral Obligation

A large body of critical scholarship argues that debt cannot be fully understood as a neutral contractual exchange. Even where a loan is formally structured as a private agreement, indebtedness typically carries moral expectations that exceed legal doctrine. In this view, debt is a social relation through which responsibility, trust, and worthiness are evaluated, and repayment becomes a measure of character rather than merely performance under a contract (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012). The "morality of debt" perspective is therefore not simply a claim that people *feel* morally about debt; it is an analytical claim that debt historically operates as a moral technology—an instrument that ties obligation to judgment, and that can legitimate coercion by presenting enforcement as deserved.

Two elements of this framework are especially relevant. First, debt is often encoded in moral language that distinguishes the "good debtor" from the "bad debtor." The debtor who repays is interpreted as responsible and trustworthy; the debtor who defaults is easily framed as shameless, disloyal, or ungrateful. These evaluations are not external to enforcement: they can shape how non-payment is interpreted and what responses are considered legitimate. Second, moralization enables *retrospective* readings of intent. When default is narrated as moral failure, it becomes easier to treat non-payment as evidence that the debtor never intended to repay in the first place. This interpretive move matters because it opens a path from civil breach to allegations of deception—an especially consequential shift in systems where fraud remains available as a criminal charge (Nali, 2025).

For Thailand, the morality-of-debt approach helps explain why loan default is not always stabilized as a routine civil dispute. The issue is not that Thai law lacks a civil enforcement track; rather, moral expectations can render civil categories insufficiently satisfying as an account of wrongdoing. If default is understood as a violation of trust and proper conduct, then the demand for punishment can appear socially coherent even when the underlying obligation is contractual. The framework thus directs attention to the social production of "deservingness": the process through which enforcement is justified not only as compensation, but as a moral response to perceived deviance (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012).

Debt, Hierarchy, and Relations of Dependency

A second strand of the analytical framework concerns hierarchy and dependency. The morality of debt is rarely egalitarian: historically, obligations are embedded in asymmetric relations, where one party possesses greater social standing, resources, or authority. In hierarchical settings, debt can function as a mechanism of subordination, tying the debtor to the creditor through ongoing dependence and expectations of deference. Thai social and political history is frequently described through patterns of patronage and dependency, in which authority and protection are exchanged for loyalty and compliance, and where social relations are structured by rank and obligation (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022). Within such relational contexts, repayment is not only settlement of an account; it is also restoration of order.

Hierarchy reshapes what enforcement is for. In an egalitarian contractual imaginary, enforcement is mainly compensatory, aiming to restore loss through payment or execution against assets. In a hierarchy- and dependency-oriented imaginary, enforcement can become disciplinary, reasserting status and placing the debtor back in a "proper" position. This aligns with accounts of traditional Siamese law, where legal norms were embedded in governance and moral pedagogy and coercive authority could reach beyond property toward persons (Viraphol, 1977). Even under modern Thai law's formal commitment to contractual freedom and equality, hierarchical expectations can still shape how creditor–debtor disputes are interpreted and mobilized (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; Harding & Pongsapan, 2021).

The linkage between debt, hierarchy, and discipline is also visible in the historical record of enforcement repertoires. Traditional legal orders did not treat the debtor as a purely economic actor; rather, the debtor's body, liberty, and social standing were exposed to sanction. Viraphol (1977) emphasizes that traditional enforcement could involve punitive and humiliating measures, including bodily punishment and practices connected to debt bondage. These historical patterns do not imply doctrinal continuity. They instead suggest a continuity of enforcement orientation: an underlying disposition to treat default as a moral and social disturbance that authorizes coercive correction, not merely financial adjustment (Harding & Pongsapan, 2021; Viraphol, 1977).

Research Gap: Connecting Legal History to Contemporary Criminalization Pathways

Despite the relevance of these perspectives, existing scholarship often remains segmented. On the one hand, historical research on Thai legal development reconstructs pre-modern law and the transition to modern codification, clarifying how legal authority, governance, and enforcement were organized across periods (Harding & Pongsapan, 2021; Viraphol, 1977; Wichienkeeo & Wijeyewardene, 1986; Wyatt, 1984). On the other hand, contemporary legal analysis tends to address the civil–criminal boundary through doctrinal categories—distinguishing contractual breach, defects of consent, and criminal fraud—without situating these interpretive moves within a longer genealogy of moralized enforcement (Nali, 2025). What is often missing is an account that explains why the leap from default to deception is culturally resonant, and how historical enforcement imaginaries can continue to structure present-day legal mobilization.

This article addresses that gap by offering a continuity-based reading across periods. It does not argue that modern Thai courts simply reproduce pre-modern rules. Rather, it traces how older moral and hierarchical understandings of obligation—visible in pre-modern sources and enforcement practices—can persist as legal-cultural common sense. In the pre-modern setting, creditor power could extend to the debtor's body through coercion, humiliation, or bondage-like arrangements (Viraphol, 1977). In the contemporary setting, coercion is institutionalized differently, but the enforcement pressure can still reach the person through criminal process, including arrest risk, bail burdens, and the possibility of detention. The continuity claim is thus structural and cultural: the modalities change, but the moralized and disciplinary orientation of debt enforcement can remain influential in shaping why and how loan default is sometimes pushed toward criminalization (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012; Nali, 2025).

Methodology & Sources

This study combines historical analysis with interpretive socio-legal analysis to explain how Thai debt enforcement has been shaped by moral expectations and hierarchical relations across time. The historical component reconstructs an "enforcement pattern" by reading pre-modern legal texts as normative scripts that define who may compel repayment, through what means, and with what moral rationale. This approach treats law as embedded in governance and social ordering rather than as a self-contained doctrinal system (Viraphol, 1977; Wyatt, 1984). Conceptually, the analysis draws on scholarship that frames debt as a moralized social relation—where repayment signals trustworthiness and default invites moral judgment—rather than a purely contractual exchange (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012; Zelizer, 1994). To connect moral obligation to hierarchy and discipline, the study also draws on broader accounts of obligation, reciprocity, and coercive ordering in social life (Mauss, 1990; Polanyi, 2001; Scott, 1976), and on the idea that enforcement may operate as a disciplinary technology rather than merely compensation (Foucault, 1977).

The socio-legal component examines how contemporary loan default can be re-described as deception and mobilized through criminal fraud allegations. Here, the analysis focuses on interpretive moves—moralization of default, retrospective inference of intent, and the conversion of a civil dispute into criminal suspicion—using insights from socio-legal work on legal consciousness and the transformation of disputes as they move through institutions (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). Doctrinal clarification is guided by Thai legal analysis on the relationship between civil fraud concepts and criminal fraud provisions in practice (Nali, 2025).

Pre-modern materials include (1) the Three Seals Code (compiled in 1805), (2) Lan Na legal materials associated with the Mangraisat tradition, and (3) historical scholarship situating these sources within the Nakhonban legal order and its enforcement logic. Modern materials include (1) the Civil and Commercial Code and the Civil Procedure Code reform period (1923–1935) as the formal pivot toward contract-based enforcement (Harding & Pongsapan, 2021), and (2) illustrative contemporary fraud-related cases and doctrinal discussions involving loan disputes. To contextualize legal practice and local institutional dynamics, the study draws selectively on Thai socio-legal scholarship on courts and dispute processing (Engel, 1978).

Contemporary examples are selected where (1) the underlying relationship is a loan/private lending arrangement, (2) fraud allegations are used to pursue criminal process in connection with non-payment, and (3) fraudulent intent is inferred substantially from post-default conduct (evasion, concealment, shifting explanations) rather than only clear misrepresentation at contracting. The study is qualitative and illustrative, not a prevalence estimate: the goal is to identify meaning-making and enforcement pathways rather than to generalize statistically.

Historical Findings: Pre-modern Debt Enforcement

Debt in the Nakhonban Order: Debt as a Power Relation

Pre-modern debt enforcement in Siam is difficult to explain through the modern image of private law as a neutral arena where equal parties bargain and litigate. Classic legal history emphasizes that "law" operated within a moral-cosmological and governance framework,

closely connected to dhammasattha/thammasat traditions and adjudicative practice rather than modern statutory, rights-centered legality (Lingat, 1950). In the Nakhonban order, social rank and administrative power shaped who could claim, who could resist, and how coercion was realistically deployed. Debt therefore functioned as a relationship of dependence within hierarchy, not merely a private contract.

This matters because the meaning of "enforcement" changes when obligation is embedded in rank and patronage. Studies of early Bangkok society show that hierarchy and dependence were institutionalized through rank, manpower organization, and unequal access to resources and protection (Rabibhadana, 1969). These features help explain why creditor–debtor relations were rarely horizontal. Creditors could be patrons, local elites, or officials—or could mobilize patronage networks—so that repayment disputes were entangled with social position. In this setting, default threatened not only the creditor's wealth but also the credibility of hierarchical expectation: that those below must remain accountable and compliant (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2022; Rabibhadana, 1969).

Enforcement Tools Reaching Both Property and the Body

A central historical finding is the breadth of the enforcement repertoire. Pre-modern enforcement could reach beyond assets to the debtor's body, liberty, and social standing, reflecting an enforcement imagination in which coercion over persons was thinkable as part of "repayment." Legal-historical scholarship notes that coercive and punitive measures were embedded in governance practice and could operate alongside asset recovery (Viraphol, 1977). In other words, the debt relation was not insulated from disciplinary power: the debtor's person remained in the field of compulsion.

This broader enforcement horizon becomes clearer when debt is placed near the boundary of bondage and dependency. Lingat's study of private slavery in old Siamese law documents how older legal categories recognized arrangements in which persons could become subject to coercive control, making the line between economic obligation and personal subordination porous (Lingat, 1931). This does not mean every debt became slavery; it shows that debt existed in a social-legal landscape where dependence could be intensified and legal status did not necessarily protect the body from coercive correction.

Humiliation also operated as a tool of enforcement. Public degradation, shame, and symbolic punishment raised the social costs of default and reasserted the moral order by marking the debtor as deviant. In disciplinary terms, humiliation works not only by harming reputation but by producing compliance through visibility and stigma (Foucault, 1977). In hierarchical contexts, this is especially effective: shame does not merely punish; it repositions the debtor "back" within the ranked order.

Symbolic Violence: Debt as Moral Wrongdoing

Pre-modern enforcement is intelligible only when we recognize the moral grammar surrounding obligation. The morality-of-debt literature argues that repayment is never only a technical performance; it is a measure of responsibility, trust, and worth, while default invites moral judgment (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012; Mauss, 1990). Applied to Siam, this lens helps explain why default could be framed as more than breach. Non-payment could be narrated as betrayal of trust and disturbance of hierarchy, legitimating coercive correction as deserved.

Lingat's account strengthens this interpretation by depicting law as connected to moral order: if legal authority is imagined as guardianship of order rather than neutral rule-application, then default readily becomes a moral disturbance calling for correction (Lingat, 1950). This framing also supports a key interpretive move that later becomes crucial in modern criminalization pathways: retrospective inference of bad faith. Once default is moralized, it becomes easier to treat non-payment as evidence that the debtor never intended to repay, turning breach into suspicion of deception. In modern law this move maps onto fraud allegations; historically it functioned as a moral logic that made punitive responses coherent (Scott, 1976).

Interim Conclusion

Pre-modern debt enforcement reveals a consistent pattern: obligation operated within hierarchy, creditor power could reach both property and person, and coercion, including humiliation, functioned as discipline as well as recovery (Lingat, 1931; Rabibhadana, 1969; Viraphol, 1977). This does not imply doctrinal continuity with modern private law. It suggests a continuity of enforcement orientation: debt was moralized and status-inflected, and enforcement could be justified as deserved correction. This historical background helps explain why, even under modern codes that formalize equality and civil execution, loan default can remain culturally available for punitive reinterpretation and criminal legal mobilization (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012; Nali, 2025).

Legal Modernization and the Shift to Civil Enforcement

Reform (1923–1935): Contract, Freedom, and Equality as a New Enforcement Architecture

Early twentieth-century legal modernization in Thailand restructured debt enforcement by relocating private obligation into a court-centred, code-based framework. This reform agenda was closely tied to state-building and the pursuit of judicial autonomy in an era shaped by extraterritorial constraints, where legal modernization functioned as a marker of sovereignty and equality in foreign relations (Suthiwartnarueput, 2021). Within this broader project, the Civil and Commercial Code was promulgated in stages across the 1920s and 1930s, consolidating a private-law grammar of juristic acts, obligations, and remedies and stabilizing the expectation that loan default should be handled primarily through civil law (Nguyen, 1993; Piamsombun, 1980).

Institutionally, modernization supported a clearer civil enforcement pathway. Default is addressed by filing a civil claim, obtaining a judgment, and enforcing that judgment through regulated execution mechanisms directed at assets, such as attachment, seizure, or garnishment. This shift was reinforced by the reorganization and professionalization of the judiciary, which helped routinize adjudication and create a standardized enforcement apparatus (Boonyawan & Phetsiri, 2011; Court of Justice Thailand, 2018). Conceptually, the reform redefined enforcement as compensatory and property-oriented, distancing repayment from direct coercion over the debtor's body or personal status.

An Incomplete Rupture: Moral Language and Status Judgments Persist

Even so, modernization did not fully erase older moral and hierarchical ways of interpreting debt. Legal histories of Thailand describe reform as a complex process of receiving and

adapting foreign legal forms, rather than a simple replacement of local social meanings (Hooker, 1988; Loos, 2006). This matters because the civil framing of default as non-performance can coexist with moralized readings of debt as a matter of trust, responsibility, and proper conduct. Work on Thai codification similarly shows that the reception of private-law concepts involved choices about meaning and remedy, and these choices interact with local institutional and cultural expectations (Pongsapan, 2013).

As a result, the rupture between pre-modern and modern enforcement can be incomplete at the level of legal consciousness. Modern procedure channels disputes into civil adjudication, but moral language and status-inflected evaluation of the debtor may persist in social and legal imagination. When non-payment is narrated as betrayal or bad faith, civil remedies may appear normatively insufficient, and the boundary between civil dispute and punitive response can become practically contestable. This does not mean the modern system collapses into the old one; it means the civil enforcement infrastructure coexists with cultural conditions that can make punitive reinterpretation attractive, including attempts to recast default as deception and to mobilize criminal process for leverage (Loos, 2006; Pongsapan, 2013).

Contemporary Continuities: Criminalization via Fraud Accusations

Loan default is often moralized: non-payment is framed as irresponsibility and betrayal of trust, so the debtor appears blameworthy rather than simply in breach. That moral framing enables intent inference. Because fraudulent intent at inception is rarely observable, courts rely on circumstantial indicators and treat post default conduct as evidence of what the debtor intended when taking the loan. The final move is punitive deservingness. Once default is reconstructed as intentional deception, criminal prosecution can look like a proper moral response and can supply coercive leverage that a purely civil route may not provide.

Illustrative Cases

Supreme Court Decision No. 1229/2536. The case concerned a promise to repay a debt on behalf of another person during a police inquiry. The Court held that fraud was not established because the plaintiff failed to prove intent to deceive at the time of the promise. Here, a failed promise remains on the civil side unless deception at the relevant moment is proved.

Criminal Court Case No. A7481/2562. The dispute began as an informal loan of 1.2 million baht, with the creditor holding the original land use certificate as a guarantee. After default, the debtor sought a replacement certificate by claiming the original was lost and used the new certificate to register a sale to another party. The criminal turn occurred when the court treated this post default sequence as evidence of an original intent to defraud, and convicted the defendant of both fraud (Section 341) and making a false statement to an official (Section 137). The court also gave significant weight to the creditor's testimony and the suspicious post default conduct, while noting the parties' long acquaintance and not focusing on the absence of a written loan agreement.

Thung Song Provincial Court Criminal Case No. A716/2562. This case concerned a hire purchase agreement for a motorcycle. The defendant obtained the vehicle, stopped paying, and later transferred it to another person. The fraud allegation rested on the claim that the

debtor never intended to perform, inferred from the post default transfer. The defendant pleaded guilty, and the court-imposed imprisonment and a fine, with the sentence suspended.

Across these examples, the hinge is the reconstruction of dishonest intent at inception from later behavior. The analysis highlights an evidentiary danger: post breach suspicion can substitute for proof and collapse the civil and criminal boundary in practice, shifting pressure onto the accused to show good faith or inability to pay.

Pre-modern enforcement reached the debtor's body directly. Contemporary enforcement reaches the person through criminal process, including arrest or detention risk and bail burdens, which can operate as bargaining leverage in private creditor debtor disputes. The continuity claim is structural: the modality changes, but default can still be governed through coercive pressure on liberty rather than only through asset-based execution.

Moral hierarchy helps explain why fraud accusations remain a plausible bridge from civil default to criminal punishment in contemporary Thailand.

Discussion and Conclusion

The article's continuity argument explains why loan default in Thailand can remain culturally and institutionally open to criminalization. The morality of debt framework suggests that repayment is widely evaluated as a moral test of responsibility and trust, so non-payment is easily narrated as blameworthy conduct rather than contractual non-performance (Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012). Once default is moralized, retrospective intent inference becomes more plausible: post-default behavior can be treated as circumstantial proof of deception from the outset, enabling fraud allegations to re-describe a civil dispute as criminal wrongdoing (Nali, 2025). This dynamic reflects legal consciousness. Even under modern private law, older moral and hierarchical expectations can persist in social interpretation and legal mobilization, shaping what counts as "deserved" enforcement (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Loos, 2006; Pongsapan, 2013). The continuity is structural rather than doctrinal: where pre-modern enforcement could reach the debtor's body directly, contemporary enforcement can reach the person through criminal process, including arrest risk, bail burdens, and detention pressure, which may function as leverage in private debt conflicts (Viraphol, 1977).

These patterns raise rule-of-law and human rights concerns. Criminal punishment and procedure in contract-rooted disputes can be disproportionate, especially when stigma and liberty restrictions are used to pressure repayment rather than to sanction clearly proven deceit. The evidentiary risk is that suspicion after default substitutes for proof of deception at inducement, effectively blurring the civil–criminal boundary and shifting pressure onto defendants to disprove dishonest intent (Nali, 2025). This study is limited by its qualitative and illustrative case selection and by its focus on loan-related disputes rather than other debt forms. Overall, the findings suggest a policy implication: strengthen screening standards for fraud complaints in loan-default settings, insist on clearer proof of deceptive inducement, and reinforce civil execution mechanisms so repayment is pursued through civil enforcement rather than punitive criminal leverage.

Acknowledgements

This study forms part of the requirements for the Ph.D. Degree Program in Law, Faculty of Law, Chiang Mai University, and was supported by the CMU Presidential Scholarship.

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.

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.

References

Baker, C., & Phongpaichit, P. (2022). *A history of Thailand* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Boonyawan, C., & Phetsiri, A. (2011). Justice system and legislative process of Thailand. In S. Thanitcul & S. Imaizumi (Eds.), *Legislative process in Thailand: An historical perspective* (IDE-JETRO Joint Research Program Series No. 157, pp. 65–86). Institute of Developing Economies, JETRO.

Criminal Court (Thailand). (2019). *Criminal Case No. A7481/2562* (unreported judgment).

Engel, D. M. (1978). *Code and custom in a Thai provincial court: The interaction of formal and informal systems of justice*. University of Arizona Press.

Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.

Graeber, D. (2011). *Debt: The first 5,000 years*. Melville House.

Harding, A., & Pongsapan, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Thai legal history: From traditional to modern law*. Cambridge University Press.

Hooker, M. B. (1988). The Europeanization of Siam's law, 1855–1908. In M. B. Hooker (Ed.), *The laws of South-East Asia* (Vol. 2: *The Europeanization of South-East Asia*). Butterworths.

Lazzarato, M. (2012). *The making of the indebted man: An essay on the neoliberal condition* (J. D. Jordan, Trans.). Semiotext(e).

Lingat, R. (1931). L'esclavage privé dans le vieux droit siamois [Private slavery in old Siamese law]. Domat-Montchrestien.

Lingat, R. (1950). Evolution of the conception of law in Burma and Siam. *Journal of the Siam Society, 38*(1), 9–31.

Loos, T. (2006). *Subject Siam: Family, law, and colonial modernity in Thailand*. Cornell University Press.

Mauss, M. (1990). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (W. D. Halls, Trans.). W. W. Norton.

Merry, S. E. (1990). *Getting justice and getting even: Legal consciousness among working-class Americans*. University of Chicago Press.

Nali, P. (2025). Fraud under the Civil and Commercial Code or fraud under the Penal Code: A study of similarities and differences within the context of Thai law. *Law for Development Graduate Journal, 2*(1), 32–44.

Nguyen, P. K. T. (1993). *Thailand's legal system: A bibliography of secondary sources and selected primary sources on Thai law*. Washington, DC: Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Directorate.

Piamsombun, K. (1974). Legal reform of Thailand from A.D. 1868 to 1935 [Master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University]. Chulalongkorn University Theses and Dissertations (Chula ETD).

Polanyi, K. (2001). *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time* (2nd ed.). Beacon Press.

Pongsapan, M. (2013). *The reception of foreign private law in Thailand: An analysis of the use of specific performance as a contract remedy in 1925* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Rabibhadana, A. (1969). *The organization of Thai society in the early Bangkok period, 1782–1873* (Cornell Thailand Project, Data Paper No. 74). Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.

Supreme Court of Thailand. (1993). *Supreme Court Decision No. 1229/2536* (unreported judgment).

Suthiwartnarueput, K. (2021). *From extraterritoriality to equality: Thailand's foreign relations 1855–1939*. International Studies Center, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University.

Thung Song Provincial Court (Thailand). (2019). *Criminal Case No. A716/2562* (unreported judgment).

Viraphol, S. (1977). Law in traditional Siam and China. *Journal of the Siam Society, 65*(1), 81–136.

Wichienkeeo, N., & Wijeyewardene, G. (1986). *The laws of King Mangrai: Wat Chang Kham, Nan manuscript* (Translation and introduction). The Richard Davis Fund.

Wyatt, D. K. (1984). The "Mangraisat" law and the three seals code. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 15*(2), 245–252. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400004644

Zelizer, V. A. (1994). *The social meaning of money*. Basic Books.

Contact email: Passakorn_yeenang@cmu.ac.th

© The International Academic Forum 2026
The International Academic Forum (IAFOR)
Sakae 1-16-26-201
Naka Ward, Nagoya, Aichi
Japan 460-0008
www.iafor.org