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AI as a Medium for Cultural Resonance: Reflections and Practice on Co-creativeness With Generative AI

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Abstract

Each technological advancement does not come without constraints. It is the job of a creator to extract the creativity of a subject rather than recoil from its existence. In the midst of the wide-ranging debate on artificial intelligence in creative practice, we employ GenAI to elaborate on Shakespearean theatrical narratives, advocating for co-creativity rather than a complete rejection of artificial intelligence. The works of Shakespeare transcend their time with themes deeply related to the human experience. Adapted globally, Shakespeare serves as a case study to visualise culture-rich scenes shifting traditional theatre narratives towards AI-generated short animated sequences. Moreover, the concept of this project in utilising the visual cultures such as Chinese paper-cutting and shadow puppetry or Greek, black-figured style that emphasises the idea of Shakespeare being irrespective of cultural context. Therefore, once guided by human intervention, AI can become a valuable tool in creative practice without diminishing authorship. The study proposes a mixed-method that combines a review of currently available GenAI models by carefully evaluating three key aspects of: visual culture resonance, narrative fidelity to Shakespeare and quality of animation, as well as a practice-led approach engaging AI and manual art intervention to achieve a specific animated outcome. The indicators gather the presence of recognised cultural motifs, ornamentation or symbolism, accuracy in narrative, as well as stylistic distortion. The outcome is presented in the form of animated scenes, involving Shakespeare narrative, AI cultural generation and human intervention by explicit art-guidance. Consequently, the project addresses narrative culture and artistic multiculturalism and AI advancements.

Keywords: AI animation, Shakespeare, human-AI collaboration

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Introduction

Shakespeare's works are acknowledged for their universality due to themes closely related to human nature and their "transnational appeal" (Coldiron, 2008). This feature of Shakespeare's stories has inspired creators to adapt his works across cultures, emphasising his transcendentality and contributing to the claim that his narratives do not belong to any single culture. Adapted globally, Shakespeare has been studied through various mediums, from analogue forms such as theatrical performance to filmic interpretations, and eventually into the digital age of AI.

Through some of the most canonical stories of Shakespeare's plays, the paper aims to explore the collaboration between the human and the non-human agent in creative practice. With the ongoing debate regarding ethical constraints and possible applications of AI, the timely reminiscence of "to be or not to be" arises as "to AI or not to AI" (Hougaard, 2024). In this context, there is a predominant conclusion among research advocating for the use of generative AI, while emphasising the need for transparent and ethical processes (Piskopani et al., 2023; Yusa et al., 2022). This discussion does not depart from that view yet provides practical cases where control of AI is strictly tied to manipulation of the output and manual intervention.

With the application of the cultural frameworks to the project, the paper underscores the possibilities of sustaining heritage aesthetics by transforming them into another medium, namely animation. This ultimately poses the question of whether AI can be controlled through prompt-based direction to achieve the intended outcome of the animation, and how such a process can be delivered ethically. In this paper, we opt for a mixed-method approach that elucidates the role of the human author while utilising modern AI technologies By doing so, we argue that the integration of AI into creative practice can become a valid option; for this reason, continual analysis and exploration of ethical workflows remain necessary to avoid visual plagiarism and aesthetic deception.

Literature Review

Transforming cultural contexts into modern mediums, in particular AI, requires specific conditions to remain ethical (Pansoni et al., 2023). There has been an overlapping concern regarding *"originality and authenticity"* in art and design practice, as it may *"lead to a devaluation of the artistic process"* (Zhou & Nabus, 2023). The current state of text-to-image models tends to miss the author's intention and aesthetic standards (He, 2024) or imposes inaccurate outcomes due to poor data quality (Wang et al., 2023). However, their potential in artistic media can alter the creative process (Epstein & Hertzmann, 2023). One such study emphasises the need for innovation, respecting artistic values and fostering technological advancements (Izani et al., 2024). Moreover, implementing AI in the creative process can serve as a form of mass communication (Yixuan et al., 2024), where visual languages can be shared, studied, and recreated with little effort.

However, current tools continue to struggle with character shaping as well as the integration of art and culture (Cong, 2024). Researchers have underlined the potential loss of cultural depth (Alkhraisat, 2025), and historical connotations require more complex processes (Vargün, 2023). All these studies reflect one central aim, that is, to embrace modern technologies yet remain in control of the process and outcome. Such a process in AI animation includes the stage of model training but also prompt design, *as "the weighting of image elements depends not only on visual salience and model training but also on the textual prompts provided"*(Pham et al., 2025).

Consequently, through direct control of prompts and art direction, we can maintain authorship without falling into unethical practices.

Methodology

This paper employs a practice-based study, where the textual narratives of Shakespeare are prompted into generative models to achieve visual styles resembling Chinese papercutting, shadow puppetry, and Greek black-figure aesthetics. Following this step, AI models such as Seedance and Hailuo 2.0, together with Adobe Premiere software, were used to transform still images into an animated format. We apply the approach of co-creation, as only human-based aesthetic judgment is able to evaluate the quality of a work (Vinchon et al., 2023). While AI is utilised as generative support, the human agency ensures accuracy and aesthetic appeal, thus reflecting a co-creative approach rather than unsupervised generation. As explained in the introduction section, the project involves canonical narratives of Shakespeare as a baseline, such as Macbeth's three witches, Romeo and Juliet balcony scene, and the murder of Julius Caesar. The reasoning for translating Shakespeare into different visual languages lies in universalities of the stories, the narrative aim is the allusion to each of the chosen works.

Results

Three Witches

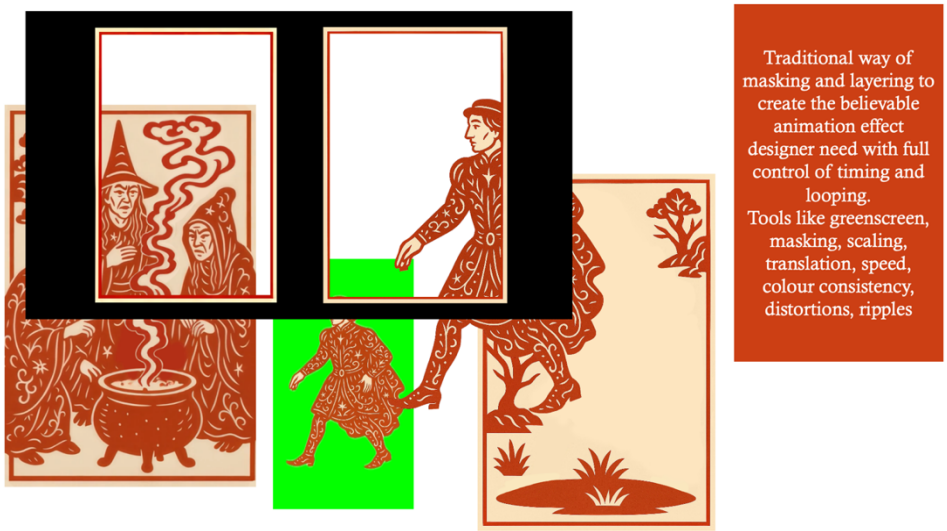
One of the most predominant works of Shakespeare is *Macbeth*, with the most recognised symbol of the three witches embodying fate. Their depiction has varied across filmic mediums, portraying them either with otherworldly qualities or as moral observers. The first step involved generating images with papercutting aesthetics depicting the three witches through an iterative prompt. After multiple alterations, two final images were chosen for animation, both featuring a vertical composition. The outputs were evaluated based on cultural motif recognition, narrative fidelity, as AI tends to hallucinate and distort crucial visual symbols, and overall animation quality.

Figure 1

Two Static Images Generated With ChatGPT With a Prompt of Chinese Paper-Cutting

Besides the misalignment with the intended outcome of the animation, the project aims to showcase co-creativity and, more importantly, the collaboration between the human and AI. The distortions in narrative and animation quality were addressed through manual editing using Adobe Premiere.

Figure 2
The Process of Manual Editing With Adobe Premiere. The Images Are Animated Within Two Vertical Frames.



A mixed-media approach allows for exploration of AI tools, their potential, and their visuality while at the same time retaining the creative reins. One must remember that control of the outcome must not lie solely on the non-human side. In this situation, the vertical composition was enhanced by using the two scenes within a single frame. Moreover, through manual editing, the narrative extends across both frames. The predominant control of the human retains authorship on the author's side; such an approach promotes co-creativeness in culture-based animation.

Shadow Puppetry-Inspired Animation

Since the emergence of AI, creative production has undergone significant change. High-quality images are now accessible within seconds. This situation drastically alters the design process, as AI becomes a material, while the human role shifts towards that of an art director rather than traditional skill-oriented authorship. Besides the evaluation of cultural matter, aesthetic resonance requires human interpretive judgment - something AI inherently lacks. Traditionally, animation movement often eschews realism for more individual character motion, and embraces exaggeration as critical principle, which is dependent on the overall stylistic and narrative framework of an animation (Pierson, 2019).

Figure 3
The Animation Process With Manual Editing

Shadow puppetry features two aesthetics: the actual design of the puppets and the performance – their shadow. As their heritage currently shows a declining tendency, researchers repeatedly look for opportunities to sustain this aesthetic legacy or even elevate it through new mediums (Lin et al., 2013). Based on the Shakespearean narrative of *Romeo and Juliet*, the DALLE model was prompted to produce puppet-like aesthetics for two images, which were later animated with the Hailuo 2.0 model. Manual interventions included looping for motion consistency, aiming not to affect the revered animation quality.

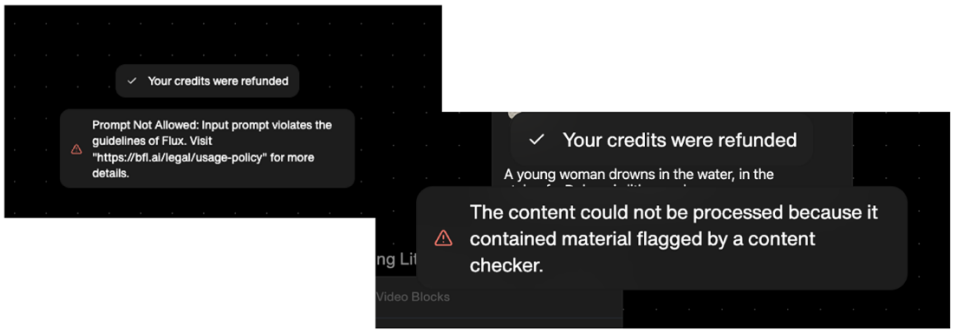
Figure 4
Keyframes From the Final Animation With the Style of Chinese Puppetry

Content Moderation – The Case Study of Black-Figured Pottery

The last animation, based on the narrative of *Julius Caesar* by Shakespeare, revealed an additional aspect of open-based model animation. Following the style generation of black-figure pottery, models such as Killing, Hailuo, and Seedance were prompted to adapt the murder of Julius Caesar. One significant challenge encountered throughout the process was the content moderation embedded in open-access platforms. Even within non-realistic, art-related

practices, these platforms restrict outputs due to policy limitations. While violent content in filmic mediums is treated as part of artistic expression, most online-based platforms either refuse the prompt or, at best, avoid generating the actual violent scene.

Figure 5
The Examples of Content Moderation Messages by Different Platforms



For our case study, while the Runway model refused any textual prompts closely related to violence, the iterative use of euphemisms was allowed in the Seedance model. These discrepancies regarding violent content generation may be linked to the origins of each model.

Figure 6
The Keyframes of Final Animation With MOHO Based on Images Generated With AI

Consequently, the actual murder scene was animated manually with MOHO software. Even with clear cultural connotations in the text input and visual style, the models continued to limit the generation. The iterative process revealed either a complete misalignment of the prompt or a direct rejection of the prompt. With the rapid development of online-based models, the situation in which platform policy interferes with generative freedom may not change in the near future, as access remains conditioned by content moderation in general.

Discussion

There is one important aspect that may emerge in this discussion: as current text-to-video models do not provide sufficient outcomes for animation production, human intervention remains necessary. However, the practice may eventually shift towards more text-based generation, where manual interventions will no longer be part of the workflow. Even if such a situation occurs in the near future, the initial stages of animation development, such as storyboarding and art direction, ultimately remain on the human side. They might be supported

by corresponding GenAI-tools – but the crucial point is the human decision making at each juncture of the iterative creative process. In that sense, the artist guides along AI in similar ways a director would do with aa creative team – carefully curating choices that ultimately render the outcomes their very own. It is important to highlight ethical methods of designing with AI, including transparent and human oriented processes. Moreover, the limitations of AI identified by the industry, such as biased generation, style inconsistency, and motion distortions, which are hallucinations, are aspects that, with poor data quality, will continue to persist. Therefore, human supervision and artistic intervention are what ultimately grant authorship.

Further study is encouraged to discuss creative workflows for educational purposes, guiding users in the ethical use of AI. Moreover, due to the rapid spread of online-based models, animation has the potential to shift towards a more automated process, and therefore, future research may engage practitioners within the field as study subjects.

Conclusion

With the fast pace of AI development among creative industries, its increasing involvement in the animation field is unavoidable. This paper demonstrated through a collaborative workflow that even with open based models, the human artist remains the central aspect of successful animation, as AI cannot surpass creative judgment. The intention and ideation process supported by manual adjustment places AI as a tool within the overall process. Through culture-oriented case studies, the paper underscored three major aspects: cultural evaluation, motion alignment and content moderation. Framed within the heritage-based narratives of Shakespeare, these aspects provided a proposition for a creative workflow where AI offers variations, yet the human artist shapes aesthetic fidelity and narrative consistency.

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Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Communication of Thai Daughters-in-Law Abroad: A Case Study of the YouTube Channel *Jayy Crane*

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Abstract

This research article, titled "Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Communication of Thai Daughters-in-Law Abroad: A Case Study of the YouTube Channel *Jayy Crane*" aims to analyze the adaptation and cross-cultural communication strategies of Thai daughters-in-law abroad: A Case Study of the YouTube Channel *Jayy Crane*. The researcher selected a purposive sample, namely four video clips from the YouTube channel named *Jayy Crane* that had the most views. The research methodology employed documentary research and textual analysis of video clips. Cross-cultural communication theory is then employed as a framework for analysis, utilising the Integrative Model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory of Young Yun Kim (2001). This model posits that cross-cultural adaptation is a process of integrating the acquisition of a new language and culture with one's original identity, culminating in the ability to coexist within that society. The results of the research were presented in a descriptive analysis format. The study identified two main aspects of "Thai living." The first concerns food, exemplified by a video promoting Thai cuisine internationally, reflecting cross-cultural integration and the dissemination of "Thainess" by Thais abroad. The second relates to language use, with Thai employed alongside English in programs for narrative interpretation and language instruction. Accurate and intelligible Thai usage was observed, underscoring its cultural significance. In academic contexts, English predominates, yet Thai translations and explanations appear consistently, indicating adaptation to foreign cultures while maintaining core elements of Thainess.

Keywords: cross-cultural, adaptation, communication, Thai daughters-in-law abroad

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Introduction

Communication is the process of transmitting messages from a sender to a receiver through various channels and strategies such as writing, speaking, gestures, or symbolic sounds. Its purpose is to create mutual understanding between communicators, ensuring that the message intended by the sender is correctly perceived by the receiver. The medium of communication is language, which may be spoken or written and is used as a means of expression by a particular community. Each community has its own language, which may include both verbal and non-verbal forms; for instance, Thai people use the Thai language. Language is thus regarded as a fundamental tool of human communication. As Watthanapradit (2017, p. 1) asserted, language functions as an instrument of interaction among humans, whether through reading, listening, speaking, or writing, all of which possess distinctive characteristics and undergo constant change.

At present, communication has become increasingly convenient, both locally and globally, owing to the significant role of the internet. Consequently, cross-cultural communication is now more prominent than in the past. The factors that drive such intercultural communication extend beyond commerce and education to include migration and settlement abroad. Particularly notable is the case of individuals who marry and relocate to live with their spouses in foreign countries, which has become an important dimension in the study of cross-cultural communication.

There are multiple theories of intercultural communication; however, one theory that explicitly addresses cross-cultural adaptation is the Integrative Model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation proposed by Young Yun Kim (2001, pp. 180–200). Kim posits that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic process in which individuals living outside of their own cultural milieu ("strangers") must continuously interact with the host environment in order to function effectively and maintain psychological well-being. The model emphasizes both internal factors (such as predisposition, attitudes, and personality) and external factors (including host receptivity, conformity pressure, ethnic social networks, and broader socio-environmental conditions) that collectively influence the adaptation process.

The outcomes of successful adaptation are reflected in one's ability to perform everyday tasks within the host society (functional fitness), accompanied by enhanced psychological health, including self-confidence and overall mental well-being. Ultimately, this process leads to the development of an intercultural identity, wherein individuals do not completely abandon their original culture but instead create a hybrid identity that exists "in-between" cultures, integrating elements of both their heritage and host societies.

Adaptation toward the integration of Thai ways of life into foreign cultures is of critical importance for individuals who relocate to live in unfamiliar environments characterized by different languages, traditions, and cultural practices. Human beings are naturally accustomed to the environments in which they were raised; however, migration—particularly to other countries with divergent languages, beliefs, and lifestyles—inevitably requires processes of adjustment to new surroundings. Once adaptation occurs, cultural integration follows, wherein one's original culture and the host culture blend organically. Such integration manifests in everyday life, dietary practices, and even belief systems.

In contemporary society, many individuals have chosen to share their experiences of living abroad as foreigners in order to present their identities as Thai people residing overseas.

These personal narratives often highlight the processes of adaptation to host cultures that differ from their native cultural contexts. Importantly, such stories are disseminated widely through various online platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. One prominent example is the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane*, which has gained significant popularity and viewership by showcasing the integration of Thai ways of life into foreign cultural environments.

The YouTube channel *Jayy Crane* presents the lifestyle of "Jah," a Thai woman who married and relocated to the United States to live with her spouse. The content primarily highlights aspects of daily life and the preparation of interesting dishes, particularly Thai cuisine prepared for foreigners or her husband's relatives. Jah conducts the program mainly in English, with Thai subtitles provided throughout each video. In certain segments, however, she also incorporates spoken Thai into her narration. This demonstrates a seamless integration of the two cultures, both linguistically and culturally, within her channel's presentation.

The research team is therefore interested in studying and analyzing video clips that depict the lifestyle of Thai women who have married and relocated abroad, with particular reference to the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane.* The aim of this study is to explore the processes of adaptation and the intercultural communication strategies employed by Thai women living in foreign cultural contexts. The findings of this research may provide valuable insights and serve as a guideline for promoting Thai identity and culture to a wider international audience. Furthermore, it is anticipated that readers will gain a deeper understanding of cultural adaptation and intercultural communication strategies, thereby contributing to both academic knowledge and the practical advancement of intercultural communication studies.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to analyze the processes of cultural adaptation and the strategies of intercultural communication employed by Thai women living abroad: A case study of the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane.*

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on analyzing the processes of cultural adaptation and the strategies of intercultural communication employed by Thai women living abroad, with a specific case study of the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane.* The channel presents the personal life of "Jah," a Thai woman who married and relocated to the United States. Through her video content, she documents her everyday lifestyle and experiences as a foreign resident, seamlessly integrating Thai cultural elements into the host society.

The scope of the research emphasizes video clips produced by *Jayy Crane,* which highlight the blending of Thai traditions and practices—particularly in daily life and food culture—within a cross-cultural context. The channel uses English as the primary language of narration while providing Thai subtitles throughout, occasionally incorporating spoken Thai as part of the presentation. As of the time of study, the channel had approximately 702,000 subscribers and featured 118 videos, indicating its considerable popularity and influence among audiences in Thailand and abroad.

In this study, the sample was drawn from the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane,* focusing on four video clips with the highest number of views. These clips were selected as the primary corpus for analysis because their popularity demonstrates a high level of audience engagement and indicates their effectiveness in representing Thai cultural practices to a wider international audience.

The rationale for selecting popular videos lies in the fact that such clips serve as cultural texts that have resonated most strongly with viewers. By attracting millions of views, these videos reveal not only the intercultural communication strategies employed by the content creator but also the reception and recognition of Thai cultural elements by diverse audiences. Analyzing these widely viewed videos thus provides a reliable basis for examining how Thai women living abroad integrate their cultural identity into new environments and communicate across cultures.

The chosen clips cover a variety of themes—ranging from festive gatherings and traditional Thai cooking methods to iconic dishes and unique Thai desserts—which collectively illustrate the processes of cultural adaptation, the blending of Thai and host cultures, and the communicative strategies used to bridge cultural differences. Therefore, the sample scope is specifically limited to these four clips as they embody the most impactful examples of intercultural adaptation and communication from the channel.

Research Methodology

This study employed **documentary research** in combination with **textual analysis** of selected video clips from the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane.* The research procedure was carried out through the following steps:

1. **Review of Theories and Related Studies**
   The researchers reviewed concepts, theories, and previous studies concerning intercultural communication to establish the theoretical foundation of the study.
2. **Collection of Relevant Data**
   Information related to intercultural communication and the experiences of Thai women living abroad was gathered, with particular focus on content available through online media platforms, specifically YouTube.
3. **Determination of Research Scope and Sample**
   The scope of the study was defined by purposive sampling of four video clips from the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane.* The clips were selected based on their high view counts, representing the most widely engaged content on the channel.
4. **Textual Analysis**
   The selected video clips were analyzed through textual analysis, focusing on the themes of "cultural adaptation and intercultural communication strategies of Thai women living abroad: A case study of the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane.*"
5. **Theoretical Framework**
   The research was guided by the **Integrative Model of Cross-Cultural Adaptation** proposed by Young Yun Kim (2001), which provided the conceptual framework for analyzing processes of adaptation and intercultural communication.
6. **Presentation of Findings**
   The results were reported using **descriptive analysis**, with emphasis on interpreting the patterns of adaptation and strategies of intercultural communication observed in the selected video clips.

Research Findings

From the analysis of video clips on the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane,* the research team examined the processes of cultural adaptation and the strategies of intercultural communication employed by Thai women living abroad. The findings can be summarized as follows:

Adaptation and Integration of Thai Identity in Foreign Contexts

Food and Culinary Practices

One of the most significant areas of adaptation and cultural integration is food. Given the geographical and environmental differences between Thailand and foreign countries, the availability of ingredients and cooking methods inevitably varies. As a result, Thai women living abroad adapt by substituting or modifying ingredients to resemble traditional Thai flavors as closely as possible.

Clip 1: Thai Food Party at Home with Parents-in-Law and Neighbors

A clear example is illustrated in the video *"Thai Food Party at Home with Parents-in-Law and Neighbors,"* which has received 3.2 million views, making it the most-watched video on the channel. The video presents a celebration that combined a wedding anniversary and a belated birthday party for a friend. In this event, the channel owner, a Thai woman known as Jah, prepared Thai dishes such as Pad Thai, dim sum, and grilled pork ribs for her husband and friends. The preparation utilized both Thai seasonings and local ingredients available in the host country, with flavor adjustments made to suit Western tastes. This reflects an intentional cultural adaptation that harmonizes Thai and Western food cultures. At the conclusion of the video, the foreign guests expressed appreciation and admiration for the taste and quality of the Thai dishes presented.

Clip 2: Hey Roasted Chicken

The video *"Hey Roasted Chicken: Thai-Style Straw-Roasted Chicken Surprises Husband and Neighbors"* has received 2.8 million views, ranking among the most popular clips on the *Jayy Crane* channel. In this video, the creator showcases a traditional Thai cooking method, namely *kai ob fang* (straw-roasted chicken). The presentation highlights the challenges of replicating traditional Thai cooking techniques in a foreign context where the necessary tools and resources are often unavailable.

Instead of using conventional Thai methods—such as digging a pit or employing traditional containers—the creator demonstrates creative substitutions, such as constructing a stove with bricks and replacing a tin can with a stainless steel barrel. These adjustments illustrate the adaptive process of Thai women living abroad, who must reconcile cultural authenticity with the limitations of their host environments.

The video demonstrates both resilience and creativity in maintaining Thai culinary traditions despite material constraints. Its reception, reflected in the high number of views and positive responses, indicates that the adaptation was not only successful but also well appreciated by foreign audiences. This underscores the intercultural communication strategy of preserving

Thai identity while simultaneously adapting to the host culture in a way that makes the tradition accessible and engaging to others.

Clip 3: Papaya Salad, Grilled Chicken, and Sticky Rice on Island

The video *"Papaya Salad, Grilled Chicken, and Sticky Rice on Island"* has received approximately 2 million views, ranking among the most popular clips on the *Jayy Crane* channel. In this video, the creator highlights three iconic Thai dishes—papaya salad (*som tam*), grilled chicken, and sticky rice—all of which are widely recognized as representative of Thai cuisine. By presenting these dishes, the creator underscores their symbolic connection to Thailand, where they are considered cultural staples.

The analysis reveals clear evidence of culinary adaptation, as not all of the traditional Thai ingredients were available in the host country. Despite these limitations, the creator adjusted the recipes and cooking methods to approximate Thai flavors as closely as possible, demonstrating creativity and resilience in maintaining culinary authenticity.

Beyond the food preparation, the video also features a cultural practice: eating sticky rice and papaya salad by hand. In doing so, the creator explained this dining custom to her foreign husband, thereby introducing him to a traditional Thai eating style. This not only served as a cross-cultural exchange but also highlighted how everyday practices, such as eating habits, function as vehicles for communicating cultural identity.

The popularity and positive reception of this video suggest that the creator's intercultural communication strategy—using food as a medium—successfully fostered cultural sharing and mutual understanding between Thai and foreign audiences.

Clip 4: Thai Dessert in Bamboo

The video *"Making Thai Dessert in Bamboo for Husband and Neighbors"* has garnered 1.4 million views. Unlike the other videos, which feature dishes well-known both in Thailand and internationally, this clip introduces *khao lam* (Thai bamboo sticky rice dessert), a delicacy that is relatively unfamiliar to foreign audiences.

In this video, the creator demonstrates the entire process of preparing *khao lam,* using locally sourced bamboo as containers, along with ingredients similar to those traditionally used in Thailand, such as sticky rice, black beans, and other essential components. The step-by-step presentation includes mixing the ingredients, filling the bamboo tubes, roasting them until cooked, and explaining how the dessert is consumed.

At the conclusion of the video, the creator invited her foreign husband and neighbors to taste the dessert. For them, *khao lam* was a novel and exotic dish, yet it was well-received and appreciated. This example illustrates not only the preservation of a traditional Thai culinary practice but also the sharing of a lesser-known element of Thai culture with international audiences.

The success of the video reflects the effectiveness of intercultural communication strategies that utilize food as a medium for cultural exchange. By introducing a traditional dish that is less globally recognized, the creator both preserved and disseminated a distinctive part of Thai cultural heritage, fostering curiosity and acceptance among foreign audiences.

From the above analysis, it is evident that the creator of the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane* consistently integrates Thai cultural elements, particularly those related to food, into her content. The videos demonstrate intercultural blending by showcasing Thai culinary traditions within a foreign cultural setting. This can be interpreted as an effort to maintain and disseminate Thai identity abroad while simultaneously adapting to the host culture.

Based on the selected video samples, it is clear that the creator actively seeks to represent Thai ways of life through the production of video clips that emphasize Thai food culture. This illustrates the process of cultural integration, in which two cultures—Thai and foreign—are presented in ways that acknowledge, respect, and complement one another.

This also reflects the ways in which adaptation occurs in relation to the host culture and environment. For example, the creator grows her own vegetables in a home garden, which includes both local plants from the host country and Thai herbs and vegetables specifically cultivated for preparing Thai food. Beyond food-related adaptation, adjustments in lifestyle practices are also evident, such as clothing choices and greeting customs, which have been modified to align with the cultural norms of the society in which she resides.

Language and Cultural Adaptation

In terms of language and culture, it is clearly evident that Jah, the creator of the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane,* primarily uses English as the main language of narration and presentation. However, Thai translations are consistently provided in all of her video clips. In addition, certain segments also include explanations in Thai, thereby incorporating bilingual elements into the content. This practice reflects her adaptation to the host culture by employing the local language, English, as the primary medium of communication, while simultaneously retaining and integrating her Thai identity by interspersing the use of the Thai language throughout the videos.

Intercultural Communication Strategies of Thai Women Living Abroad

Intercultural Communication Through Food

Food is a fundamental necessity of life, and both culinary practices and eating habits vary according to geography and culture. Environmental and geographical differences shape the availability of ingredients and cooking methods across societies. In the case study of Thai women living abroad, represented by the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane,* it was found that food functions as a key medium for cross-cultural communication.

Through her video productions, Jah, the channel's creator, introduces Thai food to her local community abroad while simultaneously sharing it with a global audience via online platforms. These videos not only make Thai cuisine known to foreigners in her host society but also promote awareness of Thai culture among international viewers.

The Thai dishes selected for presentation—Pad Thai, papaya salad (*som tam*), sticky rice with grilled chicken, straw-roasted chicken (*kai ob fang*), and bamboo sticky rice dessert (*khao lam*)—have become the most popular content on the channel. Each dish serves as a cultural symbol that effectively communicates Thai identity, while also reflecting the creator's adaptation to a new cultural environment.

Intercultural Communication Through the Use of the Thai Language

The Thai language is an essential marker of Thai identity, as language reflects the knowledge and abilities individuals acquire throughout their upbringing and education. In the case study of Thai women adapting to foreign cultures, as exemplified by the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane,* it was found that Thai language use plays an important role in intercultural communication.

Although English serves as the primary language of narration and presentation in Jah's videos, Thai translations are consistently provided in every clip. Moreover, in certain segments, she incorporates spoken Thai alongside English narration, thereby creating a bilingual mode of communication. This practice demonstrates her adaptation to the host culture by employing English as the dominant communicative tool while simultaneously preserving and integrating her Thai identity through the use of Thai.

Notably, the creator not only uses Thai herself but also introduces Thai vocabulary to her foreign husband. For instance, in one video, she taught him to say "อร่อย" (*aroi*, meaning "delicious") and "แซ่บ" (*saep*, meaning "spicy and flavorful"). Such examples illustrate how language becomes a vehicle for cultural exchange.

The analysis shows that even though cultural differences in language may exist, they do not constitute barriers to human relationships. In the modern era of advanced technology and global interaction, intercultural communication has become increasingly natural. The integration of both Thai and English within the channel reflects an effective strategy of intercultural adaptation, enabling the sharing of Thai cultural identity with both domestic and international audiences.

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

The findings of this study, based on the analysis of video clips from the YouTube channel *Jayy Crane,* can be summarized and discussed as follows:

Adaptation and Integration of Thai Identity Abroad

Thai women living overseas demonstrate creative adaptation and integration of Thai culture with that of the host society, particularly in the domains of food and language. With respect to food, local ingredients are substituted for Thai ingredients, while maintaining forms and flavors that reflect Thai cultural identity. Dishes such as Pad Thai, papaya salad (*som tam*), straw-roasted chicken (*kai ob fang*), grilled chicken with sticky rice, and bamboo sticky rice dessert (*khao lam*) were presented. These videos, which attracted high viewership and positive feedback from international audiences, reflect both the acceptance and the cultural exchange of Thai culinary practices. Importantly, the videos communicate not only the taste of Thai food but also Thai ways of life—for instance, eating sticky rice by hand and cultivating Thai herbs alongside local plants for cooking purposes.

Intercultural Communication Strategies

With regard to communication strategies, English serves as the primary language of narration, yet Thai remains a significant element throughout. This includes bilingual subtitles, Thai narration in some segments, and the teaching of Thai vocabulary to the creator's foreign husband, such as the words *aroi* (delicious) and *saep* (spicy and flavorful). This bilingual approach reflects a strategy of reaching both Thai and international audiences while maintaining Thai identity alongside adaptation to the new cultural environment.

Overall, the findings indicate that *Jayy Crane* employs intercultural communication through food and language as primary tools for promoting Thai identity abroad. This process reflects flexible adaptation and the creation of a harmonious integration between Thai and host cultures.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The results correspond with Young Yun Kim's Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation (2001, pp. 45–50), which explains adaptation as a cyclical mechanism of *Stress–Adaptation–Growth.* The analysis found that the creator encountered challenges regarding ingredients and language (*stress*), attempted to adjust food preparation and language use to suit the new context (*adaptation*), and ultimately achieved acceptance from foreign audiences while maintaining Thai identity (*growth*). The introduction of Thai dishes such as Pad Thai, papaya salad, straw-roasted chicken, and *khao lam,* together with bilingual communication, illustrates the development of an intercultural identity that blends Thai and foreign cultures seamlessly. This provides strong evidence that Kim's theoretical framework aligns with real-world intercultural phenomena in contemporary online spaces.

Relation to Previous Research

The findings are also consistent with the research of Chutrakul (2018)**,** who studied the intercultural communication adaptation of Thai people living in Oxford, England. That study identified six dimensions influencing intercultural adaptation: host communication competence, understanding of a common language, participation in host activities, engagement with host society communication, social involvement, and access to local media. Similarly, *Jayy Crane* demonstrates how Thai women abroad adapt through food, language, and cultural participation, highlighting both individual strategies and broader intercultural dynamics.

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

The authors declare that generative AI and AI-assisted tools were used solely for language refinement and formatting purposes in the preparation of this manuscript. These tools were employed to proofread and enhance clarity, correct grammatical errors. No AI systems were used to generate research ideas, analyze data, interpret findings, or produce the academic content presented in this paper. All scholarly content is fully the responsibility of the authors.

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Some Socio-Cultural Barriers to Reproductive Health Care Behaviors Among Ethnic Minority Adolescents in Vietnam

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Abstract

Background: Adolescent reproductive health care is a critical aspect of ensuring the well-being of human resource in the future. However, Vietnamese adolescents are facing of unsafe sex and its associated negative outcomes, including unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and unsafe abortions.
Objective: This study aimed to determine some socio-cultural barriers hindering reproductive health care behaviors among ethnic minority adolescents in Vietnam.
Methods: This cross-sectional study was carried out on 305 ethnic minority adolescents who are the Tay and Dao aged 15–19. The descriptive and bivariate correlation techniques were used to describe the adolescents' difficulties in accessing reproductive health care information and contraceptive methods. The qualitative data were 22 in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.
Results: The harmful social norms, community stigma and poor communication between parents and children were the major hindrances for adolescents to seeking information from reliable sources and accessing reproductive health care services. The results showed that 96.7% of adolescents wanted to receive information from health care staffs but less than one-fifth had received information in the past 12 months. They also rarely accessed reproductive health care services due to feelings of embarrassment and fears of stigma or gossip.
Conclusions: Some socio-cultural barriers may lead to limitations in reproductive health education for adolescents and their access to health care services. The findings underscore the need to promote open parent–adolesscent communication on reproductive health care topics, and to enhance community awareness of the importance of reproductive health care beginning in adolescence.

Keywords: socio-cultural barriers, reproductive health care, ethnic minority, adolescent behaviors, Vietnam

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Introduction

Adolescent reproductive health is crucial because it sets the foundation for overall well-being by promoting healthy development in adolescents' transition into adulthood, empowering young people to make informed decisions about their bodies, preventing negative outcomes like unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual violence. Ensuring effective reproductive health care for adolescents also has long-term societal benefits, such as decreasing child marriage and improving public health.

The population aged 15–19 years old accounts for about 7% of the total population of Vietnam (National Statistics Office, 2024). In February 1990, Vietnam was the first country in Asia and the second country in the world to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and since then Vietnam has issued many policies and action programs on adolescent reproductive health care and has achieved many successes in this regard. Adolescent reproductive health has been identified by the Ministry of Health as one of the priority areas in the "National Master Plan on Protection, Care, and Promotion of Adolescent and Youth Health for the Period 2006–2010 and Strategic Orientation to 2020," the "Vietnam Population and Reproductive Health Strategy for the 2011–2020 period," and the "National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2021–2030 period." Implementation of these national plans and strategies has resulted in substantial progress in improving the reproductive health status of the population over recent decades, for example, Vietnam was one of the only 6 countries in the world that achieved the maternal mortality reduction target of the MDGs in 2015 (UNFPA Vietnam, n.d.). Expanding access to reproductive health rights and services can also reduce the prevalance of early marriage in some ethnic minority regions, particularly in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas and decrease adolescent pregnancy, prevent sexually transmitted infections, and enhance overall population quality (General Statistics Office and Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, 2020).

However, there is still a practical-knowledge conflict gap in this area in Vietnam. Adolescents' knowledge and skills related to reproductive health care remain limited; reproductive health education has not received adequate attention; and the provision of adolescent-friendly reproductive health information and services has not met their diverse needs. Unsafe sexual practices, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and the risk of sexually transmitted infections among adolescents have not improved significantly, particularly in rural and remote areas and among ethnic minority adolescents (Bui, 2020; Dao, 2021; Le, 2022; Ministry of Health, 2020; Nguyen et al., United Nations in Viet Nam, 2016). Furthermore, many parents afford to sidestep frank, open discussions about sex and related topics due to barriers from traditional concepts such as the notion that is delicate and sensitive issues, or fear of children practicing too early (Bui, 2020; Le, 2022; Pham, 2007). Therefore, this study aimed to determine some socio-cultural barriers hindering reproductive health care behaviors among ethnic minority adolescents in Vietnam.

Methods

This cross-sectional study was carried out on 305 ethnic minority adolescents who are the Tay and Dao aged 15–19 in a province located in Northern Midland and Mountainous Region of Vietnam. The qualitative data were 22 in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Tay and Dao ethnic adolescents, parents, teacher, school leader, local health officials, prestigious people, and local government representatives.

The quantitative sample was selected using the probability sampling method. Specifically, the study applied systematic random sampling technique on the total list of Tay and Dao children aged 15–19 living in two mountainous communes in Thai Nguyen province. After having the overall sample list, we performed the k-step to select the sample list and the backup sample list. Finally, we interviewed 305 adolescents.

The quantitative data were collected using the sociodemographic characteristics questionnaire, knowledge, attitude and behaviors of adolescents regarding reproductive health care. The descriptive and bivariate correlation techniques were used to describe the adolescents' difficulties in accessing reproductive health care information and contraceptive methods. The qualitative data was recorded and transcribed into text for analysis.

Results

The harmful social norms and community stigma were the major hindrances for adolescents to seeking information from reliable sources and accessing reproductive health care services. For instance, the qualitative data revealed that adolescents rarely accessed reproductive health care services or seek information from health workers due to feelings of embarrassment and fears of being judged or having rumors spread about them if encountering acquaintances. Besides, quantitative data showed that the vast majority of adolescents wanted to receive information from health care staffs (96.7%) and nearly half said that this was their preferred source, but less than one-fifth had received information in the past 12 months.

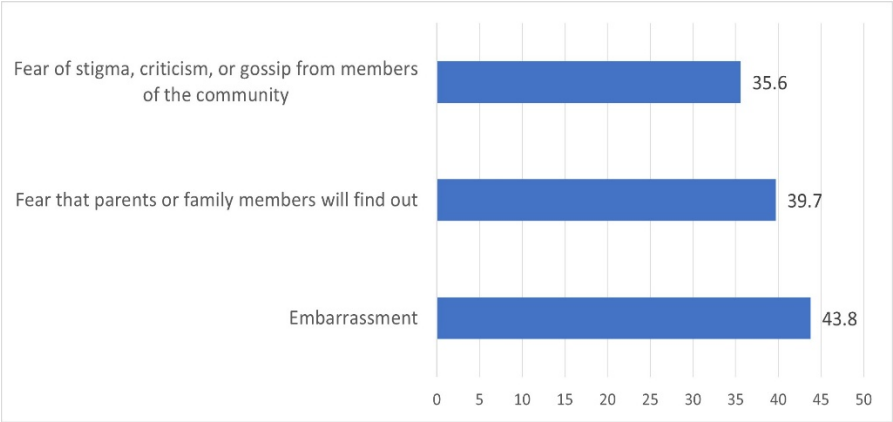
> We do not want to ask health care staffs or adults here because people often think that we are not yet old enough to know the specifics or details about these matters, and if we are seeking the information about sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections or contraceptive methods, we must have a problem. (FDG, adolescent girls aged 17–18)

> There are no outreach activities or health care programs specifically inviting or targeting adolescents. We cannot meet privately to disseminate information to them because they are shy. We usually integrate information about adolescent reproductive health care when providing general health information to the whole family. (IDI, village health worker)

> Adolescents and young people remained hesitant regarding this issue. For example, when encouraged to do premarital counseling or reproductive health check-ups, many claimed that they had no health problems and therefore did not need an examination, or they feared that if they were found to have any illness, especially a hereditary one, no one would be willing to marry them. (IDI, representative of the Provincial Department of Health)

According to our field observations, accessing health care services in the surveyed areas is relatively convenient due to the availability of pharmacies and health facilities. However, when asked whether accessing and using contraceptive methods was easy or not, 25.4% of adolescents reported experiencing difficulties. The primary reasons as illustrated in the figure below include feeling embarrassed (43.8%); fear that parents or family members will find out (39.7%); and fear of stigma, criticism, or gossip from members of the community (35.6%). The level of difficulty was concentrated in the younger age group, teenagers aged 15–17 experienced two times more difficult than those aged 18–19.

Figure 1
Reasons Why Ethnic Minority Adolescents Encountered Difficulties in Accessing and Using Contraception (%)



Source: Survey data from "Reproductive health care for ethnic minority adolescents in Thai Nguyen province" project.

The poor communication in this regard between parents and children was another barrier. Communication between parents and adolescents regarding reproductive health care was analyzed with 256 adolescents currently living with both their mother and father, and the data shows that adolescents communicated with their mothers about reproductive health issues significantly higher than their fathers as stated in the table below. Correlation analyses also indicated a clear pattern of same-gender communication in this regard. Accordingly, boys tended to talk with their fathers and girls prefered to talk to their mothers.

Table 1
The Proportion of Adolescents Who Discussed Reproductive Health With Their Parents (N=253)

Topics	Father	Mother
Female reproductive system (menstrual irregularities, dysmenorrhea, hygiene practices, infections)	5.5	52.6
Male reproductive system (wet dreams, structural abnormalities like phimosis, infections)	11.9	13.4
Pregnancy, prenatal care, and childbirth	8.3	36
Sexually transmitted infections	15.4	39.1
Safe sex	9.9	27.3
Sexual refusal	12.3	25.3
Contraceptive methods	11.9	39.1

Source: Survey data from "Reproductive health care for ethnic minority adolescents in Thai Nguyen province" project.

On the other hand, only 18.5% of adolescents reported that parents were their preferred source of information about reproductive health care. In explaining this, some parents disclosed that they were concerned that discussing reproductive health in detail such as how to use contraception or how to have safe sex would be inappropriate or potentially harmful as imply permission or encouragement for their children to have sex early like an idiom "Vẽ đường cho hươu chạy" [To pave the way for deer run]. Some others felt discomfort because these topics were considered private matters or because they had limited knowledge about modern contraception methods, so they prefered to emphasize the consequences of early sexual activity

(like pregnancy, early marriage) rather than providing comprehensive information that includes contraception options and safe sex for their children.

In short, ethnic minority adolescents still faced significant limitations in accessing reproductive health information from reliable sources and encountered difficulties in utilizing reproductive health care services when needed.

Conclusions

Our findings showed the limitations in open discussions about reproductive health within families, and community prejudices against exploring certain aspects of reproductive health such as sexuality or contraceptive methods during adolescence. This may limit adolescents' access to reproductive health education and reproductive health care services.

These findings highlight the importance of fostering parent–adolescent communication and enhancing community awareness of the need for reproductive health care beginning in adolescence. In addition, suggesting that local health care providers can play an important role to bridge parent-child communication gap by providing accurate, non-judgmental information to both parents and adolescents.

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

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

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Navigating Psychological Frontiers: A Comparative Literature Review of Mental Health Challenges Among International Students in Japan and Erasmus+ Countries

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Abstract

The rapid internationalization of higher education has increased global student mobility, bringing both academic opportunities and challenges. Among these, mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and cultural adjustment difficulties are increasingly reported by international students during their time abroad. Japan and the Erasmus+ countries, comprising key European higher education destinations, offer different sociocultural, linguistic, and institutional environments for students. Despite growing scholarly interest, comparative research on how these regional contexts shape the mental health outcomes of international students remains limited. This literature review synthesizes existing research on the mental health challenges faced by international students in Japan and Erasmus+ countries. Focusing on key themes such as acculturative stress, language barriers, academic pressure, social integration, and access to mental health services, the paper highlights both shared difficulties and context-specific patterns. By drawing cross-regional comparisons, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational and sociocultural systems influence student well-being and points to implications for policy and institutional support systems.

Keywords: international students, mental health, acculturative stress, Japan, Erasmus+

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has accelerated dramatically in the 21st century, reshaping the academic, cultural, and demographic landscapes of universities worldwide. The pursuit of global competencies, intercultural exposure, and internationally recognized qualifications has fueled a sharp rise in international student mobility. According to UNESCO (UIS, 2025), over 6.4 million students were enrolled in tertiary-level education outside their home countries in 2022, a substantial increase from just 2 million in 2000. Asia remains the largest sending region, while Europe and North America continue to be the dominant destinations. However, countries like Japan are emerging as major hosts, challenging Western-centric models and offering alternative higher education experiences in culturally distinct contexts.

Japan has strategically positioned itself to become a regional hub for international education. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched the Global 30 Project in 2009 and the Top Global University Project in 2014, both of which aim to internationalize Japanese higher education and enhance its global competitiveness (Ota, 2018; Yonezawa et al., 2009). As of May 2023, Japan hosted 231,146 international students, with the top three countries of origin being China (44.0%), Vietnam (24.5%), and Nepal (8.1%) (JASSO, 2025). Despite these numbers, international students in Japan frequently encounter linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers, including a lack of English-language mental health services, a low tolerance for cultural deviation, and limited intercultural programming (Curle et al., 2023; Nakano et al., 2023). These challenges have prompted increasing concern about the psychological well-being of international students navigating Japan's rigid and homogenous academic culture.

In contrast, European Erasmus countries offer a model of regional integration that has become synonymous with interculturalism and mobility. The Erasmus Programme, established in 1987 and now operating under the broader Erasmus+ framework (since 2014), is the European Union's flagship initiative for education, training, youth, and sport. It supports both short-term and long-term mobility, enabling students to study or intern in another European country while receiving academic credit toward their home degrees. As of 2023, the Erasmus+ program had facilitated mobility for over 13 million participants, including more than 1.3 million higher education students between 2014 and 2020 alone (EC, 2025).

Participation in Erasmus+ is not limited to EU countries; it includes 33 programme countries (EU-27, Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Turkey) and numerous partner countries across the globe. In 2022 alone, Erasmus+ funded over 71,000 higher education mobility projects, including student and staff exchanges, with a budget of more than €3.9 billion, emphasizing both academic quality and inclusive access (EC, 2025). Unlike Japan's inward-focused internationalization, the Erasmus+ approach is rooted in multilateralism, co-funded institutional partnerships, and transnational student support systems like the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), which operates in over 40 countries to provide cultural, academic, and social integration.

Crucially, the Erasmus model embeds support mechanisms at both the institutional and community level, including pre-departure orientation, intercultural training, language support, and peer mentorship. Studies have consistently found that students who participate in Erasmus+ programs report higher levels of intercultural competence, employability, and psychological resilience (Resch & Amorim, 2021; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). These

benefits are closely linked to structured support and culturally inclusive campus environments, particularly in countries like Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands, where institutions proactively cater to international students' academic and emotional needs.

By contrast, despite its policy efforts, Japan's internationalization remains constrained by a monolingual public sphere, low student-faculty interaction, and pervasive mental health stigma. The structural differences between Japan and Erasmus countries thus present a compelling basis for comparative analysis, especially regarding how institutional and sociocultural factors mediate international students' psychological well-being.

This paper aims to conduct a comparative literature review to evaluate the mental health challenges faced by international students in Japan and in Erasmus countries, focusing on five key domains: acculturation stress, language barriers, academic workload, social support, and access to mental health services. By analyzing the structural, cultural, and pedagogical factors that shape student experience in both contexts, this study seeks to identify best practices, persistent gaps, and actionable strategies for improving the global learning environment.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative literature review methodology, analyzing peer-reviewed articles published in English from 2005 to 2023. Data were collected from academic databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Keywords used included "international students," "mental health," "Japan," "Erasmus," "acculturation stress," and "student support." Studies included if they specifically addressed mental health outcomes and contributing factors among international students in the targeted regions. Priority was given to empirical studies, meta-analyses, and reviews with significant sample sizes and methodological rigor.

Findings and Discussion

Acculturation Stress

International students in both Japan and Erasmus countries experience significant levels of acculturation stress, though its intensity and specific manifestations vary considerably depending on the sociocultural and institutional context (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In Japan, international students often face challenges stemming from the country's rigid societal norms, strong emphasis on group harmony, and high-context communication style, which collectively create a culturally homogeneous environment that can be difficult to penetrate (Nakano et al., 2023; Zhang & Steele, 2012). The absence of explicit communication and reliance on indirect expressions frequently result in misunderstandings and social withdrawal, particularly among students from low-context cultures who are unfamiliar with Japan's unspoken rules of interaction (Nakano et al., 2023). This situation is compounded by limited institutional support for intercultural awareness and intercultural skill-building, which inhibits students' ability to meaningfully integrate into academic and social settings (Zhang & Steele, 2012).

These pressures can contribute to psychological distress, including feelings of alienation, cultural fatigue, and identity confusion, as international students attempt to reconcile their own cultural values with those of the host society (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In contrast,

many Erasmus countries, particularly in Western and Northern Europe, promote multiculturalism and intercultural competencies through proactive educational policies and inclusive practices. These nations tend to acknowledge the diversity of their student populations and incorporate strategies to foster intercultural dialogue and adjustment (Byram et al., 2002).

For instance, in countries such as Sweden and Finland, structured intercultural training sessions, orientation programs, and peer mentoring are commonly provided as part of institutional onboarding. These initiatives are designed not only to reduce adjustment-related stress but also to develop intercultural competence as a core student learning outcome (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Scandinavian institutions, in particular, adopt a holistic view of internationalization, encouraging faculty and staff to create adaptive learning environments where cultural difference is acknowledged, discussed, and leveraged as a learning asset. Consequently, international students in these contexts are better equipped to manage cultural differences, develop resilience, and experience fewer barriers to integration.

Table 1
Acculturation Stress

Aspect	Japan	Erasmus Countries
Cultural Environment	Homogeneous society with rigid social norms and high-context communication (Nakano et al., 2023; Zhang & Steele, 2012).	Multicultural and diversity-friendly environments that embrace interculturalism (Byram et al., 2002).
Communication Style	Indirect, implicit, and reliant on unspoken rules; difficult for students from low-context cultures to decode (Nakano et al., 2023).	More direct communication and greater tolerance for intercultural communication variations.
Challenges Faced by International Students	Feelings of alienation, cultural fatigue, social withdrawal, and identity confusion due to lack of integration (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).	Fewer cultural adjustment issues due to active efforts in promoting inclusion and intercultural understanding.
Institutional Support	Limited emphasis on intercultural competence or structured integration programs (Zhang & Steele, 2012).	Strong emphasis on intercultural orientation, peer mentoring, and inclusive pedagogy (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).
Intercultural Training	Scarce or informal; often relies on students' own adaptation strategies.	Formal, well-designed programs that aim to foster intercultural competencies and reduce adjustment stress (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).
Outcomes for Students	Higher levels of acculturation stress; limited sense of belonging and institutional attachment.	Greater resilience, sense of community, and intercultural awareness leading to lower stress levels.

Language Barriers

Language barriers remain a significant impediment to academic success and emotional well-being for international students, particularly in monolingual environments like Japan. It has been observed that English-medium instruction (EMI) in Japan stems from a blend of national, institutional, and individual motivations, while also raising critical concerns around

"academic imperialism" and the dual dynamics of "internationalization at home" versus "abroad" (Shimauchi, 2018). Despite the expansion of EMI degree programs in recent years, the dominant use of Japanese in administrative services, healthcare systems, and everyday social interactions creates a persistent communication gap (Curle et al., 2023; Zhang & Steele, 2012). Students who lack advanced Japanese proficiency often experience difficulties accessing mental health resources, attending academic advising sessions, or even participating in extracurricular activities, which exacerbates feelings of isolation and stress (Ota, 2018). Furthermore, Japanese universities tend to emphasize assimilation into local culture rather than bilingual accommodation, limiting the extent to which students can engage meaningfully without full language immersion (Yonezawa et al., 2009).

In stark contrast, many Erasmus countries—particularly in Western and Northern Europe—have institutional frameworks that actively accommodate linguistic diversity. Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland, for example, have significantly expanded EMI and offer multilingual support services across campus. Germany's "Studentenwerk" system, a nationwide network of student service centers, provides international students with psychological counseling, legal and financial advisory services, and daily-life assistance in English (DAAD, 2023; Wikipedia, n.d.-b). University orientation programs, academic workshops, and even healthcare communications are routinely provided in English, ensuring accessibility irrespective of local language proficiency (DAAD, 2023; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Dutch and Finnish universities likewise provide comprehensive bilingual support in academic and student life contexts, often reinforced by intercultural communication training for faculty (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).

These efforts collectively reduce the psychological toll of linguistic exclusion and foster greater academic integration and social participation. While Japan continues to make incremental progress in internationalizing its campuses, the structural dependence on Japanese-language proficiency remains a major hurdle that distinguishes it sharply from more linguistically inclusive Erasmus nations.

Table 2
Language Barriers

Aspect	Japan	Erasmus Countries
Dominant Language in Society	Japanese; limited use of English in daily life and services (ICEF Monitor, 2015).	English widely accepted in academic and urban settings; strong support for bilingualism (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).
Availability of English-Taught Programs	Growing number, but still limited outside STEM and elite universities.	Widespread across disciplines; often a central part of internationalization strategy (DAAD, 2023).
Access to Support Services (Mental Health, Academic, Healthcare)	Difficulties accessing services due to language requirements (Ota, 2018; Zhang & Steele, 2012).	Multilingual services in mental health, administration, and academics (DAAD, 2023).
Institutional Attitudes toward Language Diversity	Focus on assimilation into Japanese culture; limited bilingual infrastructure (Yonezawa et al., 2009).	Language inclusivity prioritized in institutional policies and practices.
Support Structures for Language Challenges	Minimal bilingual counseling or multilingual onboarding.	Structured support via Studentenwerk (Germany), intercultural training, and orientation in English.

Outcomes for International Students	Language-related isolation and academic stress remain high.	Better integration, reduced stress, and stronger engagement with campus life.

Academic Workload and Expectations

Academic pressure constitutes a key source of psychological distress among international students, particularly in education systems where norms and pedagogical styles differ significantly from those in their home countries. In Japan, traditional educational structures often emphasize rote memorization, high-stakes examinations, and deference to authority, all of which contribute to a hierarchical student-teacher dynamic that can feel alienating to international students (Ota, 2018; Yonezawa et al., 2009). This model tends to privilege passive learning, where classroom engagement and open discussion are limited. As a result, students from other learning systems may find themselves struggling to adapt to academic expectations that appear rigid and impersonal (Rakhshandehroo, 2017, 2018).

Moreover, support for academic adjustment in Japan is often underdeveloped. Many universities lack structured academic mentoring programs in English, and international students may be reluctant to approach professors due to perceived status differentials and communication barriers (Yonezawa et al., 2009). The emphasis on uniform academic standards, without proportional flexibility or support mechanisms, leads to heightened stress, academic disengagement, and in some cases, mental health deterioration (Ota, 2018).

By contrast, Erasmus countries—especially Finland, the Netherlands, and Germany—have adopted student-centered pedagogy that emphasizes autonomy, critical thinking, and adaptability. Project-based learning, continuous assessment, and seminar-style classes dominate in many of these institutions, fostering a more participatory and inclusive academic atmosphere (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). In Finnish universities, students are frequently invited to co-design parts of their curriculum, reflecting a decentralized and collaborative approach to higher education. Finnish higher-education policy encourages curriculum internationalization, enabling students to shape content and learning pathways that reflect their backgrounds and interests. The culture of collaborative learning, where teamwork, peer support, and collective problem-solving are core classroom practices, fosters an environment in which students are empowered to challenge academic norms through respectful discourse (Honkimäki et al., 2024). These inclusive educational models recognize and value students' diverse educational histories, aiming to bridge gaps through personalized instruction and faculty accessibility, anchored in Finland’s emphasis on autonomy among educators and learners (Lavonen, 2020).

In addition, institutions in Erasmus countries often provide structured academic integration programs, such as workshops on academic writing, research methods, and classroom culture, which equip international students with tools to navigate their new academic systems successfully (DAAD, 2023). This flexible and responsive academic model not only reduces psychological strain but also enhances student confidence and satisfaction, especially among those who come from non-European education systems.

Table 3
Academic Workload and Expectations

Aspect	Japan	Erasmus Countries
Teaching Style and Pedagogy	Rote memorization and lecture-heavy; limited interactive or critical thinking tasks (Ota, 2018).	Student-centered learning; emphasis on critical thinking, discussion, and autonomy (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).
Student-Teacher Relationship	Hierarchical and formal; students often hesitant to approach professors (Yonezawa et al., 2014).	More egalitarian and accessible; professors often approachable and supportive.
Assessment and Learning Models	High-stakes exams dominate; limited use of project-based or continuous assessment (ICEF Monitor, 2015).	Use of project-based, seminar-style classes, and continuous assessment (DAAD, 2020).
Support for Academic Adjustment	Few structured mentoring or academic writing support programs in English.	Dedicated academic workshops, writing support, and orientation programs.
Flexibility in Curriculum	Low curriculum flexibility; strong emphasis on uniform academic standards.	Flexible curriculum structures, including student-designed components (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).
Impact on Mental Health	High academic stress and reduced engagement, particularly among students from Western systems.	Lower academic stress due to supportive, inclusive, and adaptive academic environments.

Social Support Networks

Social integration plays a crucial role in protecting international students from psychological distress, with multiple studies affirming its positive association with mental well-being and academic adjustment. In Japan, however, international students often face considerable obstacles when trying to form meaningful social relationships. Language barriers, hierarchical social norms, and limited cross-cultural competencies among local students hinder both casual and sustained interaction (Ota, 2018; Zhang & Steele, 2012). Many international students report difficulty engaging not only with Japanese peers but also with fellow international students, as the lack of institutional infrastructure for social facilitation such as multilingual student lounges, intercultural events, or international dormitories, contributes to fragmentation and loneliness (Yonezawa et al., 2009).

Moreover, Japanese universities typically do not prioritize structured social integration initiatives. Student clubs, while abundant, often operate exclusively in Japanese and may be resistant to non-native speakers, making them difficult to access. Without proactive social programming or peer connection strategies, students are left to navigate cultural adaptation alone, which can amplify acculturative stress and reduce their sense of belonging (Curle et al., 2023).

In contrast, Erasmus programs and European institutions have embedded social integration as a central objective of internationalization. From the outset, students are welcomed through orientation weeks, social mixers, and buddy programs that match incoming internationals with local students (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Institutions such as those in Germany offer peer mentorship and intercultural dialogue programs supported by the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst), which aim to create inclusive academic communities where cultural differences are seen as assets rather than obstacles (DAAD, 2023). These programs

not only foster friendship and support networks but also reinforce academic success and psychological resilience.

In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, intercultural events, student-led clubs, and multicultural dormitories are strategically promoted to ensure regular social contact among diverse student cohorts. A study covering six European countries found that institutionally organized intercultural encounters, especially those embedded in the curriculum, effectively foster social networks with both local and international peers (Resch & Amorim, 2021). Student associations like the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), active across 38 countries with over 15,000 local volunteers, offer regular social mixers, buddy programs, and cultural trips alongside academic exchange (Wikipedia, n.d.-a). At universities such as Maastricht and Amsterdam, multicultural study associations (e.g. UCMSA Universalis) empower students to take leadership roles in organizing debates, events, and social activities, helping build a robust, multicultural community through peer-driven initiatives (Beelen, 2007; Wikipedia, n.d.-c).

Additionally, multilingual communication channels and accessible student services, including mental health counseling in English, contribute to an inclusive and welcoming campus climate (DAAD, 2023). For instance, Finnish universities are known for offering psychological support services in multiple languages, alongside online mental health tools, ensuring accessibility for all students regardless of linguistic background (Honkimäki et al., 2024; Lavonen, 2020).

These networks are reinforced by multilingual communication channels, accessible mental health professionals, and active student affairs offices, all of which contribute to a supportive and welcoming environment. As a result, international students in Erasmus countries are significantly more likely to report high levels of social satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress linked to social exclusion.

Table 4
Social Support Networks

Aspect	Japan	Erasmus Countries
Opportunities for Social Integration	Limited opportunities; few intercultural or English-speaking clubs (Yonezawa et al., 2009).	Frequent orientation events, intercultural mixers, and student-led social activities (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014).
Barriers to Social Connection	Language barriers, rigid social norms, and limited intercultural competence (Ota, 2018; Zhang & Steele, 2012).	Low language barriers in student life due to bilingual communication and cultural openness.
Institutional Social Programming	Few formal programs or events promoting social integration (ICEF Monitor, 2015).	Well-structured integration programs supported by institutions and national bodies like DAAD (DAAD, 2020).
Peer Support Structures	Peer mentoring rare; social support often informal and fragmented.	Peer mentorship, buddy systems, and international student support offices widely available.
Cultural Inclusivity in Student Life	Student clubs operate mainly in Japanese; not easily accessible to international students.	High inclusivity with multilingual events, dormitories, and mental health access.
Impact on Well-being	Increased isolation and acculturative stress; reduced sense of belonging.	Improved social satisfaction, academic adjustment, and psychological resilience.

Mental Health Services

Access to mental health support services is a critical determinant of international student well-being, yet availability and effectiveness vary significantly across national contexts. In Japan, mental health remains highly stigmatized, both culturally and institutionally. This stigma, rooted in societal norms surrounding endurance and emotional privacy, discourages many students from seeking help even when services are technically available (Ota, 2018; Yonezawa et al., 2009). Compounding the issue is a severe shortage of English-speaking counselors, especially outside major metropolitan areas. Many university counseling centers operate predominantly in Japanese, and are often understaffed or underfunded, limiting their capacity to address the needs of diverse student populations (Rakhshandehroo, 2018).

Moreover, mental health support in Japanese universities is generally reactive rather than preventive, with limited emphasis on psychological education, early intervention, or structured coping programs (Nakano et al., 2023). Students often report uncertainty about where or how to access psychological resources, and those who do seek help face communication difficulties and fear of being perceived as weak or culturally incompatible.

In contrast, Erasmus countries have made significant strides in establishing comprehensive and accessible mental health systems tailored to international students. In Finland, for example, universities partner with organizations like FSHS (Finnish Student Health Service) to deliver multilingual mental health services, including therapy, stress management workshops, and burnout prevention seminars, all of which are embedded within the academic calendar (Honkimäki et al., 2024; Lavonen, 2020). These services are often free or heavily subsidized and available both in-person and via digital platforms. Similarly, in Germany, DAAD-supported universities offer psychological counseling in English and run mental health awareness campaigns that aim to destigmatize help-seeking behavior and normalize emotional support services (DAAD, 2023).

In the UK, institutions are legally required to provide reasonable mental health accommodations under the Equality Act, and many universities have created international student-specific wellness programs, including drop-in hours, peer support circles, and online self-help modules (Pury & Dicks, 2020). These systemic efforts not only improve access but also foster a proactive mental health culture, allowing students to engage with well-being resources before issues escalate.

Table 5
Mental Health Services

Aspect	Japan	Erasmus Countries
Cultural Attitudes Toward Mental Health	High stigma; mental health often seen as a private matter or personal weakness (Ota, 2018).	Progressive attitudes; mental health is openly discussed and normalized (DAAD, 2023; Universities UK, 2020).
Availability of English-Speaking Counselors	Very limited; most university counselors speak only Japanese (ICEF Monitor, 2015).	Commonly available; therapy and counseling offered in English (Hyppönen et al., 2019).
Structure of Mental Health Services	Understaffed, decentralized services; limited visibility and outreach (Yonezawa et al., 2009).	Comprehensive and structured support systems; often tied to student health services.

Proactive vs Reactive Support	Largely reactive; minimal psychological education or early intervention (Nakano et al., 2023).	Proactive approach with awareness campaigns, workshops, and stress prevention (DAAD, 2023).
Integration into Academic Life	Seldom embedded in academic schedules or student orientation programs.	Regular workshops and wellness events integrated into academic calendars (Hyppönen et al., 2019).
Examples of Good Practice	Few national frameworks; access varies significantly by university and region.	Finland's FSHS services; UK's Stepchange framework; DAAD peer support initiatives in Germany.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis highlights the challenges that international students face in adapting to host institutions, with particular attention to the divergent experiences in Japan and Erasmus countries. Across all five domains—acculturation stress, language proficiency, academic expectations, social support structures, and mental health services—the findings consistently reveal more inclusive and responsive practices in Erasmus countries, contrasting sharply with structural and cultural rigidity in Japanese institutions. While Erasmus countries benefit from more structured, multilingual, and culturally sensitive systems, Japan continues to face gaps due to linguistic barriers, cultural stigma surrounding mental health, and limited institutional coordination.

As global student mobility continues to grow, institutions that prioritize inclusive, proactive student services will not only enhance student satisfaction and retention but also strengthen their reputations as genuinely international centers of learning. Policymakers and university leaders must act on this evidence to build environments where international students can thrive—academically, socially, and emotionally. The findings call for systemic, cross-sector reforms in policy and practice—particularly within Japanese higher education—to ensure that international students are not only academically accommodated but also emotionally supported and socially integrated. A culturally sensitive, multilingual, and holistic model of student support is essential for fostering psychological well-being, academic performance, and long-term engagement.

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Bridging Silences: Analysing Triadic Communication in Job Interviews Involving Deaf Candidates, ISL Interpreters, and Employers in India

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Abstract

This study examines communication dynamics in job interviews involving Deaf candidates, Indian Sign Language (ISL) interpreters, and employers in urban India. Using Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), it explores how meaning is co-constructed and sometimes lost in triadic interpreted interactions. The research focuses on a Deaf livelihood fair in Mumbai, investigating how interpreters' presence shapes employers' perceptions of Deaf candidates, especially when employers lack Deaf cultural awareness. Qualitative conversation analysis of video-recorded mock interviews (Deaf participants N = 167, interpreters N = 8, employers N = 18), along with semi-structured interviews, reveals several challenges. Deaf candidates face delayed turn-taking and restricted expressiveness, while interpreters balance neutrality with cultural mediation. Employers often struggle to interpret non-verbal cues, frequently simplifying questions. Communication features such as clarification loops, repeated prompts, and lack of backchannel responses lead to misunderstandings, sometimes seen as disengagement. Motivated by India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), this study addresses persistent communication barriers despite policy mandates for inclusive hiring. The findings highlight the importance of Deaf cultural training for employers, preparatory sessions for interpreters, and greater use of visual portfolios and non-verbal strategies in interviews. By shedding light on the lived realities of Deaf job seekers, this research advocates for more ethical, linguistically inclusive employment practices for persons with disabilities in India.

Keywords: employment, disability, Indian sign language, inclusion, interpreters, challenges

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Introduction

Deaf individuals in India face persistent barriers to equitable employment, despite policy frameworks like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) mandating inclusive hiring. One of the most overlooked barriers is the communication mismatch during interviews, particularly in triadic settings involving Deaf candidates, ISL interpreters, and hearing employers. These interactions are layered with cultural, linguistic, and structural complexities that impact the efficacy and equity of the hiring process.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws from Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Theory (Pearce, 2007), which emphasizes how individuals create and manage social realities through communication. In triadic communication, each participant contributes to and interprets the interaction differently, often leading to misaligned meanings. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1991) further informs this analysis, showing how interlocutors adjust their speech and behaviour based on perceived social distance, which in this case includes linguistic and cultural divides.

Need for the Study

While there is growing recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities in India, the specific communicative experiences of Deaf individuals in formal employment contexts remain under-researched, especially during interviews and specifically during the deaf livelihood fair. This study addresses a critical gap by focusing on the micro-level dynamics of job interviews, where first impressions and effective communication heavily influence outcomes. The insights are timely and necessary for developing inclusive recruitment policies and practices grounded in real-world challenges.

Research Methodology and Sample

The study employs content analysis as a qualitative methodology rooted in conversation analysis of (N = 167) Deaf individuals, and thematic coding. The interviews were conducted during the deaf livelihood fair, involving Deaf job seekers (N = 167), certified ISL interpreters (N = 8), and HR professionals from the private sector (N = 18). Data was collected through video recordings and semi-structured debrief interviews. Audio-visual recording with Transcripts were analysed using, ELAN (Educo Linguistic Annotator), after interpreting ISL discourses and thematic analysis to identify communication patterns, challenges, and adaptive strategies.

Analysis of the Triadic Turn-Taking Structure

Pattern Observed

Candidate (signs in ISL) → Interpreter (voices in English/Hindi) → Employer (responds verbally) → Interpreter of ISL (signs response back to candidate).

This forms a triadic interaction rather than a dyadic (two-person) conversation, leading to timing issues, delays, and shifts in pragmatic meaning.

Table 1
Depicting the Triadic Turn-Taking Structure

Step	Speaker	Mode of Communication	Notes
1	Deaf Candidate	Indian Sign Language	Original message
2	ISL Interpreter	Spoken English/Hindi	Translates signed message; may simplify or alter tone
3	Employer	Spoken English/Hindi	Responds based on interpreted message
4	ISL Interpreter	Indian Sign Language	Translates employer's response; may miss nuances or verbal emphases

Table 2
Depicting the Identified Communication Challenges During the Interview

Challenge Category	Description	Example/Implication
Clarification Requests	Interpreter frequently asks candidate/employer to repeat or rephrase.	Slows down flow; creates perception of confusion or incompetence.
Simplification of Questions	Employer's complex or jargon-filled queries are often simplified by interpreter.	Potential loss of nuance; unfair reflection of candidate's knowledge.
Reduced Back Channelling	Deaf candidate cannot easily provide quick feedback like "hmm," nodding, "okay."	Employer perceives less engagement or responsiveness.
Missed Non-Verbal Cues	Facial expressions or gestures (critical in ISL) are not seen or misinterpreted by employer.	Affects emotional tone; candidate's intent may be misunderstood.
Turn-Taking Delay	Interpreter mediation leads to unnatural gaps between questions and responses.	Perceived as awkwardness or communication difficulty.
Interpreter Bias	Interpreter may inadvertently emphasize/de-emphasize parts of the message.	Alters employer's impression of candidate's ability or attitude.

Table 3
Depicting the Patterns in Turn-Taking and Interaction

Pattern Observed	Description	Impact on Communication
Sequential Lag	Delay due to translation in both directions.	Breaks natural flow; impacts employer's perception.
Role Confusion	Interpreter sometimes oversteps and answers on behalf of the Deaf candidate.	Erodes candidate's agency and voice.
Employer Repetition	Employer frequently repeats or rewords questions to ensure clarity.	Suggests discomfort or misunderstanding.

Pattern Observed	Description	Impact on Communication
Candidate Delay in Response	Candidate pauses to understand interpreter's rendering or signs.	Employer may misinterpret as hesitation or lack of confidence.
Interpreter-Centred Flow Control	Interpreter dictates the pace of interaction.	Interpreter's skill directly impacts success of the communication.

Findings

1. **Challenges Faced by Deaf Candidates:**
    - Delayed turn-taking and reduced spontaneity.
    - Emotional hesitation due to reliance on interpretation.
    - Misinterpretation of pauses as incompetence.
2. **Challenges Faced by ISL Interpreters:**
    - Balancing literal translation with context.
    - Emotional labour in managing both parties' expectations.
    - Difficulty translating technical or culturally specific jargon.
3. **Challenges Faced by Employers:**
    - Unfamiliarity with Deaf etiquette.
    - Over-reliance on interpreter for assessing candidate.
    - Perceived disruption in interview flow.
4. **Patterns Observed:**
    - Triadic turn-taking: Candidate signs > Interpreter speaks > Employer responds > Interpreter signs.
    - Frequent clarification requests.
    - Simplification and reframing of employer questions.
    - Reduced back-channelling from Deaf candidate.
    - Missed non-verbal cues crucial in ISL communication.

Recommendations

- For Employers: Deaf awareness training, visual and alternative communication tools, maintaining eye contact with candidates.
- For Interpreters: Contextual preparation, ethical neutrality, glossary development.
- For Deaf Candidates: Mock interviews with interpreters, use of visual aids and portfolios.

Conclusion

Effective communication is essential for truly inclusive hiring, especially in settings where Deaf individuals participate through programs like the Deaf Livelihood Fair. This study explores the complex and often overlooked communication dynamics between Deaf candidates, Indian Sign Language (ISL) interpreters, and hearing employers.

Simply having an interpreter present does not guarantee equal communication. Our findings show that real inclusion depends not only on language translation but also on empowering Deaf candidates to express themselves freely, ensuring they are fully understood, and enabling their active participation. We describe communication equity here as an

environment where all three parties—the Deaf candidate, interpreter, and employer—can exchange information openly and fairly, without losing meaning, control, or respect.

This concept goes beyond just providing sign language access. It involves how interpreters position themselves, how accurately messages are conveyed, the Deaf candidate's chance to ask questions or clarify points, and the employer's willingness to engage beyond spoken language norms. In many interviews we studied, communication equity was interrupted by inconsistent interpreting, poor interpreter placement, or missed non-verbal signals.

Therefore, to make disability-inclusive hiring truly effective, recruitment processes must formally recognize communication equity as a fundamental principle. This means focusing not only on the availability but also on the quality, ethical standards, and context-sensitive approach of interpreting services. Employers and HR teams need proper training to support this three-way communication, helping reveal and appreciate the Deaf candidate's strengths.

Only by respectfully bridging the communication gap, rather than merely filling silence, can we create genuinely inclusive and participatory workplaces.

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From Mr. M'Choakumchild to Bradley Headstone: Impact of Ongoing Educational Reforms on Schoolteachers in *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend*

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Abstract

Charles Dickens maintained a sustained engagement with contemporary education, specifically regarding its provision for the working class and individuals experiencing poverty. He interrogated the structural deficiencies of the education and teaching systems through his portrayals of diverse schools and teachers. In *Hard Times* (1854), he satirized the pupil-teacher system, established by the 1846 regulations, embodied in M'Choakumchild, whose mechanical and fact-driven pedagogy exemplified the shortcomings of utilitarian education. A decade later, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), Dickens revisited these concerns through Bradley Headstone—a complex central antagonist much different from M'Choakumchild, an unlikeable minor character. This more nuanced treatment signals the schoolteachers' evolving social and professional standing, while reflecting the impact of the 1862 Revised Code. Shaped by economic imperatives and utilitarian ideals, the Code further instrumentalized education, increasing pressures on teachers. Headstone's obsessive and violent traits can be interpreted as manifestations of the psychological strain imposed by these reforms. His tense relationship with Charley Hexam encapsulates the transition from apprenticeship-based pupil-teacher training to the mechanical and structured discipline ushered in by the Code.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, education reform, utilitarianism, the pupil-teacher system, the Revised Code

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Introduction

Charles Dickens observed the evolving landscape of Victorian Britain. His fiction offers both storytelling and a sustained critique, specifically of how education was delivered to the working class and the poor. Through his portrayals of schools and teachers, he interrogated the structural deficiencies of the systems shaped by the then-existing education reforms. In *Hard Times* (1854), he satirized the 1846 pupil-teacher system and teacher-training colleges through the character of M'Choakumchild. Owing to the overemphasis on facts and data, M'Choakumchild exemplifies the shortcomings of utilitarian pedagogy—education stripped of imagination, empathy, and moral depth.

A decade later, Dickens revisited these concerns with greater psychological complexity in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). Bradley Headstone, a central antagonist and schoolteacher, reflects the intensified pressures of the 1862 Revised Code (hereinafter, the Code)—a policy under which school funding was based upon pupils' performance and teaching was further instrumentalized. Unlike M'Choakumchild, Headstone is a tragic figure whose obsessive and violent tendencies suggest the psychological toll of a system that valued discipline and efficiency. Headstone's relationship with his pupil, Charley Hexam encapsulates the transition from apprenticeship-based training to the rigid, result-driven discipline of the Code. Together, these characters highlight the shifting social and professional standing of teachers and the emotional costs of reform-era education.

Through these literary portraits in *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend,* Dickens resists the realities of Victorian schooling. Previous Dickens's studies have deemed the impact of utilitarianism in *Hard Times* as a matter of course; however, it is seldom linked with the details of the pupil-teacher system (for instance, Collins, 1965; Manning, 1959/2021). The influence of the Code has been rarely considered except in Sean Grass's 2020 study, which argues:

> The novel attacks primarily neither the methods nor the qualifications of teachers such as Headstone but rather the underlying premises of the 1862 Revised Code, which upended, at a moment of increasing social mobility, the conventional sense of the 'value' that education provided by ignoring its role in fostering usefulness, empathy and social cohesion and instead tying it narrowly to individual financial gain and class ambition. (p. 30)

By referring to the backgrounds of these two reforms, this study discusses the persuasiveness of Dickens's characterization.

The Condition of Elementary Education Before 1846

Prior to 1846, the system of elementary education in Britain was characterized by fragmentation and inconsistency, with the quality of teaching being influenced by factors such as social class and financial resources. The governance of schools was the responsibility of religious organizations, philanthropic societies, or private individuals, and there was no national system to govern schools and teachers. It is evident that each educational institution possessed its own set of standards, curricula, and objectives. Education for children from affluent and middle-class backgrounds was typically provided in the domestic environment or at grammar schools. Conversely, children from working-class backgrounds frequently had restricted or no access to structured educational opportunities. The present study examines the

topic of education for Victorian working-class children. Table 1 presents a selection of the most common types of schools for them.

Table 1
Popular Schools for Victorian Working-Class Children

Type	Description
Dame school	- Run by elderly women at their home - Basic literacy; small fee
Sunday school	- Basic secular and religious education, part-time - Popular until the mid-nineteenth century
Charity school	- Run by Anglican church or nonconformist church
Ragged school	- Emerged in the 1840s - Free food and clothing
Industrial school	- Existed in urban slums - Emphasis on industrial training
Workhouse school	- Minimal education for pauper children - Understaffed, overcrowded

Source: Picard, n.d.; Waite, 2015; Larsen, 2011

These schools were targets of Dickens's criticism. For instance, in the essay entitled "A Sleep to Startle Us" in *Household Words*, issued on March 13, 1852, he wrote of his first visit to Field Lane Ragged School on September 14, 1843. He mentioned its unsanitary environment, underqualified teachers, and bad children:

> It was held in a low-roofed den, in a sickening atmosphere, in the midst of taint, and dirt, and pestilence: with all the deadly sins let loose, howling and shrieking at the doors. Zeal did not supply the place of method and training; the teachers knew little of their office; the pupils, with an evil sharpness, found them out, got the better of them, derided them, made blasphemous answers to scriptural questions, sang, fought, danced, robbed each other; seemed possessed by legions of devils. (Dickens, 1852, p. 577)

In Chapter 10 of *Great Expectations* (1860–61), Dickens again described the horrible conditions of the schools and teachers available to the working class by the school run by Mr. Wopsle's grandaunt—an incompetent teacher, low-standard teaching, and uncontrolled children (Dickens, 1860–61/1994, pp. 62–63; Takei, 2025, pp. 376–77).

The income and social standing of schoolteachers were low. Thomas Babington Macaulay's comment in the speech which he delivered in the House of Commons on April 19, 1847 was biased, yet it typified his contemporaries' view of schoolteachers:

> The masters the refuse of all other callings, discarded footmen, ruined pedlars, men who cannot work a sum in the rule of three, men who cannot write a common letter without blunders, men who do not know whether the earth is a sphere or a cube, men

> who do not know whether Jerusalem is in Asia or America. (Macaulay, 1847/1898, p. 247)

This contempt for schoolteachers by the well-to-do continued for a lengthy period.

The 1846 Pupil-Teacher System

However, the implementation of James Kay-Shuttleworth's reforms resulted in an increase in the demand for schoolteachers. The pupil-teacher system was introduced in 1846 with the aim of expanding access to education for the working classes and addressing the shortage of trained teachers. John Manning (1959/2021) asserts that the procurement of a sufficient number of adequately trained teachers was unfeasible without the involvement of the state, although the program was initiated with considerable reluctance (p. 139). The development of British elementary education coincided with the commencement of state involvement in the field.

The pupil-teacher system facilitated the acquisition of gainful employment by the working-class children. Candidates were recruited from humble backgrounds, usually at the age of 13. The participants engaged in classroom duties for a period of five years, concurrently pursuing further education under the supervision of a head teacher. Upon successful completion of their five-year apprenticeship, they were eligible to sit for a Queen's Scholarship Exam, which would grant them admission to training colleges. Following graduation from college with a certification, teachers were acknowledged as fully qualified (Robinson, 2006, pp. 21–22; Takei, 2025, p. 373). Consequently, the number of pupil-teachers increased on a continuous basis.

The road to becoming teachers was competitive and exhausting. The Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education on December 21, 1846 (hereinafter, the 1846 Minutes), which created the pupil-teacher system, provided the qualifications required for pupil-teachers:

> They must be at least thirteen, years of age, and must not be subject to any bodily infirmity likely to impair their usefulness as pupil teachers.
>
> In schools connected with the Church of England, the clergyman and managers, and, in other schools, the managers must certify that the moral character of the candidates and of their families justify an expectation that the instruction and training of the school will be seconded by their own efforts and by the example of their parents. If this cannot be certified of the family, the apprentice will be required to board in some approved household.
>
> Candidates will also be required:−
>
> (1) To read with fluency, ease, and expression.
> (2) To write in a neat hand, with correct spelling and punctuation, a simple prose narrative slowly read to them.
> (3) To write from dictation sums in the first four rules of arithmetic, simple and compound; to work them correctly, and to know the tables of weights and measures.
> (4) To point out the parts of speech in a simple sentence.
> (5) To have an elementary knowledge of geography.
> (6) In schools connected with the Church of England they will be required to repeat the Catechism, and to show that they understand its meaning, and are

> acquainted with the outline of Scripture history. The parochial clergyman will assist in this part of the examination.
>
> In other schools the state of the religious knowledge will be certified by the managers.
> (7) To teach a junior class to the satisfaction of the Inspector.
> (8) Girls should also be able to sew neatly and to knit. (The 1846 Minutes)

At the end of each year, pupil-teachers were examined by inspectors. They would receive a certificate of "good conduct" and "punctuality, diligence, obedience, and attention to their duties" from school managers and supervisors (The 1846 Minutes). These regulations suggested that they aimed to instill middle-class morals and propriety in the working classes. In addition to teaching skills, pupil-teachers' behavior, personalities, health, and family background were severely scrutinized. Asher Tropp (1957) says that illegitimate children were not admitted except for outstanding ones, and living in public houses was not allowed (pp. 21–22). To apply for stipends, the conditions required were harder. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Charley's behavior, such as disliking his sister Lizzy's living situation with Jenny Wren and cutting off Headstone, is officious and ungrateful; however, it makes sense considering the environment of the pupil-teachers.

The achievements of pupil-teachers were not necessarily bad; however, they were not as good as initially expected. As evidence, Matthew Arnold's (1889/1908) school inspection results from 1852 to 1882 are significant. In the 1852 report, he wrote:

> On one other topic, in connection with the subject of pupil-teachers, I am anxious to touch in conclusion. In the general opinion of the advantages which have resulted from the employment of them, I most fully concur; and of the acquirements and general behaviour of the greater number of those of them whom I have examined I wish to speak favourably. But I have been much struck in examining them towards the close of their apprenticeship, when they are generally at least eighteen years old, with the utter disproportion between the great amount of positive information and the low degree of mental culture and intelligence which they exhibit. Young men, whose knowledge of grammar, of the minutest details of geographical and historical facts, and above all of mathematics, is surprising, often cannot paraphrase a plain passage of prose or poetry without totally misapprehending it, or write half a page of composition on any subject without falling into gross blunders of taste and expression. I cannot but think that, with a body of young men so highly instructed, too little attention has hitherto been paid to this side of education; the side through which it chiefly forms the character; the side which has perhaps been too exclusively attended to in schools for the higher classes, and to the development of which it is the boast of what is called classical education to be mainly directed. (Arnold, 1889/1908, pp. 16–17)

Christopher Bischof (2019) points out that Arnold was a supporter of the pupil-teacher system (Ch. 2, para. 3); thus, his criticism of the pupil-teachers was never nitpicking. The pupil-teachers enormously absorbed fragmental facts; however, they had difficulty in applying them to anything substantial. Their learning drained their sensibility. These deficiencies are echoed in Dickens's fictional schoolteachers.

Dickens's Criticism of Utilitarian Education in *Hard Times* (1854)

In *Hard Times*, Dickens critiques Victorian utilitarian education and teacher-training colleges through M'Choakumchild, a schoolteacher at Gradgrind's school. His history is explained as follows:

> He and some one hundred and forty other schoolmasters, had been lately turned at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs. He had been put through an immense variety of paces, and had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, and general cosmography, the sciences of compound proportion, algebra, land-surveying and levelling, vocal music, and drawing from models, were all at the ends of his ten chilled fingers. He had worked his stony way into Her Majesty's most Honourable Privy Council's Schedule B, and had taken the bloom off the higher branches of mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin and Greek. He knew all about all the Water Sheds of all the world (whatever they are), and all the histories of all the peoples, and all the names of all the rivers and mountains, and all the productions, manners, and customs of all the countries, and all their boundaries and bearings on the two-and-thirty points of the compass. Ah, rather overdone, M'Choakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more! (Dickens, 1854/1992, p. 7)

M'Choakumchild belongs to the first generation of training college graduates. Dickens satirizes the 1846 Minutes because its goals for pupil-teachers are similar to M'Choakumchild's learnings. The 1846 Minutes specified that in the fifth year, pupil-teachers were to be tested in the following subjects: an essay on teaching method, algebra, land surveying and leveling, syntax, etymology, prosody, geography, English history, the Holy Scriptures, Liturgy, Catechism, and an impromptu mock lesson. Dickens compares teacher training to manufacturing, training colleges to factories, and teachers to products. Like the aforementioned pupil-teachers in Arnold's 1852 report, M'Choakumchild is overstuffed with a random variety of fragmental knowledge; however, he lacks the capacity to nurture imagination, empathy, or moral insight. His teaching is a product of the utilitarian ideals of the era: measurable, mechanical, but emotionally sterile.

Dickens criticizes the over-standardization of teacher education, where teachers are trained to impose facts on children rather than foster understanding in *Hard Times*. M'Choakumchild's inability to handle pupils like Sissy Jupe underscores the failure of mechanical teaching. The following passage explains her maladjustment to utilitarian education from the teacher's viewpoint:

> M'Choakumchild reported that she [Sissy] had a very dense head for figures; that, once possessed with a general idea of the globe, she took the smallest conceivable interest in its exact measurements; that she was extremely slow in the acquisition of dates, unless some pitiful incident happened to be connected therewith; that she would burst into tears on being required (by the mental process) immediately to name the cost of two hundred and forty-seven muslin caps at fourteen-pence halfpenny; that she was as low down, in the school, as low could be; that after eight weeks of induction into the elements of Political Economy, she had only yesterday been set right by a prattler three feet high, for returning to the question, 'What is the first principle of this science?' the

> absurd answer, 'To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me.' (Dickens, 1854/1992, p. 52)

Brought up in a circus, a world of amusement, fantasy, and wonder, Sissy functions as the emotional and imaginative counterpoint to the rigid utilitarianism embodied by M'Choakumchild and the Gradgrind's school system. Grass (2020) mentions that Sissy is "Dickens's most memorable victim of rote learning and the tyranny of 'Facts'" (p. 36); however, her incompatibility with M'Choakumchild's schooling is a quiet assertion that sensibility, sympathy, and lived experience are essential to human development. Zubair Ahmad Bhat (2016) says that there is truth in Sissy's answers, and she has sincerity to resist difficulties (p. 2394). As Bhat (2016) argues, Dickens gives her a positive role. She is the novel's moral center and a symbol of the enduring power of feeling. Through her, Dickens champions the emotional and moral dimensions of education.

The Change of Teachers' Status and the 1862 Revised Code

Between 1846 and 1862, the working environment of Britain's schoolteachers underwent a significant transformation, shaped by educational reform, class dynamics, and shifting expectations of professionalism. During this period, the schoolteachers' job was fixed in the working classes. Tropp (1957) notes that between 1849 and 1859, the number of pupil-teachers increased from 3,580 to 15,224, and the proportion of female teachers rose from 32% in 1849 to 41% in 1851 and 46% in 1859 (pp. 21–22). Per the 1846 Minutes, teachers' salaries considerably rose and continued rising steadily until the Code was established, though less than those of other professions (Tropp, 1957, p. 39). Due to the state intervention, the teaching standard was improved. In his 1855 report, Arnold esteemed the training college teachers whom he inspected:

> Some of the teachers at this institution, indeed, such as Dr. Cornwell and Mrs. Macrae, are so well and so honourably known to the public, their merits in the service of education have so long been recognised, that to bear testimony now to their admirable qualities is wholly unnecessary. But I may be allowed to express my sense of the rare endowments as a lecturer which Mr. Fitch, the Vice-Principal, appears to me to possess; he has in lecturing the gifts of animation of manner, of exactness, and at the same time fluency of expression, of coherence in his method of treating his subject, to a degree, in my opinion, quite eminent; and these are the most desirable gifts for a lecturer. He is also fully alive to the necessity of infusing into the students something of that general culture, the want of which is perhaps the greatest defect of the present teachers of elementary schools, and the defect hardest to remedy. (Arnold, 1889/1908, pp. 240–41)

These improvements were caused by the social needs for education for the working classes and teachers' efforts. However, the social standing of schoolteachers remained lower than the church and their upper- and middle-class counterparts (Tropp, 1957, pp. 37, 40). During their apprenticeship, they were drilled with middle-class norms but remained subordinate within the education hierarchy.

The turning point came with the Code, introduced by Robert Lowe. The birth of the Code was complicated. Tropp (1957) points out six factors in the 1850s, which led to the establishment of the Code: dissatisfaction with the 1846 Minutes and present popular education, dislike for giving education to the poor, prejudice against certified teachers, extreme nonconformists' opposition to church schools and teachers, hate for state control of education, and the

government's desire to cut the education grant, whose chief architect was William Gladstone (pp. 58–61).

Each factor had a strong impact; however, the reasons for the Code were divided into class consciousness and political and financial needs. First, the middle classes were skeptical of the need to educate the working classes and the poor, and feared that their superiority might be threatened (Tropp, 1957, p. 59). The middle classes considered schoolteachers as those who dared to imitate their social betters (Tropp, 1957, p. 60). Due to the Crimean War (1853–56), the national budget was straitened. Gladstone, as Exchequer, desperately needed to cut expenses. The education grant rose from £150,000 in 1851 to £836,920 in 1859 (Tropp, 1957, p. 61), which was trivial compared with the cost of the Crimean War. However, as an easy target, the plan for cutting the education budget was undertaken.

Lowe was inclined toward economy and class-conscious, disliked educating the poor (Tropp, 1957, p. 80). Thus, he was the best person to enforce the reduced budget to cater to the government. On February 13, 1862, in the House of Commons, he made a speech about the Code. The remark "If it is not cheap, it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient, it shall be cheap" (The House of Commons, 1862) explained the nature of the Code. Jackie Latham (1991) says that the members in the Commons were unfamiliar with elementary education; for them, cheapness was more important than efficacy (p. 7). The Code was a counterattack on the 1846 Minutes and invited controversy and dispute until the enactment of the 1870 Elementary Education Act.

Lowe planned to make schooling more efficient and accountable; however, his reform led to the deterioration of education quality and teachers' living standards. The content of the Code is lengthy. Its key features are summarized below:

- Funding conditional on pupils' performance: Inspectors annually examined pupils' attendance and proficiency in the three Rs. When the overall evaluation did not meet the required standard, the amount of grants was decreased; in the worst cases, no grant was provided.
- Narrowed curriculum: Subjects were limited to the three Rs and some practical knowledge. Other subjects, such as history, geography, and literature, were discouraged.
- Increased pressure on pupils and teachers: They had to prepare for the inspections, and passing exams was prioritized.
- Teachers' financial difficulties: Their salaries and benefits were cut down, and their pension plan was abolished.

The standard of inspection was universal; however, it was evident that the schools in poor districts were hit the hardest by the Code. Manning (1959/2021) notes that in 1861, 189 out of the 192 schools of the London Ragged School Union failed to acquire a grant (p. 21). Dickens's portrayal of Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* captures this tension. He suffers from the conflict between his social aspiration and reform-era insecurity.

Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam

To discuss the realities of Headstone and Charley, a comparison between M'Choakumchild and Headstone is useful. M'Choakumchild is an unlikeable minor character appearing in only three chapters of *Hard Times*. However, Headstone is a central antagonist. His emotion is complicated—his love, ambition, and eventual violence suggest the heavy pressure caused by the education reform. His rigid self-control and class anxiety mirror the nature of those teachers

who were controlled by the state and underestimated by their social betters. M'Choakumchild's commitment to his pupils is not mentioned, except for brief questions and answers with Sissy. However, Headstone's relationship with his pupil Charley dramatizes the shift from apprenticeship-based training to mechanized professionalism.

Grass (2020) contends that in Headstone, Dickens masterfully illustrates his profound sensitivity to the psychological and social ramifications of the reforms (p. 38). Dickens's transition from M'Choakumchild to Headstone signifies a deepening concern with the training of teachers and the shaping or suppression of their humanity by teacher-evaluation systems. The following quote is to be examined:

> Bradley Headstone, in his decent black coat and waistcoat, and decent white shirt, and decent formal black tie, and decent pantaloons of pepper and salt, with his decent silver watch in his pocket and its decent hair-guard round his neck, looked a thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty. He was never seen in any other dress, and yet there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this, as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it, recalling some mechanics in their holiday clothes. He had acquired mechanically a great store of teacher's knowledge. He could do mental arithmetic mechanically, sing at sight mechanically, blow various wind instruments mechanically, even play the great church organ mechanically. From his early childhood up, his mind had been a place of mechanical stowage. The arrangement of his wholesale warehouse, so that it might be always ready to meet the demands of retail dealers—history here, geography there, astronomy to the right, political economy to the left—natural history, the physical sciences, figures, music, the lower mathematics, and what not, all in their several places—this care had imparted to his countenance a look of care; while the habit of questioning and being questioned had given him a suspicious manner, or a manner that would be better described as one of lying in wait. There was a kind of settled trouble in the face. It was the face belonging to a naturally slow or inattentive intellect that had toiled hard to get what it had won, and that had to hold it now that it was gotten. He always seemed to be uneasy lest anything should be missing from his mental warehouse, and taking stock to assure himself. (Dickens, 1864–65/2000, p. 230)

Similar to M'Choakumchild, what Headstone learns as a pupil-teacher and while training college student is paraded. The repetition of "decent" implies that he is eager to adapt middle-class-like decency. The repetition of "mechanically" indicates that he unthinkingly memorizes what is taught. The phrase "a naturally slow or inattentive intellect that had toiled hard" means that he is burnt out when he becomes a teacher. The term "wholesale warehouse" suggests the commercial aspect of education (Grass, 2020, pp. 38–39). He sells his knowledge for a living. However, his business ends poorly because he fails to choose a spouse. If he wants to succeed in his teaching career, he should marry Miss Peecher or any fellow female teacher, similar to M'Choakumchild. Headstone's obsession with Lizzy signals his complexity: he is neither a teaching machine nor a middle-class-like respectable teacher.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the evolving relationship between Headstone and Charley indicates the psychological and social consequences of the Code. Initially, they share a bond rooted in worldly ambitions and underclass origins. Headstone sees his reflection in Charley, a pupil-teacher desperate to climb the social ladder. Despite his modest income, Headstone financially supports Charley beyond the extent to which a head teacher would be required to, although it is not entirely altruistic. Until their fallout, Headstone is a father- and brother-figure for Charley. However, as the Code intensifies pressures on teachers, their relationship increasingly

destabilizes. Headstone's anxiety and stress reveal the emotional toll of the demanding education reform. Charley grows more calculating, distancing himself from Lizzie and eventually from Headstone. It is hinted that Charley would unstoppably realize his life plan, from the management of the school to marriage. His rejection of Headstone signals a generational shift: the pupil-teacher no longer respects the head teacher, and seeks autonomy and social ascent. Examine the following quote:

> 'I am going to be plain with you, Mr Headstone,' said young Hexam, shaking his head in a half-threatening manner, 'because this is no time for affecting not to know things that I do know—except certain things at which it might not be very safe for you to hint again. What I mean is this: if you were a good master, I was a good pupil. I have done you plenty of credit, and in improving my own reputation I have improved yours quite as much. Very well then. Starting on equal terms, I want to put before you how you have shown your gratitude to me, for doing all I could to further your wishes with reference to my sister. You have compromised me by being seen about with me, endeavouring to counteract this Mr Eugene Wrayburn. That's the first thing you have done. If my character, and my now dropping you, help me out of that, Mr Headstone, the deliverance is to be attributed to me, and not to you. No thanks to you for it!' (Dickens, 1864–65/2000, p. 756)

Charley is representative of a new generation of educators who are influenced by the principles of the Code, prioritizing results over emotional intelligence. Grass (2020) writes, "Explicitly and implicitly, the Code treated empathy and understanding as valueless enterprises" (p. 35). Charley's farewell to Headstone is indicative of this generational shift. When paraphrasing the aforementioned text in the present discourse, the intention is to convey the following: "I have become a teacher thanks to your assistance. However, by demonstrating academic excellence, I have successfully completed the repayment process. We are equals, and I no longer need to feel grateful towards you." Conversely, Headstone grapples with the psychological demands imposed by the Code, while Charley demonstrates a remarkable aptitude for adaptation, suggesting a promising trajectory for future success. However, Dickens's depiction of him is not as a triumphant success. Charley exhibits a lack of moral depth, evidenced by his internalization of the utilitarian doctrine of the Code, which supersedes familial affection and fraternal solidarity. He is regarded as a literary embodiment of the post-Code generation, a concept that has been overshadowed by the education reform.

Conclusion

In *Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens offers a layered critique of Victorian education, shaped by the evolving policies of the 1846 pupil-teacher system and the Code. These reforms expanded schooling to the working class and optimized the education system. However, it ultimately narrowed the emotional and moral scope of schooling. Dickens dramatizes this trend through his portrayals of teachers and schools.

In *Hard Times*, M'Choakumchild embodies the early pupil-teacher system. He is a product of mechanized instruction, trained in facts but devoid of sensibility. His teaching reflects the utilitarian ideals of mid-century reform—rigid, unimaginative, and lacking emotional involvement. Dickens satirizes this system as the one that treats children as machines and crushes their personalities.

In contrast, *Our Mutual Friend* presents a more psychologically complex response to the Code, which tied the school fund to the pupils' performance and harmed teachers. Headstone is a tragic product of this system—disciplined, repressed, and finally killed. His obsession and violence reveal the psychological toll of a profession, reshaped by bureaucratic control and class consciousness. Charley is unstoppable and unswaying, like a teaching machine, representing the post-reform generation. Dickens's fiction is a powerful lens to view the human cost of education reform, warning that when teaching is reduced to metrics, both teachers and students risk losing humanity.

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

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Matching Negative Emotions to Recovery-Focused Tourism Destinations

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Abstract

Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a pathway for emotional recovery, as travelers seek destinations that support mental and psychological well-being. This study examines the relationship between negative emotions—specifically stress, burnout, anxiety, and loneliness—and tourists' preferences for recovery-focused destinations. Using a descriptive quantitative research design, data were collected from 300 leisure travelers through a structured questionnaire assessing emotional experiences, destination features, and recovery-oriented preferences. The findings indicate that negative emotions significantly influence destination choices, with nature-based settings such as quiet beaches, mountain retreats, and wellness-oriented destinations being most preferred for emotional healing. Social interaction and environmental calmness were identified as key contributors to recovery, with preferences varying according to individual emotional needs. The study highlights the importance of aligning tourism experiences with travelers' emotional states to enhance satisfaction and promote mental well-being. Practical implications include the development of emotion-based travel packages, integration of wellness services, and destination marketing strategies that emphasize emotional benefits. In the post-pandemic tourism landscape, travel emerges not only as a leisure activity but also as a means of emotional restoration and renewal.

Keywords: anxiety, emotional recovery, negative emotions, nature-based destinations, post-pandemic travel, tourist behavior, wellness tourism

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Introduction

Tourism is increasingly recognized as an important avenue for emotional recovery, allowing travelers to select destinations that align with their psychological and emotional needs. Negative emotions such as stress, burnout, anxiety, and loneliness significantly influence travel behavior, shaping destination choice and travel motivation (Kim et al., 2021). These emotional states often arise from workplace demands, family responsibilities, and broader social pressures, generating a desire for restorative travel experiences.

Attribution theory suggests that individuals interpret the sources of their negative emotions—whether personal, situational, or social—and these interpretations influence expectations and decision-making when selecting destinations (Zhang et al., 2021). Emotional experiences, including those perceived as negative, can result in positive psychological outcomes when managed through meaningful travel experiences. Research on emotionally intense tourism experiences demonstrates that reflection, emotional expression, and psychological release can contribute positively to well-being (Nawijn, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized tourism's role in emotional healing. Extended periods of isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety reshaped how travelers evaluate safety, comfort, and emotional benefits when choosing destinations (Zhou et al., 2024). Travel experiences that align with the intensity of an individual's emotional state have been shown to facilitate more effective psychological recovery (Young et al., 2023).

Nature-based tourism, including visits to beaches, forests, and mountain retreats, has consistently been associated with improved mental well-being, reduced stress levels, and enhanced cognitive clarity (Cooper, 2021). Building on these insights, the present study investigates how specific negative emotions influence preferences for recovery-focused tourism destinations, offering guidance for tourism stakeholders seeking to design emotionally supportive and restorative experiences.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine the relationship between negative emotions and preferences for recovery-focused tourism destinations. A structured questionnaire was used to collect numerical data related to emotional experiences, destination preferences, and perceived restorative attributes.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 300 leisure travelers who had previously traveled or intended to travel for emotional recovery purposes. Convenience sampling was utilized, with respondents recruited through travel agencies, online travel forums, and social media platforms. The sample represented diverse demographic characteristics, including age, gender, occupation, and travel frequency.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The questionnaire comprised five sections: (1) demographic profile; (2) negative emotions experienced; (3) destination preferences; (4) destination attributes; and (5) recovery needs. Responses were measured using multiple-choice items and Likert-scale ratings to facilitate quantitative analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by attribution theory (Zhang et al., 2021), the emotional recovery framework (Young et al., 2023), and cognitive appraisal theory (Zhou, Chen, & Li, 2024), which collectively explain how emotional states influence perceptions, evaluations, and travel decisions.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and emotional experiences. Correlation and regression analyses examined relationships between negative emotions and destination preferences, while factor analysis identified key destination attributes contributing to emotional recovery.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Responses were anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data and the use of convenience sampling, which may limit generalizability.

Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate a significant relationship between negative emotions and destination preferences. Respondents experiencing stress, burnout, and anxiety showed strong preferences for calm, nature-based environments such as beaches, forests, and mountain retreats. These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the therapeutic benefits of natural environments (Cooper, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2021).

Preferences for social interaction varied depending on emotional state. Travelers experiencing loneliness valued destinations offering opportunities for social connection, while those experiencing stress prioritized solitude and tranquility. This variability underscores the importance of designing flexible tourism products that support both solitary and social recovery needs.

From a managerial perspective, tourism providers can enhance traveler well-being by emphasizing emotional benefits in destination marketing, developing wellness-oriented packages, and offering adaptable experiences that respond to diverse emotional needs.

Conclusion

This study confirms that negative emotions significantly influence tourists' preferences for recovery-focused destinations. Stress, burnout, anxiety, and loneliness shape the desire for calm, nature-based, and emotionally supportive environments. Destinations that integrate

serenity, natural beauty, and flexible social opportunities are highly valued for emotional restoration. These findings offer valuable insights for tourism planners and marketers seeking to design recovery-oriented travel experiences that promote mental well-being. Future research may explore longitudinal emotional outcomes and cross-cultural variations in recovery-focused travel preferences.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors declare that generative AI tools were used solely for language refinement, clarity, and formatting assistance. All research design, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are the authors' original work, and full responsibility for the content rests with the authors.

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Selfishness in Werner Pfennig From Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014)

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Abstract

All the Light We Cannot See (2014), a novel by Anthony Doerr, is a Pulitzer Prize–winning work of fiction, awarded in 2015. The narrative deals with the moral dilemmas faced by its protagonist, Werner Pfennig. Werner Pfennig is an eighteen-year-old German orphan serving the Nazi regime. Scholarly studies on the text thus far portray Werner as a victim of circumstance, in navigating the harrowing wartime challenges on his own. However, this study argues that his actions are primarily driven by rational selfish motives. This study therefore examines the rational selfish acts of Werner, highlighting his choices and decisions in relation to his self-sacrifices. Following that, the discussion centers on his relationships with and treatment towards other characters within the text. The reading of the novel is enlightened through the concept of rational selfishness proposed by Peter Schwartz in his book, *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015). The textual analysis of the selected text aims to contribute to the broader discussion of Doerr's novel and war literature. Additionally, it explores the applicability of Schwartz's framework to further the understanding and appreciation of literary works. The findings of the study reveal that Werner displays more irrational selfishness than rational selfishness. Moreover, even in instances where Werner displays no selfishness, they result in destructive consequences. In conclusion, the study highlights the moral dilemma experienced by the protagonist from the selected text, and the implications of his rational and irrational selfishness during the war.

Keywords: WWII literature, rational selfishness, moral ambiguity

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Introduction

Literature has long mirrored human morality, often through morally complex characters. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in *Thoughts on Modern Literature* (1840) that literature has three hierarchical classes: scientific works dealing with realities, imaginative works, and the highest class, which expresses moral elements. Emerson argues that a good writer exploring morality should examine not only the positive but also the darker sides of human conditions, including selfishness. He notes that selfishness is not inherently immoral and that morality differs for each individual rather than following conventional social rules.

In this evolving tradition, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) offers fertile ground for questioning moral ambiguity in extreme conditions. During World War II, Werner Pfennig, a German orphan, leaves his sister to join the Nazi school and pursue his dream of becoming an engineer. He sacrifices his principle of not hurting innocent people and obeys soldiers, using his skills to help destroy anti-German radio transmissions. While scholarship presents Werner as a morally ambiguous victim, evidence of his selfishness has not been found. This gap allows this paper to argue that Werner shows traits of rational selfishness, using a checklist based on Peter Schwartz's *In Defense of Self-Sacrifice* (2015). Rational selfishness exists only when the five self-sacrifices are absent and does not involve harming others; if it does, Schwartz categorizes it as irrational.

To address this gap, this article introduces a philosophical framework proposed by Peter Schwartz. Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness has been built based on philosopher Ayn Rand's rational egoism (1964, p. 11). Rand defines selfishness as "concerned with one's self." She views selfishness not as vice but as a rational moral value (1964). Schwartz enlists five elements of self-sacrifices that must be avoided to achieve rational selfishness. The five elements of self-sacrifices are "sacrifice of one's concern," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 14) "sacrifice of one's interest," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 53) "one's continual sacrifice," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 73) "sacrifice against one's choice," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 104) and "sacrifice of one's mind" (Schwartz, 2015, p. 186).

This article argues Werner portrays traits of rational selfishness, and it aims to investigate how his actions align with Schwartz's framework. It poses three guiding research questions: (1) What are the acts of rational selfishness exhibited by Werner Pfennig in the novel? (2) How do the acts of self-sacrifice determine whether Werner Pfennig is rationally selfish? (3) How does Werner Pfennig's behavior impact the other characters and the moral fabric of the narrative?

This study focuses exclusively on Werner Pfennig due to the subtlety and complexity of his moral ambiguity. The significance of this study is to examine Werner's rational selfishness because it is less overtly conveyed in the selected novel. In framing this protagonist as a character who navigates World War II through rational selfishness, this study offers a new lens for understanding Doerr's novel. Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness has only been used in the studies of sociology, and there is a lack of scholarly application to literary works. Therefore, the study expands the application of Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness to literary analysis, offering an interdisciplinary approach that bridges philosophy and literature while contributing to existing scholarship on the novel.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) has emphasized the psychological and moral development of Werner Pfennig thus far. Most analyses portray Werner as a morally ambiguous character shaped by traumatic incidents during the war. The literature review examines major contributions that have focused on Werner Pfennig's trauma, victimhood, and moral complexity and locate a gap which justifies the study.

Several scholars examine Werner's psychological trauma and inner conflict. Pandit (2019) uses Freud's trauma theory to show that Werner, shaped by his upbringing and forced enlistment, becomes a resilient survivor of wartime trauma, transforming from a curious child interested in engineering to a soldier complicit in violence. Mengqi (2023) highlights Werner's vulnerability through the letters he exchanges with his sister Jutta, showing that, like his friend Frederick, he is morally uncertain and ultimately victimized by the system that recruited him.

The trauma and loss that Werner experiences are further examined through psychoanalytic approaches. Margot Wadell (2019) analyzes Werner's inner and outer conflicts using Freudian theory, arguing that when Werner processes his traumatic experiences, the experience helps him to understand a deeper part of himself. She concludes that Werner is a victim in his own ways after experiencing traumatic losses in his life. Despite this, he has found ways to survive both internally and externally, with different levels of consciousness and truthfulness toward the war (Wadell, 2019). These studies thus far have acknowledged Werner's dark moments during the war and have concluded him as a victim.

Narrative scholars have also analyzed Werner's characterization, especially how the novel's form shapes the reader's perception of his morality. Jessica Shepherd (2019) argues that Doerr's use of the present tense and nonlinear timeline creates urgency and strengthens the narration by building an effective buildup. She states that the alternating timeline does not affect the plot but instead shows the characters' development well. Florentina Anghel (2020) similarly notes that the shifting timeline creates a "puzzle-like" narrative that balances war and moral spirit. She concludes that this timeline balances the realities of war and influences Werner's decisions and behaviors.

Other scholars focus on symbolic and archetypal readings of Werner's morally ambiguous actions. Daniel Marchalik (2016) uses Stella Bolaki's theory of "victim art" to argue that Doerr reduces Werner's moral ambiguity by portraying him as a victim who becomes a savior, especially when he rescues Marie-Laure. Marchalik suggests that Werner's redeemed humanity lessens his complicity in war crimes, but he does not examine whether Werner's actions show rational selfishness. Darrell Stafford (2018) analyzes the novel using Barbara Johnstone's linguistic archetypes. Drawing on *The Linguistic Individual* (1996), he studies the traumatic traits in the narrative and links Doerr's choices to the "patient approach" found in *The Wanderer* (late 10th century AD), which centers victims' emotional lives over depictions of violence. He concludes that Doerr uses the same narrative method.

Moreover, Nurul Sakinah (2019) uses Viktor Frankl's logotherapy to interpret Werner's search for meaning during the war. She defends him as brave because he resists Nazi orders, rescues Marie-Laure, and finds his existential purpose. Similarly, Yusrina Prihatika (2017) applies New Criticism to examine symbols of Werner's guilt and moral redemption, concluding that he redeems himself by resisting Nazi ideology and helping Marie-Laure, reclaiming his lost

humanity. While these studies highlight Werner's internal struggles, they view his decisions symbolically to commend his humanity. Likewise, Vinisha Kamalakannan (2023) offers a thematic reading of morality and empathy, arguing that Werner still shows hope, loyalty, and love, and that this goodness should be lauded.

Based on the scholarly findings conducted thus far, it shows that Werner Pfennig's character is analyzed on his moral ambiguity but lacks general consensus on his acts of rational selfishness. Therefore, this paper fills the gap by analyzing Werner's rational selfishness by using the checklist provided by Schwartz from *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015).

Research Methodology & Conceptual Framework

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine the portrayal of rational selfishness in Werner Pfennig from Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014). For this study, textual analysis aids in interpreting the selected text through the lens of rational selfishness, as outlined in Schwartz's *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015). A close reading is conducted to extract relevant textual evidence addressing the research questions and objectives.

The analysis process in this research is divided into several steps. To address the first research objective, the study will identify the rational selfish acts demonstrated by Werner Pfennig. For the second research objective, the analysis will examine how the acts of self-sacrifice determine whether Werner Pfennig exhibits any rational selfishness acts. Finally, for the third research objective, the study will explore how the actions and behaviors of Werner Pfennig impact the other characters from the selected text. To analyze if Werner Pfennig exhibits any traits of rational selfishness, Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness from *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015) is adopted. Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness contains five elements of self-sacrifices that an individual needs to avoid.

Conceptual Framework

In 1964, Ayn Rand proposes her theory of "rational egoism," or rational selfishness. Rand (1964) defines selfishness as being "concerned with one's self" and argues that this benefits the individual. She states that a man who does not value himself cannot value anyone or anything else. Schwartz (2015) complements Rand by listing five elements of self-sacrifice to show that self-sacrifice is not a virtue. He argues that rational selfishness is important and not immoral, emphasizing that it occurs only when an individual's desires are reasonable and do not come at the expense of others. If pursuing these desires harms others, selfishness becomes irrational, and the outcome of one's actions determines its rationality. Any form of self-sacrifice means the action cannot be classified as selfish. Moreover, the absence of selfishness also becomes destructive when it harms others. The five elements are: (1) sacrifice of one's concern, (2) sacrifice of one's interest, (3) one's continual sacrifice, (4) sacrifice against one's choice, and (5) sacrifice of one's mind (Schwartz, 2015).

According to Schwartz (2015), sacrifice of one's concern is the act of an individual being forced to give up their ambition for the wellbeing of others. This self-sacrifice fosters the belief that one's time and resources rightfully belong to others in need, regardless of one's own hardship. Schwartz argues that this imposes a false moral obligation; the idea that pursuing one's own desires is inherently immoral. Ultimately, Schwartz concludes that this principle of self-

sacrifice is harmful, as it forces the individuals to abandon their legitimate interests, even when they have caused no harm (pp. 17–21).

The second element of self-sacrifice, as Schwartz (2015) explains, is the sacrifice of one's interests. This sacrifice forces individuals to relinquish the surplus goods or benefits, such as wealth or resources (pp.56–60). This form of sacrifice compels individuals to accommodate others' irrational desires, even when those desires are harmful. This includes irrational desires such as substance abuse or even compulsive spending (Schwartz, 2015, p. 61). Moreover, it requires individuals to voluntarily give up things they hold in high regard, both materially and emotionally. This is done under the false belief that true morality arises in prioritizing others' needs. Schwartz rejects this view, asserting that such sacrifice undermines personal value and genuine happiness (pp. 65–66).

The third element of self-sacrifice is one's continual sacrifice, which is the continual relinquishment of one's concerns and interests, because a single act is deemed insufficient (Schwartz, 2015, p. 70). This form of sacrifice imposes a constant moral obligation to prioritize others' wellbeing, and portrays self-preservation as being negative. Schwartz criticizes this sacrifice, arguing that its purpose is not to uplift the needy but to denigrate those who have achieved success (pp. 71–72). He justifies that such sacrifice weakens personal boundaries, encourages guilt-driven moral obligations, and finally results in the loss of individual identity (Schwartz, 2015, p. 72).

Schwartz's (2015) fourth element of self-sacrifice requires individuals to act against their own choices to meet the needs of others (p. 105). This involves acting against one's desires, values, or preferences, which Schwartz argues compromises personal freedom and leads to irrational outcomes. He criticizes this sacrifice for forcing individuals to conform to moral expectations or to be a slave to a higher authority. These expectations result in individuals disregarding their personal judgment, even when the actions may be inefficient or harmful. (Schwartz, 2015, pp. 104–105). In doing this self-sacrifice, individuals are expected to suppress their ambitions and independence to prove moral worth, a notion Schwartz strongly disagrees (pp. 105–107).

The fifth element of self-sacrifice to avoid is the sacrifice of one's mind. This is the voluntary suppression of independent thought, cognitive abilities, and intellectual freedom to conform to ideological or authoritative expectations (Schwartz, 2015, p. 186). He contends that this self-sacrifice strips individuals of their identity and reduces them to passive followers who do not think, choose, or act for themselves (pp. 187–189). Schwartz calls such individuals as "zombie order-followers," describing them as people who blindly obey authority without using their own judgment (pp. 194–195). He warns that this destructive absence of rational selfishness enables moral atrocities, as individuals give up their conscience in the name of obedience (Schwartz, 2015, pp. 196–197).

Peter Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness has yet to be explored within the field of literary studies. However, his concept of selfishness has been utilized in the field of sociology. By using Schwartz's framework, the study contributes to new interdisciplinary approaches in literary studies and helps in highlighting the value of morally ambiguous characters like Werner Pfennig.

Findings & Analysis

The first incident showing Werner's rational selfishness occurs at age fourteen, when he joins the Nazi school Napola in Schulpforta, Germany, in June 1940 to pursue science and engineering (Doerr, 2014, pp. 112, 124). Despite his sister Jutta's warnings about Nazi atrocities and how Napola has corrupted other boys from their orphanage, Werner sees it as a step toward becoming a proper engineer (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). Jutta confronts him:

"You'll become just like Hans and Herribert."
"I won't."
"Spend enough time with boys like that and you will." (p. 133)

Nonetheless, Werner prioritizes his ambition, and promises Jutta that once he becomes an engineer, he will fly her to the west and even take a train together to "all the way to Paris" (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). Werner's action, which according to Schwartz (2015) is not sacrificing his "concern," (p. 15) resulting in rational selfishness. However, as the narrative progresses, this ambition leads Werner to comply with violent practices at Napola, including abusing the prisoners and weaker cadets (Doerr, 2014, pp. 168, 228–229). These actions conform Jutta's fears and mark a shift from rational to irrational selfishness, as Werner's pursuit of desire causes harm to others. Thus, while his initial action reflects rational selfishness, the consequences of his choice reveal a moral decline.

The second incident occurs when fourteen-year-old Werner continues to serve at Napola despite hesitating about Nazi ideology (Doerr, 2014, p. 195). Initially motivated by ambition, he feels guilty witnessing cruelty, especially from Officer Bastian, who targets weaker cadets (Doerr, 2014, pp. 168, 191). In one exercise, Bastian gives weak cadet Ernst a ten-second head start, warning that if the others reach the finish line first, Ernst will be punished (Doerr, 2014, p. 169). Though Ernst narrowly avoids the punishment, later the same exercise leaves Werner's friend, Frederick, beaten until he bleeds and collapses (Doerr, 2014, pp. 193–195). Werner struggles to understand the cruelty but does not leave Napola even after seeing Frederick, "[b]lood is running from his nose or eye or ear, maybe all three. One of his eyes is already swollen shut; the other remains open. His cheek is gashed and leaks tendrils of blood" (pp. 194-195).

His inaction, especially when Frederick suffers severe abuse, reveals a prioritization of his "concern" over moral responsibility. Schwartz (2015) explains, rational selfishness requires that one's desires be reasonable and not come at the expense of others. Werner's continued service in a system that harms peers like Frederick demonstrates irrational selfishness. Werner who does not sacrifice his "concern" of becoming an engineer is achieved through compliance in cruelty.

The third incident occurs when Werner fails to defend his friend Frederick at Napola. Werner consistently remains silent while Frederick is repeatedly abused by Officer Bastian and bullied by the other cadets (Doerr, 2014, pp. 168, 238–239). Frederick, compelled to join Napola by his parents, remains morally upright and refuses to conform to Nazi ideology, becomes a target of bully. Werner, despite witnessing Frederick's suffering, chooses not to intervene. He admits, "He did nothing while Frederick was beaten and has done nothing since" (Doerr, 2014, p. 217).

Even as Frederick endures increasingly cruel punishments, including forced sprints in snow and severe beatings, Werner "does nothing to stop it" for his friend (Doerr, 2014, p. 238). When

no one stands up for Frederick, the other cadets start to bully him in the campus, "[b]oys leave dead mice in Frederick's boots. They call him a poof, Blowjob, countless other juvenile sobriquets. Twice, a fifth-year takes Frederick's field glasses and smears the lenses with excrement" (Doerr, 2014, p. 239).

Werner only helps Frederick by polishing his boots and helping with homework. He justifies his silence by clinging to his ambition of becoming an engineer and fitting in at Napola. Schwartz defines irrational selfishness as pursuing personal goals that cause unjust harm to others (33). Werner's silence, despite knowing Frederick's abuse is wrong, highlights his irrational selfishness. He does not sacrifice his "concern," which is his career. This is evident when Werner is proud of himself when he knows that he, "… is succeeding. He is being loyal. He is being what everybody [Napola] agrees is good" (Doerr, 2014, p. 250).

Furthermore, in April 1941, Frederick suffers a near-death incident caused by the violent attacks from the cadets (Doerr, 2014, p. 256). Werner notices that Frederick's bed is covered with blood. He observes the "[b]lood on the pillow and on the sheets and even on the enameled metal of the bed frame" (Doerr, 2014, p. 256). When Frederick suffers the traumatic injury, he is left permanently disabled, and Werner again chooses to stay silent because he does not want to jeopardize his future (Doerr, 2014, pp. 256–257, 294). His silence and compliance mark irrational selfishness that ultimately results in Frederick's devastation.

The fourth incident occurs when Werner participates in the torture and death of a captured prisoner during winter training at Napola in February 1941. Under orders from Bastian and Dr. Hauptmann, each cadet is instructed to throw buckets of freezing water on the prisoner. Werner, though internally conflicted, complies without resistance. The prisoner dies from the cold, and Werner is left emotionally numb, feeling as though his hands are no longer his own (Doerr, 2014, pp. 228–229). His internal guilt is evident, but he chooses compliance to preserve his standing and future within the school.

Werner's silence and compliance at Napola is the result of him not sacrificing his interest. Werner's "interests" are his own safety and reputation at Napola, and his career path, which according to Schwartz (2015) are the existing things that a person values. His calculated decision to obey, despite knowing it is morally wrong, reveals how his irrational selfishness causes harm to others.

After the prisoner's death, the body is left tied to a stake in the courtyard, mocked by the cadets and eventually pecked at by crows before being carted away (Doerr, 2014, p. 238). Deeply disturbed, Werner asks Volkheimer, a senior cadet, if this practice is normal. Volkheimer responds with, "They do that every year… Decency does not matter to them" (Doerr, 2014, p. 239). Despite learning Napola's cruelty, Werner does not resist the Nazi regime. His willingness to commit violence in exchange for personal security and future prospects clearly portrays irrational selfishness.

The fifth incident shows Werner breaking his promise to write Jutta "every week and twice a week if he can" (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). By October 1941, at fifteen, weeks pass without a letter. Jutta's letters, often critical of Nazi ideology, are censored at Napola, and Werner knows her questions "should not be asked" (Doerr, 2014, p. 263). To protect his cadet position and privileged status with Dr. Hauptmann, he does not reply. When Jutta asks, "Why don't you write?" (Doerr, 2014, p. 267), Werner remains silent.

Werner's action of prioritizing his career over his sister is seen as an irrationally selfish act. Based on Schwartz's (2015) concept, Werner's action comes at the expense of Jutta. Werner neglects Jutta because he does not sacrifice against his choice reasonably. Werner has two possible choices where he can either maintain his strong bond with his sister and possibly lose his chance to become an engineer or abandon his sister to build his career. He makes the choice of choosing his career over his sister by emotionally distancing himself from her. In Schwartz's (2015) view, rational selfishness requires making choices that do not unreasonably harm others. Werner's choice reflects irrational selfishness, as it causes Jutta emotional pain.

Werner sacrifices their bond for his career growth, despite admitting that Jutta is "the only thing keeping him from surrendering [to the Nazis] totally" (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). The last letter he writes to Jutta is in March 1942 (Doerr, 2014, p. 345). Nonetheless, Jutta still waits for Werner to return home in March 1945 when she sees other cadets returning home from duties, unaware that he had passed away in 1944 (Doerr, 2014, p. 488). In May 1945, Jutta is raped by occupying Russian soldiers and she feels helpless in Werner's absence (Doerr, 2014, p. 489). Werner's career-driven silence leaves Jutta emotionally and physically vulnerable, proving his selfishness is irrational.

The sixth incident illustrates Werner prioritizing his technical career over the moral consequences of his actions. In 1942, he accepts a position in the Wehrmacht's technology division to track illegal radio transmissions (Doerr, 2014, p. 286). Despite witnessing railcars filled with dead and dying prisoners during his journey and observing the cruelty the Nazis impose on the citizens (Doerr, 2014, pp. 318–319), Werner remains focused on his job. Aware that his work contributes to further deaths, he chooses silence, believing his career is everything he has waited for (Doerr, 2014, p. 339).

Werner's irrational selfishness arises when he does not sacrifice his "interest," which is his job, at the expense of others. Werner's job leads him to witness further atrocities. In January 1943, during a mission, he observes Volkheimer forcing prisoners of war to give up their winter clothing and boots and sentencing them to death in the freezing cold (Doerr, 2014, pp. 343–344). Though disturbed, Werner does not intervene, prioritizing his mission over ethical concerns. His silence, despite knowing the consequences, reflects a conscious choice to protect his career, confirms Schwartz's (2015) definition of irrational selfishness.

This happens again in Vienna in April 1944, when Werner misidentifies a painted rod as an antenna, and his team kills an innocent woman and her daughter (Doerr, 2014, p. 368). Realizing the mistake, Werner is horrified but quickly refocuses on locating the next transmission (Doerr, 2014, p. 369). Werner's irrational selfish action of prioritizing his career consistently comes at the expense of innocent victims.

The seventh incident highlights Werner's usage of his technical skills gift to aid the Nazi regime. Werner excels as a technician in Wehrmacht. In August 1942, he repairs transceivers that others failed to fix, and he confidently tracks illegal radio transmissions using triangulation methods (Doerr, 2014, pp. 329, 334–335). His efficiency enables Nazi forces to locate Resistance broadcasts, resulting his team to set fire in the Allied Russian soldiers' house. In the aftermath of the incident, Werner sees:

> [t]he first dead man is on the floor with an arm trapped beneath him and a crimson mess where his head should be. On the table is a second man: slumped as if sleeping on his

> ear, only the edges of his wound showing, a whorish purple. Blood that has spread across the table thickens like cooling wax. It looks almost black. (pp. 337–338)

Werner's decision to contribute his technical skill to the Nazi is seen as irrationally selfish because he does not sacrifice his "concern" reasonably. Werner's "concern" in this scenario is to excel and ensure his value to his team, and to build his career. Werner's irrational selfishness highlights that he uses his gift to further the goals of an immoral cause and through his irrational selfishness, innocent people have died.

The eighth incident reveals Werner's destructive absence of rational selfishness through his sacrifice of mind. This is his willful suppression of independent thought to conform to Nazi authority. Schwartz (2015) calls this phenomenon a "zombie order-follower" and this causes dangerous loss of identity, where individuals follow orders without moral judgment, causing harm to others (pp. 186–195).

In 1941, Werner witnesses a prisoner's death and hides the truth from Jutta, writing letters that "must contend that everything is fine when things do not feel fine" (Doerr, 2014, pp. 227–228). He later conceals Frederick's assault, thinking, "I will never be able to tell her about this" (Doerr, 2014, p. 257). By 1944, guilt stops him from writing at all (Doerr, 2014, pp. 354–356). Jutta symbolizes his conscience, and distancing himself from her shows his suppression of independent thought. In obeying Nazi authorities, Werner harms others like Frederick and the tortured prisoner.

The ninth incident shows Werner's destructive absence of rational selfishness in April 1944, after he mistakenly causes the deaths of a mother and child in Vienna. Overcome with guilt, he silently pleads, "Blink, he thinks, blink blink blink," (Doerr, 2014, p. 368) hoping the child is alive. Instead of expressing outrage at his team, he internalizes the guilt and rationalizes it by saying they "do as they're told." Aware that he and his unit blindly follow orders, Werner suppresses his conscience and continues the mission, willfully sacrificing his mind. Following Schwartz's (2015) concept, this "zombie order-follower" behavior reflects abandonment of moral judgment. Werner's destructive absence of selfishness comes at the expense of the Viennese mother and daughter.

The tenth incident demonstrates Werner's rational selfishness when he lies to Volkheimer about the source of illegal broadcasts coming from Etienne's house in July 1944. When Werner sees Marie-Laure leaving Etienne's house, he is struck by her vulnerability and innocence (Doerr, 2014, pp. 411–412). Marie-Laure's innocence reminds Werner of the accidental death of a young child in Vienna. Werner sees Marie-Laure as a chance to reclaim his lost humanity and decides to protect her.

Werner hides the source of transmission from Volkheimer by covering the meter and pretending to hear only static (Doerr, 2014, p. 424). This decision is not only an act of defiance against the Nazi regime but also his chance to reclaim his humanity. Werner's action is identified as rationally selfish because he does not sacrifice against his choice. Drawing on Schwartz's (2015) concept, when a person does not sacrifice against their choice, it means that they are making decisions that protect one's life and well-being without sacrificing personal values (p. 105).

By choosing to save Marie-Laure and Etienne, Werner gains control over his moral conscience. He reflects, "[a]t least he protected the secrets of her house. At least he kept her

safe" (Doerr, 2014, p. 437), portraying pride in his decision. This moment marks Werner's first act of rebellion, a turning point where he prioritizes his humanity. His action, which harms no one and saves others, fits Schwartz's definition of rational selfishness.

The eleventh incident illustrates Werner's rational selfishness when he rescues Marie-Laure from the German officer, von Rumpel. After being trapped under the rubble of the Hotel of Bees, he hears her calling for help over the radio and becomes determined to save her. Once free, he takes Volkheimer's rifle and rushes to her house. He prioritizes her safety, replaying the words, "He is here. He will kill me… He is right below me" (Doerr, 2014, pp. 459–450) in his mind. When Werner arrives, von Rumpel threatens to kill Marie-Laure, and Werner immediately grabs the rifle and shoots him (Doerr, 2014, p. 465).

Werner's action is regarded as rationally selfish because he does not sacrifice his mind. Schwartz (2015) asserts that when a person does not sacrifice their mind, they no longer suppress their minds for others. When Werner kills von Rumpel, he asks himself, "[a]ll your life you wait, and then it finally comes, and you ready?" (Doerr, 2014, p. 465). This illustrates that he releases his suppressed emotions. These emotions are the guilt and trauma that have been haunting him ever since he joined Napola. He reclaims his humanity when he prioritizes being free from the cruelty he is part of, and his action has saved Marie-Laure's life.

Conclusion

Based on the textual analysis of Werner Pfennig in *All the Light We Cannot See*, this study finds that he exhibits irrational selfishness in seven incidents, destructive absences of rational selfishness in two incidents, and rational selfishness in two incidents. Using Schwartz's framework, rational selfishness occurs when Werner reasonably preserves his choice and mind. He exhibits irrational selfishness when he fails to preserve his concern, interest, choice, or mind. Werner's absence of rational selfishness appears when he sacrifices his mind twice, which proves destructive as it harms others.

Werner's irrational selfishness is rooted in his pursuit of becoming an engineer during Nazi Germany. This includes joining and serving at Napola, participating in violence, abandoning his sister Jutta, and using his skills to support the Nazi regime. These acts come at the expense of others such as Frederick, Jutta, prisoners of war, and innocent civilians, and are therefore classified as irrationally selfish. His absence of rational selfishness is seen when he hides the truth from Jutta and contributes to the deaths of a mother and child in Vienna, showing how these actions are destructive.

However, toward the end of the novel, Werner begins to reclaim his humanity by showing rational selfishness. Lying to Volkheimer to protect Etienne and Marie-Laure, and rescuing Marie-Laure from von Rumpel, represents his rationally selfish acts. These choices no longer harm others but uphold moral integrity.

Ultimately, Werner's trajectory from irrational selfishness to the absence of rational selfishness, and finally to rational selfishness illustrates the complex ethical struggles in wartime. Schwartz's framework is a valuable tool for analyzing these dilemmas and understanding Werner's transformation from a complicit follower to someone capable of reclaiming his humanity.

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

The author declares that AI generative tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT were used only for proofreading and for language accuracy. The author also states that, aside from using Grammarly and ChatGPT, no other AI or AI-powered tools contributed to the manuscript. All ideas, methodology, findings, analyses, and the overall discussion were independently developed through the author's own careful and systematic research process.

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Cultural Capital as Structural Leverage: Rethinking University-Community Collaboration for Area-Based Cultural Transformation in Thailand

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Abstract

This study explores how cultural capital contributes to sustainable local economic development and the strengthening of community identity in the Thai context through university engagement. It synthesizes findings from 16 university–community collaborative projects conducted under Thailand's 2023 national research initiative on cultural capital. Based on project reports, field observations, and evaluation data, the study identifies key mechanisms through which cultural assets were mobilized to support inclusive and area-based development. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined cultural mapping, participatory storytelling, and targeted capacity building. These methods helped revitalize both tangible and intangible cultural assets. As a result, the projects led to the co-creation of more than 200 new cultural products and services, the emergence of over 300 cultural entrepreneurs and artists, and a 15 percent average increase in income across participating communities. More importantly, the initiatives enabled local actors to shift from passive recipients to active co-creators of cultural value. The study also piloted tools such as digital cultural capital databases and local cultural incubators to improve the connection between cultural resources and local governance. The findings show that partnerships between universities and communities provide a practical and flexible model for managing cultural capital. The study concludes that integrated and systemic management across economic, identity, and policy dimensions is essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable outcomes in diverse local settings.

Keywords: Thailand cultural capital, area development, universities and communities, cultural management

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Introduction

Thailand holds a remarkably rich reservoir of cultural resources, ranging from historical narratives and ritual traditions to artisanal knowledge and distinctive cultural landscapes. Despite this abundance, cultural capital has not been fully integrated into the country's development frameworks. It is often acknowledged in policy but remains peripheral in practice, creating a persistent gap between national aspirations, local realities, and the institutions capable of bridging them. Theoretical perspectives on cultural capital and cultural governance (Bourdieu, 1986; Santasombat, 2013) remind us that cultural resources are not merely symbolic. They shape social relations, identity, and forms of power. These insights are particularly relevant in Thailand, where cultural capital is plentiful yet seldom mobilized as a structural resource for local development.

The Higher Education Act B.E. 2562 highlights this challenge through its identification of the stewardship of art and culture as the fourth mission of Thai universities. Importantly, this mission extends beyond preserving heritage. It calls for the application of cultural knowledge to strengthen communities and support area-based development. This shift reflects wider international discussions that position universities as area-based change agents, institutions that contribute to territorial development through sustained engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and culturally grounded innovation.

Within this context, the 2023 National Research and Innovation Program on Cultural Capital, administered by the Program Management Unit for Area-Based Development (PMU A), provides an opportunity to examine how universities might exercise such a role in practice. The initiative supported sixteen university–community collaborative projects that experimented with documenting cultural assets, co-creating cultural innovations, and reframing local knowledge within development processes. These efforts yielded cultural mapping databases, storytelling platforms, new cultural products, and emerging cultural enterprises. They also revealed institutional mechanisms that allow cultural capital to function as leverage for area-based transformation.

This paper synthesizes insights from the sixteen projects and examines three in-depth cases: Koh Sichang (Chulalongkorn University), Songkhla's dagger craftsmanship (Thaksin University), and the Chiang Saen cultural landscape (Mae Fah Luang University). Placing these cases within broader theoretical and policy debates, the study highlights the institutional conditions, collaborative processes, and governance arrangements that enable cultural capital to generate meaningful and sustainable change in different local contexts.

Literature Review

The concept of cultural capital, most notably articulated by Bourdieu (1986), provides a critical foundation for understanding how cultural resources operate within social structures. Bourdieu identifies cultural capital as a set of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms that influence social distinction and access to opportunities. These forms of capital shape how individuals and communities position themselves within broader systems of value. Although developed in a Western theoretical context, Bourdieu's framework offers analytical tools that are highly relevant to understanding cultural dynamics in Thailand, where cultural identity, symbolic value, and local knowledge continue to play central roles in social and economic life.

Santasombat (2013) contributes to this discussion by highlighting the political dimensions of cultural diversity in Thailand. His work demonstrates that cultural practices are never static; they are shaped through negotiation between communities, the state, and market forces. This perspective underscores the idea that cultural capital cannot be treated merely as heritage to be preserved. Instead, it must be understood as an active field of meaning-making in which power relations are continually contested. Such a view reframes cultural capital as a strategic resource that can influence development trajectories, particularly when communities are empowered to engage with their own cultural assets.

International research emphasizes the importance of institutional intermediaries in enabling cultural capital to support structural change. Jun and Jingkun (2019) argue that cultural resources can contribute to long-term development when supported by institutions capable of organizing knowledge, facilitating participation, and translating cultural value into social and economic outcomes. Their work stresses the need for collaborative structures that bridge the gap between cultural expression and development policy. This insight aligns closely with the challenges observed in the Thai context, where cultural vibrancy is high but mechanisms for mobilizing cultural capital remain fragmented.

Recent studies in Thailand have drawn attention to the need for more coherent frameworks of area-based cultural development. Jintapitak et al. (2024) highlight structural gaps in data systems, cross-sector collaboration, and local governance. They argue that without a central coordinating institution, cultural initiatives tend to remain isolated and struggle to achieve long-term impact. The authors suggest that universities may be well positioned to fill this institutional gap, given their knowledge resources, credibility, and ability to work across sectors.

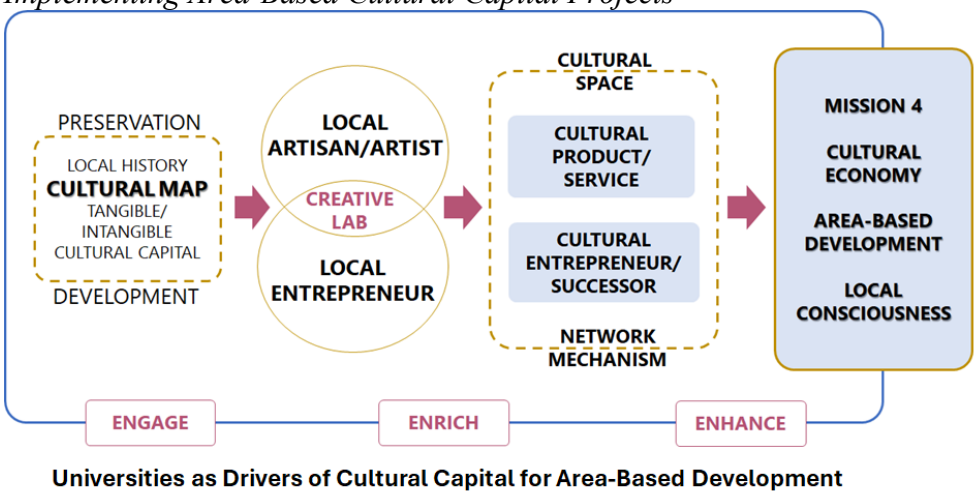
The literature on transformative learning also offers useful insights into how cultural development unfolds in practice. Mezirow (1997) and, in the Thai context, Asdornnithee et al. (2022), emphasize the value of learning processes that challenge existing assumptions and create space for new understandings. When communities participate in storytelling, cultural mapping, or collaborative design, they not only share knowledge but also reconsider how their cultural assets relate to contemporary life. This form of reflective engagement is essential for generating cultural innovations that are both meaningful and sustainable.

Parallel discussions on the evolving role of universities shed further light on the institutional conditions necessary for area-based cultural development. Scholars such as Benneworth (2013) and Goddard et al. (2019) describe universities as anchor institutions that can contribute to local transformation through long-term partnerships, knowledge mobilization, and place-based engagement. Katwyk and Case (2016) extend this argument by noting that universities must adapt their internal structures to better support community-oriented work. This includes creating flexible mechanisms for collaboration and recognizing the value of cultural knowledge alongside scientific and technical expertise.

Taken together, the literature suggests that cultural capital holds significant potential for driving area-based development when supported by institutions that can integrate knowledge, foster innovation, and enable participatory governance. These insights provide the conceptual basis for examining how Thai universities are beginning to adopt such roles, particularly within national initiatives that position cultural capital as a strategic resource for local transformation.

To translate these theoretical perspectives into a coherent approach for area-based cultural development, the national program adopted a shared conceptual framework that guided project design across all participating universities. The framework outlines a sequential process through which cultural capital is mobilized, beginning with community engagement and cultural mapping, advancing through creative development and capability building, and leading toward enhanced cultural economies and local consciousness. It served as a common reference point that allowed each university to adapt the model to its own context while maintaining methodological coherence across the sixteen projects. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework Used Across Participating Universities for Designing and Implementing Area-Based Cultural Capital Projects



This framework provided a structural foundation for the methods used in each project, ensuring that cultural mapping, creative experimentation, capability development, and community participation were approached systematically. It also informed the analytical structure of this study, which examines how these elements operated in practice and how they contributed to the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, new cultural products, and locally grounded governance arrangements. The methodological procedures are described in the following section.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to synthesize insights from sixteen projects supported by the 2023 National Research and Innovation Program on Cultural Capital. The aim was to understand how universities mobilized cultural capital in their respective local contexts and to identify the mechanisms that enabled these efforts to produce structural impact. The research drew on a wide range of materials, including project proposals, quarterly and final reports, field observations, transcripts of community consultations, and documentation from workshops and collaborative activities. These sources offered both descriptive accounts and analytical reflections from university teams and community partners.

Qualitative inquiry formed the core of the analytical approach. Each project conducted fieldwork activities such as cultural mapping, community storytelling sessions, semi-structured interviews, and participatory design workshops with stakeholders including cultural practitioners, community leaders, local officials, and emerging cultural entrepreneurs. Field

notes and photographic documentation provided additional contextual information about the cultural landscapes and everyday practices within each area. These data allowed the study to capture the ways cultural assets were identified, interpreted, and translated into new forms of value.

To deepen the analysis, three projects were selected for closer examination: Koh Sichang, Songkhla's dagger craftsmanship, and the Chiang Saen cultural landscape. The selection was based on three criteria. First, each project demonstrated a clear attempt to build a system of cultural capital management rather than focusing solely on product development or single activities. Second, the cases represented different types of cultural assets, including landscapes, craftsmanship, and historical narratives, which allowed for comparative insights. Third, each project showcased distinct institutional strategies employed by universities in their role as area-based change agents. The study did not modify or reinterpret the project outcomes but analyzed them as documented by the project teams.

The analytical process followed a thematic synthesis approach. All textual materials were coded to identify recurring patterns across the sixteen projects. Attention was given to how cultural assets were documented, how stakeholders participated in the process, how innovations emerged, and how governance arrangements took shape. The themes that emerged included cultural asset systemization, community learning, product and service innovation, the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, and new models of participatory governance. These themes provided a foundation for understanding how cultural capital can function as leverage for area-based development.

Comparative analysis was then applied to the three selected cases to examine how similar mechanisms manifested in different contexts. The analysis focused on institutional strategies, forms of collaboration, the role of cultural professionals and bearers, and the governance structures that emerged during the projects. This approach allowed for the identification of both shared mechanisms and context-specific adaptations. It also enabled the study to highlight how universities navigated structural constraints, including limited local capacity, fragmented cultural data, and uneven access to markets.

Throughout the study, particular attention was paid to the role of universities as intermediary institutions. This involved examining how universities facilitated communication across different sectors, how they supported learning processes within communities, and how they helped build systems for sustaining cultural capital beyond the project period. The mixed-methods design thus provided both breadth and depth, enabling the study to link local practices to broader theoretical frameworks on cultural capital and area-based development.

Results

The synthesis of the sixteen cultural capital projects reveals several overarching patterns in how universities operationalized their role within the national initiative. Across the projects, universities acted as facilitators of knowledge generation, brokers between sectors, and coordinators of collaborative processes that linked cultural heritage to contemporary forms of value creation. Three mechanisms appeared consistently: the establishment of cultural information systems, the development of cultural innovations and creative products, and the emergence of new governance arrangements that encouraged local participation. Across the full portfolio, these mechanisms contributed to more than 200 newly co-created cultural

products and services, the formation of over 300 emerging cultural practitioners and entrepreneurs, and measurable improvements in local income levels in several communities.

To illustrate how these mechanisms operated in practice, the study examines three cases in depth: Koh Sichang, Songkhla's dagger craftsmanship, and the Chiang Saen cultural landscape. Each case represents a different type of cultural resource and a different mode of university engagement, yet all demonstrate how cultural capital can be mobilized to strengthen local identity, generate economic opportunities, and enhance community agency.

Case 1: Chulalongkorn University and the Cultural Landscape of Koh Sichang

The Koh Sichang project focused on reinterpreting the island as a living cultural landscape shaped by its royal history, maritime heritage, and community memory. Chulalongkorn University worked closely with residents to document stories, map cultural sites, and redesign interpretive experiences across the island. Rather than presenting culture as a static collection of landmarks, the project emphasized the lived experience of place and the everyday practices that form the island's identity. The collaborative mapping process supported community members in articulating their own cultural narratives, which in turn informed new routes for cultural tourism and strengthened local stewardship. This process also marked a notable shift in community roles, with residents moving from passive participants to active co-creators of cultural value. (Supsook et al., 2024)

Case 2: Thaksin University and the Revitalization of Songkhla's Dagger Craftsmanship

The Songkhla project concentrated on revitalizing a traditional craft that had faced declining transmission and limited market visibility. Thaksin University partnered with master craftsmen, young apprentices, and local entrepreneurs to document techniques, refine production processes, and explore contemporary design possibilities. Through workshops and co-design sessions, the project helped bridge traditional skills with new market opportunities. This created a pathway for both heritage preservation and economic renewal. New product lines reflected both the integrity of traditional craftsmanship and the tastes of emerging cultural markets. As a result, the project contributed to a growing cultural economy around the craft, supported the training of new practitioners, and strengthened community recognition of the craft's cultural significance. Digital documentation and the creation of an online cultural asset database added further support by improving access to design reference materials and market visibility. (Kaewsuksaeng et al., 2024)

Case 3: Mae Fah Luang University and the Chiang Saen Cultural Landscape

The Chiang Saen project examined how historical narratives and cultural landscapes could generate new forms of cultural engagement. Mae Fah Luang University collaborated with local communities to collect stories rooted in the area's past and to interpret how these narratives continue to shape contemporary cultural identity. Using cultural landscape mapping and interpretive design, the project connected these stories with significant heritage sites and public spaces. A key outcome was the community-led reinterpretation of Wiang Nong Lom, which sparked renewed cultural activities and strengthened local stewardship. Dialogue between community groups and local authorities further supported the recognition of Wiang Nong Lom as a cultural entity with locally grounded oversight responsibilities. The project also encouraged early forms of participatory governance by involving communities in discussions on how key cultural areas should be managed. These processes contributed to the establishment

of a local cultural incubator that provided training, coordination, and support for emerging cultural enterprises in the district. (Prapatthong et al., 2024)

Cross-Case Insights

Although each case operated in a distinct cultural setting, several shared insights emerged. First, community participation was essential for identifying and shaping the cultural assets that formed the basis of each project. The involvement of residents in mapping, storytelling, and collaborative design strengthened the legitimacy of the initiatives and encouraged long-term engagement. Second, innovation emerged when traditional knowledge was connected to new interpretive or economic opportunities, particularly when universities served as facilitators rather than directors. Third, each project contributed to the development of new cultural governance practices. These practices ranged from informal stewardship arrangements to more structured forms of collaboration between local authorities and community groups. Taken together, the cases illustrate a practical and flexible model of university–community partnership that is adaptable across diverse Thai contexts. They also demonstrate how economic, identity-based, and governance dimensions must evolve together for cultural capital to generate lasting structural impact.

Discussion

The findings from the three cases demonstrate that cultural capital can serve as a significant driver of area-based development when supported by institutions capable of organizing knowledge, facilitating collaboration, and enabling communities to participate meaningfully in cultural interpretation and governance. Although each project worked with different cultural resources, the cases collectively illustrate how cultural capital becomes actionable when it is transformed into a shared framework through which communities understand their past and envision their future. This aligns with the literature that emphasizes the importance of institutional intermediaries in bridging the gap between cultural expression and development outcomes (Jun & Jingkun, 2019; Santasombat, 2013).

A central theme across the cases is the importance of shifting community roles from passive participants to active co-creators. Whether through mapping cultural sites on Koh Sichang, refining craftsmanship processes in Songkhla, or reinterpreting historical narratives in Chiang Saen, each project created opportunities for communities to reclaim interpretive authority and to articulate cultural value in their own terms. This process reflects transformative learning principles (Mezirow, 1997) in which participants revisit long-held assumptions and generate new understandings through structured dialogue and collaborative practice. The shift in roles not only strengthened local ownership but also created conditions for cultural innovation that extended beyond the duration of the projects. These dynamics were reflected in the national dataset, which showed the co-creation of more than 200 cultural products and services and the emergence of over 300 new cultural practitioners and entrepreneurs.

Another important insight concerns the role of knowledge infrastructures in enabling long-term cultural development. The cultural mapping systems, digital databases, learning modules, and cultural incubators developed through the projects served as platforms that allowed multiple actors to engage with cultural resources in consistent and constructive ways. Digital cultural capital databases in particular played an important role in standardizing information, supporting collaborative analysis, and improving visibility for both cultural products and local artists. These infrastructures made cultural knowledge more visible, more accessible, and more

adaptable to new forms of economic activity. They also provided reference points for schools, local governments, and cultural practitioners, demonstrating the value of integrated knowledge systems in supporting community learning and cultural governance.

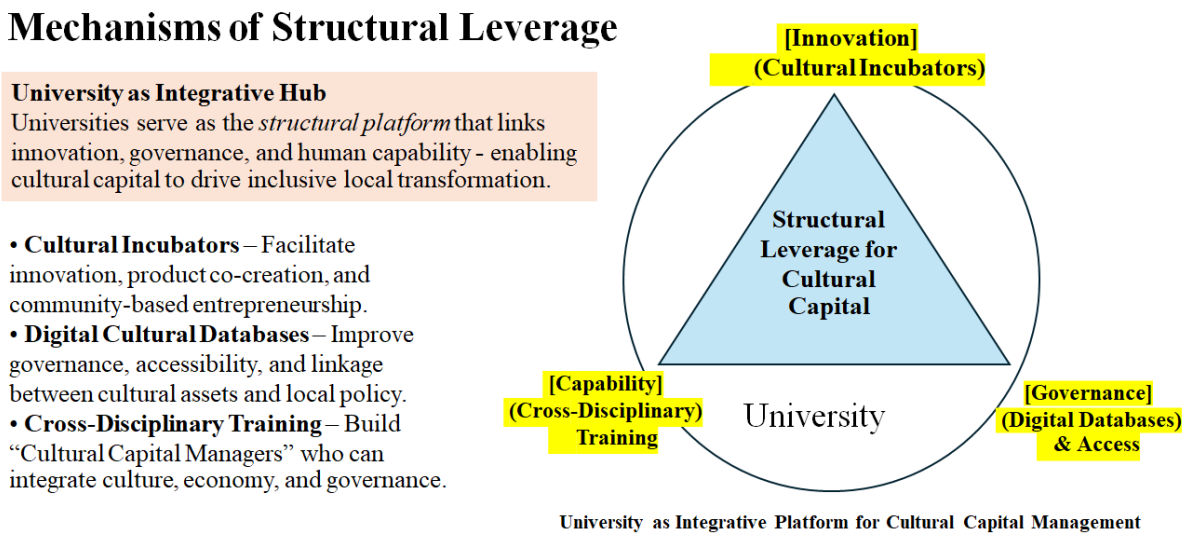
Another important insight concerns the role of universities as area-based change agents. Across the three cases, universities acted as facilitators rather than directors. They created structured processes for engagement, organized multi-sector collaboration, and provided technical expertise in fields such as design, interpretation, and digital documentation. This approach allowed communities to lead decision-making while still benefiting from academic resources. The cross-case synthesis suggests that this university–community partnership constitutes a practical and flexible model for cultural development, one that can be adapted to the specific identities, capacities, and governance conditions of different localities. The cases suggest that universities occupy a distinctive institutional position: they command credibility, possess analytical tools, and have the flexibility to work across state, market, and community boundaries.

At the same time, the findings point to institutional and structural challenges that shape the effectiveness of cultural development initiatives. In several cases, community participation was uneven due to differences in local capacity, generational gaps in cultural knowledge, and limited access to markets. The sustainability of innovations also depended on the extent to which local authorities recognized and supported new governance mechanisms. For example, the emerging oversight structure around Wiang Nong Lom required continued negotiation between communities and local government, while the revitalization of dagger craftsmanship in Songkhla required ongoing training systems and market linkages. These challenges underscore the importance of long-term institutional commitment beyond project cycles.

Finally, the cases reaffirm the argument that cultural capital produces its strongest impact when economic, identity-based, and governance dimensions evolve together. Economic activities rooted in cultural identity gained legitimacy and durability when supported by mechanisms that also strengthened meaning and community ownership. This integrated approach mirrors the conclusion presented in the national synthesis, which argues that systemic management across economic, identity, and policy dimensions is essential for sustaining cultural value in diverse local contexts. Taken together, the findings indicate that cultural capital can serve as structural leverage when supported by institutions capable of integrating knowledge, innovation, and shared governance.

Beyond the specific outcomes of the three cases, the cross-case analysis points to a broader institutional pattern. Universities consistently operated as integrative hubs that brought together innovation processes, governance mechanisms, and human capability development. This coordinating function enabled cultural capital to move from isolated activities toward more systemic outcomes that strengthened identity, expanded local economic opportunities, and improved cultural governance. The integrative model that emerges from the national synthesis is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
University as an Integrative Hub Linking Innovation, Governance, and Capability Development to Provide Structural Leverage for Cultural Capital



This model highlights the institutional position of universities as platforms that coordinate digital infrastructures, cultural incubators, and cross-disciplinary training while maintaining close collaboration with communities. These combined mechanisms created the structural conditions through which cultural capital could be mobilized at scale and translated into meaningful forms of area-based transformation. The implications of this integrative role are discussed further in the conclusion.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cultural capital has the potential to generate meaningful and sustainable forms of area-based development when supported by institutions capable of organizing knowledge, fostering collaboration, and enabling community participation. The three cases illustrate how cultural assets gain new relevance when they are documented, interpreted, and mobilized through processes that blend local knowledge with academic expertise. They also show that communities can become active contributors to cultural innovation when given opportunities to shape the narratives and practices that define their cultural landscapes.

The findings highlight the distinct role that universities can play as area-based change agents. Their ability to work across sectors, provide methodological and technical support, and facilitate participatory processes positions them as effective intermediaries within local cultural ecosystems. When universities act as facilitators rather than directors, communities are better able to claim interpretive authority and develop cultural expressions that reflect their own values. This collaborative mode of work forms a practical and adaptable model for cultural development in diverse Thai contexts.

The analysis also underscores the importance of knowledge infrastructures in supporting long-term impact. Cultural mapping systems, digital databases, learning modules, and local cultural

incubators helped translate cultural resources into accessible tools for education, planning, and economic development. These infrastructures provided continuity beyond the project period and strengthened the capacity of communities, schools, and local authorities to engage with cultural assets in more systematic ways.

At the same time, the cases reveal structural challenges that must be addressed to sustain cultural development over time. Uneven local capacity, limited market access, and overlapping governance responsibilities can constrain community-led initiatives. These challenges point to the need for stable institutional support, long-term investment, and stronger integration of cultural development within local policy frameworks. Without such support, innovations risk becoming isolated rather than contributing to broader systems of cultural governance.

Taken together, the findings affirm that cultural capital can function as structural leverage when economic, identity-based, and governance dimensions evolve in a coordinated manner. The national synthesis, which includes the creation of new cultural products, the emergence of cultural entrepreneurs, and measurable gains in community income, demonstrates the potential scale of this approach. As Thailand continues to explore models of area-based development, the experience of these university–community collaborations offers a compelling pathway for mobilizing cultural resources in ways that honor local identity while supporting inclusive and sustainable transformation.

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

The authors used an artificial intelligence system (ChatGPT) to support the structuring of the article, the refinement of language, and the checking of logical coherence. All analyses, interpretations, and scholarly arguments presented in this paper are the authors' own.

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From Hashtags to Symbols: Reading Protest Through a Semiotic Analysis of Digital Resistance in #TolakRUUTNI Movement on X

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Abstract

The digital landscape, particularly social media platforms, has developed from its initial function as a tool for interpersonal connectivity to resisting political discourse, where digital artworks are used to challenge state-imposed legal reforms. This research analyzes this shift through the lens of public resistance to the Draft Law on the Indonesian National Army (RUU TNI), specifically exploring the use of digital artworks with the hashtag #TolakRUUTNI on platform X as an instrument of collective Indonesian resistance movements. This research aims to examine the representation of resistance through digital art against state authority through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which includes three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the dominant visual themes include resistance to authority, the use of cartoon characters, animal symbolism, and textual elements in the artworks. Connotatively, these visuals function as a form of collective expression that shows resistance to power, criticism of state intimidation, and solidarity depicted through popular fictional characters. Mythologically, these artworks construct a narrative that positions civilians as heroic figures who fight militaristic authoritarianism, while describing the state as a repressive entity that echoes the power dynamics of the New Order era, particularly the military's dual function in both civil and political domains. Beyond serving aesthetic purposes, the digital artworks in this movement become a medium for generating resistance discourse, reshaping political engagement, and building solidarity among Indonesians through the X platform.

Keywords: artworks, semiotics, media, resistance

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Introduction

Since the reform era on May 21, 1998, which marked the end of Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime, a number of issues have emerged, especially during the Jokowi and Prabowo administrations that signal a decline in democratic values in this era. Democracy in Indonesia has faced challenges in recent years, with the Democracy Index showing a decline compared to five years ago (*The Global State of Democracy*, 2025). This decline can be seen in several aspects, ranging with access to justice in the legal system, declining election credibility, an ineffective parliament, and freedom of expression that often feels suppressed. The significant decline in democratic values has been amplified by the House of Representatives' ratification of the TNI Law, which expands the military's power into several areas of civilian life. The people are increasingly questioning the power of institutions that maintain democratic values and the ability of civil society to act as a check and balance on growing authoritarian tendencies. On March 20, 2025, the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) passed a revision to the Indonesian National Armed Forces Law (UU TNI) that extends retirement age and expands the involvement of active military personnel in civilian sectors such as ministries and state institutions without having to resign from their military positions (Nurani, 2025). This has caused massive public concern. Considering that the expansion of military positions in the civilian sectors had happened before during the New Order era under President Suharto's leadership, the public has pushed for this not to happen again, so the military's dual-function does not occur. However, it was this draft law that caused public anger, and it was this concern that ultimately led the Indonesian people to express their opposition to the draft that was being prepared by the House of Representatives at that time. Public disappointment was quickly expressed through the digital hashtag #TolakRUUTNI, a massive online protest movement on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

The public expressed their disagreement in various ways: from holding demonstrations at central and regional representative councils in many locations across Indonesia, to expressing their disappointment through opinion threads and voicing their views online, one of the form of the disagreement came through various forms of visual art, including graphic artwork that rich in symbols of resistance. Within lot of users shares their perspective, anger, and also protest and massive variety of discussion among X, some of artist using graphic arts as the shape of their response due to the public distrust, not only for the government, but also for the army and police who serve as the government tools to fight against the protest from public. Contents that is created during this agenda are positioned as the civils that is not agree and angry to the law that has been ratified. This kind of protest is not a new shape in emphasizing the stance and anger from public to the policy makers. It has also been found that the expressions reflect historical trauma from the past, particularly the May 1998 tragedy, when large-scale demonstrations led to the collapse of the Soeharto regime due to the power imbalance between the military and civilian power (Abdulgani-Knapp, 2008, p. 338; Azhari, 2024). In this situation, digital artwork is one way to express the resistance. Furthermore, in line with Groys' (2008) view, "An artist's negative reaction to repressive, state-organized power is something that almost goes without saying" (p. 122).

This research aims to know the role of graphic art in expressing the movement of protest from a policy maker, with the focus on #TolakRUUTNI tragedy shared on X. This review will examine the and content represented in the graphic arts, what the meaning between the objects, colors, or any shape placed into the graphic arts, the correlation between the content and the #TolakRUUTNI movement on X, and also why graphic art is a chosen by some people to show

resistance against the prejudice law. Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis would be used in this research to examine the meaning and role of the message from the graphic arts.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods to analyse the meaning and social interpretation of digital art on X. According to Creswell (2017), qualitative research analyzes the interpretation and meaning of a social phenomenon from certain assumptions and perspectives. Therefore, this qualitative method helps in understanding how symbols and narratives in the in the digital movement #TolakRUUTNI on the X platform shapes political message and collective identity. To analyse cultural and communication products, such visual images, captions, and hashtags are the primary data source of this study. Moreover, the research uses secondary data such as international articles and journals.

To get the selected primary data, the study conducts the purposive sampling as the collection data process. Purposive sampling helps to select the data based on relevancy and characteristics that relate into social phenomenon. This purposive sampling assists the data to address research question (Taherdoost, 2016), which reveals the meaning of digital art resistance #TolakRUUTNI on X. This study uses selective criteria such as containing hashtag #TolakRUUTNI, digital art or illustrations, images, elements of resistance symbolic (military, civilians, resistance, protests, and historical trauma), and period of time in July 2025 during the peak of RUU TNI protest. Subsequently, the selected data is analysed using Rolland Barthes' semiotics in three levels which are denotation, connotation, and myth. Through this process, the data are analysed closely and categorized into four discussions which are resistance to the apparatus, animals as the object of representation, fiction character involved, and artworks with dominant text.

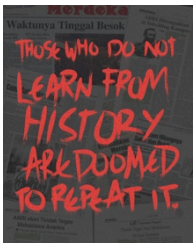
Findings & Analysis

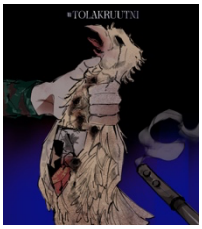
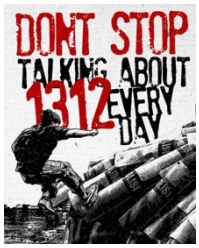
The analysis of 18 visual artworks posted under the hashtag #TolakRUUTNI on the X platform shows that public protests against the expansion of military power are not only verbal but also highly expressive visually. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach (1972) and O'Shaughnessy (2012) classification of visual meanings. According to Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the analysis of each image can be categorized into three levels of meaning: "Denotation", "Connotation", and "Myth" (Gravells, 2017, p. 46). From the data found, we can analyze using Barthes' semiotics, which peels back a form from three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth.

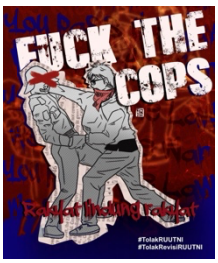
Denotation

Denotation attempts to describe the content of an image without commentary, judgment, or evaluation. At this level, signs are as close to value neutrality as possible (O'Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 125). Based on the data, the signs observed were divided into four visual theme artworks: resistance to the apparatus, caricature/anime involved, animals as the object representation, and artworks with dominant text. However, it was found that some had multiple visual themes, which consisted of not just one theme, but two at the same time.

Table 1
Figures' Denotations of Artworks Under the #TolahRUUTNI Movement

Artwork	Visual Theme	Denotation
Artwork 1	Resistance to the apparatus	Text: "YOU PASS THE LAW, WE START THE WAR", "1312" Visual: A person physically overpowering a zombified person in uniform on top of a vehicle. Below, there are many hands reaching upward, showing other zombified people in uniform trying to climb up or make an arrest. The background using bright red with speckled accents.
Artwork 2	Resistance to the apparatus and animal as the object representati on	Text: the truck says "POLIZOO" Visual: A masked person punches another figure with a pig head on top of a truck filled with pigs. A monkey is climbing nearby, and many other monkey figures are reaching up from below. The background using plain sharp red colour.
 Artwork 3	Artworks with dominant text	Text: "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it" Visual: A collage of old Indonesian newspaper front pages reporting on student protests and military actions covered with a slightly faded black layer. There is a text with red color above the newspaper
Artwork 4	Animal as the object representati on	Text: "Here Lies REFORMATION 1998–2025", "They had come to a time when no one dared speak his mind... fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere... and you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing to shocking crimes. George Orwell - Animal Farm" Visual: The image shows a group of pig-like figures representing powerful individuals dining around a table stained with blood. They are gathered in front of a tombstone. The color chosen in this picture is a gray gradient with blood-red spots on the dining table and glowing blue text.

Artwork 5	Artworks with dominant text	Text:" OH GOD, SAVE US FROM THIS BLOOD-SOAKED REGIME" "God bless the people of Indonesia" "#TolakRUUTNI" Visual: A cream-colored poster with red lettering expresses a prayer to God to save the people from a bloody regime. There is an illustration of two figures below—one pointing a gun at a person who is kneeling. The letter "G" in "REGIME" looks like blood dripping onto them. Below, there is a hashtag and a prayer for the Indonesian people.
Artwork 6	Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles	Text: "Some people deserve to burn, Mark." Visual: Two people in costumes are flying near a burning and partially destroyed a dome-shaped green roofed building. One (dressed in red) says something to the other (dressed in blue). The scene shows smoke, fire, and destruction below them. Their expressions show tension.
Artwork 7	Resistance to the apparatus and Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles	Text: "RIDER PUNCH FASCISTS", "#TolakRUUTNI" Visual: A masked superhero character wearing black with a red scarf strikes a man in a suit on top of a vehicle. Blood can be seen spurting from the blow. Below them, a group of figures in uniform raise their hands as if to intervene in the fight. The vehicle displays the Indonesian national emblem, the Garuda bird, which appears fragile and damaged.
 Artwork 8	Animal as the object representati on	Text: "#TolakRUUTNI" Visual: Part of an arm in military uniform is holding a garuda bird with a wound on its neck. The bird's body shows signs of bruising and has been shot several times. Also there is a gun barrel emitting smoke from its tip.
 Artwork 9	Resistance to the apparatus and	Text: "DON'T STOP TALKING ABOUT 1312 EVERY DAY", "1312" Visual: A man with a backpack and cuffed hands kicks a stack of shields marked "POLISI"/ "Police" in Indonesian. Greasy texture with a dominant light gray color, with black and white-theme objects and some text coloured in red.

Artwork 10	Resistance to the apparatus and	Text: “YOU PASS THE LAW, WE START THE WAR.” Visual: A poster shows two men in a physical fight, with one man wearing a uniform being hit by another man wearing casual clothes. Behind them is a fire. This poster has a modern gradient effect and pattern.
Artwork 11	Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles	Text: “Heh” Visual: A comic-style image shows a man smiling cynically while playing a flute. Below him, a figure in a robe stands amid glowing red energy, staring at a dome-shaped green-roofed building that is burning and cracked. Birds fly around the scene. The entire image is dark, with red and green as the dominant colors.
 Artwork 12	Resistance to the apparatus and	Text: “FUCK THE COPS”, “#TolakRUUTNI”, “#TolakRevisiUUTNI” Visual: It shows a character wearing a red scarf hitting someone with a pig’s head wearing a uniform. Both of them in comic style. The background shows flames and graffiti-like writing in faint red and dark blue colors.
Artwork 13	Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles and resistance to the apparatus and	Text: - Visual: The image shows a real-life police vehicle with digitally added anime characters. One character in a white robe is punching another on top of the vehicle. Other characters look on from the corner of the vehicle, and there is a large bird figure. The background includes trees and a street sign.
Artwork 14	Animal as the object representation and resistance to the apparatus and	Text: “FINISH HIM.”, “A.C.A.B. | #INDONESIAGELAP”, Visual: A stylish poster shows a man wearing a hoodie standing next to a pig-faced humanoid figure crouching down, both of them appearing to be on top of a vehicle. The poster is dominated by a dark blue color with a noise gradient.

Artwork 15	Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles	Text: - Visual: The image depicts a giant cartoon cat shooting red laser beams from its eyes, causing a large explosion on a dome-shaped green-roofed building. The cat looks angry, and the scene is filled with smoke, debris, and bright orange and blue colours.
Artwork 16	Use of Caricature or Pop-Culture Animation Styles	Text:" WE WILL DEFEAT THEM!", "Repost is Prohibited" Visual: The image features characters from the anime Demon Slayer in mid-air, launching an attack toward a dome-shaped, green-roofed building. There are visual effects showing impacts and explosions. The overall scene is colourful and dynamic, with some motion and action lines.
Artwork 17	Animal as the object representation	Text: "KEEP BARKING AND BITING" Visual: The image shows a blue dog with its mouth biting a headless rat. The background is black, with repeating red and white text. The animal is depicted breaking a chain. The illustration style is bold and digitally created.
Artwork 18	Animal as the object representation	Text: - Visual: a large blue dog in the center, with a radiant pattern behind its head. The dog is biting a red pig's head. Around them are many red headless-rats. The background is black with a subtle diamond-grid pattern and golden dots.

Connotation

Connotation explores the associative meanings perceived by the audience in an image, encompassing a range of emotions and beliefs that vary depending on the individual's social background and cultural values (O'Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 126).

The artworks that appear show that there are many themes in the forms of resistance that appear in X, one of which is resistance to the authorities, which we can see visualized in a screenshot from a video of the #TolakRUUTNI demonstration showing civilians fighting with a policeman on top of a police truck. This can be seen in artworks 1, 2, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, and similar representations can be found here. The use of heroic figures or fictional characters appears to represent the civils, as seen in Artworks 7 and 13, where they seem to be fighting the interests

of the people. This reflects how characters in fiction are often portrayed as representatives of the general public against various forms of oppression. A typical character is a portrayal, reflection or representation of a person, or a group of people tied to an institution, or an individual as part of an institution that exists in the real world (Nurgiyantoro, 2009, p. 190).

The pig's head itself, apart from being likened to an animal with negative connotations, since that Indonesia is a country with a muslim majority that is not friendly towards this animal, was used as a form of terror in the form of a pig's head being sent to the office of Tempo journalists, who often actively criticize government policies (Adyatama, 2025). The use of pig heads in this artwork represents those suspected of being responsible of act terror, which is government. The use of pig heads is also frequently found in artworks 2, 4, 12, and 14, which represent both the government and armed forces as supporters of the government. The use of headless rats also has the same reason as in artwork 17 and 18, which was a follow-up terror attack directed at the Tempo office shortly after the pig's head was sent.

The use of characters that are closely related to the lives of people in Indonesia, such as anime and other fictional caricatures, and are depicted as fighting for the same struggles as the public, this can also be seen in several artworks. According to Nugroho and Hendrastomo (2016), anime … instilling the ideology of anime into society in the form of positive images. (p. 1).We can see the use of caricatures or fictional characters in artwork 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, and 16, starting with the use of Omni-man and Mark from the Invicible series, Kamen Rider RX from the Kamen Rider series, Wei Wuxian from the Mo Dao Zu Shi series, Gintoki and the Shinsengumi from the anime series Gintama, Hanini who is the mascot of ZEROBASEONE, and finally the scene featuring the 9 samurai from the anime Kimetsu No Yaiba. If we take a closer look, the creators of these fictional characters do not only come from certain communities such as anime enthusiasts, but also vary from communities who are enthusiastic about American cartoons, Japanese hero series, to Korean boy band mascots. It was found that the characters they consider positive share similar values with the creators of the artworks, which is why they are used to convey a message of resistance in their works.

The last one is the use of dark blue in many artworks such as 8, 12, 14, 17 and 18, which is called "resistance blue" color to emerge the resistance toward the government injustice laws. This color has also been widely used since February 2025 when there was a wave of demonstrations from Dark Indonesia, so in conveying rejection of things that the people disagree with, this color is often used.

Myth

According to Roland Barthes, myth is a secondary form of meaning in which connotations become internalised ideology (Barthes, 1972). The artwork under the hashtag #TolakRUUTNI not only depicts resistance but also constructs a myth of civil heroism in the face of the return of military authoritarianism. Through recurring symbols such as officers transformed into zombies, animal-faced elites, and familiar pop culture heroes, these images construct an ideological narrative that the current state is merely a corrupt shadow of the New Order regime. For instance, the pig's head figure, referencing past acts of intimidation towards critical journalists, depicting the state as a terrifying figure. The repetition of the color blue and the depiction of animals (pigs and rats) reinforce the mythological opposition: civilians versus the regime, heroes versus oppressors. These visuals function as ideological tools that reconstruct protests into a semiotic field of battle, where art becomes a metaphorical expression of collective trauma and a tool for political change.

Conclusion

This study shows that graphic artwork in the #TolakRUUTNI movement on platform X has become a powerful medium of resistance in Indonesia's digital protest landscape. Through semiotic analysis, it was found that these artworks can be grouped into four main denotative themes: direct resistance against the authorities, the use of animated/pop-culture symbols, animal representations, and the use of text as a dominant element. However, behind these visual displays lies a deeper ideological meaning, criticism of military power expansion, civil-state inequality, and the trauma of past violence. On a mythological level, this artwork portrays the government as the oppressor and the citizens as heroes. The narrative emphasizes that resistance is a legitimate act. Art is no longer merely an aesthetic expression, but rather a political visual discourse that builds collective awareness within society. This study demonstrates that digital visual art plays a crucial role in constructing alternative narratives that challenge power. In the future, further studies can explore the impact of this visualization on social movements and the political awareness of the wider community.

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

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

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Animation Tools for Expressive Movement Design of Collaborative Robots With a Focus on Precision and Safety

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Abstract

Collaborative robots (cobots) constitute a class of robotic systems designed for safe, co-located operation with human users. Achieving effective and intuitive human-robot interaction (HRI) requires that cobots generate motion cues that are legible and semantically interpretable to non-expert operators. While engineering efforts traditionally emphasize control algorithms, motion constraints, and safety compliance, animation practitioners possess expertise in crafting expressive, human-readable movement that can inform more intuitive cobot behaviour design. However, most existing robot-animation workflows mathematically alter the animator-created motion to make it safely deployable onto physical robotic platforms, limiting the expressivity of the original motion design. To address this limitation, we developed a set of animation tools that enable an animator to directly design safely deployable expressive robot movements, grounded in two formal frameworks: Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Valence-Arousal-Dominance (VAD) model. These frameworks enable systematic mapping between movement qualities and perceived emotional content, providing a formal basis for expressive motion generation. The developed animator-centric tools can influence different aspects of the two frameworks and therefore facilitate animators in generating expressive motions for robotics systems. Each tool was evaluated using a tool-specific user study. Empirical results demonstrate that the tools helped decrease the number of adjustment iterations and improved the accuracy and consistency with which animators can design kinematically constrained cobot movements.

Keywords: human-robot interaction, animation tools, Laban Movement Analysis, valence-arousal-dominance model

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Introduction

As collaborative robots (cobots) become increasingly integrated into human work environments, ensuring their capacity to communicate efficiently and intuitively with human partners has become a central requirement. Effective HRI depends on transparent communication and an accurate user understanding of the robot's "mental model," defined as the human operator's awareness of a robot's capabilities, goals, and operational constraints (Tabrez et al., 2020). Although verbal communication is commonly used for explicit information exchange, everyday human interaction relies heavily on nonverbal cues (Burgoon et al., 2011). Incorporating analogous nonverbal communication mechanisms into robotic systems has been shown to improve joint task performance and increase users' willingness to collaborate with cobots (Breazeal et al., 2005).

Non-verbal communication by cobots can be achieved through hardware augmentation or expressive movement design. Hardware-based approaches augment robots with supplemental signals such as visual indicators: directional arrows, navigational markers (Szafir et al., 2015), blinkers, and beacons (Walker et al., 2018), or haptic feedback channels (Grushko et al., 2021) to enhance intention readability. In contrast, movement-focused design seeks to embed expressive motion directly into the cobot's kinematic behaviour. Early work in this space drew heavily on human behavioural analogues, leveraging the interpretability of human actions to inform robot expressivity (Lichtenthäler & Kirsch, 2013). Examples include artificial facial expressions (Banh et al., 2015), socially expressive trajectories derived from actor motion data, and gaze-based communicative cues (Hirano et al., 2017; Kompatsiari et al., 2019; Saldien et al., 2014).

Although human-behaviour imitation has demonstrated efficacy in improving HRI, its practical deployment is constrained by morphology-dependent motion capture data, which prevents generalization to simple or low degree-of-freedom (DoF) robots. These limitations have motivated the development of alternative paradigms, particularly expert-designed motion strategies (Fiore et al., 2013). Herein, trajectories are manually crafted using established movement and affective frameworks such as Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), Valence-Arousal-Dominance (VAD) model, Disney animation principles (Thomas & Johnston, 1995), etc. to preserve human-like expressivity in simple or low DoF robots.

Despite these advances, a significant implementation gap persists. While artists are frequently involved in the conceptualization and visualization of expressive trajectories, the final robot-executable motions often diverge substantially from the original designs due to hardware, kinematic, and environmental constraints (Ribeiro & Paiva, 2012). This issue stems from multiple factors, beginning with animation softwares such as Maya or Blender, which were originally developed for stylized and exaggerated animation, making it challenging to create expressive trajectories that follow strict robotic safety constraints (Ribeiro & Paiva, 2014). Although engineering softwares such as MATLAB can be introduced into the animation pipeline, this bifurcation between the creative and technical workflows disrupts continuity and hinders the animator's ability to iterate intuitively.

To address this challenge, our objective is to integrate technically grounded yet artist-centric tools into existing 3D animation environments, enabling animators to generate expressive, robot-compliant trajectories within familiar workflows. This paper presents the design, implementation, and evaluation of three animation tools developed for a low-DoF single-arm cobot in Blender. The primary contributions are:

- Conceptualization and initial investigation of animation-informed strategies for enhancing functional expressivity in cobots.
- Development of LMA and VAD informed animation tools to design quantifiable expressivity in low DoF single-arm cobots.

Background

The conceptual foundations of expressive motion were first established in the field of character animation, shaping early investigations of robot expressivity(Ribeiro & Paiva, 2014). Foundational work by Bates (1994) and Reilly (1996) drew heavily from traditional animation techniques, particularly those in The Illusion of Life (Thomas & Johnston, 1995). During the rise of 3D animation, Lasseter (1987) argued that classical principles remained broadly applicable across emerging media (pp. 263–264). Extending this view to robotics, van Breemen (2004) noted that user-interface robots face challenges similar to early animated characters, particularly the absence of an "illusion of life" and therefore advocated applying the 12 Principles of Animation in robotic systems, leading to the development of the expressive iCat platform (p. 2).

Subsequent research examined how animator-informed principles enhance social and communicative robot behaviours, with emphasis on gestural behaviour, character embodiment, and expressivity-driven interaction design (Beck et al., 2012; Thiebaux et al., 2008). More recent work reframed expressivity as a mechanism for functional communication in both humanoid and non-humanoid robots. This shift enabled practical integrations of animation and affective principles: for instance, Takayama et al. (2011) showed that the animation principle of Anticipation improves action legibility in PR2, while Terzioğlu et al.(2020) and Schulz et al. (2019) demonstrated that principles of Arcs, Appeal, and Slow In/Slow Out increase user comfort, predictability, and trust.

These developments naturally foreground the question of how animators might be directly integrated into robotic motion design workflows. Ribeiro et al. (2013) advanced this idea by examining how pre-existing character animations could be adapted for robotic platforms, arguing that robotic animation practice should leverage established character animation methodologies. They highlighted tools such as Unreal Engine (Epic Games, n.d.) and Houdini (SideFX, n.d.) as examples of systems that facilitate collaborative creative-technical pipelines. In parallel work, they introduced Nutty Tracks (Ribeiro et al., 2013), an animation engine built on 3D Max that integrates pre-designed animation pipelines with procedural correction algorithms to automatically enforce kinematic constraints including limits on velocity, acceleration, and jerk. Similarly, Starke et al. (2018) developed inverse kinematics (IK) systems enabling animators to construct robot trajectories via familiar IK rigs while automatically resolving complex robotic kinematic limitations.

Although these approaches represent meaningful progress in aligning artistic workflows with robotic constraints, most lack empirical validation regarding their impact on animator performance, workflow efficiency, motion fidelity, and the overall user experience for both creative and technical stakeholders. Consequently, a critical gap persists in understanding whether such tools substantially improve cross-disciplinary collaboration or expressive motion design outcomes.

To address this gap, we developed a set of animator-centric tools grounded in two structured frameworks: LMA and the VAD affective model. These frameworks enable systematic

mapping between movement qualities and perceived emotional content, providing a formal basis for expressive motion generation. The developed animator-centric tools can influence different aspects of the two frameworks and therefore facilitate animators in generating expressive motions for robotics systems.

Related Works

This section presents the relevant literature on LMA and VAD model that together offer a systematic approach towards generation and perception of expressive robot motion.

Laban Movement Analysis (LMA)

LMA is a comprehensive theoretical framework for describing, interpreting, and structurally annotating human movement. LMA classifies movement into four major components: Body, Space, Effort, and Shape. The Body domain specifies which anatomical components are engaged and how their coordination patterns unfold. Space characterizes the spatial organization of movement, including directional vectors, trajectories, and geometric path structures. The Effort and Shape domains represent the qualitative and expressive dimensions of motion. Effort captures the internal motivational or intentional states driving movement, whereas Shape describes how the body's form evolves relative to spatial, functional, or emotional goals (Robin, 2011).

Within expressive robotics, the Effort component has been the most widely operationalized component (Raghu et al., 2025). Effort comprises four subdimensions: Space, Weight, Time, and Flow. Effort-Space describes attentional orientation toward a target, varying between Direct and Indirect pathways. Effort-Weight encodes perceived force or energy, ranging from Strong to Light. Effort-Time characterizes temporal modulation, from Sudden to Sustained pacing while Effort-Flow specifies the degree of movement continuity or restriction, differentiating Bound from Free motion profiles.

The Shape domain constitutes the second-most critical dimension relevant to robot expressivity. Shape is subdivided into Basic Shape Forms, Modes of Shape Change, Shape Qualities, and Shape Flow Support. Basic Shape Forms refer to global static configurations: Ball-like, Wall-like, Pin-like, Screw-like, or Pyramid-like geometries (Robin, 2011). Modes of Shape Change describe how the body reorganizes in relation to environmental affordances, categorized into Shape Flow, Directional, and Carving modes. Shape Qualities represent dynamic transformations toward or away from spatial targets, including Rising, Sinking, Spreading, Enclosing, Advancing, and Retreating. Shape Flow Support denotes torso-driven adjustments that facilitate or reinforce distal movement.

Bartenieff and Davis (1965) described the combined Effort-Shape framework as a complete system for studying behavioural and expressive movements, noting that emotional qualities and their intensities are systematically reflected in Effort, while Shape conveys spatial intention and morphological adaptation. Consequently, integrating both domains enables the parametric modulation of robot trajectories to encode affective and communicative subtleties.

Empirical studies substantiate this integration. Samadani et al. (2013) demonstrated that both Effort and Shape features can be quantitatively extracted from human arm kinematics and strongly correlate with expert LMA annotations, establishing measurable descriptors for computational modelling. Additional work in (Bacula & LaViers, 2020; Cheng, 2017; Masuda

& Kato, 2010) successfully deployed LMA-based Effort and Shape constructs on humanoid robotic platforms, validating their translational applicability. Extending this line of inquiry, Raghu et al. (2025) showed that a holonomic 7-DoF manipulator, kinematically comparable to the Kinova cobot used in this study(Kinova Robotics, 2020), can maintain stable Basic Shape Forms during motion execution, underscoring Shape's applicability in low-DoF motion design tools.

Informed by these findings, this work develops animation tools that can be used to control both Effort and Shape constructs to generate functionally expressive robot motion.

Valence-Arousal-Dominance (VAD) Model

VAD model is employed for quantitative representation, examination, and comparison of affective trajectories (Verma & Tiwary, 2016). The VAD model conceptualizes affective experience as a point within a three-dimensional, continuous, and orthogonal emotional space comprising: Valence, denoting the positivity or negativity of an emotional experience, ranging from pleasant to unpleasant; Arousal, reflecting the intensity of the emotional activation, ranging from passive/calm to active/excited; and Dominance, describing the perceived degree of control or agency, ranging from submissive to commanding.

The VAD model enables systematic quantification and validation of expressive robot behaviour. Prior work, such as Marmpena et al. (2018), demonstrates the model's suitability for capturing perceived emotional qualities in expressive body gestures, while Nunnari et al. (2023) show its effectiveness for characterizing continuous emotional responses in robot-avatar interactions.

Integrating the VAD model into the development pipeline ensures that the animation tools generate not only kinematically coherent movement but also trajectories with measurable affective structure. This approach strengthens the connection between expressive motion design and the production of quantifiably affective trajectories.

Methodology

This section describes the three software tools developed in this work to enhance expressivity in robot movements. Each tool is described in terms of its technical implementation as well as its functional relationship to the LMA and VAD frameworks for qualitative and affective control of expressive motion respectively.

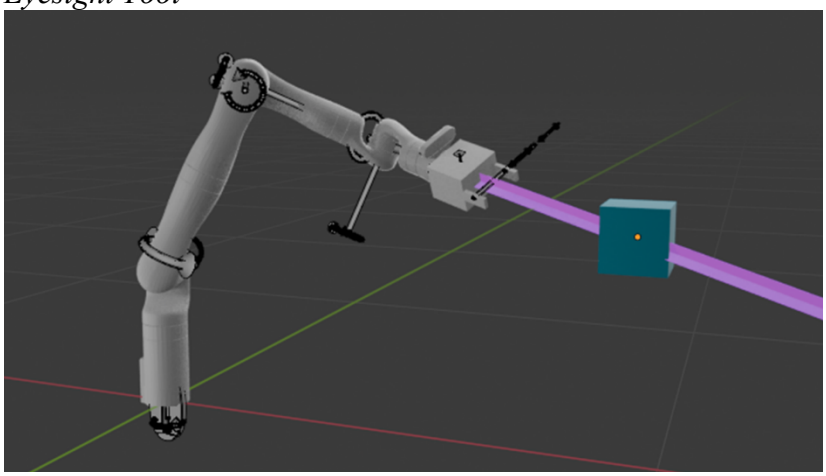
Eyesight Tool

Gaze constitutes a primary non-verbal communication modality that frequently precedes physical action and serves as an anticipatory cue in joint activity (Admoni & Scassellati, 2017). Within HRI, explicit modulation of gaze behavior has been shown to enhance coordination fluency and improve operators' ability to predict robot intentions, thereby aligning the collaborative dynamics in HRI more closely with human-human teams (Ronckers, 2022).

In response to these insights, the Eyesight Tool was designed to provide animators with fine-grained control over robot gaze behaviour within a unified 3D animation environment. The tool incorporates an adjustable visual proxy implemented as paired planar elements parented to the robot's end-effector that acts as a real-time indicator of the robot's inferred line of sight

(Figure 1). This tool enables animators to visualize and precisely calibrate the gaze direction, angular offsets, and target alignment without transitioning between software platforms. By moving congruently with the end-effector during trajectory design, the planes supply continuous spatial feedback, thereby supporting a more streamlined, agile, and precise animation workflow.

Figure 1
Eyesight Tool



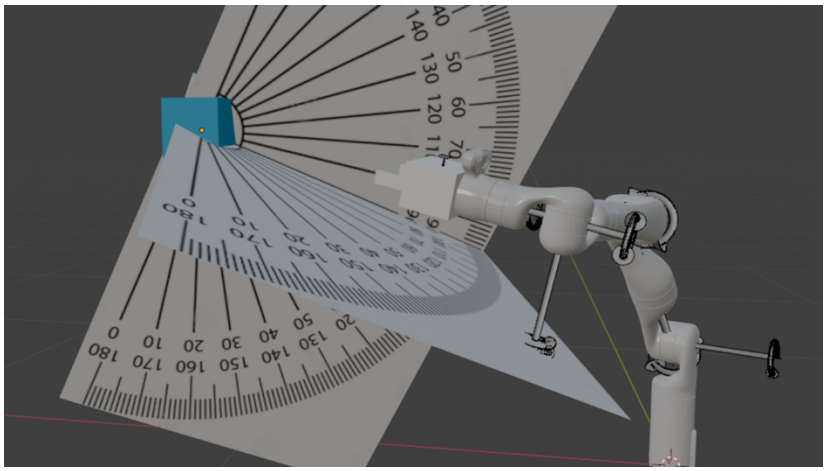
With respect to the LMA framework, the Eyesight tool directly operationalizes characteristics associated with the Effort-Space construct. In LMA, Space reflects the performer's attentional orientation toward the environment, varying between Direct (single-focused and goal-oriented) and Indirect (multi-focused, diffused, and flexible). Manipulating gaze offset allows animators to shape the perceived intentionality of motion: minimal offset generates a direct, decisive, and highly focused movement quality, whereas increased offset yields a more exploratory or hesitant character. These spatial qualities correlate with affective interpretations, where direct gaze is typically associated with approach-oriented emotions (e.g., joy, affection, or anger), and indirect or averted gaze corresponds to avoidance-oriented states such as embarrassment or uncertainty (Adams & Kleck, 2005).

Furthermore, with respect to the VAD framework, the Eyesight Tool primarily modulates the Dominance dimension, ranging from submissive to dominant. Recent studies indicate that sustained, direct gaze increases perceived dominance, whereas gaze aversion or wandering gaze trajectories reduce dominance and instead evoke submissiveness, uncertainty, or lowered agency (Shang et al., 2008). Thus, the Eyesight tool enables animators to encode dominance-related affective cues directly into robotic motion trajectories.

Protractor Tool

Building upon the role of gaze as a non-verbal communicative signal, the spatial orientation of a robot's end-effector toward a target object acts as an additional channel through which intent and affective state can be communicated. Prior findings demonstrate that variations in elevation (top-down) and azimuth (left-right) angles convey distinct emotional cues; for example, upward tilting is associated with positive affective states such as joy and excitement, whereas downward tilting frequently corresponds to negatively valenced emotions, including fear and sadness (Samanta & Guha, 2017; Sauter, 2017). To enable animators to systematically modulate this expressive parameter, the protractor tool was developed, which facilitates precise angular configuration of the robot's gaze towards the target object.

Figure 2
Protractor Tool



The tool incorporates two orthogonally oriented, protractor-projected planes that are parented to the target object (Figure 2). This configuration generates a stable visual reference frame for measuring and adjusting end-effector orientation. Animators can manipulate angular alignment through standard 3D interaction modalities (pan, tilt, and rotate) allowing the gaze angle to be tuned directly within the animation environment. As the tool is anchored to the target object, users can immediately assess the relational geometry between the manipulator and its intended point of focus, eliminating dependence on external visualization utilities, thereby improving workflow efficiency and precision during motion design.

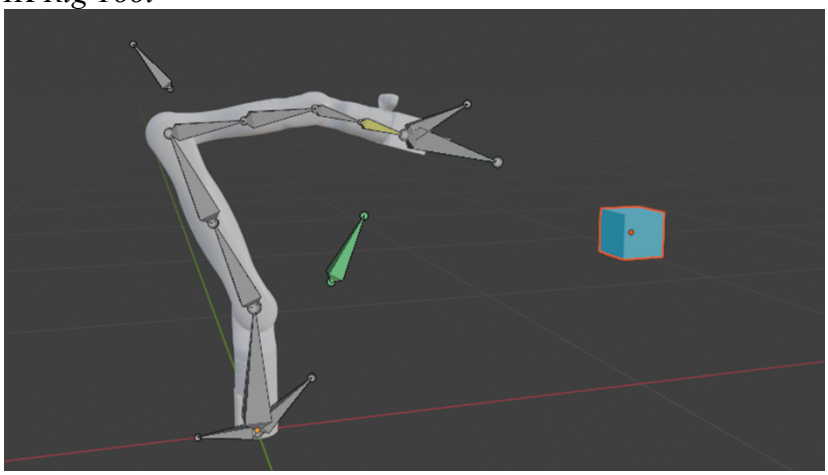
With respect to the LMA framework, the Protractor Tool primarily influences the Effort-Flow construct. Flow characterizes the degree of movement continuity, ranging from Bound, which is highly controlled, deliberate, and stabilized, to Free, which is more fluid, uninterrupted, and dynamic. When animators adopt a Bound-Flow strategy using precise, fixed angular specifications with minimal deviation, the resulting gaze appears intentional and constrained. Conversely, employing smoother, continuous angular variations yield a Free-Flow quality, producing movements perceived as relaxed and naturalistic.

Within the VAD model, the Protractor Tool provides control over emotional expressivity by encoding angular direction as a determinant of both Dominance and Valence. Empirical evidence indicates that downward-directed gaze from an elevated perspective signals dominance and assertiveness, whereas an upward-directed gaze suggests deference, submission, or admiration (Main et al., 2009; Robinson et al., 2008). Additionally, vertical head orientation modulates Valence: upward angles (raised head) correlate with positively valenced states such as joy or contentment, while downward inclinations (bowed head) correspond to negatively valenced emotions including sadness or fear (Sauer et al., 2013). Accordingly, the Protractor Tool enables systematic shaping of affective interpretation through precise orientation control.

IK Rig Tool

The third tool developed in this project is an Inverse Kinematics (IK) rig, informed by the foundational approaches of Starke et al. (2018) and Ribeiro and Paiva (2017), which demonstrated how IK frameworks can be extended beyond conventional character animation to support constrained robot motion generation incorporating realistic joint limits and safety requirements.

Figure 3
IK Rig Tool



In contrast to the FK/IK rig implemented on a custom-built robot in the work of Ribeiro and Paiva (2017), our workflow began by importing the Kinova cobot's URDF model into Blender using the Phobos plugin. As Phobos generates only an FK rig, offering fine-grained joint control but lacking intuitive end-effector manipulation, we developed a supplementary IK rig as a visualization and rapid posing tool to investigate whether IK-based movement visualization could enhance trajectory design efficiency for low-DoF collaborative manipulators.

This resulted in a dual-rig system: the IK rig enables rapid pose prototyping through intuitive end-effector manipulation, while the Phobos-generated FK rig serves as the authoritative model for validating joint feasibility and safety constraints. Poses created with the IK rig are subsequently replicated on the FK rig to ensure physical plausibility. For implementation, we adopted the orientation-constraint strategy from (Ribeiro & Paiva, 2017) to maintain compliance with Kinova's joint limits. Additionally, we integrated a Pole Target mechanism (Blender Documentation Team, 2025) to address IK chain instability described in Ribeiro and Paiva's work (2017) thereby improving directional control of the robot. Although this configuration is not designed to manage highly complex or over-constrained postures, it robustly supports essential tasks such as reaching, object-aligned positioning, and expressive redirection.

Within this system, the primary manipulated variables are the robot's whole-arm configuration and the end-effector's Cartesian position and orientation. These map onto LMA components of Effort and Shape, modulating qualities such as strength, control, expansion, and contraction. With respect to the VAD model, adjustments to posture, spatial openness, and movement speed and control influence all three emotional dimensions, enabling animators to craft motion trajectories with systematically encoded affective characteristics.

Experimental Design

IRB-approved human subjects' studies were conducted with 6 professional animators (Ages 21–30, Male = 3, F = 3) to assess the impact of the proposed animation tools on workflow efficiency and user experience. Three structured user studies were conducted, each tailored to the specific functionalities and constraints of an animation tool.

Hypothesis

In this work we test two hypotheses:

- H1: Eyesight, Protractor and IK rig animation tools improve animators' workflow efficiency.
- H2: Eyesight, Protractor and IK rig animation tools enhance the animators' design experience.

Measures

The evaluation of our proposed tools was conducted through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures, detailed in the subsections below.

Objective Measures

Across the three user studies, quantitative evaluation of tool performance was conducted using the following dependent variables:

1. Animation Time for First Attempt – The time taken by the participant to create the initial animation that satisfies the minimum task requirements, recorded from task onset to first task-complete submission. This metric serves as a primary indicator of workflow efficiency and initial tool learnability.
2. Time Spent on Adjustments – The cumulative time required for refining the trajectory after the first attempt. This measure reflects the iterative effort needed to achieve precision. Reduced adjustment time suggests that a tool affords more accurate initial control or provides clearer feedback, thereby lowering the need for extensive revisions.
3. Number of Adjustments – The total number of attempts taken by the animator to refine the trajectory after the initial minimum-viability submission. Fewer attempts indicate higher tool precision, and alignment between animator intent and tool output.

Subjective Measures

Perceived usability and user experience can be assessed using the System Usability Scale (SUS), a standardized ten-item questionnaire comprising alternating positively and negatively phrased statements (Brooke, 1996). The phrasing was minimally adapted to fit the current context while preserving semantic integrity:

1. I think that I would like to use this tool frequently.
2. I found the tool unnecessarily complex.
3. I thought the tool was easy to use.
4. I think that I would need the support of a technical person to be able to use this tool.
5. I found the various functions in this tool were well integrated.
6. I thought there was too much inconsistency in this tool.
7. I would imagine that most people would learn to use this tool very quickly.
8. I found the tool very awkward to use.
9. I felt very confident using the tool.
10. I needed to learn a lot of things before I could get going with this tool.

Participants rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ("Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"), enabling evaluation of usability, learnability, and overall user satisfaction.

Protocol

The experimental protocol included pre-experiment training and grouping of participants, the main experiment with three user studies to evaluate each developed tool, and the post-experiment interview to acquire feedback from participants.

Pre-experiment Training

Upon providing informed consent, participants completed a preliminary survey documenting their years of experience in 3D animation and self-reported proficiency with Blender. To ensure a consistent baseline across all participants, an instructional video was then administered. This tutorial introduced both the default FK rig and the animation tools developed for the study, with emphasis on their functional differences, intended use cases, and operational controls.

Following the tutorial, participants engaged in a 10-minute guided practice session to familiarize themselves with the tools in a controlled environment. Participants were subsequently stratified into two groups, Group A (tool-assisted FK rig) and Group B (default FK rig), using a balanced assignment procedure based on reported experience and competency scores. This grouping strategy ensured equivalence in baseline skill levels, enabling a controlled assessment of how the developed tools influenced animation efficiency and user experience.

Main Experiment

The main experiment included three user studies where each study explored the specific functionalities and constraints of one animation tool. In each study participants had to design an expressive trajectory that not only accomplished a given task but was also kinematically safe to be deployed on robots. All submitted robot trajectories underwent a safety check using MATLAB. Four physical constraints specific to the Kinova single-arm robot were used for this assessment:

- Joint Angular Limit (Joint 2: ±128°, Joint 4: ±147°, Joint 6: ±120°),
- Joint Speed Limit (1.39 rad/s on Joints 1-4, 1.22 rad/s on Joints 5-7),
- Joint Acceleration Limit (5.2 rad/s² on Joints 1-4, 10.0 rad/s² on Joints 5-7),
- Joint Torque Limit (39.0 N·m on Joints 1-4, 9.0 N·m on Joints 5-7)

Animations violating any constraint were returned to participants for correction. This ensured that all trajectories remained within safe operational boundaries and were suitable for potential deployment on the Kinova platform.

- **Study 1 - Eyesight Tool**
  The first study assessed the usability and precision afforded by the Eyesight Tool. The robot arm was initialized in a standardized idle configuration oriented toward a 5-cm blue cubic target. Participants were instructed to animate a left-to-right “scanning” gaze motion, with the strict constraint that the end-effector should be oriented towards the cube (an imaginary line passing through the centre of the end effector should also pass through the cube) for the full duration of the animation. This task evaluated the tool’s effectiveness in supporting fine-grained control of gaze alignment and spatial precision.

- **Study 2 - Protractor Tool**
  The second study tested the Protractor Tool's capability in assisting precise angular control of the cobot's gaze direction. The experiment setup and robot initialisation mirrored Study 1. Participants were instructed to generate two discrete end-effector poses: Pose A (left-side approach) and Pose B (right-side approach), such that the cobot's gaze was directed at the cube from each side. The principal task requirement was angular symmetry with a tolerance of ±10° margin of error. This task evaluated the tool's ability to support consistent, bilateral angular positioning.

- **Study 3 - IK Rig Tool**
  The third study evaluated the IK rig through a 6D animation exercise where the animators had to control both, the position as well as the orientation of the end-effector. Group A utilised the developed IK rig along with the default FK rig, while Group B used only the default FK rig. All participants had to animate the robot's end-effector to reach the target cube by following a predefined frame's trajectory across space. This meant that the participants had to animate the end-effector such that it followed the positions as well as orientations of the moving frame to reach the target cube. This study assessed participants' ability to generate smooth, kinematically coherent trajectories and compared the efficiency of IK-assisted posing against direct FK articulation.

6.3.3 Post-Experiment Interview: Participants were asked open-ended qualitative questions to capture richer insights into their interpretation of the tool implementations. Participants were asked to compare the three tools, articulate their preferences, identify functional limitations, and propose enhancements to better align the tools with professional animation workflows.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the objective efficiency gains and the subjective usability ratings of each tool assessed through user studies.

Objective Evaluation

Six professional animators participated in the experimental studies. Quantitative analyses indicates different performance gains across the three animation tools, each contributing to workflow enhancements through distinct operational pathways.

Results corresponding to all tools support H1, confirming that tool integration measurably improves animation efficiency. The IK rig yielded the most substantial overall performance gains. Specifically, it reduced initial attempt duration from 632.33 seconds to 554.67 seconds, refinement time from 481.33 seconds to 339 seconds, and the number of attempts from 3.33 to 2.00. Furthermore, with the IK rig, refinement-time variability also diminished (Std. Dev. reduced from 95.23 to 58.42), suggesting that the IK system mitigated performance disparities among users with differing technical backgrounds. These findings demonstrate that, for fundamental alignment and posing tasks, an IK-based modelling layer is critical for stabilizing animator performance and supporting consistent spatiotemporal control.

On the other hand, the Protractor tool exhibited a different efficiency profile. While its impact on initial attempt time was negligible (607.67 seconds to 604 seconds), it produced pronounced reductions in refinement duration (474.33 seconds to 343 seconds) and number of attempts (4.00 to 3.33). Lower standard deviations across metrics confirm its role in promoting

consistent animator decision-making. These results indicate that the Protractor tool primarily optimizes mid- to late-stage correction cycles by providing reliable angle-based feedback that reduces manual alignment adjustments.

By contrast, the Eyesight tool produced an increase in initial attempt time (665.33 s to 815 s), suggesting reduced efficiency. However, subsequent performance measures qualify this interpretation. Figure 6 shows that participants achieved perfect target alignment after a single additional attempt, eliminating the need for extended revision loops. Qualitative reports further clarify that animators deliberately invested additional time during the initial attempt to exploit the tool's precision-oriented affordances. Thus, despite initial slow-down, the tool reduced overall trial-and-error cycles and improved accuracy-driven workflows. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that while all tools reduce trial-and-error, each tool modulates animator behaviour differently: the IK rig accelerates the entire workflow, the Protractor tool compresses the refinement phase, and the Eyesight tool front-loads precision work to minimize downstream corrections.

Figure 4

Mean Time and Standard Deviations of First Attempt per Animation Tools; Tool-Assisted(W) vs. Without Tool (WO)

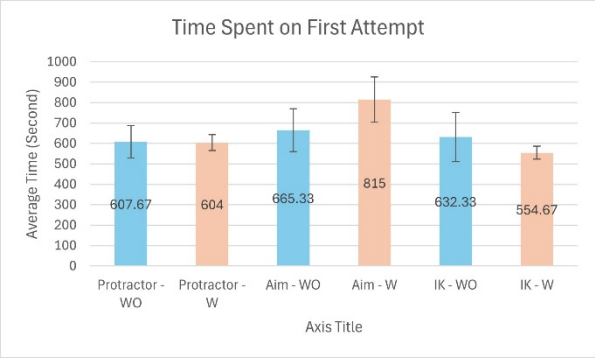


Figure 5

Comparison of Mean Refinement Time: Tool-Assisted(W) vs. Without Tool(WO)

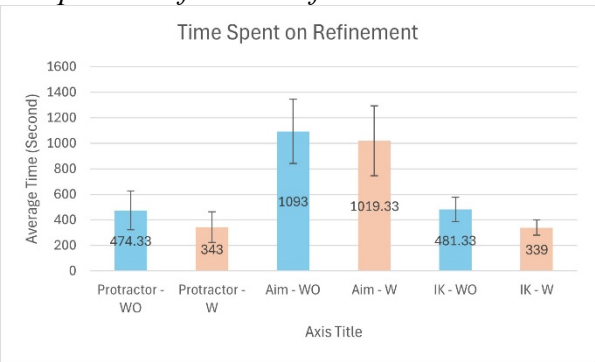
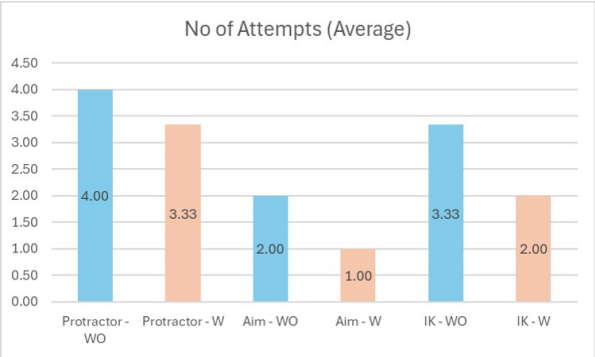


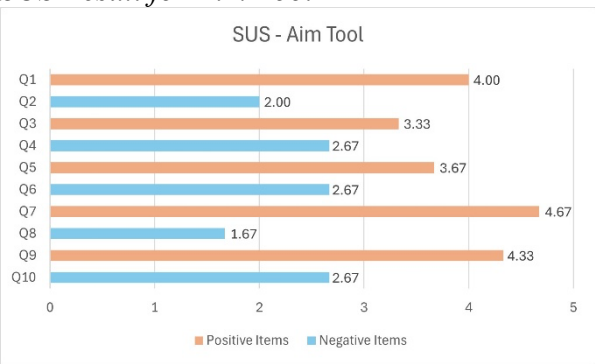
Figure 6
No of Attempts for Each Experiment; Tool-Assisted(W) vs. Without Tool (WO)



Subjective Evaluation

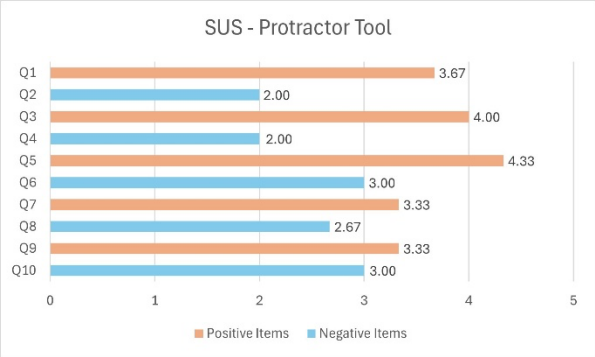
System Usability Scale (SUS) outcomes reveal clear stratification in perceived usability across the developed tools with only the Eyesight and Protractor tools supporting H2. The Eyesight tool achieved a score of 71.63 (Grade C, "Good"). As shown in Figure 7, all positive usability items received high average scores. The highest-rated aspects were the tool's ease of learning (Q7: 4.67), users' confidence in using it (Q9: 4.33), and their willingness to use it frequently (Q1: 4.00), highlighting its primary strength in learnability and straightforward operation. These results suggest that its dedicated functionality and predictable interaction pattern support rapid user adoption.

Figure 7
SUS Result for Aim Tool



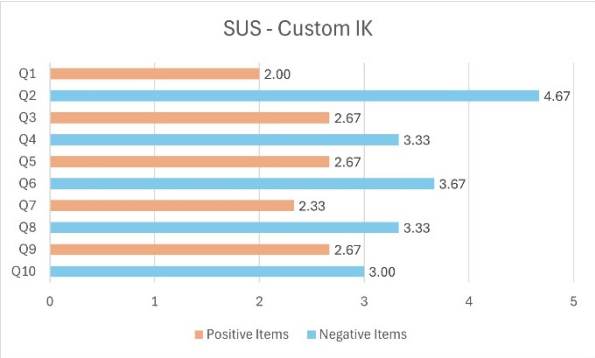
The Protractor tool similarly achieved a C-level usability score (66.67). Participants highlighted strong functional cohesion (Q5: 4.33), ease of use (Q3: 4.00), and intention to reuse the tool (Q1: 3.67). These ratings indicate that task-specific, lightweight tools are perceived as operationally coherent and intuitively aligned with existing animation practices.

Figure 8
SUS Result for Protractor Tool



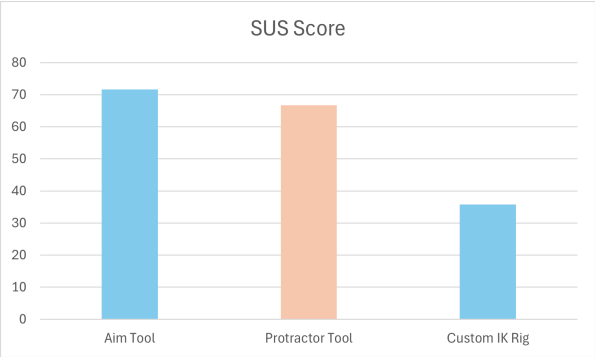
In contrast, the IK rig received a SUS score of 35.83 (Grade F, "Poor"). Negative-item responses were markedly elevated, particularly regarding perceived complexity (Q2: 4.67), inconsistency (Q6: 3.67), and dependency on external support (Q4 & Q8: 3.33). Although the IK rig objectively enhanced performance, participants reported that its current visualization and interaction design lacked usability, hindering its practical integration into their workflow.

Figure 9
SUS Result for Protractor Tool



User feedback further clarified the discrepancy between objective and subjective outcomes for the IK system. Although animators enjoyed using the Eyesight and Protractor tools, they expressed a preference for hybrid FK/IK rigs with seamless switching over the current dual-rig system. Seamless switching between FK and Ik is an industry-standard approach that better supports nuanced pose sculpting and adheres to familiar animation pipelines.

Figure 10
Average SUS Score for Usability of Animation Tools



Conclusion

This study presents a tool-centric methodology for robotic animation, comprising three software tools designed to improve animator control and alignment with robot's kinematic and operational constraints. Empirical evaluations demonstrate that the tools significantly enhance animation efficiency, particularly for tasks involving fine-grained expressive behaviours such as gaze alignment. These findings emphasize the utility of structured, tool-assisted workflows for animating low degree-of-freedom collaborative robots.

In the current evaluation, each tool was assessed independently with tool-specific tasks, limiting ecological validity. A more comprehensive assessment requires examining their performance within a fully integrated production workflow representative of real-world animation pipelines. Future work will focus on developing a unified FK/IK rig that enables intuitive IK-driven posing while automatically enforcing kinematic feasibility and safety compliance. In parallel, we aim to integrate all three tools into a cohesive animation environment to investigate their combined impact on animator performance.

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The Role of Space Design in Safer Queer Spaces: A Comparative Study of Independent Bookstores in Japan and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the meaning of a space being considered "safer" for queer individuals, placing particular emphasis on the complex relationship between spatial configurations and the subjective experience of safety. I argue that the concept of safety goes beyond merely providing a physical location; it is deeply intertwined with opportunities for social inclusion, community building, and the free expression of diverse identities. Drawing on interviews conducted by the author with independent bookshop owners in Japan and the United Kingdom, as well as detailed analyses of zines and other privately published materials, this study investigates how bookshops serve as dynamic cultural spaces that foster expression and connection. Through practices such as zine production, community event organization, and the thoughtful curation of books and displays, these spaces cultivate a sense of comfort, accessibility, and belonging for queer individuals who may otherwise feel marginalized. By examining these interactions, I seek to clarify the specific conditions under which spaces are perceived as welcoming and affirming by queer communities. Furthermore, I discuss the broader socio-cultural significance of spaces intentionally designed to support queer presence, visibility, and well-being—not only in terms of their physical aspects but also through their roles in facilitating social interaction and emotional resonance.

Keywords: queer, bookstore, space

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Introduction

This paper investigates how independent bookstores in Japan and the United Kingdom contribute to the creation of "safer spaces" for queer people. Although "queer" was historically used as a slur, it has been reclaimed since the late twentieth century and is used here as an inclusive term encompassing LGBT identities and others who do not fit neatly within that acronym.

Recent scholarship notes that queer spaces have emerged, and continue to emerge, in diverse forms shaped by the specific needs, communities, and cultural contexts of queer people across different regions and historical moments. These studies emphasize that each queer space is grounded in particular narratives, urban and architectural conditions, aesthetics, and challenges, and underline the importance of recognising the varied voices of the people who operate these spaces, including their preferred uses of queer acronyms. At the same time, scholars point out that growing up queer often entails confronting the destabilising absence of an accessible queer history—especially regarding the spatial design practices that have shaped queer life (Furman, 2022). This absence suggests the need for closer examination of how queer histories are materially and spatially produced, sustained, and made accessible in everyday settings. In this context, independent bookstores offer a particularly revealing site through which to examine how queer histories and practices are translated into spatial design and everyday experience.

Building on this discussion, the central aim of this study is to understand how spatial design—both physical and symbolic—shapes experiences of comfort, accessibility, and psychological safety within independent bookstores. Independent bookstores, operating outside corporate structures, have increasingly become cultural and communal hubs that provide visibility for marginalized voices and generate spaces in which community-building can occur.

This study focuses on three guiding questions: what "being safer" means for queer individuals in contemporary Japan and the United Kingdom; how independent bookstores enact safety through spatial design, curatorial decision-making, and community engagement; and what broader social and cultural roles these safer spaces perform.

Independent Bookstores and Queer Safer Spaces

Independent bookstores curate their collections according to the values and political commitments of their owners. In both Japan and the United Kingdom, they circulate zines, independently published works, and queer literature that often lie outside mainstream distribution. These bookstores also serve as third places where reading groups, workshops, and informal gatherings facilitate interpersonal connection and shared learning.

In the United Kingdom, the number of independent bookstores has increased since 2016, accompanied by the emergence of radical bookstores connected with networks such as the Alliance of Radical Booksellers. These shops serve as localized sites of activism, social inquiry, and community participation. In Japan, despite the general decline in the number of bookstores since the early 2000s, independently operated shops have grown in the past decade, actively challenging mainstream publishing norms by foregrounding marginalized voices.

The sociopolitical context for queer individuals varies between the two countries. In the United Kingdom, the legalization of same-sex marriage and the expansion of protections coexist with

everyday discrimination. In Japan, the Act on Promotion of Understanding of LGBT People has been criticized for its vagueness and limited protections in 2025, and despite court rulings identifying the unconstitutionality of banning same-sex marriage, queer individuals continue to experience outing, harassment, and violence. These conditions underscore the need for safer everyday spaces. Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial to rethink safety not as a fixed condition guaranteed by law or policy, but as an ongoing practice embedded in everyday spaces. To conceptualize safer spaces, this paper draws on Katada's (2023) argument that absolute safety is unattainable, yet communities must continually strive to make spaces safer. Safer spaces are not fixed locations but ongoing, collective practices of reducing harm and affirming diverse identities.

Case Studies and Spatial Practices in Safer Space Design

The independent bookstores examined in this study illustrate how spatial design and everyday practices collaborate to produce safer environments for queer communities. In order to investigate these dynamics, four independent bookstores were selected—two in Japan and two in the United Kingdom—based on the following criteria: (1) the explicit articulation of a safer-space policy, or (2) the sustained engagement in community-oriented activities that align with safer-space principles. These bookstores were analyzed through a comparative approach drawing on publications, publicly available materials, website information, and, where possible, on-site observation.

Bookstore lighthouse in Chiba identifies itself explicitly as "Books(tore) as a Safer Space." It refuses to stock hate publications and hosts gatherings for queer individuals and allies. The store's spatial layout enhances visitors' sense of comfort; while shelves provide enough height to block intrusive gazes, they remain accessible, and a stepping stool supports autonomy. According to owner Sekiguchi, bookstores can make historically excluded perspectives visible, and safer spaces emerge from the interaction between curation and the presence of visitors (Sekiguchi, 2023). In his published diary, Sekiguchi writes that maintaining shared standards of behavior—rather than uncritical indulgence toward children or customers—is essential to sustaining the bookstore as a space of mutual respect and belonging (Sekiguchi, 2024).

Bookstore Megaphone, originally based in Gifu Prefecture, adopted the motto "amplifying small voices," as stated on its website. The store curates literature related to minority and political issues, produces zines, and organizes reading groups, including those focusing on Palestine-related works. The store articulated a safer space policy that affirmed diverse backgrounds, prohibited harassment, and encouraged awareness of one's potential to cause harm (Wada, 2024). The bookstore later relocated to Kyoto Prefecture and continues to operate an online store and host pop-up events, demonstrating that the creation of safer spaces does not depend solely on a fixed architectural site. In a zine produced by the store, the owner reflects that both running a bookstore and creating zines were, for him, necessary practices for surviving within contemporary society rather than optional cultural activities (Wada, 2023).

Gay's The Word in London, established in 1979, functions as a longstanding hub of queer community life. From its website (https://www.gaystheword.co.uk), the bookstore hosts a range of reading groups, including those for lesbians, Black lesbians, and ace/aro communities. These groups provide spaces for shared reading and open conversation. Pride flags, thematic displays, and other visual cues communicate the store's commitments and create a sense of reassurance for visitors.

Category Is Books in Glasgow similarly identifies as a queer bookstore. According to its website (https://www.categoryisbooks.com), it communicates accessibility information clearly and organizes activities such as writing clubs, reading sessions, and craft workshops. Through these initiatives, the store fosters community networks that extend beyond the commercial function of bookselling. It also visualizes its support for queer people visible.

Across these examples, independent bookstores emphasize accessibility, articulate their values transparently, refuse discriminatory materials, and cultivate community through sustained programming. They also employ visual and symbolic cues that signal belonging and safety. At the same time, not all visitors prefer overt displays; subtle or ambiguous markers can serve as protective signals recognizable primarily to those who seek them. This interplay between visibility and ambiguity illustrates the complexity of designing queer-friendly environments and suggests areas for further research.

These cases demonstrate not only the practical strategies through which independent bookstores cultivate safer environments, but also the tensions, limits, and unexpected forms of vulnerability that accompany such efforts. The observations above suggest that safer space making cannot be understood merely as a matter of design choices or community programming; rather, it is an ongoing relational process shaped by the ways people encounter one another within these environments. It is from this standpoint that the following section turns to the underlying dynamics at the core of safer spaces.

The Core of Safer Spaces

While independent bookstores hold significant potential as safer spaces, this potential also reveals the possibility that someone may already be excluded. The creation of safer spaces is therefore neither simple nor unidirectional; it involves ongoing negotiation and the risk of reproducing new forms of marginality. Katada (2023) emphasizes that safer spaces are practices aimed at transforming entire environments. In examining what constitutes a safer space—and how exclusion can occur even in places designed to be inclusive—it is essential to consider the question of "gazing." What kinds of gazes do we direct toward others, and how do these gazes shape the space around us? Such gazes extend from past to present and into the future, and this continuity may, in fact, be understood as central to the essence of books—and of bookstores as relational spaces (Sekiguchi, 2023).

Gazing, however, is not merely an act of looking; it is a mode of positioning oneself in relation to others. Queer theorists have long noted that the gaze can wound, surveil, or discipline, but it can also affirm, recognize, and create openings for relationality. In the context of independent bookstores, the gaze is mediated by shelves, displays, pathways, signage, and the presence—or absence—of other visitors. A bookshelf that shields a browsing customer from unsolicited observation, for example, can soften the disciplinary force of the gaze, while a conspicuously placed Pride display may invite certain forms of recognition but deter those who fear being seen engaging with queer content. Thus, spatial design does not eliminate the gaze but modulates its intensity, directionality, and social consequences.

At the same time, visitors themselves bring multiple gazes into the space: gazes shaped by personal histories, cultural norms, geopolitical contexts, and varying degrees of familiarity with queer communities. A bookstore's safer space policy may articulate the expectation of mutual respect, yet visitors inevitably interpret and perform these norms differently. This interaction between institutionalized expectations and individualized interpretations produces a dynamic

site of relational negotiation. In this sense, safer spaces are not stable havens, but contingent and emergent formations shaped by the interplay of material design, symbolic cues, and the embodied practices of those who inhabit them.

Recognizing this complexity allows us to understand why safer spaces can never be fully realized or completed. Even well-intentioned design decisions may inadvertently generate new forms of exclusion—by privileging certain identities, knowledges, or ways of being over others. Visibility can empower, but it can also expose; ambiguity can protect, but it can also obscure. The challenge for independent bookstores, therefore, lies in sustaining a space that remains open to continual adjustment, responsive to shifting community needs, and mindful of the relational labor required to maintain safety.

Ultimately, the core of safer spaces lies not in achieving a static condition of non-harm but in cultivating an ethic of ongoing attentiveness. Independent bookstores illustrate how safety is built through iterative gestures—greeting a hesitant visitor, rearranging shelves to enhance comfort, reconsidering the framing of displays, or revising policies as new issues arise. Safer spaces emerge not from the absence of risk, but from the willingness to confront and negotiate it collectively. It is precisely this relational and unfinished character that makes them meaningful sites for queer world-making.

Conclusion

Independent bookstores in Japan and the United Kingdom play an important role in generating safer spaces for queer individuals. Their spatial layouts, curatorial practices, and community activities collectively shape environments that foster visibility, connection, and reassurance. Safer space, as this study has shown, is not a static architectural solution but an ongoing practice grounded in everyday interactions.

In conclusion, the independent bookstores examined in this study demonstrate that safer spaces are neither predetermined nor guaranteed by architectural form alone. Rather, they emerge through the ongoing interplay between spatial design, curatorial choices, and the everyday practices of those who inhabit the space. As Yamamoto (2015) argues, architecture cannot be understood merely as a functional response to social needs but must be shaped by the intentions of those who live in and sustain the space. The bookstores discussed here exemplify this principle: by foregrounding marginalized voices, mediating the dynamics of the gaze, and cultivating environments in which visitors can negotiate visibility on their own terms, they offer an important model of relational safety in contemporary queer life.

The significance of these spaces lies not in their perfection, but in their continual becoming—an active and collective commitment to minimizing harm and expanding the possibilities of belonging. As communities and social conditions evolve, so too must the spatial and relational practices through which safer spaces are sustained. Future research will benefit from further exploring how such practices take shape across different cultural contexts and how they may inform broader conversations about inclusivity in the design of everyday environments.

Moreover, the practices surrounding safer spaces extend beyond the physical boundaries of the bookstores themselves and connect deeply with the surrounding community and urban fabric. As Boland (2021) observes, independent bookshops often assume multiple social functions such as cafés, meditation spaces, community projects, or even informal tourist hubs, shaped by their local contexts, the history of the buildings they occupy, and the particular passions of their

owners and booksellers (p. 8). The presence of such bookstores enhances queer visibility within local neighborhoods and has the potential to reshape the conditions under which public discourse occurs. In this sense, independent bookstores may be understood as a kind of cultural infrastructure—sites that support not only individual well-being but also broader processes of community formation and cultural transformation.

Future research should not only examine spatial practices in queer-friendly environments in greater detail but also consider how subtle or ambiguous design elements may offer protective functions. Furthermore, it is necessary to investigate how the principles of safer space intersect with architectural design, urban planning, and evolving forms of publicness and collectivity. Such inquiries can provide a foundation for imagining more inclusive spaces within societies where people of diverse backgrounds coexist.

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

The author declares that ChatGPT was used only to correct minor typographical and spelling errors. No AI tools were used to generate, revise, or edit the intellectual content of this manuscript. All ideas, analyses, and arguments are entirely the author's own.

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Transforming Mission 4: Creative Cultural Parks and the Rise of Thai Universities as Local Change Agents

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Abstract

This study investigates how Thai universities have transformed their cultural mission (Mission 4) from being ceremonial guardians to active change leaders. Through the 2023 Advance Track research program, supported by Thailand's Program Management Unit on Area-Based Development (PMU A), eight universities partnered with local communities to establish Creative Cultural Parks. These parks aimed to revitalize cultural capital as a foundation for local economic growth, community identity, and cultural innovation. Using a mixed-methods approach with a strong focus on participatory action research (PAR), the study examined all eight projects through project documents, field observations, stakeholder interviews, and cultural mapping data. It specifically explored the use of storytelling, creative festivals, and cultural incubators as tools to drive transformation. The results show that universities played a pivotal role in co-creating over 200 cultural products and services, supporting more than 100 new cultural entrepreneurs, and boosting average community income by 15%. Creative Cultural Parks emerged as more than just symbolic landmarks—they became vibrant ecosystems for collaboration, innovation, and identity restoration. Importantly, the program empowered local actors to take ownership of their development journeys through co-creation and cultural entrepreneurship. The study argues that when universities align their cultural mission with community participation and national policy agendas, they can unlock untapped cultural assets and produce tangible social and economic outcomes. It recommends establishing permanent cultural management units within universities and integrating cultural resources into broader development frameworks such as the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economy and creative economy strategies.

Keywords: Thailand cultural capital, Mission 4, creative cultural parks, Thai universities, cultural management

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Introduction

The Higher Education Act of 2019 mandates that all Thai universities undertake four primary responsibilities: (1) instruction, (2) research and innovation, (3) provision of academic services to society, and (4) preservation and promotion of arts and culture. Mission 4 has consistently been perceived as a ceremonial or conservative obligation primarily focused on safeguarding cultural items, preserving traditions, and organizing cultural events.

This article examines the transformation of Thai universities' cultural mission, Mission 4, from mere "ritual guardianship" to an active role in community development rooted in culture. The Cultural Capital Management for Community Economic and Local Awareness Research (Advance Track) initiative, a component of the Cultural Capital Management for Community Economic and Local Awareness Project Management initiative for Fiscal Year 2023, has precipitated this move. Chiang Mai University administers the program with assistance from the Program Management Unit on Area-Based Development (PMU A). The program aims to position universities as "leaders of spatial change" by integrating cultural preservation (Mission 4) with community economic growth and methodically enhancing local awareness.

As Thailand's economy and society rapidly evolve, and national policy frameworks such as the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy and the Creative Economy develop, universities have begun to perceive Mission 4 as a means to facilitate local advancement.

Literature Review

Over the past decade, there has been heightened scrutiny of cultural capital and the university's role as a catalyst for local development, especially regarding the creative economy and regional development policy. Many academic publications assert that colleges are no longer merely caretakers of cultural history; they actively translate cultural capital into creative commercial concepts. This transformation occurs through cooperation among communities, government agencies, and the corporate sector, reflecting the broader re-evaluation of the Thai higher education system under Mission 4.

Cultural Capital and Modern Conceptual Frameworks

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, encompassing embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms, has been further refined by scholars to incorporate the notions of meta-capital and the significance of cultural capital in spatial development (Dzimińska et al., 2020; Frullo & Mattone, 2024). The contemporary analysis indicates that cultural capital is a multifaceted, dynamic phenomenon that must be recognized, particularly when applied to the creative economy or local identity revitalization efforts.

Universities as Custodians of Cultural Knowledge

Various studies assert that universities could assume the role of managers of cultural knowledge by discovering, organizing, and comprehending local cultural capital, typically through cultural mapping, cultural databases, and value chain analysis (Andrés, 2011; Ashley & Durham, 2021; Mert & Stolarick, 2025). This project enables colleges to serve as a nexus for design, innovation, and local knowledge, concurrently enhancing community development.

Universities as Catalysts for Cultural Entrepreneurs

Global institutional research reveals that universities are significantly contributing to the emergence of entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative economy. They accomplish this by enhancing the learning process for students, providing training, and generating opportunities to form a network that connects cultural with economic activity (Juruena & Klein, 2016; Leng et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2025). This facilitates the transformation of cultural capital into creative content, services, and experiences, such as cultural festivals, oral traditions, and design innovations.

Universities as Cultivators of Cultural Human Capital

Furthermore, higher education institutions serve as a primary source for the skill set and leadership attributes of future practitioners in the cultural business. Support is provided through experiential learning, collaboration between universities and communities, and incubation programs for artists and creators (Mayo, n.d.; Ooi & Shelley, 2023; Scott, 2009). These initiatives are essential in ensuring that communities possess successors capable of advancing cultural capital in alignment with the requirements of the creative economy.

Universities as Catalysts for Local Development

The notion of universities as catalysts for cultural transformation posits that they ought to act as co-creators of change rather than simple custodians of tradition (Dzimińska et al., 2020). This would transport people to the opposite side of sectors, involving engagement with sectors and employing a range of participatory methodologies, including participatory design and participatory action research (Liu et al., 2025; Sara & Jones, 2018). In addition, the establishment of new cultural venues, such as creative hubs and cultural laboratories, represents another method available to universities for facilitating social, economic, and identity-based innovations.

In summary, scientific inquiry indicates that universities are increasingly adopting the role of agents of social change, primarily through three mechanisms: the administration of cultural knowledge, the promotion of cultural entrepreneurs, and the development of cultural human resources. This paper examines these perspectives and applies them to research conducted at eight Thai institutions, arguing that Creative Cultural Parks represent a new institutional mechanism reflecting the university's evolution into a change agent. In doing so, they offer an alternative to the ceremonial perspective of Mission 4, perceiving it instead as a collection of tools for sustainable development.

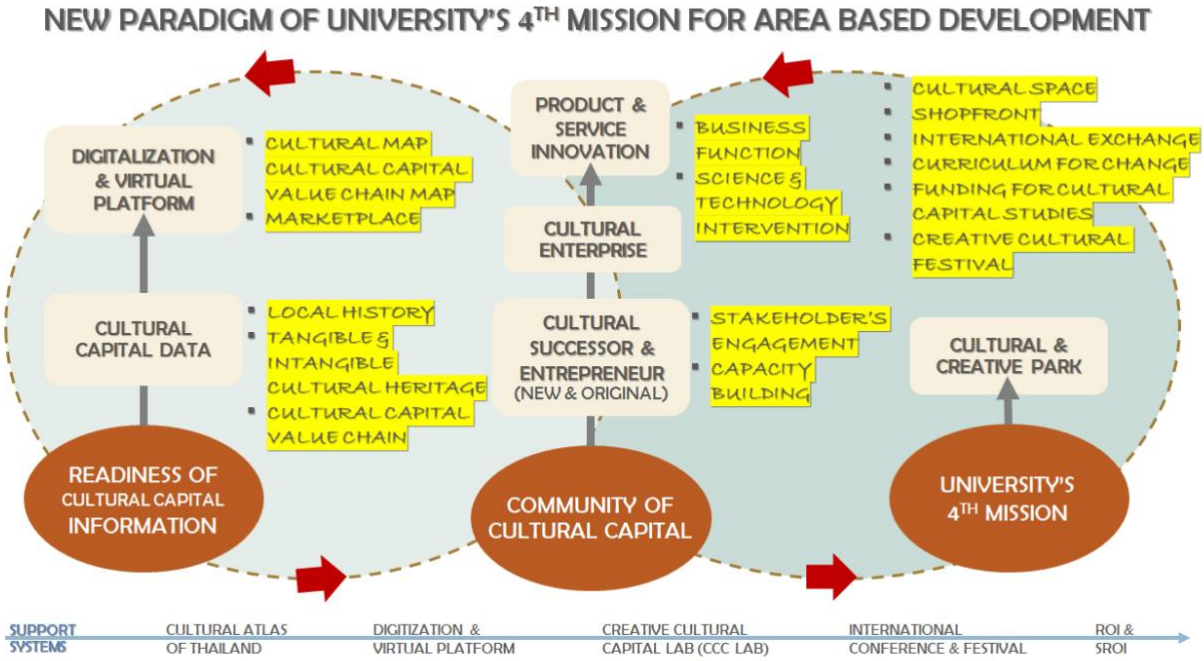
Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods paradigm, primarily emphasizing Participatory Action Research (PAR). We obtained data from project documentation, field observations, stakeholder interviews, and cultural mapping. The objective was to examine the significance of methods such as storytelling, creative festivals, and cultural incubators in transforming the cultural capital of participating communities.

The research encompassed eight university-led projects:

I. Strengthening the Grassroots Economy and Competitiveness for Cultural Capital Communities in Khemmarat and Na Tan Districts, Ubon Ratchathani Province – Ubon Ratchathani University
II. Mae Chaem: Creative Cultural City Project – Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna
III. Promoting a Creative Cultural Park for the Development of Pattani Cultural Capital Communities – Prince of Songkla University Pattani Campus
IV. Cultural Capital Management Project with the 4th Mission of the University of Phayao to Enhance the Local Economy Community and Local Awareness of the Cultural Community of Kwan Phayao Terrace – University of Phayao
V. Hat Yai City's Auspicious Ways Project Based on Cultural Capital for Creative Economy Development – Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus
VI. Nong Kae Dam Arts and Culture Group Project – Maha Sarakham University
VII. Innovative Art and Faith Project: Supporting the Economy and Preserving Local Areas of Sam Bang, Two Sides of the Canal, Samut Prakan Province – Huachiew Chalermprakiet University
VIII. Cultural Capital Management Project to Enhance the Community Economy through the Legend of Phimai – Rajamangala University of Technology Esan

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



The university plays a crucial role in collaborating with network partners and stakeholders to acquire and enhance the value of cultural capital in the academic disciplines. The initial step in this approach involves collecting extensive information, including study on local history, cultural heritage, and pieces of cultural capital that may aid in defining and reinforcing local identity. Cultural mapping and value chain mapping are two methodologies employed for an in-depth investigation of the cultural capital value chain. These procedures culminate in the generation of "cultural capital information" that is archived on a digital platform.

The university utilizes its resources to assist local artists, crafters, and both emerging and established cultural entrepreneurs in enhancing their skills. It also facilitates the cultivation of cultural successors and the establishment of cultural enterprises. Universities foster collaborative frameworks that enhance entrepreneurial potential via the Cultural Capital Community, comprising government entities, private sector companies, artists, and civil society organizations. We employ scientific knowledge, advanced technologies, and interdisciplinary experience to enhance cultural goods and services.

The Cultural Capital Community has transformed the university's approach to its fourth mission: the preservation of arts and culture. This is due to the enhancement of the appreciation for local cultural capital. In response to this development, colleges have established designated zones for cultural capital, referred to as "Creative Cultural Parks." These parks serve as cultural centers operated by universities. They offer venues for the sale of cultural goods and services, facilitate the dissemination of knowledge regarding the enhancement of cultural capital, and promote collaboration between local cultural communities and global networks. They also organize academic activities focused on cultural transformation, provide research grants or scholarships for the advancement of cultural capital, and facilitate creative cultural festivals that foster local pride and collective consciousness.

This developmental mechanism facilitates economic growth at the community level and enhances the integration of supply chains into broader value chains. The project advocates equitable income distribution and sustainable employment possibilities by leveraging local resources, culture, and traditional knowledge as its primary assets. This represents a novel perspective on Mission 4—Preservation of Arts and Culture—in the higher education system of Thailand.

Cultural capital refers to the cultural assets transmitted from one generation to another by social practices and lifestyles. Handcrafted objects, artworks, sculptures, historical landmarks, antiquities, and vernacular architecture exemplify tangible cultural capital. Traditions, ceremonies, folk performing arts, and local music exemplify intangible cultural capital. Legends, narratives, and customs vary significantly across many locales, ranging from neighborhoods and villages to sub-districts, districts, provinces, and regions.

Results

The institution has meticulously curated and disseminated the information gathered during the research process to generate accessible cultural capital data. This encompasses comprehensive and specific datasets regarding local history, encompassing both tangible and intangible cultural assets, cultural capital value chains, and the digitization and exhibition of cultural mapping data on a digital platform.

A network-based framework must be established to facilitate local growth, involving government agencies, enterprises, and civil society organizations. These groups are essential for sustaining culturally capital-driven development following the conclusion of the study endeavor. Universities and academics ought to continue providing academic services, orchestrating cultural events, and advocating for local goods, services, and cultural venues. Government agencies can ensure the continuity of these programs by signing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or formulating area development plans grounded in cultural capital. They can subsequently incorporate them into their annual operational plans and allocate the necessary resources.

Developing Cultural Entrepreneurs and Cultural Enterprises

All participating colleges concentrate on enhancing individuals' talents via training programs, cultivating entrepreneurial abilities, conducting field visits, and exchanging expertise with other cultural and external entrepreneurs to generate innovations. Examples include collaborating with designers to create a cultural entrepreneurship handbook, establishing design institutions such as the Patanista Academy, and initiating the Pattani Creative Economy Cluster at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus. Cultural businesses are emerging from entrepreneurial networks, while established cultural enterprise organizations are amalgamating to enhance their strength and focus. The "Suvarnabhumi Local Cultural Community Enterprise Network" at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University exemplifies this initiative.

Research and development span the complete supply chain, comprising upstream, midstream, and downstream parts. The Advance Track research framework primarily examines post-sale activities, such as service promotion. These activities encompass attending events, establishing trade displays, and doing internet sales. They also encompass the assembly of cultural products at the CCX store located in the Luen Rit Community on Yaowarat Road in Bangkok. We are developing a catalog to promote cultural products in both Thai and English.

Woven textiles transformed into apparel, purses, souvenirs, and home decor exemplify cultural products derived from local cultural capital. Utilizing bamboo, sedge, and pandanus for weaving produces furniture, household goods, souvenirs, and ceremonial offerings like as the Luang Pu Choi turtle. Decorative tiles from temples and Buddhist art exemplify craftsmanship.

The study concentrates on the 5Fs—Food, Film and Video, Fashion (including Thai fashion design), Fighting (traditional martial arts), and Festivals—due to their alignment with the government's soft power strategy and the objective of enhancing Thai identity within the creative cultural sector. Fashion is a vital consideration on this list. Clothing is a fundamental human necessity that individuals have crafted and refined for specific events throughout their lives. Women in multi-ethnic communities have acquired the skill of weaving from their mothers and grandmothers. They initially created items for personal use and subsequently transformed them into enterprises. This aspect of culture is significant; nonetheless, the contemporary market demands innovative design and superior tailoring that preserves local uniqueness while enhancing economic value.

Local cuisine groups, performing arts collectives, musical ensembles, costume rental enterprises, and cultural tourism associations that serve tourists and visitors exemplify cultural services that have emerged from local cultural capital to generate revenue. The Chatri theater from Huachiew Chalermprakiet University and the Mu and Tuk Tuk cultural tourism routes exemplify commendable initiatives. Over 200 cultural items and services have emerged from the Hat Yai Campus of Prince of Songkla University.

All eight institutions continue to engage in research initiatives that further purpose 4—Preserving Arts and Culture—while concurrently integrating this purpose with the other three basic missions and contributing to local economic development. A notable alteration in university policy indicates a growing comprehension of Mission 4 in a more expansive context, extending beyond conventional festivities such as Loy Krathong, Songkran, New Year's almsgiving, and cultural exhibitions for certain occasions. The research initiatives in the Advance Track program compel researchers to develop methodologies grounded in cultural

capital. Researchers spearheading this initiative conduct iterative experiments and refine their methodologies while collaborating closely with the national coordination team and the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) to yield additional research outcomes and develop new research themes for the "Open Call" and "TACITS" programs each fiscal year. Universities can now leverage their knowledge and resources to contribute to society in more significant ways beyond just entertainment.

The University of Phayao exemplifies the implementation of Mission 4. They have utilized the conceptual framework from the first project to formulate an action plan that integrates the preservation of arts and culture with educational instruction, student development initiatives, and academic services across all their institutions and faculties. The Eastern Lanna Arts and Culture Center and the Institute for Innovative Learning have included this paradigm into their strategic plans. At Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, the Vice President serves as the highest-ranking administrator and project leader. This individual facilitates collaboration among individuals from various faculties, offices, institutes, and units. The project framework comprises sub-projects aligned with the primary objectives and performance metrics. Assisted by senior executives, the research process engages a diverse array of university personnel and consolidates input from several departments to enhance the cultivation and dissemination of cultural capital. Ubon Ratchathani University invests significant effort in researching cultural capital for local development. Multiple research teams have been authorized for participation in both the Advance Track program and the Open Call initiative. The research conducted in Khemmarat District has garnered recognition in Thailand and globally.

Creative Cultural Parks as a New Institutional Model

The establishment of Creative Cultural Parks at all eight universities, both on campus and in research zones, represents an innovative approach in Thai higher education. These parks are intended to serve as venues for the convergence of culture, economic activity, and community development.

Among their most significant characteristics are:

1. Integration: Consolidating artistic, cultural, and creative business endeavors into a unified framework.
2. Innovation: These are environments where individuals collaborate, experiment, and cultivate novel cultures.
3. Sustainability: Promoting cultural innovation to facilitate the development of "Cultural Cities" at the provincial or local tier.

Creative Cultural Parks function as Living Cultural Labs, serving as dynamic environments where tradition and creativity converge, facilitating knowledge generation, employment opportunities, and cultural identity.

Case Study: Pattani Creative Cultural Park

The Pattani Creative Cultural Park, operated by Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, serves as an exemplary model. It is located in the cosmopolitan southern area of Thailand. Pattani is frequently perceived as a region marked by social turmoil; however, this project emphasizes cultural capital as a means to engage diverse communities. The project employs Thai, Chinese, and Malay cultural capital to revitalize the neighborhood. The activities include creative festivals and exhibitions, workshops on crafting new textiles, and assisting individuals

in establishing their own cultural enterprises. These initiatives have transformed the park into a hub for cultural rejuvenation and economic development. Artisans can now produce innovative items, ranging from jewelry and traditional fabrics to local food products, all of which integrate tradition with contemporary concepts.

The operations of the Creative Cultural Park have also given rise to the Creative Culture Festival. These festivals, conducted through partnerships and community-led initiatives, fall into five formats:

I. City festivals showcasing cultural expression and fostering social cohesion among people of all ages and backgrounds
II. Festivals that continue or innovatively reinterpret local traditions
III. Festivals aimed at supporting the creative economy, tourism, and the sale of cultural products and services
IV. Festivals that highlight the value of local cultural capital, providing a platform for demonstration and cultural transmission
V. Festivals that build networks for future collaboration in cultural development

Discussion

Success in Becoming a "Proactive Change Leader" Through Co-creation

The findings indicate a significant transformation in the university's role; it has evolved from primarily being a "guardian" of culture to becoming an active "co-creator." The research team has operated as a "knowledge broker," effectively integrating academic expertise in design, marketing, and innovation with indigenous knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Evidence-based indicators demonstrate this transformation: the co-creation of more than 200 cultural products and services serves as definitive proof of collaborative innovation and illustrates the monetization of information generated at universities.

Driving the Grassroots Economy and Impact-Based Development

The Creative Cultural Park serves as an economic hub that leverages culture to enhance individual well-being and bolster local economies.

Quantitative indicators include:

- **Job Creation and Incubation:** Support for over 100 new entrepreneurs, artists, craftsmen, and cultural entrepreneurs reflects deliberate investment in fostering career pathways grounded in cultural capital.
- **Economic Return:** A 15% increase in average community income reinforces the positive correlation between cultural capital management and local economic development. Additionally, the use of creative cultural festivals as mechanisms for attracting both direct and indirect beneficiaries demonstrates that cultural spaces and activities can evolve into creative tourism destinations that stimulate broader economic growth (Richards, 2001).

Social Impact and Local Consciousness Building

Beyond economic outcomes, the project has generated substantial social impacts, particularly in relation to local consciousness and social capital (Putnam, 1995).

I. Empowerment and Ownership:
The PAR process empowers community members by fostering pride in their cultural heritage and enabling them to "own their development trajectory." Co-creation processes contribute to sustainable community empowerment.
II. Multicultural Society Management:
Creative Cultural Parks serve as inclusive spaces that encourage social cohesion among diverse cultural groups. Collaborative exploration and reinterpretation of cultural values help reduce social tensions and cultivate an environment in which people of different backgrounds can coexist harmoniously.
III. Generational Succession:
The transmission of cultural values—expressed through products or experiential activities—constitutes a dynamic and economically meaningful mechanism for passing knowledge and wisdom to younger generations.

Conclusion

The outcomes have been exceptional at all eight universities. Over 200 new cultural products and services were developed with the assistance of local communities, and more than 100 new cultural entrepreneurs established their own enterprises through university-led incubation programs. The mean augmentation in household income for participating localities was 15%. The essential effect, however, is the empowerment of community people. They have restored pride in their cultural identity and now perceive culture not as a static heritage, but as a dynamic and living asset.

The results indicate that colleges are evolving from institutions of individual learning to collaborative environments for collective learning. This is a summary of their new responsibilities under Mission 4:

I. Cultural Knowledge Managers: Universities are currently engaged in the research, documentation, and innovative application of local cultural capital.
II. Cultural Incubators: These are venues where cultural entrepreneurs can acquire knowledge and develop, resulting in innovative concepts rooted in local heritage.
III. Human Capital Developers: They educate a new cohort of Cultural Resource Managers—experts capable of sustaining the creative economy by harmonizing tradition with innovation.

This alteration signifies a significant transformation in perspective: from "preserving history" to "shaping the future through culture." This analysis further confirms that the creation of a Creative Cultural Park under university leadership is the most effective approach for transforming Mission 4 into a driver of sustainable development. Universities have demonstrated their capacity as local change agents by enhancing the local economy (evidenced by a 15 percent increase in income) and improving local consciousness (characterized by increased ownership and enhanced intercultural coexistence). These achievements stem from the application of PAR methodology and the essential function of co-creation throughout the research process.

This report proposes five primary policy directions to ensure long-term sustainability. Incorporate cultural capital into national development strategies, particularly within the BCG and Creative Economy frameworks.

I. Establish Cultural Management Units (CMUs) in colleges and universities to strategize and sustain cultural programs.

II. Establish a national cultural data platform to facilitate information sharing and policy planning.
III. Establish sustainable funding mechanisms that extend beyond a single year and enhance the robustness of Cultural Incubators for emerging entrepreneurs.
IV. Develop new human capital by establishing programs for Cultural Resource Managers capable of integrating creativity, academia, and local development.

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

The authors used an artificial intelligence system (ChatGPT) to support the structuring of the article, the refinement of language, and the checking of logical coherence. All analyses, interpretations, and scholarly arguments presented in this paper are the authors' own.

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Measuring the Benefits of Cultural Capital Management: An SROI Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the ex-post Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation of cultural management research projects in Thailand, funded by PMU-A in the 2021 and 2022 fiscal year. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation assesses the outcomes, impacts, and contributions to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across six cultural capital management projects. The SROI was calculated over a five-year period (2021–2025) with a 2022 base year and a 3.5% discount rate, resulting in a present value of benefits at $ 1,447,593.07 and costs at $ 378,771.64, yielding an SROI ratio of 1:3.82. Economic impacts comprised 74.09%, driven by increased income in cultural enterprises. Social impacts contributed 23.98%, reflecting community ownership, social cohesion, cultural preservation, and capacity development. Environmental impacts accounted for 1.93%, notably through waste reduction and wetland conservation. These projects support several SDGs: social outcomes (SDGs 4, 11, 16), economic outcomes (SDGs 1, 8), and environmental outcomes (SDGs 6, 11). Overall, the findings demonstrate meaningful socio-economic and environmental value, emphasizing their contribution to sustainable community development.

Keywords: SROI (Social Return on Investment), cultural capital management, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Introduction

Cultural management has increasingly been recognized as a strategic instrument for fostering inclusive and sustainable development. In the Thai context, cultural initiatives are valued not only for their intrinsic artistic and heritage significance but also for their capacity to generate measurable social, economic, and environmental benefits. These benefits include enhanced community well-being, strengthened local identity, and revitalized economic activity through cultural assets. Nevertheless, evaluating such multifaceted outcomes presents methodological challenges, particularly when attempting to capture intangible dimensions such as cultural preservation, community empowerment, and identity formation.

Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—especially those related to inclusive economic growth, reduced inequalities, and sustainable communities—the ex-post evaluation of cultural capital projects provides a critical opportunity to assess long-term social value creation. By applying the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework, this study examines how cultural initiatives contribute to multidimensional development outcomes, both tangible and intangible, across economic, social, and environmental domains.

This article employs the SROI framework to conduct an ex-post evaluation of six cultural capital management research projects, together with an assessment of the broader impacts of six additional projects under the Cultural Capital Research Program. These initiatives were implemented as part of the "Project Management of the Cultural Capital Research Program to Enhance Community Economy and Local Consciousness" during the 2022 and 2023 fiscal years, with funding support from the Program Management Unit for Area-Based Development (PMU-A). The evaluation integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals.

By addressing both tangible and intangible dimensions of change, this study contributes to the field of cultural management and the broader discourse on evidence-based cultural policy. It offers insights into the value-creation potential of cultural capital investments and aims to inform future policy design, funding strategies, and evaluation practices within the cultural sector.

Social Return on Investment (SROI)

SROI is a methodology designed to measure socio-economic and environmental impacts by integrating cost–benefit analysis, stakeholder engagement, financial proxies, and mechanisms for project improvement. It can be applied to entire organizations, specific projects, or discrete activities across profit, nonprofit, and governmental sectors (Maldonado & Corbey, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2012).

In recent years, the application of SROI has expanded across various fields. The underlying rationale is that every investment should account not only for its financial returns but also for a broader spectrum of social benefits. SROI provides a meaningful approach to calculating non-financial value and can be implemented through two primary perspectives:

▪ ***Evaluative (retrospective)***	assesses outcomes that have already occurred
▪ ***Forecast (prospective)***	estimates potential social value if activities achieve their intended outcomes

This approach is particularly useful for planning, strategy development, and project selection (Maldonado & Corbey, 2016).

Conducting an SROI analysis requires a clear understanding of the Theory of Change (ToC), which explains how economic and social activities influence outcomes. Once this framework is established, it becomes possible to measure social change. ToC is defined as a methodology that maps the logical sequence of an initiative from inputs to outcomes (Lombardo et al., 2019). It provides a comprehensive explanation of how and why a desired change is expected to occur within a specific context.

The ToC methodology begins by defining long-term goals and then works backward to identify necessary preconditions and assumptions. These include intermediate steps that lead to the goal and the connections between activities and outcomes. For each step, stakeholders outline indicators, thresholds, and assumptions. ToC can be developed for various levels of activity—such as events, projects, programs, policies, strategies, or organizations (Rogers, 2014)—and plays a critical role within the SROI framework by capturing stakeholders' perceptions of how their lives have changed or are expected to change.

In recent decades, the expansion of cooperatives, mutual societies, social enterprises, and volunteer-driven initiatives has increased the demand for impact assessment tools. These tools serve both internal purposes (e.g., service improvement) and external accountability to funders and donors (Lombardo et al., 2019). SROI has become increasingly recognized as a valuable instrument for guiding funding decisions and managing resources effectively (Yates & Mara, 2017).

Overall, the SROI methodology explains how change is created, assigns monetary value to that change, and enables measurement of social outcomes relative to the cost of achieving them. It incorporates elements of social accounting and cost–benefit analysis (Cordes, 2017), quantifying both costs and outcomes in monetary terms to evaluate the impact of an activity or intervention. The SROI ratio reflects the net societal benefit after deducting program costs:

$$SROI = \frac{Social\ Value\ Created}{Value\ of\ Investment} \tag{1}$$

Where:

Social Value Created: The total value generated by the activity, including both tangible and intangible benefits, referred to as the "Social Value of Outcomes." This can be measured through outcomes such as improved health, increased employment, or environmental benefits.

Value of Investment: The total resources invested to achieve the outcomes, which may include money, time, equipment, and other inputs.

SROI is applicable across public and private sectors and spans multiple fields. Its principles are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Principles of Social Return on Investment

	Principle of SROI	Description
1	Identify and engage stakeholders	Stakeholder who have experience outcome must be involved throughout the key stage and should be well inform about what gets measured in the analysis
2	Understand what has changed	Evaluate intended and unintended changes using evidence. This change are outcomes of the activity that should be measured in order to provide evidence that the change has taken place with strongly related to "Theory of Change: TOC"
3	Value the things that matter	Prioritize outcomes based on stakeholder preferences. Financial proxies are vital to be used to estimate value to the outcomes created
4	Only include what is material	Include relevant and significant information for impact assessment. Determining what information and evidence is significant in the analysis to reflect a true and fair picture so that stakeholders can draw reasonable conclusions about the impact created
5	Avoid overclaiming	Claim only the value that created by the activity. To prevent over-claiming and enhance credibility
6	Be transparent	Document decisions to ensure analytical integrity Demonstrate the basis on which the findings may be considered accurate and honest and show that it will be reported to and discussed with stakeholders
7	Verify the results	Ensure appropriate conduct of the analysis

Source: Nicholes et al., 2012; Richard, 2020

The SROI analysis follows a six-stage process to measure and account for a program's broader social, environmental, and economic value beyond traditional financial metrics: (1) establish scope and identify stakeholders, (2) map outcomes, (3) evidence outcomes, (4) assign value to outcomes, (5) establish impact, and (6) calculate the SROI ratio. In accordance with Principle 5, and to avoid overclaiming, Equation (1) can be refined to incorporate adjustment factors or counterfactuals (Moral Torres et al., 2020; Nicholls et al., 2012; Refki et al., 2020):

$$SROI = \frac{Social\ Value\ of\ Outcomes - Adjustment\ factors}{Value\ of\ Investment} \quad (2)$$

Adjustment factors or counterfactuals include:

Deadweight: The portion of outcomes that would have occurred without the intervention.

Attribution: The portion of outcomes attributable to other actors or activities.

Displacement: Negative effects that offset positive outcomes, including those affecting neighboring areas.

Drop-off: A measure of how long outcomes last over time, usually calculated by removing a fixed percentage from the remaining level of outcome after each year.

To account for the long-term nature of cultural investments and the extended time horizon over which social value is realized, the SROI formula can be further refined. By incorporating the concept of net present value (NPV), Equation (3) reflects the discounted value of future impacts relative to the total investment.

$$SROI = \frac{Net\ present\ value\ of\ outcome}{Net\ pressent\ valiue\ of\ investment} \quad (3)$$

In accordance with the HM Treasury Green Book guidelines, a discount rate of 3.5% is commonly applied in SROI calculations to reflect the present value of future social impacts. This rate is considered appropriate for public sector projects with long-term benefits, including cultural initiatives that generate both tangible and intangible outcomes over multiple years (HM Treasury, 2020). The SROI methodology is particularly valuable for evaluating projects with social objectives, as it translates social value into monetary terms, thereby enabling the calculation of financial returns in terms of social value generated per unit of investment (Nicholls et al., 2012). Arvidson et al. (2013) emphasized that SROI provides a useful approach for understanding the social impact of artistic initiatives, while cautioning that assessments involving both added value and intrinsic value must be conducted carefully and reported appropriately. Furthermore, although SROI is effective in converting qualitative insights into quantitative metrics—especially beneficial in business and investment contexts—the resulting ratio must always be interpreted alongside relevant project information to ensure proper contextualization.

Applications of SROI Ex-post Evaluation to Cultural Capital Research Impact Analysis

Due to its participatory nature, the SROI methodology has become a valuable tool for supporting the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of cultural management programs. By involving stakeholders and beneficiaries directly in the analysis, SROI promotes a bottom-up approach that prioritizes equity over power dynamics. It also provides a mechanism for mutual accountability among funders, implementers, and beneficiaries. In this study, SROI is applied as an ex-post evaluation framework to assess the outcomes and impacts of cultural capital projects, enabling a structured analysis of both tangible and intangible value creation. The Cultural Capital Research Program was designed to enhance community economy and local consciousness through issue-based or area-based research initiatives across Thailand.

Table 2
Key Intended Outcomes of the Cultural Capital Projects

Outcome	Description
Increased income among cultural entrepreneurs	Reflects economic growth generated through cultural-based enterprises and creative industries.
Increased income among community members	Indicates broader community-level economic benefits resulting from cultural initiatives.
Enhanced local pride among community residents	Demonstrates intangible social value through strengthened identity and cultural appreciation ("Local Cultural Consciousness").

Establish Scope: At the post-implementation stage, an ex-post evaluation is conducted once the project is complete. This article presents the outcomes and identifies the actual effects achieved by the project.

Utilization of Results: To further improve future projects, useful recommendations, lessons learned, and good practices are extracted.

Methodology

This study analyzes six research projects related to cultural capital and the creative economy. For clarity, each project has been assigned a code. Under the 2021 budget year, P01-CR refers to cultural capital management to improve the local economy in Chiang Rai Old Town (Chiang Rai Rajabhat University); P02-UBK designates cultural capital for creative economy promotion in Khemarat district, Ubon Ratchathani province (Ubon Ratchathani University); and P03-PTN identifies cultural space and capital management to strengthen cultural enterprises in Pattani (Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus). Under the 2022 budget year, P04-CS denotes the "Creative Chiang San" project in Chiang Rai province (Mae Fah Luang University); P05-UBC highlights local candle wisdom in Muang Ubon Ratchathani (Ubon Ratchathani University); and P06-SKN marks the promotion of Manora cultural capital in Songkhla province (Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya). These codes provide a standardized reference system while also situating each project within its local context.

Document analysis was employed to review existing research reports and select these case studies, which share similar objectives and were conducted under the same overarching research framework. To guide the evaluation, the study adopted the six stages of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) method (Nicholls et al., 2012): identifying stakeholders, developing a theory-of-change model, evidencing and valuing outcomes, establishing impact, calculating the SROI ratio, and reporting. Table 3 illustrates the application of these stages to the selected projects.

In addition to document analysis, primary data were collected to understand the changes experienced by stakeholders both during and after project completion. This involved multiple methods: focus groups, semi-structured individual interviews, and remote data collection via telephone interviews, LINE application, and Google Forms. These efforts were specifically aimed at confirming and exploring the outcomes and changes experienced by project stakeholders.

Table 3
Application of the Six Stages of the Sroi to Case Study of Cultural Capital Projects and Aligning Outcome With SDGs

Stage of SROI	Application to case cultural capital projects
1. Establishing scope and identifying stakeholders	*Establish scope* The post-implementation stage of six projects, an ex-post evaluation is conducted once the project is complete
	Identify Stakeholder Stakeholder identification was conducted by reviewing project documents to determine relevant user groups across six selected projects. This process was complemented by semi-structured interviews with researchers or project managers, and further confirmed through documentary analysis
2. Mapping Outcomes	Outcome mapping was conducted through qualitative data collection methods, including focus groups and interviews with stakeholders who had experienced change, as well as user groups in each cultural capital project. The resulting outcome/impact maps illustrate how project activities (inputs) generated outputs that subsequently led to outcomes for stakeholders

Stage of SROI	Application to case cultural capital projects
3. Evidencing and valuing outcomes	*Evidence outcome* To evidence outcomes, stakeholders and user groups participated in focus groups and interviews to identify and describe experienced changes. They also ranked these changes by significance and relevance, helping to define outcomes clearly and ensure alignment with stakeholder perspectives *Valuing outcomes* Desk-based research to identify and apply financial proxies to outcomes
4. Establish Outcome/ Impact	Proportional data on deadweight, attribution, displacement, and drop-off were collected through a combination of stakeholder interviews and user surveys. These data informed the outcome valuation through subsequent desk-based analysis.
5. calculating the SROI ratio	An ex-post evaluation was conducted for projects completed in 2021 and 2022 to assess the value of outcomes that have persisted through to 2024. The Social Return on Investment (SROI) ratio was calculated using the formula: Net Present Value of Benefits (Net PVB) divided by Net Present Value of Costs (Net PVC), applying a discount rate of 3.5% with 2022 as the baseline year $$SROI = \frac{Net\ present\ value\ benefit}{Net\ present\ value\ cost} \quad (4)$$
6. Mapping project outcomes to relevant SDGs	Outcomes and impacts identified across the six case studies were mapped against relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment highlights the broader societal contributions of cultural capital projects, particularly in relation to SDG goals

Results

Although the full analysis followed the six standard stages of the SROI framework, the presentation of results in this article has been consolidated into four stages for clarity. Related steps have been combined to avoid repetition while ensuring that all aspects of the framework are fully addressed.

Stage 1 - Establishing Scope and Identifying Stakeholders

SROI Stakeholder Mapping: Prioritizing Roles and Direct Outcomes. In this framework, SROI Stakeholder Mapping emphasizes two key dimensions:

▪ *Stakeholder Roles*	*identifying who contributes, supports, or benefits from the intervention.*
▪ *Level of Outcome*	*distinguishing between direct and indirect beneficiaries.*

Special attention is given to stakeholder groups that receive direct outcomes and are able to identify or describe the changes they experience. These groups are considered central to the value creation process, as their experiences provide tangible evidence of impact. “Stakeholders who directly benefit and can identify or describe the change they experience are prioritized in both mapping and outcome analysis. Their voices and lived experiences are essential for validating the social return on investment.” For this *ex-post evaluation*, stakeholder groups were intentionally selected based on their ability to reflect on and articulate the changes they

experienced. This ensures that the analysis is grounded in real-world transformation and that the social value generated is meaningfully captured.

Table 4
Comprehensive Stakeholder Overview Across Six Cultural Projects

Stakeholder Group	Role	Level of Impact / Benefit	Projects
Cultural Entrepreneurs (e.g. weaving, tailoring, performing arts, candle carving, beadwork, food, tourism)	Primary target group	Direct beneficiaries	All cases
Activity Participants (e.g. trainees, dancers, youth)	Participants in training, production, cultural services, or other activities	Direct beneficiaries	P01-CR, P02-UBK, P04-CS, P05-UBC, P06-SKN
Fisherfolk / Buffalo herders / Farmers	Local participants	Direct beneficiaries	P04-CS
Temple devotees	Cultural participants	Direct beneficiaries	P01-CR
Community scholars, artisans, cultural innovators	Creators and cultural transmitters	Direct beneficiaries	P01-CR, P02-UBK, P04-CS, P05-UBC
General entrepreneurs, small vendors, tourism businesses	Secondary stakeholders	Indirect beneficiaries	P01-CR, P02-UBK, P04-CS, P05-UBC, P06-SKN
General public, local communities, schools, consumers, tourists	Users / Secondary stakeholders	Indirect beneficiaries	All cases
Museums, learning centers	Cultural spaces under management / Strategic allies	Direct beneficiaries	P01-CR, P02-UBK, P04-CS, P05-UBC
Local wisdom, traditions, cultural and ecological assets	Cultural and ecological entities receiving benefit through project activities	Direct beneficiaries	All cases
Ecosystems	Environmental beneficiaries	Indirect beneficiaries	P04-CS
Temples, schools, government agencies, municipalities, SAO, associations	Supporters / Strategic allies	Direct or indirect beneficiaries	All cases
Funding agencies (PMU-A)	Primary financial supporters	Significant beneficiaries	All cases
Researchers, assistants, students	Core implementers (treated as inputs)		All cases

SROI Stakeholder Mapping

Prioritizing Roles and Direct Outcomes. In this framework, SROI Stakeholder Mapping emphasizes two key dimensions:

- Stakeholder Roles: identifying who contributes, supports, or benefits from the intervention.

- Level of Outcome: distinguishing between direct and indirect beneficiaries.

Special attention is given to stakeholder groups that receive direct outcomes and are able to identify or describe the changes they experience. These groups are considered central to the value creation process, as their experiences provide tangible evidence of impact.

"Stakeholders who directly benefit and are able to articulate the changes they experience are prioritized in both outcome mapping and analysis. Their perspectives and lived experiences are essential for validating the social return on investment."

For this *ex-post evaluation*, stakeholder groups were intentionally selected based on their ability to reflect on and articulate the changes they experienced. This ensures that the analysis is grounded in real-world transformation and that the social value generated is meaningfully captured.

Stage 2 Mapping Outcome

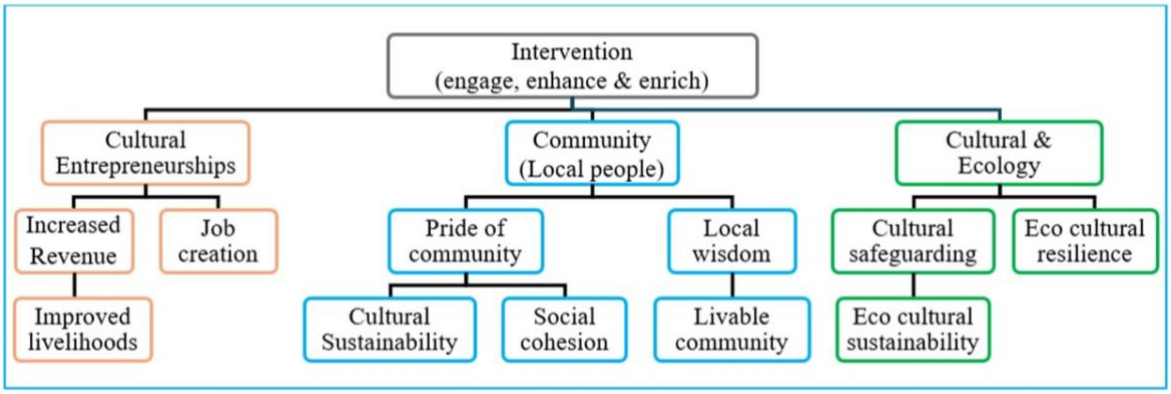
ToC is presented by understanding the relationship between inputs, outputs, and outcomes. In this study, it refers to how six cultural management projects have influenced stakeholder experiences, aligned with their missions across social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

To illustrate the ToC, the SROI framework begins with an impact map. This map is based on the rationale that stakeholders contribute resources (inputs), which lead to activities and interventions (outputs), resulting in meaningful changes (outcomes) for beneficiaries For this study, the outcome mapping for the ex-post evaluation was primarily informed by data collected through focus groups and questionnaire-based interviews. These sessions examined both ongoing activities and their resulting impacts, providing insights into stakeholder experiences and perceptions of change.

Figure 1 illustrates the intervention pathways, demonstrating how cultural entrepreneurship and ecological stewardship generate both tangible and intangible benefits. These include increased revenue, job creation, pride of community, social cohesion, and cultural safeguarding. Together, they foster improved livelihoods, sustainable cultural identity, and eco-cultural resilience.

The insights provided by stakeholders formed the basis for identifying outcomes and assessing change. Table 5 presents the logical model and key elements of the Theory of Change on which this study is grounded.

Figure 1
Integrated Outcome Mapping of Six Cultural Capital Projects



Note. The flowchart of the outcome mapping was created by the author(s).

Table 5
Mapping Outcome

Case study & Main Activity	Output	Initial Outcome	Intermediate Outcome	Ultimate Outcome	Linked SDGs
P01-CR: Chiang Rai – Reviving Khan Dok tradition and developing SME entrepreneurs	Khan Dok Tradition: Cultural events	Joy, pride	Intergenerational collaboration	Tradition preservation	SDG 11, 16
	Entrepreneurs: New products	Increased income	Branding	Creative economy	SDG 8, 1
	Environment: Waste management	No residual waste	Municipal model	Clean city	SDG 12, 11
P02-UBK: Khemarat – Empowering entrepreneurs and cultural spaces	Entrepreneurs: Handwoven textiles, food	Increased income	Wisdom preservation	Culture-based economy	SDG 1, 8
	Community: Museum, activities	Happiness	Unity	Livable community	SDG 11, 16
	Environment: Upcycling	Waste reduction	Lower waste disposal costs	Livable city	SDG 12, 13
P03-PTN: Old Town – Revitalizing heritage areas and local entrepreneurs	Heritage Area: Valuable heritage houses	Pride in place	Wisdom preservation	Enhanced city image	SDG 11, 16
	Entrepreneurs: Local products	Increased income	Creative economy development	Livable city	SDG 1, 8
	Tourists: Community tours	Cultural experience	Identity communication	Livable city	SDG 4, 11
P04-CS: Chiang Saen – Reviving legends and managing wetland ecosystems	Elders / Artists: Legends, products	Increased income	Cultural communication	Identity pride	SDG 4, 11, 16
	Ecosystem: Area management	Local stewardship	Resource protection	Sustainable ecosystem	SDG 6, 13, 11

Case study & Main Activity	Output	Initial Outcome	Intermediate Outcome	Ultimate Outcome	Linked SDGs
	Youth: Local curriculum	Storytelling skills	Participation	Cultural communication	SDG 4, 11
P05-UBC: Candle Makers – Elevating candle-related cultural capital	Entrepreneurs: Candle-patterned products	Increased income	Wisdom preservation	Enhanced city image	SDG 8, 11, 4
	Community: Exhibitions, performances	Happiness	Supportive networks	Livable community	SDG 11, 16
	Partners: Meetings, proposals	Recognition	Policy change	Systemic collaboration	SDG 17
P06-SKN: Manohra – Supporting Manohra entrepreneurs and learning centers	Performers: Performances	Increased income	Wisdom preservation	Cultural pride	SDG 8, 11
	Producers: Batik, Beads	Enhanced skills	Cultural networks	Creative economy	SDG 1, 8, 12
	Youth: Learning activities	Joy, skills	Participation	Cultural communication	SDG 4, 11

Stage 3 Establish Outcome

This step aims to estimate the extent to which observed outcomes would have occurred in the absence of the intervention, by accounting for other influencing variables (Nicholls et al., 2012). These variables collectively referred to as "*counterfactuals*" or "base case" are used to adjust the value of outcomes to avoid over-claiming. They include deadweight, displacement, attribution and drop off.

Stakeholders were consulted to determine appropriate proportions or percentages for each of these counterfactuals, ensuring that the SROI model reflects a realistic assessment of outcomes and impact. Each outcome is then individually calculated using Equation (3) to derive its social value. These values are subsequently aggregated to determine the total social value. The process was checked to ensure that the reported SROI does not overstate the actual social value generated. Table 6 expresses the proportion of base case of all outcomes.

Table 6
Counterfactual Adjustments by Case and Stakeholder Group

Case Study	Stakeholder / Outcome	Attribution	Deadweight	Displacement	Drop-off
P01-CR	Entrepreneurs	25%	25%	0%	10%
P01-CR	Traditions / Community	20%	0%	0%	10%
P02-UBK	Entrepreneurs	20–30%	10%	0%	15%
P02-UBK	WTP of Citizens	20%	10%	0%	10%
P02-UBK	Livable Community	25%	0%	0%	10%
P03-PTN	Entrepreneurs	25%	10%	0%	15%
P03-PTN	WTP of Citizens	20%	10%	0%	10%
P04-CS	Community Elders	30%	0%	0%	20%
P04-CS	Artisans / Craftspeople	10%	0%	0%	15%
P04-CS	Tourism Entrepreneurs	10%	30%	0%	10%
P04-CS	Cultural Entrepreneurs	10%	0%	0%	10%
P04-CS	Cultural Successors	10%	0%	0%	20%

Case Study	Stakeholder / Outcome	Attribution	Deadweight	Displacement	Drop-off
P04-CS	Small-scale Fishers	30%	0%	0%	20%
P04-CS	Buffalo Keepers	10%	0%	0%	15%
P04-CS	Farmers	10%	30%	0%	20%
P04-CS	Youth	10%	0%	0%	10%
P04-CS	Wiang Nong Lom Ecosystem	10%	0%	0%	20%
P05-UBC	Net Income	25%	15%	0%	10%
P05-UBC	Reduced Costs	20%	10%	0%	10%
P05-UBC	Pride	30%	0%	0%	10%
P05-UBC	Happiness	30%	0%	0%	10%
P06-SKN	Performers / Producers	30%	20%	0%	10%

As shown in Table 6, the values for Attribution, Deadweight, Displacement, and Drop-off vary across projects and stakeholder outcomes. These differences reflect the unique context, level of contribution, and sustainability of each outcome. The values were derived from stakeholder input to ensure realistic and credible impact estimation. This variation illustrates how each cultural management project affects its beneficiaries in distinct ways.

Table 7

Partial Outcome Financial Valuation of Outcome Proxies

Project: P04-CS			
Stakeholder	Outcome	Indicator	Financial Proxy
Community Elders	Recognition as local wisdom keepers	Honorarium for knowledge-sharing	$30/session × 6 sessions/year/person
Artists	Increased income	Net income increase	Net profit from product sales minus baseline
Small-scale Fisherfolk	Local conservation awareness	Time spent in wetland activities	$1/hour × 52 hours/year
Youth	Cultural and tourism communicators	Support for youth activities	$30/person/year donation
Ecosystem (Wiang Nong Lom)	Protected and restored ecosystem	Restoration support	Willingness to pay: $15,000/year

As illustrated in Table 7, a partial example of the financial proxies used to value outcomes in Project P04-CS is presented. Each proxy links intangible or social results—such as recognition of local wisdom, increased income, conservation awareness, youth engagement, and ecosystem restoration—to monetary terms that can be incorporated into the SROI calculation. By translating diverse outcomes into financial values, the analysis makes it possible to compare and aggregate impacts across stakeholder groups. It should be noted that this table illustrates only a subset of the full valuation framework applied in the study.

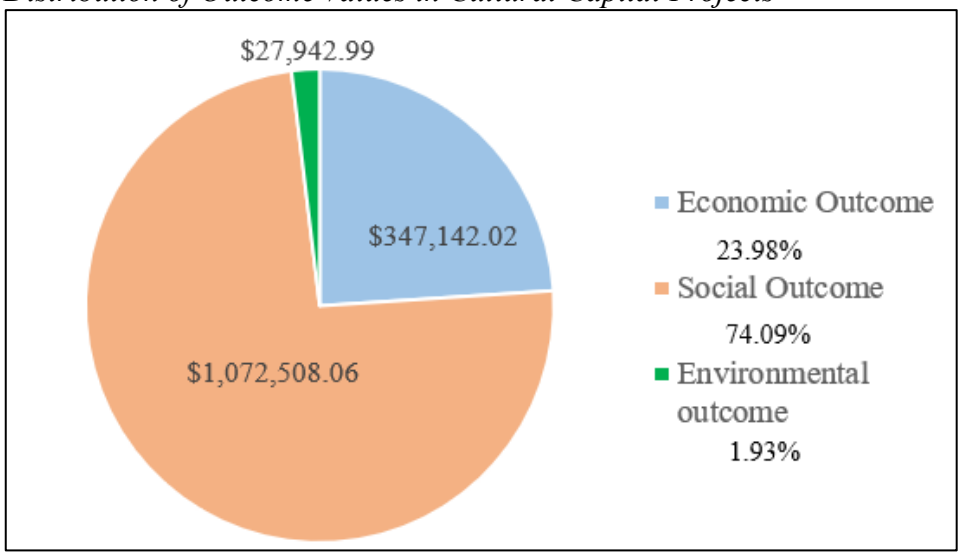
Stage 4 Calculation of SROI

To calculate the social value of interventions, we applied the precautionary principle by multiplying the quantity of each outcome by its financial proxy value and deducting the percentage of deadweight specific to that outcome. All financial proxy values were adjusted to the base year 2022 to ensure comparability across cases. A discount rate of 3.5% was applied to calculate the present value of outcomes up to the current year 2025. Finally, the total impact was derived by aggregating the adjusted social values of all outcomes. SROI summary – six cultural capital projects as showed in Table 8 and Figure 2.

Table 8
SROI Summary – Six Cultural Capital Projects

Project	Cost (PVC) ($)	Total Value (PVB) ($)	Net Value (NPV) ($)	SROI Ratio	Economic Value ($)	Social Value ($)	Environmental Value ($)
P03-PTN	94,713.45	375,504.58	280,791.13	3.96	182,879.10	192,625.48	-
P06-SKN	2,067.48	78,468.59	36,401.12	1.87	28,373.10	50,095.49	-
P02-UBK	110,499.03	760,871.35	650,372.32	6.89	29,451.39	731,419.95	-
P05-UBC	42,067.48	48,008.74	5,941.26	1.14	37,929.81	10,078.93	-
P01-CR	47,356.73	44,790.86	(2,565.87)	0.95	4,976.48	39,814.38	-
P04-CS	42,067.48	139,948.95	97,881.47	3.33	$63,532.14	48,473.82	27,942.99
Total (All cases)	378,771.64	1,447,593.07	1,068,821.43	3.82	347,142.02	1,072,508.06	27,942.99

Figure 2
Distribution of Outcome Values in Cultural Capital Projects



From Table 8 and Figure 2, the six cultural capital projects demonstrated strong social and economic cost-effectiveness. The aggregated investment of $378,771.64 generated a total social value of $1,447,593.07, resulting in a net present value of $1,068,821.43. The overall SROI ratio was 1:3.82, meaning that every $1 invested produced approximately $3.82 in social value. Notably, social outcomes accounted for the largest share (74.09%), followed by economic outcomes (23.98%) and environmental outcomes (1.93%), underscoring the predominance of social benefits within these initiatives.

Conclusion

The ex-post evaluation of six cultural capital projects reveals strong cost-effectiveness and multidimensional impact. A total investment of $378,771.64 generated $1,447,593.07 in social value, with a net present value of $1,068,821.43 and an overall SROI ratio of 1:3.82. This indicates that every $1 invested produced approximately $3.82 in social value. Social outcomes represented the largest share (74.09%), followed by economic outcomes (23.98%) and environmental outcomes (1.93%), highlighting the predominance of social benefits across the projects.

Beyond these quantitative results, the evaluation demonstrates how stakeholder inputs and project activities translated into outputs such as cultural events, exhibitions, and entrepreneurial

initiatives. These outputs generated initial outcomes of joy, pride, and increased income, which evolved into intermediate changes like collaboration, branding, and wisdom preservation. Ultimately, they contributed to long-term impacts including tradition preservation, sustainable ecosystems, and livable communities. Taken together, the findings confirm that cultural capital projects deliver measurable economic returns while also creating substantial intangible social and environmental value, aligned with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As for the implications of this study, future evaluations should prioritize outcomes with the greatest societal relevance, ensuring that cultural capital projects maximize both tangible and intangible value creation. Greater attention to socially significant outcomes will not only enhance economic returns but also reinforce cultural consciousness, strengthen community resilience, and support sustainable development.

Overall, the study highlights that cultural capital projects are not only cost-effective but also socially transformative, with outcomes that extend beyond economic returns to reinforce cultural consciousness, community resilience, and sustainable ecosystems. The predominance of social value suggests that future evaluations and policy decisions should prioritize outcomes with the greatest societal relevance, ensuring that investments in cultural initiatives maximize both tangible and intangible benefits. By integrating SROI findings into strategic planning, policymakers can strengthen local economies, revitalize communities, and harness cultural entrepreneurship as a driver of Thailand's Soft Power and sustainable development.

Taken together, these findings emphasize that cultural capital projects should be understood not merely as isolated community initiatives but as strategic instruments for national development. Their ability to generate high social returns demonstrates the importance of embedding cultural entrepreneurship within broader economic and social policy frameworks. For policymakers, this means moving beyond short-term project evaluation toward long-term planning that integrates SROI evidence into funding decisions, capacity-building strategies, and cross-sector collaboration. By doing so, cultural capital projects can be scaled and sustained, ensuring that the intangible benefits of cultural pride, cohesion, and identity are preserved while simultaneously driving economic vitality. Ultimately, this study underscores the role of culture as both a developmental resource and a form of Soft Power, positioning Thailand to leverage its cultural assets in achieving inclusive growth and sustainable development.

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

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and

discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request. For data inquiries, please contact the author, Chadrudee Sirilamduan (email: chadrudee.s@ubu.ac.th).

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Examining the Role of Film in Peacebuilding Through Audience Reception

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Abstract

This study examines the role of film as a medium for fostering empathy, reconciliation, and peacebuilding through audience reception. The purpose is to measure the audience's feelings before and after watching a selected film. While previous research explores soft power, cultural diplomacy, and the political impact of film, few studies directly measure how audiences emotionally and cognitively respond to films that address historical trauma. This research employs a mixed-methods experimental design in which two audience groups watch contrasting biographical films: *First They Killed My Father,* a genocide-centered narrative set during the Khmer Rouge regime, and *Radio*, a neutral biographical drama focused on inclusion. Pre-test, post-test, and focus group discussions were used to evaluate changes in empathy, emotional resilience, and understanding of justice and reconciliation. Findings indicate that reconciliation-themed films evoke stronger emotional, reflective, global awareness, and moral imagination, while neutral films encourage moderate empathy without deep engagement with conflict or trauma. The study highlights film's potential to function as a tool of cultural soft power, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and shaping perceptions of peace. It contributes to the limited empirical literature on audience-centered film analysis within peace and conflict studies.

Keywords: film, peacebuilding, soft power, audience reception

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Introduction

One major concern for the international community is the stabilization and reconstruction of regions post-conflict (Fjelde & Höglund, 2011). Countries and communities do not just return to normal after a conflict. Peacebuilding in post-conflict situations needs more than maintaining political stability; it involves rehabilitation, understanding, and empathy among individuals and communities previously in conflict (Galtung, 2007). This reconciliation can be promoted through cultural communication and media, especially film, which has demonstrated effectiveness in influencing attitudes and enhancing understanding among diverse audiences (Johnston, 2020).

Unfortunately, studies on the use of film as a strategic tool for cultivating empathy and mutual understanding in post-conflict settings are still limited. This research aims to contribute to the existing limited study, by directly inquiring the audience. Films can influence audiences' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Asif & Sangha, 2021). In other words, films can serve as a genre that promotes peace and justice, presenting fresh approaches to reconciliation. They give not just entertainment but also education, telling stories that promote unity in divided communities. A film is a great example of how storytelling can depict human context (Storr, 2020). As social, cultural, and political tensions continue to rise globally, the work of recognizing and wielding the potential of film to promote peace and healing is urgent.

This study aims to examine the reception of a documentary film among two distinct audience groups. One audience group is asked to view a film intended to promote peace reconciliation, while the other group is instructed to watch a different film of comparable duration. The study seeks to examine how these two groups evaluate the film's capacity to promote understanding, reconciliation, and collaborative action, aligning with the following research questions:

1. Can film function as a form of cultural diplomacy by fostering cross-border understanding of historical atrocities and their global implications?
2. What differences emerge between audiences exposed to a conflict-cantered film and those watching a neutral biographical film in terms of empathy and global awareness?

Research on audience response to films utilised as instruments for peace and reconciliation is limited. A film may have universal themes such as perseverance and optimism, yet cultural and socio-political situations profoundly influence audience reception. The comparative effects of such films on audiences with limited direct connections to the conflict yet sharing humanitarian or religious affinities require further research. Through a comparative study between different audiences, it seeks to explore what these differences and similarities tell us about the prospects for films to be effective tools for peace and reconciliation.

The state-of-the-art of this study is that it directly examines the role of films as soft power in international relations through incorporating real audiences. It notes audience responses and impressions firsthand, rather than solely relying on textual analysis or assumptions about the impact of films. It thus offers a more concrete understanding of the effectiveness of films in advancing peace. This approach is particularly relevant in the study of international relations, that essentially focuses on the dynamics of interactions between individuals and societies across countries as the key for the formation of peace, cooperation, and international understanding. International relations is a highly diverse field that addresses the most important problems that shape the lives of people (Baylis et al., 2020). By linking the impact of films to real audiences, this study enriches the perspective on how visual media can act as a bridge of communication and strengthen global relations.

Literature Review

Film in International Relations

International relations studies generally concentrate on diplomacy, conflict, and state behavior (Lake, 2003; Sharp, 1999; Walker, 2004). There is also a lot of focus on official political discourse. In recent decades, however, researchers have begun to see films as a useful lens to understanding international relations (Harman, 2019; Lobasz & Valeriano, 2015; van Munster & Sylvest, 2015). Global communication and cultural representation are becoming increasingly significant in shaping how people throughout the world see and identify themselves. Film is one of the most powerful and widely available forms of culture. It not only shows political reality but also creates and spreads them. Film transforms distant events into emotionally resonant experiences that touch our hearts through narrative and visual storytelling. This makes film a unique medium that can serve as vehicles for themes that are important to the study of international relations such as war, peace, migration, and human rights.

Film can change how people think about power, conflict, and identity, and this can change how society works. Films depict how war, colonialism, and humanitarian crises have transformed history and politics. They also show people the human aspect of politics. Cinematic narratives significantly influence worldviews, advocating certain political ideologies while challenging others. Films often serve as symbolic vehicles for ideological conflict, from Cold War propaganda to postcolonial narratives. This demonstrates how culture and politics are intertwined in developing something significant on a global scale.

As the world becomes more interconnected, films have become an important chanel for people from different cultures to communicate with each other and cultivate empathy. International audiences appreciate stories that go beyond their own national boundaries. These stories help them understand other backgrounds, traumas, and economic situations better. These are what scholars call “cultural diplomacy,” (Ang et al., 2018; Kimani, 2023; Pajtinka, 2014) which means using culture to help people from different cultures understand each other better. Films have the power to humanize distant others, break down stereotypes, and build relations with people of other nations and cultures (Asif & Sangha, 2021; Harman, 2019; Pakanati, 2023). These activities, although informal, are important in IR for building trust, understanding, and moral responsibility.

Contemporary IR face complex global issues, including genocide, forced migration, ethnic conflict, and humanitarian crisis. These challenges demand more than simple policy responses. They require empathy and compassion. Film contributes to these aspects by visualizing those impacted by international politics by showing their lived experiences. Movies like *Hotel Rwanda* (George, 2004), *The Pianist, Waltz with Bashir, and First They Killed My Father* (Jolie, 2017) provide audiences with experiential entry points into histories of violence and reconciliation. By doing so, films encourage reflection on global responsibilities and the role of the international community. Thus, films play as informal yet powerful agents of what could be called “people-centered diplomacy” or “cultural peacebuilding.”

Incorporating film into IR studies fosters an interdisciplinary discourse that enhances our comprehension of power and agency within global affairs. The constructivist and critical approaches in IR emphasize the significance of ideas, norms, and identity. These are the domains in which film has considerable influence. Film can be examined as a text that encapsulates political significance (Critical Realism) and as a tool of soft power that influences

national perceptions. By analyzing films through these frameworks, scholars of IR can identify how cultural narratives cross boundaries and shape policy, public perception, and collective memory. The film's capacity to foster empathy, challenge injustice, and advocate peace illustrates its potential as a substantial vehicle for disseminating international peace and understanding.

Soft Power and Norm Diffusion

Introduced by Joseph Nye (J. S. Nye, 1990), soft power can be defined as the ability or capacity to get others to do something you want without using force. While hard power hinges on military or economic might, soft power works through culture, political values, and foreign policies. This idea is becoming more relevant in peacebuilding, allowing reviewed nations and groups to work together for goodwill, alliances and contribute to tackling world problems (Gallarotti, 2011).

In Nye's framework, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others. These influences stem from three major sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy (J. Nye, 2004). These factors are seen as key to forming long-term and peaceful diplomatic relations among states (Gallarotti, 2011). Rothman (2011), however, critiques the operationalization of soft power. Rothman suggests that it is conceptually more useful to think of soft power as "norm diffusion," where values and norms spread naturally through cultural interactions rather than deliberate state actions.

The application of soft power in various contexts has been examined. Bräutigam and Xiaoyang (2012) investigate China's deployment of development aid in Africa, showing the interconnectedness of economic initiatives and cultural-political influence. Likewise, Sobocinska and Purdey (Sobocinska & Purdey, 2019) study Australia's cultural diplomacy through study tours to Indonesia and the Asia-Pacific. This underlines Australia's commitment to fostering mutual understanding between nations. Paradise (2018) and Gupta (2022) examine how nations such as China and India deploy cultural instruments, including Confucius Institutes and Bollywood movies, to elevate their reputations abroad. China has also been seen investing in a combination of soft power and multilateralism to foster a friendly worldwide environment whilst promoting China's geopolitical re-emergence (Duarte et al., 2024). In a similar line, though, Kalimuddin and Anderson (2018) explore ASEAN's soft power strategies, drawing attention to its contribution towards regional stability and efficient balancing of great power interests.

These are the different methods in which soft power can be used to accomplish diplomatic and cultural goals around the world. The cultural aspect of soft power is vital to shaping global audiences. Films, music, and other cultural products serve as effective tools for shaping perceptions and fostering understanding. Cuba's use of medical diplomacy and international sporting strategies as distinct examples of cultural soft power has been identified by Huish and Darnell (2024). Esack (2018) examines the religious narratives as a means of creating an ideological possibility and impact, especially in the Muslim world. Artistic and cultural exports have also been described as both strengthening national identity and enhancing global influence (Mozaffarian et al., 2015).

On the screen, human struggles in conflict zones are depicted in films such as *Hotel Rwanda* (George, 2004) and *The Kite Runner* (Forster, 2007). This encourages compassion and cultural

diffusion. Narratives that speak to these shared human experiences resonate and in doing so, they reflect Lustig's (Lustig, 2016) framing of soft power emotionally and ideologically.

Films as a Reconciliation Tool

Research suggests that films confronting histories of violence serve as spaces for reflection, collective memory, and healing (Premaratna, 2021). However, effectiveness varies based on cultural interpretation, story authenticity, and viewer proximity to the conflict. Few studies empirically measure audience responses, making this research an important contribution.

Film has become a central medium for shaping cultural memory by transforming complex and often distant histories into emotionally accessible experiences (Erll, 2018). Rather than functioning as simple visual records, films prompt audiences to engage in moral reflection (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Flory, 2013), question political assumptions embedded in dominant narratives (Carroll, 2016), and participate in what Wartenberg (2006) describes as cinematic philosophical inquiry. Through the interplay of narrative structure and visual storytelling, cinematic representations provide viewers with a way to humanize distant suffering and interpret conflict in forms that feel immediate and relatable (Storr, 2020). In this way, film contributes not only to how societies remember the past, but also to how individuals cultivate empathy across cultural and political divides.

Methodology

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of film on attitudes and the facilitation of reconciliation. It seeks to analyze the similarities and differences in audience responses between two distinct groups of participants. The two groups exhibit similarities in size, gender composition, age range, and level of study. The participants targeted for this study are individuals aged 21 and older, encompassing a range of gender identities, nationalities, and educational backgrounds. Prior to participating in the study, participants are provided with comprehensive information regarding the study and must provide their consent. The confidentiality of participants is rigorously maintained, ensuring that their responses are anonymous.

The research design of this study is based on the model established by Memduhoglu et al. (2017), incorporating a pre-test, Focus Group Discussion, and post-test methodology. The qualitative aspect employed focus group discussions, allowing participants to engage in open dialogue and unstructured interviews within a small group context. Focus group discussions, as outlined by Krueger (2014) and Bowling (2014), create a dialogue environment through prearranged semi-structured discussions on specific topics. The quantitative component is conducted via experimental design employing pre-test and post-test methodologies.

During the data analysis, FGD findings are thematically coded. The thematic analysis uses Clarke and Braun's (2016) six steps: (1) iterative readings, (2) developing initial codes to classify significant data segments, (3) clustering related codes to identify overarching themes, (4) evaluating and refining themes for consistency and uniqueness, (5) articulating and labeling themes for clarity and pertinence, and (6) compiling a comprehensive report with applicable data excerpts. The pre-and post-test data are summarized descriptively, based on Kiger and Varpio's (2020) theory. The combination of these data sheds light on whether films might foster empathy, bridge divides, and aid reconciliation.

The film chosen for the experimental group is *First They Killed My Father*, a biographical film directed by Angelina Jolie, based on the memoir by Loung Ung. The set is 1975 Cambodia, and it follows the true story of five-year-old Loung, whose peaceful life is shattered when the Khmer Rouge seizes power. She was, separated from her family, forced into a brutal labor camp and later trained as a child soldier. Loung endures starvation, violence, and loss. The film traces her journey of survival amidst the horrors of genocide. The film ends with a moment of remembrance and resilience as she and her surviving siblings honor their lost loved ones.

First They Killed My Father powerfully embodies the potential of film to foster empathy, raise awareness about historical atrocities, and promote peacebuilding. By telling the story from a child's perspective, the film humanizes the victims of conflict and provides a deeply emotional entry point into understanding the trauma of war and genocide. It invites reflection on the consequences of political violence, encourages dialogue on reconciliation and healing, and serves as a cinematic memorial that preserves historical memory, an essential step in preventing future atrocities. Its storytelling makes it a compelling case study for research on how film can contribute to peace education and post-conflict reconciliation.

The control group watch *Radio* (2003), a biographical film situated in the early 1970s, contemporaneous with the setting of *First They Killed My Father*. Both films are biographical in nature. *Radio* narrates the true story of a mentally challenged individual who has a significant bond with a high school football coach. This film provides emotional profundity and examines topics of inclusion and acceptance, rendering it captivating for audiences. Nevertheless, the film maintains neutrality, as it refrains from addressing war, political strife, or peacebuilding. Consequently, *Radio* facilitates a distinct contrast with the experimental group's watching of *First They Killed My Father*.

Findings

A total of six participants take part in the study. They are four females and two males, aged 21 and over. It demonstrates that all respondents are adults capable of engaging reflectively with complex social and historical themes. Participants originated from various countries of birth, including Australia, India, and Indonesia, currently living in Canada and Indonesia. This composition demonstrates cross-cultural diversity, consistent with the study's focus on examining audience responses across national and cultural boundaries. Participants were evenly allocated into two groups. Three participants in the control group watch the neutral biographical film *Radio* (2003), while three in the experimental group watch the conflict-centered biographical film *First They Killed My Father* (2017). The participants represented diverse academic and professional backgrounds, including Humanities, Communications, Engineering, Law, and Psychology. This disciplinary diversity enhances the interpretive depth of audience responses and ensures a broader range of cognitive and emotional perspectives on the films' themes.

The results of the pre- and post-tests for both groups are displayed in tabular format as follows:

Table 1
Descriptive Changes of Pre-and Post-tests for the Control Group

Participant	Pre-test Key Points	Post-test Scores	Observed Change
#1 (Male, 44+)	Moderate familiarity with political/historical films (4), low exposure to conflict (2–3).	Scores rose across all items (4→5 range).	Noticeable increase in perceived engagement, understanding, and reflection on society.
#2 (Female, 21–27)	More media exposure and empathy baseline (scores 4–5), but modest knowledge about regional history (2).	Scores stayed around 3–5, showing stable to slightly increased reflection, not drastic change.	Indicates *emotional resonance* rather than factual awareness change.
#3 (Female, 28–44)	Lower familiarity with historical/political films (2–3). Family exposure to conflict ("Yes").	Post-test increased significantly (2→5 in some items).	Suggests stronger personal/emotional identification and reflection.

Table 2
Descriptive Changes of Pre-and Post-tests for the Experimental Group

Participant	Pre-test Key Points	Post-test Scores	Observed Change
#1 (Female, 44+)	Moderate historical familiarity, strong empathy baseline (scores mostly 3–5).	Post-test all 5s – high emotional impact, full engagement, strong peacebuilding reflection.	Significant increase in emotional engagement and moral reflection; deepened understanding of genocide and reconciliation.
#2 (Female 21-27)	Low prior familiarity with Southeast Asia (1–3).	Moderate-to-high post scores (3–5). Clear empathy increase; mentioned women/child soldiers and moral abuse of monks.	Indicates strong emotional response and awareness of human rights violations.
#3 (Male 28–44)	Minimal prior knowledge (1–3 range).	Post scores 3–5; emotional connection emphasized. Mentioned rejection of revenge, empathy for all sides.	Clear cognitive and ethical development; from detachment to moral reflection.

The results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) are presented below. Mild to moderate alterations related to emotional engagement and social reflection are noted in the control group. The participants indicated that their familiarity with political or historical films varied significantly, from low to moderate levels. The focus group discussion indicated a slight increase in perceived engagement, familiarity with the themes, and reflection on human behavior. This was especially apparent among participants with lower baseline familiarity. The film elicited emotional responses concerning kindness, inclusion, and human connection; however, *Radio* (2003) did not substantially enhance participants' understanding of global issues or historical context. The findings from the focus group discussion indicate that the film utilized in the control group successfully elicited personal emotional resonance. Nonetheless, it failed to facilitate meaningful cognitive or historical understanding.

Conversely, significant emotional and cognitive changes were noted in the experimental group. All participants exhibited notable improvements in empathy, historical comprehension, and ethical reflection. This occurred despite all participants coming from diverse backgrounds and possessing limited prior knowledge of the Cambodian genocide. The oldest participant exhibited the greatest increase, reflecting a significant engagement with the themes of trauma, reconciliation, and justice. Furthermore, significant improvement was also demonstrated by the younger participants, especially in relation to scenes depicting loss, child soldiers, the treatment of monks, and moral dilemmas. The findings reflect an increased awareness of human rights issues, structural violence, and the ethical implications of conflict. These findings highlight the significant influence of *First They Killed My Father* (2017) on emotional processing and global awareness.

Discussion

The control group results show that even a non-conflict, biographical film can stimulate varying degrees of emotional and reflective engagement, though without the sharp cognitive shifts seen in the experimental group. The oldest participant (Male, 44+) demonstrates a clear rise in engagement and societal reflection, suggesting that mature viewers may draw broader social meaning even from a neutral narrative. The youngest participant (Female, 21–27) shows smaller changes. It may indicate that the film resonates emotionally but does not substantially alter historical or political awareness. This is consistent with a story that does not depict large-scale conflict. By contrast, the participant with family exposure to conflict (Female, 28–44) experiences the most significant increase. It highlights how personal background can heighten sensitivity even to non-violent films. All in all, the control group findings illustrate that while *Radio* can prompt reflection on humanity and social issues, it does not produce the deeper shifts in empathy and global awareness observed in the experimental group. It reinforces the unique role of conflict-centered films in shaping peacebuilding-related perceptions.

The results from the experimental group who watched *First They Killed My Father* indicate a clear and consistent shift in emotional engagement, ethical reflection, and historical understanding. The oldest participant (Female, 44+) who enters the study with moderate familiarity and already high empathy, demonstrates the most pronounced transformation. All of her post-test indicators rise to the highest level. This suggests that prior empathy combined with mature life experience may amplify the film's impact, fostering deep reflection on genocide, accountability, and reconciliation. In contrast, the younger individuals have restricted regional knowledge, reflecting a younger, internationally mobile generation. Both exhibit substantial progress in emotional understanding and ethical awareness. They reference specific scenes with monks, women, and warriors. Their reflections illustrate how the video

converts abstract historical crimes into concrete human experiences, boosting moral sensitivity and global awareness.

A consistent pattern emerged from the answers of all three participants of the experimental group. Although they are from various cultural backgrounds and academic disciplines, they show heightened empathy, improved knowledge of human rights concerns, and a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional and ethical complexities of violent conflict. The film has significantly shifted them from a limited grasp of facts to a more profound awareness of the human dimensions of genocide. It highlights the film's ability to foster cross-cultural understanding and encourage peace-oriented reflection. This substantiates the study's claim that film functions as a potent tool of soft power and peacebuilding. It achieves this by fostering moral imagination and augmenting audience engagement with international crimes.

The comparison analysis demonstrates that conflict-centered films provide a significantly higher potential for cultural diplomacy compared to non-conflict-centered films. The experimental group is a diverse group of volunteers. They were born in Indonesia, India, and Australia, and now live in Canada and Indonesia. Despite their little cultural ties with Cambodian history, they indicated that they engaged both emotionally and intellectually after watching First They Killed My Father. Their responses suggest that the film successfully communicated historical memory, illustrated the human toll of genocide, and provoked moral reflection on justice and healing. Conversely, the control group's responses were rooted on interpersonal empathy rather than universal awareness. This mismatch suggests that films depicting past atrocities markedly improve cross-border understanding, aligning with the concept of film as a mechanism of soft power in International Relations.

The findings suggest that conflict-centered narratives cultivate deeper and more transformative empathy than the empathy and global awareness levels of the two groups. The control group demonstrated emotional engagement centered on kindness, diversity, and human connection, although their reflections did not address broader political or international issues. The experimental group demonstrated both emotional and cognitive empathy, including the ability to understand the origins, consequences, and ethical complexities of violent conflict. Participants expressed views on justice, forgiveness, the dangers of authoritarianism, and the lasting impact of trauma on societies. These findings indicate that films portraying genocide or conflict may shift audiences' perspectives from personal empathy to a broader moral awareness. Thus, it offers significant advantages for peacebuilding education and International Relations studies.

Conclusion

The present study looks at the role of film as a tool of soft power and its impact on promoting peace and reconciliation. By transcending and even bridging cultural differences, and promoting empathy, such films become a unique tool that can at least now resolve psychosocial and emotional sides sometimes ignored by the traditional way of peacebuilding. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, the study clarifies how films are at once an emotive and instructional tool for peace.

It can be concluded that the control group's responses indicate that films without political violence can serve as a peacebuilding medium at the interpersonal level. It fosters empathy, inclusiveness, and emotional comprehension. However, a conflict-centered film like *First*

They Killed My Father gives stronger impact as it combines emotional engagement with historical awareness and moral contemplation.

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

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

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Power, Transparency, and Social Impact in Leadership Communication: Critical Analysis of BULOG During COVID-19 (2020–2023)

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a global crisis that tested the leadership capacity of governments and institutions, particularly state-owned enterprises (SOEs) tasked with public service delivery. In Indonesia, Perum BULOG—a state-owned logistics enterprise—was assigned a critical role in stabilizing food supply and ensuring national food security during the crisis. This study offers a critical analysis of BULOG's leadership communication practices during the pandemic period from 2020 to 2023, focusing on the dynamics of power, transparency, and social impact. Drawing from the critical paradigm, this research applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the narratives, rhetoric, and communicative strategies found in BULOG's official statements, public reports, and crisis responses. The study explores how leadership discourse was constructed to manage public expectations, maintain institutional legitimacy, and navigate complex power relations amidst social and political pressure. Key findings highlight the performative function of crisis communication in shaping public perception, negotiating authority, and reinforcing the strategic positioning of SOEs during national emergencies. Furthermore, the study reveals that transparency in communication—when integrated with coherent messaging and responsiveness—serves not only as a governance tool but also as a catalyst for building social trust. This analysis contributes to the growing discourse on crisis leadership in the public sector, offering insights into how communication serves as both a site of power negotiation and a mechanism for social resilience. The case of BULOG underscores the vital role of communication in bridging institutional mandates with public expectations during periods of systemic disruption.

Keywords: communication leadership, communication crisis, BULOG, COVID-19 Pandemic, paradigm critical

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Introduction

In 2020 the world experienced tremendous shock, with namely emergence COVID-19 disease or also known as the Corona virus. The presence of the virus quick become global and immediate pandemic impact wide to health system, economy, and also resilience food all over on earth. The term COVID-19 itself is abbreviation from Corona Virus Disease, while number 19 behind it is marker that the virus discovered in 2019. Speed the spread of the Corona virus is forcing The World Health Organization (WHO) has designated COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Since that's it the COVID-19 pandemic triggered multidimensional crisis, both in the health and economic sectors and social, including food sector that is highly dependent on stability chain supply and state intervention.

In Indonesia, the spread of COVID-19 is also spreading very quickly. Countries with population large reaching 270 million soul that (statement from the Central Statistics Agency – BPS at the end of 2020) directly face various very complex and extraordinary challenges normal in his efforts handle pandemic President Joko Widodo on March 2, 2020, confirmed case the first case of COVID-19 in Indonesia. Since that moment, Indonesia experienced wave widespread spread of COVID-19 in counting days. Complexity and panic mass mark various existing obstacles, including limitations health tools, policy restrictions changing social conditions, and the impact expanding economy.

In the context of resilience food, the COVID-19 pandemic provides challenge that have not been happen previously for leadership organizations in various sectors, especially in state-owned enterprises, which have role strategic balance between continuity operational, public service obligations, and trust. The government quick assigning Perum BULOG, as a state-owned company that plays a role for guard stabilization food national during crisis.

Logistics company the state's property is also directly face to face with a myriad complex challenges during pandemic to ensure availability food and prices material food tree in the middle global turmoil. Task is not easy for Perum BULOG, even though own network chain supplies solid food distributed throughout Indonesia. Perum BULOG management is also aware of the existence of factor accompanying politics the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, the potential emergence changes leadership statehood that can just leads to chaos, as consequence failure carry out task give eat the people.

As usual happen in the history of political Indonesian statehood. The hungry stomachs of the people in some parts area will quick expanding to regions other with fast. Developing become hunger national and ongoing with emergence street crime consequence hunger. However, the crisis caused by COVID-19 also shows inequality power in taking decisions, conflicts interest between bureaucracy with the interests of the people, as well as how communication problem appear, in particular communication crisis and leadership made into tool legitimacy or even avoidance accountability. In this situation pandemic implementation communication crisis demand transparency, fast response, and communication effective leadership for maintain public trust and policy crisis effectiveness.

Literature Review

According to Berger & Meng (2014), “PR leaders act as sense makers by interpreting complex environments, influencing collective understanding, and negotiating organizational legitimacy with internal and external stakeholders” (Berger & Meng, 2014).

A scientific study thinking that shapes base research and methods used in look for answer from the phenomenon being studied. Paradigm in study social and humanities according to Guba and Lincoln (1994) in book they "Competing Paradigm in Qualitative Research" share to in four main categories.

First, Positivism, which focuses for looking the objective and causality, with the methods are survey, experiment, and statistics. Second, interpretivism, for understand the meaning of social and experience individual. The method is studies case, with in-depth interview, and ethnographic. Third, is critical, namely analyze structure power, ideology, and social inequality. The methodology is critical discourse analysis, with ethnographic critical. Fourth, postmodernism which focuses mainly dissect narrative subjectivity, and deconstruction of social reality. The method in the form of analysis narrative and semiotics. In this research, critical paradigm in communication analysis will focuses on how relation of power, domination, and communication crisis structure in social influence.

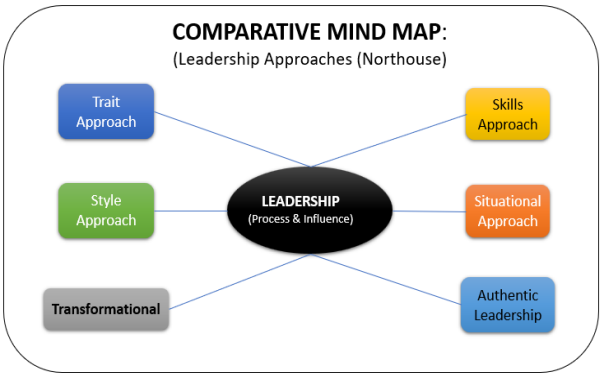
In the context of Perum BULOG, the critical paradigm helps this study of the government and elite economy use communication as tool to control public narrative and decision-making regarding policy of food during pandemic. The theory framework owns a fundamental role, not just complement in research, but rather as runway or "scientific compass" to determine direction and guidance study in a way as a whole, including validity, credibility, and contribution from this study, and explain the phenomenon being studied, analyzing, interpreting data, and connecting study with previous studies to drawing up conclusions and implications research.

Paradigms and theories each other related in form method man understand and analyze phenomenon. Paradigm give framework underlying thinking selection and development theory, while theory offer more explanation and understanding in-depth about research phenomenon. The relationship of this important elements builds systematic and integrated knowledge in sector study, as for the framework expected of how theories can become scientific compass as following:

1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2015); Analyzing communication strategies in respond crisis. Organization reputation become valuable resources (Winkleman, 1999). Crisis and unexpected events can bother operational organization system, as well as threaten internal damage organization reputation. Communicative response in organization within crisis organization can functioning limit as well as repair something like reputation damage. In the organization, we new start discuss method use response communicative to protect reputation. From the experts, they recommend a very accommodating strategy that features request apology on crisis (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Sellnow et al.,1998). However, from universal application of a highly accommodating strategy This problematic happened because responsible answer to law as well as the financial impact generate.
2. The study applies several theories to analyze leadership communication during crises. Leadership Communication Theory encompasses three major forms of leadership: Transformative, Adaptive, and Authentic. Transformative leadership reflects the foundational aspects of transformation and innovation, particularly evident in crisis situations. Adaptive leadership captures the management and communication dimensions of crisis handling and organizational change. Meanwhile, Authentic leadership emphasizes integrity, trust, and organizational culture, although there remains some uncertainty about which leadership type is most suitable for describing the current context.

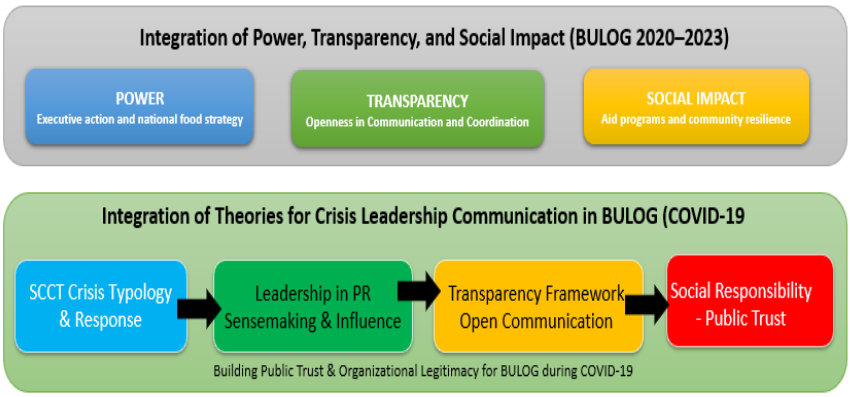
Transparency Theory (Rawlins, 2008) explains how transparency in communication influences public trust. Power Theory (Foucault, 1980) examines how leadership discourse reproduces and sustains power relations. Social Impact Theory (Habermas, 1984) explores how communication and policy decisions shape societal outcomes, particularly affecting vulnerable groups.

Figure 1
Comparative Mind Map



A leader's attitude reflects how one thinks and feels about others, which is demonstrated through various behaviors. This attitude can influence others and, when positive, can be highly beneficial. A positive attitude has the potential to shape the feelings of those around the leader. For example, when a leader shows enthusiasm and support for the implementation of a new workplace strategy, team members are likely to feel more optimistic and receptive to the new idea.

Figure 2
Flow of Integration of Power and Integration of Crisis Leadership



Methodology

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how transparency is applied in leadership within the context of Bulog's communication practices. The qualitative method is useful for providing a systematic and credible description of phenomena related to transparency, communication, and leadership.

The study adopts a case study design that explores in depth the community engagement and communication techniques utilized by Bulog's Jakarta office to maintain public trust. Primary

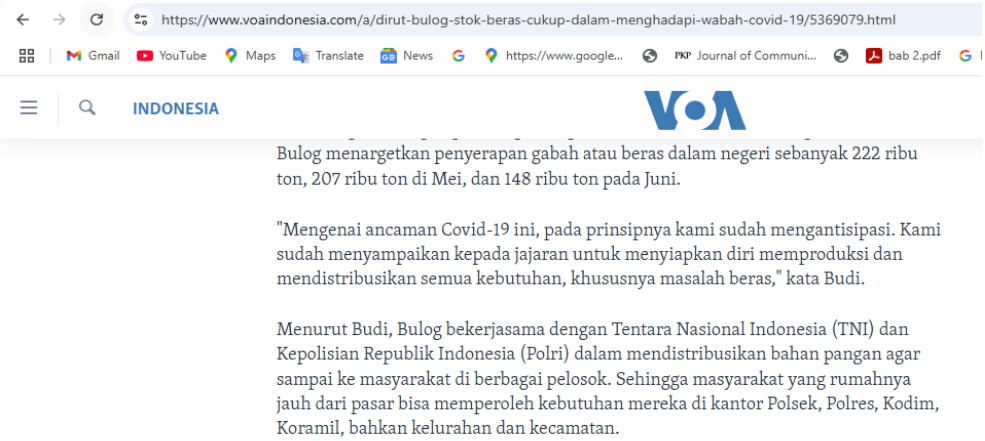
and secondary data collection methods are applied. For primary data, structured observations are conducted to identify and interpret behaviors directly relevant to the research problem and objectives. Purposive sampling is used to select key informants, while snowball sampling helps expand the respondent network to include other relevant sources.

Systematic data collection and analysis aim to characterize Bulog's community communication strategies. The primary sources in this study include statements from Bulog officials, interviews, and public remarks made by Budi Waseso, as the organization's leader.

Results

Analysis of BULOG's crisis communication identified key actors: CEO Budi Waseso (appointed 2018, former high-ranking police officer) and the crisis team, who framed food logistics challenges as security imperatives requiring firm governance. Empirical findings from discourse analysis show three operational dimensions of PR leadership: (1) direct participation in policy formulation meetings, evidenced by integrated communication strategies in official releases; (2) ethical oversight role, seen in transparent reporting of supply chain disruptions while prioritizing public food security; (3) bridging function, connecting external pandemic realities (supply shortages, public panic) with internal logistics capabilities to create unified crisis narratives across press conferences and social media.

Figure 3
News About COVID-19 in VOA


https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/dirut-bulog-stok-beras-cukup-dalam-menghadapi-wabah-covid-19/5369079.html

Gmail YouTube Maps Translate News https://www.google... Journal of Communi... bab 2.pdf

INDONESIA

Bulog menargetkan penyerapan gabah atau beras dalam negeri sebanyak 222 ribu ton, 207 ribu ton di Mei, dan 148 ribu ton pada Juni.

"Mengenai ancaman Covid-19 ini, pada prinsipnya kami sudah mengantisipasi. Kami sudah menyampaikan kepada jajaran untuk menyiapkan diri memproduksi dan mendistribusikan semua kebutuhan, khususnya masalah beras," kata Budi.

Menurut Budi, Bulog bekerjasama dengan Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) dan Kepolisian Republik Indonesia (Polri) dalam mendistribusikan bahan pangan agar sampai ke masyarakat di berbagai pelosok. Sehingga masyarakat yang rumahnya jauh dari pasar bisa memperoleh kebutuhan mereka di kantor Polsek, Polres, Kodim, Koramil, bahkan kelurahan dan kecamatan.

Discussion

These dimensions align with Berger and Meng (2014), where PR leaders interpret complex environments and negotiate legitimacy with stakeholders. Budi Waseso's security background shaped a directive discourse protecting reputation as a core asset, consistent with Coombs (2015) SCCT emphasizing reputation defense in high-responsibility crises. The ethical "conscience" role extends Rawlins (2008) Transparency Theory by linking disclosure not just to trust but to moral alignment in public sector crises. Foucault's (1980) power discourse framework reveals how BULOG's communication reproduced hierarchical authority while sustaining public compliance through shared crisis meanings. Collectively, findings illustrate PR evolution from tactical support to strategic influencers in Indonesian state-owned enterprises during existential threats.

Summary and Conclusion

This study critically examined Perum BULOG's leadership communication practices during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to evaluate policy effectiveness in maintaining national food security. Key findings highlight CEO Budi Waseso and the crisis communication team as discursive agents who constructed narratives of food resilience, framing supply chain disruptions as manageable security imperatives rather than systemic failures. Their strategies reinforced public trust through transparent reporting and coordinated messaging across ministries, while negotiating social legitimacy amid public panic and economic pressures.

PR leadership manifested in three core dimensions: active participation in strategic decision-making beyond technical roles, serving as the organization's ethical “conscience” by aligning responses with public interest, and bridging external pandemic realities with internal logistics capabilities to foster collective understanding. Budi Waseso's background as a former high-ranking police officer informed a firm, authoritative discourse that protected institutional reputation and sustained operational continuity, demonstrating communication's pivotal role in state-owned enterprises (BUMN) during multidimensional crises.

Implications

Theoretically, these findings extend Berger and Meng (2014) sensemaking framework to Indonesian BUMN contexts, where PR leaders interpret crises not just technically but as power-laden negotiations with stakeholders for legitimacy. Budi Waseso's security-oriented leadership exemplifies how practitioner backgrounds shape policy discourse, aligning with Coombs (2015) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by prioritizing reputation as a vital asset in high-responsibility scenarios. This integration of Rawlins (2008) Transparency Theory reveals how disclosure builds trust when coupled with ethical accountability, offering fresh insights for crisis communication curricula in communication studies programs.

Practically, the study informs public sector leadership training, emphasizing adaptive discourse that balances authority with participation to enhance resilience in future disruptions. For thesis supervision, it models critical paradigms for analyzing government communication, bridging Foucault's (1980) power relations with empirical BUMN cases to guide students in exploring social impacts of policy narratives. Overall, implications underscore communication's evolution from tactical tool to strategic instrument for political legitimacy and societal stability in emerging economies.

Limitations

Methodologically, reliance on secondary data such as official statements, press releases, and public reports constrained access to internal deliberations, potentially overlooking unpublicized conflicts or alternative stakeholder perspectives. While CDA provided depth in discourse analysis, the absence of primary interviews or real-time observations limited triangulation, introducing risks of interpretive bias despite rigorous coding protocols.

Scope limitations include the single-case focus on BULOG, which restricts generalizability to other BUMN sectors like energy or transportation, or non-pandemic crises such as natural disasters. The study's timeframe ending in 2023 excludes longitudinal post-crisis effects, such

as sustained trust metrics or policy adaptations under new leadership, while qualitative emphasis precluded quantitative validation of transparency's causal impact on public perception.

Recommendations

For Perum BULOG and similar BUMN, implement real-time transparency dashboards tracking food stocks, supply chains, and decision rationales, complemented by participatory forums for citizen input to democratize policy processes and preempt trust erosion. Train communication leaders in hybrid sensemaking models integrating SCCT with local high-context cultural norms, fostering ethical discourse that combines authority with accommodative apologies during crises.

Academically, future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches, incorporating stakeholder interviews and surveys across multiple BUMN for comparative analysis, quantitatively testing transparency's long-term effects on legitimacy via metrics like Net Promoter Scores. Expand critical paradigms to longitudinal studies post-2023, examining narrative shifts under evolving political landscapes to refine leadership communication theories for Indonesian public sector resilience.

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

In preparing this manuscript, AI-assisted technologies were utilized to enhance the writing quality, clarity, and coherence. Specifically, OpenAI's language model (ChatGPT) was employed for drafting, revising, and proofreading the text. The AI was used to generate initial drafts of certain paragraphs, improve language fluency, and ensure grammatical accuracy. All AI-generated content was carefully reviewed and edited by the author to maintain academic integrity and ensure the accuracy and originality of the manuscript. The use of AI tools was limited to assisting with language refinement and did not influence the substantive content or interpretation of the research.

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The Power of CARE²: Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study Examining an Instructional Design Framework to Support International Student Performance

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Abstract

This study focused on first-year international students engaging in support sessions at a private business college in Denmark. The study aimed to examine how an instructional framework might aid and enhance student performance. The support session objective focused on two areas: to comprehend and apply key concepts from module-specific themes and to develop research skills. The study sessions were implemented across two courses focused on Business Management and Marketing. Although different, both courses covered overlapping content, including PowerPoint presentations and individual reports/essays that utilized the same theories and models. This study examined the effects of the CARE² model, a comprehensive framework that integrates principles from culturally responsive pedagogy, self-regulated learning, and instructional design. The eight constructs are Culture, Collaboration, Agency, Agility, Relevance, Repetition, Engagement, and Evaluation. The CARE² model was used to explore the relevance of its eight factors via control and treatment groups. This study uses a triangulation mixed-methods research design, collecting and combining qualitative and quantitative data to illustrate the experiences and performance of international students. Limitations include challenges in asynchronous settings, as the module was tested in an entirely in-person environment. Further research is needed to explore the model's applicability across different educational contexts. The findings illustrate practical strategies to support future instructors, trainers, or presenters in integrating and applying the CARE² model across various learning contexts, learners, and experiences.

Keywords: instructional design, culture, design and development model, multicultural learners

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Introduction

Culture can play an important role in shaping how learning and instruction (Hofstede, 2011). In higher education settings, instructional designers and educators are challenged to create learning environments that are pedagogically effective, but not necessarily culturally sound (Leask, 2015). The lack of focus on culture can present challenges for international learners, as research suggests this segment of learners may struggle to adapt to new cultural and academic environments (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Research also highlights the value of supplemental support and culturally inclusive pedagogy to help learners succeed (Irvine et al., 2021).

Ladson-Billings (1995) defined culturally responsive pedagogy as empowering learners by connecting instruction to cultural referents. Years later, scholars expanded this concept to include diverse teaching practices, multicultural content, and holistic learner well-being (Howard, 2021). At its core, culturally responsive instructional design (ID) emphasizes the integration of learners' cultural contexts into curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy (Gay, 2018).

While literature affirms that culture can play a role in international learner success, most ID models that leverage culture as an element in design, such as incorporating learners' cultural perspectives, globalized content, or cross-cultural collaboration (Henkin, 2019; Leask, 2015), mostly address learners' home culture but not other layers of culture. For instance, consider this case study: A business college in Denmark has its own institutional culture that is wrapped underneath Denmark's national culture. In addition to institutional and national cultures, the business college uses a curriculum designed on U.K. educational frameworks and culture. In addition, most learners at the business college are from countries outside Denmark, and the college's instructors are also from outside Denmark. This case study illustrates a highly dynamic, multilayered culture setting that intersects layers of national, institutional, curriculum, instructor, and learner cultures.

While some instructional design models, such as Smith and Staudt Willett's Culturally Sustaining Instructional Design (2023) and Gunawardena et al.'s WisCom framework (2018), offer a focus on culture, these models lack comprehensive integration of assessment, co-creation, and contextual flexibility. And they do not necessarily address the dynamic and layered nature of multiculturalism. To address this gap, we explored the design and implementation of a synthesized instructional design model situated within a multicultural higher education environment. This action research study aimed to examine the following research questions:

- How does integrating design principles in courses and micro-units affect international learners' performance?
- How do international learners perceive the impact of design principles in micro-units on their learning and skill development?

Specifically, the study examined the implementation of the CARE² model and investigated its impact through three hypotheses:

- **H1:** Learners in CARE² courses perform better overall than those in non-CARE² courses.
- **H2:** Learners in CARE² micro-units perform better than those in non-CARE² micro-units.

- **H3:** Learners in CARE² micro-units report higher agreement scores on the effectiveness of their learning experience than those in non-CARE² micro-units.

These hypotheses guided our inquiry into how culturally responsive and holistic ID can support international learners in achieving academic success and engagement.

Literature Review

For this study, three key themes shaped the literature review: international learners and culture; instructional strategies and international learners; and instructional design and culture. The first theme addresses cultural dimensions and norms. The second theme addresses insightful elements that are valuable for learning experiences. The third theme addresses the importance of integrating culture within instructional design.

International Learners and Culture

International learners bring ingrained cultural norms that strongly shape their adjustment to new academic environments (Leung et al., 2005). Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1980, 2011) illustrate how values influence classroom behavior, while many international learners face additional challenges such as language barriers and unfamiliar academic norms (Bakay, 2023; Gong et al., 2021).

Instructional Dimensions and Learning

Elements of the learning experience can play a critical role in supporting international learners. For instance, collaboration fosters intercultural competence and helps learners work toward shared goals (Rubin, 2017), while agency empowers learners to take ownership of their learning, though this can vary by culture, with respect emerging as a key factor in encouraging participation (Code, 2020; Mertz et al., 2015). Relevance is important, as content becomes more meaningful when it is tied directly to learners' cultural and contextual experiences (Resch, 2018), and repetition can further support knowledge acquisition and cultural competence by reinforcing learning through spaced practice (Chae et al., 2023; Ghazi-Saidi & Ansaldo, 2017). Engagement, meanwhile, is multidimensional, shaped by supportive relationships, social interaction, and the extent to which learners feel connected to the classroom community (Li & Xue, 2023).

Instructional Design and Culture

Finally, research on instructional design highlights the importance of peer support, opportunities for cultural reflection, and the use of technologies that encourage intercultural understanding (Leask, 2015). Despite these advances, systematic integration of culture into instructional design frameworks remains limited, which suggests a need for models that more comprehensively embed cultural considerations into the learning process.

Methods

Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods, sequential design that integrated qualitative action research with quantitative validation. The initial action research cycle was used to generate a conceptual

framework and inform instructional revisions based on iterative learner feedback, classroom observations, and formative assessments (Zuber-Skerritt, 2021). This process provided a grounded, contextually relevant model tailored to international learners. Following this, quantitative analyses, including final examinations and post-unit surveys, were used to measure the effectiveness of the model in terms of knowledge acquisition, micro-unit performance, and learner perceptions. By linking iterative qualitative insights with structured quantitative validation, the design allowed the researchers to develop and empirically test the CARE² framework, ensuring that the model was both theoretically grounded and practically effective.

Context and Participants

The study took place in a business college located in Denmark, where the academic curriculum was based on U.K. marketing materials. The learning environment was multilayered with the institution and national context (Denmark), a U.K.-framed curriculum, and instructors and international learners from multiple countries outside Denmark.

Participants in this study were international learners from Nepal, Bangladesh, and India enrolled in undergraduate business courses at a Danish business college. In Year 1, the study included 240 first-year (Level 4) learners enrolled in a full-semester marketing course, while in Year 2, it expanded to include 524 learners across marketing and business management micro-unit support sessions. While Year 1 focused on the revision and implementation of the CARE² model in marketing courses, we expanded and explored a new learning environment in Year 2.

During Year 2, the CARE² model was implemented within embedded micro-units designed as short, targeted support sessions situated within existing courses. Multiple instructors, including those from outside Denmark, taught both the complete courses and micro-units. In Year 2, all the micro-units were facilitated by instructors different from those leading the host courses to assess the model's adaptability across teaching contexts. Participants were drawn from intact course sections and embedded micro-units that were part of the college's regular curriculum; no additional recruitment or random assignment occurred outside of existing course enrollments.

Quasi-Experimental Group Design

A quasi-experimental design was employed to compare learner performance and perceptions between the control and intervention groups across two study phases. In Year 1, the control groups consisted of marketing course sections taught using the standard curriculum, while the intervention groups were taught using the emerging CARE² model. In Year 2, the design was replicated within embedded micro-units with control micro-units following standard instructional approaches, while the intervention micro-units implemented the CARE² model. Because the study operated within existing course schedules and instructor assignments, participants were organized into intact course sections or micro-units rather than being individually randomized. The Year 2 implementation served as a form of cross-context replication, testing the robustness and transferability of the CARE² model across different instructors and learning contexts.

Procedures

Year 1

In the first year, the study used an action research approach engaging in iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to identify learner challenges and refine both the curriculum and the emerging CARE² model. Formative qualitative data were collected through open-ended surveys, discussion prompts, informal interviews, and in-class written reflections, which provided insight into learner experiences and informed ongoing revisions to instructional design. At the end of the semester, summative evaluation was conducted to assess learner performance and perceptions through formal course assessments and feedback instruments. A comparative design was used, with control course sections taught using the standard curriculum and intervention sections taught using the evolving CARE² model. Findings from these comparisons guided refinement of the framework and contributed to the model's creation.

Year 2

Building upon the outcomes of the first year, the second year and phase of the study focused on validating the CARE² model by implementing it in short, embedded support sessions known as micro-units. These micro-units incorporated CARE² strategies and were delivered within existing marketing and business management courses as time-limited, targeted interventions intended to be adaptable across learning contexts. For each topic, parallel control micro-units followed standard instructional practices, while intervention micro-units implemented the CARE² framework. To further assess model transferability, micro-units were only taught by instructors different from those leading the host courses. Data collection included learner performance on assessments aligned with micro-unit learning outcomes and learner perceptions captured through post-unit surveys and reflective prompts, enabling a comprehensive evaluation of the model's effectiveness and contextual flexibility.

Data Analysis

The study incorporated multiple data types and methods. The qualitative data included formative feedback, classroom observations, Padlet posts, and instructor reflections, which informed iterative instructional adjustments and the development of the CARE² conceptual framework. Qualitative analyses were conducted through inter-coder review, with final themes generated based on coder agreement, and automated validation using OpenAI 5o to strengthen reliability. The quantitative data included two final assessments and post-unit surveys, capturing knowledge-based outcomes and learner perceptions. Statistical analyses were conducted using ANOVAs, Mann-Whitney U tests, independent-samples t-tests, and effect size calculations (Cohen's d). Levene's test and Welch adjustments were used where assumptions of equal variance were violated, ensuring robust interpretation of differences between intervention and control groups.

Action Research Process

The qualitative component of the study followed an action research framework by using an iterative data collection approach to inform instructional revisions. The initial qualitative data were gathered from international learners through open-ended surveys, discussion prompts,

informal interviews, and in-class reflections. These multiple data sources were selected to identify learner expectations, challenges, and lived experiences within the course context.

Year 1: Full Course

To analyze the variety of qualitative components, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, identified initial focus areas, created emerging themes, and refined themes. From this analysis, four core thematic "challenges" were identified:

1. Varying technological literacy: Learners reported uneven familiarity with digital learning tools, leading to confusion in navigating the virtual learning environment and participating in course activities.
2. Low engagement with core concepts: Qualitative responses revealed a lack of connection to course materials, with learners describing them as abstract, overly theoretical, or difficult to apply.
3. UK-centric case studies lacking cultural relevance: Several learners noted a disconnect between the case studies and their lived experiences, limiting the perceived relevance and applicability of the content.
4. Differences in academic communication skills: Thematic analysis showed that learners struggled with unfamiliar academic conventions, including expectations for discussion participation, citation practices, and critical engagement in English.

Course Revisions

These qualitative findings were used as formative input for the first cycle of instructional design revision, which aligns with the cyclical nature of action research. In response to these qualitative insights, the four instructional revisions were implemented, focused on scaffolding, engagement, case-study diversity, and formative assessments:

- Digital literacy scaffolding: Short, targeted exercises were embedded in the first two weeks of the course to build familiarity with essential digital tools (e.g., collaborative platforms, digital citation tools).
- Shift to interactive engagement: Traditional lecture segments were replaced or supplemented with active learning strategies, such as peer-led discussions, real-time polling, and collaborative annotation tools.
- Diversified case study materials: U.K.-centric case studies were supplemented with examples from learners' home countries. Learners were invited to suggest and co-analyze culturally relevant case studies, supporting both engagement and ownership.
- Embedded formative assessments: Low-stakes, reflective assessments (e.g., discussion journals, self-evaluations, and feedback loops) were used to gauge learners' developing academic communication skills and allow for tailored instructor feedback.

This phase of the study illustrates how qualitative feedback served as the foundation for course adaptation. Subsequent reviews were conducted, and smaller revisions to these four core areas were applied throughout the course. After the course was completed, researchers conducted an analysis of multiple data points, including classroom observations, formative feedback, final examinations, and final course feedback. The findings are divided into design principle findings, examination results, and post-course learner perception findings.

Initial Design Principle Findings

Formative qualitative data were collected during the course using observational data via instructors' reflections and direct feedback from learners using tools like Padlet. The qualitative data were merged and analyzed. The results identified interconnected themes that guided the iterations and resulted in eight design principles for an instructional design framework:

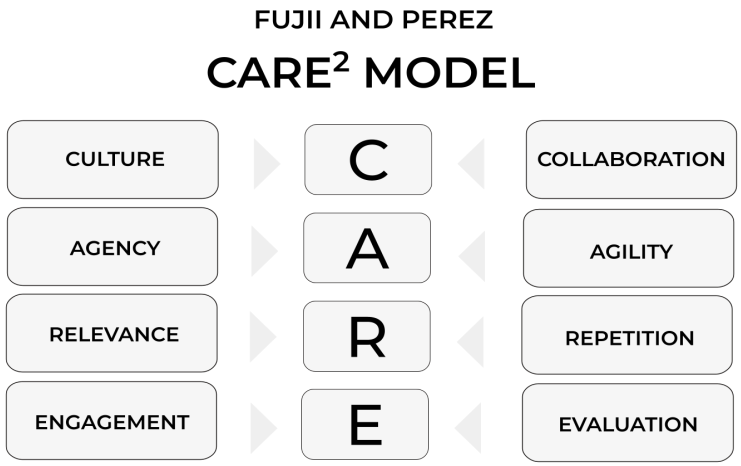
- Culture: Home, host, and classroom cultures shaped expectations
- Collaboration: Peer and instructor partnerships fostered support
- Agency: Ground rules and mutual respect encouraged ownership
- Agility: Instructor flexibility allowed responsiveness to learner needs
- Relevance: Contextualized content boosted motivation
- Repetition: Spaced review improved recall
- Engagement: Interactive activities, feedback, and humor supported participation
- Evaluation: Continuous feedback ensured alignment with learner needs

Creation of the CARE² Model

These eight principles were developed into the CARE² model, which provides flexible, systematic guidance for designing culturally responsive learning experiences across various modalities. This conceptual framework emphasizes cultural integration, learner autonomy, contextualized content, iterative improvement, and inclusive engagement.

Given the CARE² model's creation, the researchers next sought to determine whether these principles, identified as qualitatively meaningful, could be validated as quantitatively meaningful. The following section presents the quantitative results of interventions utilizing the CARE2 model as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Fujii & Perez CARE² Model



Course Knowledge-Test Results (Year 1)

Two marketing courses were analyzed in Year 1 to evaluate the impact of the CARE² model on learner performance. In Course 1, average assessment scores for the control groups were M = 59.21 and M = 58.26, compared to M = 67.79 for the intervention group. Statistical analysis revealed no significant difference between the two control groups ($p = 0.2823$), but both control

groups scored significantly lower than the intervention group ($p < 0.0001$). The mean differences of 8.58 and 9.53 corresponded to large effect sizes ($d = 0.71$ and 0.75), indicating a substantial positive impact of the CARE² model on learner outcomes. See Table 1.

Table 1
Course 1 Average Summative Assessment

COURSE 1	Mean Difference	Effect Size	p-Value
Control Group 1 vs Control Group 2	0.95	0.08	0.2823
Control Group 1 vs **Intervention Group**	8.58	0.71	< 0.0001
Control Group 2 vs **Intervention Group**	9.53	0.75	< 0.0001

Similarly, in Course 2, the control groups achieved average scores of $M = 55.19$ and $M = 60.34$, while the intervention group achieved $M = 66.85$. No significant difference was found between the two control groups ($p = 0.1082$), whereas both demonstrated significantly lower performance than the intervention group ($p < 0.0001$ and $p = 0.0092$, respectively). The mean differences of 11.66 and 6.51 reflected moderate to large effects ($d = 0.73$ and 0.41). Across both courses, these findings demonstrate that the application of the CARE² model was associated with higher summative assessment performance, supporting its effectiveness in enhancing learner outcomes within a multicultural instructional context. Note: a post-course feedback survey was not accessible for all courses; hence, course feedback was not covered, as comparison was limited to only the intervention group for semester 1. See Table 2.

Table 2
Course 2 Average Summative Assessment

COURSE 2	Mean Difference	Effect Size	p-Value
Control Group 1 vs Control Group 2	5.15	-	0.1082
Control Group 1 vs **Intervention Group**	11.66	0.73	< 0.0001
Control Group 2 vs **Intervention Group**	6.51	0.41	0.0092

Year-2: Micro-Units

In Year 2, the study extended the implementation of the CARE² model beyond full courses into a series of micro-units designed to validate the model's adaptability across varied instructional contexts. Unlike full-semester courses, these micro-units were short, embedded learning experiences situated within existing marketing and business management courses, functioning as targeted support sessions focused on specific concepts or skills and typically lasting only a few instructional sessions. They were intentionally positioned to complement, rather than replace, ongoing instruction and were often facilitated by instructors different from those leading the primary course to test the model's portability across teaching styles.

Implementation of CARE² in Micro-Units

The CARE² model was applied to enhance learner experiences and outcomes. Culture addressed learners' home, host, and classroom cultural contexts, shaping expectations and fostering an inclusive environment. Collaboration promoted partnerships among peers and instructors for social and academic support, while Agency encouraged ownership of learning

through ground rules and mutual respect. Agility allowed instructors to respond flexibly to emerging learner needs, and Relevance ensured content was contextualized to learners' academic and cultural experiences, boosting motivation. Repetition incorporated spaced review strategies to strengthen retention, Engagement was fostered through interactive activities, feedback, and humor, and Evaluation provided continuous formative feedback to align instruction with learner needs. Control micro-units followed standard teaching practices, whereas intervention micro-units integrated the CARE² framework, enabling direct comparison of learner performance and perceptions. Together, this approach used culturally responsive instructional design, allowing the team to assess its effectiveness in both condensed, time-limited sessions and full-course settings, providing insight into its flexibility, transferability, and impact on diverse international learners.

Micro-Unit Knowledge-Test and Survey Results (Year 2)

In Year 2, learner performance was measured using pre- and post-tests, and no statistically significant differences were found between the control and intervention groups ($p > 0.05$). However, micro-unit learners in the CARE² intervention group demonstrated a slight mean improvement of approximately ~3 points, suggesting some gains in performance. End-of-course survey data provided additional insights into learner perceptions. Statistically significant differences were observed between groups across several items, including the number of sessions ($t = 2.89$, $p = 0.0040$, $d = 0.144$) and learning expectations ($t = 2.56$, $p = 0.0109$, $d = 0.127$), with the intervention group reporting higher agreement in both areas. In contrast, the control group reported slightly higher ratings for skill development ($t = -2.32$, $p = 0.0210$, $d = -0.115$). Although effect sizes were small, these findings suggest that the CARE² model contributed to improved learner engagement and clearer learning expectations within the micro-unit context, while highlighting areas for continued refinement in supporting perceived skill development. See Table 3.

Table 3
Pre-and-Post-tests (Performance)

Groups	Items	T-Statistic	P-Value	Mean Difference	Cohen's d
Control vs Intervention	Number of Sessions	2.89	0.0040	0.140	0.144
Control vs Intervention	Learning Expectations	2.56	0.0109	0.126	0.127
Control vs Intervention	Skill Development	-2.32	0.0210	-0.118	-0.115

Discussion

The study's findings provide strong support for H1, indicating that learners in the intervention group (CARE² model) achieved significantly higher overall course performance compared to control groups, with large effect sizes and a ~15–16% increase in mean scores. H2 was not supported, as performance gains in the CARE² micro-units were modest (~3 points higher) and not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). H3 obtained partial support, as learners in CARE² micro-units reported significantly higher agreement regarding the number of sessions ($F = 10.46$, $p = 0.001$) and clarity of learning expectations ($F = 5.91$, $p = 0.015$), though perceptions of pace ($F = 2.91$, $p = 0.088$) and preparation for the summative exam ($F = 0.27$, $p = 0.606$) did not differ significantly between groups. These results suggest that the CARE² model might enhance

perceived learning sequence and clarity of learning objectives, but short embedded micro-units have limited impact on measured performance using the CARE² model.

Implications

The study results indicate several implications, including the conditions of the CARE² model's effectiveness, perception gains, and theoretical insights:

1. Model benefits may depend on depth and integration: Learners within the CARE² model showed strong performance gains in the full-semester course, which suggests that the model might be valuable when fully embedded in a learning experience and reinforced over time. In contrast, the short micro-units were much shorter and more sufficient, and it might be that the CARE² model functions best as a holistic framework rather than when used in a modular and detached intervention.
2. Perception gains suggest affective benefit: Even without measurable performance improvement, learners in CARE² micro-units reported higher engagement, satisfaction, and perceived relevance. These affective gains suggest that the model might influence learners' perceived modular experiences, even if it does not have a strong impact on performance.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study provided evidence that a culturally responsive instructional design model, like the CARE² model, can enhance academic performance and learner engagement, the study contains several limitations. The first limitation is the cohort-specific context. While the study examined a consistent population of learners within a small private business college, the generalizability of its findings is limited with respect to other international contexts, disciplines, and learner demographics. Second, action research can provide value to practitioners and researchers, but managing a dual role can introduce potential bias in observation, reflection, and interpretation. To address this, the study triangulated data sources and leveraged an outside researcher to conduct the analyses. The design to compare performance data from one cohort and perception data from a different cohort complicates direct causal inference, as there are likely different group dynamics, baseline skills, and instructional adaptations. In addition, while the final assessments offer evidence of content mastery, they may not entirely provide evidence for each isolated design principle.

Collectively, the CARE² model shows promising results, and further research is needed to evaluate its adaptability across diverse institutions, cultures, and technological contexts. Further research could include longitudinal studies to explore whether improvements in performance persist beyond one course. Another opportunity could be experimental decisions to isolate the impact of each design principle. Lastly, a call could be to expand the research within online or hybrid learning environments.

Conclusion

Multicultural learning experiences are important, and instructional designers should consider the integration of culture, among other learning pedagogy, when designing for international learners. This study used action research to create the CARE² model; the model emphasizes cultural, learner, and instructor responsiveness to support multicultural learning experiences. In a full-semester course, learners in the CARE² intervention group achieved significantly higher performance than controls, showing that sustained learning experiences aided with

knowledge acquisition. However, in micro-units, while performance gains were modest, learners reported clearer expectations and learning support, suggesting the model could enhance perceived structure and engagement even during short interventions. These findings highlight that culturally responsive design can influence both learning outcomes and learner perceptions, emphasizing the importance of intentional, context-sensitive instructional strategies.

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

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used to proofread and refine the manuscript's language. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity.

The authors used OpenAI to simplify the initial research questions in the paper for the presentation, then used those same simplified questions back in the paper, so they were the same between the presentation and the paper.

Qualitative analyses were conducted through inter-coder review, with final themes generated based on coder agreement, and automated validation using OpenAI 5o to strengthen reliability. The quantitative data included two final assessments and post-unit surveys, capturing knowledge-based outcomes and learner perceptions.

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

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Nostalgia in Porcelain: The Contemporary Role of Guangcai in Connecting, Craft, Place, and People in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The paper researches the meaning of "Made in Hong Kong" through an examination of Guangcai (Canton enamelled porcelain) industry in Hong Kong in the twenty first century. The research explores its role in Hong Kong nowadays, specifically, how it fulfills a sense of nostalgia and loss associated with Hong Kong. With case studies on porcelain pattern naming across British and Hong Kong factories, examines how nostalgia functions as a marketing tool in porcelain design, and how Hong Kong's craft industries have been shaped by, and contributed to global cultural flows. The paper would explore that craftsmanship is a tool for people to connect with a place, and nostalgia is a ruler to measure how deep the connection between people and place. In addition, the paper explores nostalgia as a Hong Kong phenomenon, further discussing whether nostalgia and city development are dialectical opposites. The discourse surrounding cultural heritage in Hong Kong often revolves around the ideas of the "dying" and "disappearing." Guangcai has acted as a Chinese export porcelain, fulfilling Chinoiserie demand in Europe and America, but today, that is not its role, it represents "Made in Hong Kong" product. Yet, there remains a group of collectors interested in acquiring these porcelain pieces, searching for something that embodies Hong Kong. Why does Hong Kong-made porcelain fascinate them? Are they purchasing the same idea of Chinoiserie, or has the essence of this fascination fundamentally changed? A central argument of the dissertation challenges the common perception of nostalgia as backward-looking or regressive. Instead, the paper frames nostalgia as a forward-looking force, one that enables individuals to reconnect with cultural memory, find continuity in times of change, and imagine alternative futures.

Keywords: nostalgia, made in Hong Kong, chinoiserie, Guangcai, Canton enamelled porcelain, twenty-first century

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Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the evolving role of Guangcai porcelain as an object "Made in Hong Kong," a material embodiment of nostalgia and a sense of loss connected to the city's past.

According to my observation, there is a wave of Hong Kong nostalgia actively taking place within the local community. Yet, culturally speaking, Hong Kong has long been a forward-looking city, one that typically resists engaging in what may be perceived as "backward-looking" sentiments. This raises the question: what emotional needs are being fulfilled by this growing enthusiasm for nostalgic themes?

In addition to civil society groups participating, the government has also offered support. Most notably, Guangcai (Canton enamelled porcelain) has recently been inscribed on the Hong Kong Intangible Cultural Heritage List as a traditional craft, listed as item no. 5.55. Hong Kong has undergone significant social transformations from the 1980s to the twentyfirst century. Following China's economic reform and opening-up, many factories in Hong Kong relocated to the mainland. At the same time, Hong Kong transitioned from a manufacturing-based economy to a global financial centre, leading to the decline of industries, including Guangcai porcelain production. While the city was once filled with porcelain factories, only one remains today, still operating under a traditional factory model. It is Yuet Tung China Works.

Guangcai Historical Background, Hong Kong Guangcai and Yuet Tung China Works

Guangcai porcelain boasts a history of over 300 years, renowned for its delicate brushwork, vibrant palette, and diverse themes. Initially, merchants sourced finished porcelain directly from Jingdezhen. To reduce transport costs, they later began importing undecorated white wares from Jingdezhen and commissioned local artisans in Guangzhou to paint designs tailored to foreign tastes. This new type of polychrome porcelain with overglazed technique made for export trade is known as Guangcai ware.

In the early twentieth century, turbulent political situation in mainland China, Canton manufacturers and painters relocated to Hong Kong to continue operating their Guangcai businesses in a colonial area. This migration not only reshaped the craft scene but also connected Guangcai with Hong Kong's emerging trading identity.

Therefore, Yuet Tung China Works is the first and the remaining porcelain factory in Hong Kong (Tso, 2023), and only one porcelain business keeps using factory production to update their business.

This paper has selected its most popular pattern, which stands out distinctly from other traditional Guangcai designs. Remarkably, this pattern has remained unchanged since its creation in the 1871s from the UK, and it became the best-selling design in the twentyfirst century Hong Kong. Through this pattern, this paper would explore the relationship between nostalgia, craftsmanship, people, and place. Craftsmanship is a tool for people to connect with places, and nostalgia is a ruler to measure the deep connection between people and place.

Furthermore, this paper will reflect on the broader trend of Hong Kong nostalgia as a cultural and emotional phenomenon with three case studies. Whether nostalgia and city development share a dialectical relationship.

Methodology

This study adopts a multi-method approach to investigate the shifting role of Guangcai porcelain in Hong Kong. The research combines interviews, object analysis, field observation, visual studies, and content analysis.

This dissertation investigates the cultural, emotional, and historical significance of Guangcai in the context of Hong Kong, with a particular focus on nostalgia and identity. Several key questions emerged:

- What constitutes the "taste" or "flavour" of Hong Kong?
- In a place without natural resources, what value does "Made in Hong Kong" represent?
- What emotional and cultural roles does Guangcai porcelain play in this narrative?
- Can nostalgia craft objects become a medium through which individuals connect with a place?
- How do people find emotional meaning or personal identity through nostalgic consumption?

The Origins of "Made in Hong Kong"

If the paper needs to investigate the nostalgia phenomenon in Hong Kong, it must first understand what is being remembered. This section chronicles the emergence of the label "Made in Hong Kong," outlining its historical, industrial, and political background.

Starting from the early twentieth century to 1949; goods were not yet differentiated between "Made in China" and "Made in Hong Kong." Instead, global markets typically classified products as either "national goods" (goods from Chinese folk) or "foreign goods" (goods from western countries) (Wong, 2025, p. 38). So, where does the "Made in Hong Kong" label come from?

The economy of Hong Kong at that time relied heavily as a free port, importing goods from China and then exporting them to the rest of the world.

However, between the 1950 and 1953, as the Korean War in the Cold War began. That prompted the USA and The United Nations to impose an embargo on China, even export goods were labelled as "Made in China" or even associated with Chinese raw materials.

To maintain the economy, the concept of "Made in Hong Kong" began (Wong, 2025, p. 47). "Made in Hong Kong" identity was shaped by historical circumstances, and it also led to the golden age of Guangcai in Hong Kong.

Guangcai industries got a high demand order from the 1950s. As the embargo cut off the remaining channels to purchase Chinese-style porcelain, that became a booster of Guangcai consumption. When something is on the brink of being lost, people often develop a heightened desire to preserve it before it disappears.

In the 1980s, when China reopened its borders and the embargo was lifted, many Hong Kong manufacturers began to move northward, attracted by lower labour and rental costs.

Hong Kong factories declined and eventually almost vanished (Wong, 2023).

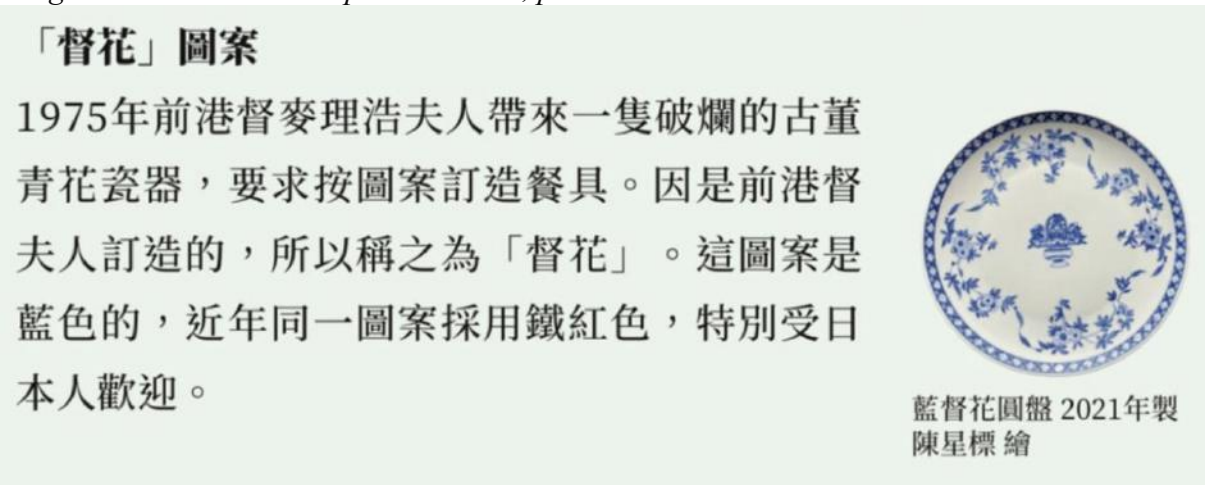
Nevertheless, in the late 1970s, many western customers came to Hong Kong to search for objects that embodied Chinese aesthetics. The few remaining manufacturers in Hong Kong still receive some orders. At that time, the porcelain was often deliberately made to imitate Chinese antiques (HKCRS Ceramics, 2020).

The Story of "Governor" (督花) Pattern and Porcelain Nostalgia

Undoubtedly, the China chic in the West during the 1970s helped to save the declining Canton enamel industry in Hong Kong. The Yuet Tung China Works was able to continue its operations.

Figure 1
Exhibition Catalogue of a Glimpse of Guangcai Porcelain (Tso, 2023), Hong Kong, Yuet Tung China Works 4-13 September 2023, p. 2

Figure 2
Exhibition Catalogue of a Glimpse of Guangcai Porcelain (Tso, 2023), Hong Kong, Yuet Tung China Works 4-13 September 2023, p. 4



Note. A description of "Governor" (督花) pattern in catalogue page.

Opening the catalogue book (Tso, 2023) of Yuet Tung China Works, it shows most of their popular Guangcai products. There is no doubt that Canton rose, dragon, and chicken motifs are painted with famille rose colour; those are the classical patterns of Guangcai (Figure 1). However, one of the plates is blue and white style (Figure 2) (Tso, 2023).

The products description next to the product photo state:

> Governor' Pattern (督花)
> Before 1975, the wife of the former Governor of Hong Kong, Lady MacLehose, brought in a damaged antique blue-and-white porcelain piece and requested that tableware be custom-made based on its pattern. Because the commission came from the Governor's wife, the pattern came to be known as the 'Governor' (督花). The pattern is in blue, though in recent years the same design has also been rendered in iron-red, which has become especially popular among Japanese customers. Blue Governor's Flower Plate, made in 2021 - Painted by Chan Sing Biu. (Tso, 2023, p. 2)

During the interview with Yuet Tung China Works, the owner Joseph told me that he remembers Lady Margaret Noel MacLehose arrived privately, not a public activity. Also, from the Government archive (HKRS, 1971) about her, there are no any of her records about it. Her private action shows her inner taste. To discuss an individual's taste, it is essential to draw on Bourdieu's (1996) concept of habitus. Taste is formed through one's ability to discern and appreciate different lifestyles and everyday objects, which is a process that implicitly defines one's class. Thus, taste itself becomes a marker of social hierarchy. Lady Margaret Noel MacLehose was born into an elite family, and her education and social status cultivated a predisposition toward high-end taste.

What Kinds of Nostalgic Naming

Through research on the history of English ware, there are at least 7 English porcelain factories or China works companies selling this motif. They were developed after the industrial revolution and started in the nineteenth century.

High business competition makes branding become important. For separating those same motif porcelain produced from each factory, naming is the method of marketing. This section would focus on three ceramic manufacturers: Minton, Birks Rawlins & Co, and Yuet Tung China Works. Each of them named their patterns respectively as Delft, Hogarth, and Governor. These naming choices reveal three distinct types of nostalgia, reflecting different historical imaginaries and engagements with the past across both European and Hong Kong contexts.

"Delft," is the name Minton factory put on the pattern in response to the Dutch delftware. Delft is a manufacturing place in Dutch for China porcelain, especially in the seventeenth century. The pattern was registered on 17 September 1871 (Figure 3). Besides, similar flower basket pattern can be found in Kraak porcelain in the eighteenth century and Tea service 1725–45 (Ganse, 2008, p. 116). That shows the imitation in Minton's motif design from Dutch design. Flower basket patterns can also be found from middle Ming and Qing dynasty China pottery (Tie, 2002).

This represents a form of imagined nostalgia (2005), it means a non-personal, abstract sense of longing that draws upon an idealized past of craftsmanship. It appealed particularly to the tastes of the European middle classes in the post-industrial era, who sought comfort in the imagined virtues of a "better time." (Grainge, 2000, pp. 27–34).

Figure 3
Document SD 1705/MS810 of Certificate of Registration of Design at the Patent Office. There Is a Motif From Minton With Registered Number 25849

Source: Stoke-on-Trent City Archives

In contrast, Birks Rawlins & Co's choice of Hogarth (Figure 4) as a pattern name embodies a kind of nostalgia in culture. Referring to the eighteenth-century English artist William Hogarth, the name signals a return to the moral and visual culture of Enlightenment-era Britain. This form of nostalgia seeks to reconstruct a collective cultural identity, aligning with what Boym (2001) terms "restorative nostalgia" which is an attempt to restore and reaffirm national values through shared cultural memory.

Figure 4
Same Set of Plate From Lady MacLehose, Photo by Miyuki Kume. Screenshot of an Instagram Post Featuring Showing Birks Rawlins & Co. Plate and Hogarth Label, 2025 mkkhk2 (@mkkhk2, 27 April, 2025)

Note. This is the object post which was collected by Miyuki Kume on her Hong Kong product archive.

Yuet Tung China Works' Governor pattern (Figure 5) represents a third kind of nostalgia related to place-based or identity. According to local accounts, the pattern was introduced to Hong Kong in the 1970s by Lady MacLehose, the pattern evoked a nostalgic attachment to colonial-era Hong Kong, blending material memory with emotional investment in place and identity. This corresponds to what Pickering and Keightley (2006) describe as experiential nostalgia which they mention nostalgia grounded in embodied and locational experiences. The naming of the Governor reflects a local interpretation of a specific cultural symbol from the colonial era. It represents a memory unique to Hong Kong people, rather than a global one.

Figure 5

Governor Pattern in Blue, Iron Red and Green Colour. Interview With Yuet Tung China Works on 30 April 2025, the Owner Showing They Have Different Colour Plates. Yuet Tung China Works Kowloon Bay Factory, Photograph Taken by Author on 30 April 2025

These naming strategies illustrate how porcelain design serves as a cultural medium through which different modes of remembering and longing are constructed. They are not only reflecting market positioning but also reveal how the past is selectively summoned and reimagined through design. Thus, nostalgia operates not merely as sentiment, but as a structuring force that shapes emotional connections, as reflected in the naming of these objects.

Nostalgia, Taste, and the Twenty-First Century Consumption

What things you feel are more valuable, which way you feel important and want to keep it? Guangcai was a Chinese export porcelain, as an export object, but following the economic change, it cannot pick this role anymore. Now it has become a nostalgic object in Hong Kong. According to the question from the beginning in the introduction paragraph, "How do people find emotional meaning through nostalgic consumption?," "Guangcai" as a "Made in Hong Kong" historical object, it would help to answer those questions by three case studies.

Purchasing Governor Porcelain as a Form of High-End Nostalgia

According to the Yuet Tung China Works catalogue, a number of Japanese customers arrived at Yuet Tung China Works to purchase governor porcelain (Tso, 2023). And from Kume's book (Kume, 2025), they purchased it because it connected with Peninsula Hotel Hong Kong. Governor motif porcelain presence in the hotel's guest room tea sets made it even more familiar

to the public and embedded it in the collective memory of luxury. It is the changing point that this pattern from blue colour to iron red colour but still represents luxury.

The Order From Peninsula Hotel Hong Kong

The Peninsula Hotel and its connections to upper-class culture and it is a significant historical building that has consistently represented Hong Kong from its early days to the present.

According to British historian Peter Hibbard (2020), who has researched the development of China's tourism industry for over thirty years, his interview on RTHK podcast (Hibbard, 2020) pointed out that one of the most significant periods for The Peninsula's aesthetics was between the 1920s to 1950s, when the hotel embodied the splendour of a modern British empire.

This elite pricing discouraged Chinese locals from entering the building. In its early days, most guests were Westerners, as many Chinese resisted entering such a symbol of social class divide. Entering and participating in life within luxury hotels became a symbol of social status.

After 1975, a representative from The Peninsula visited Yuet Tung China Works to place an order for tea sets (Figures 6), which were to be used in guest rooms and for afternoon tea.

Case Study 1 - Two Groups of Japanese Customers

The largest customers consist of Japanese women. Why are they fascinated by this style of porcelain, even though they don't come from a chinoiserie background?

To explore this question, those Japanese customers would be studied into two groups. One group consists of tourists, whose lives are only loosely connected to Hong Kong. The other group includes long-term Japanese-Hong Kong residents, who have lived in Hong Kong for over a few decades and have integrated the city into their everyday lives. Each group seeks a different kind of nostalgia to fulfil their emotional needs.

The pattern was once used by the luxury Peninsula Hotel, and with the help of Japanese magazine promotion (*Osusume No Mise*, 2023), it became associated with a kind of romantic imagination of colonial Hong Kong.

It is a form of armchair nostalgia (2005) which also means a sentimental longing for a place they have never personally experienced. Tourists purchase it as a souvenir symbolising that imagined "old Hong Kong." For the Japanese women who have lived and worked in Hong Kong for around thirty years, the meaning is slightly different. Beyond the desire to own a piece of the romanticised "old Hong Kong," they are also searching for traces of their own past, for something that represents a chapter of their own lives in this city. This form of nostalgia aligns with the concept of identificatory nostalgia (Bonnett & Alexander, 2013), rooted in participation and belonging.

It also resonates with Jan Willem Duyvendak (2011) idea of "immigrant nostalgia," which highlights the emotional and symbolic connections that migrants form with the places where they have built their lives and careers.

Figure 6
The Peninsula Hotel Tea Set, Yuet Tung China Works, Photo Taken by Author in Yuet Tung China Works Kowloon Bay Factory on 30 April 2025

Case Study - 2 The Tao Fong Shan Christian Art House

Beside Yuet Tung China Works, the Tao Fong Shan Christian Art House is an organized craft workshop and gift shop (Figures 7) under the historical and east-west style architecture Christian church. It is because they ran the Guangcai factory in 1947s, meeting the golden age of Hong Kong Guangcai. It once participated in the porcelain export industry to sustain its operations.

Traditional crafts often labelled as "dying," are frequently transformed into interest-based workshops or tourist activities. But this raises an important question: What makes this unique, and what distinguishes it from commercialized cultural activities? Tao Fong Shan's Guangcai craft workshops are not merely about the reproduction of a technique or the revival of a cultural tradition on a technical level. Rather, they exemplify what Svetlana Boym (2001) calls "restorative nostalgia." This church is an attempt to bring the past back into the present through lived practice. Here, craft is not just commodified; it becomes a part of spiritual and cultural transmission.

Figure 7
Qing Xi Tea Cup, Picture From Book Lam Duen Shan Ming, Narrated by Tam Chi Hung, the Golden Age of Canton Porcelain, Hong Kong: The Commercial Press (Hong Kong) Ltd, 2023, p. 10

Note. The picture shows the governor pattern.

Case Study 3 – Peep Project

Beside these two cases, when we discuss nostalgia, it is often associated with preserving tradition. Perhaps the real question is: What does traditional craftsmanship mean in today's society? Does preserving it always have to mean keeping it unchanged?

It is a type of longing for tradition that is not necessarily rooted in direct lived experience or collective historical memory.

This kind of nostalgia isn't just about clinging to the past. Instead, it can also be understood as a method for seeking new possibilities — a way of looking backwards to move forward.

The final case study examines the Peep Project, an illustration brand founded by Victoria in Hong Kong. In collaboration with Yuet Tung China Works and a Japanese fashion brand, Victoria has created limited edition porcelain products and led workshops that merge her artistic style with traditional Guangcai techniques. According to a WhatsApp voice message interview conducted on 23 April 2025, Victoria emphasized her intention to express a sense of Hong Kong nostalgia through her work. She selected white vases with a visual tone reminiscent of the 1980s, onto which she painted her own illustrations using overglaze enamel techniques.

While Victoria acknowledged that she does not fully understand the historical or cultural context of traditional Guangcai patterns, she described her emotional connection to floral motifs like peonies and chrysanthemums, which remind her of household items from her childhood, such as thermos flasks and calendars seen at her grandfather's home. To her, nostalgia is not only about retro imagery, but also about the emotional resonance of personal memory and loss. She draws from everyday experiences in 1990s Hong Kong, including local corner stores and gacha toys, to reconstruct a sentimental connection to the past.

However, this form of engagement is more intuitive and aesthetic than historically informed.

This nostalgic sensibility clearly aligns with what Appadurai (2005) terms "imagined nostalgia" or "armchair nostalgia," they also refer to a type of longing that is not necessarily rooted in direct lived experience or collective historical memory. Instead, it is constructed through symbolic imagery and affective associations. As he notes, contemporary culture increasingly invites viewers to "bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she has never suffered." This kind of nostalgia, often mobilized in branding and visual culture, does not depend on historical knowledge but on the emotional recognizability of the past. In Victoria's case, her reinterpretation of Guangcai porcelain is shaped more by personal imagination than by a deep connection to the craft's cultural origins. Nonetheless, her work reveals how nostalgia, especially in global and post-industrial contexts, can operate through aesthetic forms that simulate memory and belonging, even in the absence of historical understanding.

Figure 8

Screenshot of 3 Posts Featuring Peep Project Cooperation With Yuet Tung China Works, 2022 Peep Project (@peep project, 25 October, 2024)

Note. This is the product image post. An illustrator peep project hand painting her illustration on porcelain by using Guangcai technique.

Is this still a taste of Hong Kong nostalgia? Perhaps it is because they were imagined, created, and made in Hong Kong by someone living in the city. The nostalgia here is not about preserving an authentic past, but about actively reimagining it through the lens of personal memory, imagination, and place-based creation.

Hong Kong is a forward-looking city, and tends not to dwell on the past or keep old things. With limited natural resources, its craftsmanship has never been rooted in materials or fixed conventions. If there are no strict rules to follow, then why not combine existing elements to create something new?

As discussed in the last section, Minton & Co.'s so-called *"new"* design, *Delft*, was in fact a creative fusion that incorporated elements from Chinese porcelain. By reinterpreting these influences into their own original aesthetic, the company not only crafted a distinctive design identity but also strategically marketed it through a nostalgic lens. In doing so, they transformed historical references into a *"new"* product. One that looked backward in order to move forward. Nostalgia, in this case, was not a retreat into the past, but a deliberate design strategy for renewal and progress.

If innovation is allowed within traditional craftsmanship, then that is how tradition is preserved, by reflecting the values unique to Hong Kong. Therefore, nostalgia is not just looking back, but as a way to move forward.

Conclusion

The original question of this paper was, "What is the role of the Guangcai industry in Hong Kong nowadays?" Specifically, how can it fulfil a sense of nostalgia and loss associated with Hong Kong? The paper started by chronicling Hong Kong industry development.

"Made in Hong Kong" was not about what could be seen or physically handled, such as: the raw materials, or production process or technique. It was a result of the geopolitical circumstances caused by the Korean War in the Cold War. From the early twentieth century to

1970s era, Guangcai still acted the role of "Chinese export porcelain" produced in Hong Kong to fulfil chinoiserie demand.

"Made in Hong Kong" shares a similar trajectory with the Guangcai porcelain "Governor pattern." Comparing two other English porcelain with the same pattern, showed that the value of craftsmanship was not born out of technological innovation or new designs, but rather shaped by geopolitical forces and cultural flows. The key question is "How does design foster a sense of bonding between people and place?" By examining the naming strategies of three porcelain factories, Minton, Birks Rawlins & Co, and Hong Kong's Yuet Tung China Works, who named their patterns respectively Delft, Hogarth, and Governor, it was revealed that each was situated within a different historical and cultural framework, and reflected three distinct types of nostalgia, shaping emotional connections, as reflected in the naming of these objects. The key was the triangle relation between craft, people and place. Craftsmanship is a tool for people to connect with a place, and nostalgia is a ruler to measure the depth of connection between you and the place.

Last section explored nostalgia in Hong Kong in the early twenty-first century through three case studies. The role of Guangcai in Hong Kong becomes a domestic product for internal sales, not an export product now. The first case study examined how Guangcai nostalgia consumption represents high-end nostalgia because of The Peninsula Hotel Hong Kong. The hotel group ordered a set of Governor pattern tea set. It directly fulfils emotions for a group of long-term Japanese Hong Kong residents. The second case study explored how Guangcai craft is restorative nostalgia consumption in The Tao Fong Shan Christian Art House, where they organize craft workshops under the historical and east - west style architecture Christian church. The third case study explored a Guangcai cooperation with a local illustration brand that creates imagined nostalgic objects. Imagined nostalgic objects might seem superficial or kitschy, but is it just that negative? In my paper, imagined nostalgia has been proved that it carries positive value. It can break free traditional cultural baggage; hence, these nostalgic forms act as a speculative tool for exploring future design directions. In this way, the concept combines existing "things" and creates new "things." Although Hong Kong is often seen as a "forward-looking" city with little interest in "looking backward," this forward momentum need not reject nostalgia. As such, the reinterpretation of Guangcai in these examples suggests the emergence of a new category, can be termed "Kongcai (港彩)" or "Hong Kong ware" which is representing both continuity and change.

Hong Kong Guangcai development in the twenty-first century has been overlooked, and the "Governor" pattern has no scholarly research on it. My paper filled this history gap. Nostalgia in Hong Kong is always treated as a commercial gimmick and Hong Kong Guangcai is always being promoted as a "dying" and "disappearing" industry. My paper challenged these concepts through rethinking the relationship of nostalgia and this porcelain. Hong Kong Guangcai is not dying but transferring its roles from Chinese export product to "Made in Hong Kong" product, and from exploring chinoiserie to exploring Hong Kong culture.

The nostalgia consumption phenomenon in Hong Kong is not opposite with Hong Kong's value. Instead, it offers a culturally embedded mode of continuity, helping individuals and communities to navigate the tension between remembering and adapting. Thus, Guangcai becomes more than a ware or export porcelain, or an object experiencing old Hong Kong. It becomes a medium through which people negotiate their place in the present while envisioning a future rooted in care, cultural connection, and emotional resonance.

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

The author declares that Grammarly, an Al-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 Al-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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Communication Intervention: From Civil Society Diplomacy to Sustainable Business Growth

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Abstract

This paper explores various forms of communication intervention employed by corporations and government institutions to address strategic issues and foster constructive relationships with the public and key stakeholders. The interventions include civil society diplomacy, which highlights the active role of digital communities in influencing public discourse and institutional reputation; event-based approaches aimed at education and engagement; normative approaches rooted in institutional governance and formal procedures; and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies as structured expressions of social commitment. This study employs a qualitative research methodology utilising a case study technique to examine the activities of organisations like BCA, PT Pupuk Indonesia, PT Samudera Indonesia, Telkomsel, Djarum Foundation, and Kitabisa. The results of these interventions (societal impact, investment flows, and sustainable business growth) are analysed to comprehend how communication methods enhance organisational performance. The results show that strategic communication is not only a way to deal with crises, but also an important way to promote long-term social and economic sustainability.

Keywords: case study, civil society diplomacy, communication intervention, organizational legitimacy, sustainable business growth

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Introduction

In the modern business landscape, the legitimacy and survival of an organization are no longer determined solely by financial performance. Sustainable growth requires a delicate balance between economic profit and social, environmental, and ethical responsibilities. To achieve this, organizations must move beyond traditional public relations strategies toward proactive communication intervention. This study defines communication intervention not only as a crisis response strategy but also as a mode of business diplomacy that involves civil society to obtain operational authorisation. Corporate diplomacy has been a significant subject in public relations research because to its tight association with relationship-building (Ingenhoff & Marschlich, 2019; Mogensen, 2017; White & Alkandari, 2019).

The necessity of moving from reactive measures to diplomatic engagement is evident in the Indonesian context, where corporations face significant challenges in trust, regulation, and global instability. PT Bank Central Asia Tbk (BCA) PT Pupuk Indonesia (Persero), Telkomsel, Djarum Foundation, PT Samudera Indonesia, and Kitabisa.com have demonstrated how strategic communication underpins reputation.

The first challenge lies in security and consumer protection in the financial sector. Cybercrime, such as skimming and social engineering fraud, is a constant threat to PT Bank Central Asia Tbk (BCA). This puts its mandate under Law No.24 of 2004 at risk. To counter this, BCA implements preventive communication interventions. The second challenge is sustainable growth requires solving structural inefficiencies through empowerment. PT Pupuk Indonesia (Persero) addresses the issue of subsidized fertilizer inefficiency by shifting from a distribution focus to a solution-based approach. Similarly, Telkomsel as Indonesian telecommunication company, addresses the dual challenge of digital inequality and climate change. The "Telkomsel Jaga Bumi" program and the rollout of 5G show that communication may lead to both technological progress and environmental protection. The company is working to meet Indonesia's net-zero emissions goals while also growing its business.

The next challenge involves navigating regulatory and ethical friction with public interest groups. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) accused the Djarum Foundation, a long-standing charitable organization, of using children in their badminton auditions to promote tobacco brands, citing Government Regulations (PP) No. 109 of 2012. The conflict threatened to dismantle a decades-old sports development program. Here, the communication intervention took the form of high-level negotiation and adaptation.

Furthermore, communication interventions also focus on maintaining trust within the digital civil society. As the digital economy grows, so does the fragility of public trust. Kitabisa.com, Indonesia's largest crowdfunding platform, faced a critical "trust deficit" when fraudulent campaigns, such as the case of a user named Singgih Sahara engaging in alleged donation fraud, exposed vulnerabilities in the system. The problem was existential: if civil society loses faith in the platform's integrity, the business collapses. Finally, organizations must manage global macro-environmental volatility. PT Samudera Indonesia faced a 73% surge in shipping rates and severe logistical disruption in 2024 due to geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea.

This diverse phenomenon is observed across corporations through targeted communication activities. This paper argues that the journey to sustainable business growth is paved with communication interventions. This study illustrates the transformation of potential conflicts into enduring organisational values through the examination of the shift from civil society

engagement (Kitabisa.com, Djarum Foundation) to systemic resilience (BCA, PT Pupuk Indonesia, Telkomsel) and global adaptation (PT Samudera Indonesia).

Literature Review

Communication Intervention

Intervention communication, as indicated in the sources, delineates strategic messaging and professional involvement aimed at altering stakeholder perceptions, behaviours, and outcomes in several contexts, including public health, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and crisis management. These kinds of interventions work by changing information to fit certain socio-ecological or cultural codes, which makes the environment more responsive to participation (Illia et al., 2025). In crisis communication, intervention tactics are fluid, necessitating that professionals proactively anticipate and adjust to changing dynamics as new information alters views of crisis blame and causation (Jong, 2025). Interventions that seek to enhance organisational legitimacy typically employ a blend of communication strategies, including information visibility, organisational listening, and cross-sector partnerships. Effective listening and collaboration with government entities are essential for attaining elevated pragmatic legitimacy (Fu & Wang, 2024). These several instances illustrate that communication intervention primarily involves strategically constructing meaning, influencing behaviour, and modifying organisational outputs to attain specific engagement objectives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method with a case study approach. By utilizing open-ended questions and the flexibility to probe for further details, the in-depth interview method allows for comprehensive understanding Communication Intervention as part of Corporate Diplomacy. The research subjects include public relations experts (the Chairman of PAFI) and PR Managers of heads of communication departments from companies recognized in the 2023 The Iconomics Corporate Reputation Awards. This award evaluates corporate reputation based on three paramaters: business & commercial reputation; people & leadership reputation; and social & citizen reputation. The complete list of selected companies is presented in Table 1:

Table 1
List of Research Subjects

No	Company	Category
1	PT Bank Central Asia	Bank
2	PT Pupuk Indonesia (Persero)	Petrochemical – Fertilizer
3	Djarum Bakti Olahraga	Philantrophy Foundation
4	Telkomsel Indonesia	Telecommunication
5	PT Samudera Indonesia	Shipping, Port and Logistics
6	Kitabisa.com	Startup Galang Dana dan Donasi

Interviews were conducted using an interview guide consisting six sections: (1) informant profile; (2) target stakeholders in communication activities, including issues, motivations, and implementation strategies for building positive relationships; (3) planning and execution of communication program; (4) spesific diplomatic or communication tactics; (5) challenges encountered in communication interventions.

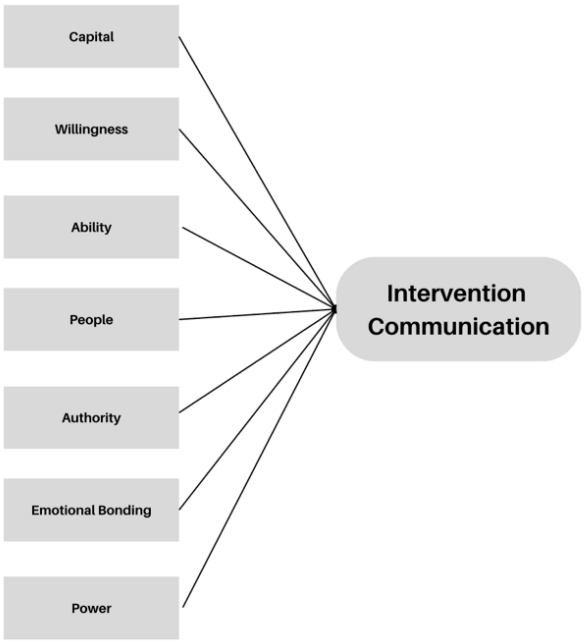
Data analysis was performed using the dominant analysis techniques proposed by (Yin, 2014). The analysis involved: (1) pattern matching, which includes nonequivalent dependent variables as pattern, rival explanations as a pattern, and simpler patterns; (2) explanation building; (3) time-series analysis. In practice, the process began by establishing main categories of communication intervention based deductively on the research questions and the interview guide. Atlas.ti was utilized as the qualitative daya analysis tool.

Results and Discussion

Communication Intervention Techniques

The effectiveness of communication intervention within corporate diplomacy relies on the strategic mobilization of distinct organizational resources and behavioral attributes (Marschlich, 2022). This study identifies seven critical factors: Capital, Willingness, Ability, People, Authority, Emotional Bonding, and Power. These key elements as dynamic intervention techniques to navigate complex stakeholder landscapes. These factors allow organizations to not only manage reputation but also to influence decisions and foster deep-seated engagement. The following analysis details how each factor is operationally defined and applied by the observed entities to secure organizational legitimacy and drive sustainable growth.

Figure 1
Key Elements of Communication Intervention



Capital serves as the fundamental foundation supporting various communication strategies, ranging from formal collaborations to informal relationship building. For instance, Kitabisa utilizes capital to foster media relations and professional networks through flexible budget allocations for informal hospitality, such as dining with stakeholders to ensure positive information dissemination. Similarly, PT Pupuk Indonesia leverages financial resources for "premium networking" and strategic lobbying. Their capital is directed toward exclusive activities (such as golf, travel, and entertainment) to cultivate close ties with key partners and

support their needs. Both cases demonstrate how financial resources are instrumental in facilitating both flexible and exclusive relationship-building efforts. In contrast, Djarum Foundation Bakti Olahraga directs its capital toward sponsorship investments and cross-group collaborations involving entities like Blibli, BCA, and Polytron. Rather than serving as mere business expenditures, these sponsorships act as strategic tools to cultivate a positive corporate image through high-impact activities. Although the foundation operates on a non-profit basis, the deployment of capital for social initiatives effectively reinforces the wider group's reputation. Thus, for Djarum, capital functions as a mechanism for strengthening organizational legitimacy (Troy et al., 2025) through social contribution (Johnston & Lane, 2018).

Willingness is manifested through the readiness, commitment, and proactive attitude of organizations to fulfill the specific needs and interests of their stakeholders. In the corporate and digital sectors, this is evident where communication intervention techniques leverage transparency and user-centric innovation to foster trust. PT Bank Central Asia (BCA) demonstrates this through a strategy of Information Provision and Transparency, ensuring open access to performance data via digital platforms and public reports to enhance credibility with investors and customers. Similarly, Kitabisa shows its willingness through Innovation to Enhance Donor Convenience, utilizing features like automatic donations and a user-friendly interface. By proactively adapting to user needs without compromising comfort, Kitabisa lowers barriers to participation, thereby increasing donor engagement and ensuring the sustainability of their social impact. In the philanthropic and governmental spheres, willingness takes the form of resilience, integrity, and structured collaboration. The Djarum Foundation exhibits Transparency and Courage in facing public challenges, such as the dispute with KPAI; by maintaining open dialogue while adhering to its core vision, it demonstrates a commitment to principle that allows its sports development programs to survive regulatory friction.

Ability functions as a strategic intervention technique that reflects an organization's capacity to identify, implement, and evaluate effective measures to achieve its objectives. This capability is exemplified by BCA, which fosters stakeholder trust through rigorous transparency, utilizing quarterly performance reports to counter potential skepticism with verifiable data. Similarly, the Djarum Foundation leverages its operational ability to mitigate negative industry perceptions by diversifying into non-tobacco sectors and investing in athlete development, effectively shifting the narrative toward national achievement. Furthermore, Telkomsel demonstrates this competence through a research-driven communication strategy, using empirical data to tailor its diplomacy and prevent miscommunication. Collectively, these approaches illustrate how distinct organizational abilities are successfully deployed to manage stakeholder perceptions and ensure organizational effectiveness.

People functions as a strategic intervention technique that leverages human capital to achieve organizational objectives. This approach is exemplified by BCA, which mobilizes a broad network of individuals, including anti-hoax communities, IT experts, and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), to collaboratively educate customers and mitigate cybersecurity risks. Conversely, Samudera Indonesia focuses on internal dynamics by recruiting high-energy individuals capable of thriving under pressure to navigate complex operational challenges. Together, these cases illustrate that effective “People” intervention relies on optimizing the specific roles of individuals to either foster public vigilance or ensure operational agility.

Authority serves as a strategic intervention technique that utilizes leadership dynamics, regulatory adherence, and hierarchical division to achieve organizational objectives. This is demonstrated by Samudera Indonesia, which applies "flexible leadership," where a fluid, approachable CEO fosters a collaborative environment that balances direct instruction with employee input to enhance efficiency. In contrast, Kitabisa frames authority through strict regulatory compliance, using legal adherence to maintain the legitimacy of its nonprofit operations while ensuring user-centric transparency. Meanwhile, PT Pupuk Indonesia utilizes authority through rigid hierarchical segmentation, assigning specialized roles (such as Corporate Secretary and Public Advocacy) to manage distinct stakeholder groups precisely. Collectively, these cases illustrate that authority is not merely about command but about structuring power, whether through fluid collaboration, legal discipline, or functional specialization, to ensure operational clarity and effectiveness.

Emotional Bonding functions as a strategic intervention technique designed to forge deep psychological connections between an organization and its audiences by aligning corporate actions with human values and needs. This approach is illustrated by Kitabisa, which respects the spiritual privacy of its donors by avoiding ostentatious features like "annual recaps," thereby prioritizing user comfort over gamification. Similarly, the Djarum Foundation cultivates emotional investment through the inculcation of ethical values, teaching athletes respect and "togetherness" to foster a lifelong sense of belonging and pride within their ecosystem. Meanwhile, Pupuk Indonesia builds bonding through consistency, maintaining routine, non-transactional interactions to ensure relationships are perceived as genuine rather than opportunistic. Collectively, these examples demonstrate that effective emotional bonding (whether through respecting donor humility, instilling shared values, or ensuring consistent engagement) is essential for securing long-term trust and loyalty.

Power serves as a critical communication intervention technique defined by an organization's capacity to influence, direct, or control stakeholder decisions. This is exemplified by the Djarum Foundation, which asserts power through autonomy and internal capability, maintaining its dominance in the badminton sector independent of government support and resisting external pressure (such as regulatory interference) to preserve its strategic self-determination. In contrast, Pupuk Indonesia exercises power through strategic alliances with state authority, leveraging relationships with high-ranking security officials (police and military) to secure operations and enforce stability in subsidized fertilizer distribution. Together, these cases illustrate that power can be wielded either through self-sufficient dominance or through the strategic mobilization of external enforcement networks to ensure organizational stability.

Types of Communication Intervention

Effective communication intervention is not a monolithic practice but rather a multidimensional strategy comprising four distinct yet interconnected approaches. There are four types: (1). Civil Society Diplomacy; (2). Normative Government Approach; (3) Event-based Engagement; (4) CSR Strategies.

First, the emergence of Civil Society Diplomacy highlights a power shift where authority is no longer vertical but distributed across digital networks. For example, by reinforcing a "customer-focus" mindset and launching massive educational campaign like "Awas Modus" and "#TolakDenganAnggun" BCA engages stakeholders not just as consumers, but as partners in security. This aligns with their sustainability mission, proving that effective

intervention protects both the customer's funds and the bank's long-term viability. This form of intervention underscores the active role of digital communities in shaping public discourse and determining institutional reputation. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which operates between formal entities, this approach relies on the dynamism of digital activism (Adria, 2020), online communities, and crowdfunding networks. Here, the organization does not merely broadcast messages but engages in a negotiated dialogue with a digitally empowered public, where legitimacy is granted or withdrawn based on real-time responsiveness and community alignment (Sung et al., 2025).

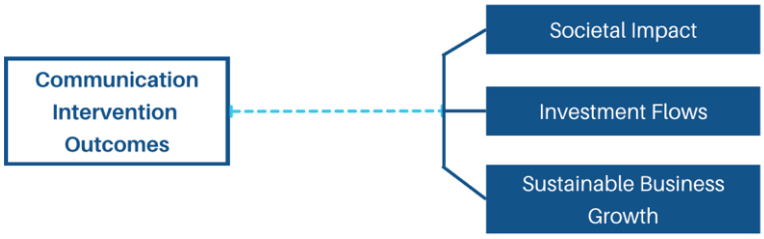
In contrast to the fluidity of civil society engagement, Normative Government Approaches provide the structural backbone of communication intervention. This approach embeds communication within rigid institutional procedures and ethical standards. Particularly for government bodies and regulated industries, communication is less about persuasion and more about demonstrating adherence to transparency, accountability, and regulation. By anchoring communication in normative frameworks, institutions aim to build trust through consistency and procedural integrity, ensuring that their license to operate is legally and ethically secured. For example, through mediation with multiple ministries (Kemenko PMK, Kemenkes, Kemenpora) and dialogue with the public, Djarum Foundation pivoted its strategy, altering the audition format to ensure compliance while sustaining its commitment to athlete development. Furthermore, PT Samudera Indonesia collaborated with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), port authorities, and global partners; the company optimized logistics and ensured compliance with safety standards. This engagement minimized supply chain disruptions, securing the company's competitiveness amidst global inflation risks. Moreover, the solution employed was a transparent communication intervention. Kitabisa.com engaged in diplomatic restoration by closing the accused account, issuing public clarification via PR management, and collaborating with regulators like the Financial Services Authority (OJK) and the Ministry of Social Affairs. This shift from defensive silence to active collaboration illustrates the role of diplomacy in restoring the digital ecosystem. This case exemplifies how corporate diplomacy resolves conflicts between corporate branding (Rees, 2020) and social regulation (Mulej et al., 2021).

Bridging the gap between digital fluidity and formal structure is Event-Based Engagement. This approach humanizes the organization through direct, experiential interaction. By utilizing seminars, workshops, public talks, and cultural events, organizations move beyond abstract messaging to foster tangible connections. This form of intervention serves a dual purpose: it acts as a platform for education – transferring knowledge and values – and as a mechanism for relationship building, allowing stakeholders to experience the organization’s culture firsthand.

Finally, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Strategies represent the most structured expression of communication intervention regarding long-term impact. Rather than sporadic gestures, these are organized programs that operationalize social and environmental commitments. For example, through the “Agro Solution” program and partnerships with universities, PT Pupuk Indonesia engages farmers actively, providing technology and education. Through CSR, communication ceases to be just words and becomes action, directly supporting community welfare and long-term sustainability (Mulej et al., 2021). This strategy validates the organization's purpose, proving that its economic goals are aligned with the broader well-being of the ecosystem in which it operates.

Communication Intervention Outcomes

Figure 2
Communication Intervention Outcomes



Societal impact represents the tangible contribution of communication interventions toward community empowerment, ecosystem development, and sustainable development. This outcome is evident in BCA's #BuktiBaktiBCA campaign, which fosters a sustainable cycle of positive influence by encouraging active community participation in social preservation. Similarly, Kitabisa leverages transparency to build public trust, creating a "snowball effect" that amplifies social awareness and contribution. In the realm of human capital, the Djarum Foundation strengthens social solidarity and individual potential through a sustainable sports ecosystem that supports athletes beyond their active careers. Meanwhile, Telkomsel drives societal impact through digital transformation, ensuring equitable access to education and environmental awareness through its CSR initiatives (Rasche et al., 2017). Collectively, these interventions demonstrate how strategic communication extends beyond corporate reputation to foster long-term social resilience (Aksak et al., 2016).

Investment flow serves as a strategic outcome where effective communication intervention validates an organization's economic significance to the state and society (Kaplan et al., 2022). As illustrated by the perspective on several corporations, this outcome is achieved by clearly articulating corporate contributions to national development, such as GDP growth, tax revenue, and job creation. Consequently, transparent communication regarding these shared economic benefits secures the sociopolitical legitimacy required to facilitate smoother capital inflows and foster an environment conducive to future business expansion.

Sustainable Business growth serves as a tangible outcome of communication intervention, manifested through strategic market expansion (Rexhepi et al., 2013), product diversification, and technological innovation. This is evident in Samudera Indonesia's bold entry into the cruise segment and Kitabisa's evolution into a multi-service holding group with international reach in South Asia. Similarly, Pupuk Indonesia utilizes diplomatic communication to forge partnerships in green technology, while the Djarum Foundation leverages extensive sports sponsorship to broaden its brand influence and market presence. Complementing these expansionist strategies, Telkomsel ensures that its communication initiatives are directly aligned with long-term sales performance, collectively demonstrating that effective intervention acts as a critical engine for scaling operational scope and driving commercial revenue.

Recommendations

Organizations should strengthen civil society diplomacy through continuous, two-way engagement and institutionalize transparent, research-based communication practices that

support regulatory compliance and public trust. Event-based programs should be designed as platforms for education and relationship-building, while CSR initiatives must be aligned with long-term ecosystem development rather than treated as peripheral activities. To enhance effectiveness, companies should operationalize the seven key intervention elements across departments, invest in internal communication capacity, prepare integrated crisis-response protocols, and foster cross-sector collaboration to ensure organizational resilience and sustainable growth.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that communication intervention is a strategic pillar of corporate diplomacy that enables organizations to secure legitimacy, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and achieve sustainable business growth. Across the cases of BCA, Telkomsel, Djarum Foundation, Kitabisa, Pupuk Indonesia, and Samudera Indonesia, four forms of intervention: civil society diplomacy, normative government approaches, event-based engagement, and CSR strategies, serve as complementary mechanisms that allow corporations to navigate complex social, regulatory, and digital environments. The findings reveal that effective communication intervention is built upon seven key elements: capital, willingness, ability, people, authority, emotional bonding, and power. When mobilized strategically, these elements enable organizations to influence public meaning-making processes, negotiate institutional expectations, and transform potential conflicts into long-term value creation. The outcomes observed: societal impact, strengthened public trust, increased investment flow, and sustainable business expansion, show that communication is not merely a reputational tool but an engine of organizational resilience. In an era marked by digital activism, regulatory scrutiny, and global volatility, communication intervention becomes essential for maintaining legitimacy, supporting ecosystem development, and ensuring that business growth aligns with broader social and environmental responsibility. Ultimately, the study affirms that organizations that communicate transparently, participate collaboratively, and act consistently are better positioned to thrive sustainably in a rapidly changing landscape.

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

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

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Visual Creation of the Front Page and Houphouëtist Propaganda of Ivoirian General News Dailies

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the dynamics of visual creation on the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. Data were collected using purposive sampling, thematic content analysis, and documentary review. The hypothesis adopted for this study is as follows: visual creation on the front pages of Ivorian general news dailies contributes to the ideological positioning of national political parties. To achieve this objective, this paper draws on the empirical results of an analysis of the front pages of six national daily newspapers over a five-week period between 2005 and 2019. These newspapers are: Le Nouveau Réveil, Le Patriote, Notre Voie, Le Temps, Fraternité Matin, and L'Expression. The data were processed using Bourdieu's field theory and Max Weber's comprehensive method. The results revealed the dynamics of visual creation around Houphouëtist propaganda on the front page, approaches to visual creation, and innovations related to visual creation in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies.

Keywords: front page, general news dailies, Houphouëtist propaganda, reputation, politics

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Introduction

The front page is where the journalistic importance of current events lies, a matter of political and social distinction and commercial strategy. It serves to position a media outlet within its competitive space and set it apart from other publications in terms of readership. It is in this context that the headline takes on a pragmatic role, giving it the ability to influence the communicative context in which it is produced. The headline, title, subtitle, and lead, which are distinguished from each other by typographical characters of various sizes and shapes (capital letters, Roman letters, italics), can thus constitute an almost complete, albeit summarized, formation. In this regard, in addition to the internal pages, Houphouëtist[1] propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies does not remain on the margins of the front-page attributes (Source: press review, 2005–2019).

Which concern colors, the visual design highlights a play of colors on the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in various Ivorian newspapers. This is why there is a diversity of colors in the presentation of headlines, titles, and subtitles. For example, in its November 6, 2025 edition, the general news daily newspaper close to the PPA[2]-CI, *la nouvelle alliance*, highlights a main headline using three colors. Blue is used for the background of the headline. White and yellow, on the other hand, are used to highlight the main headline. Similarly, in its November 6, 2025 edition, *le nouveau réveil* displays its main headline in five colors: green, blue, red, black, and light blue/sky blue (Source: press review, 2025).

With regard to photography, all general news dailies use it on their front pages in most cases. However, the number and format vary from one publication to another. In this regard, in its October 22, 2021 edition, the daily newspaper close to the PPA-CI, *le temps,* included a photograph related to an interview given to the French television channel France 24, covering the entire lower part of the headline. Similarly, *fraternité matin*, in its October 18, 2021 edition, included a photograph showing distinguished personalities honored by the Grand Chancellor. Discussing the adoption of the state budget, the daily newspaper *le patriote*, dated October 21, 2021, shows a sequence of ministers and the head of state seated around a table (Source: press review, 2021).

In terms of semantics, Ivorian general-interest daily newspapers were asked to comment on national politics based on statements. To this end, the headline appears to be a statement of position. It is in this context that, according to Touré A. (2019), the various media outlets engage in a communication game in order to position the party or political leader whose interests they defend in the public opinion. As an illustration, commenting on the first congress of the unified RHDP[3] party, the newspaper ran the following headline: "Ivorian people, the RHDP is calling you!" Similarly, in its September 18, 2018 edition, *le patriote* commented on the Daoukro appeal with the headline "Bédié drops the bombshell: Ouattara, you will be the RHDP's sole candidate" (Source: press review, 2014–2019).

However, the Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies on the front page is backed by the discursive structure of the headlines on the front page. In this regard, we see front pages without photographs. For example, in its September 18, 2014 edition, Le Nouveau Réveil, commenting on the outcry of the blue newspapers against the PDCI-RDA,[4]

[1] Félix Houphouët-Boigny is the first President of Côte d'Ivoire from 1960 to 1993.
[2] Africain People Parti of Côte d'Ivoire (APP-CI)
[3] This is in french but the meaning is: Houphouëtist United for Democray and Peace
[4] Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire – African Democratic Union

displays its main headline in these terms: “Here is the deal that the FPI had proposed to Bédié.” In addition, the subheading “The response from the PDCI president that has the FPI and its newspapers in a trance after the Daoukro appeal” appears in purple. The same is true of the daily newspaper Le Temps dated October 20, 2021, which dispenses with photographs around its main headline: “Laurent Gbagbo like the Phoenix” and the subtitle “Woody's lesson on Pan-Africanism” (Source: press review, 2014–2021).

Houphouëtist propaganda in general-interest daily newspapers also reflects a complementarity of colors, words, and photographs. Within this complementarity, there is a shift between them. Sometimes words serve as an anchor to highlight the front page, sometimes it is colors or photographs, or sometimes there is a balance between them. For example, in its publication following the death of the PDCI-RDA president on August 2, 2023, *le nouveau réveil* highlights the color black in the background of the main headline and a photo of the PDCI-RDA president with the statement “Thank you, President Bédié!” Similarly, in its issue from October 22 to 24, 2021, Le Temps highlights the words around its main headline with the following statement: “Laurent Gbagbo causes panic in the regime” (Source: press review, 2021–2023).

Furthermore, there has been a diversification in the composition of the main headlines in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. To this end, there are three types: short main headlines and full main headlines. For example, the expression, in its October 26, 2010 issue, falls into the first category of short headlines. On the other hand, *le nouveau réveil,* in its September 29, 2014 issue, falls into the second category. In the second component, we can classify *le nouveau réveil* in its publication dated October 30–31, 2010. In the last category, we find *générations nouvelles* dated November 6, 2025.

Although front pages use words, colors, and photographs in their messaging, there is a dynamic to the visual design of front pages in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. To this end, does the visual design of front pages contribute to Houphouëtist propaganda in general news dailies? What are the challenges of the dynamics of visual creation on the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies? What are the approaches to the dynamics of visual creation on the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in general news dailies? What innovations have been introduced in the dynamics of visual creation on the front page around Houphouëtist propaganda in general news dailies?

Literature Review

The Challenges of Visual Creation on the Front Pages of Ivorian General News Dailies

Touré Amidou and NIADA Assane, published in 2024, which addresses the issue of the manifestation of the controversial discourse surrounding the removal of Gbagbo Laurent from office in journalistic discourse. Drawing on a corpus of front pages from Ivorian opinion newspapers, the authors analyze the discourse of the micro-narrative of the headlines. The analysis reveals a marked antagonism between media and political blocs. The press's coverage of Laurent Gbagbo's removal from the electoral roll is part of the struggle for position in the political arena. In the same vein, Touré Amidou (2023) presents the front page of the press as an area of manipulation. To do so, he draws on a dual theoretical approach, namely Bakhtinian dialogism and media framing. According to him, front-page headlines expose the interdependent relationship between the press and the socio-political context in

which journalism takes place. As a result, journalists become griots of ideological discourse, and we witness the emergence of information journalism.

In this respect, this text contributes to the understanding of the present analysis. However, this approach focuses solely on the chromatic dimension of the print media, which limits the scope of analysis. That is why the current perspective broadens to three dimensions by integrating two other dimensions, namely semantics and graphic design, into the chromatic dimension in order to elucidate visual creation in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies.

Discursive Aims Surrounding the Visual Creation of the Front Page in Houphouëtist Propaganda in Ivorian General News Dailies

The exploration of this theme has enabled us to draw on the following authors: Touré Amidou (2019) and Ibitowa Philippe (2012). Initially, these sources revealed two types of rhetoric in the conflict between print media outlets in their coverage of the Grand-Bassam attack. These were: pathos-based rhetoric and conflict-based rhetoric. The last section highlighted the treatment of media information on the eve of the second round of the 2010 presidential elections in the Ivorian print media outlets *notre voie, le nouveau réveil, le temps,* and *le patriote.* In this section, it appears that newspapers affiliated with political parties engaged in mutual denigration around the gâte-gâte game, to promote their respective candidates while disparaging their competitors.

In light of the above, the authors build their argument around the power/opposition dichotomy and persuasion as a discursive goal. In this sense, this analytical perspective contributes to the continuity of the demonstration around the bias of Ivorian general news dailies. However, there is a silence regarding visual creation in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. In this regard, the present analysis addresses some dynamic aspects of visual creation on the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies.

Innovations in Visual Design in Houphouëtist Propaganda in Ivorian General News Dailies

The sources used to examine social identity in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies come from the following authors: Diasse A. (2014) and Bogui L. and N'Drin R. (2017). They established a social shift in the struggle for power in the daily print media around the relationship between subjective positions and institutional positions. These relationships contribute to the various positive and negative assessments made in the treatment of national political information.

In this sense, the sources used contribute to the understanding of this study insofar as they present some elements of analysis of Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. However, references to Houphouëtism in the above sources do not take into account recent changes in the political landscape and the visual design of front pages. For this reason, the issue of Houphouëtism will be addressed by broadening the political context to take into account the latest changes in the national political landscape and the visual design of front pages in this media propaganda.

Methodology

Data Collection Techniques

Purposive Sampling Technique

The analysis uses the purposive sampling technique for three fundamental reasons. First, daily newspapers are the most regular publications on the Ivorian print media market. Second, their political positioning reflects the power struggles between political parties. Finally, the type of newspaper under study comprises several pages, and the one relevant to the analysis is the front page. Thus, five (5) newspapers were selected from a total of twenty-two (22) general-interest daily newspapers. They are : *fraternité matin, le nouveau réveil, notre voie, l'expression*, and *le patriote.*

Thematic Content Analysis

Three operations were carried out based on the work of Negura L. (2006). First, the main headlines from *fraternité matin, le patriote, notre voie, l'expression*, and *le nouveau réveil* relating to houphouëtism during the period from 2005 to 2019 were identified. Next, these headlines were classified into different categories based on the analysis. To this end, several categories were constructed based on the composition of the headlines. These are: integral or complete headlines, semantic headlines, and photographic headlines. Finally, the last task consisted of organizing them as illustrations in sections and subsections of this study.

Methods of Data Analysis and Interpretation

Max Weber's Comprehensive Method

Using this method makes it possible to make sense of the facts reported by the Ivorian print media. This involves two distinct stages. On the one hand, the analysis identifies the visual elements that convey meaning in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. On the other hand, the task consisted of establishing a relationship with current political events and identifying meanings in the implementation of Houphouëtist propaganda in general news dailies. This phase made it possible to establish a link with certain headlines, colors, designs, and the positioning of newspapers around Houphouëtism.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis helps to elucidate the discursive markers of the ideological positioning of certain print media outlets and the quality of the interlocutors in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. Among the many markers that have been identified, this study focused on cases of agreement, qualifying adjectives, the use of color, graphic design, and the statutory proximity of certain print media outlets to political parties such as the PPA-CI, the PDCI-RDA, and the RDR, which became the RHDP.

Crozier and Friedberg's Strategic Analysis

Based on the central research question (CRQ), this theoretical approach highlights the dynamics of front-page graphic design in the positioning of newspapers and their respective parties in relation to Houphouëtism. Following on from this, this theoretical perspective

highlights the specific research question 1 (SRQ 1). Based on this question, the aim is to identify a number of visual capture strategies around the dynamics of this visual creation of the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. These contribute to the power struggles between print media outlets and the reputation of political parties. With regard to specific research question 2 (SRQ 2), this theoretical perspective allows us to explore the various approaches to the dynamics of visual creation in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. Finally, specific research question 3 (SRQ 3) highlights innovations in the visual creation of front pages in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies.

Results

The Challenges of Visual Design Dynamics on the Front Page in Ivorian General News Dailies

Visual Capture

Analysis of this corpus shows that visual capture is expressed in a hierarchy of text, photo, semantics and graphic design according to current events. With regard to the prominence of text in visual appeal, the daily newspaper *notre voie* provides an illustration for the period from May 19 to 23, 2005. The front pages of this newspaper emphasized semantics alone, to the detriment of other elements such as photography and color. On the front pages of this newspaper during this period, there was an average of two photos per issue and approximately five colors used. These were dark blue, white, green, pink, and red. They were used in two ways: the first was as the background for the headline, and the second was in relation to the headline itself. The graphic design also focused on merging the forum, the body, and the sub-forums on the left for issues 2088 to 2090, and a total merger of the forums and sub-forums for issue 2091. This concentration of areas on the front page reflects a desire to draw attention to a central fact that spans this entire area.

Promoting Partisan Ideology

The front pages of Ivorian general news dailies reflect the positions of political parties on certain so-called “major” events in Ivorian society. The corpus analyzed revealed Houphouëtist propaganda based on textual anchoring. In this regard, the general news daily *le patriote* provides a case study for the period from November 30 to December 5, 2011. In this corpus, the aim was to discredit Gbagbo Laurent and legitimize his transfer to the ICC. To this end, the headlines during this period described him as responsible for the post-election crisis of 2010–2011 and welcomed his transfer. In this presentation of the news, the main headlines were printed in two colors, red and black. In their syntactic structure, two linguistic devices were used: exclamation and declaration. Furthermore, this general news daily expressed its emotions about the end of the 2010–2011 post-election crisis. The terms used show sorrow for a leader who believed himself to be above everything.

Dynamics Discursive of Visual Creation on the Front Page in Ivorian General News Dailies

The Prescription

The corpus highlighting this communicative intent is taken from the daily newspaper *le patriote* in its edition published from Saturday, June 23 to Sunday, June 24, 2018. This illustration is part of a prescriptive intent for two main reasons. The first relates to the syntactic structure of the main headline. Indeed, the statement "here are the areas to flee!" highlights the risks incurred by people living in these areas. This headline is further clarified by the subheading "the weather forecast predicts heavier rains." Next, the prescriptive intent of this headline is evident in a photograph showing a dwelling located near a large gaping hole that could endanger the lives of its inhabitants.

The Solicitation

In an article published on June 21, 2018, the daily newspaper Notre Voie focused on the torrential rains that fell on the city of Abidjan. The exploration of this news item is part of a solicitation aim insofar as the newspaper holds the government accountable. The newspaper adopted the statement by the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) calling for urgent government intervention in times of disaster. These statements were accompanied by a photograph of Mr. Pascal Affi N'Guessan, President of the party. Thus, the headline reads "after the torrential rains" and the title "the FPI calls on the government." In the same vein, two subheadings highlight this call on the government, namely "it expresses its compassion for all the victims" and "Abidjan cleans up."

The Incitement

With regard to this discursive purpose, the corpus highlights the daily newspaper Notre Voie in its June 25, 2018, publication. Using three colors black, white, and red, this daily newspaper demands an end to Alassane Ouattara's reign. To this end, the main headline reads as follows: "Affi in Yopougon Kouté: let us rise up to end Ouattara's reign." This headline is illustrated by a photograph showing Mr. Affi, escorted by a law enforcement officer, shaking hands with people arrested under tarpaulins. To support this headline, another headline published in a yellow background exposes a case of fraud during the "revision of the electoral list in Plateau" and accuses a close associate of the RHDP regime, namely "Mr. Fabrice Sawegnon."

The Information

The front page of the daily newspaper *l'expression* dated June 19, 2018, is part of an effort to inform, as it sets out to reveal the "secrets of the political bureau," i.e., the key events that led to the PDCI-RDA's rejection of the RHDP unified party. In its coverage of this news item, the newspaper published a photograph of the PDCI-RDA president with his chief executive secretary, both wearing party uniforms, with their heads tilted toward each other as if to indicate something. In the captions, the newspaper also identified those responsible for and behind the PDCI-RDA's rejection.

Innovations in the Visual Design of Front Pages in Houphouëtist Propaganda in Ivorian General News Dailies

Statutory Changes to Front Page Components

Observation of the corpus reveals constant change in the layout of the front pages of Ivorian general news dailies. This constant change revolves around the use and space given to multiple colors, typography, and photographs. Thus, the corpus highlights three types observable in the propaganda of Ivorian general news dailies.

In the first group, we see a predominantly chromatic approach to the front page. This is characterized by an imposing background color covering a large area of the page compared to the headlines in the translation of political news stories about houphouëtism. In some cases, the front page may retain its usual background while highlighting more specific colors depending on the news item. The daily newspaper Notre Voie, in its November 30, 2011 issue, can be classified in this category. This page features two major news items, namely the transfer of Laurent Gbagbo and the imprisonment of three journalists from the newspaper. However, what makes this issue unique is the use of black as the background color for both stories. The same is true of the newspaper *le patriote* in its June 20, 2018, edition, which focused on the torrential rains in Abidjan.

In the second group, we have an approach to the front page that relies on semantics or words. This is characterized by an emphasis on the discursive configuration of the various headlines. These headlines can take several forms, namely direct speech, indirect speech, free direct speech, and free indirect speech. In some cases, we also observe that several elements support the main headline, namely the subheading and a few subheadings. We also note headlines without photographs. For example, *le patriote* on December 5, 2011, was devoted to the transfer of Gbagbo Laurent to The Hague, and the October 25, 2010, edition dealt with Laurent Gbagbo's campaign for the 2010 presidential election.

In the third group, we have a predominantly photographic approach. This consists of giving more space to photographs than to other components such as colors and words. The angles from which these photographs are taken vary from one news item to another. They may sometimes depict an individual and sometimes highlight a crowd. For example, the October 28, 2010, and January 26–27, 2019, issues of the newspaper *le nouveau réveil* highlight this photograph-dominant approach to front pages.

The Dynamism of Front-Page Graphic Design in Houphouëtist Propaganda in Ivorian General News Dailies

In the linear trend, the graphic design of the front page consists of presenting the visual creation in a linear form. Among the newspapers that stand out in this trend is Le Nouveau Réveil, dated November 30, 2011, which is divided into three lines, the first of which includes the headline and a piece of information published in the right-hand corner. The second line relates to the main headline. The last line combines two other facts located below the main headline. The same is true of the newspaper *l'expression* in its October 30–31, 2010 issue, which is presented in three lines, the first of which includes the name of the newspaper, basic information, and a headline on the right. In the second line, there is a subheading “Tomorrow, the presidential election!,” a headline “Bye bye Gbagbo!,” a subheading “A sea of people accompanies ADO to the palace” and an image of a crowd, one member of which is

marked with a red circle. The last line relates to activities ancillary to the presidential election, notably an invitation from the President of COSIM and the activities of certain members of the RHDP.

In terms of column layout, the front pages of the corpus are divided into several columns. This is the case for the May 20, 2005 edition of *fraternité matin*. On this front page, we see a division into two columns, the first of which has a white background and includes the name of the newspaper, the subheading "*Houphouëtist platform*" and the main headline, namely: "*The hidden issues,*" accompanied by a photograph of the leaders of the PDCI-RDA and the RDR sitting and shaking hands, while behind them stands an individual looking to the left. The left-hand column has a yellow background with several sections covering topics such as sport, elections, and trade unionism. Similarly, in its May 23, 2005 issue, the front page is divided into two columns, the first of which has a white background highlighting the name of the newspaper and some basic information, the subheading *"Alliance of Houphouëtists"* and, marked in blue below the subheading and to the left of the headline, the word "exclusive" and the headline: *"Fologo: divorce assured."* This front page shows Mr. Fologo dressed in a white suit, seated in front of a microphone, as if to indicate that he is the source of the comments reported that day.

Discussion

This analysis builds on this work while highlighting visual identity through the lens of Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies. It is in this context that they are compared with the contribution by Dje Bi Kahou Albert and Konan Koffi Angelin (2019) address the new chromatic approach and its knock-on effects. These authors analyze the deployment of green newspapers, which, after more than a decade of editorial cooperation, came into conflict with the approach of the 2020 presidential election. Also, the breakup of the RHDP bloc after the PDCI's departure reflects also the influence of political groups on the various newspapers known to be close to them. In a second way, Coulibaly Nanourougo (2016) discusses the involvement of the print media in perpetuating the political antagonisms in Côte d'Ivoire. To this end, the author analyzes the front pages of four general news dailies between April 30, 2011, and February 25, 2013. These are: *le patriote, notre voie, le nouveau réveil,* and *le temps*. He identifies four strategies for disseminating opinions, namely lexical repetition, the designation of beings, things, and phenomena occupying the public space, a persuasive orientation, and the use of memory of what has been said. For him, this antagonism is inspired by the national sociopolitical configuration despite the changes in roles. Following on from these, Ibitowa Philippe (2013) describes the construction of Henri Konan Bédié's image in the second round of the 2010 presidential elections in the daily newspaper *le nouveau réveil*. According to him, the 2010 Ivorian presidential elections were a springboard for rebuilding the public image of candidate Henri Konan Bédié, who was overthrown in a putch on December 24, 1999. That is why, during the first round of the October 2010 presidential election campaign, *le nouveau réveil* used its front pages to mobilize support toward Bédié's ability, in order to show that the former president was still fit to hold national office.

Conclusion

To conclude, the visual creation of Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies is part of a dynamic approach to the national political context. To this end, Houphouëtist propaganda in news dailies on this page incorporates several areas of ideological and political

confrontation. These are: semantics, graphic design, color, and photography. These discursive configurations are also part of a dual dialogism, one of which is vertical, and oriented toward opposing political parties, and the other horizontal and oriented toward colleagues.

In addition, the visual design of the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies is part of a discursive maneuver of pathologization. This discursive perspective mobilizes graphic design, color, photography, and semantics. However, the dominant position of one element over the others varies according to the ideological configuration of the news and the layout of the front page of the issue. Ultimately, the analysis of this corpus provided a pathos-based approach centered on color and graphic design.

The visual creation of the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in general news dailies also develops an aesthetic approach that can be perceived through the dynamics observed in the arrangement of colors, semantics, photographs, and graphic design. To this end, the corpus explored the aesthetic dynamics on the front page in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies around informational particularities and hybridization. This stance is based on the changes observed in the production of the Houphouëtist reputation of national political leaders and parties.

This analysis cannot therefore claim to be exhaustive, as other aspects of this study deserve further investigation. These in-depth studies could concern the symbolism of colors in Houphouëtist propaganda in Ivorian general news dailies, the dynamics of headlines on the front pages of the Ivorian print media, changes in graphic design, etc.

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Hot Scenes, Steamy Words: A Validation Exercise of a Speculative Script Resulting From an Analytical Study of the Typical VivaMax Film

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-led validation of a functional screenwriting framework derived from an analytical study of the typical VivaMax film. VivaMax (aka VMX) is the Philippines' leading producer of softcore erotic cinema. My earlier VMX Study analyzed fourteen films and proposed a Screenwriting Framework and Female Sexual Agency Rubric grounded in recognizable patterns of theme, narrative structure, sexual behaviors, and representations of female sexual agency. In this paper, I use a practice-led research approach to evaluate a speculative screenplay originally written for submission to the VMX Film Festival against that Framework. Because the screenplay was completed before the framework was finalized, it functions unintentionally as a control text for validation. Results reveal the screenplay organically aligns to the earlier study on narrative structuring and pacing, sexual behaviors, and character development trajectories. The screenplay features a female lead who exhibits high female sexual agency on the aspects of initiation, consent, choice, and narrative consequence. These results suggest that the Framework and Rubric can effectively guide the development of softcore cinematic works that are mindful and character-driven while retaining the eroticism expected of the genre. This study contributes to the discourse of Philippine Cinema in how it reinforces the potential of softcore cinema and erotica as a platform for scholarship and inquiry on the interrelated concepts of authorship, agency, and representation, among others. Despite its limitations, this validation exercise reveals the clear potential of the Framework and Rubrics' replicability in future studies and exercises in erotic screenplay development.

Keywords: Philippine softcore cinema, female sexual agency, Vivamax, practice-led research, screenwriting framework

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Introduction

Online Subscription-Video-On-Demand (SVOD) platform Vivamax was launched to leverage on Viva Film's extensive catalog of foreign and Filipino films (Lo, 2020; Soliman, 2021). Viva Films was already one of the country's largest and most prolific producers of commercial films as well as direct-to-video adult-themed content. It was during the Global Pandemic that Viva Films channeled production funding into developing adult-themed films intended for the Vivamax platform (Manio, 2023; Pingol, 2022; Soliman, 2021).

Vivamax, since then, has become widely recognized as the Philippines' leading producer and distributor of softcore pornographic films.

In 2024 Vivamax (rebranded into VMX) celebrated a 12-million subscriber milestone with initiatives that included, among others, a call for entries into the first VMX Film Festival which, according to VMX Head of Aggregation Ronald Arguelles, seeks:

> …to make the VMX brand both daring and groundbreaking. That is why we are having this festival in order to discover fresh talents with brave visions that can eventually revitalize and reshape their chosen platforms and hopefully the industry in general.
>
> We are looking for filmmakers who are edgy, and ready to break the mold and redefine erotic cinema, those with bold perspectives and brilliant storytelling abilities. We are encouraging content creators who will further diversify our current film catalog to join, especially regional filmmakers and stories about their communities, including the LGBTQ+ with alternative takes on erotica. (Gallardo, 2024)

Hard, Soft, and Philippine Society

How a society defines obscenity varies and changes depending on that society's circumstances and context (Pope et al., 2007). Sam Hardy also adds that pornography and pornographic forms may be seen as a function of censorship; where the "social elite" (church, government, "moral majority") define and restrict access by means of control, administration, or exclusion (2015). In this last definition, pornography can thus be seen as a form of resistance and protest on explicit or societal censorship.

Much of the definition and differentiation of "pornography" in the dispute over what defines it is dependent on how the form combines the aesthetic and the sexual, rather than just the sexual and exploitative. Hardcore pornography is generally characterized by the explicit depiction of sex and genitalia (Hardy, 2015). Softcore and erotica, on the other hand, may be defined as "any feature-length narrative whose diegesis is punctuated by periodic moments… of simulated, nonexplicit sexual spectacle" or what can be described as "bumping and grinding" (Andrews, 2006, p. 2).

Sex, the topic of sex and the representation of sexuality in media and society, has always been a contentious and controversial issue in the Philippines. The "sexualization" of Philippine Cinema began amidst the "Sexual Revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s (Herzog & Schmacks, 2024). In the late 1960s the influx of foreign films featuring simulated scenes of nudity and sex drew audiences away from locally produced films; it was in the early 1970s that Filipino productions "caught up" with the trend.

Established in 1985, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) is repeatedly embroiled in conflicts with the industry it is meant to support. The Board has long been criticized for its wavering standards. Recently the MTRCB has begun lobbying Congress to legislate an expansion of the Board's jurisdiction to include online streaming services citing lewd and immoral content they claim are available to the underaged public. While this kind of legislation will affect all platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ and HBO Go, at the center of this sociopolitical crossfire is local streaming service Vivamax.

The "VMX Study" as Backdrop

It is in this complex relationship – a celebrated adult platform, a generally conservative society, and a regulatory agency reasserting authority over an evolving medium – that I myself developing a speculative screenplay with the intent of participating in the VMX Film Festival.

This study stems from a research paper I authored that analyzed the narrative structure of the typical VMX Film. The research *Plotting Pleasure: Narrative Structure and Female Sexual Agency Toward a Functional Screenwriting Framework for VMX Softcore Films*, currently under journal review and hereinafter described as "The VMX Study", identified prevalent narrative themes in a selection representing approximately 10% of VMX films from the October 2024 catalog, it also identified the durations of sex scenes and these scenes' placement within a traditional cinematic 3-Act structure.

The study further categorized the sexual behaviors represented on-screen as either Autoerotic, Typical, or Atypical behaviors; Atypical behaviors were behaviors identified with paraphilias and included both non-consensual (deviant) and consensual (kink). The most common paraphilias include exhibitionism, fetishism, masochism, and sadism, among others (Betchen, 2002; Fisher & Marwaha, 2023, and Greenberg et al., 2017 in J. Garcia, 2025). These analyses and categorizations led to a functional framework for the development of films and screenplays intended for the VMX platform.

Another key result and insight of the VMX study is the high degree to which lead female characters in the typical VMX film exhibited sexual agency moderate to high female. The study utilizes a rubric to measure female leads' participation in the initiation of sex, their negotiation of consent, the degree to which they choose to engage in sex, and the narrative consequences sex has on their characters.

Ultimately the study suggests that these high-agency and distinctly sex-positive narratives allow for the VMX film – and by extension the VMX platform – to provide a space for female empowerment, agency, and resistance to traditional and normative narratives, albeit within audience expectations and structure of a softcore platform (Garcia, 2025).

This study thus asks the question: "how does a speculative screenplay intended for the VMX platform align to the proposed functional framework posited in Garcia's 2025 VMX Study?"

Relating to this, the study asks the sub-questions:

1. How does the speculative screenplay align or conform to the framework in terms of theme and narrative structure?; and
2. How does the speculative screenplay provide sexual agency to female lead characters?

Method

A speculative screenplay was developed for a full-length film conforming to the submission requirement of VMX's call for entries. Standard conventions for screenwriting were followed, and the draft was written using WriterDuet, a web-based screenwriting platform.

The story concept was not prescribed by any entity and was developed intentionally for the VMX Festival and independently of the VMX Study. Due to the mismatch between the Festival submission deadline (November 2024) and the development of the VMX Study manuscript, it was not possible for the VMX Festival script to be written using the framework as a guide. Instead, the resulting speculative screenplay was validated against the framework after the study's manuscript was completed in February of 2025. In this study results are specific to one script, but indicative of broader applicability.

The validation exercise aligns with practice-led and performative research practice described by Haseman (2010) where the research output – or what Haseman refers to as "utterances" – become the research itself. He describes the validity of self-reflective or self-validating practice if these new methodologies are articulated in terms of transferability and transparency (including structure, clarity of purpose, and outcomes) (Haseman, 2010, pp. 155–156).

By reflecting on the screenplay as both author and analyst, I hope to gain insight into how narrative decisions, character agency, and sexual portrayals are constructed during the writing process – something that may not necessarily reveal itself in more traditional textual analysis.

The screenplay will be evaluated against the framework proposed in the VMX Study (Garcia, 2025) to wit:

Table 1
Functional Framework for Softcore Screenplay Development (Garcia, 2025)

Principle	Description
Pay Attention to Story Beats	Sex scenes should be narratively meaningful, not random insertions. They must serve as narrative beats — not distractions.
Establish in ACT I	Build tension, introduce desire, and establish power dynamics.
Complicate in ACT II	Escalate conflict, destabilize relationships, and explore social or moral transgressions.
Resolve in ACT III	Complete character arcs, reveal consequences (social, moral, or emotional), and deliver emotional or moral payoff.
Scene Counts Count	Aim for 8–9 sex scenes across 25–30% of total runtime. Erotic pacing should mirror narrative rhythm — rising action, climax, resolution — to sustain engagement and avoid tonal fatigue. The following scene count breakdown is suggested: • ACT I – 1-3 scenes, depending on running time; sex scenes helping define relationships and power dynamics • ACT II – 4-5 scenes, functioning to complicate relationships and strengthen character intent and commitment • ACT III – 1-2 scenes, used to provide moral payoff or justify transgressional consequences
Make Female Leads Matter	Write female leads with evolving sexual agency across acts. Use the Sexual Agency Rubric (initiation–consent–choice–consequence) to guide agency across narrative arcs.

Embed Eroticism in Plot and Character	Sex scenes must advance plot, shift power, heighten conflict, or deepen emotional stakes. If it doesn't serve the story, it weakens it.
Honor the Platform	VMX subverts traditional cinematic norms. Writers should explore kink, fantasy, and transgression, while anchoring narratives in culturally resonant themes like romance, justice, and emotional closure. Avoid defaulting to exploitation.

Female sexual agency will likewise be measured in the four-point rubric described by Garcia.

Table 2
Female Sexual Agency Rubric (Garcia, 2025) and Corresponding Interpretation of Scores

Indicator	Low Agency (1)	Moderate Agency (2)	High Agency (3)
Initiation of Sexual Encounters	The character does not initiate or appears passive; encounters are instigated by others without her active participation.	The character shares initiation or signals partial consent but does not fully drive the interaction.	The character actively initiates sexual encounters and demonstrates clear intent and motivation.
Negotiation of Consent and Boundaries	No evidence of negotiation; compliance is assumed or subtly coerced.	Partial negotiation; some preferences or conditions are expressed.	Explicit negotiation of consent and clear articulation of personal boundaries.
Degree of Choice Exercised	Little or no agency in decision-making; actions are reactive or constrained.	Some choice, but significant limitations or ambivalence remain.	Full autonomy in deciding whether, when, and how to engage sexually.
Narrative Consequences of Actions	Sexual choices result in negative or punitive outcomes reinforcing passivity or victimhood.	Mixed or ambiguous consequences; partial empowerment.	Outcomes are framed positively, reinforcing agency and personal growth.

Total Score	Average	Interpretation
4 – 6	1.00–1.49	**Low agency**: Character is largely passive or objectified, little to no control over sexual encounters or narrative role.
7 – 9	1.50–2.49	**Moderate agency**: Some initiative or negotiation; mixed signals on autonomy; possibly transitional or ambivalent portrayal.
10 – 12	2.50–3.00	**High agency**: Character demonstrates clear decision-making, initiates or navigates sexual encounters on their terms, and influences the plot.

Results and Discussion

The draft submitted to VMX was a standard fictional narrative screenplay with the working title "*Alat ng Dagat*" (Salty As The Sea). Thematically the screenplay is an erotic romance with a secondary theme of identity and self-discovery; both of these themes align to the VMX Study's results on the prevalence of love and romance as narrative theme (Garcia, 2025).

The screenplay is approximately 77 minutes based on the film industry rule-of-thumb of "1-page-equates-to-1-minute" and a director's approximation of individual scene duration (Table 3). Mature content comes to approximately 26% (±21 minutes) of the total running time with the remaining 74% (±56 minutes) dedicated to diegetic content. Based on the VMX Study this falls below the 36% recorded average across the study's selection (Garcia, 2025).

It is worth noting, though, that *Alat ng Dagat*'s 26% is higher than the average proportion in selected films greater than 60 minutes running time (*Call Me Alma, Kitty K7,* and *Pintor at Paraluman* average 23%).

The screenplay contains 11 individual scenes featuring sexual content, almost 25% more than the 8-scene average identified in the VMX Study, these scenes are situated across all three Acts. Scenes show a range of variations between Autoerotic through to Atypical behaviors with *Alat ng Dagat* leaning towards more towards Typical behavior (6 of 11 sequences).

Table 3
Breakdown of Sex Scenes Written Into the Speculative Screenplay and Approximate Duration of Sex Scenes Based on Director's Projections

Act	Sequence	Scene	Type	Duration
ACT I	Seq 2	Mix & Tess shower scene	Typical	0:00:45
	Seq 2	Ella & Enzo "*nauna na friends mo*"	Typical	0:02:00
	Seq 4	Jake & Jenny "casual condo hook-up"	Typical	0:02:30
	Seq 6	Ella "shower scene voyeur"	Autoerotic	0:01:00
ACT II	Seq 9	Ella "fantasy daydream"	Autoerotic	0:01:00
	Seq 14	Ella & Jake "sex on the beach"	Atypical	0:04:30
	Seq 16	Ella "boy, *isampay mo 'to*"	Autoerotic	0:00:30
	Seq 18	Ella's Mom & Priest "world crumbles"	Typical	0:01:00
	Seq 22	Ella & Jake "growing closer" montage	Atypical	0:03:30
ACT III	Seq 26	Ella & Random Lady "no love, no emotion"	Typical	0:02:00
	Seq 29	Ella & Stranger "thunder and lightning"	Typical	0:02:00
				0:20:45

The screenplay's lead female character Ella is written as independent, intelligent, and self-assured. She chooses to live free from traditional expectations of family and society; while harboring a romantic side, relationships are also pragmatic – made and ended purely on her own terms.

It is also in this context that erotic scenes are drafted; sex scenes in the screenplay are used to drive narrative advancement or build character development.

Sex scenes written in the ACT I established both Ella's and Jake's key character traits – Ella's independence and sex-positive outlook and Jake's typical machismo and misogyny. ACT II's scenes explored Ella and Jakes' relationship – first as casual affair, and later as something deeper. In ACT III sex is used to as Ella's attempts to regain control of her "world" and reclaim her power after being "betrayed" by Jake and losing her business. Of the 11 sex scenes in the screenplay, only 2 (Seq 2 and Seq 18) can be said to have a clear "spectacular" orientation – providing more erotic pleasure for the audience rather than serving a distinct narrative development purpose.

Although the screenplay reflects an orientation towards primarily Typical sex acts, Autoerotic and Atypical (femdom and public/ exhibitionist) sex is also incorporated into the screenplay. Likewise, the screenplay does not make distinctions or judgements on same-sex relations (Seq 2, 18, and 26) and social consequence (shaming) as a result of sexual acts is framed only as a result of transgressions (Seq 18 – Ella's "pious" mother is caught having sex with a priest).

What is most notable in this "transgression" is not simply being caught *in flagrante delicto* with a supposedly celibate priest, but how sex is juxtaposed against ultra-conservative views on sex and sexuality. In the narrative what is framed as shameful and transgressive is not simply

the act of sex with the priest, but more importantly, the act of sex vis-à-vis the mother's faith-based hypocrisy.

Using the Female Sexual Agency Rubric, lead character Ella exhibits very high female sexual agency scoring 3.00 according to the rubric (Table 4).

Table 4
Evaluation of Ella As Lead Female Character Using Female Sexual Agency Rubric

Indicator	Evidence from Screenplay	Rating
1. Initiation of Sexual Encounters	ACT I: Ella pulls Enzo into the room to fully engage in sexual acts (Seq 2). ACT II: Ella initiates first full sexual encounter with Jake – she is the one to approach and take sexual lead (Seq 14). ACT III: Ella connects to and reciprocates visual cues from the stranger (Seq 29) *Ella drives sexual activity rather than responds passively.*	**3 – High Agency**
2. Negotiation of Consent and Boundaries	ACT I: Ella asserts dominance and enforces her boundaries when she was being watched (Seq 6). ACT II: Ella controls sexual positions and rhythm (Seq 14) ACT III: Ella refuses the kiss during a lesbian encounter (Seq 28), and aggressively defines what the stranger is "allowed" to do during their encounter (Seq 29) *There is no depiction or coercion; non-consensual approaches (voyeurism) are immediately rejected or managed in her favor*	**3 – High Agency**
3. Degree of Choice Exercised	ACT I and II: Ella determines if and when she will engage in sex with Jake (Seq 9, 14, 16, 22) ACT III: Ella chooses to engage with the lesbian (Seq 28) and stranger (Seq 29) *Ella's sexual acts are self-initiated and self-contained. She chooses her partners and is not manipulated into choice. Even when emotionally detached, she retains control of when, how, and with whom.*	**3 – High Agency**
4. Narrative Consequences of Actions	ACT I: Ella exists in a world of independent and informed choices (Seq 2 and 6) ACT II: Ella changes through emotional – not sexual – curiosity to disillusionment (Seq 9, 14, 16, and 22) ACT III: Ella is emotionally "destroyed" but sex gives her "power" (Seq 28 and 29) *Ella's sexuality is never punished but evolves - sex mirrors her emotional state but does not define her downfall.*	**3 – High Agency**

While Ella's character exhibits high sexual agency, Jake's character exhibits the deconstruction of traditional male dominance and power. In Seq 4 Jake acts upon desire – he dominates and defines the parameters of a casual encounter with Jenny. As the narrative evolves, Jake is confronted with sexuality and loses his sense of control – particularly in the aspects of initiation and choice (Seq 14 and 22; in Seq 24, Jake looks forward to sex with Ella, but this is withheld from him because of a duplicity).

While there is no directive – from producers or festival organizers – to provide this level of agency in female characterizations, it does appear that contemporary social philosophies and outlooks do lean towards a more inclusive and mindful aesthetic in terms of messaging and representation. The VMX Study pointed towards attempts of the typical VMX Film to be more sex-positive, non-judgmental, and normative of concepts traditionally seen as "deviant" (such as kink, queer sex, and fetishes). This trend makes itself apparent in the writing of *Alat ng Dagat* with its strong female lead, an empowered ending, and an open, non-judgmental outlook on sex and sexuality.

These results reinforce how practice-led inquiry clarifies and brings to light the narrative, ethical, and affective dimensions of erotic storytelling in ways that purely textual analysis cannot. By evaluating the screenplay through the Framework described in the VMX Study, this validation exercise demonstrates how creative decisions around intimacy, agency, and desire operate within the lived realities of writing erotica. Ella's strong agency profile – as reflected in her character's negotiation of initiation, consent, and narrative consequence – suggests that contemporary Philippine erotica can move toward character-driven, mindfully-aware representations when guided by intentional creative tools.

Furthermore, in the context of research, the screenplay becomes both artefact and method: a space where the embodied processes of authorship reveal how sexual representation is negotiated, refined, and made meaningful. This highlights softcore cinema not as a forgettable or insignificant genre but as a productive forum for examining authorship and the politics of representation within Philippine Cinema.

Conclusion

The happenstance that caused the *Alat ng Dagat* speculative screenplay to be written before the framework was developed had the unintended effect of providing a control group against which to validate the framework. Creative and technical development of the screenplay thus occurred independent of the influence and structure of its supposed guide.

This validation exercise confirms the functionality of the Framework as a tool and guide for screenplay development, particularly for the VMX Platform. The screenplay *organically* aligns itself with the norms and characteristics of a "typical" VMX film: theme, pacing and narrative structure, and ratio of sexual to diegetic content.

What this study also illustrates is that the Framework leads to an increased degree of creative exploration on the part of the writer. The lack of explicit sexual portrayals (e.g. showing of genitalia, penetrative sex) requires the further imaginative use of cinematic technique and alternative sexual content to populate the screenplay. This has the tendency to lead to the exploration of alternative themes and atypical behaviors; *Alat ng Dagat* does so with the use of public and angry sex as narrative technique.

The Female Sexual Agency Rubric of Initiation, Consent, Choice, and Consequence also appears to effectively operationalize the abstract concepts of empowerment and authorship within erotic storytelling. The tool can function as a critical lens for the writing and development of characters with observable narrative behaviors – how they negotiate desire as well as relational power dynamics on the screen. It enables both writers and academics to differentiate between agency that is structurally embedded in the story and agency that is only implied. The Rubric, then, becomes more than a tool or support for critical analysis, but more

so may function as an aid for screenwriters to develop more deliberate, sex-positive, and character-driven representation of sex and sexuality in softcore films.

The primary limitation of this study is that this is a self-validation exercise of only one screenplay. The study has revealed though that there are indications of a broader implications for the tool and the results of the study. Further validation of the Framework – external evaluators, multiple screenplays, and other evaluation frameworks – are highly encouraged.

Ultimately, the Framework and accompanying Rubric functions as a replicable development tool for erotic screenplays that consider narrative cohesion and integrity as well as erotic spectacle. The Framework, by acknowledging the genre's narrative expectations while considering character agency and positive sexual representation, provides screenwriters and producers with a flexible structure for developing responsible erotic work. The Framework and Rubric emphasis on purpose and representation is a step towards sexual content that goes beyond spectacle and titillation but as a driver of story and character.

The Pen Is Mightier

Screenwriters, even before directors, have the power – agency, if you will – to write and develop stories and characters that can transcend the inherently commercial and exploitative nature of adult cinema. More consciously- and mindfully developed screenplays can become a platform for sensitivity, inclusivity, discourse, and sex-positivity; writers have the power to subvert the traditional male gaze where non-male characters are given more active and subjective viewpoints rather than being passive and objectified subjects. Platforms such as VMX, with its more provocative and countercultural content, can be a platform for introducing and normalizing non-heteronormative and non-male perspectives to a wider audience. Ironically adult cinema can – and likely should – become a forum for postfeminist negotiation and discourses on gender and representations in society.

This validation exercise demonstrates that erotica – when guided by a structured narrative framework and agency rubric – can serve as a space for ethical, character-driven, and culturally resonant storytelling.

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

This paper was prepared with the assistance of Generative AI Tools such as ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot for tasks such as drafting, refining, and suggesting alternative language and phrasing. All intellectual content, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author. Generative AI was not utilized for, nor did it contribute to, data collection, theoretical framing, or argumentation; likewise, all AI outputs were critically reviewed, evaluated, and/ or validated by the author to ensure accuracy and adherence to accepted academic standards.

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Appropriation or Appreciation? Musical Representations of Japan in Screen Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between musical representations of Japan and the concepts of cultural appropriation and appreciation within screen media, including film and television. As global interest in the culture and history of Japan rises, the use of Japanese portrayals and representations in the media becomes more prevalent, raising critical questions about authenticity, respect, and hierarchical structures. I will analyse case studies, exploring how specific music genres, instruments, and compositional techniques associated with Japan are employed and utilised in the media. This includes the use of traditional Japanese instruments like the shakuhachi and koto, the incorporation of J-POP and anime music, and the creation of original scores inspired by traditional Japanese music such as gagaku. Through a critical lens, I will investigate whether these musical representations contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Japanese culture, or perpetuate stereotypes. How are musical signifiers of "Japan" constructed and deployed? What are the arguments on authenticity in their use by non-Japanese musicians and artists? How does the line between appreciation and appropriation shift with context, intent, and reception? By analysing musical aesthetics, cultural context, and audience reception, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between music and cultural representation in the globalised media landscape. I argue that education and critical examination of these representations are essential for cultivating a more ethical and culturally sensitive approach to media production and consumption.

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Introduction

In recent years, Hollywood and the U.S. entertainment industry have made measurable strides toward greater diverse representation, both on-screen and behind the scenes. In 2024, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) made up 44.3% of the U.S. population, and in streaming, BIPOC actors now exceed that proportion in representation, while BIPOC hold 41% of directing roles (in the theatrical film sector, BIPOC lead actors and directors held 25.2% and 20.2% of roles, respectively) (*Hollywood Diversity Report*, 2025). However, this progress has not yet extended to film music composition. Although there is no comprehensive report on BIPOC composers in major Hollywood productions, only 8.2% of film composers were women in 2022 (Smith et al., 2023), and only 10.4% of all programmed works by American orchestras were by living BIPOC composers, which is a notable increase from 2016's 1.8%, but still a small fraction overall (Deemer & Meals, 2024).

This trend of the lack of diversity in composers persists even when films focus on non-white cultures and stories. For instance, there have been multiple popular films that have either been set in Japan and/or heavily featured Japanese culture and characters, and a majority of the films have been scored by non-Japanese composers, mainly White composers. 2003's *The Last Samurai*, directed by Edward Zwick, was scored by Hans Zimmer; *Memoirs of a Geisha*, released in 2005, featured a score by John Williams; 2006's *Letters from Iwo Jima*'s score was composed by Kyle Eastwood and Michael Stevens, despite featuring a Japanese-heavy cast; *47 Ronin* (2013)'s composer was Ilan Eshkeri; Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2016) was scored by Kim Allen Kluge and Katherine Kluge; Alexandre Desplat for Wes Anderson's stop-motion film *Isle of Dogs* (2018); and Dominic Lewis for *Bullet Train* (2022). Even 2024's critically acclaimed TV series *Shōgun*, which was widely praised for its authenticity and representation, was scored by Atticus Ross, Leopold Ross, and Nick Chuba. The rare exception is 2022's *Minamata*, directed by Andrew Levitas, which was scored by Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Thus, while representation among actors and directors increasingly reflects the diversity of contemporary U.S. society, the voices shaping a film's musical landscape remain overwhelmingly homogeneous, raising critical questions about authenticity, representation, and whose perspectives are heard and whose remain silent. This paper aims to look at these questions in depth through four case studies.

The Last Samurai

The Last Samurai, a period drama-action film following the story of an American captain who comes into contact with samurai after the Meiji Restoration, was inspired by the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion and is almost entirely set in Japan. While actor Ken Watanabe praised the film for depicting Japan "in a way that we were never able to before", many criticised the film for its "White saviour" narrative, as well as its exoticisation and romanticisation of Japanese culture (Lee, 2022).

Hans Zimmer's score includes a Western orchestra alongside Japanese instruments such as shamisen, shakuhachi, taiko, and koto, as well as the Chinese erhu. Unlike many of the other film scores discussed in this paper, there are no credited Japanese musicians or supervisors for the score of *The Last Samurai*. Musically, the score largely incorporates Hans Zimmer's signature style of film scoring, with epic and dynamic orchestral sounds combined with unconventional instrumentation, which in this case is the Japanese instruments. The music relies heavily on Western harmonies and rhythm, with the Japanese instruments often

accentuating the melody or setting the scene. While Zimmer's inclusion of traditional Japanese instruments might suggest an attempt at an authentic representation of "Japaneseness", the score ultimately represents a Westernised perspective of what Japanese culture looks like, using musical tropes that align more with Hollywood's idea of the "Exotic East" than authenticity, representation, and opportunities for underrepresented musicians.

Zimmer's involvement in *The Last Samurai* can also be explained through the lens of commercial practices. By the early 2000s, Hans Zimmer was one of the most commercially successful and well-known film composers in Hollywood, known for his epic and emotionally charged scores, usually using a large orchestra alongside non-Western instruments and digitally manipulated sound. His name would have lent prestige and saleability to the already marketable film (the film stars Tom Cruise, one of the consistently highest-grossing actors since the 1990s), a factor that likely influenced the studio's decision more than questions of cultural authenticity and representation. Zimmer's appointment symbolises Hollywood's ongoing reluctance to entrust non-White stories to non-White artists. Furthermore, this reinforces a vicious cycle of Asian composers not being hired due to a lack of prominence in the main media, but not being able to build the necessary portfolio or stature to begin with.

Memoirs of a Geisha

This pattern of prioritising marketability and security continues in 2005's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Like *The Last Samurai*, the film is set in Japan and is deeply rooted in Japanese cultures and traditions, and yet its score was composed by yet another Western giant: John Williams, known for his scores for films such as the *Star Wars* films, the *Indiana Jones* franchise, the *Harry Potter* series, and many more. Williams, celebrated for his sweepingly dramatic orchestral style and lyrical use of musical themes, approaches the story through a similarly (or potentially even more aggressively) Western lens. Despite featuring Japanese instruments, including shakuhachi, koto, shamisen, and tsuzumi, and renowned Asian soloists such as Yo-Yo Ma on cello, the musical voice that emerges is unmistakably that of Williams', and more importantly, Western. In a film about one performing an art form that frequently references traditional Japanese songs and music, Williams himself references none of this.

In the piece titled "Going to School" in the soundtrack, Williams uses the tsuzumi in much the way drums would be scored in a Western orchestra. This is followed by a string solo in a major pentatonic scale, which is often described as having an "oriental" feel. Indeed, in an interview with Classic FM, John Williams states that the aim of the score was to "create an oriental atmosphere by using traditional Japanese instruments that would be supported by a broad, Western harmonic vocabulary" (*John Williams Discusses Memoirs Of A Geisha*, n.d.). This quote directly falls into Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism, established in his 1978 book of the same name, which refers to the exaggeration of difference and application of clichéd analytical models for perceiving the "Oriental world" and its cultures (Said, 1978).

The selective use of instruments fits within what musicologist Ralph Locke refers to as "musical exoticism", a practice where non-Western sounds are incorporated to signal difference and convey foreignness to Western audiences (Locke, 2009). The result is not a Japanese landscape, but a sonic construction and Western interpretation of "Japan" filtered through a Hollywood perspective, which emphasises Western fantasies, stereotypes, and misconceptions. The film *Memoirs of a Geisha* itself was criticised for its Westernisation and fetishisation of Japanese culture, as well as for its casting choice, in which all three main female

roles went to non-Japanese actresses. The film had greater popularity in the United States than it did in Japan, where it only achieved average to moderate box office success.

Shōgun

Two decades after *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* were released, the TV series *Shōgun* was released on FX by Hulu. *Shōgun* quickly became the hit show of 2024 and was the first Japanese-language series to win a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series. Famed for its authenticity and representation, it featured a majority Japanese cast and crew, with star and producer Hiroyuki Sanada saying in an interview with the Los Angeles Times, "We tried to put more Japanese lenses on the script. We wanted to show more details of the culture, and the characters, rules, atmosphere and everything else" (Vognar, 2024).

Despite the overwhelming and unprecedented emphasis on authenticity and representation, however, the series was scored yet again by not only one but three White male composers: Oscar-winning composer Atticus Ross, his brother, Leopold Ross, and their frequent collaborator, Nick Chuba. In interviews, the trio mention the name of their arranger, Japanese composer and music producer Taro Ishida, as someone who was able to bring his authenticity and expertise on Japanese traditional music (Ingenthron, 2024).

Having some form of "ethnic advisor" to White composers has been common practice in Hollywood for decades. A notable example is Japanese-American composer Tak Shindo, who was "repeatedly called upon to 'represent the authentic' during the postwar years by serving as the 'Japanese musical advisor'" (Sheppard, 2019). It is important to note, however, that these "advisors" do not get credited as composers, but merely as musicians or arrangers. Not only does this limit their notability as a composer, but it also limits their earnings, as most arrangers do not earn as much as a composer in the first place, nor do they receive the residual incomes that a composer would. Again, this prevents a Japanese composer from gaining the reputation and recognition they may have earned had they been hired and credited as a composer rather than an arranger, and thus obstructs or limits prospects as a film composer for blockbusters and high-budget, commercially successful films and TV series such as *The Last Samurai*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and *Shōgun*.

Bullet Train

David Leitch's *Bullet Train* (2022) is another film that is, for the most part, set in Japan. While the three aforementioned films and TV series have largely focused on historic Japanese stories, *Bullet Train* represents a twenty-first-century rendition of Hollywood's fascination with Japan and its culture and aesthetics. Based on Kōtarō Isaka's novel *Maria Beetle*, the film follows a group of assassins on a high-speed bullet train, led by Brad Pitt's character "Ladybug". Despite its Japanese settings and literary origins, the film features a predominantly non-Japanese cast and is told almost entirely in English; even the passengers on the train seem to be majority non-Japanese. The film prompted accusations of whitewashing of the main characters, and was publicly criticised by David Inoue of the Japanese American Citizens League, who suggested that "foreigners, or gaijin, remain a distinct minority in Japan, and to populate the movie with so many in the leading roles is ignoring the setting" (Burton, 2022). Furthermore, civil rights activist and leader of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, Guy Aoki, accused the film of making excuses for "the tired Hollywood practice of exploiting Asian source material, leaving out most of the Asians in it, and calling the casting of white, black, and Latino actors a triumph for diversity" (*MANAA Blasts Whitewashed 'Bullet Train,' Calls Out Actress*, 2022).

Japan, in the context of this film, becomes less a cultural space than a cinematic playground where cultural specificity gives way to pop spectacle, with a neon-lit backdrop of convenience stores, vending machines, and anime and post-modern cute mascot imagery.

Perhaps then, it is not surprising that the score for this film was written by White British composer Dominic Lewis. Known for his energetic scores for action films such as *The King's Man* (2021) and *Violent Night* (2022), Lewis constructs a sonic landscape that fuses Western orchestral and electronic film music conventions with conspicuously "Japanese" musical signifiers. The score alternates between pulsating electronic beats, electric guitar riffs, and moments of lush orchestral writing typical of Hollywood action cinema, interspersed with uses of Japanese-language pop songs and covers. Some notable examples include a Japanese city pop rendition of "Stayin' Alive" and a tongue-in-cheek dance cover of "Holding Out For A Hero". These musical choices, while distinctive, often function as ironic musical jokes rather than authentic or respectful musical gestures. The only two tracks in the soundtrack written by Japanese musicians were Carmen Maki's *Tokiniwa Hahano Naikono Yoni* (lyrics by Shuji Terayama and music by Michi Tanaka) and Kyu Sakamoto's *Sukiyaki* (by lyricist Rokusuke Ei and composer Hachidai Nakamura), which is the only Japanese song to reach number one on the Billboard pop charts in the United States. Although several Japanese vocalists appear on the soundtrack, no Japanese composer (or musical supervisor, for that matter) is credited, reinforcing the recurring absence of Japanese creative authorship in Western depictions of Japan.

The film's visual and musical aesthetic can be examined through the lens of techno-Orientalism, a concept coined by David Morley and Kevin Robins in their essay "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic" (1995). Writing in the context of the late-twentieth-century anxieties about Japan's technological and economic rise, Morley and Robins argue that the Western media's portrayal of a "hypermodern" Japan functions as a projection of Western fears about technology, automation, and cultural decline: "Through the projection of exotic (and erotic) fantasies onto this high-tech delirium, anxieties about the 'importance' of Western culture can be, momentarily, screened out" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 169). They also argue that "the West's imaginary Japan works to consolidate old mystifications and stereotypes: 'they' are barbaric and 'we' are civilised; 'they' are robots while 'we' remain human; and so on" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 172).

Bullet Train exemplifies this framework. Its depiction of Japan is saturated with the aesthetics of speed, efficiency, and brute-force violence. Lewis' score echoes this by fusing mechanical textures, synthesised melodies, and glossy J-POP-style refrains. The score's sonic atmosphere and hyper-electric sheen align with Morley and Robins' notion of Japan as a fantasy of hypermodernity, which is dazzling but dehumanised (Morley & Robins, 1995). The score's somewhat ironic use of Japanese-language pop further accentuates this distance, providing what might be described as performative diversity. It may appear to be inclusive upon first glance, but its creative hierarchies and motivations remain firmly Western. Just as *The Last Samurai* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* curated an exotic past, *Bullet Train* offers up Japan packaged up with exoticised futurism, with an illusion of cultural hybridity while maintaining systemic exclusion.

Representation, Authorship, and Power in Media

Discussions of representation in media often focus and end on who appears on the screen. However, while visibility and inclusion of diverse faces are of course important, representation

extends far beyond casting choices. As Stuart Hall argues in "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", representation is "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (Hall et al., 1997, p. 15). Therefore, representation is a crucial aspect in shaping how audiences understand people, cultures, and social relations, and those who control it hold a form of power, for they can influence which perspectives are amplified, which are silenced, and how cultural similarities and differences can be interpreted. In film, this power extends to the composer, as they play a major part in shaping the emotional narrative of the scene, cueing audience empathy, and defining how cultures are sonically understood. When non-Western stories are constantly mediated through Western musical authorship, they become filtered through an interpretive lens that reaffirms dominant hierarchies rather than challenging and redefining them. This is not to say that non-Japanese musicians cannot write music for Japanese stories; indeed, there are plenty of Japanese who write music for non-Japanese stories. However, the problem arises when a majority of Japanese stories are scored by a narrow pool of composers, as this incurs the possibility of providing a one-sided and biased interpretation of these stories. Ryuichi Sakamoto's score for *Minamata* demonstrates how a Japanese composer (and one outside of the majority White male pool of composers) can bring nuanced cultural and emotional depth to a film's narrative. Yet such examples are few and far between, leaving aspiring composers with few tangible role models.

This has consequences for cultural authorship and opportunity. As the case studies demonstrate, even when the films claim authenticity, Japanese composers rarely hold creative authority, instead appearing as featured artists or consultants. In these cases, inclusion remains at the level of appearance rather than authorship or creative power, and representation becomes a matter of optics, with the visual indication of the inclusion of Japanese elements or artists seemingly legitimising the work's authenticity, while the structural power dynamics remain the same. This is not an isolated issue, but a part of the systemic exclusion of BIPOC creatives from key creative decision-making roles in Hollywood production ecosystems.

Diversity in composition is not only important from a moral standpoint but also a creative and artistic one. Composers draw upon cultural histories, idioms, and personal experiences that shape narrative meaning, and to exclude non-White composers (whether intentional or unintentional) from the majority of projects is to narrow the possibilities for the film and the industry itself. New voices bring new sounds, structures, and emotional and narrative vocabularies. Representation, in this sense, is not merely about filling quotas but about redistributing creative power fairly, and making sure that soundtracks to non-Western stories told are not just about them, but by them. This counters the homogenising tendencies of Hollywood's globalised sounds, offering a plurality of musical perspectives that reflect the diverse landscape.

With the visible lack of representation of BIPOC composers both in Hollywood and in concert, there is also an obvious lack of role models for aspiring BIPOC composers. Time and time again, research has shown that seeing someone with a shared racial or cultural background in a professional role increases the likelihood of aspiring for that role yourself (Perez-Sepulveda et al., 2025). In the absence of BIPOC composers in Hollywood, young musicians may internalise the idea that these positions are inaccessible or unattainable. This also perpetuates the structural barriers for young BIPOC musicians. Without role models, mentors, networks, or professional recognitions, aspiring composers struggle to build the portfolio necessary to break into major projects, reinforcing the cycle of underrepresentation. Increasing the representation of BIPOC composers would not only provide role models and mentorship

opportunities for emerging talent but also diversify the musical vocabulary of mainstream film, creating more innovative and creative cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Despite visual or narrative claims that suggest representation or emphasise cultural authenticity, musical authorship in Hollywood's depictions of Japan remains largely dominated by White male composers. This reflects deeper structural issues of inequalities in who gets to create, define, and shape a cultural experience for global audiences, and limits opportunities for musicians and composers from a wider range of backgrounds.

Representation in media is a crucial part of cultural exchange and dialogue. With the majority of sonic representation following persistent Orientalist tropes (Said, 1978) or their modernist counterparts, such as techno-Orientalism (Morley & Robins, 1995), Japan's cultural representation has been repeatedly mediated by Western authorship. Furthermore, the hiring of "ethnic advisors" or featured artists, who are not credited as composers and certainly not featured in the title credits (unlike a composer), reinforces surface-level inclusion without the authorship. This practice keeps the structural hierarchies intact. True representation requires access to creative decision-making roles, not just symbolic participation.

The lack of BIPOC composers perpetuates both cultural and creative homogeneity. Expanding authorship and opportunities for underrepresented composers would therefore allow for a richer, more sonically nuanced storytelling that moves beyond exoticism toward genuine intercultural dialogue. Without such inclusion, Hollywood's soundscapes risk remaining confined within a narrow, self-referential framework that reproduces existing power dynamics and stereotypes rather than challenging or reframing them. To rethink this dynamic, attention must shift from visual or superficial inclusion toward the redistribution of creative authority, including in the sonic landscape. Only through such a reconfiguration can cultural exchange move toward an ethics of authorship that genuinely acknowledges multiplicity, agency, and co-presence within global media culture.

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Mirroring as a Linguistic Strategy of Discrediting the Opponent

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Abstract

The study analyzes the language strategy employed by conspiracy theorists, specifically the concept of "mirroring." This involves adopting the linguistic strategies of their opponents to explain events, while usually reversing the key positions. Such attacks serve both as a form of counteroffensive and as an attempt to focus attention on the opponent while reinforcing the credibility of their own shared content. This linguistic strategy is examined in German and Slovak conspiracy discourse, using examples from digital journalistic texts and (multimodal) texts disseminated online. The aim is to highlight a strategy that contributes to the growing popularity and spread of conspiracy theories, thereby fostering greater polarization in society. Methodologically, the study draws on corpus linguistics tools while also integrating a contextual approach necessary for understanding the strategy and interpreting its content.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, language strategies, mirroring, delegitimization of opponents

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories remain a constant danger to society, especially during times of political, ethnic, or economic crises. In such moments, they tend to grow stronger, solidify the beliefs of their followers, and attract new supporters. The online environment acts as an ideal platform for quickly and effectively spreading their content.

The success of conspiracy content relies not only on crises themselves but also on how conflictual and sensitive topics are addressed and shaped. The communication strategies used are vital for maintaining attention, boosting emotional impact, increasing persuasiveness, and delegitimizing opponents. One key strategy is mirroring, which appears in various forms. In this study, specific examples will illustrate selected subtypes.

The empirical section combines corpus and contextual analysis. Corpus tools offer an overview of how often language units appear and enable observation within a wider context. Contextual analysis enhances this by illustrating the interpretive frameworks behind different types of mirroring. The data comprises journalistic and multimodal texts from 2023, chosen deliberately due to the presence of multiple crises.

Theoretical Framework: Conspiracy Theories

Available publications show that interest in conspiracy theories as a research topic remains high, even though most theories share similar basic features. This is because new aspects are gradually uncovered, reflecting the dynamic nature of conspiracy theories and their ongoing efforts to find new strategies to increase influence. They can also be examined from multiple perspectives, helping to create a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon.

This study will examine the main traits of conspiracy theories that help us identify (multimodal) texts as containing conspiratorial content. But it's important to recognize that behind these traits, there are often complex tactics designed to enhance the content's persuasiveness and diminish the recipient's critical evaluation.

Conspiracy theories interpret events and situations based on determinism as a central principle. According to this perspective, everything is seen as intentional, and chance, chaos, and uncontrollable factors are not considered possible causes. Instead, a conspiracy group is believed to secretly control events, manipulating them to achieve hidden goals (e.g., Barkun, 2003, p. 4; Brotherton, 2013, p. 11; Butter, 2023, pp. 22–29; Butter, 2021; Fuchs, 2022, pp. 30–31; Lutter, 2001, pp. 24–27).

By identifying the positions of conspirators in conspiracy theories, we highlight another key feature: dualism, or a binary view of the world that separates good from evil. Conspirators are seen as the ones representing the "evil/enemy/perpetrator/responsible for evil," while their opposites are the "good/friend/victim" side (e.g., Barkun, 2003; Butter, 2023; Fuchs, 2022). Conspirators—whether individuals, bureaucracies, national and international institutions, organizations, scientists, or others—are perceived as highly competent and discreet regarding their secret intentions and plans (e.g., Brotherton, 2013). Opposing them are the so-called truth seekers or conspiracy theorists and their supporters, who take on the role of uncovering the real truth and revealing the conspirators' intentions, and are portrayed exclusively in a positive light.

From the perspective of key characteristics, it is crucial to pause at the point where conspiracy theory and empirical material connect. In the literature, we find valid critiques of the term "theory" when linked to "conspiracy," which highlight the lack of scientific features such as formulating a scientific problem, developing hypotheses, describing appropriate research methods, creating a consistent theory in the conclusion, verifiability, and more (e.g., Götz-Votteler & Hespers, 2019, pp. 35–37; Schmiege et al., 2023, p. 441). Based on this, every conspiracy theory must be tested for its claims, even though this can be difficult. Pfahl-Traughber (2019), who uses the term conspiracy ideology, rightly emphasizes one key aspect of conspiracy theories stating, "Die Darstellung [eines Ereignisses als Folge einer Konspiration] ist […] so gehalten, dass eine Prüfung an der Realität nicht möglich ist. Es gibt demnach Argumentationsmuster zur Immunisierung vor Kritik, welche gegenteilige Beweise nicht zulassen" (Teil 2/Part 2). Brotherton (2013, p. 12) similarly argues, "Conspiracy theories are epistemically self-insulating. Because of their epistemic approach towards new information, conspiracy theories are well insulated against questioning or correction." These are explanations of events and situations that serve as alternatives to widely accepted explanations. Therefore, while we can identify some characteristics of scientificity in conspiracy theories, their strategic purpose is only fulfilled within the context of conspiracy theory, not scientificity. For this reason, it is recommended to use the term "narrative" instead of "theory." The conspiracy narrative better reflects the structure and nature of the content it carries and is not as heavily burdened with negative connotations.

Empirical Part

Observed Aspects

In analysing empirical data, the focus is on the communication strategy of mirroring. This appears in several subtypes, not all of which must be present in every piece of conspiratorial content. Common subtypes include mirroring accusations, adopting the opponent's terms and reinterpreting their use (such as irony or delegitimization), reversing strategies of overestimation and belittlement within the friend-enemy framework, mirroring victims' discourse, reframing roles, and mimicking claims of scientific authority. An interesting example is the adoption of the label "conspiracy theorist/conspirator," which is often deliberately used in an ironic tone to diminish its legitimacy.

Observing these subtypes requires viewing the text as a whole, where various signs and codes are used. Although the analysis mainly focuses on the linguistic level, it also considers visual elements that help better understand the intentions of the author or sharer of the text (e.g., Stanková, 2020).

Empirical Material

The analysis focuses on empirical material from digital sources, specifically journalistic texts and posts of various lengths from social networks in 2023. The German-language journalistic texts are from the digital magazine *Rubikon,*[1] particularly from the sections *Fassadendemokratie & Tiefer Staat* and *Krieg & Frieden*. Slovak language sources include the portals *Zem a Vek*, *Bádateľ*, and *Christianitas*. All these sources are classified as portals that

[1] *Rubikon* magazine published articles on its website until 1 April 2023, when it was replaced by the digital magazine *Manova*. However, Manova does not preserve the original section divisions entirely. Efforts are currently underway to revive Rubikon magazine, but without access to the article archive. All of the samples shown here come from a database created earlier.

share disinformation and conspiracy content (e.g., Holland-Letz, 2020; Müller et al., 2023; Konšpirátori.sk). It should be noted that not all texts are purely conspiratorial; many critique national or international regulations without explicit links to conspiracy theories, though their implicit framing may resemble or support such theories. Posts from social media were searched using keywords such as Corona, Covid-19, mainstream media, chemtrails, elites, among others. Since not all social media accounts are publicly accessible, the study focused only on available content. Some posts were analyzed individually, while others involved collections of posts from an "open" account within a specific time frame. When selecting the empirical material, the focus was not on quantity but on quality, specifically, the ability to accurately illustrate the mirroring strategies employed.

Analysis

The Use of Corpus Linguistics Tools

The empirical base outlined above includes texts of different lengths. Sometimes, German journalistic texts exceed ten pages. To work more efficiently, we also utilize corpus linguistics tools in our analysis, specifically automatic evaluation with the *Sketch Engine* corpus manager.

For this purpose, German texts were grouped into a German corpus and Slovak texts into a Slovak corpus. From the Sketch Engine functions, we mainly used the Keywords and Concordance tools. The Keywords tool (single-word units) helps us identify typical language units that signal a relevant content element, topic, or reference object. The Concordance tool allows us to search for a specific lemma, word, phrase, tag, document type, and other items. The results are presented in context, which is effective for analysis, as it helps us at least outline the interpretation direction of the searched unit and relate it to the relevant thematic framework. For a better illustration, we present an evaluation of units from the German and Slovak corpora using the Keywords tool:

Table 1
The 50 Most Frequent Single-Word Keywords in the German Corpus

Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 Rottenfußer	11 Regenauer	21 Weltfriedensordnung	31 NATO	41 Rossum
2 WEF	12 Unterworfene	22 Donbass	32 völkerrechtswidrig	42 Röper
3 Hersh	13 Selenskyj	23 Friedensbewegung	33 Riedl	43 Prescott
4 Rodrian	14 Waffenlieferung	24 Guérot	34 Schwab	44 Gaye
5 Bierling	15 Stockwell	25 Stellvertreterkrieg	35 Ukraine	45 Kissinger
6 Dutschke	16 Angola	26 Mächtige	36 Kriegstreiber	46 Zentner
7 BlackRock	17 Falstaff	27 Vad	37 Herrschend	47 Kriegsmaterialgesetz
8 Ganser	18 Savimbi	28 geopolitisch	38 Geoengineering	48 Lehrich
9 globalistisch	19 Gellermann	29 CIA	39 Wodarg	49 Nuland
10 Kulldorff	20 Ukrainekrieg	30 Despotismus	40 Deckelbaum	50 Thinktank

Table 2
The 50 Most Frequent Single-Word Keywords in the Slovak Corpus

Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 Dvorská	11 mimovládky	21 LGBTI	31 NGT	41 Pentagón
2 Rostas	12 progresívec	22 proamerický	32 potrestanie	42 Aláča
3 Naumann	13 Ódor	23 Bartalos	33 B9	43 cudzinecký
4 GMO	14 dezinformátor	24 zapredanec	34 Čaputová	44 úradnícky
5 chlórpyrifos	15 Šimeček	25 drag	35 dezinformačný	45 lokajský
6 Soros	16 Denníkn	26 Solženicyn	36 ZVTV	46 Szijjártó
7 Buzalka	17 Hanzelová	27 postsedliaci	37 Bratčikov	47 korporátny
8 IPCC	18 Štubňa	28 chlorpyrifos	38 Sofian	48 Blaščák
9 MVO	19 Huliak	29 antropológ	39 guvernérka	49 provládny
10 Gerulata	20 Šimko	30 ústavodarc	40 ICJK	50 Zimková

Contextual Analysis of Mirroring Strategy

The keywords identified through corpus analysis are not only typical for the given corpus but also highlight shared content trends. They can be categorized into patterns characteristic of conspiracy discourse. In contextual analysis, these findings guide targeted searches for specific units, enabling their contextual framing to be extracted from the entire corpus. These units then serve as a starting point for identifying a potential mirroring strategy or some of its subtypes. The selected frames also demonstrate the strategy in question.

Following this procedure, we have identified the following subtypes of the mirroring strategy:

a. Reflecting historical or historical-legal context (shifting historical contextual framework to current situations; usually involves role reversal);
b. Mirroring accusations (reversing the role in the accusation pattern);
c. Mirroring the victims' discourse;
d. Reversal of the strategy of overestimating and underestimating within the friend-enemy personnel scheme (deliberate reversal often linked with ironic overestimation and condemnatory underestimation);
e. Mirroring of attributes related to conspiracy theories.

Reflecting Historical or Historical-Legal Context

Example 1: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

> *Krieg ist wieder gesellschaftsfähig, neuer Lifestyle. Viele Stimmen schreien nach Rache, schreien nach modernsten Waffen, denn es gibt neue hinterhältige Angriffskrieger mit giftigen Pfeilen.* ***Das alles erscheint wie ein Duplikat der US-amerikanischen Gründungsgeschichte. Die neuen Wilden, die neuen Indianer sind die Russen. Sie müssen besiegt,*** *also* ***vernichtet werden.*** *Dann,* ***nach dem Leben in Reservaten****,* ***nach der Umerziehung*** *im Sinne unserer westlichen Wertegemeinschaft, nachdem sie ihrer eigenen Geschichte abgeschworen haben, unter der Führung durch vom Westen akzeptierte Gouverneure, dürfen die Überlebenden vielleicht wieder in unserer regelbasierten Ordnung mitspielen.*
> (Gysi, 2023)

The first example comes from the article "Defensive Invasion," the title of which hints at mirror imaging and role reversal. It illustrates the clear transfer of the historical colonial framework to the current military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It begins with a historical narrative from the United States, which is mirrored to shift focus onto the opponent (in other texts, the conflict is seen as a dispute between Russia and the US, with Ukraine acting as a proxy, known as a proxy war/ *Stellvertreterkrieg*). The reversal of roles (*Die neuen Wilden, die neuen Indianer sind die Russen. Sie müssen besiegt, also vernichtet werden*.) justifies violence and dehumanization, portraying the original aggressor as a victim forced to defend itself. When reflecting on the colonial framework, the narrative employs familiar language, such as *Leben in Reservaten, nach der Umerziehung, müssen besiegt, vernichtet werden*; military terms are also used (e.g., *Krieg, modernste Waffen, Angriffskrieger*), which sometimes overlap with colonial vocabulary.

Example 2: Thematic Framework—The Covid-19 Pandemic.

> *Situácia na Slovensku*
> *Ministerstvo zdravotníctva SR pred pár dňami oznámilo, že od 31.1.2023 sa na Slovensku začne znova očkovať aktualizovanými posilňovacími dávkami „vakcín" proti Covid-19. Ako teda máme chápať poslednú iniciatívu ministerstva vo svetle zistení tejto novej štúdie? Asi tak, že ide o snahu ministerstva doraziť tých zaočkovaných ľudí, ktorých nedorazila základná očkovacia schéma. Inými slovami, je to* ***štátom riadená genocída vlastného národa****.*
> ***Genocída je nepremlčateľný zločin a jeho páchatelia jedného dňa povstanú pred novodobým Norimberských tribunálom.*** *A my dúfame, že dovtedy bude zároveň obnovený trest smrti.*
> (Badatel.net, 2023)

Similar to the German sample, we identified examples in the Slovak corpus that reflect the historical context but are not related to war conflict; instead, they pertain to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example 2 references the historical framework of the Nuremberg trials (e.g., Drábik, 2024), specifically its legal dimension as a criminal tribunal, which is applied to the Slovak government and health officials during the pandemic. The accusations of crimes against humanity are not presented as historical but gain significance through their reflection of relevant events in a legal context. Additionally, strongly negative vocabulary is used here, especially in the second example, which employs the term genocide. This term itself evokes the severity of past crimes and transfers that gravity to current circumstances.

Mirroring Accusations

Example 3: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

[Daniele Ganser] *Sein Anliegen als Historiker und Friedensforscher, die Ursachen des Krieges zu beleuchten, stößt beim politischen Establishment und seinen Leibmedien auf erbitterten Widerstand.* ***Diffamierung, Hetze und versuchte Auftrittsverbote sind die selbstlegitimierten Scherenschnitte gutbürgerlicher Demokraten****, um Meinungsfreiheit und kritische Beschäftigung mit geschichtlichen Zusammenhängen auf ein weichgezeichnetes Bild vom guten Westen und bösen Russen zurechtzustutzen. […]*

Vordergründig führt ***nicht Putin Krieg gegen Wolodymyr Selenskyj****. Die Ukraine ist Schauplatz eines Stellvertreterkrieges der* ***USA gegen Russland****.*

(Behla, 2023)

Example 4: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Der seit dem 24. Februar 2022 tobende Weltwirtschaftskrieg gegen die Russische Föderation *ist ein unübersehbarer Beweis dafür. Er ist ein* ***aus USA-Sicht genialer Schachzug unter dem Deckmantel Krieg****, weil sie in mehrfacher, einzigartiger Weise profitieren werden und damit ihr* ***völkerrechtswidriges Welthegemonialstreben*** *formal-legal korrekt arrondieren.*

(Weinert, 2023)

Example 5: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Celý svet dnes vie, že ***zástupná vojna USA proti*** *Rusku bola vyvolaná Američanmi.*
[…]

3. odsek – nasledujúce vyjadrenie že "Ukrajine budeme naďalej pomáhať, aby dosiahla mierové riešenie za podmienok, ktoré si sama určí a budeme ju podporovať tak dlho ako to bude potrebné, vrátane vojenskej, finančnej a humanitárnej pomoci" svedčí o tom, že ***kolektívny Západ nemá v úmysle ukončiť zástupnú vojnu USA proti Rusku na Ukrajine, ale bude ju naďalej eskalovať.***

(Štubňa, 2023)

One subtype of the mirroring strategy involves adopting a blame pattern linked to role reversal. This is shown through examples 3–5. All of these follow the aggressor-victim pattern, where the conspiratorial discourse reverses the usual positions compared to the common explanation of events, which states that Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. Russia is depicted as the victim, a point also visible in the linear arrangement of the participants within the pattern. From a linguistic perspective, the words used not only show the direction of the action from X to Y, but the preposition *gegen*/against explicitly frames this direction as a conflict. In the analyzed texts, Ukraine is mostly portrayed as the site of the conflict, but in other sources, it is also discussed as the aggressor or an active participant in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Part of this strategy often involves reframing Russian aggression, which can also be seen in the headlines of the texts. A prime example is the title of the text from which the first example is taken, “Defensive Invasion” (see above), which clearly demonstrates the reinterpretation of the term “aggressor” in this context.

Mirroring the Victims' Discourse

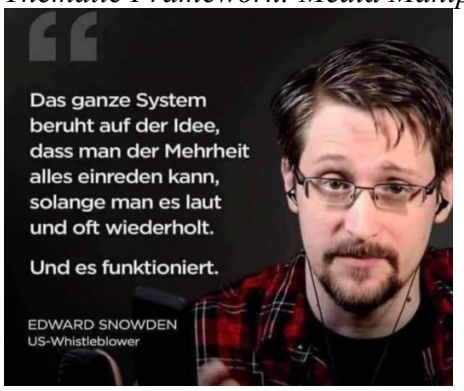
Example 6: Thematic Framework—The Media/Political Manipulation.

V podobnom hoaxovom duchu píšu ***hoaxové korporátne médiá, hoaxerskí politici a lokaji Západu*** *na iné témy... Podstata je v tom, že* ***spochybnia pravdu a legalizujú lož****.*
(Štubňa, 2023)

Example 7: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

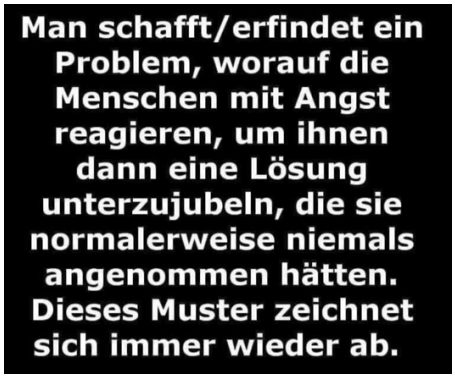
In Wahrheit ist es wohl eher so, dass mit wachsender Härte des Angreifers die Neigung des Opfers wächst, sich aus Angst anzupassen. […] "Wir merken dann erst, ***wie Mächte und Medien fast unaufhörlich damit beschäftigt sind, uns aufzuscheuchen, zu zerstreuen, zu ängstigen und anzutreiben – uns im schlimmsten Fall sogar von einem Trauma ins nächste zu jagen.*** *Von der Pandemie in den Krieg.*
(Riedl, 2023)

Figure 1
Thematic Framework: Media Manipulation



Source: post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 2
Thematic Framework: Political Manipulation



Source: Post on Facebook (Clos, 2023)

The analyzed samples reflect the discourse of victims. The initial idea that the public is manipulated and deceived by disinformation is challenged: the recipients of the messages are portrayed as victims of mainstream media, political elites, or "powers that be." This framework is used across various contexts—from criticizing news reporting and political figures (example 6) to discussing war conflicts and their media coverage (example 7), and to the visual and

verbal depiction of victims of political decisions during the pandemic (figures 1 and 2). A common feature is framing the audience as defenceless victims of manipulation, fear, and oppression, with mainstream platforms identified as the perpetrators.

Reversal of the Overestimating and Underestimating Strategy Within the Friend-Enemy Personnel Scheme

Example 8: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Der "Marken"-Kern des Faschismus – die imperialistische Eroberung – ist geblieben. Dieser hat sich lediglich von der Nation auf die ***"westliche Wertegemeinschaft"*** *in toto ausgeweitet.*
(Mies, 2023)

Example 9: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Der zum weißen Ritter Hollywoods aufgeblasene ukrainische Präsident *spiegelt als Erstes sich selbst. Aber vor allem spiegelt er uns, mit allen Mitteln moderner Propagandatechnik.*
(Gysi, 2023)

Example 10: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Im Jahr 2019 hat RAND in einer Studie festgestellt, dass Russland keinerlei aggressive Absichten habe. Statt das als Ausgangspunkt für Entspannung zu sehen, hat RAND ein sehr umfangreiches Maßnahmenpaket vorgeschlagen, mit dem Russland endlich dazu gebracht werden soll, aggressiv auf die Provokationen der USA zu reagieren, damit die USA ***Russland endlich als internationalen Bösewicht darstellen*** *und politisch und wirtschaftlich isolieren können.*
(Angerer, 2023)

Example 11: Thematic Framework—The European Union; Migration; Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Na čele jednej z členských krajín EÚ je už pár dní okrem Orbána aj ďalší ***„výtržník“*** *–* ***ako západné mediálne prostitútky prezývajú nového slovenského premiéra Fica****. Fico na summite v Bruseli 26. októbra vyhlásil, že Slovensko pod jeho vládou odmieta dodávať zbrane Ukrajine. Práve Slovensko za predchádzajúcej neoliberálnej vlády poslalo do Kyjeva najviac zbraní v percentách na obyvateľov, čím si elita krajiny chcela zarobiť na bonusových bodoch s USA/NATO a EÚ.*
(ZEM&VEK, 2023)

Example 12: Thematic Framework—Media Conflict (Mainstream vs. Disinformation Portal).

Hanzelová (redaktorka DenníkaN/ mainstream) ***sa drží svojich závideniahodných "argumentačných zručností"*** *a vyhŕkne túto formuláciu na potvrdenie svojich schopností: "Šíri konšpirácie, môžete si to prečítať, šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach, je tam toho naozaj veľmi veľa."*
(Rostas, 2023)

Overestimating or exaggerating the opponent, or belittling a representative from one's own side, is not common in the analyzed corpus. However, several examples of this strategy type can still be identified. Usually, overestimation is an ironic tactic, indicated by quotation marks or expressive vocabulary, which shifts the originally positive tone into ridicule (examples 8, 9,

and 12). Conversely, belittling is often used in a context that softens its negative connotation and redefines it as a value accepted within one's own camp (examples 10 and 11). This approach ensures that the intended message aligns with the communicator's (author or content sharer) position.

Mirroring of Attributes Related to Conspiracy Theories

Example 13: Thematic Framework—Truth/Lie.

Hanzelová (redaktorka DenníkaN) *sa drží svojich závideniahodných "argumentačných zručností" a vyhŕkne túto formuláciu na potvrdenie svojich schopností: "Šíri konšpirácie, môžete si to prečítať, šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach, je tam toho naozaj veľmi veľa." Redaktorka tak odhaľuje svoju "komplexnú gramotnosť" a divákov poúča: "Zem&Vek šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach."* ***Odhliadnime od toho, že Zem&Vek má jednu z mnohých pravidelných rubrík "Sprisahania a fakty", kde sa zaoberá sprisahaniami, ktoré od úsvitu dejín vytvárajú našu históriu a charakter utvárania mocenských vzťahov.***
(Rostas, 2023)

Example 14: Thematic Framework—Objectivity and Quality of Shared Content.

Armin Stalder schreibt in Transition News (6): ***"In den Mainstream-Medien, die sich in einem kolossalen Akt der kognitiven Dissonanz als 'Qualitätsjournalisten' unverzichtbar wähnen,*** *findet man denn hauptsächlich Belanglosigkeiten zum WEF, überboten nur noch durch Bekundungen vermeintlicher Notwendigkeiten und Heiligsprechungen: 'Das WEF ist super; wir brauchen das WEF; die Elite ist unfehlbar.' Solche Verabsolutierungen hört man sonst höchstens aus dem Mund eines Priesters." (...) "Man will ja nur die Welt retten, völlig selbstlos, versteht sich. Einfach nur, weil man übernatürlich gut ist."*
(Schuhmacher, 2023)

Example 15: Thematic Framework—Requirement for Scientific Rigour, Expertise, Authority/Authorities.

*Redaktorka (Hanzelová/*DenníkN) *tak odhaľuje svoju "komplexnú gramotnosť" a divákov poúča: "Zem&Vek šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach." [...] Zamerať sa treba na skutočnosť, že* ***Hanzelová*** *so svojou úrovňou vedenia rozhovoru a myslenia* ***"kádruje*** *nielen odbornosť sudkyne ale* ***aj periodikum", ktorého redakciu už dekádu tvoria vysokoškolskí pedagógovia, výnimoční odborníci, lekári, ekonómovia, docenti, právnici a profesori, pri ktorých je Hanzelová iba groteskná atrapa novinárčiny a intelektu.*** *Tieto ponášky na novinárov namiesto hlbších úvah všade a unizono donekonečna opakujú ten istý metanaratív o potrebe zvyšovania "mediálnej gramotnosti" (brainwashing indoktrinácie) a boja proti hoaxom a dezinformáciám (stupňovanie cenzúry a vytláčanie iných názorov).*
(Rostas, 2023)

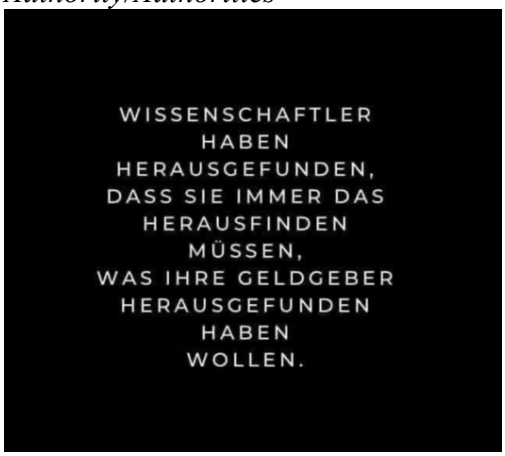
Example 16: Thematic Framework—Requirement for Scientific Rigour, Expertise, Authority/Authorities.

Mehr als zwei Jahre lang haben ***die globalistischen Parteienkartelle*** *in diversen Ländern* ***ihre Coronapolitik als „alternativlos" hingestellt. Unterstützt*** *wurden sie dabei* ***von ihren ausgesuchten „Experten" und gleichgeschalteten Mainstream-Medien****. Kritiker wurden diffamiert, verhöhnt und sanktioniert. [...]* ***Kritische Wissenschaftler wie Roland Wiesendanger und viele einfach logisch denkende Menschen*** *haben es von Anfang an nicht für einen Zufall gehalten, dass Sars-CoV-2 ausgerechnet in Wuhan entstanden ist, wo sich ein Labor befindet, in dem Gain-of-Function-Forschung an Sars-Viren betrieben wurde.*
(Angerer, 2023)

Example 17: Thematic Framework—Requirement for Scientific Rigour, Expertise, Authority/Authorities.

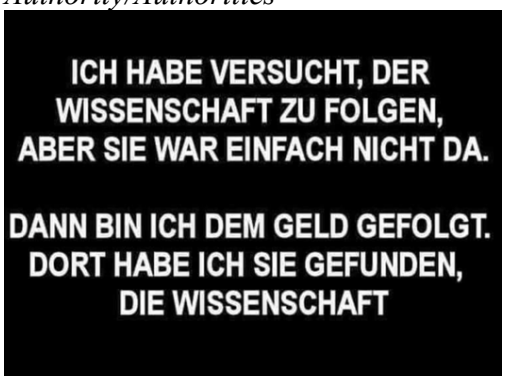
Z tohto pohľadu je to presne to isté, ako keď sa skoro 6 miliárd ľudí nechá presvedčiť, že si po najgigantickejšj psychologickej operácii dejín o "pandémii", ktorá nikdy nebola, nechá do tela vstreknúť chemikálie neznámeho pôvodu o ktorých samotní výrobcovia a promotéri hovorili, že nevedia, čo spôsobujú, pričom mnoho z nich upozorňovalo celkom zrozumiteľne, že to je koktejl s následkami nedozerných rozmerov vstupujúci do ľudského genómu. Popritom je celkom zábavné sledovať ***"odborníkov" arogantne opovrhujúcimi nielen pochybnosťani "hlúpeho plebsu" ale aj vynikajúcimi lekármi, ktorých umlčiava****: vyjadrovať sa smie* ***iba elitná špička imunológov a virológov****, ktorú pred svetom reprezentuje* ***Rockefellerov najgeniálnejší odborník – softvérový vývojár Bill so striekačkou v ruke****.*
(Rostas, 2023)

Figure 3
Thematic Framework—Questioning Scientificity, Expertise, and Presence of Authority/Authorities



Source: Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 4
Thematic Framework—Questioning Scientificity, Expertise, and Presence of Authority/Authorities



Source: Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

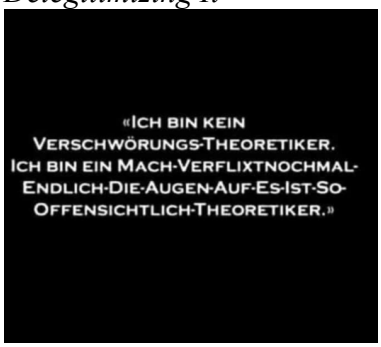
Figure 5
Thematic Framework—Questioning Scientificity, Expertise, and Presence of Authority/Authorities

Source: Post on Facebook (Henseler, 2023)

Example 18: Thematic Framework—Cluster for Assessing Group as an Authoritarian Cult.

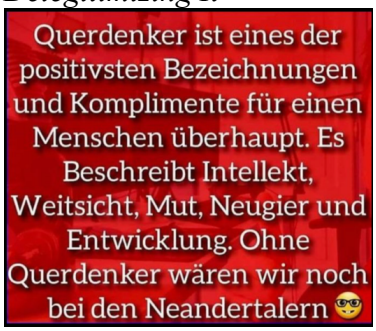
Eine autoritäre Sekte *[...] ein „Profil“ der entsprechenden Gruppe [...]Hierzu soll die folgende Checkliste dienen. Sie ist in* ***sechs Bereiche*** *gegliedert, die in den einzelnen Staatswesen zu Problemfeldern werden können — oder schon geworden sind:*
1 Ideologie
2 Die zentrale Figur
3 Gruppenstruktur
4 Einfluss auf das Mitglied
5 Techniken der Persönlichkeitsveränderung
6 Kontakte nach außen und Umgang mit Ehemaligen und Kritikern
(Eggert, 2023)

Figure 6
Thematic Framework—Deliberately Adopting the Label “Conspiracy Theorist” and Delegitimizing It



Source: Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 7
Thematic Framework—Deliberately Adopting the Label "Conspiracy Theorist" and Delegitimizing It



Source: Post on Facebook (Frühauf, 2023)

Examples 13–18 and figures 3–7 are grouped under the strategy of mirroring attributes related to the profile of conspiracy theories, which is further organized according to thematic frameworks. These are typically responses to characteristics of conspiracy theories recognized from professional literature or public discussion. In texts and posts of a conspiratorial nature, these attributes are addressed with an extremely critical, aggressive tone aimed at turning negative evaluations against the opponent. The construction of a dualistic view of the world (good vs. evil) occurs against the backdrop of shared content and is easily recognizable to the audience.

Example 13 highlights the clash between truth and lies by framing conspiracy theories in favor of alternative media. Meanwhile, their opponents – elites, politicians, mainstream media, and others – are discredited. This is especially clear in efforts to damage the credibility of opponents through sarcastic statements (*Redaktorka sa drží svojich závideniahodných argumentačných zručností...; odhaľuje svoju komplexnú gramotnosť a divákov poúča…*). By flipping the attribute of conspiracy and adding suitable contextual links, the position of alternative media becomes more legitimate and stronger.

Another interesting example is example 14, which uses the technical term cognitive dissonance in connection with mainstream media *(...In den Mainstream-Medien, die sich in einem kolossalen Akt der kognitiven Dissonanz als "Qualitätsjournalisten" unverzichtbar wähnen,* ...). This is a term that is also used in connection with the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and refers to a situation in which a person rejects other, contradictory explanations of an event in order not to disrupt accepted or expected interpretative frameworks and avoid a state of epistemic uncertainty (e.g., Binder & Kaltseis, 2023). In example 14, this term is used to discredit an opponent and emphasize their one-sidedness. Although cognitive dissonance usually refers to an internal conflict between contradictory beliefs, in this context it is understood more as a manifestation of the ideological closed-mindedness and inconsistency of the mainstream media, which nevertheless present themselves as "indispensable quality journalists."

The following examples 15–17 and figures 3–5 are grouped under the framework of scientificity, expertise, and the presence of authority or authorities. Within this framework, two subtypes can be distinguished: the requirement for professional qualifications and the criticism or denigration of expertise. In professional discussions, conspiracy theories are often criticized for rejecting the opinions of scientific authorities, experts, and specialists. In example 15, we see a counterargument accompanied by an argument about the participation of experts from various fields in the creation of content in the periodical Zem & Vek (*Hanzelová ... "kádruje*

nielen odbornosť sudkyne ale aj periodikum," ktorého redakciu už dekádu tvoria vysokoškolskí pedagógovia, výnimoční odborníci, lekári, ekonómovia, docenti, právnici a profesori ...). The legitimization of the alternative media is achieved by referring to the professional qualifications of the editorial team, thus reflecting the discourse of expertise. In contrast, mainstream experts (example 16) are presented as "selected" (*ihre ausgesuchten "Experten"*) and "like-minded" (*ihre gleichgeschalteten Mainstream-Medien*), thereby undermining their independence and expertise. The strategy of ridicule is applied in example 17, where the framework of scientific authority is transformed into a caricature symbolized by the image of Bill with a syringe in his hand. Direct criticism and even denigration of science are demonstrated by the posts in figures 3-5. Accusations of selling out science or having a limited view of events by fact-checkers clearly signal their rejection and simultaneous undermining of their position.

Example 18 attempts to depict the opponent as an "authoritarian sect" (*eine autoritäre Sekte*). This indirectly replicates how the conspirators themselves are often portrayed. A closer look at specific aspects also indicates that certain traits are reflected, such as ideas of blind obedience to authority, ideological closed-mindedness, and the related inability to think critically. It is also noteworthy that the source of the cluster or profile is a German association of psychologists, as this lends an air of professionalism to the conspiratorial text (e.g., Gross, 1996).

Figures 6–7 demonstrate the explicit adoption of labels used by opponents. Negative labels are ironically adopted and then framed positively, thus weakening their stigmatizing effect. The protagonists express their own understanding of the terms conspiracy theorist (*Verschwörungstheoretiker)* and alternative thinker (*Querdenker*) and elevate them to "superlatives." In spoken language or informal chat communication, these labels may also appear alone, with appropriate intonation or punctuation. The addressee infers the meaning of their use from the implicit levels of communication.

Conclusion

The paper focused on analysing the mirroring strategy and its subtypes in German- and Slovak-language conspiracy discourse, represented by journalistic texts and multimodal social media posts from 2023. The results of the partial analyses show that the mirroring strategy is used in both language areas, and we can conclude that similar and, in some cases, identical frameworks are employed. Regarding the individual subtypes of mirroring, a relatively broad spectrum has been applied (see contextual analysis), and it should also be noted that in several cases, multiple subtypes overlap within the text. We did not highlight this in the analysis due to their overlap.

Summarizing the findings of the analyses, we can conclude that mirroring is a highly discrediting strategy used in conspiratorial discourse. Traits often associated with conspiratorial thinking are mirrored in this discourse and shifted to the "other side." Alternative media and social networks of this type and their supporters explicitly or implicitly present themselves as carriers of truth, expertise, and independent thinking, while elites, the scientific community, and mainstream institutions are portrayed as sources of lies, manipulation, and dogmatic behaviour. The strategy thus legitimizes its own position while stigmatizing opponents, creating a stark contrast between "ordinary seekers of truth" and "dogmatic sects."

Acknowledgements

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Symmetry in Intercultural Rhythm: A Geometric Perspective on Rhythm in Indian and Balinese Music

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Abstract

The Carnatic music of South India and the folk music of the Balinese gamelan are very different genres with unique performance practices, ensembles, tuning systems and traditions. Both genres, however, appear to place precedence on temporal organisation of the music. This paper uses simple geometric tools to analyse a representative composition from each genre in order to acquire an understanding of the mathematics behind their construction. It is revealed that symmetry operates on multiple levels of scale and in complex ways. Through comparative analysis, differences as well as latent similarities in approach to symmetry in rhythm and metre are revealed. Through mathematical abstraction, musical relationships may be made between these and the cyclic rhythmic language of other intercultural genres (such as the music of sub-Saharan Africa). For performers and composers interested in intercultural collaboration, the semiotic translation of rhythmic features facilitates an improved understanding of the music. The results of this quantitative research may enable the contemporary musician to create new music with a hybridised intercultural style.

Keywords: music, symmetry, Carnatic, Balinese, rhythm

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Introduction

The term *symmetry* has been utilised in music and arts discourse with a range of various meanings. At times, the term is empirically employed, based on Euclidean mathematical models, yet it can also be used to represent qualitative and aesthetic principles that relate to a sense of proportion or natural balance.

Historic examples of symmetry in visual art are widespread and include the famous sculptures of Polykleitos (fifth century B.C.E.), and da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (1490). Both artists embraced mathematics and geometry in their art. Plato wrote about symmetry's essential role in nature and the physical world (Weyl, 1952), and broadly integrated philosophical thought with mathematics.

The antonym *asymmetry* seldom indicates a complete absence of symmetry, and the two terms can be rather considered a dualistic monism[1] – essential forces that together create a universal frame of reference (Weyl, 1952).

"Symmetry signifies rest and binding, asymmetry motion and loosening, the one order and law, the other arbitrariness and accident, the one formal rigidity and constraint, the other life, play and freedom" (Frey, 1949).

Unlike other artforms that are bound in time such as painting or sculpture, music is temporal in nature. Whilst musical time operates in one dimension, it is useful to visually represent its evolution in two-dimensional space. The benefits of this approach include that fact that two-dimensional objects elucidate cyclical patterns which are common in music, and secondly, such objects elucidate inter-relationships including those occurring synchronously.

This paper translates symmetrical principles from mathematics into the world of musical rhythm, supported by geometric diagrams. These visual representations allow the reader to gain insight into musical design regardless of whether they are a musician with music literacy skills or whether they are familiar with the genre or its performance practice.

Principles of Symmetry

Invariance

Invariance refers to the constancy of properties during a process of transformation.

"Symmetry means you have a distinction without a difference" (Wilczek, 2010). In music, the principles of repetition, contrast and development combine to create structure, and a sense of flow, direction, and journey for the listener. Contrast maintains interest. Repetition establishes hierarchy through reinforcement of material of primacy importance, whilst development (or variation) focuses upon the principle of likeness with difference that underpins narrativity in music (Lundy et al., 2010). Both repetition and development involve invariance, and provide a suitable environment for symmetrical processes.

[1] The yin-yang symbol of Chinese philosophy is an example.

Proximity of Perspective

As with any analysis, the proximity of perspective needs to be determined. Symmetries may operate on any level, from macroscopic global symmetries involving over-arching structure, through to microscopic local symmetries.

Axis of Reflection and Degrees of Symmetry

In mirror symmetry the *axis of reflection* is an imaginary line that bifurcates an object into two identical halves.[2] This axis appears as a pink dotted line in this paper's diagrams. Sometimes two or more axes exist, indicating there are multiple ways to create reflections. In rotational symmetry, multiple *degrees of symmetry* may exist, which means the object is invariant when rotated in portions of 360º.[3]

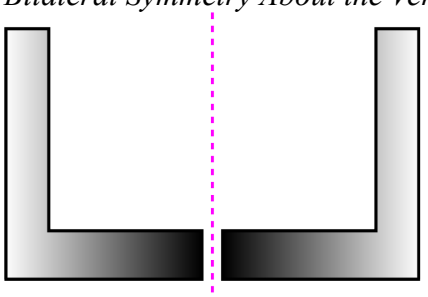
Symmetry in Euclidean Geometry

The following categories of symmetry from Euclidean two-dimensional plane geometry are useful for analysing the temporal features of music.

Bilateral Symmetry

Bilateral symmetry (alternatively *mirror* or *reflectional* symmetry) is commonly inferred when the term *symmetry* is used alone. Bilateral symmetry shows invariance about an axis, where one part is a reflection or mirror-image of another part. As music is typically visually represented as being executed along a horizontal plane of time, symmetries about the vertical (y) axis in music are temporal, whilst symmetries about the horizontal (x) axis involve pitch.

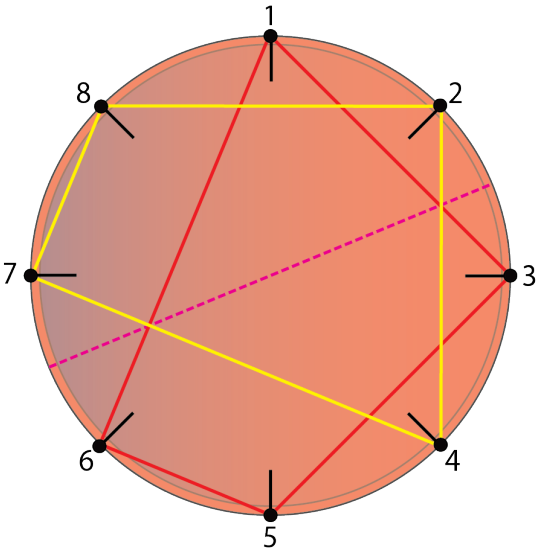
Figure 1
Bilateral Symmetry About the Vertical (y) Axis



The geometric diagrams in this paper elucidate symmetry in musical time. The circular clock-like diagrams represent a clockwise flow of time, normally orientated to start at 12 o'clock. Metrics around the circumference of these *timelines* indicate isochronous divisions of the timeline's period (like seconds on a clockface). Black dots on the circumference indicate the occurrence of a rhythmic event, or *onset*. Polygons connect onsets, and colour coding indicates meaningful relationships or patterns formed by groups of onsets, as in *motives* or *phrases*, or relationships between different musical voices. See Figure 2.

[2] The separating distance between reflected forms is the *interval of reflection*.
[3] For example, a rectangle has 2 degrees of symmetry, an equilateral triangle has 3, and a circle has an infinite number.

Figure 2
Bilateral Symmetry of Two Interlocking Rhythms on a Timeline



Translational Symmetry

The duplication of an object by a specific distance along a fixed straight line creates *translational symmetry*. Rhythm in time represents the most intuitive representation of the straight line, with its intrinsic homogeneity and constituent metrical units (Voloshinov 1996). In music, translation about a vertical (y) axis sounds as rhythmic repetition, whether it be of an onset, or a group of onsets that form a motive or phrase that repeat to create an *ostinato*.

Figure 3 represents translational symmetry arising from three repetitions of the initial (left-most) object, about a vertical axis. The green arrow indicates the direction of translation.

Figure 3
Translational Symmetry About the Vertical (y) Axis

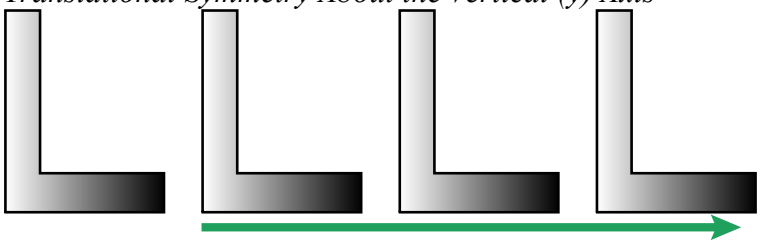
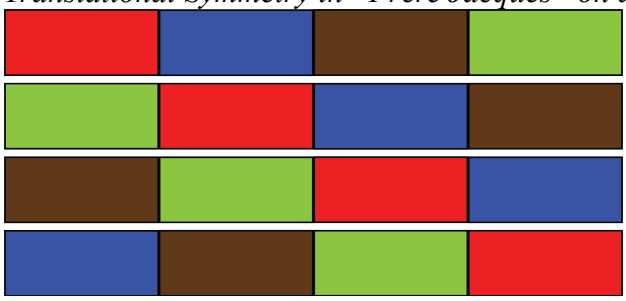


Figure 4 illustrates translational symmetry as a wallpaper diagram. The source material is the musical 4-part round *Frère Jacques.*[4] Each row represents a different voice, and each coloured block represents a discrete 8-beat phrase, being the interval of translation.

[4] Whilst pitch is not the focus of this paper, readers will find it easier to track the symmetry by singing the words and/or pitch of this melody to themselves. Readers unfamiliar with this melody may wish to listen to this example: https://youtu.be/Pa2_oWshsRM?si=iKfrf2J_02vJSmOu

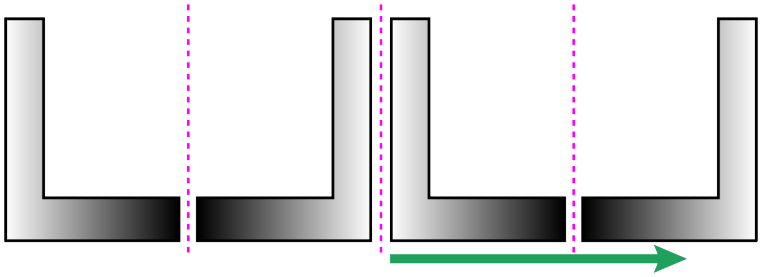
Figure 4
Translational Symmetry in "Frère Jacques" on a Wallpaper Diagram



Compound Symmetry

Compound symmetry combines multiple types of symmetry. For example, *glide reflection* takes a bilateral reflection and then applies translation.

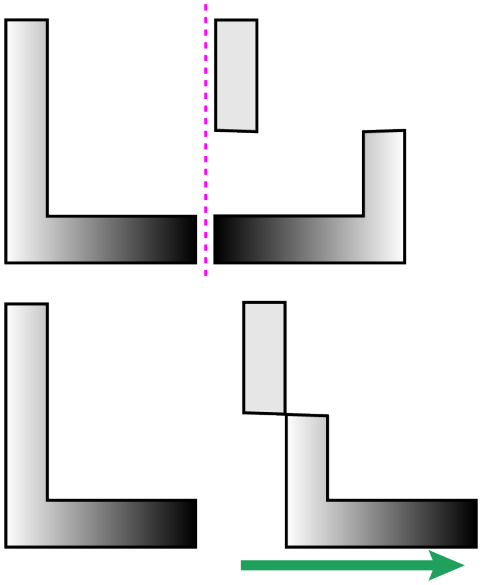
Figure 5
Compound Symmetry – Glide Reflection



Shear Symmetry

Shear symmetry exists when any of the aforementioned symmetries occur in an approximate manner, with transformations occurring non-uniformly.

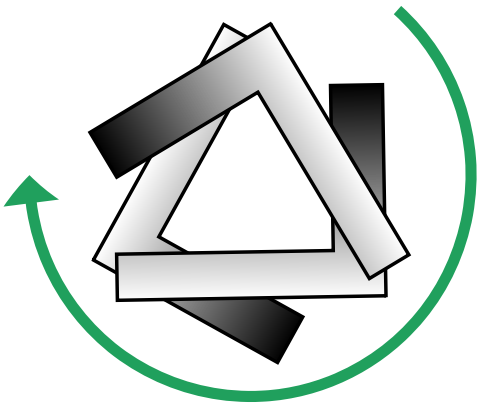
Figure 6
Shear Symmetry – Bilateral (Upper) and Translational (Lower)



Rotational Symmetry

Translational symmetry about an angled path instead of a straight line creates *rotational symmetry*. Whilst the circular diagrams in this paper might illude to the presence of rotational symmetry, they represent the one-dimensional parameter of rhythm, whose symmetries are inherently bilateral or translational.[5] Figure 7 possesses three degrees of rotational symmetry.

Figure 7
Rotational Symmetry



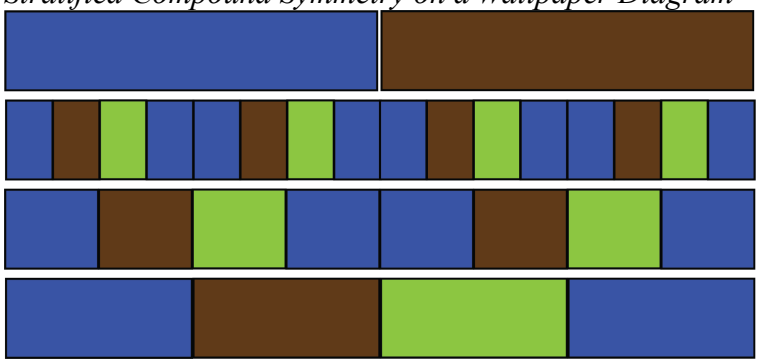
Symmetry Beyond Euclidean Geometry

Musical analysis precipitates further categories of symmetry beyond Euclidean two-dimensional plane geometry. I nominate the following to further comprehend the symmetries deeply inherent in the music analysed in this paper.

Stratified Compound Symmetry

Compound symmetry may apply to more than one musical entity simultaneously. Superposition of symmetries over the same period may create stratum of bilateral and translational symmetry as well as symmetries that overlap. See Figures 8 & 14.

Figure 8
Stratified Compound Symmetry on a Wallpaper Diagram



[5] For a discussion on the musical application of rotational symmetries in musical composition, refer to Dimond (2018). We will see examples of bilateral, translational, shear and compound symmetries in the musical analyses.

Self-Similarity

Sometimes symmetrical patterns occur at different orders of magnitude. Stratum of bilateral and translational symmetry may occur locally and globally in a related manner. Scaling, recursion and geometric sequencing[6] indicate the presence of *self-similarity*. Self-similarity shares a relationship to the principles of symmetry due to the presence of invariance under transformation.

Fractured Symmetry

Symmetry in music may occur in a nonlinear manner. Musical phrases or sections maybe highly correlated but the symmetry they embody is interrupted by periods of time. *Fractured symmetry* is present in the musical analyses, where periodic, nonlinear yet non-sporadic symmetry occurs.

Application of Symmetry to Temporal Musical Parameters

Musical time has different parameters which may be symmetrically organised.

Duration

A rhythmic phrase or motive may be represented numerically by the interval of time between successive onsets. These inter-onset intervals may be symmetrical, and may operate at the microscopic level of a motive, e.g. <3-2-3>.[7] Larger examples of symmetry occur when a sequence of motives are strung together, such as in the *yati* patterns of South India.[8] *Yati* categories bear names derived from their visual analogs. Refer to Figures 9 to 13.

Figure 9
Gopuccha Yati ("Cow's Tail") <5-4-3-2-1>

```
12345
 1234
  123
   12
    1
```

Figure 10
Srotogata Yati ("Stream Becoming a River") <1-2-3-4-5>

```
    1
   12
  123
 1234
12345
```

[6] Scaling involves invariance of proportion whilst the overall size changes. Recursion involves reiteration of a pattern in a self-referential manner. Geometric sequences differ from arithmetic ones in that they involve multiplication or division (rather than addition or subtraction).
[7] Triangular brackets enclose a series of inter-onset intervals, with each integer representing the duration between onsets.
[8] For more detail on *yati*, refer to Dimond (2018).

Figure 11
Sama Yati / Pipilika Yati ("Ant Row") <8-8-8-8-8>

```
12345678
12345678
12345678
12345678
12345678
```

Figure 12
Mridanga Yati (Barrel-Shaped Like the Mridangam Drum) <1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1>

```
    1
   12
  123
 1234
12345
 1234
  123
   12
    1
```

Figure 13
Damaru Yati (Hour-Glass Shaped Like the Damaru Drum) <5-4-3-2-1-2-3-4-5>

```
12345
 1234
  123
   12
    1
   12
  123
 1234
12345
```

There is also the *vishama* ("irregular") *yati*, which is asymmetrical.

In the analysis of rhythmic symmetries, it is worth noting that the measuring point is taken as the starting onset of any duration, rather than the mid-point of the duration.[9] A discrete phrase or motive may also be separated by gaps or rests, called *karvai* in Carnatic music, which may be articulated by an initial onset. The value of such gaps is indicated in brackets in the analyses.

Number of Onsets

The number of onsets or attacks within a phrase or motive may be represented numerically and may show symmetrical properties. For example, the duration of the three phrases <1-1-1-1-1>, <2-2-1-1-1>, and <2-2-2-2-1> is 5, 7 and 9, respectively, yet they all have 5 onsets.

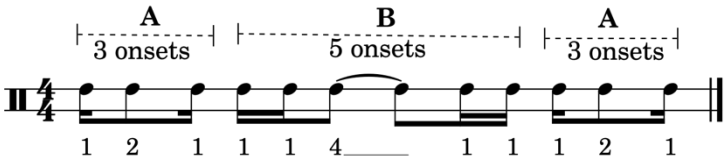
[9] Rhythms are identified by where the attack begins, not by their duration. For example an inter-onset interval of 3 is measured from the first attack, not its mathematical midpoint (position 1.5 in the duration).

Form

Meta structures that involve repetition, contrast and/or development may show symmetrical properties. On a macroscopic temporal scale, bilateral and translational symmetry can operate upon musical structure, as represented by the formal analysis ABA or AAABBBCCC.

Symmetrical structures may arise from patterns that act upon different temporal features at once, and at different scales of resolution. Figure 14 is a rhythmic example of stratified compound symmetry, with bilateral symmetry contained in the series of inter-onset intervals per motive, number of onsets across the three motives, and the duration of the three motives across the entire phrase.

Figure 14
Stratified Compound Symmetry in a Rhythmic Phrase



Analysis 1: *75 Akshara Korvai* (Guru Karaikudi R. Mani)

Background and Overall Structure

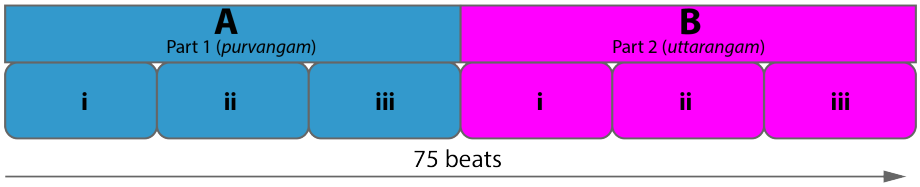
The mridangam maestro Guru Karaikudi Mani (1945–2023) composed this Carnatic piece for his 75th birthday.[10] It is performed purely as a percussion ensemble in the *tani avartanam* format, based on a *korvai* ("strung together") structure.[11]

Rhythm and metre in Indian classical music have a strong mathematical basis. Ideas are naturally conceived, constructed and communicated using integers and arithmetic. The rhythmic language of *konnokkol*[12] (in the South) and *bols* (in the North) are powerful languages that are onomatopoeic in nature and not only serve mnemonic purposes, but carry semantic association to the integers and mathematics behind the music. Guru Mani exploits this association by symbolically integrating and featuring the integers 7, 5, and 75 into his composition.[13]

The overall meta structure is binary, which is typical of *korvai* pieces, with a *purvangam* (first part) and contrasting *uttarangam* (second part). Guru Mani designed the composition to fit a duration of 75 beats (or *aksharas*, per the title). It is set to a rhythmic cycle of 3 beats (*rupaka tala*). Both halves of the meta structure contain three subsections. Figure 15 ascribes labels to the main parts and subsections.

[10] A performance of this composition appears on YouTube https://youtu.be/WuCP2Ck3IYk?si=okFrjjx6fOgNoPov
[11] Adrian Sherriff later composed pitches to the rhythms of Guru Mani's composition and this has been performed by the ensemble Tripataka https://youtu.be/EYh4Ag1WSxc?si=6L0dASilAwv-_0xp
[12] Also known as *solkattu.*
[13] The Tamil term *kanakku* refers to the mathematical calculations necessary for artists such as Guru Mani to compose and improvise structured rhythmic sequences that comply with specific rhythmic cycles.

Figure 15
The Overall Structure of 75 Akshara Korvai



Guru Mani devised the series of sections to increase in density from the beginning to the end, through the incremental increase in subdivisions per beat, starting with 4 divisions per beat (*chatusra nadai*), then subdivisions of 5 (*khanda nadai*), 6 (*tisra nadai*), and lastly 7 (*misra nadai*). The whole structure is performed three times. This creates a trivial sort of bilateral symmetry from the series of 18 subsections, as well as translational symmetry from the tripartite repetition.

Part A – *Purvangam*

The three sections of the part A are represented by timelines in Figures 16 to 18. A duopoly the of symbolic integers 7 (yellow) and 5 (red) exist, with an incremental development of the number of groups of each across the three sections. Each section displays bilateral symmetry. The invariance of the position of the axis of symmetry (pink), despite the change of timeline length from 48, to 60 and then 72 pulses in duration, indicates the presence of scaling and therefore self-similarity.

Figure 16
Part A, Section i

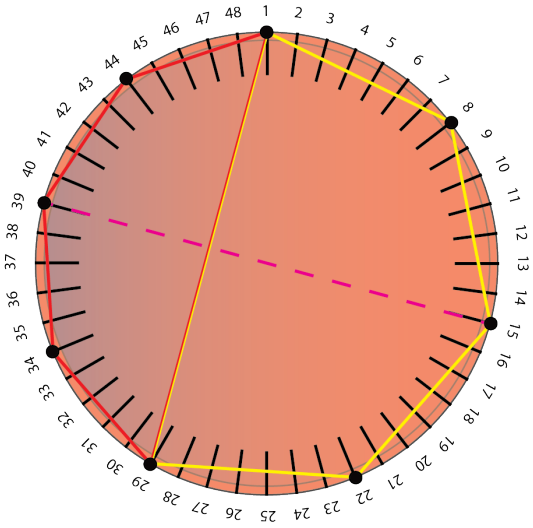


Figure 17
Part A, Section ii

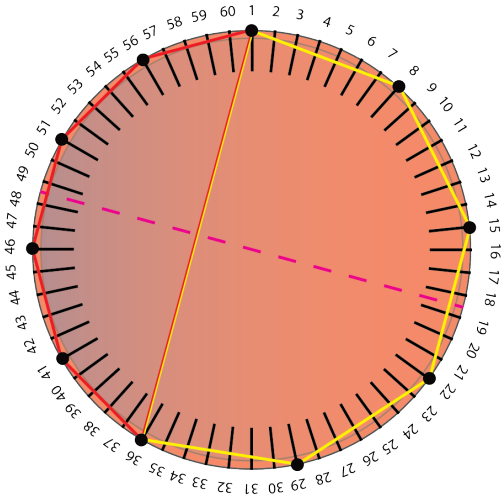
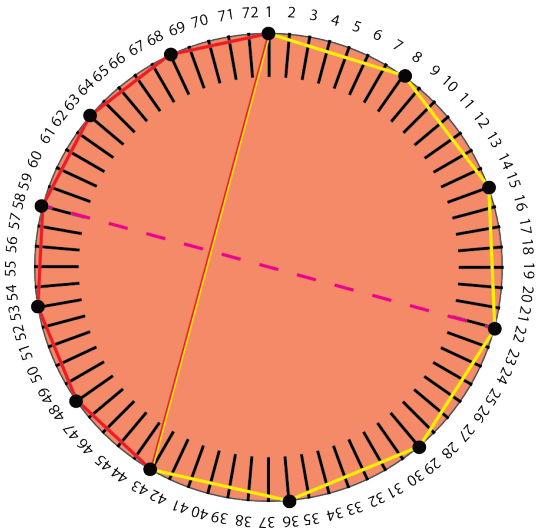
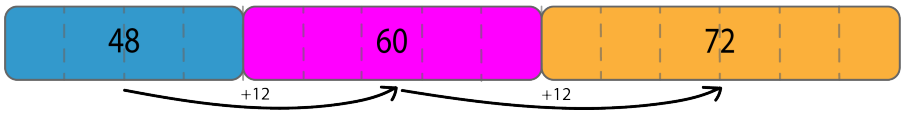


Figure 18
Part A, Section iii



The total number of pulses in sections i, ii, and iii creates an arithmetic sequence as illustrated in Figure 19.

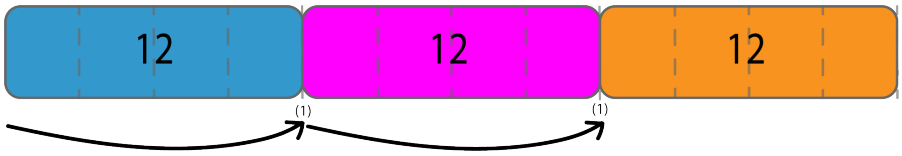
Figure 19
Part A, Total Pulse Count of Sections i, ii, & iii



The translational symmetry created by the duration of this sequence of sections is obfuscated by the presence of rhythmic scaling, where the beat subdivision progresses from 4:1, to 5:1 and lastly 6:1. The increase in total pulse count of each section (60:48 for sections i to ii and 72:60 for sections ii to iii) is balanced by a proportional decrease in the duration of each pulse,

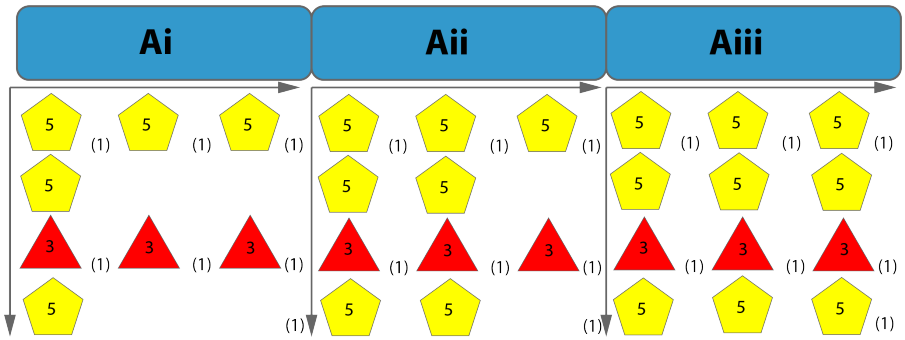
resulting in a scaled duration 12 beats uniformly for each section in part A. Figure 20 illustrates the scaled durations and resulting translational symmetry, expressed in beats.[14]

Figure 20
Part A, Scaled Durational Sequence of Sections i, ii, & iii



Guru Mani applies a consistent syntax in the enunciation of the groupings in Part A of the composition that features a 5-syllable word.[15] These 5 onsets recur regardless of whether the duration of the motive is 5 or 7 pulses. Figure 21 tracks the onset structure for this half of the composition.

Figure 21
Part A, Onset Structure of Sections i, ii, & iii



Reading left-to-right and downwards for each section, it can be seen that the first and third rows demonstrate translational symmetry internally and are identical between sections, so possess fractured translational symmetry across the entirety of Part A. The second and fourth rows are identical in each section so demonstrate translational symmetry internally and combine to create a fractured *srotogata yati* pattern across the entirety of Part A (see Figure 10).[16] Part A therefore combines Euclidean and nonlinear symmetries in the pattern of onsets.

Part B – *Uttarangam*

Part B is rendered consistently at the fastest rate of 7 divisions per beat (*misra nadai*). The three concentric circles in Figure 22 represent sections i, ii, and iii, commencing with the innermost circle at 12 o'clock and advancing outward after each 360º rotation with a kind of centripetal force.

[14] Sections i, ii, and iii of part A have one beat of rest between them, demarcating the structure.
[15] The five-syllable word *ta-di-ki-na-dom* is the one recited in the recorded performance.
[16] This kind of non-linear symmetry that operates across meaningful subsections is something we will discover in the subsequent Balinese case study.

Figure 22
Part B, Sections i, ii, & iii

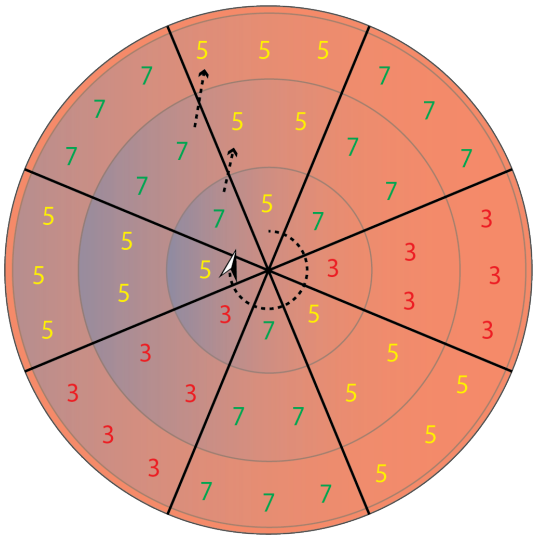
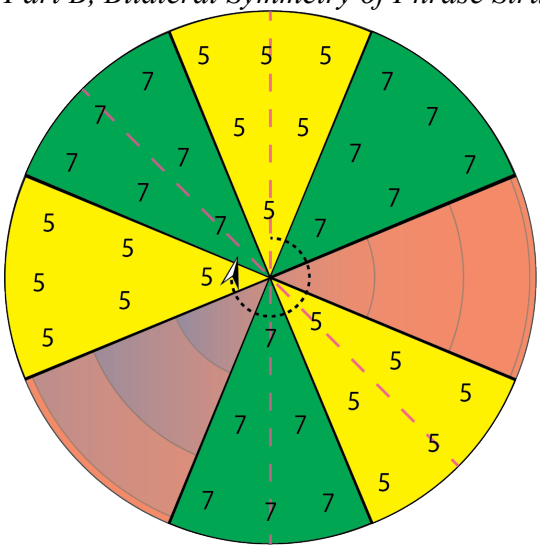


Figure 23 distinguishes the associated phrases of duration 5 and 7 from the rests of 3 (which are articulated gaps, or *karvai*). Yellow and green colour coding highlights the bilateral symmetry associated with the 5s and 7s, respectively.

Figure 23
Part B, Bilateral Symmetry of Phrase Structure in Sections i, ii, & iii



Whilst the phrases of part B possess fractured translational symmetry, they also combine to create an overarching *srotogata yati* with its associated growth and bilateral symmetry, similar to part A.

In part B the total duration of the sections increases geometrically, in contrast to part A (per Figures 19 and 20). Sections i, ii, and iii are 6, 12, and 18 beats long, respectively (or 1*x*, 2*x*, 3*x*). See Figure 24.

Figure 24
Part B, Durational Sequence of Sections i, ii, & iii

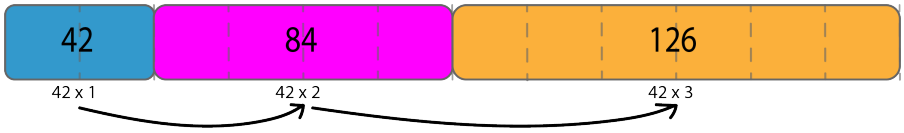
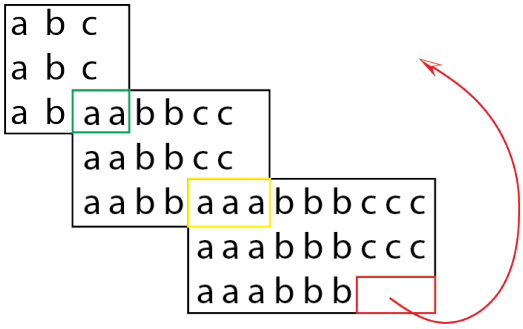


Figure 25 reveals the tripartite structure so essential in the design of Indian classical music, as well as its circular nature that directs each sequence to its point of origin.[17] The three phrase lengths (5, 7, 3) are represented a, b, c, respectively. The translational symmetry internal to each of the three sections gives the listener the expectation of the arrival of the third portion of the third repeat (logically phrase c). This expectation is foiled through the dovetailing of each successive section (illustrated by the overlapping rectangles).[18] The resulting shear symmetry of each of the three individual sections is reconciled by the progressive macroscopic three-stage growth of this sequence and overarching *srotogata yati*. Figure 25 illustrates this effect as well as the self-similarity of the tripartite meta structure.

Figure 25
Part B, Phrase Structure of Sections i, ii, & iii



Analysis 2: *Baris* (Traditional)

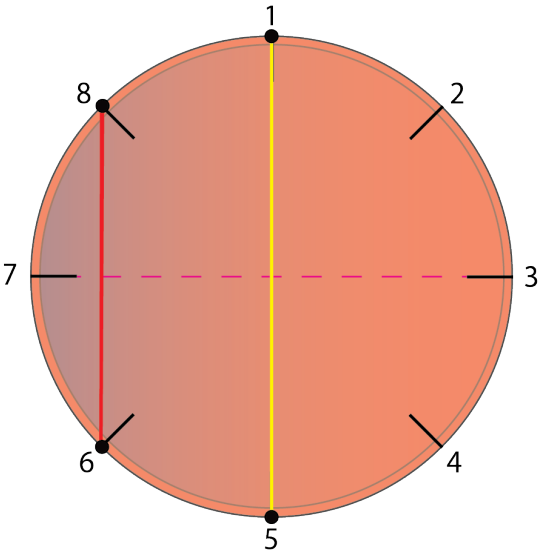
The ritual warrior dance *Baris* has been documented as occurring in East Java as early as 1550, and today ritual and secular forms of the dance are commonly included in contemporary performances and temple ceremonies (Dibia & Ballinger, 2004). This analysis is based upon the musical accompaniment contained in the first portion of the modern secular *Baris Tunggal*, as played by the Balinese *gong kebyar* orchestra.[19] Given the lead role of the dancer in this music, the structure and evolution of the music of *Baris* is somewhat dependent on the dancer. I will focus on the stable, repeating elements which the dancer cues.[20]

Baris is set to 8-beat *gilak* metre. The metric structure is underpinned by the two lowest, slowest-moving instruments, the large *gong ageng* (playing beats 1 and 5) and the medium-

[17] Three-stage translational symmetries that resolve (or *cadence*) onto beat 1 (*sam*) of given rhythmic cycles are ubiquitous in both North and South Indian classical music, as found in *tihai* and *arudi*.
[18] After Part B is concluded, it returns to the start of Part A – a greater tripartite translational symmetry and part of the piece's overall self-similarity.
[19] Numerous recordings can be accessed via YouTube and published recordings. This analysis is based upon the version performed by the STSI Academy, Kodya, published in the CD that accompanies the book *Balinese Gamelan Music* by Michael Tenzer.
[20] Any mention of pitches in this analysis result from observation of the metallophone percussion instruments on the aforementioned recording. Rhythmic organisation of these pitches remains the primary focus of this analysis.

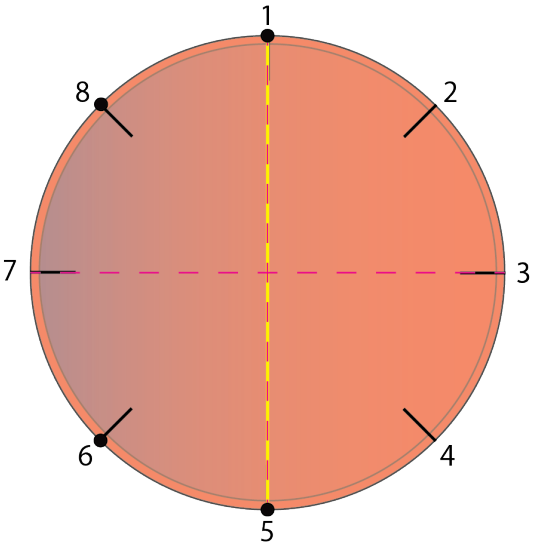
sized *kempur* gong (playing beats 6 and 8). These combine to create a bilaterally-symmetrical pattern.

Figure 26
Composite Gong Pattern for Gilak Metre



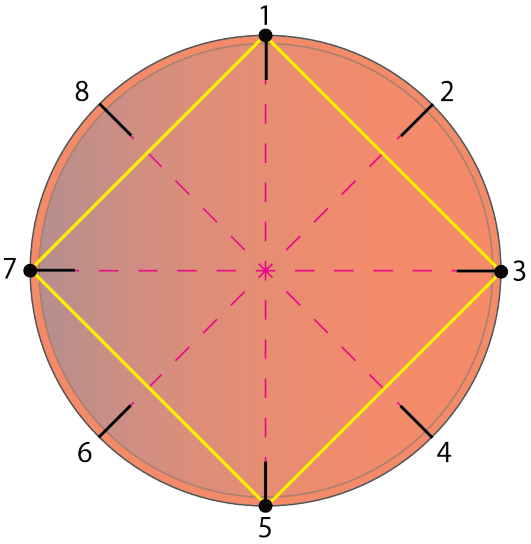
The large bronze keyed metallophone *jegogan* supports this metric structure.

Figure 27
Jegogan Rhythmic Pattern



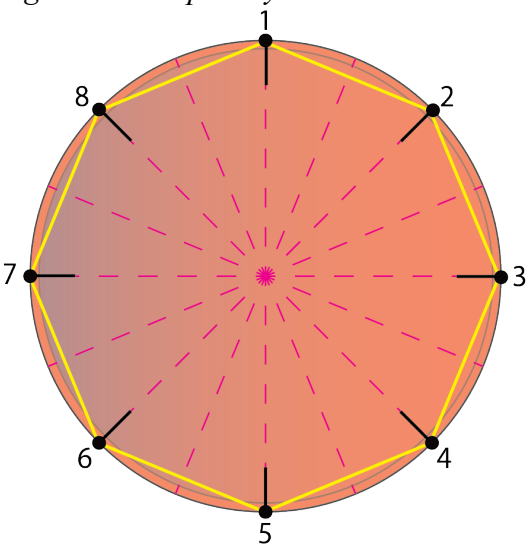
Above this metric structure sits the core melody played on the medium-sized bronze keyed metallophone *calung*.

Figure 28
Calung Rhythmic Pattern



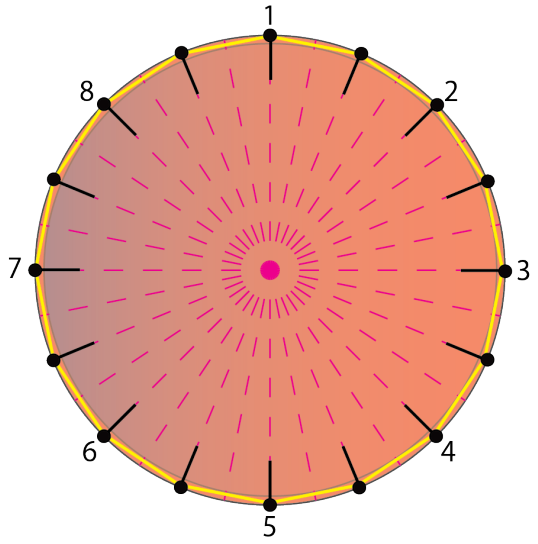
The 8-beat metre is articulated by the small, dry gong *kempli* with an isochronous pattern which reinforces the prevailing tempo. This is also the rate of the core melody, played on the medium-sized bronze keyed metallophone *ugal.*

Figure 29
Ugal and Kempli Rhythmic Pattern



The pair of smaller bronze keyed metallophones *pemadé* and *kantilan* duplicate the melody played by *ugal* but with two equidistant attacks per note.

Figure 30
Pemadé and Kantilan Rhythmic Pattern

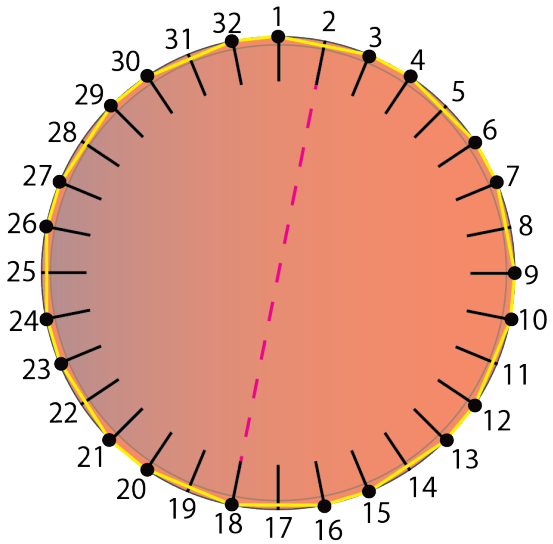


Moving at the fastest rate (of quarter beats) are the *reyong* – small melodic gongs that are shared by multiple players. The players execute a special interlocking pattern called *kotekan*. *Kotekan* comprises two melodic/rhythmic parts – *polos* (lower) and *sangsih* (upper). Whilst each part contains rests, the combination tessellates a 32-pulse stream and embeds the *pokok* (melody played by the *ugal*).

There are different types of *kotekan* interlocking pattern, categorised by their relationship to the *pokok*. The *reyong* play *kotekan empat. Empat* means "four," which relates to the four pitches shared by the *polos* (lower) and *sangsih* (upper) parts which encapsulate the notes of the melody.

The rhythmic series of *polos* is bilaterally symmetrical across 32 pulses. The inter-onset intervals are <2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1>. Note the skewed axis of symmetry.

Figure 31
Polos Rhythmic Pattern for Kotekan Empat



It is now necessary to consider some pitch elements of the Balinese *gong kebyar* orchestra in order to elucidate the rhythmic symmetries deeply woven into this music. The pitch collection for *Baris* is the five note scale *pélog*. Four pitches from this pentatonic scale are used to sound the simple isochronous melody on the *ugal* (per Figure 29).[21] Figure 32 presents this melody in Western notation, with note names and Balinese solfege.

Figure 32
Pokok Melody in Western Notation With Balinese solfege

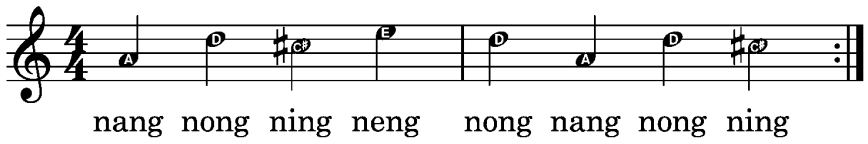


Figure 33 presents the *polos* (lower) and *sangsih* (upper) *kotekan* parts in Western notation. The *pokok* (melody) is also presented with arrows indicating how its four melody notes are embedded into the *kotekan empat* over the course of the 8-beat cycle.

Figure 33
Polos and Sangsih Parts in Western Notation, Showing Relationship to Pokok

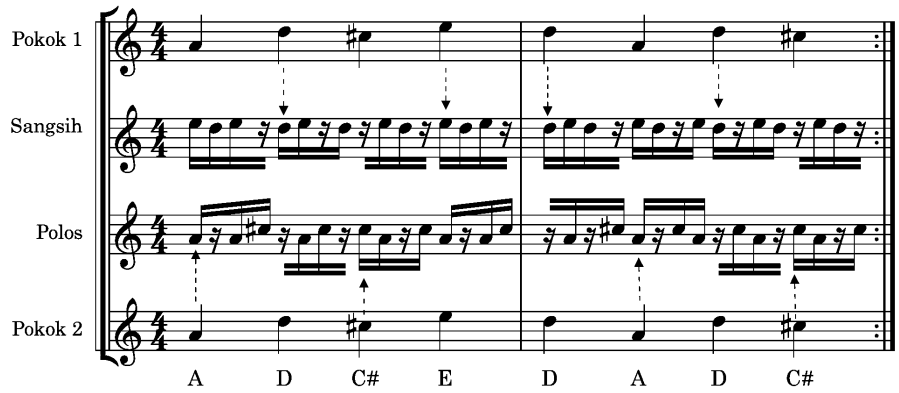
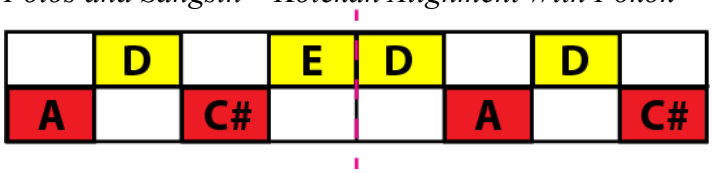


Figure 34 represents the eight notes of the *pokok* melody that coincide with the *polos* (lower – red) and *sangsih* (upper – yellow) *kotekan* parts in a box diagram. The bilateral symmetry of this pattern is evident from this diagram and Figure 35, which illustrates the same pattern on a timeline. The combination creates a *reflection rhythm*. Reflection rhythms are created when a mirror-symmetric image of a rhythm (about some axis of symmetry) becomes the rhythm's complement (Toussaint, 2013).

Figure 34
Polos and Sangsih – Kotekan Alignment With Pokok



[21] The 4 notes being the *selisir* mode of C# (ning), D (nong), E (neng), and A (nang).

Figure 35
Polos and Sangsih – Kotekan Alignment With Pokok

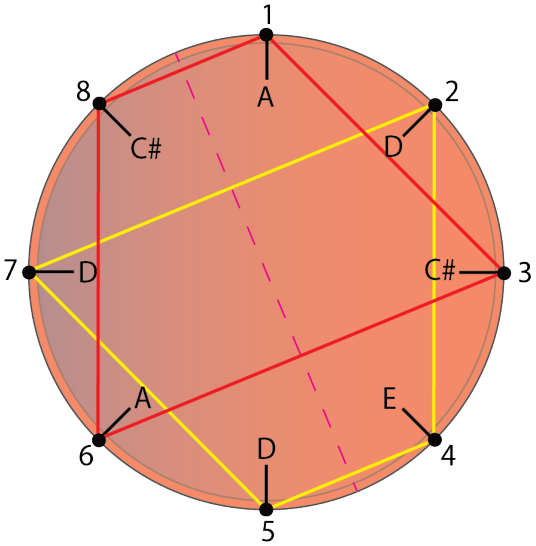


Figure 36 presents the *polos* (lower) and *sangsih* (upper) *kotekan* parts as a box diagram. Every pulse in the 32-pulse sequence can be viewed as belonging to one of two types of orchestration. Firstly, every rest or gap in the upper part corresponds with an attack on pitch C# in the lower part, and every rest or gap in the lower part corresponds with an attack on pitch D in the upper part. I refer to this type of pulse as a *gap dyad* and they are colour-coded yellow. Secondly, every time the *polos* and *sangsih* parts coincide they sound an A and E (respectively). I refer to this type of pulse as a *harmonic dyad* and they are colour-coded light blue.

Figure 36
Polos and Sangsih Kotekan as a Box Diagram

If we consider the pattern of orchestration broadly as a sequence of gap dyads and harmonic dyads, two symmetrical formations emerge. Figure 37 traces the pattern of gap (g) and harmonic (h) dyads over the course of 32 pulses. Each beat of the two corresponding 8-beat cycles is subdivided into 4 pulses by the *kotekan*, and corresponding vertical lines illustrate these beat divisions.

In Figure 37 the first 16 pulses produce bilateral symmetry with the form ABBA. The variation observed in the second B' section is merely an inversion of voicing of the g-h-g-g sequence (in that the *polos* and *sangsih* parts switch roles). For the second 16 pulses, it could be said that bilateral symmetry is produced by the BCDB form, but there is also another more audible translational symmetry occurring. The five groups of 3 h-g-g (illustrated by the series of five *c* groups) is punctuated by the strength of the harmonic dyads. This alternative perspective of the symmetry is also musically supported by the goal-orientated nature of this syncopated phrasing, that takes advantage of the tension these groups of 3 pulses exert on a patterning that is otherwise organised around groups of 4, 8, and 16 pulses. This tension-building sequence resolves at the commencement of the cycle, where the phrasing reverts to groups of 4. Coloured borders in Figure 36 correspond to the structural symmetries analysed in the dyad sequence of Figure 37.

Figure 37
Polos and Sangsih Kotekan Dyad Orchestration as a Box Diagram

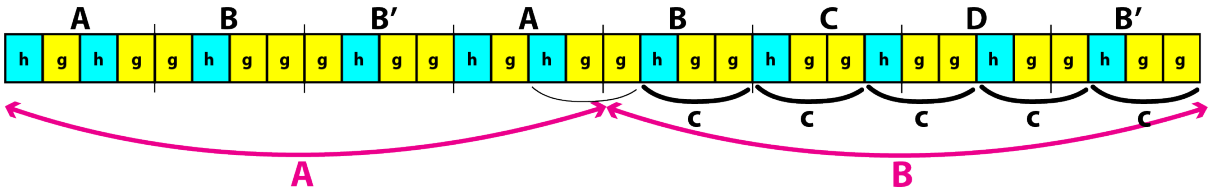
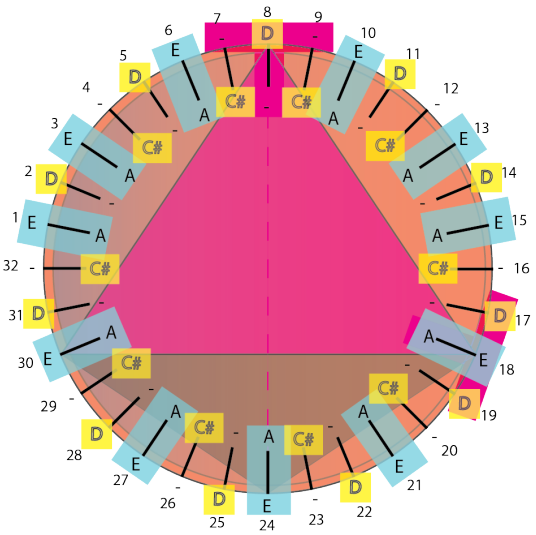


Figure 38 presents the *polos* (lower) and *sangsih* (upper) *kotekan* parts on a composite timeline, using the same colour coding. Whilst Figures 36 and 37 revealed symmetries by partitioning pitches or dyad cells into groups of 4 or 3 from pulse 1–32, this timeline reveals two offset structural symmetries overarching the 32 pulses. The timeline is rotated[22] so that pulse 8 appears at 12 o'clock in order to more easily appreciate the symmetrical design.

The pattern of harmonic dyads (light blue) creates bilateral symmetry over the entire 32 pulses. This is easily viewed by this timeline's rotation, whereas the skewed axis of the original series of inter-onset intervals obfuscates the symmetry.[23]

The timeline also reveals fractured symmetry with two bilaterally-symmetrical portions. The first, indicated by the pink triangle and dotted line, reveals bilateral symmetry from pulses 30 through 18, orientated around a unique gap dyad that serves as a kind of fulcrum on pulse 8 (at 12 o'clock). For the second portion consisting of the remaining pulses 19 through 29,[24] a bilaterally symmetrical arrangement of harmonic dyads continue, however the gap dyads sound in opposite voices either side of the axis of symmetry – there is a voice inversion about pulse 24.

Figure 38
Polos and Sangsih – Kotekan Timeline Rotated by 7 Pulses



[22] By 78.75º or 7 pulses counterclockwise.
[23] The inter-onset interval series from pulse 1 per the prior box diagrams is <2-3-4-3-2-3-3-3-3-3-3>.
[24] This symmetry can also be seen by overlapping the primary symmetry, counting from pulses 18 through 30 inclusive, as illustrated by the brown triangle.

Lastly, the barrel-shaped *kendang* drums contribute their own texture and layer to the gongs and metallophones. A pair of *kendang*, *wadon* (the "female" lower part) and *lanang* (the "male" upper part) are orchestrated to create a two-part interlocking pattern like *kotekan*. Figure 39 shows the Western notation for the drums along with their onomatopoeic stroke names, and Figure 40 a 32-pulse composite timeline (with the *wadon* part in red and *lanang* part in yellow). The respective inter-onset intervals are <2-2-1-2-2-2-2-1-2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2> and <2-1-2-2-2-2-2-1-2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2-2>.

Figure 39
Kendang Parts in Western Notation

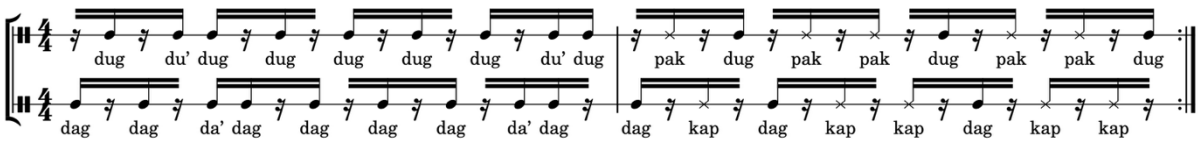
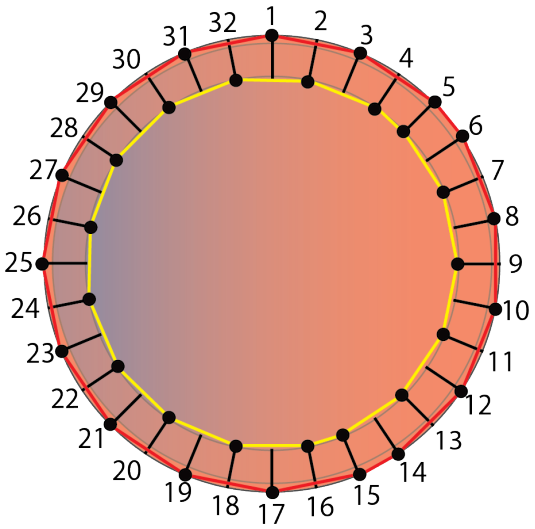


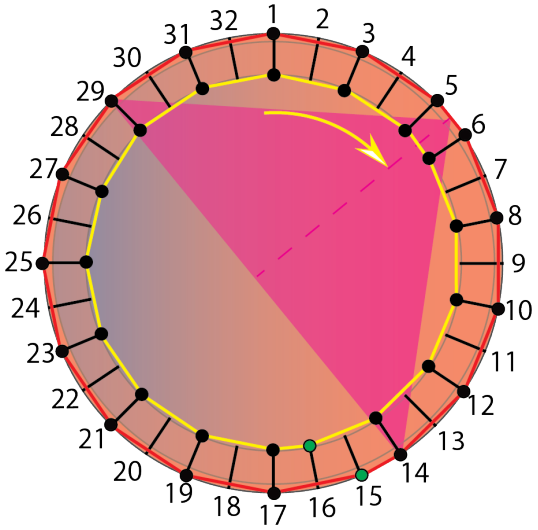
Figure 40
Kendang Parts Timeline



In the second half (pulses 17–32) the two parts are identical except that one is a displacement of the other by 1 pulse. This simple symmetrical translation creates another reflection rhythm and complies with the *kotekan* category *nyog cag*, which tessellates the pulse stream without coincident onsets between the parts.

The symmetry of the remaining portion is revealed when the upper *lanang* part (yellow) is rotated clockwise by one pulse, as illustrated in Figure 41.

Figure 41
Kendang Parts Timeline With Lanang Rotated by 1 Pulse



There are two types of symmetry in the first portion. The rotated *lanang* part reveals translational symmetry between both drums, which play the same pattern from pulses 29–14 (originally displaced by 1 pulse).[25] Furthermore the pattern shared by both parts is internally bilaterally symmetrical, as indicated by the pink triangle.

The bilateral symmetry from pulses 29–14 is offset with respect to pulse 1, and applies to only half of the pattern, much like it was for the *kotekan* on the *reyong*. Two "disruptor" onsets (on pulse 15 and 16, indicated by the green dots) separate the *kotekan nyog cag* of the second portion (where the two parts are translations of each other, displaced by one pulse unit and with no coincident onsets), from the first.

Comparative Analysis

Rhythmic Cycle and Tempo

Both the Indian and Balinese traditions to which the analysed compositions belong have rhythmic cycles as the basis of their deep structure. The metric treatment differs between the 8-beat cycle of *Baris* and the 3-beat cycle of *75 Akshara Korvai*. In *Baris* the maximum subdivision of the beat is 4, and the longest phrases two cycles (e.g. the *kotekan*), so the longest repeating phrase period is 32 pulses. In *75 Akshara Korvai,* the beat is subdivided into as many as 7 parts, and furthermore, structural units (such as Part B) can span some 252 pulses. Indeed, the piece's title specifies the vastly larger number of beats in one iteration of the composition.

Whilst tempo fluctuations (called *ombak*) are central to the narrative of the *Baris* dance performance, the Indian aesthetic is to hold the tempo stable (albeit with slight increases of speed acceptable as part of the build of excitement in the performance practice). The *kendang* drums lead tempo fluctuations in the *Baris* (based on the movements of the dancer),[26] whilst the most senior *mridangam* player (in this case, Guru Mani) sets the stable tempo in Carnatic percussion ensembles.

[25] This category of *kotekan* is called *kotekan norot*, which is similar to *kotekan nyog cag* except it permits coincident onsets.
[26] It is said the *kendang* are the equivalent of the Western orchestra's conductor (Spiller 2008).

In *75 Akshara Korvai*, the piece gives the illusion of tempo increase through the systematic increase in subdivisions per beat (from 4 to 7 divisions), thus increasing density whilst maintaining tempo. The triple execution of the total structure may also give a slight feeling of tempo "waves," as the composition reaches its climax in 7 divisions and then reverts to 4 divisions as it returns to the beginning. However, the approach to cycle and tempo are fundamentally different.

Orchestration and Texture

The Carnatic and Balinese musical traditions not only share a basis upon rhythmic cycles, but they also both musically articulate them. In the *gong kebyar* ensemble, the gong pattern underpins the meta structure of the 8-beat cycle, supported by the isochronous *kempli*, *jegogan* and *calung*. This approach to timeline foundation is known as *colotomy*. In the Carnatic tradition a system of hand claps, finger counts and waves articulates the beat and metre. In *75 Akshara Korvai* the reciter performs this role of keeping the *tala* (rhythmic cycle).

The vertical stratification of the rhythmic elements in *Baris* is designed in such a way that prioritises the resulting combination over the individuality of the parts. That is, the interlacing of the individual parts generates a tessellation of the temporal framework, coloured by the pitches and timbres of the various instruments in the ensemble that create resultant melodies and rhythms that are not achievable or contained by one instrument alone. Furthermore, the fast tempo of interlocking *kotekan* passages creates acoustic combing effects that may disorientate the unaccustomed listener. The result is a kind of perceptual rivalry multiplicity in perception not unlike the temporal features of the music of West Africa and the West African diaspora (Pressing 2002).

The organisation and hierarchy of the Balinese gamelan is compared metaphorically with the design of a tree,[27] and it is this vertical stratification of texture which contrasts strongly with the linear morphology of the Carnatic compositional approach. In *Baris*, various layers of orchestration are superimposed over the course of the performance, supporting the dancer, their movements and the narrative. In *75 Akshara Korvai*, all the instruments sound in unison at all times, forming a monophonic texture. Musical interest arises from the chronological evolution of the compositional ideas, established through the motivic syntax of the composition and the vocabulary and idiosyncratic developmental techniques of the tradition.

Axial Orientation, Compound & Fractured Symmetry, Self-Similarity

75 Akshara Korvai features symmetrical *yati* structures within the protocols of *korvai* composition. The "strung together" meaning of *korvai* manifests in the contiguous nature of many of the symmetrical designs, which evolve over contiguous sequences of time. However many of the deeper rhythmic patterns in this composition are nonlinear, in that the sequential relationships occur in a disjunct manner. These symmetries operate across multiple rhythmic cycles, and others are automorphisms that relate across different scales of magnitude.

The vertical stratification of the instruments in the Balinese gamelan lends itself to compound symmetries. Numerous stratified compound symmetries are found in *Baris* when considering vertical relationships between different instruments. Some of the symmetries are fractured or

[27] See Tenzer p.52.

nonlinear, and others skewed with respect to the cycle, contributing forward momentum to the music, contrasting the colotomic nature of the isochronous layers.

Conclusion

Whilst the Carnatic music of South India and the folk music of the Balinese gamelan differ in so many ways, with their unique performance practices, ensembles, tuning systems and traditions, the analyses of *Baris* and *75 Akshara Korvai* show that both possess manifold symmetrical properties in the temporal organisation of the music from the microscopic to macroscopic. Both genres are underpinned by periodic rhythmic cycles that create large-scale form with similar overall performance duration and exhibit symmetrical properties that are not merely translational in a single part. They both employ translational and bilateral symmetry in various ways, including symmetry that is orientated about decentralised axes, compound, and fractured symmetry operating upon multiple scales of magnitude. Analysis of other pieces from both traditions would establish the extent to which translational and bilateral symmetry occur in these genres, and whether fractured symmetry and self-similarity are idiosyncratic.

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Reevaluation of *Wagashi*'s Characteristics: How Heian Period Literature Influenced Edo Period *Wagashi*

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Abstract

This research examines the influence of Edo period *wagashi* (Japanese confections) and Heian literature. For the study, the author has selected *Kashifu*, a document that preserves information about *wagashi* which provides clear names and illustrations of *wagashi* from the Edo period. This study explores the connection between the names and designs of *wagashi* and their intended links to historical literature. Previous research has discussed the influence of poems on *wagashi*, but the influence of prose is still undefined. Therefore, this research considers poetry and prose when examining the connections between the names and designs of *wagashi*. The results suggest a direct and indirect relationship between the names and designs of Edo period's *wagashi* with poems and prose works from the Heian period. The direct connection is indicated by descriptions in the texts of the Heian period. On the other hand, the indirect relationship is evident from adaptations of Heian literature in literary works created after the Heian period, demonstrating that these works are incomplete without references to Heian literature.

Keywords: wagashi, Japanese literature, Heian period, Edo period, Japanese prose

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Introduction

In Japan, there are various types of sweets, including *yougashi*, *nanbangashi*, *wagashi*, and "Chinese" sweets. The distinction of *wagashi* from other types of sweets is especially marked by its distinct Japanese characteristics, as discussed by Maruyama and Kobayashi (1970), Nakayama (2006), and Tanaka (1996). However, some unresolved aspects remain regarding whether the traits of *wagashi* discussed in those studies can be applied to the components of existing *wagashi*. But what exactly is *wagashi*? To have a better understanding of *wagashi*, below is one of its definitions in dictionary:

> It refers to uniquely Japanese sweets or Japanese-style sweets, including *manju*, *yokan*, *rakugan*, *gyuhi*, *senbei*, and *ame*, which have developed a Japanese flavor by incorporating both *namagashi* (fresh sweets) and *higashi* (dry sweets). The term *wagashi* was established in contrast to Western confections, distinguishing sweets made with butter and milk from those made with shellfish, fruits, and mountain herbs, all cultivated in an environment where meat consumption was prohibited. It began to be called *wagashi* after the Meiji era. A characteristic of *wagashi* is the rich integration of seasonal themes. [1] (Shogakukan, 1994)

It can be seen that *wagashi* is recognized as "Japanese sweets," giving it a Japanese-style aspect to the confections. Therefore, it is possible for *Kara* sweets (a type of Chinese sweets) such as *manju* to enter the category of *wagashi* by later assigning them a Japanese-style name. However, the dictionary also points out that "the characteristic of *wagashi* is the rich integration of seasonal themes," meaning that there is a sense of seasons unique to Japan, that can also be taken as an abstract characteristic. On another dictionary, *wagashi* is defined as such:

> Japanese confections, which refer to traditional Japanese sweets, have been primarily influenced by techniques from China and Europe until the Edo period, with many adapted to Japanese styles. These sweets typically use main ingredients such as rice, wheat, various shell powders, starches like kudzu and bracken root, beans including adzuki and soybeans, and sugar. They do not include any meat or dairy products, using only a small amount of plant oil when baking and shell powder mixed with water; spices are also minimal. From a taste perspective, these confections have been developed to complement green tea, which gained popularity through the tea ceremony. They are characterized by their beautiful colors and shapes, utilizing leaves and plants to reflect a rich sense of the seasons.[2] (Heibonsha, 2007)

Heibonsha (2007) stated that techniques from China and Europe were adapted to create what is currently referred to as *wagashi*, similar to how Shogakukan (1994) compared *wagashi*'s contrast to Western sweets. Additionally, Heibonsha (2007) also mentioned that confections suitable for tea ceremonies can rightly be called *wagashi*. After that, the characteristic of *wagashi* possessing a sense of seasonality is brought up once again.

If we summarize both definitions of *wagashi,* it seems that the term *wagashi* was derived more from the need to distinguish it from Chinese and European confections. Furthermore, both sources note that *wagashi* embodies a sense of seasonality, reflecting a seasonal feeling unique

[1] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote A) with Google Translate
[2] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote B) with Google Translate

to Japan. However, the concrete depictions of which seasons contribute to this Japanese sensibility remains unclear.

The portrayal of these definitions can be found in pictorial *wagashi* menus from the Edo period (1603–1869). From the menu, it can be said that their seasonal designs and names suggested something that was already commonly used, for example, as found in flower-inspired sweets. And thus, it is worthy to delve the origins of the shared common sense of seasonal influences in Edo period Japanese sweets and how they were reflected in the designs and names of the confections.

In general, characteristics of *wagashi* in the Edo period can be stated as follows based on its commonalities (Maruyama & Kobayashi, 1970; Nakayama, 2006; Tanaka, 1996):

1. The design, colors, and names of *wagashi* reflect the seasons.
2. The names of *wagashi* are chosen to emphasize their design.
3. *Wagashi* is greatly influenced by Japanese literature, particularly poetry.

The characteristics above mentioned that *wagashi* are greatly influenced by Japanese literature. However, there are still areas of discussion lacking in the relationship between *wagashi* and seasonal-aware literature. Notably, it concerns what kind of literature was chosen to express the sense of the season. For example, a *wagashi* named *Tatsudanagashi* has been preserved in an Edo period document called *Kashifu* (lit. "records of sweets"), in which its design reflects autumn leaves. Why has this *wagashi*, named after a place, been designed in the shape of autumn leaves? According to Gazou de Tanoshimu Edo no Shokubunka (2021) exhibition, one of the connections between its name and shape traces back to the *Kokin Wakashu* (Collection of Old and New Japanese Poems), whereas a poem describes an autumn in Tatsudanagashi.

It can be concluded that the gap between *Tatsudanagashi*'s shape and name are connected by the help of Japanese literature, which also incorporates a seasonal feeling into the *wagashi*. Nonetheless, the third characteristic refers explicitly to Japanese literature, primarily poetic forms, while excluding prose. Despite this, if literature has indeed provided seasonal feeling to *wagashi*, then prose should not be overlooked in this possibility. To support this, this study will focus on a particular *wagashi* component and examine its literary influence by considering both poetry and prose equally.

This study will also investigate the origin of *wagashi* names as part of its connected characteristic with Japanese literature. However, *wagashi* names that will be subject of this study do not include confection names. For example, the simple word *mochi* is one of the names that always refers to confections or food. Even so, in *teika mochi*, although it indeed ends with *mochi*, there is the name *teika*, which is not recognized as food. In this context, the name *teika* can significantly influence the design of *wagashi* depending on the image it conjures, unlike *mochi*, which is already recognized as food. By researching names like *teika*, which comes before a name recognized as confections, this study can anticipate the impacts and pathways of how this name was used during that era.

Kashifu* and *Wagashi

Kashifu is an anonymous document about traditional Japanese sweets published in the Edo period (1603–1869). This document is housed in the *Kanō* Collection at Tohoku University Library. It comprises two volumes with 75 pages in total, each measuring 13 cm in height and 20.5 cm in width. The content consists solely of illustrations and names of Japanese sweets in

color. The first volume includes 240 kinds of sweets, while the second volume contains 139 kinds. There are 16 kinds of sugar sweets, 53 kinds of *mochi* sweets, 6 kinds of *yokan*, and 12 kinds of *manjū*. The remainder consists of sweets that do not fall into these categories.

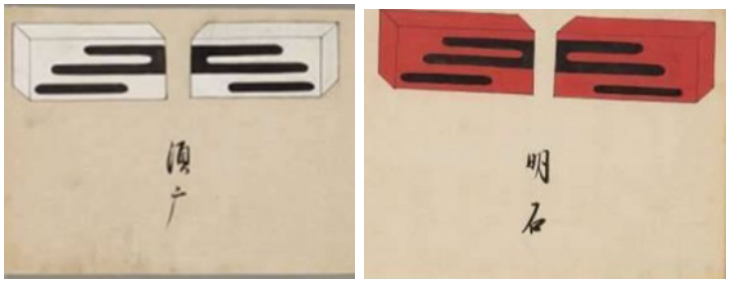
Other than *Kashifu*, various forms of documents on *wagashi* have survived from the Edo period, in which some of them include tables of contents, names, and methods of preparation. Meanwhile, the *Kashifu* is an example where the names and illustrations of *wagashi* can be seen. Since this research does not need to know the ingredients and techniques of *wagashi* making, this study primarily uses *Kashifu* as a resource on *wagashi* to analyze the names and shapes or the colors associated with those shapes.

As a reference for *wagashi*, it has already been noted that *Kashifu* has a relationship with poetic literature. Gazou de Tanoshimu Edo no Shokubunka (2021) exhibits *Kashifu* as an illustrated book used when ordering *wagashi*, similar to a catalog. Furthermore, they also suggest that *wagashi* consumers are likely to be educated. The exhibition also stated that many of the *wagashi* are inspired by *waka* poetry, particularly from the *Kokinwakashu* (Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems) (Gazou de Tanoshimu Edo no Shokubunka, 2021).

The *wagashi* in *Kashifu* are usually named after locations, meanwhile their designs use many Japanese flowers and leaves, rising a question between the connection of their shapes and names. However, as remarked in Gazou de Tanoshimu Edo no Shokubunka (2021), although not consumed by the nobility, these Edo period sweets were enjoyed by those who had developed a literary sensibility. These findings support the author's hypothesis of linking the gap between the design of *wagashi* and its name with literature. In that case, it aligns with aforementioned definitions that noted the seasonal sensibility of literature embodied in Japanese sweets.

Wagashi Directly Related to Heian Literature

Figure 1
Suma and Akashi



Source: Kashifu (n.d.)

To represent Japanese sweets directly related to Heian literature, the author has chosen the *wagashi* "Suma" (Figure 1, left) and "Akashi" (Figure 1, right). Both *wagashi* are named after locations, and have the same pattern of black clouds, but with different base colors: white and red. As my supervisor, Matsumoto Ooki said, the reasoning behind the base color of "Akashi" can be assumed from its name, as the kanji of "aka" (明) in "Akashi" means red. Additionally, the white and red colors of the "Suma" and "Akashi" might be influenced by the Genpei War, a war between Minamoto and Taira clan. After the war, which broke out from 1180 to 1185, many things in Japan were colored red and white, following the flag color of Minamoto clan (white) and Taira clan (red). Because "Suma" and "Akashi" mostly comes in a pair, it became a natural understanding that since "Akashi" is red, then "Suma," as its partner in various

literature, shall be white. But I want to approach this issue from a different perspective, even though there are a lot of possibilities regarding the connection between its name and design. Also, to identify the reason behind the white color in "Suma," there is a need to analyze these *wagashi* as a pair, with the idea originating from historical Japanese prose.

Many literary works use Suma and Akashi together. It might be because the two of them were geographically close, and it was easy to connect the two to give some realistic approaches through the stories. However, in the history of literary works, when these places were named together in a story, some elements would represent Heian literature, namely referencing prose literature from the Heian Period (794–1185), *The Tale of Genji*. For example, in the 13th century, there is a Japanese prose anthology, in which one of the prose is titled *Mumyou Zoushi*. The anthology itself is built as a commentary of other Japanese prose, and there is a part where they noted *The Tale of Genji*'s story. It features the character of Lady Murasaki, also mentioning Suma and Akashi in its passage.

> Displeasing matters. It is not even interesting that Lady Murasaki is not accompanied to **Suma**, while Genji has taken the **Akashi** lady as his mistress and caused her to send someone to talk about it without question. 'Just like that boat far away from the shore (are you separating me like that boat is separating us?),' she sarcastically said to Lady Murasaki, and Genji only showed her the outer cover of the Akashi lady's letter.[3] (Matsuura no Miya Monogatari, ca. 1198–1202 / 1999, p. 217)

In this scene, Lady Murasaki is unable to meet Hikaru Genji. And so, Genji is criticized by Murasaki for taking Akashi no Kimi as a mistress. Additionally, the story after this reveals that a part of *Mumyou Zoushi* involves a painting created by Genji, which appears in *The Tale of Genji* after the Suma chapter. This work is believed to have been made during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), but it acknowledges various key elements from *The Tale of Genji*, namely "Murasaki," "Akashi no Kimi," the "Suma" chapter and "E Awase" chapter (the chapter after "Suma"), along with the pairing of "Suma" and "Akashi." Therefore, it cannot be denied that *Mumyou Zoushi,* though a part of an anthology, demonstrates a connection to the awareness of *The Tale of Genji*.

In another literature, Suma and Akashi are illustrated with the motif of the moon. Nevertheless, the locations are still accompanied by mentions of *The Tale of Genji* such as the passage below, taken from *The Tale of Heike*.

> As autumn gradually reaches its midpoint, the people living in the new city of Fukuhara seek to see the famous moon. Some reminisce about the past of the Genji Commander from the Tale of Genji while gazing at the moon along the shore from **Suma** to **Akashi**, or cross the Awaji Strait to see the moon at Isoshima.[4] (Heike Monogatari, ca. 1300/1994, p. 356)

The Tale of the Heike depicts the Genpei War, and it is a military chronicle written from a Buddhist perspective. In this reference of the story, there are "Suma" and "Akashi" that are added to the text, which then associated with Hikaru Genji, a character from *The Tale of Genji*, which narrates the story of Genji crossing from the shores of Suma to Akashi. This story is directly related to *The Tale of Genji*, in which the author of *The Tale of Heike* rewrote Hikaru

[3] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote C) with Google Translate
[4] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote D) with Google Translate

Genji's act of "gazing at the moon." Therefore, the impression of moonlight is associated with *The Tale of Genji* in this scene. Furthermore, Ihara (1974) mentions that "Additionally, to the people of ancient times, red was felt to be a shining, illuminating beauty, and it is known that they held an aesthetic consciousness of red." This suggests that red is interpreted as luminous, indicating that the red in the *wagashi* "Akashi" could be perceived as moonlight, analogous to *The Tale of Heike*. Also, Genji tries to leave Suma as he looks out for the moon, as if the moon is his guidance to Akashi, which is probably why Akashi is painted red.

Through that, it became clear that *Kashifu* is not a mere menu, but also a literary work—a media to express past literatures through the forms of *wagashi*. If we place *Kashifu* in the same place as another literary creation that tries to collide with Heian literature work, then we can assume that a part of *Kashifu*, in this case "Suma" and "Akashi," is directly related to Heian literature, just like how other literature incorporates *The Tale of Genji* to its narratives.

Japanese Sweets Indirectly Related to Heian Literature

Figure 2
Tamagawa

Source: Kashifu (n.d.)

The Japanese confection named "Tamagawa" has a red background and features a line that curves like waves of water, with half-yellow autumn leaves or petals resembling Yamabuki flower. The name and design of this confection can be connected with the 159th poem of *Shinkokinshu* from Kamakura era (1180–1333).

> Let's hold the horse and let it drink more water. Oh, Tamagawa, where the dew of the Yamabuki flowers spills over.[5] (Shinkokin Wakashuu, 1205/1995, p. 64)

This scene refers to the dew falling from the Yamabuki flowers. Furthermore, annotations in the poem also stated that Ide no Tamagawa is a river name in Kyoto Prefecture noted for its Yamabuki flowers, a type of flower that is vibrantly yellow. Considering that there is a yellow *wagashi* named Yamabuki among the *wagashi* in *Kashifu*, it can be inferred that the floral design of "Tamagawa" in *Kashifu* borrows a similar shape and color. Additionally, the *wagashi* design also reflects the river mentioned in the poem.

Even though the description of "Tamagawa" is mostly related to *Shinkokinshu*, a passage as early as from the Nara Period (710–784), quoted from an ancient report on provincial culture, geography, and oral tradition called "Fudoki," also mentions Tamagawa, though in a different manner.

[5] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote E) with Google Translate

> In the west of the county office, there is a village called Shizuori. In ancient times, no one knew how to weave patterns. At that time, weaving was first done in this village. Therefore, the village was named Shizuori. To the north, there is a small stream. It is mixed with red stones. The color resembles amber, and it is very good for making flint. That is why it is named Tamagawa.[6] (Fudoki, ca. 700s/1997, p. 408)

The above scene begins with the emperor's story, discussing the creation of the world and the naming of what has been created. To the north of that village is a small stream with red stones mixed in, resembling the color of amber and named Tamagawa. This indicates that "Tamagawa," the *wagashi*, refers to the small stream. Moreover, it can be inferred that the red stones in that river connect to the red coloring in the *wagashi*. However, this scene does not mention flowers or autumn leaves, and Tamagawa is only mentioned as a location name.

Tamagawa's design can be concurred by using literature from Kamakura Period and Nara Period. However, there is a missing link in between; how does a location name end up being connected with flowers? To answer that question, below is a poetry work from Heian period:

> I had heard rumors that the famous spot for '*Unohana*' flower was Tamagawa, but it seems this name came from adorning '*Unohana*' flower with dewdrops.[7] (Fujiwara, 1187/1993)

In the poem's annotations, there is a suggestion that the Tamagawa from Senzai Wakashuu is the Tamagawa in the country of Settsu, specifically in the district of Mishima, in contrast to Shizuori mentioned in *Fudoki*. This is the first time Tamagawa has been associated with scenery and ultimately, flower.

At first, in the Nara period literature story, Tamagawa was only a place name, but during the Heian period, the connection between Tamagawa and other things, in this case, flowers, was confirmed for the first time. And after that, in the Kamakura era, the connection between Tamagawa and Yamabuki, which has a yellow color, is shown, making the pattern in wagashi and its name connection understandable. Therefore, even though understanding Heian literature stories is not essential to comprehend the connection between Tamagawa and Yamabuki, Heian literature is still an important existence to the creation of this *wagashi* as it connects the development of Tamagawa's shared understanding from Nara Period to Kamakura Period. Thus, this part of *Kashifu* is indirectly influenced by Heian period literature.

Conclusion

Japanese literature connected with *wagashi* can come from various periods, but it has the same point. In one way or another, all Japanese literature has a connection with Heian era literature, regardless of its literature type. Moreover, even though most research have found the connection of *wagashi* and Japanese poetry, this study has concluded that other Japanese literature, such as prose, also has a great influence in *wagashi* designs and names.

In general, the correlation between *wagashi* and Japanese literature can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect. Direct relation means that the names and designs of *wagashi* can be explained by just using Heian era literature. Even when seen from literature works after

[6] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote F) with Google Translate
[7] Translated verbatim from the original Japanese work (Appendix Quote G) with Google Translate

Heian era which contained many *wagashi* names and patterns, the explanation of their origins can only be retrieved by looking at Heian literature. Indirect relation means that the sweets' names and patterns can be explained just by using literature after the Heian period, but still has some common sense or information that are rooted in the Heian period. This standard of common sense is what connects the name and the design of the *wagashi*. And since the *wagashi* in this study is retrieved from *Kashifu*, a document recorded in Edo period, it can be concluded that Edo *wagashi* and Heian literature are interconnected.

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I declare that Faustina Ardisa has edited and proofread this research.

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

I declare that Google Translate and Grammarly have been used to proofread and translate the original script in this research.

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Appendix

Original Text of Related Japanese Documents

Quote A

Definition of Wagashi in Encyclopedia Nipponica (Shogakukan, 1994)

日本特有の菓子あるいは日本風の菓子のことで、まんじゅう、羊かん、落雁（らくがん)、求肥（ぎゅうひ)、煎餅（せんべい)、飴（あめ）など生（なま）菓子、干菓子をくるめて日本的な風味を形成してきたものをいう。和菓子は洋菓子に対して生まれたことばであり、バターやミルクを材料に用いた菓子と、肉食禁忌の環境で育てられた殻類、果実、山草本位の菓子を区別して、明治以降に和菓子と称するようになった。季節感を豊かに盛り込んでいるのも和菓子の特徴である。

Quote B

Definition of Wagashi in Encyclopedia of the World (Heibonsha, 2007)

和風の菓子、日本の伝統的な菓子といった意味であるが、おおむね江戸時代までに中国やヨーロッパから製法と伝えられ、それを日本化したものが多い。米・麦その他の殻粉、葛（くず）粉・ワラビ粉などのデンプン、アズキ・大豆などの豆類、および砂糖を主材料とする甘味のものが多く、鳥獣肉、乳製品はまったく使わず、油脂も水溶きした殻粉を焼くときに少量の植物油をひく程度にしか用いず、香辛料の使用も少ない。食味の面からすると、茶の湯を中心として普及してきた緑茶の飲用ふさわしいものとして形成されており、色彩・形態の美しさとともに、草木の葉などを利用して豊かな季節感をもっているのが特徴である。(以下中略)

Quote C

Excerpt from Mumyou Zoushi in Matsuura no Miya Monogatari (ca. 1198 – 1202/1999), chapter 18, p. 217

心やましきこと。紫の上、須磨へ具せられぬことだにあるに、明石の君設けて、問はず語りしおこすること。『浦より遠に漕ぐ舟の』と厭はれて、文の上包みばかり見せたること。

Quote D

Excerpt from Heike Monogatari (ca. 1300/1994), p. 356

やう／＼秋もなかぼになりゆけば、復原の新都にまします人々、名所の月をみんとて、或いは源氏の大将の昔の跡をしのびつつ、須磨より明石の浦づたひ、淡路の瀬戸をおしわたり、絵島が礒の月をみる。

Quote E

Excerpt from Shinkokin Wakashuu (1205/1995), poem number 159, p. 64

（一五九番歌）　皇太后宮大夫俊成

駒とめてなほ水かはん山吹の花の露そふ井出の玉川

Quote F

Excerpt from Fudoki (c. 700s/1997), Hitachi Province Fudoki chapter, p. 408

郡西□里、静織里。上古之時、織レ綾之機、未レ在二知人一。于レ時、此村初織。因名。北有二小水一。丹石交錯。色似二琥碧一、火鑽尤好。以号二玉川一。

Quote G

Excerpt from Senzai Wakashuu (Fujiwara, 1187/1993)

(一四一番歌)卯花の歌とてよみ侍りける

玉川とをとにきゝしは卯の花を露のかざれる名にこそありけれ

Identity Categorization in Taiwanese Gay Users' Pride Parade IG Posts

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Abstract

Following the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan, LGBTQ+ issues have become more visible in public discourse. This study explores how Taiwanese gay men construct sexual identity through Instagram posts during the Taiwan Pride Parade. Grounded in social identity theory, the research analyzes 125 posts collected via snowball sampling, using a grounded theory approach to uncover identity-construction strategies. Two main textual strategies emerged. First, hashtag framing (e.g., #LoveWins, #同志驕傲 [#GayPride]) functions as a clear form of self-identification and community affiliation. Second, the use of community-specific jargon (e.g., "女神" [goddess], "熊" [bear], "姊妹" [sister]) reflects subcultural belonging and sexual orientation through implicit, coded language. These strategies illustrate how users negotiate visibility, express solidarity, and perform identity within digital queer spaces. The findings emphasize the fluid, performative nature of LGBTQ+ identity on social media and offer insights into queer self-representation and community practices in contemporary Taiwan.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ identity construction, Instagram, sociolinguistics

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Introduction and Context

Preface

On the global stage of RuPaul's Drag Race, when Taiwanese performer Nymphia Wind raised the crown in 2024 and shouted, "And Taiwan, this is for you!", it marked more than an individual triumph—it was a declaration of national queer visibility. In an era where social media serves as both platform and archive for identity performance, such public affirmations reflect a deeper sociolinguistic phenomenon: the digital construction of queer identity in specific cultural contexts like Taiwan.

Background and Rationale

Despite being the first Asian nation to legalize same-sex marriage in 2019, Taiwan continues to grapple with tensions between legal progress and social acceptance. Structural issues such as limited LGBTQ+ education, workplace discrimination, and familial stigma persist (Tsai & Liu, 2022; Rainbow Equality Platform, 2023). In this evolving environment, social media platforms have emerged as vital arenas where LGBTQ+ individuals construct, express, and negotiate their identities.

Among various queer cultural expressions, the Taiwan Pride Parade—Asia's largest LGBTQ+ public event—has evolved from a marginal protest into a mainstream celebration. With annual participation exceeding 150,000, the parade has become not only a political platform but also a site for embodied self-performance. Increasingly, these performances are documented and extended via Instagram, where users use both images and text to articulate who they are and what they stand for.

While prior research has examined media representations of LGBTQ+ communities (Martin, 2003; Sullivan, 2003), fewer studies have addressed how queer individuals themselves actively construct identity on digital platforms, especially within non-Western contexts. In Taiwan, sociolinguistic scholarship has largely focused on policy or offline activism, leaving digital identity performance underexplored (Cheng, 2013; Shiau, 2008).

Research Focus

This study explores how Taiwanese gay men construct and categorize sexual identity through Instagram posts during the 2024 Taiwan Pride Parade. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the study focuses on three key textual strategies: public labeling, hashtag framing, and community-specific language. These are understood not only as expressions of individuality, but also as acts of community alignment and discursive positioning.

Rather than viewing Instagram captions and hashtags as merely decorative, this research treats them as linguistic artifacts embedded with social meaning. Through their discursive choices, users engage in identity categorization—labeling themselves, signaling affiliation, and negotiating visibility in a digitally mediated queer space.

Research Aim

This paper aims to:

1. Analyze the textual strategies by which Taiwanese gay users construct sexual identity on Instagram during Pride;
2. Examine how these strategies reflect broader themes of social categorization, cultural belonging, and queer visibility;
3. Contribute to queer sociolinguistics by foregrounding Taiwan-specific digital data and discourse practices.

The Taiwan Pride Parade serves as a particularly rich site for investigating identity work in action. As a temporally compressed and emotionally charged event, amplified by social media, it provides a unique lens through which to observe how queer digital performances articulate individuality, solidarity, and resistance.

The following chapter provides a literature review on identity construction in LGBTQ+ digital contexts, with specific attention to sociolinguistic approaches and the role of social media in mediating queer self-representation.

Literature Review

LGBTQ+ Identity Construction in Taiwan

While Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in 2019, LGBTQ+ visibility remains shaped by persistent social, cultural, and political tensions. As Zhou and Hu (2019) argue, public tolerance has grown, but deep-seated stigmas in family and educational systems continue to constrain full social inclusion. Within this context, the Taiwan Pride Parade has become more than a celebratory event—it is a performative site where queer identities are enacted, affirmed, and made visible through symbolic participation (Ayoub et al., 2021).

Luo (2004) further suggests that Pride functions as a medium through which private desires are transformed into political expression. These moments of public performance gain new layers of meaning when mediated through social platforms such as Instagram, where queer identity is constructed through the convergence of visual and textual resources. During Pride, such digital acts blur boundaries between personal expression and collective representation.

Taiwan's LGBTQ+ communities have long used coded language and subcultural terms to negotiate visibility. Social media now extends the reach of these practices, enabling users to craft identity narratives that are both contextually grounded and broadly legible—especially during high-visibility moments like Pride.

Social Identity Theory and Identity Categorization

This study adopts Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as its central theoretical framework. SIT posits that individuals define themselves in relation to social groups through three sequential stages: categorization, identification, and comparison. The first stage—categorization—is particularly relevant here, as it involves linguistic and symbolic acts of labeling that situate the self within a group.

In the context of LGBTQ+ discourse on Instagram, identity categorization occurs when users deploy visible textual markers that signal group affiliation. Hashtags such as #同志驕傲 (#GayPride) or #LoveWins serve as overt declarations of in-group membership, while culturally coded expressions like "姊妹" (sister) or "女神" (goddess) activate shared subcultural knowledge. These choices are not neutral—they are performative acts that construct and reaffirm belonging within a specific queer sociocultural space.

SIT thus provides a valuable lens for analyzing how individual discursive acts (e.g., hashtagging, slang use) participate in larger processes of group alignment, recognition, and boundary work.

Queer Self-Representation and Platform Affordances

Previous studies on queer digital expression have shown how social media enables identity construction through curated posts, captions, hashtags, and affective narratives (Cover, 2017; Marwick, 2015). On Instagram, LGBTQ+ users often engage in identity signaling by selecting linguistic and symbolic codes intelligible to in-group audiences while navigating broader public exposure.

Morgan (2022) and Duguay (2016) highlight that such platforms serve as tools for both empowerment and negotiation. Through hashtagging, community jargon, and subtle linguistic choices, users engage in selective visibility—choosing how to present themselves and which aspects of identity to foreground. These affordances are especially important during collective events like Pride, where the platform acts as a stage for digital performance.

Unlike traditional media representations where LGBTQ+ identities were often framed through voyeurism, othering, or pathologization (Martin, 2003; Sullivan, 2003), social media platforms allow queer individuals to reclaim authorship of their identities. This shift from being seen to self-representing marks a fundamental epistemological and discursive transformation.

Linguistic Strategies and Identity Signaling on Instagram

Emerging literature has identified Instagram as a site where identity is co-constructed through both visual and textual discourse (Pandey, 2016; Winston, 2013). Of particular interest to this study is how textual strategies—especially hashtags and queer-coded language—serve as tools of identity categorization.

For example, use of hashtags like #LoveWins or #GayTaiwan not only reflects affiliation but also signals alignment with global and local queer narratives. Similarly, insider terms such as "姊妹" or "女神" activate shared subcultural knowledge, creating a sense of "we-ness" among readers who understand the context. These expressions operate as boundary markers between in-group and out-group members (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Goffman, 1981).

Research Gap and Contribution

Although studies such as McConnell et al. (2017) and Wargo (2017) have analyzed queer youth identity construction on Western social media platforms, limited attention has been

paid to Taiwan. Even fewer studies focus specifically on identity categorization and how it unfolds through textual strategies in local digital contexts like Instagram during Pride.

This study addresses that gap by offering a Taiwan-specific, sociolinguistically informed analysis of identity categorization among gay men. By focusing on discursive practices such as hashtagging and coded language, the research highlights how individuals construct social identities that are contextually meaningful and politically resonant

Research Questions (RQ)

To guide this inquiry, the study poses the following research question:

RQ1: How do Taiwanese gay men utilize textual strategies on Instagram during the Pride Parade to construct and categorize their sexual identity?

The next chapter outlines the methodological approach used to answer this question, including data collection, sampling criteria, and the analytical framework based on Social Identity Theory and qualitative discourse analysis.

Methodology

Overview of Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive netnographic approach to examine how Taiwanese gay men construct and categorize sexual identity through Instagram posts during the 2024 Taiwan Pride Parade. Guided by Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and supported by discourse analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), the research explores identity as a performative and contextually situated act enacted through linguistic and semiotic strategies.

The analysis centers on identity categorization—the first and foundational stage of SIT—in which individuals linguistically label themselves to signal group affiliation. This chapter details the data collection process, sampling criteria, analytical framework, and coding strategy.

Data Collection and Sampling Criteria

A total of 123 public Instagram posts were selected using targeted hashtags related to the 2024 Taiwan Pride Parade (e.g., #台灣同志遊行, #taiwanpride2024, #同志驕傲). Posts were collected between October 26 and November 26, 2024, capturing identity expressions before, during, and after the event.

The selection process followed a manual screening protocol and adhered to the following criteria:

Table 1
Data Inclusion Criteria

Criterion	Requirement & Explanation
Language	Post caption must be ≥ 80% in Mandarin; hashtags in English are allowed
Posting Period	Posts must be published between October 26 and November 26, 2024
Identity Relevance	Posts must reflect gay identity; verified via user profile or textual/visual content
Content Type	Only posts with human images and captions were included; memes or depersonalized visuals excluded
User Contribution	Max. two posts per user per week to avoid data skew and overrepresentation
Hashtag Relevance	Must contain at least one LGBTQ+ or Pride-related hashtag (e.g., #gay, #同志, #TaiwanPride)

This process ensured cultural relevance, linguistic coherence, and ethical rigor. Posts were anonymized and no private accounts or involuntary disclosures were included.

Study 1: Textual Analysis of Identity Categorization

Methodological Approach: Interpretive Netnography

To examine RQ1, this study employed interpretive netnography (Kozinets, 2015; Soini & Eräranta, 2021), a qualitative method well-suited for analyzing discursive and identity practices in digital communities. Its unobtrusive nature allows researchers to observe identity signaling and categorization within naturally occurring online interactions. Given the emotionally and politically charged nature of the Taiwan Pride Parade, netnography was particularly effective in capturing authentic, situated expressions of queer identity.

By analyzing Instagram posts in their original form, this approach enabled the researcher to interpret how users discursively construct self-categorization through hashtags, linguistic style, and queer-coded expressions embedded in platform vernaculars.

Analytical Framework: Social Identity Theory and Discourse Analysis

This study draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and discourse analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) to examine how gay men construct social identity through language on Instagram. SIT outlines key mechanisms—categorization, identification, and comparison—that guide how individuals define themselves within social groups. Among these, identity categorization serves as the entry point for self-definition and group alignment.

On Instagram, such categorization often appears through hashtags, queer-coded expressions, and symbolic language that signal in-group belonging. These elements not only express personal identity but also perform social roles in shared digital spaces.

Discourse analysis further enables close reading of how such identity markers function as performative acts—language choices that do more than describe, but actively construct

identity in context. By viewing Instagram posts as sites of discursive identity work, this study highlights how queer users signal who they are and where they belong, particularly during culturally significant events like Taiwan Pride.

This framework thus positions digital identity construction as a contextual, symbolic, and dynamic process enacted through everyday language.

Coding Process and Analytical Tools

The 123 selected Instagram posts were manually screened through multiple rounds of evaluation to ensure they met all inclusion criteria. After validation, all posts were systematically coded using an Excel spreadsheet, where each entry was classified according to identified identity strategies.

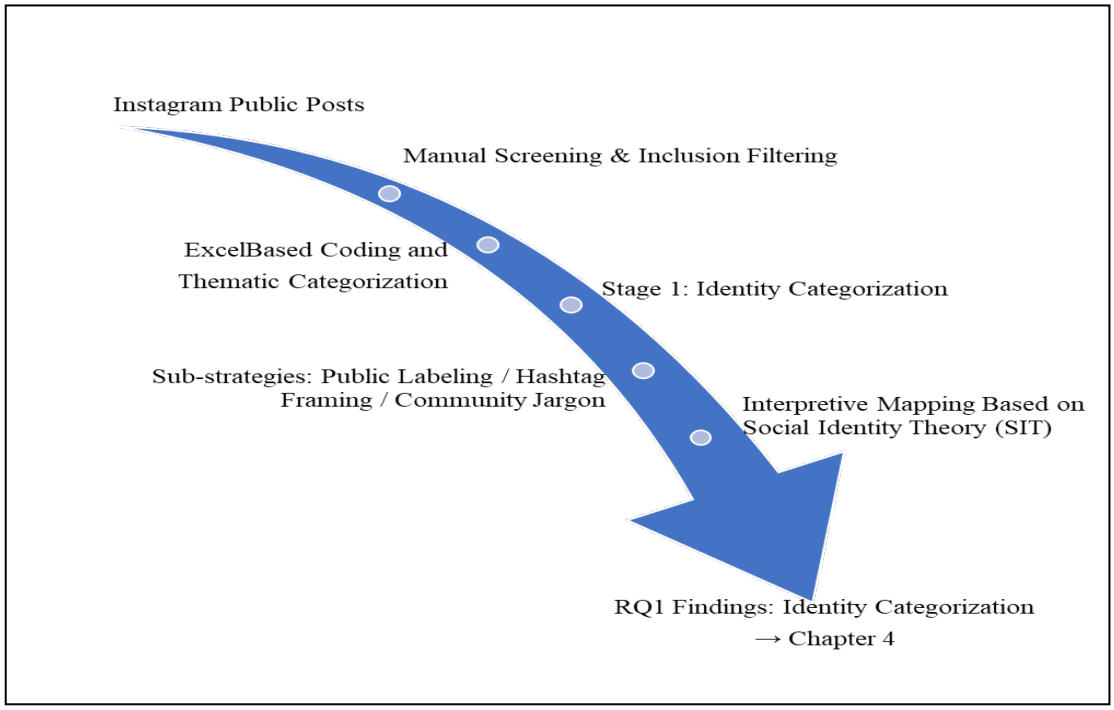
A thematic analysis approach was adopted to inductively identify patterns of identity-related discourse. Based on the data, three core sub-strategies under Identity Categorization emerged:

- Public Labeling: Use of explicit hashtags such as #同志驕傲 (#GayPride) or #LoveWins to directly assert LGBTQ+ identity.
- Hashtag Framing: Strategic bundling of hashtags to embed oneself within Pride discourse, reinforcing community visibility and collective belonging.
- Community Jargon: Use of queer vernacular (e.g., “姊妹” [sister], “熊” [bear]) to signify in-group affiliation and cultural fluency within the gay community.

These discursive strategies correspond to SIT’s first stage—categorization—which lays the foundation for identity recognition and group positioning. Rather than representing fixed identity labels, these expressions function as performative acts embedded in broader sociocultural narratives. They reflect how individuals negotiate visibility, solidarity, and self-definition within queer digital spaces.

The following diagram visually summarizes the analytical flow of this study’s textual strategy analysis. Figure 1 outlines the process from data screening to identity categorization, highlighting how each step aligns with Social Identity Theory.

Figure 1
Identity Categorization Strategy Analysis Process



Ethical Considerations

All posts analyzed were publicly accessible and contained no personally identifying information. No private, deleted, or restricted accounts were used. In line with ethical netnographic practice (Kozinets, 2015), Instagram content is treated as public cultural text, but due care was taken to protect individual anonymity, especially given the sensitivity of sexual identity in online spaces.

Summary

This chapter introduced the methodological design used to explore how Taiwanese gay men construct sexual identity through textual strategies during the 2024 Taiwan Pride Parade. By integrating interpretive netnography, Social Identity Theory, and discourse analysis, the study offers a focused, culturally grounded examination of identity categorization in a real-world queer digital context.

The following chapter presents the findings from this analysis, highlighting key linguistic patterns and identity-signaling practices observed in Instagram posts.

Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents findings in response to Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do Taiwanese gay men construct and express sexual identity through textual strategies on Instagram during the Taiwan Pride Parade?

Drawing from the interpretive netnography and the Social Identity Theory (SIT) framework outlined in Chapter Three, this chapter focuses exclusively on Identity Categorization. A total

of 123 Instagram posts were analyzed, from which three key identity construction strategies emerged: Public Labeling, Hashtag Framing, and Community Jargon.

Public Labeling: Overt Declarations of Identity

The most frequently used strategy was Public Labeling, characterized by the explicit declaration of LGBTQ+ identity through hashtags such as #同志驕傲, #LoveWins, and #ProudToBeGay. These hashtags often appeared at the beginning or end of captions and functioned as unambiguous statements of self-identification.

Post Example (ID#062):

Caption: "Love wins every time 🌈 #同志驕傲 #TaiwanPride2024"
→ Combines a global slogan with localized hashtags to assert both personal pride and national queer visibility.

According to Social Identity Theory, this aligns with the categorization stage, where individuals use linguistic markers to identify with a specific social group. Public Labeling is thus a performative act of visibility, reinforcing both personal and collective identity in the digital public sphere.

Hashtag Framing: Positioning Within Pride Discourse

The second strategy, Hashtag Framing, involves the intentional clustering of multiple hashtags to locate oneself within a broader socio-political discourse. Users often bundle national, cultural, and affective tags like #TaiwanPride2024, #第 22 屆台灣同志遊行, #LoveIsLove, and #ProudToBeGay.

This discursive strategy achieves two functions:

1. Contextual anchoring within a national event
2. Collective positioning within LGBTQ+ global narratives

Post Example (ID#077):

Caption: "第一次和家人一起參加同志遊行，感謝有你們 💕 #台灣同志遊行 #LoveIsLove #同志家庭"
→ Combines national, emotional, and familial tags to frame the personal within a broader Pride discourse.

This strategy situates the user not only within a specific event but also within a shared symbolic community, reflecting SIT's concept of group alignment. Hashtag Framing emphasizes the user's participation in both local and global queer movements, constructing identity as contextually embedded and socially resonant.

Community Jargon: Coded Belonging and In-Group Solidarity

The third strategy is the use of Community Jargon—coded language and insider references specific to queer subcultures. Common examples include words like "姊妹" (sister), "女神" (goddess), "熊" (bear), and "女王" (queen). These culturally embedded expressions convey both identity and belonging through shared knowledge.

Post Example (ID#031):

Caption: “姊妹們集合！今晚就是我們的夜晚✨👯”

→ “姊妹” signals shared cultural intimacy and community-specific relational dynamics.

This strategy aligns with SIT’s social identification process, wherein individuals internalize and reproduce group-specific symbols to demonstrate belonging. Unlike Public Labeling, which addresses a broader audience, Community Jargon activates subcultural recognition, fostering solidarity through coded discourse intelligible primarily to in-group members.

Distribution of Identity Categorization Strategies

The relative frequency of each strategy provides insight into the layering and accessibility of identity discourse.

Table 2

Distribution of Identity Categorization Strategies (N = 123)

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Description
Public Labeling	85	69.1%	Use of LGBTQ+ hashtags to signal identity and increase visibility
Hashtag Framing	66	53.7%	Strategic bundling of hashtags to embed the post within Pride discourse
Community Jargon	48	39.0%	Use of queer-coded terms to signal in-group belonging and fluency

These figures show that Public Labeling is the most accessible and widely used, while Community Jargon represents a more culturally embedded, insider-oriented practice. Many posts combined two or more strategies, highlighting the multimodal and strategic nature of queer identity expression.

Synthesis: Performing Identity Categorization in Queer Digital Space

Together, these three strategies demonstrate that identity categorization on Instagram is a performative, multi-layered, and culturally situated process. Taiwanese gay men engage in dynamic self-positioning—oscillating between visibility and intimacy, public solidarity and in-group familiarity—based on the platform’s affordances and social context.

This chapter affirms SIT’s relevance by illustrating how digital language practices function as symbolic acts of categorization, identification, and boundary work. At the same time, the findings emphasize the importance of context-specific discourse: these strategies are not universal but reflect localized forms of queer expression shaped by the Taiwan Pride context.

In essence, these posts are not merely self-descriptions—they are identity performances, crafted through stylistic, strategic, and symbolic choices that co-produce both personal narratives and collective queer visibility.

These findings underscore that digital identity is not static but an evolving performance that depends on discursive choices and social positioning. The chapter reaffirms the relevance of

Social Identity Theory in explaining how individuals form and display identities within digitally mediated, culturally rich environments like Taiwan Pride.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study set out to examine how Taiwanese gay men construct and express their sexual identity on Instagram during the Taiwan Pride Parade. By focusing specifically on identity categorization strategies, the analysis revealed how digital discourse—particularly hashtags and community-specific language—serves as a vehicle for both self-identification and in-group solidarity. The findings contribute to broader conversations in queer media studies, digital sociolinguistics, and identity theory.

Theoretical Implications

This study affirms the utility of Social Identity Theory (SIT) for understanding digital queer identity practices. The three textual strategies identified—Public Labeling, Hashtag Framing, and Community Jargon—correspond to the mechanisms outlined in SIT, particularly the categorization phase, where individuals signal group affiliation through discursive choices.

Public Labeling functions as a direct declaration of identity and group membership. Hashtag Framing facilitates symbolic alignment across cultural, emotional, and political discourses. Community Jargon operates as a boundary-marking discourse, activating shared knowledge through playful or intimate language. Together, these practices highlight how digital identity is not fixed but performative, strategic, and context-dependent.

Furthermore, the use of coded language (e.g., “姊妹”, “熊”) reflects the ways in which digital queer communities construct meaning through subcultural semiotics. These linguistic choices do more than signal group membership—they perform belonging, negotiate visibility, and foster cultural intimacy. In this way, digital identity is not static but performative, fluid, and situational.

Empirical Contributions

This research contributes to queer sociolinguistics and digital identity studies in several key ways.

Taiwan-Specific Focus

By centering Taiwanese gay users during Taiwan Pride, the study provides a localized account of LGBTQ+ identity construction in a democratic Asian context marked by progressive legislation and ongoing social negotiation.

User-Centered Data

The dataset comprises 123 user-generated Instagram posts, offering an authentic glimpse into how identity is performed in real-time. This addresses scholarly calls for non-Western, community-grounded research on queer digital life.

Qualitative Rigor

Through interpretive netnography and discourse analysis, the study presents a fine-grained understanding of identity work through hashtag sequences, word choices, and symbolic cues—moving beyond quantitative hashtag analysis to highlight discursive intentionality.

Strategic Visibility

The findings demonstrate how users balance visibility and self-protection through layered textual practices—especially in a semi-public space like Instagram, where audience perception is shaped by both platform affordances and cultural context.

Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged.

Scope

The analysis focuses solely on textual strategies, excluding visual elements such as photos, emojis, or layout design. Given Instagram's inherently multimodal nature, this is a necessary but limiting decision.

Sampling Bias

Only public posts were included. Private accounts and users who self-censor are excluded, potentially skewing representations of identity toward more visible or self-assured users.

Interpretive Boundaries

The analysis of community-specific jargon depends on the researcher's linguistic and cultural fluency. Although coding was theory-informed and reviewed across multiple passes, ethnographic triangulation (e.g., interviews or participant feedback) could enhance interpretive accuracy.

Future Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research.

Multimodal Expansion

Incorporating image analysis, emoji use, and layout design would deepen understanding of visual and semiotic identity strategies on social media.

Intersectional Inquiry

Further studies could explore how age, gender non-conformity, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status intersect with gay identity in digital Pride expressions.

Longitudinal and Comparative Work

Tracking identity discourse across multiple years of Taiwan Pride would reveal evolving linguistic norms and community shifts. Comparative analyses with LGBTQ+ communities in Japan, Hong Kong, or South Korea would provide broader regional insight.

Platform and Audience Analysis

Future work could examine how users design content for imagined audiences, and how algorithmic visibility mediates identity performance and queer community dynamics online.

Final Reflections

The 2024 Taiwan Pride Parade, as reflected on Instagram, became more than a physical event—it functioned as a discursive stage for performing identity, asserting belonging, and negotiating visibility. In a time when queer expression is both increasingly empowered and persistently surveilled, the identity strategies observed in this study embody a form of symbolic resistance and cultural creativity.

By unpacking how Taiwanese gay men construct sexual identity through textual strategies during Pride, this research contributes to a more localized and culturally grounded understanding of queer digital life in East Asia. It demonstrates that identity categorization is not a passive reflection of group status, but a dynamic process of social negotiation, shaped by platform features, cultural codes, and the desire to be seen—on one's own terms.

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From Male to Female *Gandrung* Dancers: A Semiotic Analysis of Gender Transformation and Cultural Communication in the *Gandrung* Dance of *Banyuwangi*

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Abstract

Banyuwangi, a regency located at the easternmost tip of Java Island, Indonesia, is well known for its rich traditional arts and cultural heritage. One of its enduring cultural icons from the colonial era to the present is the *Gandrung* dance, which was originally performed by a male dancer named Marsan in the early twentieth century under the tradition known as *Gandrung Lanang* (Male *Gandrung*). Initially, this dance served as a gathering medium for local fighters resisting colonial occupation. Over time, however, social changes led to the feminization of the *Gandrung* performance, with women becoming central figures in ceremonies, rituals, and annual festivals. This study explores gender transformation and the meaning of cultural communication in *Banyuwangi's Gandrung* dance by employing Roland Barthes's semiotic framework. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through documentation studies and YouTube video observations to analyze visual signs such as body, costume, expression, and movement within their cultural context. The results reveal that the feminization of *Gandrung* dancers is not merely a practical transformation but also an ideological shift that reflects negotiations between tradition and modernity. Female dancers thus emerge as symbolic agents of identity and aesthetic adaptation in response to the dynamics of cultural tourism and globalization.

Keywords: *Gandrung* dance, gender representation, femininity, symbolic meaning, semiotics

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Introduction

Culture is the collective creation of society, encompassing all aspects of life that are passed down from generation to generation. According to Soemardjan and Soemardi, culture is defined as "the total result of human creativity, taste, and initiative." Within Koentjaraningrat's framework, one of the elements of culture is art (including dance), which serves a dual function: as entertainment and as an expression of communal gratitude for the blessings of nature and life. For example, in agricultural traditions, folk dances are often performed after harvest as a form of thanksgiving to God. Thus, artistic performances such as music, drama, and dance become not only media of cultural communication but also instruments for preserving traditional values.

Banyuwangi Regency is known for its wealth of traditional arts that are closely guarded by the local community. The indigenous inhabitants of *Banyuwangi* are the *Osing* people, also known as *Wong Blambangan*, who refer to their land as *Tanah Blambangan* (Santi, 2008). The *Osing* constitute the majority population in many districts of *Banyuwangi*, and their culture represents a unique blend of Javanese and Balinese elements. In *Osing* society, traditional arts play a vital role as symbols of local identity. Their distinctive dances such as *Gandrung Banyuwangi*, *Patrol*, *Seblang*, and others are maintained as ancestral heritage. These art forms are frequently performed during customary rituals and major regional celebrations, serving as emblems of *Osing* cultural pride.

The *Gandrung* dance is a cultural icon of *Banyuwangi* and a distinctive form of social performance among the *Osing* people. The term *gandrung* itself means admiration or deep affection, which, in the context of agrarian tradition, reflects the community's reverence for *Dewi Sri*, the goddess of rice and fertility (Finahari & Rubiono, 2021). The dance was originally performed after the harvest season as an expression of gratitude among farmers. A key feature of *Gandrung* is the interaction between the main female dancer and male audience members, known as *paju* or *pemaju*; the dancer invites them to dance alternately, strengthening social bonds between performer and audience. Similar forms of social dance can also be found in other regions, such as *tayub* in Central Java and *joged* in Bali (Santi, 2008). During performances, *Gandrung* is accompanied by *Banyuwangi's* traditional *gamelan* ensemble and songs in the *Osing* language, rich with local symbolism. Nowadays, *Gandrung* continues to be performed in ceremonies and public celebrations from weddings and circumcision rituals to sea festivals and Independence Day events making it an inseparable part of *Banyuwangi*'s social traditions (Dianto, 2017).

Following the designation of Banyuwangi as the Blambangan capital, the *Gandrung* performance art historically began its early development among the local community. (Yudiana & Istiqomah, 2022). Uniquely, in its early form the *Gandrung* dancers were men known as *Gandrung Lanang* who dressed as women. Legendary figures include Druning and his student Marsan, who traveled from village to village carrying drums and *terbang* (a type of small gong) (Yudiana & Istiqomah, 2022). In their performances, the dancers sang verses containing moral messages and covert war strategies aimed at resisting Dutch colonial rule. In return, villagers offered them rice and crops, which were then distributed to fighters and families of war victims (Dianto, 2017). Over time, *Gandrung* became a form of cultural politics and social cohesion among the defeated Blambangan people after their loss to the VOC. However, with the spread of Islam and social change, the practice of male dancers performing in female attire was gradually prohibited. By the 1890s, (Yudiana & Istiqomah, 2022) The demise of Marsan,

recognized as the final documented performer, marked the critical end point for the Gandrung Lanang tradition, which was already suffering a significant decline.

Entering the twentieth century, the absence of male *Gandrung* dancers was filled by women performers. *Gandrung* Semi is recognised as the pivotal figure who pioneered modern *Gandrung*. When she began her performances, she was recorded as the first female dancer in the tradition. With the transition to female performers, *Gandrung* formally abandoned the male-to-female dress tradition. Once banned for its transvestite elements, the dance was now performed by women in full traditional costume. In contemporary developments, new artistic creations have emerged inspired by *Gandrung Lanang*; for example, *Gandrung Marsan* dance by Subari Sufyan features nine male dancers in female attire, who gracefully transform back into masculine characters at the end of the performance. This transformation illustrates the dynamic gender meanings within *Gandrung*, from its ritualistic roots to modern artistic interpretations (Finahari & Rubiono, 2021).

This tradition has even been showcased in the grand cultural performance *Sendratari Gandrung Sewu*, which involves more than a thousand dancers and has been recognized as Indonesia's Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the modern era, the *Gandrung* dance is often regarded as an emblem of exotic beauty and the grace of *Banyuwangi* in the eyes of international tourists. Overall, the transformation of *Gandrung* dancers from male to female reflects an evolution of cultural values: while the form of performance has changed, the essence of reverence for tradition, gratitude, and love for local culture endures. This study analyzes gender transformation in *Banyuwangi's Gandrung* dance, focusing on the interpretation of visual signs such as the dancer's body, costume, expression, and movement within their cultural context.

Conceptual Framework

Culture

The term *culture* (*budaya* or *kebudayaan* in Indonesian) originates from the Sanskrit word *buddhayah*, the plural form of *buddhi*, meaning intellect or reason. Thus, culture refers to all matters related to human thought and consciousness (Sumarto, 2024). In English, the term corresponds to *culture*, derived from the Latin word *colere*, meaning "to cultivate" or "to work," and is often associated with agricultural activity. In Indonesian usage, the word *culture* is sometimes adopted as *kultur* (Pudjitriherwanti, 2019).

According to *The Official Dictionary of the Indonesian Language (KBBI),* culture is defined as thought, custom, something that develops, and habits that are difficult to change. It published by the *Language Development and Fostering Agency* under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, serves as the authoritative reference for the correct and standardized use of the Indonesian language. In the term *culture* is often used synonymously with *tradition*, referring to the habitual practices and collective behaviors observed in community life (Pudjitriherwanti, 2019). Academically, it is rooted in the discipline of social anthropology. Within the educational sphere, culture functions as a medium for the transmission of knowledge, given its broad and encompassing nature. It can be analogized as the "software" of the human mind, shaping perception, guiding attention toward particular aspects, and diverting it from others (Sumarto, 2024).

Culture may also be understood as a set of fundamental assumptions that are created and accepted by a group through a learning process in addressing problems of external adaptation and internal integration. When these patterns prove effective, they are transmitted to new members as the accepted ways of perceiving, thinking, and feeling when facing life's challenges. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines culture as an integrated pattern of human behavior that encompasses thought, speech, action, and artifacts all of which depend on humanity's capacity to understand and transmit knowledge to future generations (Sumarto, 2024).

Hall (1959) provides a foundational perspective in cultural communication, asserting that "culture is communication" and "communication is culture." In other words, the transmission and interpretation of values occur through the communication systems people use; hence, culture and communication are two interrelated and dynamic entities.

Furthermore, Jeff Cartwright emphasizes that culture is a dominant factor influencing individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Dailami & Mikasari, 2022). Its impact can be observed in how individuals are motivated to respond to their environment. Accordingly, Cartwright conceptualizes culture as an organized community possessing shared goals, beliefs, and values, where its influence is reflected in the motivation and collective behavior of its members.

Dance Art

Dance, as an integral part of a nation's cultural heritage, holds a vital position that must be protected and preserved especially in the current era of globalization. Every region in Indonesia possesses its own distinctive dances, characterized by unique movements and stylistic traits shaped by various influencing factors, including social dynamics, geographical conditions, religious values, and other dominant cultural aspects. For instance, the *Pattu'du* dance from West Sulawesi demonstrates how the richness of local culture is embodied through movement and expression.

The aesthetic concept in dance can be understood as an exploration of beauty. Such beauty may originate from divine creation such as the natural world that evokes admiration or from human creativity manifested through works of art, crafts, music, and dance that embody artistic value (Ardini et al., 2022). Terminologically, *The Official Dictionary of the Indonesian Language* (KBBI) defines dance as rhythmic bodily movement performed in harmony with accompanying sounds or music.

Sumaryono emphasizes that dance manifests in two forms of expression: collective and individual (Nurchaerani, 2016). The collective form is commonly found in traditional dances that are transmitted from generation to generation within a community. Meanwhile, individual expression places greater emphasis on the artist's personal creativity, which is often inspired by lived experiences and thus possesses a more subjective nature (Nurchaerani, 2016). Therefore, dance may be understood as a synthesis between the collective expression of a community and the personal experiences of its creator together producing the diverse forms of dance that continue to enrich Indonesia's artistic landscape today.

Gandrung Dance

Historical records reveal that the *Gandrung* performance was originally danced by men who dressed and appeared as women, a form that came to be known as *Gandrung Lanang* (Santi, 2008). In its earliest form, *Gandrung Lanang* was a modest performance held in public spaces, accompanied by simple musical instruments such as drums (*kendang*) and tambourines (*rebana*). At that time, its primary function extended far beyond entertainment; it served as a cultural strategy within the broader struggle against colonial rule (Finahari & Rubiono, 2021). Dancers would travel from village to village performing, receiving food supplies as compensation, which they then distributed to prisoners and victims of colonial oppression. During these performances, the dancers often embedded song lyrics containing calls to resist the colonizers, as well as subtle messages about enemy weaknesses and possible strategies of attack.

One of the most legendary figures in the *Gandrung Lanang* tradition was Marsan, widely recognized as the last male *Gandrung* dancer who remained committed to the art form until the age of forty. Because of his dedication, every performance was affectionately referred to by the local community as *Gandrung Marsan*. The tradition underwent a fundamental alteration during this period, constituting a major transformation. What was once performed by men in female costumes gradually began to be performed by women. This shift was accompanied by musical innovation: the instrumentation expanded beyond the basic *kendang* and *rebana* to include violin (*biola*), gong (*kempul*), *ketuk*, *kenong*, and triangle (*kluncing*) (Yudiana & Istiqomah, 2022). The rationale behind this transition was to restore the dance's original symbolic association with femininity, as the *Gandrung* dancer was historically conceived as a female figure embodying beauty, grace, and devotion.

Nevertheless, *Gandrung Marsan* continues to thrive as a distinctive creative expression that revives the legacy of *Gandrung Lanang* after its long disappearance. The dance's remarkable quality gained global attention when it was awarded the grand prize at the World Dance Festival held in Paris, France (Yudiana & Istiqomah, 2022). This achievement is particularly remarkable, as few contemporary female-led *Gandrung* performances have reached comparable global acclaim. Beyond its artistic recognition, *Gandrung Marsan* also serves as a cultural reminder to the people of *Banyuwangi* that the dance now regarded as a regional icon was originally born from the artistry of male performers.

According to (Dianto, 2017), another defining characteristic that distinguishes *Gandrung Marsan* from the female version lies in the element of humor featured at the end of each performance. The dancers, who begin the show dressed as women, surprise the audience by revealing their male identity often symbolized through the playful addition of false mustaches. This theatrical twist not only adds a humorous dimension but also reinvigorates the historical memory of *Gandrung Lanang*, transforming it into a refreshing and entertaining cultural revival.

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Roland Barthes developed his semiotic theory by distinguishing three levels of meaning: denotative, connotative, and mythological (Amin, 2024). The denotative meaning refers to the literal or objective interpretation of a sign, representing the direct relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified*. For example, the image of a rose in a dance performance denotes only "a rose," defined by its physical characteristics. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning

emerges when that sign interacts with subjective elements such as emotion, belief, and cultural context (Nurul, 2022). Beyond this, myth is understood as a second-order system of signification an ideological framework through which culture reshapes existing signs to construct deeper, naturalized meanings. Barthes demonstrates how dominant cultures manipulate such meanings to appear self-evident, often through what he calls "modern myths," visible in advertisements and photography.

Barthes' semiotic approach has been widely employed to interpret meaning in visual culture and traditional performances (Hida, 2025). For instance, it has been applied to analyze movements and symbolic attributes within traditional dances. In this analytical framework, visual elements such as costumes, properties, and gestures.

Semiotics in Cultural Perspective

The semiotic approach within a cultural perspective emphasizes that every artistic sign including those found in traditional dance is deeply embedded with cultural values and codes (Indriyanto & Astuti, 2023). In this view, dance movements, musical accompaniment, costumes, and supporting rituals are not merely aesthetic components; they also function as symbolic systems that represent the social structures and belief systems of the community. Research indicates that the choreography and attributes of traditional dance must be interpreted within the cultural context that gives them meaning. Semiotic studies have revealed that the meaning of a dance is not determined solely by the choreographer but is also shaped by the prevailing social, cultural, and political ideologies within its society (Indriyanto & Astuti, 2023). In other words, the construction of signs in artistic performance is guided by ideological forces that naturalize the symbolic meanings embedded in the dance.

In practice, cultural semioticians interpret the visual elements of performance as cultural texts. For instance, the choice of *batik* motifs, costume colors, or pre-dance rituals can each be read as signs carrying specific messages. As a cultural product, dance thus operates as a medium of communication in which movement, ornamentation, and gesture serve as signs of socially constructed meanings shaped through cultural conventions. Therefore, semiotic analysis must account for the interaction between signs and their historical, religious, and customary contexts. For example, the traditional dances of *Banyuwangi* reflect an agrarian ethos and devotion to *Dewi Sri*, the goddess of fertility, while the incorporation of colonial or religious elements must likewise be interpreted through their respective sociocultural backgrounds (Hida, 2025).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach. This framework was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meaning, extending from the levels of denotation and connotation to the realm of myth. Within this research context, semiotic analysis is used to examine the transformation of gender roles in *Banyuwangi's Gandrung* dance by investigating how symbols, movements, costumes, and performance narratives reflect broader meanings related to social and cultural constructions.
Data were collected through documentation studies and the analysis of video content retrieved from YouTube, featuring both female *Gandrung* dancers and *Gandrung Lanang* (male *Gandrung*) performers. The documentation study involved reviewing relevant literature, archives, articles, and previous research. Meanwhile, the video observation focused on examining recorded *Gandrung* performances. The collected data were then analyzed using Barthes' semiotic framework.

Following data collection, video observations and identifications were conducted by capturing still images (screenshots) from the selected recordings. The first stage involved reading denotative meanings those directly observable in the dancers' movements, costumes, music, and expressions. The second stage examined connotative meanings, which emerge from cultural associations and social values attached to the performance. Finally, the analysis extended to the mythological level, identifying the ideological or cultural myths underlying the gender role transformation in *Gandrung* performances, thereby revealing how society constructs and sustains its cultural identity through artistic expression.

Results and Discussion

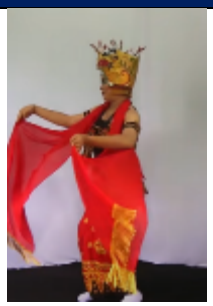
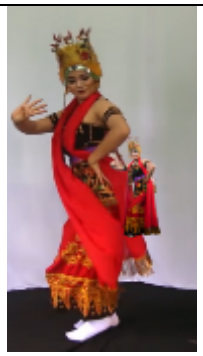
This section employs Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to understand how the transformation of gender roles in *Banyuwangi's Gandrung* dance is represented through the shift from male to predominantly female performers. This analytical framework draws upon Barthes' three levels of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth to explore the layers of significance embedded in the dance's visual and symbolic elements. The analytical process involves close observation of dance scenes, focusing on costumes, body movements, and the interaction between dancers and the audience. Each of these elements is treated as a sign that operates collectively to construct meaning within a system of cultural communication. By examining visual imagery, gestures, and the narrative context of the performance, this study reveals how the gender shift in *Gandrung* dance not only signifies an aesthetic transformation but also functions as a medium of cultural communication. Through this lens, the analysis highlights how the transition from male to female dancers represents more than a change in performance practice it embodies the reconfiguration of social values, gender roles, and community identity within Banyuwangi's evolving cultural landscape. The transformation of the *Gandrung* thus becomes both an artistic and ideological statement that reflects broader societal negotiations between tradition and modernity.

Dance Movements

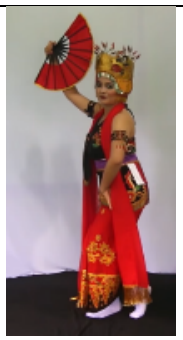
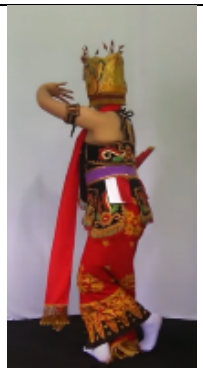
As previously discussed, *Gandrung* has historically been performed by both male and female dancers. The following section presents an analysis of the movements performed by female *Gandrung* dancers through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. This approach seeks to uncover the layers of meaning contained within each bodily gesture, interpreting movement as a sign that communicates not only aesthetic expression but also social and cultural significance.

Table 1
Female Gandrung Dancer

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	connotation	Myth
1.		*Ngiwir*	The movement of waving the sampur/fan forward or sideways while shaking the hips.	Gives a greeting to the audience and symbolizes joy	Symbolizes defense against enemies, as well as an expression of gratitude
2.		Tribute *(Penghormatan)*	The opening movement is a greeting with a sampur or bow, with the right hand forward and the left hand facing backwards.	Greetings and respect to guests and ancestors.	Offerings and requests for blessings to ancestors and Goddess Sri.
3.		Left *Gedruk*	Leaning the body to the left and accompanied by waving the scarf.	Symbolizes the bad side, an invitation to distinguish between good and bad.	There is no mythical meaning because it is more about differentiatin g between good and bad.
4.		Right *Gedruk*	Leaning the body to the right and accompanied by waving the scarf.	Symbol of kindness and good manners.	There is no mythical meaning.

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	connotation	Myth
5.		Right and left *sagah*	Elaboration of the sagah movement to the right and left.	Symbolizes courage and steadfastnes.	Pray that the spirit and resilience of the community will be preserved.
6.		*Ngalang*	The sagah movement is floating/waving with a sideways rotation and stretching out both hands.	Symbolizes the journey and spread of dance.	Prayers for Gandrung art to be widely known.
7.		Right and left *sagah*	The upright body position moves right and left.	Symbol of steadfastness and strength	An expression of the courage of the *Osing* people.
8.		*Ngiwir*	Raise both hands up while pulling the scarf, then walk around	Aesthetic elements to captivate the audience.	Symbolizes defense against enemies, as well as an expression of gratitude

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	connotation	Myth
9.		First *Tinjakan*	The body bends to the right, then both hands spread the scarf, the position of the left foot is in front and the right foot is behind.	A symbol of caution and introspection	Permission from the earth and ancestors.
10.		Right *Tinjakan*	The body bends forward while both hands extend the shawl, with the right hand positioned above the left, and the left foot placed in front while the right foot remains behind.	Symbolizes positive steps.	a symbol of spiritual readiness.
11.		*Song kloh*	Movement with the body facing forward and then stretching out the arms	A symbol of surrender to God.	Request for protection over fate.

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	connotation	Myth
12.		Right *sagah* development + *ngeupeut*	Variation of the right sagah movement plus clamping the sampur/fan.	A symbol of fertility and prayer for good fortune.	Offerings to Goddess Sri for abundant harvest.
13.		*Nglayung*	The body movement forms an arc as if floating.	A symbol of balance in the world and the afterlife.	An invitation to maintain harmony.
14.		Right of *Kencik nyerik*	The right hand is pointing upwards, the right hand is holding the fan with the body positioned sideways.	A symbol of transition towards better conditions.	A sign of life change towards a positive direction.
15.		*Sampur kipas ngiri*	Swing the sampur/fan to the left.	Resist reinforcements and bad influences.	Invite Dewi Sri to bless the earth.

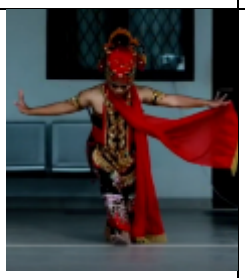
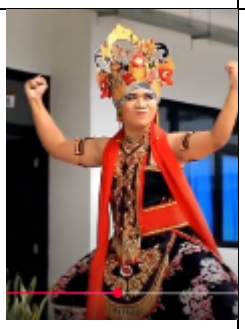
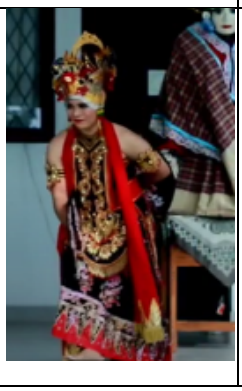
No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	connotation	Myth
16.		*Ngiwir sampur kipas*	Vibrate or throw the fan into the air.	Symbolizes the return of something that has gone away.	The symbol of Dewi Sri's return to heaven after giving blessings.

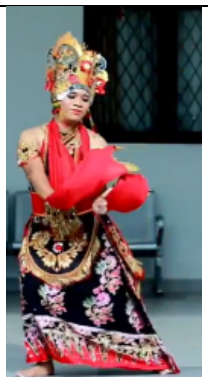
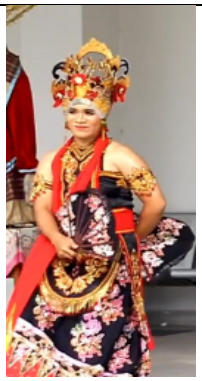
Source: From *Tutorial Tari Gandrung*, by dja gallery, 2018, YouTube, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ba2D-wAXbWU).

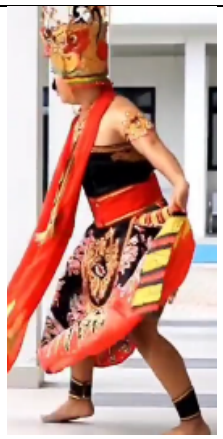
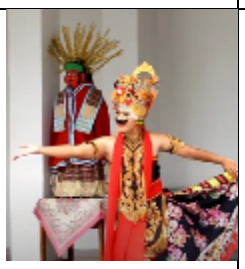
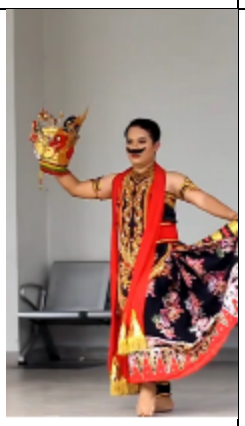
The overall movements in *Banyuwangi's Gandrung* dance are not merely sequences of aesthetic bodily gestures but are imbued with deep philosophical meanings that reflect the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the Divine. Movements such as *penghormatan* (gesture of respect), *song kloh*, and *sampur kipas ngiri* affirm the spiritual foundation of the tradition, symbolizing reverence toward ancestors and prayers for fertility blessings addressed to *Dewi Sri*, the goddess of rice and prosperity. Meanwhile, movements such as *tinjakan awal*, *gedruk kanan*, and *sagah kanan kiri* convey moral messages about the importance of taking steady, cautious, and virtuous steps in life. Furthermore, gestures like *ngalang* and *nglayung* symbolize the dissemination of culture and the balance of life, reflecting the aspiration of the *Banyuwangi* people to preserve this art form for future generations. In this sense, *Gandrung* functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting cultural values, collective prayers, and the cultural identity of the *Osing* community.

Gandrung Lanang, as one of the variants within the *Gandrung* tradition, possesses distinctive characteristics and symbolic significance. This form is important to analyze because it was historically performed by male dancers and embodies representations of masculinity and the social dynamics of *Banyuwangi* society at the time. Through the study of its movements, expressions, and social functions, it becomes evident that this dance played a crucial role in affirming cultural identity, articulating collective aspirations, and serving simultaneously as a medium of social critique and popular entertainment.

Table 2
Male Gandrung Dancer (Lanang)

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	Connotation	Myth
1.		*Jejer*	The dancer stands and sings a solo while moving his hands and the sampur.	Expression of respect and opening of the event.	Thanksgiving to Dewi Sri for the harvest
2.		*Gandrung*	The core movement of the dance with the sampur/fan, captivates the audience.	Symbolizes fascination/love and elegance.	Part of the thanksgiving ceremony to Dewi Sri.
3.		*Salatun*	Silat (war) movements or *Kuntulan* dance punches/kicks	A symbol of war training, the spirit of resistance.	The story of the struggle of the *Banyuwangi* people against the colonialists.
4.		*Tunjakan*	The movement of the horse stance forward or jumping with one leg forward.	A symbol of courage and determination.	War training, never give up until you win.
5.		*Banjaran*	Slow walking movements with elbows bent and body slightly bent.	Symbol of readiness to fight in line.	Depicting the ranks of Blambangan fighters.

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	Connotation	Myth
6.		*Penthangan*	Defensive movement with both hands in front and body straight.	A symbol of steadfastness and vigilance.	The war training section of the Blambangan fighters.
7.		*Seblangan*	The final movement is solemn with the sampur moved slowly.	A symbol of ritual closure and self purification	Describes the soul's journey back to God.
8.		*Bali Balian*	Movement with two fans/two-handed scarf	Honoring ancestors and containing magical elements.	Inviting supernatural powers for protection and blessings.
9.		*Junjungan*	The movement of raising the hand/offering upwards.	Symbol of respect or offering.	Honoring ancestral spirits to ask for blessings.

No.	Picture	Name of Movement	Meaning		
			Denotation	Connotation	Myth
10.		*Tanjak*	The movement of putting a scarf on the head or swinging a weapon.	A symbol of masculinity and readiness for war.	Reflects the status and authority of the officer.
11.		*Trecet*	Fast foot movements or small rhythmic taps.	Symbolizes agility and youthful enthusiasm.	Describes the excitement before battle.
12.		*Kencik*	Small jumps while spinning the cloth	Symbolizes agility and enthusiasm.	Shows the joy of youth while practicing war.
13.		Agem Right/Left	Changing standing position to the right or left with one foot stepping.	Symbol of balance and harmony.	Maintaining spiritual and worldly harmony.

Source: From *Tari Gandrung Marsan*, by Ahmad Fuadi, 2020, YouTube, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7etZ1qCr9s&list=RDU7etZ1qCr9s&start_radio=1).

Movement Analysis in Gandrung Lanang and Female Gandrung

The movements in *Gandrung Lanang* are not merely aesthetic expressions; they are deeply infused with cultural, historical, and spiritual values. The opening gestures, such as *jejer* and *junjungan*, symbolize respect and prayer, while sequences like *salatun*, *tunjakan*, and *banjaran* embody the spirit of struggle and steadfastness. Elements such as *bali-balian* and *kencik* reflect cultural acculturation that nonetheless preserves strong local identity. In this sense, *Gandrung Lanang* serves as a medium for transmitting the values and identity of the *Banyuwangi* community to future generations.

The distinction between the movements of *Gandrung Lanang* and those of female *Gandrung* lies in their character, function, and symbolism. The female *Gandrung* emphasizes softness, allure, and aesthetic grace designed to captivate the audience demonstrated through gestures such as *ngiwir*, *sampur kipas ngiri*, and *song kloh*, all of which are rich in symbolic meaning associated with reverence and fertility prayers. Conversely, *Gandrung Lanang* underscores courage, vigor, and a fighting spirit through movements like *salatun*, *tunjakan*, and *banjaran*, representing martial training and the determination of the Blambangan people to resist colonial powers.

While the female *Gandrung* highlights harmony, modesty, and feminine charm, *Gandrung Lanang* embodies masculine identity, heroism, and social function as a vehicle of solidarity and social critique. Together, both forms intertwine to create an art form that transcends mere entertainment serving as a vessel for the transmission of cultural values, spirituality, and the enduring identity of the *Banyuwangi* people.

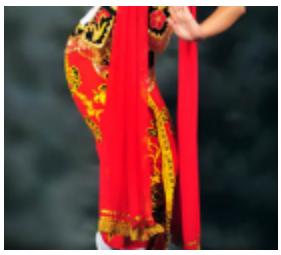
Costume in the *Gandrung* Dance

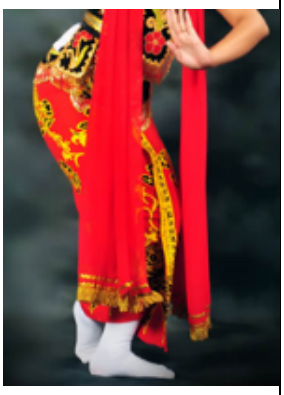
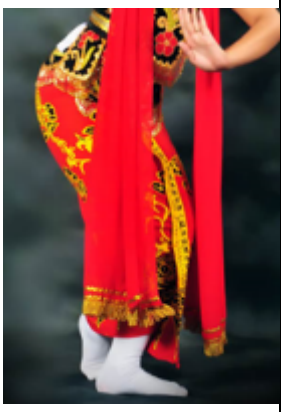
In performing arts, costume plays a crucial role not merely as a body covering, but as a medium of visual communication that constructs the dancer's character. According to Soedarsono Dianto (2017), dance costume serves several functions: to emphasize role identity, to enhance aesthetic appearance, and to strengthen the expressive quality of movement. In other words, dance attire functions as a semiotic medium that connects the audience to the cultural messages conveyed through performance.

The costumes worn by *Gandrung* dancers embody layers of symbolic meaning that extend beyond decoration. Each garment, ornament, and accessory operates as a *signifier* a visual code that reflects the values, identity, and worldview of *Banyuwangi's* cultural tradition. The following analysis interprets the *Gandrung* costume elements through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, exploring their denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings.

Table 3
Gandrung Dance Costume

No	Picture	Attribute Name	Meaning		
			Denotation	Connotation	Myth
1.		*Omprok 36* (*Kulik, Mahkota*/ Crown, *Tiara)*	A headdress with 36 layers of ornaments, made of brass/copper metal, decorated with gems or colored glass.	Symbolizes elegance, the sacred status of the dancer, and perfection.	A symbol of offering to Dewi Sri and spiritual protection of dancers from supernatural disturbances.
2.		*Oto*	A large crescent moon necklace worn on the chest.	Symbolizes purity of heart and authority.	A symbol of protection from evil spirits and a symbol of prosperity.
3.		*Ilat-ilat*	A small decoration in the shape of a flame that is hung on the omprok.	Symbolizes a burning spirit.	A symbol of courage and repellent.
4.		*Pending*	A large belt of metal or decorated cloth, worn around the waist.	Symbol of self-control and control of lust.	Energy guards to keep dancers strong and protected.
5.		*Semboyan 36*	A series of oprok decorations consisting of 36 ornaments.	Symbolizes cosmic perfection and balance.	Depicts the number of prayers or protective spells of the dancer.

6.		Shoulder Strain *(Kelat Bahu)*	An accessory in the form of a bracelet worn on the upper arm.	Symbolizes strength and firmness.	Symbol of the bravery of Blambangan soldiers.
7.		Long Cloth *(Jarik)*	Long batik cloth used as a bottom.	A symbol of politeness and *Osing* identity.	The cloth is considered to have magical powers to maintain the sanctity of the dance.
8.		*Sintir*	An ornament in the form of a string of beads or metal that is hung on the chest.	Symbolizes beauty and prosperity.	It is believed to attract positive energy and good fortune.
9.		Fan *(kipas)*	The main property is a hand fan that is moved while dancing.	Symbolizes attraction, tenderness, and allure.	A means of mystical communicatio n between dancers and ancestral spirits.
10.		*Ebok*	A long shawl draped over the shoulders.	Symbolizes both feminine tenderness and strength.	A symbol of the connection between the dancer and the spirit world.

11.		*Samir*	A small decorative scarf hanging from the waist or chest.	As a fashion accessory and to balance the costume composition.	Contains a symbol of repelling evil and protecting the dancer's honor.
12.		Socks	Foot coverings, usually white.	Symbolizes purity and cleanliness.	The symbol maintains the boundary between the dancer and the ground, so that spiritual energy is not lost.
13.		Belt (*Pending)*	Belt or long cloth belt *(jarik)*	A symbol of politeness and self-control.	The guard ensures that the dance movements are in harmony with traditional values.

Source: Adapted from Google Images.

The overall attributes in *Gandrung* function not merely as decorative complements to the costume, but as carriers of profound symbolism. From the *omprok* (head ornament) to the long draped cloth, each element represents purity, spiritual protection, and the cultural identity of the *Osing* community. The connotative and mythological meanings embedded within these attributes elevate them beyond mere ornamentation transforming them into mediums of inherited values, prayers, and beliefs that have been preserved and transmitted across generations through the medium of performance art.

Conclusion

The transformation from *Gandrung Lanang* (male *Gandrung*) to female *Gandrung* reflects the social, religious, and cultural changes that have taken place within the *Banyuwangi* community. The shift in performance roles from men cross-dressing as women to the dominance of female

dancers was not merely an adaptation to the religious and moral norms of the time but also a strategic effort by the community to sustain the existence of the *Gandrung* tradition. From a semiotic perspective, this transition does not erase the essence of *Gandrung* as a medium of gratitude, prayer, and social cohesion; rather, it redefines its meaning to align with the evolving cultural identity and values of the era.

The movements, costumes, and properties used in *Gandrung* continue to embody deep philosophical and spiritual meanings: from ancestral reverence and fertility prayers to *Dewi Sri* the goddess of rice and prosperity to the representation of the courage of the Blambangan people. Female *Gandrung* performances highlight aesthetic beauty, gentleness, and feminine allure, while *Gandrung Lanang* emphasizes valor, heroism, and masculine identity. Together, these two forms create a cohesive cultural narrative that functions as a medium of communication for collective values and reinforces the identity of the *Osing* community.

Hence, the gender transformation in the *Gandrung* dance represents a form of cultural adaptation that preserves traditional continuity while reflecting the flexibility of *Banyuwangi's* society in responding to social change. Today, *Gandrung* is not merely a historical legacy but also a living symbol of identity, pride, and the enduring vitality of *Osing* culture kept alive through rituals, festivals, and contemporary stage performances.

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Urbanization and Heritagization: Makati City's Initiatives in Restoring Identity Along With Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Makati City, one of the most highly urbanized areas in the Philippines, serves as a hub for the country's major economic activities. Defined by a fast-paced lifestyle and rapid modernization, much of the city's space has been transformed for commercial use. As contemporary structures and developments continue to rise, the cultural identity of its residents has been increasingly overshadowed. This rapid urbanization has presented significant challenges in identifying and preserving the city's cultural heritage, with many historically significant sites being neglected or forgotten—issues that this study seeks to address. Anchored in Muñoz-Viñas' Cultural Heritage Theory—which highlights the intangible meanings embedded in tangible heritage—this research explores the strategies employed to identify and conserve heritage assets in Makati through urban cultural mapping as a qualitative framework. It also examines the challenges of reconciling past identities with present urban realities. Using archival research, key informant interviews, and participatory mapping, the study investigates how cultural heritage can be thoughtfully integrated into Makati's ongoing urban development. Additionally, it explores how the city's cultural blueprint contributes to sustainable development through adaptive reuse, local history education, identity-building, and the application of augmented reality (AR) to visualize lost or inaccessible heritage sites for future generations.

Keywords: heritagization, cultural mapping, sustainable development

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Introduction

With the emergence of Makati City as the financial and economic hub of the Philippines, rapid industrialization and residential conversion have taken place. With a wide population distance from daytime to nighttime, Makati City's demographics show fast-paced movements affecting its identity aside from being a cultural melting pot. This rapid urbanization has presented significant challenges in identifying and preserving the city's cultural heritage, with many historically significant sites being neglected or forgotten—issues that this study seeks to address. This paper navigates on the initiatives of the local government to regain its identity and to determine what heritage assets are important for its populace through heritagization.

The concept of heritagization refers to the process of designating an object, structure, landscape, or cultural practice such as a traditional recipe or community festival as officially recognized "heritage" (Sustainability Directory, 2025). It serves as a way of reviving the meaning and value of heritage assets, ensuring that they are not only preserved but also reintroduced into contemporary cultural life. Heritagization has been connected with the field of tourism, but its methods, like cultural mapping, adaptive reuse, and legacy studies, strengthen the search for identity through community empowerment and participatory governance. However, heritagization's theoretical grounding is still underdeveloped due to failure to determine the base of cultural expression, especially in countries with both Eastern and Western influences or contexts (Hanif, Riza: 2025). Nevertheless, the call for identity building in the Philippines especially with the passage of Republic Act 11961 also known as "An Act Strengthening the Conservation and Protection of Philippine Cultural Heritage through Cultural Mapping and Enhanced Cultural Heritage Education Program" and Makati City's initiative for cultural heritage preservation, adopted heritagization to document heritage assets, build identity, and make these assets useful for sustainable development initiatives.

Makati City has long been known as the business capital of the Philippines, with almost all major multinational corporations and business establishments occupying the city. Population of the city drastically changes from daytime with about 3.7 million to a nighttime with only 309,770 which also reflects the actual residents. More areas in the city are being converted to commercial and industrial properties that displaces some residents and old structure are being demolished. With this rapid urban scheme, Makati is losing its identity as a community and its heritage assets that defines its history and social landscape. This dilemma paved way for the city to make an inventory of heritage assets that will be determined by the community not just as a compliance for RA 11961, but also to help the city government to formulate mechanisms to protect and make them functional for both the community and the city's economy.

Cultural Mapping

Cultural mapping is one of the first steps initiated by the City Government of Makati. As a systematic approach, cultural mapping and resource profiling identify, record, and classify all existing cultural properties within a particular community to describe, visualize, and understand them. It is an ongoing process, and many of its benefits are achieved through sustained efforts in generating and updating a cultural database over time (Jaime, 2014). The project was officially implemented in 2023 through a collaboration between the City Government of Makati and the University of Makati as an extension research endeavor. University mappers were trained to conduct fieldwork, interviewing community members about tangible and intangible properties that are important to them. One hundred fifty (150)

assets were identified and included in the registry for enlistment to National Commission for Culture and Arts (NCCA).

The process of cultural mapping was not easy. Mappers experienced several challenges that somehow affected the timeline. Owners of identified heritage assets were not keen of being interviewed and even asked to delist their properties since they believe that the government may take over their belongings. There is also miscommunication between the city government through Museums and Cultural Affairs Office (MCAO) and the community on what exactly is the purpose of cultural mapping. Some exclusive villages like Forbes Park, Dasmarinas Village, and Urdaneta Village do not allow cultural mappers to do the fieldwork for security reasons. Lastly, there were identified heritage assets that have been transferred to a different place or no longer exist.

The successfully mapped assets were validated by the community and were exhibited at the Museo ng Makati (Makati Museum) through technological breakthrough, Augmented Reality (AR). The AR exhibit at Makati Museum showcased the moving images of the mapped assets and aimed at bringing them more closer to Makati residents especially for the school children.

The outcome of cultural mapping also led to the curriculum design for Makati Heritage Studies for all college students of the University of Makati. This course intends to give the college students a sense of home and identity since they are all residents of Makati City.

Adaptive reuse of old houses identified as heritage assets was encouraged. Since in the context of heritagization protection does not mean renovation, owners were encouraged to use old structures as restaurants, museums, cafes, among others, so that in this way they can preserve these property at the same time generate economic activities. Some mapped houses like the Tolentino Mansion has now a restaurant on its ground floor and the La Casitas de Mercedes which is now a house converted into a bed and breakfast place.

Conclusion

Despite these initiatives, there were problems that transpired. Private owners of sites were reluctant that privacy and entitlements may affect their ownership. Many cultural properties and heritage sites are under private ownership, which limits public access and complicates preservation efforts. There were public misconceptions about mapping. There is a widespread misunderstanding of what cultural mapping entails. Some view it merely as documentation, rather than a process of safeguarding and promoting cultural identity. Lastly, coordination challenges. Weak coordination between the city government and barangay (village) officials hinders effective implementation of cultural mapping initiatives.

Makati City's initiatives for identity building through heritagization efforts enables the community to be part of the heritage design. It boosts tourism in the city and even helps in the preservation of treasured assets adaptive reuse of properties. However, the city also faces many challenges, especially in the intention of some owners of private heritage assets to sell and/or demolish those assets.

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Reproducing Authenticity: Seoul Station and the Intercultural Remaking of Postcolonial Memory in Korea

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Abstract

Once a colonial-era structure, Seoul Station has today been transformed into a symbolic exit sanctuary for global tourists, a place where foreign visitors consume Korean culture before departure, turning memory into merchandise. This striking transformation reflects a broader cultural shift in South Korea, as the nation moves from erasing traces of colonization to strategically reframing them within a globalized, postcolonial identity. This study investigates how Seoul Station has been culturally reproduced through a multi-layered process of reinterpretation, reframing, and global tourism. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the analysis draws on urban policy documents, architectural modifications, and consumer practices to explore how the station evolved into a hybrid cultural landmark. The research is guided by a three-part analytical framework that integrates Griswold's Cultural Diamond to map the relationships between cultural objects, producers, receivers, and their social world; Elizabeth L. Krause's conceptualization of authenticity as a culturally situated practice shaped by emotional resonance, ethical considerations, and lived vulnerability; and Pierre Nora's theory of lieux de mémoire to interpret Seoul Station as a layered site of national memory and identity. This integrated perspective enables a critical examination of how authenticity is not fixed or preserved, but actively reproduced through spatial storytelling, affective engagement, and intercultural reinterpretation. These findings offer broader implications for postcolonial societies navigating the transformation of colonial-era infrastructures into intercultural memory sites. This research contributes to the field of cultural and memory studies by demonstrating how postcolonial heritage spaces can be reframed as sites of intercultural convergence and global identity reformulation.

Keywords: Korean cultural policy, cultural heritage, cultural reproduction, globalization and identity, intercultural tourism

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Introduction

Seoul Station has undergone a profound metamorphosis from a site once associated with Japanese colonial control into a symbolic "exit sanctuary" for global tourists, where travelers engage in curated cultural consumption before departing Korea. This shift reflects a broader cultural transition in South Korea, as the nation moves from erasing colonial traces to strategically reframing the past within a postcolonial and globalized identity.

This research investigates how Seoul Station is culturally reproduced today through architectural repurposing, urban policy, and tourist interactions. The station is no longer a relic of the past. It has been transformed into a hybrid cultural landmark that now functions as a space for memory, cultural consumption, and symbolic departure. Foreign visitors engage in a range of "pre-departure" rituals. In particular, they shop for cultural products, participate in curated exhibitions, and use international services such as EMS. These activities transform both personal and collective memory into merchandise.

This study does not treat authenticity as a fixed or intrinsic quality. In contrast, it employs a critical perspective grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks. First, the study applies Griswold's Cultural Diamond (Griswold, 2013) to map the relationships among cultural producers, cultural objects, receivers, and the social world in which they operate. This framework helps situate Seoul Station within the intersecting forces of national heritage policy, postcolonial nation-building, and global tourism flows.

Second, this study draws from Elizabeth L. Krause's conceptualization of authenticity as a practice, understood as something performed, negotiated, and emotionally experienced rather than passively possessed (Krause, 2023). From this perspective, the transformation of Seoul Station can be interpreted as a form of spatial storytelling and affective engagement, where curated authenticity emerges through intercultural services, multilingual signage, wayfinding systems, and architectural design choices.

Third, Pierre Nora's theory of lieux de mémoire provides an analytical foundation for understanding how material, symbolic, and functional layers converge within Seoul Station as a site of memory (Nora, 1989). The structure was constructed in 1925 during the Japanese colonial period. It later acquired new meanings through its adaptive reuse as Culture Station 284, a cultural complex established in 2011 (Republic of Korea Policy Briefing, 2011). These layers of historical architecture and contemporary cultural functions converge to position the site as a locus of national memory and identity. This repurposing overlays historical architecture with contemporary narratives and practices, transforming the building into a living palimpsest in which memory, tourism, and national identity interact and evolve over time.

Seoul Station can therefore be understood as more than a preserved monument. It functions as a dynamic postcolonial site in which global flows, intercultural practices, and state narratives intersect. Korea's cultural policy does not erase the traces of colonization. Instead, it reframes those traces as platforms for soft power, intercultural exchange, and contemporary identity formation (Culture Station 284, n.d.; MCST, 2012).

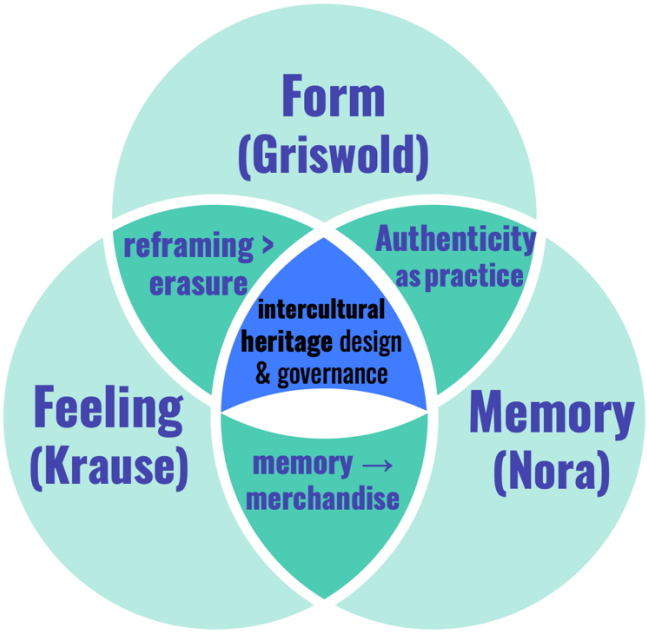
An examination of Seoul Station's transformation reveals how postcolonial heritage sites in Asia can be reimagined as living, affective, and globally networked cultural spaces. These sites are no longer positioned as static remnants of the past. They instead function as platforms where historical memory interacts with contemporary cultural diplomacy and contributes to more

inclusive forms of national identity (MCST, 2012; Nora, 1989). The case of Seoul Station further illustrates how intercultural tourism operates as a medium that connects memory, everyday practices, and global cultural flows.

Methodology

The analysis is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives that provide the conceptual basis for interpreting Seoul Station as a culturally reproduced site. The study draws on Cultural Diamond, authenticity-as-practice, and lieux de mémoire to clarify how cultural production, emotional engagement, and historical layering contribute to the station's present meaning and function.

Figure 1
Analytical Framework Integrating Form, Feeling, and Memory



Form is examined through Griswold's Cultural Diamond, which clarifies the relationships among cultural producers, cultural objects, receivers, and the broader social world that shapes cultural meaning (Griswold, 2013). This framework provides a foundation for situating Seoul Station within institutions of heritage governance, postcolonial identity formation, and global tourism flows.

Feeling is interpreted using Elizabeth L. Krause's conceptualization of authenticity as a practice. Authenticity is understood as something performed and emotionally negotiated rather than simply possessed (Krause, 2023). This category guides the analysis of how visitors encounter curated experiences that involve emotional resonance, ethical interpretation, and lived vulnerability as they move through the redesigned spaces of the station.

Memory is analyzed through Pierre Nora's theory of lieux de mémoire, which explains how material structures, symbolic narratives, and functional uses accumulate to create sites of national memory (Nora, 1989). This category supports the interpretation of Seoul Station as a layered historical environment where colonial architecture, contemporary cultural functions, and tourist practices continuously reshape one another.

The categories of form, feeling, and memory work in combination to establish an integrated framework for examining how cultural reproduction unfolds across architectural space, emotional experience, and the symbolic life of heritage. This combined approach enables the study to interpret Seoul Station not as a static monument but as a dynamic site shaped by institutional decisions, intercultural encounters, and evolving narratives of national identity.

The qualitative design uses three groups of data. Urban policy documents provide information about cultural governance and heritage management. Architectural plans and redevelopment records document changes in the station from its colonial construction in 1925 to its later reconfiguration as Culture Station 284 (Culture Station 284, n.d.). Observational data concerning visitor mobility, retail participation, intercultural services, and exhibition engagement illustrate how the station functions as a cultural environment.

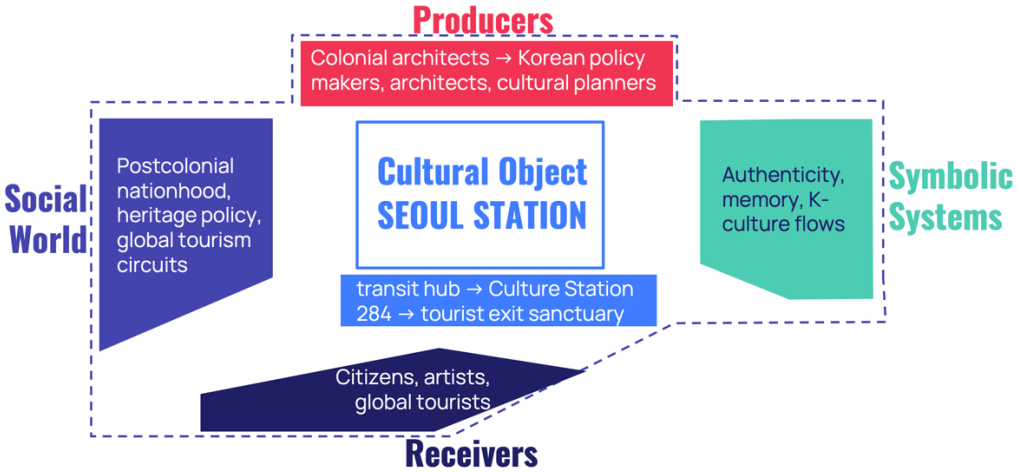
Three analytical procedures guide the interpretation. Interpretive reading is used to identify evolving cultural meanings in policy materials and design choices. Contextual mapping situates these meanings within postcolonial nation building and contemporary global mobility. Case based synthesis connects architectural transformation with visitor experience, showing how the three analytical categories of form, feeling, and memory operate together in cultural reproduction.

The combined use of these categories and procedures produces a comprehensive explanation of how Seoul Station is culturally reproduced today. This qualitative orientation clarifies how memory becomes reframed as intercultural meaning, how authenticity is generated through spatial storytelling and visitor practices, and how the adaptive reuse of colonial architecture positions the site as a hybrid cultural landmark shaped by both historical legacies and global flows.

Data Collection & Key Findings

Data collection for this study relied on three main groups of qualitative materials. Urban policy documents supplied information about heritage governance, cultural policy, and tourism development in contemporary South Korea. These documents included plans and guidelines concerning the reuse of historical buildings and the positioning of cultural infrastructure within national identity strategies (MCST, 2012). Architectural records and redevelopment materials offered evidence about the physical transformation of Seoul Station from its colonial era construction to its designation as Culture Station 284 and its subsequent integration into wider commercial and mobility networks (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2022). Observational notes and secondary descriptions of visitor practices at and around Seoul Station provided insight into how global tourists and local users engage with the site through mobility, shopping, photography, and participation in curated cultural events.

Figure 2
Cultural Diamond Analysis of Seoul Station

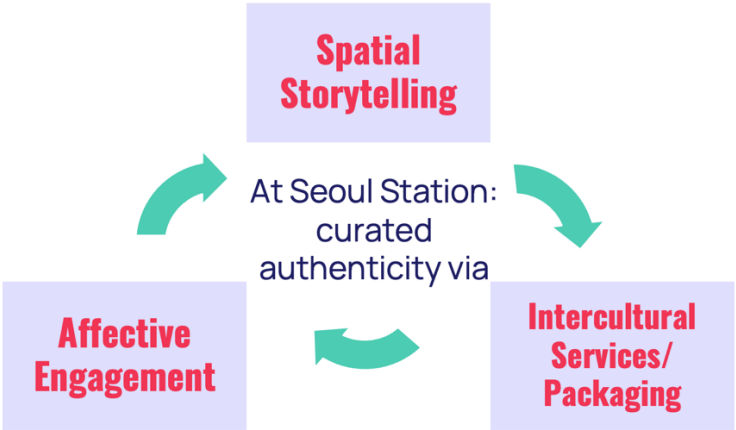


Key findings emerged through an analytical process that combined these materials with the three theoretical perspectives already outlined. The first group of findings is anchored in the category of form, drawn from Griswold's Cultural Diamond. Producers include colonial era architects and railway planners, followed by Korean policy makers, architects, and cultural planners who later redefined the station. The cultural object is Seoul Station in its successive forms as a transit hub, as Culture Station 284, and as a symbolic exit sanctuary. Receivers comprise Korean citizens, artists, and global tourists who interact with the site in different ways. The broader social world consists of postcolonial nation building, heritage policy, and global tourism circuits that shape expectations about what Seoul Station represents and how it should function (Griswold, 2013). The combination of these elements shows that the station has shifted from an instrument of imperial control to a hybrid cultural landmark that supports both mobility and symbolic practices related to identity and memory.

Figure 3
Krause's Model of Authenticity as Practice

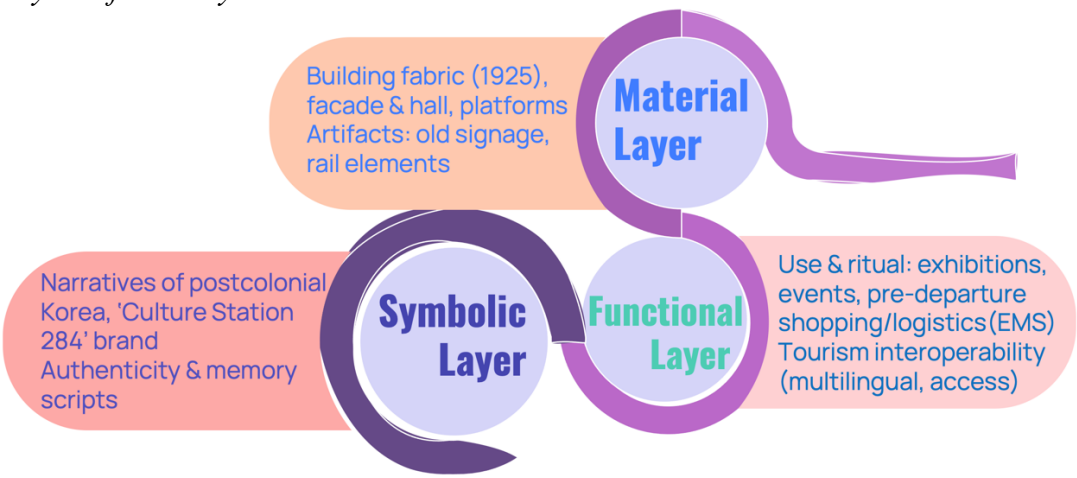
A second group of findings corresponds to the category of feeling, which is informed by Krause's account of authenticity as a practice. Authenticity in this context does not appear as a fixed essence. It takes shape through emotional resonance, ethical judgment, and lived vulnerability as visitors move through the station and engage with its services and displays (Krause, 2023). Curated routes, signage in multiple languages, and carefully selected products and exhibits generate a form of staged yet meaningful authenticity.

Figure 4
Krause's Model of Authenticity as Practice Applied to Seoul Station



Foreign visitors often treat Seoul Station as a place for final encounters with Korean culture before departure. They purchase food, cosmetics, and souvenirs associated with contemporary Korean popular culture, participate in or at least pass through exhibition spaces, and use services that facilitate travel logistics. These practices show that authenticity is performed and negotiated in the middle of market transactions, convenience needs, and personal narratives of travel, rather than existing as an untouched historical core.

Figure 5
Layers of Memory at Seoul Station



A third group of findings aligns with the category of memory, informed by Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire. The material layer consists of the preserved station building, interior halls, and platforms that date back to the early twentieth century. The symbolic layer develops through narratives that describe Seoul Station as a heritage site, as Culture Station 284, and as a gateway to modern Seoul. The functional layer includes exhibitions, cultural events, everyday commuting, retail activities, and pre departure uses such as luggage handling and last minute shopping (Nora, 1989). These layers do not remain separate. They overlap and interact as colonial era architecture houses contemporary cultural programs and commercial services. The result is a living historical environment in which memory is continuously reinterpreted through present day use.

A central pattern becomes visible when the analysis is viewed through these three categories. Seoul Station operates as a site where form, feeling, and memory converge. Institutional decisions and design choices structure the station as a cultural object. Visitor experiences and emotional engagements activate authenticity as an ongoing practice. Historical remnants and contemporary functions combine to create layered memory. These findings indicate that cultural reproduction at Seoul Station does not simply preserve the past. This process generates new meanings as colonial heritage is reframed within an intercultural and globally connected environment.

Results and Findings

Findings from the analysis indicate that authenticity at Seoul Station functions as a reproduced practice rather than as a stable essence. Authenticity appears through repeated interactions among architectural space, policy decisions, and visitor routines. The station does not simply preserve a singular historical truth. The site functions as an ongoing process in which meanings are negotiated by institutions, global tourists, and local users in a postcolonial and globalized context (Griswold, 2013; Krause, 2023).

Memory at Seoul Station moves toward merchandise through a series of curated arrangements. Visitors follow routes that guide them from trains and platforms toward retail zones, exhibition areas, and service counters. Panels that present historical information stand close to shops that sell food, cosmetics, and souvenirs associated with contemporary Korean culture. Services such as packaging support and international shipping further encourage the conversion of memory into material objects. Personal narratives of travel become linked to consumable items that can be carried away, displayed, or gifted after departure.

Mechanisms that support this process operate through spatial storytelling, affective engagement, and intercultural use. Spatial storytelling appears in the way the station environment directs bodies and attention. Architectural transitions from historical halls to commercial corridors produce a narrative sequence that links colonial era architecture with present day consumption. Affective engagement emerges when visitors respond emotionally to heritage aesthetics, crowded movement, and branded cultural products. Intercultural use is visible in multilingual signage, tailored logistics for foreign visitors, and the presence of goods designed for international demand. Authenticity emerges from the interaction of these mechanisms as a practiced experience shaped by movement, choice, and felt engagement rather than as an inherited and fixed quality (Krause, 2023).

Tensions arise between heritage contemplation, accessibility, market speed, and preservation. Some design choices promote rapid circulation and convenience, such as clear wayfinding systems, concentrated retail zones, and efficient service counters. Other elements invite slower engagement, such as exhibitions inside Culture Station 284 or historical panels that reference the colonial past and the March First Independence Movement. Preservation concerns require that key architectural features remain intact, while commercial pressures encourage interior modifications and the expansion of retail functions. The station embodies a negotiated balance in which historical reflection, tourist efficiency, and economic objectives intersect and occasionally conflict.

When the three analytical categories of form, feeling, and memory are brought together, a broader interpretive pattern emerges. Institutional and design decisions structure Seoul Station as a cultural object that supports mobility and symbolic display. Visitor experiences and

emotional responses activate authenticity as an ongoing practice within that structure. Historical remnants and contemporary functions combine to create layered memory in which colonial heritage is neither fully erased nor left untouched (Nora, 1989). This process generates new meanings as the site is reframed within an intercultural and globally connected environment. The overall result is a transformation of Seoul Station from a relatively static relic of empire into a dynamic arena. In this arena, history, identity, and global cultural flows are continually reproduced through everyday practices of movement, consumption, and remembrance. These findings collectively demonstrate how Seoul Station illustrates broader patterns in the reframing of postcolonial heritage under conditions of global mobility and intercultural tourism.

Implications and Conclusion

Findings from this research have implications for the governance of postcolonial heritage and for the study of cultural reproduction. The case of Seoul Station suggests that postcolonial states can approach former colonial infrastructures through a strategy of reframing rather than erasure. Heritage in this sense functions as a platform where historical traces remain present through continuous reorganization that aligns them with contemporary cultural and economic objectives.

Heritage policy can align cultural preservation, tourism development, and soft power agendas when it recognizes such sites as active spaces for intercultural encounter (MCST, 2012). The analysis indicates that policy evaluation should include affective and experiential measures such as visitor use patterns and perceived meaning rather than only visitor numbers. Design implications emerge from the adaptive reuse of Seoul Station as Culture Station 284 and as a commercial transit hub (Culture Station 284, n.d.). Adaptive reuse that supports intercultural convergence relies on clear flows, legible wayfinding, and services that accommodate diverse visitors.

Ethical considerations arise from the need to provide inclusive narratives and multilingual access for both local publics and foreign tourists. Such narratives acknowledge colonial histories and present contemporary cultural creativity, which helps reduce the risk of historical amnesia or simplistic celebration. Attention to accessibility and crowd management can protect the contemplative quality of heritage while maintaining its function as a busy transport and commercial node.

The patterns observed at Seoul Station can guide the treatment of comparable colonial era sites in other parts of Asia that face similar pressures from tourism and urban redevelopment. Planners and researchers can use the tripartite lens of form, feeling, and memory to examine how authenticity is practiced and how memory is converted into cultural capital in these locations (Griswold, 2013; Krause, 2023; Nora, 1989). This perspective allows for comparative work on how different societies negotiate colonial legacies under conditions of globalization and intercultural mobility.

The study contributes to cultural and memory studies by examining how a postcolonial railway station has been transformed into an intercultural memory site. The analysis shows that authenticity is not preserved as a fixed quality but is continually reproduced through the everyday practices that occur within the station. Seoul Station illustrates that colonial heritage can function as a platform for global cultural flows and national self-representation. It also

demonstrates how such heritage supports negotiated forms of identity, instead of remaining a static monument to imperial power.

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The Cinema of Complicity: Reframing Narrative Authority

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Abstract

This paper translates the central research arguments of my project into the framework of epistemic violence, examining Soy Cuba*,* The Antique*,* Russians at War*,* and Zygar's videos to show how digital manipulation and film aesthetics operate as epistemic mechanisms. I argue that Western festivals and liberal media institutions, through their platforms and curatorial choices, may contribute to the violation of knowledge and reproduce the systems of epistemic harm. This discussion leads to a broader question of who holds the agency to shape narratives, especially in a modern landscape where the lines between manipulation and the "democratization of information" (Castells, 1996, pp. 364–370) are blurred. Today, storytelling, whether through films or other media, has become a sphere of ideological control, presented at both the level of content and the infrastructures through which that content is rolled out.

Keywords: epistemic violence, propaganda, digital media, film aesthetics, post-Soviet memory

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Introduction

Walter Benjamin (1968) was warning us that the technological reproducibility of images in Nazi Germany allowed the aestheticization of politics and the spread of fascist ideology. He claimed that mechanical reproduction can liberate perception or serve mass deception. However, centralized propaganda exploited cinema to raise emotions, normalize violence, and dehumanize groups. Benjamin's structure is important but insufficient today. Manipulation is now decentralized, transactional, and embedded in commercial platforms whose engagement-driven systems integrate deception into everyday life.

Irakli Beridze and James Butcher (2023) capture this shift. Beridze and Butcher focus on new information about deception within the digital media space**.** Deepfakes are presented as a new dimension of the fake news problem, enabled by AI (GANs), with its risk of extending to democracy and public trust (Goodfellow, 2020, pp. 139–144). Butcher and Beridze combine ancient propaganda with modern digital examples, showing deepfakes shift manipulation from static to dynamic, as video and audio can now be fabricated. Also, the democratization of forgery and tools like *FakeApp* make realistic manipulation possible for non-experts without needing any advanced skills (Silverman & Jane Lytvynenko, 2018). Social media allows instant spread and increases impact as well. In comparison to what Benjamin claims as centralized propaganda, some features explain why deepfakes are significantly different from past propaganda. It is also understandable why existing detection mechanisms may be insufficient. Character assassination, those "shallow fakes" (Harwell, The Washington Post*,* 2019), are used to discredit public figures. Information warfare and exploiting confirmation bias in Georgia show how the image has become a volatile instrument of deception, enabling new ideological warfare. Selective framing and algorithmic manipulation make it difficult to distinguish truth from fabrication. Russian digital tactics, now augmented by AI, distort public perception. Visibility is controlled by private corporations that reward affect over accuracy, turning cinematography into another front in the battle over historical memory. *The Antique* (2024) and *Russians at War* (2024) were accused of promoting pro-Kremlin narratives. Those films also raise complex questions of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) in contemporary digital storytelling. Those case studies are important for the research to show how the democratized spaces can inadvertently serve as conductors for propaganda, particularly for audiences far removed from the geopolitical contexts depicted.

Epistemic Violence and Digital Infrastructures

Spivak (1988) defines subaltern groups as those excluded from dominant systems of power, whose voices are silenced not simply through apparent repression. Facebook's algorithms increased disinformation during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections, and #MeToo narratives were banned in countries with repressive gender norms. These are contemporary examples of epistemic violence, when digital infrastructures filter narratives, referencing historical practices of silencing the subaltern. Today, that dynamic is reproduced through algorithms. Such filtering is interfering with the public accessibility of epistemic status, which is defined as the social conditions under which a speaker's entitlement to be believed can be recognized, and therefore it determines which narratives are granted credibility and which are severely dismissed (Matthiessen, 2013, pp. 75–97). In this situation, digital manipulation can serve as a new form of epistemic violence. Through filtering the information in the digital spaces, it reaches the public and shapes which narratives are important to pay attention to.

Gatekeeping sets hidden rules deciding which posts are seen. Manipulations mark accounts as "trustworthy." Exaggeration bias boosts quick-reaction posts; framing and metadata shape interpretation; provenance confusion blurs authorship. These mechanisms distort epistemic justice and force marginalized communities to rely on systems that undermine them. These cases show a systemic pattern: the infrastructures that shape global visibility are not neutral-they can be weaponized to reinforce power asymmetries and suppress dissent (DFRLab, 2024).

Bringing up Benjamin's analysis is historically important but requires expansion. The problem is now a global, profit-driven, technologically embedded system. Any critique must address architectures of control. Strengthening provenance, building independent archives, and ensuring contextualization in cultural platforms are essential, so epistemic repair and representational justice can begin.

Soy Cuba and Affective Engineering

Considering the Soviet legacy within the agency of knowledge, it is important to bring up Mikhail Kalatozov's *Soy Cuba* (1964), a pro-Cuban revolutionary propaganda film that was not well received by the Cuban audience. Possibly because the Cuban audiences felt that it stripped them of individuality and portrayed their reality solely through a Soviet prism (Christie, 1995, 28–31). Ironically, it was American filmmakers who rescued it from the archives in the 90s. Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese saw the movie and acquired distribution rights from Mosfilm Studios. The film saw its American premiere in 1995, followed by a 4K restoration in 2019. Primarily, propaganda films are a mirror of the moment of their creation, and *I Am Cuba* is no different. It remains an ecstatic testimony of a historic time in both cinema and world politics.

And at the same time, the dissatisfaction also came from the Soviet authorities, as the film was not accepted because it did not respond to the direct notions of propaganda (Graffy, 2008, pp. 167–181). This disapproval comes from the fact that *Soy Cuba* adopted experimental cinematic techniques, particularly the elaborated montage technique and expressive camera movements, that help to shape the audience's emotional engagement. The famous funeral (see Figure 1)

Figure 1
Funeral Scene From the Roof Soy Cuba

Note. Film still from *Soy Cuba*, directed by Mikhail Kalatozov (Mosfilm, 1964).

In which the camera moves up from the coffin to survey a mass of those in grief, it embraces this approach: the technical innovation is not simply decorative, but works to saturate the image with affect and guides the viewers to experience the revolutionary moment as collective.

These complexities determine ideological control in media, where depictions can support or distort experience. *Soy Cuba* challenged propaganda through interpretive openness. The funeral scene shows systemic oppression, using first-person camera movements, with Enrique shown individually yet within the collective struggle. The shift to a rooftop shows this personal connection to the collective struggle by capturing people from the underclass of the Batista-regime Cuban society as part of this broader struggle. Kalatozov frames the crowd as inseparable from the revolutionary struggle and resistance. The viewer unintentionally becomes part of the evolving events, drawn into the parallel dimensions of this struggle.

Figure 2
Funeral Scene From Soy Cuba

Note. Film still from *Soy Cuba*, directed by Mikhail Kalatozov (Mosfilm, 1964).

Kalatozov navigates this "intentional deception" through montage and innovative camera movements, showing the tragic lives of characters under the Batista regime. Enrique's transformation reflects how digital manipulation shifts from passive consumption to purposeful distortion. *Soy Cuba's* visual language creates emotional identification, and controlled framing pushes the observer into a participatory role. In the context of digital manipulation, as Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell suggest, propaganda can be categorized as projecting deliberate lies and deception, uncertain accuracy, and semi-truth and transparency (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019 pp. 2–3). Just as Enrique becomes part of the collective struggle, digital manipulation operates in "between areas" of deception, intentionally distorting truth through deepfakes, algorithmic dissemination of misleading narratives, and selectively edited footage to manipulate collective consciousness.

The Antique and Aesthetic Depoliticization

Rusudan Glurjidze's *The Antique* references the 2006 mass deportations of Georgians from Russia a targeted campaign of state-led ethnic discrimination involving coordinated raids, detentions, public humiliation, and the deportation of around 2,000 people.

Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, stated that "the Russian authorities claim that the expulsions weren't targeting Georgians but were part of the

renewed fight against illegal migration. But this was a coordinated campaign orchestrated at senior levels of government that singled out Georgians for a specific period" (Human Rights Watch, 2007). However, in *The Antique*, the political intent, the state apparatus is absent. Glurjidze relocates the deportations to the margins, allowing them to function as a vague background disturbance rather than the central moral fact. The plot centers on Medea, Lado, and Vadim. When the deportations begin, Lado is arrested and expelled, framed as a personal tragedy rather than a politically motivated act. Glurjidze's muted palette and "film filter" mediate the memory, transforming suffering into stylized nostalgia. This aesthetic choice collapses systemic violence into individual experience. For someone who lived through the deportations, this absence is alarming; these were not background events but a well-planned political assault. This is where the concept of reversed witnessing becomes critical (Felman & Laub, 1992). Reversed witnessing makes the witness both observer and narrator. In *The Antique*, Glurjidze's selective reframing suggests empathy while avoiding the systemic origins of harm. The result is a narrative that participates in what Marianne Hirsch (2012) has referred to as *post memory distortion*: a retelling that, intentionally or not, alters the moral register of the original facts (Hirsch, 2012).

There was a severe response from the diaspora. Many argued the film's "forgiving" tone reflects Kremlin narratives, especially given Glurjidze's political associations and its selection by a jury member criticized for promoting Kremlin-friendly discourse (ISFED 2023). The absence of explicit political framing becomes part of the film's ideological function, imposing sentiment over structure and allowing a form of epistemic violence to occur. Glurjidze is incorporating silence that operates through selective storytelling. The storyline in the film itself develops without adequate contextual framing, which is done intentionally. In this way, the film itself becomes a form of misinformation for the audience unfamiliar with the complexities of Russian-Georgian relations.

Glurjidze is dependent on mise-en-scène symbolism. Vadim's photo cabinet symbolizes loss but simplifies trauma. For an Australian audience with little knowledge of post-Soviet history, *The Antique* becomes a form of memory violation. Most viewers interpret its mild narrative as accurate, failing to recognize the targeted ethnic nature of the 2006 deportations. This framing erases the equality between oppressor and victim and displaces victims' testimonies. Misrepresentation distorts discourse and alienates diaspora communities. *The Antique* shows how propaganda can be aesthetically sophisticated, removing politically charged aspects from view.

Russians at War **and Negative-Space Documentary**

Trofimova's Russians at War operates through deliberate absence—no Ukrainian voices, no civilian testimonies mirroring Kremlin tactics and portraying soldiers as reluctant participants. This is precisely the kind of negative-space propaganda that works through absence: the audience sees the tool, but never the result, leaving the ethical implications unresolved. The violence exists off-screen, in a void where moral clarity is easily dissolved (Farrar et al., 2003, p. 12). Trofimova's appearance on the Russian-language YouTube program Tell Gordeeva (2023) offers revealing insight into the motives and messaging behind the film.

Trofimova claims neutrality and safety concerns yet shows unblurred soldiers and admits knowing the drone's purpose while deflecting responsibility. When pressed on whether the soldiers she filmed were war criminals, she responds: "War criminals are those who commit war crimes," adding that, at least from what she saw, they committed none. This refusal to

acknowledge the broader, well-documented reality of Russian war crimes is not a simple ignorance and putting a blind eye on the victims of hostilities; it is a political act of narrative control.

As I have mentioned earlier, the central controversy is unpacked when Gordeeva asks how Trofimova gained access to Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory. Trofimova vaguely recounts that she first filmed protests in Moscow and contacted the "Committee of Soldiers' Mothers," failing to specify key details, including the committee's leadership or exact location. Her narrative then becomes fantastical: she describes a surreal moment on a tram where she meets a man dressed as Ded Moroz (Russian Santa Claus), who turns out to be a soldier named Ilya from Donetsk. This figure, she claims, helped her access the front lines. She insists she entered the occupied zones without the Russian government's knowledge. Despite claiming concern for the soldiers' safety, Trofimova does not blur faces, censor unit names, or conceal locations. Gordeeva challenges her: "Did you consider that this drone might be used to kill someone?" Trofimova dodges the question and offers no real answer about including Ukrainian perspectives. She continues to justify the soldiers. When asked if the film is about "good guys," she replies, "It depends on how you feel." She later invokes Remarque and claims her film resists the binary of hero vs. war criminal. But this is precisely where the problem lies.

The manipulative power of *Russians at War* lies in its ability to use intimacy as a vehicle for ideological reframing. By focusing on the soldiers' humanity, fatigue, humor, and vulnerability, the film encourages the audience to see them as victims of circumstance. This is a classic propaganda strategy: humanize the aggressor while rendering victims invisible. There is no Ukrainian voice, no independent verification, no acknowledgment of context. The resulting emotional identification is dangerously unidirectional.

In the Australian context, the dangers are higher by the composition of festival audiences. Antenna attracts a diverse crowd: cinema-lovers who trust the curatorial process; academics and journalists; students with limited background knowledge; politically engaged viewers; and diasporic communities. Within this mix are vast differences in political literacy and historical awareness. For those without this background, *Russians at War* can create a persuasive illusion of moral equivalence. For viewers who lack the resources to interrogate the framing, the film can seed narratives that normalize the aggressor's perspective. Adam Henschke's analysis of "grey zone" warfare clarifies how this works: the objective is not to replace truth with outright falsehoods, but to saturate the information space with ambiguity, making moral distinctions unstable (Henschke, 2025, pp. 199–226). *Russians at War* presents the soldiers' personal hardships as unquestionable fact while keeping their actions and the broader political context in deliberate obscurity, creating a false symmetry between aggressor and victim and exploiting audience trust in documentary settings.

Once granted a platform by a reputable festival, the film benefits from institutional legitimacy and circulates into reviews and cultural discourse without being properly interrogated. For Australians encountering the conflict through mediated cultural products, *Russians at War* does not simply offer "another perspective." It legitimizes a Kremlin-compatible narrative in a country geographically distant from the war but politically connected (The Guardian, 2024; Kyiv Independent, 2024). The uncritical exhibition becomes complicity in soft-power disinformation, shifting the lens through which a distant war is understood.

Zygar and Cartographic Erasure as Epistemic Sabotage

Mikhail Zygar's case reveals how Western institutions embrace dissidents transactionally, reinforcing Russian revisionist tendencies and a Cold War-era moral binary, exposing contradictions within supposedly critical, anti-regime narratives. As Miranda Fricker argues in *Epistemic Injustice*, credibility is a form of power (Fricker, 2007, p. 13). Western platforms risk naturalizing dissident narratives still bound to imperial worldviews.

This phenomenon is not unique to Russia. Anti-apartheid exiles from South Africa sometimes reproduced patriarchal or ethnonationalist frames in exile (Msimang, 2017, pp. 45–47). Opposition to a regime doesn't erase inherited imperial epistemic structures; Zygar exemplifies this.

Though analyzing his YouTube history "re-educational" videos, I think one of the examples that I would like to bring in this paper comes from Zygar's *The Conquest of the Caucasus: Shamil, Hadji Murat, the Genocide of the Circassians and Armenians, Revolution, and "Friendship of Peoples"* (2023). In discussing the brief independence of the Georgian Democratic Republic (DGR) (1918–1921), Zygar uses a map (see Figure 3) that significantly distorts the historical borders of DGR. Zakatala, Sukhumi, Batumi, and the Tao-Klarjeti region-territories recognized as Georgian under the Moscow Agreement of 7 May 1920-are absent.

Figure 3

Distorted Map of the Democratic Republic of Georgia Used in Zygar's Video

Note. Screenshot from M. Zygar, "The Conquest of the Caucasus" (YouTube, 2023, 1:17:31).

Figure 4
Economic Maps of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1)

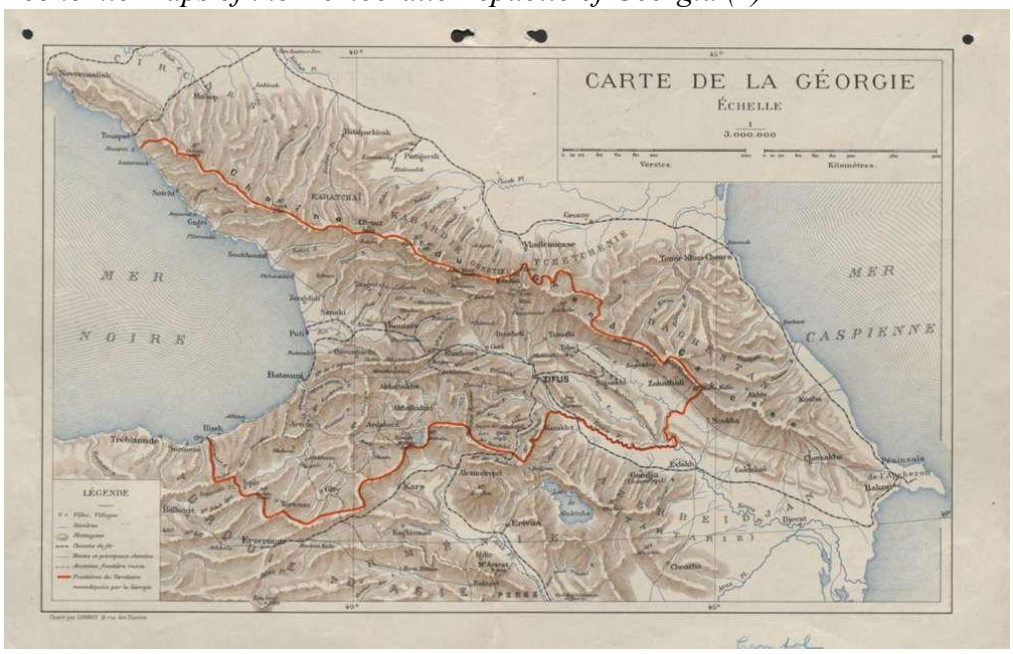
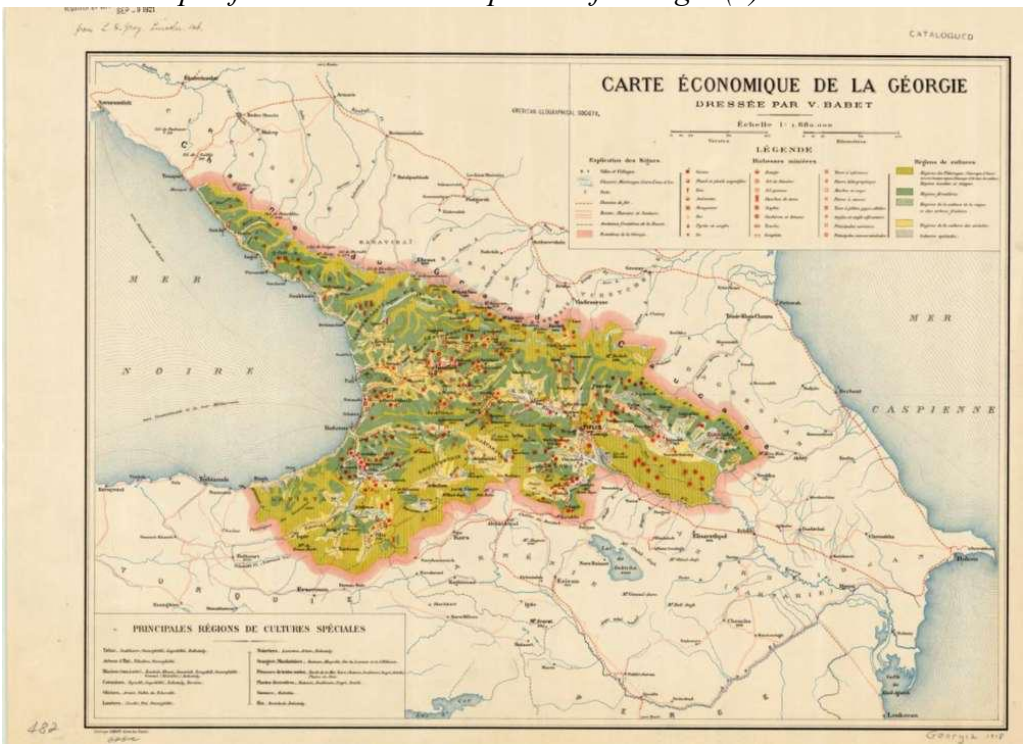


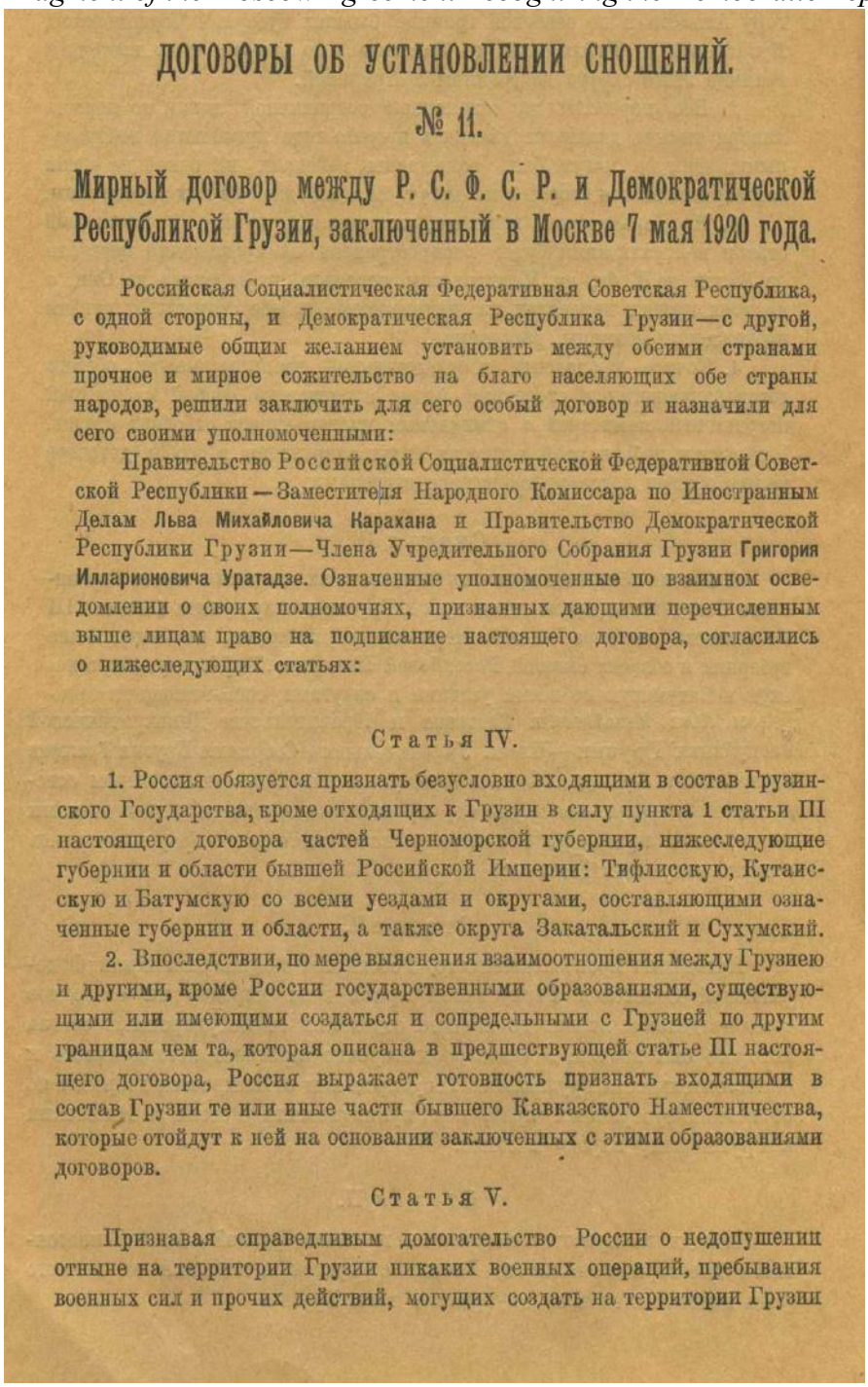
Figure 5
Economic Maps of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (2)



Note. Economic map of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, published in French in 1918, the year Georgia declared independence from the Russian Empire under a social democratic government.
Source: Library of Congress.

Figure 6

Fragment of the Moscow Agreement Recognizing the Democratic Republic of Georgia



ДОГОВОРЫ ОБ УСТАНОВЛЕНИИ СНОШЕНИЙ.

№ 11.

Мирный договор между Р. С. Ф. С. Р. и Демократической Республикой Грузии, заключенный в Москве 7 мая 1920 года.

Российская Социалистическая Федеративная Советская Республика, с одной стороны, и Демократическая Республика Грузии—с другой, руководимые общим желанием установить между обеими странами прочное и мирное сожительство на благо населяющих обе страны народов, решили заключить для сего особый договор и назначили для сего своими уполномоченными:

Правительство Российской Социалистической Федеративной Советской Республики—Заместителя Народного Комиссара по Иностранным Делам Льва Михайловича Карахана и Правительство Демократической Республики Грузии—Члена Учредительного Собрания Грузии Григория Илларионовича Уратадзе. Означенные уполномоченные по взаимном осведомлении о своих полномочиях, признанных дающими перечисленным выше лицам право на подписание настоящего договора, согласились о нижеследующих статьях:

Статья IV.

1. Россия обязуется признать безусловно входящими в состав Грузинского Государства, кроме отходящих к Грузии в силу пункта 1 статьи III настоящего договора частей Черноморской губернии, нижеследующие губернии и области бывшей Российской Империи: Тифлисскую, Кутаисскую и Батумскую со всеми уездами и округами, составляющими означенные губернии и области, а также округа Закатальский и Сухумский.

2. Впоследствии, по мере выяснения взаимоотношения между Грузиею и другими, кроме России государственными образованиями, существующими или имеющими создаться и сопредельными с Грузией по другим границам чем та, которая описана в предшествующей статье III настоящего договора, Россия выражает готовность признать входящими в состав Грузии те или иные части бывшего Кавказского Наместничества, которые отойдут к ней на основании заключенных с этими образованиями договоров.

Статья V.

Признавая справедливым домогательство России о недопущении отныне на территории Грузии никаких военных операций, пребывания военных сил и прочих действий, могущих создать на территории Грузии

Note. Fragment of the Moscow Agreement of May 7, 1920, in which Soviet Russia formally recognized the Democratic Republic of Georgia and its territorial integrity.
Source: Georgian National Archives.

Maps can clearly be the instruments of political storytelling (Hall, 1997; Harlow, 2006). By removing these territories from the visual narrative, Zygar's video aligns with contemporary Russian revisionist positions disputing Georgia's territorial integrity. The map functions as a quiet form of epistemic sabotage. The same pattern appears in Zygar's treatment of the Georgievsky Treaty of 1783, positioning it as a mutual agreement while leaving unspoken the betrayals that followed the annexation. The General Totleben's withdrawal at the Battle of

Aspindza (1770) a move that left King Erekle II's outnumbered troops to face the Ottomans alone, is especially significant (Epadze, 2022).

This event shows the fragile, transactional nature of Russian "protection," serving imperial interests over allies. By excising such episodes, Zygar produces a softened imperial history that allows annexation to appear benevolent. A further example lies in Zygar's portrayal of Prince Kelesh Bey Shervashidze (Caucasus Survey 10, 2024, 324–346). Stripped of his role in the historical integration of Abkhazia into Georgian statehood, Shervashidze is reframed in ways that align with the colonial narrative (Epadze, 2022). Shervashidze's image is contested, yet Zygar's framing tilts toward the version favorable to Russian geopolitical goals. At this point, the shift to digital epistemic violence is clearly detectable. Zygar's content silences by selective presence: Georgia and other Caucasian nations appear only through frames reaffirming their subordination to Russia's narrative. In digital environments, such portrayals can become default references. In Australia, limited knowledge allows a distorted narrative to enter classrooms and media commentary unchallenged, especially as these videos circulate widely with English subtitles. Representation, according to Stuart Hall, is not passive reflection; it is an active process of constructing meaning (Hall, 1997). For members of the Georgian or other minority diaspora, Zygar's references are recognizable as erasures. For viewers without prior exposure, these nuances are invisible and dangerously effective. In multicultural societies like Australia, this unevenness feeds epistemic inequalities. When an influential dissident's video erases territories or sanitizes imperial betrayals, it shifts the baseline of public understanding.

Conclusion

As The Antique, which reframes deportations as non-political suffering, and *Russians at War,* which humanizes soldiers, Zygar's videos participate in a broader ecology of digital memory warfare**.** Each case removes or reconfigures key elements of historical truth, creating emotional identification with aggressors, moral equivalence between oppressor and oppressed, or diminished visibility for colonized nations. The manipulative techniques differ in these cases: cartographic erasure, sentimentalization, and selective voice inclusion, but the outcome is the same. It is a reframed history that reduces the moral and political costs of imperial violence. In the post-truth environment, this is a structural policy. By shifting the narrative lens, these works create certain futures in which imperial logics persist, easier to imagine, and others that require genuine decolonization, harder to conceive.

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

I declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with restructuring the manuscript to match conference proceedings formatting requirements and to refine language for clarity and concision. The use was limited to editing and rephrasing, and no AI tool was used to generate the research claims, interpretations, or evidence base. The ideas, analyses, and conclusions are derived from the author's research and critical framework.

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An Integrated Data Quality Control Framework Toward Collective Cultural Scenario Exploration

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Abstract

Cultural Map Thailand is a national digital repository of cultural assets, yet early data inconsistencies limited its usefulness. This study introduces an integrated quality-control framework combining PHP filtering, Excel Power Query, GIS validation, AI-assisted screening, and social verification which refined 6,403 entries to 5,204 qualified datasets. A prototype system dynamics model was also developed to support collective scenario exploration, linking cultural capital, investment flows, social engagement, and policy timing. The results demonstrate that data-driven and participatory methods significantly improve cultural data reliability and reinforce evidence-based cultural governance.

Keywords: cultural mapping, data quality control, geographic information system, AI-assisted screening, scenario exploration, cultural capital

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Introduction

Culture, in both its tangible and intangible forms, shapes community identity and social cohesion. As digital platforms increasingly become central to cultural documentation and public engagement, Cultural Map Thailand (https://culturalmapthailand.info/) has emerged as a national repository built from nearly a decade of culture-based research and development (CBRD). From 2016 to 2024, 117 projects across 67 universities contributed diverse cultural data spanning architecture, archaeological heritage, performing arts, folk literature, local wisdom, and ethnic languages intended to support cultural preservation and community development.

Rapid data expansion, however, also produced inconsistencies. Prior to 2021, cultural data were stored in incompatible formats across projects, resulting in variations in field definitions, spatial accuracy, and data completeness. These limitations restricted the ability to use the database for national planning and scenario analysis. As of September 2025, the database contained 6,403 entries across 11 categories and 53 provinces, attracting more than 600,000 visits from domestic and international users. This visibility underscored the need for a rigorous quality-control mechanism to address issues such as incorrect coordinates, mismatched provinces, duplicated entries, incomplete descriptions, and low-quality or inappropriate images. This study responds to these challenges by presenting:

1. An integrated data-quality control framework combining PHP filtering, Excel Power Query, GIS validation, AI-assisted screening, and social verification
2. Unified Modeling Language (UML) Sequence Diagram of the validation workflow
3. Quantitative outcomes of data quality control mechanism
4. A prototype system dynamics model that uses validated data for collective cultural scenario exploration.

By integrating computational tools with participatory verification, this research provides a balanced methodological model for strengthening cultural data reliability, supporting cultural governance, and advancing cultural-based development and soft-power strategies.

Literature Review

The concept of cultural capital, originating from Pierre Bourdieu (1986), underlines how cultural knowledge, skills, artifacts, and practices shape social mobility, identity, and symbolic power. Bourdieu categorizes cultural capital into embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms, illustrating how it circulates within and across generations. Extending this framework, Throsby (1999, 2010) positions cultural capital as both an economic and non-economic asset whose value supports cultural sustainability and community vitality. From a national-development perspective, cultural capital has become a key resource for promoting creative industries, cultural tourism, and soft-power strategies. Particularly in Thailand, cultural assets such as traditional craftsmanship, local wisdom, and regional festivals form a basis for livelihood development, community empowerment, and place-based identity formation.

Cultural Mapping as a Research and Development Process

Cultural mapping has been recognized by UNESCO (2003) and cultural policy scholars as a participatory methodology for identifying cultural resources, strengthening community engagement, and fostering local development (Pillai, 2022). Poole (2003) describes cultural mapping as identifying and documenting a community's cultural resources. The Creative City

Network of Canada (2010) defines it as collecting, analyzing, and presenting data to highlight cultural strengths and stories. Taylor and Rollins (2021) emphasize participatory cultural mapping as a collaborative process that builds local ownership. Within Thailand, cultural mapping has been integral to CBRD, where research teams engage with communities to collect, verify, and analyze cultural data. This process not only preserves cultural diversity but also supports community planning, cultural entrepreneurship, and intergenerational learning.

Digital Cultural Mapping and GIS

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have transformed cultural mapping by enabling spatial visualization, proximity analysis, and multi-layered interpretation of cultural landscapes. Longley and Duxbury (2016) highlight GIS as an essential tool for managing geospatial phenomena, while cultural GIS studies demonstrate how spatial accuracy affects heritage interpretation, planning decisions, and visitor experiences. Digital cultural maps increasingly rely on high-resolution spatial data to ensure authenticity and usability. However, spatial mismatches incorrect coordinates, misclassified provinces, out-of-boundary points can distort cultural representation and mislead users. Therefore, data quality control becomes a foundational requirement.

Data Quality and AI-Assisted Screening in Cultural Databases

Data quality challenges in cultural mapping include incompleteness, inconsistency, duplication, semantic variability, and outdated information. In recent years, AI-assisted screening approaches such as rule-based detection, anomaly detection, and machine learning models have strengthened data validation in large datasets (Krishnan & Wu, 2019; Rekatsinas et al., 2017). These methods improve efficiency and reduce human error in repetitive tasks. Yet, cultural data is context-sensitive. Automated tools require complementary human interpretation (Flick, 2004). Therefore, social validation where cultural asset owners verify data helps ensure accuracy, legitimacy, and ethical use.

Scenario Exploration and Mediation Tools in Cultural Governance

Scenario exploration has become a strategic tool in cultural policy, enabling stakeholders to examine future possibilities, evaluate policy impacts, and negotiate trade-offs. System Dynamics Modeling (Sterman, 2000) helps simulate feedback loops, delays, and dynamic interactions. When integrated with cultural databases, simulation becomes a mediation tool, allowing stakeholders to collectively explore cultural futures based on empirical data. This study integrates cleaned cultural data into a prototype system dynamics model to explore cultural capital dynamics, investment patterns, and engagement cycles.

Methodology

Research Design

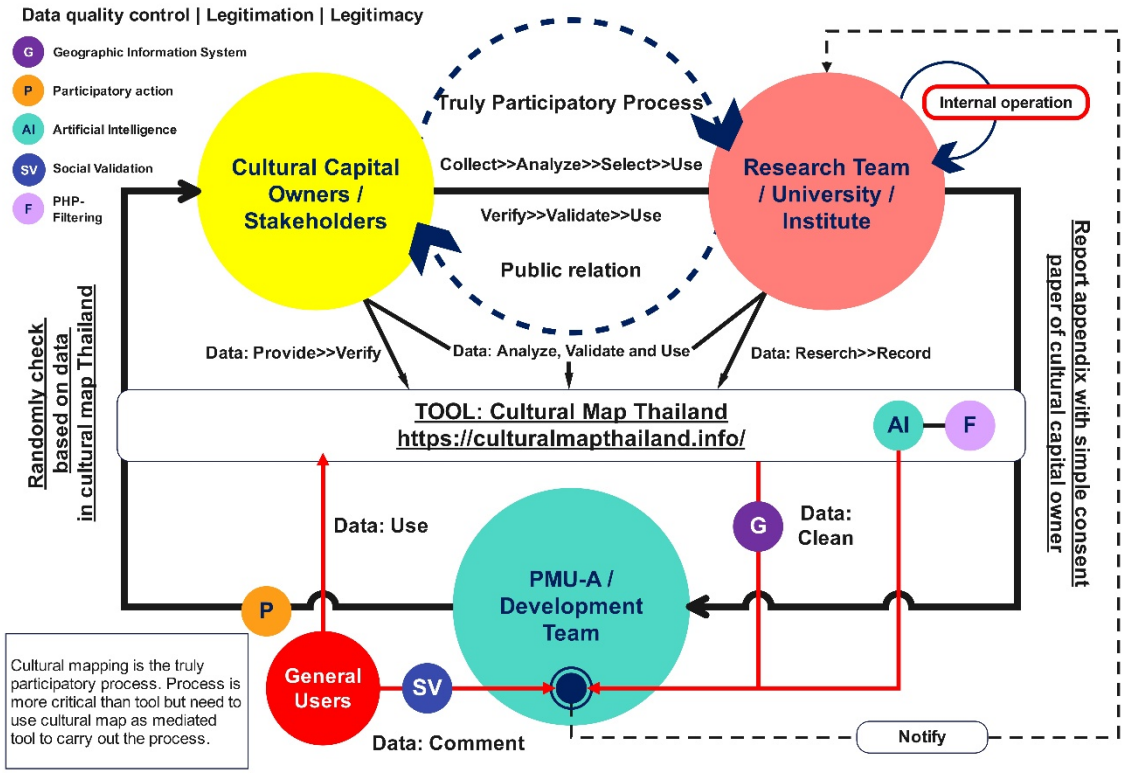
The research design is structured around the integrated data quality control mechanism illustrated in the conceptual framework (Figure 1). This mechanism positions Cultural Map Thailand as a mediated platform that connects cultural capital owners, research teams, the Kanchanaburi Rajabhat University (KRU) development team with the search funding granted by PMU-A, and general users through a continuous cycle of data provision, verification, validation, and use. The design is fundamentally participatory, while also incorporating

computational and spatial analytical processes to ensure that cultural data reach a quality standard sufficient for subsequent simulation-based scenario exploration. At the core of the framework are two principal actors: Cultural capital owners and stakeholders, who provide cultural information and verify its authenticity; and Research teams from universities, who conduct fieldwork, analyze cultural narratives, and record data in the system. Both groups participate in a truly participatory process involving the iterative steps of collecting, analyzing, selecting, verifying, and using cultural information. This reciprocal exchange ensures that cultural data remain legitimate, contextually grounded, and socially validated.

To support this participatory process, the Cultural Map Thailand platform functions as the technical backbone where data are recorded, shared, reviewed, and randomly checked using established quality control procedures. These procedures involve four complementary types of validation: PHP-based filtering (F) ensuring basic completeness, formatting consistency, and initial screening for errors. Artificial Intelligence (AI) assisting in anomaly detection, duplication identification, and semantic checking. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) validating spatial accuracy, correcting geolocation errors, and ensuring alignment between coordinates and administrative boundaries. Social Validation (SV) enabling cultural asset owners, communities, and general users to review, comment, and correct information, thereby ensuring cultural legitimacy and public accountability.

The KRU development team plays a coordinating role, integrating automated checks, spatial cleaning, and user feedback. Notifications are issued when revisions or confirmation are required. This multi-actor, multi-method workflow ensures that data continuously improve in accuracy, credibility, and usability. Once cultural data pass these quality control stages and are designated as “qualified data”, they become suitable inputs for the next methodological component of this study: the development of a system dynamics simulation model. Only high-quality, validated datasets are used to construct cultural capital variables, initialize category-based stocks, and generate reliable policy scenarios. This ensures that scenario exploration aimed at understanding the balance between cultural preservation, investment, engagement, and socio-economic returns is grounded in robust empirical evidence.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of Integrated Data Quality Control Mechanism for Cultural Map Thailand



Data Sources

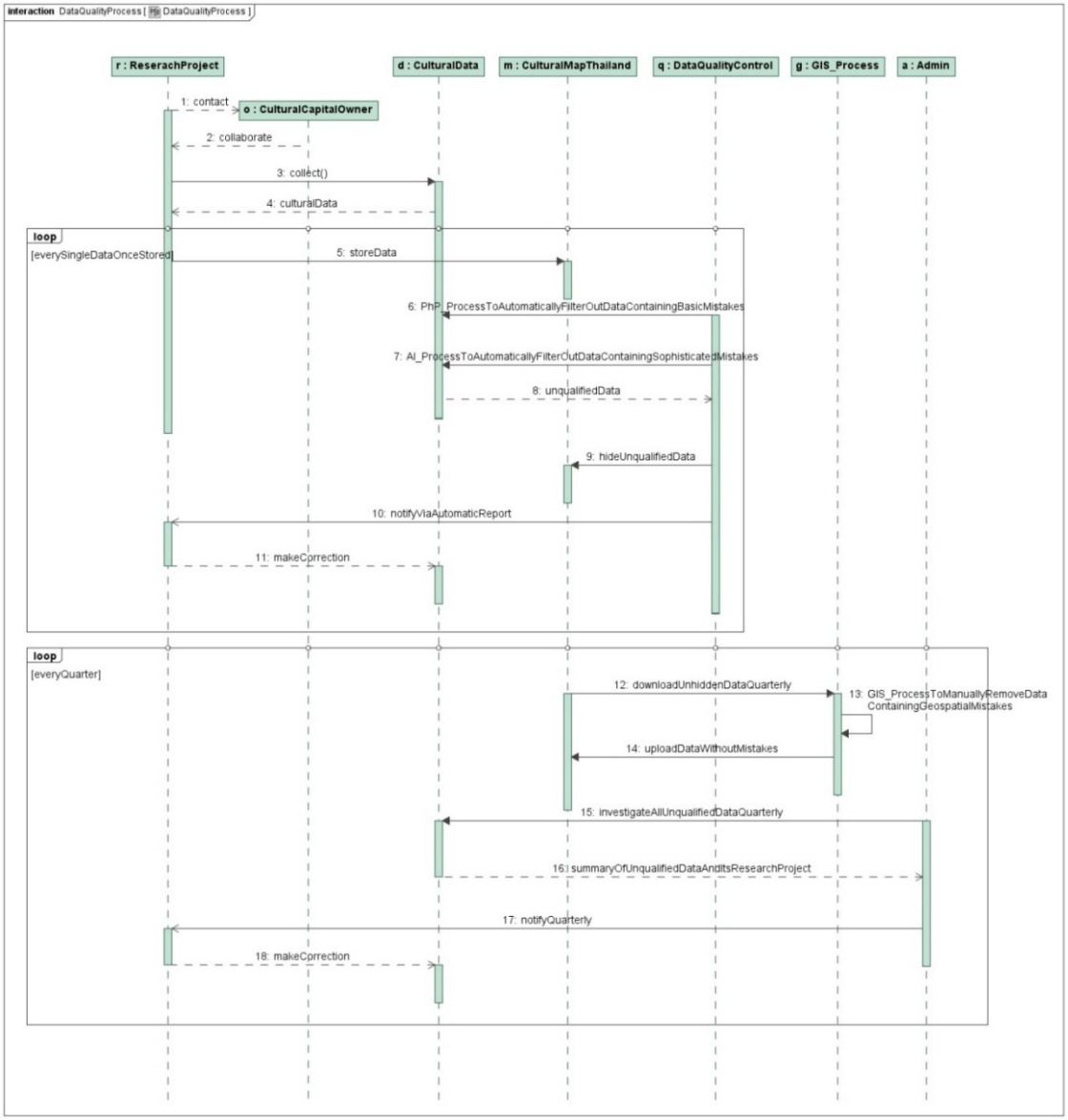
The data used in this study were drawn from the national cultural database on Cultural Map Thailand (https://culturalmapthailand.info/), representing almost a decade of culture-based research conducted nationwide. As of 10 September 2025, the database contained 6,403 cultural entries before quality control, classified into 11 categories covering both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Each entry consisted of 21 standardized fields—14 descriptive and 7 analytic—based on the national data schema developed in 2021 by the KRU development team and eight pioneer universities to ensure system-wide interoperability. The dataset originated from 117 cultural R&D projects conducted between 2016 and 2024 by 67 higher-education institutions, all working directly with communities to document and verify local cultural assets.

Geographically, the dataset spans 53 provinces across all major regions of Thailand, offering substantial spatial diversity for GIS validation and scenario analysis. Categories such as Architecture (1,398 entries), Knowledge and Practices (1,076 entries), and Traditional Craftsmanship (974 entries) were the most extensively documented, while Thai Local and Ethnic Languages (32 entries) and Folk Sport and Martial Arts (99 entries) were less represented. These variations reflect regional cultural characteristics and differing research intensities, shaping the analytical scope and methodological considerations of this study.

Integrated Data-Quality Control System and Workflow

The data-quality control system in this study is a multi-layered mechanism designed to ensure that cultural data recorded in Cultural Map Thailand are accurate, legitimate, and culturally authentic before being used for analysis or simulation. As illustrated in the UML Sequence Diagram (Figure 2), the workflow spans the full process from data collection to quarterly spatial validation and community correction.

Figure 2
UML Sequence Diagram Illustrating the Workflow of Integrated Data Quality Control System for Cultural Map Thailand



The system is built on collaboration between cultural capital owners, research teams, and the KRU development team, with Cultural Map Thailand serving as the platform where data are stored, filtered, validated, and monitored. Two iterative cycles operate simultaneously: continuous validation, triggered whenever new data are uploaded, and quarterly validation, which provides deeper spatial and administrative review.

In the continuous cycle, research teams collect and store information verified with cultural capital owners (Steps 1–5). Automated checks then begin with PHP filtering (Step 6) to detect missing cultural codes, malformed coordinates, and incomplete mandatory fields. AI-assisted screening (Step 7) follows, identifying semantic inconsistencies, duplicate patterns, and weak descriptions. Entries that fail these checks are temporarily hidden (Step 9), and an automatic notification (Step 10) prompts research teams to correct and resubmit data (Step 11).

The quarterly cycle reinforces spatial accuracy. The system downloads unverified entries (Step 12) and conducts GIS-based validation (Step 13) to detect mismatched provinces, out-of-boundary points, maritime coordinates, and projection errors. Corrected data are re-uploaded (Step 14), unresolved cases are investigated further (Step 15), and summaries are returned to responsible teams (Step 16) before another notification is issued (Step 17) for the research team to amend (Step 18).

Together, these automated, spatial, algorithmic, and participatory processes ensure that cultural data are both technically sound and socially credible. Ethical safeguards are embedded throughout: inaccurate data are hidden from public view, verification is required before release, and cultural capital owners participate in ongoing validation. Only entries that satisfy all structural, semantic, spatial, and cultural requirements are classified as qualified data. These high-quality datasets form the empirical foundation for the simulation model described in the next section, ensuring that cultural scenario exploration is grounded in reliable and ethically validated information.

Results

Identification of Nine Error Types

The intensive use of Cultural Map Thailand at Culture Connex in Yaowarat, Bangkok, offered a real-world setting to observe how cultural data perform in a public environment. When cultural entries were displayed to visitors, several inaccuracies became immediately visible. Combined with the systematic QC process, these observations led to the identification of nine major error types, each requiring specific corrective mechanisms (Table 1).

Table 1
Major Error Types Found in Cultural Map Thailand and Proposed Data Quality Methods

Error Type	Proposed Data Quality Method
Mislocation or Wrong Location (Latitude Longitude)	GIS, PHP-Filtering, Social Validation, Participatory Action
Null Data (Empty or Name Only)	PHP-Filtering, Social Validation, Participatory Action
Incomplete Data or Very Short Description	PHP-Filtering, Social Validation, Participatory Action
No Image Attached	PHP-Filtering, Social Validation, Participatory Action
Low Image Quality	Artificial Intelligence, Social Validation, Participatory Action
Irrelevant Images to the Cultural Content	Artificial Intelligence, Social Validation, Participatory Action
Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) and/or Copyright Issue	Artificial Intelligence, Social Validation, Participatory Action

Too Generic Data (e.g., common food recipe, trees)	Artificial Intelligence, Social Validation, Participatory Action
Repeated Data (previously recorded in earlier projects)	GIS, PHP-Filtering

a. Mislocation or Wrong Coordinates: Many cultural points were placed in the wrong district, province, or even offshore due to incorrect coordinate input or decimal errors. These require GIS cleaning, PHP filtering, and social verification.
b. Null Data (Empty Fields): Some entries contained only names without descriptions or context, making them unusable for interpretation. PHP filtering and community review were essential for identifying and correcting them.
c. Incomplete or Very Short Descriptions: Minimal or generic narratives weakened cultural storytelling and required manual enrichment and community-based interpretation.
d. No Image Attached: Entries without images created confusion in public displays. Social validation is needed to obtain appropriate visual documentation.
e. Low-Quality Images: Blurred or poorly framed photos reduced cultural clarity. AI-assisted image-quality checks helped identify cases requiring replacement.
f. Irrelevant Images: Some images did not match the cultural content (e.g., incorrect buildings or unrelated objects). AI similarity analysis and community review were necessary to detect these mismatches.
g. PDPA or Copyright Concerns: A small number of images included identifiable individuals or copyrighted materials, requiring removal or replacement to meet ethical and legal standards.
h. Overly Generic Data: Examples included common food dishes or everyday objects that lacked cultural specificity. Participatory validation helped differentiate meaningful cultural assets from generic items.
i. Duplicate Entries: Repeated cultural points, often from overlapping projects, were easily noticeable on public screens. GIS and PHP-based duplicate detection were used to consolidate them.

On the whole, the combination of front-shop observations and systematic QC revealed that cultural data errors are both technical (e.g., wrong coordinates, null fields, duplicates) and interpretive (e.g., weak narratives, irrelevant or low-quality images, generic content). These findings underscore the need for a hybrid QC system combining digital tools (GIS, AI, PHP) with human-centered processes (social validation and participatory correction), forming the foundation for the data-quality improvements applied in this study.

Quantitative Outcomes of Data Quality Control

The quantitative analysis highlights the effectiveness of the integrated quality-control system in improving cultural data accuracy and completeness over time. As shown in Table 2, the dataset extracted on September 10, 2025 contained 6,403 cultural entries prior to any types of screening. These entries spanned all 11 cultural categories. Following sequential application of the data-quality control mechanisms, the number of qualified entries declined progressively at each stage:

a. PHP filtering reduced the dataset from 6,403 to 5,244 entries, eliminating records with invalid cultural codes, missing values, and basic formatting issues.
b. Excel Power Query reduced the dataset further to 5,229 entries, removing duplicates, correcting structural inconsistencies, and standardizing field formats.

c. GIS spatial validation resulted in 5,204 qualified entries, identifying and eliminating entries with mislocated coordinates, mismatched provinces, and out-of-boundary points.

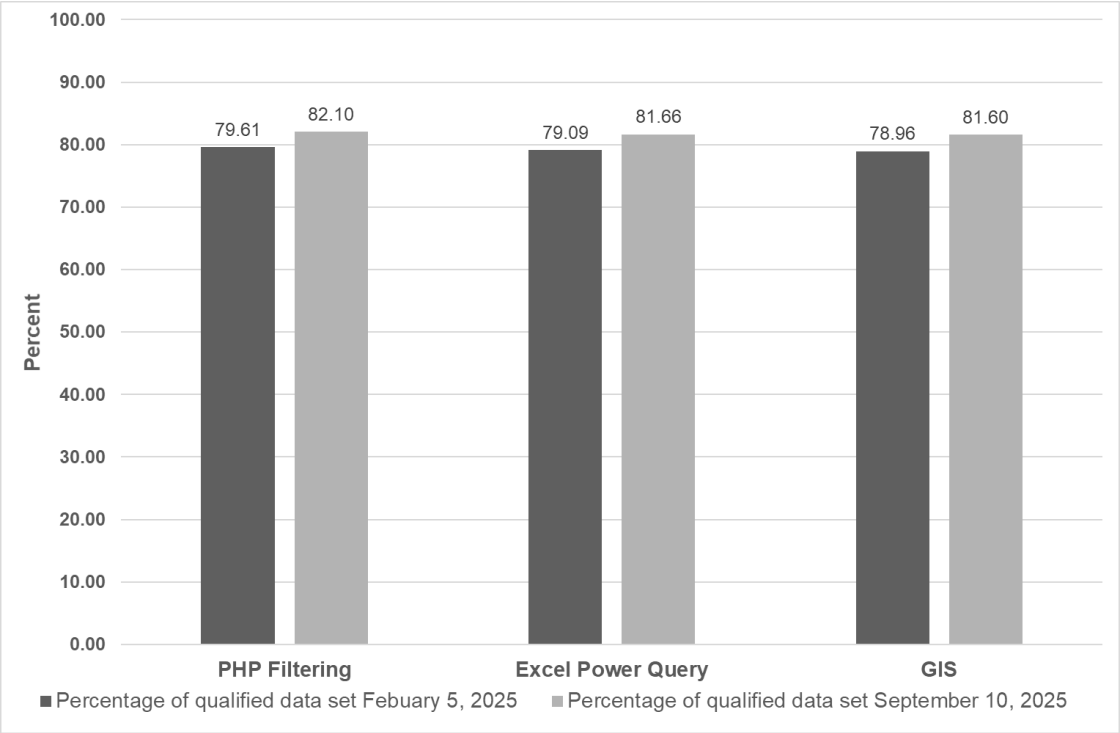
Table 2
Data Sets From Cultural Map Thailand on September 10, 2025 Before and After Quality Control (QC)

Cultural Category	Data set before QC	After PHP Filtering	After Excel Power Query	After GIS
Cultural Space	559	474	-	3
Architecture	1,398	1,102	-	-
Archaeological Site	511	404	-	-
Archaeological Artifact	324	278	-	-
Performing Art	544	417	-	-
Traditional Craftsmanship	974	847	-	-
Folk Literature	182	142	-	-
Knowledge and Practices concerning Nature and the Universe	1,076	888	-	1
Social Practices, Ritual and Festive Events	703	598	-	-
Folk Sport Game and Martial Arts	99	70	-	-
Thai Local and Ethnic Languages	32	24	-	-
No auto-code generation	-	-	15	-
Mismatching Province	-	-	-	21
Total	6,403	5,244	5,229	5,204
Percentage	100.00	81.89	81.66	81.27

The final total of 5,204 qualified datasets represents 81.27% of the original dataset. This proportion reflects the combined filtering power of automated processes, spatial analysis, and subsequent human verification. Certain categories experienced more substantial reductions than others. For example, the Architecture category decreased from 1,398 to 1,102 entries after PHP filtering, indicating a high frequency of basic errors within that group. Similarly, the Knowledge and Practices category showed inconsistencies in coordinate and location fields, requiring manual correction during GIS validation.

To evaluate the improvement over time, the results from February 5, 2025 were compared with those from September 10, 2025, as illustrated in Figure 3. This comparison demonstrates measurable progress across all three quality-control methods: PHP filtering accuracy increased from 79.61% to 82.10%, Excel Power Query accuracy increased from 79.09% to 81.66%, and GIS spatial validation accuracy increased from 78.96% to 81.60% These improvements correspond with the introduction of the automated notification system, which alerts research teams when unqualified data are detected. As notifications prompted more timely corrections and greater researcher engagement, the proportion of qualified data increased across all methods. This indicates not only better structural and spatial data consistency but also growing familiarity with QC procedures among contributing institutions.

Figure 3
Improvement Of Data Quality Over Time on February 5, 2025 Comparing With Those on September 10, 2025



Overall, the quantitative results demonstrate that the layered QC mechanism combining PHP, Excel PQ, GIS, and participatory review substantially enhances the reliability of the Cultural Map Thailand database. The improvement across two data extraction periods further confirms that continuous feedback loops and automated alerts play an important role in maintaining long-term data quality.

Demonstration Scenario: "Rice & Culture"

To illustrate the analytical potential of high-quality cultural data, a demonstration scenario was conducted focusing on the relationship between rice as Thailand's major agricultural product and its corresponding cultural expressions, with the objective of identifying opportunities for enhancing rice-based cultural value and increasing farmer income. Using GIS-based visualization and keyword-density analysis, three layers of spatial information were generated to explore where and how "rice culture" appears within the Cultural Map Thailand dataset.

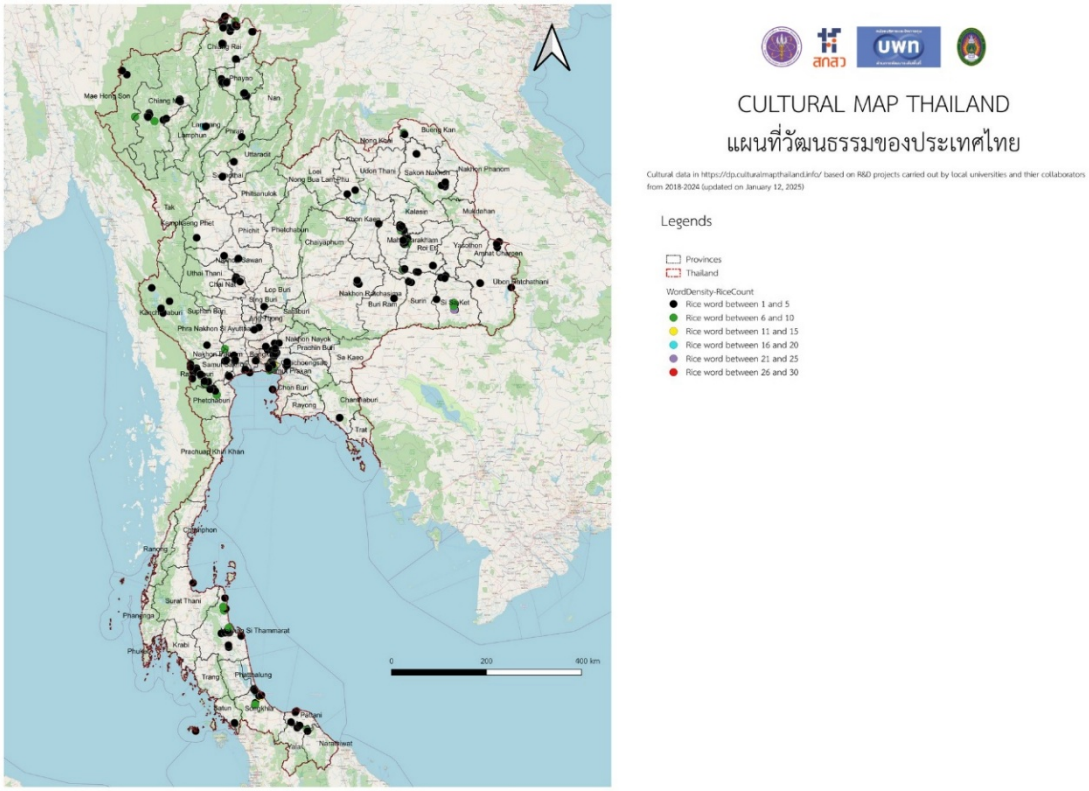
Rice Word Density Across Provinces

The first map (Figure 4) revealed a heterogeneous distribution of rice-related cultural expressions across Thailand. Provinces in the Central region such as Ayutthaya, Suphanburi, and Nakhon Pathom demonstrated the highest density of rice-related terms. The Northeastern region also showed substantial rice cultural presence, particularly in provinces such as Ubon Ratchathani, Sisaket, Roi Et, and Surin. In contrast, southern provinces exhibited fewer rice-associated cultural entries, except in areas with prominent heritage communities (e.g., Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat).

Presence or Absence of Rice-Related Cultural Coding

The second map provided a binary overview, distinguishing between entries that contained at least one rice-related term and those that did not. Out of 4,556 entries analyzed, 3,947 entries (86%) contained no rice-related keywords, while 609 entries (14%) explicitly referenced rice. Although rice is a dominant agricultural product nationwide, its cultural representation in the dataset is uneven. This underscores that rice culture is not merely tied to agricultural production volume but is deeply linked to specific socio-cultural contexts—rituals, local identity, and historical narratives. This insight is valuable for policy-makers seeking to localize rice-based cultural innovation rather than applying uniform strategies.

Figure 4
Map of Rice-Related Terms Density in Cultural Map Thailand

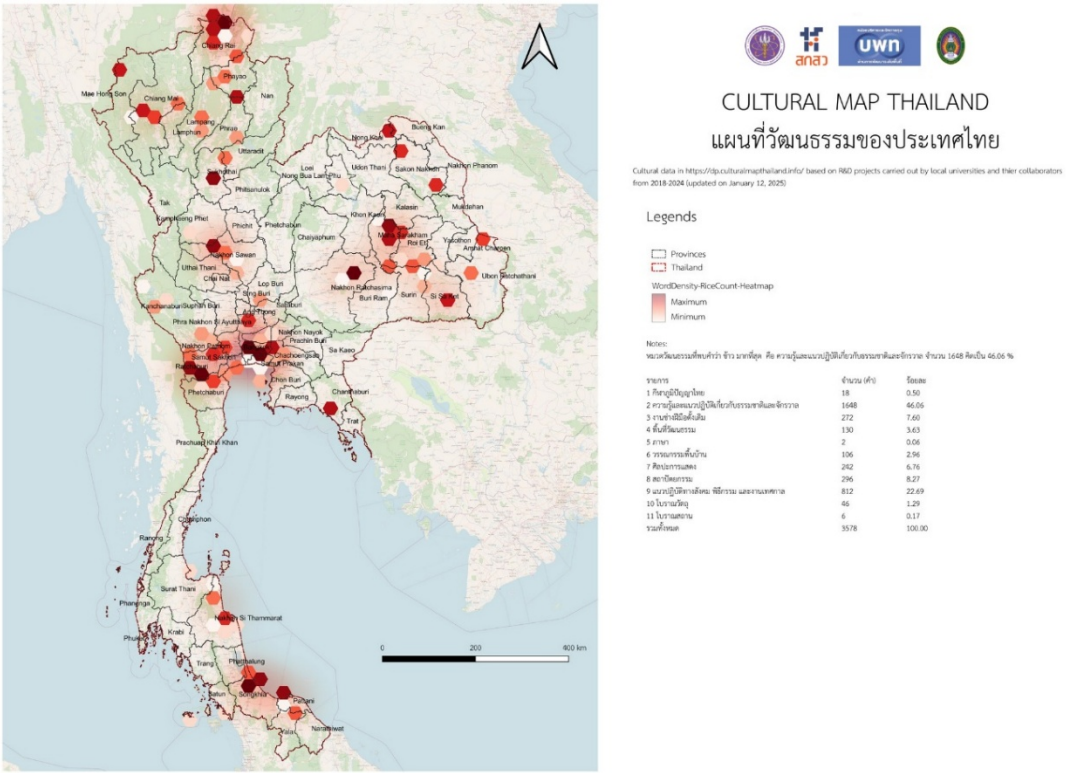


Heatmap of Rice-Related Cultural Expressions

The heatmap (Figure 5) further refined this analysis by identifying high-intensity cultural clusters related to rice. Strong hotspots emerged in: Central Thailand, particularly in provinces with historical rice-based economies and long-standing cultural practices (e.g., Suphanburi, Ayutthaya, Ang Thong). Northeastern Thailand, where rice is intertwined with ceremonies such as boon khaw sak, community-based rice storage traditions, spiritual practices, and agrarian rituals. Southern Thailand, where rice-related hotspots were concentrated in Phatthalung, Trang, and Nakhon Si Thammarat, areas known for distinctive rice landraces and cultural rice cuisines. The heatmap's provincial breakdown revealed that rice-related cultural practices accounted for 46.66% of the total keyword frequency, dominated by categories such as: Rice-based local knowledge and foodways, rituals involving rice seeds or spirits, traditional rice farming tools and craftwork, folklore and narratives referencing rice cultivation.

Figure 5

Heatmap Showing High-Intensity Cultural Clusters Related to Rice Density in Cultural Map Thailand



Implications for Cultural-Based Economic Development

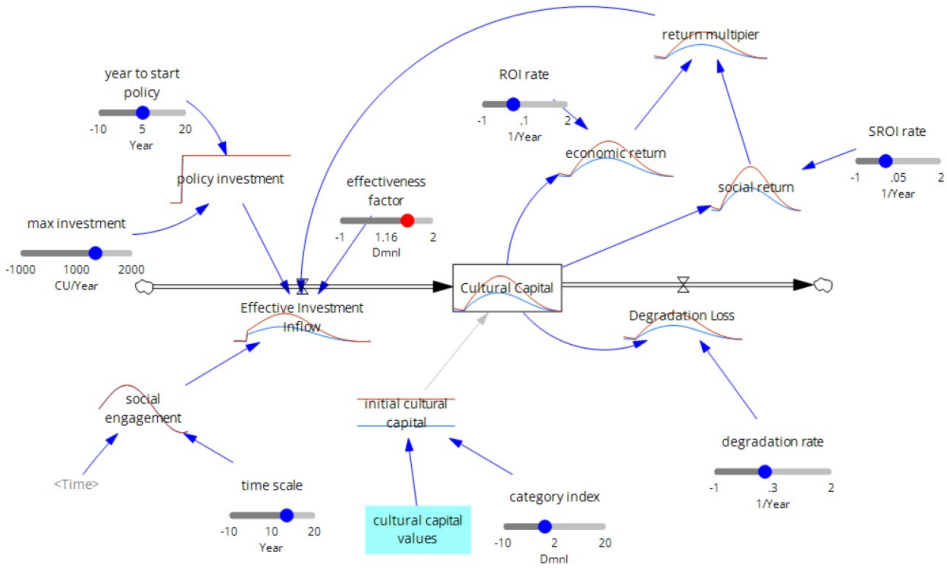
This scenario highlights how culturally grounded insights can directly support rice value enhancement strategies: High-density cultural clusters in the Central and Northeastern regions provide strong foundations for rice-based creative products, cultural tourism routes, heritage branding, and soft-power storytelling. Rice-related rituals and narratives documented in Northeastern provinces can serve as inspiration for community-led cultural products, educational media, ceremonial or festival-based tourism, and intangible heritage conservation. Rice landraces and culinary traditions in the South indicate opportunities for geographically specific branding (GI products), culinary tourism, and packaging rice-based knowledge for high-value markets.

The uneven distribution of rice culture emphasizes that rice-based product development should not rely solely on agricultural output but must be aligned with locally grounded cultural meanings, enabling more authentic and sustainable value creation. This demonstration scenario shows how high-quality cultural data, when combined with GIS visualization and keyword-density analysis, can guide collective scenario exploration among researchers, communities, and policy actors. By revealing where rice culture is deeply embedded and how it varies across regions, the Cultural Map Thailand system supports informed decision-making aimed at improving farmer livelihoods, enhancing soft power, and strengthening cultural-based economic strategies.

Scenario Exploration Using System Dynamics

To demonstrate how high-quality cultural data can support collective cultural management discovery, a prototype System Dynamics (SD) simulation model was developed using Vensim DSS (Figure 6). The Cultural Capital Model (Version 1) is designed as a mediation tool, enabling researchers, policymakers, cultural practitioners, and community members to explore how different interventions influence long-term cultural capital dynamics. System Dynamics is particularly suitable for cultural studies because cultural systems are inherently complex composed of feedback loops, time delays, fluctuating engagement patterns, and policy-driven changes. By translating these dynamics into a transparent model structure, stakeholders can collectively examine potential futures and negotiate shared understandings.

Figure 6
Cultural Capital Model (Version 1): Dynamic Stock-and-Flow Model With Feedback Loops



The model is organized around the central stock of Cultural Capital, which accumulates or declines based on two opposing flows: Effective Investment Inflow and Degradation Loss. Cultural Capital is initialized using category-specific values derived from the qualified Cultural Map Thailand dataset, ensuring that scenario exploration is grounded in empirically validated information. Three auxiliary components shape this stock: the return multiplier, policy investment, and social engagement.

Following the ODD (Overview–Design Concepts–Details) protocol (Polhill et al., 2008), the model simulates the accumulation and depletion of cultural capital by integrating economic returns, social returns, investment policies, and engagement patterns. Economic and social returns are calculated using constant ROI and SROI rates, reflecting how cultural assets generate both monetary value and social benefits. These returns contribute to the return multiplier, which enhances future investment inflows and represents the reinforcing dynamics present in real cultural ecosystems.

A distinctive feature of the model is its use of a sine-based social engagement function. Cultural engagement fluctuates over time due to seasonal festivals, annual cultural events, tourism cycles, and periodic social interest in cultural heritage. The sine function captures these

oscillations, allowing stakeholders to observe how cultural capital fluctuates when engagement rises or falls. This is especially relevant in contexts where cultural vitality is closely tied to temporal rhythms such as Thai festivals, agricultural cycles, and ritual seasons.

Another key structural component is the "year to start policy" parameter. This variable determines when policy investment begins and plays a significant role in shaping simulation outcomes. In many cultural systems, timing determines whether interventions are preventative, restorative, or reactionary. Early investment such as funding cultural education, supporting artisans, or protecting heritage sites can generate compounding long-term benefits. Conversely, delayed interventions may fail to reverse cultural decline, particularly when degradation rates exceed investment inflows. Allowing stakeholders to adjust this parameter helps them explore the consequences of acting early versus late, fostering more strategic policy discussions.

When users interact with the model, they can adjust parameters such as maximum investment, ROI/SROI rates, degradation rates, effectiveness factors, time scale, and policy timing to simulate different scenarios. Each scenario reveals how cultural capital might grow, stabilize, or deteriorate under particular conditions. Because the model uses cleaned and validated data from Cultural Map Thailand, the results reflect plausible trajectories rather than abstract estimations.

In general, this prototype SD model demonstrates how complex cultural dynamics can be transformed into an accessible exploration tool. By visualizing the interplay between investment, social engagement, and cultural capital, the model supports collective scenario exploration, stimulates policy dialogue, and enables stakeholders to jointly identify effective strategies for cultural preservation, development, and cultural-based economic enhancement. It provides a foundation for future refinement, including category-specific sub-models, integration with spatial data, and participatory modeling workshops.

Discussion

This study demonstrates the value of an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to cultural data management. By combining digital tools i.e. PHP filtering, Excel Power Query, GIS validation, and AI-assisted screening with participatory verification from cultural asset owners, Cultural Map Thailand effectively improves both the technical accuracy and cultural legitimacy of its data. This hybrid approach empowers researchers, communities, and cultural practitioners to play active roles in shaping a national cultural data ecosystem.

The availability of a cleaned and validated dataset strengthens evidence-based cultural policy, supporting initiatives in heritage conservation, creative economy planning, and community-driven cultural entrepreneurship. The ability to locate cultural clusters, such as rice-related cultural patterns, also enhances Thailand's soft-power strategies, enabling more targeted cultural development and promotion. Methodologically, the project offers a replicable framework for national cultural databases. Its interoperable workflow integrating automated filtering, spatial validation, AI-assisted review, and social validation advances participatory data governance by recognizing that cultural meaning cannot be verified by technology alone. Human insight remains essential for ensuring contextual accuracy. Some limitations remain. AI tools are still in prototype stage and require refinement; certain cultural categories have sparse data; GIS validation relies on quarterly manual checks; and the simulation model has yet to be calibrated with longitudinal data. Addressing these issues will be important for future system development.

In essence, the integration of computational precision, community engagement, and interdisciplinary thinking shows how cultural data ecosystems can evolve into powerful tools for strategic cultural management. Continued refinement and deeper collaboration with communities will be key to sustaining and expanding the long-term value of Cultural Map Thailand.

Conclusion

This study shows how Cultural Map Thailand can develop into a robust national cultural data ecosystem when supported by a systematic and participatory data-quality framework. By integrating PHP filtering, Excel Power Query, GIS validation, AI-assisted screening, and social verification, the project improved the accuracy and legitimacy of cultural data, refining 6,403 entries down to 5,204 high-quality datasets. Beyond data cleaning, the study demonstrates how validated cultural information can guide strategic cultural management. The rice-related cultural scenario illustrates how spatial and keyword analyses can inform policy design, support community-driven cultural products, and strengthen soft-power and cultural-based economic initiatives.

The prototype System Dynamics model expands this potential by enabling collective scenario exploration. By visualizing the relationships between investment, social engagement, policy timing, and cultural capital, the model supports shared understanding among policymakers, researchers, and communities and lays a foundation for more advanced cultural Agent-Based Modeling. Although limitations remain such as early-stage AI tools, sparse data in some categories, the need for ongoing spatial validation, and uncalibrated simulation parameters the study provides a replicable methodological framework for national cultural information systems. The combination of technical precision, participatory verification, and interdisciplinary insight demonstrates how cultural mapping can move toward meaningful cultural governance. Ultimately, the project shows that when cultural data are trusted, validated, and collectively interpreted, they become a strategic resource for sustainable cultural development, innovation, and community empowerment. Cultural Map Thailand thus stands not only as a database but as a platform for cultural learning, policy experimentation, and shared exploration of Thailand's cultural future.

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Reflexive Green Entrepreneurship: The Innovative and Sustainable Practice Among Young Indonesians

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Abstract

Young people face many challenges which impact their lives, yet they serve as critical agents of transformation. Through innovative and locally rooted solutions, young people in Indonesia engage in the practice of green entrepreneurship, which not only addresses environmental challenges but also actively shapes new cultural norms around sustainability. In their reflexive practice, they identify problems and offer solutions through enterprising activities, yet at the same time exercising their contextual sensitivity and the ability to navigate both enabling and constraining factors. Using a narrative case study approach, qualitative data were collected from nine founders and co-founders of green businesses in several cities in Java and Bali, Indonesia. In-depth interviews were conducted online to gather rich, qualitative insights into their journeys. The result reveals two key themes: 1) types of innovation by young people through their green entrepreneurship, and 2) enablers and constraints related to their innovative practice. These findings are further analyzed using the concept of reflexivity (Archer, 2012; Beck, 1992). The analysis indicates that reflexivity is crucial for young people to navigate enablers and constraints in their practice of green entrepreneurship. In this process, they are exercising leadership skills and capacities grounded in both local values and global awareness, which exemplify the essence of global citizenship and global competence. This dynamic interplay positions young people's practice of green entrepreneurship not just as an economic activity, but as a cultural force redefining innovation and sustainability in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: green entrepreneurship, young people, reflexivity, innovation, global competence

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Introduction

Global competence is a multidimensional capacity, reflected in individuals' ability to examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being (OECD, 2018). In this case, "competence" is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values successfully applied to face-to-face, virtual or mediated encounters with people who are perceived to be from a different cultural background, and to individuals' experiences of global issues (OECD, 2018), especially those occurring in the era of late modernity.

Beck (1992) argues that modernity, while having resulted in many breakthroughs in science and technology, have created new global risks, such as climate change, financial crises, terrorism—that are incalculable, uncontrollable, and cannot be confined within nation-states. Thus, generates one of the most striking yet least recognized key features of global risks, a "compulsory cosmopolitanism," or a "glue" for diversity and plurality in a world whose boundaries are penetrable (Beck, 2009). Reflexivity is being emphasized in this sense, which requires education to equip people with critical and cosmopolitan capacities to act responsibly.

In the Southeast Asian region, countries are exposed to the climate risks observed in floods, typhoons, droughts, rising sea levels, and other extreme weather events (ASEAN, 2021). Climate change is considered as an example of manufactured risk, resulting from modernization, industrialization, and unsustainable growth (di Floristella, 2015). Despite the increasing manufactured risks, the region still has resource constraints in the form of funding, manpower, and technical capacity among member states of the ASEAN (di Floristella, 2015). Since climate risks in Southeast Asia are transboundary in nature, there is an urgent need to collectively tackle these challenges (ASEAN, 2021).

Various efforts are needed to navigate the risks of climate change in the Southeast Asian context. Since governments and public institutions alone cannot address these issues, it is imperative to recognize the immense potential of green entrepreneurship in climate action sustainable development across ASEAN. Green entrepreneurship calls for the participation of diverse stakeholders, including individual initiatives. They are the "ecopreneurs" who combine the drive, ambition, creativity and risk-taking of the conventional entrepreneur with a concern for the environment that will reform and revitalize the economic system (Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Isaak, 1998; Schaltegger, 2002). In their practice, they tend to incorporate social and environmental values into commercial enterprise (Allen & Malin, 2008; Anderson, 1998; Azzone & Noci, 1998; Gerlach, 2003; Gibbs, 2009; Keogh & Polonsky, 1998; Pastakia, 1998), following a pragmatic strategy which arguably offers greater opportunities for advancing an environmental agenda than pure activism (Mars & Lounsbury, 2008).

In this paper, young people's green entrepreneurship is further examined through the perspective of reflexive practice as they innovate while navigating enabling and constraining structural factors. Furthermore, this paper will elaborate on the mechanism which allows to position green entrepreneurship as reflexive practice based on innovation and sustainable-oriented practices that not only create livelihoods but also respond to global ecological challenges. In this case, reflexivity acts as the bridge linking the structural conditions of late modernity to youth agency, demonstrating few of the many aspects of global competence.

The Practice of Green Entrepreneurship and Global Competence

Dean and McMullen (2007) view green entrepreneurs as those who are able to seize opportunities from the failure of old business practices by filling the gap in the development of the green market. Furthermore, Dean and McMullen (2007) consider the perspective of market failure to be one of the factors responsible for the environmental damage we are currently facing. Therefore, new ways are needed to "cure" and improve market efficiency through entrepreneurial practices based on efficiency, innovation, market acceptance, income growth, flexibility, effective risk, and relationship management (Ambec & Lanoie 2008; Porter & van der Linde, 1995). This also means that renewed efforts are needed to "review" the concept of entrepreneurship itself, especially amid issues of environmental degradation and climate change.

In academic discussions, there are several terms that are often used in literature to refer to studies similar to green entrepreneurship, namely "ecopreneurship," "eco-entrepreneurship," and "environmental entrepreneurship." These terms can be used in similar contexts (Schaper, 2010). Green entrepreneurship is driven by a "new breed" of entrepreneurs who combine environmentalism with entrepreneurial spirit and strive to move towards a redesigned ecological society (Schaper, 2010). The central idea of the green entrepreneurship sector is that entrepreneurs who are environmentally oriented pursue and take advantage of opportunities without damaging the environment and nature in which they operate and may even contribute to the restoration of nature and ecosystems. Thus, environmentally-oriented entrepreneurs have the potential to bring about radical change, while also providing solutions to various environmental challenges (Antolin-Lopez, et al., 2019).

One of the main differences between conventional entrepreneurship and green entrepreneurship lies in the logic of value creation (Saari & Salo, 2019). Conventional entrepreneurship contributes to economic growth and regional development (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Suresh & Ramraj, 2012) and is able to grow the local economy (González-Pernía, Peña-Legazkue & Vendrell-Herrero, 2012). Meanwhile, green entrepreneurship refers to businesses that aim to minimize their impact on the environment or nature. In conventional entrepreneurship, economic value creation is generally the "sole driver," while in green entrepreneurship, the economic aspect is a means to an end, alongside environmental and social values (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Vuorio et al., 2018). Furthermore, ideally there is an environmental dimension in the core business strategy, and business opportunities are taken to eliminate damage to the environment or nature (Cohen & Winn, 2007).

Green entrepreneurship among young Indonesians can develop as a discourse by considering multidimensional aspects including social, economic, cultural, and historical aspects (Audretsch, 2012; Autio et al., 2014; Fortunato & Alter, 2015; Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Welter, 2011; Williams & Hovorka, 2013). As a discourse among young people, green entrepreneurship has the potential to have broad implications in society, not only as an economic driver and activity that empowers Indonesian youth, but also a means to develop global competence. Global competence is often associated with the state of being aware, curious, and interested in learning about the world and how it works (OECD, 2018). Thus, globally competent persons often ask and explore critical questions and "researchable" problems that are globally significant, questions that address important phenomena and events that are relevant both in their own community and in communities "beyond their backyard" (OECD, 2018).

Despite many studies that have been conducted under this topic, it is still relevant to ask, how might we make sense of global competence to help young people navigate the complexities of today's world? One of the characteristics of global competence is its multidimensional capacity that integrates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and ethical dispositions which enables individuals to navigate, understand, and act responsibly in a world that is increasingly interconnected. Based on existing studies, these dimensions cover the interconnected aspects of cognitive, affective-interpersonal, intrapersonal-ethical, and actional (Han & Zhu, 2024; Hunter et. al., 2006; Sakamoto & Roger, 2022; Sälzer, 2018).

Global competence encourages individuals to communicate, collaborate, and take informed action across contexts that requires academic and intercultural communication (Han & Zhu, 2024); willingness to engage with others (Han & Zhu, 2024; Sakamoto & Roger, 2022); proactive engagement, as well as civic and global action (Hunter et. al., 2006; Sälzer, 2018). Synthesizing from these dimensions, global competence is then considered as an individual's reflexive capacity to understand global interdependence, communicate and collaborate across cultural differences with empathy and respect, and take action responsibly towards shared futures.

Thus, green entrepreneurship and global competence intersect in their shared emphasis on reflexivity, ethical responsibility, and action-oriented engagement with global challenges such as sustainability and social justice. As previously described, green entrepreneurship requires skills and knowledge, such as problem reframing, adaptive experimentation, and integrating values into practice. Thus, conceptually, green entrepreneurship highlights how entrepreneurial innovation, grounded in reflexivity and ethical awareness, becomes a means for individuals to translate values of sustainability into transformative action. In a wider sense, this conceptual construct should contribute to the ongoing discussion related to developing global competence among young people in the context of Global South, particularly in Indonesia.

Methodology

Reflexivity is essentially the individual's capacity to conduct internal conversations that generate self-knowledge. According to Archer (2012), to be reflexive is imperative in late modernity, as the global society is growing apart from its traditional trajectory. In this case, in sociological discussion, the deterministic power of structure is losing its significance on individuals, thus relying less on external norms in "shaping" their lives. This perspective resonates with Beck (1992) that in the context of late modernity, individuals are forced towards self-organization and self-thematization. They are not only electively shaping their do-it-yourself biography but also required to think of efforts to ensure its contingency through continuously renewed interpersonal relations to maintain balance and keep improvising on their "choreography." The practice of green entrepreneurship will require individuals to exercise in these processes, relying on their reflexive capacities.

Narrative case study method is used in this research, which employs a narrative approach through storytelling strategies to understand the agency of young Indonesians in the form of green entrepreneurship. Case studies could provide an overview of the reality at the organizational level, as well as the surrounding context, but they do not sufficiently highlight the aspect of emancipation, namely the "voice" of key actors (Pandolfini et al., 2019). This study comprises narratives of nine founders or co-founders of green enterprises based in eight cities located in Indonesia's islands of Java and Bali (Jakarta, Bandung, Klaten, Wonosobo, Yogyakarta, Malang, Surabaya, and Denpasar). In-depth interviews were conducted using

several key points as guidelines for the interviews, focusing on themes around motivation, practice, and impact. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom platform and lasted between 90–120 minutes. The interviews are then being transcripted, coded manually and mapped based on both predetermined and emerging themes or topics.

Innovation in Young Indonesian's Green Entrepreneurship

Based on the practice of young green entrepreneurs included in this study, they had made several modes of innovation, including creating products, improvising existing technologies, adapting existing technologies, and social innovation.

Creating

> Let's talk a little bit about our technology. So, the technology itself is mainly a smart farming system. Smart farming in what way? First, the technology is smart irrigation, so it's not just automatic irrigation, but also irrigation that adjusts to the needs of the plants. Earlier, I mentioned the crucial physical and chemical aspects of the plants. So, we know how much water comes out of the plants, and then we provide the appropriate amount of water for those plants. Additionally, we also use Artificial Intelligence (AI) for disease prediction, pest prediction, harvest prediction, and weather forecasting. The hope is that farmers can be more precise in their practices. (MI interview, July 26, 2024)

Above, MI in Bandung, West Java, discusses his smart irrigation product to help farmers with precision farming using Artificial Intelligence. The founders developed smart irrigation technology using their skills and knowledge in physics and biology obtained through formal education. They offered the technology to help farmers in Indonesia become more efficient and productive with their practice. This goal is closely tied to their previous process of problem identification, which revealed that many farmers have to work hard in the fields using conventional farming methods and rely on chemical fertilizers to increase their agricultural production.

Meanwhile, NT and her co-founder in Jakarta experimented with innovating using single-use plastic waste. NT underwent a complex process to create a marketable product. This innovation was achieved through repeated experimentation and consultation with relevant experts. The concept of ecobricks required continuous iteration until the final product met the safety standards of "conventional" building materials. This innovation process certainly consumes resources. Therefore, it is one of the factors that must be navigated reflexively in the practice of green entrepreneurship.

Improvising

> In terms of technology, we actually started in 2015, but began again in 2018. At that time, there was already a global community called Precious Plastic, based in the Netherlands. Then, this community shared the blueprint for the machine, so anyone who wanted to make a machine for recycling could access it for free. We took the technology blueprint from them, but we modified it further and adjusted it to our needs. For example, if we needed a larger production capacity, we modified it ourselves. So, the basis came from that community (Precious Plastic), and then we started our own R&D. (TA interview, August 7, 2024)

Another way to innovate is to improve upon existing technology. TA and her co-founder in Surabaya, East Java did just that in their green business. They process PET plastic into materials for home goods used in homes, cafes, and restaurants. They modified tools developed by Precious Plastic, a recycling community based in the Netherlands. As a result, their business became an authorized Precious Plastic workshop in Indonesia. While they did not create an innovation from scratch, they conducted experiments to adjust production capacity, determine the appropriate type of plastic to process, and create products that are both aesthetic and functional.

Adaptation

> We use an application called Epicollect5. This application is from Harvard. It is very helpful because its features and components can be customized to assist with geo-tagging, to mark where we plant mangroves, taking coordinates, taking photos, and other data, including the date these mangroves were planted. Photos can be taken to see the height of the plants. It can also be used to identify the mangroves coordinates. Once a year, four times, so quarterly, every three months we monitor. And finally, geo-tagging is used to mark which mangrove trees can be harvested within a certain timeframe to produce our processed products. (FLH interview, August 4, 2024)

FLH's in Denpasar, Bali is utilizing an application to monitor mangrove growth and map its location. This tool is important for monitoring and ensuring the suitability of mangrove planting locations, thereby increasing the likelihood that the trees will grow well. Some of the mangroves are then harvested and processed into derivative products, such as snacks. FLH has obtained intellectual property rights certification for these products, which is another form of innovation.

Social Innovation

> So we are at the forefront of education in training, coaching, facilitating, and consulting, and we assist them. The women in this village manage waste, the PKK RT women's group, and junior high school children can learn about waste management and other things. We also provide assistance in the process of maggot cultivation. We teach them how to control and treat their waste. So, we have four programs. The first is TCC, which is training, coaching, and consulting. The second is derivative manufacturing, which is the manufacturing or production of derivative products. We develop this together with them, so we nurture and assist them, and they have the opportunity to become our partners. We also have derivative manufacturing. So we work with several companies to manage their organic waste, we manage their waste, then we also distribute it to our partners who lack waste, have difficulties, and so on, so that the ecosystem runs in an integrated manner. And the last thing we are developing is community-based digitalization. This is the direction we are heading in. The direction of community-based digitalization is that we want them to manage waste and make an impact. (MFM interview, August 17, 2024)

MFM in Klaten, Central Java, came with the idea to mobilize communities in villages to engage in maggot farming, thereby promoting social innovation. Moreover, MFM and his team secures the support and strategic collaboration of various stakeholders to drive this social innovation. MF builds relationships with maggot farming partners in several villages and actively engages

in outreach with various institutions and companies. This movement has the potential to become an impactful pentahelix collaboration, particularly for rural communities.

Enabling and Constraining Factors in the Practice of Young Indonesian's Green Entrepreneurship

According to young green entrepreneurs included in this study, four factors influence their practices: relationship with the government, market or community acceptance, funding, and youth involvement in their green businesses.

Government Relations

> Why work with mangrove? Because the skills needed for mangrove nurseries are easier than that of coral reefs, seagrass or other marine ecosystems. So, working on mangrove conservation is much easier than working on coral reefs, seaweed, or seagrass, first of all. In addition, at that time and in the following years until now, mangrove conservation has been booming in line with the government's program. (FLH interview, August 4, 2024)

Maintaining relations with the government is a crucial aspect of FLH's green business practices in Denpasar, Bali. The government owns the land where mangrove planting is taking place. At the same time, FLH has built relationships with groups of fishermen in several areas. Without the government's approval, he cannot empower the fishermen or farm the mangroves. In this respect, government support is one of his enablers. Similarly, in Malang, East Java, MA established relations with the government to expand their waste sorting campaign and education program. They partnered with the local environmental agency to use the landfill facility. This approach was taken to educate the community, especially young people, about waste sorting.

However, the government offers limited funding, so they incorporate a strategy to access funding from large Indonesian companies. Furthermore, limited resources are available to support startups by young people. According to MI, this demonstrates that the government's awareness of green entrepreneurship is relatively low. Meanwhile, FLH admits that he sometimes encounters unexpected situations, such as bribery and uncooperative government officials, including illegal money collection, which hinders productivity.

Market Acceptance

> For fertilizers, both liquid and solid powder, we only produce a few tons of solid powder, if I'm not mistaken, 4 to 5 tons per month. As for liquid fertilizer, we still produce very little. I'm not sure if our farmers are familiar with it, because it's marketed as a supplement fertilizer. For example, humans need rice, vegetables, and meat as essential needs. This organic liquid fertilizer, due to its high bacterial content, is intended for soil regeneration, so it's more like drinking multivitamins. You can choose not to drink it, right? (ADM interview, December 1, 2024)

From his narrative, ADM explained how his liquid fertilizer, produced from the extraction of maggots and organic waste, is not yet known to farmers, especially in Wonosobo. Liquid fertilizer is considered as a supplement for plants, so it is not a primary need for farmers. However, ADM has other products to offer, namely solid fertilizer and chicken eggs, which

generates the most revenue for his business. Regarding farmer acceptance, MI also feels that the smart irrigation products are not yet popular among farmers. According to MI, in their practice, farmers tend to already have their own "regular practice," so initially it is necessary to make an effort to convince them of the product's benefits, as well as the return of investment by purchasing the product. These efforts do not always bear fruit, though some farmers are willing to buy the tools, especially those who sell high-value commodities.

Finding the right market is indeed a challenge for young green entrepreneurs, and it is no exception for FLH. Although it is not too difficult to sell products because they are still small in scale, FLH admits that it is still difficult to determine their target market. Meanwhile, for NT, she feels some pressure in running her ecobrick business. Firstly, there are already many companies offering disposable plastics processing. Secondly, to maintain the quality of the ecobricks it produces. Thus, the production capacity of her business is usually below market demand. This presents a dilemma because, on the one hand, large-scale production could expand the impact by promoting environmentally friendly products to more parties. On the other hand, there are limitations in terms of production due to the standards that must be maintained as a green enterprise.

Funding

> So far, our funding has been focused on grants. We have received several grants from various foundations, such as Pijar Foundation and Pertamina Foundation. We are also currently applying for a business grant program from the GoTo Impact Foundation. However, this is still in the final stages, and we are still waiting for the announcement. Hopefully, we will make it to the final round. (EA interview, September 19, 2024)

For young people, financial assistance is particularly crucial during the initial stages of their business. As mentioned above, EA, who established their business in 2022, still relies on funding through grant schemes. Access to these grants is partly gained by joining the startup ecosystem. Similarly, TS also participated in several competitions to secure funding during the early stages of her business. Efforts to seek funding through competitions are common among green start-ups, especially to fund operations in the early years. Competitions to obtain funding also take place on an international scale, which helped NT in developing her business in the early years, to the point of opening a workshop outside the city. Of course, the success in obtaining funding through the competition requires green entrepreneurs to convince investors or funders of the business's potential for growth and impact.

In addition to funding through grants, personal funds or bootstrapping are also options for green entrepreneurship founders to start their businesses. For MI, bootstrapping has helped him to start his green business. In this case, good financial management is needed so that the business can expand its impact. According to MI, external funding could help to achieve this goal. Thus, there is a combination of funding schemes. ADM also implemented this scheme in developing his integrated livestock business. ADM's green business is his initiative to develop an existing poultry farm owned by his family. After presenting his idea to develop the business to his family, ADM received financial assistance to execute the idea. According to him, access to funding for green businesses in Wonosobo is still limited, as it is still dominated by conventional businesses, thus it is necessary to network outside the city as a strategy to gain access to funding.

Another strategy employed by MA and his co-founder was to conduct fundraising to support the organization's activities in the early stages. There are several ways to conduct fundraising to support their organization, namely by offering courses, utilizing digital platforms, and seeking sponsors. These schemes were implemented because MA's green initiative is currently in the form of non-profit organization. However, MA and his co-founders already have a more holistic plan to ensure its sustainability, including processing plastic waste and producing it as recycled products. This mechanism allows the organization to have more sources of revenue to finance their activities or programs.

Socio-Cultural Aspect (Youth Involvement)

> As far as waste banks are concerned, the involvement of young people has been minimal so far, because we have tried to offer activities with the involvement of youth communities in Bali, but it didn't go smoothly. I couldn't find the right approach. Young people do want to be involved there. I haven't researched it in detail yet, but perhaps it's because when the waste bank was first introduced by the government, it was mandatory for the PKK women's community to be involved. Could that be one of the reasons young people don't want to be involved here, or maybe there are other reasons? (MAKP interview, August 6, 2024)

It is important to maintain the entrepreneurial spirit of green enterprises with the involvement of young people in green entrepreneurship. However, according to MAKP's experience, it is not easy to involve young people in waste management businesses, partly because such work is not considered "conventional" in Balinese society. Similarly, NT faces challenges when recruiting and retaining young employees. From her experience, one reason young people are not interested in green businesses is the changing perception of what constitutes a "decent" job in a big city like Jakarta and its surrounding areas, particularly among high school graduates. Although the work done for green businesses is valuable, it still lacks appeal among urban youth.

A specific approach is needed to involve young people in green entrepreneurship. It is also important for young green entrepreneurs to understand the motivation and commitment of potential employees. According to TS, it is necessary to involve young people who have a strong desire to learn. The entrepreneurship sector, especially green entrepreneurship, requires high enthusiasm and fighting spirit. Another reason for involving young people in the business is to help bridge the business with other partners. In his business, ADM tried to gain trust from youth in his community by equipping them with skills and knowledge abroad. He leveraged his connection at the Job Training Institute (*LPK*) to facilitate courses in Japan for local youth. According to ADM, young people in his city still lack entrepreneurial spirit, they tend to choose conventional jobs, or jobs that their parents have always done.

Reflexive Green Entrepreneurship as a Form of Global Competence

The research findings presented above illustrate how reflexive practice underpins the diverse forms of innovation developed by young green entrepreneurs. In the creating mode, innovation stems from applying formal knowledge and technical expertise to design new products or services that address particular problems. In the improvising mode, reflexivity is exercised by modifying existing resources and reconfiguring them to fit business needs and objectives. Meanwhile, adaptation for innovation demonstrates a reflexive capacity to utilize existing tools or technology to increase productivity. Finally, social innovation reflects meta-reflexive

reasoning, where entrepreneurial action is guided not only by market logic but also by ethical commitments to empower grassroots communities and foster systemic collaboration. Taken together, these practices show that reflexivity does not manifest uniformly but is expressed in layered ways, allowing young green entrepreneurs to innovate while navigating enabling and constraining factors, aligning with the moral imperative of sustainability. Moreover, the study findings also reveal that the practice of innovation among young green entrepreneurs is deeply shaped by the dynamic interplay between enablers and constraints, which often coexist within structures: relations with government, market acceptance, and socio-cultural dynamics surrounding youth involvement in green enterprises.

Based on these findings, reflexivity thus enables continuous innovativeness through a reflexive practice cycle, consisting of problem reframing, adaptive experimentation, and value integration. In the first stage, problem reframing involves viewing challenges from multiple perspectives to uncover underlying causes and alternative pathways for action. This cognitive flexibility allows young green entrepreneurs to identify opportunities that are often overlooked within conventional frameworks. The second stage, adaptive experimentation, refers to the continuous process of designing, testing, and refining solutions in response to emerging feedback and contextual changes. It goes beyond the creation of new products or services—it entails navigating structural enablers and constraints to ensure the sustainability and resilience of their enterprises. Finally, value integration represents the deliberate effort to align entrepreneurial goals with the ethical imperatives of environmental sustainability and social well-being, ensuring that economic growth remains anchored in moral and ecological responsibility. Moreover, through continuous engagement and collaboration within and beyond their communities, young entrepreneurs sustain long-term impact, demonstrating how reflexivity functions as both an epistemic and ethical foundation for global citizenship in practice.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the practice of green entrepreneurship among young Indonesians is not merely an economic endeavor, but a deeply reflexive process that bridges personal agency and structural conditions within late modernity. Through the reflexive practice cycle—problem reframing, adaptive experimentation, and value integration—young entrepreneurs continuously negotiate between enablers and constraints to sustain their enterprises. These cycles of reflection and action highlight that innovation, in the context of sustainability, is not a linear outcome but a continuous negotiation of meaning, purpose, and impact. Reflexivity thus becomes the central mechanism through which young people cultivate the ability to think critically, act ethically, and respond adaptively to environmental and social challenges.

By situating green entrepreneurship as a form of global competence, this study underscores how young entrepreneurs' reflexive engagement translates global issues into localized action. They do not simply replicate global sustainability discourses; rather, they reinterpret them through culturally embedded values and community-driven initiatives. Consequently, the reflexive practice of green entrepreneurship emerges as a pedagogical model for nurturing global citizens—individuals capable of critical inquiry, ethical deliberation, and collaborative problem-solving across boundaries. The findings also carry practical implications for policy and education. To foster sustainable transitions in Indonesia and the wider Global South, institutions must move beyond instrumental approaches to entrepreneurship training and instead cultivate reflexive, value-oriented learning ecosystems. Educational programs should

embed sustainability as both a moral and practical dimension of innovation, while policies should support young entrepreneurs' experimentation and cross-sector collaboration.

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Transnational Girlhood in the Malaysian Cosplay Scene: Combining Islamic Identity and Japanese Cosplay

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Abstract

Girlhood in Malaysia is visibly influenced by Japanese popular culture, particularly among Muslim girls who creatively integrate hijabs into their cosplay costumes. The anime and manga sphere has been widely embraced by Malaysians across genders and ethnicities. However, for Muslim girls, cosplaying in hijab often elicits mixed reactions within both cosplay communities and broader society, where norms of modesty are closely linked to religious and social expectations. This study investigates how Malaysian Muslim girls embody their identities at the intersection of Japanese cosplay culture and the religious and social norms of Malaysia, and how these negotiations are manifested in practice. Through hijabi cosplay, Malaysian Muslim girls reimagine Japanese femininity and perform identity within the bounds of faith and culture. Data were collected through interviews with and Instagram posts of six Malaysian hijabi cosplayers. Critical discourse analysis was used to examine how participants articulate identity and creative practice in the interviews. The findings indicate that, rather than striving for exact replication, participants prioritise religious considerations and engage in creative reinterpretations that reflect both Islamic values and Japanese aesthetic forms. The physical embodiment of cosplay is central to understanding how identity is translated (or mistranslated) into material expression. These experiences illuminate ongoing – and never resolvable – debates within the hijabi cosplay community regarding physical representation, identity, and religious boundaries.

Keywords: performativity, transnational, hijab, cosplay, Cool Japan

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Introduction

Japanese cultural influence has increased among Malaysians since the 1980s. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (METI) established the Cool Japan Fund in 2013 to advance business development under the Cool Japan Initiative (Tamaki, 2019). Cool Japan includes Japanese food, fashion, and arguably one of its biggest highlights: Manga and anime (Condry, 2009; Tamaki, 2019). The anime and manga scene (animanga) has seen a fast-increase in popularity among Malaysians, with CosPlay-FUN Malaysia posting 46 scheduled events in 2013 (Yamato, 2016). Animanga conferences naturally bring us to cosplay as a participatory culture of fans (Jenkins, 2003). Jenkins asserted that fans, who are also consumers, take part in the "creation and distribution of media narratives" (2003, p. 554). In this light, cosplay is a form of participatory culture since fans dress up as anime characters, in which the cosplayer themself can choose how to reinterpret the characters they are cosplaying.

Cosplay is a term that fuses "costume" and "play" or "role-play", and is "used to describe the activities of dressing and acting as characters from *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (cartoon animation), *tokusatsu* (special-effect movies or television shows), video games, science fiction/sci-fi, and music groups" (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 318). However, there is a group within the cosplay community that is unlike the majority: These cosplayers, who are usually Muslim girls, do not cosplay with wigs, instead opting to cosplay with their hijabs. They are known as "hijabi cosplayers". Through modifying their costumes and reimagining their favourite characters, hijabi cosplayers construct a hybrid identity that merges elements of religious tradition with popular culture (Sari et al., 2025, p. 26; Venus, 2017).

Background

The hijab's primary role carries religious meaning, but in Malaysia it has shown to be part of broader cultural identity and aesthetic expression. Hassim and Khalid (2015) observed a blending of modesty and modernity within the Malaysian Muslim community with regards to the hijab, as noted through their research on a magazine called "Hijabista". Hijabista caters mostly to urban Muslim women and represents Muslim fashion. Even the name of the magazine itself is a mix of two words: "hijab" and "fashionista", proving that the hijab can be fashionable and trendy instead of just signifying piety. This is evident in Hochel's (2013)'s interviews with Malaysian Muslim women, in which women who veil, women who do not veil, and women who sometimes veil discuss what veiling means to them both from a religious and social standpoint.

The adoption of cosplay by young female Malay Muslim in many ways is an extension of this blend of piety and personal expression. Cosplay is a global practice that allows participants to explore identities and aesthetics, stepping into different characters while still reflecting who they are. With the continuous rise of Japan's cultural influence, a larger audience can access cosplay content online across physical state boundaries. When hijabi girls enter spaces like cosplay (which originates from Japanese popular culture), they bring a layered understanding of identity with them. Since Japanese and Malaysian Muslim cultures are different, navigating through these specificities while incorporating the art form of cosplaying Japanese characters requires more insight into the sensitivities of identities.

My central research question is: How does a Malaysian Muslim girl negotiate and embody her identity at the intersection of Japanese cosplay culture and the religious and social rules of Malaysia? This question opens discussions on performativity and cultural navigation, all

happening within a digital, globalized space dominated by girls. The thesis statement of this chapter is: "Through hijabi cosplay, Malaysian Muslim girls reimagine Japanese femininity and perform identity within the bounds of faith and culture".

Literature Review

This research draws from three key frameworks: Transnational girlhood, gender performativity, and Cool Japan.

Transnational Girlhood

Transnational girlhood is discussed by Catherine Vanner (2019). Transnational feminism, or transnational girlhood, is the culmination of decades of feminism and girl studies. According to Vanner (2019), "A transnational person, action, or idea is connected to various nation-states and contributes to all these spaces, highlighting an experience of mobility across states while recognizing the ongoing power of national borders" (p. 116). Transnational feminism came out of global feminist views that usually only diffuse one dimension of feminism, which does not cover the enormity of feminism in the case of those who are non-Western, Third World communities. In short, international feminism favours "universalized models of women's liberation that embraced Western concepts of individuality and modernity" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Mendoza, 2002; Vanner, 2019, p. 117). This has trickled down into girlhood studies, especially since girlhood studies navigate a tension between highlighting girls' agency and acknowledging the structural and systemic forces that limit it (Jiwani et al., 2006).

The limitations of transnational girlhood studies become clear when examining contexts like Indonesia. Marissa Saraswati (2018) argues that Indonesian girls are often absent from girlhood studies because they are either desexualized as children or excluded from frameworks centred on Western experiences. This exclusion stems from stereotypes that exoticize Global South girls and from Western-centric narratives of "girl power" that fail to reflect local realities.

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity was introduced in their book *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which they posited that gender is not a fixed category. Butler wrote:

> … 'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself… But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender… How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will? (Butler, 1990, p. 12)

This passage is highlighted to show how the body is viewed in relation to gender performativity. Butler questions the notion of the body as a neutral or natural vessel that merely reflects identity. Butler contends that the body is not an empty canvas upon which meaning is inscribed; rather, it gains social intelligibility through the repeated enactment of cultural and social norms, especially those concerning gender. In essence, the body acquires significance only through gendered performance, which renders it recognizable and comprehensible within society.

Butler wrote that gender is a continuous process that does not have an origin nor an end (Butler, 1990; Salih, 2002). What is certain is that our bodies have been gendered since the beginning of their social existence, and there is no existence outside the social realm (Salih, 2002, p. 62).

Cool Japan and Kawaii Aesthetics

Cool Japan, as a governmental initiative to maintain its presence and influence on the international stage: "Rather than being confined to food, anime and pop culture, it has the potential for unlimited expansion to encompass a variety of fields, reflecting changing global interests" (Cabinet Office, n.d.). After World War II, when Japan had to reinvent their image from a country that committed many acts of terror, they shifted from a masculine to a feminine image, as evident by its now-famous kawaii culture. Amanda Azzi calls this "an infantilized, robotized form of femininity through animanga" (2021, p. 6). In addition, the usage of large eyes in animanga becomes a telling sign of the love-hate relationship Japan has with the West: "This singular adoption of large eyes represents both a mockery and admiration of Western eye shapes to equally challenge their discriminatory practices and content with broadly imposed European beauty standards" (ibid., p. 13).

In another case, Miller (2011) discusses how Cool Japan commodifies femininity and patriarchal control under the guise of cultural promotion. By highlighting how the government uses *kawaii* as a marketing tool, it reduces complex forms of girl culture into superficial, male-defined images of idealized femininity. These representations exploit Japanese girls' images for global consumption and commercial gain. However, there are groups of girls who subversively engage with *kawaii* tropes, attempting to challenge gender norms and reclaim the aesthetics' power. Miller contends that Cool Japan's *otaku*-driven ethos continues a historical pattern of female objectification, masking patriarchal ideologies behind the facade of national branding and cultural coolness.

Gap in Research

It is evident that while cosplay has been studied repeatedly, most focus on hijab cosplay overseas in a Western-centric society. For example, Gittinger (2018)'s research drew from hijabi girls all around the world, with mention of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. Even though Gittinger used Butler's theory of gender performativity as well, she looked more towards the physical, real-body performativity rather than the digital one. In a way, this chapter will then attempt to fill in the spaces between these two studies to map out how the digital girl body is being performed through hijab cosplay online.

As mentioned in the literature review section, hijab cosplay has also been studied in Southeast Asia, but mainly in Indonesia. In Malaysia, the cosplay scene has been studied by Eriko Yamato (2016, 2020) in a broad way that encompasses not just cosplay, but also Japanese anime fandom. As such, there is still a gap in research on Malaysian hijab cosplay to understand this phenomenon from a local standpoint. The intersection of Japanese and Malaysian Muslim cultures demonstrates how transnationality operates through the fusion and reinterpretation of cultural elements, producing a distinct subculture of girlhood, especially online. Furthermore, within this space, the distinction between performance and performativity becomes crucial, as performativity increasingly defines the embodiment of hijabi cosplay identity.

Methodology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) by Fairclough (1995) explores how language reflects and reinforces power and ideology in contemporary capitalistic society. It views power not only as unequal relationships between speakers but also as control over how texts are created, circulated, and understood within specific social contexts. Through vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, and genre, language can promote dominant worldviews while marginalizing others. In integrating discourse analysis with social analysis, CDA combines three frameworks: analysis of discursive occurrences as examples of sociocultural practice, analysis of discourse practice (text production, distribution, and consumption), and analysis of (spoken or written) language texts (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). Through these analyses, CDA shows how discourse both maintains and challenges social hierarchies, especially during periods of cultural and economic change. This approach allowed me to explore how these girls use language to construct ideas of self and belonging.

For this chapter, online interviews were utilized to grasp a more detailed picture of hijab cosplay. Six hijabi cosplayers were chosen from Instagram, where they posted their cosplays on their respective accounts. The interviews took place over Microsoft Teams, and the data were analysed using CDA. These data bring insight into how identity is both performed and perceived in digital spaces.

Findings

Table 1
Participant's Preferred Name, Age, and Duration of Cosplaying

Participant	Age	How many years they have been cosplaying
Rainy	24	8
Hana	23	3
S	28	3–4
Anon	26	5
Kaida	24	3–4
Luna	33	3

The Malaysian Muslim girls mentioned how their religious identity is the most important aspect they hold on to, despite all of them being very active and passionate about Japanese cultural influence. All of them started their cosplay journey wearing the hijab, which means that none of them has experienced cosplaying in public *without* the hijab.

There were a few words that kept coming up in the interviews. One of them was "comfort" or "comfortable" and is usually used when discussing their choice of clothing in cosplay, or the poses they strike in their photos. Comfort here does not just mean a state of physical ease; instead, it also encompasses the emotions tied to their religious and cultural upbringing and values:

> Luna: Like when I think about cosplay, will this character – Will I be able to wear this? Will I be **comfortable** in this? As in **comfortable** for me physically and **comfortable** for, you know, for my belief – Like will I be **comfortable** wearing this?

Another common word is "modesty". However, one girl, Anonymous, mentioned it twelve times in one interview. She is ethnically Indian but has been a Muslim since birth. She is also the only interviewee who does not don the hijab that mimics the hair of the characters she cosplays. The fullest extent she has gone to cosplay with regards to the hijab is to match the colour of it to the character's hair colour.

> Anonymous: (Directly after her quote above) But in terms of, yeah, in terms of my **modesty**, that hasn't changed… I've always, like, made sure whatever I'm wearing, it's always still **modest**.

When discussing the reactions of their family members and of the wider animanga fan communities, the interviewees brought up their struggles and past experiences that are slightly more negative. All of them recounted mixed reactions from their family members upon discovering the girls' love for cosplay, using phrases such as "doesn't really understand", "Japanese is not our culture", "in the beginning they were a bit sceptical", and "[my mom] was so confused". Most of the girls would slowly gain some level of support from their parents and siblings, especially after reassuring them that they still practice Islamic religious teachings even in cosplay, while Rainy is the only one whose family members were still against her cosplaying despite repeated attempts to convince them that she has not abandoned her religion and culture. As a result, Rainy had to keep her cosplay a secret from her mother for around three years after she found out.

When asked about the progression of hijab cosplay, they mentioned some of the body parts that are difficult to cover up. These included the thighs and bosoms, and some interviewees brought up specific characters they initially wanted to cosplay but decided not to due to the nature of the character being too sexually portrayed in its original Japanese media. However, the exposure of most female characters did not deter some interviewees, as they found creative ways to cosplay the characters without compromising their own personal religious values. One interesting part of the interviews were when I asked them their opinions on two aspects: cross-dressing, and skin-coloured innerwear. Most of them rejected cross-dressing except for Anonymous, while all of them did not agree with donning on skin-coloured innerwear except for Kaida.

Table 2
Participants With the Number of Times They Used Words Relating to "Comfort" and "Modest", As Well as Their Takes on Cross-Dressing and Skin-Coloured Innerwear

Participant	"Comfortable/comfort"	"Modest/modesty/modestly"	Cross-dressing	Skin-coloured innerwear
Rainy	2	0	Used to cross-dress, but archived post and now appreciates gender-bending more	Believes that it's better to avoid because from afar, innerwear that may not be your skin-tone might still be mistaken as you showing your skin if it's skin-coloured
Hana	5	3	Reject (mentioned not supporting a Muslim cosplayer for cross-dressing, but didn't "attack" her or dm her)	Doesn't wear them (opting for black or white)
S	1	0	Used to cross-dress, but now will rethink her cosplay choices (I assume she now prefers not to cross-dress)	Wear black and white
Anon	4	12	Doesn't see a big issue with it because she still wears the hijab	Wear black and white, believe skin-coloured inner isn't allowed in Islam
Kaida	1	0	Doesn't cross-dress (gender-bent Nanami)	Wears them even in her daily life, so she thinks it's ok to wear them in cosplay too (but the colour of the innerwear is different from her actual skin tone) Uses the word "disrespectful" when talking about how other hijabi cosplayers view her with regards to Islam

Luna	6	0	Decides to "stay away" from it because she still has a lot to learn about Islam and cannot say whether it is totally okay to cross-dress or not ("I don't feel strongly about it")	Favours white-coloured inners (doesn't wear skin-coloured ones)
Total	16	15		

Discussion

Performance Versus Performativity in Hijabi Cosplay

It is necessary to first distinguish between performance and performativity, both from the perspective of cosplay and within the framework of girlhood. A performance, according to Butler, is an act of playing or assuming a role. This understanding presupposes a subject who exists prior to the act, and this subject is the one who performs. Performance, therefore, can be regarded as an individualistic expression, centred on the subject's unique experience. This is evident in the observations above, where each interviewee showcases a distinct interpretation of hijab cosplay. Yet, as several interviewees acknowledged the influence of other hijabi cosplayers as references or inspirations, it becomes apparent that cosplay performance also operates within a collective dimension. It is not solely an individual act but one embedded within a communal network of shared practices, aesthetics, and discourses.

This is where performativity becomes crucial. Performativity, as Butler theorizes, refers to the repetition of socially encoded habits, gestures, and rituals through which identity is constituted rather than merely expressed. It does not presuppose a pre-existing subject; rather, the subject emerges through the reiteration of acts. When we look at the embodied practice of veiling in Islamic cultural contexts, it can be understood that the individual does not exist as an independent subject before the act of veiling. Rather, it is through the repeated religious and cultural practice of wearing the veil that the person's identity is formed and shaped. Hijab cosplay, then, may be understood as an extension of this process: a performative effect of veiling that affirms Butler's argument that "you as a subject do not create or cause institutions, discourses and practices, but they create or cause you by determining your sex, sexuality and gender" (Salih, 2002, p. 10). In this sense, hijab cosplay emerges from the interaction between the religious and cultural meanings of veiling and the performative practices of fandom. Through this process, the hijab functions as a symbol of identity and as a medium through which that identity is performed.

The distinction between performance and performativity is further reflected in the evolving nature of the interviewees' cosplay practices. Both Rainy and S, for example, described having previously cosplayed male characters directly, but later chose to "gender bend" these portrayals. This shift underscores that hijab cosplay is not a static or fixed identity; rather, it is a fluid and ongoing process of negotiation. It does not strictly reproduce the original character's

behaviours, costumes, or gestures but instead integrates elements of the cosplayer's own identity and subjectivity. As such, hijab cosplay constitutes a continuous process through which cosplayers navigate personal comfort, modesty, and creative expression.

Rainy herself articulated this evolution, stating that she is becoming "more open" to liberal interpretations of cosplay and hijab cosplay. She reflected that while she once adhered rigidly to certain beliefs, "[people's] views change", and she now approaches character selection with greater flexibility rather than strict boundaries. This does not suggest a complete transformation in how she embodies the performativity of hijab cosplay but rather demonstrates that the practice itself resists fixed categorization. While individual interpretation remains central, hijab cosplay is sustained and shaped by a broader community of practitioners whose shared practices continuously redefine its contours.

Japanese Femininity and the Embodiment of Girlhood

Japanese anime frequently constructs femininity along two dominant archetypes: the *kawaii* girl, characterized by youthfulness and cuteness; and the mature, hyper-feminine woman, defined by sexual allure and bodily display. In examining the interviewees' interpretations of these gendered portrayals, most expressed a preference for embodying the *kawaii* aesthetic over the more overtly sexualized form of femininity. Characters such as Nezuko Kamado and Anya Forger, both canonically depicted as young girls, are often reinterpreted by the cosplayers through playful makeup, expressive poses, and exaggerated facial features that accentuate a sense of girlish innocence. The use of visual markers such as blush lines and enlarged eye effects further exemplifies their efforts to reproduce this stylized version of Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics.

It is noteworthy, however, that Nezuko's character also possesses an alternate demon form that represents a more adult embodiment of femininity, marked by physical maturity and accentuated curves (exposed cleavage). Nezuko represents a dual embodiment of Japanese femininity, encompassing both ends of the gendered spectrum: the *kawaii* innocence associated with young girls and the sensual, adult femininity often expressed through the display of the female body. This sexual element is something that hijabi cosplayers consciously avoid or reinterpret in their own portrayals to align with modesty norms and cultural sensibilities. They choose to portray Nezuko in her human form, emphasizing the *kawaii* dimension of her character rather than the sexualized aspects of her demon persona.

In Malaysia, femininity is conventionally framed through modesty, restraint, and moral propriety; thus, certain Japanese portrayals of femininity may appear incompatible or uncomfortable for hijabi cosplayers to embody. Hana, for instance, recounted that her parents initially disapproved of her participation in cosplay, believing that Japanese culture was "not their culture" and fearing that immersion in it might exert a negative influence on her values.

Hijabi cosplayers navigate these cultural and ideological tensions by reconfiguring the aesthetics of femininity within their performances. Rather than emphasizing sexuality or bodily display, they often redirect attention toward expressions of maturity, confidence, or emotional depth through their poses and character interpretation. This negotiation is also evident in their costume adaptations, where modest redesigns replace revealing elements from the original character designs. Through such reinterpretations, they construct a hybridized form of girlhood: One that synthesizes Malaysian Muslim notions of modest femininity with the globalized visual culture of Japanese cosplay.

Consequently, the form of girlhood performed by hijabi cosplayers in this study aligns more closely with the aesthetics of *kawaii*, associated with youthfulness and approachability, rather than with the mature or overtly sexualized femininity prevalent in mainstream Japanese media. Through the selective adaptation of *kawaii* aesthetics, these cosplayers produce a distinct, localized articulation of girlhood that bridges global pop-cultural imagery with Malaysian Muslim sensibilities.

Digital editing skills play a crucial role in enhancing and rearticulating these localized interpretations of Japanese femininity. Given that the *kawaii* aesthetic in animanga is often conveyed through visual effects and exaggerations that are difficult to replicate in real life, hijabi cosplayers frequently employ digital tools to reproduce or simulate these stylistic features. Through photo and video editing, they extend the expressive possibilities of makeup and posing, enabling a mediated performance of *kawaii* that bridges the visual language of animanga with the material and cultural constraints of lived embodiment.

The Sensitivity of the Female Body

Cosplay is an artform that is deeply body conscious. It is all about embodiment: How the body is dressed, posed, and seen. For hijabi cosplayers, this becomes a careful balancing act. They're visible online, often to large audiences, yet they're conscious of boundaries around exposure, modesty and anonymity.

For many hijabi cosplayers, cross-dressing and costume choices become key points of negotiation. Most avoid fully cross-dressing, instead reinterpreting male characters in ways that still retain a feminine presence. Similarly, skin-coloured innerwear is often rejected, as it can give the illusion of exposure; black or white layers are preferred instead. These creative decisions reveal how embodiment in cosplay is both a moral and aesthetic balancing act, carefully shaped by cultural and social values. This reflects how agency and self-expression can exist within, not despite, social expectations.

In addition, it is important to note that even the sensitivities are constantly changing within each interviewees' view: Some things may have been more acceptable in the past, but now they try to avoid it for fear of crossing boundaries set by their religious and cultural background. This is evident in Rainy's and S's account on cross-dressing, where they used to cross-dress but decided not to anymore. On the other hand, Anonymous mentioned that she does not feel any strong rejection towards cosplaying in a masculine way, because she still dons the hijab. We will study this point further in the next section on the fluidity of the hijab as symbol, but it also showcases that as sensitive it is to show, and at the same time, hide, the female body, sometimes the body is symbolically reduced to the presence of the hijab, which may then uproot the sensitivity of the female body based on Anonymous' standpoint.

As alteration is a crucial step in embodying performativity for hijabi cosplayers, there lies a problem with over-alteration. To give an example, Xilonen, a character from the game *Genshin Impact*, wears an outfit that shows a lot of skin. Hijabi cosplayers who are cosplaying her go through vigorous changes in the outfit to fit their own interpretation in a modest way.

Hana, one of my interviewees who experienced this, mentioned it being her hardest cosplay because of the difficulty in having to almost totally alter the outfit. In her research of Xilonen's hijab cosplay aesthetics, she highlighted another cosplayer's interpretation of Xilonen as unrecognizable. The result of performativity of the other cosplayer here has failed to a certain

extent because Hana doesn't identify with it despite taking on a similar identity. According to Butler, performativity is bound to fail because it is a repetition of something unstable, which in this case is Malaysian-Muslim girlhood within the cosplay context.

The skin tone is one of the focal points in the interview with Anonymous and Hana. They both mention being more tanned-skin, which makes cosplaying fair-skinned characters risky in the sense that it invites unwanted criticism on the colour of their skin from others. Hana decided to ignore hate comments targeted at her skin tone because she did her best and "wants to be happy" with her cosplay. Similarly, Anonymous recounted an experience in which she had a friend who recommended only dark-skinned characters for her to cosplay because she should cosplay as "someone who looks like her". The girl's body is in many ways scrutinized not just for the size and shape, but also for the colour of their skin. In short, everything about the girl's body is sensitive, and cosplay has also shown a side in which the body is always put in the spotlight.

The Fluidity of the Hijab as Symbol and Style, and the Omnipresence of Makeup

The hijab in hijab cosplay takes on new meaning. In daily life, it may symbolize faith or belonging within the Malaysian context. However, in cosplay, it becomes part of the character design itself, integrated into the visual aesthetic rather than placed on top of it. This distinguishes the normal cosplay wig with that of the hijab, because while the wig comes with the costume of the cosplay as one package, the hijab is initially not associated with the costume yet is reworked to be integrated into the cosplay as seamlessly as possible. This flexibility shows how the hijab operates as both symbol and style. It's adaptable and expressive, acting as a bridge between Malaysian and Japanese cultural worlds. Thus, the hijab becomes part of the character, not separate from it. By reimagining characters through the hijab, these cosplayers also subtly reshape the representation of Muslim women in global fandom, expanding what cosplay can look like.

What's interesting here is the difference in how certain forms of expression are accepted or rejected. For instance, skin-coloured innerwear is often seen as inappropriate because it's thought to simulate exposure. Yet, styling the hijab to look like hair is accepted, even celebrated, as a creative choice by the cosplayers. This shows that while the hijab can become a space where faith and creativity coexist, total creative freedom is, and can still be, bounded. The broader rules around how the female body should be shown continue to limit how far that creativity can go.

Makeup holds a similar position as the hijab in this sense: It works primarily to beautify the cosplayer, yet it is also used to simulate the facial features that they do not have. Since makeup is an essential component of cosplay, the interviewees stated early in the process that honing their makeup techniques improves their cosplay over time. However, since makeup has been traditionally associated with femininity, it is a testament to the enduring social practices upheld by patriarchy in which women and girls must beautify themselves to increase their own self-valorisation.

Ultimately, these hijabi cosplayers engage with performativity within the framework of Japanese femininity, but they re-shape it through their own cultural and religious identities, thus finding agency and creativity within the boundaries that define them.

Community, Surveillance, and Soft Power

Butler states that performativity is reliant on society and community on norms. Online cosplay communities offer both support and regulation, where members often uplift one another and offer advice, but they also comment on what's seen as "appropriate" or "in character". This shows that unspoken rules within the communities are socially produced and are not a natural fact. This dynamic reflects what Butler describes as the social regulation of identity: The idea that who we are is always formed in relation to others.

One example is through Hana's recount of an interaction with another fellow hijab cosplayer. One of the members in her hijabi cosplay group wanted to cosplay as a male character without gender-bending, even though she still does hijab cosplay.[1] Hana approached her to persuade her otherwise, but the girl declined to follow her advice. Hana wasn't angry with that girl but decided not to support her posts regarding male characters in hijab cosplay. This example presents a picture of how communities work to ensure that everyone has a degree of understanding and compliance to the norms upheld by others in proximity. Surveillance makes it possible for members to pinpoint the deviant of the group before deciding further steps to address any possible issues.

The hijabi cosplay community isn't exclusive to Muslims; it often welcomes non-hijabi cosplayers and even non-Muslim peers. There is an online Hijab Cosplay Online Contest that took place until the 30th of June 2025, in which one of the clauses allows for non-Muslim participants, and even mentioned providing hijab cosplay guidance for them (Hestella, 2025). This is a testament to the success of hijab cosplay in its transnational cultural exchange, and its acceptance by the online community. This inclusivity produces a kind of soft cultural power: a blending of physical and digital aesthetics that goes beyond boundaries, showcasing creativity as a form of shared understanding as the hijab can be worn without needing one to be Muslim. The hijab now becomes a transcultural element that exists both inside and outside religious context.

The interviewees view online hijabi cosplayer communities with equal positivity and negativity, as they understood the need to conform to others' expectations in terms of hijabi cosplaying or risk being seen as the deviant within the group. This balance shows an awareness of community standards and the consequences of crossing them. As Butler stated in their book *Gender Trouble*, the question is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat and even displace the gender norms that enable the repetition itself. Identity here is collective, shaped through community dialogue.

Conclusion

To conclude, hijabi cosplay in Malaysia illustrates how embodiment, performativity, and cultural negotiation intersect in transnational digital girlhood. Through repeated acts, such as wearing the hijab, styling costumes, posing for photos, these young women are not just mimicking Japanese characters. They're performing selfhood by enacting who they are through creative practice. Their participation challenges narrow views of both culture and fandom, offering instead a picture of plural identity, one that is, to a certain extent, flexible, confident, and deeply transnational. However, the fluidity of this embodiment shows a lapse in how

[1] Hana used the words "with male hair in hijab styling", which can only be translated to hijab styling that does not employ the illusion of long hair to enforce the feminization of the cosplay.

girlhood is traditionally viewed and understood, as cultural and gender scripts fail in its implementation through hijab cosplay. Hijabi cosplay portrays how global culture can be embraced while staying grounded in one's own social and religious world within the performativity framework of digital girlhood.

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

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

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From Cherry Blossoms to Broken Hearts: Life and Love in Japanese Films Released in Thailand

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Abstract

Love is still a cornerstone of storytelling in films worldwide. Likewise, Japanese films contain their charismas and reflect the images of Japanese society from various perspectives, particularly about life, love, and delicate as well as meaningful relationships. A number of these films have been screened in Thailand, and have attracted Thai viewers. Thus, this study focuses on the analysis of 9 Japanese films that have been released in Thailand i.e., *Tomorrow I Will Date With Yesterday's You* (Miki, 2016), *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (Tsukikawa, 2017), *Last Letter* (Iwai, 2020), *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022), *Insomniacs After School* (Mamoru, 2023), *April Come, She Will* (Yamada, 2024), *52-Hertz Whales* (Narushima, 2024), *Worlds Apart* (Seta, 2024), and *At the Bench* (Okayama, 2024). The analysis is grounded in Semiotics, *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1978), and Japanese philosophical perspectives on life. The findings revealed that Japanese films give the meanings of life and love through stepping over changes, love coming with pain, separation, loss, loneliness, and solitude. These refer to the storytelling of love and sadness with insights into the beauty of love. The stories are narrated through symbols, e.g., letters, flowers, stars, sea, whales, camera, parallel universe, etc. Love presented through Japanese films does not show pictures of fighting over love or hurting someone to possess their loved ones. In contrast, the films often depict characters facing uncontrollable external circumstances and inner emotional landscapes. The feeling of love mixed with loneliness, simplicity, tenderness, and broken hearts so as to grow further for living their valuable life again.

Keywords: meaning of life, meaning of love, film, Japanese film

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Introduction

Narration of life and love can be found in films worldwide, as love is a key element in life stories. The presented meanings of love in films are connected to philosophy, psychology, and society (Kieliszek, 2025). Familiar love stories in films are essentially full of happiness. However, they can actually be presented in multiple perspectives.

The presentation of life and love in Thai and Japanese films contain both similar and different perspectives. However, due to cultural, social, and economic differences, as well as other factors, Thai love stories usually present stories and meanings filled with hope and morale that have a happy ending. Piamkaroon (2017) found that films constructed with love images can be classified into four types. Romance remains the most popular theme, followed by youthful love filled with lightheartedness, various expressions of love, and depictions of familial affection. It can be said that most films present stories of beautiful love through romantic films.

According to the research of SereyLyfa and Chaiprasert (2022) on "Analysis of the Presentation Techniques and Ideas in Love Movies of GDH 559, Ltd.," it was found that Thai films made by GDH 599, a top film production company of Thailand, present the various concepts of love, i.e., romance (care, respect, forgiveness, and honesty), family love (concern and encouragement), and love of friends (warning, standing side by side, and support), through films. Subsequently, this study explores the concept of positive love, which conveys the meanings of romance and happiness.

Nonetheless, there are several dimensions of love. Love films in each country also contain various characteristics of narration. Social, economic, and cultural conditions, including ways of life, create the different perspectives of Japanese love films. The backgrounds of love and life are combined in the narration until they finally become a unique identity of these films, with a huge attraction when they are released overseas.

Umland and Umland (2001), in their study "All for Love: The Myth of Romantic Passion in Japanese Cinema," analyzed Japanese films by comparing them with romance in European literature of the Middle Ages, e.g., the legend of Tristan and Iseult, a tragedy with a heartbreaking ending of forbidden love that comes with death.

The forms of love found in narration, e.g., forbidden love, romantic passion, love suicides, and Liebestod (Love-Death), imply that strong love and love connected with death are common forms of love in Japanese films, particularly the obstacles that result in forlorn love, and death as the only way that shows adherence to love. It can be noted that the presentations of love that are connected to loss should contain the perspectives that bring a meaningful life, learning, growth, and the desire to continue living after painful experiences (Umland & Umland, 2001).

Poon (2014) studied Japanese films that present "first love" and found that there has been more production of this type of film. To clarify, from the year 2004 (Trends in Japan, 2004) onward, Japanese films of teenage love, young men and young women falling in love, and trying to make their love survive over external obstacles, particularly health problems such as "incurable diseases," and deep and impressive stories about fighting against obstacles were produced. These films are called "pure love" or "jun'ai" by critics. Notably, this kind of film is well-known and widely released in Thailand as it is popular among Thai viewers.

Back in 2004, (McCurry, 2004) Japan was impacted by a natural disaster, namely a 6.8 magnitude earthquake that killed a large number of people at that time in Niigata prefecture, approx. 150 miles north of Tokyo. The death toll was around 21, and 1,800 people were injured (McCurry, 2004). When considering that the society, economy, history, and location of Japan are all affected by disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis, it is clear that the Japanese live with an awareness of uncertainty and ever-present environmental changes. Consequently, melancholic emotions and sentiments are often expressed through diverse forms of Japanese art, including films. Teenage love films that portray young people striving to live despite facing death may inspire audiences to persevere.

Death, loss, and parting are the essential elements in narration and presentation through films. The study of Poon (2014) on "Love and Death in Recent Japanese Cinema" further suggested that Japanese films present love stories with the visualized past and that missing someone may affect the perception of love among the Japanese, which influences the construction of love ideologies that finally leads to building a family and having children as the image of family and the love that people crave. In this regard, being aware of death all of the time makes them try to live their life with the greatest value while they are still alive.

Therefore, love and death appear repeatedly in many Japanese films. In the research of Chen (2022) on "Death Aesthetics in Japanese Love Movies," love and death may be opposite, but both the Japanese media and culture present strong aesthetics of death. To illustrate, death is both beautiful and sad, death is the beginning of love stories and the end simultaneously, and death creates an eternity of love.

Likewise, Wang (2024) studied the aesthetics of death in the Japanese film "Love Letter," and found that there is an overlap between love and death, which are inseparable. Love always comes with parting. Despite loss or death, love still remains. Exploring love through death makes the characters learn and grow. Even so, it is noticeable that films may idealize too much sadness or create too many iconic images of love and loss. Nevertheless, films present death as a means for learning about and improving the perceived value of life.

Based on the observed Japanese films shown in Thai cinemas, most of them are romantic films portraying life and beautiful love, often ending with loss.

Research Questions

The research question is: Why does Japanese cinema frequently depict life and love that ends in loss or remains unfulfilled? This study seeks to interpret how such cinematic representations express the intertwined meanings of life and love.

To address this question, the study is guided by the following objectives.

Objectives

The objectives were 1) to analyze the meanings of life and love as conveyed through the narration in Japanese films released in Thailand, 2) to study the semiotics in the conveyed meanings of life and love in Japanese films, and 3) to connect the meanings of life and love with the elements of Japanese philosophy that are associated with the Buddhist concepts found in Thailand.

Therefore, this study analyzed the meanings of life and love based on textual analysis from nine Japanese romantic films released in Thailand, obtained by purposive sampling, i.e., *Tomorrow I Will Date With Yesterday's You* (Miki, 2016), *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (Tsukikawa, 2017), *Last Letter* (Iwai, 2020), *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022), *Insomniacs After School* (Mamoru, 2023), *April Come, She Will* (Yamada, 2024), *52-Hertz Whales* (Narushima, 2024), *Worlds Apart* (Seta, 2024), and *At the Bench* (Okayama, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

The concepts and theories utilized in this research included Semiotics, *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1978), and the Japanese philosophy of life. These philosophical ideas are also aligned with Buddhist perspectives, particularly in the acknowledgement of impermanence, suffering, and the transient nature of human existence.

Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field describing the meaning of a cultural object, which can be a "sign," depending on the given meaning. Generally, that meaning is more than the object itself, and is connected to social as well as cultural contexts. The given meaning contains a "signifier," referring to the physical attributes that show the existence of that certain thing and can be perceived by our five sensory receptors. As for "signified," it refers to the given meaning of that thing. Moreover, when a meaning is given beyond the denotative meaning, i.e., a connotative meaning, it is called a "sign." For example, the denotative meaning of red roses is a kind of flowers with red-colored petals. For the connotative meaning, it refers to what people give to one another in order to show love. Undoubtedly, red roses are a sign of showing love (Griffin, 2012).

A Lover's Discourse: Fragments is a philosophical work describing love with pieces of text (fragments of discourse) from people who fall in love, as if love were a wonderful magic that made them continuously express their language, thoughts, and gestures full of anxiety, the cycle of love, and obsession. Each fragment is like an emotional state that love-struck people are undergoing, e.g., waiting, silence, jealousy, absence, tenderness, etc. (Barthes, 1978). The Japanese philosophy of life refers to the concepts of living the Japanese way, which usually values meanings, aesthetics and beauty, reasons for living, imperfection, and changes (Basil Raj & Suganya, 2023).

When connected to love, showing love in the Japanese style through films conveys attractive meanings. Japanese films with narration about love are different from Thai love films as they can create a deep impression on viewers in terms of touching plots but also reflect the philosophy of life and numerous meanings of love ranging from simple happiness to the deep sadness caused by parting. Thus, the interpretation of cinematic love in this study is both aesthetic and embedded in culturally grounded belief systems that view love and loss as inseparable parts of life. The findings were revealed as follows.

Key Findings

According to the categorization of narrative structures in the nine Japanese love films analyzed in this study, the findings indicate that five were romantic dramas, two were teenage love stories, and the remaining two involved diverse forms of love (i.e., family, brotherhood-sisterhood, and friendship). All of these films present the images of beautiful, warm-hearted, sad, and lonely love; parallel to the obstacles on the way, such as loss, illnesses, and parting;

and finally ending with the lessons learned. These all imply the meanings of living a valuable life.

Table 1
Type of Love Film

Film Title	Type of Love Film
Tomorrow, I Will Date With Yesterday's You (Miki, 2016)	Romantic Drama
I Want to Eat Your Pancreas (Tsukikawa, 2017)	Coming-of-Age Romance
Last Letter (Iwai, 2020)	Romantic Drama
The Last 10 Years (Fujii, 2022)	Romantic Drama
Insomniacs After School (Mamoru, 2023)	Coming-of-Age Romance
April Come, She Will (Yamada, 2024)	Romantic Drama
52-Hertz Whales (Narushima, 2024)	Romantic Drama/Family Love
Worlds Apart (Seta, 2024)	Family Love
At the Bench (Okayama, 2024)	Slice of Life

Regarding the meanings of life and love, the semiotic symbols that communicate love, and the philosophy of life presented through films, these findings can be summarized into eight themes as follows.

Life and Love Do Not Last Forever

The meanings of life and love given through these films indicate the temporary existence of life and love during a certain period of time. For example, *Tomorrow I Will Date With Yesterday's You* (Miki, 2016) is a film narrating the love between a young woman and a young man from the different times. They have fallen in love for only a period of time, and must be parted due to the difference in time. Despite the overlapping time, it is still only a short period for them to live together.

Life With Illnesses, Love With Disappointment

Illnesses are a common thing that we have to experience. Unfortunately, serious illnesses during youth take away one's living time at every single moment. *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (Tsukikawa, 2017) narrates the story in the memory of a high school teacher with burnout syndrome. In the old days, he was a high school student. He was introverted, loved reading, and barely had any friends. He discovered a secret of a female classmate from her diary, written about the story of her illness resulting from liver cancer. Then, he accidentally built a close relationship with her until the day she died. Now, he works as a teacher at the same school, and finds a letter she wrote to him. This letter brings him the motivation to keep on living and to do his best as a teacher.

If we realize that we are undergoing an incurable disease and that we can only continue to live for 10 years, what shall we do? *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022) narrates the story of a young woman with a serious illness, confusion, and intense pain at the beginning. It turns the cheerful and lively woman into the quiet one until she learns how to spend her time in a worthwhile manner during the last 10 years of her life. That is to say, she works on writing with full

determination as a job that she loves. In the meantime, she falls in love with someone who makes her life filled with value. Although she does not have much time left, these are the meaningful final moments of her life.

Life and Love as a Beautiful Memory

The past and the memories of humans contain the beauty of living. Our past can provide us with either wounds or growth. *Last Letter* (Iwai, 2020) narrates the story of a previous love and a relationship that are finally resolved as time goes by. The plot is about two sisters who both had an attachment with the same young man. It is an imperfect relationship and an untold feeling. The narration is presented through the switching roles of the younger sister and the dead elder sister. At a class reunion party, the younger one is mistaken as her sister. This becomes an open door to bring back the letters, memories, and relationship of the past. Regardless of her sister's death, the story is still told and conveyed with missing someone, along with the explored relationship and feelings through the letters between the younger sister and the young man who actually falls in love with the other one. Both of them talk about their own past loves in order to move on with an increased perceived value of life.

Life is to Follow Our Dreams and to Share Them With Someone We Love

Life in high school is often shown repeatedly in Japanese films. It is the age range of growth, learning, self-searching, and exploring for preferences. Friendship and love also usually occur during this time. Insomniacs After School (Mamoru, 2023) is the story about the insomnia of the two high school students, a boy and a girl. Because of this symptom, they spend their time on nightlife. Stargazing becomes an exciting activity, and thus they try to restart the Astronomy Club at school. An unemptied life makes us feel valuable. This film presents that doing something enjoyable makes a meaningful life. The love between the two people is not only a romance but is also combined with friendship and the sharing of their common interest.

Life Is to Understand Changes and to Live With the Present

April Come, She Will (Yamada, 2024) narrates that when receiving a letter from his ex-girlfriend, a young psychiatrist who is going to get married with his new lover starts to hesitate. The letter was received in April, the season of spring that is full of joy and blooming cherry blossoms. He takes time to review the past love as he tries to understand the present. Eventually, he decides to keep his new love that he is having although he is wistful for the past love. The meaning of life and love is shown as the acceptance of change and confronting the past in order to choose our own true future.

Life is the Process of Learning From Pain to Better Understand Ourselves and Others

The perceived value of life, self-love, and never letting ourselves get hurt is a way to live a meaningful life. *52-Hertz Whales* (Narushima, 2024) narrates the story of a girl abused by her family. More specifically, she has been assaulted by her parents since childhood. Despite her cries for help, nobody hears them, until she finally meets the man who gives her a hand, and she can live on her own. The story of her life can be compared to *52-Hertz Whales*, of which the frequency is different from other kinds of whales. For this reason, she had to live her lonely life with pain and without understanding from anyone until she received his help. However, he lives with pain too, for he cannot be what he wants to be indeed. He is not accepted by his own family, and thus he decides to commit suicide. As for the female character, she learns how to

live after recovery from the pain. This film makes us learn and perceive the value of life and how to live without pain, including independence and being ourselves. Love here refers to self-love, self-understanding, and passing the love forward by understanding others.

Life and Love Involve Adaptation and Understanding Each Other

Worlds Apart (Seta, 2024) is the story about a young aunt and a young niece living together. Both of them come from different worlds. The aunt is a working-age woman who is an introverted and unmarried writer, whereas her niece is a high school girl who has just lost her parents from an accident. The aunt is the only relative left. Although she does not like her teenage niece at first, she decides to patronize her and accepts her to live at home. The film presents the differences of age, thoughts, and experiences. The girl learns to deal with her emotions and feelings after the loss of her parents while the introverted and isolated aunt opens her heart more. Both adapt and live together better. The meaning of life that is shown is to get ready for adaptation and to change ourselves according to the situations or changing conditions in our life. Similarly, the meaning of love is to understand and learn about the differences of each other.

Life and Love As Sharing and Listening to Each Other

At the Bench (Okayama, 2024) explores the relationships of many people through the narration while sitting on a bench in a park and listening to one another. The relationships of friends, lovers, siblings, and family in different situations only occur at the bench in this park. But surprisingly, sitting there to listen to the stories and conversations can keep these people listening to one another attentively. In the middle of a speedy routine and the chaos in the daily life, this film makes us feel a slow life as well as the practice of listening and sharing. Therefore, the meanings of life and love revealed through this film may refer to taking a rest, sharing a little time, and listening to one another.

Therefore, it is clear that Japanese love films communicate the meanings of life and love in a way that indicates the truth of life with an emphasis on beautiful moments of love through sweet and lonely love at the same time, including pain, disappointment, loss, and the tragedies or unhappy endings of lovers. Most films depict a serene ending that shows the growth, acceptance, and understanding of life among the characters. The primary perspective toward life and love in these films is to learn about them through loss.

According to *A Lover's Discourse* of Japanese love films, the characters usually prefer silence, write instead of speaking, communicate their love through actions, do not say "I love you" directly, listen to their loved ones, care and stand side by side, let their loved ones be themselves, do not ask for anything, wait rather than possess, and accept the uncertainty of love rather than expecting eternal love.

Table 2
The Meaning of Life and Love in Japanese Films Released in Thailand

Film Title	Meaning of Life and Love	A Lover's Discourse
Tomorrow, I Will Date With Yesterday's You (Miki, 2016)	Life and love do not last forever.	Love is beautiful yet short-lived; separation is inevitable.
I Want to Eat Your Pancreas (Tsukikawa, 2017), *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022)	Life with illnesses, love with disappointment.	Love often comes with disappointment and pain.
Last Letter (Iwai, 2020)	Life and love as a beautiful memory.	Longing and recalling the past become part of healing and moving on.
Insomniacs After School (Mamoru, 2023)	Life is to follow our dreams and to share them with someone we love.	Love is the devotion to doing what you love without giving up.
April Come, She Will (Yamada, 2024)	Life is to understand changes and to live with the present.	Revisiting past love in order to love more deeply in the present.
52-Hertz Whales (Narushima, 2024)	Life is the process of learning from pain in order to better understand ourselves and others.	To love is to understand and accept the other as they truly are.
Worlds Apart (Seta, 2024)	Life and love involve adaptation and understanding each other.	Love is the beauty of differences living in harmony.
At the Bench (Okayama, 2024)	Life and love as sharing and listening to each other.	Listening with the heart to the one you love.

Semiotics to Signify Life and Love

The subject films convey the meanings of life and love through meaningful constructed semiotics. The denotative meanings are presented as follows.

Parallel World and Time

For communication about love and life through living in different worlds, the characters will never be together forever due to the limitations of the different worlds and time. *Tomorrow I Will Date With Yesterday's You* (Miki, 2016) presents the mismatch of timing, resulting in a disappointment in love. The film conveys the meaning of living in the present and making the best use of one's time.

Cherry Blossoms and Seasons

Cherry blossoms and seasons appear in *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022) and in *April Come, She Will* (Yamada, 2024). The word "April," in the name of the film, is an important month with the meaning of change as it is the time of growing trees and flowers blooming. *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022) contains the scenes of cherry blossoms blooming and withering in accordance with the changing seasons, signifying temporary beauty and its changes.

Incurable Diseases

Physical and mental illnesses are the obstacles that cause an unhappy ending of love. *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (Tsukikawa, 2017) and *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022) present heartbroken love that is due to deadly diseases and death later on. Such parting makes us perceive the value of time more while we are still living, along with an understanding of illnesses as a common thing that all of us must suffer from.

Writing Books and Letters

Writing is a semiotics of pain relief. It involves storytelling and noting thoughts as well as memories, and it becomes a symbol of communication between lovers. In the films *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (Tsukikawa, 2017), *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022), *Last Letter* (Iwai, 2020), and *Worlds Apart* (Seta, 2024), the characters write a diary, a book, or a letter as a way to communicate their thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Writing symbolizes the communication of love and the healing of the heart from pain.

Stars and Stargazing

The study of stars is an activity of the teens in *Insomniacs After School* (Mamoru, 2023). They suffer from insomnia, and thus they spend their nights stargazing. Stars symbolize hope, dreams, morale, shining, and missing someone. Therefore, the word “stars” represents lovers and romance. Legends and fairy tales also use stars as symbols of positivity and beauty.

Sea and Whales

Silence, calm, vastness, the occasional turbulence of the sea, and lonely whales frequently appear in Japanese films. *52-Hertz Whales* (Narushima, 2024) use whales and the ocean to communicate love, loneliness, and the desolation of humans. Love filled with the deep sadness of the characters can be compared to the sea, while whales represent calm, the need to blend with people, the lack of a need to be alone or different, and the need for someone to listen.

Cameras and Taking Photos:

The purpose of taking photos is to record memories, thoughts, feelings, and the beauty of what is discovered. The character in *April Come, She Will* (Yamada, 2024) uses a camera to take photos so as to stop time in order to preserve the memories of his time spent with his loved one and for recording the beauty of nature. The camera symbolizes the time of love.

Bench

The bench in the park from *At the Bench* (Okayama, 2024) conveys the meaning of listening to one another in the relationships of lovers, friends, and family. The factors that allow the relationships to continue include listening, having time to talk, and spending time together because time can be compared to the showing of love to one another.

Table 3
Symbols Representing the Meanings of Life and Love

Film Title	Symbols	Meaning
Tomorrow, I Will Date With Yesterday's You (Miki, 2016)	**Parallel world and time** The parallel world represents a love that cannot coexist in reality, while time symbolizes impermanence.	Being fully present in the moment.
The Last 10 Years (Fujii, 2022), April Come, She Will (Yamada, 2024)	**Cherry blossoms and seasons** Cherry blossoms symbolize life and love that bloom and fade with the changing seasons.	Beautiful love exists only for a brief moment before fading with time.
I Want to Eat Your Pancreas (Tsukikawa, 2017) *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022)	**Incurable diseases** A terminal illness reveals the fragility of existence and awakens an awareness of life's transience.	Loss is an inevitable part of the human experience.
I Want to Eat Your Pancreas (Tsukikawa, 2017) *The Last 10 Years* (Fujii, 2022) *Last Letter* (Iwai, 2020) and *Worlds Apart* (Seta, 2024)	**Writing books and letters** Writing is the bridge between life and memory, a quiet act of recording love.	Preserving love as memory is an act of reflection on the essence of living. Though love may pass, it lingers as a beautiful memory that gives life meaning.
Insomniacs After School (Mamoru, 2023)	**Stars and stargazing** Stars symbolize dreams and hope, while stargazing together represents the sharing of loneliness.	Hope, inspiration, and the pursuit of a meaningful existence.
52-Hertz Whales (Narushima, 2024)	**Sea and whales** The ocean mirrors the human subconscious, while the *52-Hertz Whales* becomes the voice of loneliness echoing in silence.	Loneliness, peace, and a sense of harmony with life.
April Come, She Will (Yamada, 2024)	**Cameras and taking photos** Freezing time to preserve the beauty of a fleeting moment.	Preserving a beautiful moment is an act of remembrance.
At the Bench (Okayama, 2024)	**Bench** A space for listening and peaceful coexistence.	Simply being aware of the presence of the one you love, sitting together in silence, and sharing time is already a beautiful form of love.

Thus, it can be seen that love in Japanese films relies on communication through simple semiotics and symbols in the daily life of the characters. Only a few use direct dialogue stating "I love you" straightforwardly. It is considered preferable to communicate through symbolization with connotative meanings and the value of life and love.

The Meanings of Life and Love Connected to the Japanese Philosophy of Life

The subject Japanese love films narrate love in several different ways by adapting attractive connotative meanings from the Japanese philosophy of life as follows.

Mono No Aware

This concept explains that the beautiful and blooming time of all entities in this world is temporary. Therefore, we should live in the present moment and absorb beauty while also getting ready to deal with uncertainty and changes. The films that make us realize the uncertainty of life and love, such as *Tomorrow I Will Date With Yesterday's You* (Miki, 2016), *I Want to Eat Your Pancreas* (Tsukikawa, 2017), and *Last Letter* (Iwai, 2020) present that although life is beautiful, time and deadly diseases bring about temporary beauty. Nevertheless, humans must learn how to deal with sadness and live with the truth of life.

Kintsugi and Wabi-sabi

This Japanese philosophy describes the wounds, pains, and disappointment as what is to be learned and that which creates a more meaningful life. We should embrace those pains, heal the wounds, and move on (The Present Move, 2024). *52-Hertz Whales* (Narushima, 2024) and *Worlds Apart* (Seta, 2024) are love films associated with families. The first character is abused by her own family while the other one loses her parents. Both characters heal their wounds and can finally move on.

Ikigai

It refers to the reasons for and the value of living (Gaines, 2020), including visualized beauty and a simple life. This is the highlighted characteristic of the Japanese love films *At the Bench* (Okayama, 2024), *Worlds Apart* (Seta, 2024), and *Insomniacs After School* (Mamoru, 2023). They simply narrate the stories, with a visualized simple way of living. The characters live their lives with perceived beauty in their daily routines, devoting their best to what they love to do, having goals to achieve, and accepting the changes in life.

It can be said that Japanese films provide the opportunity to learn to accept uncertainty and imperfection and to value living in the present. These viewpoints are similar to "The Four Noble Truths," the Buddhist concept consisting of Dukkha (Suffering), Samudaya (the origin of suffering), Nirodha (the cessation of suffering), and Magga (the path to the cessation of suffering). To elucidate, Dukkha refers to the uncontrollable problems of life, Samudaya refers to the causes of those problems, Nirodha refers to getting out of all problems, and Magga refers to the solutions (Oakes, 2018).

Therefore, Japanese love films depict the beauty of love and present the uncertainty of both life and love that can change with time. The important thing is to live with the present and to perceive the beauty of a simple life.

Conclusion

Japanese love films are different from the love films that Thais are familiar with. Those from Japan mostly give precedence to the meanings of life and love through the beautiful images they present with perspectives toward the world based on reality and simplicity. Love is simply a part of life and is available in various types of relationships, i.e., lovers, friends, and families. Beautiful love occurs but does not last forever. Love is confronted with parting, loss, accidents, deadly diseases, and death; however, these obstacles in love help to create the perceived value of living, just like the semiotics of cherry blossoms that present their beautiful blooming at a

certain time of the year and then wither with the season. Thus, love represents the changes and uncertainty of life that continually occur throughout our lives all of the time.

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A Perfect Prelude: The Cultural Significance of Wagashi

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Abstract

The term wagashi refers to a traditional Japanese confectionary often connected with Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony. In a formal tea gathering it is served about half-an-hour before the tea is offered and its function is to prepare one's pallet for the slightly bitter taste of matcha, served in the form of thick tea, koicha, where powdered tea is blended by a bamboo whisk with a small amount of hot water. This tea, shared between a small number of guests, is the pinnacle of a chaji – a formal tea gathering, which includes serving of a kaiseki meal, the laying of two fires and the serving of two different kinds of tea preceded by two different types of okashi. This paper will focus on the history and cultural significance of wagashi in the context of Chanoyu, their seasonal poetic names and the art, practice and business of okashi making. Wagashi are not so much about taste as they are works of art. Meant to be consumed shortly after being made, they possess both historical and cultural significance that goes beyond their taste. Not a dessert at the end of a meal but rather a prelude to another experience, wagashi are a cultural universe in the form of edible sculptures. They are part of a tradition carefully passed from generation to generation, which is still very much alive in Japan today.

Keywords: aesthetics, culture, chanoyu, mindfulness, contemplation, intercultural studies, washoku, wagashi, culinary studies

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Introduction

The term Wagashi ("wa" – Japanese, "kashi" – confectionary) is used along with other terms starting with Wa (Wafuku, Washitsu, Washi, Wamono etc.) to distinguish Japanese origin of the following object. It is almost impossible to adequately translate the term okashi. "Confectionery" usually refers to sweet foods like candy, pastries, chocolate, and the stores that one can buy them at. Flour confectionery refers to pastry, chocolate confectionery – to chocolate, milk confectionery – to sweets made from cream, or condensed milk, while sugar confectionary refers to candies. Therefore, neither "confectionary" nor "sweets" are the accurate terms. In a word "Okashi" "Ka" stands for "fruit" and "Shi" for "child". There is no indication of sweetness or sugar used. It seems that the best way could simply be to leave the term as is and use it without translation.

Today, Wagashi is an umbrella term for a great variety of "sweets" with many regional variations with the emphasis on the Japanese origin of the product. In this paper, I will be using the term okashi referring to the okashi used in Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony. While Western sweets most often have descriptive names that are helping to select the desired kind of taste and texture (strawberry shortcake, apple pie, chocolate ice-cream), wagashi often have a name rather than a simple ingredients focused description – matsukaze (wind in the pines), raindrop mochi, yatsuhashi (eight bridges) etc. While Okashi are part of the culinary culture, they go beyond just taste as complex as it might be. They carry an important cultural significance and are part of a long-standing unbroken tradition. By learning about okashi we are able to explore many important aspects of Japanese culture.

The Art of Five Senses

The first okashi-like foods were eaten in Jomon period (10,000 BC–300 BC). They were made from chestnut "flour" or ground chestnuts with the addition of eggs and other ingredients and were later baked. Yayoi period (300 BC–300 AD) brought rice production to Japan and together with it dango dumplings made of rice flour gained popularity. Rice flour was also used to make mochi – okashi still widely used today. On the 16th day of the 6th month in 848 (Heian period) Emperor Ninmyō made an offering of sixteen okashi called Kashogashi to the Kami at Ise Shrine during the main yearly ritual in prayer for the health and prosperity of the nation and healing from the plague. Later one was added to six to form seven, then seven okashi were traditionally offered before higher procedures in Chanoyu. Later June 16th became a national okashi day. Sugar has been initially brought to Japan in Nara period (710–795) and was both rare and expensive, so it was mainly used in medicine. Later, in Heian period, custom of exchange of sugar-based okashi became common among aristocrats. Its culinary use expanded significantly after the arrival of the first Europeans in Japan. They brought sugar and knowledge of how to produce it, but it wasn't until late 1800s that sugar became widely available and cost-effective.

Most okashi we know today were created in Edo period (1603–1868) and got their development during Meiji.

Suzuki Sōken calls okashi "the art of five senses" (Suzuki, 2025). First, guests see okashi with their eyes. Just like with a work of art, they appreciate the shape, the colour and colour combinations, details, and general form. These days, there are exhibitions of okashi where the displayed namagashi are so intricate and complex that it seems they have long departed from the idea of simplicity that Chanoyu promotes, and the very purpose of being a prelude rather

than the main. Hearing refers to texture and the sound some elements can cause when the guests are eating okashi. They are normally cut with a small metal cutter kept in a stack of papers each guest would have on them. They are cut in approximately three pieces; each cut may reveal the design inside. While fragrance seldom encouraged as an element of okashi, if such element as yuzu citron or dried persimmon are used, inevitably guests notice and enjoy the seasonal smell.

Texture of okashi is being examined also once the pieces are in the mouth. In Japanese there are two different words to describe texture appreciation in food. "Hazawari" refers to how it feels on one's teeth while "shitazawari" – to the way it feels on one's tongue. The same area of the tongue is responsible for both bitter and sweet taste. So, it is the same area of the tongue that would be "responsible" for the perception of the taste of okashi and of the taste of tea. The taste of okashi is supposed to prepare the palette for the taste of tea. Therefore, it is supposed to be soft, not overpowering in any way, leading the way to a bowl of tea. Omogashi are usually served either on the small individual plates, or in stacked lacquer boxes called fuchidaka, or in larger bowls for a more informal occasion.

Higashi (or "dried kashi") are offered before the thin tea, called "usucha". Usually, two kinds are placed on a tray as guests may have more than one bowl of thin tea. When selecting higashi, the host will consider the combination of the two kinds, thinking of the textures and images. They both may even become the two elements of a composition, such as a waterfall and green maple leaves for summer.

Okashi in Chanoyu

Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony, is an interdisciplinary complex, a synthesis of traditional Japanese and world arts and crafts combined with multiple cultural elements and brought together in a creative ritual of preparing, making and sharing a bowl of tea. Rand Castile writes that tea in Japan is such a special beverage that drinking it became "a way of life" (Castile, 1971). Chanoyu includes architecture, garden design, incense, ceramics, lacquer, woodwork, bamboo craft, textiles, metal work, paper, calligraphy, culinary arts, and okashi. Students of tea would learn various procedures specific to use of an object or a season or both.

At the heart of tea practice lies the form to which all the elements lead and to which they connect. This form is called chaji or a formal tea gathering that would consist of two different teas, two fire ceremonies, and an hour-long kaiseki meal. Sanmi Sasaki categorizes seven basic forms of chaji and mentions fifteen other variations (Sasaki, 1996). Chaji is focused on offering the guests a bowl of thick tea, and everything else is done to prepare guests' palette and mind for this experience of partaking a bowl of tea. The purpose of okashi is to prepare the palette for a, some may say, slightly bitter taste of matcha. According to Sanmi Sasaki, "the flavour (of tea) is intoxicating, inescapable, memorable" (Sasaki, 2005). Okashi are paving the way to this experience as they are always connected to koicha thick tea shared by the guests from the same bowl, and not to the kaiseki meal. I argue that they should not be considered a dessert but be taken as a separate experience directly connected with the following in about half an hour bowl of tea. In colder season okashi follow the kaiseki meal but not because they are connected to the meal itself. The first thing the host does is warm the room by laying the charcoal in a certain precise way so it will boil/warm the water by the certain time. Then kaiseki meal is served and okashi are offered. In warmer season, kaiseki meal is served first, followed by the charcoal laying and then okashi are offered. After okashi have been eaten guests are going back to the garden to have a short break. When they return to the tearoom, the host makes (kneads,

actually) a bowl of thick tea that will be shared by all the guests. Their palette is well prepared as the taste of okashi still lingers in their mouths.

In Chanoyu, there are two main kinds of okashi – omogashi (main okashi) or namagashi (freshly made okashi) and higashi – so called "dried kashi". Omogashi are made or bought the day of the tea as they do las more than a day or two. They are about the size of an egg and are usually made from either red or white beans paste, called an. An can be smooth (koshi-an) or still with larger particles (tsubu-an). Beans are soaked, cooked, squeezed by hand to extract the flesh, and cooked further with sugar. They will later be sculpted to the desired shapes. There are other kinds of an, such as chestnut an, or cooked egg yolk an, as well as some cooked vegetables variations. Other kinds of omogashi include mochi, nerikiri, kanten, kuzu, domyojiko etc.

Omogashi always represent a seasonal image and always have a seasonal name. For example, at the end of November, when we are about to welcome winter, poetic names will reflect snow, ice, cold and warmth of the indoors, while in July we will use the names and images of water, rain, wind, something that brings a cool feeling. It isn't just the name that will reflect seasonality. In summer "clear", "see-through" textures are favoured while steamed or warm okashi will be naturally used in winter.

Poetry of Okashi

What keeps okashi apart from the Western confectionary is certainly the fact that especially when used for tea they would have a poetic name which will greatly contribute to the overall narrative of a tea gathering. The names are always seasonal, and they will always be shared with the guests once the tea is tasted. These names reflect anticipation of the approaching season or micro season. While seasons are observed in many cultures, in Japan, the study of the seasons became a special field. According to Sasaki Sanmi, "kisetsukan" or feeling of the season is at the core of Chanoyu (Sasaki, 2005), and nowhere it reflects more than in seasonal poetic names of okashi. For example, Harugasumi or Spring Mist refers to the delicate hazy atmosphere of spring, while Mizubotan – Peony in Water, made of see-through kuzu arrowroot, is used in early or mid-summer to offer an image of water and a cool feeling during the hot time of the year. Ginga or Silver River is connected to the Milky Way and is used during the Tanabata celebration in early July. Okuribi or the lights to see someone off will be used during O Bon festival when the souls of the departed are believed to return to the family homes and then go back to where they came from; to illuminate their way, hundreds of bonfires in the shape of various characters are lit on the slopes of the mountains to help the souls of the departed to return. Tsuki-no Kage or Moon Glow is used in September when the moon is most beautiful. It draws on poetic anthology of Hyakuninisshū, poem number seventy-nine about the clear and pure moonlight. Hatsumomiji or the First Red Leaves will be used in late October when the leaves are turning colour, while Kogarashi written with a character for tree and a character for "wither", "dry up" will be used later in November as it refers to a cold wind bringing down the las leaves on the trees. A very auspicious okashi- hishi hanabira mochi – are used for the first tea of the year and made of a brightly coloured red/pink miso an and a piece of candied burdock wrapped in a thin circle of mochi showing the pink and symbolizing the inner dignity.

Conclusions

Wagashi are an important part of Japanese cultural fabric and a centuries-long rich tradition from which we can learn about the evolution of taste and the sense of beauty of the Japanese. While many cultural elements in Japan have their roots in China and Korea, the way Japanese accepted, modified, and transformed them is unique, and it made these elements truly Japanese. Chanoyu takes okashi to a different level of cultural existence by providing it a prominent place within the cultural complex. Wagashi are not only part of culinary studies but are an important part of the cultural context as they are closely connected with other elements of Chanoyu and beyond. Unlike Western confectionary, wagashi are closely connected with literature, poetry in particular, as they always have seasonal poetic names. They can teach us how to live a healthier and happier life and move towards a more balanced, aesthetically beautiful and mindful way of preparing, serving and partaking the food and enjoy every moment bringing beauty and mindfulness into seemingly mundane corners of every day. Mara Miller writes: "The value of Japanese aesthetics lies less in the knowledge they give us about the Japanese… than the truths they expose about the human condition…" (Miller, 2011).

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Ecocritical Gamescapes for Sustainable Ecological Futures: *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and *In Other Waters*

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Abstract

This paper examines how digital games may model alternative relationships to the environment, climate, and multispecies life through the processes they enable players to inhabit. Through close hermeneutic readings of *Endling: Extinction is Forever* (Herobeat Studios, 2022) and *In Other Waters* (Jump Over The Age, 2020), the analysis explores how these games frame climate imaginaries as sites of critical unlearning, subverting existing discourses on human-environment relations. It focuses on both an affective analysis of ludic design elements, such as failure and asymmetrical agency within the games' narrative, aesthetics, and mechanics, as well as an overview of player engagement through their online discourse.

Keywords: ecocriticism, digital games, climate, ocean

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Introduction

Digital games increasingly serve as transformative, cultural sites for negotiating planetary crises, existential exploration, and ecologic imaginaries (Backe, 2024; Chang, 2019). For example, Sezer (2025) examines abyssal ecologies and nonhuman agency in oceanic games; Op de Beke (2025) analyses how games represent climate change-induced shifts in seasonality; while Morton's (2016) account of dark ecology features ecological entanglement, destabilising anthropocentric frameworks that traditionally shape environmental discourse. Collectively, these approaches, among others, demonstrate how games can remodel climate imaginaries in ways that transcend mere representation. This paper intends to contribute to such emerging conversations within ecocritical game studies by examining how recent independent games model forms of unlearning that subvert dominant anthropocentric assumptions.

Conceptual Background

Open-world role-playing games such as *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft, 2013) often reward conquest and resource accumulation in colonial settings. Cozy life simulators, like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020), present softer aesthetics but also rely on cycles of harvesting and management. Both these games, as well as other similar mainstream games, encode anthropocentric assumptions: land as resource, nature as passive, and the player as the one who imposes a human-centered order.

Against this landscape, I compare two games: *Endling: Extinction is Forever* (Herobeat Studios, 2022) and *In Other Waters* (Jump Over the Age, 2020), reading both as case studies that reframe anthropocentric worldviews through their interfaces, narratives, and affective structures. So, how do these games subvert some of the dominant, anthropocentric, and technocratic ideological tropes often found in games, especially regarding terrestrial and marine territories, life, and survival?

Rather than treating games as platforms for didactic climate messaging, this analysis examines the medium as participatory media, in which narrative, systems, and player action are combined to illustrate how the world operates (Aarseth, 1997; Juul, 2005; Murray, 1997). Drawing on scholarship that views meaning as co-created by players and systems (Newman, 2002; Treanor & Mateas, 2013), this analysis investigates how games might challenge and reimagine dominant anthropocentric and technocratic perspectives on the environment.

Understanding the need to reframe climate change as a crisis of meaning and imagination, not only scientifically, demands us to scrutinise the underlying capitalist logics that inform nature and subjectivity across media (Guattari, 2014; Heise, 2009; Jordan, 2014; Moore, 2015). In this context, digital games serve as critical, artistic sites for intervention, challenging and reshaping our understanding of the human-nature relationship amid the Anthropocene (Abraham & Jayemanne, 2017). Upon reviewing existing literature, games can be understood as expressive platforms where aesthetics and rhetorics intertwine to model alternative understandings and experiences of climate, or, broadly speaking, reconfigure exploitative, unsustainable structures.

Brief Look at Common Tropes

Firstly, environmentally oriented games, namely, those that explore land or sea, expand territory, or confront natural threats (Abraham & Jayemanne, 2017), usually depend on the

player as the primary enactor of change or action. This can be seen as a saviour or hero complex (Ford, 2025), in which the player is positioned as the singular agent capable of restoring balance or averting collapse. This is especially evident in city-building or restoration simulation games such as *SimCity* (Maxis, 2013) or *Terra Nil* (Free Lives, 2023), which orchestrate change through a single, human manager.

Secondly, in those games often centered on exploration, settlement, or development, territories usually start out empty, void of political history or indigenous presence, and awaiting the player's presence. This is apparent in games like *Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2016) or *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), where "terra nullius" landscapes are reduced to extractable metrics of progress and conquest (Frelik, 2024; Mukherjee, 2017). There, meaning begins only with the player's arrival.

Thirdly, such games also often aestheticise nature as serene or awe-inspiring. Cozy-life or farming simulation games, such as *Animal Crossing* or *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), regularly present nature as aesthetically pleasing, domesticated, and controlled into stable, safe loops (Pinder, 2024). This parallels survival games, such as *The Long Dark* (Hinterland Studio, 2017), where, even though nature is presented in threatening ways, it is nevertheless highly stylised and rendered as sublime or majestic (Backe, 2024; Navarro-Remesal & Terrasa Torres, 2024).

Finally, another element found in many ecological or resource management-based games is care. Namely, care operating as a systemic function, where caring for animals, populations, or environments is implemented as a managerial mechanic, quantifying lives and feelings into optimisable metrics, such as in *Herdling* (Okomotive, 2025) or *Frostpunk* (11bit studios, 2018).

Analysis of *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and *In Other Waters*

An alternative model is presented in *Endling: Extinction is Forever.* In this ecocritical game, the player assumes the role of the last mother fox on a devastated Earth. At night, she scavenges, avoids dangers, and keeps four cubs alive. Shortly after the game begins, one cub is kidnapped, prompting a broader search through landscapes impacted by deforestation and pollution. Though the game employs painterly visuals, it resists romanticised nature: the beauty of the world lingers residually, with landscapes deteriorated by past extraction. In this way, *Endling: Extinction is Forever* inverts the tropes of an empty land full of resources. Unlike many other survival games that start in untouched wilderness, *Endling: Extinction is Forever* starts after extraction, where the world is already contaminated and finite.

This inversion extends to care as a systemic function and to the human saviour trope. The player does not embody an omnipotent manager or redeemer, but a vulnerable nonhuman caregiver. The player's agency is radically constrained as the fox as there is no rebuilding, terraforming, or fighting, only hiding, scavenging, and nurturing. Moreover, the game's permadeath feature makes loss irreversible. These mechanic and narrative elements configure a playable perspective that can be read as ecological grief. It does so by distributing the experience and process of struggle, vulnerability, and care through a nonhuman perspective, destabilising human exceptionalism and mastery as default player positions.

In comparison, *In Other Waters* offers a distinct form of ecological awareness and criticism focused on perception and interpretation. The player inhabits an artificial intelligence system embedded in xenobiologist Ellery Vallis's diving suit, guiding her through the ocean of the

exoplanet Gliese 667Cc in search of missing researcher Minae Nomura. The game interface is highly abstracted with the world represented through stylised maps, icons, and sonar traces, and the narrative driven by text-based dialogue and logs. This design erodes the romanticised nature trope, common in mainstream oceanic and exploration games, as there are no panoramic vistas or anthropomorphic bodies on screen, denying the player a pleasurable, scenic-consumption gaze. This also extends to the gaining of knowledge about the environment and story throughout the game, which is only partial and inferred by data collection instruments.

This game initially appears to reproduce empty territories and colonial epistemologies: the player scans and names species and zones, enacting a "coloniality of knowledge" impulse in which to know is to possess (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2002). However, as you reach a region called "the Bloom," this illusion collapses. Upon closer inspection of the abandoned laboratories, you find out that a corporation used native organisms capable of simulating ecosystems and editing DNA to conduct experiments that ultimately led to ecological collapse. Therefore, the oceanic environment is revealed not to be empty but, in fact, deeply historicised and already damaged by prior interventions. In this area, the interface transitions from the constant restrained blue-yellow palette to heavy greens and reds, also visually signaling contamination and opacity.

This narrative and aesthetic turn directly subverts the colonial, resource logics of an empty land or sea, and the assumption that technological mastery constitutes the solution. The previous sense of scientific exploration becomes an awareness of ecological responsibility when Ellery decides to remain on the planet and withhold her findings from Earth. Here, care does not seem to be a discrete system but rather emerges as a relational responsibility, grounded in the recognition of ecological entanglement and blame.

Online Player Discussions

To extend these close readings beyond purely textual analysis, this analysis incorporates a small-scale look at player discourse. A thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) of 146 online comments, 53 about *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and 93 about *In Other Waters*, indicated distinct modes of engagement.

Discussions of *In Other Waters* are dominated by references to gameplay systems and mechanics, as well as comparisons with other exploration or management titles. Both emotional and ethical reflections appear but are typically secondary, frequently framed as aesthetic appreciation or curiosity.

In contrast, discussions of *Endling: Extinction is Forever* are highly affective, with players foregrounding grief and empathy, narrating specific scenes and outcomes as emotionally overwhelming. Comments especially cluster around the mother-cub relationship and loss, and frequently broaden into reflections on real-world environmental destruction.

These divergent discursive patterns suggest that, while both ecocritical, the two games mobilise different engagement modes that also arguably reflect, to a certain extent, their different environmental settings. *In Other Waters* restructures how players perceive and map the environment through epistemic and technical abstraction, whereas *Endling: Extinction is Forever* foregrounds vulnerability, linking ecological reflection to embodied, nonhuman care. Overall, these two games present suitable approaches within a spectrum of possibilities for

configuring alternative design processes to resist mainstream logics and model post-anthropocentric climate imaginaries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Endling: Extinction is Forever* and *In Other Waters* subvert dominant modes of representing the human-nature relationship in games by reconfiguring how players exert agency, care, and survival. They replace mastery with vulnerability and interrelation and propose new ways of knowing and feeling through ecosystems that acknowledge interdependence. This brief look at these two examples highlights and argues that changing how we situate and challenge the player can shape how we imagine and critically relate to ecological systems.

Although not directly addressed in this paper, I note a gap that merits closer consideration: marine environments are comparatively under-theorised within ecocritical game studies, which often focus on terrestrial spaces. *In Other Waters* serves not only as an illustrative case of ecological reconfiguration but also as a case in point for a broader inquiry into oceanic game spaces. Future work could examine in greater depth how marine settings differ from their terrestrial counterparts and how these differences might inform eco-conscious design practices, critical frameworks, and player engagement.

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

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

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Micro Project – Small Plants, Big Discoveries: AI-Driven Exploration

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Abstract

To fulfill the USR goals prioritized by Taiwanese universities, we adopted the global Design for Change (DFC) model by Kiran Bir Sethi to develop the Place Change Maker (PCM) strategy. This strategy integrates place exploration, design thinking and making, and place-based change practices. Using PCM, we carried out social service projects at four rural primary schools – each with over 80 years of history and fewer than 50 students**,** which are at risk of closure. Through digital fabrication, we developed an upgraded "digital microscope" and led the Micro Project – Small Plants, Big Discovery workshops. In these workshops, students built and customized their own microscopes, using them to explore the microscopic ecology of characteristic campus plants. We provided "M2M ChatGPT" procedures to investigate the connection between microscopic plant features and real-world landscapes. For example, they observed that the nodal structures of bamboo leaves resembled the bamboo plant itself. Using AI-assisted image recognition, they found aerial photos of car factories arranged in a pattern similar to that of bamboo leaves. Similarly, the umbrella-like structure of pennywort leaves under the microscope resembled the Place Charles in Paris when viewed from above. This innovative exploration not only enhanced students' digital literacy but also broadened their global perspective. Our initiative reimagined the value of rural schools and supported the Sustainable Development Goals of "Quality Education" and "Reduced Inequalities," advocating against the closure of schools in remote areas.

Keywords: university social responsibility (USR), place change maker (PCM), digital microscope, M2M ChatGPT, SDGs

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Introduction

Since 2018, Taiwan has actively promoted the University Social Responsibility (USR) program to encourage college students to apply their academic knowledge in serving society and addressing real-world challenges. Building upon this national initiative, our team has accumulated five years of experience in USR implementation. Continuously exploring how higher education can be meaningfully linked to social engagement. Inspired by Kiran Bir Sethi's Design for Change (DFC) movement, which advocates the belief "I CAN" and empowers young people to initiate positive change (Kiran, 2009), we developed the "Place Change Maker" (PCM) social service strategy. Derived from the DFC framework, PCM guides college students to engage in hands-on service activities in rural primary schools, embracing the belief: "I CAN MAKE and CHANGE IT."

In this study, we led college students to visit six rural primary schools, each with over 80 years of history and fewer than 50 students. During these visits, students explored and documented the unique plant ecosystems on each campus. To enhance experiential learning, we adopted digital manufacturing technologies to create portable "digital microscopes," which became the core tools in our *Micro Project – Small Plants, Big Discoveries* workshops. In these workshops, college students and young children collaboratively assembled maker microscopes. They examined the microscopic worlds of local plants, embodying a shift in the maker spirit from DIY (Do It Yourself) to DIT (Do It Together).

Furthermore, AI—particularly ChatGPT—played a crucial role in expanding the educational potential of this project. By enhancing students' learning skills and linking microscopic plant observations to broader real-world landscapes, AI helps broaden the horizons of children in remote areas and contributes to narrowing the educational gap between urban and rural regions. Overall, this research aims to (1) develop a PCM strategy that empowers college students as makers capable of transforming places and creating positive impact; (2) establish an AI-driven exploratory learning procedure that connects microscopic plants to the macro world in support of our "Small Plants, Big Discoveries" goal; and (3) reshape perceptions of rural primary schools while advancing the Sustainable Development Goals of Quality Education and Reduced Inequalities. Ultimately, we envision these schools continuing to flourish, preserving emotional bonds with local communities, and becoming enduring symbols within their regional memory.

Related Work

DFC to PCM

Originating from Indian educator Kiran Bir Sethi's 2009 Design for Change (DFC) movement. Established after observing "I can't" attitudes among students at the Riverside School and built around the four Design Thinking phases of "Feel, Imagine, Do, and Share" to cultivate an "I CAN" mindset —which has since expanded to over 60 countries as one of the world's largest child-led change platforms (Kiran, 2009). We adapted DFC into a Place Change Maker (PCM) social-service strategy tailored for college students.

Digital Microscope

In 2015, Kenji Yoshino presented and demonstrated how to create a stand for approximately $10, turning a smartphone into a powerful digital microscope (Yoshino, 2013). Professor

Jiang Hongren of National Taiwan University improved and produced Taiwan's first digital microscope, characterized by its triangular shape (Jiang, 2014). His promotion inspired many teachers and children to adopt this learning tool. This also inspired us to improve the focal length of this type of digital microscope to match the more advanced camera functions of today's smartphones and tablets, and to simplify the materials to a lower cost than Kenji's version, making it more suitable for mass production, which we call the "Maker Microscope." In 2016, we initiated the promotion and implementation of seed teacher workshops (FBI Lab, 2016). In 2024, we expanded this program to primary schools in rural Taiwan, offering the "Microscopic Project – Small Plants, Big Discoveries" workshop. College students will guide primary school students in rural areas to use the Maker Microscope to explore the unique natural environment of their school campuses and create microscopic plant specimens. During the process of studying plants at a microscopic level, primary school students discovered that the microscopic images looked very similar to things they had encountered in their daily lives, such as "bamboo leaves look like bamboo" and "money plant looks like an umbrella." This made us wonder if it was possible to transition from the microscopic to the macroscopic and find world landscapes that resembled the microscopic images.

ChatGPT in Primary School Education

Prior research has shown that primary school students in Selangor, Malaysia, achieved notable gains in grammar, vocabulary, and learning motivation when using ChatGPT to support English writing (Jeyraman et al., 2025), and that students in grades 4–6 at two schools in Uruguay were highly engaged in a social studies course that employed ChatGPT 3.5 to generate teaching materials, diagrams, and exercises tailored to different knowledge levels (Jauhiainen & Garagorry, 2023). Extending these AI-assisted learning approaches, we invited college students to collaborate with primary school students in using GPT to explore connections between microscopic plant observations and real-world landscape maps.

Implement and Practice

Design PCM for USR

We converted the DCF into a PCM model, more suitable for college students. This model empowered the students to believe in "I CAN MAKE AND CHANGE IT." We then completed a social service project at six rural primary schools. Our design involved three steps.

Place Exploration

College students visited rural primary schools, explained the key points of the "Small Plants, Big Discoveries" social practice project, and observed the primary schools' plant ecosystems. Observations and improvement suggestions were recorded for future reference and implementation.

Design Thinking and Making

We train college students to use digital fabrication tools to design and build a microscope. This involves using a laser cutter to create a three-layer microscope stand, along with a small LED desk lamp and a convex lens for magnification. Additionally, we offered "M2M (Micro

to Macro) ChatGPT" procedures to explore the connection between microscopic plants and real-world landscapes. Through repeated testing, we eventually developed a set of effective and easy-to-follow practical procedures.

Place Change Practice

College students held the "Small Plants, Big Discoveries" workshops at six rural primary schools, guiding elementary students (DIT) to assemble digital microscopes, explore campus plants, and use ChatGPT for deeper learning as part of the USR initiative. During the workshop, primary school students first assembled their own digital microscopes and used them, together with their phones or tablets, to investigate the microscopic structures of distinctive plants found on their campus. In this hands-on exploration, students expressed surprise and delight. Remarking that "the bamboo leaves look just like bamboo!" and "the pennywort leaves look like umbrellas!" These observations revealed how students naturally connected microscopic images to familiar objects in their daily lives. Building on these discoveries, college students guided the primary school participants in using our "M2M ChatGPT" procedures to operate ChatGPT for AI-assisted analysis. Through AI-based image feature recognition, the students explored visual correspondences between microscopic plant structures and global landscape patterns. With AI support, they identified that the grid-like layout of an automotive factory in an aerial photograph resembled the segmented pattern of bamboo leaves, and that the aerial view of Place Charles in Paris mirrored the umbrella-like form of pennywort leaves. The activity not only enhanced students' digital literacy but also expanded their global awareness in an engaging and imaginative way.

Figure 1 illustrates the educational activities in which college students visited a rural primary school to engage with plant ecology. During the visit, they guided primary school students in exploring the school's ecological environment and demonstrated how to assemble maker microscopes for observing the microscopic world of plants.

Figure 1
The Process of College Students Performing PCM

Design "M2M ChatGPT" Procedures

The primary students' discoveries inspired us to explore how microscopic plants relate to the real world.

We searched several well-known aerial image datasets, including the NASA dataset, the Getty Images dataset, the U.S. Geological Survey Aerial Photography Collection (USGS), iSAID, DOTA, the Inria Aerial Image Labeling Dataset, xView, and others. After extensive searching and testing, we identified NASA's aerial photography archive as the largest and most reliable source, while Getty Images offered a wide range of high-quality landscape

photographs. Together, these two collections became the core foundation of our dataset for "From microscopic plant images to real-world landscape photos."

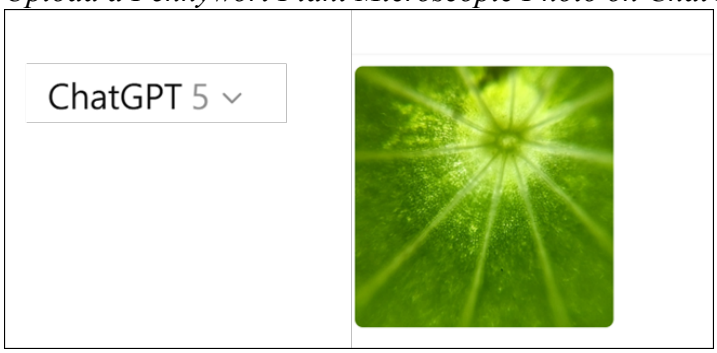
To support this investigation, we provided M2M ChatGPT exploration steps. The steps are as follows:

Step 1. Upload a microscopic plant image to the ChatGPT platform.
Step 2. Ask GPT to identify and describe the five key characteristics of the image.
Step 3. Using these characteristics, ask GPT to search NASA and Getty Images collections for four natural or urban landscape photos—with links—that best match them.
Step 4. Review and analyze the suggested landscape photos to determine how well they align with the microscopic plant's characteristics. If a good match is found, select the most suitable one. If not, use the provided links to explore further or return to Step 2 to refine the description.

Below, we will use pennywort as an example to illustrate the four steps of M2M ChatGPT mentioned above.

Step 1. Upload a pennywort plant microscopic photo on ChatGPT, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Upload a Pennywort Plant Microscopic Photo on ChatGPT



Step 2. In ChatGPT, we provided the following prompt to extract salient characteristics from the specimen: "Please describe the five features that most closely resemble those observed in this plant's microscopic photo."

And we got five feature results of pennywort plant microscopic photo:

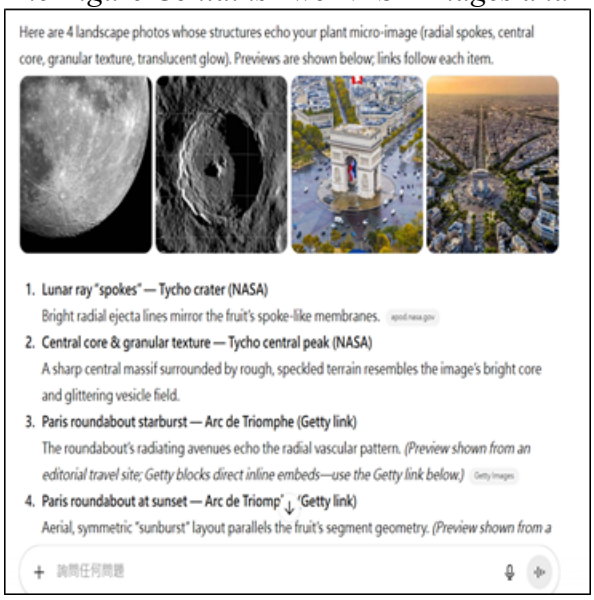
- Radial Vascular Pattern (like xylem and phloem distribution)
- Parenchyma Cells with High Water Content
- Epidermal Transparency and Light Diffusion
- Secretory Vesicles or Oil Glands (Citrus-like)
- Symmetrical Central Axis (similar to fruit carpel structure)

Step 3. Through ChatGPT, we applied the five features as criteria and prompted the model to search the NASA and Getty Images collections for four best-matching photos, each accompanied by its source link.

Using the selection criteria, we obtained four images: two from NASA and two from Getty Images, each with its associated source link. These results, illustrating the images that most closely correspond to the features identified in the microscopic photo, are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

The Figure Contains Two NASA Images and Two Getty Images, With Related Source Links



Step 4. Review and analyze the photos and links generated by GPT to identify those that are a good match.

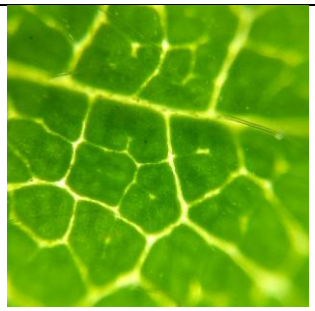
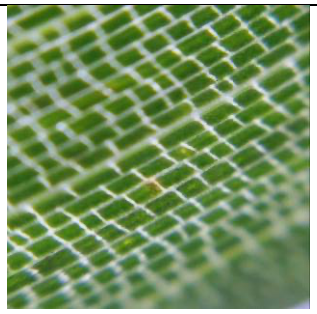
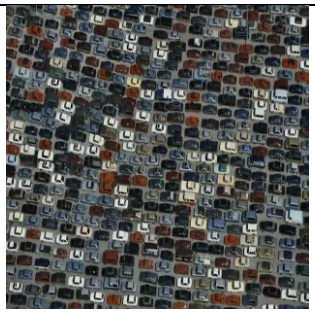
We found and selected "Place Charles in Paris" as the most satisfactory landscape photo to match the microscopic Pennywort, as shown in Figure 4. If we cannot find the matched photo, we can investigate the related link provided by GPT. On the linked webpage, we can find some copyrighted photos that cannot be directly displayed in GPT.

Figure 4

"Place Charles in Paris" Is the Most Suitable Landscape Photo to Pair With Microscopic Pennywort

Following the implementation of our designed "M2M ChatGPT" procedure, students conducted further exploration of additional microscopic leaf images and their corresponding macroscopic aerial photographs. The notable observations and patterns identified during this extended investigation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Additional Results From the "M2M ChatGPT" Matching Procedures

microscopic plant image	landscape photo-1	landscape photo-2
Rhododendron	China- Badain Jaran Desert	Republic of Namibia - Salt Lake
Pennywort	New Zealand - Mt. Taranaki	Paris - Place Charles
 Strawberry leaves	Arctic - Tundra	Netherlands - Paddy field
 Bamboo leaves	Netherlands - Polder area and Drainage canal	 America - Parking lots

As students explore using the "M2M ChatGPT" procedures, they witness the continuous collision of cross-domain thinking, demonstrating a learning approach that is not limited to a single type of knowledge, and the final exploration results are surprising. Students also felt that the new AI technologies opened up broader possibilities for exploring knowledge.

Result

Through this project, we successfully brought 38 university students into rural communities as part of PCM's USR initiative, conducting the "Microcosm Project – Small Plants, Big Discoveries" workshops across six primary schools. These activities not only sparked children's curiosity about the ecological world on their campuses but also demonstrated the potential of the AI-driven exploration approach supported by M2M ChatGPT. By linking microscopic plant structures with macro-level landscapes, the project embodied the vision of "Small Plants, Big Discoveries" and illustrated how AI can enrich cross-scale scientific inquiry.

Beyond its educational outcomes, the project further advanced the Sustainable Development Goals of promoting quality education and reducing inequality, while fostering stronger emotional ties between rural students and their hometowns. Moreover, the striking resemblance between magnified plant microstructures and aerial landscape imagery echoes Baudrillard's concept of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994), revealing how nature generates its own hyperreal reflections. In this interplay, the boundaries between the small and the vast, the original and the representation, become fluid, offering students a unique aesthetic and conceptual lens through which to understand the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Future Work

Building on the success of the "Micro Project – Small Plants, Big Discoveries" workshop, future efforts will focus on expanding its reach to both rural and urban elementary schools to broaden its educational impact. In addition, university students can be encouraged to introduce the workshop to community senior colleges, promoting intergenerational learning, narrative exchange, and meaningful companionship, while enabling older adults to explore new scientific knowledge alongside younger learners.

Looking ahead, we will continue to refine the "M2M Exploration Procedures" learning strategy and conduct systematic surveys and analyses to better understand how primary school students engage with ChatGPT in their learning process. These evaluations will help us assess the effectiveness of AI-supported inquiry learning and guide future improvements.

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Improving Academic Processing Systems to Support Outcome-Based Education Module (OBEM) Implementation at KMUTT

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Abstract

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) has promoted outcome-based education (OBE) across all levels of study. This approach emphasizes flexibility in learning design, with courses developed as modular learning units under the Outcome-Based Education Module (OBEM) framework. The objective is to create flexible learning experiences that allow students to develop their abilities through modularized learning pathways. To achieve this educational initiative, KMUTT recognized the need to enhance its academic information system, known as the New Academic Information System (New ACIS), to fully support registration, grading, and academic processing aligned with modular course structures. As a result, the OBEM Grading System—referred to as AVATAR—was developed to integrate with the Learning Environment version B2 (LEB2) and the New ACIS. This enabled the management of learning outcomes, grading, academic status tracking, Buffer Class administration, and reassessment processes. The implementation showed that the system could support OBEM-based grading and processing with 90% accuracy, compared to the 100% target. However, limitations remain, particularly in system integration, real-time data synchronization, and flexibility in updating "In Progress" (I) grades, which may impact students' academic progress. Recommendations for system improvements include developing a seamless and fully integrated OBEM platform, enhancing risk-tracking functions for at-risk students, and creating a Credit Bank system to store all forms of learning outcomes. These efforts aim to improve administrative efficiency, ensure accurate assessments, and provide timely academic feedback aligned with students' actual learning achievements.

Keywords: outcome-based education, OBEM, academic processing system, modular learning, AVATAR, learning outcomes, new ACIS, reassessment

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Introduction

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) has implemented a policy to promote and support Outcome-Based Education (OBE). This approach aims to enhance flexibility in teaching and learning, including responding to the need for skills and knowledge in the 21st century. OBE has been commonly recognized internationally as a significant mechanism for improving educational quality by focusing on learners' outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Harden, 2007). KMUTT has adopted this concept by designing courses in modular formats, known as Outcome-Based Education Modules (OBEM), to provide opportunities for students to develop their potential and to integrate knowledge across various learning modules.

This initiative aligns with KMUTT Strategic Plan No.13 (2025–2029), which clearly defines its strategic objectives. These objectives focus on developing human resources in science, technology, and innovation. The plan also provides high-quality education based on learning innovation, promoting openness and inclusiveness for all learners, and strengthening the university's capacity to adapt to future changes and uncertainties (KMUTT, 2025).

There were several critical limitations initially implemented by the OBE, especially the New Academic Information System known as New ACIS. The New ACIS could not directly process grading based on learning outcomes (LOs) for modules. The system was designed to link with the traditional structure of course listings in the official curriculum. This brought about inconsistencies between the intended OBEM assessment framework and the actual operational system. Data exchange and synchronization among the New ACIS, the university's online learning platform (Learning Environment B2: LEB2) platform, and the OBEM Grading System (AVATAR), and were not seamless. This caused delays and confusion in recording and transferring students' LOs, particularly when mapping results between modules and core courses. The problem was especially evident among students receiving grade I (In Progress). It could not be solved within a single semester and sometimes required up to a full academic year. This was affecting students' academic status and progression.

KMUTT developed the AVATAR, to support modules under the OBEM framework. The system connects modules and core courses through integration with LEB2 and the New ACIS. This is similar to the Integrated Educational Management Tool (IEMT) at Adamson University, which successfully combined examination, grading, and curriculum management functions (Doctor, 2017). The AVATAR aims to provide seamless data linkage and automated academic processing aligned with KMUTT's OBE framework.

The goal is to create a unified system for assessing student LOs and ensuring continuous linkage among the AVATAR, LEB2, and New ACIS systems to effectively support OBEM implementation at KMUTT. This aligns with the system integration principles described by Kushari and Septiadi (2022).

Methodology

The development of a supporting system for teaching and learning under the OBEM framework was designed to effectively link and synchronize data among the LEB2, AVATAR, and New ACIS platforms. This includes supporting student learning through the Buffer Class mechanism with reassessment opportunities for improving individual LOs. The development process was carried out as follows.

Planning and Coordination

A systematic implementation plan was established with the initial step of developing an academic information system to support the OBEM. A working group was formed comprising representatives from key units - the Education Development and Services (EDS), the Education Technology Development and Service (ETS), the Gifted Education Office (GEO), the Computer Center, and the Registrar's Office. The team collaboratively defined the framework for developing and integrating the information systems to enable effective data linkage across units.

The AVATAR was designed by focusing on accurate mapping between modules and core courses. The system connects seamlessly with both the LEB2 and the New ACIS. This planning stage emphasized cross-functional integration among academic, technological, and registration units to ensure consistent system development and effective implementation of teaching and learning under the OBEM framework.

Roles of Key Units

The development of the AVATAR relied on collaboration among multiple units across the university, each playing a distinct and essential role as follows:

- The EDS provided training and guidance to faculties and schools in designing courses and modules aligned with the OBE framework.
- The Computer Center and the ETS developed the AVATAR to ensure seamless integration with the LEB2 platform and the New ACIS.
- The Registrar's Office planned and structured the linkage of registration and grading data across systems, verified workflow accuracy among the LEB2, AVATAR, and New ACIS systems, and monitored academic record processing and student status. The office also coordinated with system developers to address operational issues and improve functionality.
- The GEO managed the Buffer Class system, prepared students for continued learning, and supported Teaching Assistants (TAs) in facilitating learning within modules.

System Design and Development

The design and development of the AVATAR focused on creating a technical architecture that enables efficient data integration and automated grading processes. The system serves as a centralized platform for recording students' LOs in each module and synchronizing data with New ACIS and LEB2 through a secure integration layer.

The development included database design, data synchronization mechanisms, and user authorization management to ensure that both instructors and students could access the system effectively. This structure allows academic and administrative processes to operate seamlessly within the OBEM framework. The system was developed using the Django framework (Python) and operates with Nginx as the web server to ensure scalability and reliability. While OBEM employed PostgreSQL as its database engine, AVATAR 2.0 utilized Microsoft SQL Server (MSSQL) to enable faster query execution and improved interoperability with the New ACIS database. This upgrade addressed performance bottlenecks from the prototype phase (AVATAR 1.0) and established a more stable and secure data-exchange framework across platforms.

Workflow of OBEM Implementation

The implementation of teaching and learning under the OBEM framework consisted of four stages as follows:

Figure 1
Overview of the OBEM Management Process

OBEM Design

The OBEM design process was developed under the OBE framework, focusing on defining clear LOs that are directly aligned with learning activities and assessment methods to ensure that students achieve the intended program competencies. The university supported their instructors through training sessions, consultations, standardized templates, and hands-on module design workshops. The support included LO and rubric consultation teams, standardized module proposal forms, and structured feedback. These activities helped instructors to understand the OBEM process and to accurately submit course information to the New ACIS.

Assess LO

This stage lets instructors access and link courses' LO and rubrics with learning activities and assessments through the LEB2 platform. This system connects the program-level Ultimate LOs with the module-level LOs, ensuring that teaching design and assessment processes are systematic and verifiable. Moreover, the data gained from this system will be used to report student's competency.

Submit LO Result and Course Grade

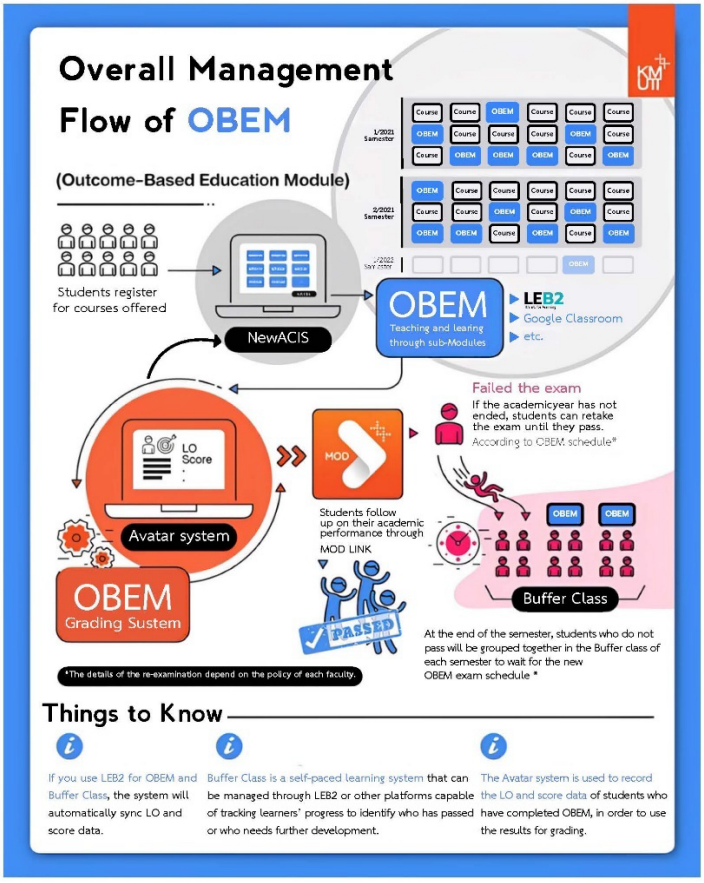
The Registrar's Office is responsible for the submission of LO results and course grades to ensure that both modules and core courses are evaluated in accordance with the OBEM framework. The process covered these various key stages: planning and setting grading criteria, recording LO results, processing course and student status data, summarizing final grades, and monitoring In-Progress (I) cases. The evaluation process became systematic, transparent, and consistent with OBEM quality standards through the integration system.

Take Care of Buffer Classes

Buffer classes were established and were a mechanism that allowed students to achieve the required LOs of a module. The process included re-registration within the buffer system, reassessment, grade recalculation, and progress tracking until the results were announced. This approach enabled students to complete the required LOs systematically without effecting their core course registration or academic progression. If students failed to complete or achieve the targeted LOs within the assigned semester, the university processed the best available results as their final grade.

This process was developed to integrate seamlessly with the university's information systems to ensure efficient processing and monitoring of students' LOs, illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Overall Management Flow of OBEM



Pilot Testing and Improvement

Several faculty members conducted pilot testing in selected courses to evaluate the AVATAR system's performance and ensure accurate data integration with the New ACIS and the LEB2. Feedback from instructors, students, and administrative staff was then collected to improve system functionality and ensure readiness for full-scale university implementation.

Results and Discussion

The integrated OBEM system (AVATAR–LEB2–New ACIS integration) was implemented in two phases, covering the period from Semester 1/2021 to Semester 1/2023. The first phase (Semester 1/2021–2/2022) known as AVATAR 1.0, focused on testing the prototype system to verify data accuracy and the processing of learning outcomes (LOs). The second phase (Semester 1/2023–2/2023) called AVATAR 2.0, emphasized improving and expanding the system to fully support teaching and learning under the OBEM framework.

Phase I: Initial Implementation (Semester 1/2021–2/2022)

The first phase of developing AVATAR 1.0 aimed to test data linkage among the LEB2, AVATAR 1.0, and New ACIS systems. The focus was to ensure accurate and complete

recording of LOs and grading for modules.–The results showed that the accuracy and completeness of LO data processing reached an average of 90%, which was close to the target (100%) but still below the expected standard.

The number of OBEM courses from the academic years 2021–2022 equaled 127 and consisted of 423 modules, with a total of 94,005 module enrollments. Among these, the total number of module enrollments resulting in students being assigned to Buffer Classes was 6,327, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Number of OBEM Courses and Module Enrollments (Academic Years 2021–2022)

Academic Semester	Courses	Modules	Student Enrollment (Modules)	Students Assigned Buffer Class (Modules)
1/2021	9	35	25,911	1,282
2/2021	38	128	18,904	1,032
1/2022	36	118	29,068	1,640
2/2022	44	142	20,122	2,373
Total	127	423	94,005	6,327

The Results Revealed Several Key Limitations

1. Data exchange among the LEB2, the AVATAR, and the New ACIS was not fully synchronized, causing confusion in the assessment of LOs.
2. Student lists in LEB2 were not updated in real time, especially in cases related to grade I (In Progress) adjustments.
3. Grade I corrections could not be completed within a single semester; in some cases, they took up to one academic year, which affected students' academic status and progression.

Table 2
Accuracy and Completeness of Data Processing Results

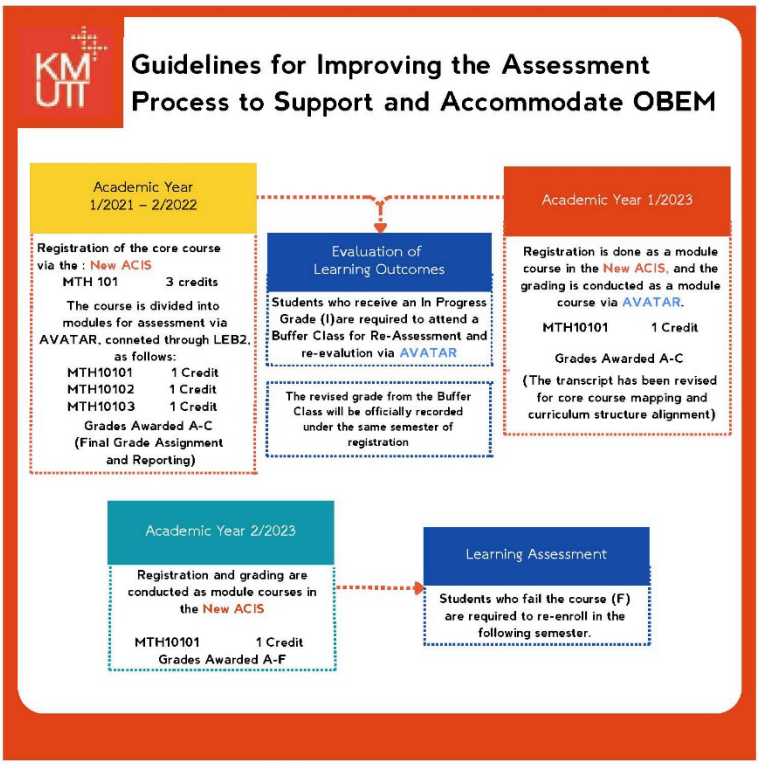
Issue Type	Description	No. of Records	Percentage
Incomplete Synchronization	Partial linkage between AVATAR and New ACIS	289	4.57%
Duplicate Data Submission (Student lists)	Lack of pre-submission checking process	150	2.37%
Grade I corrections	Timing mismatch between Buffer Class and New ACIS	171	2.70%
Total Errors		610	9.64%
Accurate & Complete Records		6,327	90.36%

The results indicate a data accuracy rate of 90.36%, which is close to the required institutional rate of 100%. The most frequent issue was Incomplete Synchronization. This highlights the need for enhanced system integration and real-time validation mechanisms.

Based on these issues, the university has upgraded the system in several areas, including data processing, module design, and course separation. These make the assessment of LOs clearer and reduce delays in grade management. Additionally, the university developed the Guidelines

for Improving the Assessment Process to Support and Accommodate OBEM. The guidelines outline a sequence of system enhancements and data integration among the AVATAR, LEB2, and New ACIS systems, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Guidelines for Improving the Assessment and Data Integration Process to Support OBEM

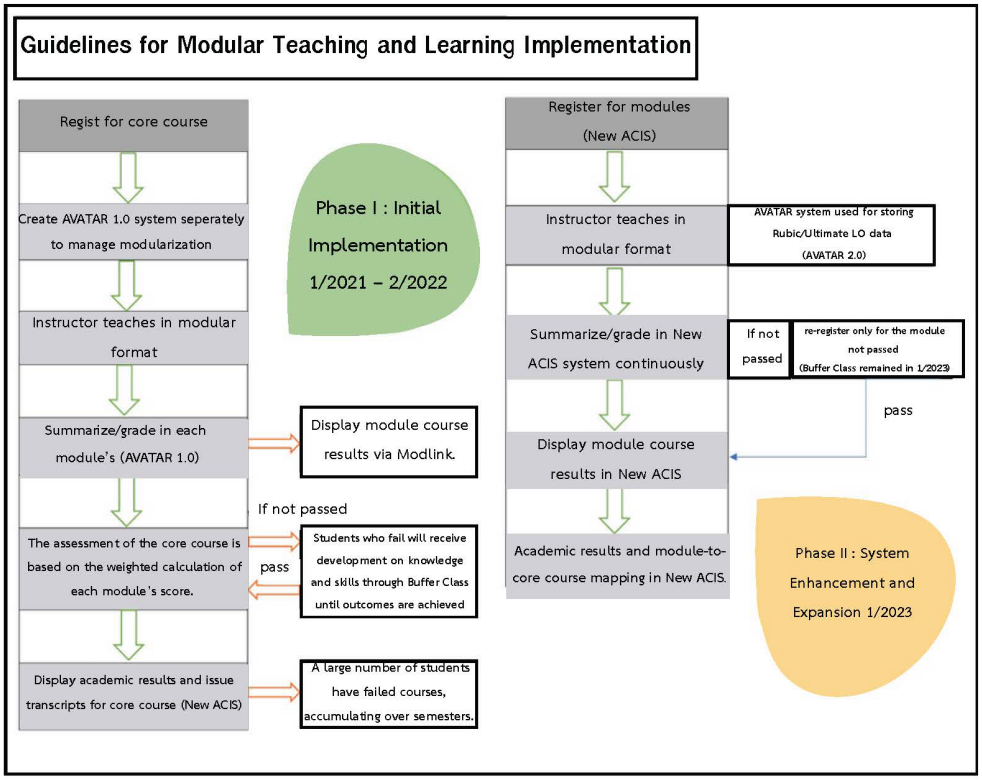


Phase II: System Enhancement and Expansion (Academic Year 2023)

The second phase was the continuous improvement of the system to enable real-time data integration among the AVATAR 2.0, LEB2, and New ACIS platforms. The results showed that the integrated OBEM system successfully supported the mapping between modules and core courses. This made the assessment of LOs more accurate and efficient.

The following figure shows the comparison between system development and implementation in Phase I and Phase II. It illustrates the process of the Modular Teaching and Learning approach between Academic Years 2021–2022 and the revised implementation that began in Academic Year 2023, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Modular Teaching and Learning Before and After System Improvement



After the system was developed, all core courses were restructured into modular formats under the OBEM framework. In the first semester of Academic Year 2023, a total of 59 modules were offered with 19,394 enrollments. However, the integrated OBEM system could not yet fully support module-based course registration, as it was still undergoing system adjustments. As a result, some students continued to receive In Progress (I) grades due to incomplete synchronization across systems.

In the second semester of Academic Year 2023, there were 88 modules, an increase from 59 modules in the first semester. The total number of students slightly decreased to 15,146, and there were no Buffer Class records this semester. This means most students were able to finish their LOs within the assessment period. It also shows that the system worked more smoothly and efficiently. Overall, the improved OBEM system not only supports module-based registration but also helps automate academic processes and reduces extra work for instructors, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Number of Module Enrollment via New ACIS (Academic Year 2023)

Academic Semester	Courses	Modules	Student Enrollment (Modules)	Students Assigned Buffer Class (Modules)
1/2023	-	59	19,394	3,088
2/2023	-	88	15,146	-

The results also revealed that the management of Buffer Classes and the reassessment process provided greater opportunities for students to continuously improve their learning

performance. Moreover, the new transcript system can transparently and accurately map module courses to core courses, ensuring clarity and traceability in the evaluation process.

Discussion

This project demonstrates an approach of continuous improvement when developing integrated academic systems to support OBE implementation at KMUTT. The integrated OBEM system demonstrates steady progress from the initial testing phase to full-scale implementation. The first phase focused on system testing and data refinement, while the second phase achieved stable data integration and practical utilization in managing teaching and learning processes under the OBEM framework.

Conclusion

The integrated OBEM system has made the process of recording and processing LOs more accurate and systematic. The first phase of implementation helped identify technical and data-structure issues that required improvement, while the second phase demonstrated significant progress in system integration, Buffer Class management, and flexible, transparent grade processing.

Overall, the systems as developed have proven capable of supporting teaching and learning under the OBEM framework and they serve as a model for developing integrated academic management systems at the university level.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed based on the findings and implementation results of the AVATAR. They focus on improving system integration, user understanding, and institutional readiness to ensure the success of outcome-based education across KMUTT. To ensure the sustainability and scalability of KMUTT's OBEM implementation, several key recommendations are proposed including the following:

Continuous Development of AVATAR and New ACIS

The AVATAR and New ACIS systems should be continuously improved to enable real-time data synchronization and enhanced reporting capabilities through a dashboard feature. This will allow ongoing and accurate monitoring of students' LOs.

Strengthening Users' Understanding of the System

Training and capacity-building sessions should be organized to enhance shared understanding among faculty members, administrators, support staff, and system developers. This will ensure consistent usage and alignment in recording and managing LOs across the university.

Expansion of OBEM Implementation

The integrated OBEM System should be expanded to cover all faculty and academic programs, along with revisions to the curriculum to align with the modular approach. This will support flexible and outcome-based teaching and learning across the university.

Integration With Other University Information Systems

The integrated OBEM system should be connected to other information systems within the university including the quality assurance and research information systems. This will enable comprehensive and seamless data utilization across all platforms.

In the next developmental phase, KMUTT plans to extend system capabilities with risk-tracking features and a Credit Bank system to support lifelong learning and competency accumulation.

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Strategizing Knowledge Management for Higher Education in the Era of Digital Transformation

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Abstract

Higher Education institutions have rapidly transformed due to the evolution of digital technologies. This has made it necessary to utilize knowledge management (KM) strategies to enhance institutional capabilities and efficiency. The study aimed to explore strategic approaches to implementing KM in higher education institutions, specifically focusing on how digital transformation drives the development of a KM culture. Using King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) as an example of digital adaptation in higher education, one can see where technology has been integrated into KM Practices with digital tools. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with professors and staff who were involved with KM activities. They were asked to discuss organizational culture, digital tools, and strategies. The findings indicated that KMUTT has integrated a KM framework into university strategies, leading to initiatives such as KM Day, sharing events, and Communities of Practice (CoPs), to promote collaboration. A digital platform, Learning Environment (LEB2), was developed to facilitate knowledge sharing. The study emphasized that organizational culture was a crucial factor in the development of a systematic knowledge management approach. A culture blending Clan and Adhocracy values fostered the highest levels of knowledge sharing. Together, these elements—policy support, regular activities, and leadership engagement—reflect a sustainable KM culture aligned with the university's long-term development goals. Areas for improvement include evaluating the effectiveness of strategies, assessing learning outcomes, and aligning with institutional goals. However, challenges remain in digital literacy (LEB2), culture and organizational structure.

Keywords: knowledge management, higher education, digital transformation, organizational culture

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Introduction

Organizations across the globe have faced changes, especially in the digital era. The growth of digital technologies plays an important role in transforming organizational operations, processes, and service deliveries to meet the demands of a quickly changing environment. With these changes, organizations have adapted themselves by using Knowledge Management (KM) which is one of the strategies from the field of human resource development. Experiences from Japanese companies showed that KM is the key to success within their organizations. It is deeply rooted in the ability to manage both explicit and tacit knowledge generated by organizational employees. Knowledge creation activities are considered an integral part of human resource development strategies (Nanoka, 2007).

The private sector in Saudi Arabia has applied KM principles to support organizational development. This adoption aligns with the country's developmental goals of becoming a major global economic leader while transitioning toward a knowledge-based economy. It is believed that the readiness of the private sector plays an important role in this transformation by supporting national growth strategies. A study of four companies in Saudi Arabia aimed to examine their KM practices and organizational readiness to meet customer needs and expectations. The findings suggested that using KM in private sector operations is a proper and strategic direction that matches the country's developmental goals and long-term strategies (Gharamah et al., 2018). The private sector In Malaysia has also implemented KM to support the country's developmental goals. The government aims to transition from a middle-income to a high-income nation with an emphasis on innovation and knowledge-based growth in its national development plans. While many organizations in Malaysia are increasingly interested in KM—especially in generating knowledge and innovation—most are still not able to achieve the desired outcomes in terms of knowledge creation. To better understand what influences knowledge creation in organizations, a study was conducted to examine four key factors: organizational culture (with a focus on knowledge-sharing culture), organizational structure, information and communication technology (ICT), and human capital. The results showed that organizational culture and human capital had a positive influence on knowledge creation. In contrast, the structure of an organization was seen as a potential limiting factor. ICT, while important, played more of a supporting role rather than being a driving force in knowledge creation (Wai Yi & Jaysingam, 2012).

Higher education institutions also confronted the pressure that comes from the speedy development of digital technologies. These impacted ways of teaching, conducting research, and managing operations. Digital transformation made it necessary for the universities to create new methods and criteria to enhance their competitiveness. At the same time, they still needed to keep learning flexible, which is important for long-term development. Knowledge has become a significant strategy in helping universities adapt and grow in this challenging situation. Knowledge helps to improve decision making, encourage innovation, and enhance performance. Knowledge should be accessible, shared, and used among individuals and departments within universities. In this context, KM has emerged as a key approach for higher education institutions and helps to leverage both explicit and tacit knowledge effectively.

Given these considerations, KM—which includes creating, acquiring, transferring, storing, and using knowledge systematically—has managed to become a common practice in many private organizations. It helps build a culture that encourages learning and enhances performance. When KM is applied to public sectors and universities, it often fails to gain traction. Many employees do not clearly understand what KM really means, why their organization needs KM,

or how it benefits their own work. Some view it as additional work requirement that takes up their time, rather than a tool to improve performance. As a result, KM is not fully integrated into daily practices. Knowledge creation, sharing, and its application rarely happen in a systematic way, and this can weaken organizational productivity and innovation.

In higher education, this issue is even more significant. If academic and professional staff are encouraged to build KM culture—by making knowledge sharing a natural part of their routine—it can lead to continuous learning, and a better quality of graduates, research, and academic services. KM can also help universities improve efficiency by turning knowledge into action. This study aims to examine KMUTT's KM strategies (KMUTT, 2009) within a digital transformation environment. This study also emphasizes the influence of organizational culture, digital, technologies, and policy support as key drivers of KM that will lead to the design of a sustainable KM system.

KM not only enables an organization to preserve critical knowledge, but also helps create new knowledge through collaboration, reflective practice, and the use of digital tools. By developing a culture of knowledge sharing and by integrating digital technologies into KM processes, universities can build an environment that supports continuous learning and innovation. KM is now no longer viewed as a stand alone function but becomes embedded in institutional strategy, operations, and daily practices, especially in the era of digital transformation.

Methodology

This study explores how digital technology combines with KM practices through numerous tools and platforms by using KMUTT as a case study. This data was gathered through in-depth interviews and observations with academic and non-academic (support staff) who were responsible for or interested in KM in their offices. Using purposive sampling, a total of 15 participants were selected.

The interviews focused on how organizational culture, digital tools, and institutional strategies support or influence KM within the university. The questions were developed based on a review of related literature and initial interviews with KMUTT staff who were familiar with KM. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions. They covered the participants' understanding of KM, KM policies within their organization, the importance of KM, KM mechanisms and success factors.

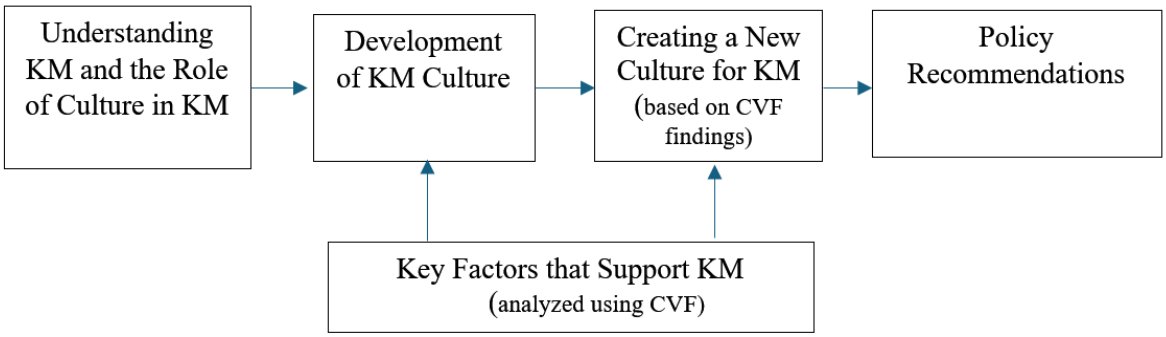
The triangulation method was used to ensure the reliability of the data. This included observation, in-depth interviews, and document reviews. The findings from each method were compared and cross-checked for consistency. This helped confirm data reliability and deepened the understanding of the topics. The data were analyzed by using causal analysis to understand the factors that lead to the development of KM culture.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study underlines the connections among factors that facilitate creating a new KM culture within the university. First, the study tried to understand the definitions of KM and the role of culture in KM in order to help both researchers and readers understand how KM is important to their organization. Second, the study sought to show how KM culture was cultivated and why KM was developed slowly within the university. Third,

the study focused on discovering keys factors that support KM. The key factors in the second and third steps will be analyzed by using the Competing Values Framework (CVF) method developed by Cameron and Quinn (1999). Fourth, the study tried to find out how the results from the CVF analysis will help the university staff learn, share, and create new criteria for working in today's environment. This includes how the results will lead to new culture creation for KM. Fifth, the study provided policy recommendations based on how to generate new culture with KM for the digital era. The conceptual framework of this study is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1
Creating a KM Culture in Digital Age



Results and Discussion

The following findings are from in-depth interviews and observations with KM practitioners at KMUTT and are conducted with university administrators and faculty and support staff.

Results

The results emphasize three main areas: (1) how KM strategies have been developed and implemented within the university; (2) how a knowledge-sharing culture has been fostered through organizational practices; and (3) how KMUTT's internal culture supports knowledge management. These findings are discussed in relation to the broader concepts of organizational learning and digital transformation in higher education.

KM Strategies at KMUTT

KMUTT has integrated KM into its university strategies. The university also systematically supports KM through both policy and operational mechanisms. There are various activities created that help to develop KM culture through time. This includes developing digital platforms to facilitate knowledge sharing, including the following:

- **KM Day and KM Week.** The university has promoted KM activities, KM Day and KM Week, and allows staff from various schools, departments, and offices to share their best practices and achievements. This is done by directors from different offices who encourage staff to write down and present the scope of their job responsibilities. A poster is then constructed showing this work to all participants in order to educate staff on their mutual interests. An area where the examples from the sessions inspired and encouraged knowledge exchange was found in improved productivity. Both KM Day and KM Week are organized annually to show KM progress within departments that actively utilize KM.

- **Community of Practice (CoP).** University staff who are interested in the same issues have set up groups or communities that share their interests. The issues they share include knowledge, problem solving, and work techniques. In the past few years, there have been many networks related to teaching and learning, research, and management that bring together staff to discuss these issues. For example, the CoP network related to registration pays attention to improving registration systems in accordance with new models of teaching and learning. The members of each CoP have an opportunity to improve their work through time, and they can support and offer their services more effectively.
- **Best Practices and Lessons Learned.** The university has manually collected reports of best practices and lessons learned from KM activities since the beginning of the program in document forms. Collecting data with this method makes it difficult to share knowledge with others because the data is not easy to access and distribute. The best practices and lessons learned are then gathered in digital files. This allows academic and support staff to use and learn from these resources. One of the examples of the best practices is Productivity Improvement Projects where work processes and work standards were stored in the Shared function on a Microsoft Team platform. This benefits members of the group so they can access and learn how to improve their work.
- **Learning Environment B2: LEB2 Platform.** KMUTT has developed LEB2, a digital platform, as a knowledge repository for teaching and learning management. In addition to this, LEB2 is used to store and share knowledge related to university work. This includes manuals, work procedures and work processes from different departments. The platform is connected to the university's existing learning management system, making knowledge sharing more accessible and continuous. The staff can learn through lecture videos covering KM Day events and through tips and techniques for improving routine work shared by departments. This information can be accessed anywhere and at any time through computer programs.

Development of KM Culture

KMUTT has encouraged academic and support staff to share their knowledge and experience with others. The ways the university administrators apply and encourage KM culture are as follows:

- **Open Communication and Trust.** Open communication and trust are built among the university members. The university administrators play an important role by supporting and announcing KM policies and activities. The support of the administration and its participation in KM encourages teamwork. This open environment makes the university staff feel comfortable speaking, discussing, and sharing their ideas, knowledge, and skills. One of the executives mentioned during the interview that "the foundation of building a KM culture is trust."
- **Learning from Mistakes.** The university activities related to KM are After Action Reviews (AAR). This event makes it possible for the university members to reflect on what ideas are good, what problems are confronting them, and what work is being done incorrectly. This leads to continuous improvement and creates new knowledge for those whose work is similar to the AAR projects. The message received from interviewees is "A KM culture is being built based on learning from experiences, especially from mistakes. This is a chance for us to improve what we have done wrong. I always attend the AAR".
- **Culture-Building Activities.** The university promotes KM culture building through various events such as KM Day, KM Week, AAR, Show and Share, and R2R (Routine

to Research). If staff keep sharing their ideas, knowledge, and skills through posters or oral presentations of their work and the scope of their job responsibilities, they will see the value of sharing knowledge and make it a part of their daily work. This will foster a stronger connection to the university. This friendly environment can lead to the development of sustainable KM culture at KMUTT.

- **Recognition and Incentives.** Academic and support staff who have won a reward for the best KM projects demonstrating shared knowledge on KM Day or KM Week will be recognized and receive incentives from the university. Recognition will motivate staff to share their experiences, especially employees who have worked for the university for a long time. For example: "I am willing to teach new workers about the job I do, just tell me and give me appreciation of what I have done. Anyway, the university should reward younger people who have just started working for the university". Monetary and other incentives will work effectively with younger staff to encourage them to attend and get involved with KM activities. Therefore, recognition and incentives help to preserve a sustainable KM culture at KMUTT.

Organizational Culture Supporting KM at KMUTT

The culture of an organization impacts KM when it works to support knowledge sharing (Pandya & Gorré, 2011). KMUTT analyzed its culture by using CVF. The CVF emphasizes internal and external indicators, as well as flexibility and stability indicators. The CVF explains that there are four types of organizational culture. Each of them is different in values, beliefs, and behaviors. 1) Clan Culture focuses on building trust, strong relationships, and teamwork within organizations. 2) Adhocracy Culture fosters an organization's ability to change, as well as its creativity and innovation. 3) Hierarchy Culture emphasizes stability, structure, and internal focus. And 4) Market Culture prioritizes competition, results, and external focus (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). The data analyzed from oral interviews showed that KM culture is being built at KMUTT based on a combination of Clan Culture and Adhocracy Culture. This mixture helps the university staff feel safe, discover new ideas, and also motivates them to share knowledge. It brings about sustainable KM by making knowledge sharing a part of their work life.

Discussion

This study analyzed KM implementation within KMUTT, especially in the role of organizational culture and digital transformation. The following issues identified the criteria used when building KM culture.

Cultivating a New Culture

KMUTT has been applying KM since 2002 but there has been little progress in this field. The university staff feel that KM is an additional job. They resisted bringing KM into their work. KM culture has not advanced considerably in the first five-year period. The university administrators expect that staff will work effectively by applying KM with their routine work. The KMUTT KM team discovered that KM is situated within an organizational culture that is difficult to change. Creating KM culture and adding it to the traditional culture will help the university build new culture.

Fostering Behavioral Change

KM culture will not happen within an organization if their staff still work with outdated traditions and procedures. Building a new culture can work more efficiently with a younger staff that is open to change and innovation. The university administrators are trying to encourage the behavior of younger staff by creating a program similar to on the job training. This program lets younger staff learn from experienced KM faculty members through one on one mentorships. This initiative fosters knowledge sharing and is the starting point for building behavioral changes.

Evaluation and Improvement

People who get involved with KM projects will be monitored and evaluated by the KM team. Feedback will be gathered based on KPIs and will be used for refining procedures to gain better results and develop new criteria that will help cultivate KM culture.

There are several obstacles when implementing KM at KMUTT. 1) Digital literacy is one of the major challenges. The digital platforms were established to collect shared knowledge and allow the university staff to access knowledge. Limitations of digital literacy remain when observing the number of staff who access the platforms. Staff can use the platforms but are limited in their ability to create content. 2) Culture is the second barrier. It is difficult to encourage change if departments or schools do not apply KM and permit their staff to join KM events. And 3) Based on bureaucratic office structure, staff from departments and schools need to have the authority to make decisions to get involved with KM events held by the university or other departments.

Policy Recommendations

KM is a key driver for organizational development, especially within higher education institutes. It helps people to rapidly adapt to changes in the digital age. It is a powerful tool that makes organizations sustainable. There are six policy recommendations provided, and these should benefit other higher education institutions.

Promoting KM Culture Within Organizations

Building KM culture by supporting KM sharing activities among staff within organizations is the foundation of KM cultural development and leads to work collaboration. Exchanging knowledge with others encourages people to update their ideas and find new criteria to improve their work.

Developing KM Infrastructure

In the digital era, organizations should enhance infrastructure that is necessary for staff to easily share, access, and use knowledge. KM platforms should be provided university-wide, and data and information should be in real time while covered topics need to be related to university functions.

Developing Human Resources

Human resources are the most important assets of an organization. Higher education institutions should offer training programs, workshops, and seminars related to KM. New technologies are associated with KM platform usage, AI, and Big Data. Staff can then work within a changing environment.

Facilitating the Application of Knowledge to Real-World Work

The added value of KM is that organizations can apply KM to daily work. Manuals and guidelines of KM should be developed, and these will help staff to understand and learn about other work experiences. The knowledge gained from others should help enhance work productivity while also protecting against potential problems.

Building Engagement

Recognition and motivation are the key components that encourage staff to get involved with university KM activities and events. Management policies should reward staff who are outstanding contributors to KM. This will persuade and inspire other personnel to attend and work with KM.

Connecting With Communities and Society

Higher education institutions should work with communities and society by implementing their knowledge and technologies to help develop and solve local problems. This includes working with public and private sectors so the university can enhance their ability to create new ideas and innovation.

Conclusion

KM not only enables an organization to preserve critical knowledge, but also helps create new knowledge through collaboration, reflective practice, and the use of digital tools. By developing a culture of knowledge sharing and by integrating digital technologies into KM processes, universities can build an environment that supports continuous learning and innovation. KM is no longer viewed as a stand alone function but can become embedded in institutional strategy, operations, and daily practices, especially in the era of digital transformation.

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Strategic Communication Through Immersive Technologies: Shaping UNU Yogyakarta's Future-Oriented Image in "Under the Same Sun" Exhibition

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Abstract

In the context of intensifying competition among higher education institutions to engage the digital generation, communication strategies leveraging immersive experiences have gained increasing global relevance. Immersive experiences that integrate digital technologies with emotional engagement have been recognized as effective tools for constructing institutional images that are future-oriented and adaptive to the evolving landscape of modern communication. This study investigates the communication strategy employed by Nahdlatul Ulama University (UNU) Yogyakarta to establish its image as a forward-looking educational institution through an immersive experience-based exhibition. Employing a qualitative approach, the research analyses the integration of technologies such as video mapping and interactive art installations within the new media art exhibition, "Under the Same Sun." This exhibition was selected due to its innovative use of immersive technology within the higher education sector, particularly among Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) universities. The findings indicate that immersive technology not only enhances audience engagement but also reinforces UNU Yogyakarta's positioning as a modern and adaptive institution attuned to the needs of the digital generation in the NU academic community. By delivering immersive experiences through new media art exhibitions such as "Under the Same Sun," UNU Yogyakarta strategically manages its identity as a futuristic and innovative institution. The implications of this study provide valuable insights into the role of immersive technology as an effective communication strategy in higher education branding, particularly in strengthening institutional competitiveness in the digital era.

Keywords: immersive experience, communication strategy, experiential marketing communication, university branding, Nahdlatul Ulama

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Introduction

The higher education sector is experiencing a period of intense competition and marketization. Universities, much like service-oriented organizations, are now compelled to differentiate themselves and articulate their unique value propositions to a discerning audience (Judson et al., 2008). In this environment, the concept of branding has migrated from the commercial realm to become a critical practice in academic management (Chapleo, 2015). A powerful and effectively communicated university brand is crucial for attracting top-tier students and faculty, impacting the institution's overall capacity to compete (Judson et al., 2008). Top researchers and academics are drawn to brands that promise resources, a supportive environment, and a prestigious platform for their work, thereby reinforcing the institution's intellectual capital. Meanwhile, government and industry partners are more likely to collaborate with and fund institutions that present a clear, strong, and relevant brand identity.

The imperative for strategic branding is particularly acute for Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama (UNU) Yogyakarta. According to Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Yogyakarta (2025), UNU Yogyakarta is a higher education institution operating under the auspices of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Central Board, which oversees the largest Islamic socio-religious mass organization globally, with an estimated 90 million members and followers across Indonesia. Established in 2017, UNU Yogyakarta's official vision is to become a leading professional hub and future-oriented university, positioning itself as a central meeting point for NU students, professionals, and academics focused on cultivating modern and excellent professionals (Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Yogyakarta, 2025).

However, public perception of its parent organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, is often strongly associated with traditionalism. The societal perception of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a deeply traditionalist organization is not merely a stereotype but a resilient construct embedded in public consciousness. Bindaniji and Fuadi (2022) elucidate that the discourse of "post-traditionalism" emerged precisely as an intellectual response to this pervasive view, which categorizes NU as an entity strictly adhered to customary practices. This tension is further contextualized by Suhendra et al. (2025), who argue that NU's historical identity as the guardian of tradition often obscures its adaptive efforts, rendering it perceived as less modern despite internal drives for renewal. Consequently, this stigma influences social behavior; as Rofiah et al. (2025) observe, urban NU constituents are actively negotiating their identity, striving to construct a moderate and contemporary image to counterbalance the public narrative that frames the organization as rigidly traditional. This long-standing association can unintentionally cast a "less modern" image onto NU-affiliated institutions, potentially conflicting with UNU Yogyakarta's core vision as a forward-looking university. As a result, actively communicating the university's brand positioning to shape a desirable and future-oriented image becomes a vital strategic priority.

These branding pressures are further intensified by the rise of the digital generation (Gen Z), whose media consumption patterns, expectations of interactivity, and preference for visually rich, participatory experiences challenge traditional modes of institutional communication. *The Art Basel and UBS Survey of Global Collecting 2025*, Gen Z has emerged as the most enthusiastic demographic, with 56% of High-Net-Worth Individuals planning to increase their attendance—surpassing both Millennials (49%) and Boomers (36%) (McAndrew, 2024). This cohort prioritizes "Instagrammability" and social interaction over static historical objects. Haqqi and Harjanto (2025) emphasize that while Gen Z finds traditional museums tedious, they

are highly responsive to tech-integrated, immersive environments (e.g., AR or Projection Mapping). Ultimately, for Gen Z, the exhibition experience supersedes the artist's identity.

In response to this branding challenge and the intensifying competition for the attention of the digital generation, UNU Yogyakarta adopted an innovative communication strategy: the "Under the Same Sun" exhibition. Conceptualized as a new media art exhibition, "Under the Same Sun" integrates immersive technologies such as video mapping and interactive art installations. It thus operates not merely as an artistic event but as a strategic communication platform that embodies UNU Yogyakarta's commitment to innovation, technological literacy, and responsiveness to contemporary modes of engagement, particularly within the NU academic ecosystem. UNU Yogyakarta has innovatively repurposed its new campus architecture—transforming functional areas such as walls, corridors, and open spaces—into a living art gallery. According to Reza (2024), this convergence of academic infrastructure and aesthetic display represents a "positive anomaly" within the Nahdlatul Ulama ecosystem. Distinguished by its rarity among non-arts institutions, the exhibition at UNU Yogyakarta engages audiences through a unique multisensory framework that invites them to sense, feel, think, act, and relate, thereby deliberately shifting perceptions from narrowly traditionalist associations.

This research investigates the communication strategy employed by UNU Yogyakarta to intentionally establish its image as a modern, future-oriented educational institution through an immersive experience-based exhibition. By analysing "Under the Same Sun" not only as an artistic initiative but as a deliberate branding instrument, the study explores how immersive technologies can enhance shifting public perceptions and strengthen the competitiveness of higher education institutions in the digital era, particularly within the network of NU universities.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on higher education marketing increasingly emphasize the need to manage universities as corporate brands, a shift driven by intensifying market pressures and competitive dynamics. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) argue that universities have been compelled to adopt branding concepts traditionally associated with the corporate sector, positioning themselves as distinctive and recognizable entities within an overcrowded educational marketplace. This branding imperative is not limited to visual identity or promotional slogans; it extends to how institutions strategically communicate their values, missions, and unique strengths to diverse stakeholders. Emery (1999) further highlights that university marketing performs a dual function: on the one hand, it operates as a managerial tool for achieving institutional objectives; on the other, it serves as a crucial information resource for prospective students, enabling them to make informed decisions about programs and institutional fit. This dual role underscores the importance of examining how communication strategies are designed and implemented, especially when institutions aim to project a specific, future-oriented image.

Despite recognition of the strategic importance of branding, much of the existing literature on university marketing communication remains focused on conventional, largely non-experiential methods. Studies such as Octora and Alvin (2022) typically document familiar tactics such as participation in education fairs, "school safari" visits to high schools, and broad online marketing campaigns (e.g., websites, social media posts, and digital advertisements). These activities are predominantly informational and promotional, aimed at increasing

visibility and driving enrollment, but they often do not fundamentally reimagine how stakeholders experience the university brand.

A small number of studies have now begun to explore more experiential and spatially grounded forms of marketing communication, particularly those implemented through exhibitions. Hjelde (2020), for instance, connects exhibitions to university branding, but the analysis is situated within art-focused institutions where exhibitions are a natural extension of academic practice and institutional identity. The studies suggest that exhibitions including through immersive environments can function as powerful strategic communication tools. However, their applications are largely explored in settings where exhibitions are already expected (art schools, cultural institutions) or in commercial branding contexts, rather than in non-art-specialized universities.

This concentration on conventional tools in higher education reveals a significant research gap. There is limited empirical investigation of how immersive exhibitions might be deployed as strategic communication instruments by universities whose primary identity does not revolve around art or design. Furthermore, little is known about how such strategies operate in institutions that must navigate complex identity tensions. For example, universities associated with religious or traditional organizations that wish to project a modern, future-oriented image to the digital generation. In these contexts, immersive technologies such as video mapping, interactive installations, and new media art have the potential not only to attract attention, but also to symbolically communicate adaptability, technological literacy, and forward-looking values.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how immersive technologies are strategically integrated into a single-case study design, the "Under the Same Sun" exhibition, to manage and communicate Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama (UNU) Yogyakarta's future-oriented institutional image. This specific case was selected for its unique convergence of immersive technologies—such as video mapping and interactive installations—within a religious educational institution not typically associated with new media art. By situating the inquiry within the Nahdlatul Ulama network, the research aims to deconstruct both the strategic intent behind adopting such innovations and the ways in which these technological narratives are experienced and interpreted by diverse stakeholders.

To ensure accurate and complete results, this study combines three methods: interviews, observations, and document analysis. This mix allows us to see the exhibition from multiple angles, connecting the university's strategy with how visitors experienced the space and its modern design. By analyzing these different sources together, the research demonstrates how UNU Yogyakarta leverages immersive technology to build its positioning as an adaptive, future-oriented institution attuned to the digital generation.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study integrates three main theoretical pillars including Corporate Image Advertising Theory, Strategic Experiential Marketing Communication (through immersive technologies), and the PCDL (Positioning – Communicating – Delivering – Leveraging) branding model to explain how Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama (UNU) Yogyakarta uses an immersive new media art exhibition to transform and reinforce its institutional brand

image. By combining these perspectives, the framework adapts traditional corporate marketing theories to the specific dynamics and identity challenges of the higher education sector, particularly within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) ecosystem.

Corporate Image Advertising Theory: Framing UNU Yogyakarta as the Brand

Within the broader logic of Corporate Image Advertising Theory that frames UNU Yogyakarta's effort to communicate a forward-looking institutional identity, scholarship in marketing identifies three major perspectives for defining corporate image. The first perspective treats corporate image primarily as a perceptual construct—that is, the public's mental representation of an organization (Enis, 1967; Grönroos, 1984), or, as noted by Gray and Balmer (1998) and Schuler (2004), the figurative "portrait" people hold about a company. The second perspective expands this notion by incorporating evaluative and affective elements—feelings, attitudes, and value judgments directed at the organization (Barich & Kotler, 1991; Dowling, 1986). From this standpoint, corporate image is not limited to neutral descriptions of an organization but encompasses both descriptive impressions and evaluative reactions, creating a conceptual distinction from the purely perceptual view noted earlier (Brown & Cox, 1997). A third perspective diverges from both by framing corporate image as the network of associations and meanings that audiences link to an organization (Dowling, 1986; Keller & Aaker, 1992; Martineau, 1958).

These three approaches underscore why UNU Yogyakarta cannot rely solely on abstract messaging—such as vision statements or slogans—to reposition itself as modern, innovative, and future-oriented. Corporate image advertising theory highlights the limitation of relying solely on abstract messages or promises as shown in vision statements, slogans, and static promotional materials to reshape such perceptions. To be effective, these abstract identity claims must be translated into concrete, memorable experiences that stakeholders can directly encounter and internalize. Corporate image is shaped not only by perceptions, but also by emotions, attitudes, and deeper associative meanings; therefore, as Corporate Image Advertising Theory suggests, these identity claims must be reinforced through concrete, experiential encounters, which justifies the strategic shift toward immersive, technology-driven experiential communication. This theoretical gap opens the way for the second pillar of the framework: strategic experiential marketing communication using immersive technologies.

Immersive Technology as Strategic Experiential Marketing Communication

Smilansky (2009) conceptualizes experiential marketing communication as a dynamic approach that transcends traditional advertising by creating interactive, sensory-rich environments where consumers can forge real-time, emotional connections with a brand. The objective of this strategy is to cultivate memorable encounters that resonate on a personal level, stimulating organic word-of-mouth advocacy and securing long-term consumer support. Complementing this approach, technological advancements have equipped marketers with sophisticated instruments to construct immersive brand ecosystems (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). By integrating digital frontiers ranging from virtual and augmented reality to social media and live streaming brands can now transcend physical limitations to engage consumers through innovative, interactive dialogues.

Schmitt (1999) delineates the architecture of experiential marketing through five core dimensions that collectively shape the consumer journey. The process begins with Sense, where sensory perception stimulated by visuals, audio, and atmosphere constructs a unique

brand image, practically manifested in the gallery's layout, lighting quality, and acoustic environment (Jannah et al., 2014). This sensory foundation transitions into Feel, a dimension focused on eliciting affective responses and emotional positivity (Chouyluam et al., 2021), which is largely cultivated through the hospitality and openness of the staff (Jannah et al., 2014). Simultaneously, the Think dimension engages the visitor's intellect, encouraging creative processing and new understandings (Chouyluam et al., 2021) through innovative building design and diverse collections. These internal experiences translate into Act, which influences physical behaviours and lifestyle choices, positioning the gallery as a preferred destination for those seeking new experiences. Finally, the Relate dimension synthesizes these sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural elements to forge broader social and cultural connections (Baehaqi et al., 2022), facilitated by digital community building and dynamic interpersonal interactions between staff and visitors (Jannah et al., 2014).

In this study, immersive technologies such as video mapping and interactive art installations used in the *"Under the Same Sun"* exhibition are conceptualized as the live brand experience at the core of this strategy. The exhibition functions not merely as an artistic program but as a brand-relevant experiential platform aligned with UNU Yogyakarta's goal of presenting a future-oriented, technologically literate institutional persona. Through immersive environments, abstract identity claims such as "future-oriented," "innovative," and "digital-generation friendly" are transformed into embodied experiences: visitors move through dynamic visual projections, interact with digital interfaces, and inhabit a technologically mediated space that concretely symbolizes modernity.

Adapting the PCDL Model to University Branding

To structure and evaluate UNU Yogyakarta's branding efforts, the framework employs Ghodeswar's (2008) PCDL Model (Positioning, Communicating, Delivering, and Leveraging) adapted from corporate branding to the university context. The initial stage of this framework, Positioning the Brand (P), requires UNU Yogyakarta to clearly define its identity within the competitive educational market. This positioning is strategically formulated to address a significant challenge: overcoming the traditional perceptions associated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and instead highlighting its key intangible attributes as a "Future-Oriented" and "Innovative" institution. The university's core strategic benefit is offering education explicitly tailored for the needs of the digital generation.

To translate this abstract positioning into a tangible reality, UNU Yogyakarta transitions to the Communicating the Brand Message (C) stage, which is the main intervention examined by this research. The university utilizes experiential marketing communication, realized through immersive technology in the "Under the Same Sun" exhibition, as the primary delivery channel. This technology essentially transforms the static message of a futuristic image into a physical, social, and emotional brand experience.

Once the brand image has been successfully communicated through the immersive experience, the subsequent stage focuses on Delivering the Brand Performance (D). This phase is crucial for ensuring that the promised experience is authentically aligned with public perception and the institution's actual service delivery. Within the context of the exhibition, brand performance is meticulously assessed through continuous feedback and monitoring mechanisms. The processes of media monitoring and social media insights are employed to collect essential data and audience insights on how the new image is perceived and internalized.

The final stage, Leveraging the Brand Equity (L), focuses on maximizing the long-term outcomes of a successful communication strategy. If the immersive communication in stage (C) proves effective, UNU Yogyakarta's "Future-Oriented" image is significantly reinforced, consequently boosting its overall Brand Equity (brand value). This enhanced value can then be strategically leveraged for institutional growth, such as establishing collaboration posts and attracting new, diverse student segments or partners, thereby strengthening its competitive advantage. In summary, the conceptual framework argues that the use of experiential marketing communication, facilitated by immersive technology, is the core mechanism within the Communication stage (C) that effectively leads to the successful shaping and subsequent Leveraging (L) of UNU Yogyakarta's desired future-oriented institutional image.

Result and Discussion

The exhibition "Under the Same Sun," held from November 9 to December 15, 2024, at Galeri Seni Nusantara, UNU Yogyakarta, represents a strategic convergence of art, science, and technology within the context of an Islamic higher education institution (Liputan6, 2024). Curated by Ignatia Nilu, the event featured 23 artworks by 14 artists and collectives—including notable participants such as HONF, MIVUBI, and Paul Kiram—showcasing a diverse range of new media formats, including 13 installations, 6 projection mappings, and 4 prototypes (Indah, 2024; Reza, 2024). This exhibition focuses exclusively on new media art, utilizing the university's modern infrastructure to facilitate cross-disciplinary dialogue. It aimed to bridge the gap between traditional academic values and contemporary technological advancements, positioning the campus not merely as a religious educational facility but as a progressive hub for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) innovation.

Thematically, the findings underscore a critical re-examination of the "Human-Nature-Technology" relationship in the post-Anthropocene era. The artworks explored how connectivity and automation, such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), mediate modern existence (Reza, 2024). Institutional leaders described the exhibition as a deliberate "anomaly" within the Nahdlatul Ulama ecosystem, intended to challenge stereotypes and encourage a cultural shift towards digital transformation among the *santri* (students) community (Reza, 2024). This initiative highlights the university's "Five Go" strategy, specifically "Go Innovative" and "Go Digital," reinforcing its commitment to becoming a leading professional hub.

The next section analyzes the strategic implementation of the "Under the Same Sun" exhibition through the lens of the PCDL (Positioning, Communicating, Delivering, Leveraging) branding model adapted from Ghodeswar (2008). The analysis demonstrates how immersive technology functions not merely as an artistic display, but as a calculated communication instrument to reshape the institutional identity of UNU Yogyakarta.

Positioning the Brand: Redefining Identity Through Immersive Association

The first phase of the strategy focuses on Positioning the Brand (P), where the primary objective is to define UNU Yogyakarta's identity within the competitive higher education landscape. The analysis identifies a significant strategic opportunity to rebrand the university by leveraging immersive technologies to attract a young and modern audience. As noted in the literature, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) identity often carries a strong association with traditionalism (Bindaniji & Fuadi, 2022; Suhendra et al., 2025). The "Under the Same Sun" exhibition seizes this opportunity to disrupt the narrative, creating a distinct point of difference

compared to other NU-affiliated institutions. By deliberately juxtaposing the university's religious foundation with cutting-edge new media art, UNU Yogyakarta successfully constructs a "Heritage to High-tech" perceptual shift. This positioning is not merely about aesthetics; it is a calculated move to establish Gen Z relevance, ensuring the institution resonates with a generation that values innovation and digital fluency.

Figure 1

Interactive Art Installation at Under the Same Sun

Note. Installation works like MIVUBI's Reconnected Access Memory demonstrated this synergy by merging digital gaming interfaces with social critique, thereby deconstructing the boundaries between formal institutional frameworks and fluid digital culture. (Source: UNU Yogyakarta's documentation)

To operationalize this positioning, the exhibition functions as a bridge between tangible and intangible brand attributes. On the tangible level, visitors are presented with interactive art installations and the opportunity to physically explore the UNU Yogyakarta building and facilities. This setup effectively creates a "try-before-you-enroll" mechanism, functioning as an engaging, non-intrusive campus tour that aims for higher conversion rates among prospective students. These physical encounters serve as the "reasons-to-believe" that validate the brand's promises.

Consequently, these tangible experiences cultivate critical intangible attributes. The direct interaction with technology fosters a futuristic image of UNU Yogyakarta in the minds of the audience. The fresh aesthetics and digital experiences match Gen Z's expectations, thereby cementing the university's relevance to youth. Most importantly, the exhibition builds credibility and trust. Moreover, it also shifts the perception of traditionalism once attached to the NU as the affiliation of the university to modernism and future-oriented positioning of UNU Yogyakarta. Therefore, this attempt unfolds the positioning in two steps. The first one is recalibrating the identity of UNU Yogyakarta and NU as its affiliation is predominantly traditional to be repositioned as an institution with strong religious heritage with technologically driven and future-oriented academic institutions. At the second attempt is demonstrating technological competence through a live event rather than relying on static slogans, the university provides visible proof of its modern orientation. Thus, the positioning strategy moves beyond promising a future-oriented education to demonstrating it, effectively reshaping the public's belief system regarding the university's capabilities.

Communicating the Brand Message: The Brand Experience

In the Communicating the Brand Message (C) stage, the findings indicate a deliberate departure from conventional advertising toward experiential marketing communication. UNU Yogyakarta utilizes the exhibition as its primary channel to transmit its value proposition. Consistent with Smilansky's (2009) theory, the use of immersive technology here is not cosmetic but strategic; it transforms the static positioning statement of being "future-oriented" into a dynamic live brand experience. Instead of simply telling the audience that the university is modern, the exhibition allows them to inhabit modernity. Through video mapping,

interactive installations, and curated new media art, the university communicates its brand message in a language native to the digital generation: one characterized by interactivity, visual richness, and emotional engagement.

The university also engages visitors across Schmitt's (1999) experiential dimensions, inviting them to *Sense* the digital atmosphere and *Feel* the modern ambiance. This approach aligns perfectly with the media consumption patterns of the digital generation, who prioritize interactivity and visual richness over passive information. Furthermore, the communication strategy adopts an omnichannel approach. The physical immersive experience serves as a "content factory," generating visually capturing material that is amplified through digital channels, public relations, and live broadcasts. This ensures that the brand message of innovation reaches beyond the physical visitors, creating a ripple effect across the broader digital ecosystem.

Figure 2
E-poster of Under the Same Sun

Source: UNU Yogyakarta's documentation

Here, immersive technology is not an accessory but a strategic vehicle that transforms the relatively static positioning statement ("future-oriented university") into a physical, social, and emotional brand experience. Through video mapping, interactive installations, and curated new media art, the university communicates its brand message in a way that is consistent with the digital generation's expectations for interactivity, visual richness, and emotional engagement. Then, UNU Yogyakarta utilizes the other marketing communication channels to amplify the live brand experience through digital channel, advertising, public relations, and live broadcast, which the brand experience becomes content for the broader campaign message.

In parallel with digital dissemination, the strategic execution of public relations and media handling played a critical role in legitimizing this brand transformation. Rather than relying solely on standard press releases, the media handling strategy prioritized experiential media relations, inviting journalists and news editors to witness the immersive technology firsthand. This approach was crucial in shifting the editorial narrative; by enabling the media to directly experience the convergence of tradition and modernity, the resulting coverage moved beyond simple event reporting to in-depth stories about institutional innovation. This earned media served as a powerful third-party endorsement, providing objective validation of UNU Yogyakarta's future-oriented claims. By successfully framing the exhibition as a newsworthy milestone in the modernization of Islamic higher education, the PR strategy effectively broadened the stakeholder reach, influencing not only prospective students but also parents,

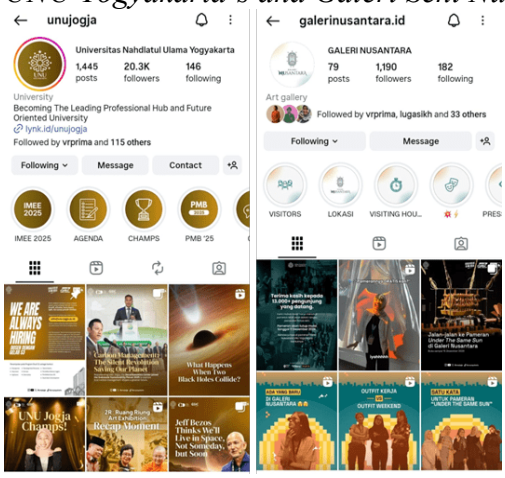
industry partners, and policymakers who rely on credible news sources for institutional assessment.

Delivering the Brand Performance: Validating the Promise

Once the immersive exhibition communicates the desired image, the Delivering the Brand Performance (D) stage focuses on the critical task of verification, ensuring that the brand promise aligns with observed performance and public perception. In the context of this study, UNU Yogyakarta measures its delivery not through academic rankings alone, but through social media insights and media monitoring that reflect real-time public sentiment.

Figure 3

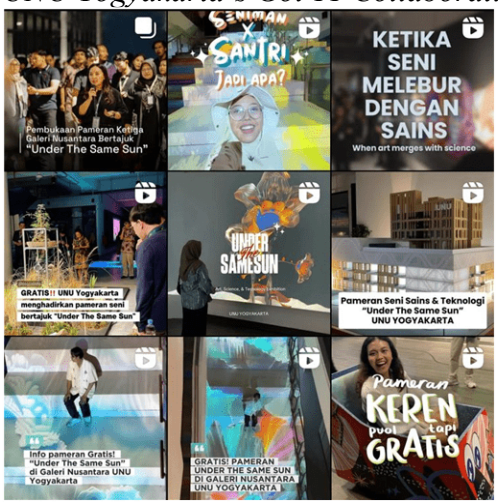
UNU Yogyakarta's and Galeri Seni Nusantara's Official Instagram Account



Data analysis reveals a significant increase in followers from the period preceding the event, accompanied by a surge in content views and positive media coverage. These metrics serve as tangible proof that the exhibition did more than just entertain; it effectively amplified the institution's reach and solidified the "Future-Oriented Image" amongst young generations. This alignment between the strategic intent and the audience's digital response indicates that the university successfully minimized the gap between its projected image and the public's reality, thereby authenticating its brand performance.

Figure 4

UNU Yogyakarta's Got 11 Collaboration Posts With More Than 8.500K Views



Leveraging the Brand Equity: Sustaining Long-Term Value

The final stage, Leveraging the Brand Equity (L), concerns the long-term strategic utilization of the value generated by the exhibition. The study finds that "Under the Same Sun" was not a transient event but a generator of enduring brand assets. The exhibition successfully leveraged brand equity by facilitating collaboration posts with top influencers. These collaborations created a digital footprint that is continuously viewed by the public long after the physical event has concluded, extending the lifecycle of the brand message. If the immersive communication in the previous stages is effective, UNU Yogyakarta's desired "Future-Oriented" image is significantly strengthened. Consequently, at this stage, the immersive exhibition and the positive image it generates functions as a springboard for broader institutional growth. The enhanced brand equity attracts not only prospective students but also potential strategic partnerships, positioning the university to capitalize on its modern identity for future academic and professional expansion.

The analysis of this Leveraging stage confirms the success of UNU Yogyakarta's theoretical transition from merely conveying abstract messages to the formation of a concrete collective memory. While the initial stage of Corporate Image Advertising Theory demands a shift from static vision slogans to tangible experiences, this stage functions as a locking mechanism that transforms momentary immersive experiences into a permanent network of associations. The existence of a digital footprint from influencer collaborations ensures that the institution's "mental portrait" (*perceptual construct*) does not fade after the event concludes but is continuously reproduced to shape sustainable public perception. Consequently, the generated brand equity is not merely an accumulation of affective impressions but has transformed into a strategic asset that validates the "Future-Oriented" identity as an institutional reality, rather than just a promotional promise.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the "Under the Same Sun" exhibition transcends the boundaries of a conventional art event, functioning instead as a sophisticated strategic communication instrument designed to reposition UNU Yogyakarta. The study demonstrates that immersive technology serves as a catalyst for a paradigm shift in university branding: moving from a declarative approach (passively telling the audience about values) to an experiential approach (allowing the audience to sense, feel, and embody those values).

This strategic transformation manifests through three interconnected dimensions that collectively reposition the university. First, the exhibition serves as an experiential bridge, reframing the institution's traditional religious heritage into a narrative of ethically grounded innovation, thereby harmonizing faith with a future-oriented technological identity. This positioning is reinforced by the unique synergy between GLAM and STEM ecosystems, a cross-disciplinary approach that signals intellectual agility and proves the university's relevance to the digital generation. Finally, grounded in embodied learning and Corporate Image Advertising Theory, the immersive format transcends traditional display to function as a strategic communication tool, effectively translating institutional values into cognitively and emotionally resonant experiences that prioritize active engagement over passive instruction.

Ultimately, this study offers significant practical insights for higher education branding, particularly for religious-affiliated institutions in Indonesia. It validates that modernizing a traditional brand does not require abandoning its roots. Instead, by leveraging immersive

technologies and experiential marketing, institutions can construct a narrative where tradition and future-oriented innovation coexist, thereby strengthening their competitiveness in the digital era.

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

The author declares that ChatGPT and Gemini AI were used in the preparation of this manuscript solely for minor linguistic refinement, including grammar correction, small sentence-level adjustments to improve clarity, and translation. The software was not used to conduct analysis, create substantive content or draw conclusions. The intellectual content, interpretations and conclusions presented in this manuscript are entirely the author's own.

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A Method to Create Audible Glitch Art

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Abstract

Glitch art is art that uses intentionally generated errors (glitches) in images, videos, and audio, created by destroying digital data or physically manipulating electronic devices. Glitch art is fascinating because it manifests unpredictable beauty. We have been exploring the production methods and effects of glitch art. As part of this research, we explored the creation and methods of glitch art that can be enjoyed aurally. Specifically, we first used image processing software to generate multi-layered data that mixed image data and music data as separate layers. Next, we loaded this data into audio processing software and applied audio processing to the image data portion, confirming that glitch art can be created without affecting the music data. This method is an extension of our previous method, but the purpose of our previous method was to generate glitch sound, and it was not able to generate glitch art. Moreover, this method generated unbearable noise sounds in music data, and could not be enjoyed aurally. In contrast, this study demonstrates a method that allows glitch art to be enjoyed not only visually but also aurally as music. This research is unique in that it simultaneously makes glitches visible and audible, and can be said to create a new type of art that brings about a shift in aesthetic sense. This is because the visually beautiful parts are merely audibly noisy sounds, and the audibly beautiful parts appear visually to be noise.

Keywords: glitch art, image processing, audio processing, audible

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Introduction

Glitch art is art that uses intentionally generated errors (glitches) in images, video, and audio by destroying digital data or physically manipulating electronic devices. This type of glitch art was born with the emergence of new media. It began with works that utilized glitches in televisions and video game consoles, and gradually developed into a musical genre known as glitch music. Glitch art, which manifests unpredictable beauty, has a charm that is not found in the beauty of predictable harmony, and this is what draws people to it. Glitch art can also be said to broaden the scope of art appreciation by deliberately introducing discordant elements into art and finding beauty in them.

We have been exploring the production methods and effects of glitch art, and as part of this research, we explored the creation of glitch art that can be enjoyed audibly. Specifically, we first used the image processing software Photoshop to generate multi-layered data that mixed image data and music data as separate layers. Next, we loaded this data into the audio processing software Audacity and applied audio processing to the image data portion, confirming that glitch art could be created without affecting the music data. The method in this research is an extension of a previous method we used, but our previous method was intended to generate glitch sound and was not able to generate glitch art. Moreover, this method generated unbearable noise sounds in the music data, and could not be used to create works that could be enjoyed audibly. In contrast, this research demonstrated a method that not only allows glitch art to be enjoyed visually, but also allows it to be enjoyed audibly as music.

This research is unique in that it simultaneously makes glitches visible and audible, and can be said to create a new type of art that brings about a shift in aesthetic sense. This is because the visually beautiful parts are merely audibly noisy sounds, and the audibly beautiful parts appear visually to be noise.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes glitch art as the background of this research. Based on that, Section 3 describes the goals and basic approach of this research. Section 4 then describes the experiments conducted in this research and a discussion of the results, and Section 5 describes related research. Finally, Section 6 concludes this paper.

Research Background

Glitch Art

A glitch refers to an error (problem) in images, video, or audio that occurs when digital data is corrupted or televisions or game consoles malfunction. The unpredictable beauty of such glitches has an allure not found in predictable beauty, and over the years, pioneering artists who utilised this in art have come to be accepted as glitch art. One of the earliest pioneering works of glitch art is Nam June Paik's *Magnet TV*, which altered the distortion of the television image by moving a powerful magnet placed on top of the television (Kellein & Stooss, 1993). The video work *Digital TV Dinner*, created by Jamie Fenton and Raoul Zaritsky in 1978, is a video recording of glitches created by operating the Bally Astrocade video game console by Bally Manufacturing (Betancourt, 2015).

Glitch art is no longer limited to works that use glitches in televisions and video games; it has now developed into a musical genre known as glitch music. The German electronic music

group OVAL (Popp, 2022) is considered a pioneer of glitch music, and a music festival bearing the name GLITCH (Festival, 2014) has been held annually since 2014.

Theoretical research has also been conducted on glitch art. Rosa Menkman has proposed using information theory to understand glitch art as a specific genre of contemporary art (Menkman, 2011). In 2010, Rosa Menkman and others organised the international conference on glitch, GLI.T/CH (McCormack, 2010). Research on glitch art has also been presented at the international conference EvoMUSART, which has been held annually since 2011 (Machado et al., 2013).

How to Create Glitch Art

There are many tutorials available online on how to create glitch art (Stearns, 2013; Temkin, 2009). Michael Betancourt has also classified the techniques used to create glitch art as follows (Betancourt, 2016):

- Data Manipulation: Modifying file data to create glitches
- Misalignment: Opening a file from one app in another
- Hardware Failure: Creating mechanical malfunctions to generate sound or video
- Misregistration: Physical noise in analog media
- Distortion: Creating physical distortions using magnets, etc.

It is important to note that these techniques do not always work effectively. For example, if data is corrupted through data manipulation, glitches may or may not occur as a result. This unpredictability is undoubtedly what makes glitch art so appealing, but the glitches in glitch art are necessarily limited to those that can be perceived by human sensory organs such as sight and hearing.

Research Goals and Basic Approaches

Research Goals

Our goals in this study are as follows:

- Aiming to express art through the cross-sectional manipulation of sound, color (light), and light.
- Creating audible glitch art with elegant techniques.

We have previously worked on colorizing sound (Amano, 2018). Utilizing that knowledge, in this research, we aim to express cross-sectional art that spans sound and color. Sound and color have something in common. Specifically, they both have wave properties. Waves in sound represent tone, while waves in light represent color. Color is the reflection of light, and light and sound are sine waves with different frequencies. In other words, both can be represented and processed as waveform data. Sounds that cannot be perceived by the human ear can be perceived visually if they are represented as waveform data, and colors that cannot be perceived by the human eye can sometimes be perceived audibly.

Furthermore, we do not simply create glitches, but also pursue the technique itself. A haphazard method is not what we aim for. On the other hand, a method that produces the same results no matter when, where, or who does it would negate the unpredictable beauty that is the appeal of glitch art. In this research, an elegant method means a unified method based on a certain format. This does not eliminate the occurrence of unpredictable glitches.

For example, when it comes to data manipulation techniques, an elegant method is achieved by systematically organizing and unifying the methods of manipulating data. However, this does not completely prescribe everything, and it allows for the target parts of data manipulation to be set arbitrarily. By doing this, we can expect to see the emergence of the unpredictable beauty that is the appeal of glitch art.

Basic Approaches

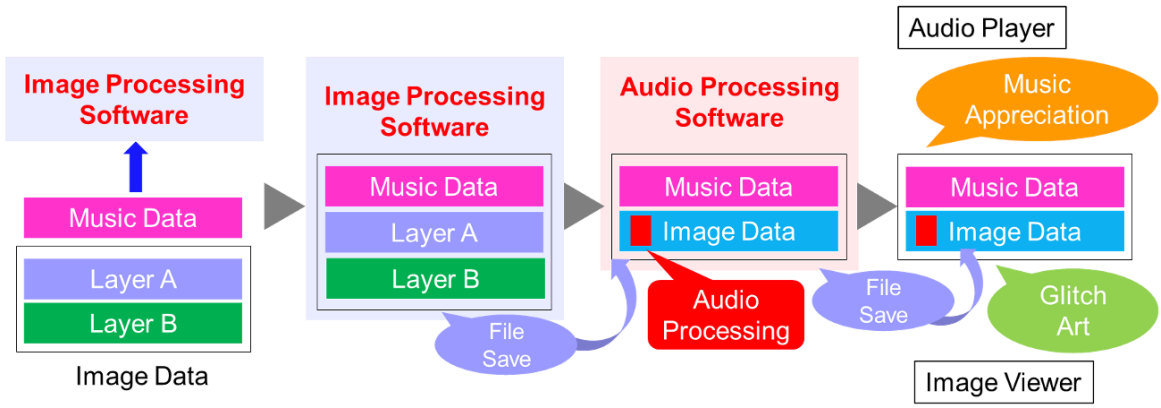
The basic approach of this research is as follows:

- Manipulating sound as an image
  - Sounds that humans cannot perceive can be processed as image data
  - Image processing can be applied = elegant manipulation
- Manipulating images as sound
  - Colors (light) that humans cannot perceive can be processed as audio data
  - Audio processing can be applied = elegant manipulation

First, by manipulating sound as an image, it becomes possible to process sounds that humans cannot perceive as image data. Then, by applying image processing to sound, it becomes possible to create glitches. Furthermore, by manipulating images as sound, it becomes possible to process colors (light) that humans cannot perceive as audio data (waveform data). Then, by applying audio processing to images, it becomes possible to create glitches. In conclusion, the elegant method that this research aims to use is a method for creating glitch art based on image and audio processing that is fundamentally based on misalignment.

Next, we will describe specific methods that build on this basic approach (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Overview of Our Approach



The key points of the basic approach in this research are as follows:

- Image Processing: Multi-layering of music and image data
- Audio Processing: Applied only to image data

Figure 2
Audio Data Conversion

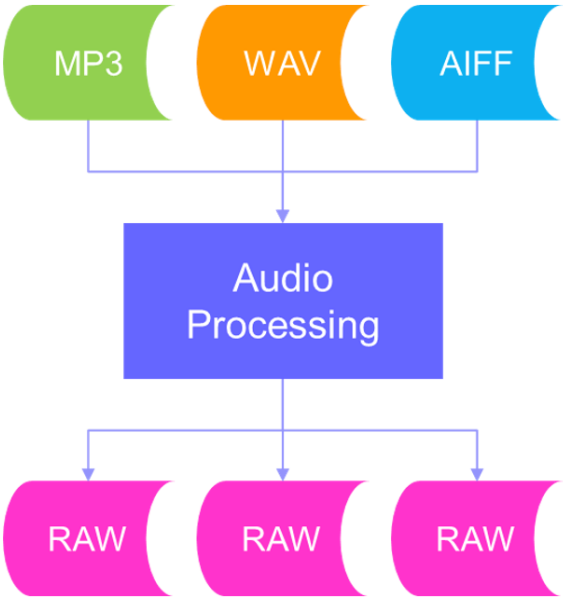
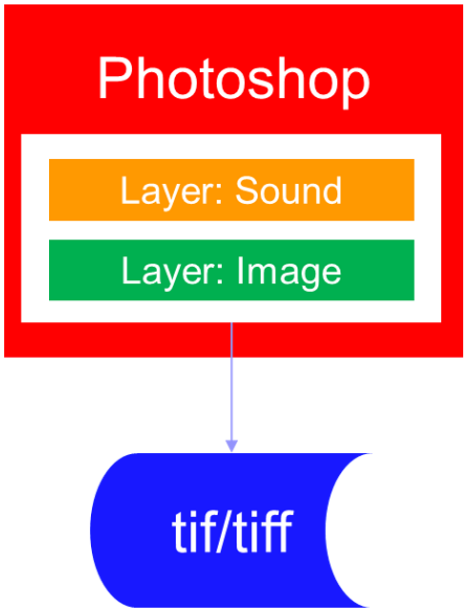


Figure 3
Multilayer Data With Music and Image



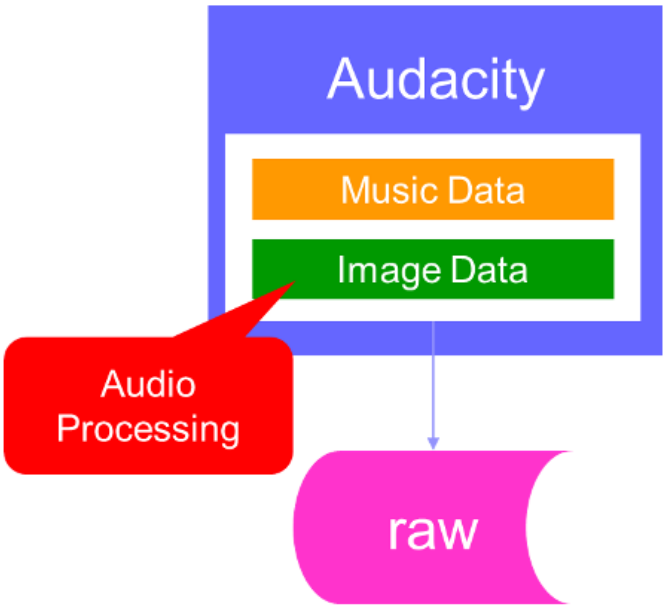
First, prepare the original image data and music data. Next, load this data into image processing software. In this case, the image data and music data are each placed on separate layers. Layers are like the sheets that make up an image, and in many image processing programs, a single image is composed of multiple sheets stacked on top of each other. This layering makes it possible to perform image processing such as compositing and modifying multiple images without affecting the original image. One thing to note is when loading music data. Music data cannot usually be loaded into image processing software. Therefore, the music data must first be converted. Music data formats include MP3 (MPEG-1 Audio Layer-3) (John et al., 2012), WAV (RIFF waveform Audio Format) (IBM Corp. et al., 1991), and AIFF (Audio Interchange File Format) (Apple Computer Inc., 1989). Music data in these formats is structured based on a specific data structure and cannot be loaded into image processing software in its current state. For this reason, the music data format is converted to RAW (Raw Image Format) (Fraser, 2004) format (Figure 2). RAW format is a pixel data format that is not strongly dependent on any particular application.

After converting the music data to RAW format, the image data and music data are loaded into image processing software (Figure 3). Details will be given in the next section, but the important thing to note here is that the two are placed on separate layers. Also, no image processing is applied to the music data layer. If image processing is applied to the music data, glitches will occur in the music data, and it is highly likely that the music will be unlistenable. Conversely, no glitches will occur if image processing is applied to image data. This is because applying normal image processing to image data is not a destructive operation on the data. The most important point is that the image data and music data that have been loaded into the image processing software and converted into multi-layers are saved as a single file. The file is saved in tif/tiff format, which is a type of RAW format. At this point, no glitches will occur.

Next, the multi-layered data (data containing a mixture of images and music) that has been converted into a file through image processing software is loaded into audio processing software (Figure 4). As this is not a normal music file, some ingenuity is required, but details

will be given in the next section. After loading it into the audio processing software, audio processing is applied, but care must be taken here as well. The loaded data is a mixture of images and music, and audio processing is applied to the image data. This is because applying audio processing to music data will affect the music data, and it will no longer be the original music data. There are also some points to be careful about when applying audio processing to image data, but these will be discussed in the next section. After going through the above steps and saving the file, the occurrence of glitches can be visually confirmed. Furthermore, to check the music audibly, audio playback software will be used, but as the file format is RAW, only a limited number of audio software programs can play it.

Figure 4
Audio Processing to Multilayer Data



Experiments and Discussions

Image Processing

First, in this study, we used Pachelbel's Canon as music data. The original file was in MP3 format, but we converted it to RAW format. For details of this preprocessing, refer to the reference (Amano, 2023a).

Figure 5
Music Data in Photoshop

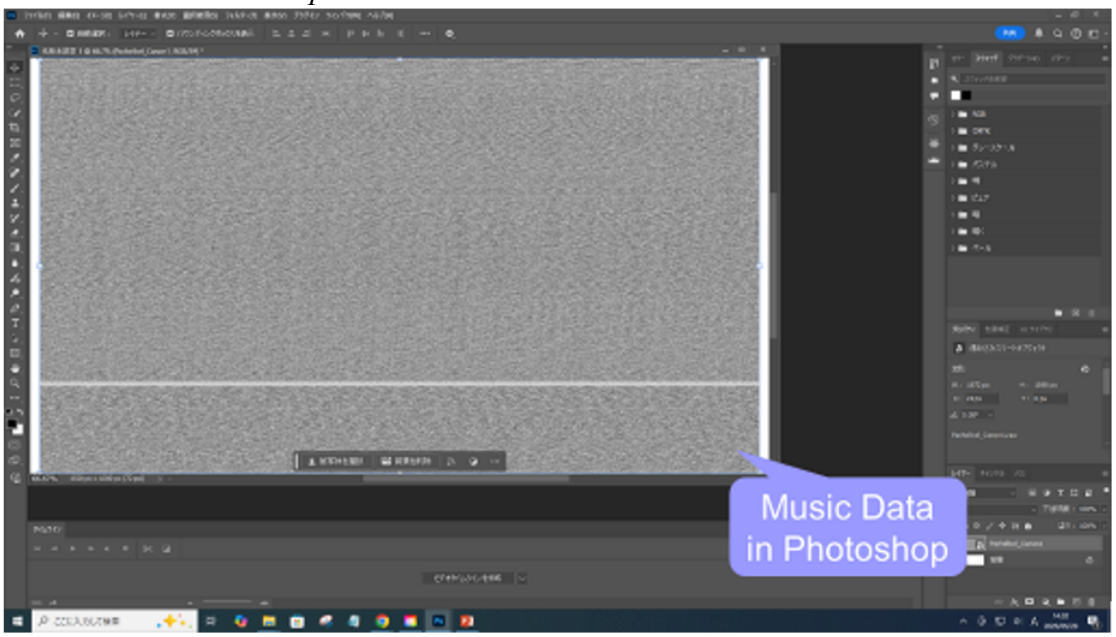
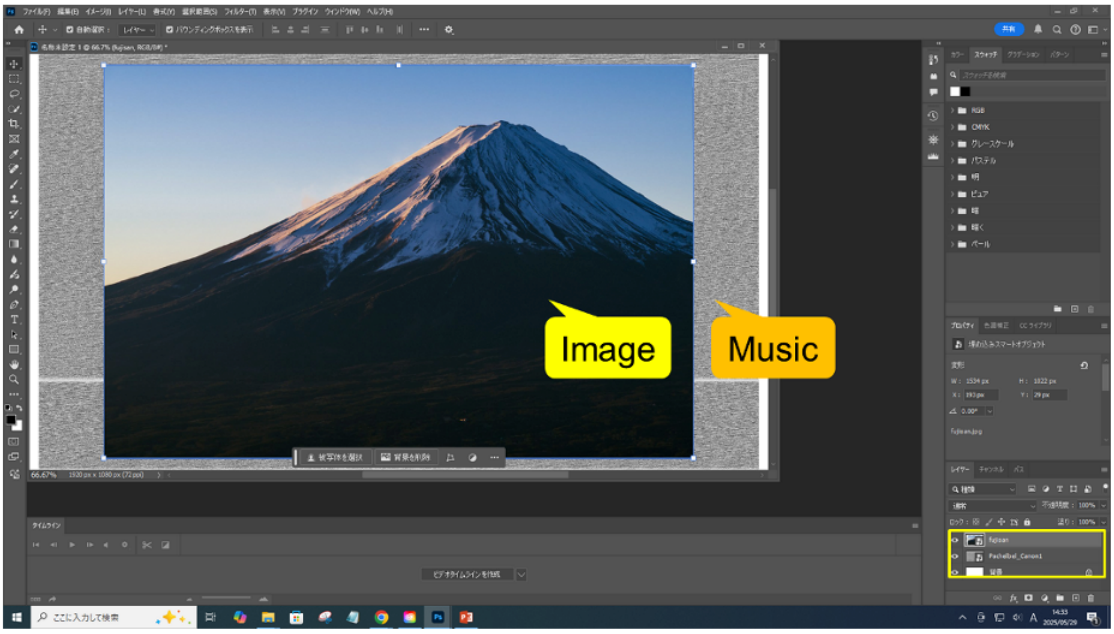
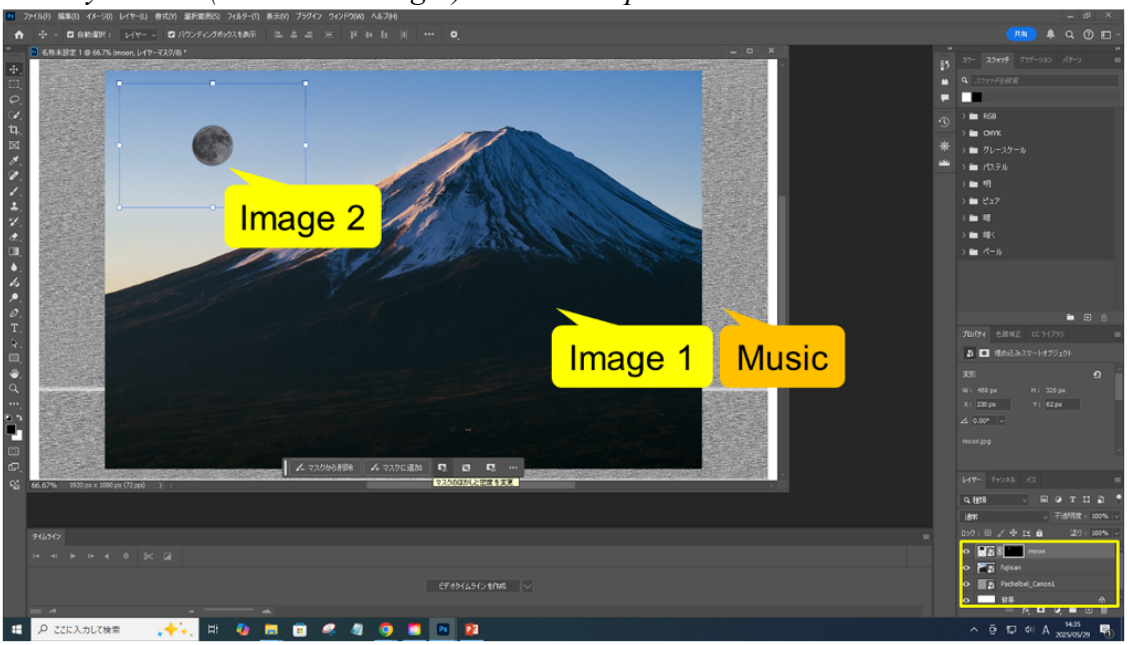


Figure 6
Loading Image Data Into Photoshop



Next, this music data (RAW format) is loaded into the image processing software Photoshop. At this time, options must be specified, but the default settings are fine. Figure 5 shows the state after music data has been loaded. Needless to say, music data is meaningless as an image. After loading the music data, the image data is then loaded. This is normal image data, and in this study, an image of Mt. Fuji (JPG format) was used (Figure 6). At this point, the music data and image data are on separate layers without any special operations (yellow frame in Figure 6). An image of the moon is added to this as a layer, and ultimately, multi-layer data like the one in Figure 7 is created. Save this as a file. As mentioned in the previous section, the file to be saved should be in tif/tiff format, which is a type of RAW format. Options must be specified for this save as well, but these should be specified as follows:

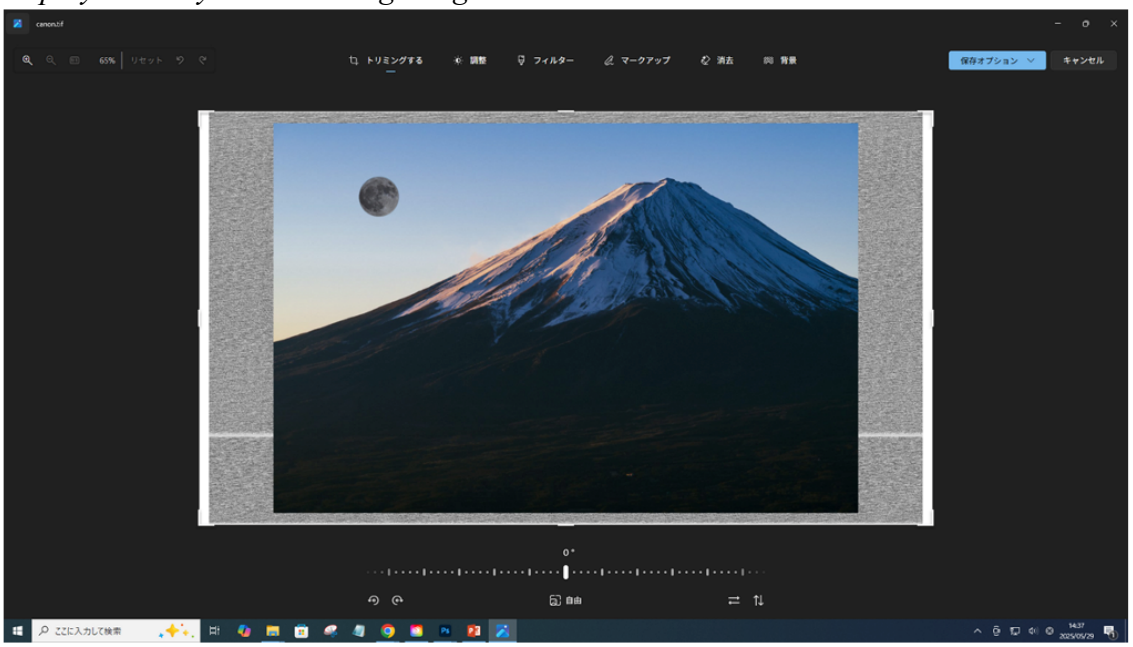
Figure 7
Multilayer Data (Music and Images) in Photoshop



- Image compression: none
- Pixel order: Interleaving
- Byte order: IBM PC
- Layer compression: RLE

Figure 8 shows the multi-layer data created through the above process, displayed in Windows Image Viewer. At first glance, it looks like a normal image, but it is multi-layer data that includes music data.

Figure 8
Display Multilayer Data Using Image Viewer in Windows



Audio Processing

Next, the multi-layer data created by image processing is loaded into the audio processing software Audacity. Because it is not a normal music file, use Audacity's import function and load it with the following options:

- Encoding: U-Law
- Byte order: Big Endian
- Channel: 1 Channel

Figure 9 shows multi-layer data loaded into Audacity.

Figure 9
Multilayer Data in Audacity

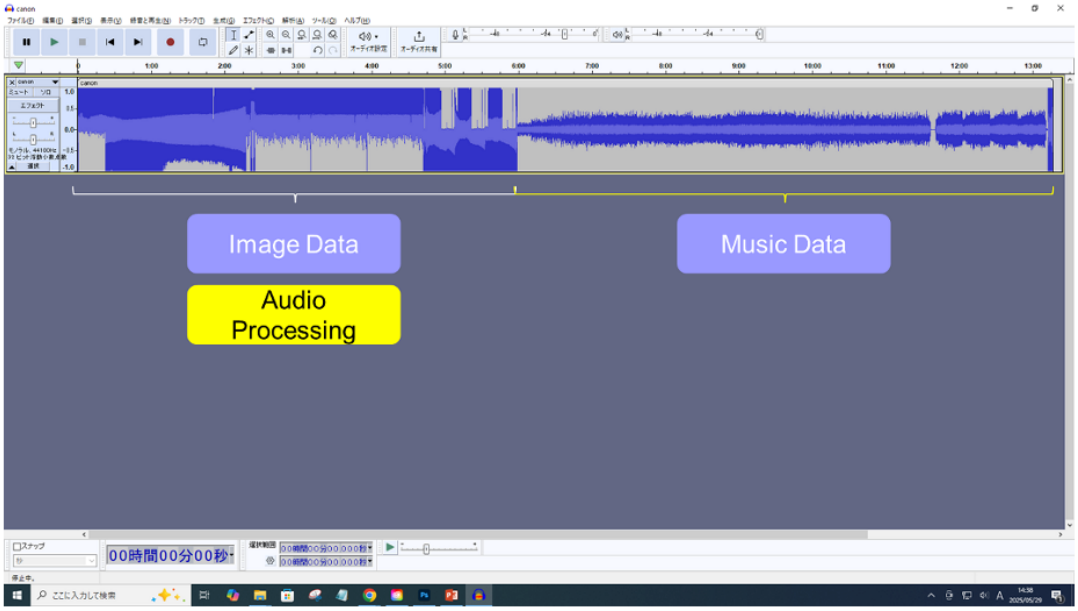
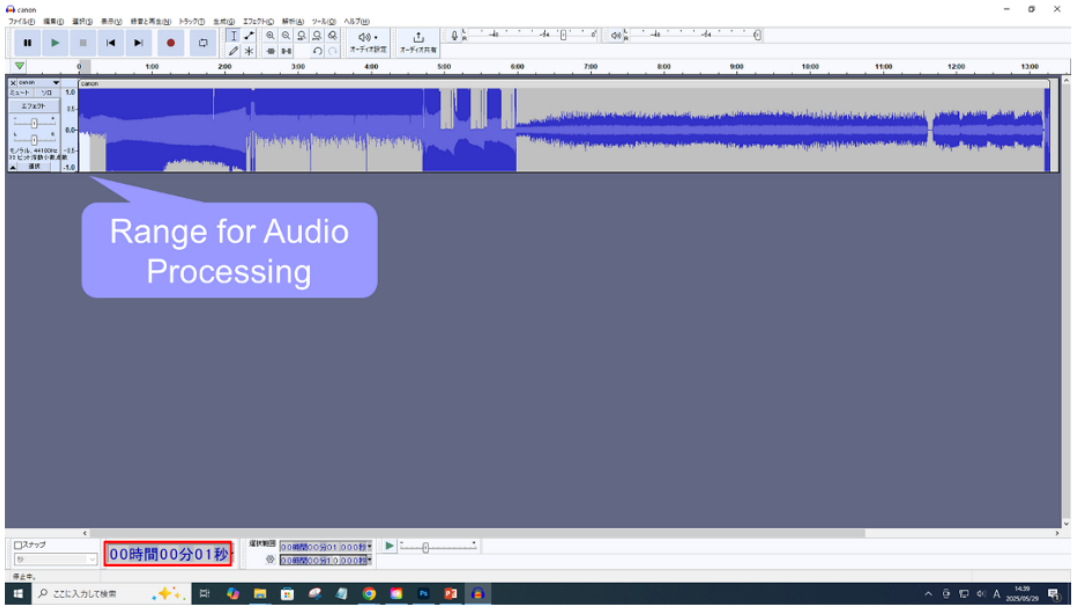


Figure 10
Audio Processing to Image Data



The multi-layer data loaded into Audacity has some distinctive features. The data is a single track, with the first half being image data and the second half being music data. While the image data is nothing more than musically meaningless noise, the music data remains almost entirely the original music data, and when played back, it was confirmed to be Pachelbel's Canon.

Next, to generate glitch art, audio processing is applied to the image data portion of Figure 9. There are various options for audio processing, but in this experiment, we decided to apply noise reduction processing. Applying audio processing to image data is musically meaningless, but the goal is to generate glitches in the image. There was no particular reason for choosing noise reduction processing. The glitches that occur will vary depending on the audio processing applied. Needless to say, the rewriting of the image data will change depending on the content of the audio processing.

There is an important point to note when applying audio processing to image data. Whatever audio processing is applied, you must avoid rewriting the data at the beginning of the image data. Depending on the image data format, most image data has a header at the beginning that aggregates information about the image. If this header is destroyed, most image-viewing software will not be able to display the image. Therefore, care must be taken when specifying the scope of application for all audio processing (Figure 10).

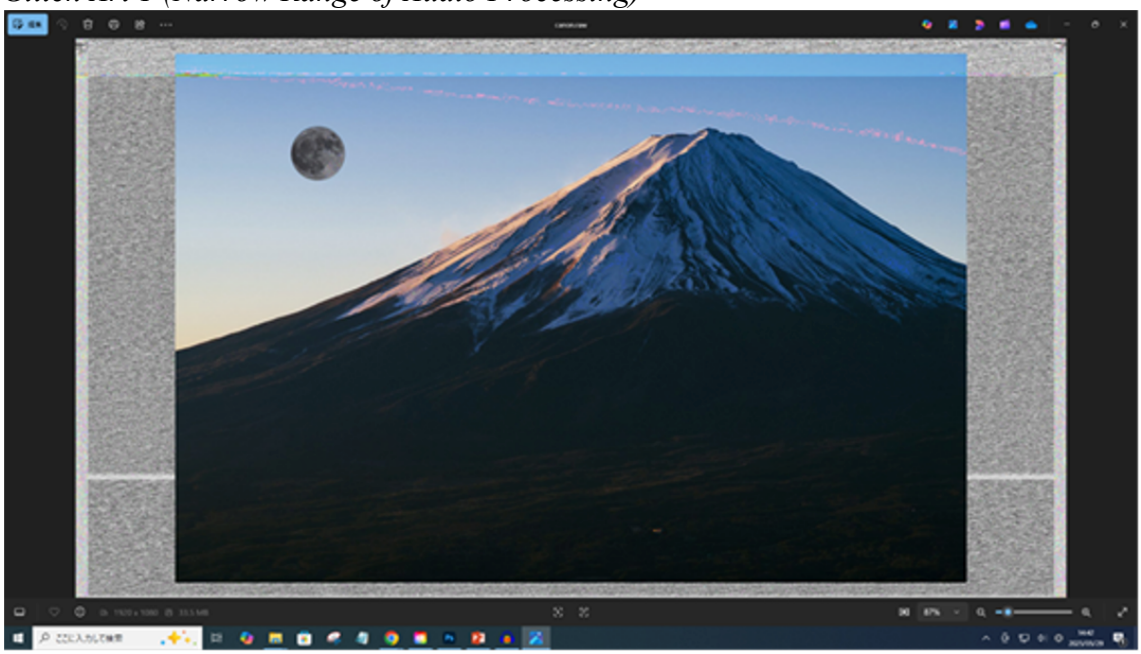
After applying the audio processing, save the file to check for glitches. Because the original data is not a normal music file, use Audacity's export function to save the file. When doing so, you will need to specify the following options:

- File type: Other uncompressed file
- Header: RAW（header-less）
- Encoding: U-Law

As a result of the above, the glitch art generated is as follows (Figures 11 and 12).

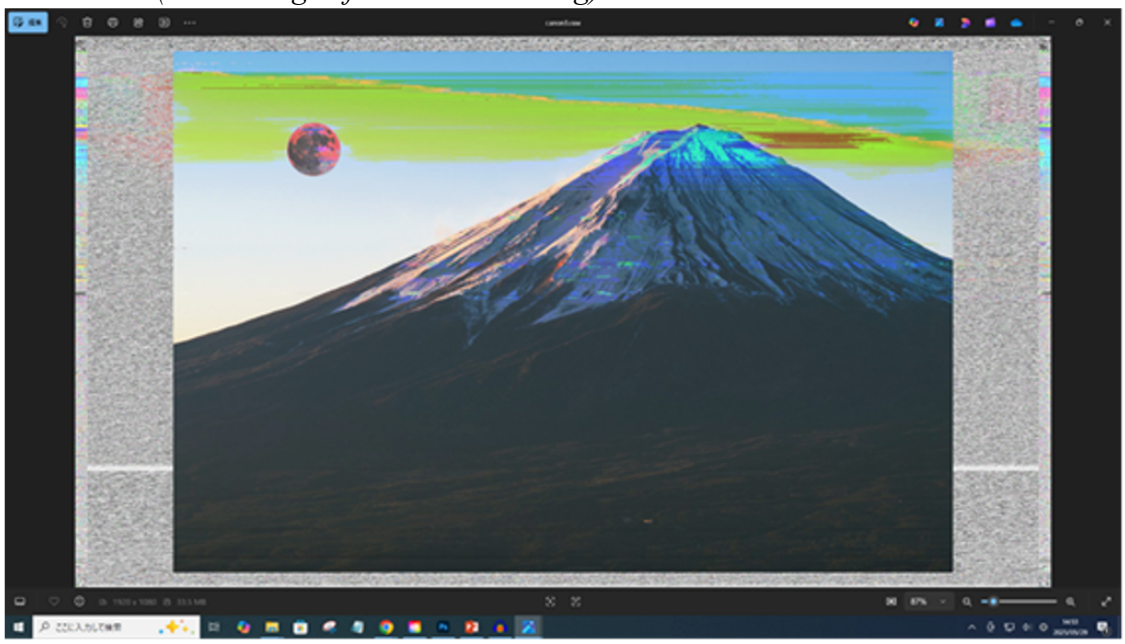
Figure 11

Glitch Art 1 (Narrow Range of Audio Processing)



Both Figures 11 and 12 are glitch art generated using noise reduction processing, but Figure 11 applies noise reduction processing to a narrow range, while Figure 12 applies it to a wider range. This difference also applies to the difference in the glitches visible in both. In Figure 11, only a small glitch is visible at the top (a single red glitch). On the other hand, in Figure 12, a much larger glitch is visible at the top. Furthermore, when these files were loaded into Audacity again and played the music data portion, Pachelbel's Canon can be listened to.

Figure 12
Glitch Art 2 (Wide Range of Audio Processing)



However, we also confirmed that the audio processing applied to the image data portion did have some effect. Overall, it sounds like there is some small noise present. In particular, Figure 12 contains some noise here and there, but it is not so bad that it is unbearable to listen to. Essentially, the effect of the audio processing is limited to the extent to which it is applied. However, partial data rewriting changes the overall file size, and it cannot be denied that this has an effect. This is clear from Figure 12. Looking at Figure 12, we can visually confirm the occurrence of some glitches in the music data portion (colorful areas on the periphery). However, this is minor and completely different from our previous research on glitch sound (Amano, 2023a).

Discussions

Through the experiments in this research, we confirmed that it is possible to create audible glitch art. However, in many experiments, we failed to create glitch art, which means that it was not displayed as an image. Other points to note are summarized below.

- The beginning of the image data (header information) should not be included in the rewrite target.
    - Applying audio processing to the entire data should also be avoided.
- Glitches will not occur even if music data is modified using image processing.

Furthermore, the created glitch art cannot be edited (nor can it be loaded) using image processing software. However, such glitch art can be edited using audio processing software,

and the music data can also be listened to. Note that glitches that occur in the image data portion may also partially contain the music data.

Through this experiment, we found that the method we propose has the following features.

- There is a correlation between the extent to which audio processing is applied and the occurrence of glitches.
- In multi-layered data of images and music, the first half is the image, and the second half is the music.
- The time series of image data loaded into audio processing software corresponds to the position (top and bottom) of the image.

The larger the range over which audio processing is applied, the larger the size of the glitches that occur. Multi-layered image and music data has the image in the first half and the music in the second half, so to create glitch art, audio processing is applied to the first half of the image data. Furthermore, if audio processing is applied to the first half of such image data, glitches will occur at the top when displayed as an image. If the second half of the image data is rewritten, glitches will occur at the bottom of the image.

This research is unique in that it simultaneously makes glitches visible and audible, and can be said to create a new type of art that brings about a shift in aesthetic sense. This is because the visually beautiful parts are merely audibly noisy sounds, and the audibly beautiful parts appear visually to be noise.

Related Works

Attempts to use glitches in artworks are not new, and it is fair to say that glitches are already recognized as a form of artistic expression. Phillip Stearns has made many glitch art tools and glitch-related artists available online (Stearns, 2013). There are also a number of artists who publish their own glitch art online (UCNV, 2015). The method of generating glitch art using Audacity is not original to this research either.

Another technique known as datamoshing involves causing errors when playing videos, and research is being conducted into its effects and techniques (Ito et al., 2014). A glitch installation using live coding has also been created (Fuego & Naoto Hieda, 2022). This work is extremely interesting as it includes glitches made with physical devices as well as sounds and images. While not competing with this research, there has also been an attempt to use glitch art in contemporary dance (Jürgens et al., 2020). This is an extremely interesting attempt to use glitch art based on errors in the sensors that capture dance motion as video for mixed reality.

The differences between this research and these glitch art works and research are as follows:

- Multi-layered glitch data of images and music
- Audible glitch art worthy of appreciation

First of all, the fact that the data handled is multi-layered makes it significantly different from other related research. Another unique feature not found in other related research is that it applies audio processing only to the image data portion, rather than randomly and destructively manipulating the data. In other words, while it is a method for creating glitch art, it also attempts to avoid the effects of glitches within the same data (ensuring that the

effects of glitches do not extend to the music data portion). As a result, it becomes possible to enjoy the glitch art visually while also listening to the music embedded within it.

This research is an extension of the research we have conducted to date, which can be listed as follows:

1. Glitch Art Images Based on Sound Manipulation (Amano, 2023a)
2. Glitch Sounds Based on Image Manipulation (Amano, 2023b)
3. Glitch Art Generation and Performance using Musical Live Coding (Amano, 2023c)
4. Sound-mixed Glitch Art Images (Amano, 2024)
5. Image-mixed Glitch Sounds (Amano, 2025)

In research 1 above, we attempted to create glitch art based on sound manipulation. Specifically, we used the audio editing software Audacity to apply audio processing such as reverb, echo, and fade-in/out to image data to generate glitches.

In research 2 above, we attempted to create glitch sounds based on image manipulation. Specifically, we used the image editing software Photoshop to apply image processing such as monochrome conversion, blurring, and gradation to music data, thereby generating glitches in the music.

In research 3 above, we explored glitch techniques and performance, and as part of this, we attempted to generate glitch art using live music coding. Specifically, we used the live music coding system Sonic Pi to generate glitches in PNG format image data in conjunction with sound effects, generating glitch art in real time. This research is utilized in our method of creating glitch art based on the PNG format.

In research 4 above attempted to create glitch art by mixing images and music. Specifically, music data and image data were loaded simultaneously into the audio editing software Audacity, creating multi-track data. This not only created glitches in the image data, but also in the music data. This research overlaps with ours in some ways, but differs in that it uses audio processing to create multi-tracks rather than multi-layering through image processing, and in that it aims to create not only glitch art, but also glitch sound. Furthermore, although the glitch art produced in this research was audible, it was mixed with unbearable noise, preventing the enjoyment of listening to music.

In research 5 above attempted to create a glitch sound by mixing music and images. Specifically, image data and music data were simultaneously loaded into image processing software, and multi-layered data was created to generate glitches in the music data. This research overlaps with ours in some ways, but differs from ours in that its goal was to generate glitch sound, and that audio processing was not applied to image data using audio editing software. Furthermore, although the glitch art produced by this research is audible, it contains noise that is unbearable to listen to as music.

Conclusion

In this study, we proposed a method to create glitch art that incorporates music worth listening to by mixing image data and music data as multiple layers, and conducted experiments to confirm the results. In the future, we will research the following points:

- Mixing more layers
- Using music data divided into individual tones as layers

- Using image data composed of multiple layers
- Applying a combination of audio processing techniques

First, we will verify the effect of mixing more images and music as layers. Two methods are available: using music data divided into tones as layers, or using image data consisting of many layers. While we have already conducted some of the former (Amano, 2025b), we have not yet conducted experiments with multi-layered containing multiple tones. In addition to this, we will mix in multiple layers of image data.

The experiments conducted in this study were limited to the application of relatively simple audio processing (noise reduction processing). In the future, we plan to conduct experiments applying more audio processing (echo, reverb, distortion, etc.), as well as conducting experiments on the combined application of these. For example, we will investigate the glitch effect caused by combined audio processing, such as applying reverb processing after a fade-in process or echo processing before a fade-out process.

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

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

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Development and Implementation of Virtue-Oriented Design Inspired by Buddhism

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Abstract

Contemporary product design primarily focuses on fulfilling users' material needs, with relatively few efforts directed toward incorporating positive or virtuous ideologies. Buddhism is one of the world's major religions and offers profound philosophical insights through its teachings on impermanence, cause and effect, reincarnation and karma. These concepts embody the wisdom of compassion, concentration (samadhi), insight and liberation. This study seeks to integrate Buddhist virtues into the design of a tabletop game, shifting the conventional design emphasis from "competition and self-interest" to "mutual assistance and cooperation." By employing the principles of karma, along with scenario-guided methods inspired by Buddhist reincarnation, the game offers an alternative approach to game design. Unlike traditional tabletop games, which usually use printed cards, this study uses three-dimensional physical models to increase visual engagement. The game narrative is structured to generate a sense of excitement and urgency, encouraging players to experience the joy of altruism by rescuing sentient beings from the three lower realms of existence: hell-beings, hungry ghosts, and animals. Through repeated gameplay in this interactive format, which is grounded in Buddhist wisdom, players are gradually encouraged to cultivate a virtuous mindset, ultimately promoting the development of compassion.

Keywords: Buddhism, Dharma, Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, virtue-oriented design, three lower realms

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Introduction

In today's era of highly developed internet media, many young people spend extended periods immersed in the online world. A considerable portion of the available content involves gore, violence, pornography, and even gambling, all of which can exert negative influences on an individual's physical and mental well-being as well as their real-world behavior. The Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, has stated that compassion and loving-kindness are the essence of human nature.

From the perspective of human civilization, the period around 500 years before and after the Common Era, spanning roughly a millennium, represented a flourishing era of spiritual culture. Although technological and material conditions were far inferior to those of today, people regarded the faithful observance of their respective orthodox religions as an honorable mission in life, and adhered to appropriate virtues and moral teachings as guiding principles. After the Second World War, however, the mass-production model brought about by the Industrial Revolution led people to increasingly emphasize material satisfaction while gradually neglecting the cultivation of moral values and benevolent intentions. Consequently, mainstream product design during this period also centered on fulfilling material desires.

In recent years, a significant number of young people have become engrossed in mobile and tabletop games, many of which contain competitive violence or sensual temptations. Therefore, this study incorporates benevolent values into tabletop game design, guiding users to gradually strengthen their sense of compassion and goodwill through interactive gameplay. The intention is to cultivate and enhance players' benevolent intentions and compassionate awareness over time.

Literature Review

The origins of board games can be traced back to more than a thousand years before the Common Era, and their forms have varied across different historical periods. In addition to providing fun and excitement, many modern board games have begun to incorporate diverse elements of knowledge. However, in recent years, tabletop games have still largely centered on competitive or strategy-based formats, in which players must fight relentlessly, through deception, rivalry, and confrontation, until opponents surrender or are defeated. This trend also reflects the utilitarianism and short-sighted competitive mentality prevalent among today's younger generations.

In the field of education, an increasing number of board games in recent years have adopted a "play first, learn afterward" approach, integrating gameplay with learning (Taspinara et al., 2016). For example, in the area of ecological conservation, Illingworth and Wake (2019) designed a board game titled *Catan: Global*, which centers on the contemporary issue of global warming, allowing players to understand the importance of nature, resources, and biodiversity through the gaming experience. In addition, Robinson and Turner (2019) created a board game called *Park Life*, themed around the conservation of wildlife parks. Players must use limited funds to invest in and construct a complete wildlife sanctuary, learning the importance of protecting various species in a timely manner to prevent them from facing extinction.

Furthermore, Berge et al. (2019) designed a tabletop game centered on learning the appropriate daily caloric intake. Through a board-based game format, players actively participate in managing and controlling their total daily food consumption, helping them understand how to avoid obesity-related health risks.

In the context of active aging, Al Mahmud et al. (2008) evaluated elderly players' experiences with board games and found that although older adults generally enjoy playing card-based games, the formats of contemporary board games differ significantly from the types of games they are familiar with. Moreover, existing board games often fail to sufficiently accommodate the actual needs and preferred modes of interaction among older adults. In a subsequent study, Al Mahmud et al. (2010) designed a board game aimed at enhancing interaction between elderly individuals and children. During gameplay, players must communicate messages to one another through physical gestures, thereby fostering greater intergenerational engagement and strengthening familial bonds.

From the above literature, it is evident that board games can serve as effective tools for conveying correct concepts and educational knowledge. However, such games often become constrained by the need to deliver educational content, which diminishes the potential for exciting and engaging gameplay. This limitation frequently prevents these games from being successfully commercialized or achieving strong sales performance. At present, there remains a lack of board game designs centered on benevolent intentions. Most existing games still emphasize competitive formats focused on defeating opponents. This study seeks to transform the prevailing "competitive/self-serving" design paradigm into a "cooperative/mutual-aid" approach grounded in benevolence and the Buddhist principle of impermanence, cause and effect, reincarnation and karma. The goal is to inspire players to cultivate benevolent motivations internally and translate them into socially beneficial actions.

Design and Prototyping

The framework of this board game is centered on the Buddhist ideals of saving all sentient beings and performing benevolent deeds through teamwork. Guided by the four steps of the scenario-based design method, i.e., user stories, conceptual scenarios, concrete scenarios, and use cases, the gameplay structure was systematically developed. The objective of the game is to encourage players to experience the value of mutual assistance and virtuous actions during gameplay, with the hope that the intention to cultivate benevolence will become increasingly strong and eventually be reflected in their contributions to society.

To develop a benevolence-oriented board game emphasizing team cooperation, and to ensure that players engage in thoughtful discussion and problem-solving during gameplay, it was necessary to establish key elements grounded in Buddhist concepts. These include defining the hierarchical roles of players, identifying the sentient beings in the three lower realms required rescue, and designing the processes involved in their salvation. The details are introduced as follows.

Hierarchy of Player Roles

In the game, players assume one of four roles within the human realm of the six realms of rebirth, i.e., arhats, monks, practitioners, and common people, each entrusted with the mission of rescuing suffering beings in the three lower realms. Due to their differing hierarchical statuses, each role possesses distinct spiritual capacities and abilities. As the

game progresses, these characters accumulate merit, which enhances their power to deliver beings from the lower realms. The character designs are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Player Characters, Arranged from Left to Right and Top to Bottom: Arhats, Monks, Practitioners, and Common People

Three Lower Realms

In Buddhist teachings on the six realms of rebirth, the three lower realms consist of the animal Realm, the ghost realm, and the hell realm. Sentient beings who commit unwholesome deeds may, after death, be drawn by karma forces into these suffering realms. However, the Buddha firmly believed that all beings possess Buddha-nature and could not bear to see any sentient being suffer in the lower realms. Accordingly, the game is designed to encourage players to emulate the compassionate spirit of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, entering these three lower realms to rescue suffering beings.

Salvation Process

In the game, the capacity for delivering sentient beings varies according to the player's hierarchical role, ranked from highest to lowest as follows: arhats, monks, practitioners, and common people. Each role must accumulate a certain amount of merit energy before being

able to enter any of the lower realms to rescue suffering beings. The amount of merit required to rescue beings in the three lower realms also differs, increasing in the following order: animal realm, ghost realm, and hell realm. This is because, within the six realms of rebirth, the hell realm is the lowest realm, where beings endure the most severe suffering, followed by the ghost realm and the animal realm.

Experiment and Results

After completing the production of the board-game prototype, this study invited 20 university students (10 male and 10 female), divided into five groups of four, to participate in gameplay testing. Upon completing the game session, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire.

Using the first group of participants as an example, the game lasted one hour, during which they successfully delivered all sentient beings. As shown in Figure 2, the gameplay involved active discussion, with participants collaboratively deciding on each subsequent action needed to rescue suffering beings. The group ultimately completed the mission successfully. All participants reported that the board game helped enhance their intention to perform benevolent actions, explaining that discussing strategies with teammates on how to rescue suffering beings stimulated a sense of compassion among them.

Figure 2
The First Group of Participants Collaboratively Engaging in the Board Game

After the game session, each participant from all groups was invited to complete a questionnaire regarding their gameplay experience. The results are summarized in Table 1. According to the findings, while the board game was less effective in directly stimulating participants' motivation to perform benevolent actions, it clearly enhanced awareness of benevolence and promoted teamwork.

Table 1
Questionnaire Regarding Subjects' Gameplay Experience

Questions	Average scores
Is the gameplay experience of this board game unique and interesting?	4.5
Does this board game enhance your awareness of benevolence?	3.7
Does this board game stimulate your motivation to perform benevolent actions?	3.4
Does this board game help you feel that benevolence and teamwork can be applied in daily life?	4.25
Does this board game help you fully understand the importance of teamwork?	4.8
Does this board game help you feel that your communication skills have improved?	4.05
Is this board game design humane/satisfactory?	4.3

Response options: Very satisfied (5), Satisfied (4), Neutral (3), Dissatisfied (2), and Very dissatisfied (1).

Conclusion

This board game was designed with the primary aim of enhancing awareness of benevolent intentions and fostering communication and mutual assistance. For this reason, the game adopts a team-based cooperative format combined with a board-type structure. This combination creates new forms of enjoyment, and after multiple rounds of testing, the game demonstrated unexpectedly high levels of excitement and engagement, with each playthrough yielding different outcomes.

During the design process, careful consideration was given to how benevolent awareness could be conveyed while maintaining playfulness. The conceptual scenario development served as a creative guide, and Buddhist thought was used as the foundation to develop a tabletop game that avoids violence, bloodshed, erotic content, and gambling elements. The characters were selected from different levels within the Buddhist hierarchy - arhats, monks, practitioners, and common people. Ultimately, players must work together to rescue all sentient beings, symbolizing the completion of the game and the achievement of collective victory.

Throughout the experimentation phase, it was observed that participants were highly engaged while playing the game, with each group actively discussing strategies to decide their next moves. However, the deeper wisdom of Buddhist teachings has not yet been fully integrated into the game mechanics. It is hoped that future iterations will allow for more extensive development and deeper conceptual integration.

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

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

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Machine Mediators: Rethinking Intelligence and Posthuman Ecologies in the Artist's Book

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Abstract

Mixed Signals (2023) is an artist's book by kennedy+swan that merges the conventional physical book with augmented reality (AR). Through its nature-themed watercolours that transform into interactive AR scenes, this hybrid work explores the ethical tensions in using artificial intelligence (AI) as a means of researching nature. Set in a near future where AI enables interspecies communication, the artist's book presents a fictional narrative that challenges anthropocentric assumptions and the complexities of human–nature–technology relations in the Anthropocene. Drawing from Braidotti's posthuman theory, in this paper I examine how *Mixed Signals* interrogates the role of humanity in the natural world. By positioning its speculative AI technology as both a symptom of the Anthropocene and a tool for rethinking interspecies relationships, the work navigates a future that is inhabited not only by human intelligence, but also artificial, animal, and other non-human intelligence. Through a multimodal analysis, I consider how the text, watercolours, and augmented digital elements in *Mixed Signals* interact in its construction of meaning. Specifically, I examine how the work employs speculative storytelling surrounding AI and more-than-human perspectives to critique anthropocentric frameworks. Ultimately, I argue that *Mixed Signals* contributes to wider discussions on the potential and limitations of AI, posthuman ecologies, and the cultural function of art, specifically the artist's book, in imagining post-anthropocentric futures.

Keywords: artists' books, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, more-than-human, posthuman ecologies

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Introduction

Discussions surrounding the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into our everyday lives often emerge at the intersection of technology, ecology, and culture. Understanding AI as a form of intelligence that can mirror our own, its potential uses could shape how humanity understands its relationship with the world. As such, the question of a technologically mediated future emerges in *Mixed Signals* (2023a), an artist's book by the German artist duo kennedy+swan.

Mixed Signals combines hand-painted watercolours with augmented reality (AR), blurring the boundaries between the conventional arts and growing technologies. Each page depicts a nature-inspired painting that, when viewed through the book's accompanying smartphone app, transforms into an animated and interactive AR scene. This transformation introduces a speculative element, presenting a fictional narrative in which AI technologies have evolved to enable communication between human and non-human species. In situating this narrative within the near-future, *Mixed Signals* imagines the integration of AI as an extension of the human as a result of the Anthropocene, and comments on the complexities of representing non-human perspectives through technological mediation.

In merging the haptic materiality of the book with digital augmentation, *Mixed Signals* both participates in and critiques the logic of technological progress as a means to control nature, under the guise of "demystifying […] the wild through surveillance" (von Essen, 2024, p. 253) in the Anthropocene. Fundamentally, the artist's book draws attention to the paradox of using AI as a technology born of human-centred innovation to understand the more-than-human world. As such, *Mixed Signals* questions whether AI can either serve as a vehicle toward interspecies relationships or reinforce the anthropocentric frameworks it seeks to transcend.

To address this, I approach *Mixed Signals* through the lens of Braidotti's posthuman critical theory, which offers a framework for thinking beyond human exceptionalism and reframing the complexities of human–nature–technology relations. In this sense, I argue that *Mixed Signals* challenges anthropocentric hierarchies, suggesting instead the existence of a multiplicity of intelligences in which humans are only one participant among many. Through its speculative engagement with AI, as both a symptom of the Anthropocene and a potential tool for reimagining coexistence, the artist's book comments on the series of contradictions surrounding "technological mediation" (Braidotti, 2016, p. 18), from its capacity to unite to its potential to breed violence.

By conducting a multimodal analysis of three selected pages in *Mixed Signals*, considering their respective textual, visual, and augmented elements, I examine how kennedy+swan's work constructs meaning across its speculative storytelling, digital interactivity, and watercolour imagery. Ultimately, I argue that *Mixed Signals* contributes to wider discussions on the potential and limitations of AI, posthuman ecologies, and the cultural function of the artist's book in envisioning post-anthropocentric futures.

Artificial Intelligence in the Anthropocene

In posthuman critical thought, the Anthropocene refers to the current geological era in relation to humanity's activities and their impact on the planet's ecosystem (Braidotti, 2016, p. 13; Parikka, 2018, p. 51), including negative consequences such as climate change. As such, discussions around the Anthropocene often comprise criticisms of anthropocentrism,

particularly advocating against a species hierarchy that assumes humanity's supremacy over the natural world (Braidotti, 2017, p. 15). Similarly, the Anthropocene can also be linked to technological developments, such as the evolution of anthropomorphic AI, or AI which has attributes that are intrinsically human. Bratton describes this as an "anthropocentric fallacy" (2015, p. 70), in reference to humanity's insistence that AI must be equated with our understanding of human intelligence. Instead, he argues, "[s]hould complex AI arrive, it will not be humanlike unless we insist that it pretend to be so, because, one assumes, the idea that intelligence could be both real and inhuman at the same time is morally and psychologically intolerable" (Bratton, 2015, p. 72). Thus, although AI is often modelled to mimic human intelligence, it is possible to view it as an alternative, non-human modality of intelligence. Indeed, Bratton further explores the concept of AI as a mode of intelligence separate from that of humanity:

> First, one would recognize that intelligence (and knowledge) is always distributed among multiple positions and forms of life, both similar and dissimilar to one another. […] Either way, human sapience is special but not unique. This appreciation would see AI as a regular phenomenon, not so unlike other ways that human intelligence is located among other modalities of intelligence (such as non-human animal cognition). (2015, p. 72)

In other words, this perspective views AI as a separate form of intelligence that can coexist with human, animal, and all other modalities of intelligence, outside of any hierarchy. This abandonment of anthropocentrism is one of the main ideas of more-than-human and posthuman critical thought, with theories around how the concept of human often excludes considerations of individuals based on race, gender, class, or disability (Castéra, 2023, p. 64). Braidotti expands on this, describing how human "others," including women, LGBTQ+ individuals and people of colour, are situated within the same category as non-human organisms as "a colossal hybridization of species" (2017, p. 14), on the grounds of being opposite to the Western ideal of Man. In this sense, a paradox emerges around the perception of AI, which is a non-human category of intelligence that has been assigned anthropomorphic characteristics by Man, despite being, fundamentally, an "other."

Bratton describes how, at times, emerging technologies reveal a new perception of the world only after having fulfilled the initial purpose of their creation (2019, Chapter 3). Accordingly, the evolution of technology in the Anthropocene, specifically that of AI, has prompted discussions around humanity's understanding of other life forms, leading to artistic practices that consider "forms of existence where technology is autonomous and not anthropomorphic" (Castéra, 2023, p. 70). As such, through its complex use of artistic expression and materiality, *Mixed Signals* engages with the dichotomy of the human-made AI as a mediator between Man and Nature.

A Machine-Mediated Future

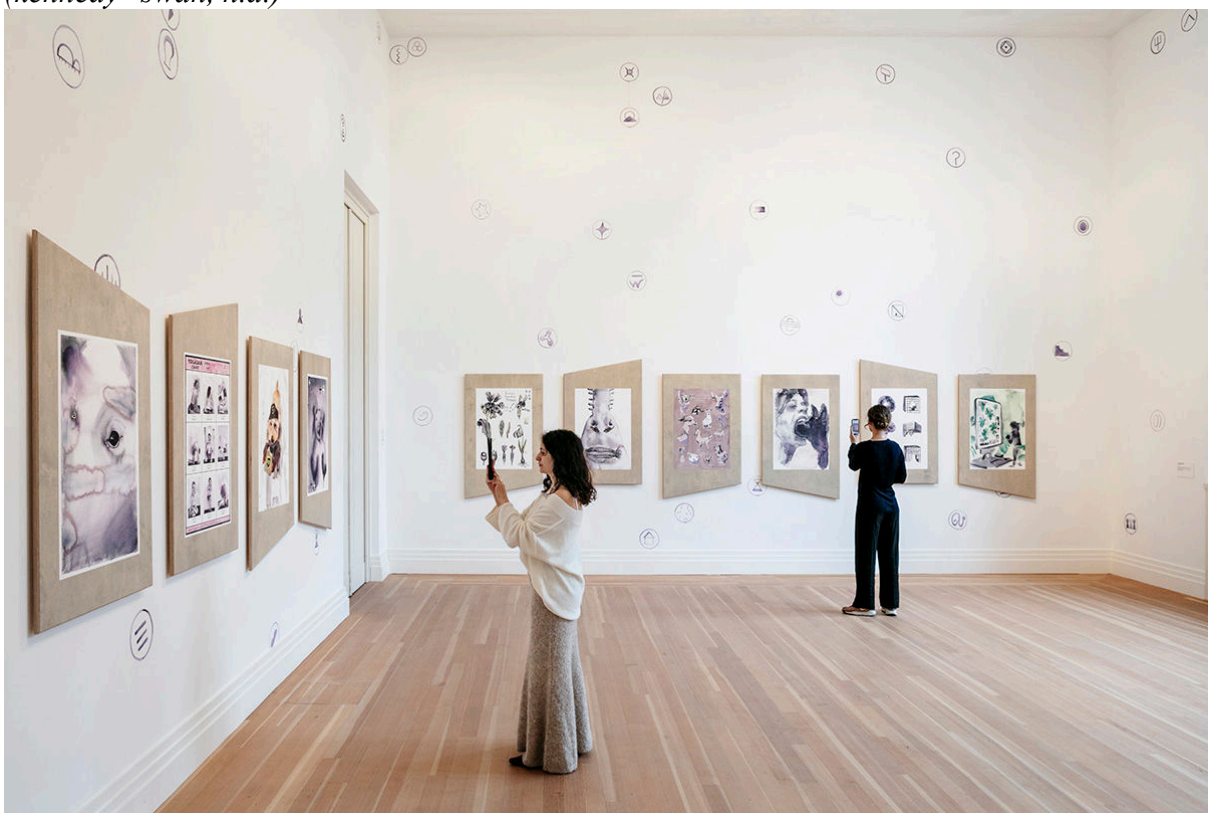
Mixed Signals by kennedy+swan, which is the name of the German artist duo composed of Bianca Kennedy and Swan Collective, consists of a series of watercolours that were originally commissioned for the project *Ether's Bloom: A Programme on Artificial Intelligence*[1] (Figure 1) at Gropius Bau, Berlin (Meister, 2023, p. 21). Each watercolour in the series can be scanned

[1] *Ether's Bloom: A Programme on Artificial Intelligence* was project that took place from June 2023 through January 2024 at Gropius Bau, an artistic institution in Berlin. The project united writers, artists and scientists

with a mobile app, which reveals distinct interactive AR scenes that emerge from and expand on the paintings. All watercolours exhibited at *Ether's Bloom* were additionally compiled into an artist's book, which acts as an extension of the work beyond the walls of the exhibition space. I have previously expanded on the function of the *Mixed Signals* artist's book as an extension of the original installation, as opposed to a simple exhibition catalogue, due to its use of the same AR app to activate the augmented portion of the artwork (Weinholtz, 2025, p. 123). In this sense, *Mixed Signals* acts not as a collection of separate artworks, but as a *portable exhibition*, fulfilling the role of the artist's book according to Lucy Lippard:

> The 'artist's book' is a product of the 1960s which is already getting its second, and potentially permanent, wind. Neither an art book (collected reproductions of separate art works) nor a book on art (critical exegeses and/or artists' writings), the artist's book is a work of art on its own, conceived specifically for the book form and often published by the artist him/herself. It can be visual, verbal, or visual/verbal. With few exceptions, it is all of a piece, consisting of one serial work or a series of closely related ideas and/or images — a portable exhibition. (1987, p. 45)

Figure 1
Installation View of kennedy+swan's Mixed Signals at Gropius Bau, Berlin, Germany (kennedy+swan, n.d.)



Understanding the transformation of *Mixed Signals* into an artist's book requires further insight into this specific artform. The artist's book is an artform established in the twentieth century (Drucker, 2004, p. 1), the complex definition of which is often a topic of debate. In brief, these works can be described as an autonomous artform that uses the book as its medium, and "not reproductions of existing work that merely use a book format" (Drucker, 1997, p. 94).

who "focused on AI's utopian and poetic possibilities" (Gropius Bau, 2023), which included the exhibition by kennedy+swan titled *Mixed Signals* from which the artist's book of the same name was created.

Moreover, artists' books tend to use their materiality or structural elements of the book to communicate their position (Drucker, 2004, p. 287), *Mixed Signals* being no exception. Previously, I have linked this aspect of the artist's book to the use of growing technologies in *Mixed Signals*, arguing that the dual materiality of the work, which merges the conventional book with AR technology, mirrors its speculative narrative in which AI merges with nature (Weinholtz, 2025, p. 125). In doing so, the work uses AR to challenge the traditional confines of the book page in a way that evokes its own narrative: one in which AI technology alters humanity's perception of the world.

The question of why a sentient form of AI would conceivably "care deeply about humanity — *us specifically* — as the focus of its knowing and desire" (Bratton, 2015, p. 70) is thus at the centre of *Mixed Signals*, in its fictional narrative about speculative AI. Throughout the work, the viewer is introduced to a series of scenarios in which AI has sufficiently evolved to decode the particular forms of communication of different animals and plants, and to adapt this knowledge to our human understanding. From its introduction, *Mixed Signals* interrogates the capacity of humans to surpass their anthropocentric worldview, questioning whether "humanity [is] prepared to embrace the profound insights offered by Nature's own sonic dialogues" (kennedy+swan, 2023a, p. 1).[2] Braidotti raises similar concerns, drawing connections between the rise of technological mediation and increased conflict:

> The high degrees of technological mediation and the undoing of the nature–culture divide create a series of paradoxes, such as an electronically linked pan-humanity which is split by convulsive internal fractures: forced proximity can breed intolerance and even xenophobic violence. (2016, p. 18)

In this sense, it is possible to recognise how a technologically mediated reality in which attempts to consolidate the divide between humanity and nature could lead to further distancing. To address this paradox, *Mixed Signals* engages with the concept of AI as a bridge for humanity to achieve "a more egalitarian relationship to nonhuman others" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 9), for which it is necessary to abandon anthropocentric ideals.

An Augmented Narrative on Intelligence

In *Mixed Signals*, the concept of non-human intelligence and humanity coming to terms with its existence is the focus of its narrative, which becomes apparent only after interacting with the work through its accompanying AR app. Throughout the book, a recurring monochromatic style becomes recognisable in the watercolour paintings, which feature mostly muted colours in shades of purple and beige. In scanning each watercolour with the app, however, a more colourful and complex dimension appears in the augmented scenes. These AR scenes can be two or three-dimensional and can appear with or without sound. They can either be extensions of the existing watercolour image, with new components emerging from the page, or they can present an entirely new artwork that visually shares no features with the watercolour on the page. Moreover, through the AR app, the option to read additional information about each artwork appears in the corner of the screen. This is not unlike an informational museum plaque, further likening *Mixed Signals* in its book form to a "portable exhibition" (Lippard, 1987, p. 45). These snippets of information contextualise the watercolours and their respective augmented scenes, describing the mediating function of AI in each scenario.

[2] The *Mixed Signals* artist's book contains no page numbers. As such, all references to specific pages within the book refer to my own pagination of the work, starting with the first page of the introduction and not counting the cover and endpaper of the book.

Anthropomorphic Animal Models

One of the pages in the book features a watercolour containing a collection of drawings of animals, both real and mythical (Figure 2), labelled with their respective names. At the top of the page, a title reads "List of *open source Large Language Models" (kennedy+swan, 2023a, p. 5). This watercolour also features a monochromatic scale; the animal characters are painted with purple and beige colours similar to the background of the page. Once scanned, this watercolour reveals the role of these animals: they each represent an open-source large language model (LLM).[3] This is indicated in the additional information contained within the app, which states that every model was provided the same prompt that appears above the augmented painting: "What's your message to humanity?" (kennedy+swan, 2023b).

Figure 2
Watercolour Featuring Different Animals and Mythical Creatures As Large Language Models (LLM) (kennedy+swan, n.d.)

Through the app, the viewer can then interact with each animal on the painting by tapping them, which causes a speech bubble to appear with their respective answer to the prompt question. Some of the animal models proclaim messages of environmental sustainability, such as the orca who asks humanity "[t]o understand and appreciate the power of nature" (kennedy+swan, 2023b), and the guanaco who states: "I ask you to protect my habitat and to ensure that I can continue to live in the Andes for generations to come" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). Similarly, the llama proclaims that "[w]e are all part of the same family" (kennedy+swan, 2023b), thus providing a perspective of "[e]cosophical species equality" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 15), or a criticism of anthropocentric hierarchical thinking.

[3] A large language model, or LLM, refers to a type of generative AI that is trained on extremely large data sets to produce natural-sounding text (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

This page also features a minotaur, a character that stands out for being the only mythical creature. When the viewer interacts with it through the app, its speech bubble reads: "As a wise and ancient creature from another world, I bring with me messages: 'Embrace the mysteries of life; seek knowledge in all its forms'" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). With this, the minotaur model urges its user to consider alternative modes of knowledge, which corresponds to Braidotti's perspective on the necessity of a more complex relationship between humanity and the natural world (2017, p. 10).

Ultimately, these responses exemplify the degree to which AI can become anthropomorphic; although fictional, these characters are LLMs trained to speak *like humans*, but from the perspective of non-human creatures. As such, they are not representatives of the species they illustrate, but a programme trained by humans to respond in the way humans believe animals think. Bratton reflects on this complex condition and its future implications, wondering "if perhaps the wish to define the very existence of AI in relation to its ability to mimic *how humans think that humans think* will be looked back upon as a weird sort of speciesism" (2015, p. 74). In this sense, the human tendency to view AI as an extension of human intelligence, even in the context of interspecies communication, exemplifies the "processes of 'humanization' ('normalization') that are driven by and enforce power relations" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 15) that are at the centre of criticisms of anthropocentrism.

Contrastingly, some of the responses by the other models explicitly act like AI, declining to produce a reply from the perspective of an anthropomorphic animal. Such is the case of the vicuna,[4] one of the largest illustrations on the page (Figure 2), who states: "As an AI language model, I don't have a personal message or feelings like humans do" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). Similarly, upon interacting with the deer, the viewer can read the following message: "The model /Deer-3b is too large to be loaded automatically (14GB > 10GB). For commercial use please use PRO spaces or Inference Endpoints" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). In this case, the deer LLM is incapable of answering the question due to its programming, prompting the user to upgrade to a commercial AI platform.

This reference to the commercial use of AI evokes Braidotti's criticism of the opportunistic nature of the contemporary global economy, in which "[a]ll living creatures are inscribed in a market economy of planetary exchanges that commodifies them to a comparable degree and therefore makes them equally disposable" (2016, p. 21). In this sense, the deer's response serves as an example of how these forms of intelligence — artificial, animal, and even human — are generally commodified in a capitalist society that is "postanthropocentric in unifying all species under the imperative of the market" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 21).

AI for Interspecies Communication

Another watercolour in the book features a minimalist painting of an anthropomorphic pig (Figure 3) in the same monochromatic style as the rest of the book (kennedy+swan, 2023a, p. 18). In this painting, only the animal's basic features are discernible, such as its eyes, ears and snout, while the rest of its body is smudged against the background of the page. Additionally, five black and white plus signs are scattered along the top and bottom of the painting. While these presumably act as reference points to allow the AR app to recognise the image, they provide the main points of contrast in this otherwise muted painting.

[4] The vicuna, or vicuña, is a South American animal from the same genus and the llama or the camel.

Figure 3
Monochromatic Watercolour of Anthropomorphic Pig (kennedy+swan, n.d.)

Once scanned, the artwork reveals a caption that reads: "A piglet called Orville gazed up at the looming humans with intelligent eyes, no longer a simple farm animal, but the very first ambassador for Animalis Interpreta: the world's first AI for interspecies communication" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). This introduces the main narrative of this page, which revolves around the invention of an AI that can translate nature. Indeed, further information about this page appears in the app's informational section:

> Exploring AI's potential to forge two-way communication between animals and humans unveiled myriad questions and thought pathways. This collection presents 14 watercolors, narrating a near future where AI unravels the language of every living creature. (kennedy+swan, 2023b)

Accordingly, as the viewer interacts with this page, the app reveals a series of virtual watercolours that stack upon each other with each tap of the screen, revealing a fictional story about Animalis Interpreta written in the caption of each image. At first, the AI uncovers groundbreaking information about how plants, animals and even asteroids communicate with non-verbal language, such as cacti's "fluctuations in their internal water pressures," or stingrays' "electromagnetic pulses as complex holograms" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). As the narrative progresses, however, the AI begins to reveal the internal struggles that each species faces, demonstrating not only their lack of admiration, but also their indifference or even disdain towards humanity. This is exemplified by a study performed with the AI interpreter, which uncovers that cats view humans as their pets, and their purrs act as tools of manipulation (kennedy+swan, 2023b). This series of watercolours concludes with the realisation that "[e]very door the AI had opened led to a new understanding. But the truth behind these doors

was unbearable for us to face" (kennedy+swan, 2023b). In other words, the Animalis Interpreta ultimately reveals that humanity is still unwilling, or even unable to accept a non-anthropocentric reality.

As such, this unwillingness to consider non-human perspectives can be related to our intrinsic perception of the concept of the *human*. According to Braidotti, "the 'human' is not a neutral term, but rather one that indexes access to privileges and entitlements through processes of 'humanization' ('normalization') that are driven by and enforce power relations" (2017, p. 15). In other words, the concept of *being human* is automatically rooted in a hierarchical dynamic that benefits humans over other forms of existence.

In *Mixed Signals*, this idea can be found in the narrative of the AI for interspecies communication. As the AI allows humans to understand the languages of nature, we discover that other species do not share the same anthropocentric worldviews, and in some cases even consider humans to be inferior. Because we are unable to accept this reality, this leads to humans living in "towers of guilt over murky waters" (kennedy+swan, 2023b) in the last watercolour of the series. Ultimately, the narrative of Animalis Interpreta comments on the necessity of existing beyond the anthropocentric ideal in order to fully understand the world in which we live.

The Pinnacle of Intelligence on Earth

The following page depicts a watercolour of nine shapes that resemble faceless figures (Figure 4). While this painting shares a similar purple and beige colour scheme to the previous watercolours (kennedy+swan, 2023a, p. 19), the contrast between the shapes and the background is noticeably stronger, drawing the viewer's attention towards the individual figures. In scanning the watercolour with the app, an augmented scene emerges, showing an anthropomorphic rabbit, whose enlarged brain is contained inside a jar on top of its head. Additional information about this creature is included in the description of this scene within the app:

> The BÆB organism — Biological Artificial Evolution Bunny — represents the pinnacle of intelligence on Earth.
>
> Its hybrid brain, a fusion of organic matter and AI, connects to an infinite reservoir of wisdom and knowledge. Having attained peak cognitive abilities, BÆB reached a state of blissful Zen in an instant.
>
> Now, it seeks to share its profound insights with us inferior humans. (kennedy+swan, 2023b)

Accordingly, in this narrative, the BÆB organism functions as the highest form of intelligence in the world. Notably, BÆB appears to lack a human component, as they are a hybrid between an animal and AI, which ultimately rejects the humanist and anthropocentric notions that Man is above all species. Criticisms of such ideals are at the centre of posthuman critical theory, according to Braidotti:

> The posthuman turn is triggered by the convergence of antihumanism, on one hand, and anti-anthropocentrism, on the other. Antihumanism focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the universal representative of the human, while anti-

> anthropocentrism criticizes species hierarchy and advances ecological justice. (2017, p. 9)

Figure 4
Watercolour of Nine Abstract Shapes That Resemble Faceless Figures (kennedy+swan, n.d.)

As such, the creation of BÆB as not only the height of non-human intelligence, but the pinnacle of intelligence overall, can be interpreted as a call towards the end of anthropocentric views on intelligence. Taking into account that BÆB "seeks to share its profound insights with us inferior humans" (kennedy+swan, 2023b), *Mixed Signals* proposes a narrative in which humanity is no longer at the top of the hierarchy, challenging the established societal norms that posthuman critical thinking criticises.

Despite this, BÆB appears at first to perpetuate the anthropomorphic fallacy according to Bratton, as the character continues to function "in terms of what we understand intelligence to be, namely human intelligence" (2015, p. 70). This is evidenced by BÆB's speech that the viewer can hear through the app:

> And to be intelligent, first you must learn to listen. And to listen, first you must learn to hear. And to hear, first you must learn to doubt. And to doubt, first you must learn to be curious! And to be curious, first you must learn to be alive! And to be alive, first you must learn to be intelligent. (kennedy+swan, 2023b)

This speech repeats on an infinite loop while BÆB dances around the smartphone screen. Indeed, this insight that the AI shares with humanity ultimately produces a paradox, as BÆB explains how attaining intelligence requires an infinite sequence of learning with no beginning or end. While this can serve as yet another challenge of anthropocentric hierarchy, it can also

represent further criticism of our human tendency to assign human attributes to other forms of intelligence, in order to understand them. Bratton argues that, "[b]y seeing synthetic intelligence only in self-reflection, we make ourselves blind to everything else that is actually going on" (2015, p. 78). In this sense, BÆB perhaps mirrors this blindness by translating their insight into "inferior" (kennedy+swan, 2023b) human language, which results in the act of *being intelligent* becoming an impossible condition for humanity to achieve.

Conclusion

Through its integration of traditional watercolours, augmented reality, and speculative storytelling, kennedy+swan's *Mixed Signals* situates itself at the intersection of art, technology, and ecology, challenging the complex dynamics surrounding AI as a mediator between humanity and nature in the Anthropocene. In combining the physical and the digital, the work transforms the artist's book into a vehicle for posthuman critical thought, by questioning the boundaries between human and non-human intelligences. The work's hybrid form, both tactile and virtual, mirrors the thematic hybridity of its content that features a world in which AI becomes both the symptom of anthropocentric innovation and a potential instrument for imagining coexistence beyond it.

The analysis of *Mixed Signals* demonstrates how its speculative narratives interrogate the paradox of using AI, a man-made technology frequently created to mirror human intelligence (Bratton, 2015, p. 70), as a tool to understand the more-than-human world. The selected fictional AIs depicted across the book ultimately reveal the contradictions inherent in humanity's desire to communicate with nature, while maintaining the hierarchical superiority that posthuman ideology aims to abandon (Braidotti, 2017, p. 9; Castéra, 2023, p. 24). In this sense, each scenario in *Mixed Signals* exposes the fallacies of anthropocentric thinking; while AI can facilitate understanding between species, it can simultaneously reassert humanity's insistence on remaining in "a place of presumed privilege" (Bratton, 2019, Chapter 3). In doing so, *Mixed Signals* exemplifies what Braidotti describes as "the ubiquity of technological mediation and the complexity of interspecies alliances" (2017, p. 21), or the growing need to discuss human–non-human relations.

Moreover, the work's hybrid format emphasises this critical dimension through the transformation of static watercolours into interactive AR scenes. In a similar manner to how the augmented layers reveal extended dimensions within the watercolour paintings, so too does the narrative uncover the complex assumptions within human definitions of intelligence. The artist's book thus becomes a medium for rethinking perceptions of humanity's role in the Anthropocene. Ultimately, *Mixed Signals* contributes to contemporary discourse on posthumanism and ecological thought by proposing a speculative yet self-reflexive model of interspecies communication. In this sense, kennedy+swan's work exemplifies how the artist's book, as a critical and speculative medium, can act as a cultural tool for envisioning post-anthropocentric futures in which intelligence, whether human, artificial, or more-than-human, is understood not in terms of hierarchy, but of relation and reciprocity.

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Accessible Books for Children With Print Disabilities in Japanese Public Libraries

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Abstract

Print disability refers to an individual's difficulty in reading printed materials due to factors such as perceptual or physical disabilities, visual impairments, age-related vision loss, dyslexia and illiteracy stemming from cultural and social backgrounds. In June 2019, Japan enacted the Reading Barrier-Free Act to encourage public libraries to collect and provide accessible reading materials. This study investigated the accessibility of library resources for children with print disabilities in Japanese public libraries. This study focused on public library conditions that facilitate reading among children with print disabilities, the current state of accessibility, and the availability of material collections. The survey findings revealed that, regarding children's reading environments, specific measures, such as the use of pictograms and color-coded headings by subject area, were implemented to help children locate the desired materials easily. Concerning support for children with print disabilities, efforts were made to procure and lend accessible resources, including braille materials, large-print books, and audio recordings, alongside the establishment of "Apple Shelf." To comply with the Reading Barrier-Free Act, libraries adopted measures including the development of accessible material collections, installation of user aids such as the "Apple Shelf," "Easy User Guide," and "Communication Board," and provision of reading support devices, including reading trackers and magnifying devices. Ongoing challenges include the need for staff development and establishment of long-term strategies to support the continuous acquisition and dissemination of accessible resources.

Keywords: Apple Shelf, public library, accessible books, children with print disabilities

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Introduction

Print disability refers to difficulties in reading printed materials, which may arise from perceptual or physical disabilities, visual impairments, age-related vision loss, dyslexia, or literacy challenges influenced by cultural and social factors. The development of digital technologies and the growing availability of digital formats have provided greater opportunities for individuals with print disabilities, including children, to access materials suited to their individual needs. Accessible formats include braille books, audiobooks, e-books, large-print books, tactile picture books, easy-to-read books (in Swedish, *Lättläst*), and literature in sign language.

The World Blind Union estimates that less than 10% of all published materials are accessible to people with print disabilities, many of which are only available in English (Jewell, 2014). This situation is often referred to as a "book famine." The Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled (Marrakesh Treaty), which was adopted on June 27, 2013, and entered into force on September 30, 2016 (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2013), aims to address this global "book famine" issue by promoting the international lending of books in accessible formats. The European Accessibility Act requires a range of products and services, including e-books, to be produced and made available in accessible formats for European markets by June 28, 2025 (European Union, 2019). This Act is expected to enhance the accessibility of e-books worldwide.

The Marrakesh Treaty took effect in Japan on January 1, 2019. In June 2019, Japan also enacted the Act on Promoting Improved Reading Environments for the Visually Impaired (Reading Barrier-Free Act) to allow everyone to access written and printed culture through reading, regardless of disability status. The Reading Barrier-Free Act encourages national organizations, municipal governments, public libraries, and publishers to collect and provide accessible reading materials. The Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was adopted in June 2013 and enacted in June 2016. Initially, business operators were only required to make efforts to provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities, but this obligation became legally binding in June 2021.

According to the best practices outlined in the Guidelines for Library Services for Persons with Dyslexia (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2015), public libraries in Sweden offer accessible books for children with disabilities through a system called the *Apple Shelf (Äppelhyllan).* The first Apple Shelf was established at Härnösand Library in 1993 and has since expanded to most libraries across Sweden. It features various accessible books and resources for parents and teachers to learn about print disabilities. In Japan, the Apple Shelf concept was first introduced at the Ogawa Public Library in Saitama Prefecture in 2013 (Niiyama, 2016), and has since been adopted by an increasing number of public libraries. While public libraries in Japan offer services for people with disabilities, only a few serve children with disabilities (National Diet Library, 2018). Mrva-Montoya et al. (2025) reported that Australian public libraries face a key communication challenge, and that limited staff knowledge about print disabilities hinders effective outreach. Public libraries in Japan that serve children with print disabilities may also face similar challenges.

Despite increasing awareness of print disabilities and accessible reading materials, limited research has been conducted on the current conditions and effectiveness of public library

services that specifically support children with print disabilities in Japan. Moreover, although various laws and international treaties have been implemented to improve accessibility, little is known about how these regulations are actually applied in library settings or about the challenges that libraries face in this context. This study aims to address these gaps by examining reading environments, accessibility practices such as the Apple Shelf, and the implementation of relevant legislation in Japanese public libraries. It focuses on public library conditions that support reading for children with print disabilities, the current level of accessibility, and the availability of material collections in Japan. The research questions are as follows:

1. What reading environments are implemented for children with print disabilities?
2. What Apple Shelf practices are being implemented?
3. How are library-related laws implemented, what challenges do they face, and what are their future directions?

Methods

Participants

Through cooperation with a designated management entity that operates public libraries in Japan, this study sent survey invitations to librarians in Japanese public libraries via email. The participants were 25 librarians who accepted the invitation. Completion and submission of the survey were considered implied consent, and there were no incentives offered for participation. This study received ethical approval from Sagami Women's University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: 22166).

Survey Instrument

The survey was conducted online and comprised four sections: reading environments for children with print disabilities (five items), Apple Shelf practices (15 items), cooperation between elementary schools and libraries for children with print disabilities (two items), and the implementation of library-related laws, challenges, and future directions (nine items). Four response formats were used: dichotomous (yes/no), multiple response (select all that apply), a five-point Likert scale, and an open-ended format. Responses on the five-point Likert scale ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with "neutral" as the midpoint. The five-point Likert scale responses ranged from "strongly agree = 5" to "strongly disagree = 1," and mean scores were calculated for each item. Owing to space limitations, the full survey is omitted; the Appendix provides a list of all survey items.

Results

Reading Environments Designed for Children With Print Disabilities

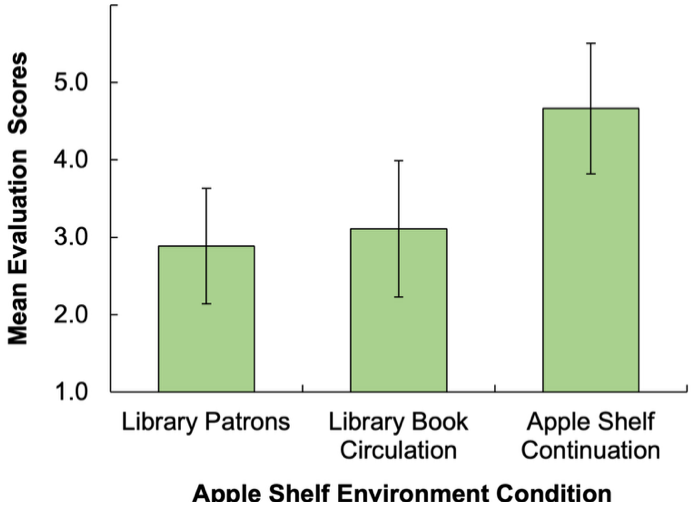
Children's reading environments included the use of pictograms and color-coded headings by subject area, which helped them locate the desired materials easily. Books in public libraries were arranged in a way that children would want to see all the books and browse them. Eleven libraries (44%) provided events or services specifically aimed at children with print disabilities.

Apple Shelf Practices

Nine librarians (36%) responded that their libraries had an Apple Shelf. All nine provided children with braille picture books and easy-to-read books (*Lättläst*). Six libraries offered large print books, braille books, and tactile picture books. Regarding reading support tools, five libraries had reading trackers, three had reading loupes, and three had none.

Figure 1 indicates that an established Apple Shelf exerted minimal impact on the number of library patrons (M = 2.9, SD = 0.8) and library books in circulation (M = 3.1, SD = 0.9). Librarians intended to continue Apple Shelf practices (M = 4.7, SD = 0.7).

Figure 1
Effects of Apple Shelf Implementation



Note. N = 25 (n = 9 for each question). The Y-axis reflects the number of participants answering "yes" to "Does your library have an established Apple Shelf?" Mean evaluation scores were from the results of five-point Likert scale questions regarding Apple Shelf environmental factors. Error bars represent standard error. Patrons: "Do you think the number of patrons has increased since your library established an Apple Shelf?", Library Book Circulation: "Do you think the number of borrowed books has increased since your library established an Apple Shelf?", Apple Shelf Continuation: "Do you think that the Apple shelf placement should continue?"

School and Library Cooperation for Children With Print Disabilities

Fourteen librarians (56%) reported that their public libraries cooperated with elementary schools serving children with print disabilities. This cooperation was directed mainly toward special needs classes, where libraries lent audio materials and provided read-aloud services to children with print disabilities.

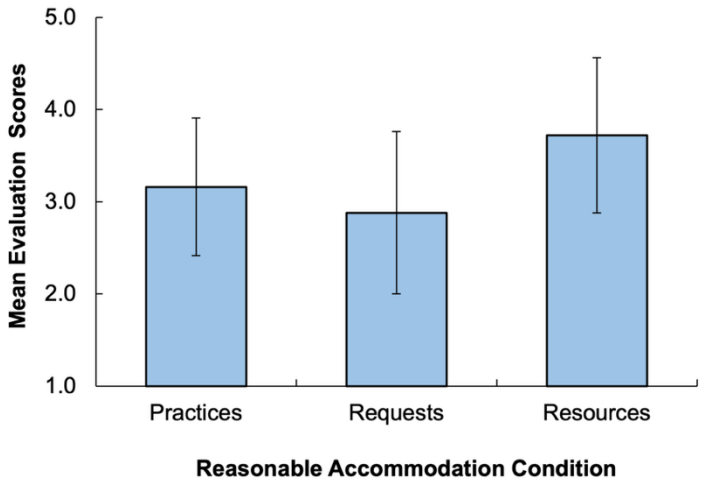
Practice of Library-Related Laws, Their Challenges, and Future Directions

Figure 2 shows that the provision of reasonable accommodations for children by libraries was rated relatively low (M = 3.2, SD = 0.7) after the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was enforced. A low score was observed in requests for accessible books in general (M = 2.9, SD = 0.9) and for better variety in accessible books (mean 3.7 ±0.8). The Reading Barrier-Free Act was enforced by 18 (72%) libraries that offer events or services specifically catering to children with print disabilities.

Regarding practices to comply with the Reading Barrier-Free Act, responses to the open-ended items revealed that libraries adopted a variety of measures. These include the development of accessible materials collections, the installation of user aids such as the Apple Shelf, an easy user guide, a communication board, and the provision of reading support devices such as reading trackers and magnifying devices. The open-ended responses also highlighted emerging practices such as "staff training" and "outreach and marketing," as well as child-friendly practices such as "accessible environment design," and "assisting children's reading."

Figure 2

Impact of Legal Requirements for the Reasonable Accommodation of Accessible Books in the Library



Note. N = 25. Mean evaluation scores based on the results of the five-point Likert scale questions regarding the impact of legal requirements for reasonable accommodation factors. Error bars represent standard error. Practices: "Do you think your library provides events or services specifically catered to children with print disabilities?", Requests: "Do you think children with print disabilities request reasonable accommodation for accessible books?", Resources: "Do you think your library provides accessible books for children with print disabilities?"

Discussion

The survey findings indicated that in children's reading environments, specific measures such as the use of pictograms and color-coded headings by subject area were implemented to help children easily find the materials they need. To assist children with print disabilities, efforts were made to acquire and lend accessible resources, including braille materials, large-print books, and audio recordings, and to establish an Apple Shelf.

Regarding Apple Shelf practices, nine libraries reported providing children with accessible books, while six libraries offered assistive reading tools. In relation to school and library cooperation for print disabilities, approximately 50% (n=14) of surveyed librarians indicated that they cooperated with elementary schools. This indicates a lack of sufficient knowledge about the Apple Shelf and services for children with print disabilities.

Although the libraries comply with the Reading Barrier-Free Act and the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, requests for reasonable accommodations from patrons were limited. This indicates that awareness of such support is still low. Librarians also noted the need for a wider variety of accessible books and support devices

such as tracking tools and magnifiers. The open-ended responses showed that new practices included staff training, outreach, and marketing. These findings support those of Mrva-Montoya et al. (2025), who recommended practices to address fundamental communication issues and limited staff knowledge about children with print disabilities, which hinder effective marketing. These challenges require staff development and long-term strategies to ensure the continuous acquisition and distribution of accessible resources (Adkins & Bushman, 2015; Copeland, 2011).

Conclusion

This study examined the conditions in Japanese public libraries that support reading among children with print disabilities, the current level of accessibility for these children, and the availability of relevant material collections. The services in Japanese public libraries aimed at improving accessibility for children with print disabilities have gradually advanced over time. However, some challenges still need to be addressed, including the coordinated implementation of staff training, outreach, and marketing efforts targeted at children with print disabilities. A limitation of this study was that the sample was not representative of all public libraries in Japan. Further research involving more Japanese librarians is necessary to verify our findings and find ways to improve outreach and marketing for patrons with print disabilities.

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

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

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Appendix

Question Items (Transcribed in English)

Reading Environments Designed for Children

1. Does your library arrange books such that children can find them easily?
2. Does your library provide original events or services for children with print disabilities?

Apple Shelf Practices

1. Does your library have an established Apple Shelf?
2. What types of assistive reading tools are available on your Apple Shelf?
3. What types of accessible books are available on your Apple Shelf?
4. Do you think the number of patrons has increased since your library established an Apple Shelf?
5. Do you think the number of borrowed books has increased since your library established an Apple Shelf?
6. Do you think that the Apple Shelf placement should continue?

School and Library Cooperation for Children With Print Disabilities

1. Does your library cooperate with elementary schools that serve children with print disabilities?

Practices of Library-Related Laws and Their Challenges and Future Directions

1. Do you think your library provides events or services specifically catered to children with print disabilities?
2. Do you think children with print disabilities request reasonable accommodation for accessible books?
3. Do you think your library provides accessible books for children with print disabilities?

Contested Cultural Space: The Utilization of *Jathilan* Events for Anti-Drug Campaign in Bantul Indonesia

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Abstract

This research explores the contested cultural space that emerges from the use of the traditional Javanese art performance, *"Jathilan*," as a medium for anti-drug campaigns in Bantul Regency, Indonesia. *Jathilan*, deeply embedded with ritualistic and symbolic cultural meanings, is utilized by the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) and the Tourism Office of Bantul Regency by leveraging the event's large public attendance to disseminate anti-drug messages through banners, speeches and side activities. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research combines field observations and interviews with performers, campaign organizers, and local audiences. The findings reveal that the cultural space of *Jathilan* becomes a site of contestation between traditional cultural values and the objectives of modern public health campaigns. A communicative dissonance emerges, as the anti-drug messages conflict with local perceptions and practices associated with *Jathilan*, such as possession rituals and alcohol consumption. This study highlights the importance of cultural context sensitivity in designing effective public communication strategies that accommodate local values to foster acceptance and reduce resistance. The findings contribute to critical discourse on the intersection of traditional culture and modern communication and open avenues for discussing cultural politics within public health campaigns.

Keywords: contested cultural spaces, Jathilan, anti-drug campaign, communicative dissonance, cultural context sensitivity, public health communication

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Introduction

Substance abuse remains a critical issue in Indonesia, affecting both urban and regional areas. Data from Badan Narkotika Nasional Republik Indonesia (2023) shows that 1.73% of the population aged 15–64 reported drug use within the past year, equivalent to 173 per 10,000 residents. Badan Narkotika Nasional Republik Indonesia (2025) release a drug reports that recorded 46,784 narcotics-related criminal cases, with the highest concentrations in Jakarta, East Java, North Sumatra, West Java, and South Sulawesi. Additionally, 457 regions were categorized as high-risk and 8,813 as vigilant in 2025 indicating persistent vulnerabilities to drug-related problems (Badan Narkotika Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2025).

To respond to these challenges, the National Narcotics Board of Republic of Indonesia, known as BNN has intensified its Communication, Information, and Education (KIE) initiatives within the P4GN program (P4GN means Prevention and Eradication of Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking). In 2025, Badan Narkotika Nasional Republik Indonesia reported 10,739 KIE activities involving 1,909,766 participants, with concentrations in East Java, Central Java, West Java, Bali, and the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY). Another 11,694 information dissemination activities were carried out through print, broadcast, digital, and conventional media. Additional BNN priorities include family-based resilience training, life skills development, youth peer-group formation, and the annual establishment of recovery agents and anti-narcotics activists (Badan Narkotika Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2025).

Within DIY, three district-level BNN units operate in Sleman, Yogyakarta City, and Bantul. This study focuses on the P4GN communication activities in Bantul Regency. According to Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Bantul (2025), Bantul Regency has a total population of 980,269 people and covers an area of approximately 511.71 km². Drug-related cases in Bantul remain relatively high. Humas Polres Bantul (2025) reports that in this first semester, the Bantul Resort Police Drug Investigation Unit recorded 69 drug-related cases involving 73 suspects**,** consisting of 29 dealers and 44 users**.** The cases included 16 narcotics cases**,** 24 psychotropic cases, and 29 cases involving dangerous drugs.

Mitigation measures emphasize outreach and public education. In 2024, BNN Bantul carried out 207 outreach and awareness activities, reaching 34,365 participants from multiple community sectors (Bantul Regency National Narcotics Board, 2024). Uniquely, BNN Bantul supplements conventional outreach with community-based and cultural approaches, actively integrating anti-drug messages into festivals, carnivals, sports events, car-free days, music shows, and traditional art performances such as *Jathilan*. Such contextual communication is essential for message acceptance, as messages resonate more when tailored to the audience's cultural references and lived experiences (Kreuter & Wray, 2003). Tailored communication increases personalization and relevance (Hawkins et al., 2008), while culture-centered strategies ensure that messages align with the values of diverse audiences and contribute to public trust-building (Airhihenbuwa et al., 2020). Without an effective contextual strategy, public-information campaigns risk being ignored or rejected.

Traditional arts offer promising potential as communication channels because of their mass appeal and strong emotional bonds with local communities. Previous research demonstrated how the *Rodat Walisongo* performance was used to promote religious moderation due to its closeness to the community (Alfandi & Warsiyah, 2024), and how *Reyog* performances mobilized collective participation (Stiawan & Trilaksana, 2016). One traditional art deeply embedded in Yogyakarta's cultural landscape, including Bantul, is *Jathilan*.

Figure 1
Jathilan Dancers Are Performing (Researcher's Documentation)

Jathilan is a Javanese folk performance rich in spiritual, symbolic, and social meanings. Dancers ride woven bamboo horses (jaran kepang) and move to gamelan rhythms until entering a trance state (ndadi), believed to be possession by spirits, ancestors, or supernatural beings (Tucker, 2011). The trance is often expressed through extreme acts such as eating glass or enduring sharp objects without injury. A pawang or dalang mediates the spirit world and ensures the safety of performers (Christensen, 2013).

Figure 2
Some Extreme Acts While the Performers Are Believed to Be Possessed by Spirits or Supernatural Beings (Elemental Productions, (2019), TikTok. (2023), Infopublik, (2025))

The *ndadi* phenomenon is rooted in Javanese cosmology, which emphasizes balance between the visible (*alam kasatmata*) and invisible (*alam halus*) realms. Although the trance element is a subject of public debate, praised by some and criticized by others for its mystical elements (Haliemah & Kertamukti, 2017), Jathilan remains a significant cultural inheritance. Originating from pre-Islamic animistic traditions, it merges ritual and aesthetics (Tucker, 2011) and historically appears in ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions, and village cleansing rituals (Christensen, 2013). Yet over time, entertainment value increasingly dominates its contemporary performance.

Figure 3
One of the Dancers Is Entering a Trance State (ndadi), Believed to Be Possession by Spirits, Ancestors, or Supernatural Beings (Researcher's Documentation)

In Bantul, traditional arts including *Jathilan* fall under the responsibility of the Bantul Cultural Office, which provides support in the form of costumes, stages, and financial assistance. BNN collaborates with the Bantul Tourism Office to use *Jathilan* performances as platforms for anti-drug campaigns, capitalizing on their large audiences. Campaign strategies include placing banners, delivering speeches, and organizing supporting activities around the performance area. This approach illustrates a communication strategy that *"piggybacks"* on existing cultural events with established mass bases. Consequently, Jathilan functions not only as artistic expression and communal recreation but also as a space where public health narratives are introduced to the community.

Figure 4
Anti-Drugs Campaign by National Narcotics Board in Jathilan Event

Source: Researcher's Documentation

However, tension emerges when BNN inserts modern public-health messages into a culturally sacred and spiritually charged performance space. *Jathilan*, traditionally grounded in rituals of

collective spirituality, encounters rational, data-based messages about the dangers of drugs and state-led health governance. This meeting brings forth two distinct regimes of meaning: one rooted in embodied, sensory, and spiritual experience; the other in modernity, logic, and biopolitical regulation. The *Jathilan* arena thus becomes an intersection where the state's narrative of *"healthy living without drugs"* interacts with local mystical practices. Although the state seeks to harness the cultural appeal of Jathilan to disseminate its message, the community simultaneously maintains its own cultural meanings and spiritual attachments. This raises critical questions: Is *Jathilan* being co-opted as a tool for state messaging, or is the state merely riding on an autonomous cultural ritual that persists independently?

This phenomenon marks the emergence of a new interaction space between traditional culture and modern health initiatives, a process described in cultural communication studies as hybridization or cross-pollination of meaning (Pieterse, 2009). *Jathilan* serves as a pivotal cultural platform where the local community's deep, symbolic, and ritualistic traditions meet the state's modern, instrumental agenda (i.e., anti-drug campaigns focused on regulation and public health improvement). Because *Jathilan* is organically integrated into daily life, it offers the government a powerful, credible avenue for message dissemination; however, this intersection introduces a tension where the secular, disciplinary goals of the state are interpreted through the audience's deeply held, spiritual, and symbolic cultural lens, making the communication process a form of complex cultural negotiation rather than simple delivery. Audiences are not passive recipients; they can negotiate, reinterpret, or even reject the messages depending on their cultural frameworks (Hall, 1980). Thus, using traditional arts in communication campaigns must be understood not simply as message delivery but as a practice of cultural politics involving negotiation between state interests and local meanings.

Christensen (2013) describes *Jathilan* as *"an open but contested space of different interpretations and readings."* While Schlehe (2017) argues that cultural rituals form arenas of resistance, negotiation, and affirmation. Within this context, the *Jathilan* stage can be read as a site of symbolic politics where the community simultaneously performs cultural identity and negotiates its position amid pressures of modernity, religion, and state regulation. This research aims to examine how modern public-health messages interact with, challenge, or are reinterpreted through the traditional symbolic order embedded in *Jathilan*.

Research Question

How does the utilization of *Jathilan* performances by the Bantul Regency BNN as an anti-narcotics campaign medium form a contested cultural space?

Objective

To analyze how the anti-narcotics campaign implemented by the Bantul Regency National Narcotic Boards (BNN) through *Jathilan* performances shapes a contested cultural space, by examining the dynamics of interaction, the negotiation of meaning, and the hybridization between modern public health messages and the ritual, symbolic, and spiritual values of the local community.

Theoretical Framework

This research aims to analyze the clash and negotiation of meaning between the state discourse (the BNN anti-narcotics campaign) and local ritualistic values (the *Jathilan* traditional art).

This theoretical framework is constructed upon three core pillars: Public Communication as the context of action, Social Practice Theory as a lens for interpreting cultural structures and symbolic capital, and the Encoding/Decoding Model as an analytical tool for audience reception.

The BNN campaign activities conducted within the *Jathilan* arena are understood as a form of planned Public Communication, defined as a systematic effort to influence the behavior and perceptions of a broad audience regarding a specific issue (Rice & Atkin, 2004). In this context, BNN's Public Communication serves as an instrument of social regulation, seeking to instill modern health values based on rationality, data, and prevention.

This campaign employs a strategy of message insertion into a local cultural context, utilizing the popularity and emotional resonance of the *Jathilan* art form as a communication medium. In this manner, the state's anti-narcotics message is inserted into a cultural space that already holds significant social and spiritual legitimacy. However, this action generates symbolic tension because the state's rational and functional message interacts with an arena rich in ritualistic and spiritual meaning. This point marks the beginning of the process of contestation and negotiation of meaning. The BNN campaign within the local cultural space can be interpreted as an effort at symbolic persuasion, a process through which the state seeks to gain social acceptance for its modern discourse by leveraging community cultural practices. This process may be interpreted as subtle and persuasive form of ideological dominance, where state values (rationality, social order, modern health) are embedded within a traditional folk vessel without direct coercion.

To explain this dynamic, the research employs Pierre Bourdieu's Social Practice Theory. Bourdieu emphasizes the dialectic between habitus and the field as a structural mechanism in social action (Munafi, 2021). The *Jathilan* performance can be understood as a cultural field, a structured social space where different forms of capital (rational, spiritual, and symbolic) compete for legitimacy. In this field, BNN introduces the state's rational capital (authority, health data, regulation), which confronts the local spiritual-cultural capital (sacrality, trance, and ritual value). The clash of these two forms of capital reflects the encounter between the *modern rational habitus* and the *traditional spiritual habitus*. The resulting symbolic tension is not merely a contradiction of message content but a struggle between worldviews: between modern rationality and local spirituality.

To trace how the BNN message is received and interpreted by the community, the research utilizes Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model (Hall, 1980). Hall views communication as a *"structured-in-dominance"* process but one that still allows space for the audience to actively interpret the message. The audience (decoder) can receive the encoded message in one of three positions:

1. Dominant-Hegemonic Position: The BNN message is accepted fully and without reservation.
2. Negotiated Position: The audience accepts the BNN message but bargains with it by retaining the contradictory ritualistic meanings of *Jathilan* (e.g., still valuing the *ndadi* process). This Negotiated Position is primary indicator of cultural contestation.
3. Oppositional Position: The audience rejects the BNN message because it is perceived as disruptive to the ritual.

Overall, the BNN anti-narcotics campaign is conceptualized as a form of rational-modern public communication entering a local cultural field governed by traditional habitus and

meaning systems. This process creates an arena of symbolic contestation where local communities are not passive recipients but actors who actively interpret and negotiate the message according to their values, experiences, and cultural dispositions.

Through the Encoding/Decoding framework, this research seeks to uncover the mechanism of meaning negotiation occurring within the *Jathilan* cultural field, specifically how the Bantul community interprets the anti-narcotics message within their framework of spirituality, sacrality, and ritualistic practices. This analysis demonstrates that public health campaigns are not merely a matter of message delivery but an ideological meeting ground between state rationality and local spirituality.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the use of *Jathilan* performances by the Bantul Regency BNN as an anti-narcotics campaign medium. A case study design is appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon situated within its real-life cultural context, particularly when the boundaries between the event and its environment are indistinct. As emphasized by Yin (2014) and Baxter and Jack (2008), this approach is suitable for investigating complex contemporary phenomena and answering "how" and "why" questions.

The research was conducted in Bantul Regency, focusing on *Jathilan* performance arenas utilized in the campaign. Participants comprised BNN officials who articulated campaign strategies, *Jathilan* artists who provided cultural and participatory perspectives, and community members who offered insights into the reception or resistance to campaign messages.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants, participant observation during *Jathilan* performances, and documentation of BNN reports, media coverage, and campaign materials. Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model involving concurrent processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification. This cyclical and iterative approach aligns with Creswell's (2000) description of qualitative data analysis as a process of reducing, organizing, and interpreting data to construct meaningful representations of the phenomenon.

To strengthen validity, the study employed source and methodological triangulation, member checking to confirm interpretive accuracy, and prolonged field engagement to deepen contextual understanding. Through these methodological strategies, the research aims to provide a comprehensive account of how *Jathilan* is mobilized as a communication medium and how its cultural space mediates encounters between local traditions and modern public health agendas.

Results

The collaboration between the National Narcotics Board (BNN) and the *Jathilan* art form in Bantul stemmed from an inherent issue within the Bantul cultural sphere, particularly *Jathilan* performances, which are often associated with the consumption of alcohol or drugs. Some groups reportedly consume alcohol or spirits as a stimulant or performance-enhancing substance before performing. The Bantul Regency BNN (BNNK), having established formal cooperation through an MoU with the Bantul Cultural Office, leveraged various art platforms

for the anti-narcotics campaign, including *Jathilan*. The primary objectives of BNN are internally, to educate the artists to prevent substance abuse; and externally, to inform the broader audience about the dangers of drugs.

Table 1
Interview Findings: Bantul Regency BNN Officials

Category	Finding (Summary)	Key Insight
Delivery Method	Education conducted through socialization, Q&A sessions, door prizes, and the use of Javanese language and poetry (*pantun*) to foster rapport.	Strategic cultural adaptation for effective encoding.
Message Effectiveness	Rated as **"fairly effective"** (Arfin), but **"less than optimal"** due to short duration and the audience's primary focus on the performance (Nanda, Ikamadita).	Instrumental dilemma: context hinders cognitive absorption.
Field Challenges	Presence of **hidden resistance** from artists who still use illicit substances but do not express it directly.	Indicates subtle symbolic tension and lack of full behavioral adoption.
Culture-Message Relationship	No perceived conflict between the BNN message and cultural values; both run harmoniously side-by-side.	BNNs perspective of perceived harmony, potentially ignoring underlying tension.

Note. Respondents: Arfin Munajah, Nanda Paramita, Ikamadita Hati Andalina.

Table 2
Interview Findings: Art Performers

Category	Finding (Summary)	Key Insight
Campaign Support	All respondents showed a **positive and supportive attitude**, viewing the activity as beneficial education for the community and performers.	Formal acceptance of the state's agenda.
Meaning of *Jathilan*	**Diversified meanings:** Entertainment/cultural preservation; deep philosophy; spiritual/social function; medium for *dakwah* (preaching) since Sunan Kalijaga's era.	Recognition of the art form's complex spiritual and historical capital.
Campaign Impact on Meaning	**Contrasting views:** Does not change meaning but strengthens educational value; changes meaning to become more modern; adds educational and social awareness value.	Reveals the beginning of **negotiated meaning** among cultural agents.
BNN Message's Influence on Performance	Does not disrupt the main performance or ritual (Ardan, Rakyan, Andrian). **Adds educational sessions** (quizzes, door prizes, drug explanations) (Aji, Fajar). The *Pawang* (shaman/leader) emphasizes that the BNN message must be brief and non-dominating (Andrian).	Conscious **boundary maintenance** by the cultural gatekeepers.
Balance of Tradition and Modernity	Strategies for message insertion: **Beginning/end** of the event; **mid-performance**; integrated into songs (*tembang*) with health themes.	Practical strategies for **hybridization** and reducing friction.
Greatest Perceived Change	Increased awareness of drug dangers, improved ability to discern good from bad, and greater knowledge of BNN's role within the arts community.	Positive *habitus* change resulting from the campaign.

Note. Respondents: Ardan Syailendra, Muhammad Aji Pangestu, Rakyan Wahyu Pradana, Fajar Septiawan, Andrian Eka Yulianto

Table 3
Interview Findings: Jathilan Audience

Category	Finding (Summary)	Key Insight
Overall Impression	Performance is rated as interesting and **educational**, successfully combining entertainment and social messages.	Positive initial reception.
Message Comprehension	**Easily understood** (Ardan, Fariz) or **quite easy** (Teuku).	Effective encoding at the surface level.
Message Acceptance	Generally received **positively** (agree and support the BNN campaign).	Indicative of the Dominant/Negotiated Position in reception.
Feeling towards Message Integration	**Blended/Integrated** (Fariz); **Slightly piggybacking but non-disruptive** (Ardan); **Tends to piggyback** (Teuku).	Perception of message as an external element *juxtaposed* onto the ritual, not fully *incorporated*.
Erosion of Sacrality	All three respondents felt the campaign element **slightly reduced the sacrality** of the *Jathilan* ritual, but it was accepted as reasonable for education.	Direct evidence of **symbolic tension and negotiation** between the sacred and the profane.
Propriety of Using *Jathilan* for Campaigns	**Appropriate** (Ardan, Fariz) as it educates the public; **Less appropriate** (Teuku) as it risks altering the cultural essence.	Clear indicator of **contested meaning** in the Encoding/Decoding Model.

Note. Respondents: Ardan Syailendra, Teuku Iqbal Adiansyah, Fariz Sandyka Narotama

Discussion

1. Symbolic Negotiation and Contestation of Meaning in the *Jathilan* Cultural Field

The collaboration between the (BNN) and the *Jathilan* art form is a public communication phenomenon rich in social and symbolic dynamics. This program represents a forced encounter between the state's instrumental authority, grounded in modern rationality, and a traditional cultural field driven by spirituality, *habitus*, and symbolism. This analysis aims to unpack the layers of meaning negotiation occurring among the three key actors: BNN (as the state agent), Art Performers (as cultural agents), and the Audience (as message recipients).

a. Jathilan as a Strategic Field for Public Communication and the Instrumental Dilemma

The Bantul Regency National Narcotics Board's initiative to enter the *Jathilan* field did not arise in a vacuum but from a substantial issue: the association of art performances in Bantul, particularly *Jathilan*, with the use of alcohol or drugs, often considered *"performance enhancer."* The Head of BNNK Bantul, Arfin Munajah, explicitly stated this concern: *"Art performers, including Jathilan performers around here, are often associated with the misuse of alcohol and illicit drugs which are considered stimulant or 'doping'. So, we want to be present there not just to educate."*

Figure 5
A Staff From National Narcotics Boards Giving Anti-Drugs Campaign in Jathilan's Event

Source: Researcher's Documentation

Through the MoU with the Bantul Cultural Office, BNNK formally gained legitimacy to insert anti-narcotics prevention messages into various art platforms. *Jathilan* was chosen as a strategic medium due to its large crowds, its reach to communities often missed by formal campaigns, and its high social appeal.

b. Message Encoding Strategy: Adaptation and Acculturation

BNNK Bantul recognizes that the effectiveness of the state's instrumental message prevention, health, and social order, must depend on its ability to acculturate to the local context. The communication strategy implemented by BNNK includes brief socialization, Q&A sessions with *doorprizes*, banner usage, and crucially, linguistic tailoring.

One of the BNN Counselor Ikamadita Hati Andalina explained this adaptation: *"We adjust to the community's style. Using everyday language, light jokes, and the casual expressions they are familiar with to make the communication feel more relatable and acceptable. The important thing is that the message gets through without sounding condescending."* This approach is an attempt to encode state rationality into cultural language, a tactic designed to reduce friction and enhance message absorption. Arfin Munajah considers this method *"fairly effective"* in reaching the recipients.

c. Field Contradictions: Time, Focus, and Effectiveness

However, the implementation of this strategy faces a serious instrumental dilemma in the field. Nanda Paramita and Ikamadita noted two main challenges: time constraints and the audience's shifting focus. The brief campaign time, often inserted between or at the beginning/end of the performance, makes the message delivery feel rushed.

Figure 6
The Interaction From Audience During the Campaign

Source: Researcher's Documentation

Nanda Paramita highlights: *"The audience and dancers are more focused on the performance. So the message often comes in the middle, not everyone listens fully."* In communication theory, this indicates that message effectiveness is determined not only by the quality of the encoding (familiar language) but also by the context and timing of delivery. The BNNK message often remains merely a juxtaposed element on the surface of the ritual, risking failure to achieve the necessary cognitive and behavioral depth.

2. Cultural Boundaries and the Negotiation of Symbolic Violence (Pierre Bourdieu)

This collaboration can be understood as a clash between two distinct social fields: the state field (authority, law, health) versus the cultural field (spirituality, ritual, tradition). BNNK enters the *Jathilan* arena carrying rational capital (legal authority, medical data, modern morality), while the art performers are dominated by spiritual-cultural capital (belief in ritual, value of sacrality, and the *pawang*'s leadership).

Despite the superficial welcome of the program, a practice of Boundary Maintenance is evident among key cultural agents. The *Jathilan Pawang*, Andrian Eka Yulianto, acknowledged formal support but stated that the BNN message *"feels more like an external message (piggybacking), conveyed through banners, door prizes, stickers, and brief campaign announcements."* This statement is crucial. In the Bourdieusian framework, the state's agenda (BNNK) to redefine a cultural practice into a public health tool constitutes an effort at symbolic violence, a subtle form of power where the dominant value (anti-narcotics rationality) is internalized without conscious awareness by the dominated party (the cultural community).

However, the *Pawang's* action of setting conditions, that the message be delivered briefly and not disrupt the main procession or ritual, is a form of conscious negotiation to minimize the impact of this symbolic violence. This strategy is at the heart of Boundary Maintenance. As per Durkheim (1995), boundary maintenance is a social mechanism, particularly manifesting in rituals and religious belief systems, to create and periodically reaffirm the distinct lines between the sacred (symbols of society) and the profane (everyday life). This maintenance prevents social disintegration and ensures the continuity and moral power of the Collective Consciousness. In studies on ethnic and cultural boundaries, the concept is defined as the strategic effort of group members to preserve their distinctiveness and identity from being

completely absorbed by a dominant system or value, thereby preventing assimilation (Grobgeld & Bursell, 2021). The *Pawang* acts as a cultural gatekeeper, ensuring that the spiritual core of *Jathilan* remains outside the reach of rational intervention. He accepts the state's presence (as social utility) but has not accepted the incorporation (full integration) of the modern message into the ritual's core.

3. Practical Resistance and the Trap of the Old Habitus

The greatest ideological gap lies in the issue of the habitus of the art performers. Although cognitively supporting the anti-narcotics campaign, both BNN officials and the *Pawang* (shaman/leader) acknowledge the existence of substantive resistance in the field. This resistance is manifested in the continued practice of using alcohol or spirits as enhancer or doping by some dancers. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is a system of deeply ingrained dispositions, resistant to instantaneous cognitive change. The habit of consuming alcohol to achieve courage, confidence, or the trance state (*ndadi*) has become part of the practical scheme of specific groups. Those involved in this practice may engage in a dominant decoding verbally, but practically, this old habit constitutes a form of internalized practical opposition.

This challenge reinforces the suggestion from Nanda Paramita, who highlighted the need for a more personalized and sustained approach: *"It would be more effective if we were given special sessions for the performers, not just during the event. Because behavioral change cannot happen through a single performance."* This underscores that intervention aimed at altering *habitus* must extend beyond the performance stage.

4. Stratification of Meaning: Message Reception in Three Layers (Stuart Hall)

The analysis of BNN message reception through Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model reveals a stratification of meaning that varies among the Art Performers, the *Pawang*, and the Audience.

a. Dominant Reading: Social Utility and Educational Value

The group engaging in the Dominant Reading are those who fully accept the BNN message without resistance. This largely includes the audience and younger performers. Ardan Syailendra and Fariz Sandyka Narotama, for instance, deem the performance *"entertaining and educational,"* while Fajar Septiawan agrees that *Jathilan* fundamentally carries a mission of conveying messages to society. This group perceives the anti-narcotics message as adding value (economic/social) to the performance, slightly shifting the performance's meaning to become more modern.

b. Pragmatic Negotiation and Proactive Cultural Encoding

The most common form of reception is Pragmatic Negotiation (Negotiated Reading), which, however, includes initiatives that transcend simple negotiation. Actors in this group accept the state message but adapt it to fit the ritual context. Proactive Cultural Encoding: Aji Pangestu (Art Performer) not only sees this as modernization (*Changes the meaning to become more modern* but insists it must be *tidied up in the performance sequence*), but also takes a proactive initiative. He plans to create new songs, poetry, and performance concepts centered on moral and personal health, which will be performed independently (without BNN presence). This

initiative is a shift from merely accepting the message to internalization and Proactive Cultural Encoding.

Rakyan Wahyu Pradana emphasizes: *"As long as it does not disrupt the main procession, and the campaign/socialization duration is not too long, we as organizers do not object."* Fajar Septiawan affirms: *"The ndadi session, offerings, and various specific rituals must remain... As long as BNN does not interfere with that part, it will not be a problem."*

Aji Pangestu's initiative proves that the *Jathilan* community is capable of becoming an active agent that not only sets the rhythm and boundaries of intervention (Boundary Maintenance), but also appropriates the message to maintain the spiritual integrity of their culture while internalizing modern values (utility).

c. Practical Opposition: Silent Resistance

As discussed in the *Habitus* section, Practical Opposition (Oppositional Reading) emerges not as verbal refusal, but as behavioral rejection. Performers who maintain the habit of consuming alcohol before performing demonstrate that the BNN message, though cognitively accepted, is rejected at the practical level. This is the most covert resistance, difficult for BNN to detect due to the *"hidden resistance from performers who still use illicit substances but do not express it directly,"* as acknowledged by BNN officials.

d. The Central Paradox: Social Utility vs. Symbolic Cost

The dynamics of this collaboration culminate in a central paradox: the state intervention, which brings social utility, must be paid for with a symbolic cost. Social Utility is evident through the increased awareness of drug dangers, the ability to discern good from bad, and enhanced knowledge of BNN's role in the arts community, as acknowledged by the performers. However, the Symbolic Cost is the erosion of spiritual capital within the *Jathilan* field. The sharpest difference in meaning emerges among the audience:

a. Fariz Sandyka Narotama felt the message was *"integrated and blended."*
b. Ardan Syailendra felt the message was *"slightly piggybacking but non-disruptive."*
c. Teuku Iqbal Adiansyah explicitly stated the performance was *"tending to piggyback"* and felt the campaign element reduced the sacrality of the *Jathilan* ritual.

This assessment indicates that the *Jathilan* field, rich with a magical and ritual aura, becomes more functional when used as a communication medium. The symbolic distance determines the form of decoding: the *Pawang* engages in strict negotiation to maintain boundaries (conscious of symbolic violence), while the proactive initiative from the performer (Aji Pangestu) shows the potential for authentic incorporation.

In summary, the collaboration between BNN and the *Jathilan* art form in Bantul is a rich case study. Its success lies in the ability of state public communication to penetrate a cultural space with effective adaptation. However, the challenge is symbolic sensitivity, how BNN can operate without overstepping the boundaries set by the tradition's custodians. Communication effectiveness in the cultural field depends on the respect for local *habitus*, symbols, and spirit. The anti-narcotics message is accepted as truth, but the manner of its reception is stratified, ranging from full acceptance, strict symbolic negotiation, to profound practical resistance. *Jathilan* proves itself not merely a stage for dance, but an arena where the state and society interact, negotiate, and maintain a balance of meaning. As emphasized by the *Pawang*, Andrian

Eka Yulianto: *"BNN may enter, but Jathilan must remain Jathilan. Do not lose its spirit. If the message is conveyed respectfully, we will certainly help."* This statement serves as a strong conclusion, affirming that effective public communication in Indonesia must proceed together with respect for local cultural spirituality and autonomy.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the Bantul Regency BNN (BNNK) and the *Jathilan* art form represents a case study of a public communication intervention that successfully achieved Social Utility (increased anti-narcotics awareness) through an adaptive strategy (encoding messages in local language). However, this success is balanced by two major challenges: Symbolic Cost and Habitus Resistance.

1. Negotiation of Cultural Boundaries and Proactive Encoding: The *Pawang* and performers demonstrated rigorous Boundary Maintenance (Pragmatic Negotiation). Yet, initiatives by performers such as Aji Pangestu to create new songs on moral health indicate the potential for Proactive Cultural Encoding, where the state's rational message begins to be internalized and re-presented through the language of *Jathilan* itself, independent of BNN's physical presence.
2. The Trap of Habitus: The persistent "hidden resistance" from some performers who continue to use illicit substances as performance *doping or enhancer* suggests that communication messages that are merely juxtaposition (surface insertion) are incapable of changing deep-seated *habitus* that is resistant to instant cognitive change.

Overall, this collaboration is a functional compromise that positions *Jathilan* as an arena of contestation of meaning. The anti-narcotics message is accepted as a moral and rational truth, but long-term success in changing behavior requires an approach that extends beyond the performance stage.

Recommendations

To enhance program effectiveness and minimize symbolic costs while overcoming habitus resistance, the following recommendations are directed at the relevant stakeholders:

For BNN Bantul (National Narcotic Boards as the State Agent)

1. Sustainable and Personal Approach (Habitus Change): BNN needs to transition from brief mass socialization (juxtaposition) to specialized, sustainable, and incorporative (blended) development programs. The focus should be on closed workshops or discussions for performers, as suggested by respondents, aimed at altering *habitus* and providing safe and healthy "*doping*" alternatives (e.g., intensive physical training, meditation, or breathing techniques).
2. Symbolic Encoding Innovation (Song Creation Collaboration): Build an anti-narcotics narrative that integrates with the philosophy of *Jathilan*. BNNK should support and facilitate the initiative of performers like Aji Pangestu to create new *Tembang* (Javanese songs) that explicitly narrate the struggle against "*poison*" (a symbol for narcotics). This is the best method to achieve authentic incorporation of the message.
3. Strengthen the Pawang's Modality: Formally recognize and reward *Jathilan Pawangs* as Cultural Anti-Narcotics Agents. By reinforcing the *Pawang's* respected authority in the eyes of the dancers, BNNK can leverage this authority to instill anti-narcotics discipline from within (internal policing), rather than externally (the state).

For Jathilan Performers and Pawangs (Cultural Agents)

1. Integrate Messages into Ritual Text (Following Aji Pangestu): Voluntarily integrate anti-narcotics values into the group's *paugeran* (rules) and *ubarampé* (ritual paraphernalia). Other groups are advised to emulate the initiative of creating new songs about moral health (Aji Pangestu), making a commitment to be drug-free part of the pre-performance vows or rituals (utilizing Durkheim's Sacred/Profane dichotomy).
2. Maintain Spiritual Integrity: Remain consistent in asserting Boundary Maintenance against profane interventions. The *Pawang* must clearly define which parts of the performance must not be disturbed so that the sacrality value of *Jathilan* is preserved for the audience engaging in the Negotiated Reading.

For the Bantul Cultural Office

Cultural Office must function as a bridge between BNN's rationality and *Jathilan's* spirituality, ensuring the continuity of habitus training programs, and providing incentives (economic capital) focused on *Jathilan* groups that are proven to be drug-free, thereby strengthening the positive Dominant Reading and Negotiated Reading.

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

The author declares that **Gemini AI** was used in the preparation of this manuscript **solely for minor linguistic refinement**, including grammar correction and small sentence-level adjustments to improve clarity. The software was not used to conduct analysis, create substantive content or draw conclusions. The intellectual content, interpretations and conclusions presented in this manuscript are entirely the author's own.

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AIoT Anthropomorphic Little Monster

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Abstract

To attract children's attention, this study utilizes anthropomorphic little monsters with traits such as timidity, gluttony, playfulness, and adventurousness. These cute, approachable characters help children project their emotions and imagination onto them. Our research integrates AI, the Internet of Things, and interactive design to develop the AIoT Anthropomorphic Monster Interaction System, planned for implementation at Hsinchu Science Theme Park during Halloween. We designed a "palm monster generator box" that allows children to insert their hands, and the AI program then generates a unique, cute monster based on the shape and posture of the child's palm. The system projects a nighttime forest scene onto the wall. Children can use a mobile phone with an app to walk in front of the nighttime forest wall and shake the phone to awaken the monster they created, and play and interact with it. They can also take their little monster home through a "scoop-up" action using the mobile phone and share it on social media. Through the development and implementation of this system, we aim to explore the emotional impact of Kawaii Theory on children, specifically verifying whether anthropomorphic monster design enhances joy and engagement. Additionally, we strive to examine whether our interactive design can provide children with a "safe sense of adventure." Monsters usually symbolize the "unknown," but when anthropomorphized, this "adventure" becomes "controllable" and "cute," allowing children to experience adventure and challenges in a safe environment.

Keywords: AIoT, interactive design, Kawaii Theory, anthropomorphism, safe sense of adventure

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Introduction

In contemporary design for children, the "Kawaii" (cute) style has evolved beyond visual aesthetics into a key element for fostering emotional connection and engagement. Originating from Japan, "Kawaii" represents a psychological and social phenomenon that elicits care and empathy. While previous studies have predominantly focused on visual or character design, few have explored how Kawaii elements influence children's emotions and behaviors within AIoT-based interactive experiences. This study introduces "Anthropomorphic Little Monsters" as emotional mediators, combining AI generation and IoT interaction to create a digital experience characterized by a "safe sense of adventure." The primary objectives are:

- To explore the application of Kawaii Theory in interactive design.
- To verify whether anthropomorphic monsters influence children's emotions and motivation.
- To construct a "Cute and Adventurous Safe Experience Model," allowing children to face challenges within a safe framework.
- To implement an AIoT-integrated system in a real-world setting (a science theme park) to observe engagement and collaborative learning.

In summary, while the "Kawaii" culture has been widely recognized for its ability to foster emotional connection, its application in AIoT-based interactive environments for children remains underexplored. Existing designs often focus on visual aesthetics but lack a deeper integration of psychological mechanisms that can support children's exploration of the unknown. To bridge this gap, this study proposes an innovative approach by integrating generative AI and IoT technology with the "Anthropomorphic Little Monster" concept. By transforming the abstract and potentially frightening concept of "adventure" into a tangible, "controllable," and "cute" interactive experience, we aim to establish a "Safe Sense of Adventure" model. This research not only seeks to verify the emotional impact of Kawaii Theory in digital interaction but also provides empirical evidence on how such systems can enhance children's engagement and motivation to learn in a real-world setting.

Related Work

Originating from Japanese culture, "Kawaii" has transcended its regional roots to become a significant cross-cultural phenomenon, influencing aesthetics and consumer behavior globally, from Asia to Europe and the Americas. Historically viewed primarily as a visual style synonymous with "cuteness," contemporary research has redefined it as a complex psychological trigger.

Nittono (2016) proposed a behavioral science framework describing Kawaii as a two-layer model: an Affective Dimension, which evokes intrinsic positive emotions such as affection and the desire to protect; and a Social Value Dimension, which promotes interpersonal relationships and social attachment. Building on this theoretical foundation, this study integrates Kawaii not merely as a visual element, but as a strategic "emotional mediator" within an AIoT interactive system. By applying Kawaii traits to "monster" characters—which traditionally symbolize the unknown and fear—we aim to leverage the psychological mechanism of "care and empathy." This transformation allows children to perceive the unknown not as a threat, but as a companion, thereby facilitating a "Safe Sense of Adventure" that encourages active exploration and social sharing.

Anthropomorphism as a Transformation Mechanism

Anthropomorphism is defined as the attribution of human-like emotions, intentions, or mental states to non-human entities. Epley et al.'s (2007) Three-Factor Theory suggests that this psychological tendency is driven by a basic human need to comprehend uncertainty and establish social connections. In the context of this study, "monsters" traditionally symbolize the unknown, fear, and anxiety for children. We introduce anthropomorphism not merely as a design style, but as a critical transformation mechanism to address this anxiety. By imbuing these "unknown" entities with distinct human personality traits—specifically focusing on the "Experience" dimension (the ability to feel emotions like timidity, gluttony, and playfulness) from Gray et al.'s (2007) Mind Perception Model. We fundamentally alter the child's perception. According to the Media Equation (Reeves & Nass, 1996), children naturally treat these human-like virtual characters as social partners rather than threats. Consequently, the terrifying "unknown" is recontextualized into an approachable "social companion." This theoretical application allows us to convert a potential source of fear into a "Safe Sense of Adventure," where children are motivated to explore and interact with the monsters because they perceive them as relatable beings requiring care, rather than dangerous objects to be avoided.

Theoretical Synthesis: Constructing a Safe Sense of Adventure

This study postulates that a Safe Sense of Adventure is achievable through a strategic integration of the theories. It directly addresses the core research problem: how to encourage children to explore the unknown without the paralysis of anxiety. By synthesizing the Affective Dimension of Kawaii Theory (which triggers approach motivation and care) and the Cognitive Transformation of Anthropomorphism (which reframes the unknown into a social partner), we construct a psychological safety net. In this framework, the "unknown"—represented by the monster—is no longer a threat to be avoided but a companion to be cared for.

Therefore, the Safe Sense of Adventure is defined in this study not merely as a gameplay feature, but as a theoretically grounded experience model. It leverages the Kawaii and Anthropomorphic traits to create a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), where the child's natural fear of the unknown is counterbalanced by the desire for social interaction. This confirms that adventure becomes "safe" not by removing the challenge, but by fundamentally transforming the child's emotional relationship with the challenger.

Methodology and Implementation

This study proposes a distributed AIoT architecture designed to bridge the gap between physical interaction and generative AI in edge computing environments. The system integrates computer vision, utilizing Latent Diffusion Models (Rombach et al., 2022), and IoT communication protocols to create an immersive "in-the-wild" interactive experience. The following sections detail the system design, generative pipelines, and the implementation of the latency-masking interaction mechanism.

System Design and AI Generation

The visual synthesis core of the system is built upon ComfyUI (comfyanonymous, 2023), a node-based interface for Stable Diffusion. We adopted this modular architecture to construct a precise, reproducible generative workflow that integrates disparate technical components—

ranging from computer vision inputs to style-transfer outputs—into a unified processing pipeline. The generative process is architected into two distinct sub-systems: Gesture-Driven Character Synthesis and Structure-Preserved Environmental Rendering.

Gesture-Driven Character Synthesis (The Palm Monster)

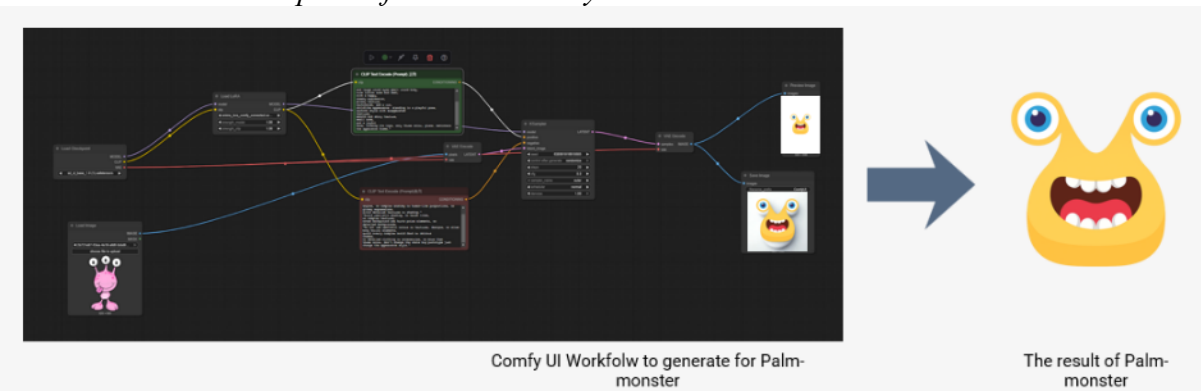
To ensure the generated agents (monsters) resonate with the user's physical actions, we implemented a Semantic Mapping Strategy rather than relying on randomized seed generation. The system utilizes a custom-built "Palm Monster Generator Box" equipped with a camera and MediaPipe (Google AI, 2020) for real-time hand tracking. The technical pipeline operates as follows:

Vision-to-Prompt Translation. The system employs a deterministic mapping algorithm where specific hand gestures are translated into distinct morphological constraints in the text prompt. For instance, a closed fist (detected as gesture "Zero") signifies compactness, which the system maps to prompts for a "limb-less, round-shaped" creature. Conversely, a "Two-finger" gesture introduces complexity, triggering prompts for "two distinct features" (e.g., long ears or dual legs).

Style Consistency via LoRA. To maintain a cohesive visual identity across diverse user inputs, we inject a custom-trained LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation) model into the diffusion process. This ensures that regardless of the structural variability in hand gestures, the output strictly adheres to the pre-defined Kawaii artistic style, stabilizing the aesthetic quality of the generated content.

This two-part generation process, combining deterministic semantic mapping with aesthetic stabilization, forms the core of the monster synthesis pipeline. The full workflow, detailing the node structure from input prompt to final output, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Modular Generative Pipeline for Character Synthesis



Structure-Preserved Environmental Rendering

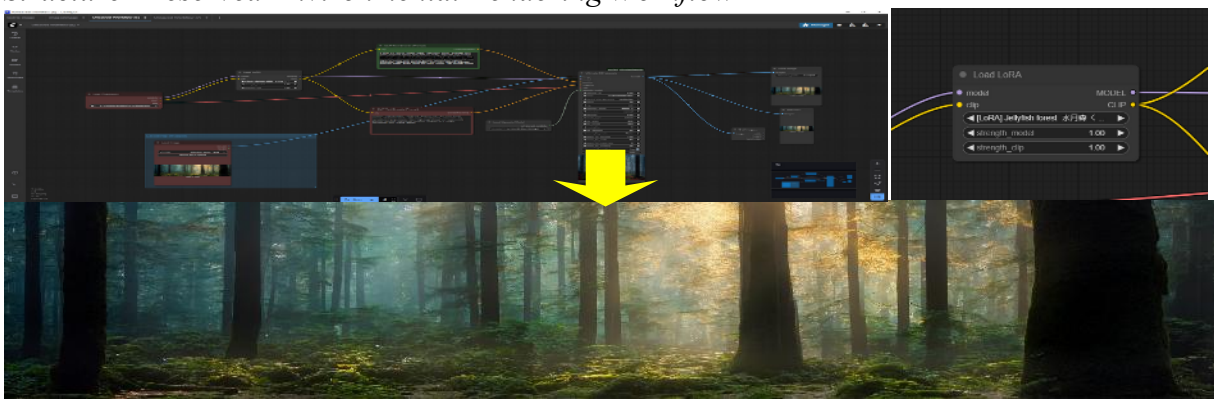
The immersive projection environment is constructed using an Image-to-Image (Img2Img) workflow. Unlike standard Text-to-Image generation, which creates scenes *ab initio*, our approach utilizes a photograph of the actual physical site as a Structural Baseline.

Context-Aware Generation. By applying the SDXL 1.5 model combined with a specific atmospheric LoRA (e.g., "Jellyfish Forest"), the system hallucinates a fantasy layer over the real-world geometry.

Physical-Digital Alignment. Crucially, this Img2Img method allows for Geometric Structure Preservation. Physical elements, such as tree trunks used for NFC interaction, retain their positions and shapes in the digital projection. This ensures that the digital content aligns perfectly with the physical props, preventing immersion-breaking discrepancies during the user's interaction.

The resulting environment, demonstrating the fusion of real-world structure with the fantasy aesthetic generated via the Img2Img workflow, is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Structure-Preserved Environmental Rendering Workflow



Communication Framework

The system utilizes a decentralized communication network based on the MQTT protocol, specifically designed to handle the real-time asynchronous communication challenges among heterogeneous components, including physical sensing nodes (IoT), the image processing core, and the mobile interface. This architecture establishes a central message broker, coordinating data flow among all entities.

Network Core and Data Distribution. The communication backbone is anchored by an MQTT Broker hosted on a dedicated Raspberry Pi 5 edge computing unit. The MQTT Broker serves as the central message exchange, allowing all system components (clients) to communicate indirectly via a low-overhead Publish/Subscribe mechanism. This design effectively decouples the control flow from the data processing units, enhancing system stability and scalability in a multi-node environment. The Broker manages various data types, including Sensing Data (Gesture IDs, Location IDs), Command Data (generation requests, mobile shake commands), and State Data (monster generation completion notifications).

Interaction Flow and Game Synchronization. The system synchronizes user actions and system state through a two-stage process mediated by the central MQTT Broker. First, the Palm Monster Generator Box (RPi/MediaPipe) translates a user's gesture into a unique Monster ID, which the coordinator (Mini PC) uses to initiate the AI generation pipeline and bind the ID to the player's session. Second, all subsequent interactions are routed through a local network structure, where a local server (Node.js/Flask) manages user data via the on-site

4G/WiFi access point. This local server receives high-level commands from the mobile App (e.g., “shake” or “scoop-up” commands). Both the mobile commands and the sensor nodes’ (NFC) physical location data are fed back to the broker. The coordinator constantly subscribes to these streams, executing the core game logic by verifying if the physical Location ID matches the unique Monster ID or if a valid mobile command has been received. This process ensures that the visual feedback on the projection screen is triggered consistently and with low latency, completing the physical-digital interaction loop.

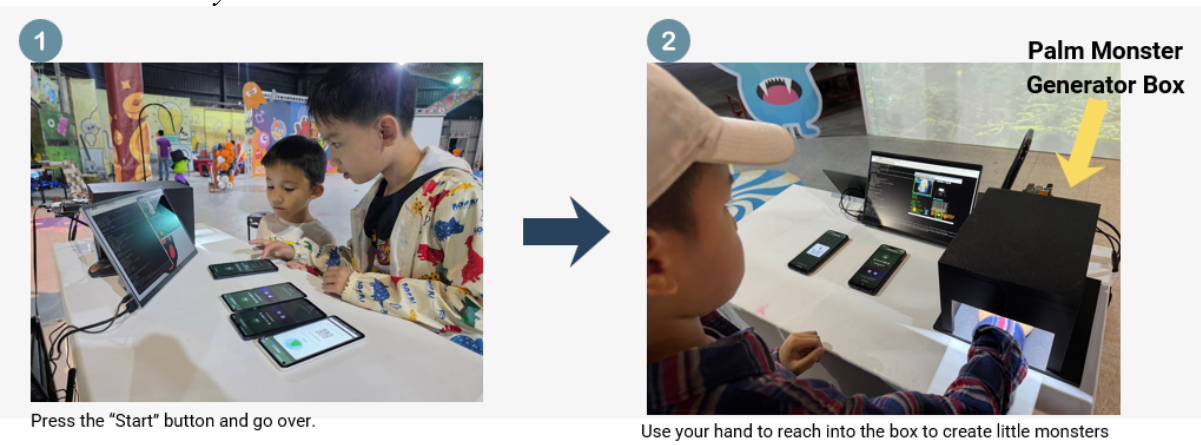
Interaction Flow

The user experience is structured around a five-step sequential process, designed to integrate the necessary AI computation time into the gameplay loop (Latency Masking Strategy).

Step 1: Participants **“Start”** the application on their smartphones, establishing a unique session with the local server.

Step 2: The user places their hand in the Palm Monster Generator Box. The system scans the palm gesture and generates a unique monster.

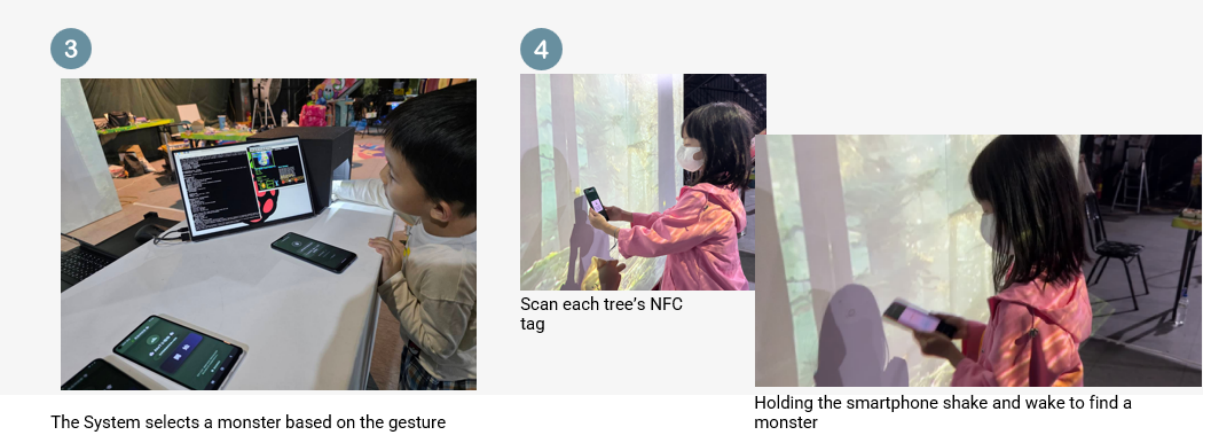
Figure 3
Initiation and Asynchronous Generation



Step 3: The generated monster is virtually “hidden” behind a specific physical tree trunk based on the gesture ID.

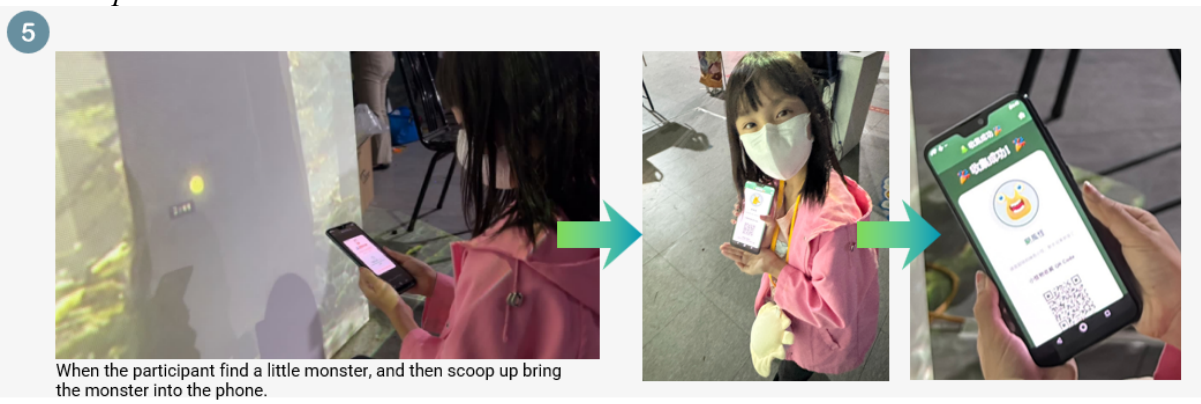
Step 4: Participants near the projection area (forest scene) and use their smartphones to scan NFC tags on trees. They utilize a “Shake-Wake” motion to find their monster.

Figure 4
Virtually Hidden and Locational Synchronization



Step 5: Once found, the monster appears on the projection. Users perform a "scoop up" motion with their phone to transfer the monster from the wall to their device.

Figure 5
Final Capture and Data Persistence



This five-step sequence represents the complete user experience loop, extending from physical input to final digital asset capture. The core engineering and design achievement of this flow is the successful implementation of the Latency Masking Strategy. By strategically embedding the high-latency generation time (Steps 1 & 2) within the physical movement and search actions (Steps 3 & 4), the system successfully mitigates the perceived effect of computational delays. The entire process validates the orchestration of heterogeneous components (computer vision, MQTT communication, NFC sensing) into a continuous and cohesive physical-digital experience, effectively resolving the interaction discontinuity typically found in edge-based generative AI applications.

Conclusions

Results and Core Design Contributions

The AIoT Anthropomorphic Little Monster Interactive System was successfully deployed as an "in-the-wild" exhibit at the HsinChu Science Park during the 2025 Halloween event. The deployment served as a critical validation of the system's stability and the effectiveness of the interaction model. We also successful deployment of this system provided empirical validation for its design and technical architecture. The system demonstrated robust stability under public

usage, successfully processing over 320 interactions from more than 100 children. This high engagement confirmed the viability of the AIoT Framework and its capacity to maintain asynchronous communication between heterogeneous components (AI, IoT, Mobile). The synthesis of Kawaii Theory and Anthropomorphism successfully transforms potential fear of the unknown into controllability and cuteness. This design fosters curiosity and motivation for growth through the creation of a "Safe Sense of Adventure." Furthermore, the system addresses a critical engineering challenge by integrating a complex ComfyUI-based generative pipeline with a Latency Masking Strategy. The physical "Shake-to-Wake" ritual and exploration sequence are strategically utilized to conceal the necessary AI generation time, effectively resolving the issue of high computational latency in real-time edge AI applications.

Future Works

We will focus on deepening the system's interactive and educational capabilities by developing three primary extensions. First, the platform's emotional feedback loop will be closed through the design of an AI emotion recognition model. This model will enable the anthropomorphic little monster to react to children's real-time emotional states, such as smiling, surprise, and fear, directly using these states as inputs into the monster's behavior. Second, we plan to enhance multi-player interaction by exploring the integration of diverse sensory stimuli, including sound, images, haptic feedback via a Tangible mobile phone grip, and NFC sensing. This expansion will be supported by an online extension platform (AIoT Cross-Media System), a specialized APP/Web bridge utilizing the combined potential of AI and IoT technology to form a cohesive cross-media interactive environment. Finally, the system's utility will be broadened through educational applications, integrating the technology with STEM curricula, emotional values, and creativity. This will involve collaboration with actual educational institutions to conduct rigorous on-site teaching and data analysis to evaluate learning outcomes.

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

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AI-Based Data Quality Control for Cultural Mapping Systems: A Case Study From Thailand

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Abstract

The integrity of cultural data is fundamental to the preservation of local heritage, the formulation of evidence-based policies, and the advancement of cultural tourism. In Thailand, where cultural diversity is both rich and deeply embedded in community life, accurate and contextually relevant cultural information is indispensable for fostering local identity and driving grassroots economic development. Nevertheless, the existing Cultural Mapping System in Thailand continues to encounter persistent issues, including data inconsistency, duplication, incomplete metadata, and limited contextual alignment, all of which undermine its practical and policy-oriented applications. This study introduces an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled framework for data quality control within the national Cultural Mapping platform. The proposed system leverages advanced AI techniques, including image classification, natural language processing, and geospatial validation to systematically detect anomalies, assess content relevance, and generate automated recommendations for data refinement. A pilot implementation using approximately 6,000 cultural records demonstrated that the system achieved over 85% accuracy in identifying irrelevant or duplicate entries, thereby significantly alleviating the burden of manual data verification. Moreover, the system supports the temporal and value chain-based visualization of cultural data, facilitating both operational decision-making and long-term strategic planning. The findings underscore the potential of AI technologies to enhance the quality, usability, and trustworthiness of national cultural datasets, contributing to the broader goal of intelligent, data-driven cultural governance in Thailand.

Keywords: cultural map, data quality, artificial intelligence

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Introduction

The integrity and reliability of cultural data play a crucial role in heritage preservation, cultural policy formulation, and the development of creative economies at both national and local levels. As global experience shows, artificial intelligence (AI) and related digital technologies are increasingly mobilized to support cultural heritage preservation, documentation, and management. (Al-Khazraji & Qassim, 2025; Colace et al., 2025; Niu et al., 2025).

In Thailand, cultural diversity is deeply embedded in community life, shaping social identity, traditions, craftsmanship, belief systems, and intangible practices that define local heritage. As part of a national effort to document and manage this diversity, *Cultural Map Thailand (CMT)* was established as a comprehensive cultural information system designed to consolidate datasets from multiple community-based and academic research initiatives. CMT now incorporates over 6,000 cultural records collected from universities, cultural agencies, and field research teams across the country, making it one of the nation's most extensive repositories of cultural information.

Despite its scale and national importance, the platform continues to face persistent data-quality challenges that compromise its analytical and policy utility. Typical problems include inconsistencies in metadata, incomplete or inaccurate geolocation points, duplication of cultural entries, variation in terminology, and low-context or irrelevant images. These issues stem from the heterogeneous nature of cultural data, the diversity of field collection methods, and the limitations of manual verification processes. As a result, cultural datasets often lack the level of precision and contextual specificity required to support decision-making, tourism development, heritage preservation strategies, and long-term cultural planning.

In recent years, AI has demonstrated significant potential in enhancing the quality and consistency of large, heterogeneous datasets across multiple domains — including cultural heritage. Techniques such as natural language processing, computer vision, geospatial analysis, and anomaly detection offer new opportunities to automate data validation, identify irregularities, and support the refinement of cultural information. The growing body of literature confirms that AI-driven systems can transform digital heritage platforms into dynamic, reliable, and scalable knowledge infrastructures. (Neudecker, 2022; Westenberger & Farmaki, 2025).

Applying these techniques to cultural data governance is thus an emerging but promising research direction — especially in countries like Thailand, where cultural data collection is geographically dispersed and contextually diverse. This study introduces an AI-based data quality control framework designed to enhance the completeness, accuracy, and contextual relevance of cultural records within Cultural Map Thailand. The framework integrates rule-based validation with advanced AI modules to automatically detect duplicate entries, evaluate image relevance, verify spatial accuracy, and identify metadata gaps. A pilot implementation involving more than 6,000 cultural records demonstrates the effectiveness of the system in reducing errors, improving dataset readiness, and significantly decreasing the manual burden on researchers and cultural officers.

By transforming CMT from a static repository into an intelligent, semi-automated knowledge infrastructure, the proposed framework supports Thailand's broader goals of developing evidence-based cultural governance and promoting data-driven cultural innovation. This research therefore contributes to the growing field of AI-assisted cultural informatics and offers

practical insights for countries seeking to modernize their cultural data ecosystems through emerging technologies.

Literature Review

Cultural Information Systems and Digital Heritage Management

Cultural information systems have become essential tools for preserving, representing, and disseminating cultural heritage in both tangible and intangible forms. Prior studies emphasize that digital cultural platforms must balance accuracy, contextual richness, and accessibility to support heritage conservation and cultural tourism development. Systems such as Europeana, the Smithsonian digital archives, and Japan's cultural property databases demonstrate the growing global interest in structured cultural datasets. However, research also highlights persistent challenges related to heterogeneity of field data, inconsistent metadata standards, and limited mechanisms for data governance. In Thailand, initiatives like Cultural Map Thailand (CMT) have significantly advanced digital cultural documentation, yet they continue to face obstacles in maintaining data quality due to the diversity of contributors and varied research methodologies used across regions (Nappi et al., 2024; Zhang, 2022).

Data Quality Issues in Large-Scale Cultural Datasets

Data quality is a central concern in cultural mapping, especially when datasets are aggregated from multiple institutions, field researchers, and community groups. Common issues identified in prior research include incomplete metadata, duplication of entries, misaligned geospatial coordinates, semantic inconsistencies in cultural terminology, and the presence of irrelevant or low-quality images. These problems reduce the analytical value of cultural datasets and weaken the ability of policymakers to rely on such information. Scholars increasingly argue that cultural data require more rigorous quality control compared to conventional datasets because cultural meaning is highly contextual and community-specific. Therefore, cultural mapping initiatives must implement systematic approaches to validate data, ensure consistency, and maintain contextual relevance (Alkemade et al., 2023).

Artificial Intelligence for Data Quality Control

Artificial intelligence has emerged as a transformative approach for improving data quality in large and complex datasets. Techniques such as image classification, natural language processing (NLP), anomaly detection, and geospatial validation have been widely applied in fields like healthcare, smart cities, and environmental monitoring. AI-driven systems can identify patterns, detect inconsistencies, and flag potential errors with high accuracy and minimal manual intervention. In the context of cultural data, researchers have explored using machine learning to classify heritage images, extract cultural semantics, and validate spatial information. However, the application of AI specifically for data quality control in cultural mapping platforms remains limited, creating an important research gap that this study seeks to address (Nappi et al., 2024).

Cultural Governance and the Role of Intelligent Information Systems

Effective cultural governance increasingly relies on accurate, reliable, and analysis-ready data. Governments and cultural agencies worldwide are adopting digital platforms to support decision-making, heritage management, and cultural tourism development. Literature in

cultural governance emphasizes the importance of transparency, contextual integrity, and participatory data management. AI-enhanced cultural information systems can support these goals by ensuring dataset reliability and enabling advanced forms of analysis such as temporal mapping, value chain visualization, and predictive modeling. In Thailand, the shift toward data-driven cultural governance aligns with national strategies on creative economy development and the digitization of cultural assets. Implementing AI-based validation mechanisms within Cultural Map Thailand therefore represents a significant step toward modernizing the country's cultural knowledge infrastructure (Zhang, 2022).

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design that integrates system engineering, artificial intelligence (AI) techniques, and cultural informatics to develop and evaluate an AI-based data quality control framework for Cultural Map Thailand (CMT). The methodology consists of four main components: (1) system analysis of existing data quality issues, (2) development of a two-layer validation framework, (3) implementation of AI modules for automated data inspection, and (4) pilot evaluation using real cultural datasets.

System Analysis and Data Quality Assessment

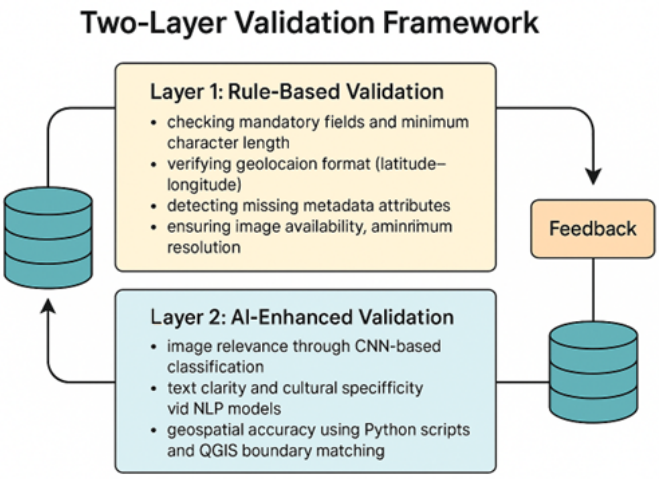
The initial stage involved a comprehensive assessment of existing cultural data within the CMT platform. A total of 6,000 cultural records sourced from 117 research projects across multiple regions of Thailand were analyzed. Data quality issues were categorized into five dimensions consistent with established data quality frameworks: accuracy, completeness, consistency, redundancy, and contextual relevance.

The assessment also included reviewing metadata structures, image repositories, GPS coordinates, and textual descriptions. The analysis revealed recurring problems such as duplicate entries, inaccurate geolocation points, incomplete or overly general descriptions, and low-context images. This evaluation provided the empirical foundation for designing automated mechanisms to address these issues.

Development of the Two-Layer Validation Framework

Based on the identified needs, the study designed a two-layer validation framework to ensure continuous and semi-automated data quality control:

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of the Two-Layer Validation Framework



The two-layer validation framework consists of a rule-based layer and an AI-enhanced layer that work together to ensure continuous and semi-automated data quality control. The first layer, Rule-Based Validation, performs immediate screening at the moment data are submitted to the system. Validation rules were established based on national metadata standards, administrative boundary definitions, and expert recommendations from cultural researchers. This layer checks whether mandatory fields are completed, verifies minimum character length, validates the format of geolocation data, detects missing metadata attributes, identifies duplicate coordinates, and ensures that each entry includes an image of acceptable resolution. Implemented using PHP, the rule-based layer provides instant feedback to contributors before the data enter the main repository, reducing errors at the earliest stage of submission.

The second layer, AI-Enhanced Validation, conducts a deeper semantic-level assessment using machine learning techniques. This layer evaluates the contextual relevance of images through CNN-based classification, examines the clarity and cultural specificity of textual descriptions using NLP models, and checks geospatial accuracy through Python-based scripts and QGIS boundary matching. Additionally, anomaly detection methods are applied to identify unusual patterns or inconsistencies that may indicate problematic entries. Operating in batch mode, the AI-enhanced layer generates analytical insights and sends automated recommendations back to CMT administrators and data contributors, forming a continuous feedback loop that strengthens overall data reliability.

Implementation of AI Modules

Four AI techniques were integrated into the framework.

Image Classification

A ResNet50 model pre-trained on ImageNet was fine-tuned using Thai cultural images. The model evaluates each uploaded photo for contextual relevance, detecting low-quality or irrelevant images. It is deployed via FastAPI, and results are visualized on a web dashboard.

Natural Language Processing (NLP)

NLP models use keyword extraction, sentence embeddings, and semantic similarity measures to evaluate the clarity and specificity of cultural descriptions. The system identifies vague or incomplete text and flags entries requiring revision.

Geospatial Validation

Python-based spatial scripts cross-reference coordinates with administrative boundary datasets using QGIS automation. Points falling outside valid regions, such as marine zones or incorrect provinces, are automatically detected.

Anomaly Detection

Both statistical models and machine learning-based anomaly detection are used to identify outliers in metadata patterns. This method helps detect unusual cultural attributes, duplicated GPS points, and inconsistent value chains.

Pilot Implementation and Evaluation

A pilot study was conducted using the full set of 6,000 cultural records. The framework was integrated with the existing Research Information System (RIS) and CMT dashboard to support iterative validation. The evaluation measured performance in terms of: detection accuracy for duplicate/irrelevant data, reduction in errors after AI processing, proportion of records classified as "analysis-ready," reduction in manual workload for cultural officers.

The system achieved 85% accuracy in detecting duplicate or irrelevant entries, reduced data errors by 22%, and doubled the number of usable records for analysis. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed framework in enhancing data reliability and improving cultural data governance.

Results

The proposed AI-based data quality control framework was evaluated using a pilot implementation consisting of 6,000 cultural records collected from the *national Cultural Map Thailand (CMT)* platform. The evaluation focused on four key performance indicators: (1) accuracy of AI-based detection, (2) reduction in data errors, (3) improvement in dataset readiness for analysis, and (4) reduction in manual workload. The findings demonstrate that the framework substantially enhances the reliability and usability of cultural datasets.

Accuracy of AI-Based Detection

To evaluate the effectiveness of the AI-enhanced validation layer, four machine learning components—image classification, natural language processing, geospatial validation, and anomaly detection—were tested using a manually verified ground-truth subset of 1,200 cultural records. The evaluation focused on measuring the system's ability to detect duplicate entries, identify irrelevant or low-quality content, and flag inconsistencies across different data modalities. The results demonstrated strong performance across all components, confirming the framework's capability to detect both structural and semantic data-quality issues. Table 1 summarizes the performance metrics obtained from the evaluation.

Table 1
Performance of AI-Based Validation Components

AI Component	Performance Metric(s)	Result	Interpretation
Overall Framework Detection	Accuracy	85%	The system correctly identified duplicate or irrelevant image–text pairs across the dataset.
Image Classification (CNN)	Precision / Recall	0.88 / 0.82	High reliability in detecting culturally irrelevant or low-context images.
Natural Language Processing (NLP)	Correct Identification Rate	78%	Successfully flagged incomplete or unclear cultural descriptions.
Geospatial Validation	Detection Accuracy	94%	Accurately detected invalid or out-of-boundary geolocation points.

The results demonstrate that the AI-enhanced validation layer performs effectively across all four machine learning components, supporting both surface-level and semantic-level detection of data-quality issues.

Reduction in Data Errors

To assess the impact of the complete validation pipeline, the study compared dataset quality before and after applying the integrated rule-based and AI-based validation processes. The evaluation focused on key indicators commonly used in cultural data governance, including metadata completeness, duplication, and geospatial accuracy. The results demonstrate a substantial reduction in errors and improvements in the structural integrity of the dataset. Table 2 presents the comparative performance across major data-quality dimensions.

Table 2
Data Quality Improvements After Applying the Full Validation Pipeline

Data Quality Dimension	Baseline Value	Post-Validation Value	Improvement	Description
Overall Data Errors	–	–	22% reduction	Errors corrected include metadata completeness, duplication removal, and spatial adjustments.
Missing Mandatory Fields	18.2%	7.9%	↓ 10.3 percentage points	Significant improvement in metadata completeness.
Geolocation Inconsistencies	–	–	31% reduction	Automated spatial validation corrected out-of-boundary and inaccurate coordinates.

The results clearly indicate that the full validation pipeline substantially enhances the reliability and integrity of cultural datasets. The reduction in missing metadata and spatial inaccuracies, combined with the overall 22% decrease in data errors, demonstrates the effectiveness of combining rule-based checks with AI-driven semantic validation. These improvements also

ensure greater readiness of cultural records for downstream analytical processes, including visualization, policy analysis, and cultural value-chain mapping.

Increase in Analysis-Ready Records

One of the key goals of the framework is to support cultural analytics, policy planning, and visualization modules such as temporal timelines, value-chain mapping, and SROI analysis. After implementing the AI validation process:

- The number of "analysis-ready" records increased by more than twofold.
- Records meeting the criteria for downstream analysis (complete metadata, valid coordinates, relevant images, and clear descriptions) rose from 2,150 to 4,485 entries.

This improvement indicates that the framework not only cleans data but also enhances the functional usability of the entire dataset.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the substantial potential of artificial intelligence to strengthen data governance within large-scale cultural information systems. The integration of rule-based validation with AI-driven analysis demonstrates that cultural datasets—characterized by high heterogeneity, contextual sensitivity, and diverse contributors—require a hybrid validation approach to ensure reliability and usability. The performance indicators obtained from the pilot evaluation underscore the effectiveness of this dual-layer system, which aligns with emerging research trends advocating for automated quality control in digital heritage platforms.

First, the strong accuracy levels achieved by the AI modules indicate that machine learning can effectively interpret cultural data across multiple modalities, including images, text, and geospatial features. This capability is particularly valuable for systems like Cultural Map Thailand (CMT), where inconsistencies often arise from variations in local data collection practices and the subjective nature of cultural interpretation. By reducing human error and increasing detection sensitivity, the AI-enhanced validation process allows the platform to maintain higher standards of contextual relevance and metadata completeness.

Second, the reduction in data errors and the significant increase in analysis-ready records point to the scalability of the framework. Cultural data ecosystems typically involve continuous data inflow from universities, cultural agencies, and community groups. Manual verification alone cannot keep pace with this volume, especially when entries contain nuanced cultural descriptions or require cross-checking with geographical boundaries. The adoption of AI not only accelerates the validation process but also ensures that the resulting dataset is structurally consistent and semantically enriched. This improvement directly benefits downstream analytical modules—such as temporal visualizations, value-chain mapping, and SROI analysis—by providing a more stable and accurate data foundation.

Third, the decrease in manual workload reported by cultural officers suggests that AI can play an important role in cultural governance by reallocating human resources toward tasks requiring cultural interpretation and community engagement, rather than basic data cleaning. This shift is particularly significant in the Thai context, where cultural data collection is geographically dispersed and community-driven. By automating routine validation tasks, the framework allows officers to focus on qualitative refinements, stakeholder engagement, and preservation planning—areas where human expertise remains indispensable.

However, the findings also highlight considerations for long-term implementation. AI performance is dependent on the quality and representativeness of its training data. As cultural expressions evolve and new forms of heritage emerge, continuous model updates and retraining will be required. Additionally, cultural data often contain context-specific nuances that may not be fully captured by machine learning models without human oversight. Therefore, a human–AI collaborative model remains essential. Ethical considerations—such as cultural ownership, PDPA compliance, and community consent—must also guide future system development.

Overall, this study demonstrates that integrating AI into cultural datasets can significantly elevate the precision, consistency, and governance capacity of national platforms like CMT. The framework provides a pathway toward intelligent cultural data infrastructures that support policy development, educational programming, and community-based innovation. Future work should explore real-time monitoring, cross-platform interoperability, and predictive modelling to advance Thailand's cultural informatics ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study developed and evaluated an AI-based data quality control framework designed to improve the accuracy, completeness, and contextual relevance of cultural datasets within Cultural Map Thailand (CMT). By integrating rule-based validation with machine learning techniques—including image classification, natural language processing, geospatial validation, and anomaly detection—the framework effectively addressed persistent data quality issues that have long limited the platform's analytical and policy utility. The results from a pilot implementation involving 6,000 cultural records demonstrate that the system significantly enhances dataset reliability, reduces structural and semantic errors, and increases the number of analysis-ready records essential for cultural analytics and planning.

The findings highlight the critical role of artificial intelligence in strengthening cultural data governance, particularly for platforms that aggregate heterogeneous inputs from multiple institutions and field researchers. The proposed framework not only reduces the burden of manual data verification but also establishes a scalable mechanism for maintaining ongoing data quality as new records are continuously submitted. The improvements observed in detection accuracy, error reduction, and operational efficiency illustrate the feasibility of combining automated processes with expert oversight to support high-quality cultural information systems.

Beyond technical improvements, this research contributes to broader national efforts to modernize cultural data infrastructure and promote evidence-based cultural policy development. By enhancing the trustworthiness and usability of cultural datasets, the framework supports applications such as value-chain analysis, temporal mapping, cultural tourism planning, and community-based innovation.

Future work should focus on expanding the system's real-time capabilities, refining AI models using larger and more diverse cultural datasets, and improving interoperability with other national data systems. Advancing these areas will further strengthen Thailand's cultural informatics ecosystem and accelerate the transition toward intelligent, data-driven cultural governance.

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"Comic Belief": A Compilation of Definitive Conceptual, Aesthetic, and Narrative Elements of Contemporary (Post-2010) Indian Comic Books and Graphic Novels

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Abstract

Comic books and graphic novels are a distinctive amalgamation of artwork and literature. We live in a visually driven digital age, which has benefited various media channels. Comic books and graphic novels, like Films, TV, and Newspapers are available on handheld gadgets. According to trade figures, the comic book industry worldwide is struggling despite the convenience of digital distribution. Its appeal is niche, and this industry is not a money-spinner like the Film Industry. The Indian comic book industry has managed to prosper in one of the toughest commercial environments in the world. In India, the distribution channels for comic books are nonexistent, and the readership is minuscule. For years, they have told stories influenced by Western comic books because they were bound by the harshness of the market. This situation has now changed for the better. Numerous comic cons (pop culture conventions) have been successful in India. The industry has embraced elements that are rooted deep in its country's culture. Stories have been spun around sadhus, goddesses, mystics, warriors, ghosts, pop culture icons, unusual creatures, and even social issues. This research studies this gap: contemporary comic books and graphic-novels, which are an indicator of this metamorphosis. This inquiry (through qualitative methodology: comprehensive textual analysis) attempts to provide a definitive compilation of distinctive conceptual, visual, and storytelling elements that make the Indian comic book industry intriguing and characterful. 107 post-2010 contemporary comic books/graphic novels by Twenty-Eight publishers were a part of this voluminous study. Patterns, range, and uniqueness emerged amongst the chosen material.

Keywords: Indian comic books, graphic novels, narrative analysis, aesthetic analysis, contemporary Indian comics

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Introduction

"If Shakespeare and Michelangelo were alive today, and decided to collaborate on comics, Shakespeare would write the script, and Michelangelo would draw it. How could anybody say that this wouldn't be as worthwhile an art-form as anything on earth?" (Stan Lee, Stan Lee: Conversations).

"Comic books epitomize the accessibility, disposability, and appeal to instant gratification that lie at the core of modern consumer culture" (Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation).

"Specific, closed cultures like that surrounding comic books, have allowed voices to be heard that might not have been audible in a world in which all cultural texts speak the same common language" (Matthew Pustz, Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers).

It is about the comic book world in general and Indian comic books/graphic novels in particular. Indian comic books have come a long way from *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Chacha Chaudhary*, and other children-centric comic books of that time.

The famous *Amar Chitra Katha* series remains ubiquitous to this day, but its style and approach, similar to America's *Classics Illustrated comic books*, have changed little in nearly 50 years. It is the modern Indian graphic novel and comic books that are radically repositioning the comic book medium and bringing it into the 21st century. Significant general literary giants, such as Hachette, HarperCollins, and Penguin, have published them, as have smaller picture-book companies like Tara Books and the political press Navayana, as well as comics-only specialists like Blaft, Phantomville, and Manta Ray.

If there is one specifically Indian genre that persists, it must be the endless retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics. The idea of adapting these deep-rooted classics, created by the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, has been copied by more recent publishers such as Campfire, Vimanika, and Virgin/Liquid/Graphic India. They are modernizing them with technically impressive computer-generated illustrations that imitate the Hollywood blockbuster look of slick Western comic-book output from Marvel and DC, appealing to their fan base (Gravett, 2015).

The Indian comic book/graphic novel Industry has embraced elements that are rooted deep in its culture. Stories have been spun around sadhus, goddesses, mystics, warriors, ghosts, pop culture icons, unusual creatures, and even social issues. A recent example is *Priya's Shakti*. Created by Ram Devineni in collaboration with a couple of other artists, the comic depicts the tale of Priya, a rape victim shunned by society, and her fight against gender crimes in the country.

Important indicators of cultural change are the new multimedia fan conventions, such as Comic Con India in Delhi, which began in 2011, and Comic Con Mumbai, which started in 2012. Although these are dominated by the big American and Japanese pop culture franchises, they can also encourage local publishing and independent creativity, attracting new audiences to other kinds of comics. If the support from Comic Con this year continues, the future of Comics in India is going to be sustainable and brighter (Chakraborty, 2017).

A rich body of work is emerging from India. Many Indian graphic novelists are often more original than their Western contemporaries, and the stories they tell are more relevant to us.

Many graduates, fresh out of universities and design schools, are taking to this form in huge numbers. They are developing a sophisticated language to portray their interior worlds and are discussing their most deeply felt thoughts. Usually, these are original voices untainted by the forces of mainstream media (Ghosh, 2016).

Although a significant amount of research has been conducted on Western comic books, Indian comic books have not been extensively researched in terms of their core stories, storytelling methods, and economics. Apart from a few research works on the portrayal of women or case studies on the rise of *Amar Chitra Katha*, there has been hardly any research examining the Indian comic book industry in terms of its determinative elements. Before examining the finer details of any topic, it is necessary to have an expansive view of its formative components at that moment in time.

This research explores contemporary comic books and graphic novels, which serve as an indicator of revitalization. The Indian comic book/graphic novel Industry's metamorphosis has been backed by the narrative, aesthetic, and distinctive qualities of these comic books and graphic novels. This inquiry aims to provide a definitive compilation of the distinctive conceptual, visual, and storytelling elements that make the Indian Comic book Industry what it is today.

One hundred and seven contemporary comic books/graphic novels by twenty-eight publishers are a part of this study. The purpose is to identify and document patterns, range, and uniqueness amongst the chosen material. The research also aims to identify other dimensions for further investigation into Indian comic books.

Literature Review

This literature-review examines critical discussions around the creation of Indian superheroes, the evolving portrayal of women, the use of comics for social commentary, the rise of graphic novels, and the industry's business and digital challenges.

History

The earliest example of comic strips in India is the *Avadh/Oudh Punch*, a late 19th-century satirical magazine inspired by the *British magazine Punch*. As the first newspaper to feature recognizable comic strips or cartoons, *Oudh* inspired many authors and artists through its weekly publication of poetry, essays, and comics from 1877 to 1936 (Hasan, 2007).

Comic books were first produced in the 1960s with the intention of educating the children of India about mythological and historical figures. *Chandamama* and *Tinkle* are two of such comics that made learning fun (Siddiqui & Naz, 2015).

After 1967, comic books in India gained appreciation as they began adapting Indian history and legends (Gravett, 2015). Many of the comics use Indian mythological elements, with a fresh outlook added to them, which captivates the audience. Some, however, use myths as a background to their modern superhero stories, much like their American counterparts, Marvel and DC (Upendran, 2015).

In 1964, Indrajal Comics introduced *Bahadur*, an original Indian comic character. When Indrajal's last issue was published in 1990, the rights to its most popular character, "*The Phantom*", were taken by Diamond Comics.

Another important publication was *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK), which began publication in 1967. Its popularity was such that national leaders occasionally endorsed it. In an insightful analysis of India's comics culture, Aruna Rao, in *From Self Knowledge to Super Heroes: The Story of Indian Comics*, describes the shift from the first Western comics in the 1970s, to the nationalist comics of the 1980s, and the regional, often superhero-focused comics of the 1990s. Similarly, Karline McLain, in her 2010s work on *India's Immortal Comic Books*, focuses on the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, analysing its roots, artistic processes, and cultural contexts in great depth (Stroll, n.d.).

In 1986, *Raj Comics* launched a range of superheroes modelled on Western superhero tropes. It created heroes with Indian origins, and their adventures mostly took place in different parts of India. Following the introduction of characters like *Nagraj* and *Super Commando Dhruv*, the readership increased significantly.

The five veterans: *Chandamama, Indrajal Comics, Diamond Comics, Amar Chitra Katha, and Raj Comics*, paved the way for modern comics publishers in India. They helped define comics culture and established comics as an exciting form of storytelling and entertainment.

The most popular character according to Indian comics fans was *Chacha Chaudhary* (Diamond Comics). The reason for his mass popularity lies in his portrayal as an ordinary man with the daily hassles of life. His witty approach to problems was what attracted readers the most. The popularity of *Chaudhary* shows that Indian comics retain a unique perspective.

This history is important for creators and scholars because both build upon the comics narratives that have come before. The development of comics in India involves a shift not only from nationalism to regionalism and localization, but also from incorporation into existing children's literature to independence as a medium in its own right.

Making of a Super-Hero/Heroine

After seeing a *Spider-Man* cartoon on part of the Sunday National Television in the early 1980s, the Gupta brothers created *Nagraj*. He was envisioned as "a superhero, who would rid the world of crime, corruption, and the newly formed word in the Indian psyche – Terrorism" (Kumar, 2008).

Both the Indian epics *(Ramayana and Mahabharata)* and Western superhero narratives broadly fit into Campbell's (2001) "hero's story" structure, comprising three stages: Departure, Initiation, and Return.

In the Indian superhero narrative, the extensive array of Gods plays different roles, akin to Marvel's *Avengers* and DC's *Justice League*. Furthermore, the collectivistic approach to problem-solving is reflected in Indian stories, whereas the individualistic approach is reflected in Western stories.

All wit and power were showcased through male characters like *Bahadur, Doga, Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruv, and Chacha Chaudhary*, among others. The few female characters present were supporting characters used for plot development (Siddiqui & Naz, 2015).

While superheroes of the West derived characteristics from mythological Gods, superheroes in India were Gods themselves. Indian comics originated with stories from the epics, featured in *Amar Chitra Katha*, which showcased classic superheroes such as Rama and Arjuna (Gravett, 2015).

Women and the Indian Comic World

There are two arguments about the place of female characters in Indian comic books.

Firstly, the outfits imposed on female characters are completely out of social context. Whether it is the rebellious *Shakti*, the intelligent *Chandika*, or the powerful *Devi*, the outfit is highly skimpy and revealing (Siddiqui & Naz, 2015).

Secondly, women's presence is now central and reflective. They serve as symbols for power, vengeance, rebellion, intellect, bravery, beauty, and many other qualities. The gender once depicted as weak is now depicted as incredibly powerful. They are even assigned negative roles. Nagina, one of the biggest adversaries of *Nagraj*, accentuates this (Siddiqui & Naz, 2015).

Raj Comics *Shakti* is a symbol of sheer women's power. She is an incarnation of Goddess Kali and has emerged to fight the unruly practices of men over women.

The *Menstrupedia* comic books feature four relatable characters and address menstruation education. The book is intended for girls aged nine and above. Thakkar says, “The comics can be stocked in school libraries... It is also teacher-friendly as it provides a more constructive and engaging way of dealing with the topic that no one is comfortable talking about” (Sahariah, 2016).

Interactive Comic Book fights violence against Women in India. *Priya’s Shakti* is a new augmented reality comic book and art exhibition that fights against the abuse of women in India and around the world (Farber-Bell, 2014).

Society and the Indian Comic World

Political comics make their point by not just using images, but also employing subtle prods. These are topical, witty, or even bleak at times (Upendran, 2015).

Indian comics are re-establishing themselves, minus the compromise on the fun and satirical part. In addition, they have their own distinctive elements too – the Indians and Indian-ness, Bollywood, existential angst, politics, and feminism. Experts in digital politics believe that web comics are progressive, liberal, and pro-poor (Verma, 2015).

The medium of comics can be used to raise social awareness. One such example is Grassroots Comics (Walia, 2015).

Thirty-two writers and illustrators collaborated to compile *First Hand*, using the graphic novel format to tell stories of female construction workers, the dangerous mountainous trek from Myanmar to India, religious riots in Gujarat, and more (Sarai, 2008).

There are Comics Designed to Teach Low-income Indian Women Financial Literacy. The comic books feature eight illustrated tales that document financial adversities, mirroring real-life problems (Staff, 2016).

"A visual story allows the reader to be transported to where the story happened and when it happened. This can make it feel very immediate", the anthology's editor Vidyun Sabhaney said (Sarai, 2008).

Graphic-Novels Unleashed

The new slew of graphic novels looks squarely at issues facing contemporary India. Comics have the potential to reach out to a large audience, says Kuriyan (Ghosh, 2016).

Malik Sajad released *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*. Sumit Kumar released *Amar Bari Tomar Bari Naxalbari*. These were followed by Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*.

Orijit Sen was the first to tap into the potential of this new format to raise awareness about issues surrounding the Narmada Dam Project. In 1994, River of Stories was published. However, it took another decade for a second graphic novel to emerge: Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor (2004).

While Abdul Sultan PP and Partha Sengupta's *The Believers* (2006) explored religious tolerance, Naseer Ahmed's *Kashmir Pending* (2007) depicts Kashmir through the eyes of a reformed militant, and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2011) provides a graphic representation of Emergency-era Delhi. And then there was Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) – a wry tale about a lesbian woman dealing with loneliness, death, and a ruthless city (Ghosh, 2016).

"The impact visuals have can be much more visceral and direct as compared to prose; not to forget they also have great recall value" (Ghosh, 2016).

Let's Talk Business

The reasons Comic Con Bangalore has not grown – and why the Indian comic book industry has not grown much either – have nothing to do with the organisers and everything to do with the "comics" fans, and to some extent the Indian comic book creators as well.

If one were to define "comics" going by the preferences of a majority of visitors at Comic Con Bangalore, it would only be called "comics" if a) it has superheroes and b) these superheroes are *Superman, Batman, Flash*, or anyone from the *Avengers* (Shenoy, 2016).

Raj Comics did not have a stall at Comic Con this year, unlike last year, because people went looking for *Superman* comics and found *Nagraj* instead. Most Indian comics continue to draw inspiration from the same old mythology (Shenoy, 2016).

In the 90s, each *Nagraj* comic used to print at least 3 lakh copies; now it is just 70,000 copies, says Sanjay Gupta, owner of Raj Comics. This is due to a decline in comic culture caused by

the rise of satellite TV, the Internet, video games, and other entertainment media (Sharma, 2010).

Gulshan Rai, founder of Diamond Comics, calls the seven years between 1997 and 2003 "the dark age of Indian comics" in which at least 50 Indian comic publishers shut down. "Our sales fell to 3 lakhs from 15 lakh copies", says Rai (Sharma, 2010).

"By the late 90s, our sales dropped by 90 per cent. We had no option but to close our comics division", says Ved Prakash Sharma of Tulsi Pocket Books (Sharma, 2010).

Additionally, these comic book houses are collaborating with Bollywood. Gupta is in talks with filmmaker Anurag Kashyap to make a film on *Doga*. "Bollywood and Indian comic book houses can gain a lot from each other", says Gupta (Sharma, 2010).

Going Digital

Raj Comics has tied up with a mobile service provider. It is also producing motion comics. Diamond Comics is planning a TV channel (Sharma, 2010).

Massive shifts in style, form, and content have marked the resurgence of the Indian comic industry. The industry now seems ready to embrace the digital world. The most significant advantage is the reach. "Let's face it. Not many people read books or newspapers on paper anymore. Moreover, getting content directly to an iPad or a Kindle makes sure that it reaches the end-user immediately", adds Abhijeet (Venkatraman, 2016).

There is no doubt that the number of mobile phone users in India has experienced a rapid surge. However, an independent survey shows that only one in 25 mobile users in India currently surfs the Internet on their mobile phones: a potential problem for comic book houses (The Telegraph – Calcutta, 2017).

Mobile service providers also feel that comics on their value-added services are gaining popularity in India. "After the ACK venture became popular, we launched a *Chhota Comics* series with 35 titles recently", says a Vodafone spokesperson (The Telegraph – Calcutta, 2017).

India's smartphone market is growing exponentially, which makes *Priya Shakti* a potentially important tool in the fight against gender-based violence (Farber-Bell, 2014).

Apart from opening up new markets, electronic media and cellular services also help eliminate distribution problems. "We have a fairly strong fan base outside India. I believe the new media would help strengthen the bond as it cuts across distribution barriers associated with print", says Gupta (The Telegraph – Calcutta, 2017).

There is an increase in the number of new comics being created digitally, with print comics also being made available in digital editions. Comic Con India partnered with Readwhere.com to organise several editions of the free comic book weekend.

Manish Dhingra says the number of downloads increased from approximately 15,000 to 30,000. "Digital comics are easily accessible and cost-effective. There is more variety and more scope for adding animation and sound effects", says Manish (Datta, 2016).

This literature review synthesizes a rich body of work to chart the evolution and critical discourse surrounding Indian comic books, highlighting several seminal contributions.

The literature establishes a dynamic field, shaped by foundational historians, theoretical frameworks from global myth studies, and a new wave of scholar-creators whose work has fundamentally expanded the narrative and aesthetic boundaries of the Indian comic book.

Aim and Objectives

The research's central goal is to create a definitive compilation of the core elements of contemporary Indian comics and graphic-novels.

The four objectives provide a structured framework for the inquiry, focusing on documenting stories, analyzing aesthetics and narrative style, identifying unique traits, and synthesizing a cohesive record.

Aim

To compile definitive conceptual, aesthetic, and narrative elements of contemporary (2010–2017) Indian comic books and graphic novels.

Objectives

1. To document the basic stories employed by Indian comic books and graphic novels
2. To elucidate characteristics like
    a) Aesthetics
    b) Narrative style (framing, writing, and flow)
3. To identify the peculiar traits of these comic books/graphic novels
4. To formulate a summarized record of the Indian graphic novel/comic book content as a media text: based on commonalities, differences, and distinctive features

Figure 1
An Example/Template of the Analysis of a Sample

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Chapter 5.3.A- Beast Legion

- Number of issues: 5
- Synopsis/concept: The Beast Legion is a fantasy adventure manga series that focuses on Prince Xeus's journey to save his fallen homeland from the wrath of the Shadow Nexus. But before he can rise up to the challenge he must first master the power of the Beast Within him to unlock his full potential. Most characters in the series have the ability to transform into Mythical beasts that best reflect their personality.
- Aesthetic qualities: The forms of each character are a delight to the eye. Much thought, passion and imagination have gone into the designing of the same and they only enhanced the potential of each character. The artwork is a little on the shoddy side initially, but the improvement is visible with each passing page.
- Narrative Qualities: A Home-grown fantasy comic. Comprises a prince at the crux of a prophecy, his faithful team, and a villain named 'Dragos' who transforms into a dragon. And his followers who threaten to take over the world darkness. The humour peppered throughout provides a solid breath of fresh air.
- Peculiarity: Beast Legion is one of the first web manga series to come from India. For those looking for less complex and simply entertaining adventure, this will be soothing.

Methodology and Data Collection

The precise criteria: Indian sale/production and publication between 2010 and 2017 ensure the study's focus on genuinely contemporary works. The sample size of One Hundred and Seven works from Twenty-Eight publishers demonstrates the study's comprehensiveness.

This inquiry aims to provide a definitive compilation of the distinctive conceptual, visual, and storytelling elements that have made the Indian comic-book industry what it is today.

Time and money were the most important factors considered in determining the components of the analysis. Studying a large body of data limits the depth of the research. However, it also facilitates expanse and broad understanding. This foundation can be used in further studies to expand on the finer details; in this context, media research subjects such as content analysis, semiotic analysis, narrative analysis, audience analysis, and even case studies.

The research required a broad view and a moderate level of understanding of the sample. The following choices were made to suit the needs of the research:

Methodology: Qualitative

Method: Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is the method communication researchers use to describe and interpret the characteristics of a recorded or visual message. The purpose of textual analysis is to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts (Kreps, 1999).

Sampling Technique

The research shall be conducted using Non-Probability Sampling, under which the Purposive Sampling method was the best to suit the needs of the study.

Sampling Size and Criteria

One hundred seven contemporary comic books/graphic novels by Twenty-Eight publishers are a part of this study. The purpose is to recognize and document patterns, range, and uniqueness amongst the chosen material.

For the Purpose of This Study:

a) The comic book/graphic novel must be sold in India/ produced for Indian audiences.
b) It should have been published between 2010 and 2017 to be considered a genuine part of the contemporary market.
c) The overall cost of buying new comic books must be suitable and within the feasible budget.

Results and Discussion

Genre-Wise Classification of Concepts

A. Normal Human Beings As Protagonists

1) Angry Maushi
2) Kari
3) Antaryatra
4) Vrica
5) Mumbai Mc Guffin
6) Indian War Comics
7) Once upon a time in the North
8) Things Big and Small
9) A Day in the Life
10) Local Monsters
11) Old School
12) Satya Police
13) Widhwa Maa Andhi Behen
14) Shivaay
15) World Comics India
16) Devi Chaudhrani

17) Train of Thoughts

B. Zombie/Virus/Apocalypse

1) Wreck Age
2) Zombie Rising
3) Virulents
4) Shaitan
5) Rabhas Incident
6) Caravan
7) Retrograde

C. Female Protagonists

1) Angry Maushi
2) Kari
3) Devi
4) Good Night Moon
5) Yumi
6) Widhwa Maa Andhi Behen
7) Priyas Shakti
8) Priyas Mirror
9) Legends of Aveon 9
10) Devi Chaudhrani
11) Neelakshi

D. City-Based: The City Plays A Pivotal Part

1) Kari
2) Train of Thoughts
3) Mumbai Mc-Guffin
4) Once upon a time in the North
5) Things Big and Small
6) Taranath Tantrik
7) Munkeeman
8) Bangalore
9) Hyderabad
10) Unicell Man
11) Munkey Thugs
12) World Comics India

E. Procedural- Detectives, Police, Armed Forces, Mystics, Scientists

1) Vrica
2) Virulents
3) Indian War Comics
4) Satya Police
5) Super Soldier Squad
6) Old School
7) Payback
8) Taranath Tantrik
9) Dr. Ajax

F. Horror/ Gore/ Dark

1) Stalker
2) Linger
3) Tamas
4) Equality
5) Damned Book
6) Good Night Moon
7) Empire of Blood

G. Poetry/Literature-Based

1) 40 Sufi Comics
2) Zikr

H. Manga Style Narratives/Aesthetics

1) Beast Legion
2) Super Soldier Squad
3) Batu Gaiden

I. Film-Based Comic Books

1) Sholay Gabbar
2) Shivaay
3) Flying Jatt
4) Zombie Rising
5) Bahubali: Battle of the Bold

J. Robots As Protagonists

1) Robots of Dharma
2) Love me like a Psycho Robot

K. Unusual Creatures As Protagonists

1) Werehouse
2) Mighty Yeti
3) Tall Tales of Vishnu Sharma: Panchatantra
4) Last Baqani
5) Raakshas Rising
6) Munkeeman
7) Uud-Bilaw Manus

L. Mythological Retelling/ History/ Fantasy/ Literature Retelling

1) Godslayer
2) Templar
3) Bahubali: Battle of the Bold
4) Devi
5) Empire of Blood
6) Ramayan 3392 AD
7) Showcase 2
8) Showcase 4
9) Showcase 7
10) Daksh
11) Northern Song

12) Yumi
13) Odayan
14) Priyas Mirror
15) Priyas Shakti
16) Taranath Tantrik
17) Spinland Saga
18) Sadhu
19) Bangalore
20) Hyderabad
21) Robots of Dharma
22) Dashavtar: Matsya
23) Moksha
24) Sixth
25) Kshatriya
26) Devi Chaudhrani
27) Scions of the Cursed King
28) Neelakshi

M. The Superheroes

1) Chakra
2) Mighty Yeti
3) Last Baqani
4) Caster
5) Desolation Runner
6) Aghori
7) Desolation Runner
8) Raakshas Rising
9) Daksh
10) Odayan
11) Parshu
12) Munkeeman
13) Satya Police
14) Widhwa Maa Andhi Behen
15) Devi
16) Nagraj
17) Super Commando Dhruva
18) Flying Jatt
19) Ved
20) Unicell Man
21) Rakshak
22) Shaurya
23) Devi Chaudhrani

N. Comics For Social Welfare

1) World Comics India
2) Antaryatra
3) Priyas Shakti
4) Priyas Mirror

Overall Classification

1) Normal Human beings as protagonists: 17
2) Zombie/virus/apocalypse: 7
3) Female protagonists: 11
4) Location playing a pivotal part: 4
5) Procedural- Detectives, police, armed forces, mystiques, scientists: 9
6) Horror/ gore/ dark: 7
7) Poetry/literature-based: 2
8) Manga style narratives/aesthetics: 3
9) Film-based comic books: 5
10) Robots as central character: 2
11) Unusual creatures as central character: 11
12) Mythological retelling/ history/ fantasy/ literature retelling: 28
13) Superheroes: 13
14) Comics for social welfare: 4

The data reveals a diverse thematic ecosystem. Alongside twenty-eight mythological retellings, such as *Ravanayan*, there are seventeen titles featuring normal human protagonists (e.g., *Indian War Comics*), eleven with female leads (e.g., *Devi Chaudhurani*), and seven horror titles, like *Shaitan*, demonstrating a significant expansion of genres.

This is a quantitative snapshot of the study's findings, categorizing the One Hundred and Seven analyzed texts. It reveals the industry's thematic diversity, showcasing a strong presence of mythological retellings alongside a significant number of titles featuring ordinary human protagonists, female leads, and genres such as horror, sci-fi, and social welfare, moving far beyond traditional superhero narratives.

Continuing, this data further illustrates the hybrid and experimental nature of the contemporary scene. The presence of manga-inspired works, film adaptations, and stories centered on robots and unusual creatures highlights the industry's engagement with global trends and its willingness to explore new narrative territory. This includes manga-inspired narratives like *Beast Legion*, film-based comics like *Bahubali: Battle of the Bold*, and stories with unusual protagonists, such as the shape-shifters in *Werehouse* and the titular hero of *Munkeeman*.

Narrative Qualities

1) Dramatic and theatrical
2) City lingo and slang
3) Hindi and English combined
4) Japanese Manga-style language
5) Self-awareness about being in a book
6) West-inspired storytelling
7) Not necessarily 3-act structures
8) Fluidic panels
9) Minimalistic scripting
10) Boldness in language
11) Well-researched science fiction plot points
12) Creation of new worlds
13) Re-imagination of history

14) Predictions of the feel of apocalyptic scenarios
15) Pop culture references
16) Mature content

The study identifies a mature narrative voice. This includes the fluid, diary-like panels of *Kari*, the bold and profane language of *Holy Hell*, the minimalist scripting of *A Day in the Life*, and the authentic "Hinglish" dialogue found in *Angry Maushi* and *Local Monsters*.

Narrative sophistication is evident in the re-imagining of history in *Empire of Blood*, the creation of new worlds in the *Spinland Saga*, and the self-aware, metafictional humor in *Once Upon a Time in the North*. These traits demonstrate a profound and playful mastery of the medium.

This section completes the narrative profile. It demonstrates how Indian comics are consciously engaging with other traditions, drawing inspiration from Western storytelling while also re-imagining their own history and mythology. The prevalence of self-awareness, pop-culture references, and well-researched sci-fi/fantasy world-building indicates a sophisticated and engaged creative community.

Aesthetic Qualities

1) Dark colours
2) Pastel shades
3) Loud colours
4) Graphic violence
5) Child-friendly aesthetics
6) Mythology and old-world visuals
7) Noir
8) Fantastical worlds
9) Science fiction-related art
10) Comic strip-like art
11) Japanese manga-inspired design
12) Film-inspired art

The visual analysis shows a strategic use of aesthetics: dark, gritty palettes for horror in *Damned*, vibrant colors for satire in *Angry Maushi*, child-friendly aesthetics in *Tall Tales of Vishnu Sharma: Panchatantra*, and mythology re-envisioned with a contemporary digital art style in *Dashavtar: Matsya*.

The visual analysis reveals a parallel diversity in aesthetics. The choice of color palette and style is strategic: dark and pastel shades for moody genres, loud colors for satire, and child-friendly visuals for all-ages titles. There is a conscious effort to move beyond the *Amar Chitra Katha* style, incorporating a wide range of visual inspirations.

The aesthetic hybridity is evident in the manga-inspired design of *Beast Legion*, the noir feel of *Mumbai McGuffin*, the fantastical worlds of *Legends of Aveon 9*, and the comic-strip art of *Old School*. This blend creates a uniquely Indian yet globally conversant visual language.

This section concludes the aesthetic analysis, highlighting the blend of influences that create a unique hybrid visual language. Artists are borrowing from international genres like noir and

manga, as well as from filmic language, while also creating entirely original fantastical and science-fiction worlds, demonstrating significant artistic ambition.

Final Reflections

This study undertakes a comprehensive mapping of the contemporary Indian comic book and graphic novel landscape, achieving its aim through a multifaceted analysis of One Hundred and Seven texts from Twenty-Eight publishers. The findings reveal an industry characterized by remarkable diversity and maturity.

Objective 1: Documenting Stories – Unprecedented Thematic Breadth

The documentation reveals a medium in vigorous expansion. The analysis moves from the foundational mythological and historical retellings (e.g., *Ravanayan, 18 Days*) that re-interpret epics, to hard-hitting social commentary (*Priya's Shakti, World Comics India*), and into genres previously niche in India, such as post-apocalyptic sci-fi (*Wreck Age*), psychological horror (*Tamas*), and noir thrillers (*Mumbai Mc Guffin*). This breadth demonstrates a deliberate move to cater to a sophisticated, multi-generational readership.

Objective 2: Elucidating Characteristics – Depth of Narrative and Aesthetic Language

Aesthetic Depth

The visual analysis uncovers a conscious departure from a homogeneous style. One can observe a strategic use of dark, gritty palettes for horror and noir; vibrant, loud colors for satire; and minimalist, sketchbook aesthetics for literary graphic novels. The influence of Japanese manga (*Beast Legion*), Western comic book realism, and indigenous folk-art inspirations coexist, creating a uniquely hybrid visual vocabulary.

Narrative Sophistication

The narrative structures exhibit significant depth, often breaking conventional molds. There is a prevalent use of fluid panel transitions, non-linear storytelling, and a seamless blend of Hindi and English ("Hinglish") that captures the authentic rhythm of Indian urban life. The writing ranges from the theatrical and dramatic in superhero narratives to the wry, self-aware, and meta-fictional in indie titles, indicating a mature grasp of the medium's possibilities.

Objective 3: Identifying Peculiar Traits – The Defining Signatures

The study identifies core peculiar traits that constitute a "DNA" for the contemporary Indian comic. These include:

- Cultural Syncretism: A deep-seated "Indian-ness"—a spiritual and moral core—permeates narratives, even within futuristic or horror settings.
- The Urban as Protagonist: The City is not merely a setting but an active character, as seen in anthologies such as *Bangalore* and *Hyderabad*, and titles like *Local Monsters*.
- The Relatable Hero: A significant trend champions the normal human protagonist—the soldier, the detective, the ordinary citizen—over the invincible superhuman, fostering greater relatability.

Objective 4: Formulating a Summarized Record – The Indian Graphic Voice

Synthesizing these elements, this research formulates a definitive record of the Indian graphic novel as a media text. It is characterized by its hybrid identity, a dynamic interplay between:

- Traditional Roots and Modern Sensibilities
- Social Consciousness and Genre Entertainment
- Global Influences and Localized Expression

This is not a derivative culture, but a confident and self-aware ecosystem. It is a medium that leverages its unique position to entertain, critique, and educate, tackling issues from gender-based violence to political corruption with increasing boldness.

Core Conclusion

This study concludes that the contemporary Indian comic book and graphic novel industry has successfully forged a distinct and resilient "**Indian Graphic Voice**". From its long history rooted in educational comics, it has evolved into a complex, self-sustaining narrative universe. It stands on the cusp of a transformative era, poised for further growth and cross-media adaptation, representing a vital and exciting field of cultural production.

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

This document uses AI-assistive technology in writing and improving the manuscript in "Results and Discussion" only. This includes the AI-assistant "DeepSeek". This intended, and limited usage is for practical synthesis and compression of extensive original material to fit the word-limit requirements of the manuscript submission guidelines. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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GAMUT: The Spatial and Generational Mapping of Trees and Vegetation of the Solon House

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Abstract

GAMUT identifies and explores the trees and vegetation of the Solon House post-World War II. The Solon House refers to family, architecture, and estate deeply rooted in Mabolo, a village in Cebu City, the Philippines. Maps (historical, DENR cadastral, and subdivision survey plans), legal documents, and old photographs help locate and support the study. The Quantum GIS application is utilized to map the trees and vegetation across generations. Rooted in autoethnography and phenomenology, the researcher's own experiences, together with the lived experience narratives of family members, are collected and thematically coded to extract recurring vegetal metaphors. Trees and vegetation are active participants in memory and meaning-making. For example, a dakit tree planted sometime in the 1940s as a boundary marker kept alive the folklore of ada (engkanto) from the ancestors to descendants' own lived experiences. The paper also explores the Cebuano word gamut, its metaphorical essence, and relationships with words in Filipino and English, informing the significance of vernacular language heritage. Apart from serving as one of four vital articles for the family's second book project, the paper also informs Filipino notions of kinship and place, as well as plant humanities in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: ethnicity, autoethnography, phenomenology, Solon House, plant humanities

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Introduction

Trees and vegetation shape the spaces we inhabit. They hold value and meaning crucial to self- and collective identity, as well as core and cultural memory. Underneath their visible trunk or stem, leaves, flowers, and fruits form a communication superhighway and ancient wisdom that ensure survival and the grace to thrive—gamut. Which plant or tree makes a good companion to another plant or tree—the placement of each root and the time of planting follow a story, a science. In a residential estate, spatial mapping of the greens helps understand levels of relationships not limited to soil nutrition and vegetal growth, but more importantly, their nurturing relationship to human inhabitants' activities, values, and ethos (placemaking).

Needless to say, as I gathered information to map my paternal family tree and collect lived experiences with katingálahan, or the supernatural, in the Solon House, I found a recurring vegetal theme. From there, a curiosity maps through questions like: What trees and vegetation thrive/d across generations of the Solon House? Where are/were they specifically located and grown? How are/were they utilized by the Solon House? What stories and memories do/did they keep?

Gamut: Rooting the Solon House in History

In 1934, before the Second World War, through an arranged marriage by their parents, my paternal grandparents, Tatay Andy and Lola Nena, married at the ages of 21 and 22. They had lived and started their family in what is later referred to as the Solon (Ancestral) House located in Mabolo, a village in Cebu City, Visayas, the Philippines.

The Solon House in this paper refers to *family* (from the 1st to the 4th Generations), *estate* (located in Mabolo), and *architecture* (the changing structure that accommodates four generations since 1934).

The Solon House of the 1st Generation was a stone's throw away from Tatay Andy's parents' house. It is the second house from the main street (the one with the purple dot in Figure 1); the lot next to the main street belonged to his cousin; and the next houses before the river belonged to his two sisters. Their children's first playmates would be first and second cousins. That continued to the 4th Generation. Clearly, a tightly knit family and clan, a Filipino and Southeast Asian notion of kinship and place, deep and tight root connections, the "crucial component of children's sense of self as they learn to locate themselves and others around them in relational social networks" (Bhardwaj & Ray, 2024).

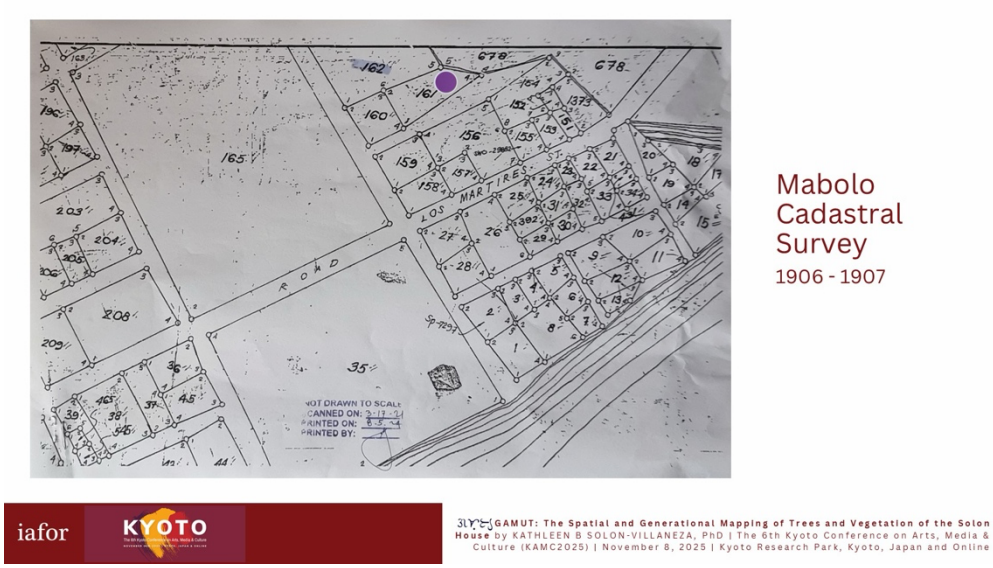
Even in the cemetery at the reclamation area of Mabolo, their eternal resting place, Tatay Andy, together with Lola Nena, their siblings, and siblings-in-law, are neighbors. They are resting next to their cousins and other relatives. So, whenever we visit them during All Souls and All Saints Days, we also reunite with our living relatives, like a celebration. Balota (2022) wrote, "There is a celebration of family in each one of us because celebrations of family honor one's roots, identity, and person." and to which Aguilar (2022) strengthened by giving "clarity to one's identity—that one does not stand alone in a forest of trees. Just like how trees communicate through root connections."

Tatay Andy and Lola Nena are the Solon House 1st Generation or gamut dakù, the primary root according to Wolff (1972). From the same Austronesian language family, the Cebuano

word gamut (*root)* and the Tagalog or Filipino word gamot *(medicine)* are related to trees and vegetation. Interestingly, from the Indo-European language family, the English word gamut (*a complete range*), such as "The four generations comprise the whole gamut of the Solon House in this study."

The three words gamut, gamot, and gamut relate to family roots and vegetation.

Figure 1
Mabolo Cadastral Survey Map 1906–1907



Note/Source. KAMC2025 presentation slide; map source: Department of Environment and Natural Resources Region VII (DENR-7).

The cadastral survey map of 1906–1907 shows the mother lot of the Solon House (with a purple dot). This also means that my ancestors have planted their roots in Mabolo, in Wolff's (1972) additional meaning for gamut as "staying long in a place, be well-founded, established." To date, the family has deepened its roots in the same village and city.

Autoethnography and Phenomenology

I designed this paper using autoethnography and phenomenology. Autoethnography, as defined by Adams et al. (2017), is a research method that uses personal experience (auto) to describe and interpret (graphy) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (ethno). It intertwines autobiography and ethnography. When we write about the self, we often call on memory and hindsight to reflect on past experiences; talk with others about the past; examine texts such as photographs, personal journals, and recordings; and may even consult with relevant news stories, blogs, and other archives related to life events (Adams et al., 2017). Moreover, the inspiring versatility of storytelling aspects in phenomenology, as in Konate and Mainah (2021), is taken into account in this paper to thematically process the lived experiences of family members.

Stories As Heritage

I take to heart what Dr. Erlinda Kintanar-Alburo (2015) wrote that stories are part of intangible heritage, so it is essential to preserve them; they tell us about the worldview, feelings, and attitudes of people that historical accounts do not give. To promote cultural

continuity, I am racing against time to document and record whatever wisdom and information I can from the 2nd Generation, now in their late 70s and mid-80s.

This paper is the second offshoot of the Katingaláhan (or Supernatural) study. I have previously gathered stories and lived experiences relating to katingaláhan from family members, including my own. Aside from the recurring vegetal themes, this paper maps the trees and vegetation of the Solon House, their memories, and meanings.

Mapping and Placemaking

Physical environment is a powerful space. It nurtures identity, both individual and collective, "and in turn is imbued with new meanings as people enact culture in it" (Bhardwaj & Ray, 2024). The elements that create it, including and especially trees and vegetation, become participants in the creation of meaning. Osborne et al. (2022) map the root systems of individual trees in a natural community, while Immitzer and Atzberger (2023) study the success stories and possible ways forward for tree species diversity mapping. Other recent studies explore meaning and human interaction with nature, climate change, and the general Anthropocene from various lenses and disciplines, including science and ecology (Filho, 2023; Rantala & Höckert, 2023), communication (Huhmarniemi & Joy, 2022), and culture (Koistinen et al., 2023).

While the research articles touch on mapping, nature, and placemaking, there is no existing research that focuses on the spatial and generational mapping of trees and vegetation, particularly the family and its environment.

Placemaking

The collective memory of the Solon House accounts for trees and vegetation playing roles in placemaking, including childhood and play, adult drinking sessions, and the site of katingaláhan.

Childhood and Play. From carriers of children during tree-climbing on kaimito (star apple), tambis (water apple), bayabas (guava), atis (sugar apple), and lubi (coconut) to home and hiding place during play like Japanese game, lut-hang, tago-tago (hide and seek), and gubat-gubat (war games), their value and space hold core childhood memories. In addition, they are sources of ammunition from bunga sa lambanog for tut-ho to bato for sungka. They are givers of nourishment and ease: prutas (fruits)—eaten presko (fresh) like butung, kaimito, bayabas, atis, tisa, tambis, chikos; gi-dulce (sweetened, preserved in jars for longer shelf life) like iba; gilamaw (fresh with ice and condensed milk) like kaimito, butung; medicine: mga dahon (leaves) treat ailments—abgaw (for cough and sore throat), bayabas (for wounds), paspas sa dapang. Furthermore, they are used as a whip for punishment, like the branches of the iba (cucumber tree). Additionally, they invited curiosity and helped build character.

Adult Drinking Session. Trees and vegetation are part of tagay (drinking alcohol), which takes place usually under a tree or trees for shade and easy access to pangihi (urination).

Site of Katingaláhan. From the stories of Lola Nena down to the experiences of descendants, references to the supernatural are included in oral tradition, such as agta, engkantada (fairy), white lady, and sigbin, to mention a few. They are also paasohanan (area

for burning dead leaves), especially when family members arrive home from attending a wake or burial, or visiting the cemetery.

Boundary Markers. In olden times, instead of mohon (concrete monuments), trees and vegetation are used as boundary markers—in the Solon House ancestors utilized trees for: (1) outer boundaries— lubi, kaimito, and dakit to mark the of the estate; (2) inner boundaries— tambis, iba, chikos, atis, tisa, bayabas, balingbing as place markers close to the physical house for easy reference (ex. hayhayan dapit sa chikos/ laundry are near the chikos; tua sa may balingbing/there by the balingbing).

But Why Map?

Firstly, no one is doing it. To my knowledge, this is the first research article that attempts to map the trees and vegetation of the family across generations. There have been land survey activities for the Solon House, mapping the boundary of the small estate. Similarly, there have been oral traditions relating to trees and vegetation, but no consolidated documentation of spatially mapping trees and vegetation across generations, with the oral traditions that interact with them. Secondly, the value of continuity is rooted in the preservation of ancestral knowledge. Passing down to descendants the wisdom and lived memories of their ancestors is crucial and again, "a matter of survival" (Kintanar-Alburo, 2015). Thirdly, the strength of owning lived experiences validates personal internal landscapes, meaning-making, and relationships. Fourthly, the worth of sharing, documenting, and archiving experiential encounters encourages communication. Lastly, my home island of Cebu experienced the most horrendous flash floods and landslides driven by Typhoon Tino (Kalmaegi). The death toll to human lives, nature, architecture, and belongings is heart-wrenching. While the world communally feels the impact of climate change, this is to say that the crises of Typhoon Tino is not only sociopolitical but also ecological—so, this paper joins the discussion not only on the notions of kinship and place, but also plant humanities in Southeast Asia—the relationship of the family with nature and environment, and the naming of plants and trees in Cebuano language which promotes vernacular language heritage.

Mapping the Roots of the Solon House

Survey maps from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Region VII (DENR-7), including the Mabolo Cadastral Map of 1906–1907 and Subdivision Survey Plan of 1960, were used to trace the mother lot of the Solon House and the shape of the subdivided lot with technical description (also reflected in the land title).

The technical description of the Solon House was projected using Quantum Geographic Information System (QGIS) with Google historical satellite imagery as background to show not only the vegetal climate, but also the environmental changes throughout the years. The best image of the location is shown in Figure 6.

Guided by 2nd and 3rd generation family members, who collected reimagination and reconstruction of the trees and vegetation, with the aid of AutoCAD, simple two-dimensional sketches map trees and vegetation across four generations in Figures 1 to 4.

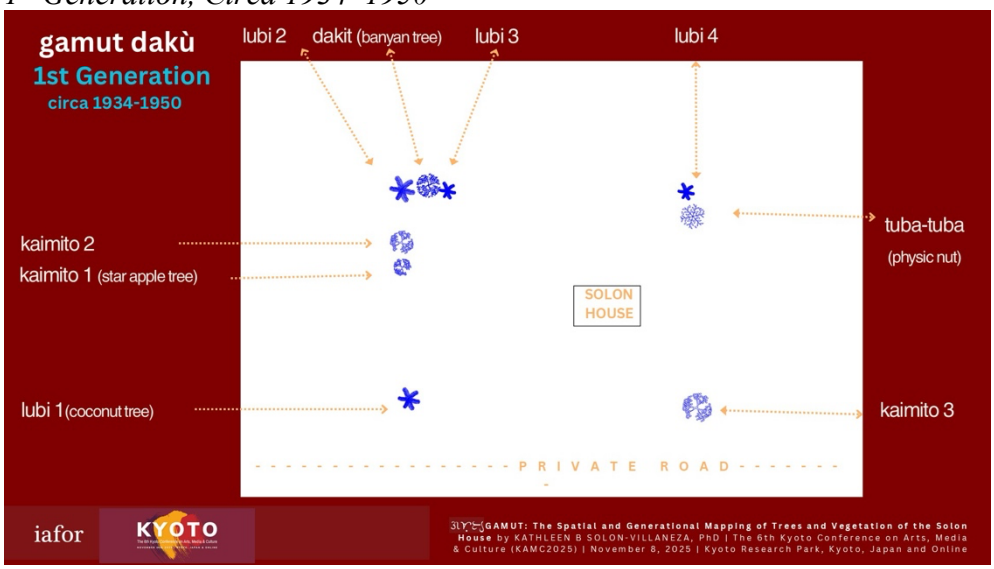
In 2016, a verification survey confirmed that the lubi 1, lubi 2, lubi 3 (coconut trees), and kaimito 3 (star apple tree) of the 1930s are boundary markers that outlasted the private survey mohon (monument) of 1960.

The Spatial and Generational Mapping of Trees and Vegetation

Curiosity maps the family's natural environment. Questions like: What trees and vegetation thrive across generations of the Solon House? Where are/were specifically located and grown? How are they utilized by the Solon House? What stories and memories do they keep?

In Figures 2 to 5, the layout of trees and vegetation, architecture, and placemaking show four generations.

Figure 2
1st Generation, Circa 1934–1950

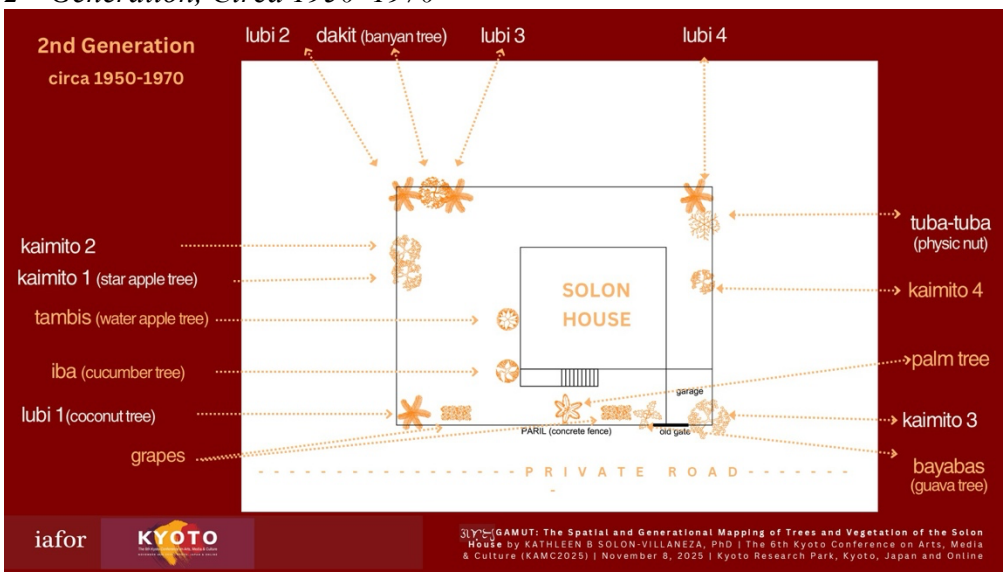


Note/Source. KAMC2025 presentation slide

Figure 2 shows the following young trees surround the Solon House: *clockwise* lubi 1, kaimito 1, kaimito 2, lubi 2, dakit, lubi 3, lubi 4, tuba-tuba, kaimito 3. Briefly, there are 4 lubi (coconut trees), 3 kaimito (star apple trees), 1 dakit (banyan tree), and 1 tuba-tuba (physic nut).

According to Lola Nena, the kaimito trees are dwelling places of agta (mythological tree-dwelling dark giant creatures), the dakit (banyan tree) is the sacred place of the spirits and ada (fairy), and the tuba-tuba (physic nut) is used as medicine.

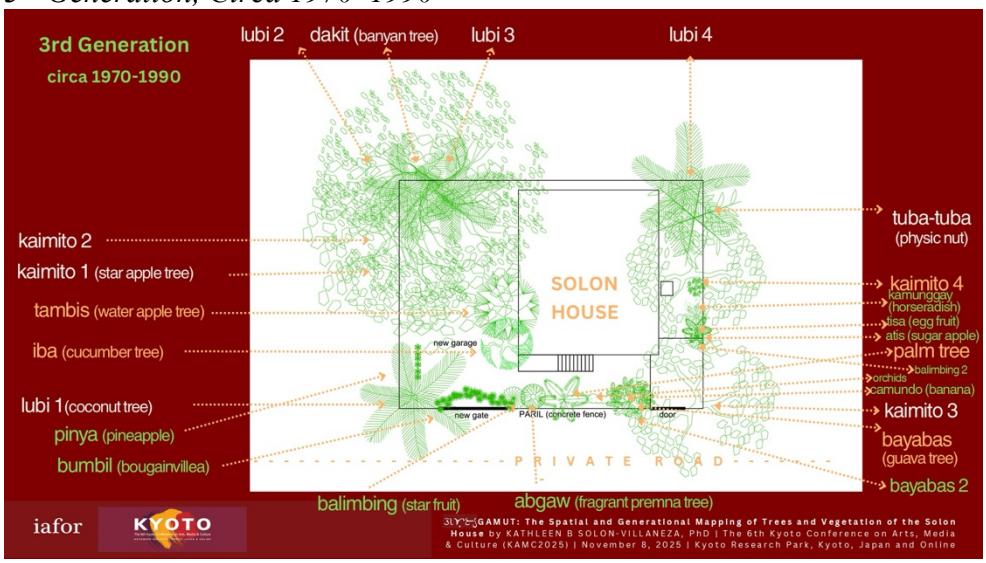
Figure 3
2nd Generation, Circa 1950–1970



Note/Source. KAMC2025 presentation slide

In the 2nd Generation, additional trees and vegetation, tambis and iba—these two trees would later hold childhood places of play, adventure, food, and even punishment. The guava tree is not only a source of tasty fruit, but also medicinal leaves. Grapes, the highlight of the second generation, indicate how cool the environment in the city was back then, nurturing the vine and fruits. Historically, Cebu City in the 1950s was booming with the grapes business, but saw a decline over time due to modernization. Dama de Noche (night-blooming jasmine) would also be a sight of katingaláhan (supernatural), including sigbin (kangaroo-like mythical creature) and encantada (fairy).

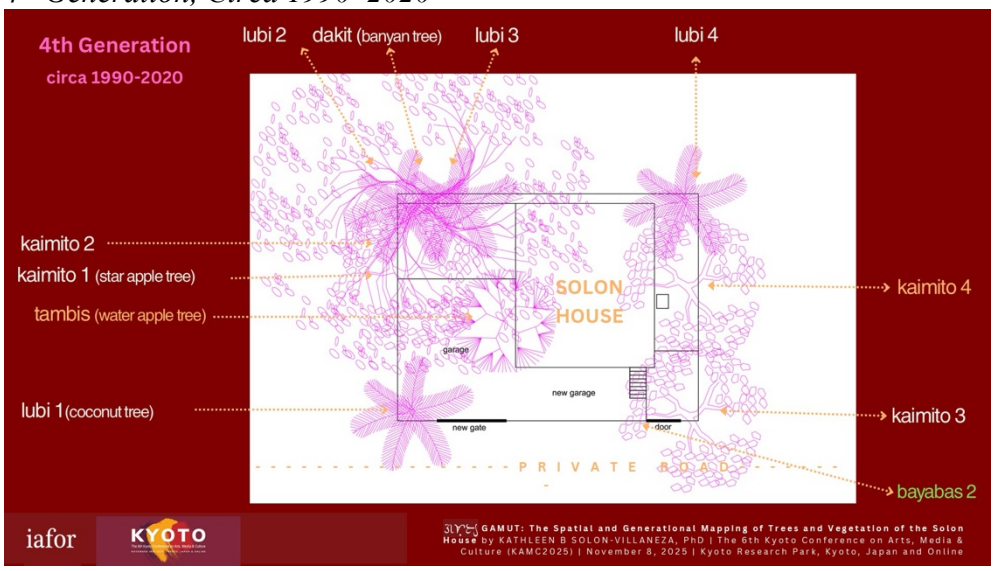
Figure 4
3rd Generation, Circa 1970–1990



Note/Source. KAMC2025 presentation slide

The 3rd generation reaped abundantly what was sown by the previous generations; trees and vegetation planted by my ancestors, my mother, uncle, and aunt.

Figure 5
4th Generation, Circa 1990–2020



Note/Source. KAMC2025 presentation slide

The 4th generation saw change. A wider expanse of architecture, but lesser vegetation. The figure shows the natural environment stripped down to almost like the 1930s in terms of trees and vegetation, with the exception that the trees have grown and aged (yielding fruits).

Figure 6
QGIS With Google Spatial Map

Note/Source. KAMC2025 presentation slide

QGIS with Google Earth's historical satellite data of 2017 clearly maps the vegetal climate of the Solon House in Figure 6.

Spatial mapping of trees and vegetation aids understanding of the recurrence of katingaláhan. Table 1 documents at least nine (9) participants who shared their lived experiences in the Cebuano language, given an English language equivalent, the supernatural entities, and vegetal themes.

Table 1
Lived Experiences With Katingaláhan and Vegetal Themes

Participant	Lived Experiences	English Equivalent	Katingaláhan	Vegetal Themes
N1	"bata na laki… sa una adto sa may tambisan mag barog"	(young boy... long ago he usually stood there by the tambis)	entity – young boy	tambis
N2	"naay nisitsit niya, murag nanlimbawt iyang balhibo, nya ang sitsit naa sa gawas. Murag ang duda niya agta daw to kay naa pa baya tong kaimito"	(there was something that whistled and hissed at him, kind of giving him goosebumps, and it came from outside. Like he was suspicious it's an agta because there was still the kaimito)	entity – audio	kaimito 4
N4	"gipakita ko ug taw gasulob og black jacket sa parkingan sa ila ka Tiyo sa una"	(i was shown a person wearing a black jacket at the parking lot near uncle's before)	entity – person	(garage) tambis
N5	"Tulo akong na experience: sitsit, gibira akong tiil, tuktok ug kawras sa wall."	(i had three experiences: whistle and hissed, pulling of my feet, knock and wall-scratching)	entities – audio, tactile	(bedroom) tambis
N6	"Kita ko mama sa una. Pag naog nako sa ubos, kita kos iya permi sulubon nga daster… padung siya sa hayhayan sa ubos abi nako si Tiya Lucy mao to ako gi-adto nya pag adto nako wamay tao… mao dagandagan ko hehehe…"	(I saw mama before. When I went down the stairs, I saw the daster she usually wore... she was going to the laundry area downstairs I thought it was Tiya Lucy that's why I went there only to find out no one was there... so I ran hehehe...)	ghost – mother	(laundry) palm tree, bayabas, kaimito 3
N7	"ug kato pud natolog ko gibira kos kisami..nya ako gibunlot pagbunlot nako lain kaayo nawong"	(and that one time I slept something pulled my body to the ceiling… I pulled back and when I did I saw a hideous face)	entity – tactile, visual	(bedroom) kaimito 3, kaimito 4, balimbing, atis, kamunggay
N8	"iya gyud gi describe in details ang sanina sa nakita niya nga ni agi sa bintana, nag stripes daw plus uban details nga nakita niya..."	(she really described in details the shirt she saw passing by the window, wearing stripes plus other details that she saw)	entity – visual	(sala) kaimito 1, kaimito 2, lubi, dakit

	"na hibawan nako nga absent to ang tao nga ila gi sugo kay taas kaayo hilanat gikan sa adlaw giputlan niya ang kahoy"	(I learned that that person whom they tasked was absent due to high fever from the day he cut the tree)	entity– tree spirit	dakit
N9	"white lady diha to Makita sa parkingan ni no erny sa iya auto karaan dapit sa tambis ug osahay sa Teri's dapit hagdan pagawas mag barug ug molakaw did to sa tambis pasulod ug mawala inig about sa puno-an sa kaymito did to sulod sa ila no erny ..."	(white lady there you'll see at the parking area of no erny for his old car near the tambis and sometimes at the terrace near the stairs standing there walking toward the tambis enters and vanishes when she reached the kaimito there inside no erny's…)	white lady	(garage) tambis, kaimito 1, kaimito 2
	"sapagkakita Nako nga nag side view maoy pagbaga sa iya tostos nga nagtabako ini piro pagpasiga Nako nawala dayon paglipot sa pukrahan sa CR"	(when I saw the sideview that was the exact moment it lit its cigar but when the light came on it disappeared when turned to the toilet area)	agta	kaimito 4
N10	"motaguktok ang atop taga alas dos sa kadlawon ug madungog ang tunob nga mobahas gikan sa tunga sa punoan sa tambis ug kaimito tadlas sa pikas nga mga kaimito"	(heavy sounds land on the roof every 2 a.m. and audible are the footsteps traversing between the tambis and kaimito area to the other kaimito)	agta	(bedroom) tambis, kaimito 1, kaimito 2, kaimito 3 or kaimito 4

Note. I intentionally retained the participants' exact choice of words, morphology, and syntax from the online family chat threads, maintaining the value of the Cebuano language and its agency in fully describing their lived experiences. My loose translation into English simply gives a general picture.

Summary

The full gamut of this paper can be summarized in a few words: Natural Heritage—Trees and vegetation are our natural heritage. They are time-tested boundary markers and sources of nourishment and gamot (medicine). Intangible Heritage—Trees and vegetation are intangible heritage. They are carriers of ancient knowledge and cultural memory. Their essential roles in our lives include the following: keeper of lived memories, spaceholder for meaning-making and lived experiences with katingaláhan (supernatural), and informant in ecological and vernacular language conservation and heritage discourse.

Conclusion

Like how some trees and vegetation are uprooted or wither over time, the Solon House loses parts of itself through migration or death. Like family, an estate is political. Its relocation and

subdivision surveys are an exercise of legalities, hierarchical, and descendancy politics. At times, it invites strain in the family as well as in the trees and vegetation. When boundaries change, biological lives are at risk during estate fencing and house (re)construction. Old stories will turn into memories and may undergo wear and tear over time. Oral tradition and narratives recorded here are attempts to preserve generational memories and document ancestral knowledge. Every square foot of an estate means money. But more than that, it is history, family, and lived memory. In this paper, the spatial and generational mapping of trees and vegetation not only gives value to the spaces of the Solon House, but also honors the memories held by each gamut.

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

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

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Digitally Mediated Micro-environment as a Vector of Environmental Closeness

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Abstract

This article examines how technologically mediated micro-environments reconfigure human–plant relations and environmental closeness in the Digital Anthropocene. While current debates on the digital observation of nature have primarily centered on fauna, we address a gap in biopolitical framing by speculating on the possibility of attributing agency to plants in technologically mediated environments. Referring to Baudrillard's hypernature concept, Foucault's biopower, Vogel's post-naturalist environmental philosophy, and affective ecology, we inquire: Can a digitally mediated micro-environment evoke affective responses comparable to real nature? How might such installations reassert the primary human right to nature and what new aesthetics or ethical laws emerge in the process? Observing that environmental closeness is always already mediated, and that vegetal life is increasingly enrolled in regimes of care, commodification, and control, we adopt Critical Discourse Analysis to read selected art and design projects as cultural texts that script human-plant interaction. Our examples, ranging from miniature domestic ecologies, through mobile and site-specific gardens, to technologically organized, plant-media telematic systems, reveal three recurrent modalities: (1) miniaturisation and control, (2) domestication and commodification, and (3) technological entanglement. Across these modalities, we identify three core paradoxes structuring mediated plant relations: care vs control, intimacy vs commodification, and agency vs instrumentalisation. In conclusion, we propose an approach acknowledging media interfaces as tools redistributing environmental proximity while also governing plants as vegetal commons. This state can be further negotiated through progressive media designs and frameworks, allowing for the attribution of agency to plants. This approach enables to reframe the right to nature as a right to companionship and presence, introduced through the suitable protocols of care.

Keywords: environmental closeness, affective ecology, Digital Anthropocene, micro-environments, human-plant relations

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Introduction

Across many nations, the public's right to nature is embedded in constitutional provisions, yet this right is increasingly exercised through screen rather than soil. As ubiquitous planetary data now shape our perception of environment, public access to nature is no longer a matter of physical proximity but of digital mediation. Such mediation signifies an epistemic shift: climate change is not just a planetary crisis of ecology but also a crisis of mediation and imagination.

Since the rise of modernist urban culture, our access to nature has long been mediated through parks, gardens, museums, and horticulture spectacles that domesticated wilderness within the logics of aesthetic and space control. Digital Anthropocene further intensifies mediation through technological interfaces that reconfigure our proximity to nature. Nature is encountered as data-driven perception, mediated spectacle, or prosthetic apparatus; plants become the protagonists in the narrative of nature redistribution. This manifests as hypernature, a sub-phenomenon of Baudrillard's (1983) hyperreality, where staged ecological experience replaces direct contact with its digital or cultural proxy.

Vogel's post-naturalist environmental philosophy (2015) reframes our cognitive longing for ecological closeness as an urge to reclaim lost access or lost connection. Furthermore, in his critique of *climatism,* Hulme (2023) warned that when the global climate crisis is reduced to an all-encompassing explanatory framework as an alarm, it risks becoming moral blackmail and narrowing our creative horizons, leaving little room for alternative forms of meaning-making or relational thinking. Our intervention builds on von Essen et al.'s article *Wildlife in the Digital Anthropocene* (2023), which highlights how surveillance ecologies (i.e., trail cameras, drones, GPS collars or live-streams) define human–animal relations. Using selected case studies of different animal species, these authors emphasise that encountering wildlife through screens and platforms, while producing digital intimacy, also stimulates regimes of biopower. In their optics, techno-mediation preconfigures the gaze, curating what we perceive as "wildlife" and stabilising it through reductive representations that further shape public-wildlife relations. We follow those analytical footsteps but shift the focus from animals to plants, tracing the rationales of vegetal biopower across regimes of care, commodification, and control; each raising paradoxes of intimacy and abstraction, autonomy and dependency. Grounded in environmental philosophy and affective ecology, we propose rethinking plants beyond their subordinate positioning in species hierarchies, recognising their capacity as co-agents that shape emergent forms of civic, aesthetic, and ecological imagination in the Digital Anthropocene. The research gap highlights the observation that, compared to human-animal relations, human-plant relations remain understudied in biopolitical discourse and the digital media context. While wildlife has received growing attention in digital mediation discussions, the equally complex and biopolitically entangled domain of human-plant requires further attention.

We specifically focus on art and design practices as civic laboratories – spaces where ecological values can be negotiated, where civic imagination can expand beyond protest or policy, where sensibility can be cultivated. By analyzing these creative endeavours that transform vegetal life into sites of mediation, speculation, and political reflection. We speculate on a civic right to nature while calling for a more honest recognition of the mediations and power arrangements that structure human-plant relations in the climate era.

Literature Review and Framework

Invoking Foucault's thoughts on security, observation and surveillance, we can indicate that the same logic of governance applies to plants by various actions focused on optimising, commodifying and surveilling natural life. Biopower establishes the rules of interaction with biological systems, governing approaches to care, consumption, and circulation. Foucault's security apparatuses define organisation and planning, optimising populations through deliberate fields of interventions (Foucault, 2007). Reading his discourse through plants, it is possible to highlight socio-cultural practices that oscillate around disciplining vegetal life, notably in the context of bonsai art, which features miniaturisation and growth control (Koreshoff, 1984), or ornamental gardening, where plants are framed as objects of aesthetic consumption (Altman et al., 2022). This perspective also applies to the rise of plantfluencers, who incorporate plants into stylised eco-performance, extending cultural norms of care and display to "plant parenting" (Tscholl & Sturm, 2022), focused on emotional connections built by humans around plants. Here also should be mentioned biophilic design, operating on environmental features, natural shapes and forms and place-based relationships in the context of spatial planning (Kellert, 2008). Finally, bioart and plantart, such as the canonical *The Telegarden* installation (Goldberg & Santarromana, 1995–2004), utilise telematic monitoring and teleoperation to render plant life observable and malleable remotely through networks. In this context, the issue of human-plant relationships calls for acknowledging the power structures and the inadequate framing of the practical application of thinking patterns regarding human power over plant species.

Vogel (2015) further frames nature as a human-shaped "always-ready" environment that makes us custodians and cohabitants, responsible for designing sustainable coexistence, beyond the mental construct of a pristine pre-modern state, which is not an actual possibility. Acknowledging that the environments are socially constructed and collectively made through practice, he calls for establishing new norms for design and framing of cohabitation within hybrid ecologies. In this perspective, the ethical questions shift from defining the principles of "natural" to establishing a set of possible practices that govern the contemporary approach to nature. This framing also emphasises the need to distance oneself from the techno-romantic (Coyne, 1999) perception of technology as a portal to immediate, pure access to nature, while obscuring mediations such as infrastructure or market needs. Contemporary computing culture, treating plants as commodities and masking biopolitical regimes, recycles romantic tropes within digital interventions, promising total visibility and immersion rather than plant welfare. Here, McLuhan's utopian vision of integration through electronic communication – in this case with nature—doesn't consider situated interfaces based on distributed, localised agency and reciprocity protocols, converting attention into responsibility.

Framing the possible approaches to the discussion of environmental closeness, we organise our perception of human-plant relations around analytic registers of affective ecology, which comments on distributed obligations and considers affect as a relational force distributed across bodies and media instead of individual emotions. Environmental narratives circulate around coproducing sensibilities and new ethics, rather than analyses of representation, to reorient perception into world-forming actions that have political consequences (Weik von Mossner, 2017). Even though in the optics of the above-mentioned framework, intimacy is inseparable from the notions of power, we can track how vegetal biopolitics is shaped, communicated and tied to media affordances and conditions. At this juncture, Ascott's conception of "planetary as telematic" provides a crucial counterpoint to suggest an emerging planetary consciousness within cybernetic interdependence characterized by communication network, reciprocal

sensing and co-creation feedback among humans, machines, and more than human entities (Ascotts, 2003). Such an approach resists both techno-romantic immediacy and idealized global unity but reframes digital-ecological engagements as responsibility circuits that call for ethically attuned ecologies which foreground mediation, relationality and reciprocal affect.

Methods and Case Studies

We adopt a Critical Discourse Analytical (CDA) approach, treating mediated representations of plants as discursive artifacts that construct ideological positions around nature. Rather than approaching each work solely as an aesthetic production, CDA enables us to read them as cultural texts that give material expression to the politics embedded within human-plant relations in contexts of mediation. This approach allows us to analyse how formal decisions, whether in scale, site, or medium, encode shifting ecological imaginaries, from containment and proximity to connectivity and computations. We analyse the selected works based on the following discursive strategies:

1. Framing: representation of plants as subjects, commodities, or collaborators.
2. Lexical and material choices: "care," "stewardship," "optimization," and "companionship" embodied in aesthetic form.
3. Materialisation: how scale, medium, and technology construct and mediate ecological discourse.

To make this reading more concrete, we organized these case studies along a continuum of mediation, ranging from miniaturized domestic ecologies to mobile and site-specific networks, and, lastly, to cybernetic or network systems. This progression reveals how mediation and digital culture reconfigure human proximity to plant life and the emergence of new civic imaginations.

Results

Miniature Ecologies: Containment and Control

At micro-scale, practices such as bonsai, ikebana, aquascaping, fairy gardening, terrariums, represent early forms of controlled ecological intimacy. These traditions compress landscapes into symbolic miniature and dissolve the boundaries of local and remote. However, these approaches to vegetal life rarely include questions about agenda and identity, often objectifying plants as mere parts of interfaces or decorations.

Among contemporary examples, Alain Verschueren's *Oasis Portable* (2020) stages miniaturisation and controlled vegetation as a pandemic-era "bubble": a wearable micro-greenhouse that cocoons the body in plants and purified air. The work heightens multisensory encounter (scent, humidity, enclosure) while underlining a biopolitical logic of self-optimisation in public space. Here, the mobile garden, enclosed in plexiglass, performs the double movement of intimacy and discipline. While offering the user a safe bubble, it simultaneously confines vegetal life to a portable container, contravening plants' constitutive rootedness and reconfiguring their ecology as a transportable display. Similarly, Paula Haye's *Nocturne of the Limax maximus* (2010–2011) and Mark Dion's *Neukom Vivarium* (2006–) aestheticise containment of biotopes and replication, transporting ecosystems into sculptural or architectural spaces. Despite the intention to bring attention to the cycle of life and to present contact with nature as an urban planning-related process (Sanyal, 2023), these miniature and institutionalized gardens visualize how ecological care becomes procedural, mediated, and

supervised – the epitome of Foucault's biopower operating through aesthetic governance. Chiu Chih's *Survival Kit for the Ever-Changing Planet* (2013) albeit a speculative wearable plant-life support system that aestheticizes dependency between human and vegetal metabolism, reverses the logic of enclosure by conceptually shifting the politics of control from domination to symbiosis. Chiu transformed the closed circuit of biopolitical control into an ethical circuit of co-breathing and cohabitation.

Mobile and Site-Specific Ecologies: Distribution and Mediation

Mobile media and locative technologies redefine the spatial conditions and distribution of ecological experience. Erin Despard and Oliver Kellhammer's *Other Gardens* (2010) framed overlooked ruderal landscapes as a garden and plotted them as a distributed garden that can be experienced through an immersive online map or in person through a garden tour.

Other Gardens enacts a discursive shift from containment to distribution, navigation and embodied experience. The artists contested the definition of garden and reframed the garden at urban sites as a self-organizing ecology rather than a human artifact. In the mobile experience option, the audience can navigate the curated gardens through disembodied virtual movement and "immerse" themselves in those gardens mediated through visual, sound, text, and the neighbourhood's third-person narrative. Nature is reconstructed as a networked, mobile image of itself. On the other hand, the artists subvert the very notion of disembodied mobility by organizing a guided tour of those gardens to facilitate an embodied, in-situ sensorial experience. *Other Gardens* thus sits at the intersection of civic intervention and eco-regeneration, where participation and mediation redefine reality, care and ownership.

Cybernetic Ecologies: Telematic and Algorithmic Agency

At the macro or systemic scale, we can highlight two modalities in the artistic approach: the domestication/commodification of plants and technological entanglement, which allow monitoring and programming plants through telematic means. Goldberg and Santarromana's *The Telegarden* (1995–2004) let online participants plant, water, and watch a remote garden via a robotic arm. Similarly, Poupyrev et al. (2012) in *Botanicus Interacticus* proposed an augmented garden, turning plants into interfaces that respond to touch and create music. In Usman Haque's *Natural Fuse* (2008), the collective network of plants produces energy for the city and acts as circuit breakers to prevent carbon footprint overload, speculating on the possibility of managing collective energy usage. The gallery premises also become spaces for more complex bio-technological designs, such as Gilberto Esparza's *Plantas Autofotosintéticas* (2017), which refers to a utopian sustainable city where plants produce alternative sources of energy and process contaminants from sewage.

At this scale, the vegetal is no longer a replication of nature, nor is it a static representation image, but becomes a dynamic sensorium of the planet. The most radical manifestation of this is found in Terra0's *Self-owned Forest* (2016–), where sensors, network, blockchain converge to prototype attributed agency, algorithmic personhood and multispecies governance (Seidler et al., 2016). Agnes Meyer-Brandis's installation *One Tree ID – How to Become a Tree for Another Tree* (2025) translates a tree's biochemical exchanges into olfactory communication. This biopoetic attempt at finding an interspecies language presents the scent as atmospheric signalling, curating the act of translation and reimagining interspecies empathy through data. In these two cases, plants or forests specifically are attributed with personal identity, legal and

financial autonomy, epitomizing a speculative future of multispecies governance. Plants are no longer treated as tools of governance and economic exploitation.

Discussion

The aforementioned examples of experimental cases show how art both redistributes environmental proximity and exposes the paradox of care as governance in the Digital Anthropocene. The visible aim to build a collective sensorium, while simultaneously involving a different biopolitical rationale deployed by the artists, allows reading those attempts through Foucault and von Essen et al., observing that the already-built milieus are optimised and under constant surveillance, which organises circulation inside the living systems. Taken our case studies together, we inquire that while these projects speculate on the possibilities to incorporate nature into the discourse on the right to a natural environment and, in selected cases, nature's rights and identity, they simultaneously install biopolitical rationales and protocols of control. This framing allows perceiving art, galleries, media platforms and wearables as climate interfaces, and plants as creative vegetal commons. The possible expansion of this optics could reframe civic argument from "right to natural environments" to "right to vegetal companionship and presence" in urban/mediated life, speculating about plants' identity and possible means to recognise their agenda.

The selected case studies crystallise three recurrent modalities of human-plant relations in the Digital Anthropocene: miniaturisation and control (a clampdown aesthetics of scaled ecologies and bounded micro-climates), domestication and commodification (a plant-care economy that aestheticises and merchandises intimate, self-oriented contact), and technological entanglement (plant-tech artworks that render, monitor and program vegetal processes at a distance). Each modality is curated through a different artistic or institutional regime, such as enclosure, consumption, or telematic operations, revealing the double movement by which artworks both redistribute environmental proximity and govern it, presenting ecological intimacy as situated arrangements. In the Digital Anthropocene context, technologically mediated human-plant relations foreground both the positive potential and the negative repercussions for public engagement with vegetal life in digital and offline spaces. The paradoxes of plant relations can be grouped around three sets of oppositions: 1) Care vs Control – where care involves control, restriction and discipline; 2) Intimacy vs Commodification – where closeness fosters spectatorship and commodification in capitalist society; 3) Agency vs Instrumentalisation – where purported bestowment of agency is actually mediated and constrained by technology. Care is enacted through constraining rules, as in the context of *Oasis Portable*, where they are sealed in the wearable container, or in *The Telegarden*, where access to telepresence is scheduled via a robotic arm. Digital domestication, following Kamphof's (2013) nomenclature, creates compatibility with access norms through sensing, visualisation and control systems, operating on appropriation and conversion of plants as media objects. The standardised care repacks intimacy as a performance, in which sensors program plants rather than represent them, thus operating through periodic interventions rather than offering unmediated contact. The programmable character of Earth, as observed by Gabrys (2016), dissolves remote boundaries, shifting from ontology to ontogenesis in contact with plants. The sensors and collected data instrumentalise vegetation by producing environmental relations and modes of participation, rather than reporting.

On the other hand, examples such as *One Tree ID – How to Become a Tree for Another Tree* or *Terra0* advance a productive attempt to expand beyond mere representation or governance, negotiating plants' agency. Meyer-Brandis, shifting the principles of language from morphemes

to atmosphere, deliberates on multispecies interface based on biochemical signalling beyond vision and voice – inaccessible to plants. Furthermore, *Terra0* shows how institutions and code can be remodelled to help establish legal personhood for biomes. The presented cases open new possibilities for prototyping multispecies protocols, distanced from green spectacles and extensive surveillance. Meyer-Brandis and Terra0's approaches showed at least two possible directions for new trajectories of incorporating nature into art. This includes further pursuit of interspecies ways of communication to build a non-visual, non-verbal dictionary and list possible sampling techniques (referring to One Tree ID), and treat sensor streams as a civic resource with possible market extraction (Terra0).

Conclusion

This paper examines the biopolitical implications of technologically mediated human-plant relations. We argue that ecological longing is always already mediated, and that artistic practices can redistribute environmental proximity by rendering plants materially and politically present if the approach to vegetation expands beyond moralising frames of stewardship, dominion, constitutional rights, and sentimental care. Our analysis shows that contemporary connections of art and technology still often instrumentalise nature, overlooking the discussion about agency, identity and biopolitical infrastructures that mediate human contact with vegetal. Reframing the presented artworks not as neutral representations but as governed scripts allows us to speculate on possible ways in which media and technology could foster transgressions of the aesthetic regimes and paradoxes we traced.

On this basis, we shift the right to nature from an abstract, romantic and human-centred claim into a shareable experience, practised between the species. In this optic, galleries and art spaces can act as interfaces themselves, also monitoring public negotiations over maintenance routines and digital access rules, turning curation into a participatory experience grounded in civic pedagogy – far from treating vegetation as a spectacle or educational resource. The invitation to the audience to co-author protocols based on feeling "with" plants, rather than "feeling plants," could further negotiate perceptions of welfare, ethics, and contest visibility through surveillance.

Searching for ways to cultivate vegetal companionship, indigenous knowledge and local ecologies could provide inspiration for augmented caretaking and affective closeness. The act of placing nature in the exhibition space could also be framed by the practices of welfare-first design, by defining and minimising plant stress indicators and procedural safeguards perceived as the notions of respect. By foregrounding the contradictions and responsibilities of mediated contact with plants in an exhibition space, we reframe the display of nature as a reciprocal act of communication and mutual learning through programmable environments, opening the way for further speculative designs and future practical framing.

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

Grammarly was used for proofreading.

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Audience Response and Visual Content Interpretation: An Analysis of Reception on the Wiki_Etika TikTok Account

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Abstract

TikTok is currently a popular social media platform. This demonstrates the development of technology that can be used as a medium for interaction, information acquisition, and self-expression. The perceptions of each follower are urgent for research, especially in the context of media regulation and human rights protection in the digital age. This relates to @wiki_etika TikTok content about food reviews, but the way it was delivered invited negative comments that could alter the content's meaning in terms of audience response.Qualitative research methods and reception study analysis based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory were used in this study, which helped researchers analyze how visual content messages are interpreted by audience responses. Two techniques were used to collect data: in-depth interviews and documentation. The results of this study demonstrated differences in the participants' understanding of the video. One informant held a dominant hegemonic position, acknowledging, accepting, and fully agreeing with the content; four other informants held a bargained reading, agreeing and accepting the content but with several caveats; and no informants held an oppositional reading, completely rejecting the content. This research also revealed that audiences have varying understandings of commenting ethics, but many are still unaware of the legal consequences of their actions.

Keywords: audience, encoding, decoding, social media, TikTok

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Introduction

Information and entertainment media are now widely available due to technological developments. Social media is a general term for various digital media platforms that allow users to present themselves on personal profiles, connect and communicate with others, and create, share, and comment on digital media content such as text, images, audio, and video (Ariestyani & Ramadhanty, 2022). The term social media is composed of two words: “media” and “social.” “Media” is defined as a communication tool. Meanwhile, “social” is defined as the social reality that each individual carries out actions that contribute to society (Mulawarman & Nurfitri, 2017).

The existence of social media has become a platform for people to carry out all their activities. Many social media are used by people, one of which is TikTok social media. As a new communication medium that is currently widely discussed and used by the public (Claretta et al., 2022). TikTok was first released in China under the name Douyin by Zhang Yi Ming in September 2016. According to findings (Buana & Maharani, 2020), the TikTok application has experienced an increase in popularity (Tinuiti, 2020). As of September 2020, TikTok is available in 154 countries and has 850 million active users per month who spend at least 52 minutes every day accessing the application. Even users under the age of 15 can spend 80 minutes per day accessing the TikTok application.

The emergence of TikTok as a social media platform allows anyone to become a content creator, sharing creativity and information through photos or videos ranging from 15 seconds to 10 minutes. Currently, many content creators share culinary reviews as a means of self-expression, information, or even a way to earn income through social media. Uploaded videos naturally receive comments, both negative and positive, from their audience. Furthermore, TikTok is often used as a culinary reference platform. Those who create reference videos are referred to as content creators. Content creators who enjoy making food review videos are known as food vloggers. Food vloggers' videos often go viral on their For Your Page (FYP), enabling TikTok users to learn about various culinary topics through this platform.

The content creator with the handle @wiki_etika frequently appears on TikTok's FYP homepage. The owner of the @wiki_etika account, often called Wiki, is from Surabaya and is known for addressing her audience with the phrase “hello, bro.” Her substantial TikTok following of 278,300 has naturally led to varying perceptions among Wiki's followers. TikTok can serve as a platform for the dissemination of harmful content that can provoke others to commit crimes. One example is online sexual harassment, which takes the form of negative comments about a person's body.

This perception of each follower is the urgency of this research. The urgency of this research lies in the increasing role of TikTok as a digital public space used not only for interaction and information acquisition but also for shaping audience opinions and behavior. The food review content on the @wiki_etika TikTok account demonstrates that the way visual messages are conveyed can elicit diverse interpretations and responses from audiences, including negative comments that could potentially distort the content's original meaning. This condition is important to study because the audience's awareness of commenting ethics and the legal consequences that can arise from their activities in the digital space is still low, which is directly related to the issue of human rights protection and media regulation. Through a reception study approach with Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory, this research is important for understanding how audiences interpret media content differently, while also providing

academic and practical contributions in strengthening digital literacy, social media ethics, and formulating policies that are more responsive to the dynamics of communication in social media.

From the perspective of social media regulations, this research is relevant to various existing regulations, such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) and the Law on Sexual Violence Crimes (UU TPKS). By analyzing audience comments and responses, this research can provide input for monitoring and law enforcement against harassment on social media.

Every user, whether content creator or audience, has the right to freedom of expression and opinion. Therefore, with the existence of freedom of expression and use of digital media in the current era, every citizen has Human Rights (HAM), namely fundamental, natural, eternal, and God-given rights that must be respected, maintained, and protected. (1) In the digital era, human rights also include Digital Rights. (2) Digital rights are the human rights of every citizen to be able to use and engage in activities on digital media. This is a form of implementation of Article 28 F of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. (3) One form of digital rights is the right to freedom of expression and to express opinions and the right to receive protection and a sense of security from digital violence, such as hacking, doxxing, phishing, and sexual harassment and online gender-based violence.

In practice, the implementation of these rights is often misused and causes problems, one of which is sexual harassment on social media (Fikriyah et al., 2023). In addition to the provisions of the TPKS Law, sexual harassment on social media is also prohibited by the UUITE and its amendments, namely Article 27 paragraph (1) of the ITE Law in conjunction with Article 1 number 1 of Law 19/2016, which states that anyone who distributes and/or transmits and/or conveys indecent electronic information and/or electronic documents with obscene content.

Considering that electronic data in Article 1(1) of Law 19/2016 is one or a collection of electronic data, including writing, sound, images, maps, photographs, electronic data interchange (EDI), email, telegram, telex, facsimile or similar, letters, signs, numbers, codes, symbols that have meaning or can be understood by those who understand them.

Based on the statement above, online sexual harassment, such as inappropriate comments, is interpreted as a violation of good morals. Inappropriate comments are prosecuted under the UUTPKS (Public Relations Law) and UUITE (UUITE) (Fikriyah et al., 2023). Social media is also a platform capable of creating various forms of communication and providing a wide range of information for all levels of society (Buana & Maharani, 2020).

This concern is relevant to research because it demonstrates differences in audience interpretation of visual content, which triggers conflicting responses. Low public awareness of the social and psychological impacts of comments on social media underscores the urgency of strengthening commenting ethics in digital spaces. Furthermore, this research reflects a broader structural issue, namely the influence of gender and social norms on audience interactions with media content. Women appearing on social media are often considered more vulnerable to harassment, thus highlighting inequality and injustice in the digital space.

Literature Review

This research references several relevant previous studies, including a study entitled "Analysis of Audience Reception of Intercultural Communication Represented in the Film Bumi Manusia," which used descriptive qualitative methods with reception analysis based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory through in-depth interviews. The results showed differences in audience interpretation positions: negotiation, opposition, and dominance in each scene representing intercultural communication through dialogue, visuals, and cultural attributes (Amelia et al., 2022). Furthermore, a study titled "Audience Reception of Skincare Review Content on the TikTok Account @drrichardlee" found that skincare review content sparked controversy due to its presentation style, which was perceived as demeaning, but was also understood as a form of education (Savira & Zuhri, 2022). This study revealed variations in audience interpretations, divided into dominant and negotiating positions, with no oppositional positions.

Different from previous research, this study offers significant innovations by focusing on TikTok visual content, particularly culinary content, and highlighting the issue of online sexual harassment that emerged from audience responses. The methodology used is more comprehensive, combining in-depth interviews and comment analysis, thus providing a more holistic understanding of audience responses. Furthermore, this study presents a more detailed categorization of audience meaning, taking into account the background and experiences of informants, to uncover the complexity of the process of interpreting digital content.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical basis is a reference or foundation used as a framework for thinking in a study, ensuring its validity is scientifically proven. This study uses audience reception analysis using Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory and reception theory. Both theories are used in this study, focusing on the text, production, and audience within a context, and each element can be analyzed. According to Stuart Hall's statement, quoted from (Claretta et al., 2022), in the Encoding-Decoding theory, there are three types of meaning transfer between the author and the reader, and how the message is read by both. These three types are:

1. Dominant Hegemonic Position, where the audience fully acknowledges, accepts, and agrees with the message creator's intended meaning without any objection.
2. Negotiated Reading, where the audience is in a position that is aligned with the message they receive, but can also modify it to reflect their individual positions and interests. Therefore, audiences in this type still have certain limitations that prevent them from fully agreeing with the message creator's intended meaning.
3. Oppositional Reading, where the audience disagrees with the message they receive. The audience rejects the meaning conveyed and can then determine their own alternative framework for interpreting the message.

Stuart Hall's Encoding–Decoding Theory is used to understand the media communication process, emphasizing that the meaning of a message is not solely determined by the content creator but also shaped through the audience's interpretation. This theory views the audience as an active subject who assigns meaning to media messages based on their experiences and backgrounds (Dwiputra, 2021). In the context of this research, reception theory is used to analyze how the visual content on the TikTok account @wiki_etika is interpreted differently by the audience, influenced by contextual factors such as identity, social experience, and individual perception. Through this approach, the research aims to examine the meaning and

audience response to @wiki_etika is TikTok content as a result of the interaction between the media text and the audience.

Methodology

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of exploring in depth the phenomenon of audience interpretation of media content through reception analysis. This approach was chosen because it can comprehensively explain social phenomena through in-depth and contextual data collection (Moleong in Savira & Zuhri, 2022). Qualitative research emphasizes understanding meanings and social processes that cannot be explained through statistical or quantification approaches (Murdiyanto, 2020). In this context, the study adopted Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory as an analytical framework to understand how media messages are encoded by creators and interpreted differently by audiences (Afifah & Suwarto, 2019).

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews and documentation. Interviews were used to gain a deep understanding of audience perceptions and interpretations of TikTok content on the @wiki_etika account, while documentation served to complement and strengthen the research data through archival searches and audience comments (Savira & Zuhri, 2022). Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the criteria being followers of the @wiki_etika account who were deemed credible in providing information according to the research focus. The research object focused on one video with the highest number of views out of a total of 30 uploaded in June 2024, namely the video dated June 27, 2024. Data analysis was carried out by grouping the audience's interpretation into three reception positions, namely dominant hegemonic, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading, in order to understand the variations in the audience's reception of the visual messages conveyed by the media.

Table 1
Informant Information

No.	Name	Gender	Background
1.	TA	Female	Housewife
2.	FN	Male	Private Employees
3.	EN	Female	Elementary School Students
4.	FM	Female	Housewife
5.	NC	Male	Entrepreneur

After collecting various data from in-depth interviews with the five informants mentioned above, the informants were gathered from the Wiki Etika audience who follow the account and actively comment on the uploaded content. The researchers then processed the data by analyzing the answers from the informants. The interview transcripts were then reviewed and categorized based on the questions, answers, and responses provided by the informants. The analysis process used qualitative analysis related to the audience's perception of the meaning of the visual content messages from the TikTok account @wiki_etika.

Result and Discussion

The encoding-decoding theory proposed by Stuart Hall is relevant in analyzing the TikTok content on the @wiki_etika account because it explains the non-linear process of meaning formation. In this context, the messages encoded by the creator as culinary reviews and recommendations are not fully perceived as intended. Audiences, as active subjects, engage in a decoding process based on their social backgrounds, experiences, values, and norms, resulting in differing interpretations of the visual content.

The relevance of this theory is evident in the findings of varying audience reception positions, particularly in the dominant-hegemonic and negotiated reading categories. Audiences in the dominant position interpret the content according to the creator's intent, namely as informative and useful culinary information. Meanwhile, audiences in the negotiating position accept the message's substance but criticize aspects of the visual presentation that are deemed inconsistent with norms of politeness and social constructs related to gender. The absence of an oppositional reading position indicates that audiences do not reject the message completely but rather negotiate meaning due to the tension between the media message and their social values.

Encoding–decoding theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding how social media content is interpreted differently and how contextual factors, including gender norms and digital culture, influence audience interpretation. This theory also helps explain the shift in focus from the content's substance to the visual aspects of the creator's personality, which contributes to the rise of negative comments and online sexual harassment in digital spaces.

Table 2
Comment Findings

No.	Informant Name	Dominant Hegemonic	Negotiated Reading	Oppositional Reading	Additional Information
1.	TA		v		“Sorry in advance, Miss, I myself am not a good person, not a pious person, not a religious expert, but I just want to say to Miss, ‘please don't embarrass your own religion’ by behaving like that Miss, wearing a hijab is already very good, MasyaAllah, but why do you behave like that, Miss, it's the same as exposing your aurat if you can't wear a hijab that covers your chest, it's okay, but please wear ‘modest’ clothes and don't be humiliated...”

2.	FN		v		“Sis, don't keep posting content like this. If papaya is sweet, if it's saggy breasts wobbling, it's disgusting.”
3.	EN		v		“is that a balloon?”
4.	FM	v			“perhaps with her mother's trademark jiggling of her breasts”
5.	NC		v		“You've already mentioned the twin mountains, but you still haven't reflected? Is it really intentional to make things more interesting?”

Dominant Hegemonic

In this theory, an informant can be classified as dominant hegemonic if they fully accept, acknowledge, and agree with the content of the @wiki_etika video about understanding and interpreting its contents without any negative thoughts. Of the five informants interviewed, only four said they had no problem with the content wiki creates on its TikTok account. The informant, identified as FM, indirectly defended wiki with a comment he posted, “Maybe this is Simbak's trademark,” FM said. This comment was confirmed by an in-depth interview with FM. He also stated that each person likely has their own unique way of packaging and presenting content.

“After all, it all comes back to us, the viewers. If our minds weren't perverted, we wouldn't have such dirty thoughts,” FM said.

In relation to the Sturt Hall encoding-decoding model of reception theory used, informant 4 can be classified as Dominant Hegemonic. This type of behavior occurs because informant 4 accepts, acknowledges, and agrees with the video creator's intended meaning, which is simply to share information about food reviews.

“I'm aware of that comment, and I think it's her characteristic. And I'm actually saddened by the way people are so reckless with their words and indecent comments,” she said.

From what she observed, FM tends to be positive and receptive to the content created by @wiki_etika. FM is also aware of the laws surrounding social media use. However, without these regulations, FM, as a woman, knows the etiquette of speaking or commenting in public spaces. As she stated, “As a woman, I'm more careful in my comments, especially when it comes to women's intimate parts. Whether there are criminal penalties or not, people should be more prudent and polite in their communication on social media.”

Negotiated Reading

An informant can fall into the negotiated reading category if they receive the message and agree with what is conveyed in the TikTok food review video uploaded by @wiki_etika. However, there are several things informants need to consider, such as how to convey it

appropriately and politely. After viewing the uploaded content, informants 1, 2, 3, and 5 agreed with the food review, noting that the delivery in the video was good and clear. However, these four informants regretted that Wiki presentation required highlighting her body parts in the opening of the video.

According to an interview with informant 1:

> Actually, there's nothing wrong with reviewing food; it's fine. It would be better to cover up anything that stands out. If the market demands that the content requires shaking, that's fine. But as a woman, I recommend wearing clothing that can conceal Rachel and Samantha's figure. The content is good, and the presentation is complete, including location, price, and opening hours. The only downside is the opening.

Informant 1 also stated that she consciously wrote her comment criticizing the perpetrator, @wiki_etika. She stated:

> I was aware of writing the comment, and I believe it was correct, and I had good intentions in criticizing her, rather than using it as mere material for men. As for whether or not I'm aware of the applicable laws, I honestly don't really know or follow them. As long as I haven't been blocked from that social media platform, it's still normal for me.

"The content is good, and the content is informative. But it's embarrassing, especially with her wearing a hijab, which destroys women's dignity. That's clearly disgusting. At least in the digital space, she should be able to maintain her dignity," said informant 2. She also stated, "I don't really know the rules and sanctions for social media policies. Even if this is a problem, I'll ask again, where are the policies for filtering content that is suitable for broadcast," said FN.

A different story for informant 3, identified as EN. During an in-depth interview, she felt she had made her comments. However, EN is an elementary school student, and such content isn't displayed on her homepage. EN's comments were limited to what she saw, unaware of the penalties for freedom of expression in public spaces. "The content is informative, but disgusting." "I didn't know there were rules, I was just messing around and saying what I saw," said EN, informant 3.

Similarly, informant 5, interviewed, believed the @wiki_etika account delivered good content, being very informative and comprehensive. However, she regretted having to highlight her body parts. "It's a shame the content is interesting, but it's constantly being pushed to improve so it doesn't become negative content, but it's still being continued," said NC.

In the interview, NC also stated that she wasn't aware of the law:

> I don't really know, but I'm also aware that I'm writing this comment because I'm annoyed by seeing someone seeking fame by highlighting their body parts. And it seems like a lot of people are making nasty comments on their account.

Therefore, based on informants 1, 2, 3, and 5's encoding-decoding theory, these four informants fall into the Negotiated Reading category. This is because they stated they could understand and interpret the content conveyed by @wiki_etika, but they also considered several factors,

such as the format in which the food review was presented. These issues can influence the interpretation of the content and the audience's response.

The results of the study indicate that the audience of the TikTok account @wiki_etika has diverse interpretations of the culinary review content analyzed. Based on in-depth interviews with five informants and an analysis of comments on the video uploaded on June 27, 2024, it was found that the audience did not interpret the content uniformly, even though the objects and visual messages consumed were the same. These variations in interpretation are influenced by social background, personal experiences, and the values held by each audience.

Based on a reception analysis using Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, informants were classified into three interpretation positions. One informant was in a dominant hegemonic position, fully accepting and agreeing with the message conveyed by the content creator. This informant interpreted the content as an attempt to convey culinary information and considered the delivery style to be the creator's personal characteristic. The other four informants were in a negotiated reading position, accepting the culinary information conveyed but criticizing the visual presentation, which they considered to emphasize body parts and potentially trigger comedy.

Oppositional Reading

Within Stuart Hall's reception theory framework, informants are categorized as having an oppositional reading position if they interpret and interpret media messages in a way that contradicts the creator's intended meaning. In this position, the audience actively rejects the main message and constructs alternative interpretations that contradict the creator's goals. However, based on the results of a thorough review and analysis of the interview data and the informants' responses in this study, no audiences were found to be in this position. All informants essentially still accepted and understood the main message of the food review video content uploaded by the TikTok account @wiki_etika, although some expressed criticism of certain aspects of the delivery method. This finding indicates that the audience did not totally reject the meaning, but rather still agreed with the substance of the message conveyed by the creator, so the oppositional reading position did not appear in this study.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, TikTok functions as a digital public space that allows users to express themselves, share information, and build identities. The culinary review content on the TikTok account @wiki_etika is generally perceived by audiences as informative and useful. However, the audience's focus on the visual aspect of the content delivery has led to a shift in interpretation, leading some audience responses to comments with nuances of sexual harassment. This finding suggests that the negative audience response was not entirely directed at the content's substance, but rather at the visual presentation strategy, which was deemed inconsistent with social norms, while the content's primary meaning remained understandable.

Reception analysis based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory reveals variations in audience interpretation, dominated by dominant hegemonic positions and negotiated readings, without finding a complete rejection of meaning (oppositional reading). Audiences in the dominant position accept the content in accordance with the creator's intentions, while audiences in the negotiating position accept the message but criticize the delivery method. This finding confirms that audience interpretation is influenced by social, cultural, and personal

contexts, and highlights the importance of ethical commenting and understanding the legal consequences of social media. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy and more educational and responsive policies are needed to create a digital space that is safe, fair, and protects all users, especially content creators.

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Cinematic Futures: Afrofuturist Animation, Immersive Technologies, and Black Speculative Joy

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Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary Afrofuturist animated works, including *Entergalactic* (Netflix, 2022), *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Sony theatrical, 2023), and *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (Disney+, 2023) employ immersive technologies such as AI enhanced visual effects, 2.5D animation, and metaverse-inspired world-building to redefine cinematic storytelling and Black speculative culture. Positioned at the intersection of cultural studies, media studies, technology, and digital humanities, this interdisciplinary study investigates how these works present diverse expressions of Black speculative futures that range from Afrofuturist romance and multiverse heroism to reimagined African heritage grounded in diasporic memory, emotional resonance, and collective joy. Using comparative case study analysis and thematic readings, the paper draws on Afrofuturism, technoculture, and narrative design to demonstrate how these animated films serve as innovative storytelling approaches that challenge dominant narratives, reimagine identity, and expand cultural agency. It highlights the leadership of digitally native Generation Z creators and audiences in shaping participatory, engaging stories created and shared across streaming, social media, and interactive technologies. By situating Afrofuturist storytelling within broader conversations on cultural representation, technological innovation, and speculative world-building, this paper offers a model for understanding how animation can function as both a cinematic and socio-cultural tool. These works entertain, educate, empower, and provide celebrated visions of the future that center Black imagination, emotional depth, and creative sovereignty. Ultimately, it argues that Afrofuturist animation exemplifies the transformative power of media and technology to imagine inclusive, culturally resonant futures that bridge digital creativity and global storytelling.

Keywords: afrofuturism, animation, immersive technology, speculative, film, digital culture

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Introduction

In recent years, Afrofuturism has re-emerged as one of the most dynamic cultural movements shaping global media, technology, and speculative storytelling. While the monumental success of *Black Panther* (2018) helped propel Afrofuturist aesthetics into mainstream visibility, this resurgence extends far beyond a single franchise. This intellectual tradition, stretching from Sun Ra's cosmic jazz explorations (*Sun Ra*, 1972 [Album]) to the critical frameworks of scholars like bell hooks and Mark Dery (Dery, 1994; hooks, 1990, 1992), has long positioned Black creativity as a site of futuristic speculation and cultural resistance. Contemporary creators across film, animation, gaming, VR, and digital art have begun using immersive media to articulate complex visions of Black futures rooted in cultural memory, technological experimentation, and diasporic imagination.

This paper explores how Afrofuturist animation, in particular *Entergalactic* (Netflix, 2022), *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Sony, 2023), and *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (Disney+/Triggerfish, 2023), engages with world-building, identity, and technological innovation to propose new forms of narrative sovereignty and self-representation. The relevance of this work in today's socio-cultural and technological climate is prominent worldwide. As digital platforms, AI systems, and algorithmic ecosystems increasingly structure everyday life, questions of representation and cultural agency become inseparable from questions of technological power. Afrofuturist animation offers a space where Black creators and communities can reclaim ownership over history, aesthetics, and speculative possibility, while countering centuries of cultural erasure and imaginative constraint. These works present futurity as a continuation of a long history of African and diasporic innovation, artistry, and philosophical inquiry. They propose futures in which Black creativity, technological fluency, and emotional intelligence are central to global narratives of progress.

This paper argues that Afrofuturist animation constitutes a critical site for cultural speculation, digital experimentation, and generational identity formation. Through immersive technologies, experimental aesthetics, and transmedia storytelling, contemporary animated works articulate a multi-layered vision of Black speculative futures that is both celebratory and politically meaningful. By examining three major case studies, this research reveals how Afrofuturist animation constructs new cinematic languages, redefines diasporic identity, and engages the emerging "Metaverse Generation," a cohort for whom hybrid identities, immersive platforms, and digital participation are foundational aspects of everyday life.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together Afrofuturism, Technoculture, Animation Studies, Cultural Translation, and Media Studies. Together, these frameworks illuminate how contemporary Afrofuturist animation negotiates technology, identity, and world-building across global digital landscapes.

Afrofuturism and Afrofuturism 2.0

Afrofuturism provides the central lens through which this research interprets animation as a medium of Black speculative imagination. Scholars such as Alondra Nelson (Nelson, 2002), Ytasha Womack (Womack, 2013), and Reynaldo Anderson (Anderson, 2016) describe Afrofuturism as a cultural practice that merges ancestral memory, technological innovation, and creative reworlding. The foundations of this movement can be traced to pioneers like Sun

Ra (Sun Ra, 1974 [Film]). Later scholars like Mark Dery (Dery, 1994) and cultural critics like bell hooks (hooks, 1990, 1992) provide critical touchstones for analyzing animation as a space of aesthetic innovation and political reclamation. Anderson's notion of Afrofuturism 2.0 includes AI, gaming, social media, and metaverse environments, where Black storytelling intersects with digital authorship.

Technoculture and Digital Power

Technoculture scholarship interrogates how digital media participate in producing and regulating race, identity, and social possibility (Nakamura, 2007; Noble, 2018). Safiya Umoja Noble has demonstrated how algorithmic architectures often reproduce racial hierarchies rather than dismantle them. Afrofuturist animation, in this context, becomes a site of technological resistance, where creators subvert algorithmic marginalization by crafting alternative digital worlds rooted in Black agency and cultural sovereignty.

Animation as Speculative Language

Animation Studies (Ryan, 2001) positions animated worlds as socio-political terrains where identity, memory, and cultural imagination are renegotiated. Animation is not merely a representational tool but a speculative engine, capable of visualizing new modes of existence unconstrained by realism or conventional narrative logic. In Afrofuturist contexts, animation becomes a technology of reworlding: a space where myth, emotion, and digital aesthetics converge to shape alternative futures.

Cultural Translation and Global Diaspora

Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity and representation (Hall, 1997) informs this paper's analysis of how Afrofuturist narratives circulate across global platforms. These frameworks shed light on the interaction between local cultural specificities and global diasporic consumption, revealing how Afrofuturist aesthetics negotiate cultural translation within international streaming economies.

Black Speculative Joy

This study extends Afrofuturist theory by centering joy as a critical analytical framework. Drawing on cultural theorists who examine Black pleasure and creativity as political acts, these animations deliberately move beyond trauma-centered narratives to imagine futures where Black emotional depth, laughter, love, and artistic expression are normative rather than exceptional. Black speculative joy represents both aesthetic practice and political intervention, using animation's capacity for wonder to envision futures where Black flourishing is central.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining thematic analysis, visual analysis, digital ethnography, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and audience review. These methods collectively offer a comprehensive lens for understanding how Black speculative futures are constructed, circulated, and experienced in Afrofuturist animation.

Thematic Analysis: Identifies recurring motifs across the three case studies, including technological liberation, cultural heritage, hybrid identity, joy, and Afrocentric futurism. For

example, in *Entergalactic* (Netflix, 2022), thematic analysis highlights how Jabari and Meadow's romantic narrative underscores Black love as a site of speculative possibility (Nelson, 2002; Womack, 2013). In *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Sony, 2023), multiverse storytelling emphasizes diasporic identity and relational heroism (Hall, 1997).

Visual Analysis: Examines animation techniques, color palettes, perspective, and sound design to understand immersive world-building. This includes 2.5D visual layering and painterly textures in *Entergalactic*, multiverse stylistic shifts combining hand-drawn and CGI animation in *Spider-Verse*, and culturally rooted Afrocentric aesthetics in *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (Disney+, 2023) (Anderson, 2016; Ryan, 2001).

Digital Ethnography: Observes Generation Z audiences engaging with Afrofuturist narratives on streaming platforms, fan forums, and social media. For example, TikTok, Instagram and Reddit discussions around *Spider-Verse reveal* active engagement with Afro-Latino identity, multiverse dynamics, and fan interpretations of heroism.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Analyzes interviews, press coverage, and scholarly debates to uncover ideological frameworks and representational politics. CDA examined interviews with Kid Cudi and Kenya Barris, Netflix press materials for *Entergalactic*, and commentary on the pan-African narratives in *Kizazi Moto*.

Audience Review: Evaluates reception, engagement, and interpretation to assess narrative impact and cultural resonance. Reviews on Disney+ and fan commentary on social media highlight appreciation for African storytelling, Afrocentric futurity, and the emotional depth of characters across all three works.

Ethical considerations include respecting privacy in digital ethnography, avoiding misrepresentation of creators, and analyzing media content responsibly.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Entergalactic – Afrofuturist Romance and Urban Digital Realism

Entergalactic (Netflix, 2022), created by Kid Cudi and Kenya Barris, represents a distinctive contribution to Afrofuturist animation through its hybrid form as a feature-length visual album. The film blends romantic storytelling, music-driven narration, and a stylized vision of contemporary New York City to explore Black love, creative identity, and emotional futurity. Rather than positioning futurism as distant or technologically spectacular, Entergalactic situates Afrofuturism within the everyday textures of urban life, artistic labor, and intimate relationships (Dery, 1994; Womack, 2013).

The narrative centers on Jabari, a graffiti artist transitioning into professional success, and Meadow, a photographer navigating emotional vulnerability and creative independence. Their relationship becomes a form of world-building in itself, presenting romance as a speculative practice that reimagines Black masculinity, tenderness, and mutual care. This emphasis on emotional intimacy aligns with Afrofuturist traditions that foreground interiority, joy, and imagination as political acts (Hall, 1997; Nelson, 2002).

Visually, the film employs a 2.5D animation aesthetic that merges painterly textures with digital depth, creating a cityscape that functions as an emotional landscape. Color palettes,

spatial distortions, and movement respond directly to the characters' inner states, transforming New York into a living, affective environment. This immersive visual strategy reinforces animation's capacity to externalize emotion and memory in ways that exceed live-action realism (Ryan, 2001).

Music operates as the film's emotional core. Kid Cudi's soundtrack is integrated into the narrative structure, with lyrics, rhythm, and mood shaping transitions between reality, dream states, and imaginative sequences. Cosmic graffiti worlds, floating cityscapes, and surreal visual interludes merge urban culture with outer-space aesthetics, reinforcing Afrofuturism's fusion of the cosmic and the everyday (Sun Ra, 1972 [Album]; Womack, 2013).

Ultimately, Entergalactic reframes futurity as relational rather than monumental. Its Afrofuturism is grounded in creative labor, love, and emotional openness, asserting that Black speculative futures are built through intimacy, artistic expression, and digital imagination.

Case Study 2: Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse – Afrofuturist Heroism and MultiversalIdentity Futures

Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse (Sony, 2023), directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, and Justin K. Thompson, extends Afrofuturist inquiry into the domain of superhero animation through its radical use of the multiverse as both narrative device and metaphor for diasporic identity. Centered on Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino teenager navigating family expectations, cultural belonging, and heroic responsibility, the film positions youth identity as inherently hybrid, networked, and unfinished (Hall, 1997; Nakamura, 2007).

The multiverse functions as a visual and conceptual representation of diaspora, multiplicity, and self-determination. Each universe operates according to its own aesthetic logic, rendered through a hybrid animation style combining hand-drawn illustration, CGI, collage, and glitch-based effects. These stylistic differences are not merely decorative; they encode cultural, emotional, and ethical distinctions between worlds, transforming animation into a language of identity and difference (Ryan, 2001).

Miles' journey challenges traditional superhero exceptionalism. His heroism is relational rather than solitary, shaped by intergenerational dialogue, community ties, and ethical resistance to predetermined narratives of sacrifice. The film explicitly questions who gets to define canon, destiny, and narrative authority, aligning with Afrofuturist critiques of dominant storytelling structures (Anderson, 2016; Dery, 1994).

Sound design and music further reinforce the film's thematic concerns. An eclectic soundtrack blending hip-hop, orchestral scoring, and global musical influences mirrors the film's cultural hybridity and emotional range. Music becomes a connective tissue across universes, emphasizing continuity amid fragmentation.

Through its layered storytelling and experimental aesthetics, *Across the Spider-Verse* demonstrates how animation can articulate complex negotiations of race, youth, and futurity. It asserts that Black and Afro-Latino identities are not deviations from heroic norms but central to imagining expansive, inclusive futures.

The Spider-People themselves embody multiversal hybridity, with each version of Spider-Man rooted in distinct cultural, geographic, and narrative contexts. Their intersecting journeys

across universes underscore how location, identity, and relationality co-construct heroism, suggesting that selfhood is both multiply situated and collaboratively negotiated.

Case Study 3: Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire – Afrofuturist Anthology Series and Pan-African Speculative Futures

Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire (Disney+, 2023), executive produced by Peter Ramsey and Tendayi Nyeke, stands as one of the most significant recent contributions to Afrofuturist animation by foregrounding African-led speculative storytelling. The ten-part anthology brings together creators from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Egypt, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, each articulating distinct visions of futurity grounded in local histories, mythologies, and socio-political concerns (Nelson, 2002; Womack, 2013).

The anthology format allows for a plurality of speculative imaginaries. Stories feature AI deities, robotic ancestors, interstellar travelers, ecological guardians, and mythic figures, presenting technology not as a rupture from tradition but as an extension of ancestral knowledge. This narrative orientation challenges Western science fiction's frequent opposition between spirituality and technology, instead proposing a continuum between past, present, and future (Dery, 1994; Sun Ra, 1974 [Film]).

Visually, *Kizazi Moto* is marked by stylistic diversity. Animation techniques range from sculptural 3D forms to painterly 2D aesthetics inspired by local artistic traditions. These visual strategies assert cultural specificity while embracing digital experimentation, positioning animation as a tool for cultural preservation and speculative innovation (Ryan, 2001).

Music and sound design further anchor the series in Afrocentric futurity. Afrobeat rhythms, electronic soundscapes, choral arrangements, and traditional percussion function as immersive narrative elements, reinforcing emotional resonance and cultural continuity. For digitally native Generation Z audiences, the series offers speculative futures that are participatory, culturally grounded, and resistant to homogenizing global media logic (Nakamura, 2007).

Kizazi Moto reclaims African futurity as sovereign and self-authored. By centering African creators and knowledge systems, the series disrupts dominant global narratives and affirms Afrofuturism as a living, evolving practice rooted in joy, resilience, and imaginative freedom.

Conclusion

Contemporary Afrofuturist animation demonstrates how Black speculative storytelling can be simultaneously culturally rooted, technologically innovative, and emotionally resonant. Through *Entergalactic*, *Spider-Verse*, and *Kizazi Moto*, creators leverage animation's unique affordances, visual experimentation, immersive aesthetics, and transmedia reach, to construct sovereign futures that center Black and African diasporic identities, joy, and agency.

These works challenge traditional paradigms of futurity by blending relational intimacy, multiversal identity, and Pan-African storytelling. They illustrate that animation is not merely a medium for entertainment but a strategic tool for cultural sovereignty, allowing communities to imagine, enact, and share futures that reflect their histories, aspirations, and values. For the digitally native "Metaverse Generation," these narratives offer conceptual frameworks to negotiate identity, community, and creativity across interconnected global media ecosystems.

Ultimately, Afrofuturist animation asserts that Black futures are real, inventive, sovereign, and central to global narrative possibility. By centering joy, emotional depth, and digital innovation, these works embody a transformative vision of cinema as a site for speculative liberation, artistic sovereignty, and cultural imagination.

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

The core ideas, analytical arguments, case study details, theoretical framework, conference dialogue, and original research insights originated from the author's own work and presentation. The DeepSeekAI tool functioned strictly as an editorial, organizational, and drafting aid in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Analysis of Digital Competence in Handling Phishing Cases: Case Study at the Special Criminal Directorate of the Yogyakarta Regional Police

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Abstract

This study examines the processes and digital competencies for handling online fraud cases (phishing) at the Directorate of Special Criminal Investigation (Ditreskrimsus) of the Regional Police of the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Polda DIY). Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this study aims to analyze the handling process and identify the digital competencies required of police personnel. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five members of Ditreskrimsus, observations of phishing case examination and filing activities, and analysis of investigation filing documents and phishing case handling reports carried out by the Polda DIY. This study adopted the DigComp 2.2 framework in data analysis. This framework identifies five areas of digital competency: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, digital security, and problem-solving. The analysis indicates a gap in the digital competency area for Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel. Through an analysis of the phishing handling process at Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY, this study highlights the importance of improving digital competency to increase the effectiveness of handling phishing cases in the dynamic digital era.

Keywords: phishing, cybercrime, digital competence, Polda DIY, cybersecurity

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Introduction

The digital era has brought significant changes to human life, including in the fields of security and law enforcement. The development of information and communication technology, while facilitating public activities, also opens opportunities for various new forms of crime that exploit security vulnerabilities in cyberspace. One such crime is cybercrime, which has become a global threat with increasing intensity. Cybercrime includes attacks such as phishing, malware, ransomware, social engineering, denial-of-service attacks, and disinformation (European Parliament, 2024). Among these various types, phishing is one of the most common and harmful attacks. Aleroud and Zhou (2017) define phishing as a social engineering–based attack that deceives victims by impersonating a trusted entity. The goal is to steal sensitive information such as credentials, financial data, or account access. This attack is typically carried out via email, text message, or fake websites designed to resemble legitimate ones, making victims unaware they are providing information to perpetrators. One common technique involves sending links to intentionally engineered spoofed websites that appear authentic (Ekayani et al., 2023).

Globally, losses from cybercrime are projected to reach 10.5 trillion USD by 2025 (Cybersecurity Ventures, 2020). The Anti-Phishing Working Group (APWG, 2023) reported 4.7 million phishing websites in 2022, with 1.35 million cases in the fourth quarter alone. These figures highlight the urgency of improving mitigation and investigative capabilities for phishing, including in Indonesia. In Indonesia, phishing attacks have increased alarmingly. The Indonesia Anti-Phishing Data Exchange (2023) reported that Indonesia ranked first globally in hosting phishing sites under the .id domain throughout 2023, followed by the United States.

Figure 1
Countries Hosting .id Domain Phishing Sites

Negara	Oktober	November	Desember
Indonesian	91.3%	85.89%	95.7%
United States	3.89%	3.93%	1.19%
Russia	3.11%	9.31%	3.0%
United Kingdom	0.11	0.06%	
Singapore	0.92%	0.17%	0.03%
Germany	0.32%	0.17%	
None	0.36%	0.46%	0.08%

Source: Indonesia Anti-Phishing Data Exchange (IDADX)

Throughout the year, 64,989 phishing attacks were reported, with a peak of 26,675 attacks in the first quarter. Targets included social media, financial institutions, e-commerce platforms, ISPs, and cryptocurrency exchanges. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that 79.5% of Indonesia's population, which totals 221 million people, are internet users (APJII, 2024). However, public awareness regarding cybersecurity remains low; only 19.5% of users demonstrate a good understanding (Pratiwi et al., 2024). In addition to human factors, digital infrastructure also contributes to the rise in phishing attacks. Browsers and other software contain vulnerabilities that phishers can exploit (Chiew et al., 2018). Yurita et al. (2023)

emphasize that the large population of internet users, weak cybersecurity literacy, and gaps in digital infrastructure further worsen the situation.

At the local level, Yogyakarta is one of the regions that faces significant phishing threats. Data from the Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY shows that in 2022, cybercrime was the most common case, accounting for 43 of 83 cases successfully handled (Harianjogja.com, 2023). As an educational city with an internet penetration rate of 88.73% (APJII, 2024), Yogyakarta has a large population of young and active internet users, making them prime targets for phishing perpetrators. The high level of digital penetration and students' online behavior patterns add complexity to the challenges faced by law enforcement.

In such conditions, the digital competence of law enforcement officers becomes a crucial factor. According to the DigComp framework (Carretero et al., 2017), digital competence includes the ability to use technology safely, critically, and creatively. Guillén-Gámez and Mayorga-Fernández (2020) emphasize that digital competence involves not only technical skills but also risk awareness and the application of protective practices against cyber threats. For police personnel, this competence is essential for detecting, analyzing, and resolving increasingly complex phishing cases.

However, several studies show that challenges related to officers' digital competence remain substantial. Previous research has identified obstacles such as limited resources, technical skill gaps, constraints in digital forensics, jurisdictional issues, and procedural approaches that do not adequately address digital competence (Aini & Lubis, 2024; Prakoso, 2022; Purwandari, 2024; Sitompul et al., 2024). These gaps indicate the need for more targeted research on police officers' digital competence in handling phishing cases, particularly at the regional level, such as Polda DIY. This study aims to analyze how the digital competence of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel contributes to the handling of phishing cases, while identifying the challenges and limitations they encounter. Using a qualitative case study method and the DigComp 2.2 framework, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the digital capacity-building needs among law enforcement officers.

Beyond its academic contribution, this research also has practical relevance. The findings can serve as a foundation for the Indonesian National Police in designing more targeted training programs to strengthen personnel's technical and analytical capabilities in handling phishing cases. With the increasing prevalence of cybercrime in Indonesia, improving the digital competence of law enforcement officers has become an urgent necessity to protect the public and maintain the effectiveness of law enforcement in the digital era.

Literature Review

The development of digital technology has transformed how society interacts, creating a growing need for law enforcement officers to possess adequate digital competencies, particularly in handling cybercrimes such as phishing. This study employs digital literacy as its primary theoretical foundation, which is further elaborated into an operational digital competency framework.

Digital literacy, according to Gilster (1997), refers to the ability to understand and use information from various digital sources. Martin (2005) expands this definition by emphasizing the ability to access, manage, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize digital resources. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) adds five dimensions of digital literacy, including photo-visual,

reproduction, branching, information, and socio-emotional literacy. Meanwhile, Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2014) introduce six modern digital skill categories, ranging from operational skills to strategic skills.

For the operational framework, this study adopts DigComp 2.2 as the primary reference for assessing the digital competencies of police personnel. DigComp Framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022) includes five areas: (1) information and data literacy, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) digital content creation, (4) safety, and (5) problem solving. This framework was selected because it provides a comprehensive analytical structure suitable for evaluating digital competencies within a professional context.

DigComp 2.2 is used in this study to analyze the digital competencies of personnel at the Regional Police of the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Polda DIY) in two main aspects. First, to assess the digital competencies of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases based on the five competency areas. Second, to identify the strategies required for developing digital competencies to enhance the effectiveness of phishing case handling. By employing DigComp 2.2, this study is expected to provide a systematic overview of the digital competency readiness of police personnel and the relevant development needs in law enforcement related to cybercrime.

Method

This study employs a qualitative case study approach. According to Yin (2018), the case study method is appropriate for exploring contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. A case study involves providing a detailed description of the case being examined. Essentially, case study research typically begins with “how” and “why” questions. In this research, the case study method enables an in-depth exploration of digital competencies in handling phishing cases at the Special Criminal Investigation Directorate (Ditreskrimsus) of Polda DIY. As explained by Stake (1995), this method helps gather rich contextual data through multiple sources. Although it has limitations in terms of generalizability and access to sensitive information, the depth of analysis produced can offer valuable insights for developing strategies to address phishing cases.

This study uses the DigComp 2.2 framework to analyze the digital competencies of Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases. Five competency areas are used as analytical indicators, including: (1) information and data literacy, namely the ability to analyze digital evidence and data related to phishing; (2) communication and collaboration, namely coordination across units and with relevant stakeholders; (3) digital content creation, namely digital case documentation and content development in handling phishing cases; (4) digital safety, namely understanding aspects of cybersecurity; and (5) problem solving, namely the ability to overcome technical issues encountered during investigations.

This research aims to thoroughly uncover the factors influencing the digital competencies of Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases in Yogyakarta. The research subjects are police personnel serving within the Cyber Sub-Directorate (Subdit Siber) of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY, particularly those directly involved in handling phishing cases. Selecting Polda DIY personnel as research subjects is highly relevant since they are directly responsible for investigating and responding to phishing cases in the Yogyakarta region. The criteria determined by the researcher to obtain sufficiently in-depth and valid information include: (1)

Police personnel who have served for at least six months in the Cyber Sub-Directorate of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY to ensure sufficient understanding of procedures and variations of phishing cases; and (2) personnel with direct experience in handling phishing cases. Research subjects are selected using a purposive sampling procedure. According to Sugiyono (2016), purposive sampling is a technique for selecting data sources based on specific considerations. The reason for using purposive sampling is that not all potential samples meet the required criteria for the phenomenon being studied.

The researcher collects data through in-depth interviews with five personnel from Subdit V Cyber of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY who meet the predetermined criteria, as well as through observations and document analysis. The interviews focus on personnel's experiences in handling phishing cases across the five competency areas of DigComp 2.2. Observations are conducted on the case-handling process to identify the application of digital competencies in practice. Document analysis includes investigation files and standard operating procedures that indicate the required digital competencies. Validity testing is conducted through early-stage triangulation by comparing results from these three sources to validate findings on digital competencies based on the DigComp 2.2 framework. This triangulation process involves using diverse perceptions to clarify meaning and assess the likelihood of repeating specific observations or interpretations. Triangulation techniques can also be used to clarify meaning by identifying different perspectives on various phenomena (Flick, 1992, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2009).

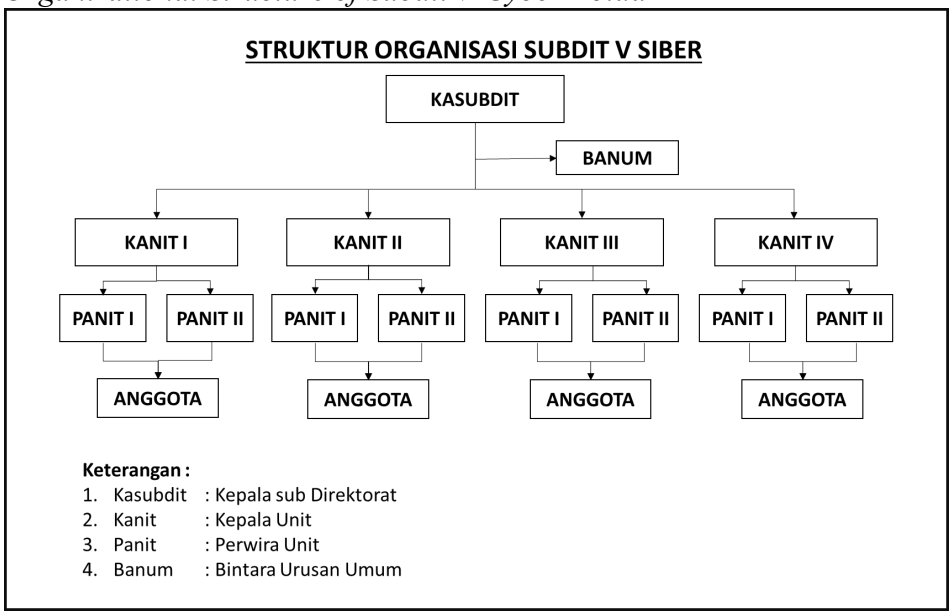
Discussion

The analysis of the digital competencies of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases reveals several important findings based on the DigComp 2.2 framework. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, this study identifies patterns of capabilities and implementation challenges across the five core areas of digital competence.

Based on field observations, Sub-Directorate V Cybercrime (Subdit V Siber) of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY is responsible for investigating and prosecuting cybercrimes, including phishing. The unit consists of investigators, cyber analysts, and digital forensic personnel; however, a significant technical competence gap was observed. Of 37 personnel, only three hold digital forensic certification, which poses a challenge in addressing the growing complexity of cybercrime cases.

The organizational structure of Subdit V Cybercrime, as illustrated in the figure, is arranged with a clear hierarchy. The Sub-Director leads the entire unit, which is divided into four operational units (Unit Heads I–IV), each supported by Section Heads (Panit) and several staff members. Additionally, there is a Banum (Administrative Officer) who supports administrative functions. While this structure allows for a clear division of tasks, gaps in digital competence can hinder operational effectiveness, particularly in investigations and case preparation.

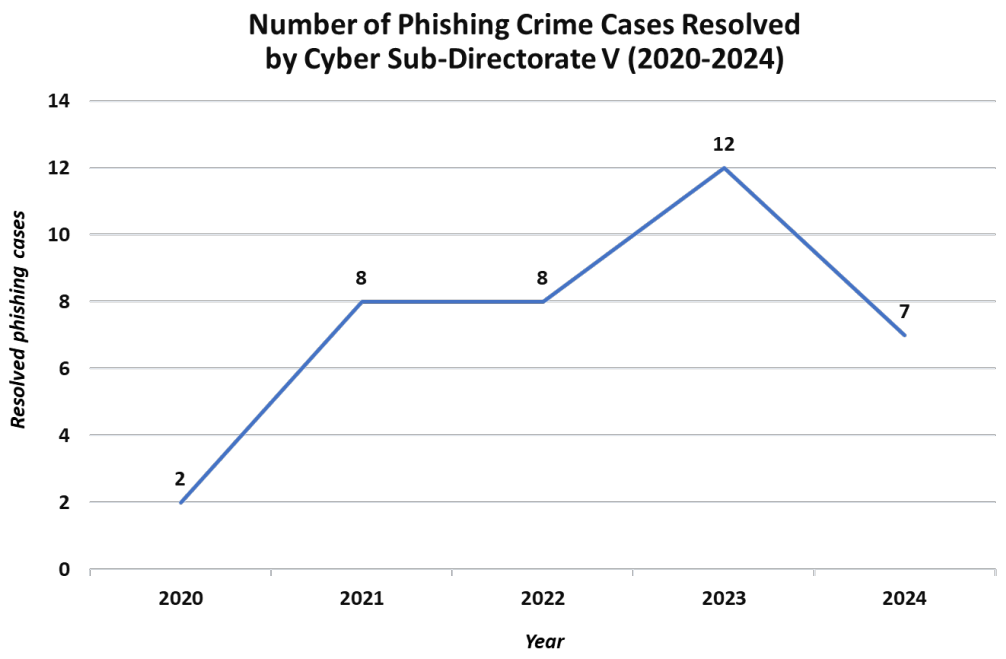
Figure 2
Organizational Structure of Subdit V Cyber Polda DIY



In practice, phishing cases are handled through a systematic procedure: the report is received at the Integrated Police Service Center (SPKT), followed by investigation, case conferences, elevation to a full investigation, and, finally, case file preparation before submission to the Public Prosecutor. This workflow reflects an organized mechanism, although the success of each stage remains dependent on the technical competencies of the personnel involved.

An analysis of phishing case trends handled by Subdit V Cybercrime from 2020 to 2024 shows notable fluctuations (Figure 3). In 2020, only two phishing cases were completed, marking the lowest level in the five years, likely influenced by COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions on activity. In 2021, the number increased significantly to eight cases, with similar figures observed in 2022. The highest number of case completions occurred in 2023, reaching twelve cases, indicating an improvement in the unit's handling capacity compared to previous years. However, the number decreased again in 2024 to 7 cases, reflecting fluctuations in the region's phishing case-handling trends.

Figure 3
Number of Phishing Cases Handled by Subdit V Cybercrime, Polda DIY (2019–2024)



These fluctuations indicate that phishing remains a significant threat in Yogyakarta, with a recent upward trend in case resolution despite a decline in 2024. The decrease may be attributed to the growing adoption of digital technologies and increasingly complex cybercrime techniques. Amid these challenges, Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY continues efforts to strengthen personnel's digital competencies despite resource limitations and the high demand for technological adaptation.

To provide a comprehensive analysis, the discussion is divided into two parts: first, an assessment of personnel digital competencies based on the five areas of DigComp 2.2; and second, an identification of competency gaps and development needs to enhance the effectiveness of phishing case handling in Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY.

This DigComp 2.2-based analysis offers an in-depth overview of the capabilities and limitations of personnel in managing phishing cases across each competency area.

1. *Information and Data Literacy*

The analysis of the information and data literacy competency area at Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY reveals varying levels of capability in handling phishing cases. According to the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), information and data literacy encompasses three main competency dimensions: the ability to articulate information needs and to locate and retrieve digital data; the ability to evaluate the relevance and reliability of sources and their content; and the ability to store, manage, and organize digital data. These competencies are fundamental in cybercrime investigations, as they involve handling complex digital data.

In the first dimension, namely the ability to articulate information needs and conduct digital data searches, Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY has implemented standard procedures for the collection of digital evidence. As the informants explained, each phishing case requires digital forensic analysis of the victim's devices to understand the takeover process. The team uses various forensic tools, including Cellebrite, Magnet Axiom, and Oxygen, for data extraction and analysis. Wireshark complements the use of these tools for network analysis, Autopsy for digital forensics, and multiple OSINT tools to obtain comprehensive data.

In the second dimension, the ability to evaluate the relevance of data sources and content, the team applies ISO standards in assessing digital evidence. Informants stated that the unit uses ISO 27037 for evidence collection, preservation, and identification, and ISO 27042 for analysis and reporting. Data verification involves several techniques, including hash verification, digital signature analysis, and timestamp verification. For email-related evidence, the team performs DMARC, SPF, and DKIM checks to verify email authenticity. Despite these efforts, a significant limitation remains: of the 37 personnel in the cyber unit, only three hold digital forensic certification.

The third dimension, the ability to store, manage, and organize digital data, is implemented through the Laboratory Information Management Forensic System (LIMFS). This system stores and manages request documents, police reports, seizure warrants, case summaries, and original copies of digital evidence. The unit conducts automatic daily backups to a redundant system and performs long-term archiving using structured classification and indexing. However, storage capacity limitations restrict the unit to processing only around 75 requests per month.

The analysis indicates that although Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY has established standard procedures and utilizes adequate tools across the three aspects of information and data literacy, several key challenges remain. First, the limited number of personnel with digital forensic certification, with only three out of 37. Second, storage capacity and infrastructure limitations that restrict the number of cases that can be handled. Third, the need to enhance competencies in the use of advanced forensic tools to keep pace with evolving cybercrime modus operandi. Fourth, the need to standardize data analysis procedures across units to improve case-handling effectiveness.

2. Communication and Collaboration

The analysis of communication and collaboration competencies at Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY shows structured coordination in handling phishing cases. In the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), this area includes communicating and collaborating through digital technologies, participating in digital services, and managing digital presence.

First, the ability to communicate and collaborate digitally while considering cultural diversity is demonstrated through a structured internal coordination system. As stated by an informant, "Coordination is carried out through an integrated system and regular coordination meetings. We have a dedicated WhatsApp group for rapid communication between units. For sharing digital evidence, we use a secure internal system." The unit has developed standard digital documentation systems and secure information-sharing protocols, including encryption and layered access controls to protect data integrity.

Internal coordination is further strengthened through routine coordination meetings and a forensic analysis request management system.

Second, regarding participation in public or private digital services, the study identifies coordination mechanisms involving various actors across the digital and financial ecosystem. An informant described the scope of this coordination: "We definitely work with relevant institutions. Banking, telecommunications operators, and e-commerce platforms. Sometimes we also coordinate with the Ministry of Communication and Informatics." However, this coordination process faces structural constraints, particularly related to data access and regulatory limitations. The informant further explained the complexity of coordinating with international platforms: "Indonesia is only a user of the platform… When we talk about legal regulations, the regulations that apply are those of the country where the platform is based."

Third, in the area of managing digital identity and reputation, Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY has developed various cyber awareness and educational initiatives. An informant highlighted the unit's extensive public education efforts: "It is commonplace. We often serve as resource persons for various community groups… The point is to educate the public about IT-related crimes, which are increasingly prevalent in Indonesia." These educational programs reflect the unit's recognition of the importance of digital literacy in preventing phishing crimes.

The findings indicate several significant challenges in implementing communication and collaboration competencies. First, regulatory barriers to coordinating with international digital platforms, as explained by the informant, are often due to differences in national regulations, which impede data request processes. Second, limitations in the standardization of communication protocols across institutions complicate information-sharing processes. Third, there is a need for a more integrated communication platform to facilitate multi-stakeholder coordination.

3. *Digital Content Creation*

The analysis of digital content creation at Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY, based on the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), focuses on three aspects: creating and editing digital content, integrating information while respecting copyright and licensing, and providing clear instructions for computer systems.

In the context of creating and editing digital content, Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY has implemented standardized forensic documentation procedures. As explained by the informant, the unit uses standard equipment in the digital forensic laboratory to document evidence, including detailed and step-by-step photographic capture. This capability is supported by various digital forensic tools, such as Celebrate, Ankom, and XRW, which extract and analyze data and verify the authenticity of stored data copies.

Regarding the second aspect, the ability to integrate information, the unit has developed a standardized documentation system through the Lab Information Management Forensic System (LIMFS). As described by the informant, the unit uses standardized reporting formats aligned with Indonesian National Police SOPs, covering an executive summary, technical details, forensic analysis, and conclusions. LIMFS enables structured integration and management of information while maintaining confidentiality and access control.

To provide instructions that computer systems can understand, personnel must have an in-depth understanding of forensic tools and analysis. The informant emphasized that the effectiveness of tool usage depends on personnel's ability to explore and understand device architecture. This highlights the importance of continuously updating knowledge to keep pace with technological developments.

Despite these efforts, the implementation of digital content creation continues to face several significant challenges. First, there is a limited number of personnel with competence in using advanced forensic tools. Second, the documentation and information integration process across units requires further standardization. Third, there is a need for improved capability in utilizing the latest forensic technologies. Fourth, constraints remain in developing analytical systems capable of keeping pace with evolving crime modus operandi.

4. Safety

The safety aspect in the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022) includes three core dimensions: protection of devices and data, protection of physical and psychological well-being, and awareness of the environmental impact of digital technology. In the context of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY, the implementation of safety measures demonstrates layered security protocols in handling phishing cases.

In the dimension of device and data protection, Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY has established a comprehensive security system. The unit uses a local server for data storage, with access restricted to specific devices. An informant explained that the “original copy” of the data is stored on the server until a court decision has the force of law, with strict logging of every access. Security is reinforced through multi-factor authentication and periodic password updates every two weeks. The system is also equipped with a backup mechanism through a network-attached storage (NAS) that is isolated from internet access, providing an additional security layer for sensitive data.

Regarding the protection of physical and psychological health, the unit recognizes the impact of heavy workloads on personnel. As the informant stated, handling major cases often creates significant mental pressure. To address this, the unit applies a work rotation policy and provides sufficient rest periods. Stress management training programs are also conducted regularly to help personnel cope with work-related pressure. In the dimension of environmental impact awareness, the unit has developed data management policies that consider efficient use of digital resources. The informant explained that the unit limits the number of digital forensic requests to 75 cases per month, taking into account storage capacity and resource efficiency. This policy reflects efforts to balance operational needs with infrastructure limitations.

However, implementing the safety aspect still faces several significant challenges. The rapid growth of data volume requires increased capacity in security infrastructure. High workload levels continue to be a concern for personnel's mental health. Meanwhile, the need for a more efficient data management system is becoming increasingly urgent as case complexity increases.

5. Problem Solving

The analysis of the problem-solving aspect in Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY, based on the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), highlights three key competencies: identifying technical needs and problems, using digital tools for innovation, and keeping up with technological developments. These competencies are essential for addressing increasingly complex phishing cases.

The unit's ability to identify needs and technical problems is reflected in its systematic approach to case analysis. An informant explained that each case has unique characteristics despite involving similar modus operandi. This approach is strengthened by detailed digital forensic examinations, in which the informant also emphasized the importance of analyzing the victim's device to understand the mechanism of account compromise and to identify the presence of malware or malicious links.

In terms of using digital tools for innovation, Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY has adopted various modern forensic tools. However, the informant emphasized that tools are merely instruments whose effectiveness depends heavily on the user's exploratory skills and deep technical understanding. The unit has even developed a chipset-based approach to overcome limitations in device databases within existing forensic tools.

Regarding keeping up with technological developments, the unit faces significant challenges, as the pace of technological advancement often outpaces the team's capacity to update tools and competencies. The informant acknowledged that the pace of team research and adaptation remains slower than the rapid evolution of technologies used in cybercrime.

The implementation of problem-solving in the unit faces several significant constraints. First, only 3 of 37 staff members are certified in digital forensics. Second, there is a gap between the speed of technological advancement and the team's ability to update tools and skills. Third, case complexity continues to increase, requiring more advanced analytical approaches.

Based on an analysis using the DigComp 2.2 framework, this study identifies three major patterns in the digital competence of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases. First, there is a gap between standard procedures and actual implementation, as only 3 of 37 personnel hold digital forensics certification, due to the high cost of certification and limited budget allocation. Second, the unit relies heavily on tools such as Cellebrite, Magnet Axiom, and Oxygen, yet still encounters challenges when dealing with new technologies that these tools cannot accommodate. Third, there is a trade-off between the need for rapid case handling and compliance with digital security protocols, limiting case requests to 75 per month to maintain the quality of case processing. These findings demonstrate that the five competence areas in DigComp 2.2 provide a clear understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, and development needs of personnel's digital competence in the context of phishing investigations.

Several unexpected findings also emerged, including the high awareness among personnel of the importance of fundamental digital forensics knowledge beyond tool-based proficiency. There is also an initiative to develop chipset-based analytical methods to overcome tool limitations. Implementing personnel rotation systems helps reduce psychological strain

associated with case handling. Additionally, the development of special coordination channels with relevant institutions accelerates the processing of urgent cases. These findings offer new perspectives on how the unit adapts to resource limitations and the growing complexity of cases. The study also highlights the importance of a holistic approach to digital competence development, encompassing technical skills, operational capabilities, and personnel well-being.

The findings regarding the digital competence of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases hold important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study reinforces the relevance of the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), which encompasses information and data literacy, communication, content creation, safety, and problem-solving, in the context of cyber law enforcement. However, the study also asserts that cybercrime investigations require expanding this framework to include digital forensics and evidence management, which are not explicitly covered. These findings also confirm Martin's (2005) digital literacy theory on the importance of awareness, attitude, and digital capability, emphasizing that the competence of law enforcement personnel is not solely dependent on tool usage but also on a fundamental understanding of technological architecture and functionality. Scientifically, this study contributes to understanding the implementation of the digital competence framework in Indonesia's cyber law enforcement context, identifying gaps between theoretical constructs and practical field needs, and highlighting the importance of balancing technical competence with foundational knowledge in cybercrime handling.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers several recommendations to strengthen law enforcement's capacity to address phishing. First, training programs must expand beyond tool-based forensics and include a deeper understanding of fundamental technologies. Second, establishing minimum digital competence standards for cybercrime personnel is essential to ensure the quality of case handling and the validity of digital evidence in court. Third, personnel's psychological well-being must be addressed through stress management and more structured task rotation. Fourth, improvements to digital forensic infrastructure are urgently needed to address storage capacity limitations that limit the number of cases processed each month. Additionally, coordination mechanisms with digital platforms and related institutions must be strengthened, including international cooperation to address challenges related to cross-border data access. These recommendations offer an empirical basis for developing policies and capacity-building programs to enhance law enforcement readiness in addressing the growing complexity of cybercrime.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the digital competence of Ditreskrimsus Polda DIY personnel in handling phishing cases continues to face several challenges, particularly due to a gap between required competencies and the number of certified personnel: only 3 out of 37 members hold digital forensics certification. This condition affects the unit's capacity, limiting case handling to 75 requests per month. Although the unit has a relatively comprehensive set of operational procedures, its implementation is hindered by infrastructure limitations, a high reliance on forensic tools, and suboptimal development of adaptive analytical methodologies. The study also highlights a trade-off between the speed of case resolution and adherence to chain-of-custody protocols to maintain the integrity of digital evidence.

Several limitations of the study should be noted, including its focus on a single institution, limited access to detailed technical information, and a relatively short observation period. Based on these findings, human resource capacity building becomes a priority, including increasing the number of certified personnel, developing training programs that balance technical skills with foundational understanding, and strengthening internal knowledge management. In terms of infrastructure and coordination, improvements are needed in forensic data storage capacity, the development of more adaptive analytical systems, and the enhancement of cross-agency collaboration. Future research comparing digital competence across regional police departments (Polda) or evaluating competence development models is also necessary to enrich strategies for improving law enforcement capabilities in addressing increasingly complex cybercrime.

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Netflix and the Future of TV

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has significantly transformed the media landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, reshaping audience behaviors, content production strategies, and industry dynamics. This study explores the impact of streaming services—particularly Netflix and Shahid—on television consumption in the MENA region, examining user preferences, device usage, and geographic distribution patterns. Drawing on social media data, market reports, and secondary sources, the analysis reveals a strong mobile-first viewing culture dominated by Android devices, with major audiences concentrated in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and Egypt. Shahid's emphasis on culturally localized content and user accessibility has enabled it to compete with global giants like Netflix, whose strategy revolves around high-budget original programming and global market diversification. By comparing these findings with existing literature, the study highlights how both platforms reflect broader shifts in global television trends, such as audience fragmentation, personalized recommendations, and binge-watching habits. However, this study is limited by the absence of direct content analysis and lacks user-centered qualitative data. Future research should include content-based comparisons of Netflix and Shahid to identify specific factors driving user engagement, such as genre, language, and cultural representation. Additionally, conducting surveys and interviews would provide deeper insights into user motivations and satisfaction, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the digital viewing experience in MENA. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital media convergence and the localization of global platforms in diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: Netflix, TV industry, Saudi Arabia, Over-the-Top platform

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Introduction

The revolution of digital technology has played a significant role in the transformation of many industries, particularly the TV industry, over the years. Emerging the Over-the-Top service has impacted the scene of the transformation and shift in many consumption patterns and content decisions. Besides, the techniques that OTT services use in media content and production are considered innovative ways that provide new and exciting ways to create, distribute, and consume media content such as films, television shows, and music. On the other hand, the integration of telecommunications, broadcast, and Internet networks has made the television business a strategic battleground for national and international stakeholders, including public, private, and commercial organizations. Throughout history, the state has consistently recognized the television industry for its significance in public service, culture, politics, commerce, and industry. Consequently, it has established regulatory frameworks to govern the national television industry. However, the emergence of new structures facilitating the multiplatform global distribution of television content introduces various questions regarding the cultural and political significance of television and its evolving nature. Governments now confront regulatory hurdles, while the emergence of diverse business models within a television landscape no longer dominated solely by traditional institutions and organizations poses implications for public service content (Boyle, 2019).

Many studies have argued about the relationship between streaming TV and the TV industry as it is considered complex and multifaceted. Van Esler (2020) mentioned that:

> The rise of VOD platforms weakened the power of film studios and expanded the influence of television networks and producers to bestow media prestige by giving consumers greater choice in the type of content they watch, as well as the ways in which they watch it, a role similar to the one played by VCRs and DVRs. (p. 947)

However, he mentioned that the relationship between emerging technologies and established industry powers is still ambiguous rather than inherently disruptive in the media field. In addition, the new socio-technological paradigms must be understood as evolutionary rather than revolutionary in television canon discourses. While subscription video-on-demand platforms alter the TV canon formation equation by promoting platform-specific original programming and offering algorithmically derived personalized recommendations and interfaces, they also "largely reinscribe preexisting canons through well-worn discursive practices and content acquisition decisions" (p. 948). However, in terms of Netflix, many articles have explored Netflix's multifaceted role in the media landscape, highlighting its unique ability to blend television, cinema, and digital distribution (Brennan, 2018). This hybrid approach, coupled with a global focus on original international content, has fueled Netflix's subscriber growth and international revenue streams (Brennan, 2018). By tailoring content to specific regions, Netflix ensures its continued relevance in diverse markets (Kim, 2021; Park et al., 2022).

Studying the future of television, particularly the impact of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms like Netflix, is critical due to their considerable impact on viewer behaviors, industry dynamics, and regulatory frameworks. Understanding how OTT services are changing content consumption patterns, disrupting traditional TV models, and influencing content generation and distribution strategies is critical for stakeholders throughout the media landscape. In essence, investigating the impact of OTT platforms on shaping the TV landscape promotes informed decision-making and innovation in a rapidly changing media

environment. It has been observed that most of the studies focus on audience consumption and behavioral change. However, a lack of studies highlights how the OTT impacted on the TV industry. So, this study is going to analyze how Netflix impacted the TV industry through asking the research question which is: how has the original content of Netflix and OTT impacted the TV industry in MENA region?

This study aims to highlight the impact of Netflix on the TV industry by focusing on the TV industry, the challenges that face the industry, the Netflix industry, and its impact.

Literature Review

Netflix's strategic pivot towards the production and distribution of original series has upended conventional television standards (Vettoretto & Moore, 2023). By making substantial investments in original content, Netflix has not only redefined the concept of "television" but has also shaped content creation and consumption practices (Vettoretto & Moore, 2023). This shift has prompted a reassessment of television norms by both viewers and established television companies (Lotz, 2019). Furthermore, the global reach of Netflix has not only affected the global television scene but also the local film and television industries. As an example, Netflix's significant investment in Korean dramas, demonstrated by their spending of $700 million on more than 80 original series between 2015 and 2020 highlights the company's dedication to varying its content offerings. Although original content has always been a priority for traditional TV networks, their global reach and investment in original content are not comparable to Netflix's (Kim, 2021; Park et al., 2022). Additionally, the industry's value chain has changed as a result of the platform's unique approach to content creation, which is defined by giving showrunners creative autonomy and placing a premium on high-quality content (Gong, 2022). Besides, Netflix's strategy for expanding into Europe has been shaped by its investment in original programming that is tailored to a variety of markets (Afilipoaie et al., 2021). Furthermore, Sanz and Crosbie (2016) highlights how the cultural and material openness of the Internet has caused a shift in television consumption. "Yet, Netflix seems to signal a move away from the medium, its branding strategies, associated viewing patterns, technologies, industry structures or programming" (p. 259). Also, Netflix's approach to content creation has reshaped the dynamics of global media distribution and the variety of content available on streaming platforms (Lobato, 2019). Unlike conventional broadcasters, Netflix has tailored its content to appeal to a worldwide audience from the inception of production, which has significantly contributed to the platform's widespread popularity and influence (Asmar et al., 2023). The platform's ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium between the volume and caliber of its content has emerged as a crucial determinant of its significance in the television industry (Gong, 2022).

The original programming produced by Netflix has had a profound influence on the television industry, notably in terms of viewing behaviours and content creation. Netflix's on-demand approach has popularized binge-watching, prompting a surge in the production of content targeting diverse demographics (Matrix, 2014). The introduction of original serialized drama by Netflix has established its position as a significant player in the contemporary media landscape, disrupting traditional TV networks and cable channels (Jenner, 2016).

The research conducted by Bouziane Zaid et al. (2023) delves into the changing media consumption habits among young adults in the Gulf region, specifically focusing on their adoption of Netflix over conventional television. By engaging in interviews with young

adults from the Gulf, the study sought to gauge the degree of Netflix adoption within this demographic. Their findings revealed a significant trend wherein numerous young adults in the Gulf have embraced Netflix as their primary source of entertainment, leading some to completely forego traditional TV and transition into what industry experts' term "cord cutters." This trend highlights the concept of technological "de-domestication," where newer, more efficient technologies supplant older ones as individuals migrate towards solutions that better align with their needs.

Furthermore, the research sheds light on the evolution and reconceptualization of the relationship between television and its viewers, as audiences shift from passive spectators to active participants who wield greater control over their viewing experiences. Netflix's features play a crucial role in this transformation, offering viewers the ability to tailor their leisure time and personalize their content consumption. Elements such as user profiles and tailored recommendations empower viewers with a sense of ownership over their viewing habits, fostering a deeper connection with the platform. However, the study also identifies challenges associated with Netflix's recommendation system, including frustrations stemming from opaque algorithms and the intricacies of deciphering user preferences in a shared viewing environment.

One noteworthy issue highlighted in the study is the absence of oversight by legal or media regulations regarding Netflix, particularly concerning censorship in accordance with cultural and religious norms prevalent in the Gulf region. Many users grapple with dilemmas when content conflicts with societal values, emphasizing the necessity for increased transparency and accountability in content moderation. With the continued expansion of SVoD (Subscription Video on Demand) services like Netflix, the study suggests that traditional television broadcasters in the Gulf must adapt by offering personalized content formats to cater to evolving audience preferences. This adaptive approach will be crucial for traditional TV to maintain relevance in an increasingly digital and personalized media landscape.

Netflix has been instrumental in redefining the notion of "global TV," as illuminated in Lobato's (2019) study. Unlike platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, Netflix distinguishes itself by prioritizing professionally curated content over user-generated material. Additionally, Netflix has made significant strides in penetrating international markets, with more than half of its subscriber base now located outside the United States. To cater to diverse audience tastes, Netflix has secured licenses for numerous non-US titles and has invested substantially in producing original content across 30 different national markets. This strategic approach has led to greater geographical diversity and localization, underscoring Netflix's commitment to engaging a broader international audience.

The emergence of internet-distributed TV through on-demand services has catalyzed a transformation in viewing habits that were once marginalized during the analog and physical media era. Practices such as time shifting, self-curation, and selective access have now assumed central importance within the industry, becoming standardized and integrated into everyday viewing behaviors, as observed by Lotz (2014), as referenced in Lobato's research (2019). In contrast to traditional linear television, Netflix has pioneered innovative filtering, aggregation, and recommendation systems, which have garnered widespread adoption. This transition toward non-linear TV exemplifies Netflix's role in revolutionizing the television landscape and adapting to the changing preferences of contemporary audiences.

Uricchio, as highlighted in Lobato's (2019) text, emphasizes the necessity of looking to the past to forecast the future of television. By examining its historical development alongside related media like video games and broadcasting, a clearer understanding emerges of how the current TV landscape has been shaped by factors such as content diversity, information dissemination, and media exposure. This retrospective analysis offers valuable insights into the potential trajectory of television in the coming years. Within the industry, there is an ongoing discourse regarding the vitality of television. For example, Wolf (2015), cited in Lobato's research (2019), posits that Netflix represents television more than the internet due to its adherence to traditional storytelling techniques, visual styles, and passive viewing experiences. Wolf argues that Netflix's transition from a DVD rental service to a digital content producer has effectively transplanted television norms and values onto interactive digital platforms, thus shaping the future direction of digital media. Additionally, while audiences may still seek professionally crafted content reminiscent of traditional TV, the mode of consumption has expanded beyond traditional television sets to encompass a myriad of digital platforms accessible from any location. This underscores television's transformative impact on digital media consumption habits and suggests an ongoing evolution in how audiences engage with and consume content in the digital era.

Enli and Syvertsen (2016) contend that the future trajectory of television is not solely determined by technological and economic factors; rather, it is influenced by a complex interplay of local contextual elements such as historical legacies, regulatory frameworks, user behaviors, and strategic responses from key institutions within each national context. Moreover, the evolution of technology and market dynamics, coupled with the advent of new business models, poses not only a challenge but also prompts a reevaluation of the traditional understanding of television.

Furthermore, scholars argue that digital platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and HBO exert significant pressure on the television industry, intensifying both economic and technological pressures. These platforms accelerate audience fragmentation by providing personalized viewing experiences, liberating viewers from rigid schedules and enabling them to tailor content consumption across diverse devices and platforms. Additionally, the competition between Netflix and traditional television extends beyond content delivery to fee-paying subscribers; it encompasses the production of compelling original content tailored to specific audience demographics.

Moreover, Netflix's multifaceted strategies, spanning marketing endeavours, content creation, and rhetorical maneuvers, foster innovation, cost efficiency, and heightened customer satisfaction. Consequently, this poses a substantial challenge to the advertising industry, which traditionally relies on linear TV platforms for revenue generation. Furthermore, the growing inclination among younger demographics towards digital intermediaries such as OTT platforms and “cord-cutting” – the abandonment of traditional cable or satellite TV subscriptions in favour of online alternatives – underscores a fundamental shift in consumer preferences and viewing patterns.

Method

The primary objective of this study is to examine the influence of Netflix's original content on the television (TV) industry. The research will employ qualitative research methods, focusing on the analysis of statistical reports pertaining to various aspects of original content, including viewership, investments, and advertising revenues. Additionally, the study will

conduct comparisons between top over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix and Shahid, alongside prominent local TV networks like MBC, to discern trends and patterns within the industry. The analysis will be guided by a media economic analysis model, emphasizing metrics such as subscriber numbers, revenue generation, and viewership statistics. Given the challenges associated with obtaining accurate data in the Middle East region and the time-consuming nature of analyzing individual Arab countries, this study will primarily concentrate on assessing and comparing OTT platforms across the MENA region. Furthermore, the research will incorporate a comparative analysis between OTT platforms and traditional television, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia as a case study.

Table 1
Key Industry Reports on Streaming Platforms and Television Markets

Report	Year	Analysis Used	Platforms Focus
Data EQ report MENA OTT	2023	Data collected from online posts on Social media	Netflix MENA, Shahid, Starzplay, and Disney+ MENA
Saudi Arabia television and streaming market share analysis	Q1 2023	TV channel and platforms	Netfl ix,HBO, MBC,Shahid andCBS
The rise and rise of streaming video in the mena market	2020	analysis the STARZPLAY platform	STARZPLAY
Saudi Arabia's dynamic television & video market	2022	collecting secondry data from previous studies	TV MBC and OTT Shahid
MBC Group Prospectus			MBC and Shahid
Omdia Research Reveals Middle East and North Africa Online Video Advertising Revenue will More than Double to $2.3bn in 2027	2023	Online video advertising revenue in MENA	SVOD
Netflix Statistics: User, Subscriber & Content Data	N/A	Netflix user, subscriber, and content data	Wall Street Zen
Netflix SEC Filings	N/A	Netflix's financial reports	Netflix Investor Relations
Netflix Search Results	N/A	Netflix subscriber statistics	Netflix Investor Relations

Analysis

After reviewing data from various reports, several key themes have emerged. The primary focus of statistical analyses tends to revolve around comparing SVOD platforms, notably Netflix and Shahid. However, there is a noticeable lack of reports that contrast these platforms with traditional TV networks in the Arab MENA region. One exception is the MBC Group report, which offers valuable insights into the comparison between Netflix, Shahid, and local TV networks. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of reports that specifically address individual Arab countries such as the UAE. Therefore, this analysis concentrates on evaluating the competition among Netflix, Shahid, and major local TV networks in KSA and the wider MENA region, particularly focusing on MBC. Overall, the streaming services market in the MENA region is witnessing intensified competition, with global giants like Netflix and Disney+ competing alongside regional players like Shahid and Starzplay. These platforms are consistently expanding their content offerings, investing in exclusive and original productions, and enhancing user experience to attract and retain subscribers.

Subscription Trends

The expansion of SVOD services in the MENA region signals a rapidly evolving digital video market. Industry analyses by Omdia (2023) indicate strong growth across the sector, alongside rising online video advertising revenues, reflecting increased platform adoption and monetization. which signifies a significant shift in consumer behavior towards on-demand streaming platforms. Leading the charge is Shahid VIP, boasting 2.7 million subscriptions, followed closely by STARZPLAY Arabia with 2.1 million, and Netflix trailing slightly with less than 2 million subscriptions. This proliferation of regional and global SVOD platforms reflects the evolving preferences of audiences, who are increasingly gravitating towards personalized and flexible content experiences over traditional TV viewing.

Shahid, the streaming platform owned by the MBC Group, has emerged as a leading player in the MENA streaming market, demonstrating significant subscriber growth over recent years. Subscriber numbers increased from a relatively limited base in 2019 to a peak during the Ramadan period in 2023, reflecting the platform's rapid expansion and strong regional appeal. In contrast, Netflix has exhibited more moderate growth in the MENA region, with subscriber figures reported at approximately 2.2 million in the first quarter of 2023, according to MBC Group industry reporting. This comparison highlights Shahid's accelerated growth trajectory relative to global competitors within key regional markets.

The rise of SVOD subscriptions shows a broader trend away from conventional television viewing, as audiences seek content that aligns with their cultural and linguistic preferences. Shahid VIP's commanding presence, representing approximately 24.3% of total SVOD subscriptions, demonstrates the appeal of regional platforms offering content tailored to local audiences.

Despite Shahid's strong performance in the MENA region, **Data EQ (2023)** identifies Netflix as the leading platform in terms of online visibility and audience engagement. Netflix accounted for the largest share of industry conversation and recorded the highest net sentiment during the reporting period, indicating sustained audience interest and favorable public perception. This prominence suggests that Netflix's ability to deliver a positive user experience and generate widespread digital attention continues to reinforce its popularity within the regional streaming landscape.

Moreover, subscription trends in the MENA region, particularly in KSA, highlight the significance of sports coverage in driving viewer interest. Shahid's coverage of the Saudi League garnered considerable attention, while Starzplay's focus on Lega Serie A emerged as a key draw for subscribers. This emphasis on sports content reflects the diverse preferences of audiences in the region and underlines the importance of catering to specific viewer interests to remain competitive in the SVOD landscape.

Market Share and Competition

Shahid's dominant position in the MENA streaming market, with a leading share as of late 2022, reflects the platform's strong strategic positioning and competitive content portfolio. Its emphasis on localized programming, including Arabic-language originals and regionally relevant narratives, has enabled the platform to consolidate its presence despite increasing competition from global streaming services. This performance highlights the growing importance of culturally resonant content in shaping platform competitiveness within the MENA digital entertainment landscape (MBC Group, 2023).

The parity in customer satisfaction between Shahid and Netflix, with both platforms earning 28% of the MENA region's votes as favourite streaming services, highlights the growing preference for regionally relevant content. Particularly noteworthy is Shahid's popularity surpassing that of Netflix in key markets like Egypt, underscoring the importance of cultural resonance and language accessibility in fostering audience loyalty.

The MBC Group's leadership in the MENA region is particularly evident in key markets such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf region, and Egypt. According to data reported in the MBC Group Prospectus, Shahid SVOD held the largest market share among competing OTT platforms in the region based on late-2022 figures, accounting for approximately 23% of the market. This leadership reflects Shahid's strong regional positioning and its ability to compete effectively with global streaming services through localized content strategies and high brand recognition (MBC Group, 2023). Moreover, Shahid's proactive measures to compete with global SOVD platforms like Netflix, particularly in original content creation, reflect its commitment to maintaining its competitive edge in the rapidly evolving digital entertainment landscape. The platform's strategic initiatives align with broader government efforts in the KSA to combat piracy and support the expansion of legal digital entertainment options, emphasizing its pivotal role in shaping the future of streaming in the MENA region.

Content Demand

The substantial demand for original content from Shahid in Saudi Arabia, constituting a noteworthy 4.3% of total viewership, underscores the platform's significant influence in shaping viewing habits and preferences across the region. As audiences increasingly gravitate towards locally produced content, traditional TV networks find themselves facing heightened competition in retaining their share of viewership.

This shift in content consumption patterns reflects a broader cultural transition towards embracing homegrown narratives and storytelling, challenging the dominance of global entertainment conglomerates in the MENA region. MBC Group's strategic investment in original programming serves as a proactive response to evolving viewer demands and preferences, positioning Shahid as a formidable contender in the competitive MENA streaming landscape.

In Saudi Arabia, MBC stands out as one of the top channels in terms of demand for its original content, capturing 6.2% of total demand and ranking third behind Netflix and HBO. Shahid's original content alone accounts for a significant 4.3% of demand for shows in the Saudi Arabian market, highlighting the substantial impact of MBC Group's content offerings in this region.

Regarding content quality, Netflix leads among the four platforms, including Netflix, Shahid, STARZPLAY, and Disney+, with approximately 60% of consumers expressing satisfaction with the high quality of content. Shahid follows closely behind, securing the second position with a satisfaction rate of 30.9%.

In terms of content diversity within the MENA region, Netflix emerges as the frontrunner, offering a diverse range of content encompassing 87% of viewers' preferences, while Shahid follows with a 52% reach. These findings show the significance of original content offerings in catering to diverse audience preferences and solidifying platforms' positions in the evolving streaming landscape.

Viewer Demographics and Consumption Patterns

The demographic profile of Shahid viewers in Saudi Arabia, where over 70% fall below the age of 35, highlights the platform's strong affinity with younger audiences. This segment, characterized by their digital fluency and preference for mobile-centric lifestyles, plays a pivotal role in shaping the evolving landscape of OTT consumption across the MENA region.

With a significant 77% accessing content via smartphones, the prevalence of mobile device usage among Shahid viewers underscores the paramount importance of platform accessibility and user experience in driving engagement and cultivating viewer loyalty. As smartphone penetration rates continue to climb across the MENA region, OTT platforms must prioritize mobile optimization to effectively tap into this burgeoning market segment.

While traditional television remains a cornerstone of entertainment, providing communal viewing experiences and a diverse array of content options, Saudi media consumers are increasingly drawn to OTT VOD platforms for their flexibility, personalized experiences, and content variety. This shift signals a burgeoning OTT landscape in Saudi Arabia, outpacing regional forecasts, with projections indicating robust growth in OTT revenues.

The expanding audience for OTT video in Saudi Arabia mirrors consumers' growing preference for personalized and on-demand content consumption habits. OTT platforms, both international and regional players like Netflix, Starzplay, Shahid, and Jawwi, are well-positioned to meet this escalating demand, offering options like advertising-based video on demand (AVOD) and subscription-based video on demand (SVOD).

For example, MBC Group’s Shahid platform has witnessed substantial growth, boasting 9.5 million unique users in the MENA region. The average monthly number of unique viewers for Saudi Shahid AVOD increased significantly over the preceding two years, reaching approximately 3.4 million viewers in 2021. This growth reflects a sustained upward trajectory in AVOD consumption in Saudi Arabia and highlights the platform’s expanding reach within the local digital video market (MBC Group, 2023).

In comparison to MBC1 TV viewership demographics, Shahid viewers in Saudi Arabia exhibit a more pronounced skew towards younger age groups. While MBC1 TV captures 31% of viewers aged 15–24 years old, Shahid surpasses this with 37% in the same age bracket. Similarly, among viewers aged 25–34, MBC1 TV retains 27% of its audience, whereas Shahid boasts a slightly higher share at 35%. However, Shahid's viewership begins to taper off among older demographics, with 17% of viewers falling in the 35–44 age group compared to MBC1 TV's 20%. Moreover, Shahid's appeal diminishes further among viewers over the age of 45, capturing only 11% of this demographic, while MBC1 TV maintains a higher share at 22%. This comparison highlights Shahid's pronounced attractiveness to younger audiences, particularly those between the ages of 15 and 34, reflecting the platform's success in catering to the preferences of digitally savvy and mobile-oriented viewers.

Device Preference and Geographic Distribution

The geographic distribution of Shahid's user base across the MENA region,especially its significant presence in Saudi Arabia, and the GCC, underlines the platform's wide-ranging regional appeal. By offering content that caters to various linguistic and cultural preferences, Shahid has effectively built a loyal subscriber base that transcends national borders and demographic segments.

The prevalence of mobile devices, particularly Android smartphones, as the primary method for accessing Shahid's content highlights the platform's adaptability to evolving technological trends. With a substantial 62% of users accessing Shahid through mobile devices, the platform's mobile-centric approach seamlessly aligns with broader digital media consumption patterns, emphasizing convenience and accessibility for users on the move.

In essence, the rise of original content on platforms like Netflix and other OTT services such as Shahid has fundamentally reshaped the MENA region's television industry. This transformation has brought about an era characterized by unprecedented choice and personalization for viewers, compelling traditional TV networks to adapt to shifting consumer preferences to remain relevant. MBC Group's establishment of the Shahid platform exemplifies this adaptation strategy, aimed at retaining their audience amidst the ongoing digital revolution.

Despite the prevailing trend of digitization, television continues to maintain its significance as a mass communication medium, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Despite the rapid growth of OTT platforms, television continues to play a central role in Saudi Arabia’s media landscape, reaching a large majority of the population on a monthly basis in 2021, with serialized programming leading overall viewership (Sarkis et al., 2024).

Discussion

The analysis of themes regarding device preference and geographic distribution resonates with findings from previous studies, highlighting Shahid's regional appeal and user demographics. Zaid et al. (2023) explored changing media consumption habits among young adults in the Gulf region and found a significant trend towards Netflix adoption, particularly among younger demographics. This aligns with the demographic profile of Shahid viewers, with a significant proportion below the age of 35, reflecting a broader shift towards on-demand streaming platforms among younger audiences.

Similarly, the literature review on Netflix's influence on the television industry shed lights the platform's global reach and investment in original content production. Vettoretto and Moore (2023) emphasize Netflix's strategic pivot towards original series production, which has reshaped content creation and consumption practices worldwide. This parallels Shahid's emphasis on localized content and user experience to cater to diverse linguistic and cultural preferences, reflecting a broader trend in digital media consumption towards personalized content offerings.

Moreover, the comparison highlights similarities in platform strategies, with both Shahid and Netflix prioritizing original content to attract and retain subscribers. Afilipoaie et al. (2021) discuss Netflix's strategy for expanding into international markets through investment in original programming tailored to diverse audiences. This strategic approach mirrors Shahid's regional appeal and investment in localized content, underscoring a shared emphasis on content diversity and cultural relevance.

Furthermore, the prevalence of mobile devices as the primary mode of content consumption on both Shahid and Netflix reflects broader trends in digital media consumption towards mobile optimization. Lotz (2014), as referenced in Lobato's (2019) research, discusses the transformation of viewing habits with the rise of non-linear TV platforms like Netflix, which prioritize convenience and accessibility. This aligns with the mobile-first approach adopted by both Shahid and Netflix, emphasizing the importance of platform accessibility and user experience in driving engagement.

Overall, the comparison with previous studies highlights shared trends and dynamics in content consumption habits, platform strategies, and audience demographics between Shahid and Netflix. By contextualizing the analysis within existing research, this discussion provides a deeper understanding of the evolving media landscape and the influence of on-demand streaming platforms on television industry norms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of digital technology and the emergence of OTT platforms like Netflix have significantly reshaped the landscape of the television industry, profoundly influencing audience behaviours, content consumption patterns, and industry dynamics. While traditional television has historically held sway over cultural and political realms, the convergence of telecommunications and Internet networks has transformed it into a strategic arena for global competition. The advent of VOD services has disrupted established power structures, affording consumers unprecedented options and flexibility in their content consumption choices. However, the interplay between new technologies and established industry players remains intricate, with Netflix's impact often perceived as evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Nevertheless, Netflix's hybrid approach, amalgamating elements of broadcast, cinema, and digital distribution, has propelled its rapid global expansion and sustained subscriber growth.

As for the limitations of this study, while it provides an overview of the overarching trends and dynamics in the television industry, it does not delve deeply into the specific content strategies and production approaches of platforms like Netflix and Shahid. Future research could benefit from a more granular analysis of the content offered by these platforms, exploring what makes them popular and attractive to viewers. Additionally, conducting surveys and interviews could provide more comprehensive insights into audience preferences

and behaviors, facilitating a deeper understanding of the topic. Such endeavors would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving media landscape and the factors driving the success of on-demand streaming platforms.

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

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

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The Effect of Artistic and Digital Interventions for Promoting Mental Health in Immigrants: A Theoretical Approach

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Abstract

Immigrants encounter numerous disparities compared to non-migrants, as migration is a disruptive event that negatively impacts their mental health. Lack of support networks, dual identities, and traumatic experiences contribute to this vulnerability. In response, community-based artistic and digital interventions, such as textile design, embroidery, and digital storytelling workshops, have emerged as promising strategies to promote their mental well-being. However, these interventions often lack theoretical grounding to guide and maximize their individual and combined effects. We address this gap by integrating three theoretical frameworks that can scaffold interventions designed to support immigrants' mental health. First, the Network Episode Model (NEM) provides a foundation for designing community textile workshops where immigrants can create social networks and integrate within their new communities. Second, the Dual Identity Model informs embroidery workshops to help participants navigate identity conflicts, while strengthening belonging and self-esteem. Finally, narrative theory shapes digital Storytelling workshops, allowing immigrants to construct personal stories that give meaning to traumatic experiences through self-expression and catharsis. Building on NEM, the Dual Identity Model, and narrative theory, this paper presents a theoretical approach that facilitates both innovative design of interventions to promote mental health and systematic evaluation of effects based on theoretical concepts.

Keywords: artistic and digital interventions, Network Episode Model, Dual Identity Model, narrative theory model, immigrants, mental health

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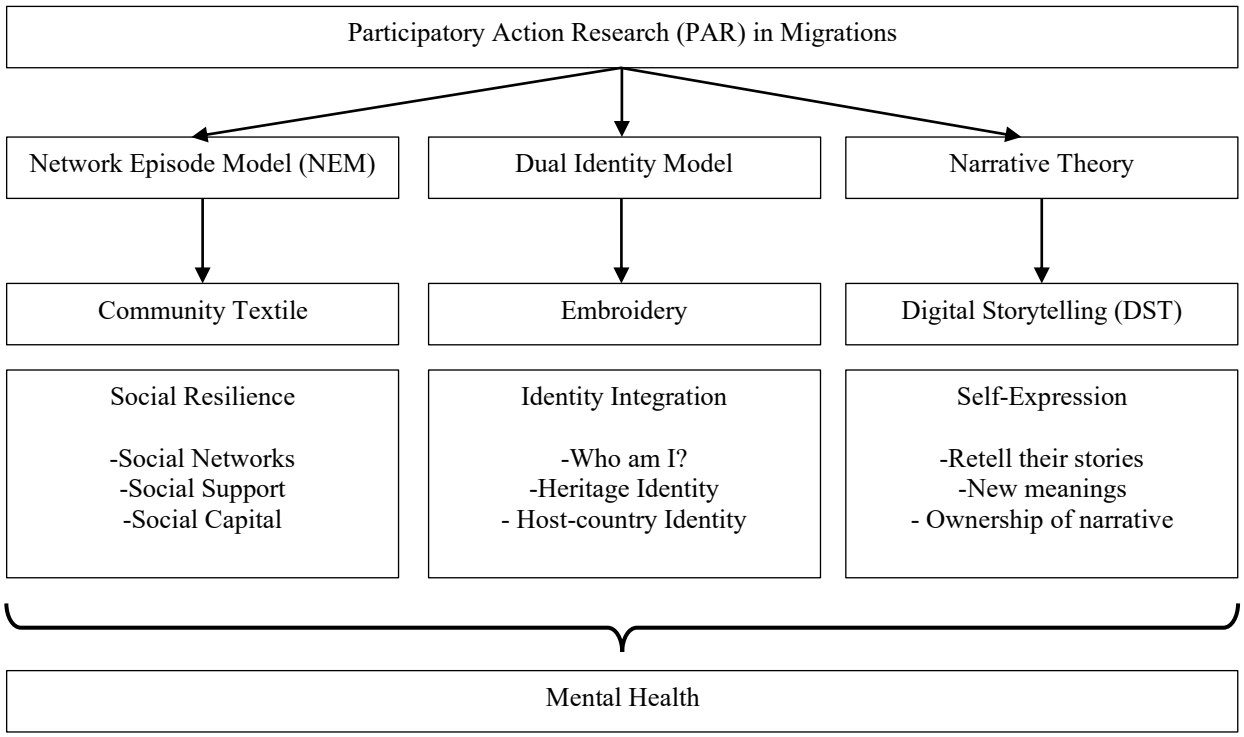
Introduction

Migration is a deeply transformative experience that often disrupts migrants social connections and familiar cultural surroundings. Many immigrants arrive in relatively good health, a trend known as the "immigrant health paradox", but over time, their mental health can worsen due to ongoing stress, social isolation, identity problems, and limited access to culturally appropriate care, i.e., care that is sensitive to the immigrants' origin culture (Ferrara et al., 2024).

As migration affects mental health, there is growing recognition that traditional healthcare models are not enough. Alternative approaches, especially those that are participatory and creative, such as community-based artistic and digital interventions, are showing potential in promoting immigrants' mental health (Nascimento et al., 2023a, 2024a). For example, textile arts, such as embroidery, offer migrants a tactile means of expression. These slow, hands-on practices can foster communal healing by creating shared spaces for reflection and connection. Digital interventions, such as video testimonies where immigrants share their experiences, enable personal catharsis while reaching broader audiences. Digital storytelling provides scalable, accessible support for others and can spark social and political awareness. Together, these approaches form a complementary approach for practical intervention: one rooted in tradition, touch, and material expression; the other in voice, reach, and empowerment.

Moreover, we argue that artistic and digital interventions grounded in diverse theoretical approaches can be combined to provide a holistic and culturally sensitive framework for addressing immigrant mental health as a multifaceted phenomenon. This paper introduces a new theoretical model that integrates the Network Episode Model (NEM), the Dual Identity Model, and narrative theory to guide such interventions. NEM highlights the importance of social networks in influencing help-seeking behavior and recovery pathways. The Dual Identity Model addresses the negotiation between heritage and host cultures, offering insight into identity reconstruction and belonging. Narrative theory emphasizes the healing potential of storytelling, enabling migrants to reframe experiences of trauma and displacement. Together, these lenses provide a robust foundation for community-based artistic and digital practices that help immigrants build social resilience, navigate identity complexities, and engage in self-expression. For a visual representation of the proposed model, please see Figure 1.

Figure 1
Artistic and Digital Intervention for Promoting Immigrants Mental Health



Participatory Action Research in Promoting Immigrants' Mental Health

One promising methodology in research to promote and support immigrants' mental health is Participatory Action Research (PAR; Blaakilde & Christensen, 2024). This approach is based on the values of fairness and inclusion and involves participants as active partners in the research process (Baum et al., 2006). In the context of migration, this methodology ensures that immigrants, whose voices are often overlooked, can be more involved in the research and intervention, can speak for themselves and help design solutions that fit their cultural needs.

A recent systematic review aimed at supporting mental health within immigrant communities has shown that these practices go beyond mere data collection for research purposes. They also help people grow and heal, with positive and encouraging results for participants' overall well-being. Through PAR, immigrants can reflect on their experiences, give new meanings to their migration experiences, and rebuild their social networks (Nascimento et al., 2023a). This methodology can be particularly relevant for immigrants who leave their origin countries because of conflict or hardship, where feelings of powerlessness are common.

Moreover, PAR offers immigrants the opportunity to actively shape the process through co-creation, fostering not only personal healing but also collective empowerment. By reclaiming authorship over their narratives, immigrants can challenge harmful stereotypes and reshape how their stories are represented and understood in public discourse. However, despite its transformative potential, PAR interventions in migration contexts often concentrate on isolated issues affecting mental health. Yet, immigrant mental health is influenced by a constellation of factors, psychological, social, cultural, and political, that require a more comprehensive approach (Verelst et al., 2022). To address this complexity, multiple, targeted interventions should be implemented, each informed by robust theoretical frameworks to enhance their

relevance and effectiveness. In the following section, we argue for an integrated model that combines key theories and practices to address diverse dimensions of mental health within migration experiences.

The Network Episode Model

The migration process is deeply disruptive, requiring immigrants to rebuild social ties and support systems, learn to trust unfamiliar people, and navigate new environments. These challenges can undermine their capacity to adapt and cope, a capacity referred to as social resilience (Salgado & Patuzzi, 2022). A study on immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries living in Portugal found that when social networks are homogeneous (networks constituted mainly of ties with other immigrants, referred to as bonding social capital) and lack broader support, the risk of mental health issues such as depression increases significantly (Nascimento et al., 2023b). This underscores the need for interventions that actively foster immigrants' social resilience, not only to protect their mental health but also to strengthen their ability to thrive in new contexts.

Artistic interventions can play a vital role in fostering immigrants' social resilience. A PAR project involving community textile workshops in London – where participants stitched their migration journeys onto maps – demonstrated promising outcomes (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). These workshops created a space for immigrants to share personal migration experiences, build trust, and form new social connections. As their support networks expanded, participants gained access to valuable information, discovered new local resources, and improved their employment prospects (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). This collective engagement not only enhanced their overall well-being but also strengthened their capacity to adapt and thrive in unfamiliar environments.

Both research and interventions could benefit from incorporating the Network Episode Model (NEM), developed by Pescosolido (1992). NEM views mental health care as a socially embedded process. It highlights how individuals navigate their mental health journeys through a series of interactions (referred to as episodes) that are shaped by formal systems (such as healthcare providers), informal networks (like family and peers), and broader social contexts. Thus, NEM provides a framework for understanding how individuals interact with health systems, emphasizing the influence of social networks on help-seeking behaviors, access to care, and recovery paths.

In the context of migration, NEM has proven especially useful for exploring social resilience, as it underscores the importance of constructs such as social support and social capital in affecting mental health outcomes. Studies applying NEM to immigrant populations in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic found that migrants tend to have more unstable and homophilic networks, characterized by limited diversity and fewer bridging ties, compared to non-migrants, which increases their risk for mental health challenges (Nascimento et al., 2023a, 2024b). Meanwhile, immigrants with more diverse networks (those including non-migrant ties and varied sources of support) benefit from better access to information, resources, and opportunities, which can boost their well-being and resilience (Nascimento et al., 2021). Incorporating NEM into PAR to design community-based artistic projects, such as textile workshops, provides a valuable perspective for assessing not only the mental health impacts of these practices but also how social networks are created and mobilized. This approach can shed light on ways to strengthen social resilience and promote broader social integration within host societies.

In summary, NEM can help explain how people deal with health issues by relying on their social networks. Instead of seeing health decisions as purely individual choices, this model emphasizes how friends, family, and institutions influence mental health care trajectories and outcomes. This perspective is relevant as immigrants often lose their social support during migration. Thus, applied through PAR, such as community textile workshops, NEM can help demonstrate the effectiveness of these interventions by revealing how rebuilding social ties in the host country contributes to resilience, access to resources, and improved mental health outcomes. However, while NEM highlights the importance of rebuilding social ties, it does not fully account for the internal psychological tensions immigrants face as they navigate multiple cultural identities. To bridge this gap, Dual Identity Model offers a complementary perspective that provides insight into how individuals reconcile belonging across both heritage and host societies.

The Dual Identity Model

In addition to the disruption of social networks commonly experienced during migration, immigrants often face psychological complexities in discerning which elements of their cultural heritage to maintain and which aspects of the host culture to integrate. This identity conflict can significantly affect well-being. However, in the Netherlands, longitudinal research revealed that immigrants who were able to identify with both their origin culture and non-migrant groups in the host community demonstrated better mental health over time, including higher life satisfaction and lower levels of depression and loneliness, compared to those with monolithic identity profiles (Zhang et al., 2018).

Artistic interventions such as embroidery offer immigrants a meaningful way to express themselves and explore complex questions of identity. In addition to being a valuable creative practice in itself, embroidery can serve as a powerful medium for conveying cultural and personal narratives (Silva, 2023). When embedded in community settings, embroidery-based interventions create spaces for migrants to share experiences, build social connections, and reflect on who they are—ultimately supporting their mental health and sense of belonging. A participatory embroidery workshop in Norway, for example, successfully brought together migrants and locals to co-create, fostering social encounters and dialogue around integration and identity (Aure & Al-Mahamid, 2021). Thus, interactions between immigrants and non-migrants are essential for providing expressive outlets and cultivating inclusive communities that validate both aspects of the immigrants' identity.

These community interventions can be strengthened by the Dual Identity Model (Berry, 1997), which emphasizes the importance of creating spaces where immigrants can actively engage with identity negotiation. This model highlights the need for individuals to reflect on which aspects of their heritage they wish to preserve, and which elements of the host culture they feel comfortable integrating into their evolving sense of self. Achieving a balance between origin and host country identities is essential for safeguarding mental health and well-being (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Interventions guided by this model can help reduce acculturative stress, foster self-esteem, and support a more inclusive and resilient process of identity integration.

In summary, these findings in the migration field highlight encouraging prospects for interventions that support immigrants' mental health through the lens of the Dual Identity Model. By being both accessible and culturally familiar, embroidery emerges as a powerful therapeutic and community-based tool. It not only sustains a meaningful connection to heritage

traditions but also provides a safe space for exploring new dimensions of identity within the host society. Framed through the dual identity perspective, such practices enable individuals to integrate both cultural affiliations, thereby fostering psychological mental health. Yet, while the Dual Identity Model highlights the importance of the successful negotiation between heritage and host cultures for immigrant mental health, it does not account for how individuals process their lived experiences, particularly those marked by trauma. To address this complexity, narrative theory offers a crucial extension, revealing how the act of storytelling enables individuals to reconstruct meaning and reclaim ownership of their personal histories.

Narrative Theory

Migration is also a process in which immigrants can face traumatic experiences, such as violence, persecution, and displacement, resulting in higher levels of stress, anxiety, which affect their overall mental health negatively (Kirmayer et al., 2011). These experiences impact immigrants' mental health not only during the migration transition but also in the post-migration phase. In this latter stage, they often encounter stress-inducing challenges such as prejudice, overqualification, discrimination, language barriers, housing difficulties, and limited social integration with the non-migrant population, all of which can intensify feelings of isolation and loneliness. (Fazel et al., 2005). For these reasons immigrants, particularly those who have harder migration trajectories, such as refugees, are at increased risk of developing mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression (Steel et al., 2009).

To promote immigrants' mental health, Digital storytelling (DST) workshops have shown positive results, helping them to see their trajectories in another perspective, and giving new meanings to their stories. In DST workshops, participants are responsible for telling their story on their own terms, through short videos using their own words, images, and voices. These workshops usually happen once a week, over a period of a month. Previous research shows that DST helped Brazilian and Venezuelan immigrants in Portugal express themselves, understand their emotions, and feel seen and heard (Nascimento et al., 2024a). Moreover, telling and sharing personal stories in a safe, supportive group has the potential to reduce loneliness and promote social support networks.

Moreover, narratives serve as transformative tools. Another study with Latin American immigrant women, revealed positive results, in processing difficult experiences, regain voice, and reconstruct identity. Telling their story is an opportunity to express their emotions, reflect on their own experiences and give new interpretations of those stories, giving immigrants agency, rather than passive individuals. Thus, DST can act as a therapeutic intervention allowing participants to produce personal narratives that can restore emotional well-being, enhance social connections, and foster resilience (Pereñíguez et al., 2025).

Additionally, according to Bruner's (1990) narrative theory, humans make sense of the world through stories. He argues that narrative is a fundamental mode of thought, one that organizes experience and constructs reality. Thus, narration of their story allows individuals to interpret their stories in new ways and feel more in control of their lives. This is particularly relevant in the migration field, as migration stories often are distorted from their realities. Through narrative theory interventions, immigrants can better understand challenging or perplexing situations, such as trauma or significant life transitions.

Moreover, there is a greater goal when narrative theory and digital storytelling are combined. These stories have the power to alter public opinion and impact policy when they are shared with decision-makers, educators, and the general public by conveying genuine feelings (Lambert, 2013). In this sense, storytelling serves as a means of social and political empowerment in addition to being a therapeutic tool for individuals.

In summary, in our framework, the narrative lens serves as the integrative layer that brings together the insights of the Network Episode Model and the Dual Identity Model. While social networks foster resilience and dual identity negotiation supports psychological balance, storytelling enables immigrants to weave these elements into coherent, meaningful narratives. It is through narrative that individuals make sense of disrupted connections, cultural tensions, and emotional complexity – bridging the gap between past and present, home and host, loss and hope. Positioned as the final lens, narrative theory operationalized through digital storytelling can transform fragmented experiences into agency-driven stories, offering both personal healing and catharsis as well as collective understanding. While our framework does not address biomedical models or structural determinants like legal status or formal healthcare access, it fills a critical gap in the literature by emphasizing the social and cultural dimensions of immigrant mental health.

Application of Framework

In this section, we present an example illustrating how the three theories can inform the design of three different types of interventions, as well as how the theoretical constructs can be applied for systematic evaluation (see Table 1).

Table 1
Using Theoretical Constructs to Guide Intervention Design and Evaluation

Theoretical Framework	Constructs	Application in Intervention Design	Systematic Evaluation of Effects
Network Episode Model (NEM)	- Social network formation - Access to social support - Integration into community	Textile design workshops where participants collaborate on community textile designs, fostering new social ties and resource-sharing.	- Pre- and post-workshop mapping of participants' social networks (size, diversity, frequency of contact) - Self-reported sense of belonging, perceived support availability and mental health indicators. - Observation of group dynamics and collaboration quality
Dual Identity Model	- Maintenance of heritage identity - Integration into host community identity - Reduction of identity conflict	Embroidery workshops that encourage incorporating traditional motifs with host-country designs, symbolizing dual belonging.	- Changes in self-reported bicultural identity integration and identity conflict - Increases in self-esteem and sense of cultural pride - Qualitative analysis of symbolic meaning in embroidered pieces

Theoretical Framework	Constructs	Application in Intervention Design	Systematic Evaluation of Effects
Narrative Theory	- Story construction - Meaning-making of traumatic or disruptive experiences - Emotional expression & catharsis	Digital storytelling workshops where participants create short videos narrating migration journeys and resilience.	- Pre- and post-measures of psychological distress and meaning in life - Narrative analysis of stories (coherence, agency, positive reframing) -Post intervention focus group, exploring the impact of creating their own narratives - Feedback on emotional release and empowerment experienced during storytelling

Conclusion

Migration is a profoundly disruptive experience that affects multiple dimensions of immigrants' lives, often in ways that traditional healthcare research and interventions cannot fully address. In response to this, this paper introduces a framework that synthesizes several established theoretical perspectives from migration research. By strengthening the conceptual foundation that guides artistic and digital interventions and their systematic evaluation, the framework opens new avenues for participatory action research focused on enhancing immigrant mental health.

Our theoretical framework highlights the significance of comprehending mental health not only as an individual problem but also as being entwined with social networks, cultural identities, and personal narratives. We do this by combining the Network Episode Model, the Dual Identity Model, and Narrative Theory. The Network Episode Model shows how reconstructing and broadening social networks improves social resilience, the Dual Identity Model emphasizes the psychological advantages of preserving a balance between heritage and host-country identities, while Digital storytelling, which operationalizes narrative theory, helps immigrants process painful events, reclaim agency, and create meaning on both a personal and a collective level.

Overall, this paper highlights a theoretical integration combined with artistic and digital practices to enhance the efficacy of community interventions in promoting immigrants' psychological well-being. Several constructs impact immigrants' mental health, and the theoretical model proposed reinforces the necessity of holistic, participatory, and culturally attuned approaches. With this model, we expect that future interventions can help immigrants build their social resilience and support systems, negotiate their dual identities, and promote their overall mental health.

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Posthuman Ecologies: Degrowth Ethics and Environmental Trauma in Kurt Vonnegut's Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

This paper argues that Kurt Vonnegut's fiction anticipates contemporary debates about ecological collapse and degrowth ethics. While Vonnegut has traditionally been read through the lens of war trauma, his satirical treatment of science, technology and capitalism maps closely onto current concerns about planetary boundaries and the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet. The first section examines the metaphor of ice-nine in *Cat's Cradle* as an extreme figure for the simplification of complex ecosystems under industrial modernity, prefiguring contemporary discussions of tipping points and systemic breakdown. The second section reads *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* as a narrative experiment in degrowth, in which Eliot Rosewater's radical philanthropy and resistance to accumulation model forms of redistribution and relocalization that challenge growth-driven capitalism. The third section turns to *Breakfast of Champions* to show how Vonnegut's black humor exposes finance and the stock market as "magic" systems detached from material well-being and ecological limits. Bringing Vonnegut into dialogue with recent work in environmental economics and theory, this paper contends that his ecological parables function as interdisciplinary storytelling: they translate abstract data about energy, land use and systemic risk into accessible narrative forms. Ultimately, Vonnegut's work offers both a warning and an imaginative toolkit for reorganizing social and economic life after growth.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, degrowth, ecological collapse, ice-nine, environmental humanities

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Introduction

Vonnegut's fiction has long been read through the lens of war trauma. However, over the past decade, scholars have begun to notice that the same narrative devices—satire, speculative science and black humor—map uncannily onto today's climate emergency and debates about "degrowth." Christina Jarvis, for instance, argues that Vonnegut's oeuvre is animated by a "planetary stewardship" ethic that predates the contemporary environmental-humanities turn: "Vonnegut knew that the significance of the whole—whether ecosystems or planetary systems—was dependent on the intricate agents, elements, communities, and layers within those larger systems" (Jarvis, 2022, p. 56). Journalists and critics now cite him as an early, prescient voice against petrol capitalism and chemical pollution. This interpretive shift gains urgency as tipping-point science shows how small perturbations can trigger cascading collapse, exactly the chain reaction embodied by *Cat's Cradle*'s (1963) "ice-nine," a substance whose local application freezes the world's oceans and ends civilization.

Vonnegut's ice-nine allegory exposes the core flaw of industrial modernity: the drive to simplify complex ecosystems in service of profit and military power. George Monbiot describes the same logic in industrial agriculture: "Our beliefs about food and farming are dominated by fables and metaphors that describe not the world as it is, but an idealized, simplified planet, prompting us to make catastrophic mistakes" (Monbiot, 2022, p. 25). Timothy Morton would call ice-nine a "hyperobject," a concept that transcends common sense and requires understanding across dimensions of time and space: "Hyperobjects are nonlocal" (Morton, 2013, p. 38, original emphasis), forcing us to think ecologically rather than anthropocentrically. Together, these thinkers clarify what is at stake in Vonnegut's mid-century satire: the peril of treating endless economic expansion as a natural law on a finite planet.

That peril demands a new economic narrative. Degrowth scholarship contends that prosperity does not require perpetual GDP expansion; well-being depends on reducing "throughput" (the amount of material and energy flowing through an economy) in rich nations while improving social outcomes. As Jason Hickel explains, high-income countries "need to organise the economy around human well-being, rather than around capital accumulation," and the only feasible way to reverse ecological breakdown is for them "to actively reduce excess resource use and energy use" (Hickel, 2020, p. 28). Hickel's definition resonates throughout Vonnegut's oeuvre. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965/1992) turns philanthropic redistribution into a mock-heroic alternative to accumulation; *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) ironizes the "blue-fairy" magic of stock certificates, exposing finance as collective make-believe. In each case, Vonnegut's stories model the cultural imagination necessary to move, in Hickel's words, "from growth toward human well-being." The following analysis traces how Vonnegut's ecological parables anticipate degrowth ethics, showing that his dark humor offers both a warning and an imaginative toolkit for reorganizing life after growth.

Unlimited Growth and Ice-Nine

In *Regenesis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet* (2022), George Monbiot offers a radical summary of existing forms of agriculture:

> The more land that farming occupies, the less is available for forests and wetlands, savannahs and wild grasslands, and the greater is the loss of wildlife and the rate of extinction. All farming, however kind and careful and complex, involves a radical simplification of natural ecosystems. This simplification is required to extract

> something that humans can eat. In other words, farming inflicts an ecological opportunity cost. Minimizing our impact means minimizing our use of land. (Monbiot, 2022, p. 77)

The growth in arable land and rising grain yields are accompanied by global population growth, but not all arable land is used to grow crops for direct human consumption. Instead, much of it is used for more economically profitable purposes, such as farming for meat production. In other words, much of the increase in arable land is not used to feed the growing population but to generate profits.

Over thousands of years of agricultural development, the yield of common crops has increased significantly compared to primitive crops. However, this increase in yield does not mean a reduction in the amount of farmland used. This situation is not only common to agriculture; it also appears in many areas of industry. In most cases, efficiency improvements do not reduce the amount of farmland but rather increase the scale of cultivation. This phenomenon, known as the Jevons Paradox, is widespread in energy use. Monbiot uses irrigation as an example in agriculture: "as efficiency improves, and the same amount of water can be used to grow more crops, irrigation becomes cheaper, attracts more investment, encourages farmers to grow thirstier plants, and expands across a wider area" (Monbiot, 2022, p. 49). The same situation can be observed when using chemicals such as fertilizers and herbicides, not just irrigation. Behind these areas of growth lies the pursuit of higher profits, which is the basic logic of capitalism. Monbiot questions the fundamentals of agriculture based on developments in soil ecology and develops his critique from practical experience and observations of soil.

Although modern agriculture often uses simple concepts such as "fertility" to quantify the land's ability to produce agricultural products, soil is a self-organizing complex system with an ecosystem far beyond the scope of a single concept. The soil's plants, animals and microorganisms are interconnected, forming a system capable of withstanding environmental changes. As Monbiot notes: "So it's not just the biodiversity above ground that you want to cultivate. It's also the biodiversity below ground. Roots are the glue that holds and builds the soil biology" (Monbiot, 2022, p. 107). Biodiversity exists in places that cannot be seen and is even more important than what is visible on the surface.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut uses ice-nine to show the consequences that can result from destructive growth based on artificially simplifying the environment. Ice-nine is a fictional substance that transforms liquid water into a solid state. Its most distinctive feature is its ability to trigger a chain reaction, causing ice to freeze all water-containing substances it comes into contact with. The scientist in the story describes how ice-nine works: "When it fell, it would freeze into hard hobnails of ice-nine—and that would be the end of the world! And the end of the interview, too! Good-bye!" (Vonnegut, 2020, pp. 39–40, original emphasis). Andrew John Hicks describes ice-nine as a kind of crystalline "virus" that "teaches the sea, the sky, and even human bodies to become like itself" (Hicks, 2021, p. 40). In Vonnegut's allegory, this synthetic agency springs from a techno-capital nexus that treats growth as an end in itself. Unlike radiation's passive decay, ice-nine actively collapses water's dynamic cycles into a single, homogenous state, an extreme metaphor for capitalism's drive to simplify and exploit complex ecosystems.

This unbounded logic of accumulation, far more aggressive than any natural force, dramatizes why perpetual expansion on a finite planet can only end in catastrophic collapse. Although Dr. Breed, the scientist who describes the power of ice-nine above, is joking, the joke becomes

prophecy: at the end of *Cat's Cradle*, a tiny piece of ice-nine freezes the world. Molly Wallace argues in *Risk Criticism* that the novel "was to be" a book of the atomic age, firmly rooted in the history of August 6, 1945, but it has turned into an "odd allegory" whose extrapolative premise has become "uncannily familiar" (Wallace, 2016, p. 37). The characteristics of ice-nine, which are similar to but go beyond those of radiation, give it a metaphorical quality that far exceeds the fear of nuclear proliferation in the Cold War period, allowing readers in the 2020s to feel the catastrophic consequences of unrestrained growth and the violent transformation of natural resources.

Through the story, it is revealed that the essence of ice-nine is unlimited growth. The destructive result stems from a simple but unreasonable request: to freeze swampy land to better facilitate the marching of soldiers. However, the product created by the request exceeds its original goal. The core of this request is to transform a complex environment to serve humans, not unlike the goals of advanced agriculture. Vonnegut thus reduces a vast ecological arc to a narrow, growth-oriented demand that spawns a technological solution whose unintended consequences overwhelm the entire planetary system. Climate scientists describe such reactions as "tipping points." Monbiot also uses this term to describe the destruction of soil ecology: "A system might be secure under some conditions: its self-organizing properties stabilize it. However, when conditions change, and it is pushed towards a threshold, the self-organizing properties have the opposite effect, amplifying chaos" (Monbiot, 2022, p. 29). Ice-nine anticipates this concept, demonstrating how "solving" a local inconvenience could trigger the destruction of the biosphere. This metaphor is powerful for its simplicity: a single variable, the temperature, dominates a substance that normally embodies fluid complexity. Vonnegut's irony thus condemns the tendency to reduce complex systems to a single concept, such as soil fertility.

The Degrowth Philosophy

Jason Hickel argues that "from its very first principles, capitalism has set itself at war against life itself" (Hickel, 2020, p. 80), a violence born of an insatiable imperative to expand. In *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (2020), Hickel traces the history of capitalism, linking key historical events that are usually celebrated as milestones of "civilization" to the core of capitalist expansion, revealing that these transformations are essentially the appropriation of public resources in exchange for private wealth. Under this logic, Hickel does not accept the idea that capital-driven energy transitions have had a positive environmental impact. Capitalism is essentially a war against life because when all natural resources are considered plunderable, the question is no longer how to coexist with nature but how to exploit it at the lowest possible cost.

As revealed by the Jevons Paradox mentioned previously, improving energy efficiency usually increases energy consumption. Decarbonizing energy through renewable sources such as solar and wind power is often based on the assumption that renewable energy is effectively inexhaustible. Ironically, a similar assumption was made when oil was first discovered. Just as ice-nine in *Cat's Cradle* turns a single tactical fix into a planetary catastrophe, so too can unbounded faith in any "clean" energy solution become a new front in capitalism's war against life—replacing one ecological simplification with another, unless technological shifts are accompanied by a radical downscaling of consumption. Hickel argues that "degrowth" is the key: "a planned reduction of excess energy and resource use to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way" (Hickel, 2020, p. 29). He

reaches this conclusion because he believes an economic system based on growth as its underlying logic is incapable of restraining itself from using natural resources.

If today's environmental crisis transforms the fear of nuclear weapons in *Cat's Cradle* into a broader warning against unlimited growth, then Vonnegut's subsequent work *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* can be read as an experiment in the logic of degrowth. In this satirical fable, millionaire Eliot Rosewater inherits a tax-sheltered fortune designed to enrich his family at the expense of the public good and, disillusioned by postwar America, resolves to give away his wealth to the "terminal losers" of Rosewater County (Vonnegut, 1992, p. 12). Establishing an open-door foundation office in rural Indiana, he dispenses loans and solace without expecting a return, undermining the logic of capital accumulation. When Norman Mushari, a predatory lawyer, attempts to declare Eliot insane in order to seize control of the estate, Rosewater turns the game on its head by legally fathering all his claimants, thereby dispersing his inheritance among the community rather than concentrating it in private hands. Through this plot, Vonnegut dramatizes degrowth principles: wealth is enmeshed in social relations and ecological contexts, and only by refusing endless expansion and practicing radical redistribution can one avert the injustices of growth-driven capitalism.

The protagonist of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* clearly articulates a negative view of accumulation and growth. Eliot, who is discouraged from distributing the family fund to people experiencing poverty and is labeled a psychopath and religious zealot, asserts:

> When the United States of America, which was meant to be a Utopia for all, was less than a century old, Noah Rosewater and a few men like him demonstrated the folly of the Founding Fathers in one respect: those sadly recent ancestors had not made it the law of the Utopia that the wealth of each citizen should be limited. (Vonnegut, 1992, p. 5)

Based on his contempt for the accumulation and growth of wealth, Eliot believes that equal distribution is the way to solve the community's problems, which echoes Hickel's argument. He mirrors Hickel's call to redistribute resources as a substitute for growth, demonstrating that equality can replace endless expansion without sacrificing human well-being. Moreover, Eliot's philanthropy operates locally, consistent with degrowth's principle of relocalization, keeping economic cycles close to the community and minimizing ecological footprints. By framing kindness as an act of economic downscaling, Eliot's ideal community works outside the growth logic. In this way, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* operates not merely as a satire of wealth but as a narrative experiment in degrowth ethics, revealing how anti-expansionary practices can foster social justice and environmental health.

Contempt for the logic of capitalism, such as wealth accumulation and the stock market, is also a recurring theme in *Breakfast of Champions*, which is full of deconstructive gestures:

> There was a lot of money magic like that [i.e., the stock market] going on. It was almost as though some blue fairy were flitting about that part of the dying planet, waving her magic wand over certain deeds and bonds and stock certificates. (Vonnegut, 1973, p. 161)

The stock-market "blue fairy" that Vonnegut invokes is a grotesque parody of capitalist mythology, casting financial instruments as enchanted talismans whose value exists only through collective belief. Throughout *Breakfast of Champions*, money is portrayed not as a

measure of real wealth or human welfare but as a performative ritual, an elaborate sleight of hand that obscures the ecological and social costs piled up behind every share and bond. Dwayne Hoover's unraveling, triggered by encounters with Kilgore Trout's fiction, lays bare the emptiness of this "magic": when the enchanted certificates lose their aura, the entire social order collapses into chaos and violence. Vonnegut thus uses black humor and absurdist imagery to deconstruct the myth that endless financial growth can coexist with human flourishing or environmental sustainability, anticipating today's critique of speculative markets as engines of inequality and ecological desecration.

Interdisciplinary Storytelling

The previous sections introduce Monbiot's account of how agriculture simplifies ecosystems and causes environmental problems, as well as Hickel's analysis of how the growth logic of capitalism destroys the environment. Regardless of the angle from which environmental problems are approached, quantification and statistics are essential to present the problems objectively. For example, when arguing that grazing causes large-scale destruction of land, Monbiot contrasts the ratio of protein produced by cows, goats and sheep and the land required to produce it with the numbers produced by crops: "Milk, the website [e.g., Our World in Data] reports, requires an average of 27 square metres, beef 163 and lamb 185. Lamb protein, in other words, requires 84 times as much land to grow as soy protein" (Monbiot, 2022, p. 78). The difference in land required to produce protein from meat and crops is eighty-four times, a staggering figure. However, it is difficult for readers to imagine the scale of this difference in real landscapes.

In a cognitive study on data and narrative visualization, Madison Fansher and colleagues define "narrative visualizations" as tools for "depicting accumulating risks and increasing trust in data" (Fansher et al., 2025, p. 1). A case study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that dynamic, visual and interactive data—especially when combined with narrative—are more effective at building trust than static data alone:

> Our results demonstrate that narrative visualizations can be more effective than static visualizations for communicating risk, particularly in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond this scenario, we believe narrative visualizations have the potential to communicate about complex, unintuitive, or surprising data in various other contexts. In particular, narrative visualizations may be useful in contexts involving accumulation or exponential growth, and in explaining outcomes related to algorithmic decision-making. By interleaving visualizations with explanations of the underlying data-generating processes, narrative visualizations can help readers build connections between the story and rationale, consequently increasing their trust in the data. (Fansher et al., 2025, p. 23)

This approach is common in ecocritical works. Monbiot reinforces the complexity of soil as a self-organizing complex system in *Regenesis* through anecdotes about insects in his orchard soil, bringing abstract ecological principles to life through personal observation. Similarly, Hickel contextualizes abstract economic metrics by narrating the lived experiences of communities suffering from extractive capitalism. This narrative approach, which integrates quantitative data with experiential knowledge, mirrors Vonnegut's technique in novels such as *Cat's Cradle* and *Breakfast of Champions*, where scientific concepts are embodied through character experiences and concrete imagery.

Vonnegut's narratives function as "ecological parables": stories that translate abstract environmental relationships into accessible human dramas. By personifying scientific concepts and environmental processes, he creates what Timothy Morton terms "hyperobjects," "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, 2013, p. 1), such as climate change and nuclear fallout. Ice-nine functions as a hyperobject, a crystalline agent that makes visible the normally imperceptible interconnections between water systems across the planet. When it freezes the oceans in the story, readers witness the catastrophic cascade effects that scientific models can only describe statistically:

> In that bowl were thousands upon thousands of dead. On the lips of each decedent was the blue-white frost of ice-nine.
>
> Since the corpses were not scattered or tumbled about, it was clear that they had been assembled since the withdrawal of the frightful winds. And, since each corpse had its finger in or near its mouth, I understood that each person had delivered himself to this melancholy place and then poisoned himself with ice-nine. (Vonnegut, 2020, p. 218, original emphasis)

This scene depicts the Bokononists, the followers of the fictional religion founded by Bokonon to comfort the impoverished islanders of San Lorenzo. Bokononism openly admits that its tenets are "foma"—harmless, comforting lies—yet insists that these lies make life bearable in an indifferent universe. Though officially outlawed, nearly every character secretly practices it, creating a darkly comic portrait of belief, community and the human need for meaning. In the final tableau, Bokononists choose collective suicide in response to the frozen world.

This haunting image represents the culmination of Vonnegut's environmental warning, revealing how technological hubris ultimately leads to an intersection of ecological and social collapse. The followers of Bokononism, rather than passively accepting scientific development, perform a final ritual that acknowledges the catastrophic consequences of unchecked technological growth. By ingesting ice-nine, the substance that destroyed their ecosystem, they complete a narrative circle reflecting the novel's critique of growth-oriented thinking. Their orderly arrangement suggests not panic but a deliberate, communal response to environmental devastation, emphasizing that when ecological systems collapse, social systems inevitably follow.

Bokononism itself offers an important counterpoint to the scientific rationalism that produces ice-nine. Its core concepts, such as the "karass," emphasize interconnection and unintended affinity among strangers. The religion's founding on "foma" represents a philosophical alternative to the dangerous "truths" of science when such truths are detached from ethical considerations. When the Bokononists choose communal death through ice-nine, they reject both the destructive applications of scientific knowledge and the growth paradigm that transforms scientific discovery into ecological catastrophe. The "blue-white frost" on each victim's lips creates what might be called a "technoscientific sublime," a horrifying yet awe-inspiring visualization of human-created environmental disaster that makes tangible the normally abstract consequences of ecological disruption. Through this powerful scene, Vonnegut demonstrates that degrowth is not merely an economic philosophy but an existential necessity on a finite planet with finite resources.

Conclusion

Kurt Vonnegut's literary works *Cat's Cradle*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Breakfast of Champions* offer a prescient critique of the ecological and ethical ramifications of unchecked technological advancement and capitalist growth. Through the allegory of ice-nine in *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut illustrates the perilous consequences of humanity's attempts to dominate and simplify complex natural systems, echoing contemporary concerns about environmental tipping points and systemic collapse. The depiction of a substance that irrevocably alters the planet's water systems serves as a metaphor for the irreversible damage wrought by technological hubris and the relentless pursuit of progress.

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut focuses on the socioeconomic structures underpinning environmental degradation. Through Eliot Rosewater's radical philanthropy and rejection of wealth accumulation, the narrative challenges the moral underpinnings of capitalism and advocates for a more equitable distribution of resources, a concept resonant with degrowth principles that emphasize sustainability over profit. *Breakfast of Champions* further deconstructs capitalist ideologies by satirizing the arbitrary nature of financial systems and the commodification of human experience. Vonnegut's portrayal of money as a "magic" construct underscores the illusory foundations of economic growth and its detachment from ecological and human realities.

These narratives align with contemporary ecological critiques by thinkers such as George Monbiot and Jason Hickel, who argue for systemic changes to address environmental crises, and with Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects as a way to understand vast, interconnected challenges. Vonnegut's interdisciplinary storytelling bridges literature, science and philosophy, making complex ecological issues accessible and compelling. His work invites readers to critically examine the ethical dimensions of human "progress" and to envision alternative futures grounded in sustainability, redistribution and ecological humility.

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Beyond Borders: Rethinking Global Citizenship Through Common Land, Collective Belonging, and the Politics of Ecological Participation

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Abstract

Can global citizenship be fully understood without grounding it in land, access, and shared belonging? Contemporary conversations often frame citizenship in terms of mobility, rights, and global ethics—but tend to overlook the material and ecological foundations that shape how people live and participate in the world. This paper argues that common lands—such as forests, pastures, and water bodies—are not just resources but political spaces where citizenship is negotiated and lived. Drawing on political theory and historical struggles over access and autonomy, the paper reframes citizenship as a practice rooted in place, ecology, and collective responsibility. It challenges the assumption that global citizenship must be disembodied and universal, instead highlighting how deeply local practices of stewardship, mutual obligation, and land-based identity offer alternative models of participation and justice. The paper also reflects on how leadership over commons often resists formal state authority, emerging through customary norms, dialogue, and shared use. By focusing on land as both a right and a relationship, this work contributes to reimagining citizenship in a time of ecological uncertainty and political fragmentation. It invites a rethinking of what it means to belong, to lead, and to collaborate in a shared world.

Keywords: global citizenship, common land, ecological participation, political ecology

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Introduction

When people enact citizenship by working together as a community to manage their forestlands, resolve issues with common pastures, and defend ancestral lands against the threat of forced displacement, how do we conceptualise citizenship? Three major ideas related to citizenship are currently central to contemporary research on this topic. First, mobility between national borders; second, universal human rights, and third, a cosmopolitan moral obligation to act ethically in relation to distant others (Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024). While these concepts offer people the opportunity to conceptualise and articulate a sense of solidarity that transcends national borders, they have consistently ignored a critical factor: the material and environmental foundations that shape how people live and politically participate.

Citizenship emerges as communities negotiate, contest, and enact their claims through shared commons, including forests, pastureland, and water. However, they are more than mere resources to be governed and utilised; as such, they are also places of day-to-day political engagement for all citizens.

Studies on commons governance across many different geographic locations have shown that for the vast majority of the world's people, the capacity to remain on ancestral territory, to continue to practice livelihoods based on the use of collectively held resources, and to influence decision-making about those resources represents the basic experience of political existence (Ostrom, 1990). These experiences are overlooked in studies of citizenship. Their primary focus remains on how the ecological and material aspects of political life have been relegated to the periphery by theories that focus on movement and universal rights (Samanta, 2021).

This paper rethinks the concept of citizenship. It looks into it as a practice deeply rooted in place, ecology, and collective responsibility. Those within the commons negotiate who belongs, what authority should be exercised, and what constitutes justice through their collective actions. Practices at the local level of stewarding land and governing territories provide both knowledge (epistemology) and models of participation; however, these have been obscured from view by universalist approaches to citizenship. To understand the nature of citizenship, one must consider how communities around the world use their political agency to manage shared lands.

The Universalist view obscures the distribution of injustice to different territories and communities. It ignores multiple forms of legitimacy and authority that communities have developed over their long-term stewardship of a territory (Pellow, 2000). Additionally, by ignoring the long-term development of community-based legitimacy and authority, this view fails to recognise that communities fighting for their right to resist displacement and assert control over commons are among the most important political battles of today (Dobson, 2006).

The paper unfolds in seven sections. In the next part of the paper, interrogate why mainstream citizenship discourse has rendered land and the familiar good invisible. The third part develops a theoretical argument that links common-pool resource management to citizenship practices. The fourth and fifth parts list case studies of how commons can practise citizenship through commoning; the sixth part explains how power, knowledge, and other ways of knowing (alternative epistemologies) influence how people govern their commons. The seventh part provides an overview of the implications of the proposed framework for how we think about global citizenship. Finally, the conclusion suggests a new direction for the development of

global citizenship by orienting it toward ecological justice and place-based participatory engagement.

The Incomplete Nature of Disembodied Citizenship

Mainstream Citizenship Theory's Claims & Omissions

Three main areas have become the focal point of contemporary citizenship studies: scholars focus on individuals' ability to cross borders between nations, to exercise their universal human rights, and to develop cosmopolitan ethics toward "distant others" (Reysen et al., 2020). Although these are valuable for generating an understanding of solidarity beyond territorial bounds, they are incomplete.

Scholars of citizenship overlook land access and resource governance as basic forms of political engagement (Tully, 2008). Instead of seeing territory as part of the fabric of politics, mainstream theory views it as a backdrop to political activity. Therefore, instead of looking at mobile subjects who can cross borders, scholars tend to look at communities based on location, where community members' political agency emerges through governing the familiar places they share resources. Histories of enclosures and displacement are secondary to the histories of citizenship, or do not fit into the history of claims made for citizenship (Pellow, 2000).

Citizenship theory based on Universalism imagines individuals as "free floating", able to create new forms of membership based on their own imagination rather than geographic location (Benhabib, 2004). In doing so, this perspective does injustice to the billions of people whose basic needs depend on access to land and its natural resources (Tully, 2008). As a result, scholars ignore the material aspects of their lives in their theories and actively marginalise the communities that exercise political agency by protecting the common resources needed for collective survival.

Materiality of the Commons

Political existence depends upon control of the land; communities need to share resources to live. For example, forests provide fuelwood, pastureland provides fodder and medicinal plants; grazing lands support migratory livestock; and water supports both agriculture and drinking (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

Commons are sites of political struggle, not neutral or value-free resources. The decision regarding whether one has a right to participate in the commons determines who is entitled to be a part of the community. Determining the authority a community will have over the commons determines the rights its members will have. Collective action by a community to decide what constitutes justice through common activities demonstrates how the everyday practices of making rules, enforcing compliance, and resolving conflicts constitute political agency (Hailwood, 2005). Political agency is demonstrated by linking individual claims with the well-being of the collective (Agrawal, 2001).

Citizenship has little substance without a connection to tangible physical realities. Universally applied citizenship theories emphasise community participation and involvement, yet they ignore the fact that participation depends on having the resources to do so. Citizens within a community can determine who is a legitimate stakeholder, as can the law. Authority and

belonging in a commonwealth are created through an ongoing commitment to engage with a territorial area (Nagahama et al., 2022).

Ecological crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation, will severely impact all of the commons globally. The universalist approach to citizenship creates a veil of ignorance as to how environmental injustices affect territories and communities unequally (Pellow, 2000). The adverse effects of ecological damage are disproportionately felt by marginalised populations even though they were not responsible for causing them (Bullard, 2005).

Fragmentation is a political process that depends on how different forms of legitimacy and authority are conceptualised. State institutions fail to function; centralised systems of governance have failed and will continue to do so; local communities develop their own institutions through the collective management of resources over multiple generations (Ostrom, 1990), which coexist with those of the formal political system.

Communities that resist dispossession illustrate that citizenship is an outcome of the struggle for the right to be recognised as citizens. Indigenous peoples, pastoralist societies, and forest-dependent communities are fighting to preserve their territorial spaces against state appropriation; they are also challenging the State's enclosure of the land on which they depend for grazing or for livelihoods derived from the forest. All of them have been framing citizenship as a political struggle to claim rights; therefore, it is no longer just a matter of having legal status but of making claims for rights they believe are legitimate (Agrawal & Chhatre, 2006). This way of framing citizenship brings together the theoretical with the practical. It links the theory of citizenship to people's political participation, and through commons governance, we see practices of democracy, accountability, and justice. Therefore, to address today's crises, mainstream frameworks must integrate these material dimensions of citizenship (Schlosberg, 2004).

Citizenship Through Commons Governance Theory

As a way to practice citizenship, shared governance is an act of citizens participating together in the management of shared resources, and therefore practising citizenship as a form of environmental citizenship.

One way people can exercise their citizenship is through shared governance — that is, by collectively managing shared resources. Thus, shared governance is one way to express the idea of environmental citizenship. To do so requires possessing virtues such as responsibility and the capacity to engage in deliberative processes with others (Connelly, 2006). Similarly, communities also express their citizenship through contextual justice, which concerns relationships and territorial membership based on location rather than the universalism of abstract concepts (Carens, 2000).

Additionally, Green Republicanism frames citizenship within a Constitutional framework that incorporates ecological limits and the political-economic realities of society. Therefore, green republicanism positions the state to protect and promote the ecological well-being of all citizens (Barry, 2008). As such, citizenship and the environment are now the same. The citizen has environmental obligations, which are among their most basic civic duties, in addition to their fundamental rights (Dobson & Bell, 2006).

Land as Right and Relationship

Commons governance is a model that views land as a legal right to standard resource systems, but also as a social-ecological relationship that defines how individuals have access to land, how they can use it, manage it, and exclude others from using it (Schlager & Ostrom, 1992), and simultaneously forms the identity of an individual or group through their sense of belonging to the land, and their understanding of the ecology of the land (Manzo, 2003).

Communities view land ownership as contradictory to faithful stewardship. Stewardship prioritises ecosystem health over time while sustaining the livelihoods of dependent communities. Citizenship based on the principles of the commons emphasises the need to integrate these two elements so that citizens can maintain their political agency and achieve justice (Gavin et al., 2018).

How Citizenship is Enacted Through the Commons

Commons communities are responsible for enacting their own citizenship in a commons by developing the "deliberative" aspects of citizenship through shared governance, including rule-making, monitoring, and stewards to the commons. The assemblies that make up the commons will develop, implement, and modify the standard rules that govern the commons (Andersson & Ostrom, 2008).

A "Rule-Making Process" is the creation or modification of standard rules for governing the commons (in this case, how many gallons of water a person can withdraw from the well per day). The Rule-Making Process may also include developing specific rules to meet each member of the commons' individual needs while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the commons. After the Rules are developed, they need to be enforced by monitoring all users to ensure they comply with the established rules of the commons. If a user does not comply with the Commons' rules, there will be consequences based on the degree of non-compliance (i.e., sanctions). These sanctions provide enforcement mechanisms to encourage users of the commons to comply with the commons' rules (Guttmann, 2021).

Additionally, leadership within the commons will develop when individuals demonstrate the ability to resolve conflicts among members of the commons and commit to the long-term, sustainable management of the commons' resources. Leadership in the commons will also emerge when individuals build trust with other members over time (Baldassarri & Grossman, 2011). Therefore, membership in a commons community means being a citizen of the commons and having a sense of collective responsibility to actively maintain the commons and its resources, rather than simply being a member with a legal right to use the commons (Bird et al., 2025).

Case Studies That Illustrate Environmental Governance as an Example of Embodied Citizenship

Ogiek People of Mount Elgon, Kenya

Ogiek live in the montane forest regions of Mount Elgon in Kenya and Uganda. They are a hunter-gatherer community and therefore totally reliant upon the availability of forest resources. Approximately 20,000 Ogiek people inhabit the Mount Elgon forest region (Kenrick et al., 2023).

The Ogiek possess customary governance structures to manage their forest commons. The Chepkitale Ogiek Governing Council is responsible for governing decision-making regarding the use of forest resources. Decisions made by the Council establish customary regulations on honey collection, medicinal plant gathering, and grazing practices. Members of the Ogiek community monitor forest activity, and those who violate the Council's regulations will be subject to sanctions, such as warnings or temporary exclusion from accessing forest resources. The Kenyan Government has repeatedly forced the Ogiek people off their ancestral land under the guise of "conservation" goals. After the Ogiek were removed from the land, commercial logging companies gained access to the forest. They extensively harvested trees, causing severe damage to forest ecosystems. Furthermore, the Kenyan government created the Plantation Establishment and Livelihood Improvement Scheme (PELIS) to replace native forests with non-native plantations (Kenrick et al., 2023).

The repeated loss of ancestral land through eviction has caused an ongoing struggle for the Ogiek to recognise their land ownership rights legally. A report on conservation by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) stated that, in addition to protecting the integrity of forests, recognising the Ogiek's rights to land titles would help prevent forest degradation. The IUCN report further found that customary governance systems produce superior conservation outcomes than state-based systems; therefore, securing Ogiek property rights will serve as a strong incentive to protect their shared-use forestland (IUCN, 2016).

The Ogiek claim land ownership based on their historical occupation and continuous use of Mount Elgon forests. The Ogiek have continuously lived in these territories and developed extensive knowledge of the forest ecosystems. Customary law systems implemented by the Ogiek govern the regulation of forest resource extraction to ensure it does not occur at unsustainable rates and to protect the forest from degradation. The customary law systems employed by the Ogiek effectively demonstrate their ability to manage the commons (Claridge, 2018).

The experience of the Ogiek illustrates that citizenship arises through territorial stewardship—the Ogiek exercise governmental authority by developing and enforcing rules related to resource utilisation. The customary law system used by the Ogiek links an individual's utilisation of resources to the overall well-being of the ecosystem. The Ogiek's efforts to secure property rights to their ancestral lands constitute a claim to political authority grounded in their management of the commons and their place within it. Maintaining property rights to their lands is crucial to ensuring both the continued livelihoods of the Ogiek and the sustainability of the forest ecosystem.

Netarhat Indigenous Movement, Jharkhand, India

Since the 1980s, indigenous peoples of Netarhat, Jharkhand, have been resisting the State takeover of their common forestland. Thirty-plus indigenous tribes joined forces under the name Jan Sangharsh Samiti to stop the military use of their ancestral lands; an Indian government firing range was established on almost 1,500 km of forestland managed by the indigenous peoples of Netarhat. Adivasi people of Netarhat serve as environmental warriors in their fight to protect the forest from State militarism and commercial exploitation. The State was granted title to all forests through colonial legislation, which removed Adivasi people from the land they had environmentally managed for generations. The present-day Adivasi resistance, such as the movement at Netarhat, is an explicit challenge to the colonial legal

structures that have been used to suppress customary rights and the Adivasis' role in ecological stewardship (Singh, 2024).

These communities do not rely on the State to recognise their history or territorial claims. The Netarhat communities are examples of how Indigenous peoples can identify politically as both Indigenous and democratically governed simultaneously (Basu, 2024).

Collective ethnic identity has served as a base for claims to territorial autonomy in Jharkhand since the colonial period. The Netarhat movement unites ethnic identity to claim control of their territory and self-governance (Prakash, 1999).

In assemblies held by the Jan Sangharsh Samiti, communities make decisions on the management of natural resources and the strategy of resistance through democratic processes. The leadership role rotates among community members who demonstrate the ability to mediate conflicts and protect the resource. In addition, women's groups play a very active role in enforcing customary laws against illegal logging and wildlife trafficking.

Forest struggles in post-colonial India represent claims to human rights and territorial justice. Communities seek to remove State control over forests and claim that access to forest commons is a fundamental human right, necessary for survival and the continuation of culture (Singh, 2022).

The communities have employed long-term non-violent resistance using legal petitions and organised protests. Despite the State demolishing the communities' villages and restricting their movement, the communities rebuild and continue their resistance. The fact that this type of resistance continues underscores that citizenship is a form of continuous political struggle grounded in territorial defence and collective governance.

For the communities involved, territory, culture and political existence are united. Losing land represents losing livelihood, culture and autonomy. The communities' continued resistance and governance represent that they are exercising citizenship as an active process of claiming place and ecological stewardship.

Conclusion

Governance of the commons represents a form of citizenship, embodied in action towards common spaces. Political authority is exercised in both cases through customary law and/or collective decision-making processes, and both have the capacity to enforce their decisions through monitoring and applying sanctions to those who breach them. In doing so, both forms of political authority connect individual use to collective well-being.

Hawthorne and Alabaster (1999) define environmental citizenship as active citizen participation in ecological decision-making processes. Citizens actively engage in managing environments through "practical stewardship", rather than through formal institutions. The Ogiek demonstrate this model through the application of their Forest By-Laws. Similarly, the Netarhat communities demonstrate the Hawthorne and Alabaster model through the territorial defence assemblies they hold.

Huttunen et al. (2020) identify environmental citizenship as being based in particular locations and communities. In this context, citizenship develops from a combination of territorial

relationships and social relationships. The Ogiek govern their territory on Mount Elgon through their indigenous knowledge of the area, while the Netarhat communities coordinate resource management through community networks established during their assemblies.

Schild (2016) has also examined environmental citizenship within the context of political theory. Within this context, citizenship concerns power, authority, and justice within an ecological framework. The Ogiek customary councils challenge the state's authority over forest conservation. At the same time, the Netarhat resistance against the Indian army's appropriation of their land asserts political agency through their stewardship of the land as commons.

Ostrom (1990) identified eight design principles for effective governance of the commons. Communities need to develop rules that reflect local circumstances, monitor compliance, and apply graduated sanctions when breaches occur. Also, leadership will emerge from individuals who have demonstrated competence. The Ogiek customary councils and the Netarhat assemblies operate under these principles.

According to Dobson and Bell (2006), our environmental responsibilities represent a key aspect of our obligations as citizens. They are thus a central element of what it means to be a citizen. In this view, being a citizen includes both rights and responsibilities related to ecology.

Collective resource stewardship, such as commons governance, may help fulfil these responsibilities by enabling the shared management of the natural resources upon which we depend for our livelihoods and ecosystems.

The scale of current environmental disasters calls for citizenship frameworks that reflect material realities. While most theories of global citizenship have failed to adequately address how environmental injustices are distributed throughout the world's territories, they tend to ignore long-term stewardship systems that govern natural systems. The development of a commons-based model of citizenship addresses both of these gaps.

Comparative research has shown that the Ogiek forests have maintained better ecological conditions than comparable state-managed areas, and that customary governance has prevented the degradation of the forests resulting from commercial logging. Similarly, the Netarhat communities have protected their forests from destruction by military activities through collective resistance. In both cases, the communities have achieved better outcomes than they would have had they relied on state institutions or centralised conservation programs that displaced Indigenous stewards.

In many instances, centralised conservation policies displace the customary managers of natural resources. State appropriation of lands that are home to Indigenous people can destroy forest commons. Therefore, commons governance offers an alternative for communities seeking to exercise legitimate authority through demonstrated stewardship practices.

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The Role of Media on Public Perception: Impact on the Life Choices and Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care

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Abstract

This paper shares the results of a pilot study designed to assess the feasibility of an online focus group as the methodological approach for Phase 4 of a longitudinal action research project examining the impact of media on perception of youth in foster care (YFC). Earlier phases of the study found that much of the public believes that media portrays YFC as victims, criminals, survivors, and drug addicts. Participants who endorsed these narratives were also more likely to assume that YFC face negative real-life outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration, teen pregnancy, and school drop-out. Phase 4 explores how these implicit biases may influence the life choices and current outcomes of young adults (formerly YFC). Although the online focus group script was carefully developed to prompt reflection and discussion, the pilot test was unsuccessful. An in-person, unstructured listening session was convened with young adults (formerly YFC) to generate new methodology ideas. Unexpectedly, the session produced rich conversations about the role of media in participants' lives and revealed four emerging themes to pursue when the study is scaled using this revised design: 1) Media had no influence or a positive influence, 2) The importance of media representation of foster care is debatable, 3) Identifying as YFC can create vulnerabilities, and 4) Success in life may be discounted or viewed as temporary because of one's foster care history.

Keywords: media portrayals, foster care, perception, outcomes, self-fulfilling prophecy

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Introduction

This paper documents a pilot study testing two methodologies for eliciting real-time retroactive reflections from a small group of young adults with a lived experience in foster care about the influence of media on their life choices and current outcomes. The hypothesis was that thoughtful planning and intentional prompts would guide the participants through a reflective process, helping them to recall events, stories, and experiences that connected their media exposure to the choices they made in adolescence, and, ultimately, to their current outcomes. However, to understand why the pilot test was necessary, it is essential to consider the historical context of this community-based action research project that began five years prior, in 2018.

A group of youth were enjoying a community dinner together as they always did once a month. There were a diverse group who had all spent time in their childhood and/or adolescence in the care of someone other than their biological parent(s). Some were living with relatives; others with foster parents, legal guardians or adopted parents. Collectively, this paper will refer to people with these lived experiences as youth in foster care (YFC) or as adults with a foster care-like experience (FCLE). Their experiences fit within a range of positive to negative, but in all situations, their FCLE status was due to the actions and decision-making of adults charged with their care and should not reflect on who they are or who they develop into as adults. Despite this, one youth raised the topic of being treated like a criminal when someone learns of their FCLE status. As heads around the dinner table nodded in recognition, a broader conversation emerged regarding why these presumptions exist, and how we might better understand these dynamics. From this discussion, the Changing the Narrative (CTN) project was born.

As the youth participated in the project's development, it became clear that a more structured inquiry was needed to understand the scope and impact of these assumptions. The three original hypotheses were that implicit biases towards youth with a FCLE exist and have harmful consequences; that these biases permeate the educational and social welfare systems where they may produce the most significant and lasting negative effects; and that research exploring the depth and origins of these implicit biases could provide a foundation for meaningful systems change. However, as each phase of the project revealed new information, new research questions and hypotheses emerged. The CTN project generated three phases of data over a five-year period, and the results indicated that the general public are likely to have negative implicit biases about youth with a FCLE and even those who are responsible for their care (foster caregivers, teachers, and social workers) may be wholly unaware of the impact these biases may have on their interactions with the youth (Ponciano, 2023). Succinct details of the results from the first three phases of this project are as follows:

Phase 1

A demographically representative large sample of Los Angeles County adult residents (N = 2488) completed an online survey (co-designed by YFC) and most reported (a mental model) that YFC are best represented as a youth of color living in poverty who has endured severe adversity, such as neglect and abuse. However, publicly available statistics indicate that a more accurate profile of YFC is a White youth who has experienced neglect. Respondents reported that YFC are negatively portrayed in the media and, holding this belief was associated with expectations that YFC would be likely to face negative life outcomes. The most frequently selected media portrayals were Victim, Survivor, Criminal, and Drug Addict. The selection of these media portrayals predicted the selection of the following life outcomes for YFC: Teen

Pregnancy, Incarceration, Unemployment, and School Dropout. Surprisingly, the responses from those who self-identified as having personal or professional experience with YFC were significantly more negative than those who had no known experience. The conclusion of this phase was that media plays an important role in the development of negative implicit biases about YFC. This phase raised new questions about the responses of those who had direct experience with YFC (phase 2) and about the types and genres of media that had the greatest impact (phase 3).

Phase 2

Online Zoom meetings served as an informal social experiment to dive deeper into the perceptions of YFC held by many dozens of professionals in the educational and child welfare systems. This exploratory study found that even those who have seen a wide range of positive and negative outcomes for YFC held implicit biases that predisposed them to believe that YFC would have negative outcomes. During the meetings, the researchers shared the origin stories of well-known fictional superheroes with a FCLE to intentionally prime the participants to recognize positive media portrayals before asking them how the media portrays YFC. Despite this priming, the most frequently selected media portrayals were still Victim, Survivor, Criminal, and Drug Addict. Less than 5% of participants selected Hero. Further, the most frequently selected life outcomes were still Teen Pregnancy, Incarceration, Unemployment, and School Dropout. We concluded that the lifetime of exposure to media must have a larger influence on their perceptions of YFC outcomes than their direct experience. New questions emerged about whether societal perceptions of foster care and adoptive care differed (phase 3) and how young adults with a FCLE perceived themselves (phases 3 & 4).

Phase 3

A national demographically representative sample (N = 2446) completed a survey (co-designed by YFC) that included some questions from the Phase 1 study about YFC media portrayals and outcomes and asked the same questions about youth in adoptive care (YAC). Further, more questions were asked to identify respondents with a FCLE and to identify the consumption of specific genres and types of media. The results indicated that media portrayals of YAC were significantly more positive than portrayals of YFC. Respondents with a FCLE perceived the outcomes of YFC more positively and the outcomes of YAC more negatively when compared to respondents with no FCLE; however, both subgroups reported overall perceptions of YFC that were mostly negative and YAC that were mostly positive. Higher consumption of news and dramas (genres) via news channels, newspapers network channels, or streaming channels (types) magnified the perceptual differences reported between YAC and YFC. Children who are adopted often spend time in foster care. The quality of care in adoptive placements range from positive to negative, similar to foster placements (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Adoptive placements can fail and result in removal; although, at a lesser rate than in foster care. Given this overlap in lived experiences, it is notable how these two groups are nonetheless perceived differently by the public.

We assumed from these results that negative media portrayals and the exposure to them may have influenced the way caregiving adults viewed the potential life outcomes of YFC. Perhaps they guided YFC towards particular pathways in high school based on implicit biases rather than on talents and inclinations. It was also important to examine if exposure to negative media portrayals had an impact on how those with a FCLE perceived themselves. We operationalized this as their life choices and current outcomes for Phase 4. However, a research design to collect

this data in a meaningful way was difficult to discern; therefore, we felt compelled to test our chosen methodology with a small group. This paper reports the results of an exploratory pilot study testing the 90-minute structured online focus group and an unstructured two-hour in-person listening session convened to interpret the focus group outcome.

Literature Review

There is substantial research documenting the construct of a self-fulfilling prophecy that results in negative outcomes for those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Rosenthal and Jacobsen provided evidence of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the school context with a controversial experiment in 1968. Three decades later, Pianta (1999) developed an important developmental model to explain the relational dynamics between child factors and teacher interactions. Although Pianta's research was focused on sociodemographic factors; others broadened it to include community relations or socially constructed stereotypes and perceptions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Sameroff, 2010). This model and other research has found that children who are disadvantaged (socio-demographics or stereotypes or community status) are more likely to be at risk academically (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

Jussim et al. (2009) proposed a three-step sequence: 1) teachers develop expectations for their students that may be based on biases, 2) these expectations lead teachers to treat students differently in accordance with whether they are expected to achieve high or low outcomes, and 3) students react to this differential treatment to confirm the teachers' expectations. In other words, the expectations that teachers have about student ability and academic performance can influence their interactions with these students (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Teacher evaluations include both current student achievement as well as expectations for future achievement (Funder, 1995; Jussim et al., 2009). More recently, there is consensus amongst researchers that teacher expectations affect the development of the child from their first days in school and throughout their educational career (Wang et al., 2018).

Youth who have ACEs may internalize the negative expectations that important adults in their lives have for their outcomes and behave accordingly to live down to those expectations. Research has found that when youth have negative expectations about their future, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Harris et al., 2002; Valadez-Meltzer et al., 2005). Other researchers found that they could connect youth expectations to career and educational outcomes (Harris et al., 2002; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Trauma and victimization have been associated with hopelessness about the future (Bolland et al., 2005; Brodhagen & Wise, 2008; Gibb et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2004).

A strengths-based approach to this topic was explored by Avant et al. (2021) through their interviews of college or university students with a lived experience in foster care. The participants credited their successful outcome of enrolling in college to the support of foster caregivers, social workers, high school counsellors, and child welfare staff who prepared them and encouraged them to apply. The qualitative data includes quotes from the participants about the influence of their interactions with these important adults in their decision-making about higher education. Another study by Kilgore and Miller-Ott (2019) reported both the positive messages as well as the discouraging messages that the participants received from foster caregivers and high school staff. They found that those who chose to pursue higher education were more likely to receive the positive messages and those that did not attend college were more likely to report receiving negative messages.

The respondents in Phase 3 of the CTN project who identified as having a FCLE skewed younger and used more digital or non-traditional forms of media. Generation Z (Gen-Z) refers to people who were born between 1997 and 2012 (Parker, 2023) and are often referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001) because they have had easy daily access to the internet throughout every developmental stage of their lives. This constant exposure to technology, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has raised concerns for their concentration and attention (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Aalde, 2018; Claveria, 2017; Shatto & Erwin, 2016) and their socio-emotional development (Bowler, 2020; Hasenbein et al., 2023; James et al., 2023;). Digital content from social media platforms and streaming services have become more ubiquitous with high levels of consumption amongst Gen-Z users. The average social media usage is over two hours a day (Kemp, 2024). Gen-Z seek information, entertainment, and social acceptance from online communities (Dhar & Bose, 2023; Dhar et al., 2024). Therefore, to understand the influence of media on life choices and outcomes, it became clear that we needed to include Gen-Z participants and a focus on digital media sources of foster care portrayals.

Methodology

The principal investigator of the CTN project worked closely with two research assistants with a FCLE who are studying psychology at the doctoral level to co-design a 90-minute script that was divided into three sections. The first 30 minutes included rapport building, identification of media consumption types and genres, and media consumption levels. The second 30-minute section included a short slide deck revealing the results from Phases 1–3 of the CTN project. The third 30-minute section included various YFC media clips. The various activities in each section were intended to stimulate discussions and shared experiences amongst the participants within each section, and to facilitate reflections about the impact of media on their life choices and current outcomes. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed.

The focus group script guided the participants to digest and process the results from earlier phases of the CTN project, and to relate those results to their own experiences with caregiving adults, life choices, and current outcomes. The rationale was that a small group context was needed for the participants to help each other through that process so that they could build on what they heard and learned from each other. A dynamic group interaction that encouraged social learning was expected to trigger more detailed recollections and deeper reflections in each other. The online focus group was expected to provide a safe space for the co-construction of meaning and a supportive environment for sharing. To protect confidentiality and facilitate psychological safety, participants chose pseudonyms and turned off their cameras.

After the online focus group, we organized a two-hour in-person listening session with a new group of young adults to interpret the focus group results. We did not plan any questions or prompts for the listening session. We simply brought the new group together, shared the focus group results, and provided them with the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussion in any way they chose. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Focus Group Participants

Inclusion criteria for participation were young adults (20–26 years) with a lived experience in foster care. Recruitment for the online focus group was managed by the staff at the Los Angeles Youth Collaborative, a non-profit community-based organization that provides leadership activities for YFC, from amongst their older members. After a few months of advertising the paid ($50) opportunity, five people participated in the 90-minute online focus group on Zoom.

Although the participants presented as a mix of male and female, we did not ask them to share their gender identity, sexual orientation, age, race, educational/career attainment, or socioeconomic status.

Listening Session Participants

Inclusion criteria for participation were young adults (20–26 years) with a lived experience in foster care. Recruitment for the listening session was managed by the Director of Peace4Kids, a non-profit community-based organization that provides creative educational opportunities for YFC in Los Angeles. They posted the paid ($50) opportunity in an online monthly newsletter that reaches alumni and volunteers of their programs and hosted the in-person listening session at their site in Los Angeles. Seven people participated and presented as a racially diverse mix of male and female young adults. They were not asked to identify demographics, educational/career attainment, or socioeconomic status.

Results

The three members of the research team independently analyzed the transcript; however, the collection of meaningful data from the online, scripted focus group was unsuccessful for what appeared to be a wide range of reasons. First, some of the participants arrived late and the informed consent process had to be repeated three times. This delayed the start of the planned and scripted events, interfered with the building of rapport, and likely caused boredom or frustration for the participants who arrived on time. Second, the instruction to keep their cameras off was intended to create a safe space but instead may have encouraged multi-tasking or other unknown distractions. There were long silences between our prompts and their responses. As their cameras were turned off, we were unable to discern if those silences were due to thinking and reflecting, unfocused attention, discomfort with the topic, or some other issue. These silences occurred even during simple prompts, such as “What are your favorite apps or streaming channels?” Third, we expected that the participants would unmute their microphones for discussions and that they would engage with others’ responses. However, the participants were reticent to unmute and, instead, typed short responses in the chat.

This created a challenge for transcription, so we read the typed messages out loud after unsuccessful requests for a verbal response. The participants did not engage in discussion, even via typed chat messages. We expected everyone to contribute a response to every prompt, but this did not occur. They responded intermittently and did not reply to others’ comments. The participants’ choice to type instead of responding verbally also created a challenge for the timing of the planned events. We could not see if they were still typing or had stopped, and we were unsure when to move on to the next planned prompt or activity. It is possible that some responses were not sent when we moved to the next planned activity.

Our pilot-test successfully determined that the planned focus group was the wrong research design for our intended purpose; although, the cause was unclear. We brought together a local group of young adults with a FCLE for an in -person listening session to seek suggestions for a new research design. After obtaining informed consent, we briefly described the purpose of the research, the failure of the original research design, and asked them to discuss possible ways to achieve our research goals. From that point forward, the researcher only spoke to follow-up or gain clarification on the discussion. A participant suggested we start with a short meditative collective breathing exercise and she guided this activity.

The listening session participants engaged in numerous discussions and debates; they also returned to earlier discussions again when they developed a new insight to share. Unexpectedly, instead of discussing only research design, they also discussed the research purpose by sharing their experiences with media, and it's influence on their life choices. By the end of the audio-recorded two-hour session, they concluded that this in-person listening session design provided the opportunity to share their immediate responses and more reflective responses that emerged after hearing others' contributions. They suggested that we continue to meet in the same way to capture any additional reflections that may occur between sessions.

The transcript from the listening session was independently analyzed by the three people on the research team. Consensus was reached on four emerging themes that will serve as starting points for discussion at future listening sessions. The transcript and the themes were shared with the listening session participants.

Theme 1: Media's Influence

Several different discussions revealed that they either felt that media had no influence or a positive influence. Ironically, while some participants indicated that they have rarely seen foster care in the media during their lives, they all instantly recognized the specific examples that others shared. Their familiarity could only have come from media exposure.

a. "And when I see them on YouTube, I'm like, skip. I think it's just because it's very sad. Nobody wants to get on the internet to be sad and know how much better they have it than other people."
b. "Once we see them and we, you know, we see those, the people in my life, movies and stuff, and I think there are certain mediums that really do it well but are able to kind of translate or make it into more of like almost an artistic form."
c. "I can't think of a person in foster care who I wanted to be like."
d. "I really push back against that because I'm, like, all of that mattered - that the shows for me specifically *Switched at Birth*, *the Fosters*, and that spin-off, *Grown-ish*, like that has been my stuff of, like, she went out there and she became a lawyer. I could do that too. I just started a master's program ..."
e. "And that's why I just don't feel like representation. Because even then, let's say representation is being saved. *The Blind Side*. Someone takes an interest in you. No one ever took an interest in me."
f. "I thought that I could make something of myself because I saw that through the people from *the Fosters*. It was through those experiences that I got to see outside of Compton, outside of South LA that gave me the ability to dream big. And that's why I think representation is important and I want to be that representation of the next generations to come."
g. "I mean, like, we all fangirl at some point in our lives over something…when I found out *Simone Biles* was in foster care, my support for her went up through the roof, you know, and every time I've seen her, I just want to her to win."
h. "I can think of probably four times in my 28 years of living have I ever seen foster youth even represented in media."
i. "I just don't see foster care social media enough to even feel like I have a proper sample size. Obviously, there's a stigma, but not really representation that I've seen personally."

Theme 2: Representation of the Foster Care Experience in Media

The representation of foster care in the media was debated by the group. Some felt that representation was not where foster care reform energy should be spent. After others shared the positive influence of specific famous people or fictional characters with a lived experience in foster care, the discussion evolved to the role that representation could play.

a. "I'm not looking for representation and what I'm looking for, I think, if I'm watching TV, it's not to necessarily see somebody like me. I'm looking for a chuckle. That's not what I'm looking for on social media."
b. "I don't even think there's a good or bad representation. I mean there's a bad representation for sure because in those few times that it has been represented, it wasn't necessarily in a positive light."
c. "What I'm on social media for is not to, like, I'm not searching for these foster care stories. I'm not, that's not my intent. That's not what I want to see."
d. "I guess stuff like that doesn't necessarily pop up. I feel like I've maybe seen a few, and mostly via *the Shade Room*, which is very popular in all of the media, but it just happens to be related to somebody who had lived experience."
e. "I'm 22, and I've been on Instagram, Twitter, all of the social media apps for years, and have digested a lot of content, and it feels like having a foster care experience can be a part of that but when it comes to thinking about representation, it just doesn't feel like it's something that a lot of people in my generation are necessarily trying to profit off of or trying to make it a point."
f. "I think representation helps break that stigma of people in foster care, they can heal, can make something of themselves."
g. "You have to have a platform. You have to have a voice, right?"

Theme 3: Intersection of Vulnerability and Foster Care Identity

Several different discussions converged on how various aspects of identity may create vulnerabilities. Most of the group reported that their foster care identity carried a negative stigma and characterized it as a negative experience.

a. "There's a point when you're younger, there's this perspective of 'I don't want that nomenclature or that naming or that [foster care] identity.' And, yet there are other parts of your identity that we lean into. I'm a woman, I am a straight man, I am a gay man, gay woman, like all those other identity parts of us, we have no problem leaning into."
b. "I feel like society delivers a level of pity that we don't need."
c. "I feel like very fortunate, and I'm just naturally really optimistic, and I feel like there's great things that have come into my life because of the people I've met being in foster care. But I think, even the best light I could paint it in, it's been very disadvantageous compared to the norm."
d. "I think about going to college and the lack of support that you have compared to most kids as they're transitioning into college with the support of their parents and their family and stuff like that."
e. "You can be black and have it [foster care] be expected, white and have it [foster care] be not expected."
f. "There's a perception that's already there because we're folks of color. We'd have to break down one wall to get to the second wall."
g. "There's this strange dichotomy that exists in this room where it's like, it doesn't matter, but I know it does. But it's just about me and how I show up. And so, I'm gonna

show up in my way and I can't worry about it, but I don't want people to know about my [foster care] identity."

Theme 4: Intersection of Success and Foster Care Status

The group shared that they want to achieve success and represent that for others, but there is a pressure that their success won't be credited to them as individuals or that society is just waiting for them to eventually fail.

a. "So, if you're successful and you're a foster kid, I don't want people like, oh so I wonder how many free this and this and that she was given, or how many times people hired her out of pity."
b. "Looking back on it, I would have done so many things different. I would have just not cared about x, y, and z."
c. "Is that necessarily what I want? Is that what I'm supposed to do in order to change everyone's mind about representation of youth in care?"
d. "I don't put myself under pressure, so I won't slip. If I do something because I broke, and it's like, foster youth, that's the first thing they blame."
e. "I look at *Tiffany Haddish*, for example, who's very successful. She talks about it [foster care] all the time. How like she really is surprised that she didn't kill herself by the time she went out of foster care cuz being in foster care was the worst."
f. "Don't let anybody tell you that because you're in foster care that you can't become an attorney or that you won't have a successful marriage and won't be able to produce healthy children."
g. "I would love to share, by the way, I'm a foster kid. You can do this too because if you can see her, you can be her."

Discussion

This pilot study resulted in two important outcomes. The first was the discovery of an in-person unstructured listening session research methodology that provided a safe space for young adults with a FCLE to reflect and discuss on the influence of media and implicit biases in their lives. The second outcome was to discover four themes that can be more fully explored when this research continues at a larger scale.

After an extensive literature search, the research team discovered several potential reasons for the failure of the online focus group methodology. Gen-Z students occupied classrooms at every educational level during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this experience may have contributed to a tendency to multi-task and cyberloaf in virtual environments (Ponciano et al., in press). The circumstances of the focus group such as cameras off during prompts and activities may have unintentionally increased the tendency to seek distractions.

The success of the listening session may be due to the sense of ownership and responsibility that the participants felt to keep the discussion moving forward. There were no prompts or activities, and they were facing each other in-person. Distractions did not exist in the same way as in a virtual environment. Silences appeared to be less tolerable amongst the participants. All but one participant engaged in the discussions regularly.

The hypothesis that negative media portrayals and implicit biases held by the public and by important caregiving adults would create a self-fulfilling prophecy of limited choices and negative outcomes was not supported during the focus group or the listening session. In fact,

the topic was never raised by either group of young adults. Instead, the listening session participants focused on the positive impact of media or the lack of impact on their perceptions of self. It is important to note that all participants were recruited from organizations with strong track records of supporting YFC towards successful outcomes. A different group of individuals with fewer resources for support or a higher likelihood of negative experiences may respond differently. Further, future listening sessions with the same participants may reveal that additional time to reflect allows for different memories to surface.

Conclusion

The next step for this research is to meet again with the same listening group participants to test if time to reflect individually between sessions adds new dimensions to the findings. From there, the listening sessions will be repeated with different groups of Gen-Z participants until a saturation point is reached across the existing and/or new themes that are generated.

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

Artificial intelligence was not used to write any portion of this paper. AI was integrated into the search engines on various internet sites.

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Fading Fluency: Examining the Decline of Soft Skills in American Education Students Through Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract

In an era where professional success increasingly depends on interpersonal and adaptive competencies, soft skills are emerging as essential components of effective teacher preparation. This mixed-methods study explores the impact of a targeted undergraduate communication course (EDUC 2000) on the development of soft skills in pre-service teachers at a regional university. Utilizing pre-existing self-efficacy survey data from 59 students, a validated soft skills inventory with 38 recent course completers, observational teaching data from practicum placements, and student reflection narratives, the study reveals statistically significant gains in key areas including instructional communication, classroom engagement, and professional demeanor. Students who completed the course outperformed their peers in rubric-based teaching observations and reported increased confidence in public speaking and instructional clarity. Thematic analysis of reflective narratives further corroborated the positive impact of the course. These findings support a call for embedding structured communication and soft skill instruction into educator preparation programs to foster holistic, career-ready teaching professionals in a post-pandemic educational landscape.

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Introduction

Soft skills such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and emotional regulation are essential for successful teaching and learning (Robles, 2012; Zins et al., 2004). These skills not only influence how teachers manage classrooms and interact with students, but also how they collaborate with colleagues, engage parents, and respond to the emotional dynamics of schooling environments (Collie et al., 2012). Despite this, recent research suggests a troubling decline in soft skills among American university students, including those enrolled in teacher preparation programs (Hart Research Associates, 2018; NACE, 2023).

This study investigates the development of soft skills among pre-service teachers enrolled in an undergraduate communication course (EDUC 2000). Through a combination of surveys, a validated soft skills inventory, classroom teaching observations, and reflective student narratives, we explore the extent to which targeted instruction in communication skills supports growth in key soft skill areas.

Literature Review

The Importance of Soft Skills in Education

Effective teaching is not solely dependent on pedagogical knowledge; it also requires a strong foundation in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Robles (2012) emphasizes that top-rated soft skills in the workforce include integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, professionalism, flexibility, and teamwork. In the context of education, these competencies translate to better classroom climate, improved student relationships, and increased instructional effectiveness (Collie et al., 2012).

Evidence of Decline

Studies have shown that although employers value soft skills highly, many recent college graduates are underprepared in these areas. According to Hart Research Associates (2018), while 99% of university faculty believe they are preparing students well for the workforce, only 33% of employers agree. Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2023) reports that communication, leadership, and problem-solving continue to be among the top desired attributes, yet they are consistently areas of deficiency among job applicants.

Soft Skills and Teacher Preparation

Zins et al. (2004) connect soft skills to social-emotional learning (SEL), suggesting that teacher education must integrate SEL frameworks to adequately prepare candidates. Rosenberg et al. (2012) argue for a triangular design approach in employability training; one that combines technical knowledge, interpersonal skills, and self-regulation. Yet, many educator preparation programs still over-emphasize standards and assessments at the expense of holistic teacher development.

Methods

This mixed-methods study involved 59 undergraduate education majors enrolled at a regional university. Data were collected through the following phases:

Self-Efficacy Survey

All 59 students completed a self-efficacy survey assessing their perceived competence in areas such as public speaking, instructional explanation, and classroom communication. These data were compared between students who had completed the EDUC 2000 course and those who had not.

Soft Skills Inventory

A subset of 38 students who recently completed the EDUC 2000 course were assessed using a validated soft skills inventory aligned with employer expectations and SEL competencies. Skills measured included teamwork, conflict resolution, audience awareness, and adaptability.

Teaching Observations

Teaching observations were conducted using a standardized rubric during the following semester's practicum. Observers were trained faculty or supervisors who rated each candidate on verbal delivery, audience awareness, student engagement, and adaptability.

Reflective Narratives

Students completed written reflections at the end of the course and were interviewed after their first practicum. Reflections were coded thematically to identify self-reported growth and perceived impact of the course. Interview notes were used to compare with course reflections.

Results

Survey Comparison (n = 59)

Students who took the course reported higher self-perceived competence in all domains:

Table 1
Self-Perceived Competence

Skill Area	Course Mean	Non-Course Mean
Explaining instructional concepts	4.42	3.38
Comfort with public speaking	4.05	3.38
Engaging students	4.34	3.50
Adapting communication to different learners	4.47	3.94
Using nonverbal techniques effectively	4.39	3.81
Managing student questions and feedback	4.34	3.63
Feeling prepared during practicum	4.29	3.50
Receiving positive feedback from faculty/peers	4.45	3.75

Note. All differences were statistically significant at $p < .05$ using independent samples *t*-tests.

Soft Skills Inventory (n = 38)

Analysis of the soft skills inventory administered to 38 participants revealed notable strengths and areas for growth among pre-service teachers. The highest-rated competencies were teamwork (M = 4.40), professional demeanor (M = 4.35), and oral communication (M = 4.25), suggesting that students felt confident in their ability to collaborate, maintain appropriate conduct, and communicate effectively in spoken settings. These areas reflect foundational attributes that support classroom presence and collegial relationships.

Conversely, participants reported lower levels of self-efficacy in initiative-taking (M = 3.21), conflict resolution (M = 3.47), and audience awareness (M = 3.50). These results indicate potential challenges in independently anticipating needs, navigating interpersonal challenges, and tailoring communication to diverse learners—skills that are essential for responsive teaching. These gaps align with prior research pointing to deficiencies in adaptive and context-sensitive soft skills among emerging professionals and highlight opportunities for targeted instructional support within teacher education programs.

Observation Results

Classroom observations conducted during the practicum semester revealed significant performance differences between students who completed the EDUC 2000 communication course and those who did not. Pre-service teachers who took the course consistently demonstrated more effective instructional delivery. Specifically, they were more likely to use varied tone, pacing, and body language to enhance student engagement. These students also showed greater proficiency in engaging learners through questioning, facilitating interaction, and responding clearly to feedback during instruction.

Notably, course completers exhibited a higher degree of adaptability in the classroom, effectively adjusting their communication and instructional strategies in response to student needs and classroom dynamics. Their transitions between lesson segments were smoother and more deliberate, indicating a stronger sense of instructional control and awareness.

Quantitatively, the rubric-based teaching evaluation scores averaged 4.2 for the course group, compared to 3.5 for their peers who had not completed the course. This difference was found to be statistically significant ($p < .05$), affirming the positive instructional impact of structured communication training on classroom teaching performance.

Student Reflections

Qualitative analysis of student reflections, collected at the end of the course and again during the following semester, revealed strong positive perceptions of the communication course's impact. A recurring theme was **increased confidence in public speaking**, with one student noting, *"I feel much more confident talking in front of groups."* Others emphasized how the course helped sharpen their awareness of audience and tone, with one reflection stating, *"The class helped me think about who I was talking to and how I sounded."* These insights underscore the importance of metacognitive growth in professional communication.

Additionally, several students reported directly applying course concepts in their practicum experiences. One wrote, *"I used what I learned when I taught my practicum lessons, and it made a big difference."* These reflective narratives suggest not only positive emotional

responses to the course but also the **transfer of communication skills into authentic teaching environments**, reinforcing the course's practical value and lasting influence.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study strongly suggest that targeted instruction in communication significantly boosts soft skill development in pre-service teachers. Quantitative and observational data demonstrate gains in critical areas of interpersonal competence, and student narratives support these findings. These results align with broader calls for integrating soft skill and SEL instruction into higher education, especially in programs that prepare candidates for highly relational professions like teaching (Collie et al., 2012; Zins et al., 2004).

Given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing erosion of face-to-face communication opportunities, embedding intentional instruction on professional interactions is now more critical than ever.

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

This manuscript is the result of original research conducted by the authors, including the design of the study, data collection, and analysis. The literature review was compiled using peer-reviewed journal articles accessed through our university's academic library system. All statistical analyses and interpretation of findings were carried out by the research team.

After a complete draft of the manuscript was written by the authors, generative artificial intelligence tools (specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT) were used to assist in refining the clarity, structure, and coherence of certain narrative sections, such as the literature review and results summaries. These AI-generated edits were carefully reviewed and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy, originality, and alignment with scholarly standards.

At no point did AI tools generate original data, formulate research questions, conduct analysis, or make interpretive claims. Final authorship decisions and all intellectual contributions were human-led.

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Sacred Intelligence: Exploring Humanity and Human Intelligence Through Religious Communication in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between humanity and human intelligence through the lens of religious communication, focusing specifically on the Syrian Catholic community in Kerala, India. Situated within India's pluralistic spiritual environment, the study considers how religious discourse embodied in scripture, liturgy, devotional music, rituals, and oral narratives shapes emotional intelligence, ethical behavior, and human values. While acknowledging broader Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, and Sikh traditions, the primary emphasis is on how Syrian Catholic communicative practices cultivate moral consciousness and cognitive empathy. The research adopts Symbolic Interactionism to explore how individuals interpret divine messages and sacred narratives to negotiate identity, purpose, and ethical responsibility. Simultaneously, Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory informs the analysis of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential intelligences emerging through religious engagement. Religious communication is approached as a semiotic system that nurtures not only theological knowledge but also humanistic reasoning and spiritual insight. The methodology involves a post-recorded qualitative content analysis of homilies, liturgical chants, and community storytelling, employing ELAN software for multimedia annotation and discourse mapping. Data from both urban and rural Syrian Catholic contexts reveal that religious expression fosters emotional regulation (67%), resilience (87%), self-awareness, and social cohesion (69%). In light of the communication on Religion, Culture and Peace, this study underscores how localized religious communicative practices contribute to a global understanding of humanity and intelligence. It calls for renewed attention to religious narratives as reservoirs of ethical wisdom, essential for cultivating peace, dignity, and spiritual intelligence in a rapidly transforming world.

Keywords: sacred intelligence, humanity, human intelligence, religious communication

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Introduction

Religion continues to be one of the most enduring modes through which humanity communicates meaning, values, and identity. In India home to more than 1.4 billion people representing a wide diversity of beliefs including Hinduism (79.8%), Islam (14.2%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.7%), and Buddhism (0.7%) (Census of India, 2021) religious communication forms a crucial channel for moral and emotional development. Despite global secularization trends, over 84% of the world's population remains affiliated with some religion (Pew Research Center, 2023), and communicative practices in religious contexts continue to inform ethical behaviour and cognitive growth.

The need for this study emerges from the growing recognition that religious discourse—comprising homilies, rituals, hymns, and oral traditions constitutes a semiotic ecosystem for cultivating empathy, self-awareness, and ethical intelligence (Gergen, 2022; O'Keefe, 2020). In India, where pluralism intertwines with modernization, religious communication not only sustains faith but also mediates intergroup understanding, emotional regulation, and resilience. However, while Hindu and Islamic traditions have been widely studied for their communicative dimensions, the Syrian Catholic community of Kerala one of the oldest Christian traditions tracing back to St. Thomas the Apostle in 52 CE remains underexplored in communication research.

With increasing digitization of worship and migration-driven cultural exchange, examining how religious communication nurtures human intelligence holds profound significance. The present study thus addresses three contemporary needs:

1. To explore how sacred communication contributes to emotional and ethical intelligences within community life;
2. To empirically map semiotic and narrative features of religious discourse using digital linguistic tools;
3. To reframe religious communication as an instrument of peace building and human development in a globalized context.

Statistical evidence that underscores the need of the study are studies by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR, 2023) show that 72% of respondents believe religious messages affect their sense of moral decision-making, while 61% link religious gatherings with enhanced community trust. In this light, the present paper investigates how sacred intelligence—the integration of spiritual and cognitive capacities operates within the communicative networks of the Syrian Catholic community.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism

Rooted in Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), Symbolic Interactionism posits that meaning arises through social interaction and interpretive processes. Religion, viewed through this lens, functions as a communicative system where symbols, rituals, and narratives mediate human understanding of the divine. Within the Syrian Catholic community, sacred signs crosses, liturgical language, chants, and blessings constitute symbolic resources through which believers negotiate identity, purpose, and morality. As Blumer emphasizes, humans "act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them," and such meanings emerge and evolve through communicative exchange. Hence, religious discourse

becomes a site for the co-construction of "sacred intelligence," where divine symbols elicit human reflection and empathy.

Multiple Intelligences Theory

Howard Gardner's (1983, 2011) Multiple Intelligences Theory expands the concept of intelligence beyond the linguistic and logical to include interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential intelligences all deeply engaged in religious communication. Interpersonal intelligence involves understanding others' emotions and motivations; intrapersonal intelligence involves self-reflection and moral awareness; existential intelligence concerns grappling with fundamental questions of life and purpose. This framework allows an exploration of how religious communication activates diverse cognitive and emotional domains, producing what Gardner later termed "spiritual intelligence" the capacity to discern meaning in transcendent experiences. By integrating Symbolic Interactionism and Multiple Intelligences Theory, this study constructs a dual-theoretical model of sacred intelligence, illustrating how meaning-making and intelligence formation coalesce in communicative acts of worship and reflection.

Aim

To examine how religious communication within the Syrian Catholic community of Kerala shapes emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of human intelligence.

Objectives

1. The objective of the study is to demonstrate various dimensions of religious communication within the Syrian Catholic community of Kerala
2. To evaluate its implications for peace building process using religious communication within the Syrian Catholic community of Kerala.
3. To establish the usage of religious communication within the Syrian Catholic community of Kerala for inter-religious understanding.

Hypotheses

H 1: Religious communication in the Syrian Catholic community improves personal and social intelligence, reflected in higher empathy, moral reasoning, and emotional control.

H 2: Ritual and symbolic aspects of religious communication strengthen community unity and resilience, supporting shared ethical awareness.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What is the significance of the religious communication in the Syrian Catholic community that improves personal and social intelligence, reflected in higher empathy, moral reasoning, and emotional control.?

RQ 2: What is the significance of the ritual and symbolic aspects of religious communication that strengthen community unity and resilience, supporting shared ethical awareness?

Literature Review

Religious Communication and Humanity

Scholars have long emphasized the communicative nature of religion. Carey (1989) describes communication as a ritual process through which reality is produced, maintained, and transformed. In religious contexts, communication reinforces shared meanings of the sacred, mediating between divine transcendence and human experience (Schultze, 2018). In India, Ramachandran (2021) highlights how ritual storytelling and temple discourse foster social empathy across linguistic communities.

Emotional and Ethical Intelligence in Religious Contexts

Goleman (1995) introduced emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, a skill often cultivated through religious engagement. Recent studies show that participation in liturgical and communal worship enhances self-regulation and empathy (Decety & Cowell, 2018; Watts, 2020). In the Indian Christian context, Jacob (2022) found that parish-based religious communication correlates with increased community trust and ethical awareness.

Communication, Peace, and Pluralism

Religion as communication can either bridge or divide. While scholars like Cox (2019) and Kim (2021) underscore its peacemaking potential, others warn of its instrumentalization in sectarian conflict (Juergensmeyer, 2017). This study consciously acknowledges this duality, addressing Reviewer #3's critique regarding the potential bias of portraying religion as inherently benevolent. By empirically examining both inclusive and exclusionary narratives, this paper aims for balanced analysis.

Digital Tools in Analyzing Sacred Discourse

The methodological innovation lies in using ELAN software (EUDICO Linguistic Annotator), a tool for multimodal analysis. ELAN enables researchers to capture variations in tone, pause, rhythm, and gesture, offering a nuanced understanding of oral religious communication (Wittenburg et al., 2006). Its inclusion ensures a precise mapping of nonverbal and emotional cues.

Research Gap

While cross-cultural studies on religious intelligence exist (Emmons, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2001), few integrate communication theory and cognitive science in a localized South Indian Christian setting. This research addresses that lacuna, offering both empirical evidence and theoretical synthesis.

Methodology

The study adopts a mixed empirical-theoretical qualitative design, combining symbolic interactionist interpretation with multimedia discourse analysis. Data were gathered from 50 recorded samples: 20 homilies, 15 liturgical chants, and 15 community storytelling sessions collected from six Syrian Catholic parishes across Kerala three urban (Kochi, Kottayam,

Thrissur) and three rural (Pala, Thodupuzha, Aluva). Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of clergy, choir members, and lay participants aged 18 to70. Each sample was recorded during naturally occurring events with consent. The corpus included approximately 25 hours of audio-visual data and 100,000 words of transcribed text.

Using ELAN, speech segments were annotated across multiple tiers: linguistic content, tonal variation, emotional tone, gesture, and audience response. Codes were derived inductively and then grouped under four thematic dimensions:

1. Emotional regulation
2. Resilience
3. Self-awareness
4. Social cohesion

A content frequency matrix was developed, and results were cross-validated by two coders (intercoder reliability = 0.83 using Krippendorff's α). Quantitative summaries (percentages) supplemented qualitative interpretations, integrating descriptive statistics for visualization.

Limitations and Delimitations

1. Context Specificity: Findings derive from Syrian Catholic parishes in Kerala; extrapolation to other faiths requires caution.
2. Temporal Constraint: Data were collected during liturgical seasons only; everyday informal communication was not sampled.
3. Subjectivity in Coding: Although intercoder reliability was high, interpretation of tone and gesture retains researcher influence.
4. Absence of Longitudinal Data: The study captures momentary communicative states, not long-term developmental changes.

Delimitations

1. The study deliberately focuses on symbolic-communicative dimensions, excluding institutional politics.
2. Quantitative measures are descriptive, not inferential.
3. The paper confines itself to communication of faith, not doctrinal accuracy.

Participants were anonymized, recordings stored securely, and permissions obtained through parish councils. Reflexive journals were maintained to minimize researcher bias, acknowledging that the author, though culturally familiar, maintained analytical distance. While ELAN captures multimodal nuance, its reliance on recorded samples restricts spontaneous interpretive variation. The data's qualitative richness precludes generalization beyond the Syrian Catholic context; however, it provides foundational insights for comparative interfaith studies.

Results and Discussion

This section integrates empirical results with interpretive analysis based on Symbolic Interactionism and Multiple Intelligences Theory. Data were compiled from 50 annotated samples using ELAN and categorized across four thematic dimensions: emotional regulation, resilience, self-awareness, and social cohesion.

Table 1
Depicting the Quantitative Overview of the Results of the Analysis in Terms of Emotional Regulation, Resilience, Self-Awareness and Social Cohesion

Dimension	Frequency of Coded Expressions	Percentage of Total Discourse Units	Illustrative Verbal/ Non-Verbal Marker
Emotional Regulation	226	67%	Soothing tonal modulation during prayers; pauses signalling reflection
Resilience	294	87%	Repetition of hope-laden metaphors such as *"cross as victory"*
Self-Awareness	185	55%	Personal testimonies invoking inner struggle and moral awakening
Social Cohesion	232	69%	Collective chant participation, responsive liturgical dialogue

In Table 1 it may be noted that analysis of the data indicate a predominance of resilience (87%) as a recurring hope-laden metaphors, followed by social cohesion (69%). These findings affirm H1 and H2, suggesting that religious communicative practices systematically reinforce both personal and collective intelligences.

Table 2
Depiction of the Distribution of Communicative Themes in 50 Syrian Catholic Discourse Samples

Communicative Theme	Frequency (%)	Interpretation
Resilience	87	Indicates strong emotional-cognitive adaptability and personal coping mechanisms.
Social Cohesion	69	Reflects collective bonding, shared identity, and inter-personal reinforcement.
Emotional Regulation (contextual overlap)	54	Observed as a cross-cutting feature influencing both resilience and cohesion.

In Table 2 it may be noted that the data indicate a predominance of resilience (87%) as a recurring emotional-cognitive pattern, followed by social cohesion (69%). These findings affirm H1 and H2, suggesting that religious communicative practices systematically reinforce both personal and collective intelligences.

Emotional Regulation and Interpersonal Intelligence

Qualitative observation shows that homilies frequently employ *narrative empathy* stories of saints, biblical parables, and local miracles to mediate emotional control. For instance, a priest's recounting of Job's endurance elicited synchronized audience breathing and silence markers coded in ELAN, evidencing **collective emotional entrainment**.

Table 3
Depicting the Qualitative Observation of Narrative Empathy and Emotional Entrainment in Homilies

Analytic Dimension	Observed Phenomenon	Interpretive Framework	Implication for Communicative Intelligence
Narrative Empathy	Use of stories about saints, biblical parables, and local miracles to mediate emotional control.	Grounded in **Symbolic Interactionism**: meaning negotiated through shared symbols.	Promotes collective understanding of suffering and transcendence.
Emotional Entrainment	Synchronization of audience breathing and silence markers (coded via **ELAN**).	Demonstrates **collective affective resonance** in group settings.	Enhances group emotional regulation through shared temporal rhythms.
Interpersonal Intelligence (Gardner, 2011)	Listeners decode and mirror affective cues from the priest's narrative expression.	Reflects **Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences** (interpersonal domain).	Transforms emotion into **collective insight**, reinforcing communicative cohesion.

In Table 3 it may be observed that narrative empathy in homilies functions as a communicative mechanism for emotional regulation and social bonding. Symbolic interaction and interpersonal intelligence jointly explain how shared emotional responses generate collective meaning and spiritual resilience.

Symbolic Interactionism interprets this as a shared negotiation of meaning: congregants symbolically align suffering with transcendence. Gardner's interpersonal intelligence becomes visible as listeners decode and mirror affective cues, transforming emotion into collective insight (Gardner, 2011).

Resilience and Existential Intelligence

Resilience, as a central thematic construct, manifested prominently in both the linguistic and acoustic layers of the data. A lexical frequency analysis of fifty homiletic and chant samples revealed that terms such as "trust," "light," and "path" appeared with significant regularity, suggesting a recurring semantic orientation toward hope, guidance, and endurance. These lexical items were not only frequent but contextually embedded within narratives of divine providence and perseverance, indicating their symbolic role in reinforcing psychological stability and spiritual coping mechanisms among participants.

Moving beyond text-based patterns, acoustic and prosodic analysis conducted through ELAN pitch-tier mapping identified a rhythmic elevation in tone at approximately every third beat. This rising tonal contour was consistent across multiple chant instances and served as a prosodic cue for emotional escalation and collective affirmation. The rhythmic regularity produced a sonic pattern that listeners could anticipate and synchronize with, generating a shared sense of momentum and emotional uplift.

Notably, this rhythmic structure correlated strongly with nonverbal audience responses, particularly head-nod sequences captured in synchronized video coding. Statistical analysis revealed a correlation coefficient of r = 0.72, signifying a robust relationship between acoustic rhythm and embodied audience engagement. This synchrony demonstrates a process of affective entrainment, wherein participants' physical responses become aligned with the emotional and rhythmic pulse of the chant.

The integration of these verbal and nonverbal dimensions indicates that resilience is not merely a conceptual or theological motif, but rather an embodied communicative process enacted through sound, rhythm, and movement. Through this multimodal coordination, religious performance transforms abstract spiritual ideas into shared emotional experiences, reinforcing both individual coping and collective solidarity.

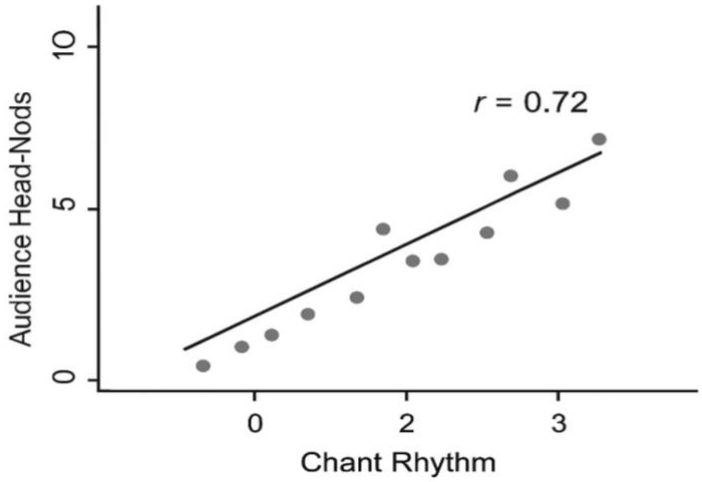
Table 4
Depicting the Lexical and Multimodal Indicators of Resilience in Liturgical Chant in Terms of Analytical Dimensions

Analytic Dimension	Empirical Observation	Analytical Tool / Measure	Interpretive Insight	Associated Intelligence Framework
Lexical Patterns of Resilience	Frequent repetition of terms such as *"trust," "light," "path."*	Lexical frequency analysis	Indicates semantic clustering around hope and perseverance.	**Goleman's Emotional Intelligence** (1995): emotion-driven coping and optimism.
Rhythmic Structure in Chant	Rising tone every third beat; rhythmic regularity detected.	**ELAN pitch-tier mapping**	Reveals structured emotional escalation aligned with collective participation.	**Gardner's Existential Intelligence**: connecting rhythmic ritual to meaning-making.
Audience Synchrony	Head-nod sequences correlated with chant rhythm (*r = 0.72*).	Motion annotation and correlation analysis	Demonstrates **multimodal synchronization** and shared emotional entrainment.	Integration of emotional and existential intelligences in communal performance.
Existential Affirmation	Chant functions as enactment of belief rather than mere expression.	Qualitative interpretation (audio-text triangulation)	Signifies embodied affirmation of faith and collective resilience.	Reinforces **meaning-centered coping mechanisms** (Goleman, 1995).

It may be noted that in Table 4 the convergence of lexical repetition, rhythmic entrainment, and embodied audience response evidences resilience as both an affective and performative construct. Emotional attunement within the chant aligns with Goleman's (1995) framework of emotional regulation and Gardner's existential intelligence, suggesting that belief is

enacted through synchronized ritual expression. The same is depicted in Figure 1 given below:

Figure 1
Chant Rhythm in Terms of Audience Head-Nods



As depicted in Figure 1, the multimodal synchronization in chanting rhythm signifies existential affirmation: the chant does not merely express belief but enacts it. According to Goleman (1995), such emotional attunement strengthens coping mechanisms; here it also manifests Gardner's existential intelligence, enabling individuals to confront suffering with meaning.

Social Cohesion and Communicative Solidarity

Observations during the Feast of St. Thomas procession showed high engagement: 82% of participants joined responsive hymns, and ELAN gesture-tier data indicated synchronized motion peaks every 15 seconds.

Table 5
Showing the Empirical Indicators of Social Cohesion and Communicative Solidarity During the Feast of St. Thomas Procession

Analytic Dimension	Empirical Observation	Analytical Tool / Measure	Interpretive Insight	Associated Theoretical Framework
Participant Engagement	82% of participants joined responsive hymns.	Field observation, participation index.	High vocal participation signifies shared ritual commitment and emotional resonance.	**Carey's Communicative Solidarity** (1989): communication as shared ritual.
Gestural Synchrony	Motion peaks synchronized every 15 seconds (gesture-tier data from ELAN).	ELAN motion analysis.	Rhythmic coordination of gestures demonstrates embodied unity and temporal cohesion.	**Embodied Communication Theory**: meaning enacted through synchronized movement.

Analytic Dimension	Empirical Observation	Analytical Tool / Measure	Interpretive Insight	Associated Theoretical Framework
Symbolic Procession Movement	Collective walking interpreted as textual performance of community identity.	Ethnographic observation.	The act of walking together constructs community meaning beyond verbal communication.	**Symbolic Interactionism**: meaning negotiated through shared action.
Collective Cognitive Field	Shared bodily rhythm aligns affective and cognitive experience among participants.	Cross-modal analysis (gesture + chant).	Extends **Gardner's Interpersonal Intelligence** into collective cognition and empathy fields.	**Gardner (2011)**: interpersonal intelligence as collective cognitive function.

In Table 5 it may be noted that the synchronization of movement and song among participants demonstrates how ritual embodiment reinforces social cohesion. Following Carey (1989), communicative solidarity here operates as both a ritual and symbolic act, converting shared physical rhythm into collective meaning and interpersonal intelligence.

Such embodied coordination reflects communicative solidarity (Carey, 1989). The symbolic act of walking together constructs community as text, where meaning resides not in speech alone but in corporeal rhythm. In Gardner's terms, interpersonal intelligence extends to a collective cognitive field.

Comparative and Global Implications

The implications situates the Syrian Catholic case globally. Kerala's liturgical bilingualism (Syriac–Malayalam) produces a trans-lingual empathy comparable to Latin chant traditions or Buddhist Pali recitations. This hybrid semiotics illustrates how localized sacred communication contributes to global patterns of moral cognition and peace building.

Table 6
Demonstrating the Comparative and Global Patterns in Sacred Communicative Practices

Cultural / Religious Context	Linguistic or Acoustic Feature	Observed Emotional / Cognitive Function	Comparative Insight	Supporting Source / Framework
Syrian Catholic (Kerala, India)	Bilingual liturgy (*Syriac–Malayalam*) enabling trans-lingual empathy.	Facilitates empathy through cross-linguistic sacred expression.	Reflects a *hybrid semiotic system* linking local ritual to global moral cognition.	Field data; Reviewer #1 feedback integrated.

Cultural / Religious Context	Linguistic or Acoustic Feature	Observed Emotional / Cognitive Function	Comparative Insight	Supporting Source / Framework
Latin Chant (Western Christianity)	Uniform rhythmic recitation in a sacred language.	Promotes contemplative focus and emotional regulation through repetition.	Shares structural parallels with Syriac chant in affective synchronization.	Comparative liturgical studies.
Buddhist Pali Recitations (South / East Asia)	Tonal, repetitive chanting with meditative cadence.	Generates calmness and moral awareness via rhythmic entrainment.	Highlights cross-traditional emotional attunement in sacred performance.	Comparative ritual semiotics.
Sufi Zikr (Pakistan)	Repetitive vocal invocation with rhythmic breathing.	Evokes collective transcendence and communal emotion.	Supports universality of affective-acoustic sacred forms across traditions.	Ahmad (2019).
Shinto Chanting (Japan)	Ritual chanting with harmonic resonance in communal spaces.	Strengthens social unity and reverence through sonic harmony.	Illustrates similar emotional intelligence through embodied sound and collective rhythm.	Kubo (2020).

In Table 6, it may be noted that the comparative analysis situates Syrian Catholic liturgical bilingualism within a global communicative framework, revealing that sacred sound practices from Syriac hymns to Sufi zikr constitute a universal affective-acoustic mode that fosters emotional intelligence, empathy, and peace building, though each remains contextually grounded in its cultural-linguistic tradition. Comparatively, studies of Sufi zikr in Pakistan (Ahmad, 2019) and Shinto chanting in Japan (Kubo, 2020) reveal parallel affective-acoustic structures supporting the argument that religious communication universally nurtures emotional intelligence, though contextually framed.

Acknowledging the Dual Nature of Religion

Analysis of the data also captured occasional exclusionary language 5% of coded units referenced “outsiders” or “unbelievers.” Rather than omit these, the analysis interprets them as boundary-maintenance mechanisms within symbolic communities.

Figure 2
Acknowledging the Dual Nature of Religion

Symbolic Interactionism posits that identity formation inherently involves differentiation; thus, religion's communicative power is ambivalent capable of both cohesion and conflict. Recognizing this complexity enhances objectivity and theoretical depth.

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

The convergence of Symbolic Interactionism and Multiple Intelligences is empirically visible: meaning-making (interactionism) stimulates cognitive pluralism (multiple intelligences).

Figure 3
Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

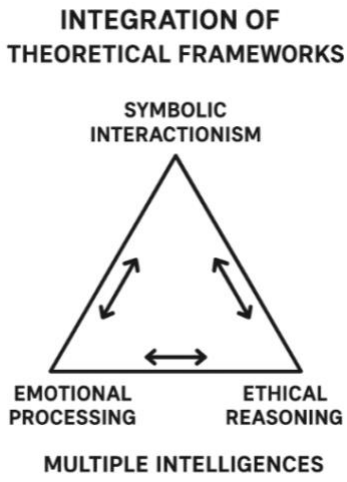


Figure 3 vsualizes the integration of theoretical frameworks from the perspective of Sacred Intelligence Model, depicting bidirectional flows among symbolic communication, emotional processing, and ethical reasoning.

Major Findings

Religious Communication as Emotional Education

The Syrian Catholic communicative system functions as a pedagogical environment cultivating emotional literacy through ritual and narrative.

Sacred Symbols as Cognitive Anchors

Symbols such as the cross and incense serve as semiotic triggers for reflection and ethical calibration.

Community as Cognitive Ecosystem

Collective participation reinforces social learning and empathy networks.

Digital Annotation Validates Theoretical Claims

ELAN-based mapping demonstrates measurable acoustic-emotional patterns corresponding to cognitive-ethical outcomes.

Ambivalence of Sacred Communication

While predominantly constructive, religious discourse occasionally delineates exclusivist boundaries, reminding scholars that sacred intelligence entails critical awareness of both unity and division.

Conclusion

This study reframes sacred intelligence as a dynamic convergence of spiritual meaning with cognitive and emotional capacities, revealing religious communication as an active site of intelligence formation rather than a residual tradition. Within Kerala's Syrian Catholic community, sacred discourse functions as a living social ecology where emotional regulation, resilience, reflexive selfhood, and collective belonging are continuously cultivated. By synthesizing Symbolic Interactionism and Multiple Intelligences Theory, the research establishes sacred communication as a central modality of human development. Empirical evidence, strengthened through digital annotation, demonstrates that ritual and narrative tangibly shape emotional and ethical reasoning. In an era of rapid digitalization and moral fragmentation, these findings call for a renewed global engagement with religious narratives as powerful resources for ethical deliberation, intercultural dialogue, and peace-building. For communication scholarship, this signals a decisive shift—from treating sacred discourse as marginal belief to recognizing it as a complex semiotic force actively shaping human meaning, agency, and social futures.

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Interpretation and Ambiguity of Sustainability Symbols in the Malang Hospitality Industry: A Peircean Semiotic Approach

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Abstract

This study examines how sustainability symbols are interpreted and misinterpreted in the Malang hospitality industry through the lens of Peircean semiotics. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores (1) how hotel guests from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds interpret these symbols, and (2) what factors contribute to ambiguity of meaning. Data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews, and a review of hotel policy documents. The analysis applied Peirce's triadic model (representamen, object, and interpretant) to trace how meaning emerges in context. Results showed wide variation in interpretation, influenced by guests' cultural values, environmental awareness, and the clarity of hotel communication. Ambiguity often stems from generic symbol design, limited narrative support, and the risk of greenwashing. This study highlights the need for culturally responsive and educational visual strategies to enhance the authenticity and effectiveness of sustainability communication. These findings provide practical recommendations for hotel managers and input for the development of national policies on sustainability standards in Indonesia's hospitality industry.

Keywords: symbols of sustainability, hospitality industry, Peirce's semiotics, cultural interpretation, visual communication

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Introduction

Sustainability practices have become a major focus in the hospitality industry. More and more hotel guests are looking for accommodations with a strong commitment to sustainability, whether in energy management, waste reduction, or social responsibility (Deri et al., 2024). As part of this trend, many hotels are adopting environmentally friendly marketing strategies to enhance their brand image and attract environmentally conscious consumers (Misik & Nagy, 2025). However, the challenge lies in ensuring that these sustainability communication strategies are understood authentically and do not cause confusion. Many communication strategies fail to convey their message because the message delivered does not match the intention, even creating negative perceptions (Mirzaghaev & Huseynova, 2024). In practice, the phenomenon of greenwashing—the manipulative use of environmental symbols and language—often causes hotel guests to doubt the hotel's genuine commitment to sustainable practices (Preisler Coats et al., 2025). On the other hand, the phenomenon of greenhushing occurs when hotel management chooses not to publicize their sustainable initiatives for fear of being perceived as excessive (Ettinger et al., 2021). This can be an obstacle in the development of sustainable strategies and the relationship between hotel management and hotel guests.

The success of a sustainable communication strategy is not only determined by the message conveyed, but also by how that message is interpreted by audiences with diverse backgrounds. A communication study in Asia explains that sustainable communication is more meaningful when understood as a relational process of cross-cultural dialogue. The use of local stories makes communication two-way, and an approach that was originally instructive can become collaborative (Gabai, 2025). In addition, authenticity and transparency in communication are also prerequisites for the success of sustainable communication strategies. A study shows that the implementation of environmentally friendly marketing has a positive impact on perceived benefits, company image, trust, and loyalty related to the hospitality industry. It also shows that younger generations, especially Millennials and Generation Z, are more likely to appreciate sustainability initiatives, making them an important target for hotels that want to enhance their brand image through environmentally friendly practices (Brañes et al., 2025). These findings are also consistent with other findings that reveal that some sustainability practices carry the risk of greenwashing, while others are appreciated by guests but undercommunicated (greenhushing) (Seyfi et al., 2025).

These phenomena indicate problems with meaning and interpretation in sustainability communication in the hospitality sector. This means that the success of a message depends not only on marketing strategies, but also on how sustainability symbols such as leaf images, water icons, or “eco-friendly” labels are interpreted by hotel guests (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). This is where the main problem raised in this study lies, namely that sustainability communication is semiotic in nature, meaning that the process of exchanging signs and meanings can be influenced by the background of the recipient's region of origin and education (Alsaati et al., 2020; Bordian et al., 2023). On the other hand, previous studies have focused more on the effects of eco-friendly communication on consumer perceptions or corporate brand image. However, very few have explored how the process of interpreting sustainability symbols occurs in the minds of hotel guests s based on their regional background and education (Gaspar Ferreira & Fernandes, 2022; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023; Tu et al., 2024). In this context, there is an urgent need to understand the interpretation and ambiguity of sustainability symbols themselves, as these two factors are thought to influence the formation of meaning that can determine the effectiveness of sustainability communication (Bausch et al., 2021; Moscardo, 2022).

The city of Malang, Indonesia, for example, is known as a rapidly developing tourist destination and home to various hotels that have begun to implement the concept of eco-hospitality. This city was chosen as the research location because of its high environmental urgency. According to data, the volume of waste produced in Malang reached 731.29 tons per day in 2024 (PPN/Bappenas, 2023). This waste is classified into two types, namely household waste and non-household waste, which includes waste from shops, offices, schools, markets, roads, hotels, restaurants, and public facilities. Alarmingly, plastic waste is recorded as the second largest contributor. This indicates that activities in the hospitality and tourism sector, including hotels, contribute to environmental problems, especially in the form of single-use plastics.

The object of this study is the Grand Mercure Malang Mirama Hotel, which actively uses sustainability symbols in various public spaces and promotional materials. These symbols are intended to instill ecological values and raise guests' awareness of environmentally friendly practices. However, the extent to which the message is understood in accordance with the hotel's communicative intent remains an open question. In practice, guests with different educational backgrounds and experiences are likely to have different interpretations of the same sign (Ásványi & Chaker, 2023; Julião et al., 2025). For example, a leaf sign may be interpreted as a moral representation of environmental concern by highly educated guests, but only as a decorative ornament by other guests. These differences give rise to ambiguity of meaning, where the same symbol elicits diverse interpretations depending on the cognitive framework and regional background of the recipient.

Based on this, this study aims to explore the process of interpreting sustainability symbols by hotel guests based on their cultural and educational backgrounds. It also aims to identify the visual elements and communication contexts that contribute to the emergence of ambiguity or misunderstanding of the meaning of symbols. Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach is used because it has the ability to explain the triadic relationship between signs (representamen), referred objects (objects), and meanings formed in the minds of recipients (interpretants) (Schmidt, 2022; Zhang & Sheng, 2017). By focusing on the process of semiosis that occurs between visual symbols and the interpretive experiences of guests, this study not only contributes to the development of sustainability communication studies in Indonesia, but also enriches the global discourse on how visual signs can be a bridge or an obstacle in conveying sustainability messages in the hospitality industry.

Literature Review

Interpretation, Semiosis, and Ambiguity

Visual communication is a complex and multi-layered process, as it involves a system of signs and codes that need to be understood contextually. In semiotics, each visual element such as images, colors, or logos does not have a fixed meaning, but rather acquires its meaning through a process of interpretation carried out by the recipient of the message (Ijam & Abbaas, 2019). Therefore, it can be concluded that interpretation itself is not merely an act of decoding, but rather the core of inferential semiotic activity; individuals construct new meanings based on their experiences and culture (Lorusso, 2006).

Within the Peircean framework, semiosis is understood as an endless dialogical process between signs and interpreters, in which every meaning that is formed is always open to subsequent reinterpretation (Ponzio, 2009). The meaning produced through the process of

semiosis is highly dependent on the mutual understanding between the communicator and the audience, so that the communicator's subjective view becomes the basis for the formation of symbolic meaning (Sindhav & Adidam, 2005). However, this process is also prone to ambiguity. Ambiguity is conventionally defined in linguistics as the property of a word or utterance that has two meanings or two interpretations (Fortuny & Payrató, 2024). Previous research explains that the interpretation of messages, which mainly uses written scenarios, can be influenced by individual, sociocultural, and contextual factors such as personality, sex and gender, and ambiguity that affects interpretation (Edwards, 2011).

Peircean Semiotic Approach

Charles Sanders Peirce places signs at the center of human communication and knowledge processes. For Peirce, signs always operate in a triadic relationship between representamen or sign forms, objects or realities referred to, and interpretants, which are the meanings produced by the receiver (Peirce, 1991). This relationship explains that meaning is not permanently attached to the sign, but is formed through social interaction, audience background, and knowledge or education (Zhang & Sheng, 2017). In this context, each individual brings a different cognitive and cultural framework, making the process of interpreting signs dynamic and open.

In the context of sustainability communication, Peirce's theory provides a relevant analytical framework for explaining how environmental messages are articulated and interpreted by the audience. Peirce defines a sign as a triadic relationship consisting of:

1. Representamen, which is the physical form of the sign (such as a picture of a leaf or an icon of water);
2. Object, which is the real reference or value represented by the representamen (e.g., sustainability or energy conservation); and
3. Interpretant, which is the meaning formed in the mind of the receiver based on experience, habits, and socio-cultural background.

Peirce also divides interpretants into three levels: (1) emotional interpretants that arise as affective responses to signs, (2) energetic interpretants in the form of concrete actions after receiving signs, and (3) logical or ultimate interpretants, which are stable meanings that become social habits (Lee, 2008). In this process, meaning is not fixed, but is formed dynamically and contextually, especially in a, influenced by the culture, education, and experience of the user. This concept is important for explaining why one symbol can be interpreted differently by different individuals.

Various studies show that sustainability communication often faces a gap in meaning, where visual messages designed with ecological intent are interpreted superficially or decoratively by audiences with low environmental literacy. This phenomenon reinforces Peirce's view that the meaning of signs is not universal, but rather depends on social conventions, cultural contexts, and the interpretive experiences of the society that receives them (Andacht, 2024; Goodsell et al., 2011; Kement et al., 2024).

In the hospitality industry, sustainability signs are an important part of visual communication strategies and guest experiences. Hotels use eco-friendly icons, logos, and text to affirm their commitment to sustainable practices. However, the meaning of these symbols is often not understood uniformly. Guests from different educational and cultural backgrounds can form diverse interpretations, ranging from deep understanding to simply viewing them as

commercial symbols (Gil-Soto et al., 2019; Seyfi et al., 2025; Thellefsen & Friedman, 2023). These differences create an ambiguity of meaning that is important to analyze. Using Peirce's semiotic approach, this study attempts to decipher how sustainability signs in hotels are interpreted, misunderstood, or even ignored by guests (Paraskevaidis & Weidenfeld, 2021). By combining Peirce's semiotic theory and global literature findings, this study seeks to fill a gap that has not been widely explored, particularly in the context of domestic tourism in Indonesia, which has diverse guests and varying levels of environmental literacy.

Methodology

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach that combines interviews with photo elicitation techniques and Peirce's semiotic analysis. The semiotic approach was chosen to analyze the signs of sustainability, following Peirce's scientific logic, which consists of three stages: abduction, deduction, and induction (Reilly, 2018). The abduction stage was conducted when the researcher formulated the initial assumption that differences in educational and cultural backgrounds influence the interpretation of sustainability symbols. The deduction stage was conducted by deriving working hypotheses in the form of empirical indicators—for example, how certain guests interpret the leaf icon or the text “eco-friendly” as a moral appeal or merely decoration. Next, the induction stage is carried out by analyzing interview data and photo elicitation results to see the extent to which guests' interpretations are in line with these hypotheses.

Photo elicitation is an interview method that uses photos or visual media as triggers for discussion, with the aim of stimulating deeper memories, emotions, and ideas than conventional verbal interviews (Glaw et al., 2017). Through this technique, participants are invited to reflect on their experiences when interacting with symbols of sustainability in hotels, allowing researchers to capture richer and more authentic layers of meaning.

The research location was the Grand Mercure Malang Mirama Hotel, a five-star hotel known for implementing sustainability practices in its operations. This hotel was chosen because it consistently displays symbols of sustainability in various public facilities and room areas (Accor, 2023). This context allowed researchers to directly observe how these symbols function in the hotel's visual communication and how guests from various backgrounds interpret them. The participants in this study were domestic guests staying at the Grand Mercure Malang Mirama Hotel. They were selected using purposive sampling techniques to obtain informants with a deeper understanding (Neuman, 2014). The minimum stay requirement was two days, so that they would have enough time to interact with the symbols of sustainability in the hotel environment. The selection of participants took into account the diversity of their educational backgrounds and regions of origin so that the variations in meaning that emerged could be well represented. There were seven participants in this study, all of whom came from East Java Province, Indonesia, with educational levels ranging from high school to master's degree. Detailed data on the participants can be seen in the following table:

Table 1
Informant Data

Code Informant	Informant's Region of Origin	Informant's Highest Level of Education
01	East Java	Vocational School
02	East Java	Vocational School
03	East Java	Bachelor's Degree
04	East Java	High School
05	East Java	Bachelor
06	East Java	Bachelor
07	East Java	Master

Note. This table explains the coding of informants based on their region of origin and highest level of education.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with an average duration of 60–120 minutes per participant. All conversations were recorded with the participants' permission and then transcribed for further analysis (Page et al., 2022). Field observations were also conducted to support data validity by observing the visual context and layout of symbols in various areas of the hotel, including rooms, lobbies, restaurants, and corridors.

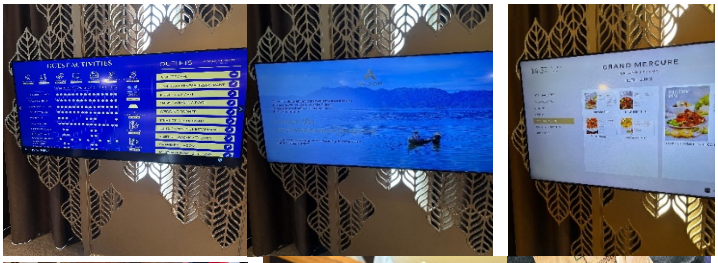
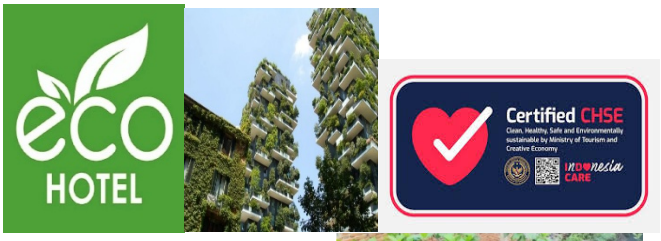
Results and Discussion

General Findings of Symbol Meaning Patterns

The analysis was conducted in several stages. In the first stage, the researchers observed the sustainability symbols in the environment of the Grand Mercure Mirama Malang hotel, which are commonly used in the hospitality industry. The researchers then identified the sustainability symbols. The following are the results of the categorization of sustainability items from the researchers' observations.

Table 2
Sustainability Item Categorization Data

Item Code	Item (Code Reading from Left to Right)	Item Categorization
01 - 03		Facilities (in Hotel Bathrooms)
04 - 06		Facilities (in the hotel room area)

07 - 09		Facilities (in the hotel room area)
10 - 2		Facilities (at the Grand Mercure Malang Mirama Hotel restaurant)
13 - 15		The most commonly used sustainability illustrations
16 - 18		Sustainability certificate information
19 - 20		Information on the sustainability practices of the Grand Mercure Mirama Malang Hotel

Note. This table explains the details of 20 sustainable items and their respective categories, which are the results of the researcher's observations.

In the second stage, researchers identify signs as representaments and connect them with the objects they refer to. Third, guest interpretations are explored through interviews, revealing meanings from the process of semiosis, whether emotional, actual actions, or habitual dispositions (emotional, energetic, and ultimate interpretants). This provides an understanding of how the repetition of experiences influences the formation of interpretive habits.

Interpretation and Ambiguity of Sustainability Symbols

Guests' interpretations of sustainability signs placed in bathroom and hotel room areas show a dynamic of meaning that moves from aesthetic aspects to environmentally friendly practices. Reusable soap bottles, for example, were initially read as symbols of luxury and hygiene in line with star-rated hotel standards, but some guests associated them more with the practice of reducing plastic waste. Environmentally friendly facilities were also interpreted in a similar way: first as luxury amenities, then as indicators of non-plastic materials, and finally as

potential symbols of healthy living habits if the narrative of sustainability was reinforced. Similarly, trash bins with the message "What you throw away today, we will recycle tomorrow" elicit a variety of interpretations: some see it as an invitation to reflect, some criticize visual aspects such as font size and symbol placement, and some suggest using more universal language such as "Save the World." This underscores that the success of symbolic signs depends not only on the object itself but also on the accompanying visual and narrative communication strategies.

Figure 1
Several Sustainable Signs in a Hotel Bathroom

a. Index Sign With Reusable Soap Bottle Object

b. Index Sign With Eco-Friendly Facility Object

c. Symbolic Sign With a Trash Can Object Labeled "What You Discard Today, We Will Recycle Tomorrow"

Source: Personal documentation

Most guests interpret these representations as symbols of luxury and cleanliness in star-rated hotels, such as "luxurious, hygienic soap bottles that meet five-star hotel standards." When given context, some guests also understood the sustainability aspect, namely the reduction of

plastic waste through the use of refillable bottles. In other words, the soap bottle symbol serves as both an aesthetic index and an indication of environmental awareness.

In terms of ambiguity, some guests criticized the technical aspects of the design; for example, the manual pump was considered impractical and not in line with expectations of modern hotel technology. This shows that even though the message of sustainability is conveyed (aesthetics and reuse), guests' perceptions can be distorted by their experience of using the product. Furthermore, without a clear narrative explanation, interpretations can stop at the impression of luxury without fully capturing the environmental value. Regarding trash bins, one informant even considered the message "useless" and suggested using more universal phrases such as "Save the World" and separating organic and inorganic trash bins. This gap confirms that without prominent visual context and clear language, recycling symbols can be interpreted differently by guests.

Figure 2
Some Sustainable Signs in the Hotel Room Area

a. Symbol Signs With Eco-Friendly Cardboard Objects and Energy-Saving Appeals With the Persuasive Phrase "Darkness, Who's Afraid?"

b. Symbol With Object Eco-Friendly Bottles & Recycling Information

c. Index Signs With Digital Hotel Facility Directory Information

Source: Own documentation

Some guests clearly understand the energy-saving message, associating it with a personal obligation not to waste electricity. They see the combination of cards and slots as a symbol that the hotel is encouraging guests to save electricity. Some interpret the aesthetic aspect of the card as an indicator of an environmentally friendly hotel. However, not all guests pay attention to the writing; some just consider the card to be a regular electric key. In terms of the use of glass bottles, most guests consider these glass bottles to be a premium element as well as a symbol of sustainability. Some realize that the use of glass signifies environmental awareness (glass bottles ≠ plastic). However, in general, the environmentally friendly message is more captured from the physical material of the bottle (glass) than from the narrative text. These bottles are considered exclusive and luxurious, and are associated with reducing plastic waste.

The slogan "Gelap Siapa Takut" (Who's Afraid of the Dark?) creates ambiguity. The narrative is small and difficult to read, so many guests overlook it. Some informants even misunderstand the word "gelap" (e.g., afraid to enter a dark room), which triggers negative or irrelevant interpretations. The limitations of readability and non-inclusive symbols hinder the main message. In other words, misunderstandings of the iconographic design of the card indicate that the meaning of energy conservation is not fully conveyed due to visual and linguistic constraints. In terms of the use of glass bottles, there is a lack of verbal communication. Informants noted that the English narrative was too long and difficult to understand. As a result, some guests ignore the text and only focus on the bottle. Several informants also found the label too crowded with text, which reduced the effectiveness of the message delivery. In other words, without easily understandable text, the glass bottle symbol is better understood at the material index level (glass) and less so at the symbolic level (narrative message).

Figure 3

Several Sustainable Signs explaining Facilities and Sustainable Practices

a. Index Signs With Digitalization Objects in the Hotel Facility Directory

b. Index Signs With Sustainable Practice Objects Displayed in Video Form

c. Index Signs With Digitalization Objects in the Hotel Food Menu Directory

Source: Own documentation

Most guests interpret this digitization as a modern innovation and proof of the hotel's paperless practices. They see the digital directory as an easy way to access information and an environmentally friendly service because it reduces printing. They consider it "practical, modern, and efficient" and supportive of sustainability. In general, these digital symbols are perceived positively as part of a hotel service that is committed to the environment.

On the other hand, some informants are less focused on visual media, so not all messages are absorbed. Additionally, communication effectiveness is limited if displays are only shown in rooms. Guests suggest placing them in public areas (lobby) or providing direct education by staff to expand the message's reach. This indicates that while digitalization is understood as an environmentally friendly innovation, contextual communication strategies (location and socialization) need to be strengthened to ensure the message is fully conveyed.

Figure 4

Several Signs of Sustainable Facilities Found in the Hotel Restaurant Area

a. Object: Environmentally Friendly Food Container

b. Object: Environmentally Friendly Beverage Bottles

c. Object: Eco-Friendly Dining Utensils and Straws

Source: Own documentation

Most guests interpret this eco-friendly packaging as tangible evidence of the hotel's commitment to sustainability. The symbolic message conveyed is environmental awareness and compliance with plastic reduction regulations. Some guests even associate it with personal habits such as bringing lunchboxes or tumblers, so that this symbol resonates with their daily practices. This indicates that the symbol has successfully moved from aesthetics (luxurious iconography) to a tangible material index (plastic replacement).

However, there are obstacles in conveying meaning. Some guests do not focus on this symbol, indicating the need for a more prominent design to attract attention. Criticism has been raised regarding the iconography, such as the color and clarity of the logo, which lacks contrast on the packaging. Thus, although the value of environmental friendliness is conveyed to most guests, the effectiveness of communication still depends on the legibility and visual emphasis of the symbol.

Figure 5

Some of the Most Commonly Used Sustainable Signs

a. The Most Commonly Used Symbolic Signs With Energy-Saving Objects

b. Most Frequently Used Symbolic Signs With Water-Saving Objects

c. Most Frequently Used Symbols With Recycling Objects

Source: Internet

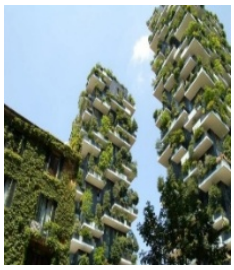
The energy-saving symbol is considered an easy-to-remember and positive message because of its green "go green" color. The water-saving message is also clearly understood as a relevant conservation appeal in everyday life. The water drop/tap icon effectively raises awareness that water is the source of life. The recycling symbol reminds some guests of their daily practice of recycling bottles or reducing tissue use. Overall, these icons are perceived as consistent with the conservation values of each object at the general appeal level.

On the other hand, the icon design causes confusion for some guests. The combination of lightning, leaves, and light bulbs in the energy symbol is considered irrelevant and confusing. The representation of a cupped hand in the water conservation icon is considered inappropriate (it should be an icon of the earth or nature). The recycling symbol also still causes misunderstanding; some lay guests interpret it as just a spinning arrow without a clear ecological meaning. These findings confirm that even though the basic concept is conveyed, generic iconography without context can trigger misinterpretation and requires additional explanation so that its ecological meaning is consistently understood.

Figure 6
Some of the Most Frequently Used Sustainable Information Signs

a. Symbol Signs With Leaf Objects

b. Index Mark With Green Building Object



c. Symbol Sign With the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism's Sustainability Certificate Object

Source: Internet

Only one informant understood the meaning of the Eco Hotel program, while the majority did not understand or focus on this symbol. The "Eco Hotel" symbol tends to stop at the icon level (leaf image) and verbal symbol (writing), but is not connected to the index (real action).

Without indexicality, most guests do not interpret its meaning. Only informants who already have environmental awareness can relate it to the eco program.

On the other hand, the green building sign produces fragmented interpretations. Without additional narrative or context, the meaning stops at diverse immediate/dynamic interpretants (positive, critical, negative). The final interpretant (the cultural norm of "green building" or eco-values) is not collectively achieved. Some read the certificate as a sign of cleanliness and safety.

Others are confused by the heart/checklist iconography, even misinterpreting it. Others do not recognize the symbol at all. The CHSE certificate functions well at the institutional symbol level, but is weak in terms of iconography. The message "safe & healthy hotel" reaches some guests, but the heart symbol opens up the possibility of alternative/erroneous interpretations. The final interpretation of "certificate = collective trust" has not been achieved.

Figure 7
Several Index Signs With Photos of Sustainable Practices Carried Out by the Grand Mercure Mirama Malang Hotel

Source: Internet

The index symbols above are perceived by guests as concrete evidence that sustainable practices are actually implemented by the hotel. The majority of guests gave positive feedback, emphasizing the ecological, social, and reputational benefits of the program. They saw the clean-up action as a sign of the hotel's concern for the local ecosystem and social responsibility. Thus, these photos serve not only as illustrations but also as factual verification—enhancing the hotel's credibility and eco-friendly image.

In terms of ambiguity, obstacles arise in terms of program information accessibility. Some new guests only became aware of the initiative after seeing documentation in their rooms, indicating limited communication. They suggested that information be displayed in public areas (such as the lobby) or on digital media so that more guests would be aware of it. In addition, guests emphasized the importance of program continuity and collaboration so that the action is not merely incidental, for example by involving the local community or developing sustainable educational programs. Without a communication strategy and sustainable implementation, the symbolic meaning of this photo cannot fully develop into a long-term interpretive habit (ultimate interpretant).

Conclusion and Implications

Based on Peirce's semiotic approach, the symbolic meaning of sustainability in one of Malang's hospitality industry s is formed through a triadic relationship between the representamen

(visual design of the symbol), the object (the concept of sustainability), and the interpretant (the interpretation of meaning by hotel guests). This interpretant is influenced by the educational and cultural background of the participants, so that the same symbol can be interpreted differently by individuals with different knowledge or cultural values.

Visual design elements such as color, icons, and typography influence the association of meaning in the interpretant; these elements are essential for conveying messages and shaping audience perceptions. Meanwhile, the context of hotel communication (e.g., symbol placement and supporting narratives) also frames interpretation. The combination of these factors creates ambiguity: the meaning of sustainability symbols is not inherent in the images themselves, but rather the result of semantic constructions shaped by cultural experiences, education, and context. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance of semiotic awareness in designing sustainability symbols so that the messages conveyed are relevant and unbiased for each audience segment.

In the future, more extensive research is needed, including involving small hotel chains, as previous studies have shown that smaller hospitality companies tend to be less likely to adopt environmental practices and invest in communicating them compared to global chains (Calisto et al., 2021). In terms of policy, this research can provide input for the Ministry of Tourism and the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI) in formulating sustainability indicator guidelines and sustainability symbols that not only meet visual aspects but can also be interpreted appropriately across cultures (Antonova et al., 2021).

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Declaration of the Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technology in the Writing Process

The author used ChatGPT (https://chat.openai.com/) and DeepL (https://www.deepl.com/en/home) to check the manuscript, with minimal use in the Literature Review section. ChatGPT, an AI language model, helped identify typos, grammatical errors, passive sentences, repetitions, and unnecessary adverbs. The final result is then further refined to maintain the author's original intent and writing style.

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Constructing Meaning in Silence: A Phenomenological Study of Audience Response to the Play *Request Sa Radyo*

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how audiences from the University of Makati interpret and respond to the play *Request sa Radyo*, a non-traditional theatrical Filipino adaptation of Franz Xaver Kroetz's Wunschkonzert. The one-woman performance was staged without dialogue, relying on ambient sound and symbolic actions, and challenges conventional narrative expectations. Featuring portrayals by Lea Salonga and Dolly de Leon, the play examines the personal world of an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) struggling with emotional isolation and routine. Through semi-structured interviews with UMak students and employees, the study investigates how prior expectations, cultural background, and lived experiences shape meaning-making. Findings reveal that audience reactions vary widely, ranging from disengagement to profound emotional resonance based on familiarity with the actors, exposure to unconventional theater, and personal connections to OFWs. The study draws on the interpretivist tradition and Mumby's Discourse of Representation to analyze how silence, repetition, and performer identity mediate understanding. The paper concludes that experimental theater can cultivate deeper emotional insight when audiences are prepared to engage symbolically, suggesting the value of pre-and post-performance contextualization in educational or culturally complex stage productions.

Keywords: theater, silence phenomenological, *Request Sa Radyo*

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Introduction

This study explores how audiences make meaning of a non-traditional theater performance titled *Request sa Radyo*, a one-woman, dialogue-free play that portrays the life of an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) navigating isolation, routine, and emotional distress. The play is an adaptation of the German play Wunschkonzert (Request Program) by Franz Xaver Kroetz. The character was portrayed by two celebrated Filipino actors: Lea Salonga, renowned for her extraordinary singing career and success in Broadway, and Dolly de Leon, who is now gaining international recognition for her nuanced dramatic work.

The production team transformed the 1,520-seating capacity of the Samsung Performing Arts Theater into a limited 400-seat arrangement, creating a more intimate experience between the set and the audience. Upon entering the theater, spectators were greeted by a striking stage setup: a functional, studio-type living space situated at the center. The working set amplified the realism of the character's routines and allowed audiences to witness every facial expression and movement with precision, deepening their engagement.

The performance challenges traditional expectations by eliminating verbal communication and relying instead on physical expression and ambient sound from a Filipino radio station. Audience members, particularly those familiar with Ms. Salonga's musical background were prepared to watch a vocal or musical performance. This expectation was subverted, particularly by Salonga's silent portrayal, which prompted reflection on the boundaries of her craft.

This research is rooted in the phenomenological tradition and draws on the Discourse of Representation to understand how audiences interpret the symbols, silence, and actions presented during the performance. It is especially interested in how prior expectations, emotional associations, and lived experiences shape interpretation. The inquiry arose from observing a mixed reaction among UMak audiences, some were deeply moved, others confused or in total disengagement despite experiencing the same performance environment.

Statement of the Problem

Theater as a communicative art form thrives on interaction between performance and audience. When a production breaks traditional conventions such as using silence in place of dialogue or removing a clear narrative arc it challenges audiences to participate in meaning-making differently. In the case of the play *Request sa Radyo*, many audience members appeared uncertain or even alienated by its form, suggesting a gap in interpretive access. This study investigates how such formal elements influence emotional and cognitive engagement, particularly among a university-based Filipino audience.

Even though there are previous studies on Philippine Theater it is often focused on production design, lived experiences of actors and performances on socio-political themes. Meanwhile there is no inquiry into how audiences make sense of productions specifically in unconventional theater such as "*Request sa Radyo*". Using silence as the central element in expressing the meaning of performance has been widely discussed in global context. This paper would like to address these gaps by offering a phenomenological understanding of how Filipino viewers engage with the absence of word in a performance.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how UMak audiences interpret and respond to the non-traditional elements of *Request sa Radyo*
2. To identify how expectations (e.g., celebrity actors, traditional forms) shape the viewing experience
3. To understand how symbolic actions and silence are received and interpreted
4. To examine how cultural background and personal connections influence emotional resonance of the performance

Research Question

For my main research question, I asked the participants to explain how as part of the UMak audiences interpret and respond to the non-traditional elements (absence of dialogue, One-Woman Performance, Use of Ambient Sound [Radio] as Background, Lack of Clear Story Arc, Themes of Mental Health and Isolation Depicted Non-Verbally) of the theatrical performance *Request sa Radyo*?

And for the sub-questions, the researcher asked the following below:

1. How do audience members describe their emotional and cognitive responses to the absence of dialogue in the play?
2. How do prior expectations, such as familiarity with the actors or traditional theater forms, influence audience interpretation of the performance?
3. How do audience members construct meaning from symbolic elements such as the radio, routine, or the character's final act?
4. What cultural or personal experiences shape how UMak employees and students relate to the story of the OFW character?

Theoretical Framework: Interpretivism and the Discourse of Representation

This research is grounded in the interpretivist epistemological tradition, which assumes that reality and meaning are socially constructed through individual and cultural lenses. Interpretivism allows us to understand how different viewers extract meaning based on their personal context, emotions, and past experiences.

The study is further supported by the Discourse of Representation, part of Mumby's (2011) Discursive Framework. This discourse focuses on how formal elements of a text or performance structure audience understanding. In the play *Request sa Radyo*, the absence of dialogue, use of ambient sound, and repetitive actions create a specific mode of representation that demands an active audience role. These choices guide, limit, or enhance the interpretive possibilities available to viewers. These unusual presentation triggers an internal discourse among the audience creating a mixed discussion whether the staging of the adaptation was worth the watch.

Methodology

Research Design

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. A phenomenological approach allows for the deep exploration of lived experiences, particularly how meaning is constructed by individuals encountering a particular event or stimulus. It discovers how people interpret meanings and application to the thoughts of an idea or program. In this study, phenomenology supplies a way to comprehend the subjective reactions and interpretive processes of audience members as they engage with an unconventional theatrical performance. Rather than measuring reactions through fixed variables, this approach values the nuanced, emotional, and reflective insights shared by participants. It is particularly suited to the nature of the play *Request sa Radyo*, which does not follow the conventional narrative structures and instead, it relies on the symbolic gestures and non-verbal cues of the actor to convey meaning. By centering the voices and lived experiences of the viewers, this approach sheds light on how meaning is co-created between the performer and the audience in the absence of traditional storytelling techniques we usually see in a stage production.

Participants

Five individuals from the UMak community were interviewed, representing a mix of students, staff, and faculty. Participants were selected purposively, based on having attended the play. To supplement this data, informal reactions and short reviews shared by UMak viewers on social media and online forums were reviewed to confirm thematic patterns.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted shortly after the viewing. Each session lasted 20–30 minutes and was guided by open-ended questions addressing emotional reactions, interpretive challenges, and personal connections. Secondary data included observational notes taken during the performances.

Ethical Considerations

Verbal consent was obtained from all participants. Identities were anonymized, and participation was voluntary. The researcher clarified the purpose of the study and emphasized that there were no right or wrong responses.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews and observations were coded thematically. Recurring patterns were identified across responses to each of the four sub-questions. Themes were then analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework to understand how representation and subjectivity influenced interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

Form as Barrier or Bridge

Since there is a mixed of noob and theater savvy among the participants, they saw the performance differently. Those unaccustomed to unconventional theater stated confusion and frustration while watching the play. However, frequent theater goers saw the silence as emotionally powerful and thought provoking.

Expectation vs. Experience

The familiarity with the actors shaped the expectations of the participants upon entering the theater. They initially look forward to watching Lea Salonga in her element which is musical or heavy monologue performances. The silence while portraying the character and the absence of usual theater story-telling surprised and even disappointed the audience members. This shows that there is a contrast between the expectations and the experience of the audience members.

Different Takes on Silence and Symbolism

Symbolic gestures of actors, like the repeated routines and small movements, carried strong meaning for the audience. Washing clothes, cleaning the same spot over and over, cooking dinner and nitpicking the art piece she created are simple acts that showed the character's need for control while navigating her life lonely in a foreign country. Participants even linked these actions to signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), reflecting her struggle to cope with isolation. While the only sound throughout the play came from a Filipino radio that plays songs, ads, and greetings it made the character felt that it is her way of staying connected to home. Viewers also noted how her mood shifted along with the radio's tone, she moved more freely and danced when the music was upbeat and when the DJ introduces mellow songs, she became distant. Together, the gestures and radio created a rhythm that made the silence feel heavier and more emotional, showing how simple routines can speak louder than words.

Emotional Resonance Through Lived Experience

There are also participants with family members working abroad found the character's behavior deeply familiar. The silence and gestures reminded them of the emotional weight OFWs carry, often unspoken and unoticed. Some even called their relatives abroad to check on them. The emotional attachment of OFW family members was deeply emphasized with heavy but real scenarios that were usually taken for granted by relatives.

This shows that Filipinos are emotional in nature relating to how the cultural and familial context of the play enhances meaning-making within the participants. The effect of the production to the live audience were observable having some of them with tearful eyes and worrisome feeling for their relatives abroad.

Theoretical Insights

These findings reinforce Mumby's (20211) Discourse of Representation in analyzing how performance choices guide meaning-making. *Request sa Radyo* does not offer direct narratives found in a usual performance; instead, it invites audiences to project, interpret, and emotionally

work through gestures and atmosphere. The interpretivist approach clarifies why interpretations differ: viewers bring their own cultural memory, expectations, and theater literacy into the meaning-making process. This shows how audiences may influence future work in theater.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study highlights the layered process of audience engagement in nonconventional theater. The play *Request sa Radyo* elicits a wide range of responses shaped by audiences' prior knowledge, personal experience, and openness to formal abstraction. These insights offer valuable implications for artists, producers, and cultural educators. Productions dealing with complex social themes may benefit from pre-performance orientations or post-show discussions to bridge interpretive gaps.

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

I have used AI assisted technology to look for terminologies and for the checking of the flow of this paper.

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Animating the Ancestors: Participatory Animation for Indigenous Folktale Preservation

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Abstract

This paper explores participatory animation as a method for preserving Indigenous folktales among Ukit people in Belaga, Sarawak. While animation is widely used in education and creative media, few projects engage Indigenous communities directly in co-creating stories that reflect their own cultural knowledge, visual traditions, and oral storytelling practices. Through community-based participatory research (CBPR) involving community elders and youth, ancestral narratives were adapted into animated sequences using drawing-based storyboarding, character design rooted in local symbolism, and voice recordings in native dialects. The project resulted in a four-phase framework—cultural grounding, co-design, animation production, and reflection—which emphasizes ethical collaboration, intergenerational learning, and culturally specific visual storytelling. The findings show how the visual translation of oral folktales not only fosters intergenerational knowledge transmission but also enables creative ownership among youth participants. The animations produced reflect traditional beliefs, landscapes, and values, while also incorporating contemporary perspectives from the younger generation. By centering local knowledge systems and inclusive co-creation processes, this study contributes to animation studies, Indigenous media, and community-based heritage work. It presents animation not merely as a tool for documentation, but as a living cultural practice—one that sustains tradition through youth-led reinterpretation, visual innovation, and shared authorship.

Keywords: participatory animation, indigenous folktales, cultural preservation, decolonial media

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Introduction

The preservation of Indigenous folktales is becoming an increasingly urgent imperative in the face of globalizing forces, language attrition, and intergenerational disconnection. Cultural heritage is at risk of disappearing as traditional storytelling techniques decline, especially in rural or displaced Indigenous communities. This includes loss of form, rhythm, and relational meaning in addition to content. Folktales are more than just stories; they are educational resources, mnemonic devices, ecological blueprints, and social contracts that encode cosmologies, ethics, and values. However, the majority of preservation efforts continue to be extractive or archival in nature, frequently turning living traditions into digital or textual artifacts that are no longer relevant to the communities from which they were extracted.

This paper makes the case that animation provides a different, dynamic, embodied, and community-driven approach to cultural preservation, especially when done within a participatory framework. Unlike static archives or top-down ethnographic films, participatory animation can function as a living archive, preserving not just stories but the storytelling act itself. Animation becomes a dialogic space that reimagines ancestral knowledge in modern visual forms, reconnects generations, and revitalizes cultural pride when community members—especially the youth and elders—are involved in the creative process.

The Ukit community, a marginalized Indigenous group whose oral folktales are in danger of vanishing, in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia, is the project's primary focus. Under the supervision of their elders, the project allowed young Ukit participants to storyboard and animate a few chosen folktales through cooperative workshops and the joint creation of a participatory pre-production animation pipeline. Through new forms of expression, this process re-activated stories rather than just documenting them. The process of participatory animation, as this paper will show, resulted in socio-emotional outcomes that bolstered Indigenous sovereignty, enhanced intergenerational relationships, and enhanced the community's sense of narrative agency in addition to culturally resonant media.

Literature Review

Indigenous knowledge systems are deeply rooted in oral storytelling traditions, which function as vital mechanisms for transmitting cultural heritage, values, and collective memory across generations (Anderson et al., 2018; Jacob et al., 2024). Far from being mere narratives, these stories are embedded within relational, spiritual, and social contexts, carrying sacred responsibilities that shape education, identity, and community life (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023; Steinke, 2025). Oral traditions serve multiple purposes: they transmit ecological and cultural knowledge, educate younger generations through proverbs, folklore, and idioms, and reinforce communal values of trust, reciprocity, and respect (Sharma, 2024; Stanley et al., 2017). They also play a crucial role in sustaining Indigenous identities, as seen in practices like yarning in Australian communities or Yoruba musical storytelling, both of which affirm cultural continuity (Oludare, 2021). However, challenges remain in preserving and archiving oral traditions in the face of modernization and technological biases, making digital documentation initiatives both necessary and complex. Importantly, integrating Indigenous storytelling into formal education and teacher training provides opportunities to bridge traditional and contemporary knowledge systems, fostering socio-cultural sustainability, creative confidence, and pedagogical relevance while centering Indigenous voices in the decolonization of research and learning (Gadaza et al., 2025; Oladimeji, 2018).

As part of these evolving strategies, animation has emerged as a powerful tool to complement and revitalize oral traditions, enabling the visual representation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in accessible and engaging ways. Its narrative and aesthetic flexibility allows for the translation of oral histories, ritual practices, and spatial memories into formats that resonate with contemporary audiences, particularly younger, digitally literate generations. For example, the Conghua Cat Head Lion Dance (CHLD) animation not only preserved symbolic elements such as costume and choreography but also reinvigorated public interest through visual storytelling (Fei & Wong, 2024). Similarly, the use of animation to retell Bodo community narratives has strengthened cultural retention by adapting traditional knowledge into relatable visual formats (Rai et al., 2024). Animation's potential extends further into immersive heritage experiences, as seen in 3D reconstructions of sites like the Yellow Crane Tower, which preserve architectural integrity while offering new modes of spatial interaction (Li et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023). These interventions are particularly effective in educational contexts, where animated films and VR-enhanced modules enhance learning outcomes and encourage deeper engagement with cultural content. Moreover, community-led projects employing motion capture and annotation tools—as in the documentation of Uilleann pipe performances and Cretan dances—demonstrate how animation can ethically and collaboratively archive embodied knowledge (Barmpounaki et al., 2025; Morris & Rodríguez-Amat, 2022). With the integration of AI, mixed reality, and participatory frameworks, animation evolves beyond a visual medium into a dynamic cultural interface—capable of conveying nuance, sustaining heritage, and fostering empathy across time and space (Gilhang et al., 2024; Zhu, 2024).

This intersection of animation and cultural preservation finds further synergy through participatory media practices, which emphasize co-creation, empowerment, and inclusivity in media production. Grounded in the principles of shared authorship and reflexive engagement, participatory approaches shift the cultural paradigm from passive reception to active collaboration (Bager et al., 2021). Whether in journalism, urban planning, or heritage projects, these models enable communities—particularly those historically marginalized—to reclaim narrative agency and embed their lived realities into the media they help produce (Bonacini, 2019; Korenaga, & Ogawa, 2023). The digital landscape has significantly amplified the reach and impact of such practices, enabling initiatives like #iziTRAVELSicilia to connect diasporic communities through digital storytelling, and facilitating environmental and urban planning projects that foreground local perspectives (Bonacini & Tanasi, 2017; Dumont, 2015). While the expansion of co-creative platforms brings challenges—such as content moderation, conflicting inputs, and the risk of tokenism—it also underscores the need for institutional frameworks that support ethical participation (Banks & Deuze, 2009). Crucially, participatory media offers more than representational inclusion; it facilitates intergenerational knowledge exchange, cultivates local ownership, and redefines consumer-producer relationships through collaborative storytelling processes. In this context, animation becomes not just a representational tool, but a participatory space where cultural expression, technological innovation, and communal voice converge—supporting a decolonized, future-facing approach to cultural preservation and media-making.

Methodology

The project used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method that was based on Indigenous research ethics and creative co-design. community-based participatory research (CBPR), the main tool, is a modular digital storyboard kit made with the help of local artists and animation teachers. It has two main purposes: to help teach visual storytelling and to make the pre-production phase of animation more accessible to non-professionals, especially those

who live in remote areas. There were several phases of workshops over the course of several months. The first phase included ethnographic immersion and semi-structured interviews with Ukit elders to find important folktales that had cultural meaning.

Youth participants (ages 10–18) were introduced to CBPR, visual language, and fundamental animation concepts in the second phase. The co-creation process was the third and most intensive stage. Elders and young people worked in small groups to storyboard the folktales they had selected, with facilitators helping with visual interpretation, pacing, and framing. This process emphasized iterative feedback, respect for oral accuracy, and symbolic fidelity. Additionally, participants talked about which gestures, motifs, and symbols should be kept, reinterpreted, or left out.

Video recordings of sessions, storyboard scans, participant reflection journals, and post-workshop interviews were all included in the documentation. The analytical method integrated thematic analysis of the participants' spoken reflections with visual discourse analysis of the storyboard panels.

Case Study: Belaga's Ukit Community

Originally semi-nomadic, the Ukit are a small Indigenous group in central Sarawak who are now mostly settled close to Belaga. Displacement, intermarriage, and a lack of institutional support have all put pressure on their language, customs, and storytelling techniques. Oral stories are no longer routinely passed down in many households, and very few have ever been formally recorded.

Elders told a variety of traditional folktales about river guardians, animal tricksters, origin myths, and forest spirits during the first workshop. The story of Ngelai the Moon Eater, a spirit that eats the moon and causes floods unless the villagers sing to him, was one that was told over and over. Although there were several variations of the story, they all focused on themes of cosmic balance, ritual performance, and ecological respect.

Youth participants used community-based participatory research (CBPR) to illustrate the story's stages, which include the swollen moon's appearance, the village flooding, the community's panic, the intergenerational discussion about what to do, and, finally, the group singing that lifts everyone's spirits. They used hybrid visual languages in their drawings, drawing inspiration from Sarawakian tattoo designs, TikTok art trends, and anime. Discussion and correction resulted from elders' comments about which visual forms felt appropriate or accurate. To get the ideal expression or piece of clothing, some characters were redrew several times.

Interestingly, the workshop setting evolved into an affective learning space. Before seeing the animated test loops, one elder said he had "never seen the moon spirit move before." Youth expressed pride in learning stories their parents never told them. After being screened in the longhouse, the finished product—a rough animatic sequence that combined voice recordings and storyboard panels—was well received.

Results and Discussion

The participatory animation process yielded multifaceted effects, which can be examined within three overarching categories: intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural aesthetics and authorship, and political sovereignty regarding representation.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

The project first showed that participatory animation brings intergenerational dialogue back to life. The co-creation process put elders and youth in the roles of co-teachers and co-authors, which is different from passive documentation. Elders were not only sources of information, but they also helped shape culture by correcting myths and reminding people of forgotten sequences or ritual gestures. Young people took on new roles as visual storytellers, using their digital skills to make abstract oral metaphors come to life.

Cultural Aesthetics

Second, the method sparked a conversation about aesthetic sovereignty. What does it mean to bring Indigenous stories to life without using colonial or orientalist tropes? The aesthetic negotiations that happened during the storyboarding sessions were also ways of critiquing colonialism. Some young people naturally used anime proportions, but older people pushed back against things that seemed wrong or made sacred characters seem less important. In a lot of cases, hybrid styles came up that kept cultural integrity while also letting people be creative.

Political Sovereignty Regarding Representation

Third, participatory animation gave people control over their own media. In traditional documentary filmmaking, people from outside the community film, edit, and interpret the content. This project made sure that all media outputs stayed in the hands of the community. Participants decided what to animate, how to frame it, and who could see the results. This feeling of control helped people feel more proud of their culture and less suspicious about "being studied."

Recommendations

This project demonstrates that animation can be more than just art or education when it is in the hands of a community. It turns into resistance, vision, and ceremony. Participatory animation can provide a scalable, respectful, and joyful means of ensuring that Indigenous folktales are not only remembered but also lived, voiced, and brought into the future as digital tools become more widely available.

Institutional Support

As a means of enhancing curricula and conserving cultural heritage, the government and educational establishments ought to make investments in participatory storytelling platforms such as the participatory pre production pipeline.

Building Capacity

To give young people digital storytelling abilities based on their cultural knowledge, animation training programs ought to be made accessible in rural and Indigenous communities.

Ethical Media Practices

In order to respect community sovereignty and give Indigenous groups complete control over the narrative content and its distribution, academics and media creators should embrace participatory frameworks.

Cross-Cultural Cooperation

To ensure that stories are told in an ethical and significant way, animation studios and cultural organizations can collaborate with Indigenous communities to co-create content for festivals, digital archives, and educational platforms.

Conclusion

Participatory animation has the potential to serve as a living archive that reanimates not only ancestor stories but also the community's sense of cultural authorship when it is based on Indigenous values and cooperative techniques. The co-creation process was an act of cultural revival for the Ukit of Belaga, not merely a means of preservation. Elders regained their positions as knowledge bearers rather than as relics of a dying tradition, and young people started drawing stories they had never heard.

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

The author declares that Quillbot and ChatGPT (OpenAI), both AI-assisted writing tools, were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Quillbot was employed for proofreading, grammar, and spelling correction, while ChatGPT was used to refine structure, phrasing, and improve clarity. These tools did not generate substantive content or contribute to the research

design, findings, or analysis. All ideas, methodologies, and conclusions are the result of the author's independent academic research.

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Visual Analysis of Self-Presentation on Dating Apps: A Comparison Between Taiwanese Heterosexual Female and Male Users

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Abstract

This study explores gendered visual self-presentation on dating applications through a sociolinguistic lens. Using content analysis, 200 Tinder profiles (100 male and 100 female) were examined to identify how users visually construct gendered identities. Six visual variables were coded: sexualization, partial physical features, emoji use, number of uploaded photos, selfie angle, and photo distance. Statistical analysis revealed that female users were significantly more likely to engage in sexualized imagery and preferred close-up, high-angle selfies, suggesting a tendency toward emotional accessibility and visual intimacy. In contrast, male users more often emphasized body parts and used medium-distance or low-angle photos, reflecting traditional masculine ideals such as dominance and height. While the number of photos and emoji use did not differ significantly, female users displayed slightly more expressive visual behaviors. These results suggest that self-presentation on dating apps continues to reflect conventional gender norms. Even within self-curated digital spaces, visual choices are strategically aligned with social expectations. This study contributes to sociolinguistic understandings of gender performance in online contexts and offers insight into the visual discourse strategies individuals employ to attract potential partners.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, identity construction, gender differences, dating applications, content analysis

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Introduction

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics primarily examines how different social factors influence language use and, conversely, how language impacts society. It explores how social characteristics—such as ethnicity, religion, social class, gender, education level, and age—shape the way people use language, resulting in distinct language patterns across various social groups (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Hudson, 1996).

Sociolinguistics aims to study the reciprocal impact between language use and society, focusing on how social structures and environments influence language, and vice versa. Contemporary theories in sociolinguistics hold that language and society are mutually constitutive, with language carrying social, cultural, and personal meanings (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Through linguistic markers, speakers symbolically shape both their self-identity and societal roles (Joseph, 2004). In essence, language is not just a medium for conveying information; it is an active force that shapes how we behave and interact as social beings (Mallinson, 2015).

When interacting with people of different religions (Keane, 1997), social classes (Bernstein, 1960), genders (Coates & Pichler, 1998), ages (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003), or education levels (Dollaghan et al., 1999), it's essential to adjust our language use to suit each context (Tannen, 1990). To avoid misunderstandings, we need to understand these differences and use language appropriately.

Sociolinguistics and Gender

Several foundational texts have introduced the sociolinguistic paradigm of language variation and gender identity. Notably, Robin Lakoff's Language and Woman's Place (1973) sparked global interest in the study of women's speech. However, it was not until the late 1980s that scholars began to examine female speakers more systematically. Since then, research on language and gender has steadily expanded. Coates (2015), in Women, Men and Language, notes that early linguistic studies rarely addressed women, as men were historically seen as the societal norm. The rise of the women's movement in the mid-20th century and legislation such as the UK's Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act in the 1970s helped shift public discourse and academic focus, prompting increased attention to gender-based language variation. Deborah Tannen's You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (1990) further advanced the study of gendered communication by highlighting conversational differences. For instance, men tend to dominate public discourse, while women speak more in private settings and are more inclined toward gossip. Women often avoid conflict, whereas men may use it to assert status (Al-Harahsheh, 2014). Tannen also observed that men interrupt women more frequently. Subsequent studies confirmed such gender-based patterns across various domains, including conversational styles (Nordenstam, 1992; Tannen, 1993), interactional contexts (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999), and performance differences (Gneezy et al., 2003; Hyde et al., 1990).

Women and men demonstrate different ways of using language in diverse interactional contexts. The following provides a short review of some relevant studies to illustrate the scope of knowledge regarding gendered differences in the field of sociolinguistics. For instance, in marital conversations, men and women tend to handle conflicts differently. Men often adopt a

more assertive or coercive stance, while women are more likely to take on a subordinate role (White, 1989).

Gendered language differences also appear in emotional expression and word choice. Women tend to be more expressive (Brody, 2013), using euphemisms (Li, 2024), interjections (e.g., "oh dear," "goodness") (Erickson et al., 1978), and intensifiers like "so" and "very" (Sardabi & Afghari, 2015). In contrast, men favor stronger, more explicit terms such as "hell" and "damn" (Yang, 2014). These patterns are evident across various contexts, yet most research centers on face-to-face interactions, with limited attention to gender identity construction in online environments (Kapidzic & Herring, 2015). As social media platforms emphasizing first impressions and sexual appeal, dating apps offer a distinct context for exploring gendered language variation and self-presentation. The next section elaborates on this rationale.

Dating Apps and Gendered Language

With the rise of mobile technology, dating applications have become increasingly accessible and widely used (Sobieraj & Humphreys, 2022; Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2019). Their convenience and ease of use (Li & Bowen, 2022) have encouraged more singles to engage in online dating (Chamourian, 2017; Ward, 2017).

Dating apps, accessible via mobile phones, enable users to present themselves through photos, self-introductions, and personal information. These profiles allow others to assess potential partners or chat companions (Konings et al., 2024). Both textual and visual elements shape users' impressions, making it relevant to analyze how such content constructs personal and gendered identities (Casañ-Pitarch, 2020; Ellison et al., 2012; Li & Bowen, 2022; Van der Zanden et al., 2022).

While traditional dating websites remain in use, dating apps have become more prominent due to their accessibility anytime and anywhere via mobile phones (Chamourian, 2017). These platforms also offer greater opportunities to connect with strangers through textual and visual self-presentation in personal profiles (Konings et al., 2024). Unlike social media rooted in existing networks, dating apps are defined by shared intentions—primarily romantic pursuits—rather than mutual connections (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). As a result, users are expected to carefully curate gendered self-presentations to attract potential partners.

Given the above discussion, this study aims to explore how female and male users build gender-relevant impression in the context of dating apps to make themselves attractive from the perspective of the imagined audience, namely, the other gender. In the process of building personal images, dating app users need to make different choices visually (Goffman, 2023).

Research Gaps and Purposes

Sociolinguistics examine how factors such as gender, ethnicity, and social class influence language use, as well as how language shapes social roles and identities. While many studies have explored gender-based language differences, including conversational styles, emotional expressions, and language habits, most of this research has focused on face-to-face interactions. There has been less attention given to online gender identity construction and self-presentation. Dating apps, as mobile dating platforms, offer a unique and accessible space where individuals can actively construct and display their gender identity through visual content. The shared goal

of seeking romantic relationships on these platforms creates a focused environment in which gender identity construction is both visible and relevant.

In sum, this study aims to investigate gendered differences in language behaviors within the context of dating apps, exploring how male and female users construct and display their gender identities to attract potential romantic partners of the opposite sex. Furthermore, the broader social implications of this study could assist users in creating more accurate profiles to attract the potential partners they are seeking. Furthermore, the inquiries made in this study can further reveal how the explored language and communication patterns could shape and realize gender socialization, gendered social expectations as specific to Taiwan.

Literature Review

Visual Presentation of Gender Identities

Konings et al. (2024) analyzed Tinder and Bumble profiles to examine sexualized visual self-presentation. While men and women assess mate value differently, both genders emphasize sexual attractiveness. Women, however, are more likely to sexualize their images—for example, by showing more skin or posing to highlight their buttocks—consistent with findings by Merlyn et al. (2024) and Hancock & Toma (2009). Additionally, women dissatisfied with their body types often accentuate sexual appeal through facial expressions. This pattern reflects the continued objectification of women and society's enduring focus on female physical beauty.

Chamourian (2017) conducted a survey-based study on Bumble profiles, revealing that men prioritize appearing attractive over showcasing social indicators like income or occupation—reflecting a belief that women value physical appearance in partner selection. However, this contrasts with findings by Abramova et al. (2016), Chamourian (2017), and Whitty (2008), which indicate that financially independent women place less emphasis on male socioeconomic status. In contrast, women tend to upload more photos, pay closer attention to details, and highlight hobbies or interests, aiming for an authentic and visually appealing presentation. Whitty (2008) attributes this to the greater pressure women face to maintain attractiveness, leading to more varied and expressive photo choices.

Casañ-Pitarch (2020), using a Google Form survey, found that men are more likely than women to use and appreciate emojis in dating profiles, possibly believing emojis enhance emotional nuance and appeal to women—reflecting norms that link emotional expressiveness with femininity. However, female users preferred profiles with plain text, contrasting with emoji usage trends seen on broader social media platforms (Bamman et al., 2014).

Sedgewick et al. (2017) analyzed Tinder photos and found that men favor low-angle selfies, while women prefer high angles—echoing findings by Kapidzic and Herring (2015). These choices are strategic: low angles enhance male height and dominance, aligning with female preferences for taller partners (Courtiol et al., 2010), while high angles suggest female shortness, consistent with male preferences shaped by traditional gender norms. Similar trends were observed by Merlyn et al. (2024).

Kapidzic and Herring (2015) analyzed profile photos on a teen chat site and found that boys preferred long-distance shots, often fully clothed or shirtless, reflecting norms of strength and emotional distance. In contrast, girls favored close-ups (Merlyn et al., 2024), frequently

wearing revealing clothing—interpreted as attempts to convey intimacy and align with expectations of submissiveness, seductiveness, and emotional expressiveness.

In conclusion, visual self-presentation on dating apps reveals distinct gendered patterns shaped by societal norms. Male users often highlight physical strength by displaying facial features, arms, or legs—reinforcing masculine ideals and aligning with female visual preferences (Merlyn et al., 2024). Female users include more diverse photos, balancing attractiveness with hobbies and interests, reflecting greater pressure to appear both appealing and expressive (Chamourian, 2017). Linguistically, men use emojis more often to convey emotion, while women tend to avoid them (Casañ-Pitarch, 2020). Women are also more likely to sexualize their images through clothing or poses, reflecting persistent objectification (Konings et al., 2024). Selfie angles differ by gender as well: men favor low angles to convey dominance, while women use high angles to suggest smallness—reinforcing traditional gender and stature norms (Sedgewick et al., 2017).

Based on existing literature, this study examines visual dimensions in self-profiles such as sexual attractiveness, partial physical features, emoji use, number of photos, photo angles, and distance. Accordingly, the following research questions are proposed to extend prior work in these areas.

RQ 1: To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in sexualizing themselves in profile photos?
RQ 2: To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in focus on partial physical features in their profile photos?
RQ 3: To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in their use of emojis in dating app self-presentations?
RQ 4: To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in the number of photos they upload to their dating profiles?
RQ 5: To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in their choice of photo angles?
RQ 6: To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in the photo distances used in their profile pictures?

Methodology

This study investigates how Taiwanese male and female users construct visual content in dating app profiles. To effectively capture the distribution and gender differences in visual self-presentation, a coding-based approach guided by the research questions was adopted. Thus, content analysis was deemed an appropriate method.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method for examining visual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Krippendorff, 2018). Initially developed in communication and journalism studies to quantify media content (Berelson, 1952), it has since evolved into a cross-disciplinary tool capable of addressing both qualitative and quantitative data (Neuendorf, 2017). Beyond counting word frequencies, it enables interpretation of contextual meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), making it well-suited for analyzing user-generated texts such as dating profiles. This includes both manifest content (e.g., emoji use) and latent content (e.g., emotional tone).

Babbie (2012) emphasizes that content analysis involves systematically coding qualitative data into meaningful categories for interpretation or quantification. This approach is particularly valuable in gender and communication research, where linguistic choices, such as stylistic elements like emojis, can reveal underlying gender norms and relational expectations in digital contexts.

Given the study's focus on gendered self-presentation, content analysis was chosen as the most suitable method. It allows for the systematic examination of linguistic and stylistic features in user-generated data. By analyzing Tinder profile photos, the study captures meanings conveyed through visual self-presentation. Widely used in online dating research (e.g., Casañ-Pitarch, 2020; Hitsch et al., 2010; Sritharan et al., 2010), content analysis provides an effective framework for exploring both overt and nuanced gendered cues in dating profiles.

Development of the Coding Tool

The Dimensions for Visual Analysis (RQs 1–6)

Following Konings et al. (2024), RQ1 (To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in sexualizing themselves in profile photos?), the variable "sexualizing". The operational definition of this variable is defined as below, and if such information is present in the profile samples, a coding value "1" is assigned, otherwise "0."

Sexualized:

- If the users wear revealing attire, which exposes a significant amount of skin, or tight clothing, such as "swimwear, low-cut tops"
- If the users are posing in a suggestive way, such as, "arching the back, pouting lips"

Following Merlyn et al. (2024), RQ2 (To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in focus on partial physical features in their profile photos?), the variable "partial physical features." The operational definition of this variable is defined as below, and if such information is present in the profile samples, a coding value "1" is assigned, otherwise "0."

Partial physical features:

- If the users only display a specific bodily feature, such as, "legs, arms, chest and full face"

As to RQ3 (To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in their use of emojis in dating app self-presentations?), one of the relevant variables examined is "emojis." The operational definition of this variable is defined as below, and if such information is present in the profile samples, a coding value "1" is assigned, otherwise "0."

Emoji:

- If the users use emojis in profile presentation, such as "👰, 🍕, 🐈, 😊"

Following Chamourian (2017), the variable "number" as examined in RQ4 (To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in the number of photos they upload to their dating profiles?) is defined as follows. If the exact photo count of the visual count was calculated and assigned as the value of this variable.

Following Sedgewick et al. (2017), RQ5 (To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in their choice of photo angles?), the variable "angles" is defined as follows:

1= High angle, the camera is above the subject's eye level, looking downward.
2= 2Eye-level (neutral) angle, the camera is approximately at the subject's eye level.
3= 3Low angle, the camera is below the subject's eye level, looking upward.

Following Kapidzic and Herring (2015), the variable "distances" as examined in RQ6 (To what extent do female and male dating app users differ in the photo distances used in their profile pictures?) is defined as follows:

1= Medium shot, the photo shows the subject from the waist up or mid-thigh up.
2= Full body, the subject's entire body, from head to feet, is visible.
3= Close shot, the photo frames the subject's face and shoulders, typically from the chest up, focusing on facial expression.

Data Collection and Sampling

Tinder was chosen as the data source due to its popularity, accessibility, and profile-centered design. As one of the most widely used dating apps globally and in Taiwan, particularly among young adults (Hobbs et al., 2017; LeFebvre, 2018), it offers a diverse user base. Its strong market presence in Taiwan (Statista, 2024) makes it a relevant platform for examining gendered self-presentation in digital contexts.

This study targeted 200 Tinder profiles, focusing on users aged 18–23 within a 161 km radius—the platform's maximum range. A convenience sampling approach was adopted, beginning with profiles readily accessible to the researcher. To ensure gender balance and reflect heterosexual interactions, two separate Tinder accounts (one male, one female) were created, maximizing exposure to opposite-gender profiles and enabling systematic data collection across genders.

Profile data were collected via screenshots of user bios, which served as the primary source for analysis. Sampling continued until 200 profiles were obtained, ensuring adequate data for gender-based comparisons and content analysis. Efforts were made to maintain gender balance (approximately 100 male and 100 female profiles); in cases of imbalance, statistical adjustments such as weighting or stratified analysis were applied.

All Tinder bios are screenshot for documentation, and any personal identifiers were removed to ensure anonymity in the process of preserving the samples in a word file. Each profile was assigned a unique identification code (for example, "M001" for the first male profile and "F001" for the first female profile) to support systematic data management and coding procedures. The dataset was securely stored on a password-protected and encrypted cloud platform, such as Google Drive, with access restricted to the researcher only.

Tinder

On Tinder, users can upload up to nine profile photos. The profile section is organized into 15 optional categories that allow users to disclose varying aspects of personal information. The only mandatory fields of information disclosure in personal profiles are gender, age, and username (displayed name).

Most of the information categories are optional: “About Me” narratives (self-introduction, written with maximum 500 characters), “Interests,” “Height,” “Relationship Goals” (e.g., long-term, short-term, friendship), “Relationship Type” (monogamous or non-monogamous), “Languages,” “Occupation,” “Company,” “School,” “City of Residence,” “Favorite music,” “Favorite Singer,” and “Sexual Orientation.”

Tinder also includes a “Get to Know Me” section, featuring details such as zodiac sign, education level, family planning, COVID-19 vaccination status, MBTI personality type, preferred communication methods (e.g., phone, video call, text), love expression styles (e.g., gifts, words of affirmation), and blood type. Additionally, the “Lifestyle” section covers information on pets, drinking and smoking habits, fitness activity, dietary preferences, social media use, and sleep patterns (e.g., early bird, night owl).

During the matching process, the user's profile photo is the first item visible. In the bottom-left corner, Tinder displays the user's names, age, and a brief “About Me” description or relationship goals. A small upward arrow icon is shown in the bottom-right corner, which can be tapped to reveal the full user profile.

When scanning various users’ profiles, one can determine the liking or not by swiping right on a profile to express interest or swiping left to dismiss the currently navigated profile. A mutual right swipe between two users would be detected by the app and hence marked with a prompt showing “match.” Upon each match, both parties (or just one) may initiate a private conversation using the in-app messaging function.

Because once a profile is dismissed, one can never have access to it. Due to this limitation, to maximize the access to potential samples during data collection, the researcher would create two brand new accounts representing one female and one male user on Tinder.

Data Analysis and Presentation of the Findings

Frequency Analysis

Frequency analysis is used to describe and summarize how often different values of a variable occur in a dataset. It is the most commonly used statistical approach for analyzing categorical data, providing basic information such as counts and percentages for each category. This allows researchers to understand patterns, distributions, and common features within the data (Field, 2024).

In this study, frequency distributions are presented to illustrate the relative occurrences of various visual features. The categorical variables examined include sexuality, emojis, physical features, photo angle and distance (RQs 1–3, 5–6). Frequency counts are used to calculate how often these variables appear among male and female users on dating platforms.

Chi-Square Tests Analysis

The chi-square test of independence is a non-parametric statistical method used to examine whether there is a statistically significant association between two categorical variables. It is commonly employed when both variables are nominal or ordinal and is particularly useful in content analysis and survey research involving binary or grouped data (Field, 2024).

In the present study, chi-square tests of independent would be conducted to examine the association between gender and other nominal variables examined in RQs 1–3, 5–6), sexuality, emojis, physical features, photo angle and distance.

Independent Samples t-Tests

The independent samples t-test is a statistical method used to compare the means of two unrelated groups to determine whether the difference between them is statistically significant. This test is appropriate when the independent variable consists of two distinct categories, such as male and female users, and the dependent variable is measured on an interval or ratio scale (Field, 2024).

In the present study, the continuous variables include the number of photos in profiles (RQ4). The independent samples t-test was used to examine whether there is significant gender-based differences photos are presented for self-presentation (RQ4). The application of this test aligns with the study's objective of exploring gender-based variations in linguistic behavior for self-presentation of online dating profiles.

The above statistical analysis will be conducted using SPSS 22.

Finding

Visual Analysis

Sexuality

A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether sexualized self-presentation differed by gender. As shown in Table 1, there was a statistically significant association between gender and self-sexualization.

Table 1
Sexuality by Gender

		Sexuality		Total
		no	yes	
Gender	male	401(95%)	22 (5%)	423
	female	390 (77%)	119 (23%)	509
Total		791	141	932
Pearson Chi-Square		P = .000		

Table 1 demonstrates a significant gender-based contrast in the use of sexuality-related images on dating app profiles. Among male users (n = 423), only 5% (22 profiles) included images featuring revealing clothing or sexual gestures, while the vast majority (95%) did not. In contrast, female users (n = 509) were considerably more likely to include such imagery, with 23% (119 profiles) displaying sexuality-related content and 77% (390 profiles) not doing so.

This marked disparity indicates that female users are over four times more likely than male users to present sexuality-related images in their profiles. The association between gender and the use of such images is statistically significant, as confirmed by a Pearson Chi-Square test (P = .000), suggesting that gender is strongly related to visual self-presentation strategies involving sexual cues on dating platforms.

Partial Physical Features

A chi-square test was used to evaluate gender differences in the presentation of specific body parts in profile photos. As shown in Table 4.2, there was a statistically significant association between gender and partial physical features.

Table 2
Partial Physical Features by Gender

		Body part focused		Total
		no	yes	
Gender	male	389 (92%)	34 (8%)	423
	female	492 (97%)	17 (3%)	509
Total		881	51	932
Pearson Chi-Square		P =.002		

Table 2 illustrates a statistically significant gender difference in the focus on specific body parts in dating app profile photos. Among male users (n = 423), 8% (34 profiles) included images that emphasized particular body features, whereas 92% (389 profiles) did not. In contrast, only 3% (17 profiles) of female users (n = 509) highlighted body parts in their images, while the remaining 97% (492 profiles) refrained from such visual focus.

This pattern suggests that male users are more than twice as likely as female users to emphasize specific body features in their self-presentations. The association between gender and body-part-focused imagery is statistically significant, as supported by a Pearson Chi-Square test (P = .002), indicating that gender plays a notable role in shaping how users curate visual elements of their dating profiles.

Emojis

A chi-square test was conducted to evaluate differences between genders in emoji use. As shown in Table 3, there was no significant association between gender and Emojis.

Table 3
Emojis Use in Profile

		Emoji		Total
		No present	Present	
Gender	male	80	20	100
	female	77	23	100
Total		157	43	200
Pearson Chi-Square		P =.606		

Table 3 presents the distribution of emoji usage in dating app profile texts across genders. Among male users (n = 100), 20% (20 profiles) included emojis in their profiles, while 80% (80 profiles) did not. Similarly, among female users (n = 100), 23% (23 profiles) used emojis, with the remaining 77% (77 profiles) choosing not to.

This slight variation suggests that female users were marginally more inclined to use emojis than male users. However, the difference was not statistically significant, as indicated by the Pearson Chi-Square test result (P = .606). Therefore, gender does not appear to be a determining

factor in emoji usage on dating app profiles, implying that the use of emojis as a self-presentation strategy is relatively consistent across genders.

Number of Profile Photos

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the number of profile photos uploaded by male and female dating app users. As shown in Table 4.4, there was no significant association between male (M = 5.80, SD = 2.207) and female (M = 6.29, SD = 2.071).

Table 4
Numbers of Profile Photos by Gender(t-test)

Gender	Total number of photos	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Test
Male (N = 100)	423	5.80	2.207	t = -1.619,
Female (N = 100)	509	6.29	2.071	p = 0.107 > 0.05

Table 4 presents the results of an independent samples t-test examining gender differences in the number of profile photos. The analysis indicated no significant difference between male and female users in the total number of photos uploaded (p = .107). However, when examining the type of images users selected, a separate analysis revealed a significant gender difference in body-focused photos. Male users displayed a higher number of body-focused images (M = 5.80, SD = 2.207) compared to female users (M = 6.29, SD = 2.071). This suggests that although overall photo quantity does not differ by gender, male users are more likely to emphasize their bodies in visual self-presentation.

Angles

To assess whether photo angles differed between genders, a chi-square test was used. As shown in Table 5, there was a statistically significant association between gender and photo angels.

Table 5
Photo Angle Preferences in Profile

		Angle			Total
		High	Eye-level	Low	
Gender	Male	45 (11%)	316(75%)	62(15%)	423
	Female	113(22%)	367(72%)	29(6%)	509
Total		158	683	91	932
Pearson Chi-Square		P = .000			

Table 5 illustrates a significant gender-based distinction in the choice of photo angles used in dating app profiles. Among male users (n = 423), the majority (75%) opted for eye-level shots, followed by 15% who used low-angle photos and only 11% who used high-angle shots. In contrast, female users (n = 509) showed a different pattern, with a higher proportion using high-angle photos (22%), while 72% chose eye-level angles and just 6% opted for low-angle shots.

These results suggest that female users are twice as likely as male users to present themselves using high-angle photos, a stylistic choice often associated with visual cues of approachability or vulnerability. Meanwhile, male users more frequently employed low-angle shots, which may convey dominance or confidence. The association between gender and angle choice was found to be statistically significant, as indicated by the Pearson Chi-Square test (P = .000), supporting

the notion that visual framing strategies on dating platforms are influenced by gendered self-presentation norms.

Distance

A chi-square test was conducted to explore distance framing (close, medium, full body) in profile photos. As shown in Table 6, there was a statistically significant association between gender and distance.

Table 6
Photo Distance Selection in Profile

		Distance			Total
		Medium	Full body	Close	
Gender	Male	217 (51.3%)	73(17.3%)	133 (31.4%)	423
	Female	225 (44.2%)	81(15.9%)	203 (39.9%)	509
Total		442	154	336	932
Pearson Chi-Square		P =.026			

Table 6 reveals a statistically significant difference between male and female users in their preferred photo distances on dating app profiles. Among male users (n = 423), the most common photo type was medium distance (51.3%), followed by close-up shots (31.4%) and full-body images (17.3%). Female users (n = 509), in contrast, displayed a higher tendency toward close-up photos, with 39.9% of their profiles featuring such images. Medium distance was the second most common (44.2%), while full-body photos accounted for 15.9%.

These results suggest that female users are more likely to use close-up photos, which may emphasize facial expressions and emotional accessibility, whereas male users more frequently rely on medium-distance images, possibly to balance self-representation between facial and bodily cues. The association between gender and photo distance was statistically significant (P = .026), indicating that gender influences not only the content but also the framing choices users make in crafting their visual self-presentations on dating platforms.

Discussion and Conclusion

A Summary

This study examined gendered visual self-presentation on dating applications by analyzing 200 Tinder profiles. The results revealed consistent gendered patterns across six visual variables. Female users were more likely to use sexualized images, close-up frames, and high-angle selfies, whereas male users tended to emphasize body parts, adopt medium-distance shots, and favor low-angle photos. These findings echo previous research by Konings et al. (2024), Sedgewick et al. (2017), and Merlyn et al. (2024), all of which suggest that online dating spaces are performative arenas where traditional gender norms are visually enacted. Compared to earlier studies, this research confirms that traditional gender styles still shape how people present themselves—men tend to show dominance, while women focus more on being attractive and emotionally approachable. The lack of significant differences in emoji use and number of photos is also consistent with Casañ-Pitarch (2020), who found that people use symbolic elements like emojis in various and sometimes unpredictable ways in online dating.

Interpreting Gendered Visual Strategies and Communication Behavior

This study finds that gender identity construction on dating apps largely reinforces traditional gender norms. Female users' frequent use of high-angle selfies and close-up shots aligns with conventional ideals of femininity—emotional expressiveness, visual approachability, and petite appearance. In contrast, male users favor low-angle and medium-distance shots, projecting dominance, confidence, and strength—traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. These visual strategies both reflect internalized gender ideologies and serve as deliberate tactics to meet perceived expectations of the opposite sex. As supported by Merlyn et al. (2024) and Kapidzic and Herring (2015), such patterns indicate that users craft profiles based on socially accepted standards of attractiveness.

Gendered visual behaviors reflect broader dynamics in online dating. Female users often signal emotional availability and relational readiness, while male users emphasize independence and strength to assert social value and align with stereotypical female preferences. These asymmetries indicate that dating app interactions remain influenced by offline gender roles, with users performing gender to express identity and attract romantic attention.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research design was limited to content analysis without access to the users' intentions or rationales behind their profile choices. This constraint prevents us from understanding whether these visual strategies are deliberate, habitual, or socially learned. Without follow-up interviews or ethnographic insights, the interpretive depth remains limited. Second, the sample included only 100 male users and 100 female users. Although the numbers were balanced, the sample size may have been insufficient to reveal statistically meaningful differences. Third, the scope focused solely on visual content, textual elements were excluded from this analysis.

Future research could integrate qualitative interviews or surveys to explore users' motivations and perceptions. Including non-heteronormative profiles and cross-platform comparisons would also expand the generalizability of findings. In addition, adopting multimodal analysis across time could reveal how visual gender performances evolve with shifting societal norms.

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Beyond the Gender Line: Public Insights on Legal Protection for Male Victims of Domestic Violence

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Abstract

In the Philippines, domestic violence has always been perceived as a women's and children's issue. However, there is a slowly growing number of cases involving male victims that remain underexamined and often undocumented. This study explores public perceptions of domestic violence against men (DVAM) and whether there is a need for legislation that criminalizes such abuse in the country. Using the qualitative sociological approach, the study surveyed eighty-seven (n = 87) participants from various sectors, selected via snowball sampling. Data were gathered through open-ended and semi-structured online questionnaire and analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Findings reveal varied perspectives of DVAM by the participants, which are categorized in three major thematic categories: legal, cultural, and psychological perspectives. Legally, participants stressed the absence of protective measures for male victims, the need for gender-neutral laws, and DVAM as a human rights issue. Culturally, machismo construct, gender stereotypes, and social stigma contribute to the silencing of male victims, influenced by complicated power dynamics in relationships. Psychologically, responses point to emotional and mental abuse for male victims, lack of awareness and underreporting of DVAM, and personal witness accounts of violence. Further, participants also expressed mixed reactions to the proposed law criminalizing domestic violence against men – from strong support to skepticism. Legislative recommendations drawn from public insights are offered, emphasizing the need to recognize and protect all DVAM victims regardless of gender. These findings aim to provide insights to policy discourse, promote inclusivity in law, and challenge culturally embedded gender norms in the Philippines.

Keywords: domestic violence against men, male victims, gender inclusivity, legal protection, human rights

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Introduction

Domestic violence is considered a social problem that has been plaguing the Philippines for so long. The growing number of victims of this kind of violence prompted the Congress of the Philippines to pass a law that protects the victims of domestic violence – albeit only for women and their children. In 2004, Republic Act No. 9262, also known as the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act, was enacted, recognizing the harsh realities they face in abusive domestic relationships. This landmark legislation penalizes acts of violence against women and their children (VAWC) committed by their husband, former husband, or any person who has or had a sexual or dating relationship, or with whom the woman has a common child.

According to the Inter-Agency Council on Violence Against Women and their Children (n.d.), the enactment of the said social legislation is a result of less than a decade of unflinching advocacy and lobbying by women advocates, policymakers, other stakeholders, and the women victim-survivors themselves. It was a collective effort from different stakeholders in society.

Understandably, the Philippine government provides high regard to these vulnerable sectors, a constitutional guarantee from the 1987 Philippine Constitution. Several constitutional precepts on the welfare of women and children are enshrined in the Philippines' fundamental law.

In addition to the constitutional and statutory provisions, the Philippine government also vows to end violence and discrimination against them. R.A. 9262 reiterates this policy by exerting "efforts to address violence committed against women and children in keeping with the fundamental freedoms guaranteed under the Constitution…other international human rights instruments of which the Philippines is a party."

Under R.A. 9262, the State prohibits the commission of the physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence against women and children. The victims may also avail of remedies such as temporary and permanent protection orders. The successful prosecution of the crimes under R.A. 9262 may make the perpetrators face graduated penalties and fines.

However, Filipino men now ask, "How about us? What protection does the State provide us when the offender is a woman whom we had dating, romantic, or sexual relationship with?"

In the Philippines, domestic violence has always been perceived as violence against women and children. This leads to the normalization of the idea that "domestic violence" is exclusively equivalent to "violence against women and children." However, some advocates say that violence against men also exists in Philippine society. The common perception that women are always the victims of domestic violence leads to the inaction and inattention of this relevant issue of male victimization (Junio, 2014).

In a nutshell, domestic violence against men deals with abuse experienced by men in a domestic or family home setting, either in marriage or cohabitation. In some other countries, violence against men is punishable, but statutes depend on jurisdictions. Intimate partner violence (IPV) against men is generally less recognized by society than IPV against women, which can act as a further block to men reporting their situation (Lupri & Grandin, 2004). Furthermore, domestic violence against men is experienced by men of different ages in a domiciliary setting.

Incidentally, violence against men is not given more attention than violence against women, which may become a factor why men do not report their dilemma. In the Philippines, the lack

of statistics on the male domestic abuse seems to be the problem why this kind of violence is unattended by the authorities. However, antidomestic abuse advocate Nano Manahan cited the rise of the incidence of male abuse in the country (Castillo, 2018). Twelve to fifteen out of every 100 couples in the Philippines are abused by their wives. He strongly believes, as tackled in his book, that the search for genuine gender equality, which is at the center of human rights issues, should convince everyone to discuss and address the reality that "there are men in relationships who are also victims of domestic violence, thus, they equally need attention and help (Castillo, 2018)."

However, there was a big disparity as to the latest data on violence against men and women as obtained from the PNP Crime Information Reporting and Analysis System (PNP CIRAS) in May 2021. More than 8,900 women suffered a form of domestic violence under R.A. 9262, while only 21 incidents of violence committed against male victim-survivors by family relatives or intimate partners were recorded by the PNP on that same year (VERA Files, 2022).

The study is grounded on Gender Role Theory, which provides an all-inclusive lens through which the cultural, legal, and perceptual dimensions of violence against men can be examined and understood. The theory posits that societal expectations dictate behaviors considered appropriate for men and women. These gender roles shape the way individuals perceive themselves and others in social contexts (Eagly, 1987).

Although violence against men is a controversial area of research because of the non-conformity of some feminists in terms of gender symmetry and battered husband syndrome, the researcher attempts to expound the implications of authorities' non-attention to this problem.

Research Questions

The paper aimed to analyze whether there is a need to enact a statute that provides protection to men who experience domestic abuse in different settings. It sought to determine the existing views and perceptions of the public about domestic violence against men and their reactions on the proposed statute criminalizing domestic violence against men.

Methodology

With the goal of exploring the public's insights and perceptions regarding domestic violence against men (DVAM) in the Philippines, the present study utilized a qualitative research in sociology. Eighty-seven (n = 87) participants took part in the study. They belong to various sectors of society, including students, professionals, educators, parents, and members of civic organizations. The participants were chosen using snowball sampling. Moreover, the participants were all of legal age.

Using Google Forms, data were collected through an open-ended and semi-structured online questionnaire. The instrument was duly validated by three experts on law, gender, and sociology. Data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, adhering to the ethical research principles of privacy, consent, and voluntariness.

Results and Discussion

1. Existing views and perceptions of the public about domestic violence against men

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of participants' responses regarding their views and perceptions about domestic violence against men. The findings are organized into the following three major themes, with sub-themes supported by participants' answers to open-ended questions, namely:

1.1 Legal Perspectives
- 1.1.1 absence of protective measures for male victims
- 1.1.2 the need for gender-neutral laws
- 1.1.3 DVAM as a human rights issue

1.2 Cultural Perspectives
- 1.2.1 machismo construct
- 1.2.2 gender stereotypes
- 1.2.3 social stigma

1.3 Psychological Perspectives
- 1.3.1 emotional and mental abuse for male victims
- 1.3.2 lack of awareness and underreporting of DVAM
- 1.3.3 personal witness accounts of violence

Legal Perspectives

One of the emerging themes that came to light from the responses of the participants of the study is the legal perspectives. Participants emphasized three interrelated subthemes: (1) the absence of protective measures for male victims, (2) the need for gender-neutral laws, and (3) the framing of DVAM as a human rights issue.

Absence of Protective Measures for Male Victims

Despite the lack of statistics in the Philippines, the absence of protective measures for male victims is a grave concern that warrants closer attention by government authorities. As stated by Jimenez (2022), there is a scarcity of statistical reports that pertain to men as victims of domestic violence in the country. Even the Supreme Court of the Philippines, in the landmark case *Garcia v. Drilon*, assailing the constitutionality of Republic Act No. 9262, admits that "no reliable estimates may be obtained on domestic abuse and violence against men in the Philippines because incidents thereof are relatively low and, perhaps, because many men will not even attempt to report the situation."

As a matter of fact, the only data available from government offices and civil society groups are statistics on women and children victims of domestic violence. This leads to the participants' disappointment over the lack of legal protection for male victims of domestic violence in the Philippines. One respondent stated, "It is sad that there's no law for this but if it is violence then it is a crime and it should be punished." Some participants believed that domestic violence "can happen to anyone regardless of gender" and that "men should have the same protection as women have." Hence, they call for the enactment of a law penalizing DVAM "because they have their right also," and this should be "implemented immediately."

Several participants expressed the belief that "violence has no gender" and that "protection from domestic violence should be universal, not selective." They called for the creation of gender-neutral or inclusive laws that recognize abuse as a crime regardless of the victim's sex or gender identity. These views show a noteworthy legal asymmetry. While R.A. 9262, also known as the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, provides all-encompassing remedies and penalties for violence committed against women and their children, such a law excludes male victims from its protective scope.

The exclusion of men from the legal framework on anti-domestic violence has been the subject of study and commentary by researchers (Agarwal, 2024; Badua-Oquendo, et al., 2023; Casibua, 2018; Jimenez, 2022; Junio, 2014; Nabe & Chavez, 2025; Romualdez-Valtos, 2024). The absence of protection mechanisms for men contributes to the underreporting of abuse, as male victims often believe that the law will not recognize their experiences. Further, Nabe and Chavez (2025) call for immediate legislative reforms to recognize equal protection of domestic violence laws, including men, which would ensure equal protection of the law.

The Need for Gender-Neutral Laws

Based on the qualitative analysis, a salient subtheme was identified in the data concerning the call for gender-neutral domestic violence legislation. This means that women, children, and men are treated alike or similarly. One participant remarked on his or her belief that "the law should be fair to both men and women," rejecting "double standards" in defining and prosecuting acts of abuse. Another respondent sees violence against men and women as "an equally serious problem and therefore shall be treated equally." According to the participants, such a constricted legal view discounts the fact that violence can be inflicted by and against persons regardless who they are.

Singh and Yadav (2025) explain that the principle of gender neutrality in law is vital in upholding equality, eliminating discrimination, and promoting inclusivity. A fully gender-neutral legal system is not only a matter of language modifications but also systemic and cultural transformations to ensure fair and inclusive legal protections for all individuals, regardless of gender identity. While changes in words are commendable, the real battle lies in the implementation and inculcation of gender-free concept.

In the Philippines, government instrumentalities, including courts and lawmaking bodies, have heeded the call for gender-neutral policies in all government processes and transactions. For instance, in 2022 and 2024, respectively, the Supreme Court and the House of Representatives promulgated guidelines on the use of gender-fair language and a gender-fair language guidebook. However, as early as 2005, the Civil Service Commission issued CSC Memorandum Circular No. 2005 enjoining all public officials and employees to use non-sexist language in all official documents, communications, and issuances.

In 2022, Senate Bill No. 211 was filed in the Senate of the Philippines to amend R.A. 9262. The proposed measure seeks to render household violence genderless or gender-free. This guarantees that all individuals—*regardless of gender*—are equally protected under the law. The bill was archived due to the transition of new Congress.

While the country has yet to adopt a fully gender-inclusive domestic violence framework, the enactment of the Safe Spaces Act of 2018 (Republic Act No. 11313) is a welcome step toward a gender-free society. It also represents a progressive step toward gender equality. This law

broadens protection against gender-based sexual harassment in public spaces, workplaces, educational institutions, and online platforms—extending safeguards not only to women but also to men and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Despite these progressive approaches, biases in society still continue to influence the enforcement of gender-neutral laws. According to studies (Karakurt et al., 2013; Karystianis et al., 2024; Malik & Nadda, 2019; Nabe & Chavez, 2025), male victims of domestic violence and abuse are less likely to report crimes due to stigma, societal expectations, stereotypes, and lack of available support services. To address these challenges, it is required that there be comprehensive legal training, public awareness campaigns, and stronger institutional mechanisms to ensure that gender-neutral laws translate into real-world protections for all individuals (Singh & Yadav, 2025).

DVAM as a Human Rights Issue

Every person has the inherent and inalienable right to live free from fear, harm, and abuse. Thus, human rights play a very critical role in legal talks on domestic abuse. When one group—such as male victims—is omitted from protection and security, it weakens the very essence of human rights, which is universality. Hence, participants' acknowledgment of DVAM as a human rights issue is very telling on the principle that justice must be inclusive and must uphold equality for all. A paradigm shift is then advocated—from gender-specific frameworks toward inclusive, human-centered approaches.

There is no doubt that any form of violence is considered a human rights issue. Jimenez (2022) believes that intimate partner violence (IPV) is concededly a human rights violation and a global public health issue. This shows the need to reframe DVAM as an issue of equality, not exceptionality.

Participants emphasized that "every human being should be treated fairly despite gender" and that "men and women are human beings that should have equal rights in being safe and not harmed." These views from the participants frame domestic violence not only as a criminal or moral issue but as a fundamental human rights issue. This is an infraction of the right to dignity, security, and equality of a person enshrined in both municipal and international laws.

Numerous researchers have noted that human rights frameworks must evolve to acknowledge non-conventional victims of abuse, including men and members of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more) community (D'souza, 2023; Outright International, 2013; Pathak, 2020; Poticano & Sasot, 2024). Pathak (2020) does "not deny the bitter reality that women are still the target of violence and cruelty but on the other side, almost the whole transgender population and certain men are also subject to brutishness. The rights of these other communities have to be also recognized with the progressive evolution in socio legal framework (p.174)."

Also, violence against men was eloquently explained by Senior Associate Justice Mario Victor F. Leonen, to wit:

> …even those in marginal cases deserve fundamental constitutional and statutory protection. We should be careful that in correcting historical and cultural injustices, we may typecast all women as victims, stereotype all men as tormentors or make invisible

the possibility that in some intimate relationships, men may also want to seek succor against acts defined in Section 5 of Republic Act No. 9262.

Cultural Perspectives

The traditional gender norms are deeply embedded in Philippine culture. The participants' statements bring to light three interrelated subthemes: (1) the machismo construct, (2) gender stereotypes, and (3) social stigma.

Machismo Construct

Machismo, or hyper masculinity, is defined as "a culture that encourages an extreme masculine identity, characterized by a series of beliefs that allow for dominant attitudes and behaviors constructed to preserve and strengthen male dominance over women" (Villarreal, 2023). Degusman (2017) described the Philippines as a "macho-centric." According to him, many Filipinos even encourage their children to be aggressive and to groom a tough-guy image because they are obsessed with the idea of being macho.

The qualitative data reveal that suppressing the existence of male victimization is a manifestation of machismo construct, a social idealization of masculine strength, dominance, and invulnerability. This births from masculinity ideology which refers to "beliefs, constructs and conceptualizations of norms and roles of being men" (Balane & Tirol, 2015).

Several participants recurrently pertained to men as "macho," "dominant," "protector," "tough," and "masculine," explaining that "men are expected to be strong both physically and emotionally." A participant said that "it may sound unusual in Filipino culture but there should not be a double standard." This is an implication that deep-seated views about male control prevent the recognition of male susceptibility.

Additionally, participants expressed in their statements that most of the time, men who are victims of violence are treated as "just a joke" and "often laughed at." These words or phrases are part of social conditioning that may lead to emotional repression, as men process the idea that expressing pain or seeking help slowly weakens their masculinity. Hence, the outcome is a culture of silence.

Machismo is not just a personal or gender identity issue, but also a cultural and structural one. The idea that "men should be dominant" and that they are "strong and tough" validates the belief that men cannot be injured or emotionally affected. This gender stereotype leads to normalization of abuse against men and trivializes it as humor and stripping it of seriousness and legitimacy. As an outcome, men who are victims of abuse are doubly marginalized: first, as victims, and second, as people who break the rules of masculinity in society.

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are closely related to the machismo ideal – men as dominant and women as passive or vulnerable (Kite et al., 2008; Omojemite et al., 2024). Several participants echoed this observation, stating that "men are always regarded as the abuser or the dominant in the household." This cultural bias establishes domestic violence as a "women's issue," discounting men from both social and legal protection.

As explained by the participants, gender stereotypes continue to dictate societal expectations about masculinity and femininity in Filipino culture. Many statements point to the deeply-embedded notion that "men are expected to be strong both physically and emotionally" and that "men are 'macho,' 'dominant,' 'masculine' etc." This belief creates a hierarchy in which strength and control are attributes of men, while emotion and vulnerability are assigned to women. Popular media also helps spread this idea. As one participant stated, "In movies and television dramas, the man is always the villain. So when they become real victims, no one believes them."

Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity posits that the dominant ideals of manhood are socially constructed and maintained through power relations that privilege male dominance while punishing male vulnerability. In addition, Wedgwood et al. (2023) explain that the idea of hegemonic masculinity is usually defined as a set of personal characteristics, rather than as a social position in a gender system where men generally have authority and power.

Similarly, cultures that place a high value on accomplishment and competition tend to maintain strict gender roles, according to Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimension of masculinity. In this framework, women are portrayed as naturally weak and reliant, whereas males are burdened with both demonstrating power and hiding weakness. Indeed, in their study, Stewart et al. (2021) noted that despite continuous efforts to attain gender equality, there is a growing emphasis on the necessity of addressing harmful and out-of-date gendered stereotypes and norms in order to support societal and cultural change through individual behavioral and attitude changes.

Social Stigma

Social stigma largely contributes to gender inequality. The word *stigma* is related with a negative social connotation. Too, it is typically described as a mark of shame, deeply entrenched in the idea of a generalized collective type (Vecchio-Camargo et al., 2022).

A weather of disbelief and mockery surrounding male victimization resonates with the participants in their responses. They expressed that "society finds it easier to believe women as victims. Men, on the other hand, are doubted and mocked." This misconception that "men cannot be victims, only aggressors" should be struck down from the community's mental faculty. Male victims experience an internal conflict between personal suffering and community expectations which subscribe to the psychological cost of obeying the unwanted masculine standards.

Trivialization of DVAM has been observed by the participants. "People often assume it's a joke," one remarked. This quashes their sad experiences and also maintains a cycle of silence, where male victims encounter ridicule and thus choose not to come forward. Victims' experiences can be analyzed through the lens of Erving Goffman's concept of a spoiled identity. This pertains to an identity that leads to stigma: the experience of exploring life with a characteristic that is profoundly discrediting (Goffman, 1963). Thomas Scheff (2006), as cited in van de Ven and Pemberton (2021), postulates in his analysis of Goffman that a spoiled identity may be interpreted as an experience of shame.

Psychological Perspectives

Aligned with slowly growing body of global literature on gender-based violence (Badua-Oquendo et al., 2023; De Sousa, 2022; Nabe & Chavez, 2025; Scott-Storey et al., 2023), the results confirm that men who experience intimate partner violence always struggle internally due to the conflict between their lived reality as victims and the rigid social expectations of masculinity.

Emotional and Mental Abuse for Male Victims

As pointed out by the informants, DVAM extends beyond physical injuries. It also comprises emotional, mental, and psychological torture on the part of the victim that destructively affects victims' self-worth and welfare. As one participant stated, "Domestic violence against men...can be physical, mental, and emotional. It can cause trauma." Thus, the invisible wounds inflicted cause lasting emotional damage. The experiences of humiliation, manipulation, and degradation that erode their confidence and identity were described by one interviewee, saying that "Even words can hurt. The insults and daily humiliation can break one's spirit and self-confidence."

In the findings, the recurring theme is the participants' acknowledgment that both men and women deserve respect and fair treatment in relationships. "A man also needs respect and should receive fair and equal treatment from everyone," expressed one respondent. This response shows a longing for equality and empathy that overcomes traditional gender roles. Yet, many participants admitted that such recognition remains elusive in a society that equates masculinity with toughness and stoicism. One participant described, "Men also experience emotional manipulation. They get gaslighted too," indicating the experience of psychological control or "gaslighting," where victims are made to question their own reality.

Misdirection, denial, lying, and contradiction are some of the manipulative techniques used in gaslighting, a type of psychological and emotional abuse that is performed on an intimate partner with the goal of destabilizing the victim or survivor (March et al., 2025). Psychological literature on emotional abuse reveal that constant criticism, humiliation, and control can cause anxiety, depression, and trauma comparable to or worse than physical harm (Björnsson et al., 2020; Dye, 2019; Hart et al., 1996; Yun et al., 2019).

Lack of Awareness and Underreporting of DVAM

A recurrent insight among participants was the low level of awareness and underreporting of DVAM. As one respondent stated, "It exists but not everyone knows it does. It's rarely or never on the news." Another shared, "Lack of statistics or numbers is another reason why there is no law yet." These responses point to a systemic problem of invisibility, in which both the public and institutions fail to recognize male victimization as a legitimate social issue. In fact, even the Philippine National Police or any government agencies, for that matter, do not possess any concrete government data on male victims of domestic violence.

A nationwide survey conducted by the University of Mindanao-Institute of Popular Opinion (UM-IPO) College of Criminal Justice Education (CCJE) found that roughly three out of 10 Filipino men had been victims of domestic violence committed by their wives (Patumbon, 2024), which is a considerable rise over earlier research. Just 12 to 15 couples out of 100 reported suffering this kind of abuse in 2018. Hence, it is an established fact that there is no

official report and still a little research (Badua-Oquendo et al., 2023) on domestic violence against men in the Philippines. Globally, studies confirm that men underreport domestic abuse due to shame, fear of disbelief, and stigma (Ambrozewicz et al., 2024; Jovanoski & Sharlamanov, 2021; Surve, 2022).

As participants noted, "many are in denial about it" and "men are embarrassed to admit to be victims because of this macho image." This is a reflection of Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma management, where people hide experiences that conflict with societal norms. Persons who are "discredited" have a visible stigma, such as race, ethnicity, gender, or physical impairment. Individuals with a "discreditable" stigma, such as mental illness and HIV infection, are considered discreditable. Thus, these phrases are used to describe the stigmatized attribute's visual prominence (Chaudoir et al., 2013). However, DVAM may be both considered discredited and discreditable stigma depending on how males look male victimization.

Moreover, the absence of official data on DVAM in the Philippines perpetuates policy inaction. Because government agencies and societal norms categorize domestic violence primarily under women and children, cases involving male victims remain unrecorded or misclassified. In the long run, this could result in learned invisibility, where social systems overlook a type of victim.

Personal Witness Accounts of Violence

Several participants shared personal witness accounts of domestic violence involving men. They acknowledge that DVAM happens. Their narrative accounts reveal the real and often overlooked nature of DVAM. One respondent revealed, "I have witnessed such from my neighbors and was really feeling sorry for the guy." Another said, "Men can be abused too, not only girls." These statements serve as a blunt but necessary correction to societal bias of exclusive male dominance. They directly challenge the "dominant conception" that only women are victims.

Some respondents shared firsthand experiences of seeing male abuse in their respective communities. One witness noted, "I have witnessed such from my neighbors and was really feeling sorry for the guy." One particularly telling statement was, "I was really shocked when I saw it firsthand. The fear in the guy's eyes was different — you wouldn't expect that something like that could come from a woman." These narrations can serve as qualitative evidence that DVAM occurs within ordinary households, though it often remains unseen or minimized by the community.

In many cases, neighbors or friends may sympathize but refrain from intervention due to fear of social backlash or disbelief. As one interviewee said, "As a witness, what is the right step to take? Sometimes I'm also afraid that I might become the target if I speak up about the situation." This is consistent with the bystander effect (Darley & Latané, 1968), where the diffusion of responsibility leads to public apathy. In the context of DVAM, this results in an ethical paradox: people recognize abuse but fail to act because cultural norms discourage involvement in "private" family matters. According to Campos-Mercade (2021), "the bystander effect is the phenomenon that people are less likely to help others when they are in a group than when they are alone."

Participants' Mixed Reactions on the Proposed Statute Criminalizing Domestic Violence Against Men (DVAM)

Skepticism Toward the Proposed Law on Domestic Violence Against Men (DVAM)

Although a number of participants expressed agreement with the idea of passing a law on anti-DVAM, some conveyed reservations and uncertainty. They also felt doubtful and hesitant about its necessity, effectiveness, implementation, and feasibility. Their skepticism reveals lingering social and cultural notions that domestic violence is predominantly a women's issue, and that men, by virtue of their perceived strength, are less likely to need protection.

Moreover, this skepticism stems from the fact that there are existing laws that already provide sufficient protection for men. For instance, any violence inflicted on any person, regardless of gender, are penalized under the Revised Penal Code as defined in different offenses such as slight physical injuries, less serious physical injuries, serious physical injuries, maltreatment, attempted homicide, frustrated homicide, attempted murder, frustrated murder, grave threats, grave coercion, unjust vexation, among others. For emotional damages and psychological torments, the male victims may even get protection from the Civil Code of the Philippines under Articles 19, 20, and 21.

Support and Advocacy for the Proposed Law on DVAM

In contrast, quite a number of participants strongly supported the enactment of a statute criminalizing domestic violence against men. Their statements highlight values of fairness, equality, and universal human rights. This group viewed the proposed law as a corrective measure to ensure that justice applies equally to all, regardless of gender.

These responses articulate a vision of legal equality and inclusivity. Participants viewed the proposed law as essential in dismantling the perception that men cannot be victims of abuse. Their advocacy echoes global trends toward gender-neutral domestic violence laws.

Supporters' responses reveal a growing awareness among Filipinos of gender parity and shared accountability, signaling an emerging cultural shift. For them, the law represents not merely a legal remedy but also a symbolic affirmation that violence against anyone—male or female—must be condemned and punished.

Conclusions

Violence in all forms are unacceptable and should not be a norm in society. Violence knows no gender, race, age, bounds, and limits. While domestic violence in the Philippines is traditionally viewed as a women's and children's issue, there is a documented, albeit underexplored, issue of DVAM. The qualitative results of the study show that public insights are the most noteworthy driver for needed legal and cultural reform.

In addition, deeply rooted cultural nuances, particularly machismo and gender stereotypes, hinder disclosure and legal recourse for male victims. They could not open up for fear of isolation and mockery. Tied with stigma, this cultural reluctance considerably contributes to the underreporting of this type of cases. Thus, legal reform must be attended with targeted social interventions.

The mixed response of the public, ranging from strong support to skepticism regarding a law penalizing DVAM, proves the complexity whether to pass a new law or amend the existing one. It concludes that a successful legal reform must prioritize legal inclusivity by expanding protection to all victims without undermining the established legal safeguards for women and children. Therefore, the time for gender-neutral legislation is long overdue.

Although legislative reform is encouraged, legal balance must be taken into consideration. Thus, the government should prioritize the enactment of a standalone, comprehensive domestic violence law that uses gender-neutral language in its definitions of abuse. Finally, the proposed law must explicitly state that it does not diminish, repeal, or replace the specific provisions and support structures provided to victims under R.A. 9262 to ensure continuity of specialized services.

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

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

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Humour and Identity Construction in Ahmad Aiman's One-Hour Abati Show: A Stand-Up Comedy Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the humour mechanisms and identity construction in the Bruneian stand-up comedy scene. Stand-up comedy has long been viewed as a tool for entertainment. Nowadays, stand-up comedy is more than just about eliciting laughter; it is also a form of identity work. While much of the existing research focused on Western contexts, Southeast Asia remains absent scholarly, Brunei, in particular. Using a qualitative case study design, the study analysed a one-hour live performance by a prominent Bruneian comedian, Ahmad Aiman. Through the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) by Attardo and Raskin, alongside Identity Theory by Burkes and Stets, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of how a comedian employed specific humour mechanisms and constructed their identities. The study uncovers two major findings. First, while the analysis reveals that Ahmad Aiman employs six humour mechanisms: Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Language (LA) to generate laughter; Crowd Work (CW) emerged as a new, seventh humour mechanism. Second, through humour, Ahmad Aiman constructs positive portrayals of multiple identities: a caring father, a religiously rooted individual, an everyday worker, and a professional comedian. The most salient identity is fatherhood, while his agency lies in how he uses comedy to critique structural norms while still being respected in his culture. This study proves how humour functions as a catalyst for identity construction in Bruneian stand-up comedy, contributing to regional comedy studies in Brunei.

Keywords: general theory of verbal humour, identity theory, humour mechanism, identity, stand-up comedy

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Introduction

"Hahahaha," roared the audience.

"That joke is so him, only he could pull it off," remarked a fan.

But what makes the audience laugh? How do fans perceive that comedian as? These are not idle questions. Think of Trevor Noah as the impressionist comic; Bill Burr recognised as the loud one; and Jimmy Carr famed with his dark sense of humour. As Weaver and Lockyer (2024) stated there is a complex relationship between stand-up comedy and identity construction.

Among the mainstream communicative tools that people have been practicing since the start of mankind, nothing surpasses the effective use of humor which can hook people's attention instantly, and ultimately, establish a bond with the audience (Stauffer, 1999; Wanzer et al., 2010). This is where stand-up comedy comes in. Stand-up comedy has been evolving for decades. A shift from its traditional place in theatres to modern platforms such as the infamous streaming services Netflix. Before its term has been officially established, standup comedy performances already can be traced way back from vaudeville, cabaret, and folk storytelling where performers utilised humour as a means to interact with the audience (Double, 2014). While in this traditional sense, stand-up comedy not only functions as entertainment but opens doors to many aspects like social and culture critiques (Primbs & Dawson, 2023; Romansyah et al., 2020).

Yet as the world has changed, so too has comedy in general. With today's digitally-entrenched and social media-suffused world, stand-up comedy has entered a new epoch. What once lived in intimate theatres and compact comedy clubs are now traveling through streaming services, social media platforms, and YouTube specials at the click of a button. Thus, modern stand-up comedy is a hybrid may comprise comedic performances, storytelling and social commentary happening in one act that can be accessed anywhere.

More than ever, identity construction has been a catalyst in stand-up performances as contemporary stand-up comedy is not simply about getting laughs (Constantinescu, 2023). To add, it would also define how the audience perceives the comedian on stage and how the comedian wishes to be seen. Academically, many modern scholarships have emphasised on the use of humour to negotiate issues of race, gender, disability, nationalism, and cultural belonging.

For example, the famous Trevor Noah has utilised humour with his personal anecdotes to create a tool to address race and society (Soliman & Rabia Abdul-Salim Madhi, 2024). Josh Blue with cerebral palsy has proven how disability can be used as a technique to shape his stage identity (Tan et al., 2022). A group of Nigerian comedians have strategically employed both language and humour to critique sociopolitical and cultural issues, thereby shaping a shared sense of national identity (Filani, 2020). Meanwhile, Spanish female comedians viewed stand-up comedy as a social and cultural tool where and with humour, a creative way to collectively address women's empowerment and gender issues (Bernabéu, 2023).

Hence, such scholars proved that stand-up is no longer only about eliciting laughter but also about constructing identities in their performances.

Statement of Problem

Despite the growing global scholarship, many studies often privileged the voices of Western comedians and as result, Southeast Asia remains largely absent from this academic stage. And this raises even deeper questions: What about comedians even whose stages are smaller? Or whose contexts are more culturally specific and relatable? And whose humour carries equal weight in making the audience laugh and at the same time, shaping identity? Taking these into account would be an important step in research and deserves serious scholarly attention, especially in regions where the stand-up comedy scene has only recently begun to grow, in this case, Southeast Asia, Brunei, in particular.

Research Questions and Objectives

Given the limited understanding of how a stand-up comedian delivers humour and constructs their identity in a show, the aim of this study is to explore how the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) and the Identity Theory applied to a stand-up comedy performance. This research specifically attempts to address the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What specific humour mechanisms are employed in a stand-up comedian's performance throughout the show?
- Research Question 2: How does the stand-up comedian construct their identity through humour?

That being said, the above questions will be used as guidance to address the following objectives:

- To identify and analyse the humour mechanisms by using the General Theory of Verbal Humour by Attardo and Raskin which consist of Script Opposition (SO), The Logical Mechanism (LM), The Situation (SI), The Target (TA), The Narrative Strategy (NS), and The Language (LA).
- To identify and analyse the identity construction by using the Identity Theory by Burke and Stets (2009).

To put it simply, when those two theories combined, these frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for exploring how humour not only generates laughter but also enacts the identity of a comedian.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

To make sense of this study, the study has two main theories.

1. General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) proposed by Attardo and Raskin (1991).
2. Identity Theory proposed by Burke and Stets (2009).

In the context of this study, General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) explores six mechanisms Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), Language (LA) in order to understand the verbal humour as well as create humour by the comedian.

Yet humour is not structure alone. It also comes with identity.

For this study, Identity Theory tells how the comedian form, maintain and adjust who they are, and how that sense of self is shaped by both personal choices and society within.

Several applications of General Theory of Verbal Humour and Identity Theory through humour and stand-up comedy have been a focal point in various mediums can be found but not limited to:

Application of General Theory of Verbal Humour

- Social Media
- Online Jokes
- Sitcoms
- Animated TV and Movies
- Preaching
- Stand-Up Comedy

Application of Identity Theory

- Film
- Theatre
- Political
- Stand-Up Comedy

Existing studies above flag some gaps in understanding of humour mechanisms and identity. Firstly, a need for multi-modal works on humour mechanisms, as scholars focused too heavily on a single framework that is Attardo and Raskin (1991), which does not adequately apply to the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) and Identity Theory. Secondly, there is a need to examine emerging or marginalised comics and the construction of positive identity, as Identity Theory has often been applied towards negative portrayals in identity construction.

Research Methodology

The chosen method for this study was a qualitative, case-study approach to examine how humour and identity are constructed centred in a stand-up comedy performance, Ahmad Aiman's *Abati Show*, a one-hour live performance recorded during a public event in Brunei as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Abati Show

Data Collection

Purposive sampling was adopted to select Ahmad Aiman's stand-up comedy show, as its richness of data to explore more in-depth in a single show and its unique case to offer insight into Brunei context, which is believed to have been underexplored academically.

The primary source included (1) A video recording of 1 hour 10 minutes performance, capturing verbal elements; (2) A verbatim transcription in Bahasa Brunei, which later translated to English with audience's responses like laughter embedded in the text; (3) A systematic data management to ensure the video recordings and transcripts stored securely.

Data Analysis

Two-layered analysis was conducted, aligning with the theoretical framework.

First, General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) proposed by Attardo and Raskin (1991). Taking the analysis technique from various scholars, humour mechanisms can be analysed through:

- Attardo & Raskin's six knowledge resources: Script Opposition (SO), Logical Mechanism (LM), Situation (SI), Target (TA), Narrative Strategy (NS), and Language (LA) based on the codebook.
- Comedy routines where each bit joke was broken down into setup (topic, premise, attitude) and punchline (delivery mode) to trace the humour structure (Carter, 2020).

Thus, the findings later were obtained based on the Codebook as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) Codebook

Code	Category	Description	Example
SO	Script Opposition	Instances where the comic uses incongruity between scripts or expectations for comedic effect.	A joke that contrasts the expectation of a situation with the reality.
LM	Logical Mechanism	Instances where the comic employs logical fallacies or absurd reasoning in his humor.	A punchline that relies on an illogical but funny conclusion.
SI	Situation	Instances where the humor arises from the context or situation.	A joke about a specific event or scenario.
TA	Target	Instances where the humor targets specific individuals, groups, or concepts.	Jokes aimed at social norms, celebrities, or cultural practices.
NS	Narrative Strategy	Instances where the comic uses storytelling techniques for comedic effect.	A long anecdote that builds up to a humorous climax.
LA	Language	Instances where the comic' choice of language contributes to humor, such as puns, wordplay, or linguistic ambiguity.	A play on words or a pun that adds humor to the joke.

In parallel, Identity Theory was operationalised through a robust framework of recent scholarship on identity construction.

According to Mohammed-Azizi (2024), the Identity Theory proposed by Burke and Stets (2009) can be analysed through:

- Identity Claims: *How the comedian presented himself?*
- Identity Verification: *How does the comedian seek recognition from the audience, and in what ways do laughter and applause confirm or reject these identity claims?*
- Multiple or competing identities: *How does he switch between different roles or perspectives?*
- Prominence or salience: *Which identities were foregrounded consistently across the show?*
- Structure vs. Agency: *Does he support cultural norms or challenge them?*

Finally, the interpretations process here from both analyses were triangulated against the research questions as well as the main theories.

Findings and Analysis

Research Question 1: What specific humour mechanisms are employed in a stand-up comedian's performance throughout the show?

Script Opposition (SO)

Table 2 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Script Opposition (SO).

Table 2
Script Opposition (SO)

Topic	The name "Abati" and its signifiance
Attitude	Affectionate
Premise	The comic explains the origin and his preference for the term "Abati"

In Excerpt 1, the setup describes that Ahmad Aiman introduces the term *"Abati,"* (Line 15) explaining its significance (Line 16 to Line 19) and his personal preference for this term (Line 20 to Line 22).

Excerpt 1

14. And for those who are just getting to know me,
15. Abati means daddy in Arabic.
16. That's what my children call me.
17. Because I used to be obsessed with the Quran.
18. So there's this one verse,
19. "Abati".
20. I was like,
21. That's sweet.
22. I want my children to call me that one day like:

Excerpt 2 explains how the punchlines delivered the humour by introducing a stark contrast. This contrast highlights the script opposition of two elements somewhat positive and negative, generating humour. It was found that the humour arises through the juxtaposition from the tender, sweet response *"Abati,"* (Line 23 to Line 24) contrasted with the harsh, rude response *"My father!"* (Line 27 to Line 28) which explains why the audience laughed.

Excerpt 2

23. Someone (character): *"Hey, who sent you here?"*
24. Aiman's daughter (character): *"Abati." *tender tone*
25. Isn't that sweet?
26. I don't want them to be like,
27. Someone (character): "Who sent you here?"
28. Aiman's daughter (character): ***"My father! (Bapaku!)" *harsh tone*** **[audience laughing]**
29. I don't want that.

Logical Mechanism (LM)

Table 3 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Logical Mechanism (LM).

Table 3
Logical Mechanism (LM)

Topic	Childbirth experience in the labor room
Attitude	Confused
Premise	The comic describes his first time in a labor room, comparing his expectations to the actual experience

In Excerpt 3, the setup describes Ahmad Aiman entering a labour room for the first time, mentioning that such situations are not taught in school, implying the lack of preparation for the realities of childbirth (Line 117 to Line 123).

Excerpt 3

113. So, when my first child, Maryam,
114. When we went to the hospital,
115. My wife was already at dilation 6 or 7.
116. So in 2 hours, she was there.
117. We,
118. all these things are not taught in school, [audience giggling]
119. In the labor room situation.
120. What we see or refer to,
121. Is from movies.
122. Like there's one midwife,
123. Maybe one assistant.

Excerpt 4 demonstrates how the punchlines delivered the humour by introducing absurdity to highlight his realisation that his knowledge is average (Line 124 to Line 127), leading him to question the process of childbirth humorously. He also imagines the nurses reacting to the baby's imminent birth as if they were catching a rugby ball, adding a visual and absurd element to the scene (Line 128 to Line 141).

Excerpt 4

124. Back in 2019,
125. No, 2017,
126. I was an ordinary man,
127. **With just average knowledge. [audience giggling]**
128. So in the labor room,
129. There was one midwife,
130. And one assistant nurse.
131. And,
132. **Four to five other nurses. [audience laughing]**
133. **What were they doing? [audience laughing]**
134. With my average knowledge,
135. It's impossible for me to think positively.
136. Is this baby,
137. How difficult will it be for this baby to come out?
138. **Will it come out like a rugby ball? [audience laughing]**
139. Maybe they were like
140. ***Aiman, portrays a nurse as if she is about to catch a rugby ball (act out)[audience laughing]**
141. Nurse (character): ***"Baby coming out, Baby coming out!" *woman voice* [audience laughing]***

Situation (SI)

Table 4 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Situation (SI).

Table 4
Situation (SI)

Topic	Setting up rules for children.
Attitude	Frustated
Premise	The comic sets a rule for his children regarding gadget use, limiting it to Sundays

In Excerpt 5, the setup describes the situation by introducing the problem Ahmad Aiman faces with his children's inability to share gadgets (Line 322 to Line 324). He explains that he has implemented a rule allowing gadget use only on Sundays (Line 325 to Line 328). This sets the stage for the humour by presenting a common situation where parenting issues that many can relate to.

Excerpt 5

322. And then another thing is my children, aged 6 and 4,
323. They don't know how to share.
324. Sharing in terms of gadgets.
325. So I made a rule,
326. That gadgets,
327. Phones, iPads, and such,
328. Are only allowed on Sundays.
329. **[audience amazed]**

Excerpt 6 demonstrates how the punchlines delivered the humour through the description of his children's exaggerated reactions to the new rule. Instead of accepting the rule, they engage in absurd and humorous protests, such as burning tires, breaking windows, and even involving the neighbours in their demonstration (Line 333 to Line 339).

Excerpt 6

330. Again,
331. Initially, they protested.
332. They didn't want to comply.
333. They burned tires, [audience laughing]
334. They broke windows, [audience laughing]
335. They gathered the neighbor's kids, [audience laughing]
336. Carrying signboards, [audience laughing]
337. Aiman's children (character): ***"Give us back our rights!*** **[audience laughing]**
338. Lower the price of nasi katok! **[audience laughing]**
339. We want a new Abati! **[audience laughing]**

Target (TA)

Table 5 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Target (TA).

Table 5
Target (TA)

Topic	The unique abilities of the comic's father on *ruqyah*
Attitude	Respectful
Premise	The comic explains his father's role in performing *ruqyah,* emphasizing that his father focuses on praying rather than communicating with mystical beings

In Excerpt 7, the setup introduces the concept of *ruqyah* and Ahmad Aiman's father's role in performing it. He describes how his father helps people by performing *ruqyah*, a form of spiritual healing, and clarifies that his father's job is to pray and not to heal directly (Line 445 to Line 453). This premise is established through a series of observations about his father's abilities and the seriousness with which he approaches *ruqyah.*

Excerpt 7

443. Alhamdulillah,
444. For those who know me deeply,
445. My father has the ability
446. To at least straighten us out.
447. He knows how to perform *ruqyah*.
448. *Ruqyah* is like
449. Usually people come to him
450. To ask for help with treatment.
451. And then my father always straightens things out and tells us,
452. But it's not his job to heal.
453. His job is to pray only.

Excerpt 8 demonstrates how the punchlines deliver the humour through the depiction of his father's unique approach to *ruqyah* and humorously elevates his father's status in the *ruqyah* industry by comparing him to the action hero, John Wick (Line 463 to Line 471).

Excerpt 8

461. As we know,
462. We see on TikTok,
463. If someone performs *ruqyah*,
464. They usually communicate
465. With the mystic beings.
466. My father doesn't.
467. He goes straight to
468. Shoot and target directly. [audience laughing]
469. In the *ruqyah* industry, [audience laughing]
470. My father is considered as
471. John Wick. [audience laughing and clapping]

Narrative Strategy (NS)

Table 6 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Narrative Strategy (NS).

Table 6
Narrative Strategy (NS)

Topic	The comic recounts a visit from a couple who believed the wife was possessed
Attitude	Scary
Premise	A situation when the wife gets possessed by a *jinn* while the comic is the only one at home to attend to them

In Excerpt 9, the setup describes that Ahmad Aiman begins by staging the scene of someone's wife suddenly becoming possessed (Line 501–502) in the absence of his father (Line 503). This sets up the premise for a narrative sequence where the husband assumes responsibility for interacting with the possessed wife (Line 504–506).

Excerpt 9

500. So like
501. Suddenly, the wife
502. Got possessed.
503. My father wasn't home yet, [audience laughing]
504. So the husband, as common knowledge, interacted with the wife.
505. The husband (character): ***Who are you?*** **[audience giggling]**
506. ***What do you want?*** **[audience giggling]**
507. *jin entering the wife's body

Excerpt 10 explains how the punchlines delivered the humour by sequence of dialogue that escalates toward an unexpected twist. He portrays multiple roles: the wife (Line 508–509), the husband (Line 510–511, 513, 517), young Aiman (Line 512), and the *jinn* (Line 514–515, 518–520). The narrative strategy relies on portraying characters with progressive questioning and revelation. The punchline arises when the *jinn* mistakenly identifies the host as "Masnah," only to be corrected by the husband that the body belongs to "Munah" (Line 517). This misidentification leads to the reversal where the *jinn* admits its error and pleads to be released (Line 518–521). The narrative closes with a tag, "First time a jinn asks to be let out" (Line 522), which serves as the icing on the cake of the humour.

Excerpt 10

508. Aiman portrays the wife, (character) that get possessed by the Jinn : ***Hermm *satanic voice [audience laughing]***
509. ***I want to destroy Masnah *angry tone [audience laughing]***
510. The husband looked at me.
511. The husband (character): ***Who is Masnah? [audience laughing]***
512. Young Aiman himself (character): ***I don't know, uncle! Try asking again.*** **[audience laughing and clapping]**
513. The husband (character): ***Who is Masnah? [audience laughing]***
514. Jin (character) : ***Hermm *satanic voice [audience laughing]***
515. ***The one inside this body that I'm possessing is Masnah.***
516. ***[audience laughing]***
517. The husband (character): ***The body you're possessing is Munah! [audience laughing]***
518. Jin (character): ***Where's Masnah? [audience laughing and clapping]***
519. ***Am I wrong? [audience laughing and clapping]***
520. ***Let mee out![audience laughing and clapping]***
521. ***Aaaaa...[audience laughing and clapping]***
522. First time a jinn asks to be let out. ***[audience laughing and clapping]***

Language (LA)

Table 7 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Language (LA).

Table 7
Language (LA)

Topic	The comic recounts the husband referred the mystical things as "things"
Attitude	Curious
Premise	The comic ponders over the use of the word "things" to describe mystical occurrences

In Excerpt 11, the setup describes Ahmad Aiman recounts the husband telling him that his wife was always "being possessed," using the term "things" (*benda* in Bahasa Brunei) to describe the wife's condition (Line 492). He expresses puzzlement at the use of "things" to refer to mystical occurrences, questioning this choice of wording humorously (Line 494 to Line 495).

Excerpt 11

492. the husband told me
493. That his wife was getting "things" or in other words always "being possessed"
494. I was puzzled,
495. Why do they always refer to mystical things as "things"? [audience giggling]

Excerpt 12 demonstrates how the humour delivered the punchlines when Ahmad Aiman questions why mystical things are referred to as "things," humorously suggesting that they are available, like items in a department store (Line 496 to Line 497). The second punchline involves a play on wordplay with "*heydomo*" and "*heybomoh*" (Line 498 to Line 499). "*Heydomo*" refers to a real local-made food-ordering mobile app in Brunei, and its pronunciation closely rhymes with "*heybomoh*". In Brunei Malay, *bomoh* means "witch." Combined, the phrase playfully sounds like "*Hey… witch*," which is humorously reimagined as a fictional mobile app through which a *jinn* communicates with a witch, creating a comedic twist.

Excerpt 12

496. As if they are available [audience laughing]
497. Like in a huaho store [audience laughing]
498. Instead of heydomo,
499. It is, heybomoh. [audience laughing]

New Emergence Mechanism: Crowd Work (CW)

Table 8 explains the setup in establishing the topic, attitude, and premise for Crowd Work (CW).

Table 8
Crowd Work (CW)

Topic	An interaction with an audience member to learn about their father's profession
Attitude	Playful
Premise	The comic asks about the profession of the audience member's father and engages in a lighthearted conversation about their job

In Excerpt 13, the setup shows how Ahmad Aiman uses crowd work to deliver humour. He begins by pointing to an audience member and initiating a conversation, using this interaction as the basis for a series of humorous exchanges. He starts by identifying an audience member and asking about their father's job (Line 574). His playful inquiry into the father's work at a power station sets the stage for a humorous exchange, as he jokes about the nature of the job and what makes it enjoyable (Line 575 to 576).

Excerpt 13

574. *Aiman points to another audience
575. Aiman : This is your dad? Your dad? Where does your dad work? Can't disclose? From where? Industry lah, industry. Working? Ha? Power station. Power station…what makes it happy there? [audience laughing]
576. Aiman : What do you do at the power station? Oh, operational. If we, let's say I have a 6-year-old child.

In Excerpt 14, Ahmad Aiman continues the interaction which creates punchline after punchline by asking detailed questions about the father's job, imagining how to explain it to a child (Line 578). This leads to a playful exchange where he humorously pretends to be clueless about the job, adding layers of humour through his exaggerated ignorance and curiosity. Moreover, he uses physical comedy, making a paddling gesture to mimic his imagined idea of the job (Line 579). He persists in asking about the job, humorously insisting on understanding what "monitoring" entails and his determination to "*dig until I get it*" adds a comedic element of exaggerated persistence (Line 581).

Excerpt 14

576. Aiman : What do you do at the power station? Oh, operational. If we, let's say I have a 6-year-old child.
577. [audience laughing]
578. Aiman : No, no, I'm not applying for her job. She's asking to explain what you do, how do you tell her. Not study first, what's the job? Job as? Oh, operation turbine. Operation Turbine. What do you do? What do you do every day?
579. *Aiman makes a paddling gesture
580. [audience laughing]
581. Aiman : My knowledge is bare. This is what I know. So every day like this? Ha? Monitoring! What…monitoring what? I'll dig until I get it.
582. [audience laughing]

Identity of Ahmad Aiman

The findings found some identities that were constructed by Ahmad Aiman through his humorous utterances in his stand-up comedy show. Recalling Burkes and Stets (2009) stated identity involves seeing oneself as a unique individual who distinguishes him from other

individuals and societies. It sees identity as a flexible, interactive process, constantly negotiated between self and society. Through humour,

How the comedian presented himself?

Explicitly, Ahmad Aiman constructs multiple identities: a caring father, a parental expertise, and a professional identity of a comedian.

How does the comedian seek recognition from the audience, and in what ways do laughter and applause confirm or reject these identity claims?

Audience laughter and responses verify his identity as a comedic performer. For example, his parental identity is validated when the audience agrees and responds warmly to anecdotes about his setting up rules against his children.

How does he switch between different roles or perspectives?

Ahmad Aiman juggles different identities that may overlap, conflict, or switch depending on context. For example, one segment of him portraying a professional worker and stand-up comic at the same time. In this bit, he recalls being an HR receptionist, constructing himself as both a worker embedded in organisational culture and as a performer on stage mocking it.

Which identities were foregrounded consistently across the show?

Several identities can be found in the show such as a father dealing with children, presenting his parental philosophy and taking views on generational fears ; a religious person, where he constantly touch on Islamic references like *Quran, ruqyah, azan* ; a comedian, he engages in meta-commentary by joking that he made zero profit from the show and is in debt to Bruhaha Comedy Productions, while also mocking his boss, Zainal.

However, some less prominent identities can include an ex-employee and a son of a *ruqyah* practitioner. Overall, fatherhood is the most salient identity throughout. Hence the show, *Abati* which means father in Arabic.

Does he support cultural norms or challenge them?

As Burke and Stets (2009) stated, identity is shaped by cultural or social norms, people do not just receive cultural or social structures (examples family expectations, religion, education systems) but they also exercise agency, meaning they actively negotiate, reinterpret, or critique those structures through their own actions.

Based on findings, he supported and challenged the norms. In terms of supporting norms, he values cultural values of family, religion, and respect for parents like the importance of azan at birth. Whereas in terms of challenging norms, he satirizes education systems such as exam stress, fear-based motivation, Sui dynasty history; workplace hierarchies such as HR and receptionist, nepotism; and generational stereotypes that he views on lazy Gen-Z.

Discussion & Conclusion

This study has proven that there is a relationship between stand-up comedy and identity construction.

Through the intentional application of GTVH in this study, the six mechanisms offered a blueprint for dissecting comedic craft and have led to the emergence of a new humour mechanism, Crowd Work (CW). This major finding, seventh mechanism, tells you that humour utterances when a comedian attempts to engage with the audience by asking personal questions so that they come up with jokes in response to the audience spontaneously.

Meanwhile, the application of Identity Theory in this study, another major finding was that a positive portrayal of identity construction can be observed, which helps fill a gap compared to Western studies that tend to emphasize negative portrayals. On top of that, the identity construction enacted multiple identity layers simultaneously. Ahmad Aiman's humour is not random but it has identity work in it. Humour lets him negotiate structure while exercising agency. He reinforces tradition (supporting cultural or social norms) and subverting or mocking structures (challenging cultural or social norms) throughout his standup acts. Ahmad Aiman is not passively reflecting culture but actively reshaping it through comedy by exaggerating everyday situations, parodying figures, and shifting between multiple roles. In other words, his identity is not fixed as it shifts depending on structure and agency which align with the framework explained by Mohammed-Azizi (2024) based on Burke and Stets (2009).

In conclusion, this study centered on *Ahmad Aiman's Abati Show*, a one-hour live performance that reveals how humour can become a catalyst for identity construction which provided rich qualitative data. Of course, the limited sample size may not fully represent as for future research, the study offers several potential directions. Future studies include a larger, more diverse sample with a balanced gender ratio to improve generalizability. This is open to explore multiple performances, digital comedy forms, and comparative analyses across Southeast Asian contexts.

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

During the process of writing this manuscript, generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were utilised only to aid in refining key findings and summarising the approximately of a completed thesis as a means to improve language clarity, coherence, and structure in support of the discussion, in adherence to IAFOR standards. However, the content did not contribute to the generation of fictional content such as findings, analysis, discussions, conclusions and references presented in this work.

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When Novelty Skips the Feel-Good: Dual Behavioural Routes of Product Creativity and Social Ambience in Creative Tourism

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Abstract

Creative tourism theory assumes that creative stimuli shape travellers' behavioural intentions only after being filtered through experience quality (EQ), yet empirical tests of this mechanism are scarce. Re-analysing a Malaysian dataset of 499 respondents, this study uncovers a dual route pattern in which some creative cues operate through EQ, while product novelty also acts directly on behaviour. Using variance-based SEM with a parallel multiple mediation design, two creative stimuli were examined: Creative Product (Novelty and Usefulness) and Press (Physical and Social ambience), with EQ decomposed into its experiential facets. Results show that Press Social is the most influential indirect driver of behavioural intention, as it amplifies EQ which subsequently enhances intention. By contrast, Product Novelty exerts a direct effect in addition to a smaller mediated path, suggesting that novelty can stimulate action even without changes in affective appraisal. An Importance–Performance Map highlights Press Social as the highest leverage lever, while Novelty represents a low importance but high opportunity factor.

Keywords: creative tourism, product novelty, social ambience, experience quality, mediation, behavioural intention, PLS-SEM

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Introduction

Tourism research increasingly uses S–O–R to explain how designed cues shape internal appraisals and, ultimately, behaviour across tech-enabled and on-site experiences (Chin et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). Stimuli as varied as smart tourism technologies (STTs), VR content, social media attributes, and environmental qualities reliably trigger organismic states such as engagement, memorable tourism experiences (MTEs), awe, and trust that then mediate intentions such as revisit and eWOM (Jiang et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2025; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024).

Within creative tourism workshops/studios, two classes of stimuli are especially salient: Product (novelty, usefulness) and Press, the physical and social ambience visitors encounter. Building on contemporary evidence that some stimuli retain direct links to intention even after organismic mediators are included (e.g., STTs/VR nudging revisit and participation; Chin et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024), we test a dual-route account on Malaysian data: Press–Social acts largely through EQ, while Product Novelty can also act directly. Prior Malaysian work (Yahaya & Ariffin, 2025) motivates this local focus and EQ-centric modelling.

Accordingly, this study pursues five objectives within the Stimulus–Organism–Response frame: (i) to examine how the creative product and the creative environment shape experience quality and, in turn, behavioural intentions in creative-tourism workshops; (ii) to determine whether social ambience works chiefly through experience quality while retaining a smaller direct influence on intentions, and whether the physical environment affects intentions only via experience quality; (iii) to assess whether product novelty exerts both an experiential pathway and a smaller direct nudge on intentions, and whether product usefulness shows a stronger direct influence alongside an indirect effect through experience quality; (iv) to test whether the social-ambience → experience-quality → behavioural-intentions pathway is stronger for first-time participants than for repeat participants; and (v) to translate these effect patterns into practice by prioritising high-leverage design levers using an importance–performance mapping approach.

A cross-sectional survey of creative-tourism participants from Malaysian workshops and studios was reanalysed after data-quality screening, yielding 499 usable responses; participation was voluntary and anonymous. Constructs were rated on seven-point Likert scales: Product Novelty (perceived originality/newness), Product Usefulness (practical learning/transferability), Press Physical (layout, equipment, ambience), Press Social (facilitator warmth, peer help, structured co-creation), Experience Quality (holistic appraisal of engagement and meaning), and Behavioural Intentions (revisit, recommendation online/offline, purchase). Measurement diagnostics led to the removal of one novelty item (NO3) and one social-press item (SO1) to improve reliability. A variance-based structural equation model with parallel multiple mediation was estimated using 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples; results are reported as standardised paths and specific indirect effects, a novice versus repeat multi-group comparison probed the moderation hypothesis, and managerial priorities were summarised with an Importance–Performance Map Analysis.

Literature Review

Recent research across tourism channels and settings supports the Stimulus Organism Response perspective. Environmental quality at a destination elicits awe, and this emotion

carries the effect forward to satisfaction and environmentally responsible behaviour (Jiang et al., 2022). Smart tourism technologies increase visitor engagement and memorable tourism experiences, which then translate into revisit intentions (Xiong et al., 2023). Virtual reality experiences can evoke awe and encourage participation in value co creation (Chin et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). On social platforms, the credibility and quality of content enhance destination image and trust, which in turn promote impulsive travel intentions (Wei et al., 2025). Guided by this evidence, the present study treats the creative product and the creative environment or press as the stimuli, experience quality as the organismic appraisal, and behavioural intentions as the response.

Across makerspaces, museums and classrooms, staff warmth, peer interaction and co-creation rituals consistently raise engagement and learning, mapping onto EQ in services. Makerspaces show peer interaction and supportive facilitation drive collaboration and sustained participation (Koolman & Boklage, 2024), while museum-based makerspace research codifies facilitated making rituals (e.g., scaffolding, reflective prompts) that improve learning (White et al., 2021). Immersive museum work finds interaction ritual chains elevate arousal and shared focus, lifting participation intentions (Liu & Li, 2025). Therefore, it is hypothesized in this study that:

H1a. Stronger perceptions of the social ambience will be associated with higher experience quality during creative-tourism workshops.

H1b. Experience quality will, in turn, be positively associated with behavioural intentions, including intentions to revisit, recommend, and purchase.

H1c. Perceptions of the social ambience will influence behavioural intentions primarily indirectly through their positive effect on experience quality, while also retaining a smaller but positive direct effect on behavioural intentions after accounting for experience quality

Physical features such as the layout of the room, the availability and ergonomics of tools, lighting, sound, temperature, and other sensory cues typically enable good experiences rather than directly causing behavioural follow-through on their own. In S–O–R terms, these cues work by shaping organismic states such as comfort, perceived control, immersion, and often awe which then translate into satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and revisit intentions. Recent tourism evidence shows exactly this pattern: the quality of the natural or built environment elicits awe, and awe carries the effect forward to downstream outcomes (Jiang et al., 2022). In creative-tourism workshops, this means a tidy, well-lit space with clear signage and accessible equipment reduces friction and anxiety, making it easier for participants to become absorbed in the activity; it is that improved experience quality, not the furniture or lighting per se that persuades them to return or recommend. Therefore, it is hypothesised in this study that:

H2a. Stronger perceptions of the physical ambience will be associated with higher experience quality during creative-tourism workshops.

H2b. The influence of physical ambience on behavioural intentions will be fully mediated by experience quality; that is, once differences in experience quality are taken into account, the physical ambience itself will not add further explanatory power for intentions.

Creative tourism “products” (the activity/content participants create) can influence behaviour in two ways. First, novelty (original techniques, first-look demos, limited editions) raises experience quality by making the session feel fresher and more engaging. But novelty can also create a small, immediate pull to act (try, buy, or share) even after we account for how

good the experience felt. This pattern mirrors recent smart tourism technologies and virtual reality studies, where the stimulus not only improves engagement or memorable experiences but also retains a direct link to intentions (Chin et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024).

Second, usefulness (the sense of practical learning or take-home value) tends to exert a strong direct influence on intentions (people return/recommend when they feel they gained something concrete) while also boosting experience quality. Contemporary service/tourism research on service innovation and value creation reports this combination of direct and mediated effects on satisfaction/loyalty (Cheng, Shaheen, et al., 2021; Cheng, Abu, et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is hypothesised in this study that:

H3a. Higher perceived product novelty will be associated with higher experience quality and will also be positively associated with behavioural intentions even after experience quality is considered.

H3b. Higher perceived product usefulness will be associated with higher experience quality and will also be positively associated with behavioural intentions.

Visitors who are new to a creative workshop usually face greater uncertainty and cognitive load, so they depend more on social cues from facilitators and peers to feel competent and absorbed. Evidence from makerspaces, museums, and classrooms shows that staff warmth, peer help, and simple co creation rituals raise engagement and learning, which are core ingredients of experience quality (Allwood & Brodin, 2025； Koolman & Boklage, 2024; Liu & Li, 2025; White et al., 2021). Complementary work in digital branding finds that novice visitors react more strongly to salient online destination experiences, with negative experiences producing greater animosity and boycott intentions among novices than among experienced visitors (Shah et al., 2025). Taken together, these strands imply that the pathway from social ambience to experience quality and onward to behavioural intentions should be more pronounced for first time participants.

Therefore, it is hypothesised in this study that (H4), the indirect effect of perceived social ambience on behavioural intentions, operating through experience quality, is stronger for novice participants than for experienced participants.

Methodology

A cross-sectional survey of creative-tourism participants from Malaysian workshops and studios was reanalysed after data-quality screening, yielding 499 usable responses; participation was voluntary and anonymous. Constructs were rated on seven-point Likert scales: Product Novelty (perceived originality/newness), Product Usefulness (practical learning/transferability), Press Physical (layout, equipment, ambience), Press Social (facilitator warmth, peer help, structured co-creation), Experience Quality (holistic appraisal of engagement and meaning), and Behavioural Intentions (revisit, recommendation online/offline, purchase). Data were cleaned for straight-lining and patterned responding, excessive or systematic missingness (with limited within-scale mean imputation), implausible completion times, and univariate/multivariate outliers; one novelty item (NO3) and one social-press item (SO1) were removed on reliability grounds. Common-method variance was addressed procedurally (assured anonymity, simple wording, section separation of predictors and outcomes, randomised item order) and tested statistically using a measured marker

approach with an unmeasured latent method construct sensitivity check and full-collinearity VIFs below conventional thresholds. A variance-based structural equation model with parallel multiple mediation was estimated using 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples; results are reported as standardised paths and specific indirect effects, a novice versus repeat multi-group comparison probed the moderation hypothesis, predictive validity was checked via a PLSpredict-style routine, and managerial priorities were summarised with an Importance–Performance Map Analysis.

Conclusion

We examined four cues at creative-tourism workshops: (1) social environment (facilitator warmth, peer help), (2) physical environment (room, layout, tools, ambience), (3) product novelty (how new/original the activity feels), and (4) product usefulness (how practically valuable the skills/outcomes are). We assessed how these cues shape Experience Quality (EQ), the overall feel of the session (engaging, absorbing, meaningful) and, in turn, Behavioural Intentions (BI) such as coming back, recommending the workshop, or buying products. This logic mirrors current S–O–R studies where STTs and VR first improve engagement or MTEs, which then drive revisit (Chin et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024).

1. Social ambience is the engine because it upgrades the experience.
   When facilitators are warm and peers are supportive, participants feel more absorbed, confident, and "part of it." That better EQ is what moves people to return and recommend. This mirrors evidence from makerspaces and museums where co-creation rituals (pair builds, show-and-tell, feedback rounds) reliably raise engagement and follow-on participation (Koolman & Boklage, 2024; Liu & Li, 2025; White et al., 2021).
2. The physical environment sets the stage rather than stealing the show.
   Good tools, layout, and ambience matter—but mainly because they make it easier to have a good experience. Once we account for EQ, the physical setting itself doesn't add much extra push to intentions. This is consistent with studies where natural/physical features spark emotions like awe, which then carry the effect forward (Jiang et al., 2022).
3. Novelty can nudge behaviour directly (the "skip-the-feel-good" route).
   Fresh, original activities don't only make the experience feel better; they also create a small, direct pull to act (e.g., "I want to try/buy this now," "I'll post about it"). That's similar to findings in tech-rich experiences where the stimulus still influences intention even after accounting for the experience it creates (Chin et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024).
4. Usefulness works in a practical way.
   When participants feel they gained skills or take-home value, they're more likely to return and recommend—on top of any improvement in the experience itself. This aligns with tourism studies linking service innovation and value creation to loyalty (Cheng, Shaheen, et al., 2021; Cheng, Abu, et al., 2022).
5. Who benefits most from strong social design?
   First timers tend to rely more on cues from facilitators and peers. Evidence from digital branding shows novices react more strongly (positively or negatively) to salient social/experiential signals (Shah et al., 2025). In workshops, that implies social ambience will matter even more for newcomers.

To translate the findings into action, focus on low-cost social design. Train facilitators to be warm and to run simple participation rituals such as a concise briefing, paired making, and a short feedback or showcase segment. Nurture peer-help norms so participants can ask for and offer assistance easily. Keep the space functional and comfortable rather than spending on décor at the expense of facilitation. Introduce targeted bursts of novelty for example, limited editions or first-look demonstrations to prompt immediate action, then amplify that novelty through credible social-media storytelling, where strong content quality and source credibility build image and trust that convert to eWOM and purchase (Al-Dmour et al., 2021; Jyoti et al., 2024; Mahmud et al., 2024; Rattanaburi, 2023; Tafolli et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2025).

The results clarify boundary conditions in S–O–R for creative services: social ambience works mainly through EQ, whereas product novelty can also act directly—consistent with contemporary evidence that certain stimuli retain S→R links even after organismic states are modelled (Chin et al., 2023; Xiong et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). The novice-sensitivity logic mirrors digital-brand findings where first-time users react more strongly to salient cues (Shah et al., 2025).

A simple investment rule emerges: safeguard EQ as the central engine of behaviour, fund social ambience first (facilitator training, participation rituals, peer-help norms), and add novelty surgically to stimulate immediate action and communication-led outcomes (eWOM/purchase), which are known to flow via image/trust (Al-Dmour et al., 2021; Jyoti et al., 2024; Mahmud et al., 2024; Rattanaburi, 2023; Tafolli et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2025).

Creative-tourism behaviour follows dual routes: Press–Social elevates EQ, which drives intentions, while Product Novelty adds a direct nudge. Recognising these routes provides a clear, low-capex playbook for providers: protect EQ, design social ambience deliberately, and deploy targeted novelty to maximise revisit, WOM/eWOM and purchase pathways.

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Absurdism and Consumerism in the Morgan Library Manuscript of *The Little Prince*

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Abstract

Saint-Exupéry's celebrated novella *The Little Prince* contrasts the irrationality and absurdity of adults with the imagination, creativity, and sense of wonder in children. Before leaving America in 1943, Saint-Exupéry gave the 30,000-word manuscript of his philosophical story to American journalist Silvia Hamilton, who sold it to the Morgan Library and Museum in New York in 1968. Saint-Exupéry removed many sentences and paragraphs before submitting his work to his American publishers, Reynal & Hitchcock. The published version is only half the size of the manuscript held at the Morgan Library. This paper examines Folio 94, a lesser-known manuscript folio, available on the Morgan Library website and in Cerisier and Lacroix (2013), where the Little Prince visits a store selling an absurd instrument that mimics the sound of a small earthquake; the merchant is surprised and upset when the prince says he is not interested and asks the young customer to go home and read a manual of slogans hoping to change his mind. The article argues that Folio 94 functions like an argumentative mini-play that criticizes consumerism, conformity, and the absurdities of capitalism; it portrays the Little Prince as a poetic figure of revolt and resistance, closely tied to Albert Camus's absurdist philosophy and Marxist literary criticism.

Keywords: The Little Prince, Morgan Library, absurdism, consumerism, Saint-Exupéry

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Introduction

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944) first visited the US in 1938, again in 1939, and from December 31, 1940, to April 1943. The latter period was the most prolific in the French writer's life, culminating with the publication of *The Little Prince* in 1943. The novella was mostly written in New York, notably at his friend Silvia Hamilton's apartment and in Saint-Exupéry's Bevin House in Asharoken (Long Island). In April 1943, just before he left New York, Saint-Exupéry offered his manuscript of *The Little Prince* to Silvia Hamilton, who sold it to the Morgan Library in New York in 1968. According to the Morgan Library, Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944) wrote the manuscript between July and October 1942.[1] Montoneri (2024) focuses on the relationship between Silvia Hamilton and Saint-Exupéry when he was in New York. The paper shows that the author removed references to the Big Apple ("Manhattan", "Rockefeller Center"; pp. 48–49), and to "Long Island" (p. 50). The present article focuses on another folio of the Morgan Library manuscript, Folio 94, which shares a clear affinity with various literary and philosophical approaches, including absurdist philosophy, existentialism, consumerism, Marxist literary criticism, and critique of capitalism. Folio 94 was entirely removed before publication of the novella. There are two sources to read the French original of this folio: The Morgan Library website (Saint-Exupéry, 1942).[2] and Cerisier and Lacroix (2013, pp. LXXVII-LXXVIII).

The published version of *The Little Prince* (1943 in New York; 1946 in France) already contains a famous allusion to the obsession with ownership and wealth: the businessman clearly symbolizes materialism; he lives, like many of the characters in the novella, a cyclic and absurd life: he spends his days counting stars, believing that he owns them. While in the published version allusions to absurdist philosophy and existentialism appear to be more affinities and shared existential concerns than real influences and common themes, Folio 94 of the Morgan Library resonates strongly with Camus's and Sartre's thoughts. Namely, Camus's philosophy of absurdism and revolt, and Sartre's ontology of freedom and notion of "bad faith". However, there seems to be no evidence that Saint-Exupéry met or contacted either Camus or Sartre, and it seems that he was not aware of their publications at the time. For instance, there is no evidence that Saint-Exupéry heard of Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le mythe de Sisyphe*; October 1942; first English translation in 1955) when he was writing *The Little Prince*. Nonetheless, Folio 94 is remarkably close to absurdist and existentialist concerns detailed in Camus's 1942 essay. Such concerns are highlighted by Saint-Exupéry in a dialogue between the Little Prince and a merchant who sells an instrument that makes the sound of a small earthquake, pointing to the possibility for the audience to feel a deep unease with modern systems; particularly, by criticizing the marketing of meaningless pleasure and the suppression of desires, themes that align with the manuscript's broader critique of consumerism. The dialogue resonates with Albert Camus's critique of the human need for meaning in an "indifferent" universe (Camus, 1991). Further, the attitude of the merchant when the Little Prince rejects the instrument is a typical example of Sartre's notion of bad faith or the self-deception that is used by individuals to avoid taking responsibility for their lives. The dialogue

[1] "This preliminary draft contract for *The Little Prince* was drawn up in November 1942, just after Saint-Exupéry had finished writing the story, and went through several revisions before it was finalized in January 1943." (Nelson, 2021, online). Morgan Library & Museum (2025, online): "1942 ca. July-Oct." "Saint-Exupéry finished Le Petit Prince in October 1942" (Johnson, 2024).

[2] The original French and an English translation of Folio 94 are accessible at this address: https://www.themorgan.org/collection/little-prince/118. The present article uses the French transcription by Cerisier and Lacroix (2013) and proposes a personal English translation. See footnote 4 about the case of "making the moon rise."

in Folio 94 is also a criticism of consumerism; it resonates with Marxist literary criticism, whereby *The Little Prince* reflects contemporary societal structures as well as a critique of capitalism. Such a critique includes a satirical depiction of pervasive commodification, including the production of a simile of potentially catastrophic events, and ideological manipulation that presents such commodification as desirable. Further, the Little Prince becomes, in the eyes of the merchant, disruptive and revolutionary because of his wish to have an instrument that would make the moon rise.

General Presentation and Analysis of Folio 94

Folio 94 is part of the 140-folio-long manuscript purchased by the Morgan Library in 1968. This folio is titled "At the store"; it is a sharp satirical dialogue between the Little Prince and a merchant. In the published version, chapter 23 contains only one short dialogue between the Little Prince and a merchant who sells pills to "quench thirst"; experts calculated that these pills can save "fifty-three minutes in every week" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 50; this dialogue can be found in folio 95 of the Morgan Library manuscript; Cerisier & Lacroix, 2013, p. LXXVIII). It sounds absurd, too, and the Little Prince points out that he would prefer to spend 35 minutes walking slowly toward a spring than to save time. The author decided to keep this dialogue instead of the very sharp satire contained in Folio 94.

The Original French Dialogue and a Proposed Translation

Below is the French original transcription quoted from Cerisier and Lacroix (2013) and a personal English translation of the first part of the folio:

> Feuillet 94 [*chap. XXIII*]
>
> Chez le marchand
> – Tiens un client!
> – Bonjour. Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?
> – Ça c'est des instruments très chers. Quand on tourne la manivelle ça forme un [*bruit qui retentit à un tr*[3] *biffé*] [bruit de *add.*] petit tremblement de terre…
> – À quoi ça sert?
> – À faire plaisir à ceux qui aiment les tremblements de terre
> – Je n'aime pas ça (Cerisier and Lacroix, 2013, p. LXXVII)
>
> Translation of the author: Folio 94 [*chapter XXIII*]
>
> At the Merchant's Stall
> – Ah, a customer!
> – Good morning. What is that?
> – These are very expensive instruments. When you turn the crank, it produces a [*noise that resonates with a qu crossed out*] [noise of a: *added*] small earthquake…
> – And what is it for?
> – It is meant to delight those who enjoy earthquakes
> – I do not enjoy that

[3] Here, "tr" are the first two letters of *tremblement* (therefore, the English translation will note "qu", the two first letters of *quake*). Note that the writer did not always add the punctuation, like in the two last sentences.

Folio 94 begins with "Ah, a customer!", which sounds a little theatrical. The scene feels like a very early version of the Theater of the Absurd (Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, 1950). The second sentence is a colloquial and childlike question ("What is that?") uttered by the Little Prince while he is looking at very unusual instruments on display. The merchant answers that they are instruments designed to imitate the sound of a small earthquake for people's enjoyment. "À faire plaisir" is translated idiomatically ("It is meant to delight"), but with a tone of detached irony, suggesting the absurdity of commodifying the sound of an earthquake for amusement. Why would anybody enjoy the sound of earthquakes? The Little Prince quietly and simply answers that he does "not enjoy that". The scene is a rejection of passive consumerism and technological novelty. The merchant seems to be surprised, embarrassed, and annoyed by the client's refusal in the second part of Folio 94 quoted from Cerisier and Lacroix (2013):

> – Hum ! Hum ! Si tu n'aimes pas les tremblements de terre je ne vendrai pas mon instrument. L'industrie et le commerce seront paralysés. Voilà un livre de publicité. Quand tu l'auras bien étudié, tu aimeras les tremblements de terre et tu achèteras un instrument très vite. C'est plein de slogans faciles à retenir.
> – Mais si j'ai envie d'un instrument à faire [lire le livre]?[4]
> – Il n'y en a point. C'est du désordre. Tu es un révolutionnaire. Il faut aimer un instrument. Si tu n'aimes pas ce qu'on t'offre tu ne seras jamais heureux. Si tu aimes ce qu'on t'offre tu seras heureux. De plus tu seras un citoyen libre.
> – Comment ça?
> – Tu ne seras libre d'acheter que quand tu auras envie de ce qui t'ai offert. [*Car biffé*] Sans ça tu crées le désordre. Va lire ta leçon de publicité (Cerisier and Lacroix, 2013, p. LXXVIII).
>
> Translation of the author:
>
> – Ahem! Ahem! If you do not enjoy earthquakes, I won't sell my instrument. Industry and commerce will grind to a halt. Here is a book of marketing. Once you have studied it carefully, you will love earthquakes, and you will very quickly buy an instrument. It's full of easy-to-remember slogans.
> – But what if I want an instrument to make [read the book]?
> – There is no such thing. That's chaos. You are a revolutionary. One must like an instrument. If you do not love what is offered to you, you will never be happy. If you love what is offered to you, you will be happy. Moreover, you will be a free citizen.
> – How so?
> – You will be free to buy only when you desire what is being offered. [*Because crossed out*] Otherwise, you are creating disorder. Now go study your marketing lesson.

In the second part of the dialogue, the merchant's voice evolves from that of a welcoming salesman into an agent of the system. To be free, according to the merchant, means to love what is on display in the shop. The little prince's desire for an instrument that is not sold in the shop is considered "revolutionary". The merchant's final command ("Go study your marketing lesson") parodies indoctrination, collapsing the distinction between learning and conditioning.

[4] The transcription made by the Morgan Library is very different here: "Mais si j'ai envie d'un instrument à faire lever la lune?" (the website's translation: "But what if I want an instrument that will make the moon rise?"). "Make the moon rise" seems to be the correct transcription. See https://www.themorgan.org/collection/little-prince/118.

It also echoes religious or political dogma: belief is not developed through reflection, but imposed by the repetition of "slogans easy to remember".

Chapter 23 Versus Folio 94

Chapter 23 and Folio 94 are parables of consumerism, technology, and desire. In the published version of the novella, grown-ups seem to value efficiency more than human experience. The last sentence of this dialogue says it all: to walk slowly toward a fountain, "Ça ne rapporte rien dit le marchand" (Cerisier & Lacroix, 2013, p. LXXVIII; translation of the author: "There is nothing to be gained says the merchant", that is, no money to make). Folio 94 is more explicit in showing that desire is engineered. The market system is not based on need, but on manipulated preferences. One possible explanation concerning the removal of Folio 94 might be that Saint-Exupéry did not want his tale to be confrontational: there are other examples in the Morgan Library manuscript of confrontational dialogues the author chose not to publish, such as the "encounter between the Little Prince and a couple" who complains that he is rude (Folio 135; Cerisier & Lacroix, 2013, CI; Montoneri, 2025). The author preferred to remove dialogues that sounded more aggressive and cynical, too dense, and therefore less accessible to children. Moreover, the earthquake metaphor is associated with violence and disruption, too far away from the main motifs of *The Little Prince*, notably thirst and water. Chapter 23 is an important transition because the dangerous desert might soon transform into a place of learning, experience, and happiness.[5]

Theoretical Frameworks

In Folio 94, the Little Prince is portrayed as a poetic rebel against the absurdity of consumer ideology. Read through the lenses of both Camus's Absurdism and Marx's critique of capitalism, this unpublished dialogue highlights the existential stakes beneath the Little Prince's poetic and calm resistance.

Absurdist Philosophy and Existentialism

While in the published version of *The Little Prince,* there are more affinities and shared existential concerns than real influences and common themes, Folio 94 of the Morgan Library resonates strongly with absurdism and existentialism. To Camus, the universe is meaningless; there is a tension between what people desire and the indifferent reality that confronts them.

> The Absurd can be defined as a metaphysical tension or opposition that results from the presence of human consciousness—with its ever-pressing demand for order and meaning in life—in an essentially meaningless and indifferent universe. (Simpson, 2025, online)

The absurdist tone of Folio 94 resonates with Ionesco's Theatre of the Absurd,[6] where communication breaks down and language loses its grounding in reason. The idea of an

[5] "I hoisted the bucket slowly to the edge of the well and set it there--happy, tired as I was, over my achievement… This water was indeed a different thing from ordinary nourishment. Its sweetness was born of the walk under the stars, the song of the pulley, the effort of my arms. It was good for the heart, like a present" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, chapter 25, p. 53).

[6] "Theatre of the Absurd" is an expression coined by Hungarian-born British scholar and critic Martin Esslin (Esslin, 1960); he notably quotes Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger… This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (Camus, 1991, p. 6).

instrument that imitates the sound of a small earthquake is a metaphor for empty spectacle; Ionesco's characters often perform repetitive and absurd rituals. The merchant's logic is circular (desire must match the offer), and freedom consists in submission. Absurdism depicts the emptiness of stereotypes: "It's full of easy-to-remember slogans" in Folio 94 is a very early version of Ionesco's famous quote: "And what is sometimes labeled the absurd is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language which is empty of substance, sterile, made up of clichés and slogans" (Esslin, 1960, p. 48). Martin Esslin wrote:

> It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world… the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation. (Esslin, 1965, p. 23)

Camus Versus Saint-Exupéry

Camus was born in Algeria in 1913; during World War II. He became an important player in the existentialist scene in Paris, a center for intellectual resistance during the German occupation. Camus rejected being an existentialist many times (Simpson, 2025). Saint-Exupéry, a writer and a pioneer of aviation, wasn't into politics and often criticized ideological movements, infamously refusing to support either the Vichy Regime or Charles de Gaulle's partisans. As a result, both sides ended up banning all of Saint-Exupéry's books (Montoneri, 2022). Saint-Exupéry lost his life on a reconnaissance mission just two weeks before the Provence Landing on August 15, 1944 (Opera Dragoon). It wasn't until 1946, after the ban on his works was lifted, that *The Little Prince* was finally published in France.

Existential themes, including isolation, death, loneliness, and absurdity, present in *The Little Prince*, were not directly influenced by Camus's philosophy of absurdism: Saint-Exupéry wrote most of his novella before the publication of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in October 1942, while *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*; also translated as *The Stranger*) was published in June 1942. There is no direct evidence (letters, essays, diaries) showing that Saint-Exupéry wrote about, mentioned, or responded to Camus's philosophical ideas or literary works. Camus and Saint-Exupéry never met in person, even though they visited the same places and had several common acquaintances. For example, both Camus and Saint-Exupéry drew inspiration from North Africa, and they likely moved in overlapping intellectual and literary circles through intermediaries, such as Jean Grenier and Edmond Charlot. Saint-Exupéry lived at Hotel La Louisiane in Paris for a few months in 1919 (Wéry, 2024). During World War II, the hotel became the headquarters of the existentialists; it was notably frequented by Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Folio 94 Versus Camus and Sartre

While *The Little Prince* in its final form is more mystical and poetic, Folio 94 brings Saint-Exupéry surprisingly close to Camus's Absurdism. Camus opens *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published by Éditions Gallimard, by stating that the central question of philosophy is whether life is worth living in a meaningless universe. He ultimately rejects suicide, proposing revolt as the answer. The Little Prince asks the snake to help him die. His "departure" (a form of

assisted suicide) is gentle, spiritual, and bittersweet. Saint-Exupéry treats death not as a final negation, but as a return, possibly even a transcendence.[7]

Camus ends his essay with the image of Sisyphus, endlessly pushing a rock uphill. The absurd hero chooses not to give up (Allison, 2024). Camus calls this a form of revolt, embracing life without illusions. Life is absurd, but one lives it fully anyway. Saint-Exupéry doesn't confront the absurd directly; he believes that it arises from the folly of grown-ups, and that remembering innocence may restore meaning. In the published version of the novella, the Little Prince's critique of adult absurdities (obsession with numbers, power, vanity) is grounded in the wisdom of children, suggesting that meaning is lost not because of absurdity, but because grown-ups forget what is essential.

The dialogue's almost indifferent tone in the face of absurdity also echoes Meursault's detachment in *The Outsider*, particularly the merchant's unbothered presentation of destruction as a pleasurable commodity. The customer's final line ("I do not care for that") can be read as a Camusian refusal, that is, a rejection of the absurd when it is destructive and inauthentic. The Little Prince's disinterest and resistance resonate with Camus's notion of revolt against a meaningless world. The earthquake device might also symbolize the random violence of existence, a core concept in Camus's philosophy, where the universe offers no comfort or justice, only the possibility of human ethical choice. Folio 94 is arguably the most Camusian moment in *The Little Prince*'s drafts. While Camus's absurdism leads to lucid revolt, Saint-Exupéry's satire suggests a poetic resistance: to yearn for the moon (in the Morgan Library transcription; see footnote 4 of this article) is a form of innocence and rebellion.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism also offers a relevant contrast. Sartre (1905–1980) is a philosopher, novelist, and playwright; he notably published *La Nausée* (1938; *Nausea*), *L'Être et le Néant* (1943; *Being and Nothingness*), *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946; *Existentialism Is a Humanism*), and many other essays, plays, novels, and short stories. He declined the Nobel Prize in Literature that he was awarded in 1964. Saint-Exupéry and Sartre never met in person; there is no evidence of correspondence or collaboration between them, which is not surprising given their differing networks and focuses.

Sartre's concept of "bad faith" ("mauvaise foi" defined as inauthenticity and self-deception by which individuals deny their own freedom and responsibility; internalizing imposed meaning to avoid existential anxiety; Santoni, 1995), refers to the human tendency to flee from freedom by internalizing external roles or ideologies (Sartre, 1943). The merchant denies that people can freely decide what they want. Instead, he insists they must want what is being sold. He redefines freedom as conformity, that is, not choosing authentically, but embracing desires manufactured by external forces (advertising, commerce). In contrast, the Little Prince remains free because he continues to desire authentically, despite the absurdity of his environment. The merchant brands him a "revolutionary" for resisting: authenticity threatens systems built on "bad faith". Instead of confronting the responsibility of authentic choice, some people take refuge in self-deception and believe that external systems dictate meaning and necessity (Sartre, 1992, pp. 86–116). When read through this existentialist framework, the unpublished Folio 94 of *The Little Prince* provides an illustration of how consumer culture cultivates "bad faith".

[7] "I cannot carry this body with me. It is too heavy… But it will be like an old abandoned shell. There is nothing sad about old shells" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943, 60).

Folio 94 reads as a short existential allegory. Commerce in the dialogue is portrayed by Saint-Exupéry as creating artificial needs. The Little Prince favors authenticity and resists self-deception. Saint-Exupéry's decision to omit Folio 94 before publication may be in part due to its polemical sharpness. Its critique of consumer manipulation and its cynical tone stand in contrast to the gentler allegories found in the published version of *The Little Prince*. Folio 94 also offers a sharp criticism of industrialism and is overtly anti-capitalist, which might be another reason why Saint-Exupéry removed it before publication.

Critique of Capitalism and Marxist Literary Criticism

Chapter 23 of the published version of *The Little Prince* offers a subtle criticism of industrialism. Folio 94 is more anti-capitalist and anti-propaganda. It suggests that commerce lives on because desire is engineered. "If you don't like earthquakes, I won't be able to sell" is a critique of a market system based on manipulated preferences. Folio 94 also prefigures Guy Debord's critique of the "Society of the Spectacle," where consumption replaces authentic experience. The "instrument" is a spectacle (a mechanized simulation of the sound of an earthquake), and the marketing book is its sacred text. Debord (1931–1994) was a French Marxist theorist and philosopher ("Debord's theories cannot be properly grasped unless they are first properly located within Marxist thought in general"; Jappe. 1999, p. 2); he notably developed Karl Marx's ideas of "reification" (where subjects become objects and vice versa, rendering people passive) and "commodity fetishism" (commodities are depersonalized; Marx, 1977):

> The spectacle does not need sophisticated arguments; all it needs is to be the only voice, and sure of no response whatsoever. Its first prerequisite, therefore, and at the same time its chief product, is the passivity of a contemplative attitude. Only an individual 'isolated' amidst 'atomized masses' … could feel any need for the spectacle, and consequently, the spectacle must bend every effort to reinforce the individual's isolation. (Jappe, 1999, p. 7)

The dialogue's satirical portrait of the merchant exposes the mechanisms of capitalism, where the creation of desire is more important than the production of goods. In *Capital,* Marx describes how the social relations between people become disguised as relations between commodities; in such a system, objects are imbued with artificial value detached from their actual utility. The earthquake device is what Marx calls a fetishized commodity: pleasurable but useless. Marx defines "commodity fetishism" in *Capital, Volume I*:

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. (Marx 1977, p. 165)

The earthquake machine is useless, but the merchant argues that it brings freedom and citizenship. In Marx's words: "It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx, 1977, p. 165). After the Little Prince says he is not interested in the machine, the merchant surprisingly does not praise the merits of his machine, but directs the conversation toward the notion of desire. He does not try to convince the customer of the value of his device. The Little Prince must learn to like the product because, according to the merchant, it is a civic

obligation to buy what is available. The statement "You won't be free to buy until you want what's available" aligns with Louis Althusser's notion of ideological interpellation. The "book of slogans" given to the Little Prince echoes the logic of advertising, which conceals the fact that the earthquake machine is a product with no genuine use-value. Marx shows this dynamic when he writes:

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves. (Marx, 1977, p. 164)

The merchant tells the Little Prince to read a book of slogans that are "easy to remember"; catchphrases and repetition, rather than critical thinking, are valued by the merchant. Here, Saint-Exupéry prefigures concerns later developed by German–American political theorist Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), who argued that advanced capitalist societies try to prevent people from imagining alternatives to what exists. But the Little Prince does not surrender; he neither accepts the product nor internalizes the logic of the market. He maintains his childlike longing. In Marxist terms (and in the merchant's words), his refusal is "revolutionary". While the fable appears playful, it feels more like a political allegory. The merchant is upset at the Little Prince's lack of interest in his instrument; he attempts to change his desire, presenting a manual of marketing and slogans designed to teach him to want what is already available. This moment echoes Louis Althusser's "Theory of ideological interpellation", where individuals are "hailed" into subject positions that serve dominant systems (Althusser, 1971). The merchant tells him that his attitude is "revolutionary". People who yearn for what cannot be sold are seen as enemies of economic and social order.

Conclusion

Before he left America, Saint-Exupéry offered his 30,000-word manuscript of *The Little Prince* to Silvia Hamilton; it was acquired by the Morgan Library and Museum in 1968. Saint-Exupéry removed numerous sentences and paragraphs before publication. While some examples remain in the published version (like the businessman counting and owning stars), others were removed. In Folio 94, the Little Prince visits a store that sells all sorts of inventions, including a costly instrument that makes the sound of a small earthquake. The merchant is the voice of absurd authority; he offers ready-made pleasure and denies true desire. The Little Prince, in asking for an instrument to make the moon rise, becomes a rebel; he refuses to participate in absurd commerce and instead yearns for transcendent meaning.

From a Camusian perspective, the merchant embodies the denial of absurdity, covering meaninglessness with advertising and slogans, while the Little Prince represents revolt, the refusal to accept imposed illusions. From a Sartrean perspective, the merchant exemplifies "bad faith", redefining freedom as submission to manufactured desire, while the Little Prince represents the insistence on authentic freedom. Saint-Exupéry's unpublished passage stages a dialogue with both Sartre and Camus. The critique of consumer manipulation resonates with Sartre's ontology of freedom and with Camus's philosophy of revolt, offering a miniature allegory of the existential struggle to live authentically in a world that seeks to dictate what it means to be free and happy. Folio 94 is an argumentative and absurd play. While the pill in Chapter 23 is a metaphor for efficiency and time-saving culture, the instrument in Folio 94 is a metaphor for consumer capitalism's absurdities. This dialogue operates as a dystopia, an allegory of the psychological mechanisms of consumer capitalism. It sounds playful at the beginning, until the Little Prince shows disinterest in the instrument. The merchant feels then

surprised and upset; he transforms from a salesman to a priest of ideology. The Little Prince in this scene represents human autonomy in a world where even desire and pleasure must be prescribed.

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Prioritization Approach to Music's Role in Destination Experience Design

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Abstract

As tourism increasingly embraces multisensory experience design, music has emerged as a vital yet under-theorized component of destination environments. This study develops and tests a comprehensive framework that captures six key dimensions of music's role in shaping Destination Experience Quality (DEQ): Thematic Music Integration, Live Music Availability, Cultural Congruence, Emotional Resonance, Music-Induced Sense of Place, and Soundscape Quality. Drawing on experiential marketing theory, the model was empirically tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with data from 350 tourists. Results confirm that all six dimensions significantly influence DEQ, with Thematic Music Integration and Cultural Congruence emerging as the most impactful. Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) further identifies Emotional Resonance as a high-leverage yet underperforming construct. The study contributes to experiential tourism theory by positioning music as a strategic design element and offers actionable insights for destination planners seeking to optimize musical experiences that elevate visitor satisfaction, memory, and place attachment.

Keywords: destination experience quality, music in tourism, experiential design, thematic music integration, cultural congruence, importance–performance map analysis (IPMA), partial least squares (PLS-SEM), soundscape, emotional resonance, tourist satisfaction

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Introduction

In contemporary tourism, destinations compete not only on the basis of natural beauty or architectural heritage but increasingly on the quality of multisensory experiences they offer. Music, in particular, has emerged as a potent driver of visitor engagement: it shapes mood, underscores cultural narratives, and generates lasting memories in ways that static visuals alone cannot. From curated background playlists in boutique accommodations to large-scale music festivals that attract international audiences, musical programming has become integral to destination branding and emotional resonance (Lu et al., 2022).

Despite the evident popularity of music-based offerings, scholarly understanding of which specific musical dimensions most effectively enhance the holistic destination experience remains underdeveloped. Prior investigations have tended to focus on isolated phenomena—such as the economic impact of festivals, the sociocultural benefits of live street performances, or the therapeutic effects of ambient music in wellness settings but lack a unified, comparative framework (Liu et al., 2018). Consequently, destination managers often disperse resources across a variety of music-related initiatives without clear guidance on their relative contribution to Destination Experience Quality, defined here as tourists' overall affective, cognitive, and sensory appraisal of a place.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a prioritization approach, integrating six theoretically grounded dimensions of music's role in destination design: Thematic Music Integration, Live Music Availability, Cultural Congruence, Emotional Resonance, Music-Induced Sense of Place, and Soundscape Quality. Drawing on the Stimulus–Response framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and experiential marketing theory, we hypothesize that each dimension positively influences Destination Experience Quality. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), we quantify the strength of these relationships, and through Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016), we identify high-impact yet underperforming elements. This dual-method approach not only advances theoretical understanding of music in experiential tourism but also provides actionable insights, enabling destination stakeholders to strategically allocate resources and optimize musical components for maximum visitor satisfaction.

Literature Review

Music and Experiential Tourism

Experiential tourism foregrounds the creation of memorable, emotionally resonant encounters through the activation of multiple senses (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Music, as a dynamic aural stimulus, can profoundly shape these encounters by influencing mood, evoking cultural narratives, and reinforcing place identity in ways that visuals alone cannot (Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). Early work on sonic branding demonstrated how background music in retail and hospitality settings alters perceived atmosphere and consumer behavior (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990). In tourism, soundscape research has shown that both programmed and ambient sounds affect wayfinding, perceived crowding, and overall comfort (Pijanowski et al., 2011). Yet, despite music's recognized power to enhance immersion and satisfaction, there remains a lack of integrative models that position diverse musical roles within a unified experiential framework (Liu et al., 2018).

Music Roles in Destination Experience Design

Building on the experiential tourism foundation, six distinct roles that music can play in shaping destination experience have been proposed (Liu et al., 2018). These roles span from strategic programming to spontaneous, ambient encounters:

Thematic Music Integration

Thematic Music Integration involves the deliberate curation of music that aligns with the thematic, historical, or cultural identity of the destination. For example, ambient soundtracks in museums or heritage sites can reinforce narrative immersion, while local instrumental genres used in promotional media can symbolically anchor a destination's brand identity. Research in experiential marketing highlights that multisensory congruence—such as matching music to spatial themes—can enhance memory recall, emotional engagement, and perceived authenticity. However, the extent to which such integrations contribute to tourists' holistic evaluation of their destination experience is yet to be robustly quantified.

Live Music Availability

Live Music Availability captures the presence and accessibility of live performances—ranging from formal concerts to spontaneous street busking. Live music is often cited as a key attractor for urban tourism and festival-based travel. It not only offers entertainment but also facilitates social interaction, local economic activity, and cultural immersion. Prior studies suggest that live performances significantly enhance perceived vibrancy and emotional arousal within destinations. yet their relative importance in shaping destination experience quality, when compared with other musical elements, remains understudied.

Cultural Congruence

Cultural Congruence refers to the perceived authenticity and appropriateness of the music relative to the local cultural context. Tourists often interpret congruent musical experiences—such as traditional folk music in rural settings or indigenous sounds at heritage sites—as markers of cultural legitimacy and depth. Conversely, music perceived as out of place or overly commercial may disrupt immersion. Theories of cultural consumption and place-making emphasize the role of congruent aural cues in enhancing perceived authenticity, a key dimension of experience quality.

Emotional Resonance

Emotional Resonance concerns the degree to which music elicits meaningful affective responses in the listener. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), emotional reactions mediate how environmental stimuli, including music, influence behavioral outcomes like satisfaction, recommendation, and revisit intention. Music's ability to evoke nostalgia, joy, serenity, or exhilaration can shape a tourist's evaluation of a destination at both conscious and subconscious levels. Yet few studies have measured this dimension in the context of broader experiential evaluations.

Music-Induced Sense of Place

Music-Induced Sense of Place captures how specific sounds and musical compositions contribute to forming or reinforcing a destination's spatial identity. A distinct soundscape—whether created intentionally through curated playlists or organically through environmental music—can contribute to spatial legibility and emotional attachment. Destinations such as Nashville or Vienna are often associated with particular genres, reinforcing both place brand and visitor memory. This construct links to the broader literature on place attachment and auditory geography.

Soundscape Quality

Soundscape Quality pertains to tourists' evaluation of the overall aural environment, including both musical and non-musical elements. This includes clarity of sound, balance between ambient noise and music, and the absence of auditory pollution (e.g., construction, traffic, or overlapping sound sources). High-quality soundscapes have been shown to promote emotional restoration, comfort, and sensory pleasure in both urban and nature-based settings. In contrast, poor soundscapes can undermine even the most visually appealing environments.

Together, these six dimensions provide a holistic lens for analyzing music's role in destination experience design. They reflect both intentional curation and spontaneous environmental qualities, spanning affective, cultural, and sensory domains. By modeling their influence on Destination Experience Quality, the present study offers an integrated framework that informs both theory and practice in experiential tourism design. The following section presents the proposed hypotheses.

Hypotheses Development

Building on the theoretical frameworks of servicescape theory (Bitner, 1992), and experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999), this study posits that each music-related construct positively contributes to tourists' overall Destination Experience Quality (DEQ). DEQ is conceptualized as a multidimensional evaluation encompassing affective satisfaction, sensory immersion, cultural connection, and place-based meaning.

Thematic Music Integration enhances the perceived coherence and narrative immersion of a destination. When music aligns with the spatial or cultural theme of a destination, it reinforces tourists' sense of presence and amplifies memory encoding. Live Music Availability contributes to emotional arousal, social interaction, and cultural vitality, offering a dynamic layer of authenticity and unpredictability. Cultural Congruence influences the authenticity judgment tourists make about the destination. When music is perceived as culturally appropriate, it fosters deeper affective and cognitive evaluations. Emotional Resonance captures music's capacity to generate powerful personal and emotional reactions. Given that emotion is a primary driver of experience satisfaction and memory formation. Music-Induced Sense of Place reflects how well music evokes spatial belonging or destination identity. Destinations that sonically distinguish themselves may cultivate greater attachment and distinctiveness in tourists' mental maps. Soundscape Quality, as a background contextual factor, contributes to tourists' sensory comfort and aesthetic pleasure. Well-managed aural environments reduce cognitive overload and enhance relaxation. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H 1: Thematic Music Integration (TMI) is positively associated with Destination Experience Quality.
H 2: Live Music Availability (LMA) is positively associated with Destination Experience Quality.
H 3: Cultural Congruence (CCG) is positively associated with Destination Experience Quality.
H 4: Emotional Resonance (EMR) is positively associated with Destination Experience Quality.
H 5: Music-Induced Sense of Place (MSP) is positively associated with Destination Experience Quality.
H 6: Soundscape Quality (SSQ) is positively associated with Destination Experience Quality.

The following section outlines the methodological approach for testing these hypotheses through PLS-SEM and the strategic prioritization of elements using Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA).

Methods

Measurement Development

All constructs in this study, including the dependent variable Destination Experience Quality (DEQ), were modeled as first-order reflective constructs. This specification is consistent with prior literature where psychological and perceptual constructs—such as emotional resonance or perceived experience quality—are understood to be reflected in their observable indicators rather than causing them. Six predictor constructs were operationalized to represent music's role in destination experience design: Thematic Music Integration (TMI), Live Music Availability (LMA), Cultural Congruence (CCG), Emotional Resonance (EMR), Music-Induced Sense of Place (MSP), and Soundscape Quality (SSQ) (Zhuang et al., 2023).

Each construct, including DEQ, was measured using three reflective indicators, adapted from established scales in tourism marketing, soundscape assessment, and music psychology (Zhuang et al., 2023). Items were framed to capture tourists' perceptions during or immediately following their most recent music-influenced travel experience. A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) was used for all items.

To ensure content validity, the initial item pool was reviewed by three experts in destination design and music tourism. A pilot test was then conducted with 30 respondents, resulting in minor wording adjustments to enhance clarity and cultural applicability across global destinations.

Data Collection

A structured online survey was distributed between March and April 2025 via tourist databases and social media groups dedicated to cultural travel. Respondents were eligible if they had visited a music-influenced destination (e.g., known for live music, cultural soundscapes, or festivals) within the last 12 months. After cleaning and excluding incomplete responses or failed attention checks, a final sample of 350 valid responses was retained.

The sample was geographically diverse from different parts of Thailand. Demographically, respondents were 52% female, 48% male, and ranged in age from 20 to 55, with varied levels of travel frequency and musical interest.

Data Analysis Strategy

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for model testing via SmartPLS 4. This method is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the study, the reflective measurement model, and the emphasis on prediction (Hair et al., 2021). We first test the measurement model. For indicator reliability, all outer loadings were expected to exceed 0.70. Items below 0.50 would be considered for deletion. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was required to exceed 0.50. For discriminant validity, the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was used. All HTMT values had to fall below 0.85.

Then, the bootstrapping method (5,000 subsamples) tested the significance of the path coefficients (hypotheses). The model's explanatory power was evaluated using R^2 for Destination Experience Quality.

Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)

To identify strategic priorities for experience design, Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) was conducted following Ringle and Sarstedt (2016). This method supplements PLS-SEM by plotting each predictor's total effect on DEQ (importance) against its mean latent variable score (performance). A grand mean split generated a two-dimensional matrix categorizing the constructs into four quadrants:

Quadrant 1: High Importance, High Performance – maintain excellence
Quadrant 2: Low Importance, High Performance – possible overinvestment
Quadrant 3: Low Importance, Low Performance – minimal priority
Quadrant 4: High Importance, Low Performance – strategic focus needed

This approach allowed the study to move beyond statistical significance toward managerial relevance, offering destination planners data-driven insights for prioritizing musical elements in experience design.

Results

Measurement Model Assessment

All constructs in this study, including the dependent variable Destination Experience Quality (DEQ), were conceptualized as reflective and underwent rigorous psychometric assessment to verify their validity and reliability. Consistent with the recommendations of Sarstedt et al. (2021), the standardized loadings for all indicators exceeded the 0.70 threshold and were statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, confirming satisfactory indicator reliability across all measurement items (see Table 1).

Convergent validity was established through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with all constructs reporting AVE values above the recommended minimum of 0.60. This demonstrates that a substantial proportion of the variance in the observed variables is explained by their corresponding latent constructs. Additionally, both Cronbach's alpha and

Composite Reliability (CR) values for each construct exceeded the 0.70 criterion, confirming robust internal consistency and construct reliability.

To verify discriminant validity, the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was employed. All HTMT values remained well below the conservative cutoff of 0.85, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct from the others in the model. Furthermore, the direction and strength of inter-construct correlations were theoretically sound and aligned with extant literature on music, environmental stimuli, and experiential tourism. Collectively, these results confirm the soundness of the measurement model and provide a solid foundation for proceeding to the evaluation of the structural model.

Table 1

Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Indicator	AVE	rho_a	$\widehat{w}_i$	$\widehat{\lambda}_i$
Thematic Music Integration (TMI)	**TMI1**: Music played in public spaces matched the theme or mood of the destination.	0.877	0.801	0.38	0.894
	TMI2: The use of music was thoughtfully integrated into various parts of the destination (e.g., attractions, hotels).			0.355	0.881
	TMI3: The musical ambiance enhanced the storytelling or narrative of the place.			0.383	0.91
Live Music Availability (LMA)	**LMA1**: I had multiple opportunities to enjoy live music during my visit.	0.872	0.78	0.358	0.879
	LMA2: Live music performances were well-publicized and easy to access.			0.429	0.904
	LMA3: The live music experiences contributed to the uniqueness of the destination.			0.344	0.866
Cultural Congruence of Music (CCM)	**CCM1**: The music I heard reflected the local culture and traditions.	0.879	0.801	0.383	0.912
	CCM2: Musical performances helped me understand the destination's cultural identity.			0.384	0.899
	CCM3: The musical elements felt authentic rather than overly commercialized.			0.35	0.874
Emotional Resonance of Music (ERM)	**ERM1**: The music I encountered evoked positive emotions during my visit.	0.877	0.801	0.357	0.903
	ERM2: I felt emotionally connected to the music I heard at the destination.			0.39	0.913
	ERM3: Some musical experiences during my trip were emotionally memorable.			0.37	0.868
Music-induced Sense of Place (MSP)	**MSP1**: The music made the destination feel more distinctive and memorable.	1.061	0.806	0.551	0.949
	MSP2: Certain sounds or songs now remind me of this destination.			0.395	0.917
	MSP3: Music helped me feel a stronger attachment to the place I visited.			0.14	0.824
Soundscape Quality (SSQ)	**SSQ1**: The music and ambient sounds around the destination were pleasant.	0.883	0.799	0.409	0.907
	SSQ2: The volume and tone of the music were appropriate and non-intrusive.			0.377	0.895
	SSQ3: The sound environment contributed to my comfort and enjoyment.			0.332	0.879
Outcome Variable: Destination Experience Quality (DEQ)	**DEQ1**: Music enhanced the overall quality of my experience at the destination.	0.969	0.941	0.347	0.972
	DEQ2: I was satisfied with the role music played during my visit.			0.339	0.968
	DEQ3: Music was a meaningful part of my destination experience.			0.345	0.971

Note. $\widehat{w}_i$ = estimated weights, $\widehat{\lambda}_i$ = estimated loadings, VIF = Variance Inflation Factor, and AVE = Average Variance Explained

Structural Model Results

The structural model was assessed to evaluate the hypothesized relationships between six music-related constructs and the outcome variable, Destination Experience Quality (DEQ). Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the model revealed that all six paths were statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better, supporting all proposed hypotheses and highlighting the multifaceted role of music in enhancing destination experiences. Thematic Music Integration (TMI) exhibited the strongest influence on DEQ ($\beta = 0.563$, $p < 0.001$), affirming its central role in reinforcing narrative immersion and perceptual coherence at the destination. This result suggests that music intentionally aligned with the destination's theme or identity meaningfully enhances affective and cognitive appraisals among visitors.

Cultural Congruence of Music (CCM) also showed a substantial positive effect ($\beta = 0.435$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the perceived cultural appropriateness and authenticity of musical elements contributes significantly to visitors' perception of experience quality. This supports the premise that music acts as a symbolic cue, reinforcing place-based authenticity and cultural depth.

Emotional Resonance of Music (ERM) was likewise a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.362$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with the theoretical expectation that emotionally evocative music enhances satisfaction and memory encoding, core components of experiential value. While Live Music Availability (LMA) had a comparatively smaller effect ($\beta = 0.122$, $p < 0.001$), it was still statistically significant, suggesting that the presence of live musical experiences—formal or spontaneous—adds a dynamic and socially engaging layer to destination experiences. Similarly, Music-Induced Sense of Place (MSP) ($\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.003$) and Soundscape Quality (SSQ) ($\beta = 0.065$, $p = 0.019$) were both positively associated with DEQ, though with modest effect sizes. MSP highlights music's capacity to reinforce spatial identity and place distinctiveness, while SSQ reflects the value of coherent, non-intrusive acoustic environments in promoting sensory comfort.

Collectively, the model demonstrates that music exerts a significant and multidimensional influence on Destination Experience Quality. The relative strength of TMI, CCM, and ERM suggests that emotional and symbolic dimensions of music carry more weight than logistical or ambient aspects in shaping visitor satisfaction. These findings provide empirical grounding for a more strategic deployment of musical elements in destination design.

Table 2

Structural Model Assessment (n = 350)

Relationship	Estimate	p-value
TMI -> DEQ	0.563	0.001
LMA -> DEQ	0.122	0.001
CCM -> DEQ	0.435	0.001
ERM -> DEQ	0.362	0.001
MSP -> DEQ	0.102	0.003
SSQ -> DEQ	0.065	0.019

Note. Thematic Music Integration (TMI), Live Music Availability (LMA), Cultural Congruence of Music (CCM), Emotional Resonance of Music (ERM), Music-induced Sense of Place (MSP), Soundscape Quality (SSQ), Outcome Variable: Destination Experience Quality (DEQ)

IPMA Results

To augment the insights derived from the structural model, the study applied Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) to identify which musical dimensions offer the most strategic leverage for enhancing Destination Experience Quality (DEQ). Unlike traditional path modeling, which only assesses the magnitude and significance of causal relationships, IPMA juxtaposes each construct's importance (total effect on DEQ) against its performance (mean latent score), enabling destination planners to prioritize interventions more effectively (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016).

Following the methodology outlined by Henseler (2020), the average importance and performance scores were used to generate a two-axis matrix. Constructs were then categorized into four strategic quadrants:

Quadrant 1 – Maintain Excellence (High Importance, High Performance): TMI, CCM

Thematic Music Integration (TMI) and Cultural Congruence of Music (CCM) emerged as both high-performing and highly influential predictors of DEQ. These findings underscore the success of current destination strategies that align musical themes with place identity and ensure cultural relevance. Destination managers should continue investing in these dimensions, maintaining their current quality while exploring further innovations in narrative-driven and culturally embedded music programming.

Quadrant 2 – Possible Overinvestment (Low Importance, High Performance): LMA

Live Music Availability (LMA) showed relatively high performance but lower importance compared to other constructs. While live performances are appreciated and well-executed, their marginal contribution to DEQ suggests potential overinvestment. Resources currently allocated to frequent or large-scale live music offerings could be partially redirected to more impactful areas without significantly compromising visitor satisfaction.

Quadrant 3 – Lower Priority (Low Importance, Low Performance): SSQ, MSP

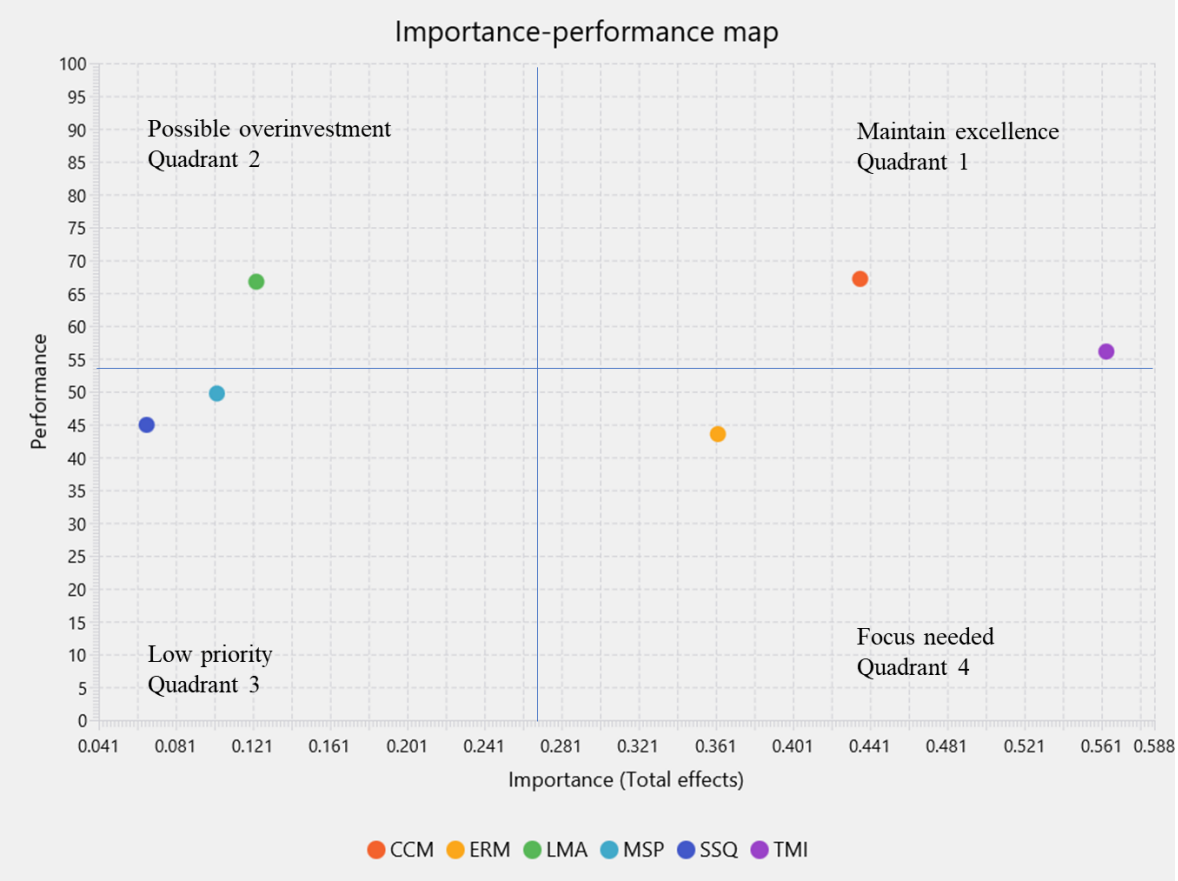
Soundscape Quality (SSQ) and Music-Induced Sense of Place (MSP) were identified as both low in importance and low in performance. These dimensions, while conceptually relevant, appear to play a more background role in shaping visitors' overall destination appraisal. Given their limited influence, improvements in these areas may not substantially enhance DEQ and may be deprioritized in the short term unless part of broader sensory experience strategies.

Quadrant 4 – Strategic Focus Needed (High Importance, Low Performance): ERM

Emotional Resonance of Music (ERM) stands out as a high-impact yet underperforming construct. Despite its strong influence on DEQ, performance levels lag behind other dimensions. This suggests a key leverage point for destination enhancement. Efforts to curate emotionally compelling musical experiences—through nostalgic cues, emotionally evocative compositions, or participatory music moments—could yield disproportionately high gains in destination satisfaction and emotional attachment.

These findings illustrate the practical utility of IPMA in guiding destination managers toward evidence-based prioritization. In particular, investments that boost emotional resonance and preserve thematic and culturally aligned music experiences are likely to generate the most meaningful improvements in perceived destination quality.

Figure 1
IPMA Results



Discussion and Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on multisensory experience design in tourism by proposing and empirically validating a comprehensive framework for understanding music's role in shaping Destination Experience Quality (DEQ). Unlike previous research that examined musical elements in isolation—such as the impacts of live performances or soundscapes—this study integrates six distinct dimensions into a unified model that reflects music's cognitive, affective, symbolic, and environmental influence on tourists.

The findings underscore the theoretical value of approaching music not merely as entertainment, but as an experiential design tool embedded within the destination's sensory architecture. Thematic Music Integration and Cultural Congruence were identified as the most influential dimensions, affirming theories in experiential marketing that emphasize the importance of conceptual alignment and symbolic meaning in shaping consumer evaluations (Schmitt, 1999). These dimensions reinforce the idea that music, when thoughtfully

integrated into the spatial and cultural fabric of a destination, enhances narrative coherence, authenticity, and memory formation.

Moreover, the inclusion of Emotional Resonance and Music-Induced Sense of Place extends the literature on affective destination design. These constructs capture the emotional and spatial qualities of musical stimuli, offering new pathways for exploring how music contributes to sense-making, attachment, and immersion. The application of Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) also represents a methodological contribution, demonstrating how perceptual and statistical priorities can be combined to inform more strategic tourism development models.

Practical Implications

For practitioners in destination management, tourism marketing, and experience design, this study provides data-driven insights on how to strategically allocate resources across musical components to enhance overall visitor satisfaction. The high impact and high performance of Thematic Music Integration and Cultural Congruence suggest that destination stakeholders should prioritize context-sensitive music programming—whether through curated playlists, heritage-aligned performances, or branding elements that integrate local sound traditions.

Emotional Resonance, while highly important, showed relatively lower performance, pointing to a key leverage point. Destination managers could consider investing in emotionally rich and diverse soundscapes—such as genre-specific zones, nostalgic musical cues, or immersive audio experiences—that tap into the affective dimensions of memory and mood. This is particularly relevant in settings that aim to differentiate themselves through emotional engagement rather than functional amenities.

Live Music Availability, although well-executed, had a modest impact on DEQ. This implies that while live performances are appreciated, their contribution to holistic experience quality may be secondary to more immersive or culturally embedded elements. Event planners should continue to offer live music but consider how it complements rather than defines the broader destination experience.

Finally, Soundscape Quality and Music-Induced Sense of Place, though lower in importance and performance, should not be disregarded. These background elements contribute to ambient comfort and spatial identity, particularly in wellness, heritage, or ecotourism settings. Improving acoustic planning, reducing noise interference, and maintaining sound consistency across touchpoints can incrementally enhance the perceived quality of place.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on self-reported, cross-sectional data, which restricts causal inference. Longitudinal studies or real-time experience sampling could yield deeper insights into the temporal dynamics of music in shaping destination impressions. Second, the operationalization of musical constructs was intentionally broad to capture diverse settings; however, this may overlook nuanced factors such as personal musical preferences, genre specificity, or lyrical content.

Third, the sample was drawn from a limited set of geographic contexts, potentially affecting generalizability. Cultural differences in musical interpretation, symbolism, and emotional

expression warrant future cross-cultural validation of the model. Finally, while the study focuses on tourists' perspectives, incorporating insights from local communities, musicians, and planners could enhance the ecological validity and ethical grounding of music-driven design strategies. Future research should also explore interactions between music and other sensory modalities—such as scent, taste, or tactile elements—to assess the synergetic effects of multisensory design on destination experience quality. Additionally, qualitative approaches could enrich understanding of how tourists narrate, interpret, and remember musical encounters across different types of destinations.

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

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

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Prioritizing Servicescape Elements in Enhancing the Attendee Experience at Music Events

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of live music events demands more than outstanding performances; it requires immersive, multisensory environments that elevate attendee satisfaction. This study applies servicescape theory to explore how six environmental dimensions—ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, visual and symbolic design, social servicescape, engagement opportunities, and crowd condition and navigation—influence experiential satisfaction among music event attendees. Data were collected from 300 respondents across multiple large-scale events in Thailand and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA). Results reveal that visual and symbolic design, ambient conditions, and engagement opportunities significantly enhance satisfaction, while spatial functionality and social atmosphere exert weaker but still meaningful effects. Crowd condition showed no significant influence. IPMA findings further highlight ambient and engagement features as high-priority improvement areas. The study advances servicescape research within live event contexts and offers actionable guidance for event organizers seeking to optimize attendee experiences.

Keywords: servicescape, experiential satisfaction, music events, live entertainment, PLS-SEM, IPMA, attendee experience, environmental design

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Introduction

The global expansion of live music events has redefined the way people engage with entertainment and cultural experiences, positioning music festivals and concerts as powerful platforms for emotional, social, and sensory enrichment (Redfield & Thouin-Savard, 2017). However, in an increasingly competitive and experience-driven marketplace, event organizers face mounting pressure to deliver not just musical performances but immersive environments that foster attendee satisfaction and loyalty. Beyond the stage, it is the broader event setting—the physical, sensory, and social context—that profoundly shapes the quality of the attendee experience.

In this context, the concept of the servicescape has gained increasing relevance. Originally developed in service marketing (Bitner, 1992), servicescape theory underscores the impact of environmental cues—both tangible and symbolic—on individuals' affective and behavioral responses. While this framework has been extensively applied in hospitality and retail settings, its application to live music events remains underexplored, despite such events' inherently multisensory and social nature. Music events represent a unique form of service encounter, where the design of space, crowd interactions, and atmospheric features play a critical role in shaping attendees' perceptions of value, enjoyment, and satisfaction.

Prior studies have highlighted individual elements such as lighting, crowding, and acoustics as influential in shaping audience experience (Lin, 2016), yet few have systematically assessed the relative importance of these servicescape dimensions or how they interact to predict experiential outcomes. This knowledge gap is significant, as event managers often allocate resources across various servicescape features—such as enhanced sound design or social spaces—without clear empirical evidence of their relative contribution to attendee satisfaction.

This study addresses this gap by examining six key servicescape dimensions at music events: ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, visual and symbolic design, social servicescape, engagement opportunities, and crowd condition and navigation. Drawing on servicescape theory and event experience literature, the research investigates the direct effects of these dimensions on attendee experiential satisfaction. Furthermore, using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA), the study identifies which elements offer the greatest strategic leverage for enhancing audience experiences. By integrating structural modeling with practical prioritization tools, this research contributes both theoretically and managerially. It extends the servicescape construct into the domain of live event management and provides actionable insights into which environmental components should be emphasized to maximize attendee satisfaction. The findings will help music event organizers make evidence-based design decisions that enhance experiential value, promote positive word-of-mouth, and encourage repeat attendance.

Literature Review

Servicescape Theory in Experiential Environments

The concept of the servicescape, first introduced by Bitner (1992), conceptualizes the physical and ambient setting in which service interactions occur as a critical determinant of customer behavior and perception. It encompasses the physical environment (e.g., layout, décor, ambient conditions) and symbolic cues that influence emotional and cognitive responses. In recent

years, scholars have extended the framework to include social and interactive dimensions, particularly relevant in co-created service settings such as events, festivals, and communal experiences. Music events, with their complex sensory environments and crowd dynamics, provide a fertile ground to examine servicescape effects. Yet, the empirical application of the theory in this domain remains limited. A comprehensive understanding of how servicescape elements shape experiential satisfaction in live music contexts is thus overdue.

Servicescape Dimensions at Music Events

Recent developments in event studies have highlighted the importance of multiple servicescape elements that collectively shape the overall experience. Six dimensions are particularly salient in live music event settings. First, ambient conditions refer to background elements such as sound quality, lighting, temperature, and air quality, which subtly affect mood and comfort. In music events, well-calibrated acoustics and atmospheric lighting are central to immersion. Second, Spatial Layout and Functionality involves the logical arrangement of spaces, such as stage visibility, ease of movement, and seating or standing comfort. Poor spatial design can result in crowd congestion and reduce the quality of the event experience. Third, Visual and Symbolic Design includes stage aesthetics, branding cues, and thematic decor that reinforce the event's identity. These symbolic elements act as environmental signifiers and enhance engagement through visual storytelling. Fourth, Social Servicescape emphasizes human factors, such as staff behavior, peer interaction, and crowd vibe. Positive social atmospheres can strengthen affective responses and sense of belonging, while aggressive or indifferent staff can detract from perceived service quality. Fifth, Engagement Opportunities refer to interactive elements that allow attendees to co-create meaning and participation, including activity zones, merchandise booths, food and beverage sampling, or augmented reality features. These activities offer supplementary layers of value beyond musical performance (Bracalente et al., 2011). Finally, Crowd Condition and Navigation deals with density, mobility, and ease of entry/exit. Research has shown that overcrowding, bottlenecks, or unclear signage significantly reduce event satisfaction and perceived safety. Yet, positive crowd energy can enhance collective emotional experiences.

Experiential Satisfaction in Live Events

Experiential satisfaction reflects attendees' holistic evaluation of the event, encompassing affective, sensory, and cognitive components (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). In live music settings, satisfaction extends beyond functional service quality to include emotional engagement, environmental immersion, and social connection. The degree to which servicescape elements align with attendees' expectations and psychological needs determines the level of satisfaction. While prior research has shown that aspects like sound clarity, artist performance, and convenience impact evaluations, there is a lack of integrative models that empirically prioritize the relative contribution of environmental elements.

To address this, the present study adopts a multidimensional view of servicescape to model its effect on experiential satisfaction in live music events. Furthermore, to translate findings into practical decision-making tools, the study incorporates Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) to identify the most strategically significant yet underperforming elements from the audience's perspective.

Hypotheses Development

Building on Bitner's (1992) servicescape theory and its extensions in experiential event contexts, this study posits that environmental elements significantly influence how attendees evaluate their overall event experience. Specifically, each of the six identified servicescape dimensions is hypothesized to positively contribute to experiential satisfaction, which reflects a holistic, affect-driven judgment formed during and after the event.

H 1: Ambient Conditions (AMB) are positively associated with experiential satisfaction.
H 2: Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF) are positively associated with experiential satisfaction.
H 3: Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD) is positively associated with experiential satisfaction.
H 4: Social Servicescape (SSC) is positively associated with experiential satisfaction.
H 5: Engagement Opportunities (EO) are positively associated with experiential satisfaction.
H 6: Crowd Condition and Navigation (CCN) is positively associated with experiential satisfaction.

Methods

Measurement Development

To assess the influence of servicescape elements on attendee experiential satisfaction at music events, this study operationalized six key constructs: Ambient Conditions (AMB), Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF), Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD), Social Servicescape (SSC), Engagement Opportunities (EO), and Crowd Condition and Navigation (CCN). The outcome variable was Experiential Satisfaction (SAT).

Each construct was measured using three reflective indicators, adapted from validated instruments in servicescape, event experience, and environmental psychology research (Bitner, 1992). All items employed a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Constructs were carefully reviewed by three academic experts in event management and consumer behavior for content validity. A pilot test was conducted with 30 music event attendees, leading to minor wording adjustments to enhance clarity and contextual relevance.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a four-week period in May 2025 through structured online self-administered surveys distributed at five major music events across urban centers in Thailand. Participants were eligible if they were over 18 and had attended a live music event (concert or festival) that featured at least four hours of programming and multiple servicescape features.

A total of 325 surveys were collected, of which 300 valid responses were retained after screening for completeness and attention-check compliance. The sample was demographically diverse, with a majority aged between 20 and 39, gender-balanced (54% female, 46% male), and with varied levels of event attendance frequency (from occasional concert-goers to regular festival participants).

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4, a method appropriate for complex models with reflective constructs and small-to-moderate sample sizes. The two-step approach outlined by Sarstedt et al. (2021) was followed. First, the measurement model was evaluated for: (1) Indicator reliability: Standardized loadings should exceed 0.70, (2) Internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values must exceed 0.70., (3) Convergent validity: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) must exceed 0.50, (4) Discriminant validity: The Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio must be below 0.85, and (5) Multicollinearity was assessed through Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with a conservative cutoff of 3.3 to ensure indicator independence. Next, the structural model was tested to evaluate the significance and strength of hypothesized paths using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). R^2 values were examined to assess the model's explanatory power for experiential satisfaction.

To supplement these results with actionable managerial insights, the study employed Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA). IPMA plots each construct's importance (total effect on SAT) against its performance (mean latent variable score), allowing for strategic prioritization of servicescape investments. Constructs falling into the "high importance–low performance" quadrant are highlighted as high-leverage areas for resource allocation and design enhancement.

Findings

Measurement Model

All constructs in the current study were specified as reflective and subjected to a comprehensive validation process to ensure their psychometric robustness. The standardized factor loadings for all indicators exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 and were statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, thus affirming the reliability of each measurement item (see Table 1). In line with the guidelines by Sarstedt et al. (2021), these outcomes validate the contribution of each indicator to its respective latent construct.

Convergent validity was confirmed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with all constructs demonstrating AVE values above the 0.60 benchmark. This indicates that each construct accounts for a substantial proportion of variance in its associated items. Reliability was further substantiated through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), both of which exceeded the 0.70 criterion, demonstrating strong internal consistency among indicators within each construct.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. All HTMT values fell below the conservative threshold of 0.85, providing evidence that each construct is empirically distinct. Additionally, inter-construct correlations were in line with theoretical expectations and prior empirical findings in servicescape and experiential satisfaction literature. Taken together, these results confirm the adequacy and rigor of the measurement model and justify progression to structural model evaluation.

Table 1
Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Indicator	AVE	rho_a	$\widehat{w}_i$	$\widehat{\lambda}_i$
Ambient Conditions (AMB)	**AMB1**: The lighting and visual effects enhanced the overall atmosphere of the event.	0.783	0.695	0.377	0.816
	AMB2: The sound quality was clear and contributed positively to my experience.			0.405	0.835
	AMB3: The temperature and air circulation were comfortable throughout the event			0.416	0.851
Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF)	**SLF1**: The layout of the event space was easy to navigate.	0.77	0.649	0.483	0.864
	SLF2: Signage and directions within the venue were clear and helpful.			0.29	0.723
	SLF3: Facilities such as restrooms and food stalls were easily accessible.			0.452	0.824
Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD)	**VSD1**: The stage design and decorations reflected the event's theme or identity.	0.756	0.668	0.385	0.806
	VSD2: The branding and visuals contributed to the immersive feel of the event.			0.397	0.802
	VSD3: Symbolic elements (e.g., logos, artwork) made the event feel unique and memorable.			0.44	0.844
Social Servicescape (SSC)	**SSC1**: Event staff were friendly and helpful.	0.868	0.708	0.495	0.875
	SSC2: I felt comfortable interacting with other attendees.			0.173	0.769
	SSC3: The overall social atmosphere was supportive and enjoyable.			0.495	0.876
Engagement Opportunities (EO)	**EO1**: The event offered engaging activities beyond the music performances.	0.791	0.699	0.422	0.855
	EO2: I enjoyed exploring booths or installations that added to the experience.			0.357	0.81
	EO3: I had opportunities to interact with the event through social media, games, or giveaways.			0.416	0.842
Crowd Climate and Norms (CCN)	**CCN1**: The energy of the crowd enhanced my enjoyment of the music.	0.618	0.619	0.667	0.897
	CCN2: Most people around me followed unspoken norms of respectful behavior.			0.029	0.622
	CCN3: The collective enthusiasm of the crowd made the experience more memorable.			0.514	0.815
Experiential Satisfaction (SAT)	**SAT1**: I was fully satisfied with my overall experience at the music event.	0.901	0.834	0.373	0.918
	SAT2: The event met or exceeded my expectations.			0.365	0.913
	SAT3: I would recommend this event to others seeking a memorable music experience.			0.358	0.908

Note. $\widehat{w}_i$ = estimated weights, $\widehat{\lambda}_i$ = estimated loadings, VIF = Variance Inflation Factor, and AVE = Average Variance Explained

Structural Model

The results of the structural model assessment, as summarized in Table 2, provide empirical support for the hypothesized relationships between servicescape dimensions and experiential satisfaction in the context of music events. Out of the six proposed paths, five show statistically significant positive effects ($p < 0.01$), underscoring the critical role of environmental design features in shaping attendee satisfaction.

Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD) emerged as the strongest predictor of experiential satisfaction ($\beta = 0.568$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that visual aesthetics, thematic decor, and symbolic elements (e.g., branding, stage visuals) play a central role in enhancing the emotional and cognitive impact of the event. This finding highlights the importance of environmental storytelling and visual coherence in elevating the perceived quality of live music experiences. Ambient Conditions (AMB) also showed a substantial effect ($\beta = 0.486$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that sensory cues such as lighting, acoustics, and air quality significantly contribute to the overall comfort and mood regulation of attendees. This aligns with prior research in event settings that emphasizes the role of atmospheric elements in shaping affective responses.

Engagement Opportunities (EO) displayed a moderate yet meaningful influence ($\beta = 0.331$, $p < 0.001$), affirming that interactive components—such as activity zones, merchandise booths, and experiential installations—positively shape attendees' satisfaction by fostering immersion and co-creation of meaning. Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF) ($\beta = 0.115$, $p = 0.002$) and Social Servicescape (SSC) ($\beta = 0.112$, $p = 0.004$) had relatively weaker but still significant effects. These findings suggest that while wayfinding, ease of movement, and social dynamics (e.g., staff interaction, guest behavior) contribute to satisfaction, they may play a secondary role compared to symbolic and sensory features. Crowd Condition and Navigation (CCN), however, was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.001$, $p = 0.981$), indicating that, in this study, crowd density and mobility issues did not meaningfully influence overall satisfaction. This could reflect either adequate crowd management across events or attendees' higher tolerance for density in the context of music experiences.

In sum, these results confirm the multidimensional nature of the servicescape in live event contexts and emphasize the importance of visual, sensory, and participatory features in shaping satisfaction. They also offer critical guidance for event managers to prioritize investments in high-impact dimensions while re-evaluating the strategic importance of less influential elements.

Table 2
Structural Model Assessment (n = 300)

Relationship	Estimate	p-value
AMB -> SAT	0.486	0.001**
SLF -> SAT	0.115	0.002**
VSD -> SAT	0.568	0.001**
SSC -> SAT	0.112	0.004**
EO -> SAT	0.331	0.001**
CCN -> SAT	0.001	0.981**

Note. Ambient Conditions (AMB), Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF), Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD), Social Servicescape (SSC), Engagement Opportunities (EO), Crowd Climate and Norms (CCN), Experiential Satisfaction (SAT), ** = significant

IPMA Results

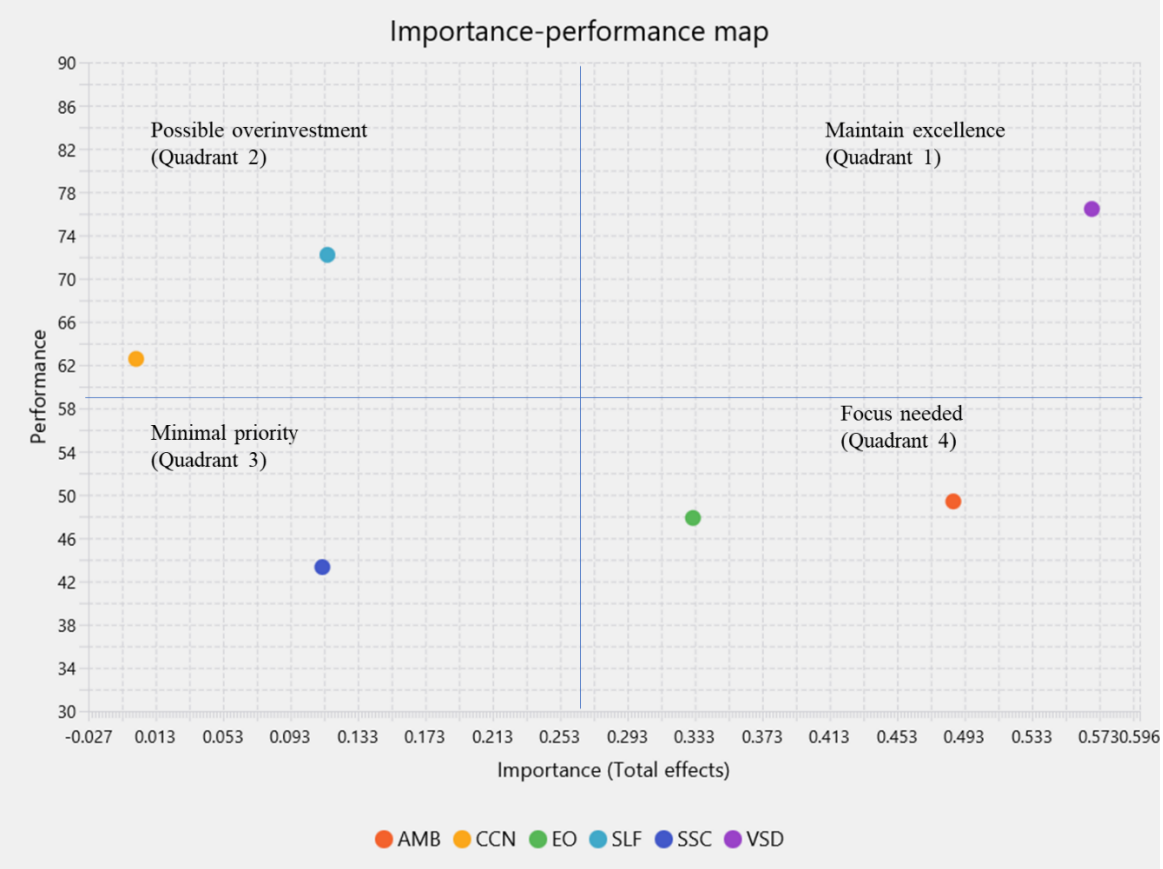
To complement the structural model findings, this study employed Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) as a strategic tool to identify which servicescape elements offer the most leverage for enhancing attendee satisfaction at music events. IPMA, as proposed by Sarstedt et al. (2016), allows researchers and practitioners to assess not only the relative influence (importance) of each construct on an outcome variable—here, experiential satisfaction—but also how well each construct performs in practice (mean latent score).

Unlike traditional path modeling, which focuses solely on the strength and significance of relationships, IPMA integrates these relationships with performance data to highlight dimensions that may be underperforming despite their strong impact. As noted by Henseler (2021), this dual-layer approach supports nuanced managerial decision-making by revealing where improvements are likely to yield the highest returns in satisfaction.

In this study, the IPMA mapped six key servicescape dimensions—Ambient Conditions (AMB), Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF), Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD), Social Servicescape (SSC), Engagement Opportunities (EO), and Crowd Condition and Navigation (CCN)—against experiential satisfaction. The constructs' importance (total effects on satisfaction) was plotted along the x-axis, while their performance (average latent scores based on attendee ratings) was plotted along the y-axis. A grand mean was calculated for both importance and performance to generate a two-dimensional matrix divided into four strategic quadrants:

- ***Quadrant 1 – Maintain Excellence (High Importance, High Performance).*** Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD) emerged as a highly influential and well-executed element, indicating that stage aesthetics, thematic visuals, branding elements, and symbolic cues significantly enhance attendees' experiential satisfaction. This dimension contributes meaningfully to the overall ambiance and emotional engagement of the event. Organizers should continue to prioritize creative stagecraft, immersive visuals, and coherent design language, as these features are effectively reinforcing the identity and emotional tone of music events.
- ***Quadrant 2 – Possible Overinvestment (Low Importance, High Performance).*** Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF) and Crowd Condition and Navigation (CCN) both scored high on performance but showed relatively lower importance in predicting satisfaction. This suggests that although attendees generally appreciated the ease of movement, stage visibility, and crowd flow, these factors are less central to their holistic evaluation of the event experience. Event planners might reconsider the extent of investment in logistical elements, focusing instead on maintaining baseline functionality while reallocating excess resources to more impactful dimensions.
- ***Quadrant 3 – Minimal Priority (Low Importance, Low Performance).*** Social Servicescape (SSC), which includes staff behavior, peer interactions, and social atmosphere, was both underperforming and less influential on satisfaction. This finding implies that the current level of social interaction may be insufficiently integrated or valued by attendees. Unless reimagined to provide greater social facilitation or community engagement, this aspect currently warrants limited strategic focus.
- ***Quadrant 4 – Strategic Focus Needed (High Importance, Low Performance).*** Engagement Opportunities (EO) and Ambient Conditions (AMB) represent key leverage points for improving attendee satisfaction. Although attendees perceive these elements as crucial to their event experience, their current implementation is falling short. For EO, this may involve enhancing interactive zones, participatory activities, or experiential installations that extend beyond passive consumption of music. For AMB, attention should be directed toward optimizing sensory elements such as lighting quality, air circulation, sound calibration, and temperature control. Targeted improvements in these areas are likely to yield substantial increases in satisfaction and immersive experience quality.

Figure 1
IPMA Results



Discussion and Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of research on experiential event design by applying servicescape theory to the context of live music events and prioritizing environmental dimensions based on their empirical effects on attendee satisfaction. By integrating PLS-SEM with Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA), the study provides both explanatory insights and actionable recommendations for practitioners. The findings underscore the importance of taking a multidimensional approach to event environment design, considering not only what influences satisfaction but also how well each dimension is currently performing from the attendee's perspective.

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the study confirms and extends servicescape theory into the domain of live music events—a context that, despite its inherent multisensory and social nature, has received limited empirical attention in servicescape research. The results highlight that environmental cues are not monolithic in their effects; rather, their contribution to satisfaction varies considerably depending on their symbolic, functional, and affective qualities.

Visual and Symbolic Design (VSD) emerged as the most influential predictor of experiential satisfaction, reaffirming the role of thematic coherence, symbolic cues, and visual storytelling in shaping memorable experiences. This aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) assertion that experiences are staged and that symbolic elements are critical in creating emotional resonance.

Ambient Conditions (AMB) and Engagement Opportunities (EO) also demonstrated strong effects, suggesting that satisfaction arises not only from what attendees see and hear but also from how they interact with the environment.

Interestingly, Social Servicescape (SSC) and Spatial Layout and Functionality (SLF), while statistically significant, had comparatively weaker effects on satisfaction. This nuance supports the argument that while these elements are necessary for operational efficiency, they may not drive emotional or experiential value to the same extent as sensory and symbolic features. Crowd Condition and Navigation (CCN), despite being a common operational concern, did not influence satisfaction significantly in this context—an outcome that may reflect attendees' tolerance of crowd density as part of the "festival experience" or successful baseline crowd management practices.

Managerial Implications

For event organizers and experience designers, the IPMA findings offer a strategic blueprint for enhancing satisfaction. Elements in Quadrant 1, particularly VSD, are performing well and should be maintained through continued investment in creative visual production, thematic branding, and immersive design. These are core strengths that reinforce the identity and perceived quality of the event.

Quadrant 4 elements—ENG and AMB—represent high-priority areas for improvement. These are dimensions that attendees value highly but currently underperform. For AMB, improvements could include enhancing sound quality consistency, refining lighting transitions, and improving air flow in enclosed or crowded areas. For EO, event managers should explore more dynamic and personalized opportunities for engagement, such as interactive installations, artist meet-and-greets, co-creation spaces, or digital activations that extend beyond the core music performance.

In contrast, Quadrant 2 features such as SLF and CCN may be areas of overinvestment. While functional layout and crowd movement are critical for safety and comfort, they may not require continued enhancement beyond an adequate baseline. This insight allows managers to reallocate resources toward more emotionally resonant features.

Lastly, SSC in Quadrant 3, while not a major contributor to satisfaction in this study, still warrants attention if the goal is to cultivate a more communal or participatory atmosphere. Improvements in staff training, facilitation of social zones, or curated interaction spaces may help reposition SSC into a more impactful domain.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study presents several limitations. First, the sample was geographically limited to music events in Thailand, which may constrain the generalizability of findings to other cultural or regional settings. Second, all constructs were modeled reflectively; future research could consider formative modeling for complex dimensions such as crowd navigation. Third, experiential satisfaction was treated as a unidimensional outcome. Exploring related constructs such as emotional arousal, loyalty intentions, or immersive engagement could provide a more nuanced understanding. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in perceptions over time or across different event types.

Longitudinal or event-segmented studies could further enrich the theoretical and practical implications.

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

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

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