

OFFICIAL CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities (SEACAH2026)

February 05-09, 2026 | Singapore EXPO, Singapore & Online

ISSN: 2760-5698

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

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The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026

Official Conference Proceedings

ISSN: 2760-5698

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Date Published: April 21, 2026

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

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

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Revisiting Perceptions of Colonial Burma

Salvatore J. Russo, California State University Dominguez Hills, United States

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Orwell's 1934 novel "Burmese Days" is based on his time as a constable in the Imperial Indian Police. The book depicts Colonial Burma as a poorly developed, mostly neglected outpost of the British Empire, administered by incompetent British officials and corrupt Burmese ones. Orwell's work has shaped perspectives of Colonial Burma to the present day. Indeed, peer-reviewed studies in fields as diverse as critical theory and international relations this decade continue to site Orwell as a reliable narrator of conditions in Colonial Burma. This is a problem, as the picture Orwell paints is not an entirely accurate one. Fortunately, there has been a rise in research that shows a more complex, and more accurate, picture. Colonial Burma was attractive to immigrants, and native Burmese worked hard to rebuild their nation. The British invested time and resources into Colonial Burma, albeit not for entirely altruistic reasons. The British saw great potential for profit due to Colonial Burma's geographic location, and abundant natural resources. Rather than using Colonial Burma as a dumping ground for their least capable civil servants, the British often sent officials with proven track records and years of experience in colonial administration. They often erred, however, thinking experience in India would necessarily be applicable to Burma, a wholly distinct nation with its own culture and people. This work builds on recent trends in Burmese studies, demonstrating the prevailing view shaped by Orwell was a misguided one, and highlighting Colonial Burma's growth and innovation.

Keywords: Burma, colonialism, imperialism, Orwell

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Introduction

> In the end the secrecy of your revolt poisons you like a secret disease. Your whole life is a life of lies. Year after year you sit in Kipling-haunted little Clubs, whisky to right of you, Pink'un to left of you, listening and eagerly agreeing while Colonel Bodger develops his theory that these bloody Nationalists should be boiled in oil. You hear your Oriental friends called 'greasy little babus', and you admit, dutifully, that they are greasy little babus. You see louts fresh from school kicking grey-haired servants. The time comes when you burn with hatred of your own countrymen, when you long for a native rising to drown their Empire in blood. And in this there is nothing honourable, hardly even any sincerity. For, au fond, what do you care if the Indian Empire is a despotism, if Indians are bullied and exploited? You only care because the right of free speech is denied you. You are a creature of the despotism, a pukka sahib, tied tighter than a monk or a savage by an unbreakable system of taboos. (Orwell, 1934)

These are the words of Eric Arthur Blair, better known to the world as George Orwell, author of such groundbreaking novels as *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). The above quote is from one of his earliest and most personal works, *Burmese Days* (1934). Orwell served in Colonial Burma (present day Myanmar[1]) as a constable in the Imperial Indian Police. With the Imperial Indian Police, Orwell traveled much of the country, in a variety of roles. In Mandalay[2] he trained for the position of assistant district superintendent, though he also visited Maymyo during this time period. Orwell later found himself at a posting in Myaungmya, in the Burmese Delta, and then the Delta city of Twante. From there, Orwell was moved to Syriam, and then Insein, both on the outskirts of Rangoon. A promotion saw Orwell moved to Moulmein, where he ran the police headquarters, and finally his tour of Burma ended in Katha, Sagaing Region, which served as the inspiration for the fictional town of Kyauktada in *Burmese Days.* While one would think that this whirlwind of movement and new jobs would mean Orwell spend a lengthy amount of time in Burma, in fact he was only in country from 1922 until 1928 (Larkin, 2005).

Burmese Days, while fiction, has numerous scenarios based on actual people or events Orwell encountered. In fact, Orwell so accurately recounted the corruption and bigotry he saw that he was forced to make changes lest he face libel lawsuits (Larkin, 2005; Orwell, 2021). Throughout *Burmese Days,* Orwell describes a neglected and underdeveloped colony, administered by incompetent British officials who could not be trusted in more important locations, and by greedy and corrupt Burmese officials looking to exploit their own countrymen just as much as the British. Orwell painted such a vivid picture in his magnificent book that it has shaped the perception of Colonial Burma for decades. In fact, to this day scholars continue to refer to *Burmese Days* in their research on Colonial Burma (Wimuttikosol, 2009). There is only one problem with this reliance on Orwell as a source for information on Colonial Burma: the picture Orwell painted is not an entirely accurate one! Orwell himself said that "I dare say

[1] For the purposes of this narrative, I use the term "Colonial Burma" when referring to the state in the time period from 1824–1948. I will use Myanmar when referring to the post-1948 independent state purely for purposes of avoiding confusion on the part of the reader. I am not using these names as a way of making any statement as to the legitimacy of the present regime. This practice has been utilized by respected scholars in the field (Saha, 2013b).

[2] For reasons of continuity and to attempt to avoid confusing the reader, this paper will use the historical names of Burmese regions, towns, and cities, rather than using the names those areas have been re-named by the current (2026) Myanmar government. Again, this convention has been used by other scholars in the field, and is in no way a statement as to the legitimacy of the present regime, or an apologia for colonialism (Saha, 2013b).

it's (*Burmese* Days) unfair in some ways and inaccurate in some details, but much of it is simply reporting what I have seen" (Larkin, 2005).

Some may argue that the use of *Burmese Days* as an accurate work upon which to build scholarship should not be a matter of much concern to all but the most niche of academics and social critics. The problem with that argument is that Orwell's experiences in Colonial Burma continue to attract attention from fans of literature *and* academic researchers alike from a wide array of disciplines. *Burmese Days* being cited in recent, peer reviewed research in fields as diverse as critical theory (McManus, 2022) and international relations (Lubina, 2024), demonstrates that Orwell, unfortunately, continues to be seen by scholars as a reliable narrator as to what Colonial Burma was like. As it was under colonial governance that "so many features of contemporary Myanmar would become visible", it is important for scholars of modern Myanmar, too, to have an accurate picture of just how Colonial Burma was administered (Keck, 2015).

Literature Review

Looking at scholarship in the field from both contemporary accounts, as well as modern research, the present study will argue that Colonial Burma was not a neglected colony, or a dumping ground for incompetent or dissolute British civil servants who ran out of chances in more desirable outposts. The British understood the geographical and material value of the nation that they had conquered, and sent experienced personnel to administer it. However, they found that Burma was not a land to be easily administered! The geographic and cultural particularities of the land made it a difficult one to subjugate (Keck, 2015). The multitude of languages in their newly conquered colony also seemed to flummox the British. The various languages of Burma were then—and remain now—ones where intonation and the use of diacritical marks distinguish various homonyms from each other. One can sense how overwhelmed the British were in Forbes' 1878 discussion of the languages of Burma: "The Burmese has three of these tones, but the Karen, Chinese, and other dialects have six. Thus in Burmese, 'tao' may mean, 'to speak', 'to be wicked', or, 'to stop', according to the intonation given to it" (Forbes, 1878, pg. 339). Moreover, British reliance on administrative and bureaucratic experience in India as if it were a fungible quality with knowledge of Colonial Burma did not help matters.

Administrative structures were based on those utilized in India, with the Indian Civil Service (ICS) simply expanding to include Burma, and the use of the Indian Penal Code. The administrators sent to create and oversee the new civil structures of Colonial Burma did not speak Burmese, did not have any knowledge real of Burmese culture, and the new borders they drew of the subnational states were done so without any understanding of the various different ethnicities and religious groups that lived in those areas (Aung-Thwin, 2011; Saha, 2013b; Targosz & Sławik, 2016; Thant Myint-U, 2001). This is not to say that British government—or public—was monolithic in its belief that Burma was rightly seen as part of The Raj, or British India. So-called "Burmaphiles" tried their best to accurately convey their experiences in the colony, and to present Colonial Burma in the most positive light, fully cognizant of the fact that Burma had a bad reputation, particularly with regards to crime (Keck, 2015). To their credit, the Burmaphiles were among those who insisted that "Burma was fundamentally different from India in every way" (Keck, 2015). Writing in 1897, Alice Hart—publishing as "Mrs. Ernst Hart"—included in her book *Picturesque Burma: Past and Present* a section that flatly states, "Though Burma is for the purposes of government treated as a province of India, it has little in common with India proper…make Burma as distinctive in character from the

Hindu nationalities as is Japan" (Hart, 1897; Keck, 2015). Hart is just one of many Burmaphiles who worked to carve a unique Burmese history and identity in the minds of the British public, one distinct from India, and from South Asia, broadly (Keck, 2015). Despite their best efforts, and despite the growth of the Burmese economy and its increasing urbanization, as the Twentieth Century dawned, Colonial Burma was "still regarded as something of a colonial backwater" (Keck, 2015).

That having been said, what failures in managing the colony existed was not for lack of effort or willingness to spend time, manpower, or treasure on the part of the British. As will be demonstrated in this work, the British were very concerned, for example, with issues such as crime and banditry (*dacoity*) and invested heavily in building a constable corps and in establishing criminal courts throughout Colonial Burma (Keck, 2015; Myoe, 2009). One may very well be able to argue that Colonial Burma was not a wisely administered colony, or an effectively administered colony, or a humanely administered colony, but this work seeks to demonstrate that it was not a neglected colony, or an afterthought of the British Empire.

As the administration of a colony is a multifaceted task, an attempt to evaluate it could have seemingly endless areas of exploration and discussion. For the sake of space, the paper will be broken into three broad areas of discussion, each large enough to encompass several sub-topics within them. These areas will include law and order, or attempts to reduce crime and insurrection in the colony, and have a peaceable existence for those who dwelled therein. Economic development will also be discussed, particularly with an eye towards trade and the management—or exploitation—of Burma's numerous natural resources. This work will also discuss public hygiene, which will include demographic information such as population growth, and infant mortality rates, as well as education efforts and vaccination programs. I want to stress that I am not implying that the British were doing this for any altruistic reason—though individual government or religious figures did approach their tasks with genuine concern for the people of Burma (Bryant, 1997; Jarvis, 2021; Leigh, 2011)—rather than engaging in these undertakings to maximize the profitability of colony.

It should be stated early and explicitly that in no way, shape, or form is this manuscript an apologia for colonialism. My research never has been, and never will be in the furtherance of colonialism or whitewashing past violations of human rights. The purpose of my research project is not to praise The Raj, the British Empire, or any other imperialist, colonial power. I want it stated explicitly that countries and cultures may be *influenced* by being colonized, but they do not *benefit* from being colonized. Thus, the scope of this paper is more "disproving that the British Empire neglected and did not care about their Burmese colony" rather than "proving that the British Empire did a good job administering Colonial Burma", as one cannot do a normatively "good job" of subjugating a people. That all having been said, if Orwell's depiction of Colonial Burma was not accurate, what do we know about that country during that period of time?

Discussion

It's a fact that Colonial Burma was a highly diverse country. This is in part due to the fact that the Konbaung Empire, the Burmese nation-state that existed prior to British subjugation, was an expansionist nation that swallowed territories and subjects from a heterogenous mix of peoples (Bowman, 2000; Lieberman, 1996). It was also in part due to the fact that Colonial Burma was highly attractive to immigrants from a wide variety of religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. While even today Myanmar is home to eight official major races, subdivided into

135 officially recognized ethnic groups (Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in Brazil, Retrieved April 30, 2025), in the colonial era immigrants from numerous other ethnic and religious groups, including neighboring Indians and Chinese, but also peoples far from home such as Iraqi Jews and Armenian Orthodox Christians, also immigrated to Burma to build new lives for themselves (Cernea, 2007; Cockett, 2015; Li, 2017). While the fact that a diverse group of immigrants sought to migrate to Colonial Burma does not tell us everything about the state of affairs in Colonial Burma in and of itself, to put it bluntly, people do not voluntarily uproot their lives to travel thousands of miles, far from the lives they've known, to move to economically moribund, stagnant nations with no opportunities. However, this is far from the only indication that Orwell's novel, while a brilliant piece of writing, and undoubtedly informed by his own experiences in Colonial Burma, is not an accurate or full account of the development of Colonial Burma. This article will present data relating to the improvements in infrastructure and establishing a professional civil service in support of the assertion that the British actually made great pains to develop Colonial Burma. While these efforts were more successful in some areas than others—despite British effort, Colonial Burma was long associated with crime for most of its existence prior to independence—one can point to numerous areas where this work by the British bore fruit (Keck, 2015).

Before picking up this discussion in earnest, a brief overview of how the British came to be in Burma will be useful for many readers. The British engaged in three wars with what was then known as the Konbaung Empire, an ethnically Burmese empire that controlled area in all of present-day Burma and, for a time, parts of modern-day Thailand. The First Anglo-Burmese War resulted in land being seized from the Konbaung Empire and added to British India, as well as a round of economically crippling sanctions being placed on the Konbuang Empire. Under thirty years later, with casus belli viewed as questionable even at the time, the British launched a second large scale invasion, in what is now known as the Second Anglo-Burmese War. As a result of the Second Anglo-Burmese War, additional land was seized by the British from the Konbaung Empire, thus creating two distinct states: the British controlled colony of "British Burma", which was administered as part of the British Raj,[3] and the independent state of "Upper Burma". This state of affairs did not last long, however. A little over thirty years later, despite earlier assurances after the Second Anglo-Burmese War against further imperial designs, the British completed the conquest of Burma by conquering Upper Burma, as well, with a formal declaration of annexation proclaimed by the British Empire on January 1st, 1886, and incorporation into the British Raj. Burma would not be administered as a separate colony in its own right until 1937. During this time period, there were several periods of insurrection, including the lengthy pacification period from 1886–1890, and the rebellions inspired by Saya San in the early 1930's. Even in dealing with uprisings in their new colonial holding, the terminology and phrases used by the British were the ones they used in India (Aung-Thwin, 2011; Chew, 1979; Keck, 2015; Lange, et al., 2006; Means, 2000; Pollak, 1978; Trager & Maung, 1956).

From the late 1800's until 1940, Colonial Burma "experienced a substantial and broadly sustained rise in production and trade, establishing the territory from the outset as a hugely important possession" (Brown, 2011). While economic development, improvements in agriculture, and population growth do not tell a complete story, especially in the case of a colonized nation, they can be useful first indicators as to the general health of a region. Forbes,

[3] The British Raj was massive British colony consisting of the present-day states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

in one of the earliest accounts of Colonial Burma, gives such descriptive statistics as to the state of the colony:

> A province such as British Burma, which during the twenty years between 1855 (that is, two years after its annexation) and 1875–1876 has increased in annual revenue from 532,100*l*. to 1,527,296*l*.; in its commerce from 4,856,400*l*. to 14,665,286*l*.; and in its population from 1,274,640 to 2,896,368 souls; a province, which is now looked on by the commercial world as the trade high-road into the vast regions of Western China, we think deserves to be a little better known to all classes. (Forbes, 1878, viii)

By the time Orwell arrived in Burma, Burma was exporting half the world's rice supply, over three million tons of rice (Larkin, 2005). By the beginning of the Twentieth Century, "if not before" Burma, "an important province" was "producing rice, oil, teak and minerals, while helping to support the eastern flank of the Indian empire" (Keck, 2015). In fact, Burma was the second largest producer of oil in the British Empire, and by the twentieth century was so synonymous with teak production that it was known as "the land of teak" (Bryant, 1997; Larkin, 2005). In the roughly fifty years from 1855 to 1905–1906, Colonial Burma went from exporting 162,000 tons of rice to exporting 2,00,000 tons of rice and paddy. The number of acres cultivated for rice grew from 700,000–800,000 to 6,000,000 during the 19th century, reaching 9.93 million acres in 1940 (Brown, 2011; Keck, 2015). Crude oil production went from roughly one million barrels at the turn of the century to between 6 and 7 million barrels a year up to the outbreak of World War Two (Brown, 2011).

One can argue that these resources could have been squeezed from an exploited, oppressed, or brutalized colony, but it seems improbable that this sort of economic output is the result of a neglected or mismanaged colony. For example, let's look at the rice industry again. Between Burmese labor, labor and capital provided by Indian laborers and Chettiar moneylenders from Madras (present day Chennai), respectively, and capital brought in by British entrepreneurs, the expansion of rice cultivation and trade in Burma from the final decades of the nineteenth century has been called "one of the most impressive examples of sustained economic growth under the aegis of a European colonial regime" (Adas, 1974; Brown, 2011). While it would be naïve to say that this was done solely out of altruistic reasons by the British, it should be noted that by the 1920's, well over half of the rice mills in Burma were owned by Burmese (Brown, 2011; Cheng, 1968).

This misguided belief that Burma was just a continuation of India, and what was utilized in India would doubtlessly work just as well in Burma, also plagued British efforts to roll out mass vaccination programs. Indian hesitancy towards vaccination was motivated by factors such as the caste system, as well, as Hindu religious customs. The caste system, for example, led to some Indians being concerned that the vaccine would contaminate their blood. The importance of the cow in the Hindu religion meant some Indians wanted to avoid the vaccine due to the pain inflicted upon the cow during the creation of the lymph. Still other Indians saw smallpox as the manifestation of the goddess Sitala, and thought that receiving a smallpox vaccine would no doubt invoke her wrath (Naono, 2009). However, none of these are issues in Burma, a country with a heavy Buddhist majority, and no caste system. The British, however, were still approaching the vaccination program thinking these would be obstacles in Burma. The British also failed to take advantage of the highly literate population in Burma. The Burmese were the most literate people in the Raj, as many had received the benefits of a Buddhist monastic education. Still, the British were slow to utilize the printed word to try and raise awareness and educate the public as to the benefits of being vaccinated against smallpox

(Naono, 2009). That all said, legislation such as The Vaccination Act of 1880, which gave municipalities and cantonments the "power to prohibit inoculation and to make the vaccination of children compulsory" did lead to an increase in the number of vaccinations, "with 110,149 vaccinations performed in Upper Burma, and 156,116 in Lower Burma" (Naono, 2009). However, the tendency to treat India and Burma as fungible qualities also damaged British efforts in their use of medical subordinates.

The British initially attempted to set up medical training centers in Burma, with locations offering free classes in Rangoon, Moulmein, Bassein, Henzada, Prome, and Akyab. The Akyab and Henzada schools never got off the ground, but the other four did in 1875. However, issues such as the language barrier and a demonstration-based teaching style, where students might be shown autopsies and vivisections, to keep their interest, but then never really have explained to them what, exactly is happening, soon caused attendance to dwindle (Saha, 2012). The poor pay for hospital assistants was another likely reason for why students soon lost interest in the classes. By 1877, all of the classes had ceased. Hospitals were to be staffed by Indians trained in India, with intermittent scholarship programs for Burmese to be trained in India occasionally offered (Brown, 2011; Saha, 2012). As a result, as they were staffed with Indian doctors, Indian, medical subordinates, and Indian ward menials, ostensibly Burmese hospitals were, "for all intents and purposes, Indian institutions" (Brown, 2011; Furnivall, 1948). These Indian-trained Indian medical assistants "abused their powers to protect friends, deliberately suppressed evidence of violent death, and inadvertently allowed corpses to go missing" (Saha, 2012). Saha also asserts that "the largely Indian hospital assistants in Burma uniformly failed to detect semen stains in evidence for criminal cases" and that "Colonial enclaves of biomedical practice, such as the hospital and lunatic asylum, became the sites of abuses of power and gendered violence" (Saha, 2012).

In addition to their efforts in the vaccination campaigns, the British also were slow to try and educate the public about the effects of proper nutrition, or lack thereof, in keeping infants and children healthy. Burmese mothers would often put themselves on a restrictive diet during, and after, pregnancy. This was done both out of a misunderstanding of what foods were or were not healthy for a developing foetus, and out of a desire to have a "not-too-heavy baby with a small head" (Boomgaard, 2007; Richell, 2006). Similarly, problems with tetanus in rural areas were linked to practices with the umbilical cord (Keck, 2015; Richell, 2006). It seems as though these would be prime areas in which a public education campaign could have greatly helped the lives of their colonial subjects. However, as some historians argue, the British were slow to respond to public health issues unless, as in the creation of the Sanitary Commission, when the health and well-being of the British Military would also benefit from the investment (Keck, 2015; Richell 2006).

The British spent no small amount of money and effort in attempting to address crime in Colonial Burma. For decades, Burma had the "dubious honour" of having the highest rate of criminal activity in the entire Raj, and it was, despite the attempts of the British government to present Burma as a land of commercial opportunity and a place to explore the mysteries of "the East", inexorably linked with crime in the minds of the British public (Keck, 2015; Saha, 2013a). While somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, Saha explains that there is a continuing debate among historians as to just why there was such a high rate of reported criminality in Colonial Burma. Some argue that the rates of criminality reflect that Colonial Burma was never fully "pacified" by the British, and the crimes cataloged by the British were a sign of a nation continually trying to shake off the shackles imposed upon them by their colonial overlords. Indeed, the small revolts and rebellions which that were almost regularly

breaking out in the countryside would point to a country bristling under colonial occupation. Others argue that the British were coming up with "new and lasting definitions of criminality", and thus arresting people for conduct that the Burmese themselves would view as perfectly legal. The first argument would say that the high rates of criminality are due to the state being so weak and ineffectual that it could not "impose its will". The second argues that the state was so able to impose its will that it could incarcerate any number of people for whatever reason it saw fit (Saha, 2013a). Saha, looking at the case study of public gambling, concludes, at the risk of oversimplification, "It's both". This is due to the confusing definition of "public gambling" as codified by The British, the fact that gambling on pony races during festivals was a widespread practice in Burma, that many colonial administrators did not see prosecuting public gambling as a priority, and that the British did not wish to enforce the law in such a way that the British themselves could not gamble!

Gambling was not the only vice that the British regulated along racial lines. Regarding the sale and consumption of opium, the British allowed—and, depending on the colonial official, even encouraged—the use of opium among Chinese and Indian immigrants who had come to Burma as laborers, as well as among the Shan and Kachin populations along the border regions. However, they banned the sale of opium to the ethnic Burmese (Wright, 2014). The Burmese themselves wanted stricter opium laws, as elders witnessed the awful effects that the drug was having on the younger population. The British government, however, found the opium business to be a profitable one, and did not want to shut that revenue stream entirely. Private entrepreneurs, for their part, saw trade in commodities like teak to be better ventures than drug running. The British government also did not want to restrict opium use among the "foreign nationalities" within Burma, thinking that the drug did no observable harm to the Chinese, for example, while it ravaged the more "child-like" Burmese (Wright, 2014, pg. 8). Thus, Chief Commissioner of Burma, Charles Aitchison, penned a compromise whereby sale to native Burmese was prohibited, but sale to the Indian, Shan, Kachin, and Chinese communities was allowed, if not even encouraged.

Conclusion

Was Orwell a fabulist? Certainly not. Orwell, by his own admission, was only writing from his own experiences, and it is likely, as a constable, that he had to deal with people having the worst day of their lives on many an occasion. This could include Burmese, as well as English, as both accused and the accuser alike. Orwell would not be the first police officer—never mind one serving as part of a colonial corps—to find themselves growing jaded. Additionally, more than one thing can be true at once. Someone can be a well-trained, experienced administrator overseeing an area of expertise will skill and competence, and still have disgusting views on matters such as race or empire.

Did the British do a "good" job administering Burma. Again, it's a difficult question, as how does one do a "good" job ruling over a people who don't want you ruling over them. But, to return to the question framed earlier in the paper, it seems that Burma was not a neglected colony in any sense. The British did not send dissolute alcoholics who washed out in every other civic service position they ever held to Burma as a last resort. Charles Aitchison, for example, had over twenty years of civil service in India to his credit before being sent to Burma to serve as Chief Commissioner. The British themselves seemed pleased with how things were proceeding in Colonial Burma, viewing it as a success into 1930 (Aung-Thwin, 2011). However, it ultimately seems that the British government should have listened to the Burmaphiles, as, despite the fact that, as we have seen, the British put considerable time and

treasure into their Burmese possession, there were numerous areas where they erred due to their belief that Burma was, for all intents and purposes, another India. Recognition of Burma as a unique nation, with a unique culture, and unique challenges and opportunities, could have perhaps led to a more prosperous colony for the British, and a more tolerable existence for the colonized Burmese population.

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

ChatGPT was used to assist in the formatting of the bibliography. Otherwise, no AI was used in the writing, proofreading, or formatting of this manuscript.

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Contact email: srusso@csudh.edu

Representation and Construction of Main Characters' Occupational Identities in Boys' Love and Girls' Love Thai Series Produced by GMMTV

Supamonta Supanan, Bangkok University, Thailand
Orisa Boonyamanond, Bangkok University, Thailand

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Boys' Love and Girls' Love Thai series have become a significant soft power that creates the phenomenon of popularity in several countries across Asia. These series also reflect social issues to attract audiences and raise awareness of gender diversity and equality. Recently, Thailand officially enforced the Marriage Equality Law on 23 January 2025 (UN Human Rights Office for South-East Asia, 2025). Notably, the number of these series has kept increasing continuously, particularly from GMMTV, one of the leading Thai entertainment production companies in Thailand. The objectives of this study were to analyze the representation and construction of the main characters in the series. This study conducted a textual analysis of 20 Boys' Love and Girls' Love series produced by GMMTV, over a five-year span in the early 2020s, as defined by the researcher. The study focused on the construction of identities, occupational roles, and relationships, guided by Stuart Hall's representation theory. The findings revealed that the main characters are valued and given social space, demonstrating that they exist and lead meaningful lives. In contrast, when portrayed in mainstream series, they are often marginalized or overlooked. Storytelling emphasizes learning, personal growth, self-acceptance, and the ability to bring about societal change through a variety of occupational roles, such as doctors, teachers, forest protection officers, entrepreneurs, scholars, and lawyers, among others. They demonstrate their ability to contribute to society and drive change. The construction of occupational identities generates new representations that challenge traditional Thai values. These narratives function as cultural capital that may foster a deeper understanding of gender diversity in the future.

Keywords: representation, construction, Boys' Love, Girls' Love, Thai series

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Introduction

The Boys' Love Series and Girls' Love Series in Thailand have continuously become more popular both nationwide and worldwide. According to a report by ThaiPublica (2025), analysis by the SCB Economic Intelligence Center (SCB EIC) revealed that Y series, including Boys' Love and Girls' Love series, comprise an entertainment business with rapid growth in Thailand as well as overseas. Moreover, the popularity of Thai Y Series has risen as a result of the presenting of open relationships and reaching viewers through streaming. Also, in terms of public policy, the enforcement of the marriage equality law was announced on 23 July 2025 (Pongruengphant, 2025). These occurrences have drawn even more attention to the growth of the Boys' Love Series and Girls' Love Series with their plots that present interesting social issues.

One of the companies with nonstop production of Boys' Love and Girls' Love series is GMMTV, a leading company in the Thai entertainment industry. Disdtabong (2022) documented a six-year increase in GMMTV's Y series production, beginning with *SOTUS: The Series* (Samajarn & Samajarn, 2016–2018). The trend continued until 2022, reaching a total of 27 series (Disdtabong, 2022). Currently, GMMTV continues to produce Boys' Love and Girls' Love series.

The phenomenon of Thai Y Series, both Boys' Love and Girls' Love, has created huge economic value for the country, including additional business opportunities, e.g., a popular book business related to Y Novels, and entertainment businesses, e.g., concerts and fan meets featuring cast members from Y Series as the magnet for these events along with their role as product presenters (ThaiPublica, 2025). Thus, it is not surprising that Y Series have become Thailand's soft power to other countries. Furthermore, they also provide more media space for LGBTQIAN+.

As for the studies on Y Series, the research of Santawee (2022) on "The Representation of Boy Love in Thai Yaoi Series" found that the initial Y Series were mainly focused on the stories of Boys' Love rather than Girls' Love. Most Y Series are created based on novels written by female authors. For the images of the main characters, the roles of male leads are apparently masculine, while their male partners show feminine characteristics with tenderness and loveliness but still retain masculine appearances.

The most popular Boys' Love Series of GMMTV with a popular trend across Asia and worldwide is *2gether: The Series* (Thongjila, 2020) starring Bright-Vachirawit Chivaaree and Win-Metawin Opas-iamkajorn. During its on-air period, there were consistent viewers, resulting in a No. 1 trend on Twitter in Thailand and worldwide. The series was awarded Best Drama, Best Couple, and Best Actor from the Thailand Actors Awards in Japan 2021 (GMM Grammy, 2021).

Girls' Love Series or Yuri Series and Sapphic Series have also started to become more popular, compared with earlier periods. Female characters in these series are rarely presented or depicted as supporting couples, and their love stories are not outstanding. The presented images of the initial Thai Girls' Love were categorized based on physical appearances, which are known in Thai society as "Tom-Dee." Tom is derived from the word "Tomboy," while Dee is from the word "Lady" or possibly "Dyke," and refer to the images of Girls' Love. A "Tom" physically resembles males, with short hair, cool clothing, and a masculine appearance but with

a female mentality and tenderness. A “Dee” looks like ordinary girls but are attracted to girls with masculine appearances (“Toms”) (Suksamai, 2015; TCIJ, 2018).

The early image of Tom-Dee or Girls’ Love in the Thai social context, presented widely and successfully, was the movie called *Yes or No* (Wongsompetch, 2010). However, the presented images of Girls’ Love in media spaces eventually changed later on. The images of Girls’ Love are constructed with female characteristics, e.g., long hair and sweet appearances, with the presentation of two girls falling in love. This representation has over time been appearing more frequently in entertainment media.

Production of Girls’ Love Series, with the main characters as female couples, has been gradually increasing. The first Girls’ Love Series of GMMTV was *23.5 When the Earth is Spinning Around* (Kwanyu, 2023). This novel-based series was able to attract viewers throughout the country and overseas (Phatchaem, 2025; Rocket Media Lab, 2025) by presenting a love story of two lovely girls in their teens, who are studying in high school. The story was popular with viewers and inspiring as a presentation that opened new perspectives for storytelling about Girls’ Love.

GMMTV continues to produce Boys’ Love Series and Girls’ Love Series, which are still very popular in the country and overseas. As a result, storytelling about LGBTQIAN+ is appearing more often in mainstream entertainment media spaces. The growth of these series reflects changes in the Thai media industry, with a key role to create recognition and understanding of identities, gender, and relationships in contemporary society.

Hence, the primary objective of this study was to examine the representation and construction of the main characters’ identities in Boys’ Love and Girls’ Love Thai Series produced by GMMTV. The study is mainly focused on the dimensions of identities, occupational roles, and relationships in order to understand the roles of entertainment media in the construction of meanings and narration of stories about LGBTQIAN+ in the current Thai society.

Research Question

How do the Boys’ Love and Girls’ Love Series produced by GMMTV represent and construct identities, occupations, and relationships in Boys’ Love and Girls’ Love?

Objectives

1. To analyze the representation and construction of main characters’ identities in the Boys’ Love and Girls’ Love Thai Series produced by GMMTV.
2. To examine the representation and construction of main characters’ occupational identities in the Boys’ Love and Girls’ Love Series, including social meanings reflected through those occupations.
3. To analyze the representation and relationship construction of main characters’ occupational identities in the Boys’ Love and Girls’ Love Series in the dimensions of love, friendship, and power relationships in the contemporary social context.

Theoretical Framework

Textual analysis was used, relying on the concepts of representation and construction of identities developed in Stuart Hall's representation theory, who described that apart from reflecting stories in a society, media also construct the society through storytelling, languages, and symbolism for interpretation. Media choose to present some things and may leave out some others, and thus they create meanings for society through storytelling (Hall, 1997).

In this regard, presentation through entertainment media such as series facilitates the likelihood for viewers to recognize and absorb stories quickly because they usually introduce the love-related issues of the main characters. Beyond this, Boy Love and Girl Love series also construct identities and produce meanings that contribute to audience engagement, social acceptance, and social value.

For the purpose of this research, 20 Thai series produced by GMMTV, Thailand, were examined. The study focuses on a five-year span in the early 2020s, during which 16 Boys' Love series and 4 Girls' Love series formed the analytical corpus. The study analyzes 16 Boys' Love series produced by GMMTV including the following titles: *2gether: The Series* (Thongjila, 2020), *Still 2gether* (Chaiwimol, 2020), *My Gear and Your Gown* (Sawatmaneekul, 2020), Fish Upon the Sky (Wongsinwiset, 2021), *Bad Buddy Series* (Chaiwimol, 2021–2022), *We Are* (Sawatmaneekul, 2024), *Not Me* (Boonyawatana, 2021–2022), *Last Twilight* (Chaiwimol, 2023–2024), *Only Friends* (Chookamsri & Phukhaotong, 2023), *Tonhon Chonlatee* (Trakulkasemsuk, 2020–2021), *The Eclipse* (Sukkhapisit, 2022), *My School President* (Niyomsilp, 2022–2023), *My Love Mix-Up!* (Niyomsilp, 2024), *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (Chaiwimol, 2021), *Cupid's Last Wish* (Wongsinwiset, 2022), and *Moonlight Chicken* (Chaiwimol, 2023).

In addition, the corpus includes four Girls' Love series: *23.5 When the Earth is Spinning Around* (Kwanyu, 2023), *Pluto* (Snap25 Team, 2024), *Us* (Kwanyu, 2025) and *Whale Store xoxo* (Wongsinwiset, 2025).

The primary objective was to analyze characters' identities, occupational roles, and relationships in order to understand the perspectives of identity construction of Boys' Love and Girls' Love presented through modern stories.

Key Findings

According to the analysis of Boys' Love and Girls' Love Series produced by GMMTV, the research findings revealed the representation and construction of Boys' Love and Girls' Love in three dimensions, i.e., identities, occupational roles, love, and friendship, and power relationships.

Boys' Love Series: Identities

The series present stories of Boys' Love, divided into at least two age ranges, namely teenagers in high schools or universities and working adults. The representation of these characters can be examined through two main dimensions: their external appearance and their personality traits. Interesting representation was found as follows.

A Calm, Cool, Strong Boy With Leadership and a Cute, Cheerful, and Friendly Boy

2gether: The Series (Thongjila, 2020) and *Still 2gether* (Chaiwimol, 2020): These series present the story and identities of the two teenage male university students at the age of self-discovery. Thus, their physical images include a calm, cool, strong boy with leadership qualities along with a cute, cheerful, and friendly boy.

Top-Notch, Smart, Cool, Competitive Boys and Nerdy, Eye-Glassed, Studious Boys

My Gear and Your Gown (Sawatmaneekul, 2020), *Fish Upon the Sky* (Wongsinwiset, 2021), and *Bad Buddy Series* (Chaiwimol, 2021–2022): These three series are about the friendship of boys as university students, with disagreements, competition, and battles of wits among the main male characters.

The series represented physical, psychological, and behavioral masculinity and featured tall, strong, healthy, smart, sporty, tough, daring, decisive, and competitive boys. The male leads in these series were usually studying in science-related faculties, e.g., the Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Architecture, etc.

Likewise, *We Are* (Sawatmaneekul, 2024) is a Boys' Love Series taking place at a university. It concentrates on love, studying, and self-searching. It is a joyful love story about falling in love, secret admiration, and chasing after a loved one. Also included were brotherhood and friendship, with the depiction of a group of cheerful friends.

The Fighting Boys and the Gentle and Kind Boys

Not Me (Boonyawatana, 2021–2022): This is the story of teenage twins as university students. The twins in this series possess different characteristics. The first one is strong, good at fighting, and wise, whereas the other one is not good at fighting, gentle, and does not like solving problems through the use of violence.

Last Twilight (Chaiwimol, 2023–2024): This series presents a sporty, strong, and healthy boy. Unfortunately, there is a turning point when he has a serious illness and may become blind. Consequently, he has to fight for himself to get strong again. The other boy who is stronger and good at fighting stands beside him and takes care of him in daily life.

Sentimental, Affectionate, and Emotional Boys

Only Friends (Chookamsri & Phukhaotong, 2023): This series is about the complicated relationships of a group of six friends in a story about confusing and awkward love. There are passionate love scenes and complicated relationships among friends. The characters vie for love and yearn for their loved ones and the love that must belong to them only. The images of the male characters in this series are filled with emotions, i.e., love, sorrow, happiness, disappointment, and sadness. It reveals intense emotions, different from the familiar images of boys who control their emotions and do not show any feelings.

A Caring Boy With Leadership and a Childish, Cute, and Vulnerable Boy

Tonhon Chonlatee (Trakulkasemsuk, 2020–2021): This Boys' Love Series is about teenagers at a university. The male leads are set as being in brotherhood, presenting the image of elder

and younger brothers although they are not actually related by blood. It represents vivid masculinity, with the image of the cautious and caring elder brother while the younger brother is cute, charming, and gentler.

A Disciplinary Boy and a Daring Boy Who Changes Society for the Better

The Eclipse (Sukkhapisit, 2022): The backdrop of this series is a famous boys' school. It is about the relationship between two boys, one of whom is ready to strictly abide by the school rules while the other is ready to resist the rules and change them, representing the socially expected image: one boy who follows the rules and the other one who is ready to fight and search for truths.

Daring Boys Who Follow Their Dreams

My School President (Niyomsilp, 2022–2023): This is a story about high-school friends with their dream to join a music band contest. They have to prove themselves in terms of their studies and musical talent. The series represents the images of a group of teenage boys obsessed with music, along with self-searching and the courage to show their feelings.

My Love Mix-Up! (Niyomsilp, 2024): This is a love story of teenage boys in a high school. The protagonist must find a way to confess his love and show his courage to tell his crush, which may prove his personal development and understanding of life, with the fulfilled and disappointed love, togetherness, and separation and goodbye that are experiences inevitable to all humans.

Boys in the World of Working and Businesses

Several Boys' Love Series also present working age characters, i.e., *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (Chaiwimol, 2021), *Cupid's Last Wish* (Wongsinwiset, 2022), and *Moonlight Chicken* (Chaiwimol, 2023), which are stories of Boys' Love with friendship and family. In these series, Boys' Love develops from co-worker relationships with students, including the world of work and problem-solving, and numerous other characters with a variety of age ranges. There is also a male character with a hearing impairment, implying that boys can be weak and need care.

To summarize, the representations in Boys' Love Thai series can be analyzed through two main dimensions: external appearance and personality traits. The representations found in Boys' Love Thai Series physically reveal ordinary boys with fit and firm bodies. They are basically tall, strong, healthy, with fair or light, yellow-toned skin and clean, short hair, wear trousers and embrace masculinity. Their bodies are the primary physical appearance as they are equal to a social capital. Thus, Boys' Love is represented as pleasant and harmless.

Regarding habits and personalities, there are the calm, cool, strong boy with leadership; the cute and empathetic boy; the nerdy and wise boy wearing eyeglasses; the mature and warm boy; and the childish, affectionate, vulnerable boy, representing various masculine characteristics. There are also the images of gentle boys, e.g., painting, playing music, and cooking. Nevertheless, the point is these series present the male bodies as well as characteristics that are generally accepted in the major social trends. These masculine characteristics might be viewed by girls in the groups of Boys' Love Thai Series fans. The series may also indirectly argue or imply that Boys' Love characters are normal like other boys in order to reduce the stereotype of Boys' Love as weak or abnormal.

Girls' Love Series: Identities

Four Girls' Love series produced by GMMTV were selected for analysis, and their representations were examined in terms of external appearance and personality traits, and the interesting representations were found as follows.

An Introverted Girl and an Outstanding and Attractive Girl

23.5 When the Earth is Spinning Around (Kwanyu, 2023): This is the story of Girls' Love at a private high school, in which a girl from a rural area comes to study in Bangkok. She is introverted, wears eyeglasses, and rarely communicates with others. She meets a pretty, lovely, and smart girl who is the school star. With regard to their physical appearances, they have long hair, wear skirts, and look pretty and lovely.

A Smart Working Girl and a Girl Who Needs Care

Pluto (Snap25 Team, 2024): This is a love story between a pair of twins and another girl. The girls in the series are presented as the young pretty girls with long hair. Both of them have feminine characteristics but different personalities. The first girl is cool, smart, wise, and able to ride a motorcycle, but sentimental, while the other girl is blind, pretty, tearful, and imaginative.

A Smart, Pretty Girl Who Is True to Herself and an Empathetic Girl

Us (Kwanyu, 2025): This is a love story between a young doctor and a university student. She secretly likes her, but does not have the courage to confess her love because her brother also secretly falls in love with the doctor. The story communicates the overcoming of the feeling that Girls' Love is wrong, which then turns into the valuing of love. The doctor is pretty, well-mannered, smart, kind, and tender, while the student is lovely, kind, and ready to step aside for her brother's love.

Whale Store xoxo (Wongsinwiset, 2025): Khun Wan, a girl who is a former company employee, returns to her family grocery business after her father dies. Ajarn Maewnam helps her with the business plan to keep the store open. The love story between Khun Wan and Maewnam makes us realize that in the world of Girls' Love, they are ordinary people in society who just want to have a good life. Khun Wan reflects a strong, patient girl who is determined to create security in her life. She looks normal and pretty, with long hair. Maewnam, the lecturer, is from a rich family. She looks feminine, small, sweet, and also has long hair but can work like a boy. Her extra jobs are repairs and delivery, representing a tender, strong image of a girl with leadership skills.

To summarize, Girls' Love Thai Series represent female physical appearance through the healthy, clean girls with long hair, who wear skirts or trousers. They are tender and well-mannered, or also sometimes smart. Most of them are independent, working girls who are intelligent, with self-care, leadership, decisiveness, and the courage to express their feelings to their loved ones. Although they are scared to be rejected by their families or society, they choose to show that Girls' Love is beautiful, valuable, and based on sincerity similar to other forms of love.

These changes reflect the development of the representation of Girls' Love in Thai media, from "Tom-Dee" to the construction of various and flexible identities conforming to more realistic portrayals of the life of girls in contemporary society. It also expands the visibility, space and understanding of LGBTQIAN+ in the dimension of "being humans" and provides more elaborate details. Nonetheless, the constructed images of Girls' Love in the series are from the selection of pretty, smart, working, and competent girls. However, there may be other different identities of Girls' Love that have not been presented so far.

Boys' Love Series: Occupational Roles

Presenting the occupational roles and work in Boys' Love Series is a significant process for the construction of value and meanings of characters as the members with social roles. This study found that the Boys' Love Series produced by GMMTV present various occupations and social status of male characters. Those occupations are usually linked to the identities, responsibilities, and development of the characters. The following are the occupational roles that were identified in this study.

High School and University Students

Most Boys' Love Series present the stories of high school and university students. *2gether: The Series* (Thongjila, 2020), *Still 2gether* (Chaiwimol, 2020), *My Gear and Your Gown* (Sawatmaneekul, 2020), *Tonhon Chonlatee* (Trakulkasemsuk, 2020–2021), *Fish Upon the Sky* (Wongsinwiset, 2021), *Bad Buddy Series (Chaiwimol, 2021–2022), Not Me (Boonyawatana, 2021–2022), Only Friends (Chookamsri* & Phukhaotong, 2023), and *We Are* (Sawatmaneekul, 2024) are the stories that involve university students.

The male leads are well-educated, studying in the Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Architecture, etc. because these fields are usually well-paid, with high income and social acceptance. *Last Twilight* (Chaiwimol, 2023–2024) presents the role of a basketball player who has a serious illness, but never gives up. Being an athlete reflects value, strength, and possibly a more special status than other people.

One clear example can be seen in *Only Friends* (Chookamsri & Phukhaotong, 2023), where most main characters are university students with different dreams, lifestyles, and social backgrounds.

Some characters are academically focused, while others are connected to creative or service-oriented work. For instance, one character is a music instrument repairer who works to support himself, another is skilled in photography and visual storytelling, and another works in mobile and IT repair. Meanwhile, some characters come from wealthy families and live a more luxurious lifestyle.

The Eclipse (Sukkhapisit, 2022), *My School President* (Niyomsilp, 2022–2023), and *My Love Mix-Up!* (Niyomsilp, 2024) are about high school students. Besides love, their passions, e.g., music playing, activities, learning, development, friendships, and problem-solving skills, are also presented.

These male characters are reflected as having a bright future and acting as a valuable social resource. They are competent learners and have the potential to be successful in life. Their

representation can reduce bias and bring legitimacy for the existence of Boys' Love as a major social trend. Overall, the series largely portray middle-class occupations and lifestyles.

A Teacher, a Forest Protection Officer, a Business Owner, and a Chef

A Tale of Thousand Stars (Chaiwimol, 2021): Love in this series is linked through the work of a teacher and a forest protection officer. A young boy who receives a heart donation applies to be a volunteer teacher in a mountain village. He falls in love with a forest protection officer. Both of them are determined, working as a teacher as well as a forest protection officer at their best, thereby constructing the image of Boys' Love as devoted people with a public mind and social responsibility.

Cupid's Last Wish (Wongsinwiset, 2022): This is the story about a young boy, the owner of a dairy farm, who inherits his dead father's business. He must try to carry on the business operations and solve various problems in life. Presenting this entrepreneurial occupation reflects leadership, responsibility, and maturity.

Moonlight Chicken (Chaiwimol, 2023): This is the story about a young boy who is the owner and the chef of a Hainanese chicken rice restaurant. Because he loves cooking, he proves that this job is meaningful and valuable. Apart from selling tasty chicken rice, he provides mental support for the people around him.

In the world of Boys' Love created by the media, these constructed meanings can be interpreted as demonstrating that these boys have receive good care and grown up very well, are well-educated, and are learners like other people. In some cases, these images even reflect connotative pressure that the characters must be smarter or more virtuous than others in order to be accepted.

The occupational groups represented in Boys' Love series therefore include university students, as well as high-status professions such as doctors, business executives, corporate heirs, and state officials. In addition, Boys' Love narratives frequently feature creative professions, including artists, musicians, and chefs.

Overall, these career representations tend to center on middle-class, socially prestigious, and economically stable identities, reinforcing aspirational and socially acceptable images of masculinity within contemporary media.

These stories encourage viewers, open perspectives toward human diversity, and confirm that these boys have valuable, meaningful roles in society.

Girls' Love Series: Occupational Roles

The female characters in these series are high school students, university students, a dentist/doctor, a motorbike rider, a business owner, and a university lecturer.

These roles enlarge the representation of Girls' Love beyond a merely love-related frame. Viewers perceive that these girls have dreams, goals, and responsibilities like other people in society.

High School Students at a Private School

23.5 When the Earth is Spinning Around (Kwanyu, 2023): This series presents the story at a private school, where the characters spend the majority of their time. The social interactions at the school may imitate those of the real world and life of high school students, i.e., their studies, extra-curricular activities, and love/relationships.

A Motorbike Rider, a Novel Writer and a Lawyer

Pluto (Snap25 Team, 2024): The occupational roles of the main characters are obvious in two dimensions: a motorbike rider and a novel writer. The first job is usually regarded as being for males because it requires physical force, agility, and working in public. Presenting a girl in this role is challenging as it is linked to gender. Novel writing reflects the female role as a meaning creator and storyteller. Meanwhile, the role of a lawyer represents authority, knowledge, and access to institutional power. As a profession associated with legal systems, social justice, and public credibility, portraying a female lawyer constructs an image of intellectual competence and social legitimacy. It situates Girls' Love characters within formal structures of power rather than limiting them to private emotional spaces.

Together, these three occupations expand the representation of women in GL series beyond romance, positioning them as economically active, intellectually capable, and socially empowered individuals.

A Dentist/Doctor and a Student Working as a Part-Time Coffee Shop Staff

Us (Kwanyu, 2025): This series presents the occupation of a dentist/doctor as the backdrop. This occupation requires knowledge and a high level of responsibility, and is praised in society. Presenting a female doctor in the context of Girls' Love adds value to the characters and reflects that girls are as competent in specialized professions as boys. The presented female student working part-time in a coffee shop reflects the effort of self-reliance and life management in the real world.

A Grocery Owner, a Company Employee, a Lecturer, and a Repair Girl

Whale Store xoxo (Wongsinwiset, 2025): This series presents various occupational roles, from a company employee, a grocery owner, to a university lecturer, along with the female character's skills to repair things and electrical appliances at home. These roles eliminate the gender stereotype related to repair work and business administration. They construct the image of multi-skilled girls with leadership abilities who can securely take care of themselves.

Overall, the representations of the occupational roles of the female characters in the studied Girls' Love Series are constructed as modern working girls who have dreams, goals, and key roles in society. Thus, these series not only focus on love but also expand the visual space of girls and Girls' Love in the dimensions of work, capabilities, and social participation.

In Girls' Love series, occupational representations often differ in emphasis from Boy Love narratives. Girls' Love characters are frequently portrayed as working professionals rather than predominantly university students. These careers typically position female characters as economically independent and socially established.

Presenting the characters with occupations and employment in Boys' Love and Girls' Love Thai Series significantly confirms their "selves" as valuable people with social roles. Occupations and work are the mechanisms of identity construction as responsible, competent persons with self-reliance and provide legitimacy for the existence of Boys' Love and Girls' Love in the public space. Presenting them through the series creates a variety of images of life rather than love only.

Despite the presented characters with occupations that confirm their value, the selection process reflects that some representation forms are more outstanding than others. Competent and successful characters are usually highlighted. Nonetheless, further opening of space for storytelling that presents more various occupations and ways of life in the future is necessary.

Love, Friendship, and Power Relationships

Love, friendship, and power relationships function as the key mechanisms to drive the stories of Boys' Love and Girls' Love.

Love and relationships are the space to communicate identities, development, and social power negotiation. In this study, the forms of love and relationships are divided into two phases, i.e., during academic life and during work life.

Love, friendship, and power relationships during the teenage years and school life are joyful, warm, and lively. It is a time of self-discovery and pulling through together in terms of studies, family expectations, school rules, and social pressure; however, it has not progressed to living together as a family or with a legal commitment. In these groups of series, the characters are still high school or university students, e.g., *2gether: The Series* (Thongjila, 2020), *My Gear and Your Gown* (Sawatmaneekul, 2020), *Tonhon Chonlatee* (Trakulkasemsuk, 2020–2021), *The Eclipse* (Sukkhapisit, 2022), *My School President* (Niyomsilp, 2022–2023), and *My Love Mix-Up!* (Niyomsilp, 2024).

These series present love parallel to friendship and the development process. The characters use schools or universities as the space for identity negotiation. Friendship functions as a safe space, and power relationships appear through family roles and social rules. Despite no images of living together formally in this age range, the characters usually dream and hope to build a long-term future together.

When presenting relationships at working age, the characters have jobs and more obvious goals. Their love is securely and seriously constructed and linked to future plans, living together, and married life. In addition, the characters must face power relationships in the contexts of workplaces, families, and more complicated social structures. The stories usually end with relationship development and moving in with each other to live together, e.g., *Us* (Kwanyu, 2025). Some series show weddings or marriage registration, like *Pluto* (Snap25 Team, 2024) and *Whale Store xoxo* (Wongsinwiset, 2025) in the Girls' Love Thai Series. These reflect the changes occurring in the social and legal contexts in Thai society. Thus, love during this age range is not personal but linked to existence in public spaces and social acceptance.

Conclusion

This study on the representation and construction of main characters' identities in the Boys' Love and Girls' Love Thai Series produced by GMMTV opens perspectives and reveals the

development of Thai series with a space for LGBTQIAN+. We can observe various identities, with representation of the characters within the dimensions of work, occupations, hidden social issues, and social interests, including relationships in the Boys' Love and Girls' Love Series that tend to develop toward legal certification and building a family. Such presentation reflects recent changes seen in the social context and more open attitudes toward LGBTQIAN+ in Thai society.

The Boys' Love and Girls' Love Series produced by GMMTV both function as a crucial cultural space to produce, create, and negotiate meanings related to identities, genders, occupations, and relationships through the representations of the complications of human experiences that are linked to real life. Such representations increase the understanding of LGBTQIAN+ and provide a space for various stories in the form of entertainment media.

However, the representations remain largely centered on middle-class, socially accepted identities. Future research and media production may further expand diversity in terms of class, gender expression, and intersectional identities.

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Milestones & Mindsets: A Board Game to Navigate Emotional Baggage, Inspired by *Klassens Tid*

Angela Shueh Ching Ng, University of Reading, United Kingdom
Yin Khoo, Independent Scholar, Singapore

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Workplace burnout has become a growing concern across professional environments, with emotional suppression contributing to employee stress, disengagement, and reduced well-being. While many organisational interventions focus on workload management or individual resilience, fewer address the emotional climates of workplaces where employees process, express, and make sense of their experiences. This study explores the use of a serious game, the Emotional Baggage Boardgame (EBBG), as a structured intervention to facilitate emotional reflection, empathy, and collaborative dialogue among working adults. The study involved 68 Asian working professionals in Singapore who participated in facilitated gameplay sessions during a company-wide learning day, with 37 participants providing response to post-game survey. Each session was conducted in small groups to encourage interaction and reflection. Data were collected through facilitators observations, conversations during play and post-game survey. Template analysis was used to examine participants' experiences and identify key themes emerging from gameplay. Findings suggest that the EBBG created a structured and psychologically safe space for participants to articulate emotions, share perspectives, and reflect on workplace challenges. The gamified format lowered barriers to discussing sensitive topics, enabling authentic conversations that fostered empathy, relational awareness, and collaborative problem-solving, which are often challenging to achieve within conventional workplace settings. The study demonstrates how EBBG adapted the principles of *Klassens Tid* from educational contexts to the workplace, offering organisations a practical approach to facilitate emotional dialogue, strengthen interpersonal understanding, and support employee well-being as part of broader efforts to mitigate workplace burnout.

Keywords: workplace well-being, burnout, serious games, emotional labour, emotional expression, Asian organisation culture

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Introduction

Burnout is a widespread challenge in professional settings, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, with consequences for individual well-being, team performance, and organizational sustainability (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; WHO, 2019). Nearly half of employees globally report burnout symptoms, highlighting the urgency of interventions (Boston Consulting Group [BCG], 2024). While many approaches focus on workload or individual resilience, less attention is paid to workplace emotional climates to create spaces where employees process, share, and regulate emotions, which are central to both the experience and prevention of burnout.

A key contributor to burnout is emotional suppression (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Maslach et al., 2001). Many professional environments implicitly reward composure, rationality, and restraint, requiring employees to manage or conceal feelings to conform to workplace norms (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Sustained suppression has been associated with increased psychological strain, relational tension, and reduced well-being (Lieberman et al., 2017). Cultural expectations, particularly in Asian contexts, further constrain emotional disclosure, as communication prioritizes harmony, hierarchy, and face-saving (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Hwang, 1987).

Despite growing awareness of burnout, workplaces rarely provide structured opportunities for emotional reflection. Organizational practices such as meetings or feedback sessions typically prioritize operational goals and performance outcomes, leaving little space for emotional processing. In contrast, Scandinavian educational settings implement structured emotional sharing sessions, such as *Klassens Tid*, which provide protected time for dialogue, shared concerns, and collective problem-solving (Adecco Group, 2020) that normalise emotional expression. However, equivalent practices are uncommon in adult professional environments. Bridging this gap requires culturally sensitive mechanisms that create structured spaces for emotional dialogue without violating social norms. Serious games (Abt, 1970; Crookall, 2010), designed for learning and development rather than entertainment, offer a potential mechanism to fill this gap.

This study examines the *Emotional Baggage Boardgame (EBBG)*, a facilitated serious game designed to encourage emotional literacy, empathy, cognitive-flexibility through emotional sharing among working adults in Asia. It explores how this structured gameplay may create a culturally adaptive and psychologically safe space for emotional sharing in professional contexts, enabling adults to engage in collective dialogue similar to *Klassens Tid*.

Literature Review

The following Literature Review situates this study within four interrelated domains: the relationship between emotional suppression and burnout; the concept of emotion expressions in the context of Asian cultural norms; the pedagogical practice of *Klassens Tid* as a model for structured emotional reflection for organizational settings; and how serious game can be a model of intervention, specifically the *Emotional Baggage Boardgame (EBBG)*, which serves as the primary intervention examined in this study. By examining these literatures, the review provides the conceptual foundation that informs the design of this study's research framework.

Emotional Suppression and Burnout

Emotional suppression is a form of emotion regulation in which individuals consciously inhibit the outward expression of their internal emotional states (Gross, 1998). Rather than altering the emotion itself, suppression focuses on controlling visible responses such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or behaviour (Gross & Levenson, 1993). In many professional environments, this restraint is often interpreted as professionalism, where employees are expected to remain composed, rational, and controlled even in emotionally demanding situations (Hoschild, 1983). Organisational norms frequently encourage workers to conceal negative emotions – such as frustration, anger, or distress, in order to maintain professional relationships and workplace harmony (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

This expectation is closely linked to the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), defined as the process by which employees regulate their emotions to conform to organizational "display rules" during workplace interactions. In professions involving high levels of interpersonal engagement, such as healthcare, education, hospitality, and customer service, employees are often expected to display warmth, patience, and empathy regardless of their genuine feelings. As a result, workers frequently rely on emotional suppression to align their behaviour with these expectations. This behaviour creates a discrepancy between felt and displayed emotions, known as emotional dissonance (Grandey, 2000, 2003). Over time, repeatedly suppressing authentic emotional responses requires sustained cognitive and emotional effort, which can gradually deplete psychological resources (Grandey, 2003). This process has been strongly associated with burnout, a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment resulting from prolonged occupational stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Emotional Expression in Asian Workplace

Emotional expression and suppression are shaped not only by individual personality but also by cultural norms and values (Gross, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Many Asian cultures, which are predominantly rooted in collectivism, place strong emphasis on group harmony, social cohesion, and maintaining "face," a form of social respect (Hofstede, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These cultural expectations often encourage restraint in emotional expression tend to prioritize group interests over individual desires, encouraging individuals to regulate or suppress negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or sadness (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013).

Research suggests that in collectivist societies, emotional suppression is not necessarily viewed as maladaptive (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Instead, it may be regarded as socially appropriate and even morally desirable. Studies shown that individuals in Asia often suppress emotional impulses to avoid conflict or embarrassment and to maintain smooth interpersonal relationships (Klein et. al., 2024). In this context, emotional restraint can signal self-control, maturity, and respect for others (Tsai & Levenson, 1997). Public displays of strong emotion may therefore be perceived as disruptive, particularly within formal or hierarchical workplace settings (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

However, even when culturally sanctioned, prolonged emotional suppression can contribute to psychological strain. Research found that service workers in Asia experienced higher risks of depression and anxiety when working in emotionally restrictive environments, despite strong social support (Kim, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020). Similarly, Choi and Kim (2014)

reported that expectations to suppress emotions in Korean workplaces contributed to burnout when employees felt unable to express themselves authentically. A large-scale study in China also found that emotional suppression intensified and increased the risk of job burnout (Zhu et al., 2021).

These findings suggest that while emotional suppression may be culturally normative, its long-term psychological costs remain significant (Chong et al., 2019). When employees lack opportunities to collectively process emotional experiences, suppressed feelings may accumulate, contributing to emotional exhaustion and relational strain. Existing research therefore highlights the need for a culturally sensitive interventions that provide structured, low-risk spaces for emotional reflection and dialogue in Asian context.

Klassens Tid for Organisational Settings

Klassens Tid, a practice originating in Scandinavian educational contexts, provides structured time for reflection, discussion, and collaborative problem-solving (Sandahl, 2017). Its structured format allows participants to articulate emotions collectively while minimizing social evaluation or disruption. Participation is normalized, the process is predictable, and reflection becomes both personal and communal.

In Danish schools, *Klassens Tid*, or "class time," is a compulsory weekly session conducted from ages six to sixteen (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, n.d.). The aim of *Klassens Tid* is to cultivate empathy by providing time and space for students to listen, understand, and collaboratively support one another (Adecco Group, 2020). Such sessions allow students to feel acknowledged within a larger community while also giving teachers opportunities to reflect on how they foster safe and inclusive learning environments (Sandahl, 2017).

Beyond educational settings, the principles underlying *Klassens Tid* may hold relevance for adult workplaces. Organizations increasingly recognize that empathy and compassion contribute to positive individual and organizational outcomes (Meechan et al., 2022). Research also highlights a strong relationship between empathetic leadership and employees' sense of psychological safety, motivation, and well-being (Chu, 2016).

However, many workplaces still lack environments where employees feel comfortable expressing emotional concerns. Surveys around the world indicated that a significant proportion of employees are hesitant to share personal or emotional challenges with managers due to fear of judgment or negative consequences (MHFA England, 2026; Milieu Insight, 2024). In such contexts, structured reflective practices similar to *Klassens Tid* may offer a valuable framework for fostering healthy emotional dialogue, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving for better wellbeing at workplace.

Serious Games as Intervention for *Klassens Tid* Moments at Workplace

Serious games are interactive games designed with purposes beyond entertainment, often aiming to educate, train, or influence behaviour in real-world contexts (Djaouti et al., 2011). The concept was first introduced by Clark C. Abt (1970), who defined serious games as games with explicit educational objectives rather than purely recreational purposes. According to Abt (1970), these games are structured to achieve specific learning or behavioural outcomes, distinguishing them from traditional entertainment games. Since then, the concept has expanded to include both digital and non-digital applications across fields

such as education, healthcare, and professional development, where interactive gameplay serves as a medium for experiential learning, reflection, and skill development (Djaouti et al., 2011).

Among non-digital applications, LEGO® Serious Play (LSP) represents a notable methodology that applies serious game principles in organisational settings. Developed by Johan Roos and Bart Victor (1999), LSP was initially designed to help managers articulate complex ideas and strategies through hands-on model building. The LEGO Group later formalized the methodology as a facilitation process used to support dialogue, strategy development, creativity, and reflection within teams (LEGO Group, 2010). In LSP sessions, participants build symbolic models using LEGO bricks to represent organisational challenges, ideas, or solutions. These models then become tools for storytelling and shared reflection, enabling participants to communicate perspectives and collaboratively construct understanding. Unlike traditional games, LSP emphasizes reflection and dialogue rather than competition or entertainment, making it particularly suited for professional learning and development (Roos & Victor, 1999).

Empirical research highlights the potential of serious games to influence emotional outcomes. Studies in educational and clinical contexts suggest that serious games can enhance emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and promote empathy (Sitzmann, 2011; Wouters et al., 2013). In organisational contexts, serious games have been applied to leadership development, team training, and collaborative problem-solving. By simulating workplace challenges within a structured and low-risk environment, serious games can facilitate reflection, dialogue, and emotional awareness. Such characteristics align closely with the objectives of *Klassens Tid*, suggesting that structured gameplay may offer a culturally adaptable mechanism for fostering meaningful emotional dialogue within professional Asian settings.

Emotional Baggage Boardgame to Replicate *Klassens Tid* at Work

The Emotional Baggage Boardgame (EBBG) is an interactive experiential learning tool designed to enhance emotional literacy and communication within organisational settings. It was developed to address workplace stressors arising from the suppression of authentic emotions (Ng et al., 2024). As such, it is particularly well suited as a mechanism for replicating *Klassens Tid* within workplace environments. Developed collaboratively by Chemistry and Pod of Life (Chemistry Team, n.d.), the game addresses workplace stressors and interpersonal challenges by encouraging participants to explore, identify, and discuss a wide range of emotions in a structured yet engaging format.

EBBG is a facilitated tabletop game for four to six players. Participants take turns moving across the board to accumulate milestones while responding to prompts that stimulate dialogue about emotional experiences and workplace scenarios, aim to shed emotional baggage. Gameplay typically lasts 45–60 minutes and concludes with a facilitated group reflection. Unlike conventional discussion-based interventions, the game's structure ensures that conversations remain focused on emotional awareness for empathy, and solution-focussed.

The selection of EBBG as a mechanism to replicate *Klassens Tid* in the workplace lies in its features of providing a time-bound and structured play session that focused emotional work-related scenarios, with play mechanism that encourages participants to reflect on their experiences, articulate emotions using emotion cards, and engage in game challenges to

generate solutions to the workplace scenarios. As such, EBBG offers a tangible and operationalizable mechanics that replicate the core dynamics of *Klassens Tid* in a workplace context.

Research Question

This study is guided by a primary research question: How can the Emotional Baggage Boardgame (EBBG) serve as an effective mechanism to replicate *Klassens Tid* moments in the workplace?

The study is conceptually grounded in the rationale that structured and protected time for emotional sharing, modelled on *Klassens Tid*, promote empathy, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby contributing to the reduction of workplace burnout. For the game to be effective, it needs demonstrate its ability to operationalise these elements in professional contexts.

In addition, the study explores how working adults experience emotional sharing through the game. Together, these questions aim to examine both the mechanisms by which the game facilitates structured emotional dialogue and the participant experiences of engaging in the serious play processes. Conceptually, the model underlying the study positions the game as the intervention – providing structure and process for emotional dialogue to generate emotional awareness, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving as the intended outcomes. This provides a framework for understanding how this particular serious game can replicate *Klassens Tid* in adult workplace settings.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist intervention design conducted through an exploratory workshop setting. Interpretivist research assumes that social realities are constructed through individuals' interpretations and interactions (Schwandt, 2014). Understanding how working adults engage with emotional experiences requires attention to participants' subjective interpretations rather than relying solely on objective measurement. The interpretivist was applied because the study aimed to explore how reflective dialogue and relational functions associated with *Klassens Tid* could be recreated within professional contexts through a serious game intervention.

Intervention-based workshops are increasingly used in organisational research to examine how structured activities stimulate reflective dialogue and collective sensemaking (Cunliffe, 2004; Raelin, 2007). In this study, EBBG, a serious game designed to support reflective dialogue through metaphorical prompts, served as the medium for the intervention. The game as a intervention workshop, provided a deliberate reflective environment, enabling participants to articulate experiences, consider alternative perspectives, and explore coping strategies collaboratively. This format approximated key functions of *Klassens Tid*.

Participants

A total of 68 Asian working adults, each with a minimum of one year of professional experience, participated in the gameplay sessions, of whom 37 completed the post-game survey. EBBG was implemented company-wide by a multinational creative and media company in Singapore as part of their learning day. Twelve trained facilitators conducted the

game across two structured gameplay sessions in a single day. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and involved small groups of four to six participants, each guided by a facilitator. This small-group format enabled meaningful interaction, allowing participants to reflect on personal experiences and share perspectives within a structured and time-bound session.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining participant confidentiality, were strictly observed. Additionally, approval was obtained from the company to use the data for publication purposes.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative data sources were collected to capture individual reflections and group dynamics. Facilitators recorded observational notes documenting participant interactions and verbal reflections. Participants completed a brief post-session survey capturing perceptions of whether the workshop facilitated meaningful reflection and dialogue about emotional experiences. Facilitators also engaged in structured debrief sessions to discuss recurring themes, group dynamics, and engagement with reflective prompts. Triangulating these sources enhanced the credibility of the analysis by examining patterns across observational, conversational, and reflective accounts (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis and Reflexivity

Qualitative data were analysed using Template Analysis, a form of thematic analysis that facilitates the development of hierarchical coding templates informed by both theoretical constructs and patterns emerging from the data (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012). This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, allowing analysis to be guided by a conceptual framework derived from *Klassens Tid* while remaining open to emergent insights. Initial top-level themes informed by the principles of *Klassens Tid* and the study's research questions were used to guide the coding – protected reflective time, emotional labelling, perspective-taking, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. These themes served as sensitising concepts rather than fixed categories, providing a templated but flexible coding structure that accommodated the identification of additional themes and subthemes as they arose from participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Reflexivity was a central component of the analytic process. Given the researcher's involvement in the development of EBBG, third-party facilitators conducted the workshops to preserve neutrality and mitigate potential bias. Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout coding and theme development to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than reflecting the intended design of the intervention (Finlay, 2002). Analytical decisions were guided by sustained engagement with the data and a commitment to openness, allowing emergent themes to be identified beyond the initial conceptual framework.

Together, the use of Template Analysis and reflexive practice ensured that the analysis remained both conceptually informed and empirically grounded, capturing participants' experiences of reflective dialogue, emotional articulation, and collaborative problem-solving within the structured gameplay context. This approach allowed the study to explore how EBBG could operationalize the relational and reflective dynamics of *Klassens Tid* in a professional setting.

Findings

Analysis of the workshop data revealed several key themes reflecting how participants engaged with EBBG and how it functioned as a mechanism to replicate *Klassens Tid* in the workplace. The findings are presented using the initial coding template – protected reflective time; emotional labeling; perspective-taking; empathy; and collaborative problem-solving, while also integrating emergent patterns related to impact of gamification, subtle awareness, and enhanced communication. This dual approach allows for both theory-driven interpretation and recognition of novel insights arising from participants' experiences.

Framing Reflective Time Through Play

Participants consistently appreciated the opportunity to pause from work, yet the reflective function of the workshop was not always immediately apparent. Many participants perceived the session primarily as "game time" rather than an explicitly reflective activity, making it feel less like heavy mental work. All participants expressed appreciation for the chance to take a break from work, engage in playful interaction, and discuss emotions in relation to workplace challenges.

The findings suggest that framing protected reflective time as play reduces resistance to engaging with emotional topics. The gamified format acted as an entry point, making reflection approachable and lowering cognitive and emotional barriers typically associated with conventional reflective exercises (Katsaliaki et al., 2025).

Emotional Labeling Effect Aligns With Affect Labeling Theory

The EBBG incorporated 106 emotion cards, of which participants received only seven at the start of the game. This intentional limitation restricted access to emotional vocabulary, requiring participants to navigate their emotional articulation with a finite set of labels. Some participants reported frustration with this limitation, noting that it constrained their ability to fully verbalise experiences. This aligns with *Affect Labeling Theory* (Liberman et al., 2007, 2017), which suggests that the process of naming emotions can help regulate affective responses but may also be hindered when vocabulary is insufficient.

Despite these initial constraints, the majority of participants reported learning new emotion labels through the cards and gameplay, improving their ability to identify and articulate emotions. Many expressed that this experience increased their confidence in labelling emotions and recognizing nuanced emotional states after the session.

The findings suggest that structured exposure to emotion labels within a playful activity can support emotional awareness and skill development in professional contexts.

Perspective-Taking as Catalyst for Empathy and Collaborative Problem-Solving

Although participants did not explicitly report an increase in empathy, the activity consistently exposed them to alternative perspectives. Many were positively surprised by viewpoints differing from their own when addressing workplace scenarios.

This exposure to diverse perspectives appears to foster incidental empathic understanding, even if participants do not consciously recognize it. These findings are consistent with

perspective-taking theory, which posits that cognitively engaging with others' viewpoints can enhance understanding, inform problem-solving, and support relational well-being (Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky et al., 2008).

Although collaborative problem-solving was not overt during gameplay, specific game challenges, such as tasks requiring them to "put a spin on the situation," encouraged consideration of multiple approaches to workplace challenges. Encountering a diversity of strategies not only surprised participants but also prompted them to reflect on how they might approach the same scenario differently. In this way, the diverse perspectives provided a form of collaboration to solve the problem even in the absence of direct group coordination. Some groups were so engaged with this particular game mechanic that they actively sought out diverse viewpoints, even when it was not required.

Together, these findings illustrate that structured perspective-sharing within the EBBG facilitates a subtle interplay between cognitive empathy and problem-solving. Participants gain insight into others' experiences, which can inform adaptive strategies for workplace challenges, highlighting how reflection, empathic reasoning, and exposure to multiple viewpoints can collectively nurture relational understanding and emergent collaboration in professional contexts.

Enhanced Awareness in Improving Workplace Relationships

Facilitators observed multiple instances of subtle awareness developed during gameplay. For example, when a player drew a challenge card indicating a co-worker had embarrassed them by correcting their work in public, before the player could response to the scenario on the card, another participant acknowledged having engaged in the same behaviour and apologised. Similarly, discussion of after-hours managerial communication prompted reflection on how such practices impact team members and inspired consideration of alternative approaches.

These incidents suggest that the structured gameplay provided a low-stakes environment for participants to surface and reflect on relational dynamics, enhancing awareness of workplace behaviours and their effects on others.

EBBG Provides Psychological Safety for Expression

Some participants expressed initial concern about playing the game with their superiors, fearing vulnerability or judgement. Post-game reflections indicated that these fears were largely alleviated, and participants reported enjoying the opportunity to share perspectives and personal experiences with managers. Many highlighted that the game made it easier to express emotions than in typical work interactions, and helped them understand their manager's perspectives and challenges as well.

Other participants reported appreciating the opportunity to engage in a safe and supportive space where they could openly express emotions related to challenging workplace situations. Several participants who had just concluded a difficult client meeting, during which they felt compelled to withhold emotional expression, described the game session as cathartic and helpful in processing their experiences.

These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that gamified activities at workplace can enhance psychological safety by providing participants with opportunities to adopt alternative personas or engage in storytelling, thereby creating emotionally safe spaces for sharing and reflection (Geurts et al., 2020).

High Reflectivity on Success and Emotional Experience

The gameplay mechanics, where winning is based on acquiring milestone cards while managing emotional baggage, prompted participants to reconsider conventional notions of success. Many reflected that achieving milestones often introduced additional emotional challenges, leading to insights that success is highly individual and interlinked with managing positive and negative emotional experiences.

Participants' reflections demonstrate increased awareness of the interplay between achievement and emotional management, consistent with theories of emotional intelligence and self-reflective learning, which emphasise recognising, accepting, and integrating a full range of emotions to guide behaviour and decision-making (Goleman, 1995; Schön, 1983).

EBBG Enhanced Facilitators' Learning

Facilitators reported that their engagement in the gameplay process also offered opportunities for learning. While guiding participants through the EBBG, facilitators described gaining insights from the personal and professional experiences shared by participants. Several noted that hearing diverse perspectives helped them reflect on their own approaches to workplace challenges and deepen their understanding of how different individuals navigate emotional experiences.

This emergent theme suggests that the EBBG not only functions as a tool for participant reflection and collaborative sensemaking but also provides a learning experience for facilitators. The structured prompts and shared dialogues create conditions in which facilitators can observe and internalize patterns in emotional articulation, perspective-taking, and problem-solving. In this sense, the intervention produces a dual-layered learning effect, where both participants and facilitators benefit from engagement with diverse viewpoints and reflective processes.

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that the EBBG effectively replicates key aspects of *Klassens Tid* in the workplace by providing structured reflection, supporting emotional articulation, and fostering perspective-taking and emergent problem-solving.

Notably, the study also revealed secondary outcomes: increased relational awareness, enhanced psychological safety, and facilitator learning. These emergent themes highlight the game's potential to create spaces for authentic and vulnerable conversations in Asian workplaces, where cultural norms often constrain emotional expression. Together, these results suggest that the EBBG can serve as a practical tool to support emotional engagement, interpersonal understanding, and collective reflection, offering a pathway to reduce workplace stress and burnout in the professional contexts.

Discussions

The findings highlight the potential of the EBBG as a gamified intervention to facilitate emotional reflection in organisational settings. By framing emotional dialogue within play, the game creates a low-stakes entry point for conversations that are often difficult in professional contexts, particularly in Asian workplaces where hierarchical norms and restrained emotional expression are prevalent (Jeung et al., 2018; Matsumoto et al., 2008). This suggests that EBBG can serve as a practical tool for organisational development, leveraging on its structured gameplay mechanism, to create a workplace adaptation of *Klassens Tid*, that supports emotional sharing, reflection, perspective-taking, and collaborative problem-solving in organisations.

However, organisational perceptions of "play" may influence the effectiveness and adoption of such interventions. If play is viewed as trivial or peripheral, the intended reflective impact may be undermined, and a single session is unlikely to produce sustained changes at the organisational level. Repeated engagement and integration with broader wellbeing initiatives are likely necessary to achieve lasting outcomes.

Contextual relevance emerged as another key consideration. Participants responded most meaningfully to scenarios that resonated with their professional and cultural experiences, highlighting the importance of tailoring content to local organisational contexts. Customised prompts and challenges with context and cultural relevance could enhance engagement, encourage authentic sharing, and stimulate richer reflective dialogue.

An additional and notable outcome was facilitators' learning. Facilitators reported gaining insights from participants' shared experiences, suggesting that the EBBG not only supports participant reflection but also has the potential to function as a developmental tool for leaders. Future applications could explore integrating the role of "leaders as facilitators" (Amy, 2008) enabling managers to strengthen empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional awareness while guiding reflective interventions in their teams.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample comprised exclusively Asian working adults with at least one year of professional experience from creative and media industry, limiting generalisability across other cultural and industries contexts. Cultural norms around emotional expression and hierarchical dynamics may influence how emotions were deciphered by the participants and facilitators. Second, data relied heavily on self-reported reflections and facilitator observations, which could introduce social desirability bias (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Paulhus, 1991). Multiple data sources and triangulation were used to enhance credibility, but participants' responses may have been shaped by group dynamics or perceived expectations. Third, the study examined a single two-hour workshop, so longitudinal effects on emotional articulation, relational insight, and workplace behaviours were not assessed. Future research should explore repeated sessions and investigate transfer effects into day-to-day organisational practices. Finally, burnout was not explicitly measured as an outcome in this study; rather, its potential effects were inferred indirectly through related variables such as increased authentic emotional expression, perspective-taking and collaborative problem-solving. Future research could incorporate more targeted measures to assess burnout more explicitly.

Conclusion

EBBG demonstrates significant potential as a gamified intervention to address workplace burnout by creating structured mechanism for authentic emotional conversations. By encouraging participants to articulate emotions, consider diverse perspectives, and collaboratively explore solutions, the game fosters empathy, relational awareness, and supportive interpersonal dynamics – key protective factors against burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). While a single session cannot produce long-term organisational change, EBBG offers a practical mechanism for surfacing emotional experiences before they escalate into chronic stress, enabling more proactive engagement with workplace well-being (Grandey et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the potential of incorporating leaders as facilitators, which have yet to be tested, may extend the intervention's impact by embedding reflective dialogue within everyday team interactions and strengthening psychological safety across the organisation. In doing so, EBBG demonstrates how serious games can function as an engaging medium to translate reflective and emotionally attuned practices into professional settings. By combining playful mechanics with structured reflection, the intervention adapts the principles of *Klassens Tid* from educational settings to the workplace, offering organisations a practical tool to cultivate empathy, strengthen workplace relationships, and support long-term organisational resilience against burnout.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the Chemistry Team for their creativity and collaboration in designing and co-developing the *Emotional Baggage* Boardgame (EBBG). In particular, I am grateful to Nicholas Loke, Aimee Kyffin, Videa Goenadie, Jasmine Poh, Eunice Siow and John Chan for their dedication and contributions.

I also extend my appreciation to all the facilitators who generously supported the boardgame play sessions. Special thanks go to Janice Tan, Nicholas Loke, Jasmine Poh, Shaleen Porwal, Khoo Yin, and many others whose contributions were invaluable in bringing the sessions to life.

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

The author declares that ChatGPT and 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 ChatGPT and 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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Adoption and Impact of Generative AI on Teaching Strategies Among Community College Educators

Siti Shuhaili binti Mohamad Moha, Temerloh Community College, Malaysia
Mohd Fazli Khaisunizam bin Ismail, Temerloh Community College, Malaysia

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study investigates the adoption and impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) on teaching strategies among community college educators in Pahang, Malaysia. Guided by technology acceptance and pedagogical change perspectives, the research examines (i) the level of GenAI adoption, (ii) its relationship with teaching strategy transformation, (iii) perceived benefits and challenges, and (iv) demographic influences on adoption and impact. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 132 lecturers selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring GenAI adoption, perceived instructional impact, and benefits and challenges. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were used for analysis. Findings indicate a high level of GenAI adoption (all mean scores > 4.00), with strong internal reliability of measurement scales. A significant and strong positive correlation ($r = 0.867$, $p < .01$) was found between GenAI adoption and perceived impact on teaching strategies, suggesting that higher usage is associated with greater instructional adaptation in planning, delivery, assessment, and feedback. Major challenges include limited access to AI tools, ethical concerns, and risk of student over-dependence, while the most requested support involves clear guidelines and structured professional development. Teaching experience significantly influenced adoption levels, although no significant differences were found in perceived instructional impact. The study highlights the need for systematic governance, capacity-building, and responsible integration frameworks to sustain effective GenAI-enabled teaching practices in community college contexts.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, GenAI adoption, teaching strategies, community college educators

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Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) are AI system that is able to generate new content (e.g., text, images, audio, video, and code) with user prompts, often by means of large-scale machine learning models. GenAI technology (e.g., ChatGPT-like chatbots, integrated writing/analysis assistants, etc.) is becoming a common tool in higher education instructional preparation, content writing, formative assessment, and support of learners. Responsible use, academic integrity, transparency and staff capacity-building have also been the reactions of policy and quality-assurance bodies to make educational quality sustainable as adoption gains momentum (Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023a).

The level of GenAI relevance is particularly high in Malaysia, as Polytechnique's and community colleges are directly included in the national higher-education quality ecosystem, and educators are supposed to guarantee valid and accountable learning outcomes operating in high-speed digital environments. According to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), teaching and learning can be enriched with GenAI, however, there are risks (e.g., integrity, reliability, and misuse), which demand institutional direction and professionalism (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2023). Simultaneously, institutional policies (e.g., university-level documents on governance to be used as realistic references) emphasize the fact that employees and students should consider the outputs of GenAI in terms of validity, reliability, and transparency, instead of accepting the system as an authority figure (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2024).

The community colleges are an especially consequential environment. They are TVET-oriented institutions, which focus on applied learning, industry orientation, and practical assessment scenarios where GenAI can interfere with lesson plans, assessment activities, feedback processes, and student interaction techniques. Recent open-access studies hosted in the polytechnic and community college (POLYCC) ecosystem of Malaysia indicate awareness and willingness of lecturers to embrace AI is unevenly distributed over disciplines, and non-technical disciplines may require increased development resources (Ahmad et al., 2025).

GenAI in Education: Pedagogical Opportunities and Constraints

Recent literature explains GenAI as a two-purpose educational technology: it is relevant to both increasing productivity and facilitating instructional design, but it brings its risks associated with credibility, bias, and integrity. Thematic surveys of ChatGPT-related literature show common advantages to include writing teaching resources, facilitating explanation and tutoring-like communication, encouraging brainstorming, and facilitating workflows of formative feedback; in their turn, they highlight the problems of hallucinations/inaccuracy, overdependence, ethical issues, and the threats of plagiarism (Ali, 2024; Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023b).

In addition to general assertions, the open-access instructional design studies demonstrate how educators can coordinate GenAI to organized pedagogical frameworks. As an example, work in Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence that is open access describes how GenAI tools can be categorized and aligned with the stages of inquiry-based lesson planning, including support of activity design, content creation, assessment, and feedback. This work is relevant to the context of TVET since inquiry-based and applied problem solving are typical instructional outcomes, and GenAI could transform the way lecturers structure learning tasks sequences instead of simply writing (Willert & Würz, 2025).

Simultaneously, the guidance at higher education emphasises that outputs of GenAI should be assessed and put in context, and institutional policy, audits, and staff development should be considered as the fundamental prerequisites of safe and useful implementation. As an illustration, the UNESCO quick-start guidance positions GenAI introduction as the process that needs organisational evaluation (AI audits), consultation with the stakeholders and the clear focus on privacy, integrity, and the development of the staff competence (Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023a).

Policy and Governance Signals Relevant to Malaysia's Community College Context

The positioning of quality assurance is also apparent in Malaysia: the advisory note of GenAI by MQA concerns not only higher education institutions but also Polytechnique's and community colleges, and the premise of GenAI is a dynamic trend that can be used to enhance teaching and learning, but needs to be reinforced with a better comprehension of risks and responsible practice to maintain quality and integrity (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2023). This creates a professional governance norm according to which GenAI is to be governed by the competence-building and integrity protection instead of the informal and personal experimentation.

There are also institutional-level governance documents that offer operational guidance that is applicable in designing measurement items in this study. As an illustration, GenAI teaching and learning guideline of UTM focuses on the fact that academic personnel is expected to explain the purpose of GenAI use, will be accountable to the validity of results, and analyse outputs in terms of accountability, transparency, and reliability. Although this guideline is specific to a university, it belongs to the universal logic of governance the educators of community colleges have to deal with as well: responsible use is not a choice, and adoption cannot be achieved without evaluation competence or policy alignment (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2024).

Another reason why educator perceptions are important is on the basis of international community-college sector reporting. Surveys and consultations of sector staff reveal that areas of employee concern usually focus on integrity, trustworthiness, job redesign, and the necessity of life-long professional learning; as staff concerns may diminish adoption or drive adoption into informal and inconsistent practices when institutional support is not clear. This is why the measurement of contributions and difficulties is worthwhile in adoption research instead of adoption being discussed as a technological availability problem (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2024).

Theoretical Foundations for Studying GenAI Adoption and Teaching Strategy Change

The acceptance and diffusion perspectives are widely used to explain adoption in terms of education technology research. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) focuses on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as the key predictors of technologies acceptance whereas the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) introduce social influence and facilitating conditions as particularly important in the institutional context where practice is determined by training, policy, and leadership. Such frameworks are applicable to GenAI since the choice of educators to use a particular instructional strategy is dependent on the perceived instructional value, the level of confidence and effort needed, peer pressure, and institutional facilitation (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Pedagogical technology frameworks emphasize teaching strategies on the fact that tools should not only affect effectiveness but also the choice of instructional design. More recent GenAI design-oriented studies present sequences of inquiry activity planning, assessment support generation, and feedback structuring use cases, which are related to tangible strategy changes (e.g., faster lesson plans versioning, variated activity versions, feedback templating). Open-access literature has suggested a human-AI hybrid co-design approach to keep the objectives of learning in balance with the assistance of GenAI as a partner-in-planning instead of an authoritative (Dogan, 2025; Willert & Würz, 2025).

The implication to this study would be to measure adoption as a behaviour (what educator are doing with GenAI) but also understand adoption interpretation in terms of perception and support conditions (why educators are doing it and why are they constrained). This is in line with the demands in the guidance documents to train, clarify the policy, and a consistent review of the educational impacts of GenAI (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2024; Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023b).

Empirical Evidence on Educators' GenAI Use, Benefits, and Challenges

Empirical studies of GenAI use among educators are growing at an impressive rate, and trends are both encouraging and limiting. When open-access instruments are developed with TAM groundwork, educator survey has demonstrated that the dimensions of acceptance can be reliably measured under GenAI/ChatGPT specifics and combined with demographic profiling, which proves the possibility of the structured questionnaire measurement in the given research (Barakat et al., 2025).

In the POLYCC ecosystem of Malaysia, more recent open-access quantitative data (n-134) reveals more or less the same perceptions of benefits/challenges across disciplines, though there is a significant trend: ICT lecturers might be more aware/ready than non-technical disciplines, with a difference in capacity and confidence. This has a direct implication on Pahang community colleges since it implies that adoption and impact can be patterned with regard to field of study, which supports the use of stratified sampling and demographic analysis in the current research design (Ahmad et al., 2025).

In more general research on educators education, there also are studies in open-access that emphasize that the perceived benefits tend to pertain to time savings (planning and materials), scaffolding of explanations, and aiding differentiation, whereas perceived issues are customarily issues related to accuracy, ethics, privacy, and the potential to harm authentic learning. GenAI competency and self-efficacy are becoming defined as separate constructs that determine the ability of educators to incorporate GenAI responsibly and effectively, which implies that items related to capability are relevant in the challenges domain (e.g., skill gaps, training needs) (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2024 ; Xia, 2025).

Despite the availability of global and regional guidance, as well as, the initial empirical research, there is still a high demand on local evidence on community college educators in Malaysia – specifically in the state of Pahang – connecting (i) adoption rate, (ii) perceived advantages/disadvantages, (iii) changes in specific teaching strategies. The POLYCC study can serve as a good precedent but is not a replacement of a Pahang-specific community college investigation of the effects of GenAI (not general AI) adoption and teaching strategies. Thus, the current research fills this gap with the help of a cross-sectional, stratified survey that will measure the levels of adoption and test the relationships and group differences in line with the

above stated objectives (Ahmad et al., 2025; Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2023; Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023a).

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a quantitative and cross-sectional survey design will be used to quantify the levels of GenAI adoption, perceived effects on teaching strategies, and perceived benefits/challenges of community college educators in Pahang. The cross-sectional method is appropriate since the research is designed to establish the baseline and measure relationships and group differences at one point instead of assessing longitudinal change.

Population, Setting, and Sample Size

The intended study sample is community college instructors in Pahang, Malaysia (N = 200). The sampling size will be 132 minimum as calculated according to Krejcie and Morgan sampling table methodology of small populations. In order to safeguard representativeness in the different colleges and disciplines, the study employs stratified random sampling (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Sampling Technique and Procedure

(i) community college institution and (ii) field of study/discipline grouping (e.g., ICT/technical vs non-technical, aligned to local evidence that readiness can differ by discipline) will be used to create strata. In every stratum, the participants will be picked on the basis of random selection (e.g., by assigning random numbers to the list of the staff members delivered via institutional channels). This design enhances the external validity of the Pahang community colleges and allows testing the demographic differences that will be the focal point of the Objective 4 (Ahmad et al., 2025).

Research Instrument and Measures

Data will be collected using a structured Google Form questionnaire with four sections:

- Section A: Demographics. Age group, sex, teaching experience, highest qualification, institution, and study area/discipline, and previous exposure/training to GenAI.
- Section B: GenAI Adoption Scale. Items assess frequency and breadth of GenAI use to teach tasks (e.g., lesson planning, preparation of content/material, design of activities, drafting of assessments, drafting of rubrics/feedback, and administrative teaching support). The content of the item is based on a recorded use cases of education and design-oriented mappings of GenAI to planning and assessment processes (Dogan, 2025; Willert & Würz, 2025).
- Section C: Effect on Teaching Strategy Scale. The use of GenAI in planning quality/speed, differentiation, inquiry/activity design, feedback cycles and assessment approaches are measured using items that are perceived to be changed as a result of GenAI use. This is in line with the open-access instructional design literature that places GenAI as a co-designer that facilitates systematic lesson design and a feedback process (Dogan, 2025; Willert & Würz, 2025).
- Section D: Perception Scale (Benefits and Challenges). Benefits items represent synthesised gains that are frequent (efficiency, idea generation, scaffolding, feedback

support). Challenges items align with integrity, trustworthiness, bias/inaccuracy, privacy, and skill/training needs, which aligns with systematic review and industry guidance that highlight the importance of integrity and reliability evaluation in terms of an obligation (Ali, 2024; California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2024; Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2023).

The non-demographic questions will be based on a five-point Likert scale ranging between 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree).

Validity of Instrument

Expert review will be used to establish the content validity of 2–3 educators in education technology or TVET with expertise in the implementation and design of GenAI. The items will be screened in accordance with their clarity, applicability to the community college teaching activities, and their relevancy to the responsible-use considerations (e.g., validating outputs, integrity considerations) (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2023).

Data Collection Procedure

The Google Form link was shared on institutional channels (staff email lists and college administrative communication groups) after institutional permissions have been acquired. The initial page will contain the information about the study and informed consent. The participation will be voluntary and no personally identifying data will be gathered except the broad demographics. The collection of the data will last about 2–3 weeks or until the target sample is achieved.

Data Analysis Plan

The analysis was done with the use of statistical software (e.g., SPSS). Objective 1 (adoption levels) and summarise benefits/challenges were addressed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies). In the case of Objective 2, Pearson correlation was used to test the relationship between adoption scores and teaching strategy impact scores. In Objective 3, descriptive analysis was used also. In Objective 4, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA will be used to test the differences in adoption and perceived impact between demographic groups for example, discipline, experience bands, age bands (Ahmad et al., 2025).

Ethical Considerations

Rights of ethical protection involve informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary involvement and data security. It was explained to the participants that the answers are utilized in research purposes exclusively and will be published in the aggregate. The study did not also collect sensitive instances of misconduct given the guidance on integrity and responsible use of GenAI; moreover, the research will focus on measuring the perceptions and practices at the attitude level and self-reported use of GenAI (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2023; Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023a).

Results

Demographic Analysis

Table 1
Demographic Profile

Respondents Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	89	67.4%
Male	43	32.6%
Age Group		
20–29 years old	3	2.3%
30–39 years old	46	34.8%
40–49 years old	79	59.8%
50 years and above	4	3.0%
Teaching experience		
11–15 years	57	43.2%
5–10 years	27	20.5%
More than 15 years	48	36.4%
Field of teaching		
Akuakultur	3	2.3%
Aquaculture	4	3.0%
Building	3	2.3%
Business	9	6.8%
Culinary	3	2.3%
Engineering	44	33.3%
Fashion	3	2.3%
Fashion	8	6.1%
Fesyen	2	1.5%
Hospitaliti	12	9.1%
Information Technology	37	28.0%
Pengajian Am	4	3.0%

The demographic characteristics of the respondents have been summarised in table 1. The majority of the respondents were of the female gender (67.4%), whereas males were 32.6. The majority of the respondents were 40–49 years (59.8%), 30–39 years (34.8%), and only a small number of respondents were 20–29 years (2.3%), 50 years and beyond (3.0%). With regards to the teaching experience, the highest group was 11–15 years (43.2%), then more than 15 years (36.4%), and 5–10 years (20.5%). The participants were selected in various disciplines, the largest participants (33.3%) being in the field of Engineering and (28.0%) in the field of Information Technology.

Descriptive Findings for GenAI Adoption

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
B1. I frequently use Generative AI tools in my teaching practice.	132	2	5	4.16	.809
B2. I feel confident in using Generative AI for teaching and learning.	132	2	5	4.27	.666
B3. I actively explore different Generative AI applications for education	132	2	5	4.08	.762
B4. My institution encourages the use of Generative AI in teaching	132	3	5	4.17	.690
B5. I intend to continue adopting Generative AI in future teaching practices	132	3	5	4.30	.641
Valid N (listwise)	132				

Table 2 indicates that the GenAI is adopted at a high level among the community college educators (N = 132) with all the items registering a mean score of more than 4.00. The results showed that the respondents were willing to continue using GenAI in teaching in the future (M = 4.30, SD = 0.641) and they had great confidence in using GenAI both in teaching and learning (M = 4.27, SD = 0.666). GenAI was also frequently used in the teaching practice (M = 4.16, SD = 0.809). The institutional encouragement was viewed in a positive way (M = 4.17, SD = 0.690), whereas the active exploration of the various GenAI applications was high (M = 4.08, SD = 0.762). Generally, the findings indicate high intention to uptake and maintain adoption.

Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Benefits and Challenges of GenAI

Table 3
Challenges in Using Generative AI

	N	%
Concerns about ethical use	4	3.0%
Concerns about ethical use, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	14	10.6%
Lack of knowledge or skills	6	4.5%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities	10	7.6%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Concerns about ethical use	4	3.0%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Limited access to AI tools	6	4.5%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Limited access to AI tools, Concerns about ethical use, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	4	3.0%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Limited access to AI tools, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	4	3.0%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Limited access to AI tools, Risk of student over-dependence on AI, Time constraints	4	3.0%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	4	3.0%

Lack of knowledge or skills, Lack of training opportunities, Time constraints	4	3.0%
Lack of knowledge or skills, Limited access to AI tools	3	2.3%
Lack of training opportunities, Concerns about ethical use, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	10	7.6%
Lack of training opportunities, Limited access to AI tools	6	4.5%
Lack of training opportunities, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	3	2.3%
Limited access to AI tools	12	9.1%
Limited access to AI tools, Concerns about ethical use	15	11.4%
Limited access to AI tools, Concerns about ethical use, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	7	5.3%
Limited access to AI tools, Risk of student over-dependence on AI	3	2.3%
Limited access to AI tools, Risk of student over-dependence on AI, Time constraints	3	2.3%
Risk of student over-dependence on AI, Time constraints	6	4.5%

Table 3 shows that perceived barriers of using GenAI are multi-faceted and that they tend to co-exist based on the results of the respondents. Limited access to AI tools in conjunction with ethical concerns (11.4%), and ethical considerations along with over-dependence risk of students (10.6) were the most frequent reported issues. Moreover, inaccessibility to AI tools alone constituted 9.1, which represents infrastructure and availability as a significant limitation. There are also several responses that emphasise the gaps in capabilities, with the absence of knowledge/skills and trainings opportunities being seen in various combinations proving the significance of organised capacity-building. All in all, the results indicate that the access, ethics, and issues with student dependency are the prevailing challenges that inform the implementation of GenAI.

Table 4
Support or Training Needed

	N	%
Access to AI tools and software	9	6.8%
Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching	10	7.6%
Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Institutional policy and encouragement	3	2.3%
Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice	3	2.3%
Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice, Institutional policy and encouragement	4	3.0%
Access to AI tools and software, Peer sharing or community of practice	3	2.3%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI	6	4.5%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching	3	2.3%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice	7	5.3%

Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice, Institutional policy and encouragement	3	2.3%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching	7	5.3%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice	3	2.3%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Technical support from institution	3	2.3%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Technical support from institution, Access to AI tools and software	4	3.0%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Technical support from institution, Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching	4	3.0%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Technical support from institution, Access to AI tools and software, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice, Institutional policy and encouragement	15	11.4%
Formal training or workshops on Generative AI, Technical support from institution, Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice	4	3.0%
Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching	21	15.9%
Guidelines or best practices for AI use in teaching, Peer sharing or community of practice	6	4.5%
Peer sharing or community of practice	10	7.6%
Technical support from institution, Access to AI tools and software, Peer sharing or community of practice, Institutional policy and encouragement	4	3.0%

Table 4 bring together the categories of support or training that respondents reported they would require to increase GenAI integration in teaching. Guidelines or best practices on AI use in teaching (15.9% in the first place) was the most often requested need, which demonstrates the high demand to have a clear and practical guidance regarding how to use AI in the classroom. One of the biggest combined requirements was a holistic package of formal training/workshops, technical assistance, access to AI resources, guidelines, peer exchange/community of practice, and institutional policy / encouragement (11.4%), implying that many lecturers need multi-layered assistance, not single ones. Furthermore, peer sharing/community of practice and access to AI tools and software was mentioned in the response's multiple times, which served as support to the significance of both resources and collaborative capacity-building.

Table 5
Correlation Analysis

		GenAI Adoption Scale	Impact on Teaching Strategy Scale
b. GenAI Adoption Scale	Pearson Correlation	1	.867**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	132	132
Impact on Teaching Strategy Scale	Pearson Correlation	.867**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	132	132

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 demonstrates that GenAI adoption has a strong, positive, and significant association with the perceived influence on teaching strategies ($r = 0.867$, $p < .01$, $N = 132$). This means that the higher the lecturers reported the greater was GenAI adoption, the more they reported the changes in their teaching strategies. The size of the correlation indicates a highly strong association, which means that the use of GenAI is closely associated with perceived instructional adaptation in such areas as planning, delivery, assessment, and feedback. On the whole, the finding validates RO2 by showing that the more GenAI is adopted the more pronounced the reported effect on teaching strategy.

Group Differences

Table 6
Independent Samples t-Test (Sex)

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
GenAI Adoption Scale	Equal variances assumed	2.259	.135	-1.348	130	.180	-.15417	.11438	-.38046	.07212
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.467	103.652	.145	-.15417	.10510	-.36259	.05425
Impact on Teaching Strategy Scale	Equal variances assumed	9.580	.002	-1.537	130	.127	-.15103	.09827	-.34545	.04339
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.745	114.803	.084	-.15103	.08654	-.32246	.02040

Table 6 indicates that sex does not significantly influence either GenAI adoption or perceived impact on teaching strategies. For the GenAI Adoption Scale, Levene's test was not significant ($p = .135$), so equal variances were assumed; the t-test showed no significant difference between males and females, $t(130) = -1.348$, $p = .180$, with a small mean difference (−0.154) and a 95% CI that crosses zero (−0.380, 0.072). For the Impact on Teaching Strategy Scale, Levene's test was significant ($p = .002$), so equal variances were not assumed; the result remained non-significant, $t(114.803) = -1.745$, $p = .084$ (95% CI: −0.322, 0.020).

Overall, the measurement scales demonstrated very good reliability (GenAI adoption $\alpha = 0.915$; teaching strategy impact $\alpha = 0.887$). Respondents were mainly female (67.4%) and largely aged 40–49 years (59.8%), with most having 11–15 years of experience (43.2%). GenAI adoption was high across all items (means > 4.00). Key challenges centred on access, ethics, and student over-dependence, while the most requested support was clear guidelines and comprehensive training. GenAI adoption strongly correlated with teaching strategy impact (r

= 0.867, p < .01). Sex differences were not significant, but experience significantly affected adoption.

Discussion

Level of GenAI Adoption Among Educators in Pahang

The results of the descriptive analysis show that the GenAI adoption level is high, and the mean score of all five items of the adoption is greater than 4.00. The trend indicates that GenAI is no longer used to trial but is actively used in the common practice of instructional support. Recent educator-centred evidence also emphasizes that institutional backing and educator confidence are two variables that are tightly connected with the implementation of GenAI in teaching work that is done in a long-term perspective (Collie et al., 2024). Practically, the adoption scale has good reliability which provides further evidence to the fact that adoption is being recorded regularly in the given population of educators.

Impact of GenAI Adoption on Teaching Strategies

The correlation test revealed that the GenAI adoption was strongly positively associated with the perceived effect on teaching strategies (r = .867, p = .01). This suggests that educator who report increased GenAI usage also report increased change in the instructional planning practices and the practices related to instructional delivery. GenAI has been placed as a co-design tool that could help reduce the time spent in the lesson planning process, create alternative activity designs, and aid in structuring feedback based on the problematic focus of the present study (Dogan, 2025; Willert & Würz, 2025). Although the correlation does not define causality, the extent of association implies that GenAI use is strongly linked with perceived pedagogical adaptation.

Perceived Benefits and Challenges of GenAI in Teaching and Learning

Challenges profile indicates that barriers do not standalone, they often co-exist. The greatest themes revolve around inadequate access to tools, ethical, and dangers of student over-dependence. This corresponds to open-access syntheses of GenAI in education that continue to highlight integrity, reliability of outputs, and dependency on students as constant risks that need in advance governance and capacity-building (Noroozi et al., 2024; Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023b). The results of the support needs support this interpretation: the most often among the educators are asked guidelines or best practice, and the most significant number of respondents would like to get a full set of support that includes training, technical support, access, peer learning and encouragement of an institutional policy. It is a reflection of the international guidance that emphasizes the presence of transparent institutional structures and personnel training as the conditions to do such implementation responsibly (Sabzalieva & Valentini, 2023b).

Demographic Differences in Adoption and Impact

Examination of groups reveals no sexually statistically significant adoption differences or perceived impact differences. Nevertheless, the adoption of GenAI was also greatly affected by teaching experience (p = .002) but not by the perceived impact on teaching strategies (p = .112). This implies that experience might influence willingness or comfort to embrace GenAI, yet when adopted, the effect of the latter on instruction might be experienced differently at the

experience level. The previous studies show that educator GenAI self-efficacy and valuing are the main sources of integration, and this motivation may depend on the background traits and workplace conditions (Collie et al., 2024). Based on this, the adoption differences attributed to experience in this study are most likely to be unequally confident or interpolated as useful or exposed to facilitating support.

Conclusion

In general, the use of GenAI among the educators of the Pahang community college is high and it is closely related with the perceived change of the teaching strategy. Among the major limitations, one can single out access to tools, ethical issues and the risk of student's dependency, whereas the most obvious areas of support include guidelines and thorough training. The perceived impact of teaching-strategy is not differentiated by experience, whereas adoption is. These results confirm the necessity of a systematic regulation and the development of capacity to maintain responsible and efficient GenAI-enabled teaching practice.

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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Contact emails: shuhaili@kkmen.edu.my
fazli@kkmen.edu.my

The Wooden Clogs in *Shishuo Xinyu*: Everyday Use, Gracious Bearing, and Official Seclusion

Chunyao Li, Nanfang College Guangzhou, China

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (*Shishuo Xinyu*), the footwear described as wooden clogs appears eight times. In the three anecdotes about Zheng Xuan and two other figures, the clogs are ordinary daily items with little cultural significance. By contrast, in the three anecdotes about Ruanfu and the Wang brothers (Wang Xianzhi and Wang Huizhi), the clogs embody the Wei–Jin temperament. Ruanfu's preference for wooden clogs over wealth suggests his engagement with the external world is aesthetic rather than utilitarian, a stance praised by contemporaries. The Wang brothers' preference for "high-toothed wooden clogs" signals unrestrained personalities and disdain for secular ritual proprieties. When confronted with a fire, their responses differ: on the one hand, Wang Xianzhi's magnanimity somewhat exceeds Wang Huizhi's; On the other hand, this entry also hints at the aristocracy's dress fashions of the time. The clogs also reflect nobles' ambivalent attitudes within official life. *Shishuo Xinyu* records Yu Liang, disappointed in politics, wearing wooden clogs to mingle with subordinates; another entry notes Yu Liang wearing wooden clogs to visit hermit Zhai Tang, but donning formal footwear (lǚ) when visiting hermit Zhou Shao, a contrast that illuminates the Wei–Jin era's nuanced mindset of heroes navigating between officialdom and withdrawal (shi and yin).

Keywords: Shishuo Xinyu, wooden clogs, Wei-Jin temperament

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Introduction

In popular stereotype, wooden clogs are seen as a typically "Japanese" form of footwear. In fact, however, the appearance and popularization of wooden clogs in Japan postdate those in China. According to ancient Chinese sources, wooden clogs had already become common and fashionable by the Warring States period. Under Han ritual law, wooden clogs were regarded as relatively casual, informal footwear. From the late Eastern Han onward, however, the social upper strata began to wear wooden clogs for outings and socializing, and this fashion persisted from the end of the Han through the Sui and Tang, covering the entire Six Dynasties period. Wooden clogs appear eight times in *Shishuo Xinyu*. In the entries on Zheng Xuan, Xi Chao, and Wang Shu, the "clogs" are fairly ordinary daily items without strong cultural implication; the three entries concerning Ruan Fu and the Wang brothers reflect the so-called Wei–Jin temperament; and the two entries involving Yu Liang reflect the special mindset of Wei–Jin literati regarding life questions such as official service and withdrawal. The following discussion treats these cases separately.

The Wooden Clogs as Everyday Items

The Wooden Clogs Worn by Zheng Xuan

In the *Shishuo Xinyu*, wooden clogs first appear in the chapter of *Wenxue*. The story records a feud between the classicist Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan. The gist of the original is as follows:

> Zheng Xuan studied under Ma Rong but could not see Ma Rong for three years; Ma Rong only had his outstanding disciples instruct Zheng Xuan. Ma Rong attempted to calculate celestial phenomena but could not obtain accurate results, and his disciples could not resolve the problem either. Someone suggested that Zheng Xuan might be able to do it. Ma Rong had Zheng Xuan try, and Zheng Xuan immediately solved the difficult problem, to everyone's surprise and admiration. When Zheng Xuan completed his studies and took his leave of Ma Rong, Zheng Xuan sighed, 'Civilization will now flow eastward with Zheng Xuan', and Ma Rong feared that Zheng Xuan's fame would surpass his own, which made him anxious. On the other hand, Zheng Xuan feared someone would pursue and kill him. He sat beneath a bridge and pressed his wooden clogs against the surface of the water. Ma Rong intended to use divination to hunt down Zheng Xuan, but after consulting the oracle he told those around him, 'Zheng Xuan is beneath earth, above water, beside wood', which indicated he was surely doomed. Ma Rong therefore abandoned the pursuit, and Zheng Xuan astonishingly escaped death. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118)

We can be fairly certain that this story was invented. In his annotation Liu Xiaobiao writes, "Ma Rong was a widely influential and morally upright Confucian scholar. Zheng Xuan was Ma Rong's disciple and inherited his learning; how could Ma Rong have harbored malice against him and killed him?" (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118). Liu Xiaobiao's analysis is persuasive: Ma Rong had no motive to frame Zheng Xuan. Although the tale is probably not historically true, it nevertheless yields some potentially valuable information.

In the latter half of this tale, there is a detail about sorcery: Zheng Xuan walked beneath the bridge and pressed his wooden clogs against the surface of the water; meanwhile, Ma Rong, far away, based on his divination tools, inferred that Zheng Xuan was beneath "Earth", above "Water", and beside "Wood", which signified that he would surely die. In the above detail,

Zheng Xuan used his wooden clogs to conjure himself above the "Water" and beside the "Wood", and thus escaped unharmed. Since one could readily produce wooden clogs to perform sorcery, this suggests that the wooden clogs were Zheng Xuan's everyday footwear. Liu Xiaobiao questions the overall authenticity of this story but does not challenge this particular detail (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118). And according to related historical sources such as the *Hou Han Shu*, in the era of Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan, wooden clogs had indeed gradually become commonplace daily footwear for the general public.

In this story, the only part that is difficult to understand is the expression "pressing the wooden clogs against the water surface". Wooden clogs do not float, so how could Zheng Xuan make them press against the water surface? One possible method is that Zheng Xuan sits beneath the bridge with his legs hanging down, allowing them to touch the water. In this way, his position would simultaneously satisfy the three conditions: beneath "Earth", above "Water", and beside "Wood". Ma Rong, relying on his knowledge of "sorcery", inferred Zheng Xuan's doomed fate (Liu et al., 2013, p. 118).

The Wooden Clogs Worn by Wang Shu

In *Shishuo Xinyu*, the story of Wang Shu eating eggs is recorded, and it also mentions wooden clogs.

> Wang Shu's temper was irascible. Once, when he was eating eggs, he tried to stab them with chopsticks but failed, becoming very angry and throwing the egg to the ground. The egg spun and rolled on the ground; he then attempted to press the egg with the teeth of his wooden clogs, but failed again. He grew extremely angry, picked the egg up from the ground, put it in his mouth, bit it, and spat it out. When Wang Xizhi heard about this, he laughed loudly and said, 'Wang Shu's father is like this; what is strange about Wang Shu's behavior?' (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 588–589)

The plot is simple but amusing: Wang Shu seems to have had difficulty managing his emotions. However, according to the *Jin Shu*, Wang Shu's temperament was calm; some people insulted him with harsh language, but Wang Shu did not respond and simply looked at the wall, which people praised (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 588–589).

From this record, it appears that for much of the time Wang Shu's temper did not resemble the egg-eating episode. Nevertheless, the egg-eating story is also recorded in the *Jin Shu*, which is somewhat puzzling. On this, Zhu Bilian argues that the egg-eating story is only one of Wang Shu's early experiences, "Wang Shu later changed this bad temper" (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 588–589). I think it is possible that other explanations cannot be ruled out. Perhaps, during the egg-eating moment, Wang Shu experienced a relatively rare emotional outburst, which is human and not unusual. Or perhaps the story was "falsely attributed" to Wang Shu. At the end of the tale, Wang Xizhi's biting mockery of Wang Shu further fuels suspicion that the egg-eating episode may have been embellished or transplanted.

In this story, of course, the discussions above are not essential. The wooden clogs in the tale are not a "cultural prop"; their appearance suggests that this type of footwear may have been a common household item at the time, and Wang Shu may have been accustomed to wearing such shoes during meals.

The Wooden Clogs Discussed by Xi Chao

In *Shishuo Xinyu*, there is also a record about wooden clogs. The entry tells of a plan by the court to dispatch Xie Xuan to lead a northern expedition to resist Fu Jian's southward invasion. Although Xi Chao did not get along well with Xie Xuan, he nonetheless assessed Xie Xuan fairly, roughly saying: "I have worked with him; regarding a class of matters concerning formal footwear (lü, 履) and informal footwear (ji, 屐), he can handle them very well. From this, one can infer that he will surely succeed" (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 255–256). In the above quotation, "lü" and "ji" do not refer to specific shoes; they are merely metaphors for "small matters". The whole passage means that "even in details, Xie Xuan handles things very appropriately" (Liu et al., 2013, pp. 255–256). Both "lü" and "ji" are footwear, and by juxtaposing these two kinds of shoes when expressing his view, Xi Chao's statement also suggests that in contemporary social life, "ji" (wooden clogs) was a common and ordinary type of footwear.

The Wooden Clogs as Symbols of Wei-Jin Elegance

Ruan Fu, the Waxer of Wooden Clogs

When speaking of the wooden clogs in *Shishuo Xinyu*, the story of Ruan Fu is probably the best known. It states:

> Zu Yue loved money, while Ruan Fu loved wooden clogs. … Someone visits Zu Yue and finds him dealing with his wealth; when the guest arrives, there is not enough time to gather all the wealth, leaving two small baskets behind, which Zu Yue blocks with his body, looking very uneasy. Someone visits Ruan Fu and sees him waxing the wooden clogs, and sighs: 'I don't know how many pairs of wooden clogs one will wear in a lifetime!' His expression is very relaxed and at ease. From then on, people concluded that, in some respects, Ruan Fu surpassed Zu Yue. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 225)

In the tale above, people compare Zu Yue and Ruan Fu and conclude that Ruan Fu surpasses Zu Yue. Why is that? I think there are at least two reasons. First, Zu Yue loved wealth but was secretive; Ruan Fu loved wooden clogs but was very straightforward. Although both men were attached to something, Zu Yue's character had already been twisted, whereas Ruan Fu's mindset was very untroubled; this difference suggests that he was closer to a state of freedom. This is the first reason.

Second, could money not buy wooden clogs? Money can be exchanged for any commodity; in a sense, money's "value" is naturally far higher than that of wooden clogs. Yet, people still hold that "loving wooden clogs" is more about "elegant bearing" or "nobility". The explanation is simple: the wooden clogs Ruan Fu prefers look "useless", but this precisely reflects his attitude toward the external world as aesthetic; Zu Yue's money looks "useful", but this precisely reveals his attitude toward the external world as utilitarian. This is the second reason.

Wang Huizhi, the One Who Couldn't Be Bothered to Wear Wooden Clogs

Shishuo Xinyu records a tale about Wang Huizhi and Wang Xianzhi:

> Wang Huizhi and Wang Xianzhi once shared a room. Suddenly a fire broke out. Wang Huizhi hurriedly rushed out and did not have time to put on his wooden clogs. Wang Xianzhi remained very calm, slowly calling his retinue to help him leave the scene of the fire, behaving exactly as he did in normal times. Based on this incident, people distinguish the bearing of Wang Hui-zhi and Wang Xianzhi.

In this narrative, the narrator distinguishes their temperaments by how they faced the fire. Facing the blaze, Wang Huizhi did not even have time to wear his wooden clogs, which indicates that, at least at that moment, wooden clogs were his everyday footwear. Did Wang Xianzhi also wear wooden clogs? The original text does not say; but from the context, his dress is estimated to be similar to his brother's. Following the narrator's description, I even boldly conjecture: Wang Xianzhi not only wore wooden clogs, but also wore high-toothed wooden clogs. Why? The text says: "Wang Xianzhi was very calm, and slowly called his retinue to help him leave the fire site." Why would he need others to assist him? One possibility is that he had been drinking, or had taken some special medicine. But once he sensed the fire, he knew to escape, which basically rules out the possibility of him being unconscious. Another possibility is that, due to his attire being very special, he needed attendants to assist him.

In the Wei and Jin periods, scholars tended to wear garments that exuded an aura of the immortals, a style that, from the perspective of daily life, was not very convenient. But this "self-chosen trouble" was indeed the fashion trend of the time: from the Wei dynasty to the Jin dynasty, because society was relatively poor or because hierarchical norms could not be fully carried out, people dressed rather casually, and thus the Wei–Jin era formed a peculiar dress fashion. Some literati even scorned rank distinctions, deliberately wearing loose clothing and not grooming their hair (Shen & Wang, 2004, pp. 67–68). Wearing broad clothes and high-toothed wooden clogs would make walking very inconvenient without assistance, let alone running. Hence Wang Xianzhi needed to call his attendants to help him (Ning, 2022).

Wang Xianzhi, the One Who Wore High-Toothed Wooden Clogs

Although Wang Xianzhi slightly surpassed Wang Huizhi, it is undeniable that the two brothers were both figures of considerable "elegant bearing" for their time. The following story comes from *Shishuo Xinyu Jian'ao*, with Wang Xianzhi himself as one of the protagonists. Among them, is "Wang Xianzhi's brother" Wang Huizhi? The original text does not explicitly say, but the possibility is fairly high. "Arrogance" and "elegance" are both elements of the Wei–Jin style. The original reads as follows:

> Wang Xianzhi and his brother went to see their uncle; they wore very formal shoes and appeared very polite. After their cousin (that is, their uncle's son) died, they all switched to high-toothed wooden clogs, and their attitudes became very arrogant. Their uncle asked them to sit; they both said, 'Busy, no time.' After they left, their uncle lamented, 'If my son hadn't died, would they dare to behave like this!' (Liu et al., 2013, p. 511)

Zhu Bilian believes that Wang Xianzhi and his brother's attitudes reflect their "snobbery" (Liu et al., 2013, p. 512). I think this claim may be somewhat presumptuous. As is well known, it is difficult to judge relationships among relatives. In the story, Wang Xianzhi and his brother no longer show respect to their uncle, which certainly carries the suspicion of

"snobbery", but we cannot rule out another possibility: they simply did not like their uncle to begin with. Since a cousin with a similar temperament had already died, there was little need for them to maintain a kinship that existed only in name. This interpretation seems to be more in line with the brothers' character.

Additionally, this story also corroborates an important etiquette of the time: in more formal occasions, people were required to wear shoes of the lǚ (履) type; only in relatively casual settings could people wear the jī (屐) type. After their cousin's death, Wang Xianzhi and his brothers brazenly switched to high-toothed wooden clogs to visit their uncle, and they even refused to stay at their uncle's house. This behavior undoubtedly violated etiquette, so their uncle's anger is easy to understand. But was the brothers' conduct due to their temperament, or were there some other reasons? Based on the available materials, we cannot determine.

The Wooden Clogs as a Means to Express Attitudes Toward Official Service or Seclusion

Yu Liang Exhibits His Elegance on the South Tower

Regarding the last two stories about wooden clogs, the involved figure is Yu Liang. The first story is found in *Rongzhi*, and its text reads as follows:

> When Yu Liang was serving in Wuchang… Yu Liang's subordinates gathered on the South Tower. Just as the music began to swell, a sound of wooden clogs could be heard from the stairs. Everyone guessed that Yu Liang had arrived. Not long thereafter, Yu Liang came forward with more than ten people; his subordinates rose to retreat, but Yu Liang slowly said: 'Everyone, don't hurry to leave; I am very interested in your activities.' He then sat down and joined in the merriment with them. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 410)

In the above stories, Yu Liang's appearance has a strong dramatic sense of "you hear the sound before you see the person". And Yu Liang's "sound" does not come from his words, but from his footsteps. Because wooden clogs are made from special materials, they have a distinctive feature: the sounds they produce can be high, low, slow, or rapid (Guo, 1990). When Yu Liang walked, the sound of the wooden clogs was loud and brisk, which suggested the owner's vivid personality. And once people heard the clogs, they immediately guessed that the visitor must be Yu Liang, showing that Yu Liang's subordinates were very familiar with this volume and rhythm of footsteps. In other words, Yu Liang regularly wore wooden clogs and walked in this way.

Yu Liang Visits Hermits in Wooden Clogs

The final story about wooden clogs comes from *Shishuo Xinyu Qiyi*. In this story, Yu Liang plays a supporting role, but if one considers Liu Xiaobiao's annotations, the story is also related to wooden clogs. The original text is as follows:

> Zhai Tang and Zhou Shao are a pair of friends who live in seclusion together in Xunyang. Yu Liang went to persuade them to come out to hold office; Zhou Shao eventually agreed, but Zhai Tang persisted in his decision. Later, Zhou Shao, in his official capacity, visited Zhai Tang, who refused to speak to him. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 437)

After the original text in *Shishuo Xinyu*, Liu Xiaobiao added one note:

> At first, Yu Liang arrived at Jiangzhou, and, hearing that there was a recluse like Zhai Tang, he went dressed neatly and visited him wearing wooden clogs. Yu Liang's attitude was very respectful; Zhai Tang said, 'What you face is nothing but a wastrel.' Yu Liang highly admired his eloquence and recommended him to his superior. The superior invited Zhai Tang to participate in government service, but Zhai Tang refused to go. Zhang Xuan commented, 'This gentleman is like a dragon concealed within, who will not change his state.' Later, Zhai Tang died at his own home. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 438)

An interesting detail in Liu Xiaobiao's annotations: Yu Liang wanted to invite Zhai Tang to come out and take office, and his attitude was very humble. But why did he wear wooden clogs? According to ritual propriety, visiting important people in wooden clogs is impolite. In the earlier story, Wang Xianzhi and his brothers initially visited their maternal uncle wearing formal shoes. Could it be that, being in official circles, Yu Liang did not understand the basic social etiquette of the time? I suppose Yu Liang had anticipated the recluse's mindset, so he deliberately wore wooden clogs instead of formal footwear. He merely wanted to use the wooden clogs as a prop to move Zhai Tang to come out of seclusion, just as he had successfully persuaded Zhou Shao before. But Zhai Tang remained unmoved, insisting on seclusion until death, and never entered official service.

In another interesting detail about Yu Liang's visit to the recluse: Yu Liang wore formal shoes and persuaded Zhou Shao, but soon after he entered official service, Zhou Shao regretted his earlier decision. In Liu Xiaobiao's annotations, it is said:

> Zhou Shao… lived in seclusion with Zhai Tang on Lushan. After Yu Liang arrived at Jiangzhou, hearing that there were two worthy men, Zhai Tang and Zhou Shao, he went to visit them dressed neatly in formal shoes. When Zhou Shao heard that Yu Liang had come, he hid. Yu Liang then visited frequently again, and on one occasion happened to encounter Zhou Shao in the forest, shooting birds, and he urged him again with his previous words. After returning, Yu Liang said: 'Zhou Shao can hold office.' Later, Zhou Shao was promoted to an official. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 600)

That is to say, Yu Liang did not manage to move Zhai Tang with wooden clogs, but he wore formal shoes, gradually approached Zhou Shao, and ended his seclusion. However, not long after, Zhou Shao regretted it. *Youhui* records the following story:

> Yu Liang wanted to promote Zhou Shao, but Zhou Shao firmly refused. Each time he went to visit Zhou Shao, Zhou Shao would see Yu Liang and flee through the back gate. Once, Yu Liang visited unexpectedly; Zhou Shao could not escape, and the two sat face to face for a whole day. Yu Liang asked Zhou Shao to entertain him; Zhou Shao provided only very simple food. Yu Liang reluctantly ate but was very happy. They discussed current events together, and finally agreed to undertake a career together. Zhou Shao obtained an official post, but was not happy. One late night, he lamented: 'I have been betrayed by Yu Liang!' After this lament he fell ill and died. (Liu et al., 2013, p. 600)

Zhou Shao's ending is heartrending. From his last words, it seems he harbored deep resentment toward Yu Liang. But isn't ending his life of seclusion also a free-will choice?

My view may be accused of over-interpretation: the informal shoes (ji) and the formal shoes actually correspond to two life choices—seclusion and serving in officialdom. Zhou Shao still had political ambitions, which allowed Yu Liang to take advantage of him. Zhai Tang's commitment to seclusion was very firm; he even severed ties with old friends, but would never be swayed by Yu Liang wearing wooden clogs. Therefore, he could complete his life as a recluse. Zhang Xuan praised Zhai Tang as "a dragon hidden within", which is a very apt compliment. In the Wei and Jin period, Zhang Xuan and Xie Xuan were equally renowned; people called them "Double Xuan". How could such people lack discernment?

Conclusion

In *Shishuo Xinyu*, wooden clogs play three roles. First, they are merely ordinary footwear. Second, they serve as a prop for Wei–Jin scholars to display their bearing. Third, wooden clogs also hint at whether their wearer harbors ambitions to participate in government. Of these three roles, the first carries little cultural connotation; the second is widely known; the third attracts relatively less attention. In the history of Chinese culture, wooden clogs are a very important symbol: they carry an intrinsic hermit-like nonconformist aura and reflect a scholar's attitude of not being bound by ritual propriety. From an archaeological perspective, the earliest wooden clogs in China were unearthed at the Liangzhu culture site; the most exquisite wooden clogs were found in the tomb of Zhu Ran—the Zhu Ran family is one of the "Four Great Clans of Jiangdong" mentioned in *Shishuo Xinyu*. In the Jin dynasty, as Chinese culture's aesthetic orientation shifted, wooden clogs entered their golden age. It is, however, somewhat regrettable that after the Sui-Tang empire was established, wooden clogs gradually became marginalized; by the Song dynasty they had finally degenerated into utilitarian shoes.

The development of wooden clogs in Japan and the popularity of wooden clogs in China happened to be "off-peak" relative to each other. Based on historical records of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, wooden clogs and their culture were brought to Japan early by the envoys who accompanied the Sui and Tang dynasties, but in the Nara and Heian periods they did not spread widely in Japan. Modern people often mistake wooden clogs for a "Japanese characteristic footwear", largely reflecting a stereotype of Edo-period Japan. I have another article, using an examination of artifacts, literature, and images, and conclude that the popularity of wooden clogs in Japan began roughly in the Kamakura period.

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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Contact email: chunyaochunyao@aliuyun.com

Exploring the Characteristics of Interactive Digital Tools to Enhance Engagement and Reduce Fatigue in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Norkhushaini Awang, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Muhammad Nur Hakim Shukor, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
Zarina Zainol, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This research explores the characteristics of interactive digital tools that enhance engagement and mitigate fatigue in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Given the rising global prevalence of ASD, there is a demand for effective interventions that address the unique cognitive and sensory challenges of these children. Traditional therapeutic methods often struggle with attention maintenance, frequently leading to autistic fatigue and reduced session efficacy. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with five experienced therapists from the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM). Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework, facilitated by NVivo software to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. The analysis identified five main themes which are digital technology platforms, interface design and user experience, educational outcomes and social learning, system usability and therapeutic efficacy, and implementation barriers. Results indicate that tools featuring simple instructions, adaptive difficulty, multisensory feedback, and relatable social scenarios significantly improve participation while preventing sensory overload. The findings indicate that successful digital tools must balance engaging activity with ease of use by employing simple steps and consistent, predictable patterns. This study concludes with a thematic map that offers practical guidelines for therapists and developers to improve digital tool design. By focusing on simple, sensory-friendly features that put the child first, these digital tools can become more reliable and effective, ultimately supporting better learning and emotional growth for children with ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), interactive digital tools, engagement, fatigue, thematic analysis

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Introduction

The global rise in the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with recent estimates indicating that approximately 1 in 36 children are diagnosed with the condition, has intensified the demand for specialized interventions (Maenner, 2021; Salloum-Asfar et al., 2024). ASD is a complex neurodevelopmental condition marked by challenges in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors. Standard therapy often struggles to keep children with ASD focused, as they may show little interest in schoolwork or become restless during tasks (Siyam & Abdallah, 2023). Furthermore, the inherent sensory and cognitive demands of these conventional activities often lead to heightened fatigue, which significantly reduces the efficacy of learning and therapeutic sessions (Keville et al., 2021). To address these challenges, there is a growing interest in leveraging interactive digital tools such as mobile applications, video games, and virtual reality to create supportive and motivating learning environments (Cardy et al., 2023). Research suggests that gamified environments can significantly improve social and emotional skills by providing immediate feedback and safe spaces for practice (Daud et al., 2023; López-Bouzas & Del Moral-Pérez, 2025). Additionally, virtual reality allows children to participate in interactive scenarios that simulate real-life situations, facilitating better skill acquisition (Kourtesis et al., 2023; Soleiman et al., 2023). Because children with ASD often have a natural affinity for screen-based media, these tools can make the therapeutic process more appealing, leading to increased participation and better generalization of learned behaviors (Cardy et al., 2023; Pliska et al., 2023). Despite these benefits, a critical gap remains in understanding how these technologies specifically influence fatigue levels. For children with ASD, fatigue is a serious issue that makes it difficult for them to concentrate and harms their overall well-being (Keville et al., 2021). Failure to incorporate these specific neurodivergent requirements into the design of digital tools may inadvertently exacerbate cognitive overload and burnout, thereby impeding sustained therapeutic progress and long-term developmental outcomes (Cardy et al., 2023). Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research method to explore the experiences of therapists at the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM). By identifying the specific characteristics of interactive digital tools that enhance engagement while mitigating fatigue, this research aims to develop a thematic map to guide the design of more sustainable and effective digital interventions for children with ASD.

Literature Review

Defining the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) represents a neurodevelopmental conditions primarily defined by persistent challenges in social communication, reciprocal interaction, and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior (Atsalaki & Kazanidis, 2025; Posar & Visconti, 2023). The clinical manifestation of ASD is heterogeneous, where individuals display a unique constellation of strengths and deficits (Vetri & Roccella, 2020). While some individuals possess fluent verbal communication skills, others may be nonverbal, necessitating the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) strategies (Aftab et al., 2023; Bhana et al., 2023). Cognitive profiles also vary extensively, ranging from profound intellectual impairment to superior intellectual capabilities (Christensen & Zubler, 2020). Consequently, the level of required support is individualized where some require substantial assistance with daily living, while others achieve high levels of independence (Maggio et al., 2023). As a lifelong condition, the needs and challenges of individuals with ASD evolve across the lifespan, requiring dynamic adjustments in support systems and environmental accommodations (Kumar & Bhattacharya, 2024; Naithani et al., 2022). The evolution of

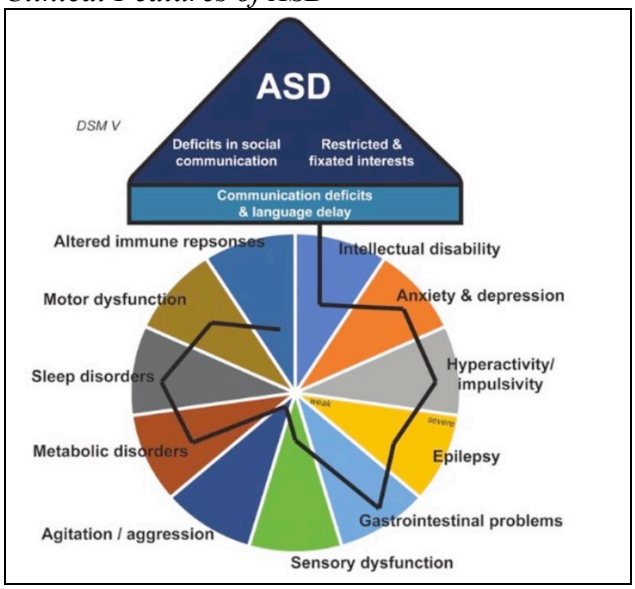
diagnostic criteria, particularly with the transition to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), has shifted the focus from distinct subcategories to a single, unified spectrum (Waterhouse, 2022). ASD is characterized by two primary domains are the social domain and the behavioral domain (Coffey et al., 2020; Zacharov et al., 2021). The DSM-5 classification introduces three levels of severity based on the intensity of support required: Level 1 (requiring support), Level 2 (requiring substantial support), and Level 3 (requiring very substantial support) (Posar & Visconti, 2023). This classification system acknowledges the diversity in intellectual and linguistic abilities, which can range from significant impairment to exceptional proficiency (Vogindroukas et al., 2022). However, the inherent heterogeneity of the disorder, often complicated by co-occurring medical, genetic, or psychiatric conditions, continues to challenge rigid categorization, reinforcing the view that ASD is not a unitary disorder but a multifaceted spectrum of biological and behavioral manifestations (Renzo et al., 2021; Waterhouse, 2022).

ASD Indicators

The behavioral markers of ASD typically emerge during infancy and early childhood (Abualait et al., 2024). In the social-communication domain, common signs include a lack of eye contact, diminished response to one's name, and difficulties in engaging in reciprocal or imaginative play (Okoye et al., 2023). Behavioral patterns often include stereotyped movements, an insistence on sameness, rigid adherence to routines, and fixated interests (Petrolini et al., 2023; Zacharov et al., 2021). In addition to these main symptoms, many children face co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, hyperactivity, and sleep problems, which can make their primary symptoms even more difficult to manage (Qi et al., 2023; Tsai et al., 2020). Identifying the condition early is a primary goal, as providing support as soon as possible is closely linked to better long-term progress and development (McCarty & Frye, 2020). Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and eye-tracking, are increasingly utilized to provide objective and efficient diagnostic screening, overcoming the limitations of traditional, subjective clinical assessments (Peng et al., 2021; Cortese et al., 2025; Solek et al., 2025). Figure 1 shows the clinical features of ASD, highlighting the core diagnostic criteria alongside a range of associated comorbidities.

Figure 1

Clinical Features of ASD



Source: Sauer et al., 2021

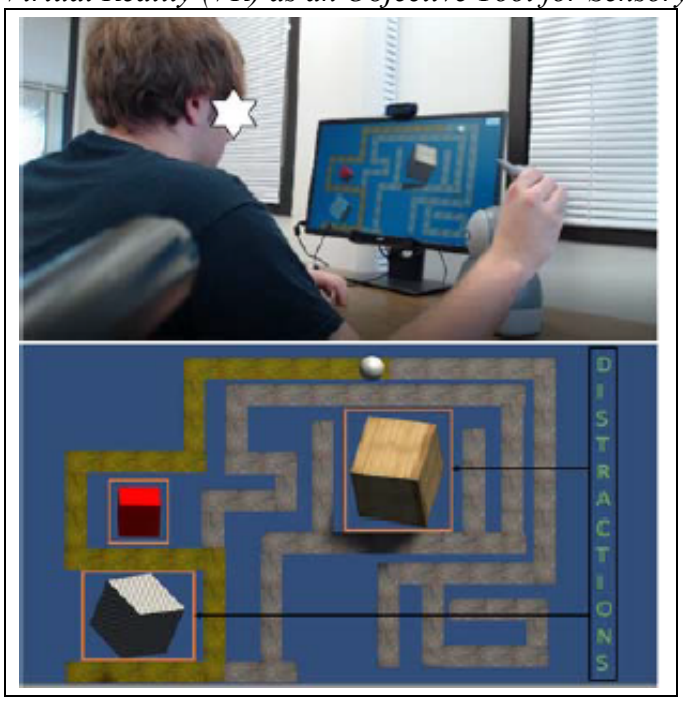
As illustrated in Figure 1, the primary standards for diagnosing ASD involve difficulties with social communication and the presence of narrow, repeated interests. While these core traits are essential for a diagnosis, other issues like language delays and communication gaps also commonly define the experience of those with ASD. The diagram uses a pie chart to show related health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and sensory issues, which vary in how much they affect a person. For example, the chart highlights severe challenges like epilepsy and stomach problems, while noting that others, such as motor skills or immune system changes, may be less intense. Ultimately, this visual emphasizes that ASD is highly diverse, meaning every individual faces a unique combination of symptoms at different levels of severity.

Digital Therapy Integration

Traditional intervention approaches for ASD are categorized into behavioral, educational, and technological strategies. Behavioral interventions, specifically Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), emphasize the systematic reinforcement of adaptive behaviors (Eckes et al., 2023). Educational strategies focus on creating predictable, structured environments to accommodate atypical sensory processing and attentional profiles (Mallory & Keehn, 2021). Recently, technological interventions including serious games and social robots have gained prominence due to their structured, interactive, and predictable nature (Scarcella et al., 2023). These digital platforms provide a safe environment for skill acquisition, reducing the uncertainty often associated with human-led social interactions. Interactive digital tools are particularly effective in addressing cognitive impairments, social communication deficits, and sensory sensitivities by offering tailored, engaging content that manages cognitive load and provides immediate, constructive feedback (Liu et al., 2021; Rezayi et al., 2023). The application to address neurodevelopmental needs is demonstrated in Figure 2, which illustrates the use of Virtual Reality (VR) as a tool for sensory assessment in ASD by integrating haptic feedback and eye-tracking systems to monitor real-time behavioral responses.

Figure 2

Virtual Reality (VR) as an Objective Tool for Sensory Assessment in ASD



Source: Koirala et al., 2019

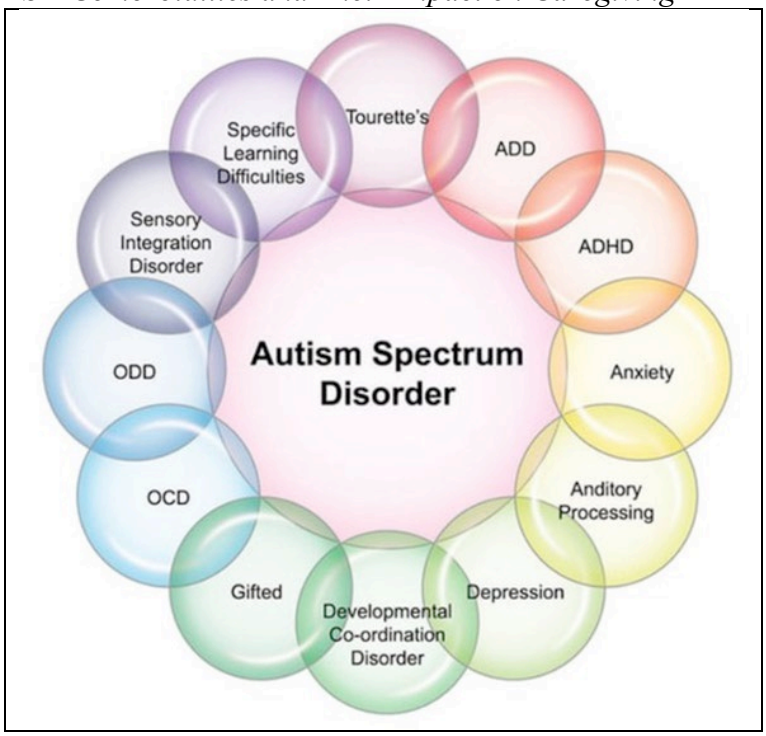
The study by Koirala et al. (2019) demonstrated that VR can objectively assess sensory processing differences in children with ASD, addressing the core drivers of engagement and fatigue. In this study, researchers utilized a Sensory Assessment Virtual Reality (SAVR) system that integrated haptic robots and eye-trackers to record real-time behavioral data with high spatial and temporal resolution. The findings revealed that children with ASD exhibited distinct visual and tactile processing patterns compared to typically developing peers, including a higher susceptibility to visual distractions. This research also mention that participants did not request breaks or report significant fatigue despite the complexity of the tasks. This suggested that the structured, predictable, and interactive nature of digital tools specifically their controllability sustained engagement without triggering the frustration or exhaustion typically associated with traditional clinical assessments. These results supported the premise that specific digital characteristics can be optimized to manage the sensory load and energy expenditure of children with ASD in therapeutic settings.

Fatigue Management in ASD

Fatigue, often referred to as autistic burnout or autistic fatigue, is a pervasive somatic symptom that significantly impairs daily functioning (Keville et al., 2021). In children with ASD, fatigue is frequently the result of navigating a world not designed for their sensory and cognitive processing styles (Keville et al., 2021). The effort required for social camouflaging the suppression of autistic traits to meet neurotypical expectations serves as a primary driver of chronic stress and subsequent exhaustion (Mahony & O'Ryan, 2022). This fatigue negatively impacts learning by hindering concentration and the ability to process new information (Mallory & Keehn, 2021). Addressing these energy regulation challenges is essential for facilitating meaningful participation in academic and therapeutic contexts.

Figure 3

ASD Comorbidities and Their Impact on Caregiving



Source: READS Consultancy, 2023

As depicted in Figure 3, the management of Autism Spectrum Disorder involves navigating an interconnected web of comorbidities that significantly intensify the logistical and emotional demands placed upon caregivers. This figure delineates the complex network of co-occurring conditions frequently associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), illustrating the multifaceted challenges inherent in managing the disorder. As visualized, these comorbidities ranging from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) to specific learning difficulties and anxiety function as interconnected layers of clinical complexity. These conditions necessitate a comprehensive therapeutic approach to address a child's simultaneous developmental, emotional, and cognitive requirements. Consequently, caregivers must navigate a demanding landscape of concurrent medical interventions, educational modifications, and specialized therapies. The synergistic effect of these disorders, including sensory integration challenges and depression, often leads to unique behavioral manifestations that intensify the demand for professional support. Ultimately, the interconnected nature of these conditions underscores the substantial emotional, financial, and temporal investments required by families to sustain the child’s long-term well-being and developmental progress.

Managing Fatigue Through Digital Tools

Interactive digital tools possess inherent characteristics that can significantly contribute to addressing fatigue in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A primary factor is the natural appeal and high acceptance of digital technologies by children with ASD, who are consistently reported to be attracted to screen-based media and video games, often preferring these formats for learning activities (Pliska et al., 2023). This inherent inclination fosters active engagement and provides motivating avenues for teaching skills and delivering supports (Cardy et al., 2023). By leveraging this natural preference, digital tools can make interventions less demanding and more enjoyable, thereby indirectly mitigating the mental exhaustion that leads to fatigue. Furthermore, these technologies are designed to help children with ASD experience less stress and neurophysiological distress, which are direct contributors to fatigue (Pergantis et al., 2025). By creating environments that specifically address and reduce these stressors, digital tools can help alleviate the physiological and psychological burden that often leads to exhaustion. This targeted reduction in discomfort allows for more comfortable and sustained participation in activities, potentially leading to improved energy regulation over time. The concept of "autistic fatigue" and "autistic burnout" highlights the critical need for interventions that acknowledge and alleviate these unique sources of tiredness in individuals with ASD (Keville et al., 2021). The capacity of digital tools to provide customizable and adaptable content is crucial (Cardy et al., 2023). By tailoring interfaces and tasks to match the specific needs and sensory sensitivities of each child, digital platforms minimize cognitive overload, a significant factor in digital fatigue (Supriyadi et al., 2025).

The ability of digital tools to adapt and personalize the learning environment is also critical, as this can greatly reduce cognitive overload by presenting information in manageable, digestible formats tailored to the individual's needs and capabilities (Keville et al., 2021). Personalization extends to pacing, allowing children to proceed at their own speed and repeat activities as necessary, which reduces pressure and anxiety that exacerbate fatigue. Moreover, the use of digital media enables creative and constructive environments, allowing for the development of differentiated, meaningful, and high-quality activities tailored to the individual's needs (Santos et al., 2016). Additionally, digital tools offer the opportunity to incorporate regular breaks and promote physical movement, strategies identified as effective in reducing digital fatigue (Murugan & M, 2024). Integrating timely reminders for breaks and exercises within the digital

platform encourages balanced engagement, thereby reducing the likelihood of prolonged screen exposure and its associated fatigue effects (Korunovska & Spiekermann, 2019). Moreover, anxiety, a common comorbidity in children with ASD, is often associated with depressive symptoms and self-injurious behavior but can be decreased with physical exercise (Lo et al., 2023). Digital technology also provides innovative methods for anxiety assessment and treatment, enabling customization that caters to individual needs (Adams et al., 2022). The adaptability and versatility of digital tools make them well-suited for addressing fatigue in children with ASD (Coulter et al., 2022; Keville et al., 2021; Pliska et al., 2023). Interactive digital tools employ specific strategies to manage and reduce factors that contribute to fatigue in children with ASD. A key approach involves directly alleviating stress and neurophysiological distress, which are recognized precursors to fatigue in this population. Assistive and developing technologies are specifically designed to help children with ASD experience less of these taxing conditions, leading to a more regulated internal state (Pergantis et al., 2025). The strategies employed include customization of interfaces to reduce sensory overload, providing clear and predictable task structures to minimize anxiety, and offering immediate, positive feedback to promote a sense of accomplishment and reduce frustration.

Another important strategy is the use of virtual environments for social skills training. Virtual reality applications, telehealth systems, social robots, and dedicated applications are all utilized to target communication, social learning, and imitation skills, as well as other conditions associated with ASD (Aresti-Bartolome & García-Zapirain, 2014). By simulating real-world interactions in a controlled, predictable setting, children can practice and improve their social abilities without the overwhelming stimuli that often accompany real-life situations. This not only enhances their social competence but also significantly reduces the social anxiety and mental effort required during interactions, thereby conserving energy and preventing fatigue. One of the main advantages of digital tools is the ability to offer multimodal learning experiences tailored to children with ASD. The integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements into digital platforms caters to different learning styles and sensory preferences, which may help avoid sensory overload. By using technology to identify distractions and potential causes of anxiety, sensory management recommendation systems can be used to give alerts to teachers and caregivers on how to improve risky environmental factors (Deng & Rattadilok, 2022). Moreover, the interactive and engaging nature of digital platforms can make learning more motivating and enjoyable, which reduces the perception of effort and increases willingness to participate. Gamified learning experiences, for example, transform monotonous tasks into engaging challenges, capturing children's attention and sustaining their engagement while diminishing the mental energy expenditure associated with traditional learning methods (Moreno et al., 2019). Another strategic characteristic of these tools is their ability to address sensory overload, a significant source of fatigue. Excessive noise, for example, can lead to sensory overload and increased anxiety in children with autism (Kwong et al., 2025). Technologies, such as aural perception controllable headsets, are developed as intervention tools to manage such sensory inputs, thereby directly reducing a common trigger for distress and subsequent fatigue (Kwong et al., 2025). By mitigating these environmental stressors and emotional burdens, interactive digital tools contribute to a less draining experience, promoting sustained engagement and conserving the child's energy reserves. In addition to their therapeutic applications, digital tools offer practical benefits that can help manage the daily demands faced by children with ASD.

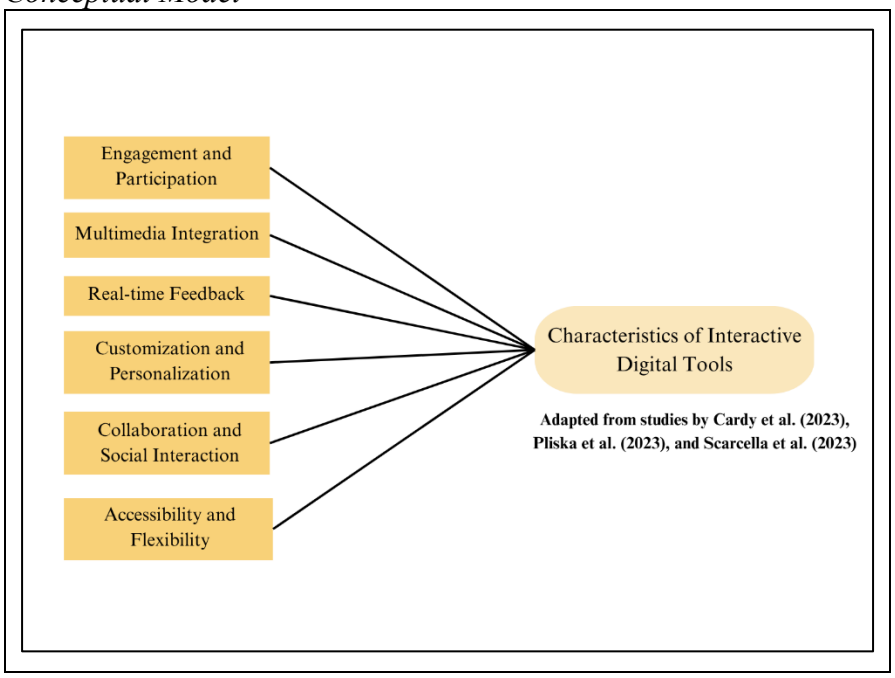
Research Gap

Although current studies emphasize the general advantages of digital tools for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a significant gap exists in understanding how specific design features affect fatigue management. Many existing tools focus on immediate engagement or skill building but often overlook the long-term sensory impact of extended use. In Malaysia, this issue is worsened by limited access to specialized resources and trained experts. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the professional insights of therapists at NASOM to identify the key features of interactive digital tools that support lasting engagement and emotional well-being for children with ASD.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences of therapists working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at NASOM. This philosophical approach is essential for exploring the complex perceptions and subjective experiences associated with digital tool usage within active therapy sessions. To ensure the collection of rich, expert data, five therapists were selected via purposive sampling, a technique that prioritizes relevant expertise and professional representation to address the specific research objectives. The primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews designed to capture nuanced insights into how interactive digital tools influence both engagement and fatigue-related outcomes.

Figure 4
Conceptual Model



The analytical phase followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) rigorous six-phase thematic analysis framework, which includes data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and final reporting. This systematic process was supported by NVivo software to enhance coding accuracy and facilitate the visualization of emergent patterns. As illustrated in Figure 4, the conceptual model outlines the dimensions of interactive digital tools including multimedia integration, personalization, and accessibility to provide a structured framework

for analyzing their impact on therapeutic engagement and fatigue mitigation in children with ASD. This framework, adapted from foundational studies by Cardy et al. (2023), Pliska et al. (2023), and Scarcella et al. (2023), served as the structural basis for developing the final thematic map. By synthesizing these theoretical characteristics with therapist insights, the study successfully identifies the specific digital features required to foster sustainable engagement while mitigating the sensory and cognitive toll on children with ASD.

Results and Discussion

This section presents a thematic analysis of the characteristics of interactive digital tools used to enhance engagement and mitigate fatigue in children with ASD. Utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, qualitative data were collected from five therapists at the NASOM through purposive, criterion-based sampling. Participants were selected based on their professional qualifications, a minimum of one year of direct experience with ASD, and practical expertise in integrating digital software into therapy sessions. Although the sample size was focused, data saturation was systematically achieved by the fourth interview, at which point no new codes or meanings emerged regarding the phenomenon. The resulting thematic map addresses the study's core objectives by investigating current engagement challenges and identifying the specific tool characteristics such as sensory integration and adaptive difficulty most effective in clinical practice. This rigorous analysis provides grounded, information-rich insights into the role of digital interventions in optimizing therapeutic and learning outcomes for children with ASD in the Malaysian context.

Familiarization and Immersion

In the initial phase of data analysis, semi-structured interview transcripts from five therapists at the NASOM were systematically prepared and managed using NVivo qualitative analysis software. This computational tool facilitated the efficient organization of large textual datasets, the maintenance of an audit trail for coding decisions, and the extraction of salient terms and patterns. Complementing this technical process, an immersive phase involved iterative readings of each transcript alongside the original audio recordings to ensure that contextual meanings, emotional subtleties, and the nuanced lived experiences of the therapists were faithfully captured. This deep engagement allowed for the organic detection of emerging themes, grounding subsequent analysis in participant insights rather than preconceived notions. To enhance the rigor of this familiarization process, automated computational insights were integrated with manual interpretation. A systematic scan of the documents was performed to group content sharing conceptual similarities, ensuring a comprehensive identification of recurring ideas that might otherwise be overlooked. These identified concepts were then tabulated by frequency of mention and reviewed in a checklist format to synthesize the raw text into manageable, meaningful clusters. To maintain maximum precision and fidelity to the participants' original utterances, coding was conducted at the sentence level.

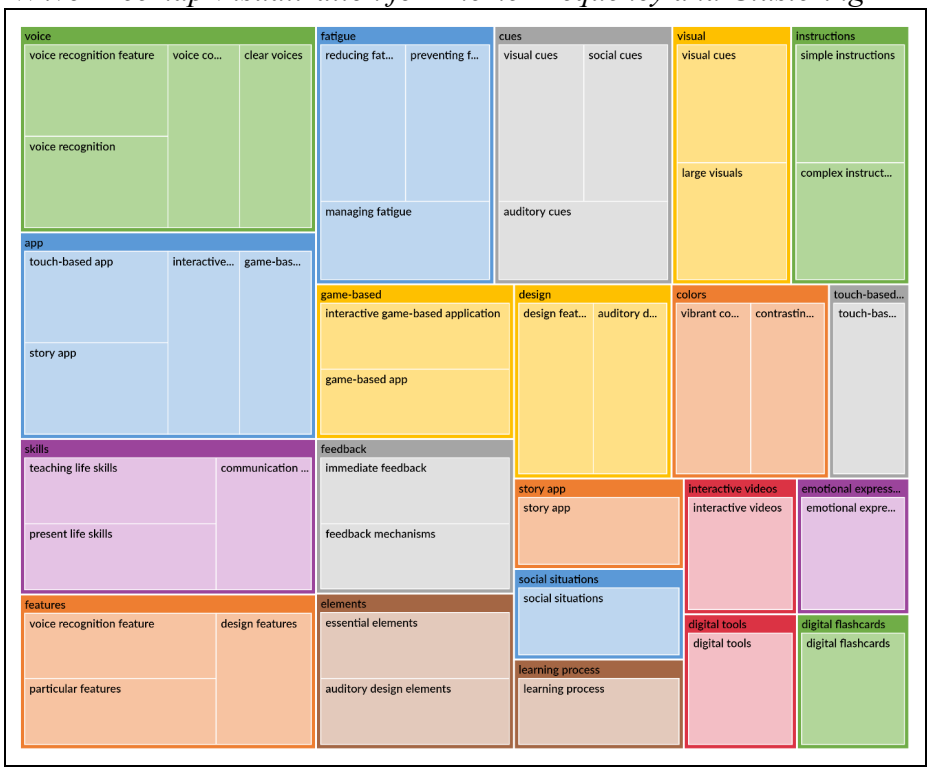
The resulting analysis was organized into a hierarchical system, enhancing the traceability and transparency of the analytical workflow. Visual representation of these coded transcripts emphasized the most significant concepts, where the prevalence of specific themes corresponded to their frequency in the data. Key insights from this stage included:

1. Dominant Therapeutic Tools
   Categories such as *story apps*, *touch-based apps*, and *game-based apps* emerged as the most frequently discussed interventions, indicating their perceived impact in autism therapy.

2. Thematic Clustering
   Broad categories including *visual, voice, features,* and *fatigue* effectively grouped related sub-themes, demonstrating how therapists naturally link specific digital functionalities to clinical outcomes.
3. Hierarchical Interplay
   The nesting of specific codes, such as *auditory cues* and *social situations* within larger thematic categories, revealed a layered structure of experience and a contextual interplay between digital features.
4. Analytical Prioritization
   This data-driven mapping established a clear rationale for subsequent inquiry, allowing for the systematic refinement of codes and the prioritization of themes most relevant to managing engagement and fatigue in children with ASD.

As illustrated in Figure 5, the treemap provides a thematic grouping of codes, highlighting prevalent topics such as *voice*, *fatigue*, *instructions,* and *design* through a color-coded hierarchical structure. This visualization facilitates a quantitative comparison of the data, where the relative size of blocks such as *voice recognition feature* and *reducing fatigue* indicates the primary emphasis placed by therapists on specific clinical preferences or practices. Furthermore, the map reveals a significant degree of interconnectedness, as cross-cutting priorities like *feedback* and *visual cues* emerge across multiple clusters rather than as isolated features. High-frequency themes, specifically *reducing fatigue* and *simple instructions*, underscore the core concerns tied to maintaining engagement while meeting the practical therapeutic needs of children with ASD. Ultimately, this data-driven visualization establishes a rigorous rationale for subsequent analysis, ensuring that the intervention design is grounded in the most salient, participant-driven elements of the research.

Figure 5
NVivo Treemap Visualization for Theme Frequency and Clustering



Generating Initial Codes

The systematic review of interview transcripts facilitated the extraction of initial codes that delineate the intersection of digital technology and ASD therapeutic practices. This foundational phase identified that therapists utilize a diverse array of platforms, including interactive game-based applications, digital flashcards, and animated story apps, to target specific developmental milestones such as communication and life skills. However, the data reveals significant attention and engagement challenges, as children frequently lose focus or become overwhelmed by complex interfaces and information processing overload. To address these barriers, therapists emphasize the importance of effective design features, specifically citing voice recognition responsiveness, vibrant colors, and immediate feedback mechanisms as critical drivers of sustained participation. The management of fatigue emerged as a dominant priority within the coding structure, with practitioners advocating for content segmentation and short sessions to prevent rapid exhaustion. Strategic interventions, such as breaking down complex scenarios into manageable parts and providing a balanced pace of activities, were identified as essential for maintaining a child's regulatory state. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted the necessity of sensory processing accommodations, including the use of clear, large visuals and calm auditory cues to minimize overstimulation. These initial codes collectively underscore that for digital tools to be therapeutically efficacious, they must balance high-interactivity with essential design principles like simple instructions and adaptive difficulty levels.

Table 1

Group Initial Codes and Corresponding Themes

Research Category	Initial Codes & Key Concepts	Summary of Findings
1. Digital Tools & Technologies	Game-based, Digital flashcards, Touch-based apps, Interactive videos, Story apps, Mobile apps, Digital tools.	Therapists utilize a diverse range of platforms including voice-recognition games and animated stories to teach communication and life skills.
2. Attention & Engagement Challenges	Lose focus, Tired quickly, Frustrated, Hard to focus, Overwhelmed, Information processing overload.	Maintaining attention is difficult due to complex interfaces, repetitive activities, or information overload, which leads to rapid fatigue.
3. Effective Design Features	Voice recognition, Visual cues, Colorful images, Shapes/Colors, Physical interaction, Character-driven scenarios.	Engagement is highest when tools incorporate multisensory elements like touch, voice responsiveness, and relatable characters.
4. Fatigue Management Strategies	Short sessions, Frequent breaks, Balanced pace, Short bursts of content, Manageable parts, Content segmentation.	Fatigue is managed by breaking complex tasks into small segments and allowing children to work at an individualized, self-paced speed.
5. Essential Design Principles	Clear/Simple instructions, Vibrant colors, Physical engagement, Flexible difficulty, Positive reinforcement, Immediate feedback.	Success depends on simplicity in functionality and the use of immediate rewards to maintain motivation and prevent frustration.

Research Category	Initial Codes & Key Concepts	Summary of Findings
6. Sensory Accommodations	Bright/Contrasting colors, Large visuals, Icons, Soft auditory cues, Movement, Background music.	Beneficial elements include clear visual hierarchies and calm, soothing audio to prevent sensory overstimulation during therapy.

As presented in Table1, the initial coding process identifies diverse digital platforms such as game-based applications, digital flashcards, and interactive videos used to facilitate learning at NASOM. The table further delineates critical challenges and effective design features, highlighting how voice recognition, visual cues, and content segmentation are utilized to manage attention deficits and reduce sensory fatigue. The qualitative analysis identifies a broad spectrum of digital platforms used in ASD therapy, ranging from voice-recognition games to animated story apps, which are designed to facilitate the acquisition of communication and life skills. While therapists face significant challenges with children losing focus or becoming overwhelmed by information overload, engagement is effectively sustained through multisensory design features such as physical touch, vibrant visual cues, and relatable character-driven scenarios. To mitigate rapid fatigue, the findings emphasize the necessity of essential design principles like content segmentation, adaptive difficulty levels, and the use of calm auditory cues to prevent sensory overstimulation.

Searching for Themes

The third phase of the data analysis involved developing themes by systematically organizing initial codes into meaningful categories aligned with the research objectives. This stage employed an inductive analysis approach, prioritizing the natural emergence of patterns from the data without the constraints of pre-existing theoretical frameworks. As a bottom-up strategy, inductive analysis facilitates a data-driven exploration that ensures findings remain grounded in the authentic voices and lived experiences of the participants.

In practice, coded segments were iteratively reviewed to identify conceptual similarities and contextual relevance. Initial codes were then clustered into broader thematic categories representing distinct dimensions of therapists' experiences with interactive digital tools for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). NVivo qualitative analysis software supported this development by identifying code co-occurrences and refining themes to ensure conceptual integrity. Following this systematic clustering, six key themes were identified. These themes—ranging from digital tool technologies to social learning outcomes (see Table 4.3)—provide a structured framework for addressing the study’s research objectives.

Table 2
Group Initial Codes and Corresponding Themes

Initial Codes	Themes
• Interactive game-based applications • Touch-based interactive apps • Voice recognition applications • Game-based learning platforms • Digital flashcards • Interactive videos	Digital Tools and Technologies

Initial Codes	Themes
• Animated story applications • Character-driven scenarios	
• Attention deficits • Distractibility from complex interfaces • Difficulty sustaining focus • Information processing overload • Rapid fatigue onset • Decreased engagement over time • Repetition intolerance • Frustration with delayed feedback	Attention and Engagement Challenges
• Voice recognition responsiveness • Touch-based interaction • Immediate feedback mechanisms • Character connection features • Vibrant colors and visual cues • Clear visual contrast • Large, simple icons • Calm auditory elements	Effective Design Features
• Clear, simple instructions • Adaptive difficulty levels • Self-paced learning options • Intuitive navigation • Break integration for fatigue management • Content segmentation • Positive reinforcement systems • Overstimulation prevention	Essential Design Principles
• High contrast visual elements • Bright, engaging colors • Clear visual hierarchy • Simplified visual interfaces • Calm, clear audio cues • Soothing background music • Volume control options • Multi-sensory integration	Sensory Processing Accommodations
• Social situation scenarios • Emotional expression recognition • Life skills training • Communication enhancement • Emotional expression apps • Relatable character interactions • Social cue understanding • Behavioral modeling tools	Social and Emotional Learning

Reviewing Themes

The refinement of the thematic framework synchronized the raw qualitative data with the study's core objective which identifying digital characteristics that optimize engagement while mitigating sensory and cognitive fatigue. By cross-referencing therapist narratives against the emergent themes, the analysis moved beyond mere categorization to establish a functional relationship between interface design and clinical efficacy. For instance, the initial overlap between *visual cues* and *game-based tools* was refined into distinct themes of Interface Design and User Experience versus Digital Technology Platforms, ensuring that the specific aesthetic drivers of attention such as high-contrast visuals and simple icons were isolated as critical success factors. This iterative validation process further clarified how sensory processing accommodations act as a direct buffer against the attention and engagement challenges identified in earlier coding phases. By merging related concepts like *short bursts of content* and *content segmentation* into the overarching theme of System Usability, the research underscores a pivotal finding that *high controllability* and structured pacing are the primary mechanisms for managing a child's energy expenditure. Consequently, the finalized thematic structure does not merely list features but provides a data-driven map that illustrates how digital environments can sustain therapeutic participation by addressing the specific neurodivergent needs of children with ASD.

Defining and Naming Themes

The final analytical stage focused on the precise definition and naming of each theme. Building on the iterative review, code groups were refined into finalize themes representing unique dimensions of the therapeutic experience. Each theme was assigned a descriptive name and a formal definition outlining its scope and relevance to the research goals. Table 3 illustrates this progression from initial codes to finalized defined themes. This structured process ensures transparency and analytical credibility, providing a clear framework for the subsequent presentation of findings.

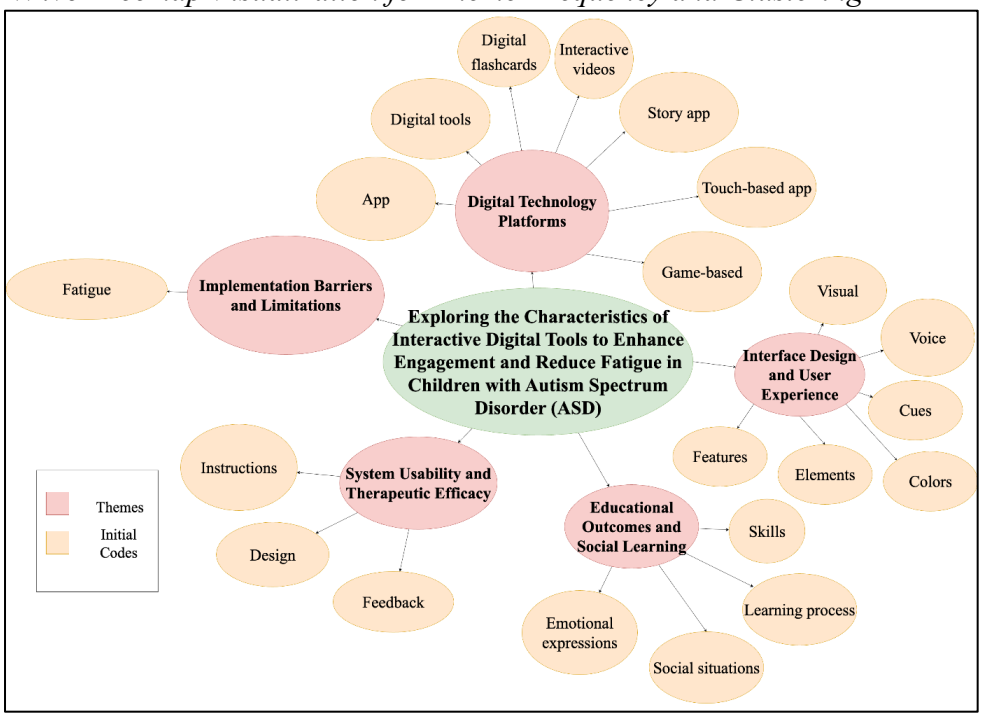
Table 3
Thematic Refinement Matrix

Initial Codes	Themes	New Defined Themes	Theme Definitions
• app • digital tools • digital flashcards • interactive videos • story app • touch-based app • game-based	Technology Types and Applications	Digital Technology Platforms	Encompasses the various digital platforms, applications, and technological tools employed in ASD therapy and educational interventions, including interactive games, multimedia content, and specialized therapeutic software.
• visual • voice • cues • colors • elements • features	User Interface and Interaction Design	Interface Design and User Experience	Refers to the design components, interactive elements, and sensory modalities that facilitate user engagement, comprehension, and accessibility in digital therapeutic tools.

Initial Codes	Themes	New Defined Themes	Theme Definitions
• skills • learning process • social situations • emotional expressions	Learning and Skill Development	Educational Outcomes and Social Learning	Focuses on the educational outcomes, social-emotional learning objectives, skill acquisition, and therapeutic goals facilitated through digital interventions in ASD therapy.
• instructions • design • feedback	Usability and Accessibility	System Usability and Therapeutic Efficacy	Addresses the ease of use, accessibility features, user experience considerations, and therapeutic effectiveness factors essential for successful technology adoption in ASD therapy.
• fatigue	Therapeutic Challenges and Barriers	Implementation Barriers and Limitations	Identifies the obstacles, limitations, adverse effects, and challenges that may impede the successful implementation and sustained use of digital therapeutic interventions.

The findings derived from the thematic analysis are illustrate in Figure 6, which presents a thematic map illustrating the complex interconnections between the identified core themes. This visual framework clarifies how specific digital tool characteristics and therapeutic practices converge to influence developmental outcomes for children with ASD. The analysis revealed five primary themes that capture essential dimensions of the therapeutic experience where Digital Technology Platforms, which serve as the foundational hardware and software mediums for intervention delivery; Interface Design and User Experience, focusing on sensory and interactive elements that optimize engagement while mitigating cognitive load; Educational Outcomes and Social Learning, reflecting observed cognitive and social-emotional skill development; System Usability and Therapeutic Efficacy, addressing the practical integration, adaptability, and clinical effectiveness of tools within established routines; and Implementation Barriers and Limitations, which identifies technical and resource-based obstacles to sustained success. Collectively, these themes offer a holistic understanding of the facilitators and challenges inherent in using interactive digital tools to enhance engagement and manage fatigue within an ASD therapeutic context.

Figure 6
NVivo Treemap Visualization for Theme Frequency and Clustering



Conclusion

This study explored the characteristics of interactive digital tools that enhance engagement and reduce fatigue in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), focusing on insights from therapists at the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM) Setia Alam. The research found that interactive digital tools particularly gamified and visually engaging applications have the potential to increase motivation, sustain attention, and improve learning outcomes among children with ASD (Cardy et al., 2023; Daud et al., 2023). The findings revealed that effective tools share several critical features: visual clarity, personalization, predictable interface design, and real-time feedback mechanisms. These characteristics promote sustained engagement and reduce cognitive fatigue, allowing children to participate more actively in therapy and educational sessions (Pliska et al., 2023; Scarcella et al., 2023). Additionally, adaptive technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality provide immersive experiences that help children develop emotional regulation and social interaction skills in a safe and controlled environment (Kourtesis et al., 2023). Despite these positive outcomes, therapists identified challenges such as overstimulation, screen dependency, and limited accessibility of certain digital platforms. Therefore, balancing technology-assisted interventions with traditional therapeutic practices remains essential to ensure holistic child development (Keville et al., 2021). This research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital interventions for autism therapy by providing qualitative evidence from practitioners' experiences. Future research should involve user-centered design approaches, integrating feedback from children with ASD and their families to refine digital tools for greater therapeutic value (Albaum et al., 2024). Overall, the study highlights that well-designed interactive digital tools, when effectively implemented, can significantly enhance engagement and reduce fatigue among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the National Autism Resource Centre (NARC) and the Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences (FSKM) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for providing the academic framework and resources essential to this research. Deep appreciation is also extended to the therapists at the National Autism Society of Malaysia (NASOM). Their willingness to share expert perspectives on digital tool integration was invaluable and provided the essential data that forms the core of this study.

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

The author declares that AI tools, specifically Quillbot and Gemini, were used solely for language editing and proofreading to enhance the readability of this manuscript. These tools were not used to generate research content or original ideas. The conceptualization, data collection, and analysis remain the original work of the author, ensuring the integrity and authenticity of the research findings.

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The Role of Digital Humanities in Digital Publication in Bangladesh: An Evaluation

Md. Masud Rana, Khulna University, Bangladesh
Md. Shahjahan Kabir, Khulna University, Bangladesh

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The use of digital technologies in the humanities, known as digital humanities (DH), is rapidly growing in Bangladesh. This study examines the role of digital humanities in digital publishing in Bangladesh. It focuses on four main areas: Adoption of Digital Publication Practices (ADPP), Institutional Support for Digital Publication (ISDP), Access to Digital Technology (ADT), and Digital Literacy in Publication (DLP). The research employs a quantitative method to collect data from 106 academics, researchers, and students from different institutions. The collected data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with Smart PLS 4. The findings demonstrate that skills and media literacy, access to technology and the digital divide, institutional support and resource availability, and digital publication practices all play a pivotal role in research and digital publishing. The study also finds that universities with DH centres, clear digital publication policies, and active leadership are further advanced in their digital transformation. Based on the study, the researcher recommends that universities implement digital literacy training programs for both students and teachers. Second, institutions should invest in digital infrastructure and provide low-cost devices and better internet to reduce the digital divide. Third, clear policies should be introduced to encourage digital publishing, such as by offering research grants or rewards. Finally, a culture of innovation should be promoted by sharing success stories and creating teamwork platforms. By addressing these areas, Bangladesh can enhance its digital humanities and digital publishing practices, ultimately contributing to the modernisation, inclusivity, and relevance of the humanities.

Keywords: digital humanities, digital publication, digital literacy, technology access, digital divide

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Introduction

The digital humanities is a growing field that integrates traditional humanities scholarship with digital technologies. Globally, it is receiving considerable attention in academic and cultural fields. In Bangladesh, digital humanities are also becoming important for the management, preservation, and sharing of cultural and scholarly resources. It uses digital tools to study literature, history, linguistics, and cultural studies. These tools create new ways to connect technology with the humanities (Rahman et al., 2023). Alongside this, digital publications have transformed the way knowledge is shared. They have made academic and cultural materials more accessible and easier to distribute.

In Bangladesh, digital publications and online databases are growing at a slow but steady pace. Many universities have started publishing online journals. Some journals are recognised internationally and are listed under Q1, Q2, and Q3 rankings. Universities such as the University of Dhaka, Khulna University, North South University, BRAC University, the University of Liberal Arts, and other institutions publish online journals covering a range of subjects. In addition to universities, publishers such as Bangla Academy and other research institutions contribute by publishing digital journals and databases. However, many journals continue to struggle to secure international indexing and achieve a global readership.

Digital databases in Bangladesh mainly focus on preserving old manuscripts, research articles, and cultural archives. Some universities have established digital repositories that store and make available theses, dissertations, and research papers online. Institutions such as the Bangladesh National Museum and the Liberation War Museum are also establishing digital archives to preserve historical records.

The digital humanities play a crucial role in advancing digital publishing in Bangladesh. By using digital tools, researchers can now easily publish, share, and analyze data. Projects in Bangladesh have started digitizing rare documents, folk literature, and oral histories. Khalid and Chowdhury (2020) demonstrated that social media and online platforms are now utilised to represent intangible cultural heritage, including folk songs and traditional arts. This has helped preserve cultural identity while reaching a global audience. At the same time, digital humanities are helping academic institutions integrate technology into education and research. Rahman et al. (2023) noted that some universities are offering courses and workshops to train students and researchers in digital methods. However, challenges remain, including insufficient funding, limited technical expertise, and a shortage of specialised digital humanities centres.

Methodology

Research Design

To achieve the objective, the study employed a quantitative research design and administered a survey to academics, researchers, and students from various institutions to critically evaluate the role of the digital humanities in digital publications in Bangladesh.

Population and Sample

A total of 106 respondents participated in the survey, representing teachers and students, as well as staff members from the humanities disciplines of two public and two private universities

in Bangladesh. The study also included government ICT policymakers, digital content creators, librarians, and publishers.

The list of stakeholders is as follows:

- **University Librarians** – Professionals managing digital resources in academic libraries.
- **Faculty Members in Humanities Departments** – Academics adopting or promoting digital tools in their teaching and research.
- **Government ICT Policy Makers** – Officials involved in shaping policies related to digital transformation in education and culture.
- **Digital Content Creators and Publishers** – Individuals or organizations engaged in producing digital academic or cultural content.
- **Students in Humanities and Social Sciences** – End-users of digital tools and platforms for learning and research.

The participation was voluntary. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals directly involved in or affected by DH adoption. The sample consisted of 59 (%) females and 41 (%) males (N = 106). Of the total participants, 65 % were undergraduate and graduate students in the humanities; 25.5% were humanities teachers; and 9.5% were staff members, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Research Instruments

Based on the frameworks proposed by Aziz and Naima (2021), Khalid and Chowdhury (2020), and Rahman, Ahmad, and Zakaria (2023) (Appendix 1), the study critically analysed the interrelationships among the identified factors. A questionnaire was prepared using a Likert scale, where Strongly Agree (SA) = 5, Agree (A) = 4, Neutral (N) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2, and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. The questionnaire focused on key variables, including assessing Institutional Support for Digital Publication (ISDP), Access to Digital Technology (ADT) for Digital Publication, and Digital Literacy in Publication (DLP). These variables were measured to assess their impact on the implementation of Digital publishing in Bangladesh. Data were collected in person and via Google Forms.

Ethical Issue

To conduct this study, the researchers placed the highest priority on ethical considerations, including participants' honesty, security, and privacy. All respondents participated in this study voluntarily and were informed that they could withdraw at any time. They were also informed that the confidentiality of all personal data would be strictly maintained, that it would be used solely for research purposes, and that no identifiable information would be shared or published.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Smart PLS 4 for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). SEM was chosen to analyse the relationships between the dependent variable (Adoption of Digital Publication Practices (ADPP) and the three independent variables: Institutional Support for Digital Publication (ISDP), Access to Digital Technology (ADT) for Digital Publication, and Digital Literacy in Publication (DLP). This method enabled the examination of the direct and indirect impact of these variables on the implementation of DH in Bangladesh.

Findings

Table 1

Factor Loadings With Communality and Redundancy, Convergent Validity, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	Communality	Redundancy (P-value)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
ADPP					0.8085
	ADPP1	0.8678	0.6718	0.0438	
	ADPP2	0.8448	0.6668	0.0728	
	ADPP3	0.8518	0.7118	0.0308	
	ADPP4	0.7898	0.7088	0.0498	
	ADPP5	0.8118	0.6428	0.0408	
ADT					0.8185
	ADT1	0.8398	0.593274	0.021	
	ADT2	0.7988	0.714215	0.016018	
	ADT3	0.9138	0.58191	0.02325	
	ADT4	0.8568	0.649179	0.016078	
	ADT5	0.7798	0.67537	0.016165	
ISDP					0.7985
	ISDP1	0.7648	0.666885	0.016181	
	ISDP2	0.8678	0.605262	0.016318	
	ISDP3	0.8618	0.549959	0.015937	
	ISDP4	0.9068	0.650554	0.02221	
	ISDP5	0.8208	0.667645	0.018978	
DLP					0.7695
	DLP1	0.8018	0.69993	0.02194	
	DLP5	0.8388	0.614218	0.024269	
	DLP3	0.7978	0.714313	0.01934	
	DLP4	0.7998	0.590363	0.02421	
	DLP5	0.7498	0.647278	0.019385	

Note.
- ✓ Communality values above 0.5 indicate inclusion in factor analysis. All values exceed 0.5.
- ✓ Factor loadings > 0.7 indicate sufficient variance extraction. All factor loading scores are > 0.7.
- ✓ P-values < 0.05 indicate statistical significance. All p-values are < 0.05.
- ✓ AVE scores > 0.5 ensure adequate convergence. All AVE scores exceed 0.5.

Table 2

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Item	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability rho(A)	Composite Reliability rho(C)	VIF
ADPP	0.833	0.829	0.9	1.992
ADT	0.795	0.846	0.916	1.542
ISDP	0.821	0.917	0.833	1.172
DLP	0.87	0.936	0.851	1.292
Optimum Values	> .7	> .7	> .7	<5

Table 2 shows that all variables meet the criteria: Cronbach's α, Composite Reliability rho(A), and rho(C) are all > 0.7, and VIF is less than 5. VIF values below 5 indicate no significant multicollinearity.

Table 3

Outer Model – Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion: Correlation Matrix of Constructs and Square Root of AVE [in Bold])

Construct	ADPP	ADT	ISDP	DLP
ADPP	0.781	-	-	-
ADT	0.684	0.7885	-	-
ISDP	0.346	0.384	0.782	-
DLP	0.527	0.61	0.219	0.753

The Fornell-Larcker criterion checks discriminant validity by ensuring the square root of a construct's average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than its correlation with any other construct. In this study, all constructs meet this criterion, confirming discriminant validity.

Table 4

Cross-Loading Analysis

Item	ADPP	ADT	ISDP	DLP
ADPP1	0.766	0.585	0.089	0.03
ADPP2	0.765	0.598	0.088	0.13
ADPP3	0.815	0.581	0.128	0.234
ADPP4	0.659	0.491	0.324	0.167
ADPP5	0.623	0.326	0.137	0.189
ADT1	0.599	0.894	0.257	0.256
ADT2	0.469	0.745	0.047	0.351
ADT3	0.525	0.802	0.011	0.452
ADT4	0.406	0.686	0.014	0.306
ADT5	0.365	0.752	0.032	0.195
ISDP1	0.258	0.493	0.623	0.203
ISDP2	0.143	0.579	0.74	0.136
ISDP3	0.079	0.045	0.713	0.319
ISDP4	0.07	0.048	0.881	0.247
ISDP5	0.093	0.062	0.831	0.308
DLP1	0.038	0.051	0.564	0.658
DLP5	0.046	0.033	0.227	0.849
DLP3	0.318	0.456	0.219	0.742
DLP4	0.235	0.413	0.226	0.763
DLP5	0.354	0.328	0.336	0.892

Gefen and Straub (2005) state that discriminant validity is achieved when items correlate weakly with other constructs, except their own. Reflective relationships, known as loadings, should be high within a given construct and low across constructs. Table 3 confirms high within-construct loadings and weak cross-construct correlations, validating the outer model for cross-loading analysis.

Table 5
Outer Model – Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio) Threshold: HTMT < 0.9

Construct	ADPP	ADT	ISDP	DLP
ADPP	-			
ADT	0.5655	-		
ISDP	0.052	0.534	-	
DLP	0.148	0.187	0.479	-

According to Franke and Sarstedt (2019), if the HTMT value is significantly below the critical value of 0.9, it establishes discriminant validity. Here, the value is below 0.9. Thus, the model is valid and established.

Table 6
Inner Model; Path Coefficients of Tested Model & Hypothesis Testing and Structural Model Evaluation

Hyp	Relationship	B	Mean	Std. Dev	R2	Q2	f2	t-statistic	sig.
H	ADT→ADPP	0.305	0.425	0.1	0.542	0.0012	0.74	0.855	0.031**
H2	ISDP→ADPP	0.214	0.741	0.05	0.551	0.0352	0.68	0.846	0.0076**
H3	DLP→ADPP	0.232	0.454	0.01	0.545	0.026	0.57	0.835	0.0042**

Note. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001; n.s = not significant; (two-tailed test). R = Rejected; (A) = Accepted.

Beta coefficients (B) estimate path relationships in the structural model and indicate consistency across items. The cutoff value for B is > 0.20, and all values in Table 6 meet this threshold.

R Square (R2) quantifies the proportion of variance in the endogenous variables explained by the exogenous variables. Values of 0.42, 0.51, 0.535, and 0.537 are considered moderate and align with the benchmarks of Cohen and Chin.

Q-square (Q2) measures predictive relevance; values above zero indicate good model fit.

F-Square (f2) assesses the effect size when an exogenous variable is removed. Values of 0.74, 0.68, 0.57, and 0.369 indicate a large effect according to Cohen's benchmarks.

Table 7
Goodness-of-Fit Indicators

Fit indices	Structural model value	Recommended value	References
Gfi	0.987	> .90	Hair et al. (2010)
Agfi	0.92	> .80	Hu and Bentler (1999)
Nfi	0.964	> .90	Hu and Bentler (1999)
Cfi	0.985	> .90	Bentler and Bonett (1980)
Rmsea	0.031	< .08	Hu and Bentler (1999)
Srmr	0.046	< .07	Hu and Bentler' (1999)

Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI): The Value 0.987, which exceeds the suggested value of 0.90, indicates a strong fit between the model and the observed data.

The Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI) Value of 0.920 exceeds the suggested value of 0.80, indicating a good fit, given the number of parameters.

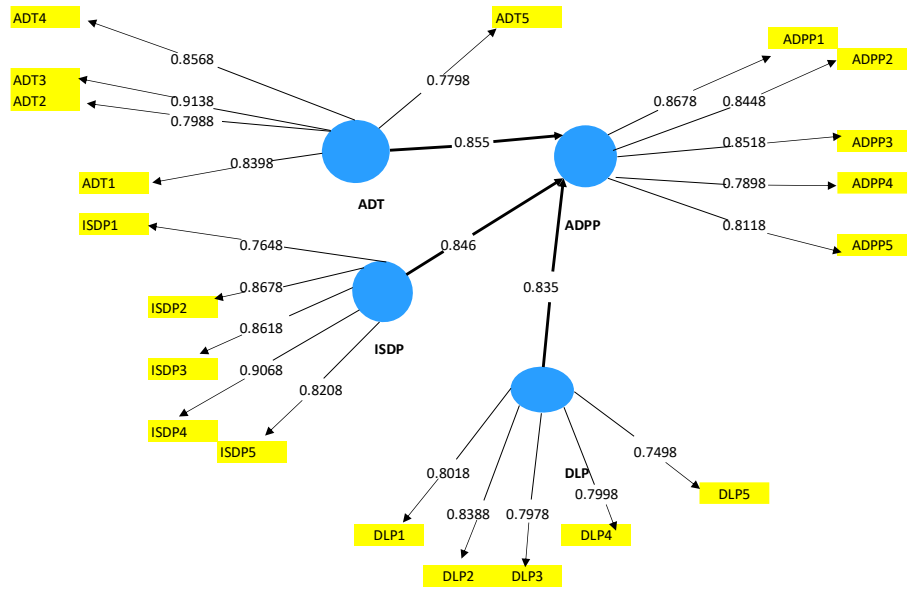
The Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.964 exceeds the suggested minimum of 0.90, indicating a high level of fit between the model and the data.

The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is 0.985, which exceeds the recommended value of 0.90, indicating a reasonable fit between the model and the observed data.

The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) Value of 0.031 is below the recommended 0.08, indicating a satisfactory fit between the model and the data.

Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) Value is 0.046, clearly meets the suggested value of 0.07, and indicates a good fit for the structural model.

Figure 1
Bootstrap Model



Discussion

Digital Literacy and Its Influence on Digital Publishing

Digital literacy refers to the ability to utilise digital tools, databases, and online resources effectively. It plays a key role in the adoption of digital publication practices in Bangladesh. People with strong digital skills can easily access, use, and contribute to digital publications and databases. In Bangladesh, many universities and researchers are learning to work with online journals and databases. According to Aziz and Naima (2021), digital literacy helps users find, understand, and create digital content.

However, digital literacy in Bangladesh remains under development. Many students and faculty members, especially outside major cities, struggle with digital skills. As a result, they encounter difficulties when accessing international journals or utilising digital databases. Enhancing digital literacy is crucial to bolstering the digital publishing landscape. Training, workshops, and digital awareness campaigns are crucial steps in bridging this gap.

The Impact of Accessing Technology

Access to technology, including internet services and digital devices, is another crucial factor. It affects how people engage with digital publications and databases. In Bangladesh, urban areas generally have better internet access, but rural areas continue to face poor connectivity. This digital divide limits the reach of online journals, databases, and digital publications. Rahman et al. (2023) note that without reliable internet and devices, students and researchers are unable to fully utilise digital resources.

Many universities in Bangladesh subscribe to online journals. Some universities offer access to Q1 and Q2-ranked international journals through consortia and library portals. However, without reliable internet and devices, students cannot fully benefit from these resources.

Also, local publishers are trying to digitize their journals, but limited access slows this progress. Public and private initiatives are needed to improve infrastructure and provide affordable internet and devices across all regions.

The Role of Institutional Support

Institutional support is very important for promoting digital publications and database access. Universities, government agencies, and publishers must collaborate to develop digital infrastructures. Begum et al. (2020) explain that strong institutional support enables individuals to adopt digital practices with greater confidence.

Many universities in Bangladesh have begun establishing digital libraries. They provide access to journals, theses, and e-books. Examples include Dhaka University, BUET, and North South University. These universities subscribe to high-ranking journals, such as those published by Elsevier, Springer, and Taylor & Francis, through their library services. However, not all universities have enough funding or resources to subscribe to international databases.

Also, local academic journals are now being published online. Some Bangladeshi universities are publishing Q3- and Q4-ranked journals digitally. Examples are the “Dhaka University Journal of Science” and the “Journal of Bangladesh Agricultural University.” These digital publications help local researchers share their work globally. Still, more institutional efforts are needed to promote digital publications, train faculty and students, and build partnerships with global publishers.

Interrelationship Between Factors

Digital literacy, access to technology, and institutional support are deeply connected. Effective digital skills enable students and faculty to utilise available digital journals and databases. At the same time, access to technology ensures that these resources are reachable. Institutional support ensures that quality journals and databases are readily available.

Without strong digital skills, even access to good internet and devices will not be enough. Without access to technology, digital skills cannot be used. Without institutional support, there will be no digital resources available. Therefore, all three factors must work together to foster the growth of digital publication practices in Bangladesh.

For example, universities that offer both digital literacy programs and have good internet connections tend to have better digital adoption rates. Collaboration among the government, universities, and the private sector can strengthen these connections and enhance the digital humanities and publications in the country.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have important policy and practical implications. First, digital literacy programs should be expanded across all universities and colleges in Bangladesh. This will prepare students and researchers to access and contribute to digital publications and databases. Second, access to technology must be improved. Internet services should be affordable and available in both rural and urban areas. Special funding should be allocated to universities to enable them to subscribe to international journals and databases.

Third, institutional support must be strengthened. Universities should establish digital libraries, encourage local journals to transition to online publication, and collaborate with international publishers. The government should also support universities through national initiatives, such as library consortia.

Finally, digital humanities can play a significant role in promoting digital publications. Digital humanities projects often involve creating online archives, digitizing research, and sharing academic outputs. This aligns with the broader goal of building a strong digital knowledge base in Bangladesh. Promoting digital humanities will not only preserve cultural heritage but also create new opportunities for researchers and students to engage with digital platforms.

Recommendations

Enhancing Digital Literacy

In Bangladesh, improving digital literacy is a key priority for advancing digital publications in the academic and research sectors. Faculty members, researchers, and students must be equipped with the necessary digital skills to effectively engage with online journals, digital archives, and digital humanities platforms. Managers in educational institutions should invest in continuous professional development programs focused on digital literacy. These programs should include hands-on training in publishing software, digital content management, and the interpretation of digital materials. Aziz & Naima (2021) emphasize that developing digital literacy not only builds confidence among stakeholders but also encourages the adoption of digital tools in research and publishing practices. Furthermore, incorporating digital literacy into the academic curriculum can prepare students to engage with emerging technologies from the outset. By offering courses in areas such as digital archiving and computational analysis, institutions can provide students with a solid foundation for navigating the digital humanities landscape effectively (Rahman et al., 2023).

Bridging the Technology Access Gap

One of the significant challenges in Bangladesh is the unequal access to technology, especially between urban and rural areas. This disparity impacts the adoption of digital publishing and the digital humanities in the country. Managers must address these issues by ensuring that all stakeholders have access to the necessary digital devices and internet connectivity. Khalid and Chowdhury (2020) stress that addressing these access gaps is crucial for the widespread

adoption of digital humanities practices. Institutions should partner with technology providers to ensure students and researchers have affordable, reliable access to devices such as laptops and tablets. Additionally, expanding internet connectivity to underserved areas should be a priority. Initiatives like subsidized devices, community internet hubs, and mobile internet services can help bridge this gap. Furthermore, cloud-based solutions can provide a cost-effective alternative for accessing digital tools and resources, enabling institutions to circumvent the financial challenges posed by limited infrastructure (Aziz & Naima, 2021). Cloud platforms facilitate collaboration, remote learning, and access to digital resources, eliminating the need for expensive hardware and thus making them an effective strategy for ensuring inclusivity in the digital humanities.

Strengthening Institutional Support

Institutional support is critical for fostering the successful adoption of digital publishing practices in Bangladesh. Educational leaders should advocate for significant investments in digital infrastructure, including the development of online journals, digital archives, and content management systems. These resources are vital for the growth of digital humanities. Begum et al. (2020) point out that institutions that prioritize digital infrastructure are better positioned to foster innovation and academic success. To further enhance this process, universities could establish dedicated digital humanities centres that serve as hubs for interdisciplinary collaboration, research, and training. These centres could provide faculty members and students with access to resources and expertise in digital publishing. Additionally, policymakers should be encouraged to implement supportive policies, such as research grants, publication incentives, and tenure considerations, for those engaged in digital humanities practices. Khalid and Chowdhury (2020) argue that clear institutional policies foster a supportive environment for digital innovation, thereby motivating faculty members to engage in these practices.

Promoting a Culture of Innovation

Fostering a culture of innovation is essential for sustaining digital transformation in the humanities. Managers should encourage an experimental approach to integrating digital tools into academic and research work. Aziz and Naima (2021) suggest that institutions can cultivate this culture by celebrating success stories of digital humanities projects within their communities. Recognizing faculty members and students who have successfully utilized digital tools to enhance their research or teaching can inspire others to adopt similar practices. For example, projects using digital storytelling to preserve cultural heritage or data visualizations to study historical trends illustrate the potential of digital humanities (Begum et al., 2020). Additionally, creating platforms for knowledge-sharing, such as webinars, conferences, and online forums, enables stakeholders to exchange ideas and best practices, thereby strengthening the community's digital engagement. These initiatives foster creative exploration and foster a collaborative environment within the institution (Rahman et al., 2023).

Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers play a crucial role in fostering an environment that supports the adoption of digital humanities at the national level. Government investments in digital infrastructure, research development, and digital inclusion initiatives are key to overcoming barriers to technology adoption. Khalid and Chowdhury (2020) emphasise that national policies supporting ICT development and digital humanities projects are crucial for ensuring that digital

tools reach a broader audience. Furthermore, policymakers should promote public-private partnerships to combine resources and expertise from both sectors. These partnerships can help bridge the technological gap by providing affordable devices, internet access, and training for both faculty and students. Aziz and Naima (2021) suggest that such collaborations would also enhance academic institutions' capacity to innovate and adopt digital publishing practices.

Conclusion

The integration of the digital humanities into Bangladesh's academic landscape presents an exciting opportunity to transform research, teaching, and publication practices. However, to realize the full potential of digital publishing, several challenges need to be addressed. These include enhancing digital literacy, bridging the technology access gap, and providing robust institutional support. The administration should focus on improving digital literacy through targeted training programs and by integrating it into the curriculum. By ensuring equitable access to technology, including affordable devices and expanding internet connectivity, institutions can create a more inclusive environment for digital humanities practices. Strengthening institutional support by investing in digital infrastructure, providing training, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration will further enhance the adoption of digital publishing. Finally, fostering a culture of innovation within universities will inspire stakeholders to explore new possibilities in the digital humanities realm. At the policy level, government initiatives and public-private partnerships will be essential for overcoming systemic barriers and ensuring that digital humanities practices benefit a wide range of stakeholders. In conclusion, a comprehensive and coordinated effort across all levels—academic, institutional, and governmental—is necessary to fully unlock the potential of digital humanities in Bangladesh, fostering innovation, inclusivity, and academic excellence.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Variable	No.	Question	Source Reference
Digital Literacy in Publication (DLP)	1	I am confident using digital tools for academic purposes.	Aziz & Naima (2021)
	2	I understand how to access digital resources for my research.	
	3	I find digital platforms intuitive and easy to use.	
	4	I am aware of the ethical implications of using digital resources.	
	5	I believe improving my digital literacy enhances my productivity in academic work.	
Access to Digital Technology (ADT)	1	I have reliable internet access for my academic work.	Rahman, Ahmad, & Zakaria (2023)
	2	I own the necessary digital devices to engage in digital publishing practices.	
	3	The cost of accessing digital tools is affordable for me.	
	4	My location does not hinder my access to digital technology.	
	5	I find the existing digital infrastructure sufficient for academic and research purposes.	
Institutional Support for Digital Publication (ISDP)	1	My institution encourages the use of digital tools in academic work.	Begum et al. (2020)
	2	I have received adequate training in using digital platforms.	
	3	My institution provides access to digital libraries and repositories.	
	4	Institutional policies support the adoption of digital publishing practices.	
	5	There are sufficient technical support services available in my institution.	
	1	I frequently use digital tools in my academic work.	

Adoption of Digital Publication Practices (ADPP)	2	Digital platforms have improved the quality of my research and teaching.	Khalid and Chowdhury (2020)
	3	I collaborate with others using digital tools.	
	4	I actively explore new digital tools and platforms for my academic work.	
	5	I believe that adopting digital publishing practices is beneficial for my field of study.	

Bridging History and Visual Art: Translating Scholarly Work Into Visual Storytelling

Chung Oi Kok, Independent Scholar, Singapore

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

A critical challenge in historical scholarship involves limited public engagement associated with traditional academic texts. Visual art offers a compelling alternative methodology for translating complex heritage narratives through a visual lexicon that fosters public accessibility and connection to the past. This paper details an interdisciplinary art education exhibition that re-contextualises historical scholarship through practice-based visual art. The project employs a Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology, involving the qualitative, documentary-based translation of Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819–2002*. Nine interpretive acrylic paintings utilise semiotics of place, employing symbolic colour palettes and structural forms derived from architectural heritage to articulate the river's diachronic and synchronic narratives. A key feature is the introduction of narrative personae, "Ah Huat" (past) and "Wei Wei" (present), establishing a visual dialogue across eras. Each artwork is supported by a synopsis and scholarly quotations, grounding the artistic interpretation in historical rigour. Sited from August 16 to September 29, 2025, at The Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery, the exhibition utilised its location to enhance experiential context, supported by a bumboat workshop and artist talk. Functioning as a pedagogical resource and a contribution to PaR, this study demonstrates the viability of interdisciplinary collaboration for revitalising academic content and establishing new modalities for historical discourse.

Keywords: interdisciplinary art education, historical visual storytelling, practice-based research, Singapore river history, academic knowledge translation

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Introduction

The core challenge in historical scholarship lies in the limited public engagement with traditional academic texts. As social media platforms—offering fragmented, immediate gratification—become primary sources of information, sustained engagement with long-form historical contexts has declined (Twenge et al., 2018). While academic reading demands careful reflection, the nature of digital content encourages skimming, which can impair deep, sustained reading (Carr, 2010).

These trends are highly relevant in Singapore. Research indicates that while teenagers read frequently, many do not often engage with newspapers (35%) or books (32%). Instead, 51% read via social media, with 76% using these platforms to discover new content (Lee, 2019). These shifts highlight the potential of visual art as a medium for public engagement. Digital platforms emphasise visual primacy and rapid decoding over sustained analysis (Ozturk & Ozturk, 2022). Visual art, capable of eliciting emotion and sustaining interest, aligns with these modern consumption habits (Villanueva et al., 2024). Given that preserving history is crucial for understanding societal roots, revitalising historical content is particularly vital in Singapore.

To address these challenges, this study adopts an interdisciplinary Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology to translate complex scholarship into visual form. It focuses on Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs's (2003) seminal work, *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. The study analyses how the artist-practitioner employed visual narratives to distil and interpret the scholarly text, culminating in the exhibition *Timeless Flows: The Evolution and Legacy of the Singapore River*. Functioning as both a pedagogical resource and a contribution to PaR, the project demonstrates the viability of visual art in creating new modalities for historical discourse.

The following section reviews theoretical and empirical literature on visual communication, public engagement with history, and visual cognition. This establishes a scholarly foundation for translating historical narratives into an evocative aesthetic medium.

Literature Review

The rise of social media and digital platforms has shifted conventional modes of reading manuscripts, literature, and books, making them increasingly remote in daily life. Comprehending the characteristics of these platforms is essential for understanding the digital behaviours that draw audiences to visual content. Russmann and Svensson (2017) observed that social media engages users through visually rich content that simulates real-life situations, motivating deeper exploration and interaction through comments and shares. Social media integrates multiple modalities—images, videos, hashtags, emoticons, and text—allowing users to consume and manipulate visual material before dissemination. They noted that visual imagery enhances comprehension by enabling faster processing and multiple interpretations.

Visual imagery is effective even in institutional contexts. Klein et al. (2020) found that approximately 70% of adults use social media, prompting health organisations to adopt visual media to convey key messages. Ma and Fan (2022) highlighted that visual imagery is fundamental to human communication. They reported that Instagram alone has over one billion users, with more than 500 million photographs uploaded daily.

Visual content inherently captures attention. Seo (2020) noted its eye-catching qualities, while Deubel and Schneider's (1996) eye-tracking studies confirmed that images draw attention more effectively than text. Visual stimuli engage brain areas responsible for comprehension and memory retention, influencing attitudes, decisions, and recall. Consequently, audiences are more likely to respond to visual imagery before reading the accompanying text.

This dominance of visual communication informs the use of visual narratives in exhibitions. Visual storytelling—composing images to convey meaning, emotion, and narrative—can translate complex textual history into forms that resonate with contemporary audiences. The exhibition *Timeless Flows* seeks to represent the lives of lightermen—labourers who navigate twakows along the Singapore River—capturing both the historical livelihood and the socio-economic significance.

Visual narratives engage viewers emotionally and cognitively, allowing interaction and memory recall. Hidayat (2018) emphasised that narrative structures in museums enable visitors to interpret and retell experiences, enhancing engagement. Similarly, Calvi et al. (2023) demonstrated that storytelling-based exhibition designs revitalise audience engagement and learning.

In line with these findings, the exhibition integrated a bumboat craft workshop and artist talk, featuring two visual characters, *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*, representing the historical and contemporary Singapore River. These strategies exemplify visual storytelling's power to transform research into experiential, participatory encounters, fostering connection, understanding, and memory. Building on these insights, the following section outlines how these principles informed the Practice-as-Research design of *Timeless Flows*.

Practice-as-Research Methodology

This study adopts Practice-as-Research (PaR), in which creative practice functions as a form of inquiry. The practice component involves nine acrylic paintings serving as visual narratives, based on Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. The paintings feature two characters—*Ah Huat*, representing the historical river, and *Wei Wei*, representing the contemporary river—conveying the river's transformation over time.

The research component encompasses analysing and reflecting on Dobbs's (2003) text to develop these characters, documenting how they were conceptualised and created as tools of visual storytelling. This process aims to evoke memory, foster appreciation, and encourage reflection, particularly through the accompanying bumboat craft workshop and artist talk. By integrating creative making with reflective analysis, PaR generates knowledge from the interplay between artistic practice and scholarly inquiry, demonstrating how visual storytelling can bridge historical research and audience engagement. Although "Practice" precedes "Research" in PaR, the research component takes precedence. The researcher must digest, analyse, and reflect upon Dobbs's (2003) text before translating it into visual practice. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) incorporated PaR in 1996, recognising that creative practice could hold equal value to conventional research outcomes (Elkin & Law, 1997).

For the nine acrylic paintings in *Timeless Flows*, the author's practice was guided by rigorous research. Documentary analysis, a qualitative method, was employed to study historical texts,

images, and other resources (Ahmed, 2010; Bohnsack, 2008; Iowa State University Library, n.d.). This ensured that the artworks were products of informed, reflective inquiry. The visual storytelling approach invites audiences to engage emotionally and cognitively, echoing the RAE's assertion that research can give rise to new discourse.

As Candy and Edmonds (2018) state, "PaR [Practice as Research] involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where … a practice … is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry." Here, the author's role as a visual artist embodies the practice component, while research—including analysis, reflection, and investigation—underpins the creative outputs. Through this process, Dobbs's (2003) historical account is translated into visual storytelling, inviting interpretation and engagement.

Gray and Malins (2004) note, "Practitioners learn by doing, we 'know' by doing, by experiencing. The research journey obliges us to make tacit knowledge explicit through reflective practice so that others may see our progress through the landscape." Throughout the project, the author engaged in continuous reflection to determine how best to translate Dobbs's (2003) text into visual narratives. The process also considered how visual images, informed by studies of social media platforms, could simulate experiences and elicit comparable responses from exhibition audiences.

The next section presents the research findings that guided the development of the visual storytelling. Drawing on insights from documentary analysis, reflective practice, and critical engagement with Dobbs's (2003) text, the author translated historical knowledge into visual narratives. This section examines how these findings informed the conceptualisation of *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei* and shaped the nine acrylic paintings, demonstrating how research and creative practice intersect to communicate historical narratives visually.

Research Findings

Visual narrative, or visual storytelling, was adopted as a medium to communicate the past and present of the Singapore River, based on Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. This approach was chosen because it engages audiences through visual imagery that evokes memory, reflection, and appreciation of the river's historical transformation. Through visual storytelling, viewers can juxtapose the river's past and present states, thereby deepening both their emotional and cognitive connection to its history. This idea was largely inspired by Dobbs's (2003) concern about whether younger generations could still relate to the river's historical significance. In his conclusion, he observed that the new millennium had redefined the river's socio-economic role. Once a bustling artery of trade, it has since been transformed into a leisure and tourism precinct—its old warehouses and godowns restored as cafés and boutiques while retaining their original architectural structures to preserve authenticity. However, Dobbs (2003) questioned whether these renovated and brightly painted buildings could still evoke an authentic sense of the river's historical identity. His concern reflects the shifting role of the Singapore River: from its former function as an entrepôt and economic lifeline powered by the labour of lightermen, to its present role as a site of tourism and recreation following the relocation of shipping activities to the Pasir Panjang Wharves. This shift signified not only an economic transition but also a symbolic one—from industrial vitality to cultural consumption.

Dobbs (2003) warned of the potential tension between new economic goals and heritage conservation, suggesting that it remains uncertain whether the Singapore River should be

remembered primarily as a historical, cultural, or tourist site. His concluding remark—"It remains to be seen, however, whether or not younger Singaporeans will find along the river a connection between the past and present"—deeply resonated with the present study. This reflection became the core motivation for visually interpreting Dobbs's (2003) concerns, enabling audiences to perceive the continuity and transformation of the river across time through visual storytelling. To embody this concept, two characters—*Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*—were created for the exhibition *Timeless Flows: The Evolution and Legacy of the Singapore River*. *Ah Huat* represents the past, while *Wei Wei* embodies the present. Characters were chosen because, as Donovan (2018) noted, human cognition naturally responds to stories centred on the thoughts and feelings of characters.

Krieken et al. (2017) mentioned that storytelling has long been recognised as a primary mode through which people exchange information. They concluded that when characters are introduced into narratives, readers' physical and psychological engagement intensifies, resulting in clearer neurocognitive responses. Although their study focused on linguistic narratives, the essential argument—that storytelling through characters is powerful and effective—applies equally to visual storytelling.

In visual art, the use of characters enhances narrative potency because visual imagery is often more immediately accessible to viewers than written text. Thus, the inclusion of characters such as *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei* renders the exhibition both relatable and compelling to audiences. According to StudySmarter (n.d.), visual storytelling, or narrative in art, conveys meaning through characters, settings, and events without reliance on written text. This mode of communication, used since ancient civilisations, has long served to share cultural myths, religious stories, and personal experiences—demonstrating its enduring capacity to help audiences comprehend stories visually. Moreover, by engaging in narrative art, audiences cultivate interpretive skills and a deeper appreciation of the meanings embedded within visual compositions.

The use of characters in this project also aligns with Dobbs's (2003) historical focus on the lightermen—the workers who navigated the shallow waters of the old Singapore River in bumboats (*twakow*) to transfer goods between large vessels and the shore. His documentation of the lightermen's labour provided the historical foundation for developing these visual characters, translating textual history into lived human experience within the visual narrative.

Documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009) was used to extract relevant quotations and descriptions from Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. This method highlighted key themes such as the lightermen's activities, the landscape of the old Singapore River, and its transformation into the present-day river. These themes were then visually interpreted through the characters *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*. Each quotation provided historical grounding for the paintings while allowing space for new aesthetic and emotional interpretations.

On the back cover of his book, Dobbs (2003) stated that it "traces the history of the Singapore River and the people who made it their home and workplace." Despite the pollution of the old river, it remained a vital lifeline for communities such as the coolies and tally clerks. The term *coolies* refers to the lightermen who worked along the river. The exhibition venue—the Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery—was deliberately chosen for its location along the Singapore River. This setting invited audiences to reconnect with the river's history through personal memory and spatial experience.

Due to the gallery's limited size, two long and two short exhibition panels —approximately nine artworks were curated to fit cohesively within the space. The following quotations, extracted from Dobbs's (2003) seminal work, were selected and served as historical anchors for the artworks:

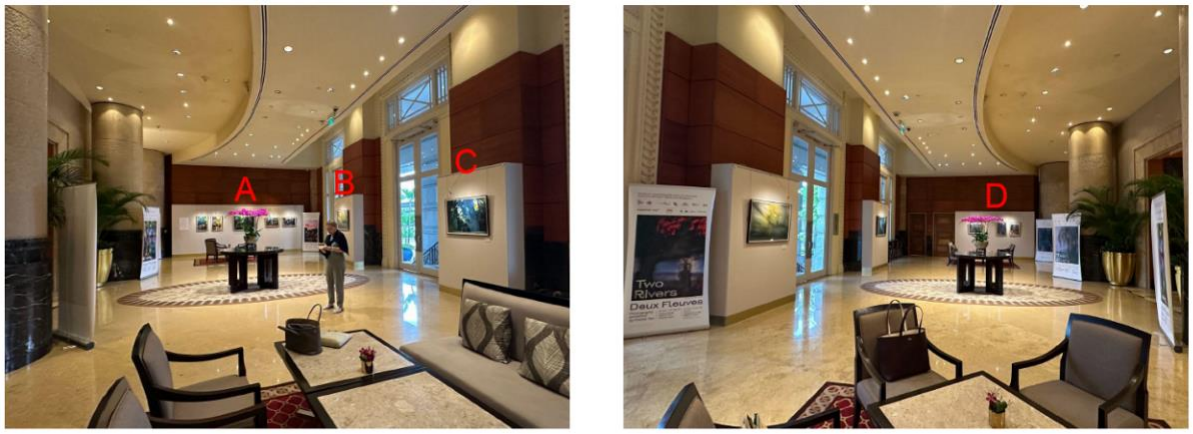
1. Dobbs (2003) states, "For many years after the establishment of the British Settlement in Singapore in 1819, to speak of Singapore was to speak of the river... Colourfully painted vessels called lighters, ranging in size from a few tonnes to more than 150 tonnes, crammed the confined waters of the river. They carried valuable trade goods from ships in the outer harbour to quays along the river, at times forming a virtual impenetrable blanket over its waters" (p. 3).
2. Dobbs (2003) states, "...Chinese who worked on lighters along the Singapore River— arduous toil was a daily reality. Forced to leave their villages and homelands because of grinding poverty and political turmoil, they arrived in Singapore to take any sort of job" (p. 63).
3. Dobbs (2003) states, "The principal task of lightermen was the transport of cargo between ships in the harbour and warehouses along the river. They were responsible for both the safety of their craft and the cargo it carried" (p. 64).
4. Dobbs (2003) states, "Lightermen got to know which itinerant hawkers and eating houses served the best food or drink and frequented these places between working hours... Perambulating hawkers serving a variety of noodle or rice dishes were found all along the river at any time of the day or night, catering for the manual workers in one of the busiest parts of the city" (p. 92).
5. Dobbs (2003) states, "Times quickly changed, and by the end of the decade, the PSA was handling most of the cargo moving through Singapore... There was little the lighterage industry could do to offset the impact of these dramatic changes in the ocean shipping industry" (p. 109).
6. Dobbs (2003) states, "The clean-up of the Singapore River and planned development along its banks has continued unabated since the removal of lighters and support industries in 1983... Renovated shophouses and godowns that once supported entrepôt-trading activities are once again coming to life. Now refurbished, they house cafés, bars, and restaurants" (p. 116).
7. Dobbs (2003) states, "The government has successfully achieved its goal of transforming the old, filthy Singapore River into a clean and pleasant environment. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether or not younger Singaporeans will find along the river a connection between the past and present" (p. 116).

Together, these excerpts encapsulate the Singapore River's evolution from a centre of maritime trade to a revitalised cultural and leisure district. Through the visual characters *Ah Huat* and *Wei Wei*, these historical narratives were reimagined into contemporary visual form, allowing audiences to experience the coexistence of continuity and change. The paintings not only highlight the transformation of the river's physical and social landscape but also evoke emotional connections between the lived experiences of the lightermen and the present-day visitors of the riverfront. In doing so, the exhibition extends Dobbs's (2003) scholarship beyond textual history, offering a visual dialogue that bridges the past and present, and encouraging audiences to reflect on their own sense of place, memory, and heritage along the Singapore River.

Discussion/Analysis

The paintings were exhibited at The Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery, which comprises four white display panels, as illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 1). The curatorial design was deliberately structured to cultivate visual coherence and facilitate a progressive narrative flow, enabling viewers to experience the temporal and socio-spatial evolution of the Singapore River. Each panel was arranged to balance visual weight and rhythm, guiding the audience's gaze seamlessly across the works while preserving the integrity of the overarching narrative.

Figure 1
The Fullerton Hotel East Garden Gallery



As indicated in the diagram, the panels were labelled A, B, C, and D. Panel A displayed four paintings, each measuring 96 cm × 66 cm; Panel B featured two smaller works measuring 50 cm × 66 cm; Panel C presented a single painting of 96 cm × 66 cm; and Panel D exhibited two larger works, each measuring 107 cm × 81 cm. This calibrated configuration was conceived to sustain visual equilibrium and structural rhythm, allowing the viewer to transition between works naturally. Each of these works was executed in acrylic on canvas, ensuring a vibrant and durable finish across the entire series.

Each pair of paintings juxtaposed representations of the past and present, articulating the transformation of the Singapore River's physical, social, and economic landscape over time. Accompanying each painting was an A4-sized interpretive panel (Figure. 2, 3, 4, 5) comprising a thematic synopsis and an excerpt from Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*. These textual elements functioned as historical anchors, situating each work within its scholarly context and intensifying the dialogue between visual representation and historiographic interpretation. The overall layout of the paintings is shown in Figure. 6, 7, 8, 9.

The gallery's minimalist architecture, defined by white walls and controlled lighting, further reinforced the exhibition's narrative intention. The unobtrusive environment heightened perceptual clarity, directing attention toward the dialogue between image and text and fostering a contemplative rhythm that guided viewers through the visual chronicle of the river's transformation.

Figure 2

A4-Size Explanatory Panel



Figure 3

A4-Size Explanatory Panel

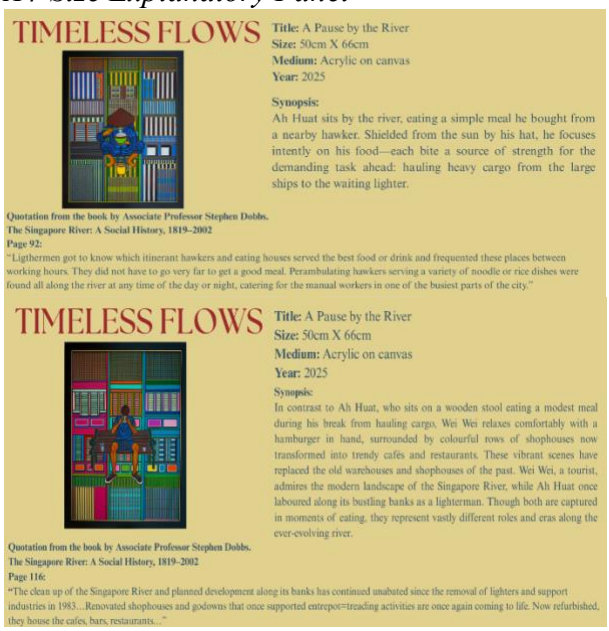


Figure 4

A4-Size Explanatory Panel

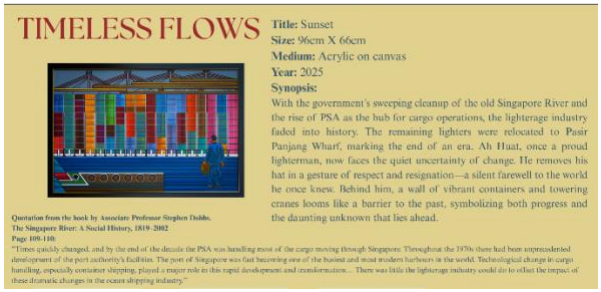


Figure 5

A4-Size Explanatory Panel

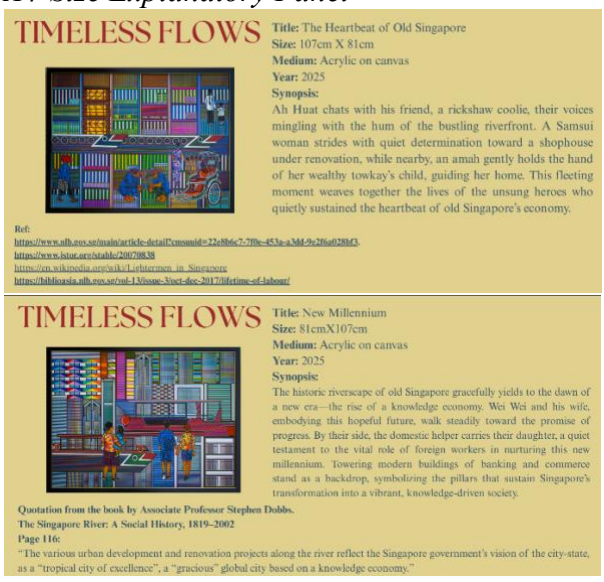
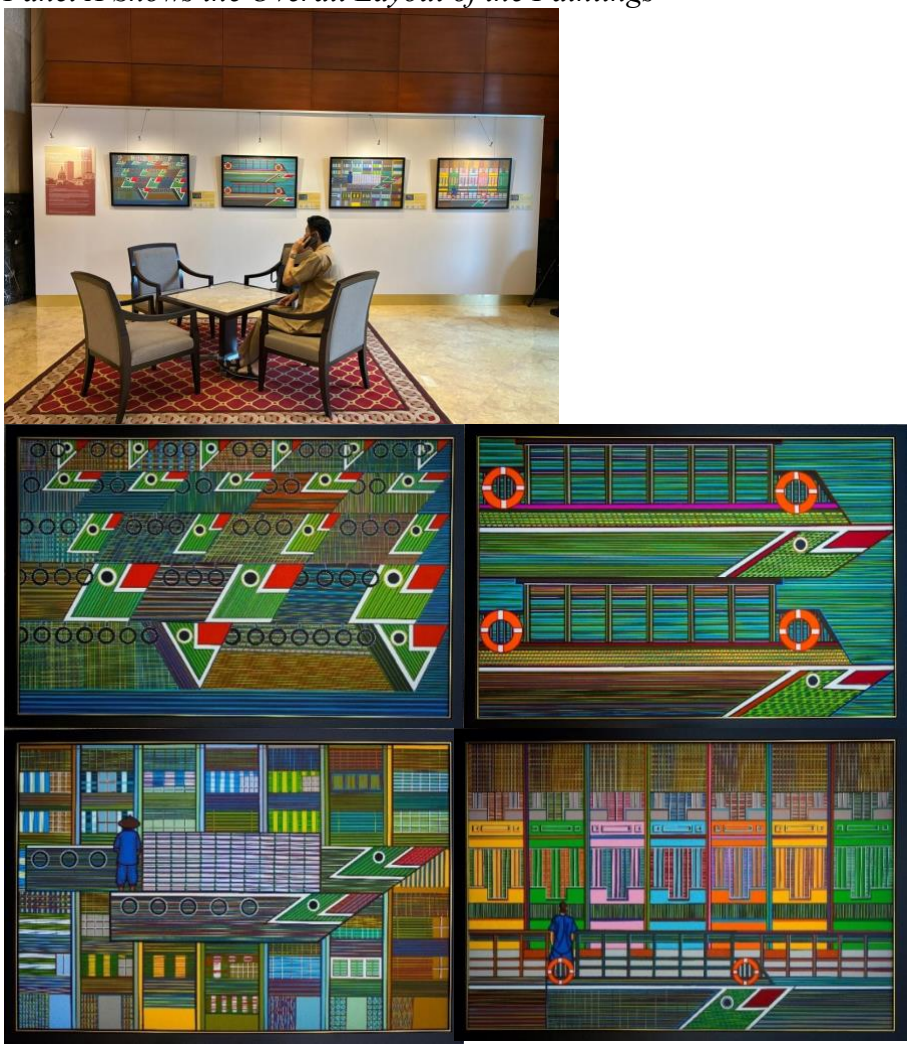


Figure 6
Panel A Shows the Overall Layout of the Paintings

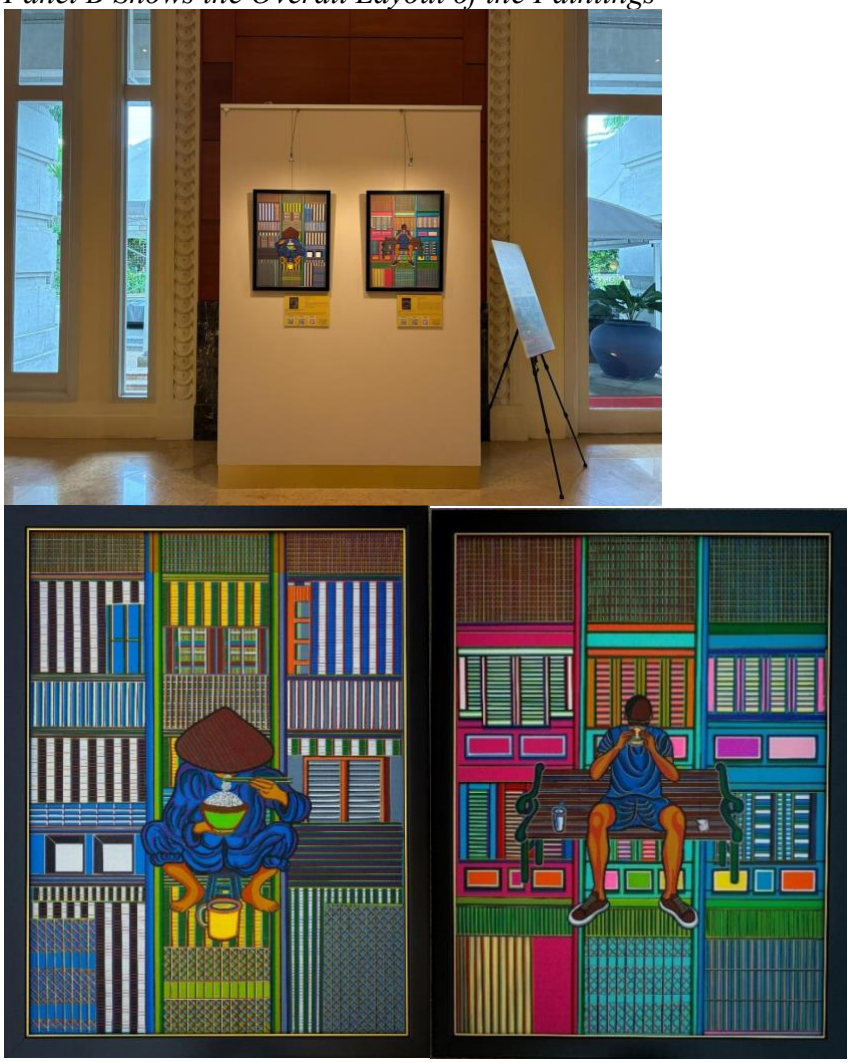


On the top left, the painting titled “The River’s Lifeline” captures a perspective of the past; conversely, the piece on the top right, titled “Lighters Reborn: From Trade to Tourism”, reflects the present day. The painting on the bottom left, “The Lighterman’s Journey,” captures the past as Ah Huat guides his goods-filled boat toward the river’s warehouses. In contrast, the piece on the bottom right, “A River’s New Voyage,” shows Wei Wei in the present day, enjoying a scenic tour on a bumboat that has evolved from a vessel of trade into one of tourism.

Panel A initiates the visual narrative through four paintings. The first pair juxtaposes the congested, bumboat-filled river of the past against its transformed state as a modern tourist hub. The second pair features “Ah Huat” navigating goods toward historical warehouses and shophouses, illustrating the logistical constraints of the old riverfront. Its companion piece shifts to the present, depicting “Wei Wei” aboard a tourist bumboat admiring the renovated landscape of cafes and commercial premises that now occupy former godowns, highlighting the river's evolving socio-spatial dynamics.

Figure 7

Panel B Shows the Overall Layout of the Paintings



Panel B continues the narrative through two smaller paintings. Although both are titled "A Pause by the River," the work on the left depicts Ah Huat seated on a low wooden stool, taking a modest meal of rice and black sauce. This scene reflects the economic hardships of lightermen who endured low wages and physically demanding labour. In contrast, the counterpart shows Wei Wei seated on a bench enjoying a burger, underscoring the leisure and comfort of the contemporary riverfront. This juxtaposition emphasises the shift from the labour-intensive lives of the past to the recreational, commercialised present.

Figure 8

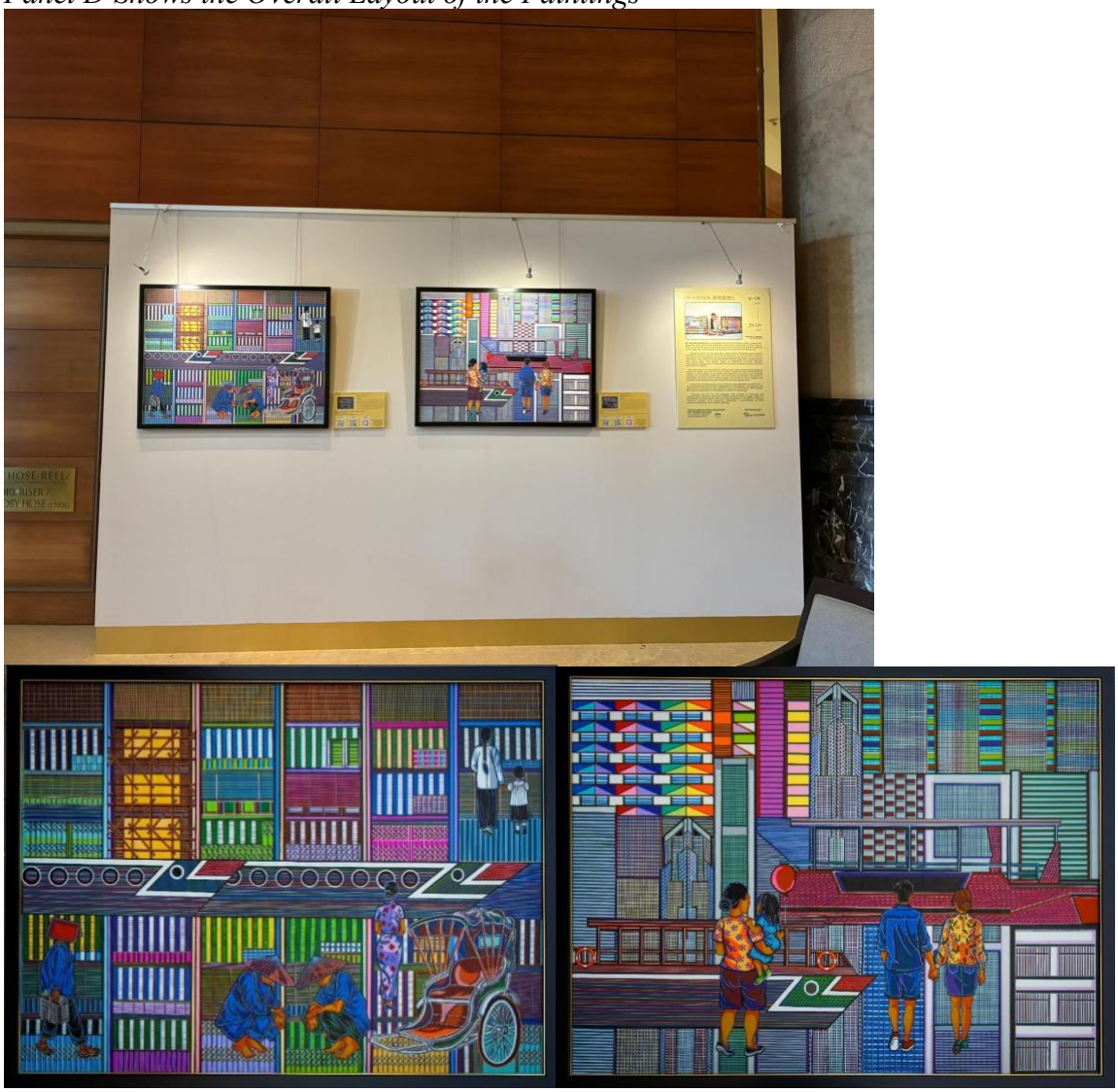
Panel C Shows the Overall Layout of the Painting



Panel C featured a single painting, titled “Sunset,” that encapsulates the transition from the traditional lighterage industry to mechanised logistics at Pasir Panjang Wharves. Ah Huat is depicted lowering his straw hat, a symbolic gesture marking both the end of the day and the conclusion of his career as a lighterman. In the foreground, a large vessel loaded with colourful containers and mechanised equipment visually overshadows the smaller bumboat, highlighting the redundancy of traditional vessels and the efficiency of modern logistics.

Figure 9

Panel D Shows the Overall Layout of the Paintings



The first work on the left, titled "The Heartbeat of Old Singapore," depicts Ah Huat in conversation with a rickshaw coolie, situating the scene within the communal networks of the historical working class. The composition also features a Samsui woman in her iconic red headdress and a Majie (domestic servant) escorting a young girl home. Behind them, shophouses with ground-floor warehouses and upper-level residences reinforce the socio-economic stratification of the era. Its companion piece, "New Millennium," reflects the contemporary riverfront, showing Wei Wei and his wife admiring a skyline dominated by commercial skyscrapers. The inclusion of a household helper carrying their daughter illustrates the continuity of domestic labour within the modern family structure. Together, these works frame a comprehensive temporal arc, juxtaposing the intimate labour practices of the past with the leisure and urbanisation of the present.

All the paintings incorporated montages of shophouses and warehouses, with Ah Huat representing the past and Wei Wei the present. Colour palettes referencing old shophouses and bumboats were used to evoke collective memory and sensory recall. Symbolic elements, such as the fisheye and mouth of the bumboat, signified navigational guidance and protection for lightermen. Each work, paired with A4 explanatory notes and relevant quotations, enabled

audiences to navigate the paintings and interpret historical developments along the Singapore River.

Utilising visual storytelling through Ah Huat and Wei Wei drew audiences into both historical and contemporary dimensions of the river, evoking emotional and cognitive responses. This aligns with Dobbs's (2003) documentation of the river's evolution as a site of human endeavour and transformation. The characters activated empathy and recognition, supporting claims that narrative figures facilitate deeper engagement with complex histories (Bruner, 1990).

The visual compositions employed montages of architecture, bumboats, and characters to communicate meanings beyond text (Arnheim, 1974; Eisner, 2002). Colour and design were intended to trigger sensory recall and collective memory (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007). The sequencing of paired paintings reinforced temporal transformation, while explanatory notes integrated textual literacy, providing cognitive scaffolding for audiences (Fisher et al., 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Ritchhart, 2007). Audiences were encouraged to engage visually rather than solely through text. This participatory approach transformed viewers into active interpreters, aligning with Dewey's (1934) principle of art as experience and Sullivan's (2010) articulation of PaR as a dialogic knowledge process. By translating Dobbs's (2003) historiographical insights into visual and narrative formats, the exhibition bridged the gap between scholarship and public understanding (Leavy, 2015; McNiff, 2018).

The exhibition featured interactive elements, including a bumboat craft workshop and an artist talk (Figure 10). Participants folded origami bumboats while the author shared memories and engaged audiences in discussion. This fostered intergenerational connections and highlighted the pedagogical and reflective purpose of the exhibition.

Figure 10
Bumboat Craft Workshop/Artist Talk



Conclusion

This Practice-as-Research (PaR) project aimed to integrate scholarly inquiry into the author's creative practice as a visual artist. By examining Stephen Dobbs's *The Singapore River: A Social History, 1819–2002*, the researcher used documentary analysis—a qualitative method for interpreting historical themes—to inform the development of nine visual artworks. These were exhibited at The Fullerton East Garden Gallery from 16 August to 29 September 2025. The central objective was to communicate the intertwined histories of the Singapore River through visual storytelling, using two narrative characters, Ah Huat and Wei Wei, as interpretive conduits of Dobbs's (2003) scholarship.

This exhibition strategy responded to a contemporary media environment where digital saturation often diminishes sustained engagement with long-form historical texts. Against this backdrop, painting served as a narrative device to reintroduce contemplative engagement, transforming textual accounts into visual experiences that invite emotional connection. The introduction of Ah Huat and Wei Wei was a deliberate strategy to anchor viewer attention through relatable figures, enhancing cognitive accessibility to complex themes. Situated within contrasting settings of old shophouses, godowns, and modern redevelopments, these paintings visualised the river's transformation from a site of labour and trade to one of leisure and tourism.

For the artist-researcher, this process underscored the PaR practitioner's responsibility to balance creative interpretation with historical authenticity. Rigorous qualitative analysis ensured the paintings preserved the integrity of Dobbs's (2003) scholarship while rearticulating it through an aesthetic medium. This approach reaffirmed the ethical dimension of practice-based interpretation, in which the artist avoids distorting the original meanings. Consequently, the nine paintings stand as "visual artefacts" that demonstrate how artistic practice operates as a legitimate mode of knowledge production.

Audience engagement during the exhibition was highly encouraging. Guests included Associate Professor Stephen Dobbs, alongside artists and friends. Many noted that the paintings' colours and compositions evoked nostalgia, while the inclusion of Ah Huat and Wei Wei made the historical narrative accessible. An A0-sized introductory poster and A4-sized explanatory notes guided viewers through the exhibition's focus, helping them understand that the artworks were inspired by scholarly text.

The paintings were displayed in a logical sequence depicting the landscape of the old and new Singapore River. For instance, lightermen labouring along the river were juxtaposed with modern tourists; a coolie eating by the riverside contrasted with a visitor on a park bench; and the decline of the lighterage industry was shown alongside urban renewal. Historical people such as Samsui women and rickshaw pullers were represented alongside contemporary commercialised riverfronts. This sequencing allowed viewers to experience a narrative progression, with many remarking that the visual imagery prompted them to read the accompanying texts for deeper historical understanding.

Associate Professor Dobbs, the guest of honour, noted that the paintings clearly reflected the historical contexts of his work, describing the exhibition as powerful and engaging. The impact was further extended through bumboat craft workshops and artist talks. Participants remarked that the storytelling captured the essence of the river's evolution and expanded their appreciation of how historical texts can be reinterpreted through painting.

Certain limitations must be acknowledged. Feedback was primarily gathered during the opening and workshops, as the artist could not be present throughout the entire duration. This may have introduced bias, as many respondents were acquaintances. However, several artworks were purchased by unknown visitors who provided unsolicited praise regarding the visual storytelling. Spatial constraints also limited the scale and quantity of works; smaller paintings would have reduced visual impact, while larger ones would have restricted the number of historical themes depicted.

Looking forward, the impact of digital disruption has motivated the artist to consider expanding into digital storytelling to engage broader audiences, particularly younger

generations. Ultimately, this project successfully bridged the gap between historical scholarship and public engagement. The creative and historical dimensions of this work affirm how Practice-as-Research can transform academic history into accessible, evocative, and enduring forms of visual knowledge.

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

The author confirms that the intellectual content, original ideas, and scholarly analysis presented in this work are entirely their own. Generative AI was not used to create or influence the research. AI-based tools (Grammarly/Gemini Google) were utilised strictly for linguistic polishing, grammatical refinement, and word-count reduction of the author's original draft.

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Integrating Diverse Language Scripts Through a Unified Typographic Framework for Global Branding

Anosh Gill, Florida A&M University, United States
Kia Dolby, Savannah College of Art and Design, United States

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In today's interconnected world, the convergence of language, typography, and design offers new opportunities to develop innovative strategies for cross-cultural communication. This study proposes a unified typographic framework that integrates structurally diverse scripts—Nastalik (Urdu), Devanagari (Hindi), Hanzi (Mandarin), Jawi (Malay), and Latin (English)—within a rectangular typographic system. By systematically analyzing the structural features, stroke patterns, spatial arrangements, and cultural conventions of each script, the research identifies points of convergence and divergence that inform the creation of a cohesive design approach. The proposed rectangular typographic system functions as a visual bridge, enabling the seamless combination of diverse linguistic forms while preserving their cultural and aesthetic integrity. Through this integration, the study investigates how such typographic design can enhance readability, foster intercultural understanding, and create meaningful visual dialogue across linguistic boundaries. In addition, the research evaluates the implications of this approach for the broader design landscape, considering its potential to influence global typographic trends, inform digital and print media practices, and contribute to inclusive design methodologies that respect cultural nuance. By emphasizing visual harmony, cultural sensitivity, and the communicative power of typography, this study offers a framework for future exploration at the intersection of language, design, and cross-cultural engagement. The findings provide valuable insights for designers, linguists, and educators seeking to harness the interplay of script and form to promote clarity, understanding, and aesthetic innovation in a multilingual and globally connected world.

Keywords: visual design, language, typography, communication

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Introduction

Human language, with its 7106 living variations (Ethnologue, 2014), is vital for cultural identity while at the same time posing challenges for effective communication. Addressing language barriers, the International Phonetic Association developed a notation system (Kawada, 2023). This exploration through typography seeks to create a cohesive communication platform, transforming ideas into a universal language through fluency, including pronunciation and contextual meaning, aligning with Derrida's insights (Kawada, 2023).

The integration of computers, supported by prior research (Heppner et al., 1985; Kak, 1981; Mocci et al., 2001; Oborne & Holton, 1988), has increased information consumption. Using a digital typeface on a rectangular grid assists those with limited language knowledge. Typography, influenced by digital mediums and ongoing legibility studies (Hannah, 2023; Hoener et al., 1997), becomes crucial. Grids, essential for organizing design elements, enhance content accessibility (Samy, 2023). This research proposes efficiently integrating multiple languages on a single rectangular grid for clear and concise information display.

Linguistic History

Thousands of years ago, humans began communicating through spoken language, long before the written version was developed. The Sumerians introduced cuneiform around 3500 BCE, marking the first true written language that used letters instead of ideograms (DRM, 2021). Today, English has become a global lingua franca, valued for its flexibility, easy pronunciation, and learning accessibility. Despite not being the oldest language, English plays a pivotal role in modern communication, marketing, logo design, and information transfer.

Exploring ways to connect with diverse consumers in multiple languages involves considering the fusion of words or phrases from different linguistic backgrounds. To better understand how languages may be fused, an examination of the historical roots of significant language systems is needed. The focus of this study is on English, Hindi, Urdu, and Chinese (Mandarin). This exploration aims to uncover the potential for integrating languages and fostering cross-cultural communication (DRM, 2021).

Language Systems and Typography

The English language has been evolving for 1,600 years and maintains its global impact by the ease with which it absorbs elements from diverse languages (Kaisa, 2020). British English, rooted in the Middle Ages, is globally esteemed but faces criticisms for pronunciation challenges (Naveed, 2023). In India, Hindi and Urdu have deep cultural significance and use distinct scripts that serve as mediums for shaping thoughts (Lesso, 2023; Sariya, 2021). Mandarin, originating from the Ming Dynasty, poses unique challenges for cross-cultural fusion (Gui Su, 2019). This study explores the fusion of English, Urdu, Hindi, and Mandarin for global communication strategies, aiming to harmonize words across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Miyatsu, 2019).

Typography, the art of arranging type for aesthetic appeal and readability, has evolved from symbolic representation to various written forms, including digital fonts, hieroglyphs, calligraphy, and signwriting (Bigman, 2012). Writing, a universal mode of communication prioritizing legibility and consistency, has seen the transformation of typefaces from medieval

Blackletter to modern styles like Modern, Slab, and Sans Serif, influenced by cultural and historical factors (Bigman, 2012). Early typography styles were strongly influenced by text production methods, as seen in Egyptian hieroglyphs (3000 BC), hieratic script, and Sumerian cuneiform (3500–3000 BC) (*Figure 1*). Roman serifs originated from chiseled stone inscriptions in the Roman Empire, and contemporary Roman typefaces like Trajan (1989) have roots in Trajan's Column inscriptions (113 AD), often used for authority in official documents. Original Roman texts exclusively used uppercase letters (Forrest, 2021) (*Figure 2*).

Figure 1

Table or Diagram Showing Ancient Writing Systems



Note. From Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization (pp. 170–171), by A. T. Browder, 2007

Figure 2

Table Comparing Ancient Scripts



Note. From Science Photo Library (Terry, S., n.d.).
https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/118991/view/table-comparing-ancient-scripts

Arabic uses glyphs for phonetic sounds, employing an abjad system with vowels represented by diacritics. Urdu follows similar principles. Indic language design, rooted in India's print history, features Devanagari with distinct characteristics. Chinese fonts, with over 6763 characters, present challenges for designers, favoring Hei Ti/Sans Serif for digital design on low DPI screens (Ahmed, 2018; Hynuza, 2017; Malli, 2022; Sibal, 2019). These diverse

characteristics pose challenges and innovations in creating legible written forms across scripts and languages.

Design Elements

Designers shape communication using elements like typefaces, fonts, and white space to convey tones and trends (Hannah, 2023). Following Gestalt theory, the brain simplifies complex images and seeks patterns (Chapman, 2018). Combining Gestalt principles, a system could merge elements from four languages within a grid for multilingual understanding (Interaction Design Foundation, 2016). The **Malay** cultural sphere has historically encompassed maritime Southeast Asia, particularly regions of present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei, where shared linguistic and cultural traditions developed through extensive trade networks (Reid, 2015). Examples of these words in original fonts are provided in Figure 3:

Figure 3
English Words With Urdu, Hindi, Mandarin, and Malay Fonts

ENGLISH	URDU	HINDI	MANDARIN	MALAY
WE	ہم Hum	हम Hum	我们 Women	KITA
GO	جا Ja	जाना Ja	去 Qù	PERGI
ICE	برف Baraf	बर्फ़ Baraf	冰 Bing	AIS
YOU	تم Tum	आप Tum	你 Ni	AWAK

The growth and emergence of new technology, in addition to new trends in design, are offering typographers a wide opportunity for experimentation, design and ways to increase accessibility.

Artificial Intelligence is impacting not only the field of design, but specifically how type designers create type. Font generators, tools that use AI technology and that have been trained

using existing typefaces, are becoming an easy way to create fonts and variations of type. In addition, design studios are collaborating with AI tools to generate experimental type forms, adding a variety of AI tools including generative AI tools and machine learning. Kinetic typography is the art of creating engaging type that incorporates movement and motion timed synced with the message. Kinetic type is being used more in social media and other online content forms to create moving imagery, generating excitement and engagement (Monotype, n.d.).

Universal and multilingual type present multiple challenges due to differences in language and characters. Type foundries and studio efforts exist to create fonts that move towards Google and Monotype's development of Noto font, an unmodulated ("sans serif") design for texts in the *Latin, Cyrillic* and *Greek* scripts. Google's Noto fonts are "perfect for harmonious, aesthetic, and typographically correct global communication, in more than 1,000 languages and over 150 writing systems" (Google, n.d.).

Type Together is a type foundry which creates multilingual typography, with fonts spanning many scripts and languages. Klim Type Foundry is also dedicated to producing fonts that is supported by a large number of languages. (Klim Type Foundry, n.d.). Other type foundries have made strides in creating inclusive font options, such as OpenDyslexic's typeface designed against some common symptoms of dyslexia (Gonzalez, A. n.d.).

Grids and Written Language

Writing systems evolved with technology and culture, initially favoring right-to-left stone carving for right-handed practicality (Children's Museum of Indianapolis, 2017). The shift to top-to-bottom, right-to-left occurred with ink and paper, as seen in Ancient Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Mongolian (ShreevatsaR, 2010). The Ancient Greeks, influenced by the Phoenicians, later adopted the left-to-right system to prevent ink smudging (Bellis, 2016). Currently, Arabic and Hebrew maintain right-to-left, while East Asians use both directions. In Japan, writing direction symbolizes historical or modern contexts, influencing museum designs. The left-to-right system, linked with Western culture, reflects Westerners' impact on writing technologies.

Grid layout design originated in ancient handwritten books, evolving to carefully measured systems with the printing press. The Gutenberg Bible exemplifies early printed artifacts' two-column grid. In the 19th century, newspapers adopted grid-like formats, influencing contemporary design. 20th-century grid design, shaped by movements like Bauhaus and De Stijl, embraced intricate forms, breaking away from traditional structures (Tondreau, 2019).

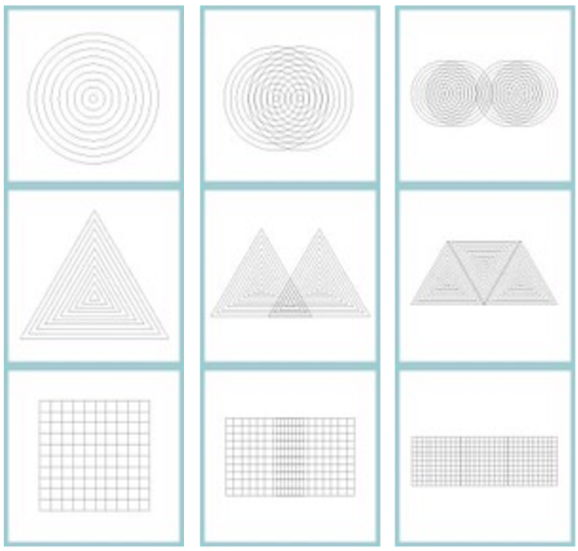
Grid Options

There are three basic options for using grids *Figure 5*. Designers may opt for circular, rectangular, or triangle grids. Triangle grids, with their simplicity and geometric elegance, are praised for their consistent planarity and ease of use in computer graphics. They excel in applications like 2D tiling and heightmaps due to their straightforward nature. This makes them a superior choice for grids compared to more complex polygons or hexagons (Boris, 2021).

In modern logo design, there's a growing trend of using circular grids to shape curves, inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. While circular grids offer intrigue for intricate marks, the enduring influence of the golden ratio in achieving balance remains significant (Hardy,

2012). Rectangular grids, on the other hand, enhance alignment, balance, and spacing, seamlessly integrating into the design phase. However, they may potentially limit creativity in abstract designs, depending on the amount of content and visual elements. Specific content requirements may necessitate alternative methods, emphasizing the need for careful consideration in a grid-based approach (mauve928, 2009). Since all three grids are common design work, experimentation was conducted with each grid using multiple languages to determine which one might best uniformly translate. Experimentation was done on using overlapping grids to see if any model had potential.

Figure 4
Circular, Triangular, Rectangular



Comparing Circular, Triangular, and Rectangular Grids

The circular grid posed challenges for seamlessly integrating multiple languages in design. It faces issues with precision, alignment, spatial efficiency, content length variations, and maintaining design consistency.

The conclusion was that circular grids are difficult to fuse disparate languages. Using a triangular grid also presented problems when trying to blend multiple languages in a design. Triangles come with their own set of issues like being complicated, not giving much room for alignment, and making it tough to keep the text flowing smoothly and easy to read.

Figure 5
Urdu, Hindi, Mandarin, Malay—Efforts Using Circular Grids



Triangular setups might disturb the natural flow of text, creating problems in showcasing different languages and constraining creative freedom in multilingual designs. The uneven shape of triangles makes it tricky to evenly space out characters, and it might not lend itself

well to the kind of visual consistency you need for effective cross-cultural communication. While triangles have their uses, the shape is not as commonly used or as practical as rectangular grids when it comes to bringing together different languages in a cohesive visual system. *Figure 6.*

Figure 6

Urdu, Hindi, Mandarin, Malay—Efforts Using Triangular Grids



The rectangular grid (*Figure 7)* was easily the most useful. After review by four graphic design educators, assessment by three bilingual individuals, and ten rounds of refinement, the rectangular grid emerged as the optimal choice for our unified typographic system.

Figure 7

Efforts Using Square Grid



Its effectiveness lies in ensuring precise alignment, maintaining consistent spacing, and creating a visually harmonious integration of languages. The simplicity and adaptability of rectangular grids make it seamless to incorporate diverse linguistic elements while ensuring balance and readability. Moreover, considering the historical significance of grids in writing systems and their ability to handle varying content lengths, their effectiveness is further underscored as seen in the following examples (*Figures 8, 9, 10, 11)*:

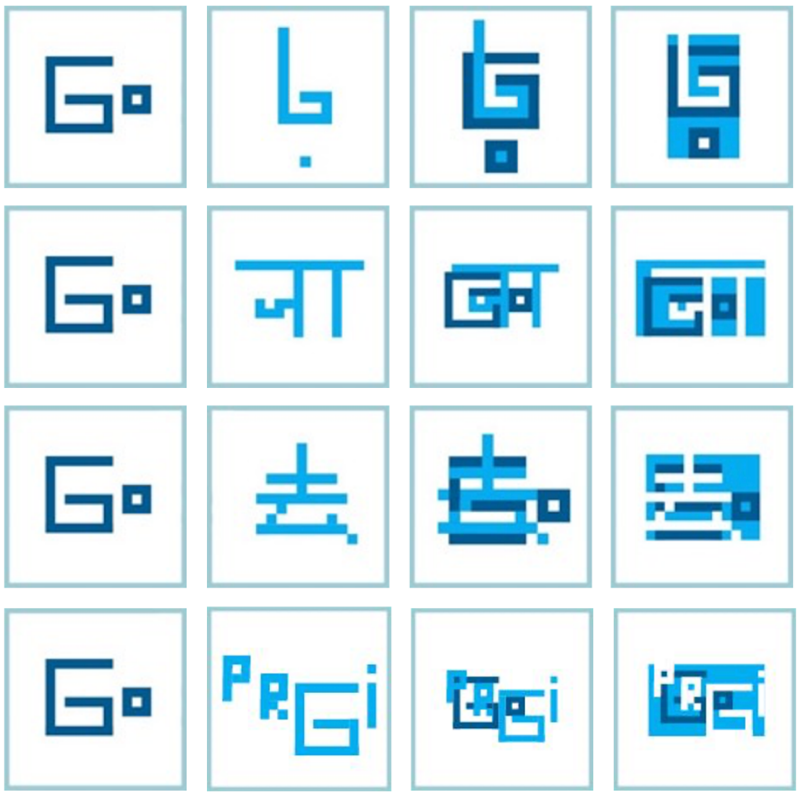
Figures 8

Row 1 – Urdu, Row 2 – Hindi, Row 3 – Mandarin, Row 4 – Mala—Efforts Using Rectangular Grids With Word "We"



Figures 9

Row 1 – Urdu, Row 2 – Hindi, Row 3 – Mandarin, Row 4 – Malay—Efforts Using Rectangular Grids With Word "Go"



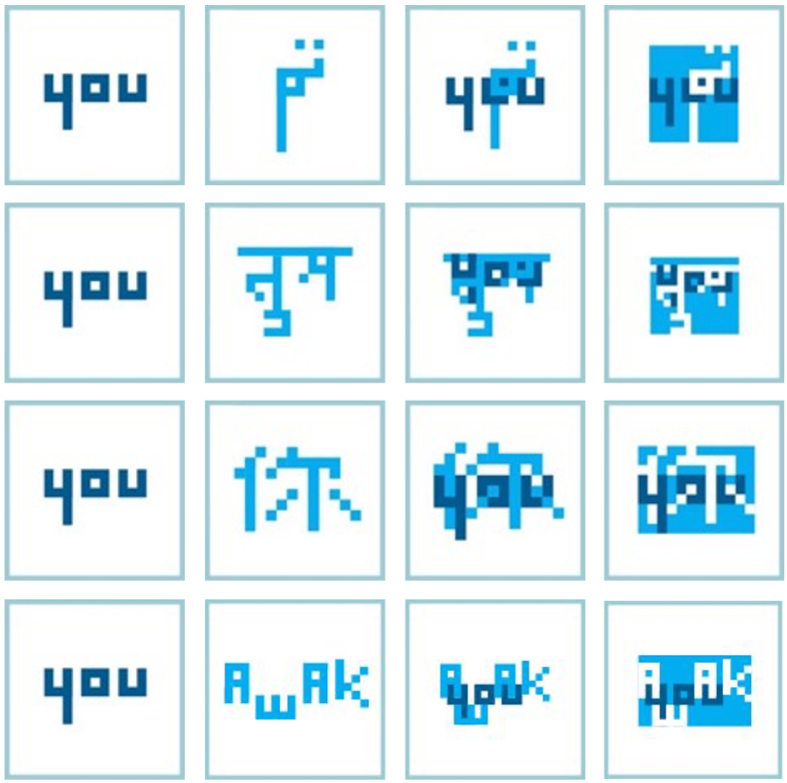
Figures 10

Row 1 – Urdu, Row 2 – Hindi, Row 3 – Mandarin, Row 4 – Malay—Efforts Using Rectangular Grids With Word "Ice"



Figures 11

Row 1 – Urdu, Row 2 – Hindi, Row 3 – Mandarin, Row 4 – Malay—Efforts Using Rectangular Grids With Word "You"



As design trends evolve, the inherent adaptability of rectangular grids aligns perfectly, making them ideal for crafting a multilingual system that is clear, concise, and visually pleasing—an essential component for effective cross-cultural communication. Ultimately, the choice of grid hinges on specific design goals and the unique demands of the content.

Conclusion

In our connected world, the interplay of language, typography, and design proposes both challenges and opportunities for innovative solutions for cross-cultural communication. After exploring multiple options for creating a unified typographic framework for Urdu, Hindi, Mandarin, and English, a system based on a rectangular system shows promise. Detailed analysis forms the basis, utilizing the rectangular system as a visual bridge for diverse linguistic elements while preserving cultural nuances. The rectangular system shows the most promise in creating visual harmony and alignment. The research assesses the impact on cross-cultural communication, envisioning broader influence on the global design landscape. It provides insights into linguistics, typography, and design, suggesting avenues for future exploration.

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Toward a Unified Art ID: Reviewing International Standards for Art Identification and Provenance Management in the New Digital Age

Daniel Chun, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong
Xuanyi Lyu, University of Toronto, Canada
Karen Gao, Yale University, United States
Zara Warne, University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

As our world becomes more digitised, so must our methods in categorizing the data. Digital media and content creation have always suffered from the threat of misinformation and a lack of transparency. Furthermore, AI has risen with meteoric speed, outstripping our abilities to carefully extricate it from human-made media, further exacerbating the issue of data privacy and misrepresentation. Several standards have been created to help organizations verify digital media and establish its provenance, but a comprehensive comparison of all the standards has yet to be conducted. This paper provides a comparative analysis of six major initiatives: Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), Art Identification Standard (AIS), International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF), Linked Open Data (LOD), Linked.art and Digital Object Identification (DOI). We examine their approaches to content authentication, metadata interoperability, stakeholder communities, provenance tracking, and anti-piracy measures. Through analyzing the similarities and differences between these standards, we highlight their strengths and gaps. Our findings underscore the need for a more universal framework that integrates the best practices of current standards. We conclude by proposing considerations toward a unified art identification system that can be easily applied to art images worldwide, ensuring trust and transparency in the global digital art ecosystem.

Keywords: art ID, blockchain, decentralized identifiers, provenance, C2PA

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Introduction

As the Internet grows and becomes an increasing presence in all aspects of our lives, ensuring authenticity of an image has become a more prominent issue. The Internet is a wonderful place where data can become interconnected across institutions; research avenues are opening with ease that could not have happened before. However, with the rise of openness and rapid dissemination of images and information, we have entered a new age of misinformation, forgery, and misattribution. Traditional experts of provenance and authenticity, experts, appraisers, and museums must adapt to keep pace with both the rise of misinformation and accessibility. Provenance, the documented history of an artwork's ownership and origin, is crucial in both the art world and as a datapoint in research. Furthermore, Cultural Heritage Institutions hold a wealth of data about "images and their metadata, artworks and their metadata, and all related information, such as artist details, dates, conservation data, provenance data, and more" (Dressen, 2025). With these unique influences coming together, the need for reliable identification for artworks (both physical and digital) has become the mission of many institutions.

Internationally, multiple standards and initiatives have been proposed over the years to solve the question of how to accurately display content provenance, first due to the sheer amount of data that institutions hold and are willing to share due to the gradual shift to adopt open data but then due to the recent advent of powerful AI image generation. Each standard addresses a piece of the problem, from assigning unique IDs and embedding metadata into digital files to creating frameworks for sharing art information across institutions. However, these efforts have largely developed in parallel. Six of these prominent standards that we will be examining are:

1. **Art Identification Standard (AIS):** a governance framework that highlights the problems of incompatibility across systems, information loss and distortion, asymmetric information and diversity of views (*Home | Art Identification Standard*, n.d.). Founded in June 2019, it aims to be a standard such as "ISBN, DOI and ORCID" (*FAQ | Art Identification Standard*, n.d.).
2. **Digital Object Identifier (DOI):** A unique string assigned to an object, physical, digital, or abstract, used predominantly in academia. DOI's website states that it solves a common problem "keeping track of things. Things can be matter, material, content, or activities" (*Home | DOI Foundation*, n.d.). The standard was approved in November 2010 and published in 2012, it is a well-established system that has shown to work well in certain industries and was conceived as early as 1997 at the Frankfurt Book fair after recognizing the trend towards digital convergence and multimedia availability (*DOI Handbook*, 2023).
3. **Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA):** An open technical standard for "publishers, creators and consumers to establish the origin and edits of digital content" (*Content Credentials*, n.d.). It aims to ensure content is adaptable with standards as the digital ecosystem evolves. Established from the concern surrounding deepfakes, voice cloning, and synthetic media. It looks into building trust in what is displayed online.
4. **International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF):** A set of open standards that gives its audience access to many images and audio/visual resources that used to exist in silos, access that used to be restricted to locally-built applications (*International Image Interoperability Framework*, n.d.). Focusing on interoperability, any IIIF-compliant image server can work with any IIIF viewer. Allowing users to "publish once, reuse often" and "remix content."

5. **Linked Open Data (LOD):** An approach rather than a single standard, LOD refers to the American Art Collaborative, a consortium of 14 art museums committed to establishing a "critical mass of LOD on the semantic web." Funded from 2014–2017, it aims to "exponentially enhance access, linking and sharing of information about American art in a way that transcends what is currently possible with structured data" (*American Art Collaborative Linked Open Data Initiative | Smithsonian American Art Museum*, n.d.).
6. **Linked.Art:** A community working to create a model based on Linked Open Usable Data (LOUD) to describe cultural heritage, with a focus on artwork (*Linked Art - Linked Art*, n.d.). Version 1.0 was released in February 2025. It aims to define a metadata application profile and the technical means to interact with it using an API.

Each of these standards is working towards reliable authenticity in its specified field, taking different approaches. The remainder of this paper is organized by thematic aspects: blockchain usage, metadata frameworks, metadata fields, and community. By comparing their strengths and weaknesses, we can understand where they converge and identify opportunities for creating a more universal art ID system that builds on their successes.

It is worthwhile to also give credit to Carnegie Museum of Art (CMOA) which had created and funded the development of Art Tracks in 2013–2015. This project aimed to convert textual provenance records into structured, machine-readable data—extending the AAM standard into a strict superset that supports JSON, Linked Open Data, and RDF—thereby enabling sophisticated queries, visualizations, and cross-institutional storytelling (Newbury, 2017). The official project can be found at https://www.museumprovenance.org/ and the open source library has been shared at Github https://github.com/arttracks/provenance-interactive.

Blockchain Technology in Art Identification Standards

Bureacă and Aciobăniței (2024) define three technical mechanisms to protect content authenticity: applying digital signatures to verify the signer's identity, using watermarks as unique identifiers, and storing identifiers in the blockchain and distributed ledger technology (DLT) systems, which have strong potential to improve trust in the storage of online data. Historically, most of our data has been stored in centralized databases that the public deemed to be controlled by trustworthy entities (Cheney et al., 2009). However, digital data and document metadata are constantly being modified as they are moved around the internet without central control, undermining the credibility of any online data (Lynch, 2001). Blockchain and DLT systems offer potential to solve this problem by storing data as a chain of immutable transactions that have been confirmed and validated in a decentralized system. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has earlier defined the use of decentralized identity (World Wide Web Consortium (2022) which also suggested the use of blockchain and DLT technologies. These digital infrastructures can create and manage digital originals with fixed content, a uniquely identified owner, and a confirmed time of creation. To register a piece of literary art or artwork to the blockchain, the system creates a cryptographic envelope around the original content and the owner's private key and adds a timestamp. Although multiple copies of the data can be created, the owner retains the rights to the content. If the owner transfers the rights to another person, an amendment cryptographic envelope containing the original cryptographic envelope and the transfer information is registered to the blockchain, therefore preserving provenance (Batista et al., 2021). Chun (2023) has also suggested that the Art ID Standard (AIS) (wwe.artidstandard.org) organization which was initiated in Europe with

an international membership base which is currently under development also proposed the use of blockchain technologies specifically using decentralized identity.

Multiple frameworks utilizing blockchain have been developed to protect data authenticity. One example is to combine blockchain with an off-chain storage solution called a data lake, removing the need to trust a third party for data storage and maintenance (Vishwa & Hussain, 2018). Eliminating third parties simplifies intermediary costs and lowers the risk of data being modified without the owner's consent. Another framework leverages blockchain, crowd wisdom, and AI to create a decentralized platform for fact-checking and trust assessment (Buțincu & Alexandrescu, 2023). It uses web crawlers to fetch online news into the blockchain and a combination of federated AI modules and human validators to analyze the content. This system also uses an off-chain storage component to store a bundle of text and media for each processed news item. Bureacă and Aciobănițe (2024) claim that their framework offers more features than other existing frameworks: it identifies fake information, handles more than one category of media, and follows the C2PA standard, which improves the potential for the framework to be adopted. The above frameworks are just a few examples of blockchain solutions proposed to improve data security and authenticity. The applications of these frameworks in enhancing data provenance demonstrate the benefits of using blockchain in protecting artists' ownership of their work and implementing art identification standards. In regards to the six art identification standards being examined in this paper, only AIS explicitly uses blockchain, although C2PA is also compatible with blockchain. More details regarding each standards applications in blockchain are provided below.

AIS: AIS assigns each artwork a decentralized identifier (DID) that is distributed on the blockchain (Magnin et al., 2023). This standard also contains multiple metadata fields pertaining to blockchain, which will be explained in more detail in the metadata frameworks section.

C2PA: Although the C2PA standard does not require the use of blockchain, it is still compatible with blockchain systems, as evidenced in the framework proposed above by Bureacă and Aciobănițe (2024). In their framework, information can be verified by analyzing the blockchain with the resource identifier in the C2PA metadata within the CCM. Therefore, the authors claim that "every C2PA compliant tool can be used to read and extract provenance information about a registered asset." C2PA also includes metadata fields that allow W3C Verifiable Credentials to be embedded in a manifest (*Content Credentials : C2PA Technical Specification :: C2PA Specifications*, n.d.).

DOI: The DOI system is an important tool for managing digital objects by resolving frequently changing URLs into unique and permanent identifiers to help locate online resources or research papers. The DOI system does not use blockchain, and is, in fact, centralized; therefore each publisher pays a fee to an official registration agency to register a domain name. However, DOI digital objects are still vulnerable to modifications or copying. Although the DOI system itself does not use blockchain, there may be ways to improve this system. For example, Rong et al. propose to replace the traditional DOI system with decentralized identities (DID) for decentralized distributed digital objects; their system also uses NFT-like schema and smart contracts (2022).

IIIF/LOD/Linked.Art: Neither LOD, IIIF, or Linked.Art use blockchain technology, but rather they focus on more centralized systems for managing art collections. LUX, a knowledge-graph discovery system, is an example of a platform that uses the Linked Open Data standards

IIIF and Linked.Art to house over 41 million records related to art, natural history, archival, conservation, and bibliographic collections (Sanderson, 2024). Sanderson explains that LUX's "overall architecture for acquiring, processing and loading data was informed by the need for a single system to manage the information" (2024).

We conclude that AIS and C2PA are most compatible with blockchain technology and decentralized systems, while DOI, IIIF, LOD, and Linked.Art standards employ centralized data storage systems.

MetaData Frameworks

One core question when creating a standard is "how do we get the information across in an accurate and efficient way?" Many museums hold extensive information on artworks and are willing to share it with the public, but have no way of categorizing it in a way that is interoperable and readable to many who wish to query the dataset. As E.Fink states, "today's documents about artifacts are being chronicled in a variety of machine-readable formats that do not allow us to easily make connections across multiple databases and museums websites at once" (2018) and as M. Magnin, executive chair of AIS, writes, echoing the one of the first pillars of EU digital transformation "data is an essential resource for economic growth" (2022). Data is crucial to the growth of both worlds of collecting art from financial to research, the standards explored in this paper all try to tackle and find a way to sort and order metadata attached to artworks.

AIS formats their data by supplying an identifier distributed on the blockchain, hence the name DID (Decentralised + Identifier) (*Standard | Art Identification Standard*, n.d.). It bases itself on W3C terminology and technology, using a DID controller; entities that have the capability to make changes to a DID document. The DID will point to where the metadata can be found, whether it can be accessed at a cost or freely (Magnin, 2022). Contributors to the AIS also must conform to the AIS DID protocol, which "contains a set of formally-defined metadata fields used to document an object for the purposes of identifying that object and recording information relevant to the creation of the associated AIS DID" (Magnin et al., 2023). The aim of this framework is interoperability, so that different platforms such as galleries, auction houses and artists themselves can interoperate using this common ID. Artists can retain a self-sovereign control over their data without relying on centralized authorities. The metadata itself is less extensive than other standards, focusing on four sections: Aggregation, Object, Entity Resolution and DID management. It also, interestingly, adds a tiering system designed to reflect the confidence one has that the AIS DID connects and is related to a specific object. The ID is a tool to facilitate verification not an outright stamp of approval.

DOI, much like AIS, has a single identifier, but which points to the object rather than a set of metadata. However, the DOI system does require a core set of metadata to be stored in the DOI registry. The metadata model was based on the INDECS (interoperability of data in e-commerce systems) interoperable metadata framework (*DOI Handbook*, 2023). The use of the metadata is to "enrich" the service provided to users as the users can search for a DOI name using metadata. Like AIS, the metadata framework follows strict rules so that DOI can achieve interoperability and the automated integration of metadata. One such rule is that for every entity identified with a DOI name must have a minimum set of mandatory metadata (DOI Kernel), to make sure that every entity within the system is identifiable. The limitation behind this, however, is that it must be applicable to every single entity within the system, not just artworks. Thus, the metadata is broad with no data specific to art. Of course, additional information can

be declared but it is not mandatory. DOI shows us how to establish a reliable system with a persistent identifier, even when information surrounding it may change, such as ownership or location.

Other standards, such as IIIF, have extensive metadata frameworks, due to their nature as primary research viewers. IIIF Presentation API specifies a JSON-LD based format for image metadata and sequence structure, called a Manifest. The manifest holds information on a particular piece, the title and other descriptive information (Appleby et al., 2012). The metadata itself is an ordered list of human-readable label and value entries; with entries that could be information about the creation of the object, physical description, and ownership information. IIIF allows limited metadata for the creation of the manifests but allows creators to add more if they wanted to. The API further builds on interoperability by allowing users to have external links within the metadata, with the appropriate label and value to describe the relationship. The linking of data allows for a deeper understanding of the information held by IIIF, which allows for a richer researching experience, to further this, the API also allows internal links such as "partOf" that allows users to navigate collections with ease. AAC is an example of museums adopting IIIF for the express work of contrasting works of art and as a key function of conducting research (Fink, 2018).

Linked.art is perhaps the most extensive of all the standards we will look at, as it has a focus towards artworks and museum-oriented activities. They state that their scope "is to define the semantic description of cultural heritage items, and the important surrounding contextual information such as people, places, concepts and events." Despite the large amount of data, they aim to make sure that they are interoperable and easy to use. Like IIIF, Linked.art also utilizes JSON-LD documents and the CIDOC-CRM model with GETTY vocabularies (*Home | CIDOC CRM*, n.d.). The metadata allows objects and people to be easily searchable and easily linked to multiple different themes. For example, two museums publish data using Linked.art, a researcher could query all objects that a certain artist created, this level of semantic interoperability is essentially data integration by design. The trade-off is complexity. Linked.art requires sophisticated mapping of legacy data into the model and a commitment to maintain those URIs and references. As shown by the Leeds library when it decided to categorize its data through Linked.art, "it became very apparent in discussions with peer institutions such as The Getty Trust that implementing a data model is no mean feat" (Abel, 2024). However, the benefits of implementing are greater, a step towards open, interconnected data.

C2PA has a different approach to their metadata framework, as it is not so much linked to the other frameworks due to its broader spectrum of content; social media posts and digital art being created at this moment. Its aim is to standardize provenance metadata attached to a media file and to document its journey through the internet. The C2PA specification defines their metadata through fields such as content's creator, edit history, software used and timestamps and is signed by a specific signer enabling cryptographic validation and attribution of the data (*Content Credentials : C2PA Technical Specification :: C2PA Specifications*, n.d.). C2PA is concerned with the way the metadata files are treated by consumers, with many social media platforms stripping metadata for privacy and size reasons (Steidl, 2016). Thus, alongside their files, C2PA users must have a compliant C2PA reader to ensure validation.

In summary, the two main concerns with the metadata frameworks are interoperability and validation of IIIF and Linked.art strive to make information exchange across institutions as seamless and effective as possible. DOI and AIS establish a single reference identifier which people can refer to but requires additional metadata to allow them to be searchable in a

database. C2PA refines their focus on metadata to just provenance logs that can be shared between content editing and publishing platforms. Only AIS has proposed to adopt the use of blockchain technologies particularly following the concept of the W3C Decentralized Identity methods. The following Table 1 depicts the metadata being used for identifying an artistic object.

Table 1

Comparison of Metadata Fields Across Five Digital Media Standards

Metadata Category	AIS	DOI	C2PA	IIIF	Linked.art
Title/Identifier	title objectURI imageURI referenceNumber	DOI name referentIdentifier(s)	dc: identifier xmp:Identifier Iptc4xmpExt:DigImageGUID	id label	id identified_by
Creators	creators creatorsURI	principalAgent	author	-	produced_by carried_out_by destroyed_by removed_by modified_by encountered_by used_for
Creation Date	creationDate	dateOfBirthOrFormation	dc:date xmp:CreateDate	navDate	timespan
Size/Format	measurements objectType materialFormat	structuralType mode character	dc:format dc:type Iptc4xmpExt:DigitalSourceType Iptc4xmpExt:Genre Iptc4xmpExt:MaxAvailHeight Iptc4xmpExt:MaxAvailWidth	type format height width duration	classified_as dimension
Location	currentLocation	associatedTerritory	Iptc4xmpExt:LocationCreated	-	current_location current_permanent_location took_place_at
Rights/ Registration	rights rightsURI	registrationAuthorityCode issueDate issueNumber	Iptc4xmpExt:RegistryId	rights requiredStatement.label.Attribution provider	current_owner current_custodian current_permanent_custodian
Blockchain/DID	blockchainTokenID blockchainInitialTXNHasRecord blockchainInitialChain blockchainMetadataURL blockchainSmartContract blockchainViewOnChain dIDCreator dIDCreatorURI dIDCreationDate dIDVersion dIDDefinition dIDTier dIDCreatorAuthority	-	credential	-	-
Groups/ Related Items	aggregationType, aggregationConnectedItems	linkedCreation linkedParty associatedTerritory	dc:relation	seeAlso partOf	member_of
Other	isShownAt distinguishingFeatures subjectMatter tagIDCode tagIDType tagIDDef tagEncoding tagEncodingType tagEncodingDef	primaryReferentType referentType dateOfDeathOrDissolution	**Refer to C2PA Technical Standards for Full List of Metadata Fields*	**Refer to IIIF API for Full List of Metadata Fields*	**Refer to Linked Art API for Full List of Metadata Fields*

Note.

- AIS classifies its metadata into four tiers, with Tier 1 requiring the least amount of metadata fields and Tier 4 requiring the most (Magnin et al., 2023).
- C2PA metadata assertions support numerous schemas–for brevity, only some of the relevant fields from the schemas XMP Basic, XMP Media Management, Dublin Core (DC), and IPTC Extension have

been included (*Content Credentials : C2PA Technical Specification :: C2PA Specifications*, n.d.). The required elements for a C2PA manifest are a label that ends in ".metadata" and a single JSON content type box with the @context property and the JSON-LD serialization of at least one metadata value. This is specified in more detail on the C2PA technical standards documentation.

- The DOI Metadata Kernel listed above includes the minimum required metadata fields (*DOI Handbook*, 2023). Additional metadata fields can be declared if they comply with existing metadata schemas. More details can be found on the DOI Handbook.
- IIIF has a field titled "metadata" that can include any metadata the user would like, but these entries are intended for presentation only (Appleby et al., 2012). IIIF also requires different metadata fields depending on the type of object or property, which is explained in detail on the IIIF API.
- The Linked.art metadata included above is from the Linked.art API for physical objects, which includes artwork (*Linked Art API: Physical Object Representation - Linked Art*, n.d.).
- The most relevant metadata fields have been included above, but the full list of the metadata fields for C2PA, IIIF, and Linked.art can be found on their respective websites.

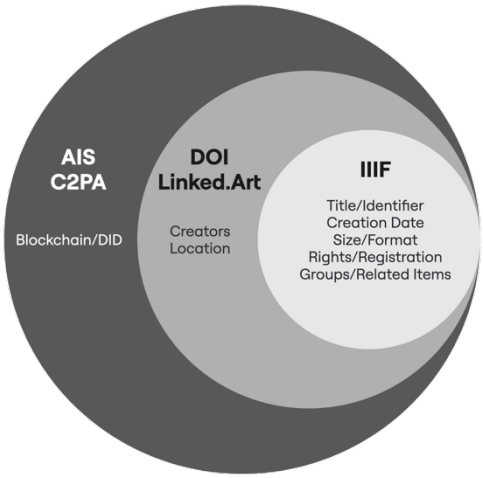
Communities and Their Objectives

The very purpose of art is about communicating, conveying a message, it then makes sense that "preserving and providing access to cultural heritage resources relies on collaborative, community-driven initiatives" (Raemy, 2023). The standards discussed in this paper all have a community around them, ranging from DOI and C2PA whose community consist of those who use the protocols and help uphold them; to IIIF and Linked.art whose community is much more open to individuals who wish to educate and help build the protocols and standards. However, these different communities have been the cornerstone of the drive and development; focusing on two areas: outreach and education.

IIIF and Linked.art have big community drives for outreach, IIIF making it clear within their website that they meet regularly and are open to everyone (*IIIF Community and Technical Specification Groups*, n.d.). These programs are for anyone around the world and while most of the IIIF participants are from the United States, Europe or the UK; the participation of other countries across the globe has been noted (Raemy, 2023). showing the effort to create a global network of collaboration. As Demlas-Glass and Sanderson (2020) state, "The mission of cultural heritage institutions is to share knowledge effectively to further scholarship and it is important that they participate in the development of the framework that disseminates their knowledge in the semantic web." While museums and other art institutions like universities strive to find the resources to follow any one standard such that the dissemination and provenance management could be managed at scale as handlers. It is the existing art community ecosystem that really lack the resources to maintain a common standard. AIS's mission is meant to deliver this change by forming as a non-profit organization to promote the adoption of Art ID Standard.

In summary, the communities surrounding each standard and their aims largely coalesce into two main pillars: Outreach and Education. Teaching cultural institutions about these standards increases the likelihood that they too will upload their data onto the web in a way that's interoperable and easily queried for the future (Fink, 2018).

Figure 1
Comparison of Metadata Fields Across Five Digital Media Standards



A New Novel Concept of an Art ID Registry Using DID:ART and DID.ART

The authors proposed the use of W3C DID:ART and a domain name DID.ART as a framework to implement a blockchain-based system infrastructure to allow digital platform providers to apply for an unique Art ID from the server endpoints that are agnostic of any blockchain network but yet follow the metadata framework proposed by AIS and one which can also implement the C2PA protocols suggested by the Content Provenance and Authenticity Coalition as well as the metadata framework required by the Chinese National standard of the Digital Copyrights Identifiers 3.0 (DCI 3.0). DCI 3.0 is currently operated by the subsidiary company of Alibaba called Ant Financial using AntChain as the blockchain. Such novel Art ID metadata framework proposed by the authors has not been achieved before as there is currently a limitation for the Chinese's very owned DCI 3.0 standard (Chun, *personal communications,* 2025) due to the need to authenticate real persons or an entity's real ownership.

Conclusion

In this era of digitized data, the rise of generative AI and the increasing use of open data sharing present significant new challenges for the art world. There is a pressing need for flexible, comprehensive, and secure data frameworks capable of adapting to an evolving digital landscape to ensure proper art provenance and management. Harnessing the combined strengths of approaches such as C2PA's provenance data, IIIF viewers, and AIS blockchain solutions suggests that a unified and interoperable system is both feasible and desirable. However, successful unification requires recognizing the unique features of each technology, enabling the framework not only to integrate diverse standards but also to support specialized use cases for museums, art galleries, insurance companies, historians, researchers, auction houses, art funds, and collectors. The DID:ART and DID.ART framework proposal aims to fulfill this promise by providing a foundation robust enough to thrive amid the rapid changes of the AI era, and trustworthy enough to safeguard and connect diverse types of media creations and artworks for the future. Future work will involve further development of the system architecture and detailed specification studies.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Department of Emerging Interdisciplinary Areas at the Academy of Interdisciplinary Studies of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology to host the summer research programs for the Art ID Registry project.

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Contact email: djychun@ust.hk

"Where There Is Love, There Is Money": Negotiating Gift Economy and Capitalist Logic in Chinese Digital Idol Fandom

Qingyu Ma, University of Nottingham Malaysia, Malaysia

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

"Where there is love, there is money" is a common slogan in idol fandom, reflecting the belief that genuine affection for idols naturally translates into financial support. In this context, love and money are treated as equivalent. This research examines how fans navigate between emotional expression and structural exploitation. Initially driven by affective dedication and voluntary participation, fan activities have gradually been absorbed into the capitalist framework, where love is quantified as labor and financial support. Using a qualitative approach that combines semi-structured interviews and online textual analysis, this study explores how Chinese digital idol fans engage in practices of consumption, content creation, and emotional labor, all of which blur the boundaries between personal devotion and commercialized participation. While fan communities once showcase creativity, mutual support, and subcultural agency, these same practices are increasingly mediated by market logics and algorithmic infrastructures. The fan economy, though rooted in affect and voluntarism, has evolved into a system where financial contributions and digital productivity become markers of legitimacy within fan communities. This dynamic creates moral pressures and internal hierarchies, complicating the ideal of unconditional gift-giving. Rather than framing fandom solely as resistance or co-optation, this research highlights its ambivalent nature: a negotiated space where empowerment and exploitation coexist. It questions whether affective authenticity can be sustained under increasing commercialization and calls for more nuanced understandings of fan agency that recognize both the possibilities and limitations embedded in contemporary fan culture.

Keywords: fan studies, Chinese idol fandom, affective economy

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Introduction

“Where there is love, there is money” is a common slogan in idol fandom, meaning that fans believe that if someone loves an idol, they will definitely spend money on them. Money and love are equivalent here. Under the background of the increasing popularity and everyday use of media platforms, the boundaries between fans' identities as consumers and workers have gradually blurred, and their practices have become intertwined, jointly constructing a specific cultural ecology. The development of the fan economy in this process is precisely the ultimate pursuit of the idol industry for the fan community. However, when the industry tries to fix fans’ love into quantifiable, obligatory commercial labor, to what extent is actual emotion destroyed and denied.

Literature Review

There is good reason to believe that fan consumption and fan labor are characterized by a certain degree of initiative and selectivity. In Anthony Y.H. Fung's (2009, 2013) research on popular culture and youth culture, he traces the rise of pop singers Jay Chou and idol Li Yuchun, analyzes the changes in Chinese fan culture promoted by them, and the complex interactive relationship between fan groups and the government. In addition, during the heyday of idol talent shows such as Super Girl and Produce 101, fans mobilized through organization to purchase voting rights for their idols and vote collectively. This voting mechanism, which is similar to popular election politics, has entered the public eye in the context of the entertainment industry and has been a success (Xiao, 2012).

In the context of idol fandom, idol fans have demonstrated a certain ability to act collectively and have bargaining power in certain situations. For example, interviewee Meloniano (2023) mentioned that some K-pop fan clubs with strong purchasing power often adopt joint bargaining strategies and directly negotiate with entertainment companies to obtain more favorable prices for goods. According to his description, some fan clubs were able to successfully negotiate a 30–40% price discount. In addition, collective “boycotts” by fan groups are also seen as an effective means of negotiation with idols and the industry. For example, Wang, E.S. (2022) documented that after BTS members' remarks related to the Korean War triggered the dissatisfaction of Chinese nationalists, many Chinese BTS fan celebrities collectively cancelled large-scale orders and stopped the scheduled birthday support activities, while posting screenshots on social media (such as Weibo) to express their protests. This phenomenon shows that fans are not simply passive consumers, but to some extent can use market mechanisms and use consumption decisions as a tool to express their positions and play games.

Overall, driven by the market and the media, the fan economy is the result of idol fans' active participation in the practice of consumerist discourse. The mechanism behind it can be found in Galluzzo's (2022) research on how business shapes consumers. By reviewing the development of consumerism in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries, Galluzzo points out that young people often try to escape the monotonous, serious and closed lifestyle in traditional society, and the rise of the market economy provides them with new consumption channels. In this process, the rapid development of the media has promoted the formation of subcultures and helped young people establish unique aesthetic standards and identities. Consumption is no longer just seen as a means of satisfying material needs, but has gradually become an important means of expressing individuality, displaying taste and distinguishing social classes. The rise of consumerism has prompted people to break away from

the ascetic thinking of the past and begin to recognize and embrace the pleasure of consumption.

This logic of consumerism is also reflected in the context of idol fandom. A study on postmodern consumption and fandom of Japanese popular culture points out that fan consumption is logically similar to the consumption behavior of ordinary consumers, both involving the pursuit of happiness, social capital and personalized identity (Stevens, C. S., 2010). To some extent, the fan economy allows individuals to temporarily escape the constraints of traditional family and workplace environments and find emotional sustenance in their consumption behavior. Interviewee Shark directly stated that due to various restrictions in real life, she was unable to pursue her ideals without any worries, but supporting idols who love art and helping them achieve their dreams gave her emotional sustenance. In this process, idol fan culture not only provides young people with a form of entertainment, but also becomes a way for them to reconstruct their identity in the digital age. Fans generally recognize the value of consumer desire in the process of idol worship and regard it as a reasonable personal choice. In discussions about the fan economy and real-life consumption, many idol fans express positive identification with idol worship consumption. For example, they believe that fan consumption for idols is not fundamentally different from consumption behaviors such as travel and shopping, and that they are all ways for individuals to pursue happiness. Some fans even say, “My real life is not as interesting as idol worship” (Strawberry milkshake watermelon juice, 2025).

However, the rise of the fan economy is accompanied by deep concerns about the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. The digital labor contributed by fan communities, especially in the fields of content creation and media promotion, is highly susceptible to being absorbed and commodified by capital. Driven by the “name of love,” this unpaid labor, which was supposed to be voluntary, has gradually been transformed into free publicity for the industry and a tool for digital platforms to make profit, strengthening the invisible exploitative mechanism. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, fans' transformative works are also being quantified as a key indicator of the market value of idols, which in turn has gradually shifted fan creation from a challenging cultural practice to one that caters to commercial logic. This change has raised concerns about the possible erosion of the core value of transformative works, that is, whether they are being transformed from a subversive expression of mainstream narratives into a tool to serve the growth of commercial profit.

It is worth noting that in the process of seeking legitimacy for the fan economy and transformative works, if their commercial value is overemphasized, fan consumption and labor may be moralized and even evolve into an implicit obligation. In a study of K-pop fan communities, Sun, M. (2020) points out that “the Chinese K-pop fan labors themselves define fans as those who contribute to the idols and fandom” (p. 402). Under this logic, the success of idols is shaped as the result of the collective efforts of fans, thus making fans responsible for their continued investment in idols. However, the concept of idol success itself does not have fixed criteria but is dynamically shaped by the logic of industrial operations. In fact, idols and their industries have gained substantial economic benefits through this logic, while most fans, despite their active participation in industry production, are still subject to the moral framework of the gift economy and cannot enjoy the same social or economic benefits as the idol industry.

Furthermore, the expansion of the fan economy, especially the competitive mechanism surrounding fan wars, is also becoming a core profit method for idol industries and digital platforms. Ge and Wang (2022) documented how digital platforms use custom algorithms and

celebrity ranking mechanisms to implicitly force fans who want to increase the commercial value of their idols to invest a lot of time in platform labor to improve virtual data, while also driving fans to consume virtual goods. Chen (2018) traces the formation of K-pop-related fan communities on the early Reddit-like platform "Baidu Tieba," pointing out that fan labor has undergone a transformation from spontaneous behavior to organized management. In this process, the bar owners (i.e., community organizers) of the post bar played a key role in the operation of fan labor: "Although fans join the post bar voluntarily, this 'voluntariness' is often subject to group pressure, as well as the domination and exploitation of the post bar organizers and the entertainment companies behind them" (para. 12). In addition, some entertainment companies even hire dedicated personnel to infiltrate the community as "fans" to directly manage the fan community, monitor and guide public opinion, to promote the organised operation of fan labour and promote the sale of commercial products. The function of cultural mediation is not limited to emotional connections, but is deeply coupled with economic and labor systems, so that new fans are transformed into efficient fan labor while learning the structure of the fandom.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, primarily utilizing methodological triangulation and data triangulation. It combines semi-structured interviews with fan interviewees, online text observation within fan communities, and relevant historical literature to cross-validate the relevant practices of fan emotional labor and emotional economy shifts. Between 2022 and 2024, I conducted 20 interviews with Chinese idol fans recruited through online fan communities and snowball sampling. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 26 and varied in levels of participation and financial contribution. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. Interviewees were made aware of their rights and the purpose of the research prior to participation. All interview data have been anonymized in storage and publication. In addition, I conducted discourse analysis of fan-generated content on Weibo, Douban, and RedNote. All the online textual materials analyzed in this study were drawn from publicly accessible sources. In cases where content might involve sensitive or controversial issues, additional anonymization was applied to protect the individuals involved.

The Obligation of Fan Emotional Economy

"Daimeng de Tuofen Huicai" (rough meaning: cute accounts for fans deciding to unfollow a celebrity, colloquially abbreviated as TFHC) is a Weibo account specifically designed to provide a platform for fans who wish to anonymously express their disappointment toward once-admired mainland celebrities (Daimeng de Tuofen Huicai, n.d.).

Within idol fandom, for various reasons, some fans choose to end their support for their idols. This behavior is called "tuofan," which means "to leave the fan identity." If the act of tuofan is accompanied by dissatisfaction with the idol, and the idol and their related actions are publicly exposed or criticized, it is called "huicai," which means "to step back and trample on" the once-beloved star. To some extent, this phenomenon is similar to the cancel culture in the Western context. However, whether it is tuofan or huicai, especially the latter, (both?) means the interruption of emotional and economic support, and may have a negative impact on the idol's commercial image. Therefore, the public expression of such emotions often encounters strong resistance from fan groups that still support the idol, and even triggers online violence. Against this background, intermediary accounts like TFHC (short for TuoFan HuiCai) have emerged and have become popular among fan groups. These accounts are dedicated to posting

content for fans to dump their idols. The operating model mainly relies on an anonymous submission mechanism – fans can send their dissatisfaction with their idols to the account operator via private message. The operator will conduct a small amount of content review, hide the fans' accounts and private information, and then publish the content. This move not only provides disappointed fans with a space for emotional catharsis and identification, but also effectively avoids the risk of retaliation against public expression of dissatisfaction.

It is worth noting that a large number of submissions not only reflect the fans 'dissatisfaction with the existing fan culture, but also have a certain degree of rebelliousness and self-reflection. However, this does not mean that the contributors have fully reflected on the structural ills of fan culture. A notable example is that the account requires contributors to attach screenshots of their past fan consumption records to prove their previous investment. Afterwards, other fans will calculate the total expenditure of each contributor in the comment area – those with higher expenditure amounts are often more likely to win sympathy and recognition, while those with lower consumption amounts are more likely to be ridiculed. This evaluation system shows that although fans often mention their own emotions and labor investment in their contributions, in the end, the total amount of money they spent is still the most visible and indispensable criterion. Some contributors even need to actively declare that their own consumption amount is relatively low when submitting, but they have done their best, in order to ask for understanding and tolerance from other fans. This phenomenon reflects an implicit consensus within the fan group: while fan's love is measured by the amount of consumption, fan's economic contribution to idols has been generally regarded as a moral obligation. Only fans who have created enough commercial value for idols can gain community recognition and be allowed to express fan disenchantment with their idols.

For example, Nine Percent is a limited group selected through fan voting on the talent show Idol Producer, and its leader is the aforementioned Cai Xukun. A fan, referred to here by the pseudonym Orange, who once supported the group submitted a post to TFHC to share why she decided to quit fandom, especially the psychological process she went through after suffering online violence from Nine Percent members' fans (see Figure 4, Daimeng de Tuofenhuicai, 2025). In the post, the fan Orange attached 11 screenshots of her spending records. Netizens in the comment section calculated that her total spending was no less than 16,297.34 RMB (about 2,250 USD). However, even though her spending was substantial, she was still mocked by some fans.

Figure 1
Screenshot of Fans Mocked Orange in the Comment Section of the Account TFHC



The reason is that there are nine members in the group, and if this amount is divided equally, Orange has spent less than 2,000 RMB (about 276 USD) on each member. Therefore, fans believe that Orange's spending amount is not outstanding for an individual idol in the context of fandom and does not qualify as Tuofan and Huicai. In response, fans who oppose her said (see Figure 2):

"Nine people for seven years, only a little over 200 (RMB) per person per year?"

"It makes me laugh, many people buy endorsements for albums for more than this amount, what's there to brag about?"

"The extent that she would be scolded in any fandom."

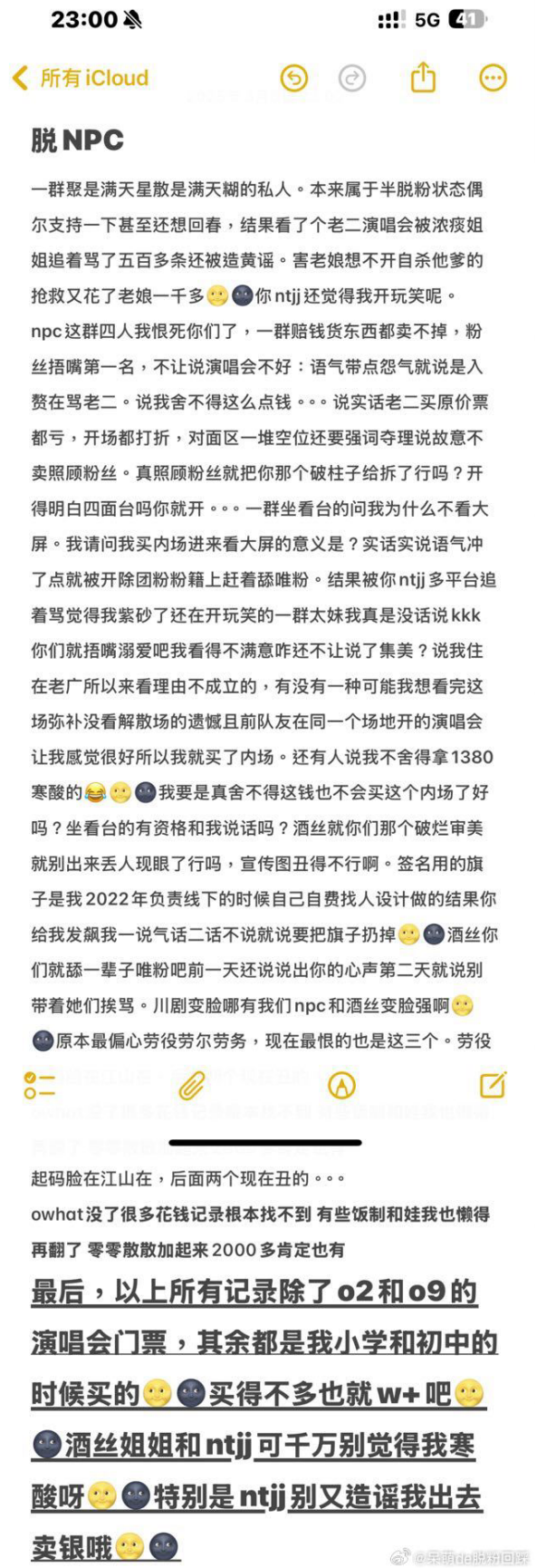
Figure 2
Screenshot of Fans Questioning the Authenticity of Orange in the Comment Section of the Account TFHC



In addition, some fans also noticed that Orange did not provide records of purchasing a specific album by a certain member or endorsing a product, thus questioning the authenticity of her fan identity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Orange's Complaints About Nine Percent and Idol Fandom Posted by TFHC Account



In an attempt to refute the mockery directed at her, Orange criticized the phenomenon of "fan gagging" (i.e., a climate that suppresses reasonable criticism) within the fandom in her post and responded to the doubts in the comment area (see Figure 4 and 5). However, Orange's reflection did not touch on deeper structural issues. In Orange's post, she emphasized that she had purchased the album and performed various forms of support work for her idol, and said,

> I was only in junior high school back then, and I was still a little girl who felt that even a short-sleeved shirt that cost a few tens of dollars was expensive. I was only willing to spend so much money because of them.
>
> Do you remember this flag from Chen Linong's concert in Guangzhou? (I made it.) In the end, I was the one who was questioned about my fan identity. How many of the people who scolded me actually love them more than I do?

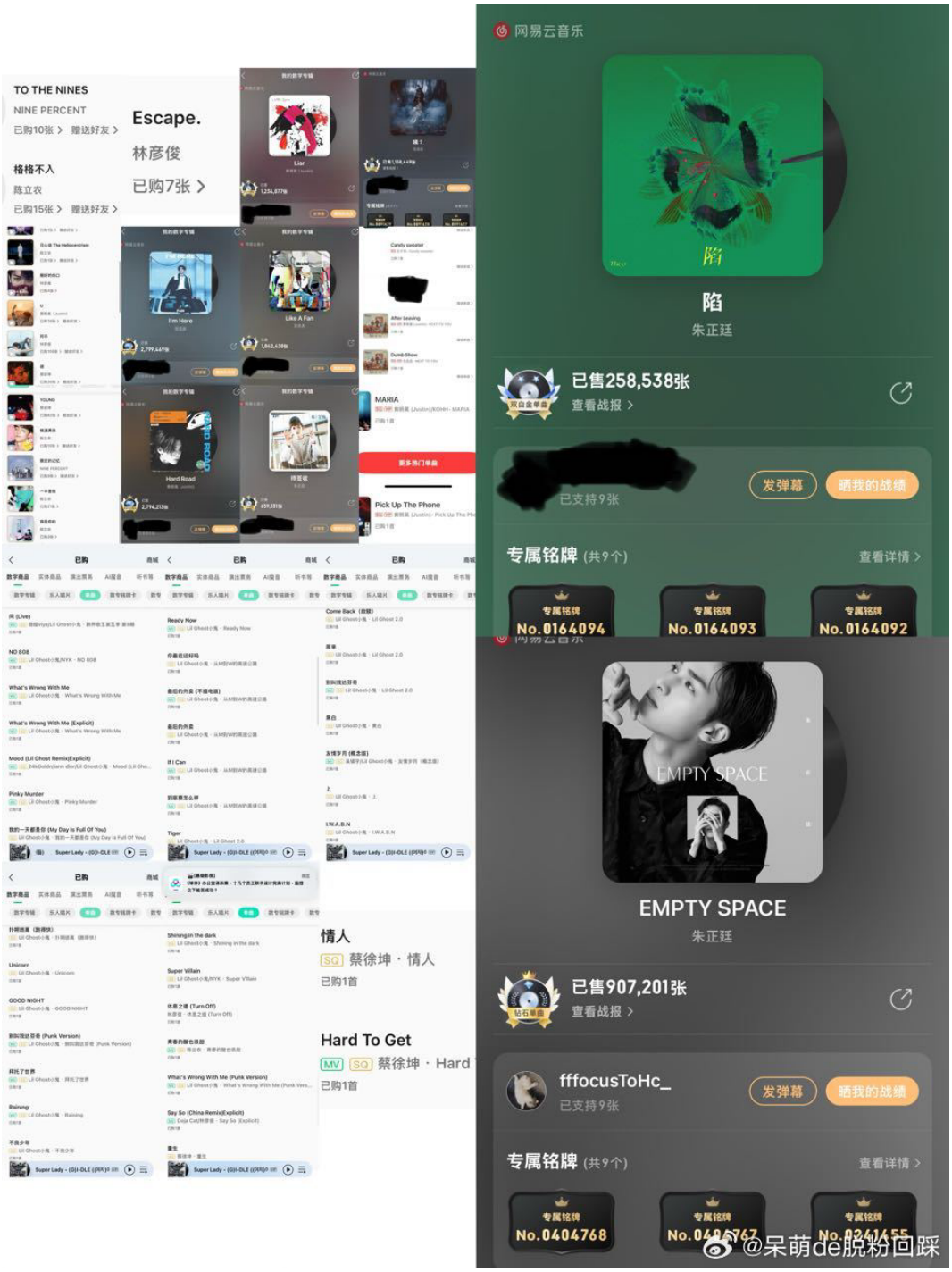
This narrative shows that Orange defends her fandom credentials and the legitimacy mainly for two reasons: First, Orange believes that she has already spent enough money compared to other fans, and second, she has done her best within her limited financial resources. Although Orange mentioned her disappointment with Nine Percent because they didn't perform well enough, and questioned the fans who insulted her, they may not love Nine Percent as much as she does. But all the arguments about love on both sides ultimately come down to direct monetary expenditure. Even when Orange said that she had once considered suicide due to the online violence from other fans, her final argument was to emphasize that the rescue cost in the hospital spent 1,000 RMB. One potential point is that Orange feels the cost of the rescue should also be counted as part of the expenses of being a fan, to demonstrate her love, as well as her financial strength, or potential commercial value. And she hardly mentioned the emotional obsession with idols in the past, or the mental pain caused by being driven to suicide by online violence. Love as a subjective emotional expression and meaning is easily replaced and overshadowed by commercial logic in the discussion of fandom.

Figure 4

Screenshot of Orange Defending Herself in the Comment Section of the TFHC Account



Figure 5
Screenshot of Orange Posting Records of Spending Money on Idols



It is worth noting that in this debate surrounding "who is qualified to Tuofan and Huicai," almost no one questioned the logic of consumption within the fandom. Both Orange and the fans who criticized her tacitly agreed that the level of consumption is a core measure of fan identity and love, and this agreement is deeply rooted. In the current context of fandom, the definition of fan identity has become extremely homogenized and is closely linked to commercial profits. This change has not only affected the way fans interact within the community, but has also shaped the deep intertwined relationship between fan culture and the logic of capital.

The benefits that fans get from this identity mostly remain at the emotional level. The current fan consumption model of young people is highly digital in nature and includes a large number of consumption behaviors with no physical substance or low physical value (such as, re-purchasable digital albums, digital collectibles, purchasable data promotion services, etc.). The convenience of online payment and the operating model of digital platforms enable fan support behaviors to be quickly transformed into industry profits. Chen (2018) expresses concern about this trend, namely that the entertainment industry may actively guide and even manipulate fan groups, shaping their collective identity through marketing strategies to improve the efficiency of monetizing the emotional economy. The impact of such manipulative strategies is already evident in fan culture, for example, fans' perception of the amount spent as a measure of "love," which leads to the obligatory consumption of rewards.

Take the case of Orange, according to her consumption record, mainly buys digital albums, fashion magazines and idol-endorsed products. Among these, repeated purchases of same digital albums are a common way of showing support in fan culture, and their symbolic meaning is closer to "rewarding" their idols than to general consumption of digital content. In addition, her consumption of idol-endorsed products mainly involves clothing, cosmetics and food, and almost all of these goods are purchased online. On these e-commerce platforms, merchants often specifically label the names and images of idols to distinguish between ordinary goods and goods targeted at fans.

In fact, this phenomenon reflects a shift in the business model of the idol industry. In advertising collaborations involving idols, the traditional advertising model's reliance on long-term brand promotion is weakening. For fast-moving consumer goods with high substitutability, such as clothing and food, advertisers prefer to take advantage of the immediacy of the fan economy to encourage fans to quickly place orders based on emotional support, rather than cultivating brand loyalty over the long term through advertising. Brands that hire idols as brand ambassadors often set up a special online purchasing option for the idol's fans. This option features the idol's name and image, distinguishing it from other regular purchasing options. Fans will concentrate their purchases on this option, and the sales volume under this option is counted as evidence of support for the idol. After the ambassadorship collaboration ends, fans will immediately stop purchasing. This consumption pattern has become a consensus among fan groups. In related discussions, almost no one mentions the actual value of these products. Instead, the discourse system of fan groups emphasizes the symbolic significance of the consumption behavior itself. This shows that in the current idol industry, fan consumption has gradually shifted from individual consumption preferences to a collective emotional mobilization mechanism, and the latter has been effectively integrated into the industry's operating logic and transformed into a sustainable business model.

In China's online consumer environment, common e-commerce platforms such as Taobao generally have a product sales display function, and music platforms also make public sales data for digital albums and stimulate competition among different idol fan groups through sales rankings. This mechanism not only promotes repeat purchases by fans but also becomes part of a data war. In this context, fan celebrities and fan clubs often set specific consumption goals and mobilize ordinary fans through social media to purchase albums or other goods as a way to support their idols. At the same time, fan groups will also spontaneously collect and organize sales data and publish comparative information on social networks to demonstrate the advantages of their idols in market competition.

As Galluzzo (2022) points out, under the influence of the consumerist value of "being yourself," women have to learn more about consumerist fashion and spend more money to maintain their new image in order to appear relaxed and rebellious. This can also become a source of bondage and anxiety. Similarly, in the context of idol fandom, being a fan of an idol also always means making continuous efforts and spending money to become the ideal type of fan. The over-acknowledgement of the value of consumption has sometimes worryingly led fans into another kind of bondage, seemingly of their own volition.

In the long-term process of legalizing and regulating reward-based consumption, a noteworthy moral requirement has gradually taken shape: fans are expected to provide economic support to their idols as a matter of course, and even to invest resources "as much as possible." This morality not only shapes the operating mechanism of the fan economy, but also strengthens the identity of fans to a certain extent. If we observe the comments of young Chinese idol fans about consumption, we can easily find a paradoxical phenomenon: a certain ascetic logic of "restraining one's desires" seems to be revived. However, unlike traditional asceticism based on moral or religious beliefs, the legitimacy of this logic is based more on commercial logic.

Fans generally believe that it is more valuable to invest funds in supporting their idols' careers than in personal consumption (such as buying milk tea, food, or entertainment expenses for travel). Within this framework, individuals voluntarily cut back on material enjoyment in their daily lives to strengthen their sense of morality as "ideal fans." For example, many of the fan groups interviewed regarded behaviors such as "reducing daily expenses to support idols," "working in thin clothing in cold weather," and "working part-time specifically for fan consumption" as proud "contributions." This consumption practice not only shapes the identity standards within the fan community, but also promotes the maximization of the fan economy. Ideal fans are expected to "spare no effort" to support their idols, but the actual rewards (such as entertainment experiences or financial rewards) that fans can get in return are often ignored or concealed. This phenomenon essentially echoes the logic of asceticism – supporters need to suppress their desire to consume in other areas in order to maximize the benefits of their idol or religion, while the rewards are mainly in the form of moral affirmation or future promises.

Under the logic of consumerism, the fan economy ultimately aims at a kind of "success" in the conservative sense: idols need to gain higher popularity and greater economic returns. However, this ultimate goal contrasts sharply with the rebellious spirit of the early days of consumerism. Traditionally, the rise of consumerism has been accompanied by a challenge to mainstream cultural norms, especially among younger groups, where consumption is often associated with identity expression, individual choice and rebellion against the established social order. However, in the context of idol fan culture, this rebelliousness presents a highly contradictory state.

On the one hand, fan behavior itself is still regarded as "irrational" or "rebellious" by mainstream society, and is labeled "immature" or "addicted." Many fans are also aware that following idols does not fit into the mainstream social framework of defining "success." However, on the other hand, fans do not project their own "rebellious values" onto idols and the idol industry. Instead, idols are still required to maintain a moral image of "purity," "hard work," and "positive energy," and must continue to achieve commercial success in a highly competitive industry environment to prove their value. In this process, the industry still measures idols by a single commercial indicator, and the "ideal fans" are also measured by the economic benefits they can bring.

This phenomenon shows that although fan behavior may be regarded as a form of subculture that carries connotations of anti-mainstream values, its core goal is still conservative. Unlike other subcultural groups with clear countercultural attributes, idol fans do not really abandon or challenge the existing social value system. On the contrary, through crowdfunding-style consumption behavior, they actively adapt to and further consolidate the success criteria under the market logic. This phenomenon reveals a deep contradiction in fan culture: the pursuit of "being oneself" by fans does not point to an escape from the existing social order, but resembles a transfer of anxiety about success. In terms of underlying logic, idol fan culture does not get rid of or reflect on the mainstream value system, but rather further strengthens and replicates it through consumerism.

Conclusion

This paper aims to review and analyze the contradictions and evolution of idol fan culture in recent years, both in practice and in collective awareness. With the development of online commerce, the gift economy model, which was initially characterized by cross-class, unpaid sharing, has gradually evolved into a commercial tool that can be quantified by industrial institutions and used for negotiation. Fan agency has played a complex and far-reaching role in this evolution: on the one hand, fan agency has enabled fans to transmit and extend emotions, integrating isolated fan individuals into a collective with market influence; on the other hand, this collective voice has been assimilated by capitalist ideology, reinforcing fans' collective identity. When fans' emotions are measured solely by the influence generated by the "fan economy," love is transformed into a potential profit source for the idol industry. Class divisions in real society easily extend into the internal structure of fan communities. Meanwhile, the painful experiences endured by fans are often used as tragic evidence to mobilize and unite the collective, further reinforcing group identity, fostering ambiguous hostility toward the outside world, and promoting compliance with and embrace of capitalist structures and authority systems. In this series of interactions, the love and hatred of individual fans are incorporated into collective economic logic, and diverse perspectives are marginalized and rejected, while the intangible emotional experiences implied are ignored.

In the future, the idea of returning to the old days of fandom is unrealistic, but it is crucial that voices advocating for the importance of personal emotional experiences over collectivism, and for interpreting fan emotions from diverse perspectives rather than through a single economic value statement of influence and importance, continue to be heard.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Khoo Gaik Cheng and Dr. Gayathry S. Venkiteswaran for their valuable guidance and constructive feedback throughout the development of this research.

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 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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Contact email: zy15900@nottingham.edu.my

Transfer of Control: Reconstructing the Role of Artists in AIGC Image Co-Creation

Yichen Wei, Renmin University of China, China

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study explores visual language bias and cultural stereotypes in AIGC image creation through the AI-generated artwork Ongoing Memories. Addressing challenges such as AI images misaligning with artistic intent and reproducing stereotypical visual prototypes, the study proposes a "control delegation" strategy. Artists establish collaborative mechanisms by setting data boundaries and style prompts while allowing AI a degree of visual autonomy. The project reinterprets "historical" visual construction through a stylized dataset and dual-layer image structure, offering new methodological references for AIGC images within the contemporary art context.

Keywords: AI image generation, visual bias, cultural memory, artistic collaboration, control delegation

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Introduction

Figure 1
Stills From Ongoing Memories



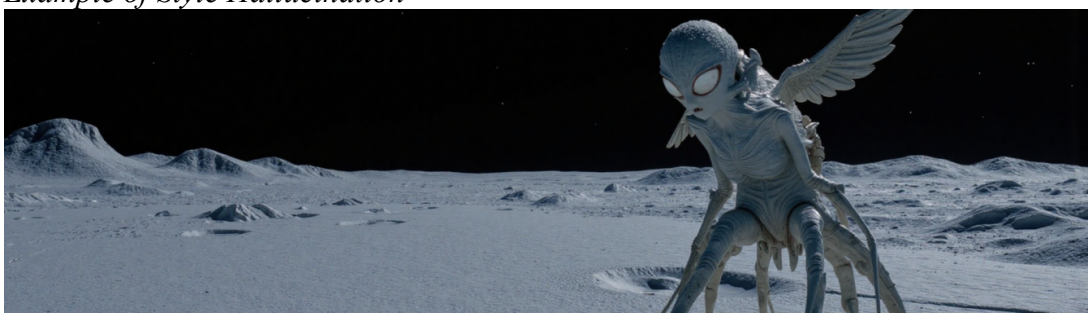
Note. Selected stills from Ongoing Memories, showing the dual-layer structure of AI-generated imagery and fossil photographs.

In recent years, AIGC image generation has been widely applied in the field of artistic creation, greatly enriching visual expression forms. However, it has also brought about numerous methodological challenges. As contemporary artists focused on visual control and aesthetic consistency, we have long attempted to create art using AIGC technology but have repeatedly encountered failures in visual control. Specifically, these failures manifest in two aspects: first, the difficulty in aligning visual language with user expectations; second, the generated results often exhibit strong cultural biases.

In terms of visual language consistency, AI-generated models generally suffer from issues such as misaligned visual elements and stylistic deviations, failing to accurately convey the creator's aesthetic and logical intentions. AI struggles to correctly map descriptive attributes to objects (Zarei et al., 2024), while existing diffusion models exhibit limited generalization capabilities when encountering novel combinations they have not encountered before, often automatically reverting to patterns common in the training dataset, resulting in semantically confusing and illogical generated images (Park et al., 2021).

Beyond visual aesthetic issues, cultural biases and the replication of stereotypical archetypes in AI image generation constitute another major obstacle in creative practice. Extensive research has demonstrated that the outputs of AI-generated models are significantly influenced by the inherent cultural patterns in their training data, leading to generated images that tend to repeat and reinforce existing cultural biases (Grba, 2022; SIGGRAPH Digital Arts Community, 2025; University of Washington News, 2023).

Figure 2
Example of Style Hallucination



Note. Example of "style hallucination" in AI-generated output, where visual elements not present in the training prompts emerged unexpectedly.

In our personal creative attempt to use AI to generate imaginary alien creatures, even without explicit cinematic prompts, the AI still tended to output monster images similar to those in classic science fiction movies. This demonstrates that the model is not engaging in true creation but rather reproducing pre-existing "cultural visual memories."

Furthermore, from the perspective of the overall art system, most AIGC creation practices are confined to technical demonstrations, AI art competitions, or discussions about AI as a tool for reflecting on the future, rather than being truly integrated into the theoretical framework and cultural context of contemporary art. In this context, the emphasis is often on technical prowess, lacking a deep dialogue with artistic language and theory (Grba, 2022). This state of creation suspended outside the art system constrains the in-depth development and exploration of the lasting value of AIGC image production in an artistic context.

In response to the above-mentioned challenges in the use of technology itself and the time required for its implementation, this study attempts to propose a new creative strategy: consciously ceding some visual control to algorithms and allowing the generation of AIGC images to become an integral part of the work's logic, thereby exploring a more flexible collaborative mechanism between artists and AI. Specifically, this study constructs a collaborative method based on the cultural characteristics of the training set through the creation of the video artwork "Ongoing Memories," enabling AI to exercise autonomy within the data and style parameters provided by the artist, thereby generating visual expressions that blend human intent with algorithmic characteristics. This method not only offers a new theoretical perspective for artistic creation but also demonstrates a potential path for AIGC image generation to achieve methodological coherence within the contemporary art context planet.

Related Works and Key Issues

This section will further analyze the two types of issues discussed in the previous section in the context of art, based on existing research and artistic practices. The focus of this paper is not on works that showcase AI models themselves, but rather on exploring how the role of AI images should be defined when they are used as part of a work, and proposing a creative strategy of "transfer of control" based on these companies.

The Heterogeneity of AI Visual Language in the Art Context

Current AIGC image creation heavily relies on large image datasets, which often carry the cultural perspectives and biases of the creators. For example, ImageNet contains biased labels targeting people (Sivertsen et al., 2024). When AI models learn from these datasets, they inevitably internalize the implicit cultural biases into their own visual expression logic, resulting in generated images with obvious cultural tendencies (Sivertsen et al., 2024). When these culturally biased AI images enter the art domain, they produce a noticeable "heterogeneity"—that is, there is a significant asymmetry between the meaning expressed by AI images and the expectations of the artistic context.

Lev Manovich's research also points out that AI-generated images are good at replicating existing visual patterns in training sets, but they perform poorly when it comes to truly innovative, complex, or unprecedented conceptual expressions. This makes the content they generate often conform to mainstream aesthetics, but difficult to adapt to the diverse demands of artistic creation (SIGGRAPH Digital Arts Community, 2025). Additionally, existing reception studies indicate that viewers tend to lower their aesthetic evaluations of works when informed that the images were generated by AI, revealing a value recognition barrier for AI images in the realm of artistic reception (De Rooi, 2024). The above research highlights that cultural biases in AI visual language and the mismatch with artistic contexts constitute one of the core challenges facing current AIGC art practices.

The Shift From Tool to Collaborator

Despite the aforementioned biases and heterogeneity issues, some artists are actively exploring how to leverage the deviations and errors in AI-generated images, attempting to transform AI from a tool into a "visual agent" or even a collaborator in artistic creation.

For example, Refik Anadol inputted a large amount of visual data into his work "Machine Hallucinations," allowing AI to autonomously generate abstract images filled with uncertainty. He incorporated AI's uncertainty and visual hallucinations as aesthetic elements of the creation itself, a strategy that clearly leverages the inherent biases in AI visual expression (Sivertsen et al., 2024). Mario Klingemann's Neural Glitch Art, on the other hand, directly uses glitches and distortions generated during the AI process, explicitly transforming AI errors and loss of control into creative and aesthetic language, continuing the artistic tradition of Glitch Art (Sivertsen et al., 2024). These artistic practices clearly demonstrate that AI is no longer merely viewed as a tool but as an agent with partial autonomy, bias, and creative agency, forming a complex interactive relationship with artists.

However, most of the above practices emphasize AI as a creative subject with partial autonomy, and its "visual bias" is directly incorporated into the work itself. This approach focuses more on the "behavioral nature of algorithms," that is, how AI continuously generates images, sounds, or structures during its own operation, thereby constituting a continuously evolving work site. Although this "AI as art" approach is experimental, its creative boundaries are relatively clear, and it has not been the subject of intense controversy (Putra, 2025).

The approach we focus on in this study is different. We do not regard the AI model itself as part of the artwork, nor do we make its operational process public or present it in a dynamic form. Instead, we are more concerned with how to use AI-generated images in artistic creation and embed these images as a medium of visual composition into a larger narrative and cultural

reflection framework. In this sense, AI is not the "exhibited subject" of the work but a visual collaborator—its role is akin to that of a co-creator with pre-existing biases, whose generated images, though not fully controllable, can function within the artist's framework.

Method

In response to the dual challenges of visual control and cultural bias in AIGC, this study proposes a human-machine collaborative creation strategy called "control transfer" using the experimental video work Ongoing Memories as a practical vehicle. This method constructs a dataset with explicit cultural references, sets fictional style labels, employs the LoRA training mechanism, and combines a dual-layer narrative structure to explore how AI can generate images with shared visual characteristics within the framework defined by the artist. The following sections will elaborate on this approach from four perspectives: image structure, dataset preparation, model training, and collaborative logic.

Creative Objectives and Basic Concepts

"Ongoing Memories" is an experimental video artwork based on AI image generation. Its objective is not to recreate the true appearance of prehistoric life but to explore, through AI's visual production mechanisms, how "our understanding of the past" is continuously constructed and imagined within the current cultural logic. The project begins with a seemingly simple question: When we talk about "dinosaurs," where do the images that come to mind originate?

These images do not originate from direct observation or pure archaeological evidence, but rather from the continuous shaping of visual culture through films, children's picture books, museum exhibitions, and other sources. They represent a collective image memory that has been encoded and solidified. Based on this understanding, the work employs a dual-layer narrative structure: one layer consists of AI-generated dinosaur images, representing the emotionalized and anthropomorphized representations circulating in contemporary visual culture.

The other layer consists of real fossil images, symbolizing the past as "material remains." These two types of images continuously intertwine and repeat in the footage with equal transparency, creating a visual loop and interference of time while revealing the blurred boundaries between "reality" and "fiction" on a conceptual level. Through this structure, the work aims to present an illusory mechanism of historical sense, that is, the "past" we perceive is not a stable and reproducible truth, but rather an image construct that is constantly being regenerated in the present culture.

Dataset Construction and Style Control Strategy

To support the aforementioned visual narrative structure, this project constructed a specialized dinosaur image dataset, with image materials mainly sourced from contemporary visual contexts such as museum exhibitions, video games, and children's picture books. These images typically exhibit highly stylized characteristics, reflecting the mainstream visual perceptions of "dinosaur imagery" in contemporary society. The selection of these materials aims to reveal that our visual impressions of prehistoric creatures are actually the result of repeated construction and solidification by cultural media.

Figure 3
Training Dataset Overview



Note. Selected training dataset images, sourced from games, artworks, children's books, and museum displays.

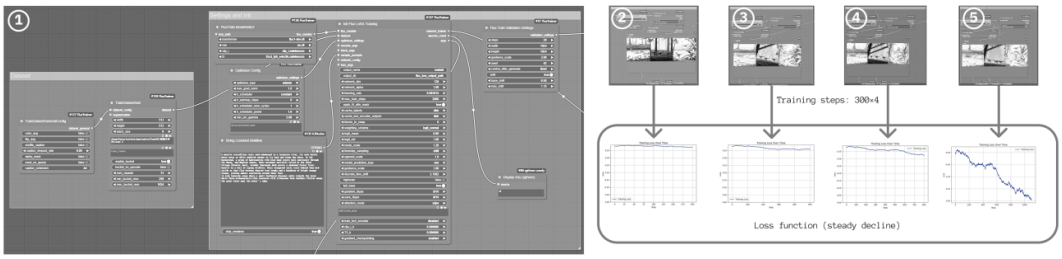
During the dataset construction process, each image is accompanied by a corresponding tag file that provides a detailed description of its content and stylistic elements, such as thematic composition, emotional tone, and color usage. In order to enable AI to better distinguish between "image content" and "style features," this project also specifically set a fictional and unique style prompt word "dinoblend" and placed it uniformly at the beginning of all tags. This setting ensures that the model can stably identify and call pre-set styles during training and maintain consistency in style when generating images, while retaining a certain degree of content freedom.

The training process of this project also reflects the differences in objectives between rounds. From the first to the third round of training, the core objective is to improve the model's ability to fit specific image features, especially to enable the model to more effectively grasp the required stylistic elements while maintaining consistency in the prompt words. In the later stages of training, artists use prompt word combinations that are as consistent as possible with those used during training in the generation phase to improve the stability and logical consistency of the images generated by the model.

Model Training and Technical Implementation

In terms of technical implementation, this project adopted the LoRA training strategy. This method enables efficient style learning and image generation on small-scale datasets, effectively improving the model's ability to capture specific visual features. Compared to traditional model fine-tuning methods, LoRA is more cost-effective in terms of computing resources and training time, making it particularly suitable for targeted style transfer tasks.

Figure 4
LoRA Training Diagram



Note. Diagram of the LoRA training process with parameter tuning and prompt control; left shows training flow, right shows prompt semantic structure.

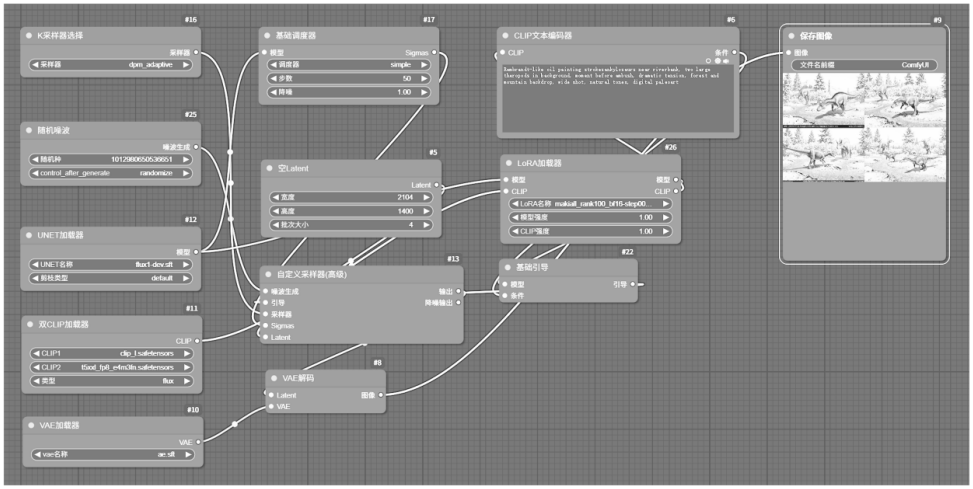
A total of four training rounds were conducted, with each round set to 300 training steps, for a total of 1,200 steps. During training, we continuously monitored changes in the model's loss function to assess training stability and generation performance. The overall training process showed a good convergence trend, indicating that the model was able to stably learn the target style and maintain consistent visual features in subsequent generations.

Image Screening and Cleaning Strategy

Although this project uses an automated AI generation mechanism, this does not mean that all generated images will be directly used for image creation. In practice, artists will screen and correct the generated images as necessary, mainly in the following aspects: First, images with obvious visual logic errors, such as “sails growing out of a dinosaur's back,” which violate structural common sense, will be directly discarded. Such issues often arise because the model cannot accurately map descriptive attributes to target objects, leading to mismatches in visual elements such as color, texture, or position in unintended locations within the image. Second, some images blend multiple unrelated elements in their overall composition, creating a visual “patchwork” effect or semantic “misalignment.” These are also considered uncontrollable noise and are removed. Additionally, the project prioritizes consistency between generated images and the overall visual style of the project. For example, when the visual tone of a batch of generated images deviates significantly from the narrative tone, the artist will remove or regenerate them. The screening strategy does not pursue absolute standards, but rather a relative stability in narrative and aesthetics.

Figure 5

Post-processing Workflow



Note. Workflow diagram of post-processing for AI-generated images.

Visual Narrative Strategy of Double-Layer Image Structure

At the image creation level, Ongoing Memories uses a double-layer, intertwined, parallel visual narrative structure. The first layer consists of AI-generated dinosaur images with pronounced emotional and anthropomorphic characteristics, reflecting contemporary visual culture's reinterpretation of prehistoric life; the second layer is composed of real fossil images, representing fragmented, irreparable material remains. The two layers of images continuously alternate and overlap at the same transparency, interfering with and permeating each other, creating a visual tension with blurred boundaries.

This cyclical image overlap not only breaks down the traditional distinction between "reality" and "fiction" but also induces a temporal delay and dislocation in the viewing experience. As viewers struggle to discern the origin of the images, they gradually realize that our understanding of the "past" is fundamentally a visual construction of the present culture. The work thus emphasizes that history is not a static truth but a dynamic process constantly reorganized by emotions, media, and context.

To enhance the overall coherence of the dual-layer imagery, the project underwent post-production adjustments to the tone and clarity of the images, ensuring that visuals from different sources seamlessly transition in narrative rhythm and visual style. While this post-processing minimizes intervention in the generated content itself, it still enhances the fusion between images, reinforcing the emotional consistency and structural integrity of the work during viewing. The "control cession" strategy adopted in this project involves the artist not attempting to precisely control every output of the AI, but rather setting clear boundaries for its generation through the design of datasets, style tags, and prompts, while accepting a certain degree of visual autonomy within these boundaries.

Discussion

The practical process of this project demonstrates that the key challenge of AIGC image generation in artistic creation is not simply whether the images are "beautiful" or "accurate," but rather whether we can rethink the boundaries of artistic control and modes of expression through collaboration with AI. The creation process of *Ongoing Memories* does not seek to suppress the uncontrollable aspects of AI-generated content but actively incorporates them into the creative workflow. By setting frameworks rather than precise instructions, the model engages in a limited yet genuine visual collaboration.

From this perspective, "control transfer" is not a technical issue but a methodological choice: it requires artists to clearly define creative parameters such as datasets and style prompts, while also being willing to accept the uncertainty and heterogeneity brought by AI and transform them into part of the work's semantic meaning. The significance of this strategy lies not only in expanding the ways images are produced, but also in prompting us to rethink the role of the artist—the artist is no longer the sole visual outputter, but rather someone who defines direction, guides the process, and reconstructs meaning from the results within a collaborative system.

It is worth emphasizing that this creative strategy also raises new questions: When AI becomes a co-creator of visual results, does the subjectivity of artistic expression shift?Has AI, to some extent, gained "visual agency"? These questions have no standard answers, but they prompt us to move AI beyond its traditional roles as a "tool" or "creator," and instead view it as a generative participant situated between the two. It possesses computational capabilities but lacks intent, has structure but lacks understanding—this ambiguity is precisely the most intriguing aspect of our current collaborative relationship with AI.

In this sense, the value of this project lies not in producing a set of images or completing a video work, but in its role as a process that opens up a new way of questioning visual collaboration. We are beginning to realize that AI is not a substitute for creativity, nor is it a fully transparent tool; it exists between the two, intervening in our visual narratives with a "biased logic." The collaboration between artists and AI is not about efficiency, but about the redistribution of choice, control, and interpretation.

Conclusion

This study proposes a creative strategy of “transfer of control” and attempts to establish a collaborative mechanism based on boundary settings, given that generative AI cannot be completely controlled. Through the practice of “Ongoing Memories,” we see that when artists no longer pursue absolute control over image generation but instead accept the visual biases and structural limitations brought about by AI, artistic creation gains a new kind of flexibility.This flexibility does not stem from AI's “creativity,” but rather from how artists define collaborative methods and the meaning of images within an asymmetrical relationship.

Future research can further explore three areas: first, how to improve the control precision of prompt words and training labels; second, how to maintain visual style consistency in more complex multimodal structures; and third, how to understand the psychological acceptance mechanisms of audiences when faced with AIGC images, thereby enriching the interpretive pathways of their cultural contexts.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks all those who provided support and feedback during the development of this project, especially in dataset preparation and image model training.

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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Contact email: wyc151354133@gmail.com

Navigating Artificial Intelligence and Digital Equity in Online Learning: A Self-Efficacy Perspective

Kareen Guscott, University of the West Indies, Jamaica

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper explores how students at a Caribbean higher education institution engage with digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) tools in online learning environments, and how these experiences shape their academic self-efficacy. As AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Microsoft Copilot become embedded in everyday academic practices, questions of digital equity extend beyond access to devices and connectivity to include skills, confidence, and institutional guidance. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the study draws on survey data from 141 students and in-depth interviews with nine participants. Findings indicate that students' confidence in online learning is closely connected to their digital competence and their ability to navigate technological challenges. AI tools were often used to support writing, idea generation, and academic organisation, and many students described these tools as helping them feel more capable and independent in their studies. At the same time, AI engagement was uneven. Some students limited or avoided AI use due to concerns about academic integrity, unclear institutional policies, or uncertainty about how to use the tools responsibly and effectively. The study interprets these patterns through Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, showing how confidence develops through successful digital experiences but can be constrained by structural barriers and ambiguous expectations. While AI has potential to support learning, its benefits are shaped by access, literacy, and clarity of guidance. The paper argues that equitable AI integration in higher education requires not only access to technology but also the development of critical AI literacy and supportive learning environments that build students' confidence and ability to work independently.

Keywords: artificial intelligence in education, digital equity, self-efficacy, online learning, AI literacy, higher education

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Introduction

The growth of online learning in higher education has intensified long-standing concerns about digital equity, particularly in developing and small-island contexts. Although online education is often presented as flexible and inclusive, students' participation and success continue to be shaped by uneven access to devices, connectivity, digital skills, and institutional support. These patterns became especially visible during and after the COVID-19 transition to online and blended learning.

The integration of tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Microsoft Copilot introduces a further dimension of digital equity. While these technologies can assist with writing, idea development, and academic organisation, their benefits depend on reliable access, literacy related to their use, and clear guidance regarding acceptable practices. Where these conditions are uneven, such tools may reinforce existing disparities by magnifying the advantages of students with stronger digital competence and confidence. How students develop confidence in using AI tools when access is uneven and institutional expectations remain unclear is not yet fully understood.

This study examines how students at a Caribbean higher education institution navigate digital technologies and AI-enabled tools in online learning, with a focus on the role of self-efficacy. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, it investigates how digital competence, tool use, and perceptions of institutional clarity shape students' confidence and academic outcomes. The analysis draws on Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory and Van Dijk's Digital Divide framework to interpret how emerging practices interact with digital inequities in contemporary higher education.

Literature Review

Digital Equity, the Digital Divide, and the Rise of Artificial Intelligence in Online Learning

Digital equity in online learning tends to be examined through the concept of the digital divide. Early scholarship conceptualised the divide primarily as unequal physical access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), including computers and internet connectivity (Servon, 2002; OECD, 2001). As digital technologies became more widespread, researchers demonstrated that access alone was insufficient to ensure meaningful participation or equitable outcomes. The digital divide is now understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing access, skills, patterns of use, and outcomes (UNESCO, 2019; Van Dijk, 2005).

Contemporary frameworks distinguish three interrelated levels. The first level refers to material access, including reliable internet connectivity and appropriate digital devices. The second level concerns digital skills and competence, including the ability to navigate digital platforms and use technologies effectively. The third level focuses on outcomes, that is, the extent to which digital engagement results in educational, economic, or social benefits (Ragnedda, 2017; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015). These levels are sequential and mutually reinforcing, such that inequalities in access and skills often translate into unequal outcomes.

In online learning environments, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. Although higher education institutions may provide learning management systems and digital course materials, students' ability to engage meaningfully depends on stable access, sufficient skills, and

confidence in using digital tools. Where these conditions are uneven, online learning can reproduce or intensify existing educational inequalities rather than mitigate them (Selwyn, 2016). These patterns are especially visible in developing and resource-constrained contexts, where infrastructural instability, affordability challenges, and reliance on mobile data remain persistent barriers to equitable participation (ECLAC, 2024; ITU, 2023). As higher education becomes increasingly mediated by intelligent systems, AI is emerging as a new frontier of digital inequality. AI tools introduce additional layers of access requirements, skill demands, and outcome differentials, expanding the scope of digital equity beyond traditional ICT use (Holmes et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Artificial Intelligence as a New Layer of Digital Inequality

Student-facing AI tools, including generative chatbots and automated writing support systems, are increasingly used to assist with drafting, editing, summarising, and organising academic work (Kasneci et al., 2023; Mollick, 2024). These technologies hold potential to enhance efficiency, provide feedback, and support personalised learning pathways. However, their benefits are not evenly distributed, and their use is shaped by the same structural and social conditions that underpin earlier forms of digital inequality.

At the first level of the digital divide, AI use depends on reliable connectivity, compatible devices, and sustained access to online platforms. Students who rely on unstable mobile data or shared devices may face practical constraints that limit meaningful AI engagement. Thus, AI participation remains contingent on material access conditions.

At the second level, AI introduces new forms of digital literacy. Effective engagement requires not only technical competence but also the ability to formulate prompts, critically evaluate AI-generated outputs, and integrate these outputs responsibly into academic work. This form of AI literacy extends traditional digital skills to include judgement, adaptability, and ethical awareness (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng et al., 2021). Students who lack opportunities to develop these competencies may use AI superficially, misunderstand its limitations, or avoid it altogether.

At the third level, disparities in AI literacy and access may translate into unequal academic outcomes. Students who are able to use AI strategically may gain advantages in writing clarity, time management, and conceptual understanding, while others may not experience similar benefits. Scholars have warned that without equitable support, AI in education may reproduce or intensify existing educational inequalities (Holmes et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Research has also highlighted concerns surrounding academic integrity, ethical use, and policy ambiguity as factors shaping students' engagement with AI (Cotton et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023). In the absence of clear institutional policies, students may perceive AI use as risky, which can discourage experimentation and limit potential learning benefits. AI therefore represents an emerging dimension of the digital divide, where disparities in competence, confidence, and institutional support influence who can appropriate these technologies effectively.

Self-Efficacy in Digital and AI-Mediated Learning

To understand how students navigate digital and AI-mediated learning environments, scholars have increasingly drawn on Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capability to organise and execute actions required to achieve desired outcomes

(Bandura, 1997, 2004). In educational contexts, self-efficacy influences motivation, persistence, effort, and coping when learners encounter challenges.

In online learning environments, self-efficacy plays a central role in shaping students' engagement with technology. Students with higher levels of technology-related self-efficacy are more likely to explore digital tools, persist when technical difficulties arise, and adopt adaptive learning strategies (Kukafka et al., 2003; Thatcher & Ndabeni, 2011). Conversely, students with lower self-efficacy may avoid unfamiliar technologies, disengage when difficulties occur, or experience heightened anxiety, even when access is available.

With the integration of AI into academic work, students must now develop AI-related self-efficacy: confidence in their ability to use AI tools effectively, critically, and ethically. Early discussions in AI-in-education research suggest that learners' perceptions of competence and control influence how they experiment with and benefit from AI systems (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Kasneci et al., 2023). Students who lack such confidence may avoid AI use or experience uncertainty, even when they have technical access.

Linking Digital Equity, AI, and Self-Efficacy

Research at the intersection of the digital divide and self-efficacy highlights the importance of psychological factors in understanding digital inequality. Individuals who lack consistent access to ICTs or opportunities to practice digital skills are less likely to develop confidence in their ability to use technology effectively (Chinn & Fairlie, 2004; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). This diminished confidence can reduce motivation to engage with digital tools, creating a cycle in which limited access and low self-efficacy reinforce one another.

In AI-mediated learning environments, similar dynamics apply. Students who have limited opportunities to develop AI literacy or who perceive AI use as risky may experience lower AI-related self-efficacy. This can limit their willingness to engage with AI tools, even when those tools could support their learning. Conversely, successful AI use may provide mastery experiences that strengthen students' confidence in managing digital academic tasks (Bandura, 1997).

Resources and Appropriation Theory and AI Use

Van Dijk's Resources and Appropriation Theory provides a complementary framework for analysing how digital inequalities persist across stages of technology engagement. The theory conceptualises access as a process comprising motivation, material access, skills acquisition, and usage (Van Dijk, 2005, 2013). Inequalities arise when individuals are unable to progress through these stages effectively. This multi-level perspective is particularly useful for examining AI use in online learning. Students may be motivated to use AI tools but lack reliable access, AI-related skills, or refrain from use due to ethical uncertainty or institutional ambiguity. Even when access and skills are present, patterns of usage and perceived legitimacy determine whether AI contributes to positive educational outcomes. Research in AI and education similarly emphasises that the educational value of AI depends on how learners appropriate these tools within supportive pedagogical and institutional contexts (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Mollick, 2024).

Student Support, Institutional Context, and AI-Related Self-Efficacy

The online learning literature consistently identifies student support systems as critical to equitable engagement. Instructor feedback, academic advising, and peer support influence students' confidence and persistence, particularly in digitally mediated environments (Borup et al., 2010; Roddy et al., 2017). Supportive interactions can strengthen self-efficacy through social persuasion and vicarious experience, while weak or inconsistent support may undermine confidence. In the context of AI, institutional support becomes especially important. Clear guidance on acceptable AI use, transparent assessment policies, and opportunities to develop AI literacy can reduce uncertainty and foster confident, ethical engagement (Cotton et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Without such support, AI may exacerbate digital inequities by benefiting students who already possess higher confidence and digital competence.

It is evident from literature that digital equity in online learning extends beyond access to encompass skills, confidence, and outcomes. AI introduces a new layer of digital inequality, where disparities in access, literacy, and institutional support shape who benefits from emerging technologies. Self-efficacy provides a critical lens for understanding how students interpret and navigate these conditions, while Resources and Appropriation Theory situates AI use within broader processes of digital inequality. Together, these perspectives provide a coherent framework for examining how AI, digital equity, and self-efficacy intersect in online higher education.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) with a digital equity perspective to examine how students engage with AI in online learning. The framework positions students' confidence in their ability to use digital and AI tools as a central mechanism shaping engagement, while recognising that this confidence develops within broader structural and institutional conditions. At the core the theory explains how beliefs about personal capability influence motivation, persistence, and responses to challenges. In online learning environments, self-efficacy shapes how students approach digital tasks, cope with technical difficulties, and sustain engagement. As AI tools become embedded in academic work, students must develop AI-related academic self-efficacy and confidence in their ability for usage effectively, critically, and ethically. This domain-specific confidence influences whether students experiment with AI, how they integrate it into learning practices, and how they interpret its role in their academic success.

To situate these psychological processes within their broader context, the framework incorporates Van Dijk's (2005) digital divide perspective, which conceptualises digital inequality across interrelated dimensions of material access, digital skills, and patterns of technology use. This perspective highlights that students' opportunities to develop AI-related confidence are shaped by structural conditions such as reliable internet access, appropriate devices, and opportunities to build digital and AI literacy. AI is therefore understood not as a neutral tool, but as a technology, of which its educational value depends on how it is accessed, understood, and supported within institutional environments.

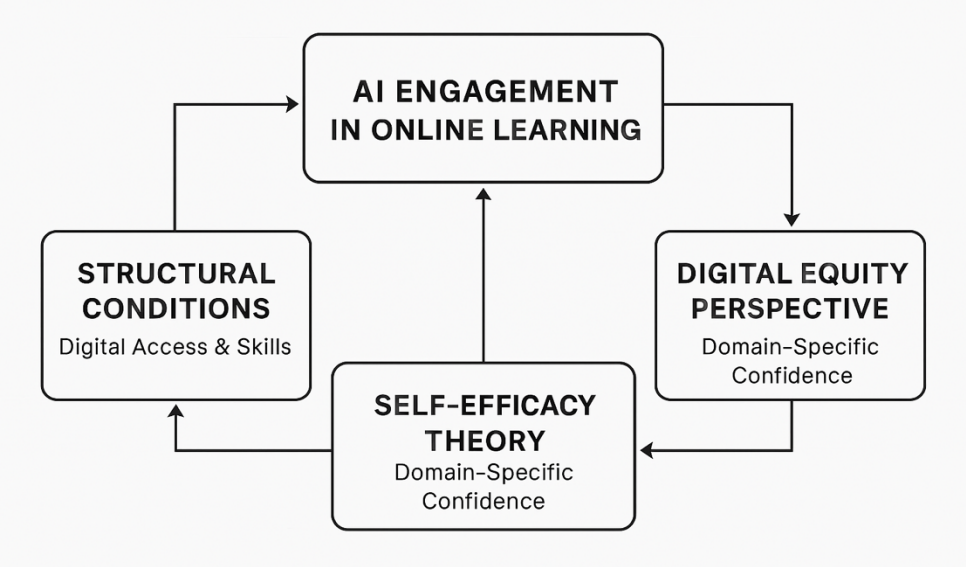
Together, these perspectives conceptualise AI engagement in online learning as the result of an interaction between structural conditions and psychological beliefs. Digital access and skills shape the conditions under which AI can be used, while self-efficacy influences how students respond to those conditions, whether they persist in using AI, and how they translate its usage

into academic outcomes. This integrated framework helps explain why students with similar technological exposure may experience different levels of confidence and benefit.

Methodologically, this framework informs the study's convergent mixed-methods design. The quantitative strand measures patterns of digital access, AI use, coping behaviours, and self-efficacy, while the qualitative strand explores how students interpret these conditions in their lived experiences. Integration of the two strands allows the study to connect measurable structural conditions with students' subjective experiences, consistent with the framework's emphasis on the interaction between context and belief. Figure 1 illustrates how digital equity conditions (access, skills, and institutional support) shape the development of AI-related academic self-efficacy, which in turn influences AI engagement and its contribution to academic outcomes and persistence.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Integrating Digital Equity and Self-Efficacy in AI-Mediated Online Learning



Methodology

This study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm, which prioritises research questions and practical outcomes and supports the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods when investigating complex educational issues (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2014). This orientation was appropriate for examining digital equity and AI in online learning, where both structural conditions and students' subjective experiences shape engagement.

Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014) was used where quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analysed separately, and then integrated during interpretation. This approach captured both the structural dimensions of digital inequities and the lived experiences through which students navigated these conditions. The design was theoretically informed by Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997), which explains how beliefs in personal capability influence engagement, persistence, and coping in technology-mediated learning. Van Dijk's Resources and Appropriation Theory (2005) provided a complementary structural lens, situating students' experiences within broader

patterns of unequal access, digital skills, and technology use. Quantitative data allowed for the measurement of digital access, skills, AI usage, and self-efficacy, while qualitative data illuminated how students interpreted these conditions and how they influenced their confidence and learning practices.

Quantitative Component

Design and Instrument

The quantitative strand employed a descriptive correlational survey design (Babbie, 2010) to examine relationships among digital access, AI use, coping behaviours, and self-efficacy in online learning. A structured questionnaire was developed in Qualtrics and organised into four domains: (1) demographics, (2) access to and use of ICTs, (3) ICT competencies and coping strategies, and (4) academic and digital self-efficacy.

Consistent with the study's theoretical framework, measures of academic self-efficacy were adapted from Bandura's (2006) guide for constructing self-efficacy scales and focused on students' perceived capability to manage academic tasks in online environments. ICT self-efficacy items were informed by the computer self-efficacy framework developed by Compeau and Higgins (1995), capturing confidence in performing technology-related tasks. Items measuring digital access and skills were informed by Van Dijk's (2005) digital divide framework, which conceptualises inequality across material access, digital competence, and patterns of technology use. All items were measured using five-point Likert scales.

Pilot Testing and Reliability

A pilot survey with 96 students was conducted to assess clarity, structure, and reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .71 to .94 across the major constructs, indicating acceptable to excellent internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Items with inconsistent scaling or ambiguous wording were revised prior to full deployment.

Sampling and Data Collection

The study targeted students at The University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. Although stratified random sampling was initially planned, institutional procedures required the use of a polling approach, resulting in a voluntary, non-probability sample. The survey was distributed campus-wide through official communication channels, yielding 141 valid responses for analysis. While this approach limits statistical generalisability, it aligns with pragmatic research in institutional contexts and supports analytic rather than population-level inference (Morgan, 2014).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Normality testing indicated non-normal distributions; therefore, Spearman's rank-order correlations were used to examine relationships among variables (Field, 2018). Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) guidelines. A multiple regression model was also conducted to assess the predictive influence of coping strategies and digital barriers on students' confidence to continue online learning. Regression diagnostics indicated no problematic multicollinearity among predictors.

Qualitative Component

Approach, Participants, and Data Collection

The qualitative strand employed a descriptive phenomenological informed approach (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990) to explore students' lived experiences of online learning and digital inequality. This approach was appropriate for examining how students interpreted technological barriers, institutional guidance, AI use, and their own sense of academic confidence.

Nine students were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience with online learning. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were conducted both face-to-face and via Zoom. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. A hybrid inductive–deductive strategy was employed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives while also being interpreted through the lenses of self-efficacy theory and digital inequality models. Manual coding supported close engagement with the data and ensured interpretive depth.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Integration occurred during interpretation and was achieved through systematic comparison of quantitative results and qualitative themes. Areas of convergence strengthened explanatory claims, while divergences highlighted the complexity and variability of students' experiences (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This process enabled the study to connect measurable digital conditions with students' perceptions, coping behaviours, AI engagement, and confidence in continuing their studies, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how digital equity and self-efficacy interact in AI-mediated online learning.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed key ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data handling. Ethical approval was granted by the Mona Campus Research Ethics Committee. Participants were fully informed about the study and their rights, including the freedom to withdraw without penalty, and all data were anonymized and securely stored with restricted access. The research posed minimal risk, avoided sensitive topics, and offered both digital and paper-based participation options to ensure accessibility. Visually impaired participants were assumed capable of understanding the consent materials given their status as tertiary students. The researcher maintained transparency, accuracy, and proper academic integrity throughout, using all data solely for the approved research purposes and ensuring the study's ethical rigor.

Findings

The findings show that AI, digital access, and self-efficacy are closely interwoven in shaping students' online learning experiences. Rather than operating as a simple technological add-on, AI functioned as a new layer of digital inequality that influenced how students engaged with

coursework, coped with academic challenges, and evaluated their own capability as online learners. Three central patterns emerged: access to digital infrastructure shaped students' ability to participate in AI-supported learning; AI-related skills influenced confidence and academic engagement; and AI produced both positive and problematic effects on students' sense of efficacy.

Digital access formed the bedrock of meaningful AI participation. Quantitative data showed strong correlations among lack of devices, unstable internet, and difficulty using digital platforms, indicating that digital barriers clustered rather than appearing independently ($\rho = .596–.637$, $p < .001$). Students with reliable internet and personal computers described AI as easily incorporated into their study routines. Those reliant on mobile phones or inconsistent connectivity experienced fragmented, interrupted interactions with AI tools. Although comfort with handheld devices was linked to perceived grade improvement ($\rho = .302$, $p = .005$), interview accounts revealed that mobile use often required compromises such as frequent app switching, limited document editing, and coping with dropped connections. These constraints reduced opportunities for sustained engagement, demonstrating that AI use reflected the first level of the digital divide: students with stronger infrastructure could integrate AI more effectively, while those with weaker access encountered practical limits that reduced its potential benefit.

Differences also appeared at the level of digital and AI literacy. Improvement in digital skills was moderately associated with increased confidence in continuing online learning ($\rho = .363$, $p = .002$). AI use correlated positively with grades ($\rho = .268$, $p = .013$) and with organised academic behaviours such as structured scheduling ($\rho = .276$, $p = .015$) and deliberate skill building ($\rho = .325$, $p = .004$). Interviews clarified that these patterns stemmed not from simple access but from proficiency in using AI. Students who knew how to craft prompts, evaluate AI output, and apply suggestions appropriately described AI as helping them refine writing, generate ideas, and understand difficult concepts. Others, however, were unsure how to use AI critically, feared producing inaccurate work, or avoided AI entirely due to concerns about academic integrity. These disparities reflect the second level of the digital divide, in which differences in competence shape students' capacity to appropriate technology meaningfully. For many, AI literacy functioned like a form of academic capital that enhanced coping and strengthened confidence.

AI also appeared to produce an emerging outcome divide. While many students credited AI with improving organisation, clarity, and efficiency, those lacking digital confidence or institutional guidance did not experience similar gains. Students with stronger skills and clearer expectations from instructors were able to convert AI access into academic benefit, whereas others struggled to do so. This suggests a third-level divide in which differences in AI competence translate into unequal outcomes; rather than levelling inequalities, AI risked magnifying them.

From a self-efficacy perspective, AI contributed to both strengthened and diminished academic confidence. For many students, AI served as a scaffold: successfully using it to organise ideas, improve grammar, or clarify complex material provided mastery experiences that reinforced their sense of capability. This aligns with quantitative associations between skill-building, coping behaviours, and confidence. Students who engaged in deliberate digital skill development and integrated AI into structured routines tended to express higher confidence in managing online learning demands.

However, AI also introduced new forms of uncertainty. Some students were hesitant to use AI because of unclear institutional policies, inconsistent instructor expectations, or concerns about the risk of academic misconduct. These ambiguities weakened students' sense of control and contributed to reduced willingness to engage with AI, even when they believed it could help them. In self-efficacy terms, these environmental constraints limited students' confidence not because of personal skill deficits but because the learning context felt unpredictable.

Digital barriers continued to depress confidence more broadly. Students with unreliable connectivity or limited device functionality described frustration, disrupted study routines, and reduced engagement ($\rho = -.471$, $p < .001$). At the same time, coping strategies such as scheduling, help-seeking, and intentional skill improvement were positively associated with both confidence and AI use, suggesting that adaptive behaviours mitigated some structural disadvantages. Several students described using AI as part of these coping strategies, noting that it helped them manage time, fill knowledge gaps, or stay organised, thereby increasing their sense of academic control.

Overall, the findings position AI as a structural component of digital equity rather than a neutral educational tool. Participation in AI-supported learning depended on access to devices and connectivity, proficiency in digital and AI literacy, and the clarity of institutional guidance. These factors shaped academic outcomes and influenced students' beliefs in their ability to succeed online. Across all three levels of the digital divide, AI interacted with students' self-efficacy, functioning as both a confidence-building resource and a source of uncertainty. The integration of AI into higher education therefore carries significant equity implications, affecting not only what technologies students can use but also how they perceive their academic capability and persistence in digital learning environments.

Discussion

This study examined how AI interacts with digital equity and students' self-efficacy in online learning. The findings show that AI is not experienced as a neutral tool but as an emerging domain in which existing inequalities are reproduced. Interpreted through Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997) and Van Dijk's Digital Divide framework (2005), the results illustrate how structural access conditions and psychological beliefs jointly shape students' engagement with AI.

AI as a New Layer of the Digital Divide

Patterns of inequality were visible across access, skills, and outcomes. At the material level, limitations in device quality and unstable internet constrained sustained AI use. Although mobile phones enabled participation, students described difficulties completing extended tasks, reflecting earlier findings that infrastructural barriers remain foundational in digitally mediated education (ECLAC, 2024; Selwyn, 2016).

At the skills level, effective AI use required competencies beyond general digital literacy. Students who could generate prompts, evaluate responses, and apply AI outputs responsibly reported clearer academic benefits. This supports emerging work identifying critical evaluation and ethical judgement as central components of AI literacy (Long & Magerko, 2020; Ng et al., 2021). Students without these skills tended to avoid AI or rely on it superficially, reflecting second-level divide dynamics in which competence shapes meaningful use (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015).

Differences in access and skills produced unequal academic outcomes. Students with stronger digital foundations described improvements in clarity, organisation, and efficiency, while others reported minimal gains or uncertainty. These findings align with concerns that AI may magnify the advantages of those already positioned to use it effectively (Holmes et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

AI Use and the Development of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy provided insight into students' varied experiences. Successful AI use often generated mastery experiences that strengthened confidence, particularly when AI helped refine ideas or clarify complex material (Bandura, 1997). Students frequently described AI as a form of academic support that complemented their learning processes.

However, AI also introduced uncertainty. Concerns about unclear institutional policies, academic integrity, and appropriate use discouraged some students from experimenting with AI even when they believed it could help them. Such ambiguity reduced feelings of control, limiting efficacy beliefs. These findings support research showing that policy uncertainty influences students' willingness to use emerging technologies (Cotton et al., 2023; Perkins, 2023). AI-related self-efficacy appears to be emerging as a specific domain shaped by academic ability, digital skills, and confidence in using AI responsibly.

Coping Strategies and Institutional Context

Coping behaviours linked structural conditions to self-efficacy. Students who maintained organised study routines, sought assistance, or engaged in deliberate skill development were more likely to use AI productively and report confidence in continuing their studies. These patterns reflect adaptive responses consistent with Self-Efficacy Theory; however, opportunities to develop such strategies differed. Students with reliable access and stronger digital skills described greater freedom to practise, seek help, and experiment with AI. Institutional clarity also mattered. When expectations were unclear, students reported hesitation and reduced confidence. This supports calls for clearer guidance to promote equitable and responsible engagement (UNESCO, 2023). Overall, AI functioned as both a technological and social phenomenon shaped by access, confidence, and institutional culture.

Implications for Practice

Integrate AI Literacy Within Digital Equity Initiatives

Access alone may be insufficient for equitable participation. Institutions may benefit from embedding AI literacy into digital skills programmes, with an emphasis on critical evaluation, ethical considerations, and discipline-specific application. Structured opportunities to practise using AI can contribute to building confidence through mastery experiences.

Provide Clear and Consistent Policies

Uncertainty about acceptable AI uses appeared to limit students' willingness to engage. Establishing clear guidelines, aligning assessment practices, and facilitating ongoing dialogue may help reduce anxiety and support responsible use.

Support Educators in AI-Inclusive Pedagogy

Instructors' confidence can influence students' confidence. Professional development could better equip educators to model responsible AI use and integrate it as a learning scaffold. Collaborative learning opportunities may provide vicarious experiences that strengthen students' self-efficacy.

Address Infrastructural Constraints

AI-supported learning presupposes stable internet and suitable devices. Continued attention to first-level digital divide challenges remains important, particularly in resource-constrained regions.

Recognise AI Integration as a Confidence-Building Process

AI adoption may be understood not only as a technical shift but also a psychological one. Supportive learning environments that encourage exploration and help-seeking can promote AI-related self-efficacy and more inclusive participation.

Conclusion

This study examined how students interpret and engage with AI within the realities of online learning. The findings suggest that AI is experienced within a broader landscape shaped by access, confidence, institutional guidance, and personal values. Some students perceived AI as a supportive resource that enhanced their independence, while others approached it cautiously due to limited access, uneven skills, or concerns about academic integrity. In this way, AI becomes embedded within existing digital inequalities rather than standing apart from them.

Drawing on Self-Efficacy Theory and digital divide scholarship, the study highlights that digital equity involves human and institutional factors as much as technological ones. Students' beliefs in their ability to use AI effectively influenced how they navigated online learning and their confidence in persisting academically. For higher education in resource-constrained and postcolonial contexts, these findings underscore the need to approach AI integration as both a pedagogical and ethical process. Institutions must cultivate critical literacy, provide clear guidance, and build supportive environments that allow students to question, practise, and reflect.

When framed in this way, AI becomes part of an evolving educational culture. Its contribution to higher education will depend on how institutions and educators shape its use toward inclusion, critical engagement, and student confidence. Thoughtful integration can support more equitable digital learning; without such attention, AI risks reinforcing existing divides.

Acknowledgments

A Large Language Model was used to assist in revising portions of this paper. Specifically, some sentences in the introduction and literature review were edited for flow and clarity. All AI-assisted text was reviewed, edited, and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content. The conception, methodology, findings, and discussion are entirely the author's original work derived from rigorous research.

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Trans-Babelism Theory: English, AI, and the Transformation of Global Linguistic Order

Hoang-Nam Tran, Tokushima University, Japan

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper proposes the Trans-Babelism (TB) theory to interpret the shifting dynamics between English and global multilingualism in the age of AI. For decades, English has served as the modern Tower of Babel symbolizing both unity and inequality in global communication. Yet AI-driven translation, speech recognition, and generative language models are now dissolving linguistic boundaries, creating the possibility of a post-lingua-franca world. TB argues that humanity is entering a stage where technology transcends Babel rather than reconstructing it: algorithms mediate understanding directly across languages, redefining what shared meaning means. However, the transformation remains paradoxical. While AI promises to democratize communication, it is still largely trained on Anglocentric data, potentially recoding English as an invisible algorithmic substrate rather than a spoken global standard. Drawing from sociolinguistics, media ecology, and AI ethics, this paper examines whether the digital age herald's linguistic liberation or the subtler persistence of English dominance within machine architectures. TB theory contends that the future of language will be determined not by which tongue prevails, but by how human and artificial intelligence chooses to interpret the diversity of expression.

Keywords: Trans-Babelism (TB), AI multilingualism, linguistic power, algorithmic bias, English dominance, epistemic justice, digital communication, cultural semiotics

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Introduction

Language is never just a system of signs and sounds, but a mechanism of power, a medium of identity, and a technology of governance. Human society have been accompanied by the rise of dominant languages: Latin in the Roman Empire, Arabic in the scholarly world of the medieval period, and more recently, English in the global era of industrialization, commerce and the internet. The ascendance of English is well documented as a process of "linguistic imperialism," the systematic privileging of one language over others through institutional structures, education systems and global networks (Alshahrani, 2020; Phillipson, 2018); this remains visible today in the persistence of English as the default lingua franca in science, business and diplomacy (Alshahrani, 2020; Lukianenko, 2024). In the 21st century, however, we are witnessing not just a continuation of English dominance (Zeng & Yang, 2024) but a potentially more radical transformation of the linguistic order driven by artificial intelligence (AI). With the proliferation of real-time translation tools, multilingual large language models (LLMs) and speech recognition systems, the possibility arises of a "post-lingua-franca" world in which no single human language must hold primacy (Ataman et al., 2025; Resck et al., 2025). AI technologies promise mediation across hundreds of languages, potentially dissolving the traditional hierarchy that placed English at the apex. AI-driven translation offers a nuanced understanding of the current state of language translation, emphasizing the advancements, challenges, and ethical considerations (Y. A. Mohamed et al., 2024). Yet this promise is complicated by structural realities. AI language systems are frequently trained on large English-centric corpora, evaluated with benchmarks skewed toward high-resource languages, and suffer from cultural and linguistic biases that favors Anglophone norms (Gao et al., 2024). While the interface of communication may appear to be democratizing, the underlying architecture may still embed English as the invisible substrate of meaning (Bender et al., 2021).

This paper proposes the Trans-Babelism (TB) theory to interpret this shifting landscape. The biblical myth of the Tower of Babel recounts humanity's attempt to unify under a single language and the subsequent divine scattering that produced linguistic plurality and mutual incomprehension (Genesis 11:1–9). Long interpreted as a symbolic origin of linguistic fragmentation, Babel has been invoked by scholars as a foundational metaphor for the entanglement of language, power, and meaning in human civilization (Eco, 1997; Steiner, 1975). In the era of AI, we might say that a new "tower" is emerging, not built of bricks but of algorithms, vectors and embeddings. The question is whether this new structure dismantles the old order, or merely re-constructs it in digital form under new terms (Crawford, 2022). TB argues that what will determine the future of language is not simply which tongue prevails, but how human and AI mediate diversity, whether the medium of understanding becomes multilingual equality or covert Anglophone hegemony.

Historical Context

English's rise was neither accidental nor purely linguistic. Its dominance was powered by colonial expansion, global trade, and later by digital communication. English became the world's lingua franca through institutional reinforcement rather than inherent superiority (Phillipson, 2018). The 20th century extended this influence into every domain, academia, diplomacy, business, and technology. Programming languages, scientific journals, and internet infrastructure all adopted English as their foundation. By the early 2000s, English was not merely a language but an infrastructure of globalization, a modern Babel (Crystal, 2003). Yet globalization also diversified English. The emergence of local variants both challenged and reinforced global linguistic hierarchies (Kachru, 1996). While English united people in

commerce and science, it also created new inequalities between native and non-native speakers, between linguistic centers and peripheries. Before English dominance, other languages held prominent roles. Latin served as the scholar's and cleric's lingua franca across medieval and early modern Europe: even when no longer a native tongue, Latin enabled communication among the educated across different vernaculars (Shank et al., 2013). French became lingua franca during the 17th to 19th centuries, replacing Latin in diplomacy and intellectual exchanges (Darquennes, 2016). Spanish achieved vehicle-language status through colonial expansion, embedding itself as a regional lingua franca even beyond Europe (Castillo, 2011). Russian played a similar intermediary-role in the 20th century as a language of communication across Central Asia and Eastern Europe (Pavlenko, 2006). Finally, while Mandarin Chinese serves as a national lingua franca within China, unifying numerous dialects and minority languages, it has so far not displaced English globally (Li, 2006). The emergence of AI promises to disrupt this pattern. Automated translation could decentralize linguistic authority, but the algorithms behind it remain shaped by the very dominance they appear to transcend.

Theoretical Foundations of Trans-Babelism

Sociolinguistics: Language as Power and Identity

Sociolinguistics conceives language not merely as a neutral conduit for communication but as a social institution that encodes hierarchy, power, and belonging. As Bourdieu (1991) observed, language operates as a form of symbolic capital, those who speak the "legitimate" or prestigious language gain access to social mobility, authority, and economic opportunity (Bourdieu, 1991). In this sense, linguistic competence is inseparable from social privilege. The global dominance of English thus extends far beyond grammar or vocabulary: it functions as a gateway to participation in international academia, diplomacy, and the digital economy (Canagarajah, 2012; Pennycook, 1994). Historically, the status of English emerged through colonial and post-colonial networks that linked education, religion, and governance. The spread of English in Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific institutionalized a linguistic hierarchy between "native" and "non-native" speakers, reinforcing what called linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2018). Even as World Englishes diversified, producing distinctive varieties in India, Nigeria, and Singapore, the symbolic hierarchy persisted: proximity to "Standard English" remained a marker of legitimacy (Kachru, 1996). In the age of AI, this hierarchy takes a new form. Language within AI systems becomes abstracted from human community and cultural experience, it becomes data. Every utterance, once a situated social act, is converted into quantifiable units: tokens, embeddings, and probabilities. Meaning is reconstructed through pattern recognition rather than lived context (Bender, E. M., Gebru, T., McMillan-Major, A., & Shmitchell, 2021). In doing so, linguistic authority shifts from the speaker to the system designer. The new "elite" are no longer those fluent in English but those who control the datasets, algorithms, and parameters that define what counts as coherent or correct language (Gao et al., 2024). This transition represents a profound reconfiguration of linguistic power. Where once discourse was negotiated through social interaction, it is now regulated through computational logic. The politics of accent, grammar, and idioms give way to the politics of training data, model architecture, and representational bias. In short, in the AI era, to own the corpus is to own the conversation. Sociolinguistic inequality persists, but its arena has shifted from classrooms and parliaments to servers and datasets.

Media Ecology: The Medium as Mediator

Media ecology examines how communication technologies shape not only what humans say but how they think, perceive, and organize society. The aphorism that "the medium is the message" encapsulates the foundational principle: every new medium reconfigures the scale and form of human association (McLuhan & Lapham, 1994). Language, in this framework, is both message and medium—a technology that extends the human mind. When spoken tongues evolved into writing, and writing into print, each transformation altered cognition, authority, and cultural continuity (Ong, 1982; Postman, 1970). The rise of AI represents the next phase in this trajectory: language itself becomes computational; its mediation automated through code. In digital modernity, communication no longer travels through purely human channels but through algorithmic infrastructures that filter, translate, and generate meaning. The user interacts not with another mind directly but through an intelligent interface that interprets and reformulates intention. This is like an entry into the Infosphere, where information objects—data, code, algorithms—constitute a shared environment of being (Floridi, 2014). Within this sphere, AI functions not as a neutral tool but as a new medium of mediation—a semi-autonomous agent that structures how meaning circulates. For example, machine translation tools such as Google Translate or DeepL do not simply carry messages from one language to another; they reshape the communicative act. They prioritize efficiency over ambiguity, legibility over cultural resonance. In effect, AI systems mediate the world through a "flattened semiotics" (Couldry & Mejias, 2020): they privilege what can be parsed by an algorithm, thereby standardizing linguistic diversity into a statistically tractable form. What McLuhan once observed of television, that it re-patterns attention and re-defines public discourse, now applies to AI language systems. They do not merely transmit human messages; they model how meaning itself should be structured.

The Trans-Babelism Framework

The first stage corresponds to the pre-modern multilingual world of Babel 1.0, characterized by local tongues, regional lingua francas, and reliance on human translators or interpreters. Before mechanical printing or global navigation, linguistic diversity was the norm rather than the obstacle. Communication across regions depended on cultural intermediaries—scribes, merchants, missionaries, whose work intertwined language with diplomacy and ritual (Burke, 2004). Latin served as the pan-European medium of theology and science, Arabic connected scholars across the Islamic world, and Sanskrit linked South and Southeast Asia through religion and law (Pollock, 2006). Yet these lingua francas remained bounded: they circulated within civilizational ecologies, not as universal systems. Translation was human, contextual, and slow, ensuring depth but limiting reach.

The second stage, Babel 2.0, emerges with industrial modernity and the expansion of European empires. English, propelled by colonialism and later by American cultural hegemony, became the de facto global lingua franca (Phillipson, 2018). The standardization of education, trade, and technology created a shared linguistic infrastructure that accelerated globalization but entrenched new inequalities (Pennycook, 1994). During this period, English evolved from a communicative tool into an epistemic filter: scientific publication, international law, and digital networks increasingly required proficiency in English for participation. As Kachru's "Three Circles" model illustrates, the Inner Circle (native English countries) controlled legitimacy, the Outer Circle (post-colonial states) adopted institutional English, and the Expanding Circle (the rest of the world) engaged English instrumentally (Kachru, 1996). This architecture of hierarchy mirrored global power relations. The "Babel 2.0" phase thus achieved what earlier

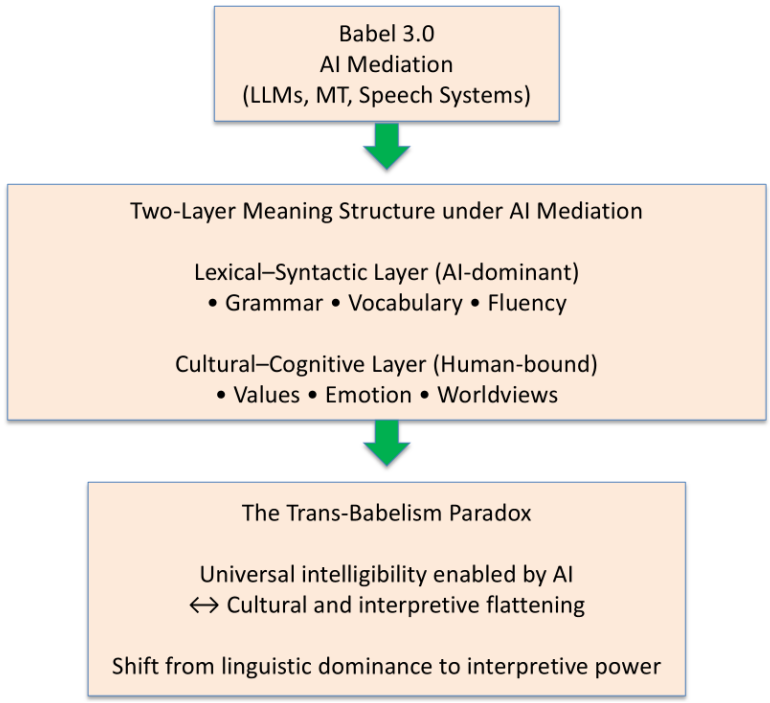
lingua francas never could but at the price of linguistic homogenization and epistemic exclusion. Languages without state or economic backing became marginalized, while English's symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) deepened. In effect, humanity's dream of one shared tongue materialized through globalization, not divinity.

The third and current stage, Babel 3.0, introduces a qualitatively different paradigm: the mediation of language by artificial intelligence. Here, communication no longer depends on linguistic mastery or human translation but on computational models that convert speech, text, and images into mathematical representations. This stage appears to fulfill the ancient dream of transcending linguistic fragmentation. Real-time translation tools, large multilingual models, and speech-to-speech systems enable near-instant comprehension across hundreds of languages. In theory, every person can now speak in their own language and still be understood. Yet, as scholars warn, the infrastructure of this new Babel remains profoundly asymmetrical: most models are trained primarily on English data, Western cultural norms, and high-resource language pairs (Bender et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2024). Thus, Babel 3.0 represents not the end of English dominance but its metamorphosis. English becomes the hidden algorithmic substrate through which AI systems interpret and align other languages, a form of "computational lingua franca." The linguistic center has shifted from empire to algorithm, from classroom to cloud. The new priesthoods are not philologists but data scientists and engineers.

Figure 1 synthesizes the TB framework by illustrating how AI-mediated communication (Babel 3.0) restructures meaning into two asymmetric layers, giving rise to the TB Paradox, universal intelligibility alongside cultural and interpretive flattening.

Figure 1

Mechanism of Trans-Babelism Under AI Mediation



Two-Layer Model of AI-Mediated Communication

Layer 1: Lexical-Syntactic encompasses the structural and statistical dimensions of language: grammar, vocabulary, and surface semantics. Neural machine translation (NMT) systems and

large language models excel in this domain. They map tokens across vast multilingual corpora, identify probabilistic correspondences, and generate sentences that appear fluent and contextually appropriate (Vaswani et al., 2017).

The success of this layer is evident in real-time translation tools such as Google Translate, DeepL, and Meta's SeamlessM4T. These systems routinely achieve BLEU or COMET scores approaching human parity in high-resource language pairs like English–French or English–Spanish (Kocmi et al., 2023). Yet this computational fluency is contingent upon abundant parallel corpora, texts aligned sentence-by-sentence, and thus privileges dominant languages. The lexical-syntactic layer can be described as the quantitative frontier of communication: measurable, optimizable, and scalable.

However, this efficiency comes at a cost. Words are treated as interchangeable symbols rather than culturally situated acts. Semantic equivalence is defined statistically, not experientially. As noted, language models "simulate understanding without grounding"—they predict text forms but lack any connection to human intention or social meaning (Bender & Koller, 2020).

The second layer encompasses the pragmatic, emotional, and cultural contexts that imbue language with human depth. It includes metaphor, irony, politeness, and collective memory, the elements that resist quantification. In this realm, AI performance remains brittle. Research in cross-cultural pragmatics confirms this limitation. It has been found that neural models misinterpret indirect speech acts and politeness strategies because such cues are culture-specific, not syntactically encoded (Pavlick & Kwiatkowski, 2019). These shortcomings reveal that while AI can approximate meaning, it cannot inhabit it. In the cultural-cognitive layer, translation demands empathy, historical awareness, and shared worldviews, qualities that remain uniquely human. The distinction mirrors Jakobson's classic taxonomy of translation: from intralingual (within one language) to interlingual (between languages) and intersemiotic (between sign systems) (Jakobson, 1959). AI currently operates between the first two levels; the third, where symbols acquire affective resonance, remains inaccessible to computation.

These two layers are not isolated but interdependent. The lexical-syntactic layer provides efficiency; the cultural-cognitive layer provides authenticity. In human communication, both coexist seamlessly. In AI systems, however, they are dissociated—one automated, the other residual. Emerging research in neuro-symbolic and multimodal AI seeks to bridge this gap by combining linguistic data with visual and contextual cues (Bisk et al., 2020). Projects like Meta's No Language Left Behind (Costa-jussà, 2022) attempt to embed low-resource languages and cross-cultural representations. Yet these innovations remain technically driven rather than anthropologically grounded. Without explicit modeling of cultural cognition, the deeper layer of meaning continues to elude AI.

Case Illustrations: The Limits of Algorithmic Translation

Poetry is the ultimate stress test for any translation system because it compresses emotion, rhythm, and cultural resonance into condensed linguistic form. Machine translation systems tend to flatten these dimensions into semantic paraphrases. Scholars of translation studies emphasize that such poetic failure is not accidental but intrinsic: poetry depends on untranslatable, terms whose meanings are tied to sound, rhythm, or cultural metaphor (Apter, 2013). Neural systems cannot perceive aesthetic form or intertextual reference; they treat metaphor as statistical anomaly. Comparative analyses confirm this: while transformer-based models outperform earlier phrase-based systems in literal accuracy, human evaluators

consistently rate them poorly on figurative or emotional fidelity (Toral & Way, 2018). In this context, AI achieves what would call "interlingual translation" but fails at "intersemiotic translation," the movement between cognitive and affective universes (Jakobson, 1959). The TB framework interprets this failure as a sign of technological transcendence without human transcendence: a new tower that connects languages but not souls.

The translation of political rhetoric reveals another layer of AI's cultural inadequacy. Words like "freedom," "democracy," or "solidarity" carry distinct historical and moral weight in different societies. When AI translates such terms, it often normalizes them into Western liberal semantics, erasing ideological nuance. Translation of Arabic news headlines about gender or religion tends to reflect Western frames of secularism and individualism (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2015). Such distortions illustrate the myth of algorithmic neutrality. AI systems trained on uneven global datasets reproduce the ideological balance of their sources. It has been noted that "every dataset carries a politics of representation"—the choice of what is translated, by whom, and for what purpose (Crawford, 2022). Thus, when AI claims impartial mediation, it actually reinforces an invisible Babel of epistemic asymmetry.

Humor epitomizes the cultural-cognitive layer because it relies on shared assumptions, double meanings, and timing. AI translation routinely fails to recognize irony, sarcasm, or wordplay, especially in cross-cultural contexts. Empirical studies confirm that humor is one of the hardest linguistic acts for AI to model. Even advanced transformer models achieve less than 50% accuracy in detecting sarcasm in multilingual corpora (Hossain et al., 2020). Likewise, computational humor systems can identify word associations but fail to grasp socio-cultural taboos or irony cues (Mihalcea & Strapparava, 2005). Humor depends on contextual intelligence, the tacit social knowledge of what is laughable, offensive, or absurd within a culture. AI, lacking experiential grounding, processes humor as lexical deviation rather than pragmatic performance. To translate perfectly, machines must first reduce meaning to what can be measured. In doing so, they risk converting the infinite variety of human expression into a "global village" (McLuhan & Lapham, 1994), connected yet homogenized. The challenge ahead is to design AI systems that re-embed culture within translation, drawing on cross-disciplinary collaborations between technologists, linguists, and anthropologists.

Implications for Global Communication

AI has begun to erode English's monopoly as a functional lingua franca while simultaneously entrenching it as an infrastructural code. English remains the dominant training language in machine translation, natural-language processing, and large-model corpora, constituting over 60 percent of web content and the majority of scientific repositories (W3Techs, 2025). Even when users communicate in Swahili, Vietnamese, or Arabic, the translation pathway often passes through an English pivot—effectively re-encoding global speech through an Anglophone filter (Tiedemann & Thottingal, 2020).

AI's ability to generate and translate across hundreds of languages fosters what may appear to be technological multilingualism—a surface pluralism in which all languages coexist digitally. UNESCO celebrates this potential as a pathway to inclusive education and cultural exchange (UNESCO, 2025). Yet scholars caution that automated translation often favors semantic clarity over cultural authenticity, producing what described as "commodified multilingualism": diversity repackaged for global consumption (Duchêne & Heller, 2012).

In education, AI translation tools democratize access to information. Students can now read textbooks in real time or converse with instructors across languages. However, research in bilingual cognition suggests that linguistic diversity itself fosters creativity, perspective-taking, and cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2018). If AI mediates all learning through an invisible English-based layer, learners may unknowingly internalize Anglophone logic even when reading in their native tongue. This has implications for global knowledge production. Non-English research, long marginalized in international citation systems (Hamel, 2007), risks further invisibility when AI prioritizes data from English-dominant sources. The resulting epistemic bias could perpetuate a "digital Matthew effect," where languages with large corpora grow ever more dominant while smaller linguistic traditions fade from scientific and intellectual discourse.

AI offers powerful tools for revitalizing endangered languages, speech synthesis for Māori, corpus building for Yoruba, or digital archives for Ainu (Bird, 2020). Yet such projects raise issues of linguistic sovereignty: Who owns the model trained on indigenous data? Who profits from its deployment? The case of the Māori-language chatbot Kōrerorero (2022) exemplifies both promise and peril, community engagement preserved nuance, but commercialization risked appropriation.

The final implication of TB is philosophical. If AI becomes the universal interpreter, then ethics must address not only who speaks but how machines listen. The goal is not the erasure of difference but its intelligible coexistence: an AI pluralism where translation preserves worldview as much as word. As reminded to translators decades ago, "translation is not words for words but meanings for people." In the age of intelligent machines, that humanistic reminder becomes newly urgent (Nida, 2002).

Conclusion

The biblical story of Babel symbolizes humanity's tension between unity and diversity. The rise of AI is the most ambitious attempt yet: transcending Babel not by enforcing one tongue, but by allowing all languages to speak through one machine. Yet TB theory suggests this achievement is both revolutionary and illusory. AI removes linguistic barriers but replaces them with algorithmic ones. The hierarchy of languages becomes a hierarchy of models, datasets, and architectures. English, once the language of global commerce, now reappears as the hidden code of computation. Communication becomes instant, yet filtered through systems few understand. The miracle of translation risks becoming the mirage of comprehension. Still, this paradox offers possibility. If Babel 1.0 fragmented humanity and Babel 2.0 unified it under English, Babel 3.0 may enable coexistence through interpretation. True transcendence will not come from perfect translation but from ethical mediation, technologies that preserve difference as a source of meaning. This requires moving from linguistic justice to interpretive justice. AI must be accountable not only for translation but for understanding, while policymakers, educators, and technologists ensure that all languages retain their epistemic dignity. Ultimately, the future of language depends on how humanity chooses to listen. The goal is not to rebuild Babel in code but to transcend it in spirit, recognizing diversity as humanity's collective intelligence. In this vision, TB marks not an end, but a beginning.

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Contact email: tran@tokushima-u.ac.jp

From Attitudes to Action: Exploring Key Factors Influencing Chinese Mainland Design Educators' Intention to Integrate AI Into Creative Teaching Practice

Yuanyi Liao, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong
Henry Ma, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping how design knowledge is taught and practiced. AI tools now support concept generation, visual exploration and design evaluation, yet the behavioural and contextual factors shaping educators' adoption remain underexplored in Chinese mainland. This mixed-methods study explores key determinants influencing design educators' intention to integrate AI tools into teaching, using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Semi-structured interviews with ten design lecturers are combined with survey responses from 100 design educators, enabling statistical patterns to be interpreted alongside contextual insights (N = 100). Findings indicate relatively positive attitudes toward AI's efficiency and ideation benefits, with persistent concerns about over-dependence, academic integrity, and erosion of foundational skills. Industry and institutional norms strongly favour AI integration, while peer and student influences are more mixed. Educators indicated high self-efficacy but face structural constraints related to access, policy ambiguity, and assessment design. Sustainable adoption depends on aligning institutional resources, teacher professional development, and studio-based assessment so that AI operates as a co-creative partner rather than a replacement for human creativity.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, design education, Artificial Intelligence in Education (AIEd), theory of planned behaviour, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

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Introduction

The rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion provides both opportunities and challenges for the creative sector. Design professionals now use AI for concept generation, visual exploration and design evaluation, raising fundamental questions about pedagogy, curriculum design and the evolving role of human creativity in AI-augmented contexts. Industry expectations for AI literacy are increasing, and institutions are beginning to treat AI integration as a strategic priority. At the same time, educators must protect foundational skills, critical thinking, and student-centred pedagogy, creating tension between preparing students for AI-assisted workplaces and preserving core design competencies. Research on design educators' AI adoption remains limited, particularly in Chinese mainland, where most work has focused on students, technical implementation or ethics rather than teachers' perspectives. This study is filling in this gap by exploring how Chinese mainland design educators think about and implement AI in their teaching, focusing on attitudes, social influences and perceived constraints, using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and insights from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as guiding frameworks. Using semi-structured interviews with ten design lecturers and survey data from 100 design educators, the study provided an integrated insights of how educators balance AI's promises and risks in Chinese mainland design education.

Background

Generative AI has rapidly entered studio-based design education, where these tools are being integrated across the design process for ideation, iteration and visualisation, and there are calls for further work on co-creative workflows, creative autonomy, governance and authorship norms, and fair AI-assisted assessment (Gulzar et al., 2025). Within this context, studies of generative AI in undergraduate studio programmes remain scattered, so the empirical picture is fragmented and inconsistently reported, Gulzar et al. (2025) explored how GenAI is being integrated into studio-based design education by synthesising classroom practices, enabling and constraining conditions, pedagogical framings and directions for future research. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) identified four main areas of AIEd application work: profiling and prediction, assessment and evaluation, adaptive systems and personalisation, and intelligent tutoring systems in their systematic review of AI applications in higher education, and concluded that research on AI in higher education rarely engages in critical reflection on challenges and risks, is only weakly connected to pedagogical theory, and leaves many ethical and educational questions under-explored. Holmes and Tuomi (2022) review existing AI systems in education and their underlying pedagogical assumptions, arguing that much AIED work has been shaped by narrow views of the functions of education and has largely been driven by computer scientists, which revealed the importance of engaging educators and local educational purposes more directly in future research (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022). However, because this emerging evidence is organised around reported classroom practices and conditions rather than educators' broader pedagogical narratives, how teachers themselves conceptualise AI's role in studio pedagogy and curriculum design remains only partially visible in the current literature (Gulzar et al., 2025).

Teacher beliefs and perceived support are central to technology adoption. Ertmer (1999) distinguished "first-order" barriers, such as lack of access, time and support, from "second-order" barriers, including beliefs about teaching, learning and the value of technology, and indicated that both types of barriers must be addressed if technology is to be sustainably integrated into classroom practice (Ertmer, 1999). Subsequent work showed that teachers'

pedagogical beliefs and the support they perceive from colleagues and administrators strongly shape whether and how they perform technology-rich curricula, even in the face of technological, administrative or assessment barriers (Ertmer et al., 2012), effectively positioning them as key pedagogical gatekeepers in decisions about technology use. According to the TPB, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control jointly determine behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991), and Teo's model of teachers' technology applied these constructs to show how attitudes, perceived usefulness and facilitating conditions shape teachers' intentions to use digital tools in their teaching (Teo, 2011). Research using the TAM and its extensions shows that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are core determinants of technology acceptance (Davis, 1989), while critiques of TAM emphasise the need to go beyond these individual perceptions to incorporate richer social, cultural and contextual factors in explaining technology adoption (Bagozzi, 2007). Meta-analytic and critical work has therefore highlighted the limits of models that focus only on individual perceptions, calling for approaches that engage more seriously with ethical, pedagogical and contextual dimensions of technology adoption (Bagozzi, 2007; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

There remains a lack of theoretically grounded research concerning how design educators, particularly in Chinese mainland, assess generative AI, navigate societal and institutional pressures, and perceive their capacity to integrate AI into studio teaching. Guided by the TPB and grounded in the TAM, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do design educators in Chinese mainland evaluate generative AI tools in relation to their pedagogical goals and core studio practices?
2. How do industry expectations, institutional policies, peer practices and student demands shape educators' decisions about whether and how to integrate AI into teaching?
3. How do educators perceived self-efficacy and structural conditions influence their perceived control over integrating AI?
4. Under what conditions do strong intentions to integrate AI translate into sustained, ethically responsible teaching practices in design education?

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods design. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected within the same time frame, analysed separately and then integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of Chinese mainland design educators' AI integration. The qualitative phase explored how lecturers described their experiences, concerns and decision-making processes in depth. The quantitative phase examined how strongly TPB-related factors appeared among design educators in higher education institutions.

Participants

Qualitative Phase

Ten design educators from higher-education design programmes in Chinese mainland took part in semi-structured interviews. They were invited through existing professional contacts and then through colleagues' recommendations, with the intention of including different types of institutions, design disciplines and teaching experience, rather than targeting any specific institutional sector. Disciplines included visual communication, environmental design, product

design and digital media, and teaching experience ranged from roughly 5 to 10 years. All interviewees were directly responsible for studio and project-based teaching.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase consisted of an online survey of design educators working in colleges and universities in Chinese mainland. The questionnaire was completed by 105 educators, after removing incomplete responses and cases where respondents did not hold a current design-teaching role, a final analytic sample of 100 design educators was retained (N = 100). Participants were recruited through professional networks, design institutional mailing lists. The analytic sample included 53 lecturers, 36 associate professors and 11 professors across programmes such as visual communication, environmental and spatial design, product design and digital media. Respondents generally had substantial experience teaching in design programmes and were responsible for studio courses, project modules or capstone projects.

Instruments

Interview

An interview guide was developed to align with TPB while leaving space for unanticipated themes. Questions addressed experiences using generative AI tools in personal practice and teaching, perceived benefits and risks for design learning and assessment, perceptions of industry, institutional, peer and student expectations, confidence and perceived constraints in integrating AI, and short and long-term intentions for AI use in studio and project teaching. Interviews were conducted via face to face and online video conferencing platforms, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were audio recorded with consent and transcripts in Chinese for analysis.

Survey Questionnaire

A 100-item questionnaire operationalised key TPB constructs, informed by technology acceptance literature and prior AI in education studies. Items covered attitudes toward AI in design teaching, subjective norms (industry expectations, institutional climate, leadership encouragement, peer practices and student pressure), perceived behavioural control (self-efficacy, pedagogical knowledge, access and structural constraints), behavioural intention and future-oriented beliefs about AI and design education. All items used a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with several items reverse coded so that higher scores consistently indicated stronger endorsement of the underlying construct.

Procedure

After institutional ethical approval was obtained, recruitment emails were sent to potential participants and shared via professional networks. Interested lecturers contacted the researcher directly and received information sheets and consent forms. For the qualitative phase, interviews were scheduled at convenient times and conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Pseudonyms were used and institutional identifiers removed, audio recordings were transcribed, anonymised and stored securely. For the quantitative phase, the online survey was minimised re-identification risk, no specific institutional identifiers were collected; only broad academic rank, role and discipline area were recorded.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly to build familiarity, and initial codes were generated inductively with attention to TPB constructs of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and intention. Codes captured explicit evaluations of AI and more implicit assumptions about professional responsibility, student capability and institutional risk. Codes were iteratively organised into candidate themes describing patterned ways in which lecturers reasoned about AI integration, with attention to both convergence and variation across cases. Quantitative analyses used the cleaned analytic survey dataset (N = 100). For each item, means, and standard deviations were calculated. These results form the basis of the survey evidence reported in the Findings section and are directly triangulated with interview themes.

Findings

Finding 1: Design Educators Show Cautiously Positive, Conditional Attitudes Toward Generative AI

Interview data showed that design lecturers regard generative AI as a helpful assistant for accelerating repetitive tasks, supporting research and broadening visual exploration in early ideation and prototyping. At the same time, they have drawn clear boundaries around what AI should not replace, emphasising drawing, observational skills, material experimentation and iterative refinement as non-negotiable foundations of studio-based learning. Several lecturers worried that students might submit polished AI-generated outputs without engaging in underlying processes that develop judgement and tacit knowledge, and therefore framed AI as something that must augment rather than substitute core practices.

Table 1
Attitudes Toward AI in Design Teaching (N = 100)

Item	M	SD
AI improves efficiency in certain design tasks	4.59	0.53
AI helps weaker students produce higher-quality visual concepts	4.02	1.00
AI accelerates prototype iteration and class discussion	4.19	0.81
AI stimulates students' creativity	3.72	1.15
Over-reliance on AI may weaken critical thinking	4.20	0.99
AI may erode foundational design skills	4.08	0.94
Effective use of AI requires skills many students lack	4.03	0.99
AI outputs are often insufficient as final deliverables	4.22	0.92
AI's impact depends on how it is used in teaching	4.39	0.75
Overall, I have a positive attitude toward AI in design education	4.35	0.70

Note. Items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Survey responded from the full sample of Chinese mainland design educators (N = 100) supported this conditional stance. As shown in Table 1, perceived efficiency benefits were rated very highly (M = 4.59), and educators also agreed that AI can support weaker students and speed up prototyping and classroom discussion (all M ≥ 4.02, except creativity at M = 3.72). At the same time, concerns about over-reliance, foundational skill erosion and student skill gaps were also strongly endorsed, with all concern items at or above M = 4.03. Overall attitude toward AI in design education was clearly positive (M = 4.35), but respondents strongly stressed that its impact depends on how it is used pedagogically (conditional item M = 4.39). These scores showed that both perceived benefits and concerns are rated highly, supporting the interpretation of pragmatically positive but tightly conditional attitudes toward generative AI in creative teaching.

Finding 2: Industry and Institutional Norms Strongly Promote AI Integration, While Peer and Student Influences Are More Mixed

Interviews revealed a clear hierarchy of normative influences shaping educators' decisions. Industry expectations emerged as the strongest and most uniform pressure: lecturers reported that internship partners and employers increasingly expect graduates to be familiar with AI tools and to demonstrate AI-supported workflows. Institutional norms were also visible through AI-related initiatives and signals from leadership, even when formal policies remained ambiguous. Peer norms and student expectations were more heterogeneous, with some colleagues and students pushing for AI use and others expressing scepticism or concern.

Table 2
Subjective Norms Regarding AI Integration (N = 100)

Source	Item	M	SD
Industry	Industry's emphasis on AI use is increasing	4.58	0.62
	Employers urgently expect AI-proficient graduates	4.36	0.69
	Industry expects teachers to integrate AI	4.45	0.64
Curriculum	Adopting AI is necessary to keep design courses relevant	4.30	0.70
Institutional	My department head actively encourages AI use	4.42	0.79
	AI integration is seen as a strategic priority	3.99	0.94
Peers	I feel pressure from colleagues to adopt AI tools	3.81	1.11
	Colleagues share a clear consensus on the importance of AI integration	4.07	0.79

The survey data confirmed this hierarchy of norms. As shown in Table 2, educators almost agreed that the design industry is paying increasing attention to AI (M = 4.58) and that industry expectations for AI-proficient graduates are high (M = 4.36). Respondents perceived strong expectations from industry that teachers integrate AI (M = 4.45) and largely endorsed AI adoption as necessary to keep design curricula relevant (M = 4.30). Institutional leadership encouragement was also high (M = 4.42), whereas peer consensus and especially peer pressure were more moderate (M = 3.99 and 3.81). Departmental climate around AI as a strategic priority sat between these poles (M = 4.07). These patterns indicated that industry and

institutional signals form the dominant subjective norms for AI integration, while peer-related pressures are more mixed and context-dependent.

Finding 3: Educators Feel Confident Using AI but Perceive Strong Structural Constraints

Lecturers described themselves as confident and willing to experiment with AI, but constrained by uneven access, unclear policies and assessment challenges. They indicated that many students lacked foundational design skills to use AI reflectively, and that institutional processes around software licensing, reimbursement and assessment templates created friction.

Table 3
Perceived Behavioural Control: Self-Efficacy (N = 100)

Dimension	Item	M	SD
Self-efficacy	I am confident in my ability to use AI in teaching	3.94	0.87
	I know how to apply AI appropriately in design education	3.94	0.84
	I lack sufficient confidence and knowledge to troubleshoot AI tools (reverse)	2.73	1.17
Structural barriers	Students' lack of foundational design skills is a major obstacle	3.78	0.99
	Institutional barriers (e.g., licensing, reimbursement) make AI implementation difficult	3.74	1.06
	Current AI technical limitations reduce the effectiveness of students' final products	3.63	0.97
	My institution provides sufficient technical/administrative support for AI use (reverse sense)	3.21	1.23

The survey results showed a similar contrast between internal capability and external constraints among design educators more broadly. As Table 3 indicated, respondents reported relatively high confidence in their ability to use AI in teaching (M = 3.94) and to apply it appropriately in design pedagogy (M = 3.94). In contrast, perceived institutional support was much lower (M = 3.21), with only 42% agreeing that their institution provides sufficient technical or administrative support for AI integration. Many educators saw student skill gaps (M = 3.78), institutional barriers such as software licensing and reimbursement rules (M = 3.74) and technical limitations of current AI tools (M = 3.63) as substantial obstacles. Agreement with the reverse-coded low-self-efficacy item was relatively low (M = 2.73), confirming that lack of confidence is not the primary barrier. These results showed a pattern of strong internal control but reduced external control, which helps explain why high intentions do not automatically translate into widespread, intensive AI integration.

Finding 4: Strong Intentions Lead to Staged and Conditional AI Integration

Lecturers expressed strong intentions to integrate AI but emphasised that implementation would proceed gradually and conditionally. They described experimenting with AI in

demonstrations, optional activities and specific project phases, while postponing full integration into core graded assignments until policies, access and pedagogy felt more secure. They were cautious in foundational courses, where they prioritised manual skills and process over efficiency.

The quantitative data underscored the strength and breadth of intention across Chinese mainland design educators. As shown in Table 4, all intention items have means above 4.46, with between 92% and 97% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they will further explore, gradually apply and share AI uses in teaching. Future-oriented belief items are similarly high (all means ≥ 4.40), including the expectation that AI will become a standard tool in the design industry (M = 4.56), that teachers have a responsibility to integrate AI (M = 4.51) and that future designers must combine strong foundational skills with AI proficiency (M = 4.60). These findings indicated that lack of willingness is not the bottleneck. On the contrary, the phased strategy adopted by educators reflects a deliberate and responsible pacing of progress within structural and pedagogical constraints.

Table 4

Behavioural Intention and Future Beliefs (N = 100)

Scale	Item	M	SD
Intention	I intend to further explore AI applications in my future teaching	4.54	0.59
	I will gradually apply AI in my courses in the coming years	4.52	0.60
	If adequate resources and training are available, I am willing to use AI	4.51	0.59
	I am willing to share AI-related teaching experiences with colleagues	4.46	0.67
Future beliefs	AI will become a standard, widely used tool in the design industry	4.56	0.56
	Teachers have a responsibility to integrate AI into curricula	4.51	0.69
	Design educators' roles are shifting toward conceptual curation and critical evaluation	4.46	0.78
	In a design industry enhanced by AI, solid fundamental design skills will become increasingly important, not diminished.	4.40	0.88
	AI should be viewed as a powerful tool that designers should master and control, rather than replacing human creativity.	4.61	0.78
	A key educational goal should be to teach students how to critically evaluate and improve AI-generated content.	4.61	0.62
	The most successful future designers will combine traditional skills with AI proficiency	4.60	0.72

Discussion

The combined qualitative and quantitative findings depict Chinese mainland design educators as pragmatically optimistic but professionally cautious about integrating generative AI into creative teaching. Attitudes are clearly positive in terms of perceived efficiency, support for weaker students and enrichment of prototyping (all benefit items $M \geq 4.02$), yet educators simultaneously express strong concerns about critical thinking, foundational skills and student readiness (all concern items $M \geq 4.03$). Rather than uncritical adoption or outright rejection, the present findings support a view close to what Gulzar et al. (2025) describe as responsible and effective GenAI use, in which AI functions as a powerful assistant but is carefully bounded through governance, authorship norms and assessment frameworks to protect core studio practices (Gulzar et al., 2025).

Subjective norms in this study are dominated by industry and institutional expectations. Almost all respondents perceive a strong industry shift toward AI and urgent demands for AI-proficient graduates, and they feel corresponding expectations that teachers integrate AI to keep curricula relevant (all key industry/institution items $M \geq 4.30$). Peer norms in the present study are more ambivalent, with moderate consensus and relatively low reported peer pressure, suggesting that while AI is increasingly framed as a strategic priority, day-to-day practice is still negotiated within diverse departmental cultures.

Perceived behavioural control findings highlight a crucial distinction between internal and external control. Educators report high self-efficacy for both technical and pedagogical use of AI ($M = 3.94$), and the low mean on the reverse self-efficacy item confirms that lack of confidence is not a dominant barrier ($M = 2.73$). In contrast, institutional support is comparatively weak ($M = 3.21$), while student skill gaps, institutional barriers and technical limitations are widely perceived as obstacles ($M = 3.63–3.78$). This pattern resonates with Ertmer's distinction between first-order (external, structural) and second-order (internal, belief-related) barriers and with broader technology-integration research showing that even teachers with positive beliefs and high confidence struggle to sustain innovation when resources, institutional policies and school culture are misaligned (Ertmer, 1999; Ertmer et al., 2012). In this context, the main constraints lie less in educators' ability to operate AI tools and more in whether those tools can be used in legally compliant, reliable and fairways within existing policies, infrastructure and assessment regimes.

Behavioural intention and future-oriented beliefs in this study are uniformly strong. Nearly all respondents intend to further explore and gradually integrate AI, conditional on appropriate resources and training (all intention items $M \geq 4.46$), and they strongly endorse AI as a standard future tool, a teacher responsibility and a key dimension of hybrid professional competence (all future items $M \geq 4.40$). These strong intentions and future-oriented beliefs suggest that high perceived usefulness and social legitimacy can sustain commitment to AI integration even when external control remains weak.

These findings have several implications for policy and practice. First, interventions to support AI integration in Chinese design education should prioritise institutional conditions, such as stable and equitable access to tools, clear policies on acceptable AI-assisted work, and assessment frameworks that make AI use transparent and assessable rather than hidden. Second, the results suggest an emergent professional identity for design educators as orchestrators of human–AI collaboration. Rather than banning AI outright or allowing it to displace core practices, educators in this study are experimenting with staged integration,

designing tasks that make AI use explicit and discussable, and teaching students to combine AI outputs with traditional skills in reflective ways. Systematic work on AI in design education similarly emphasises the value of integration requires positioning AI as a co-creative partner and foregrounding critical evaluation, iteration and material practice. Supporting this evolving role will require not only technical resources but also time, collegial spaces and institutional recognition for the curricular design work. In the context of Chinese mainland design education, such support may be decisive in determining whether very strong intentions to integrate AI can translate into sustainable, ethically grounded practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Chinese mainland design educators' intentions to integrate generative AI into creative teaching are strong, widespread and grounded in clear perceptions of industry necessity and pedagogical potential. The primary barriers to rapid, comprehensive AI integration are not attitudinal resistance or lack of technical confidence but structural and contextual constraints: insufficient institutional support, unclear policies on acceptable AI-assisted work, uneven access to tools and platforms, assessment frameworks that were designed before AI became ubiquitous, and student cohorts with varied foundational skills.

These findings have several implications for policy and practice. First, interventions to support responsible AI integration in Chinese design education should prioritise institutional conditions, stable and equitable access to tools, clear policies on acceptable AI-assisted work, and assessment frameworks that make AI use transparent and assessable rather than hidden. Focusing only on tool training would overlook the primary constraints identified in this study. Second, vocationally oriented and applied design programmes, where employability imperatives and craft-based pedagogies intersect most sharply, are often at the forefront of AI education tensions that other disciplines will soon encounter. If AI integration can be made to work in these settings, where questions of authorship, skill erosion and fairness are particularly salient, it may offer transferable models for wider higher education.

The study points to an increasingly important role for design educators as orchestrators of human–AI collaboration. Rather than banning AI outright or allowing it to displace core practices, educators are experimenting with staged integration, designing tasks that make AI use explicit and discussable, and teaching students to combine AI outputs with traditional skills in reflective ways. Supporting this evolving role will require not only technical resources but also time, collegial spaces and institutional recognition for the curricular design work involved. Future research should explore longitudinal trajectories of AI integration, tracking how initial experimental uses evolve as policies stabilise and pedagogical models mature. Comparative studies across different institutional tiers and disciplinary traditions would illuminate how context shapes the pace and form of AI adoption. Studies could also investigate student perspectives on AI-augmented pedagogy, particularly around the development of critical judgement and reflective practice in AI-supported design processes.

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

The author declares that ChatGPT, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The 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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Contact email: yuanyi.liao@connect.polyu.hk

The Gaze and the Look as Female: Placing *Fleabag* Within the Field of Vision

Malavika K Pradeep, English and Foreign Languages University, India

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The term “female gaze” has acquired widespread currency in recent times; the paper analyses the show Fleabag, popularly lauded as a series exemplifying the female gaze to expand the scope of the female gaze beyond the narrow definition of a female counterpart for the “male gaze,” through a psychoanalytic analysis of the text, drawing on Kaja Silverman's framework of identification and gaze. As a postmodern text, the research scrutinizes the subjectivity of the character “fleabag,” examining how she is constituted in the field of vision in relation to the concepts of the look, the gaze, and the screen. Lacan describes the camera as a metaphor for the gaze in Four Fundamental Concepts, and existing within a particular socio-political and historical context, specific values are concomitantly attached to the camera/gaze (Lacan, as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 132). Against this background, the paper attempts to explore how far the female gaze and the female look/eye (of the spectator and the protagonist) redefine and restructure “heteropathic identification” (identifying outside the self) of the spectator with the characters as well as the identification between the lovers in the show, promoting “active gift of love” (Silverman, 1996, p. 23, p. 78).

Keywords: female gaze, heteropathic identification, active gift of love, the field of vision

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Introduction

Fleabag, widely acclaimed for its depiction of the female gaze, follows the protagonist's misadventures as she grapples with grief, loneliness, regret, loss, and love through wit and humor. The show's title denotes the unnamed protagonist and points to one of its main strains: chaotic, messy, antiheroic actions often leading to difficult or even tragic outcomes. Congruent with the theme, the first season reaches its height of dramatic tension when Fleabag's mistake, which led to the demise of her closest and only friend, Boo, is revealed by her sister. Similar morally grey actions mark the entirety of the show, with fleabag constantly being enamoured by the forbidden. This conquest of the taboo leads her to pursue a romance with a priest in the second season, the implications of which will be discussed later in this paper.

When discussing fleabag's desire, it is worth noting that it is entirely haphazard. She engages in meaningless sexual encounters with random men, some of whom she loathes. Her desire leads her to commit the mistake aforementioned, the betrayal of her best friend, which is revealed to us in the final episodes of season one. This casual sex becomes less about sexual autonomy and more about self-destruction following the accidental suicide of her best friend. It is only in the sexual encounter with the priest that she is truly present, turning the camera away. I read the love between the priest and fleabag through the lens of Kaja Silverman's "heteropathic identification" (used interchangeably with "excorporative identification"), meaning identifying outside the body, to foster the "active gift of love" between them (Silverman, 1996, p. 41). Jacques Lacan argues that when the subject encounters the other, it searches for itself in the other. In other words, Lacan quotes that it is "one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (Lacan as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 42). By contrast, the active gift of love is when the subject celebrates the "particularity" of the other, viewing the other beyond as an extension of the subject (Silverman, 1996, p. 73). Although Lacan mentions the possibility of this kind of love in *Seminar I*, it is undertheorized, and Silverman develops it in *Threshold of the Visible World,* which I would be utilizing in this paper.

I also apply the concept of heteropathic identification to the relationship between the spectator and the characters in this paper. The primary target audience of the show is women, and, as mentioned, it has received widespread praise for exemplifying the female gaze; women's intimate experiences are foregrounded, ranging from the emotional to the biological. Fleabag freely discusses the body in the show, whether it be menstruation or masturbation. This underlining of the embodied experience prompts the question of the embodied look and the self-versus-other distinction that accompanies it. When a subject looks at an object, Jacques Lacan posits the possibility of the object looking back at the subject, disturbing the subject's field of vision and "photographing" it (Lacan, 1998, p. 89, p. 106). The "point of light" from which the subject is apprehended constitutes the gaze (Lacan, 1998, p. 95); between these two lies the screen (Bellou, 2024, February 26). Thus, the components of the field of vision consist of the subject's look, the gaze, and the screen. Aligned with this notion, the research paper interrogates the idea of the female gaze within the psychoanalytic framework of Kaja Silverman, who, as stated earlier, follows a Lacanian strain in her work. In this manner, it attempts to transcend the limited understanding of the female gaze as a counterpart to Laura Mulvey's male gaze. Furthermore, this research will examine the extent to which, if at all, the female gaze exists. It seeks to offer possibilities rather than definitive answers in which the female gaze can occur, while cross-examining the validity of the term.

Literature Review

The mass popularity of the show has led to considerable scholarly research, highlighting various aspects of it, ranging from the "absent mother" to the contextualization of fleabag as a "heteropessimistic" post-feminist subject (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2021, p. 1902; Wilson-Scott, 2020, p. 273). While Joanna Wilson-Scott (2020) asserts the "omnipresence" of the dead mother in the narrative, even though she is absent, the latter highlights how Fleabag presents the bonding between women, especially to her best friend Boo, as an alternative to "heteropessimist feelings of guilt, shame, and disappointment" (p. 274; p. 1912). It is worth mentioning that Boo's love tries to fill the gap left behind by the mother's loss, evidenced in the scene when fleabag says, "I don't know what to do with it…all the love I have for her," Boo replies, " I'll take it…you have to give it to me" (Waller-Bridge, 2019b, 14:39–14:51). As argued by Holzberg and Lehtonen, although the potential of queer bonds as non-normative modes of intimacy in which "heteropessimistic" women can gain "something else" (Boo) is explored, the show reattaches itself to the "promises of heterosexuality" in the end, in other words, "she cannot not want the same" (the Priest) (2021, p. 1914). While I acknowledge the relevance of such a reading and the necessity to transcend the bounds of heterosexuality and the institutional violence it perpetuates, I search for ways to cope with certain aspects of heterosexuality that beget the above-quoted "heteropessimism," namely, the invisibilization of identities, especially female identities, within heterosexual relationships to promote ethical interactions between the two members.

Turning to the next aspect that I examine in this paper, that of spectatorship, Inge Van De Ven emphasizes fleabag's use of the audience to "distract herself" from her emotions and "cope with loneliness" and how this relationship is "reciprocal" (Van De Ven, 2021, p. 464). The author argues that fleabag, as a neoliberal subject dealing with isolation, searches for connection beyond the diegetic world and, being fully aware of our look, "performs" authenticity through cringeworthy actions to create a sense of relatability with the audience (Van De Ven, 2021, p. 460). When her real emotions resurface, she does not perform her cheeky address at the camera. As Faye Woods observes, "her pain flickers through the performance of control deployed through her direct address" (2019, p. 208). She loses control towards the end, and in moments of utter despair, she does not confide in us. Aviva Dove-Viebahn (2023) interprets fleabag's loss of "narrative control" towards the end of the season as a critique of the limitations of modes of "subjectivity" offered by feminism. Repeatedly calling herself a "bad feminist," she lies at the intersection of refusing to adhere to conventional femininity norms and failing to assert herself as a feminist subject. Dove-Viebahn quotes: "fleabag's refusal to conform even to viewers' expectations of her performance instead embodies a resistant femme subjectivity."

Dove-Viebahn repudiates the categorization of Fleabag as a miserable protagonist whom the viewer can identify with. It is asserted that by rejecting our gaze and asking us not to follow her towards the end of the final season, she wrests control back of her narrative at the same time she renounces it. Through the Lacanian model, her gaze back at the audience decenters us as subjects and asserts her individuality. While I agree with Dove-Viebahn that fleabag is a privileged subject in many aspects, she is white, middle-class, and conventionally attractive. She is not truly an abject subject in many respects; nevertheless, as Fleabag is widely lauded as a nuanced expression of the female gaze, this paper examines the possibility of the female gaze through heteropathic identification. Fleabag stops performing for us towards the end of the show. Dove-Viebahn (2023) places her as a "resistant femme subject by virtue of this rejection." Acknowledging the validity of such a reading, I examine her paradoxical

subjectivity through psychoanalysis when she occupies the diegetic space and how spectatorship operates in this context.

Research Methodology

Jacques Lacan defines gaze as the "pulsating, dazzling, spread out of function of light" (Lacan as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 168). In simple terms, the gaze is the object looking back at the subject, inducing awareness of its lack in the subject, thereby removing the illusion of supremacy it strives to maintain. It "constitutes the subject as a spectacle" and "divests his look of its illusory mastery" (Silverman, 1996, p. 168). It instills in the subject that he/ she is also caught in the loop of desire, the subject's vulnerability to the Other's desire. The gaze resists symbolization; it cannot be directly apprehended by the subject and is an *Objet Petit a*, a remainder of the real as the subject attempts to symbolize it (No Subject, 2026, n 22). In short, the lack of the subject and his/her look is that he/she can never successfully capture the object; the subject is under surveillance by the Other/object, which renders it as a spectacle, thereby decentering the subject. Lacan quotes in *Seminar XI*, "You never look at me from the place at which I see you" (1977, p. 103). Hence, the gaze is a disturbance in the field of vision that exposes the splitting of the subject, establishing it as the site of the Other's desire.

What separates the look and the gaze is the screen, "at which social and historical difference enters the field of vision" (Silverman, 1996, p. 134). Lacan identifies the screen as opaque, and Silverman defines the screen as the "culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which the subjects are not constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality" (1996, p. 134). It consists of both "normative" and resistant representations (Silverman, 1996, p. 178). Encompassing divergent images of female experience on screen, this article analyses how Fleabag is positioned within our field of vision and how the show strives to bring female subjectivity to the forefront by circulating renewed articulations of it.

The look creates subjectivity, and Kaja Silverman defines it as an "embodied, psychic and visual category…marked by lack" (1996, p. 134). The subject, characterized by lack, projects abjection onto others to compensate for its lack. This is the narcissistic identification, and in response to this type of self-centered identification, Silverman advocates heteropathic/ excorporative identification (outside the body). As noted earlier, this concept is applied to love relationships to facilitate ethical love.

Fleabag and the Female Gaze

To examine *Fleabag* through the lens of the female gaze, first, the term must be defined; Lisa French delienates it as the "expression of female subjectivity, a gaze where female agency is privileged and which is shaped by a female "look," voice and perspective—in effect, the subjective experience or perspective of someone who lives in a female body" (French, 2021, p. 54). As this definition makes evident, the lived body is a central focus of the female gaze. There are two sides to it; it visibilizes the female body, at the same time, invites critique for reiterating the gender binary and for rejecting experiences outside the paradigm of white feminism. Additionally, excessive focus on the female body risks marginalization of queer identities, such as those of trans and intersex individuals. Acknowledging these limitations, I will examine later in this paper whether the category of the female gaze is valid. For now, I stick to Jill Soloway's framework as detailed by Lisa French for the female gaze. The female

gaze highlights the "feeling body" and returns the gaze back to the spectator (French, 2021, p. 60).

Through the context of this definition, *Fleabag* references the female gaze. The body is constantly referenced in *Fleabag,* from periods, breasts, buttocks, sex, and even passing gas; it dominates the show. The body here is not sexualized, but viewed as how someone views it from within. One of the instances is when the eponymous main character is talking to the camera about how much she loves sex, while using the toilet. She quips, "I'm not obsessed with sex. I just can't stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it. The drama of it. The moment you realise someone wants your body. Not so much the feeling of it" (Waller-Bridge, 2016b, 05:12–05:32). The effect this scene creates is comical while talking about her sex addiction, which ultimately led to a significant loss for her. It also clearly opens the door to why she is addicted to it, to affirm her desirability and possibly to cope with the emptiness she experiences post her loved one's death.

When we position *Fleabag* within our field of vision, the most jarring element is the gaze that emerges through her direct address to the audience. Here, the object looks back at us, the spectator, demanding our attention; initially, she treats us as her confidante as she "performs" cringe for our entertainment. The show begins with a sex scene, and she talks through it to us, which further confirms that she is addicted to the validation it brings rather than the feeling of it. Here, even as we are voyeurs observing the scene, the direct address provides comic relief and invites a sense of relatability. This excess decenters us as subjects; it reminds us that we are not the masters of the situation; she, as a self-aware subject, is the one who performs for us. The "I" dissipates into "we" as we encounter the object's look, inspiring a horizontal relationship instead of a vertical one. This is the logic of the second criterion that Jill Soloway underscores regarding the female gaze: it returns the gaze to the viewer, demanding to be seen as a subject rather than an object.

The Gaze as *Objet Petit a*

The Lacanian model holds that the other's gaze reminds us of our own lack as subjects; here, the object's gaze evokes our inability to exercise complete control over the screen. Usually, the gaze is not easily apparent; it exists as a point of light lying beyond the screen/image in the Lacanian model of vision. The gaze is treated as an *Objet Petit a*, a remnant of the Real leaking through the screen (Banerjee, 2021, p. 2). One reading of the gaze as *Objet Petit a* describes it as a "lost object," a radical lack in vision, from which the subject separates itself to gain subjectivity (Scott, 2015). It is what remains after the process of symbolization, a fundamental lack that cannot be compensated. Here, the real inches closer to the visible as the character faces the camera. Even though the gaze becomes more visible, and the subject can apprehend the object's look, it does not speak about the mastery of the eye. There is still something beyond the screen that gazes back at us, even when the character is not directly looking at the audience. It is the "point of light" (Lacan, 1998, p. 95) beyond the screen, something that "precedes the act of looking" (Silverman, 1996, p. 168). It exists before and after our look, evident in the other two readings of the gaze as *Objet Petit a*: it is not the original lost object but rather an object that attempts to fill the lack, and it is what controls and captures our look (Scott, 2015, August 5). Fleabag's direct address to the camera is one manifestation of the gaze as *Objet Petit a*. It temporarily fills in the lack experienced by the look, as we apprehend the object's gaze.

However, it is vital to emphasize that this is a mere representation of *Objet Petit a*. As argued before, even though the gaze is more visible, the eye's mastery fails. Obviously, the gaze back at the audience destabilizes the exertion of control over the object. The consequence of this is deliberate: to challenge the classical identificatory paradigms offered by the male gaze. As stated above, gaze reminds us that we ourselves are objects in the field of vision, as we are subject to the symbolic Other's look. Laura Mulvey's male gaze presupposes a male way of seeing, and the female gaze is the contrary of this. How fleabag exemplifies the female gaze has been elucidated earlier in this paper. The gaze is the point from which light is emitted from beyond the screen, constituting the subject; the screen acts as a buffer between the gaze and the subject's look. For Silverman, the screen is not just the literal cinema screen but a "culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality" (Silverman, 1996, p. 135). She details that it is the site where "historical or social variability is introduced in the field of vision…The screen encompasses the particular representational logic and range of material practices through which a given society at a particular moment in time apprehends something which is itself unchanging" (Silverman, 1996, p. 174).

Fleabag and Spectator Identification

Fleabag foregrounds the abject, even if instances like her sexual debasement seem to be agential in the beginning, as the show progresses, it demonstrates a lack of control and appears as a response to grief and loss (Bentley, 2025, p. 24). Initially, her direct address proves commanding of the diegetic space, but she eventually loses her grasp on it. Although the direct address encompasses all the notions outlined in the paragraphs above, it raises the question of what happens when she does not address the audience. As noted earlier, the gaze exists even when she is not directly addressing the camera. *Fleabag* exists within the larger gaze of the symbolic systems of patriarchy and white-centric, neoliberal feminism. One of the ways through which patriarchy is exemplified is the presence of God's gaze in the second season. For example, when fleabag remarks about her atheism, a painting hung upon the wall immediately falls down, to which the hot priest responds- "I love when he does that" (Waller-Bridge, 2019a, 05:03). The patriarchal gaze, symbolized by the priest's devotion, is set in opposition to the female gaze and desire in the second season. Bounded by these structures and the gaze of the symbolic Other, the female gaze perpetuated by the show penetrates the cultural screen to reflect the historical and social context in which it was produced. The show evidently mocks neo-liberal feminism's failings and, by circulating alternate images of womanhood, as decoded by Dove-Viebahn (2023), of "resistant femme subjectivity," it attempts to redesign the tenets of female gaze.

This resistive pressure is exerted on the cultural screen to motivate a restructuring of female spectatorship and subjectivity, prompting us to form a lateral relationship with the character on-screen. The lateral relationship is achieved through techniques such as direct address, which decenters our ego and foregrounds the interiority of characters, and through the employment of the "productive look" (Silverman, 1996, p. 180). The "productive look" is achieved through memory in Silverman. She borrows from Freud to illustrate that when a stimulus is encountered, it passes through the memory reserves for apprehension. The stimulus acquires meaning through associations with other memories. However, these associations in the unconscious are not always logical, as the unconscious itself is "indifferent" to what is culturally valorized (Silverman, 1996, p. 180). This potential can be leveraged to circulate libido on the abject by disseminating alternate visual images. By the promulgation of the other images, the "remembering look" can be altered; the memory archive of repetitive meanings

can be transformed (Silverman, 1996, p. 181). Thus, through the repeated expression of the female gaze in visual media such as Fleabag, a reorganization of the cultural values that are deemed desirable occurs.

It elicits identification and apprehension of the character's weaknesses, reminding us of our own. Most of the feminists, especially heterosexual spectators of the show, are caught in a similar conundrum: having to perform in accordance with cultural norms and resisting them. The identification with the titular character is carefully crafted so that her mistakes are not celebrated in a manner that undermines accountability. Instead, as repeatedly emphasized, the identificatory potential is utilized to subjectivize female experiences that refuse to conform to conventional femininity. This horizontal identification of the spectator with the imperfect object on-screen is a form of heteropathic or excorporative identification. It is an identification beyond the self, as opposed to the egoistic, "narcissistic" introjection of the other or the object into the self (Silverman, 1996, p. 20). The Lacanian model of narcissistic identification constructs the other as an extension of the self, leading to aggression and the subject attempting to ingest the other into itself, and thereby trying to eliminate the distance between them. The implication of this mode of identification is that it enables an equal exchange between the self and the other, thereby helping to maintain the simultaneous subjectivity of the two (Silverman, 1996, pp. 20–25).

Silverman treats identification hand in hand with idealization; here, the spectator should not idealize the protagonist, but rather the character's flaws are rendered hypervisible in the show. Fleabag self-reflexively comments on her own faults as a "bad feminist." For example, in one of the feminist lectures on being asked if they would trade years from their life for the so-called perfect body, fleabag and her sister affirm yes. Another instance is when fleabag confesses that she worries that she would not be such a feminist if she had bigger breasts. This predicament of being a "bad feminist" that haunts fleabag is highlighted in the show to question the viewing subjects and their own position as the audience.

Silverman equates identification and idealization to establish an empathetic relationship with abject bodies or identities. Here, I would argue that idealization is neither necessary nor desirable for the spectator to engage in dialogue with the character. The intended or "imagined" audience or spectator is one who does not identify with a perfect, heroic protagonist; fleabag's relatability lies in her weaknesses. Here, identification operates through lack; it is an alignment with the characters' vulnerabilities in contrast to narcissistic identification, where undesirable attributes or a lack in oneself are projected onto others. Initially trying to conceal her grief and regret by performing the fun and quirky part, the mask slips when her sister confronts her with "what you did to Boo" (Waller-Bridge, 2016c, 15: 16). After which, it is revealed that Boo's death was an accidental suicide because her boyfriend cheated on her with an unknown woman, incidentally with the character, fleabag. Thus, fleabag resorts to the masquerade of the excessive, eccentric subject to wrestle with her sorrow.

Nevertheless, a necessary distance is maintained so that the spectator's identity does not collapse into the protagonist's identity, and the character is not glorified; another outcome of the protagonist's gaze at the camera is the creation of affective distance that foregrounds the show's fictional nature and precludes blind idealization. Hence, excorporative identification is undertaken with full awareness of one's role in the identification. Here is a flawed object that meets our look; nowhere in the narrative are her foibles validated. Concurrently, an emotional connection forms, underscoring subjective experience and serving as another marker of the female gaze. The performative mask slips in between the narrative, like how she drunkenly

monologues to her father that she has “a horrible feeling I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist” (Waller-Bridge, 2016a, 20:35–20:47). While she rejects traditional femininity, she simultaneously seeks validation, particularly from men, throughout the show, reflecting how women are audited by the gaze of the Other in the patriarchal systems in which they are placed.

Hetero-Pathic/ Sexual Identification

The show attempts to foreground alterity; at the same time, she remains part of the structures that determine and shape female identities, discussing the various negotiations that postmodern feminist subjects conduct in their lives. Another context in which such operations are enacted is romantic relationships, which feature in the show's second season. The protagonist falls in love with a priest; in addition to fleabag’s tendency to revel in the forbidden, this relationship is profoundly healing for her. I would argue that their relationship proves the conditions necessary for a heteropathic relationship. They idealize each other with full awareness of conferring ideality on the other, culminating in the exchange of an “active gift of love” (Silverman, 1996, p. 78). The priest is fully aware of her limitations, the only one who truly “sees” her and is able to discern the “mental place” she goes to while addressing the audience. During their first meeting at the family dinner, she is ignored by everyone, while he is the only one who shows interest in her and is concerned about her after the confusion that ensues when she punches Martin. This also works the other way around: all the others see his identity as limited to that of a priest, except fleabag. Although the character is unnamed and described as the “hot priest,” she discovers his quirks and clumsiness over time.

The stark reality of his priesthood and his adamant commitment to his faith is the central tension of the second season. Rather than idealizing the other as an extension of the self and collapsing the distance between them, both identities remain separate, as a discovery of the self in the other, to quote Silverman (1992), finding “the self at the site of the other” (p. 203). I argue that the female gaze lying at the centre of the show provides the necessary framework for such an identification. The female gaze’s focus on affective ties between individuals rather than extravagant spectacles allows space for the diminishing of one’s ego, finding it in the other. Even though this may seem the complete dissolution of one’s identity and the fusion into each other, active idealizing of the other prevents the same. Through the other, the self vicariously finds itself, as happens at the end of the show, when fleabag no longer needs our identification to validate her existence. The priest also discovers truths about himself and love, albeit with a devastating ending.

Is Female Gaze Valid?

Claims of essentialism have been levelled against the female gaze, with its emphasis on the lived body as a primary locus around which the definition is centered. I would like to pose the question of whether the category of female gaze should be limited to defining the female body. Even though it has been argued that the universalizing claim of the female gaze smoothens the contours of identity, I find that the female gaze is only a way of seeing, seeing beyond the spectacle of cinema. The solution to the apparent erasure of other identities within the ambit of the female gaze is to adopt an intersectional approach. Undoubtedly, multiple layers of oppression exist within gender and sexuality, like race, class, and caste. I accept the fact that Fleabag explores only one dimension of gender performativity and resistance, of a white, middle-class, cis- gender woman. *Fleabag* exemplifies one among the varied forms the female gaze can assume and offers a critique of the performance of gender while being a feminist

subject, exposing the faults within feminism itself. In this manner, it becomes a satire on itself, critiquing feminism as a feminist show, reflecting that imperfect feminism does not dismiss the validity of feminism in a postmodern society.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the female gaze by juxtaposing it with heteropathic identification and the formation of lateral bonds with the spectator. It has delved into the legitimacy of the term and assumes the position that the female gaze exists without resorting to essentializing the category. Theories and praxis of the female gaze and feminism are ever-expanding and must be approached with careful consideration of their limitations to enable more nuanced readings. There are no definitive answers to certain questions posed when one practices feminism, and I maintain that patriarchy is not the only evil in society that must be addressed. Regardless, as emphasized before, both historically and in the future, imperfect feminism is better than no feminism; we are placed within the system, and continued evolution of these understandings is necessary.

Faye Woods classifies Fleabag as a "precarious girl comedy" (Woods, 2019, p. 194), and her precariousness is relatable to each one of us, at least at some point in our lives. The structure of the show is designed to create, borrowing Woods' (2019) term, an "affective pull" in the audience; the randomness with which events are sewn together mirrors how life events unfold, effectuating a more immersive experience. This immersion, punctuated by direct address that disturbs the field of vision, intentionally foregrounds gaze, forcing the audience to engage in dialogue with the character. The simultaneous immersion and distancing create a narrative capable of exposing the paradoxes of the female gaze and feminism. In moments of deep distress, the character does not find solace in us, but in other characters of the show. However, her refusal to address the camera during moments of genuine emotion does not engender a narcissistic identification of the spectator with the character because fleabag has already disrupted the screen by presenting alternative images of gender normativity and feminism.

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

I have used Grammarly, Inc. to proofread my research paper.

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Contact email: malavikakpradeep26@gmail.com

Utilization of Emotional Language as an Effective Tool in Mass Media Discourse

Zdenka Kumorová, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In general, the aim of study was to closely examine media statements which are an answer to sociological and economical problems of the modern world of the twenty-first century. Following extracted texts originating from various sources (such as social media, internet pages) will point to the typical linguistic expressions painting the picture of current problems during the time of crisis. For the main topics of interest were chosen health and vaccination, pseudoscience thesis and geopolitical representation. Unfortunately, the portrayal of such topics using specific language in the media space is characterized by the intent of influencing the consumer. These linguistic expressions effectively shift the perception of consumer, hence we will point out the pragmatic-persuasive side of statements. During the course of study, a specific lexicon analysis will be introduced, meaning stylistically characteristic, expressive and emotional lexicon, semantically characteristic, including metaphors and idioms. We will identify primary flag and stigmatizing words that play an important role, mainly when it comes to public discourse. The main purpose of this contribution is to identify such argumentative patterns through complex analysis and consequently to define characteristic discourse. The identification and revelation of emotional-expressive lexicon and the determination of typical argumentative patterns can serve modern society as a precaution through uncovering manipulative and persuasive strategies.

Keywords: manipulation, specific lexicon, groupthinking, stereotypes, argumentation

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Introduction

Mass media play a key role in information distribution but they can also be used to gain power through the distribution of conspiracy theories and manipulative representation. All conspiracy stories share a common verbal presentation, which is the picture of an enemy that is to blame for the desperate condition of society. We will focus on the current socio-economic topics happening within the European space while also influencing the entire world. We will point out the typical strategies and ways of influence of the consumers of the media texts during the critical time and we will do so through the identification of emotional language. As it is, all of the conspiracy theories about both the real and the mythical worlds point out the verbal presentation of the culprits. Behind them stand migrants, representatives of various religions, feminists, politicians, the wealthy and the strong ones, the lying media, pharmaceutical companies, but also chips and radio waves. The act of spreading the conspiracy narratives such as "the uniqueness of knowing the real truth" and "the one about the lonely warrior fighting the dark forces and conspiracies" add to easy conviction and manipulation of people wrapped up in their own negative emotions. Underneath the emotional load supported by the conspiracy theories, that person either becomes radical and joins the conspirators' side, using the help of supporting agents (such as homeopathics, amulets etc.) and procedures (connection to like-minded people such as antivaxers, anti-Semitisms people and right-wing thinkers), or they choose the second way and become socially isolated, eliminating the deep fear and despair (which includes the total separation from the close ones – family, friends, connections in general). In addition, the choice of social isolation can also manifest as a failure to pay the bills, the fraternization of alike thinkers and the fear to leave the safety of home, for they could expose themselves to dangerous radiation, all the while being incapable of accepting any form of medical treatment. Various layers of society submit to the belief of conspiracy theories, ranging from the educated to uneducated society, from the economically stable to the opposite, from younger to older generations. When the degree of spread of seemingly harmless stories exceeds the all-social effect, they can become a weapon to influence the thinking of society and its standing (e.g. narratives connected to anti-vaccination or antisemitism leading to radicalization and absolute loss of respect). There is a whole range of expressions and linguistic realizations of anti-Semitic prejudice, from allusions to very obvious insults (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Authors K. Farrow, G. Grolleau and N. Mzoughi (2023) argue that the power of words has often been overlooked during the COVID-19 crisis and that seemingly irrelevant manipulations of word choice can influence behaviour. Many ruling parties and their politics are contributors to such state – they feed the distrust and socio-economic instability within the society. Consequently, both alternative media and radically right-wing parties use the weakened trust and the power of conspiracy theories to spread alternative versions of truth, leading to the increase in their voter base, their overall reach and spread of political strategies, which, despite their claims, do not bring any viable solutions. On the contrary, their expansion contributes to the spread of hate and anger within the population, all the while suggesting radical solutions, verbal and physical abuse. The populists' strategic manipulation abuse the current state of affairs in society in order to establish political power. Hence, commoners are not to gain any certainty nor profit – the possible benefits such as the higher preferential profits go straight to the manipulators.

The Verbal Manipulation in the Media

Unfortunately, the consumers of media content find the topic of manipulation uncomfortable, for they cannot acknowledge being privy to manipulation or suggestion to certain opinions,

they do not like to admit giving in to their emotions and repetitive verbal influence (Dinka, 2008, p. 7). The culprit is often the information surplus along with the complexity of media contributions. Frankly, the portrayal of relevant and truthful information uses the very same linguistic agents as the portrayal of half-truths or lies, purposeful misinterpretation or conspiracy, which is why their distinction remains crucial (Nutil, 2022, p. 14). "Medial manipulation is properly hidden, using methods difficult to untangle, so their meaning is likely to escape the consumer's scrutiny" (Dinka, 2008, p. 10). "Words hold power because language is a major influencer of our perception of the world and our consequent actions. If someone was to borrow the language of the conspirators or people violators, they would strengthen their position of impact on our society" (Nocun & Lamberty, 2021, p. 274). The quality of verbal manipulation is determined by anonymity, which within the internet space enables the liberty of speech. However, it also facilitates the uncontrolled diffusion of hateful speeches, aggressive reactions or vulgar contributions. D. G. Myers (2016) defines this issue as deindividualisation, meaning the loss of self-awareness and fear of being held accountable, leading to the loss of responsibility altogether. Authors of such contributions act as their role models to fulfil the expectations of their chosen social groups, in order not to be excluded from them. This groupthinking is also referred to as group stupidity (Nutil, 2022). The goal is to achieve collective thinking and the illusion of flawlessness, invincibility (Koukolík & Drtilová, 2006). These convictions are sufficiently rationalized – "the correct words" serving as alibi and absolution of any wrongdoings. Groupthinking is a reflection of alternative media space through expression structures and ideological convictions. Verbal narratives lean toward the defence of own alternative thinking in the presence of opposition along with mainstream media. The authors of such articles deem themselves "smarter, better and the ones recognizing the actual truth" (in the perspective of opposition, WE are good, THEY are wrong). In the spirit of the phrase "social plague" (the shared imitation in actions, thinking and overall expressions) (Myers, 2016), the attention shifts to the fact that dominion grows exponentially in regard to the grade of medialization of its topic. We were able to witness topic recirculation within the Slovak alternative publications, the matters ranging from criminal behaviour of the marginalized groups, migration, anti-ruling and anti-European tendencies attacking democratic values, non-governmental organizations and coup d'états lead by the former female president of the Slovak republic, LGBTI critique and also the critique of the globalization and the liberalism. Due to the migration situation in 2015, Slovak politicians have also begun to use the topic of migration to mobilise their voters (Štefančík et al., 2021). These shared thoughts are the "only solution" originating from the conformism of the collective thinking as a society. Stereotyping allows disinformation to be easy when it comes to mental conduct, for it mainly utilizes our subconscious, certain stereotypes are spread within our own social groups, which significantly adds to their trustworthiness (Kolomazník et al., 2023, p. 98). The ultimate result is labelling or stigmatization in the name of diversity and ideological preference, such as you are a liberal and I am a conservative, or you are part of a progressive movement and I am a traditionalist. Alternative media dispose with many labels or various flag words in the likeness of fascist, racist, traitor, parasite or a "sun person". What matters the most when discerning the truth are often the stereotypes instead of evaluation of information (Wodak, 2002). Groups with shared interests raise negative emotion within the society and they do so with the help of hateful, rash or aggressive statements, aimed to polarize society. This strategy along with anonymity contributes to the birth of extreme and radical pronouncements. Certain groups of like-minded people have the potential to elevate their opinions into higher positions (Sunstein, 2009). Our society has to deal with surplus of information daily, which needs to be organized in order to be understood. This information also carries many subjective assumptions that are deemed to be the truth. Kolomazník et al. (2023, p. 91) introduce excellent example of the

polarization of the Slovak republic through the effect of opinion consistency: the bubbles are hermetically closed and more and more radical opinions are accepted, while other conclusions are declined. The bubble WE vs THEY grows deeper by each conversation, which creates an atmosphere of distrust. Verbal attacks, extreme beliefs and physical abuse are approved. In the midst of these social bubbles of alike opinions, groupthinking is thriving along with fanaticism and certain sects' memberships. Contrariwise, there is no space for rational thinking and argumentation (Nutil, 2022, p. 55). Consequently, social media enclose people into carefully filtered bubbles. This precaution ensures precise time monitoring of the time passed on social media, all the while monitoring product/service preferences which inevitability leads to targeting ads within the media space and further risks associated with social media. The exact opposite is cognitive flexibility linked to tolerance and respect of all humankind, characterized mainly by the ability to change one's behaviour and decisions based on new facts with evolving context. However, depolarization of society requires a different approach: the search both of mutual human characteristics and capabilities and of goals needed to solve issues practically and in real time. This approach also includes exhibiting respect in the midst of different ideas and overall cooperation.

Methodology

The search of the language in Slovak mass media (Badatel.net, Biblik.sk, Rizikaockovania.sk, Infohrot.sk) in 2022–2023 is based on the analysis of a specific lexicon, focusing on stylistically symptomatic and expressive vocabulary. The linguistic expressions capturing the essence of recent problems emerge amid the crisis. The method of the research is the analysis of a specific lexicon, focusing on stylistically symptomatic and expressive vocabulary (phraseological units, linguistically aggressive and vulgar representation, controlling lexicon) and flag words (within the media often signalizing manipulation, emotion or warning, such as "garanted", "exclusive", "you must", "always", "never", "all" etc. – they point out emotionally charged information).

With the help of lexical and text content analysis, we were able to identify the very expressions that effectively manipulate the audience's perception. The statements offered following presentations: the language of fear and hate, the invocation of negative emotions, the polarization of society, the charlatan character of contributions, the information used in deceiving context, the false news and propaganda, the encouragement of violence, the extremist content, the lack of authors and of reaction from hurt audience, the mixture of messages and comments, the shocking wrong statements, so called professionals and discredited scientists spreading pseudoscientific thesis, the critical, aggressive and reactive content, the rejection of mainstream media and of crucial democratic principles, the indication of own idea connection.

Verbal manipulation techniques include only the linguistic expressions that are used to ascertain various persuasive strategies. Calling upon emotional persuasion (Tomášková, 2015, p. 15), meaning the needs of consumer, their feelings, interests and wishes, is effective. Importantly, we have to capture the consumer's attention. It is also possible to target emotions such as fear or anger. Those manipulative verbal techniques can be both on the level of word and sentence. When it comes to the linguistic expressions within the words contributing to the resulting manipulation, they can be semantically symptomatic lexeme, figures and tropes, emotionally-expressive, stylistically symptomatic words, manipulative synonyms, verbal defects etc. Dysphemism, pejorative words or rash words in the midst of mass communication are linked to dysphemization within the common speeches. The

emotion-text level in mass communication is characterized by the use of tropes. Additionally, a metaphor can fulfil multiple functions in the relation to verbal manipulation (Čulenová, 2019, pp. 192–193): the shift of spotlight onto the manipulator themselves, the encouragement of certain mood and emotion, the influence of consumer, irony and dishonour of the consumer themselves or their opinions, the increase or decrease of certain situation's importance, the self-forgives or the lack of accountability on the manipulator's side. Metaphors and analogies are used instead of direct insults to evoke unexpected emotions (Wodak, 2002, p. 498). Comparison as a word has emotional base and that is why it possesses grand emotional power. Ironically, shifting the significance from a positive meaning to a pejorative one can have strong manipulative effect. In the end, the consumer is influenced by content with emotional subtext, that is to say the consumer is a witness to ridicule, disrespect and trivialization of certain phenomenons. The role of epithet is to provide emotion as it has the power to mock or disrespect both a person and a situation, but it becomes more and more cliché with every usage (Mistrík, 1997, p. 141). As for metonymies, they function as a dynamic and economizing element, that can turn the text into an emotional painting. Another elements, such as symbols and allegories represent abstract phenomenons and if author implements them accordingly, they can engage the audience, even convert them into the manipulator's point of view.

Next, flag words are expressions or phrases that emphasize something important within the text, alt. capture attention, activate quick emotional decision-making, contain generalizations – within the media, they often signalize emotion, manipulation or even warning, they are a notice for emotionally charged information. Additionally, they signalize emotional manipulation, the ease of reality, the creation of "WE vs THEY" movement within the politically touched media. Their goal is to mobilize the audience into action, to anger the consumer of media content or to simplify a complex problem. The image of THEY is created using expressive adjectives and sometimes unusual phrases (Schuppener et al., 2021). One of the typical characteristics of populistic content is a higher frequency of repetition of emotional expressions. The creation of the enemy and the search for the culpable party emphasises the polarization of society, it divides it into the good and bad. The communicatively-oriented research, primarily focusing on expressions typical of the populist communication style, was examined by R. Štefančík (2025) on selected media texts of media statements of the Slovak coalition in 2023. The analysis reveals that the category of "enemy" (or "enemies") is extensive for the new governing coalition. These encompass both internal enemies such as the media, NGOs, and George Soros, and external enemies such as illegal migrants and Western European states. Typical flag words in the time of crisis are "THEM": "liberals", "globalists", "Brussels", "the West", "traitors", "elite", "media are lying", "system" etc. The feeling of fellowship and moral superiority is painted into the expressions of irony of humankind, which suggests the existence of a homogenous "correct" group that is to say "WE": "ordinary people", "the majority of citizens", "real Slovaks", "voice of people", "working nation" etc. The usage of expressions referencing fear, anger, threat, the feeling of guilt point to the emotionally charged content. Flag words suggest the desire to invoke a powerful emotion rather than rational argumentation: "shocking", "catastrophe", "threat", "destruction of a nation", "invasion", "scandal". The populists tend to reduce complex problems into much simpler yet unreal solutions: "immediately solving", "suffice", "just need to", "simple solution", "it is clear". Flag words offer the black and white picture of the world through extreme absolutization and generalization of matters, for instance with the help of words such as "always", "never", "all", "no one", "the only truth".

Results

Stylistically symptomatic words signalized negative evaluation, negative connotation: “criminal corporations”, “financial groups/sharks”, “Satanists and fascists” which served as a reference to the conspiracies of world rulers, “cell cannibalism” as resistance to chemotherapy in relation to cancer treatment, “scum” as a declassed social group. We identified the aggregation of adjectives with a negative evaluation aspect serving as a tool to invoke syntactic expressiveness in following statements: “satanic and fascist associations”, “people nowadays lead their herds to even greater fear and demise”, “they were closing, forcibly curing and destroying our livelihood”, “non-scientific and segregated, even stupid precautions and statements of the pandemic”, “segregated and discriminatory precautions”.

Additionally, we identified expressive lexicon based on the dichotomy “WE vs THEM” as an adherent expressiveness in following statements: “anti-Slovak and anti-Slavic fascistic killer (in the phraseological meaning of destroyer)”, “satanic practices (in the meaning of intrigues)”, “tyrants (in the phraseological meaning of ‘the one who torments, terrorizes their environment’)”, “they will not pull in their tail (a phrase with a negative expressive reference - ‘to retreat’)”, “the loop progressively tightens (a phrase with the meaning of incoming doom)”, “the devil (expressively a person with many prominent, usually negative features)”, “Goyim-cattle (with an expressive meaning of taking likeness to an animal and possessing their urges)”, “over-motivated sanctions (the prefix over – pointing to expressiveness)”. The expressions in themselves profit from dysphemism, pejorative and vulgar words such as: “in-server” (a pejorative), “cursed solution” (in reference to vaccination), “the staging PANDEMIA” (in reference to the make-believe reality, enforced by the usage of introduction marks), “children only type into their phones” (in reference to shallow and consumer way of life), “slut” (a rough expression appointed to the former female president of the Slovak Republic, who was to fraternize with the West), “they are laughing into their faces” (an expressive phrase of the meaning of laughing on the expense of someone), “you voted the devils – Sulík, Kollár, Matovič, Čaputová and such dirt” (the expressive word “the devil” enforced by the negative pejorative effect of the word “dirt”).

Flag words and stigmatizing expressions were found in following media statements: “the Creator’s treatment”, “vaccination = fascism and dictatorship”, “the fear trade”, “a silent epidemic”, “segregation of the unvaccinated children”, “Aluminum as an adjuvant of vaccines”, “the real virus”, “a covidiant before court or in jail”, “criminal corporations such as Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson&Johnson”, “How much profit will arise from pharmaceutical and medical industries?”, “EU, NATO are satanic and fascistic associations”, “EU-Global criminal syndicate”, “liberal fascists”, “representatives of criminal fascist government”, “corrupt policemen”, “They want us to focus on Ukraine and blame Russia for economical devastation.”

Typical argumentative patterns based on the dichotomy “WE good ones vs Them bad ones” are characterized by statements: “they take part in homicide through wars and vaccines”, “to eliminate EU, NATO plus the developers of vaccines and all of their servants”. Next, we found following medical conspiracies in alternative media: “chemotherapy causes death”, “You are committing crime with every vaccination performed on a healthy individual or a child! WITH EACH ONE!”, “A breakthrough study revealed that four shots of covid vaccines are the culprits of total immunity collapse.”, “a vaccine that was falsely advertised to be effective”, “the genocide of own nation”, “THE REAL GOAL OF ALL THE CURRENT VACCINES = THE SPREAD OF DISEASES, CONSEQUENT

DEGENARATION AND ULTIMATE DEATH!", "HPV vaccines are full of toxic substances", "the vaccinators are primary killers", "the injections of criminal companies!". It is quite popular to multiply the negative tuning of content through linguistic units with negative meaning (Fraštíková & Demčišák, 2025, p. 61). As it is, the narratives referring to the covid-19 pandemic are based on impactful emotional-expressive statements spreading alarm, distrust and fear, for instance: "the rehearsal of holocaust and mass homicide", "Face masks cause insufficient flow of oxygen, which leads to irreparable damage on a developing brain and a decrease in intelligence by 20 percent", "the plans to exterminate humanity through precautions, poisonous tests and vaccines!", "'dictation of the vaccines' creators!", "Lockdowns caused many disastrous physical and psychological issues in children, including the increase in suicides to a number for month that was attributed to a year in the past".

Such narratives spreading conspiracy theories about the world domination founded upon the expressive presentations and negatively evaluating words which are the basis for the polarization of society and the diffusion of negative emotions: "EU forces nation rulers into the disruption of states", "the European territory will be occupied and they will rape our women, our wives, our daughters!", "This is not really a migration, rather that an import of an army of terrorists set to evoke chaos within the nation states.", "possible outbreak of World war 3", "Criminal satanic societies that have world domination and killings of the majority of the world population set as a main goal!"

Then we witness conspiracies linked to harmful radio waves and shocking discoveries of the extra-terrestrial civilisations about the rescue of habitants from the chemtrails, such conspiracies running freely through the alternative media on daily basis: "changes in one's mood but also sharp headaches – probably a result of the bounce of the waves from the chemical layer in the sky", "the Earth surface becomes progressively more inhabitable as a result of the fashion industry's activities, radio waves and the desire to control weather – chemtrails", "We will have to forsake radio waves altogether!", "Humankind needs normal environment free of radio signals, we need more than GPS, mobile phones or the internet!", "Thank you, boys: the Pleiadian spaceship cut through the chemtrail.", "Humankind would be much more poisoned by the chemtrail and other similar substances if it was not for the work of these light creatures.", "orbs such as the ones in the sky are moving so quickly that it is impossible for an ordinary human to see them", "The light of the size of a much brighter star, that lit up every 43 seconds, only to turn off again. ...It must have been a UFO (unidentified flying object), for no one could identify it.", "These chemicals and probably a technology named HAARP as well are a tool to modify both the weather and human thought." Frankly, a huge part of the conspiracy theories is the questioning of scientific research and academic knowledge, as demonstrated: "meteorological textbooks mention chemtrail in a similar context – they were falsified long ago, so individual research speaks clearly".

Conclusion

Finally, the identification and exposure of the emotional-expressive lexicon and the definition of typical argumentative patters can serve the modern society as a prevention in the reveal of manipulative and persuasive strategies. The contributions have a multithematic character, meaning the versatility of contributions entices the readers to consume the content of the conspiracy theories and to spread it on directly, as follows: The health and anti-vaccination, The NATO's aggressors, The European Union as a reason of a failure of the democratic system, The migrants and minority citizens are criminals, parasites, The corporate economic

system and capitalism, The hate to the sexual minorities and orbs. During the process of our research, we used lexical analysis to discern the alternative media's use of similar or even exact linguistic strategies within their conspiracy and manipulative statements. In Slovakia, such statements are spread by the alternative media such as Badatel.net, Davdva.sk, Napalete.sk, Slobodnyvysielac.sk, Infovojna, Kulturblog, Hlavnydennik.sk, Biblik.sk, Rizikaockovania.sk, Infohrot.sk, Eurorespekt.sk.

As it is, alternative media incorporate sharp nationalist, xenophobic or extremist statements into their articles, which attack the very ideals of humanism such as liberty and democracy, moral action or protection of human rights, tolerance, respect of others and the openness to consider their arguments. Alternative media usually present only one truth that was created by "US" (the only just people) and paint "THEM" as the opposite party that is responsible for all the bad in the world. When it comes to manipulators within the mass communication, they tend to be politicians, media workers or artists, but they can also be healers, even proper physicians. Importantly, their formal performance has physical effects on the audience (charm, sympathies), but also verbal ones as well (the use of foreign words, phrases, syntactic structure inserts, uncommon grammatical tools such as transitional and passive forms of verbs).

Unfortunately, building resistance to media manipulation and social media conspiracies is a systemic process. Nobody can resist such manipulation and disinformation in full – the only distinction between people is the level of resistance possessed by individualists. That is how we can determine the resistance of society as a whole. Additionally, academic environment carries the potential to prevent such negative manipulative influence within the social media. Consequently, training and strengthening the abilities to identify and expose toxic media content on social media can contribute to the establishment of healthy and safe relationship between the students and also to the establishment of correct and respectful communication within the academic environment. Strategies eliminating manipulation in the media space are possible to recognize, consequently to train and implement in education in relation to prevention of any possible negative impact on the student, but also on the educational process in whole.

When it comes to media and interdisciplinary education related to the ability to resist media manipulation, it is imperative to expand one's "digital immune system", which is established upon adequate critical thinking. Critical thinking is a powerful tool in resisting manipulation (on social media). We can train it by doing following primary actions: discussion (shared thinking with teachers, students, parents are the best filter), posing of questions, argumentation, active listening. Within the course of academic practice, critical thinking can be developed with simple key questions regarding an article on the internet: Who was the author and why did he publish the article? Who is this article serving? For instance, students of intersubject education should have the opportunity to recognize such manipulative techniques of common and frequent internet manipulation. They should identify the Clickbait technique (big shocking title to draw attention and to reach optimal sharing and spread of disinformation). Next, they should be able to discern an effective strategy using disinformation, hoaxes and half-truths abused to manipulate information (manipulation in itself often combines truth and lies in order to appear trustworthy). Also, they should identify Deepfakes manipulation, video edits and their convincing yet falsified visual content. In addition, they should detect the technique of social pressure ("they are all sharing it, so you should too"), the technique of challenge "share it now" (manipulative pressure to act quickly without the thorough understanding of the text), the technique of repetitive content display,

the technique of emotional manipulation where emotion is a warming signal (manipulation aims for fear, anger, any negative emotions, invokes outrage). Importantly, it takes a lengthy training in order to control one's emotions to resist such manipulation – if something was to evoke a very strong feeling, it is advised to step back from the statement in question, to take a proper pause and only then share one's opinion on the matter. The very goal of manipulators on the internet is for the user of social media to react quickly, without thinking, but with a great emotion indeed.

Finally, we can implement satisfactory education in the familiar, academic and media environment, so that young content consumers can learn to identify and select suitable/unsuitable content and to eliminate harmful media content. There are many internet sites available within the media space that are able to increase the protection of an internet user, such as bezpecnenainternete.sk, factcheck.org, fullcheck.app, konspiratori.sk, facebook.com/hoaxyapodvody and other educational platforms.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written within the framework of the APVV project No. APVV-22-0221.

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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Contact email: zdenka.kumorova@ucm.sk

Hybrid Aesthetics in Khai Dinh's Court Architecture (1916–1925): Cultural Modernization and East–West Encounter in Early 20th-Century Vietnam

Le Vu Truong Giang, Hue University, Vietnam
Nguyen Ngoc Tung, Hue University, Vietnam

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study explores the hybrid aesthetics embodied in the court architecture under Emperor Khai Dinh (1916–1925) as a distinctive expression of Vietnam's cultural modernization during the early 20th century. In the transitional period between tradition and colonial modernity, Hue's imperial monuments, such as Khai Dinh's Mausoleum, An Dinh Palace, and Kien Trung Palace, became architectural palimpsests that fused Eastern cosmological symbolism with Western stylistic and material innovations. Through a qualitative and comparative approach combining morphological analysis, iconography, and postcolonial aesthetics, this research investigates how Khai Dinh's architectural projects negotiated power, identity, and modernity. The study situates these works within the theoretical framework of postcolonial hybridity (Homi K. Bhabha) and cultural translation, viewing architectural hybridity as both an aesthetic choice and a political discourse. Findings suggest that the fusion of Baroque, Rococo, and Art Deco elements with Confucian-Buddhist iconography was not merely decorative but reflected an emerging "vernacular modernity," in which Vietnamese elites redefined cultural identity amid colonial transformation. By reinterpreting these monuments as dynamic cultural texts rather than passive relics, the paper contributes to broader discussions of Southeast Asian architectural modernity and heritage interpretation in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: hybrid aesthetics, court architecture, Khai Dinh, cultural modernization, east–west hybridity, postcolonial studies, Hue, Vietnam

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Introduction

The period from 1858 to 1945 represents a major turning point in Vietnamese history, marked by Vietnam's extensive encounter with French colonial rule and Western civilization. These encounters initiated a broad process of cultural interaction between Eastern and Western traditions, producing hybrid cultural forms across multiple domains of social life, including architecture, the arts, and urban development.

Within this broader historical context, the architectural landscape of Hue underwent significant transformations during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh (1916–1925). This period represented a moment of profound political and cultural transition. Under French colonial rule, the Nguyen dynasty retained symbolic authority while its political autonomy was substantially limited. At the same time, colonial administrators pursued policies intended to consolidate political control and reshape the cultural environment of Indochina (Thúy et al., 2017). Colonial urban planning initiatives and new architectural projects were introduced throughout Vietnam as visible expressions of colonial governance (Tùng, 2025).

During the administration of Governor-General Albert Sarraut (1911–1919), architecture assumed an increasingly strategic role within colonial policy. Sarraut's policy of association viewed architecture as a symbolic instrument of colonial authority while also promoting the selective incorporation of local cultural elements (Betts, 1961). In this context, the Khai Dinh court faced the challenge of maintaining cultural legitimacy within a political environment shaped by colonial modernity.

Architecture therefore became one of the most visible arenas of cultural encounter. Buildings constructed during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh departed from earlier Nguyen architectural traditions. Reinforced concrete increasingly replaced timber structures, while Western stylistic vocabularies such as Baroque, Neoclassical, Rococo, and early Art Deco elements appeared alongside traditional East Asian symbolic systems (Phát & Sirisuk, 2025). Rather than representing simple imitation, these architectural developments reflected complex processes of cultural translation and adaptation (Long, 2005).

This study interprets Khai Dinh–era architecture through the concept of hybrid aesthetics, understood as the interaction of different architectural languages that generate new cultural meanings. The article addresses three central questions: how Western architectural forms were incorporated into imperial architecture while preserving traditional cosmological symbolism; why hybridity emerged as a dominant architectural strategy during this period; and what these architectural transformations reveal about broader processes of cultural modernization in colonial Vietnam.

Literature Review

Previous studies on Vietnamese court architecture have largely focused on the early Nguyen dynasty, particularly the major architectural projects constructed during the reigns of Emperors Gia Long, Minh Mạng, and Tự Đức. These works established the spatial and symbolic order of the Imperial City of Hue. The planning of the capital followed principles derived from Chinese cosmology and Confucian political philosophy (An, 2005), reflected in the axial symmetry of the urban layout, the hierarchical organization of space, and the carefully structured ceremonial zones that shaped the imperial citadel and palace complexes. Vietnamese scholars such as An, P.T. have documented the architectural characteristics of these structures and emphasized the

close relationship between architectural form and the cosmological worldview of the imperial court (An, 2005). Within this perspective, architectural decoration and artistic elements have been interpreted as expressions of an aesthetic system that preserved cultural identity while selectively absorbing external influences (Thông, 2001).

Research on colonial architecture has introduced broader interpretive frameworks for understanding architectural hybridity. Mark Crinson argues that colonial architecture often produced hybrid forms shaped by complex negotiations between colonial authorities and local elites (Crinson, 2003). From this perspective, colonial architecture should be understood as a site of cultural interaction rather than merely the imposition of European architectural forms.

Vietnamese scholars frequently employ the concept of acculturation to explain such processes of cultural transformation. Cultural acculturation refers to changes in cultural patterns that occur through sustained contact with external influences (Tấn, 1996). Similarly, the concept of cultural refraction suggests that foreign cultural elements are transformed through the interpretive frameworks of local traditions rather than adopted unchanged (Hiệu, 2021). These perspectives emphasize the active role of Vietnamese cultural actors in receiving, adapting, and transforming external influences.

Postcolonial scholarship further highlights the creative possibilities that emerge from hybrid cultural forms within contexts of East–West encounters (Scriver & Vikramaditya, 2007). Hybrid architecture can therefore be understood as a product of colonial interaction, in which Western architectural technologies and stylistic vocabularies intersect with indigenous symbolic systems (Harris & Myers, 2007). This phenomenon is closely related to the concept of cultural hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha conceptualizes hybridity as a “third space” in which cultural meanings are negotiated, translated, and redefined through intercultural contact (Bhabha, 1994). This theoretical perspective provides an important framework for interpreting cultural and artistic transformations in colonial societies, where identities are continually reshaped through processes of interaction and reinterpretation.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs three interconnected theoretical concepts to interpret architectural transformations during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh: hybrid aesthetics, indigenous modernity, and cross-cultural exchange.

Hybrid aesthetics refers to the coexistence and interaction of multiple architectural traditions within a single built environment. In colonial contexts, such hybridity often emerges through processes of cultural translation and reinterpretation. As Mark Crinson (2003) argues, colonial architecture frequently reflects the negotiation between European aesthetic models and local cultural practices, producing architectural forms that cannot be attributed to a single cultural origin.

Indigenous modernity describes forms of modernization that develop through local reinterpretation of global influences rather than through direct imitation of Western models. Anthony D. King (2004) notes that modern architecture outside Europe often arises through processes in which external technologies and design ideas are integrated into existing cultural frameworks. In this perspective, modern architecture in Asia can be understood as a locally mediated expression of modernity shaped by interactions between global and indigenous traditions.

Cross-cultural exchange refers to the multidirectional circulation of ideas, technologies, and aesthetic forms across cultural contexts. Logan (2000) demonstrates that colonial cities in Southeast Asia often developed architectural landscapes shaped by the interaction between European planning systems and local building traditions.

Together, these concepts provide a framework for interpreting Khai Dinh–era architecture as the result of dynamic cultural interaction within the broader historical context of colonial modernity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach that combines architectural analysis, historical interpretation, and cultural theory.

Architectural morphological analysis focuses on the spatial organization, construction techniques, and structural systems of the buildings under examination.

Table 1
Analytical Framework for the Morphological Study of Khai Dinh–Era Court Architecture

Analytical Component	Analytical Focus	Manifestation in Khai Dinh–Era Architecture
Spatial Organization	Overall layout, ceremonial axes, spatial hierarchy	Stepped courtyard systems and axial approaches leading toward the central core of the complex
Structure and Materials	Construction technologies and building materials	Reinforced concrete, brick masonry, and mortar
Decorative Arts	Architectural decorative systems	Porcelain and glass mosaic inlay, relief sculpture, ornamental motifs, floor tiles, and murals
Stylistic Influences	Sources of aesthetic influence	Baroque, Rococo, Beaux-Arts, Art Deco, and related stylistic elements
Symbolic System	Symbolic meanings and cosmological worldview	Sacred animals, mythical creatures, immortals, auspicious symbols, human and natural imagery, imperial motifs, and other cosmological references

The analytical framework employed in this study is summarized in Table 1, which consists of five principal components: spatial organization, materials and structural systems, decorative programs, stylistic influences, and symbolic systems.

Iconographic analysis examines decorative motifs and figurative representations associated with the cosmological frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Comparative analysis situates the architectural characteristics of the Khai Dinh period within the broader context of colonial architectural development in Southeast Asia.

The study is based on multiple sources of data, including architectural documentation, field observations of the monuments in Hue, historical photographs, and secondary historical literature on Vietnamese architecture and colonial urbanism. Through the integration of these

sources, the research seeks to reconstruct the architectural and cultural context in which Khai Dinh–era monuments were designed and constructed.

Three architectural complexes were selected as the principal case studies in this research:

- An Dinh Palace
- Kien Trung Palace
- Khai Dinh Mausoleum

These monuments were selected because they represent three distinct architectural functions within the imperial landscape: mausoleum architecture, royal residence, and palace architecture.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive interpretation of architectural hybridity in Khai Dinh–era monuments and to situate these structures within the broader processes of cultural negotiation and architectural modernization in colonial Vietnam.

Case Studies

Three architectural complexes were selected as case studies in this research: An Dinh Palace, Kien Trung Palace and the Khai Dinh Mausoleum. These structures represent three distinct architectural typologies within the imperial landscape of Hue in the early twentieth century: royal residential architecture, political architecture within the Imperial City, and mausoleum architecture. The selection of these three cases enables an examination of architectural hybridity at multiple levels, ranging from spaces of royal residence to ceremonial environments and symbolic spaces of imperial authority. The morphological characteristics of these structures are analyzed according to the methodological framework presented in Table 1, with particular attention to spatial organization, materials and construction, decorative systems, and layers of stylistic influence.

An Dinh Palace

An Dinh Palace offers a distinctive perspective on how hybrid architecture entered the everyday life of the imperial court. Originally, the complex functioned as the residence of Khai Dinh before his accession to the throne, when it was known as Phụng Hóa Prince's Residence. Between 1917 and 1918, An Dinh Palace underwent a comprehensive reconstruction, marking a fundamental transformation in both its scale and function. The original timber architectural system was entirely replaced by more durable structures, primarily employing modern materials such as reinforced concrete. Consistent with Vickers's (1996) argument that modernity often seeks inspiration from heritage in order to generate new forms, the spatial planning of An Dinh Palace can be interpreted as a reinterpretation of the traditional sacred axial layout through a modern lens. Rather than strictly adhering to the static symmetrical principles characteristic of earlier court architecture, the spatial sequence from the riverside landing area to Khai Tuong Pavilion, the theatre, and the rear garden was organized as a dynamic, interconnected progression. This transformation represents a significant shift in both scale and function: from a purely ceremonial setting to a multifunctional architectural complex that reflects the aspirations for change and integration expressed by its historical actors during a period of profound transition. As noted by An (2005):

> An Dinh Palace constitutes an architectural ensemble that was designed, constructed, and decorated in a style distinct from other auxiliary palaces previously built in the Nguyen imperial capital. Its architecture, decorative programs, sculpture, and painting all bear a vivid imprint of a historical moment characterized by the convergence of Eastern and Western influences, as well as of the ancient and the modern, within the history of Hue art and that of Vietnam more broadly. (An, 2005, p. 336)

This transformation represents a process of architectural modernization within the imperial court, marking a transition from traditional forms toward Western Neoclassical stylistic influences. The architecture of the palace clearly reflects elements associated with French colonial villa typologies. As can be observed in Figure 1, the palace façade displays a pronounced axial symmetry and decorative details influenced by European Neoclassical design. Architectural features such as balconies, ornamental reliefs, and the tripartite composition of the façade recall the colonial villa forms widely found in Indochinese cities during the early twentieth century.

Figure 1
An Dinh Palace



However, inside Khải Tường Pavilion, the murals decorating the interior spaces of the palace depict royal ceremonies, scenes of courtly life, and episodes from Vietnamese history. Within the same architectural environment, Western formal elements and indigenous cultural symbolism coexist and interact. Through the combination of these different architectural languages, An Dinh Palace illustrates how Western residential architectural forms were adjusted and reinterpreted within the cultural framework of the Vietnamese imperial court.

Kien Trung Palace

Kien Trung Palace is one of the most distinctive architectural structures within the Imperial City of Hue. The construction of Kien Trung Palace, carried out between February 1921 and May 1923, provides a representative example of the theory of cultural acculturation operating through the mechanism of cultural refraction (Hiệu, 2021). Rather than passively imitating foreign models, the historical actors actively formulated an architectural form that corresponded to contemporary tastes. This approach clearly reflected the aspirations of

modernity, expressed in a desire to move beyond the perceived constraints of the past in search of new sources of inspiration (Vickers, 1996).

The result was a performative architectural entity in which reinforced concrete structures and Western architectural forms provided the structural framework, while the underlying spirit remained guided by inherited cultural values and imperial symbolism. This synthesis produced a balance between global influences and local identity. Figure 2 clearly illustrates the combination of Western architectural massing with roof forms that retain a distinctly courtly character.

Figure 2
Kien Trung Palace



Kien Trung Palace was a completely new structure, reconstructed on the foundations of an earlier building but presenting an entirely different appearance, scale, and stylistic character. The building represents the modernization of Nguyen court architecture along the central ceremonial axis of the Imperial City. Quỳnh et al. (2024) observe that:

> …most notably Kien Trung Palace, whose interior and exterior were designed in a European style. This structure altered the architectural character along the main axis of the Hue Imperial City compared with traditional Nguyen architecture, while retaining the original location and spatial scale within the overall layout of the citadel. (p. 532)

The destruction of the building during the wars of the twentieth century and its recent reconstruction have further highlighted important questions concerning authenticity and heritage memory. Kien Trung Palace therefore constitutes a significant case for examining how hybrid architectural works are interpreted and reconstructed within contemporary heritage conservation policies.

Khai Dinh Mausoleum

The Khai Dinh Mausoleum is often regarded as the most elaborate and complex architectural project undertaken during the reign of this emperor. Construction began in 1920 on the slopes of Châu Chữ Mountain, located outside the city of Hue. The complex is organized as a sequence of terraced courtyards connected by stairways that gradually lead toward the central sanctuary. The spatial composition of the mausoleum reveals an architectural logic reminiscent of European Baroque design, in which the movement of the viewer through successive spatial layers produces dramatic visual effects. As shown in Figure 3, the sequence of terraced

courtyards and the ceremonial axis guiding visitors toward the central structure creates a spatial experience characterized by theatricality, comparable to the visual strategies commonly associated with Baroque architecture.

Figure 3
Khai Dinh Mausoleum



However, within this spatial framework influenced by Western architectural principles, the decorative program draws deeply from the symbolic system of East Asia. The surfaces are richly ornamented with intricate mosaics composed of porcelain and glass fragments, forming elaborate patterns that depict dragons, clouds, and other cosmological motifs.

> This artistic synthesis emerged from the cultural encounter between East and West during a period of historical transition, combined with the personal aesthetic preferences of Emperor Khai Dinh. Through careful selection and the skilled craftsmanship of Vietnamese artisans, the monument was transformed into an exceptional work of art. (Hue City People's Committee, 2025)

The combination of Western spatial composition with traditional symbolic systems produced an architectural environment characterized by a dense visual texture and multiple layers of symbolic meaning. The architectural characteristics of the three buildings are summarized in Table 2, which demonstrates that despite their differing functions, all of them exhibit forms of hybridity that integrate Western architectural forms with traditional symbolic systems.

Table 2
Comparison of Architectural Characteristics of Three Khai Dinh–Era Structures

Architectural Element	Khai Dinh Mausoleum	An Dinh Palace	Kien Trung Palace
Function	Imperial mausoleum	Royal residence (outside the Imperial City)	Royal residence (within the Imperial City)
Spatial Layout	Terraced courtyard system organized along a ceremonial axis	Symmetrical villa layout with a longitudinal axis	Two-storey palace structure
Primary Materials	Reinforced concrete, colored glass, decorative tiles, oil paint	Brick, concrete, colored glass, decorative tiles, oil paint	Brick, reinforced concrete, colored glass, decorative tiles, oil paint
Western Influences	Baroque-like spatial organization	French colonial villa architecture	French academic architecture
Indigenous Symbolism	Sacred animals, mythical creatures, immortals, cosmological motifs, imperial motifs	Murals depicting court rituals and imperial motifs	Imperial court motifs
Hybrid Characteristics	Western spatial composition combined with East Asian symbolism	Hybrid residential architecture	Hybrid palace architecture

As summarized in Table 2, all three case studies exhibit distinct forms of architectural hybridity. The Khai Dinh Mausoleum combines a Baroque-like spatial composition with East Asian symbolic systems. An Dinh Palace reflects the adaptation of the colonial villa typology within the cultural setting of the imperial court. Kien Trung Palace illustrates the modernization of palace architecture through the adoption of European academic architectural forms.

Discussion

Architectural Hybridity as a Historical Condition

The architectural transformations that occurred during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh cannot be explained solely through stylistic analysis. The hybridity evident in these structures reflects broader historical processes associated with colonial modernity. In the early twentieth century, Vietnam existed within a complex network of cultural exchanges shaped by colonial governance, global trade, and technological change. The introduction of reinforced concrete, industrial production techniques, and new decorative materials expanded the expressive possibilities of architecture. However, these technologies were not simply imported from Europe. They were mediated through local artisans and builders, who adapted new materials to existing aesthetic traditions. Architectural hybridity in this context therefore involved both stylistic choices and wider historical conditions. Architecture became a site where different cultural systems encountered one another and generated new forms of expression. The buildings constructed during the reign of Khai Dinh can thus be interpreted as material manifestations of a broader process of cultural transformation. As Phát and Sirisuk (2025) observe:

> With the political context during his reign and the country's situation, Emperor Khai Dinh was aware of the weak position in all aspects of the court. Therefore, he innovated a new Vietnamese identity with the acceptance of Western cultural and artistic elements. The hybridity in architecture at An Dinh Palace is a display of the quintessence of indigenous traditions. It is a lesson in preserving the core spiritual values of a culture by embracing an outside influence. (p. 287)

However, the case of Khai Dinh retains a distinctive character marked by the coexistence of cultural transformation and symbolic continuity. Rather than adopting Western architectural forms in their entirety, Vietnamese elites translated foreign stylistic vocabularies into an existing system of indigenous symbolism. This process is particularly evident in the decorative program of the Khai Dinh Mausoleum. While the spatial composition of the monument exhibits a dramatic quality reminiscent of European Baroque architecture, the symbolic system embedded in its mosaic decorations remains rooted in East Asian cosmology. Mythical creatures, sacred animals, natural imagery, human figures, and mythological motifs continue to function as symbols of imperial authority and cosmic harmony. These elements derive from long-standing Vietnamese court traditions shaped by Confucian political philosophy and Buddhist cosmology (Thông, 2001). The multiple cultural influences present in these monuments can therefore be analyzed through different symbolic sources, ranging from Vietnamese imperial traditions to Western architectural styles. These layers of influence are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Layers of Cultural Influence in Khai Dinh–Era Architecture

Source of Cultural Influence	Architectural Expression	Examples
Vietnamese imperial tradition	System of imperial symbolism	Sacred animals, mythical creatures
Confucian cosmology	Spatial order and ceremonial organization	Ceremonial axis, audience courtyards, Taiji symbolism
Buddhist symbolism	Religious motifs and decorative elements	Lotus motifs, swastika symbol
Daoist symbolism	Religious motifs and decorative elements	Eight Immortals, Seven Sages, gourd of immortality
Western architecture	Style, spatial composition, structure, materials, decoration, column orders	Reinforced concrete, stained glass, balconies, relief sculpture, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite orders
International modern aesthetics	Geometric motifs and decorative styles	Rococo, Art Deco, Beaux-Arts

The juxtaposition of Western spatial composition and traditional symbolic systems does not produce visual contradiction. Instead, it creates a multilayered aesthetic environment in which different cultural frameworks coexist. This overlap of symbolic layers reflects the capacity of indigenous traditions to absorb and reinterpret external influences. Western architectural and decorative elements therefore function not merely as signs of cultural imposition but as materials for creative adaptation and reinterpretation. As Hải (2021) has argued:

> In the course of historical development, the architectural ensemble of the Nguyen imperial court in Khai Dinh represents a harmonious and skillful synthesis of Eastern and Western techniques and aesthetics, as well as a convergence between artistic influences from abroad and locally rooted artistic traditions. These forms constitute both novel achievements and inevitable outcomes of the continuous evolution of national aesthetic sensibilities, shaped by the historical, geographical, and psychological context of the people of Hue. (Hải, 2021)

The Role of Royal Patronage

Although political authority was significantly constrained under colonial rule, the Nguyen court continued to function as a symbolic institution. Architectural projects sponsored by Emperor Khai Dinh therefore carried important aesthetic and ideological significance, expressing the continuity of imperial authority within a rapidly changing historical context. Emperor Khai Dinh himself played a key role in shaping the architectural direction of this period. While many historical narratives portray him as a ruler dependent on the French colonial administration, the architectural initiatives undertaken during his reign suggest a more complex degree of cultural agency. Royal patronage provided the institutional framework that enabled architectural experimentation, bringing together artisans, engineers, and designers capable of working with both traditional techniques and modern building technologies. Within this context, the decision to employ reinforced concrete rather than traditional timber materials was particularly significant. Concrete enabled architectural forms that would have been difficult to achieve with conventional construction methods. As An (2003) notes:

> The emperor preferred such materials. Instead of the traditional local construction material of wood, Emperor Khai Dinh favored durable materials such as reinforced concrete, stone, brick, porcelain fragments, and glass. In the mausoleums and palaces built during his reign, modern technologies and facilities such as electric lighting, piped water, fountains, lightning rods, and iron doors were also introduced. (p. 156)

Despite the adoption of industrial materials, the decorative programs of these buildings continued to rely heavily on artisanal craftsmanship. The combination of industrial materials with traditional decorative techniques produced an architectural language that was neither entirely Western nor entirely traditional. Rather, it reflected the hybrid nature of colonial modernity (Phát & Sirisuk, 2025).

Moreover, the prominent visual presence of An Dinh Palace along the An Cựu River, the Khai Dinh Mausoleum on the slopes of Châu Chữ Mountain, and Kien Trung Palace within the Imperial City of Hue can be interpreted as an effort to reaffirm the symbolic authority of the monarchy within a changing political environment. Dramatic spatial compositions and richly layered decorative programs create an atmosphere of solemnity and grandeur. Such architectural strategies demonstrate how visual expression functioned as a form of cultural assertion under colonial constraints. In this sense, royal patronage facilitated processes of cultural transformation within architecture.

Indigenous Modernity in a Colonial Context

The architectural transformations that occurred during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh can be interpreted through the concept of vernacular modernity. This concept refers to forms of modernization that emerge through processes of local cultural adaptation and reinterpretation

rather than through the direct imitation of Western models. In colonial societies, modernity rarely develops along a linear trajectory. Instead, it typically arises from complex interactions between globally circulating technological innovations and local cultural traditions (King, 2004).

In the case of early twentieth-century Vietnam, modernization unfolded within conditions shaped by colonial power structures. However, the introduction of new construction technologies and Western aesthetic vocabularies did not necessarily lead to the complete replacement of indigenous architectural traditions. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, such zones of contact often generate hybrid spaces in which different cultural elements are reconfigured through processes of negotiation and reinterpretation (Bhabha, 1994).

Within the architectural landscape of the Khai Dinh imperial court, local cultural actors, including the court itself as well as artisans and craftsmen, played an active role in adapting foreign influences. Buildings from the Khai Dinh period demonstrate how modern materials such as reinforced concrete, together with references to international stylistic vocabularies, were integrated into the traditional symbolic system of imperial architecture. This synthesis produced an architectural language that reflected global modernity while preserving the continuity of indigenous symbolic structures.

From this perspective, Khai Dinh–era architecture may be interpreted as an expression of vernacular modernity within a colonial context. Such forms of modernity illustrate how modernization in non-Western societies often unfolds through cultural adaptation and hybridity rather than through a straightforward trajectory of Westernization. As Logan (2000) demonstrates in his study of Southeast Asian cities, colonial architectural landscapes frequently emerged from the intersection of European planning principles and building technologies with local cultural traditions, producing distinctive hybrid architectural forms.

Hybrid Heritage and Contemporary Interpretation

Hybrid architecture often poses challenges for heritage interpretation because such structures do not easily fit into conventional categories such as “traditional architecture” or “colonial architecture.” As a result, hybrid buildings have frequently been undervalued, particularly when heritage evaluation relies on aesthetic criteria based on stylistic purity. Laurajane Smith argues that dominant heritage discourses are commonly constructed around notions of authenticity, originality, and the continuity of tradition. She describes this framework as the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), in which heritage values are defined according to standards of cultural purity and historical origin (Smith, 2006). Within this framework, hybrid forms of heritage emerging from complex processes of cultural interaction are often regarded as lacking legitimacy or interpreted as signs of aesthetic decline. Consequently, hybrid architectural works have sometimes been viewed as evidence of Westernization or as indicators of the degeneration of imperial architecture rather than as outcomes of cultural negotiation within colonial contexts.

The significance of Khai Dinh–era architecture extends beyond the historical moment of its construction. These monuments continue to shape contemporary debates on heritage conservation and cultural identity in Vietnam. Yet interpretations based solely on stylistic coherence or notions of authenticity often overlook the historical importance of hybridity as a cultural process.

In postcolonial scholarship, hybridity is understood as a space in which different cultural systems interact and generate new forms of expression (Bhabha, 1994). From this perspective, architectural landscapes formed in colonial contexts should be interpreted not only as products of colonial power but also as material traces of negotiation, adaptation, and cultural transformation.

Studies of urban heritage in Southeast Asia further support this perspective. Logan (2000), in his research on colonial cities in Vietnam, argues that these architectural environments constitute valuable historical records documenting the interaction between planning systems, construction technologies, and cultural traditions. Reassessing Khai Dinh–era architecture is therefore significant both for understanding Vietnamese architectural history and for broader discussions on hybrid heritage in postcolonial contexts.

Conclusion

Architecture of the imperial court constructed during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh marks a significant turning point in the history of Vietnamese architecture. Rather than representing aesthetic decline, these buildings reveal a complex process of cultural negotiation between courtly traditions and colonial modernity.

In the context of Khai Dinh, debates surrounding hybrid heritage are particularly evident in relation to Khai Dinh–era monuments. For many decades, structures such as the Khai Dinh Mausoleum, Kien Trung Palace, and An Dinh Palace were often interpreted as signs of the aesthetic decline of the Nguyen dynasty. Such evaluations, however, reflect an understanding of heritage grounded in the notion of stylistic purity, rather than an approach that recognizes architecture as the outcome of historical processes of cultural interaction.

Through the selective appropriation of Western architectural stylistic elements, Vietnamese elites produced hybrid architectural forms that both maintained the continuity of symbolic traditions and engaged with global artistic currents. From this perspective, Khai Dinh–era architecture should not be understood as an aesthetic deviation within the history of Vietnamese architecture. Instead, these monuments represent a distinctive form of hybrid heritage characteristic of the colonial modern period, reflecting the cultural strategies through which local elites negotiated identity and authority within a rapidly globalizing world.

Recognizing the significance of this hybridity allows us to move beyond simplified interpretations of Westernization and instead appreciate the cultural creativity embodied in the architectural works of this period.

More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on architectural modernity, colonial heritage, and cultural hybridity within the context of Southeast Asia.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by Hue University under project number DHH 2024-01-214. The author(s) would like to express their gratitude to Hue University for the financial support provided for this study.

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

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author utilized generative AI and AI-assisted technologies, specifically ChatGPT and Gemini, for linguistic refinement and grammatical editing. These tools were employed solely to enhance the clarity, flow, and technical accuracy of the language, as well as to perform comprehensive spell-checking.

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Contact email: lvtgiang@husc.edu.vn

Virtual Ethnography of Chinese Jazz Culture Across Major Platforms: Memes, Posts, and Participation

Liu Yufei, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In the past five years, there has been an increasing number of research papers on the virtual ethnography of jazz music and its fans; however, there are almost no studies on the virtual jazz life of Chinese netizens. This article addresses this gap by analyzing platform vernaculars, including memes, posts, commentaries, and forum threads—on RedNote and exploring their influence on recent jazz culture and urban life in China. The findings suggest that online platforms reshape jazz participation by lowering barriers to entry, expanding audiences beyond elite urban spaces, and enabling new forms of affective, symbolic, imaginary engagement. This research contributes to studies of jazz communities, digital music cultures, and the globalization of jazz by demonstrating how jazz is locally reinterpreted and emotionally circulated through everyday digital practices in contemporary China.

Keywords: virtual ethnography, jazz online community, Chinese social media platform

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Introduction

Offline Jazz Community

In the early twentieth century, the arrival of jazz in Shanghai made it one of the main forms of entertainment for the upper class of Shanghai citizens and foreigners. In the Chinese historical context, jazz music was therefore embedded within elite culture in Shanghai, and its circulation was closely connected with urban modernity and international exchange (Marlow, 2018). The situation of jazz music in Western countries during the same period differed significantly. Jazz has historically been framed as a form of youth subculture (Margolis, 1954). At the same time, scholars have described jazz communities as racialized and marginalized urban formations closely associated with African American culture, segregated urban spaces, nightlife, and underground scenes (Gerard, 1998).

Research on jazz communities has also historically emphasized professional musicians and formal performance contexts. Merriam and Mack's (1959) influential sociological study of the jazz community suggested that jazz communities revolve primarily around the work, skills, and contributions of those who perform jazz professionally. Within this framework, audience members are positioned as secondary participants whose role is largely defined through their relationship to musicians. Becker (2023) argues that art should not be understood as the product of isolated geniuses but rather as the outcome of cooperative networks involving many participants, including individuals who are not artists. From this perspective, audiences, technicians, promoters, educators, and other participants all contribute to the production and circulation of artistic meaning.

In practice, however, beginners often experience feelings of exclusion due to the technical demands of improvisation and the informal norms governing jazz performance (De Bruin et al., 2020). Consequently, some people associate jazz communities with isolation and exclusion. In contemporary China, several major cities—including Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong—host active jazz scenes with clubs, festivals, and conservatory programs. Nevertheless, these activities remain concentrated within relatively limited cultural spaces. Jazz performance is largely confined to niche audiences and specialized urban environments, and access to live jazz events often depends on geographic location, social class, or formal musical training. Consequently, participation in jazz culture remains unevenly distributed.

Virtual Communities and Changing Modes of Jazz Engagement

The development of digital platforms has introduced an alternative mode of engagement that expands beyond these traditional boundaries (Prouty, 2011, 2013). Through short videos, memes, posts, and comment threads, online users can encounter and interact with jazz culture in everyday digital environments. In addition to professional musicians and individuals with clearly articulated jazz identities, digital environments expand the field of participation to include ordinary listeners, video viewers, commenters, sharers, meme creators, and even passers-by who, in the information age, may also function as insiders in meaningful ways (Judd, 2022).

Although Howard S. Becker's "art world" model acknowledges the presence of audiences and their contribution to the arts (1982), it offers limited insight into how audience members interact with one another. Virtual communities make jazz-related content and people's interactions visible. In this sense, online spaces extend existing jazz communities. As a result,

virtual communities play an increasingly important role in shaping contemporary jazz culture by expanding the range of participants who can engage with the music.

These conditions raise several important questions: How do people online engage with jazz music? Do fans matter in the formation of virtual jazz communities? While jazz scholarship has increasingly examined virtual jazz communities, research in the Chinese context remains relatively limited. Chinese platforms such as RedNote, Douban, Bilibili, and TikTok host large volumes of jazz-related content in the form of memes, short videos, posts, and comment threads. Within these environments, users actively interpret, discuss, and circulate jazz-related materials. These interactions transform how jazz is experienced and understood, shifting participation away from exclusively performance-based contexts toward broader forms of cultural engagement.

This study therefore examines how jazz culture is experienced and interpreted within Chinese digital environments. It focuses particularly on the interactions of ordinary users who engage with jazz through online media rather than through professional performance or formal training. The study investigates the following research questions: How do Chinese netizens engage with jazz music online? What cultural interaction patterns emerge from their engagements?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines perspectives from communication theory and music studies. These perspectives help explain how musical meaning is produced, circulated, and experienced in digital environments. Rather than treating jazz as a fixed musical object, this framework conceptualizes online jazz engagement as a social and communicative process in which emotions, symbols, and interactions play central roles.

Affective Media and Resemblance Theory

Affective media theory suggests that media engagement often operates at the level of feeling rather than cognitive interpretation (Grossberg & Rudd, 1992). Cultural theorists argue that audiences frequently respond to media texts through emotional intensities that precede analytical understanding (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019a, 2019b). Similarly, Papacharissi (2015) conceptualizes contemporary digital environments as “affective publics,” in which emotional expression, circulation, and amplification become primary forms of participation. Music constitutes a particularly powerful medium for affective communication. In music philosophy, Peter Kivy’s theory of musical expressiveness (1993) proposes that listeners perceive emotional qualities in music because musical structures resemble patterns of human expressive behavior. For instance, slow tempos and descending melodic gestures may resemble sadness, while abrupt dynamics or rough timbres may evoke tension or excitement. Crucially, such expressive perception does not require formal musical training; listeners can intuitively recognize emotional qualities in sound.

Symbolic Interactionism and Musical Meaning

While affect theory emphasizes emotional experience, symbolic interactionism highlights the social processes through which meaning is constructed. According to symbolic interactionism, cultural meanings do not reside inherently within objects but emerge through interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969). Musicologist Nicholas Cook (2001) similarly argues that

musical meaning is not produced solely by the sonic structure of a work but through the interaction between performance, mediation, and reception. This perspective suggests that the meanings associated with musical sounds are continuously negotiated through listening practices, discussions, and cultural narratives. Visual imagery, historical narratives, and social contexts therefore shape how audiences interpret music.

Participatory Culture

Shifman (2012) describes internet memes as a central form of participatory culture in which users reproduce, remix, and reinterpret shared cultural symbols through everyday digital practices. Within such environments, participation does not depend on professional expertise or specialized knowledge. Users engage with cultural materials through humor, emotional reactions, symbolic commentary, and short textual responses. These forms of interaction enable large numbers of individuals to contribute to cultural conversations even when they lack technical or academic familiarity with the subject matter.

Methodology

This study employs virtual ethnography, a qualitative research approach designed to examine cultural practices and social interactions within digital environments. Virtual ethnography enables researchers to observe how meanings, identities, and communities are constructed through online communication (Ward, 1999), making it particularly suitable for investigating music cultures that increasingly circulate through social media platforms. The primary field site for this research is RedNote, one of the most widely used social media applications in China (Cao, 2025). The platform hosts large volumes of user-generated cultural content and facilitates extensive interaction through comment sections, reposts, and visual media. Because jazz-related materials on RedNote frequently appear in the form of short videos, memes, and discussion posts, the platform provides a valuable environment for examining how Chinese netizens encounter and interpret jazz music in everyday digital contexts.

The dataset for this study consists of associated comment chains, memes, short videos, and GIFs related to jazz music. From this broader dataset, four representative posts were selected for detailed analysis. These cases were chosen according to three criteria: temporal breadth, including posts published between 2023 and 2026; form diversity, incorporating different types of media such as short videos, concert clips, and internet memes; and high levels of netizen interaction, with comment sections ranging from approximately 170 to 600 responses. The analytical approach focuses on identifying patterns of affective, symbolic, and participatory engagement within user interactions. Comments were coded according to recurring themes, emotional expressions, symbolic interpretations, and cultural narratives in order to reveal how jazz is collectively interpreted and experienced within Chinese online communities.

Discussion

Affective Resonance

The meme “Jazz for Your Soul” illustrates how humor operates as an affective entry point into jazz culture (Figure 1). The image of a man holding a fire extinguisher as if it were a saxophone, accompanied by the caption “Jazz for your soul,” exaggerates the emotional intensity often associated with jazz performance while simultaneously mocking its performance skills. The humor lies in the tension between chaotic or amateurish performance and the exaggerated claim

of emotional authenticity. Commenters respond with brief reactions such as “so funny”, “so many people are jazz men!!”, or “why jazz is niche, but so many jazz men on RedNote?” These responses demonstrate that users recognize the meme’s irony and collectively participate in its playful self-mockery. This acknowledgment fosters a sense of belonging, as users collectively negotiate the humorous if jazz fandom and affectionate dimensions of jazz musicians. Importantly, interaction is pre-discursive, which means the resonance of the meme does not require verbal explanation or musical expertise, but rather is experienced affectively and socially. Through this mechanism, the meme creates a virtual space where community identity is reinforced via shared humor, irony, and emotional recognition.

Figure 1

Screen Shot of RedNote Search Results for “Jazz Memes”



Note. The post was posted in RedNote on April 20, 2023 by 周北树. It was originally uploaded in early 2007 by Daum Blogger Masaru7 from Korea. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/jazz-for-your-soul

A similar affective orientation appears in responses to Tony Bennett’s performance of Fly Me to the Moon (Figure 2). In this case, emotional engagement centers on empathy and vulnerability. This piece of music has no connection with sadness either in terms of rhythm style or lyrics. However, commenters frequently mention Bennett’s declining health, noting that he was already suffering from dementia when the performance was recorded. Expressions such as “this made me cry,” “so many emotional triggers,” and “tears kept flowing” dominate the comment section. From the perspective of affective media theory, this video operates as an affective event, generating collective emotional resonance among viewers. Comment sections function as amplifiers, synchronizing grief and empathy through the repetition of crying emojis and expressions of sadness, creating a networked space of shared affect. Viewers’ engagement is primarily characterized by empathetic affect, in which responses are oriented less toward technical musical appreciation and more toward an emotional recognition of the performers’ vulnerability and perseverance. In this sense, jazz here transcends sonic experience, operating as a medium through which audiences co-experience and articulate profound human emotions.

Figure 2
Screen Shot of "Fly Me to the Moon" Video



Note. The video was posted in RedNote on June 17, 2025 by 听爵士乐的木兆先生

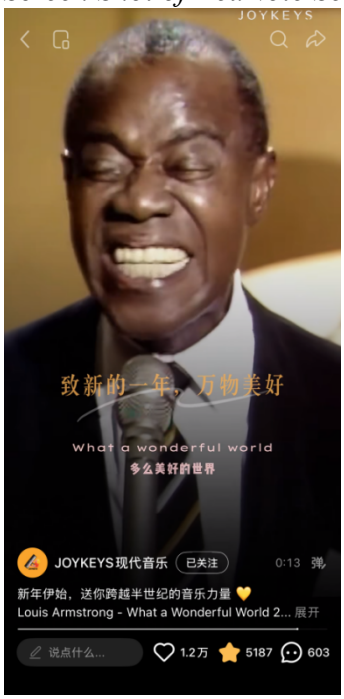
Symbolic Association

Another theme emerging from the data involves the symbolic interpretation of jazz authenticity. In online discourse, users frequently rely on culturally recognizable cues—such as vocal timbre, performer identity, or visual imagery—to interpret what counts as "real" jazz. This pattern is particularly evident in responses to Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World* (Figure 3). Although Armstrong occupies a canonical position within jazz history, netizens interpret the video primarily through symbolic icon. Comments such as "I knew it was a black singer without even watching the video," "This jazz sounds truly authentic," or "Why don't white singers sing like this?" illustrate how audiences associate certain sonic qualities with racial identity. There is a symbolic recognition: Armstrong's vocal timbre and presence are read as markers of "real jazz," and his racial identity is associated with the authenticity of jazz music as well. Armstrong's performance thus becomes a symbolic sign of cultural expectations about what "real jazz" should sound like in Chinses context.

Interestingly, symbolic association also appears indirectly in the meme "Jazz for Your Soul." The humor of the meme relies on the cultural stereotype of the "soulful jazz musician," exaggerating the idea that emotional intensity is central to jazz performance. Even in parody, the meme depends on a shared symbolic understanding of what jazz is supposed to represent.

Figure 3

Screen Shot of RedNote Search Results for "Jazz Music"

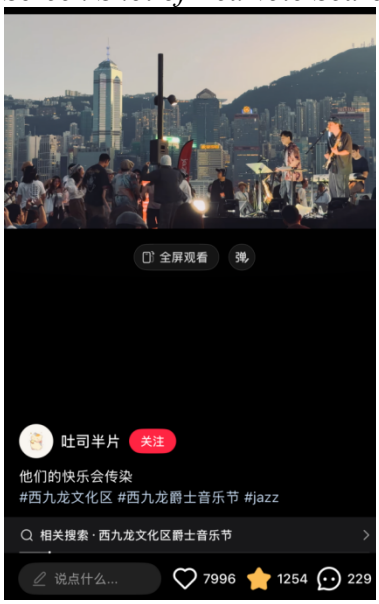


Note. The video was posted in RedNote on Janurary 1, 2026 by JOYKEYS 现代音乐

Aspirational Imagination of Jazz Culture

In some digital contexts, audiences respond more to the lifestyle and atmosphere surrounding jazz performance. The video of the West Kowloon Jazz Music Festival (Figure 4) provides a clear illustration of this pattern. Commenters frequently describe the scene using expressions such as "This is too happy," "It feels like a completely different world from my life," or "I really want to run over there and feel this happiness." Rather than discussing the music itself, viewers focus on the emotional atmosphere created by the setting: outdoor performance spaces, sunset lighting, relaxed audiences, and the communal enjoyment of live music. Jazz music in this mediated form becomes a symbol of freedom, leisure, and emotional fulfillment, evoking an imaginative space that contrasts sharply with the pressures of everyday life. In online contexts, the meaning of jazz is often inseparable from the broader sensory environment in which it is presented. Music, imagery, and atmosphere combine to produce an idealized representation of jazz as a symbol of cosmopolitan cultural life.

Figure 4
Screen Shot of RedNote Search Results for "The Jazz Festival"



Note. The video was posted in RedNote on November 9, 2025 by 吐司半片

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Chinese people engage with jazz music in RedNote application. The analysis suggests that online participation is structured through a multilayered engagement model consisting of affective resonance, symbolic association, and aspirational imagination. Affective resonance emerges when audiences respond to jazz through immediate emotional reactions such as humor, empathy, or shared sentiment, as seen in meme culture and emotional responses to performances. Symbolic association reflects how users interpret jazz through recognizable cultural cues, including racialized notions of authenticity or widely circulated images of jazz identity. Aspirational imagination, meanwhile, highlights how jazz-related media evoke visions of desirable emotional and social worlds, where music becomes linked to ideals of happiness, freedom, or meaningful human connection.

The findings underscore the significance of virtual participation in jazz music. Such engagement reshapes who can access jazz, how it is understood, and the cultural functions it performs, particularly in contexts where formal jazz education and live performance opportunities are limited or unevenly distributed. Virtual participation positions jazz not as a fixed tradition preserved through technical mastery, but as a dynamic cultural resource that is emotionally experienced, symbolically negotiated, and socially reimagined through everyday digital practices.

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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Digital Linguistics and Online Communication: Examining Language Use in Online Academic and Social Interactions

Charito Ong, University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, Philippines
Sterling Ong, Capitol University, Philippines

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The rapid proliferation of digital communication platforms has fundamentally altered language use, reshaping how students interact in both academic and social contexts. This study examines the intersection of digital linguistics and online discourse, focusing on students' adaptive language practices in virtual classrooms, messaging platforms, and social media environments. Drawing from two institutions in Northern Mindanao—a state university and a private school—the research investigates patterns of code-switching, multimodal communication, and lexical creativity in students' digital interactions. Anchored in a mixed ethnographic approach, this study employed digital discourse analysis, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample of 100 students (50 per institution) was selected based on their active engagement in online platforms. Data were collected over eight weeks, with ethical consent, through screen recordings, chat logs, and focus group discussions. The analysis revealed frequent platform-dependent language shifts, hybrid code constructions, and the strategic use of emojis, abbreviations, and memes to enhance clarity, tone, and engagement. The findings underscore the evolving nature of digital language and the importance of integrating digital literacy into language education. The study advocates for curriculum enhancements that address multimodal communication and platform-specific discourse strategies. By offering a nuanced understanding of student communication in digital spaces, this research contributes to the broader fields of applied linguistics, language pedagogy, and digital literacy.

Keywords: digital linguistics, online communication, digital discourse, language and technology, virtual interaction

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Introduction

The digital era has revolutionized the way language is used, transmitted, and interpreted. With the widespread use of online platforms such as social media, learning management systems, and messaging applications, new forms of linguistic expression have emerged, reflecting the dynamic interplay between technology and communication. This evolution has given rise to the field of digital linguistics, which explores how digital technologies reshape language practices, discourse, and semiotic meaning-making (Jones, 2020; Tagg, 2021). In academic and informal settings alike, students navigate various forms of online interaction—ranging from structured class discussions to casual peer conversations—where they must adapt their language to suit platform-specific norms and multimodal expectations.

The shift to online communication, especially accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has blurred the boundaries between formal academic discourse and informal digital speech. Students are increasingly required to move fluidly between synchronous Zoom classes, asynchronous LMS forums, group chats, and social media spaces, employing a range of discourse strategies, code-switching behaviors, and digital artifacts such as emojis, memes, and abbreviations (Barton & Lee, 2022; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2023). These practices are not merely stylistic; they carry implications for identity performance, power negotiation, and academic engagement in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. However, many curricula remain rooted in traditional language instruction, leaving a gap between students' digital fluency and institutional literacy expectations.

This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how students in a state university and a private school in Northern Mindanao use language in online academic and social contexts. Through a mixed ethnographic approach, the research explores digital discourse patterns, platform-based adaptations, and the pedagogical relevance of online communicative strategies. In doing so, it contributes to the growing scholarship on language and technology while offering practical insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance students' digital communicative competence in a rapidly evolving linguistic landscape.

Statement of the Problem

As digital technologies increasingly mediate both academic and social interactions, students today must navigate diverse online communication platforms that demand new forms of linguistic adaptability. However, despite the prevalence of these platforms, educational systems have yet to fully explore or integrate the complexities of digital discourse into mainstream pedagogy. Students often shift between formal academic expression and informal digital language, incorporating code-switching, emojis, memes, and multimodal strategies that influence how meaning is conveyed and interpreted. These practices remain underexamined in local educational contexts, particularly in the Philippines, where digital literacy and linguistics intersect unevenly across schools. This study aimed to understand how students from a state university and a private school in Northern Mindanao engage in digital linguistic practices and how these shape their academic and social interactions online.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did students adapt their language use across various online platforms in both academic and social contexts?
2. What digital communication strategies emerged as influential in shaping students' learning experiences and peer interactions?

3. How could the integration of digital linguistic practices into classroom instruction improve online discourse competence among students?

Framework of the Study

This study was anchored on Multimodal Discourse Theory and Digital Literacy Theory, both of which support the exploration of language use in digitally mediated contexts. Multimodal Discourse Theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) emphasizes that communication in the digital age involves not just written text, but also visual, audio, spatial, and gestural modes. This theory is relevant in analyzing how students construct meaning using emojis, memes, punctuation, and other non-verbal elements during online interactions. It enables the researcher to examine how these multimodal elements influence meaning-making, tone, and relational dynamics in digital communication.

Complementing this, Digital Literacy Theory (Belshaw, 2011; Mills, 2010) frames students' ability to adapt linguistically to various platforms as a key competency in today's educational environment. Digital literacy extends beyond basic technical skills—it encompasses critical thinking, contextual language use, platform-specific discourse practices, and the ability to shift registers depending on the audience. This theory situates digital linguistic behavior not as a deviation from standard norms, but as a reflection of students' emerging communicative competence in diverse and evolving digital contexts.

Guided by these theoretical lenses, the study adopted a conceptual model that explored the relationship between platform-specific features, students' linguistic adaptations, and communicative strategies. The framework posits that online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Messenger, LMS) shape discourse features, which in turn influence language practices such as code-switching, multimodal signaling (e.g., emojis), and lexical innovation. These practices impact academic engagement and social cohesion in online settings.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed ethnographic approach to explore the digital linguistic practices of students in online academic and social settings. Combining digital discourse analysis, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews, the research was conducted in two academic institutions in Northern Mindanao: one state university and one private school. These sites were selected for their active use of digital platforms in both instructional delivery and student communication. The focus was to capture how students linguistically adapted across platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, Facebook Messenger, and other messaging apps commonly used in their academic and social interactions.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 100 participants—50 from each institution. Participants were chosen based on their regular engagement in online academic activities and peer communication through digital means. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring adherence to ethical research protocols. Data collection occurred over an eight-week period and involved the collection of chat logs, screenshots, online discussion transcripts, and screen recordings (with participant permission). These data were triangulated with insights from virtual participant observations and follow-up interviews conducted via video conferencing. Interviews were designed to gain deeper insight into students' reflections on their language choices, perceived communication challenges, and the impact of digital media on their discourse.

The data were analyzed through digital discourse analysis methods, particularly examining multimodal elements such as emoji use, code-switching frequency, textual features (e.g., punctuation, spacing, abbreviations), and linguistic shifts across platforms. Thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was used to identify recurring communication strategies, contextual factors influencing discourse, and patterns of digital linguistic adaptation. To enhance reliability, peer debriefing and member-checking were conducted with a subset of participants. This methodological design allowed for a contextualized understanding of how students manage meaning-making in fluid and multimodal digital environments, both in formal and informal contexts.

Results

The analysis of students' online interactions revealed three major themes: (1) Platform-Dependent Linguistic Shifts, (2) Multimodal Communication Strategies, and (3) Lexical Innovation and Peer Identity Performance. These findings reflect the evolving dynamics of digital language and students' adaptation to the communicative affordances and expectations of different platforms.

Platform-Dependent Linguistic Shifts

Students exhibited noticeable variations in language use depending on the platform and audience. In Google Classroom and LMS environments, language was generally more formal, closer to academic English conventions. In contrast, communication in group chats and Facebook Messenger allowed for relaxed structures, extensive code-switching, and informal expressions. Many students instinctively shifted between English, Cebuano, Filipino, and Taglish, depending on the context—a phenomenon supported by earlier studies on translanguaging in digital spaces (García & Kleyn, 2023). These shifts were not random but reflected intentional adaptations aligned with perceived communicative expectations.

Multimodal Communication Strategies

Students regularly employed emojis, GIFs, memes, and visual symbols to enhance the tone, emotion, and clarity of their messages. This multimodal layer of communication served not only as expressive reinforcement but also as a strategy to manage digital presence and relational dynamics. For instance, emojis were used to soften disagreement, signal humor, or show empathy—functions also highlighted in recent work by Georgakopoulou and Spilioti (2023). The use of memes was particularly notable among peer groups as a bonding mechanism and a form of socio-cultural commentary.

Lexical Innovation and Peer Identity Performance

Students demonstrated a high degree of creativity in their online language use, coining abbreviations (e.g., "FR" for "for real," "Lods" for "idol/lods"), reshaping standard phrases, and using trending expressions from popular digital subcultures. These lexical innovations were tied to peer identity performance, signaling group belonging, wit, and awareness of digital trends. The findings align with Tagg's (2021) observations on how youth cultures innovate linguistic forms to reflect affiliation and self-expression in online communities.

To provide a clearer comparison of the digital linguistic practices observed across different online platforms, the table on the next page summarizes the thematic patterns identified in the

study. It contrasts how students adapted their language use, multimodal strategies, and lexical choices in academic versus social digital environments. This side-by-side presentation of findings offers insights into the role of platform-specific contexts in shaping students' discourse, tone, and communicative intent.

Table 1

Summary of Thematic Findings on Linguism in the Philippines and Texas

Theme	Academic Platforms (LMS, Zoom)	Social Platforms (Messenger, FB, GC)
Platform-Dependent Language Use	Formal tone, English-dominant, minimal emoji use	Informal tone, code-switching (Filipino/Cebuano-English), emoji-rich
Multimodal Strategies	Occasional emoji use for emphasis or politeness	Frequent emojis, GIFs, memes; used for humor, tone modulation, connection
Lexical Innovation	Adherence to conventional syntax and spelling	Creative abbreviations, slang, trend-based expressions (e.g., "Lods," "FR")
Communication Purpose	Instructional, task-focused, clarifying assignments	Social bonding, affirmation, expression of humor or emotions

The findings demonstrate that students are not passive users of digital language but active participants in shaping discourse through context-sensitive adaptations. Their ability to navigate linguistic shifts, leverage multimodal elements, and craft identity through digital expressions reflects a growing form of communicative competence that is often overlooked in traditional academic settings. These insights underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that recognize and integrate digital linguistic practices into formal instruction to better support students' language development in an increasingly technology-driven world.

Conclusions

This study shed light on the evolving nature of language use in digital spaces, particularly among students navigating both academic and social online interactions. By examining their platform-specific discourse patterns, multimodal strategies, and creative lexical innovations, the research highlights how students actively shape their communication to meet the demands of various digital environments. Their frequent code-switching, emoji use, and adoption of internet-born expressions are not merely stylistic choices but strategic adaptations that reflect audience awareness, social positioning, and meaning-making in context.

The results affirm that students possess a nuanced and context-aware digital communicative competence—one that challenges conventional views of language proficiency limited to formal academic expression. This underscores the importance of revisiting traditional curricula to incorporate elements of digital linguistics and online discourse practices. Educators and curriculum developers are encouraged to embrace a broader, more inclusive understanding of language that values students' digital experiences as legitimate and educative. Doing so not only promotes engagement but also empowers learners to navigate digital spaces with critical awareness and communicative agility.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the growing discourse on language and technology by offering grounded insights into how virtual environments are reshaping linguistic norms

and learner identities. It calls for further investigation into how these evolving practices influence language learning outcomes and interpersonal relationships within digital academic communities. As communication continues to migrate online, it becomes imperative that language education reflects the realities of students' digital lives—bridging the gap between formal instruction and the linguistic demands of the 21st century.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, this study recommends a pedagogical shift that integrates digital linguistic awareness into language instruction. Educators should incorporate authentic online discourse tasks—such as chat-based discussions, meme analysis, and emoji interpretation—into the curriculum to develop students' multimodal communication skills. These activities can help bridge formal academic competencies and real-world digital fluency, fostering deeper engagement and relevance. Moreover, teacher training programs should include modules on digital discourse analysis and platform-sensitive language use to prepare educators for the linguistic realities of online learning environments.

Institutions are also encouraged to develop clear guidelines and support systems for inclusive digital communication, ensuring that all students, regardless of their linguistic background or platform familiarity, have equitable opportunities to participate. Recognizing code-switching and multimodal practices as valuable tools rather than deviations can help reduce language-based bias and support identity expression. Finally, future research should explore the long-term effects of digital linguistic engagement on academic writing, critical thinking, and professional communication to further refine instructional approaches.

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Contact emails: charito.ong@ustp.edu.ph
sterong@cu.edu.ph

Negotiating Desire Through Profiles: A Multimodal Analysis of Taiwanese Gay Men's Self-Presentation on Grindr

Chin-Hui Chen, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan
Bo-You Wu, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study explores how gay men in Taiwan strategically construct their gay identities and sexual desires through self-presentation on Grindr, which is a globally popular dating app. Drawing on a multimodal content analysis of 11 gay users' profiles, the research investigates both visual and textual strategies, including photo choices, role labels, and coded language to imply sex preferences. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, this study identifies key patterns in how users negotiate visibility, masculinity, and sexual positioning within Taiwan's evolving queer landscape. Despite the country's progressive stance on same-sex marriage, findings reveal that ongoing tensions between public visibility and personal privacy, as evidenced by the selective concealment of faces and reliance on community-specific slang. The analysis demonstrates how the observed gay users mobilize both dominant and submissive tropes through images and coded language, enacting gender/sexuality roles in line with Butler's theory of performativity. The findings also underscore the importance of subcultural literacy for the purpose of decoding profile content, because many textual cues and emojis function as in-group signals intelligible only to culturally embedded users within gay communities. This study contributes to queer digital media research by foregrounding Taiwanese-specific communication practices in global gay app cultures and emphasizes the need for further multimodal inquiry into LGBTQ+ digital self-representation in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: Grindr, dating app, gay users, Taiwan, gay codes

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Introduction

Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in 2019 (Friedman & Chen, 2023). This milestone has been followed by a gradual increase in social acceptance of gender diversity and emotional expression, significantly expanding the freedom of gay men to articulate their identities and desires in both public and digital spaces (Taiwan Equality Campaign, 2024). Within this context, gay dating apps have emerged as key platforms through which many gay men pursue emotional intimacy and sexual encounters (Steele et al., 2024).

To attract specific partners and increase visibility, users engage in strategic self-presentation through profile photo selection (Jaspal, 2017), gender role labeling (Birnholtz et al., 2014), and linguistic choices (Cardoso et al., 2019). These forms of presentation are not merely reflections of individual preference but are deeply embedded in broader norms around gender roles, expressions of desire, and the "insider discourse" of gay culture (Qiu, 2012). Thus, the images and language used in these digital profiles often serve functions of attraction, filtering, and identity performance.

However, existing research on Taiwanese gay dating app use has primarily relied on interview-based qualitative methods (Hou, 2020; Wu, 2023), with limited empirical attention to the actual profile content created by users. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the visual and textual strategies employed by Taiwanese gay men on one dating app, that is, Grindr. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how gender and desire are enacted and reproduced in digital queer spaces.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ: How do gay men in Taiwan present themselves on Grindr through images and language?

To breakdown the above umbrella question, the following specific narrow-down inquiries are targeted:

RQ1. What kinds of images (e.g., face, body, fashion style) are frequently used by gay male users in Taiwan?

RQ2. What kinds of language (e.g., role labels, emojis, coded expressions) are frequently used by gay male users in Taiwan?

Based on the answers to the above specific questions, the following one is also proposed to discuss the cultural implications of the visual and textual patterns identified in the self-profile construction by gay users of Grindr:

RQ3. How do these visual and linguistic elements reflect gendered expectations and the sexual culture of the gay community?

Literature Review

This study examines how gay men present themselves on gay dating apps, with particular attention to how visual and linguistic strategies are used to construct gender roles and express desire. This section reviews four key studies that inform this investigation, highlighting their contributions and limitations in relation to the Taiwanese context.

To address the research gap, this study poses the following guiding questions: How do gay men in Taiwan present themselves on Grindr through images and language? What social or cultural

meanings do these strategies reflect? The following review of studies shed some light on these aspects of inquiries.

Self-Presentation and Identity Construction

Jaspal (2017) investigated identity construction among 18 Grindr users in the UK and found that users frequently employed both visual and linguistic strategies to shape their online personas. These included avoiding racial identifiers, blurring traditional gender roles, and selecting profile photos that obscure the face – strategies often motivated by concerns over slut shaming and privacy. Jaspal noted that users sought to maintain a boundary between their online and offline selves, enhancing a sense of control and self-efficacy through selective interaction. However, participants also expressed difficulty in sustaining a consistent identity across these contexts, reinforcing a tendency to compartmentalize self-representations.

Linguistic Strategies and the Representation of Gender Roles

Birnholtz et al. (2014) analyzed the linguistic patterns in user profiles and identified the word "looking" as the most frequently used term. It commonly signals users' intentions, ranging from seeking emotional connection to casual sex. This term is often paired with euphemisms, such as "NSA" (no strings attached) or "fun", allowing users to subtly communicate desires while avoiding direct sexual language.

Interestingly, when users employed the phrase "not looking for...", they tended to use more explicit vocabulary, like, "hookups". This contrast illustrates how users strategically shape first impressions and manage interactional boundaries. The word "friends" also appeared frequently; while seemingly platonic, it often served as coded language implying sexual interest. These linguistic choices reflect broader societal taboos surrounding open sexual expression, and the need to navigate respectability within a stigmatized communicative landscape.

The Interplay Between Images and Language

Cardoso et al. (2019) explored how Brazilian Grindr users used profile photos, captions, and emojis to express body ideals and sexual preferences. The study revealed a dominant hypermasculine aesthetic (marked by shirtless photos and assertive poses) that was closely linked to race, class, and cultural norms. Linguistically, users employed coded expressions such as "raw top" and emojis like 🌿 (a euphemism for drug use), creating a semiotic system intelligible only to those familiar with queer subcultural norms. The researchers argued that language in this context functions less as a fixed code and more as a flexible social practice. Understanding these signs relies on users' sociolinguistic competence and cultural embeddedness, emphasizing the dating app as a symbolically rich and culturally gated space.

Platform Design and the Social Masking of Sexual Orientation

He (2021) conducted a content analysis and interviews with Chinese users of the gay dating app, Blued. The study found that Chinese gay users often avoided displaying identifiable facial images, largely due to fears of discrimination, privacy concerns, and platform surveillance. Although few users explicitly stated sexual intentions in their profiles, many privately acknowledged using the app for sexual encounters. Masculine language tended to accompany bodily or action-oriented descriptors, indicating that linguistic choices were intertwined with performative gender ideals. The study concluded that gay identity construction on dating apps

is not purely a matter of personal expression but is deeply shaped by platform affordances, cultural norms, and community expectations.

Summary and Research Gap

Collectively, these studies underscore how self-presentation on gay dating platforms is shaped by intersecting forces: community norms, gender regulation, platform design, and the politics of desire. While they offer significant insights, most are situated in Western or mainland Chinese contexts. There remains a lack of empirical research on how Taiwanese gay men engage with dating platforms in ways shaped by local sociocultural frameworks and linguistic practices.

This study addresses the abovementioned gap by focusing on the profile content of Taiwanese gay men on Grindr. Specifically, it investigates how Taiwanese gay users employ visual and linguistic strategies as tools for self-presentation, and how these strategies reflect broader cultural meanings related to gender and desire within Taiwan's evolving queer landscape.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how gay men in Taiwan use images and language for self-presentation on a dating app Grindr. Instead of relying on interviews or surveys, the analysis in this study is based on publicly accessible user profiles, using qualitative content analysis to identify textual and visual themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that are recurring in the dataset.

The aim of the analysis is to understand how the textual and visual self-presentation strategies reflect users' sexuality identity, expressions of desire, and engagement with cultural and community norms. The dual focus on both visual and textual elements offers a more holistic understanding of identity construction in queer digital spaces.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

In terms of sampling, data were collected through purposive sampling; that is, the authors deliberately selected 11 public Grindr profiles to represent diverse patterns of visual and textual self-presentation among gay men in Taiwan. These profiles shared the following inclusion criteria: (1) each profile contained at least one photo (either of the user's face or body); (2) the profile included written self-descriptions or role labels (e.g., top, bottom, vers); and (3) the users were located within regions of Taiwan, as identified on Grindr.

To protect user privacy and address ethical concerns in the analysis, the study removed or obscured any identifiable information that could disclose personal identity or provoke sensitivity regarding sexuality. This includes users' faces, explicit exposure of sexual organs, and usernames. Although Grindr profiles are publicly accessible, the study took ethical precautions to ensure anonymity and respectful representation.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a qualitative content analysis framework, drawing on the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process can be divided into the following stages:

- Familiarization: All profile texts and images were reviewed multiple times to identify initial patterns and communicative strategies.
- Coding: Key elements were manually coded, including visual markers (e.g., shirtless photos, covered faces), role labels (e.g., top, bottom), and textual cues (e.g., emojis, slang, coded phrases).
- Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that reflect how gay users present masculinity, express desire, and negotiate community-specific or gay-cultural norms.
- Interpretation: Each theme was analyzed in relation to the research questions and existing scholarship on gay digital culture, gender performance, and semiotic self-presentation.

Findings

Overview of the Findings

This section presents the findings from the analysis of 11 publicly accessible Grindr profiles as produced by the gay male users located in Taiwan. The analysis focused on four key aspects, namely, photo types, age ranges, disclosure levels of sexual roles, and linguistic strategies employed for self-description. These elements were reviewed to understand how gay users construct their self-presentation and negotiate visibility, identity, and sexual desire on a gay dating app.

Table 1 shows the coding manual for this study. Each profile was coded in terms of four features: age range, presence of facial photos, presence of body photos, and disclosure of sexual roles. Each sampled profile was levelled in terms of D1~D11. The age range could be identified in the profile section, as required to be revealed by the dating app.

Table 1
The Overview of the Coded Data

Data	Age	Facial Photos	Body Photos	Sexual Role
D1	30~40	✓	✓	Vers Top
D2	40~50	×	×	Top
D3	30~40	×	✓	Side
D4	20~30	✓	✓	×
D5	30~40	×	✓	Top
D6	30~40	×	✓	×
D7	30~40	×	✓	Bottom
D8	30~40	×	✓	Top
D9	20~30	✓	×	Top
D10	20~30	✓	✓	Bottom
D11	40~50	×	✓	Top

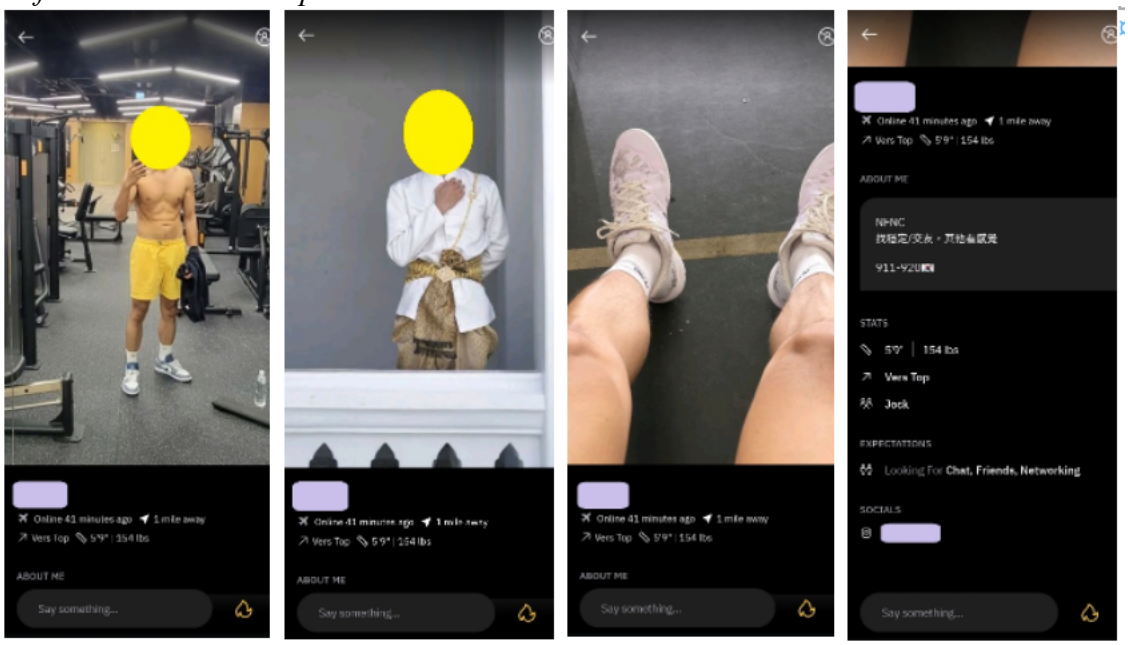
What follows presents the details of the textual and visual representative features in each of the 11 profiles. The textual and visual strategies employed by the gay users for self-presentation in the profile sections are discussed as follows.

Analysis of the Sampled Profiles

This section presents a detailed analysis of each individual profile based on four dimensions: image type, age range, sexual role disclosure, and language strategy. Each example illustrates how users combine visual and linguistic elements to express identity, desire, and interactional intention.

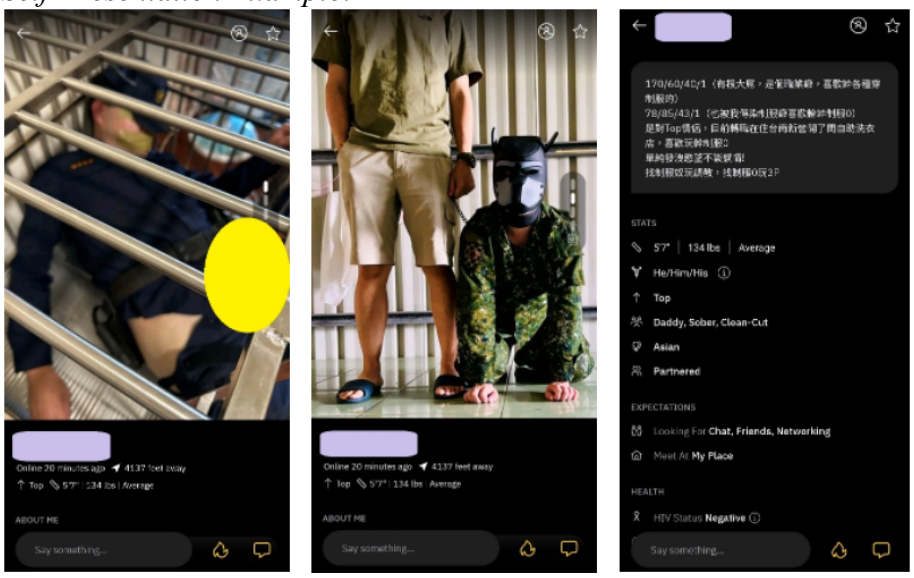
Example D1 featured both a clear facial image and an upper-body photo showing muscular definition. The user disclosed a "Vers Top" role, indicating flexibility with a dominant preference. Coded terms such as "NFNC" (no photo no chat) were also used, suggesting a desire to control the dynamics of conversation. The combination of full-face exposure, dominant role, and coded language reflects a confident, assertive self-presentation.

Figure 1
Self-Presentation Example: D1



In example D2, neither the face nor the full body photo was shown. This showed that the users (two of them seem to share one account) strongly preferred anonymity or privacy. However, the goals as projected through the photos appeared to be sexual connections with clearly defined power asymmetry. In this profile, we can observe that one user constructs a rather masculine and dominant identity while the other one, portrayed as a dog, being submissive (which is further reinforced in the cage portrayal).

Figure 2
Self-Presentation Example: D2



In example D3, the user did not provide a facial photo, but instead uploaded a body photo that highlighted the torso. The user called himself "Side", a less common gender identity term that refers to someone who likes non-penetrative sex. This character shows a more subtle or non-mainstream sexual identity. While his profile does not contain a detailed self-description, it uses some in-group terms, which are highlight sex-oriented, such as " Pig (肉)", "Blowjob (吹)", and "Jerk together (互打)". We can observe that in this example, the gay user's visual emphasis on his body (not very attractive), and the use of unique gender roles (not interested in penetrative sex) portrayed himself rather non-traditional as a user of this dating app.

Figure 3
Self-Presentation Example: D3

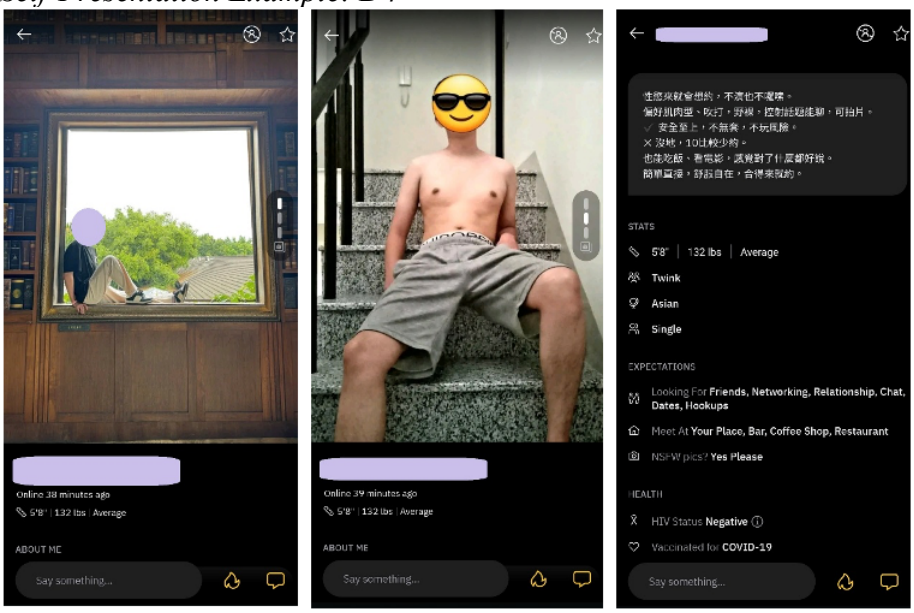


As shown in example D4, photos in which the face can be seen (being covered to protect the identity) and a full-body image was shown. Although the user did not state a sexual role, the presented body image was sexually suggestive. Also, some in-group language codes were referred to and with implications of sex desires. They are for instance “Do not have self-place (沒地),” “Exhibitionism (野裸)” and “Orgasm Control (控射)”. In the context of the gay community, the phrase “Do not have self-place (沒地)” typically indicates a lack of private space for sexual intercourse. In addition to explaining the actual conditions, this term also indirectly communicates to the other party the expectation that if they are interested in pursuing a relationship, they should provide a suitable location. “Exhibitionism (野裸)” refers to the preference for exposing one's body and engaging in sexual activities in outdoor spaces. This behavior is often associated with the pursuit of excitement and the challenge of traditional spatial norms and sexual performances. It reflects an individual's inclination towards open sexual practices and adventurous desires. In the context of the gay community, “Orgasm Control (控射)” primarily refers to sexual control behaviors characterized by power dynamics, where one party exerts control over the other party's ability to ejaculate.

This profile relied on a visually open strategy enhanced by coded language, allowing others to interpret the user's intent while avoiding role labeling. The emphasis appeared to be on attracting attention through visibility and sexual innuendo.

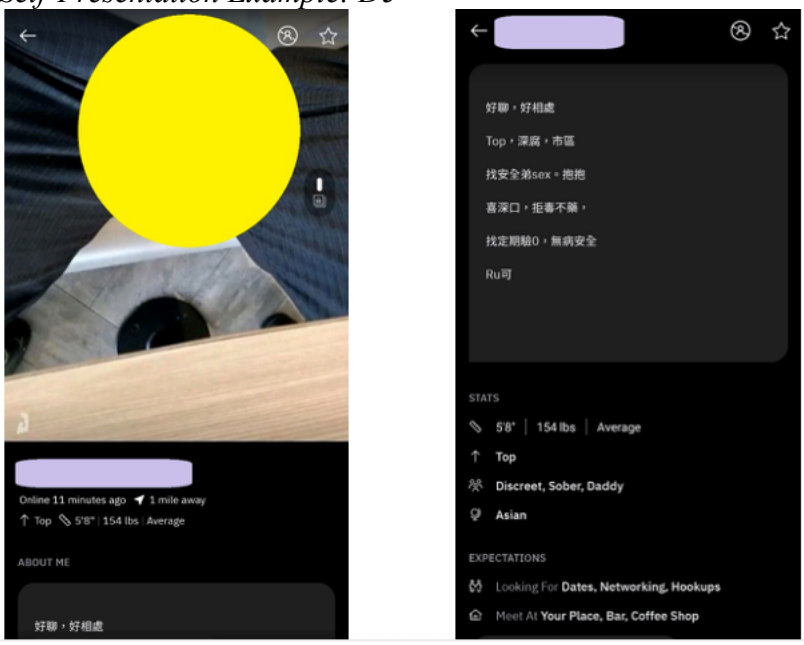
Figure 4

Self-Presentation Example: D4



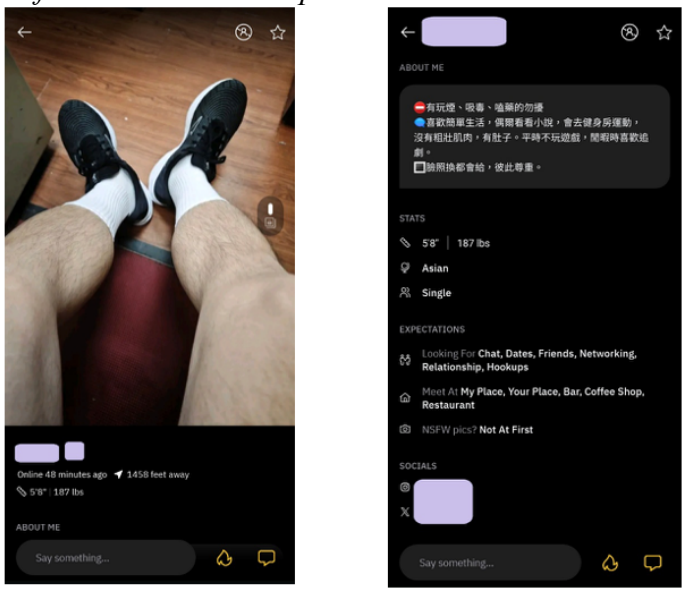
As shown in example D5, the profile contained no facial image but included a body photo focusing on the lower torso, with overt sexual implications. The user self-identified as “Top” and employed concise, suggestive language to indicate a preference for sexual interaction. The profile strategy centered on bodily display and targeted verbal cues, reinforcing a dominant and masculine presentation.

Figure 5
Self-Presentation Example: D5



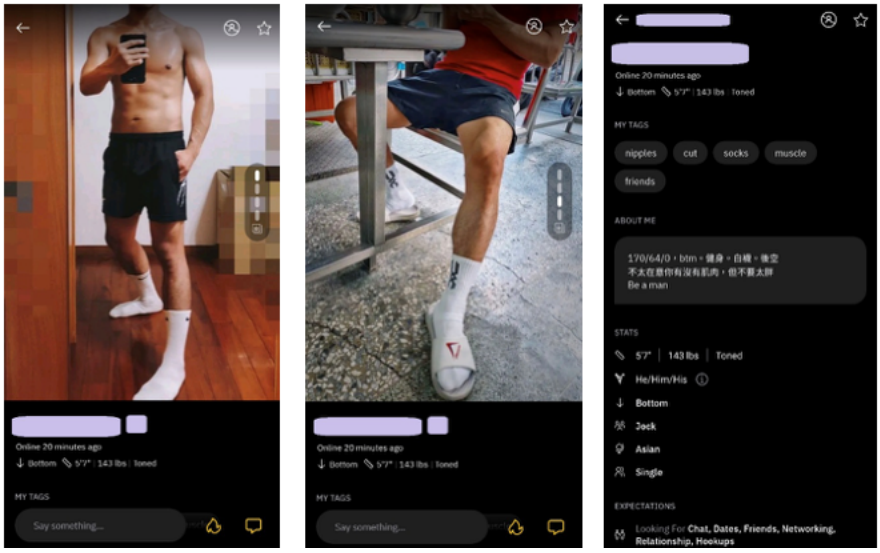
No face or body photo was present in example D6. Instead, the profile included a sneaker-wearing foot photo, possibly symbolizing masculinity or athleticism. The user did not disclose a sexual role, and the profile remained largely non-verbal, with limited textual filters. This minimalist strategy may reflect selective participation or a cautious approach, suggesting the user prefers to engage privately before revealing more.

Figure 6
Self-Presentation Example: D6



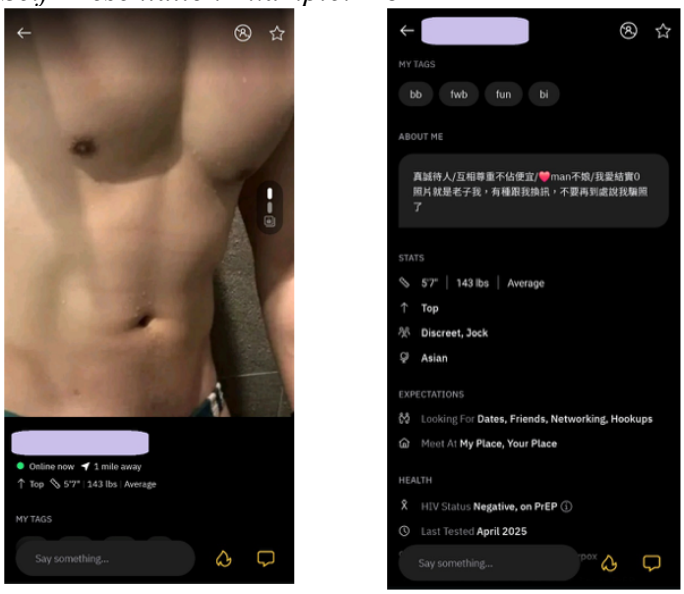
Example D7 omitted facial imagery but included muscular torso shots. The textual content identified the user as a “Bottom” and mentioned “exercise”. The presentation was visually suggestive but textually minimal. The profile reflected a traditional body-role pairing, using physical imagery and a clear role label to signal intent while preserving partial anonymity.

Figure 7
Self-Presentation Example: D7



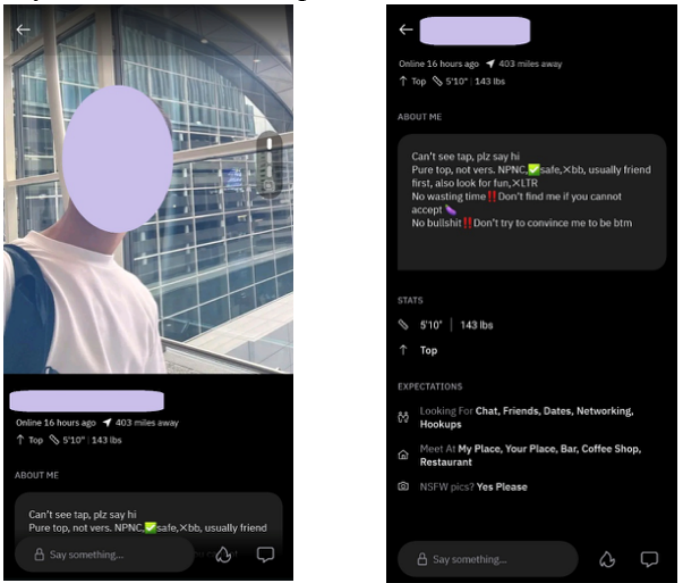
As shown in example D8, this user presented a full-body photo without a facial image. The photo emphasized muscularity and masculinity, and the user self-identified as "Top". Language filters were used to express preferences (e.g., "likes masculine, not feminine [喜 Man 不娘]", and "likes strong bottom [喜結實 0]",) alongside a narrative tone consistent with traditional masculine expressions such as "Lao Tzu (老子)" and "have guts (有膽)". The overall presentation strategy reflected strong masculine performance through both image and language.

Figure 8
Self-Presentation Example: D8



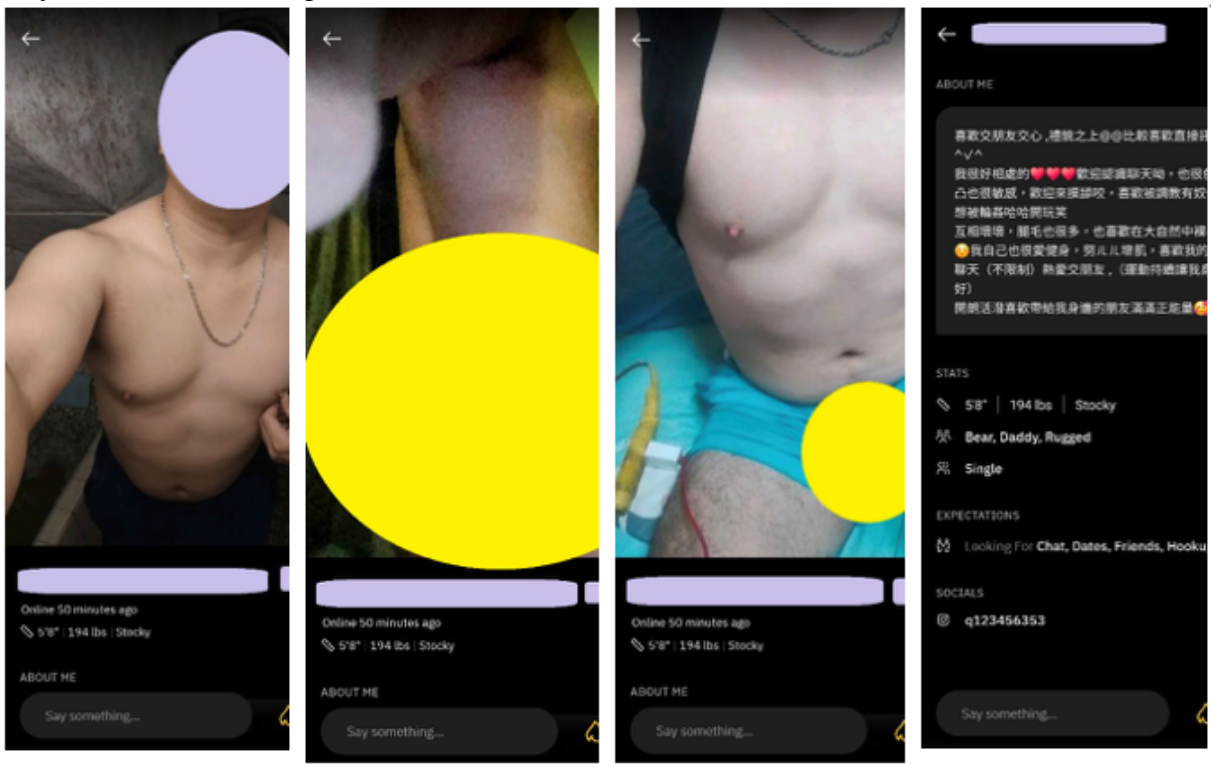
In example D9, this profile included a facial photo but no body image. The user, aged 20–30, displayed a casual, smiling face and described himself as a "Top". Language choices included phrases like "NPNC", "Pure Top". and "Looking for Fun", all of such preferences were expressed with emojis. This profile constructed an identity with sexual connection as the main goal. This shows that the user takes a confident and open approach to self-presentation, providing clues about relationships and sex without relying on obscure language.

Figure 9
Self-Presentation Example: D9



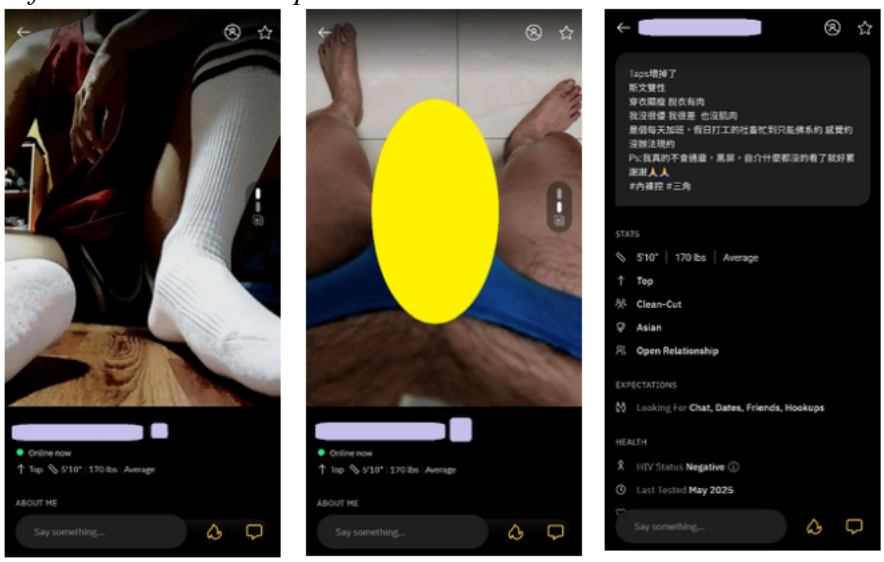
The age range of example D10 is between 20 and 30 years old, which is consistent with example D4 and example D9. All of them commonly chose to reveal their faces. In addition, the user of example D10 also posted a highly nude body photo and defined his sexual role as "submissive". The chosen camera angle implied a power-dynamic framing, consistent with the sexual role described in the profile. This profile integrated visual exposure with submissive-coded language, clearly signaling an intent for sexual connection.

Figure 10
Self-Presentation Example: D10



In example D11, no face or full-body images were provided, but the user disclosed the role "Top" clearly. No emojis or overt sexual codes were used in the description, although phrases like "date" and "no date" appeared. A close-up underwear shot and a low-angle foot photo subtly communicated dominance and masculinity. This profile exemplified indirect but intentional visual strategies to convey a sexual objective without explicit language.

Figure 11
Self-Presentation Example: D11



Summary

Across these eleven profiles, users employed a variety of self-presentation strategies that combined or contrasted facial visibility, body imagery, sexual role disclosure, and coded language. Some profiles leaned heavily on visuals, while others prioritized text, especially when visuals were absent. A consistent theme was the negotiation between privacy and sexual signaling by means of muscular imagery, role identifiers, or subcultural codes. These examples illustrate the diverse ways Taiwanese gay men on Grindr construct sexual desire and sub-gay identity in a visually driven yet linguistically coded environment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Some interesting discussions are briefly presented in relation to the theoretical conceptualization of the identified self-presentational patterns as observed in the textual and visual design of Taiwanese gay users' profiles on Grindr.

First, the findings in this paper show that Taiwanese gay male users of Grindr perform their gay identity and show sexual desires through visual and linguistic cues, which is supported by Judith Butler's (Butler, 2025) notion of gender performativity. The strategic blending of masculine imagery and coded language reflects not only personal preference but a performative act shaped by digital and cultural expectations. Grindr becomes a stage where gender and sexual roles are constantly rehearsed and negotiated in gay communities.

Despite Taiwan's progressive legal landscape that endorses homosexuality and its own rights, the findings in this study still show that many gay users chose to conceal their faces or used indirect imagery. Such self-presentational preference indicates ongoing anxiety about queer

visibility. This privacy-performance duality in the process of pursuing sex or romance on dating apps suggests that acceptance of the homosexual remains partial, and self-presentation must balance openness with safety and discretion, especially in semi-public digital spaces established in Taiwan.

The findings also suggest that there is constant negotiation of power asymmetry and sexual position in the self-presentational decisions by gay men on Grindr. For example, in terms of some identified visual strategies (muscle display, faceless torsos) and textual filters (coded phrases, role labels), they seem to serve to manage how one's desire should be signaled properly and how it can be received through complicated decoding processes. In terms of portraying oneself as a powerful figure, some users would assert themselves with terms of dominance ("老子" implying "me", as great as your daddy), while others chose to emphasize submissiveness through camera angles or minimal language. These choices reflect an ongoing negotiation of relational positioning.

Some textual jargons specific to the gay community were identified in this study and such findings show that understanding Grindr requires subcultural literacy. Phrases as evidence are like "NFNC", "控射 (Orgasm control)", or "沒地" (No private space). They are not universally legible but function as gatekeeping tools that foster in-group recognition. Users must signal knowledge to gain desirability and legitimacy within the app's community norms. Such obscure meanings can be decoded because one of the authors is an insider of the gay community, who is hence familiar with the decoded meanings.

Finally, as for future research suggestions, this study opens avenues for comparative research (e.g., Grindr in Taiwan vs. Japan or South Korea), longitudinal analysis (how profiles change over time), and expansion to include other queer identities. More multimodal approaches are also encouraged to approach textual and visual construction of digital identity of the under-researched Asian LGBTQ+ contexts.

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Contact email: irenechen@mail.npust.edu.tw

Negotiating Rights, Enabling Voices: Disability Inclusion and Governance Participation Among Marginalized Women in Nepal

Kiran Chalise, Mid-West University, Nepal

The Southeast Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study investigates the landscape of disability inclusion and the participation of marginalized women with disabilities in local governance processes in Nepal. Drawing on an extensive field-based assessment across 15 municipalities in three provinces—Madhesh, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim—the study combines quantitative survey data from 180 respondents and qualitative insights from key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Despite progressive national laws such as the Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ARPD, 2017), and international commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), many women with disabilities remain excluded from meaningful participation in governance, decision-making, and access to essential services. The research identifies significant gaps in legal awareness, administrative barriers to disability ID cards, and low representation in planning and budgeting processes. Anchored in the Capability Approach, the Social Model of Disability, and Intersectionality Theory, this study argues for a recalibration of local governance practices that centers voice, agency, and rights. Findings suggest that despite the existence of OPDs and advocacy networks, structural and attitudinal barriers continue to undermine effective inclusion. The paper concludes with policy recommendations focused on improving service delivery, legal empowerment, and institutional inclusion.

Keywords: Dalits with disabilities, intersectionality, structural violence, marginalization, disability and caste, human rights

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Introduction

Disability inclusion has emerged as a pivotal concern in global development discourse, particularly following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006. This landmark treaty catalyzed a shift from charity-based or medicalized understandings of disability toward a rights-based model, emphasizing agency, autonomy, dignity, and equal participation (United Nations, 2006). The convention underscores the obligation of state parties to ensure that persons with disabilities (PWDs) can access the same rights and opportunities as everyone else—including participation in public life and decision-making at all levels of governance.

For Nepal, this global movement intersects with its own socio-political transformation. The promulgation of the Constitution in 2015 and the subsequent shift to federal governance devolved substantial power to 753 local governments or Palikas. This decentralization aims to bring governance closer to communities, with increased responsiveness and inclusivity in service delivery. However, this transition has also revealed capacity limitations at the local level, including inadequate awareness of disability rights, inconsistent implementation of national laws, and a lack of disaggregated data on persons with disabilities—particularly women. Nepal's 2017 Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ARPD) sought to address these challenges by aligning national policies with the UNCRPD, yet implementation remains fragmented, poorly resourced, and inconsistently monitored.

Women with disabilities—especially those from disadvantaged caste and ethnic groups such as Dalits, Janajatis, and Madhesis—face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. These intersecting identities lead to compounded vulnerabilities, as structural inequalities tied to gender, disability, caste, and geography collide. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality provides an effective analytical lens to understand these layered exclusions. While Nepal has adopted progressive gender and disability policies, such provisions often fail to meaningfully address the realities of women situated at the margins of both systems.

This marginalization has far-reaching implications—not only in terms of individual wellbeing but also for democratic governance and inclusive development. A society that excludes women with disabilities from decision-making undermines its own ability to deliver equitable and responsive policies. Despite local governments being constitutionally mandated to ensure representation and participation, evidence suggests that women with disabilities are often absent from public forums, ignored in planning processes, and overlooked in budget allocations. These exclusions reflect not only policy gaps but also entrenched social attitudes that frame women with disabilities as passive recipients of care rather than active rights-holders.

In light of these challenges, this paper draws upon a baseline study conducted by KOSHISH, a national self-help organization working in mental health and disability, in collaboration with FWDN and supported by UN Women. The research was undertaken in 15 Palikas across three provinces—Madhesh, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim—and employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey component included 180 respondents selected from marginalized groups, while the qualitative component involved 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 15 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with OPD leaders, government representatives, and community members.

The objectives of the study were threefold:

1. To assess the level of awareness about disability rights among women with disabilities.
2. To evaluate the extent of their participation in local governance and access to services.
3. To identify barriers and enablers to inclusion, and generate evidence-based recommendations for policy and programming.

By situating these findings within broader theoretical frameworks—namely the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1996), and Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989)—this paper aims to unpack the complex dynamics of exclusion and propose strategic interventions to realize the rights of women with disabilities in Nepal.

Literature Review

The academic and policy literature on disability rights and inclusive governance reflects a growing recognition of the need for systemic transformation to achieve equality for persons with disabilities (PWDs). Globally, the UNCRPD (2006) has been instrumental in setting normative standards by reframing disability as a matter of human rights rather than medical pathology or charity. The convention obliges states to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity (United Nations, 2006).

Despite this progress at the normative level, translating international commitments into practice remains a major challenge, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). As Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) argue, many countries in the Global South face institutional, economic, and cultural obstacles that hinder meaningful implementation. In the context of South Asia, deeply embedded social hierarchies—such as caste, patriarchy, and ableism—interact to marginalize persons with disabilities, especially women.

Nepal's ARPD (2074 BS) represents a major step in aligning national law with the UNCRPD. The ARPD recognizes disability as a cross-cutting issue and guarantees a wide range of rights, including access to education, employment, healthcare, social protection, and political participation (Government of Nepal, 2017). Yet empirical studies suggest that awareness of these legal provisions remains low among intended beneficiaries, and the infrastructure for delivering services is underdeveloped. According to Lord and Stein (2018), laws without operational mechanisms, dissemination strategies, or accountability frameworks fail to yield substantive change.

The situation is particularly acute for women with disabilities (WWDs), who experience multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion. Research shows that WWDs are more likely to live in poverty, have lower literacy rates, face domestic violence, and experience barriers to healthcare and justice (Groce & Kett, 2014). Dhungana (2006) found that in Nepal, disabled women often lack support networks and are stigmatized by both the disability movement and the women's movement—being perceived as "invisible" in each.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), provides a useful framework to understand these overlapping forms of oppression. Intersectionality highlights how systems of power—such as casteism, sexism, and ableism—do not act independently but combine to reinforce disadvantage. This is especially relevant in the Nepali context, where the interplay of caste, ethnicity, gender, geography, and disability produces unique patterns of marginalization.

Another body of literature focuses on the role of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in promoting inclusion and holding duty-bearers accountable. According to the WHO and World Bank (2011), OPDs are crucial intermediaries between the state and disability communities, offering peer support, advocacy, and service delivery. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by a lack of financial resources, training, and institutional recognition. Lang and Murangira (2009), studying disability advocacy in Uganda, emphasize that meaningful participation requires not only legal inclusion but also material and technical support for OPDs.

From a theoretical standpoint, several frameworks inform the analysis of disability inclusion. The Social Model of Disability, developed by Oliver (1996), asserts that disability is not inherent in the individual but arises from societal barriers—whether physical, institutional, or attitudinal. This model has been influential in shifting focus away from impairments and toward environmental and policy structures that hinder participation.

Complementing this, the Capability Approach, articulated by Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum (2011), provides a human development perspective on inclusion. The approach emphasizes the expansion of individual freedoms, opportunities, and the actual ability to pursue a life one has reason to value. It argues that real inclusion must address both structural enablers and individual capabilities.

Finally, Intersectionality Theory serves as a critical lens to examine how social categories interact to shape power relations and access to resources. In the context of this study, it helps explain why women with disabilities from Dalit or Janajati communities are more likely to face exclusion than their upper-caste or male counterparts, even when legal protections are in place.

Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a multidimensional understanding of exclusion and inclusion. They also inform the study's analytical approach, which seeks to identify not only the barriers but also the institutional and community-level enablers that can advance the rights of women with disabilities in Nepal.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods approach to examine the level of disability inclusion within local governance systems in Nepal, particularly focusing on women with disabilities (WWDs) from marginalized groups. The rationale for this approach was to integrate numerical trends with lived experiences, thus capturing the complex, layered realities of social inclusion and exclusion. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods enabled triangulation, improved validity, and helped explore both the structural and cultural dimensions of disability rights at the local level.

Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in 15 municipalities (Palikas) across three provinces—Madhesh, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim—chosen based on geographic diversity, population density, and socio-political marginalization indicators. Each province reflects unique socio-cultural dynamics and infrastructural capabilities, which makes comparative analysis meaningful.

The population of interest was women with disabilities aged 18 and above, particularly those belonging to Dalit, Janajati, and other underrepresented caste and ethnic groups. The target was

to reach individuals who had direct or indirect interactions with local government offices or service systems.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 180 respondents. The Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size formula was used to determine the minimum number of participants required for statistical confidence based on an estimated population of 300 eligible individuals across the study areas. The final sample exceeded this minimum, with proportional allocation across Palikas to ensure representation by disability type and region.

Participants were identified through local Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), ward offices, and community referrals. Additional screening ensured inclusion of women with physical, sensory, mental, and multiple disabilities.

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys administered using the KOBO Toolbox digital platform. Enumerators were equipped with tablets and conducted interviews face-to-face, ensuring accessibility based on the respondent's comfort—whether at home, OPD centers, or public venues.

The questionnaire was developed in consultation with OPD leaders and experts in disability rights. It was translated into Nepali and localized dialects, then pre-tested in a similar non-sample municipality. Revisions addressed linguistic clarity, cultural sensitivity, and response flow.

Key sections of the survey included:

- Demographic details
- Awareness of legal frameworks (ARPD, CRPD)
- Access to services and entitlements
- Participation in governance and public forums
- Affiliation with OPDs and advocacy experience

Enumerators received two days of training on disability-sensitive data collection, ethical considerations, and use of KOBO Toolbox. Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks.

Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative component comprised 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 15 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) across the 15 Palikas. FGDs were conducted separately with WWDs and local OPD representatives to create a safe space for open discussion. Each FGD had 6–8 participants and was moderated using a semi-structured guide.

KIIs targeted municipal officials (e.g., mayors, chief administrative officers), ward-level social mobilizers, and disability rights advocates. The interviews explored perceptions of inclusion, awareness of policy mandates, challenges in service delivery, and institutional practices.

All qualitative interactions were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were cleaned and analyzed using SPSS (Version 25). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, cross-tabulations, and percentage distributions were generated to examine relationships between variables such as:

- Gender and legal awareness
- Province and access to disability ID cards
- Disability type and participation in planning

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding. Two independent coders developed codes inductively from the transcripts, followed by consolidation into broader themes such as:

- Structural exclusion
- Identity recognition
- Organizational engagement
- Municipal accountability

Findings from both methods were synthesized in the results and discussion sections.

Results

This section presents the findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study conducted across 15 Palikas in the Madhesh, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim provinces of Nepal. The results are organized thematically according to the major domains of inquiry: demographic characteristics, awareness of disability rights, access to services, participation in governance, and engagement with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). Where relevant, comparative insights across province, gender, and type of disability are provided to highlight intersectional dimensions of inclusion and exclusion.

Demographic Profile

Of the total 180 respondents, a significant majority (79%) were women, in line with the study's focus on women with disabilities (WWDs), while the remaining 21% were male participants. Notably, 61% of all participants belonged to historically marginalized Dalit and Janajati communities, underscoring the intersectional approach of the research.

In terms of provincial representation:

- Madhesh Province: 35%
- Sudurpaschim Province: 34%
- Karnali Province: 31%

Reported types of disability included:

- Physical impairments: 43%
- Sensory impairments (visual and hearing): 24%
- Mental or intellectual disabilities: 15%
- Multiple disabilities: 18%

Educational attainment levels were notably low:

- 56.1% of respondents were illiterate
- 23.3% had completed primary education
- Only 6.1% had completed secondary education or higher

These demographic patterns highlight the intersection of disability, caste, gender, and educational exclusion—factors that compound vulnerabilities in access to services and civic participation.

Awareness of Disability Rights (ARPD & CRPD)

The study found that awareness of legal rights among respondents was alarmingly low. Only 47.2% of the participants reported having heard of the Act Relating to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ARPD, 2017), and a mere 31% were familiar with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Among those who had heard of the ARPD:

- Only 40.6% could articulate one or more provisions of the Act
- Awareness levels were somewhat good in Karnali Province than the Madhesh Province

Qualitative evidence from FGDs revealed that legal literacy was minimal even among those possessing disability ID cards. Respondents described an almost complete lack of information dissemination by local authorities:

“I have a disability ID, but I don't know what the law says about my rights. We were never told.” (FGD participant, Doti)

“We don’t know the name of the law. We just heard that some people with cards got benefits.” (FGD participant, Sarlahi)

These narratives emphasize the disjuncture between legal frameworks and the lived realities of women with disabilities, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Access to Services and Disability Identification Cards

Access to disability ID cards—a prerequisite for entitlements and services—was relatively high, with 76% of respondents reporting that they had received a card. However, satisfaction with the process and the outcome was significantly lower:

- Only 32% of respondents believed that their disability category on the card was accurate
- Many felt they had been placed in lower categories than deserved, resulting in fewer benefits
- The application process was widely reported as inaccessible, confusing, and costly

Provincial differences were notable:

- Respondents in Sudurpaschim Province had greater card coverage, but also expressed higher dissatisfaction
- Participants from Madhesh Province reported greater delays and more bureaucratic hurdles

Commonly cited barriers included:

- Physically inaccessible municipal buildings
- Uninformed or insensitive municipal staff
- Lengthy and expensive travel for documentation and follow-up

"They told me to bring proof from the hospital. I went twice, but they didn't accept it. It's expensive to go again." (FGD participant, Jumla)

These findings illustrate not just logistical hurdles but also systemic insensitivity to the needs and realities of women with disabilities.

Participation in Local Planning and Governance

Despite the emphasis in national policy on inclusive governance, actual participation by WWDs in local decision-making was found to be extremely limited:

- Only 24% of respondents had ever participated in a local planning meeting
- Of these, fewer than half reported that they had been able to speak or that their contributions had been taken seriously

A recurring theme in both interviews and FGDs was tokenistic inclusion. WWDs were frequently invited as an afterthought, and often their involvement lacked substance or continuity.

"They call us only when there's a donor project. Otherwise, we are not asked anything." (KII, OPD Leader, Bardiya)

"We go, sit, and come back. Decisions are already made." (FGD participant, Surkhet)

Differences across provinces were evident:

- Madhesh Province reported higher levels of participation, largely due to stronger OPD networks and advocacy presence
- Karnali Province saw minimal engagement, attributed to geographical remoteness, limited mobility options, and the absence of proactive inclusion by local governments

Role of Organizations of Persons With Disabilities (OPDs)

Only 28% of respondents reported being a member of a formal OPD. Membership patterns were shaped by geography and social capital:

- OPD engagement was higher in urban Palikas
- WWDs associated with OPDs exhibited greater awareness of their rights, and were more confident engaging with municipalities

Nevertheless, structural constraints undermined the impact of OPDs:

- Many were underfunded, with little or no support from municipal budgets
- Only 17% of key informants said that OPDs were regularly consulted in local planning processes

"We submitted a proposal for accessible toilets. It was ignored because the Palika said we are not 'officially recognized'." (OPD Leader, Janakpur)

"We have many members, but no budget. We rely on volunteers." (FGD respondent, Kailali)

These findings suggest that while OPDs have the potential to be powerful vehicles for advocacy and inclusion, their ability to influence governance outcomes is heavily contingent on formal recognition, institutional support, and consistent resourcing.

Discussion

This section interprets the study's findings through the lens of the Capability Approach, Social Model of Disability, and Intersectionality Theory. The results paint a layered picture of legal, institutional, and socio-cultural exclusion that limits the agency and participation of women with disabilities (WWDs) in Nepal. Each of the main themes is examined in light of relevant academic frameworks to identify both structural patterns and potential entry points for reform.

Legal Identity and Rights Awareness

The study reveals a critical gap in awareness of disability rights laws, with less than half of the respondents familiar with the ARPD and even fewer aware of the CRPD. This lack of knowledge undermines the ability of WWDs to assert claims, challenge injustice, or participate meaningfully in public life. It confirms Lord and Stein's (2018) assertion that legal recognition is insufficient unless coupled with widespread dissemination and community education.

From the lens of the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), legal knowledge is not just an informational asset but a capability in itself—essential for agency, choice, and self-determination. Without it, women with disabilities are denied the freedom to function as civic actors. They may receive welfare services passively but remain unable to negotiate their rights proactively, especially in the governance domain.

Moreover, the findings underscore the need for local government actors themselves to be sensitized to disability rights frameworks. Several officials interviewed lacked even basic understanding of ARPD provisions, reinforcing the gap between national legislation and decentralized action.

Barriers to Accessing Services

Although the majority of respondents held disability ID cards, widespread dissatisfaction with categorization accuracy, application difficulty, and unequal treatment was reported. Many respondents believed they had been misclassified in a lower disability category—resulting in reduced entitlements. Others reported repeated travel and expense for bureaucratic tasks.

According to the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1996), individuals are not disabled by their impairments but by social and institutional barriers. This was clearly reflected in the data. A respondent with a mobility impairment who was denied support not because of her condition, but because of inaccessible government offices and uninformed staff, is emblematic of how systems themselves perpetuate exclusion.

These findings also point to procedural injustice—where people are formally included but structurally excluded. Without accessible grievance redress mechanisms or oversight of ID card assessments, inclusion is performative rather than substantive.

Structural Exclusion in Local Governance

Participation in planning processes is a key indicator of democratic inclusion. Yet the results show that WWDs are systematically excluded from public forums, often invited late or not at all. Even when present, they are rarely given opportunities to speak or influence outcomes.

The data corroborates Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, showing how multiple identities—gender, disability, caste, and geography—interact to produce compounded disadvantages. Women with disabilities from Dalit and Janajati backgrounds were especially underrepresented and silenced in governance settings. Their absence is not merely an oversight—it reflects deep-rooted structural bias in how institutions define participation and whose voices are considered legitimate.

The study also demonstrates that current participatory mechanisms in Palikas are often tokenistic. Invitations to WWDs or OPDs occur only during donor-funded projects or special events. This undermines the principles of ongoing, institutionalized inclusion that the Constitution of Nepal mandates.

The Role and Challenges of OPDs

Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) have the potential to act as powerful intermediaries between WWDs and the state. Respondents with OPD affiliations had higher levels of awareness, self-confidence, and participation. However, the study found that OPDs themselves face institutional exclusion, insufficient funding, and limited technical capacity.

Lang and Murangira (2009) argue that unless OPDs are empowered as equal stakeholders in governance processes, they risk becoming marginalized alongside the communities they represent. The current practice of project-based engagement—where OPDs are consulted only when donor funding mandates it—creates dependency and erodes the continuity of advocacy.

Institutional integration of OPDs in Palika planning, budgeting, and monitoring is critical. This involves not only providing financial resources but also establishing legal mandates for their participation, regular consultations, and accountability mechanisms.

In summary, the findings reveal that exclusion operates across legal, institutional, and cultural domains. Rights may exist on paper, but unless capabilities are developed, systems are reformed, and intersectional inequalities are addressed, women with disabilities will remain marginalized in Nepal's governance structures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study underscores the urgent need to advance disability inclusion in Nepal's local governance systems. Despite the presence of progressive legal frameworks such as the Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ARPD, 2017) and international commitments like the UNCRPD, the lived experiences of women with disabilities reveal enduring exclusion, limited agency, and unequal access to resources and decision-making platforms.

The findings illustrate that while services like disability ID cards are available, they are often delivered through bureaucratically inconsistent and structurally inaccessible processes. Additionally, awareness of rights is limited, both among WWDs and the municipal actors

responsible for upholding them. The participation of WWDs in local planning remains low, often symbolic, and rarely empowered. While Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) have made progress in advocacy and capacity building, their roles remain insufficiently institutionalized and under-resourced.

From a theoretical perspective, this research affirms the value of applying a multi-lens approach:

- The Social Model of Disability explains how institutional and infrastructural constraints—not impairments—generate exclusion.
- The Capability Approach emphasizes the importance of enhancing the real freedoms and agency of WWDs.
- Intersectionality Theory reveals how caste, gender, geography, and disability intersect to deepen marginalization.

Together, these perspectives highlight the need to move beyond surface-level inclusion toward substantive, institutional, and community-rooted empowerment.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence and analysis, the following policy and programmatic actions are recommended:

1. Launch disability rights literacy campaigns
   Develop inclusive, multilingual, and accessible information materials about the ARPD and CRPD. Disseminate through community radios, ward offices, and women's groups. Include visual and audio materials for persons with sensory impairments.
2. Reform and standardize the disability ID card process
   Ensure transparency and equity in disability classification. Establish mobile disability assessment units in remote areas. Train Palika staff on disability evaluation procedures and create feedback mechanisms for appeal.
3. Invest in inclusive education and digital empowerment
   Expand literacy and digital training programs for WWDs. Partner with OPDs and NGOs to create learning hubs and accessible training centers, particularly in rural areas.
4. Institutionalize OPD participation in local governance
   Mandate OPD representation in municipal planning, budgeting, and monitoring committees. Provide annual grants to recognized OPDs and facilitate capacity-building initiatives to enhance their technical and advocacy skills.
5. Enforce inclusive service delivery guidelines in Palikas
   Develop and implement a "Code of Disability-Inclusive Practice" for local government offices. Include accessibility audits, staff sensitization modules, and community scorecards to track inclusion performance.

These actions require collaborative efforts between federal, provincial, and local governments, as well as civil society, donors, and OPDs. Real change will come not from isolated projects, but from a long-term commitment to rights, participation, and justice.

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Contact email: kchalise@gmail.com

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The International Academic Forum (IAFOR)
Sakae 1-16-26-201
Naka Ward, Nagoya, Aichi
Japan 460-0008
www.iafor.org