

ULTIMART

Vol. 19, No.1, June 2026

JURNAL KOMUNIKASI VISUAL

ISSN : 1979 - 0716

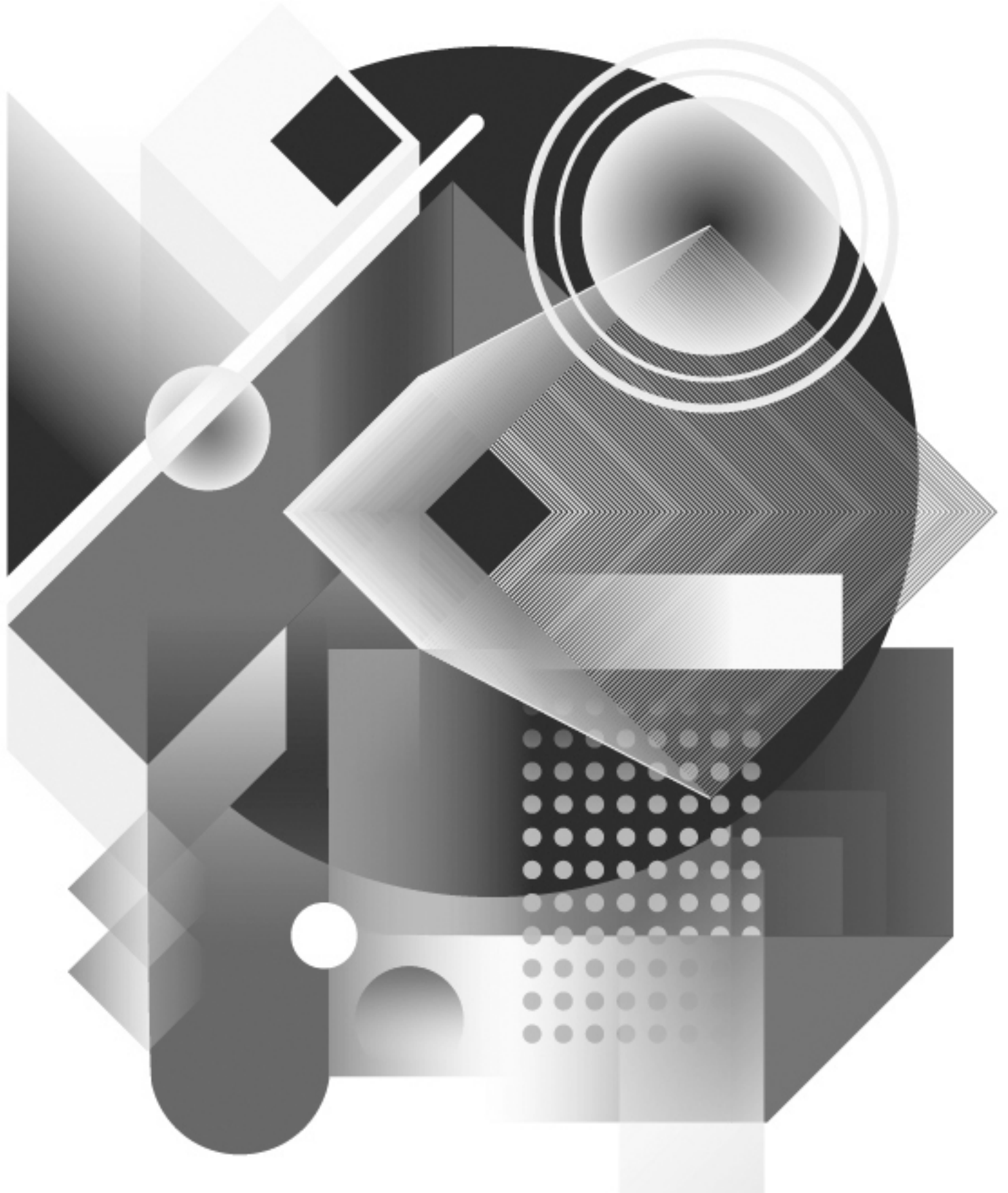


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ULTIMART: Journal Komunikasi Visual is a journal published by the Faculty of Art and Design, Multimedia Nusantara University (UMN). The Ultimart journal, published twice a year, contains scientific writings and research results from both the academic community within UMN and outside UMN.

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EXPLORATION OF BATIK QR CODE USING ATUMICS METHOD TO INCREASE THE FUNCTIONAL VALUE OF BATIK

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Received Aug. 17, 2025; Revised Nov. 16, 2025; Accepted Jan. 19, 2026.

Abstract: Batik is an Indonesian ancestral heritage in the form of oral and intangible culture that has long been recognized by UNESCO. As time progresses, batik usage has diminished, particularly among the youth who prioritize practical, efficient technology such as QR Codes through the adoption of digitalization and QRIS. On the other side, the limitations of fashion MSMEs in providing information regarding alternative products brought to exhibitions have resulted in buyers not finding products that match their desires, so MSMEs need a product catalog to represent products that cannot be brought to exhibitions. This research attempts to combine batik and QR Codes using the atumics method to create a new product that is relevant to the times. By combining culture and technology, the batik QR Code can be filled with digital information links, one of which can be a digital catalog of fashion MSME products fostered by Rumah BUMN Pekalongan. It is hoped that with this research, batik will have a functional value that is harmonious with its aesthetic value and can provide an additional product alternative for buyers at exhibitions

Keywords: batik; QR code; atumics; fashion; technology

Introduction

The research was conducted at Rumah BUMN Telkom Pekalongan, also known as the center of Nusantara batik and the Pekalongan Batik Museum. The data collection process took place from December 2024 to February 2025. The results

of direct observations revealed several challenges faced by MSMEs in the batik industry. One of the problems faced by fashion MSMEs at exhibitions is the limited number of products that can be brought. To overcome this, MSMEs need a product catalog to add alternative products that can be offered at exhibitions.

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In addition, the use of batik has started to decline, especially among young people (Sono 2023). Many efforts have been made, such as the Indonesia Berkain campaign, the Nusantara batik week, and inacraft, which aim to foster an interest in wearing batik. Efforts to increase the interest in wearing batik among teenagers can also be done through innovation in batik itself.

Younger generations find it difficult to be separated from gadgets because they have become a part of their daily lives. One of the practical and frequently used technologies on gadgets is the QR Code, especially through the adoption of QRIS. According to data from the Indonesian Payment Systems Association (ASPI), the number of QRIS users increased by 191.59% in 2023-2024 (data.goodstats.id 2025).

In the Pekalongan Batik Museum, there is a unique batik combined with Hijayah letters called besurek batik. From this observation, the idea arose that batik and QR codes could be combined into a new motif. One way is by designing batik that can be read like besurek batik, but made with a digital language in the form of a QR Code so that it can be scanned by a smartphone. The QR Code on this batik can be used as a medium for storing product catalogs. Therefore, the problem statement for this design is how to design a batik QR Code that is applied to a bag product, which contains a product catalog for MSMEs fostered by Rumah BUMN Telkom Pekalongan and can be accessed via a mobile device to be attractive to the younger generation, especially teenagers aged 12 plus.

Methodology

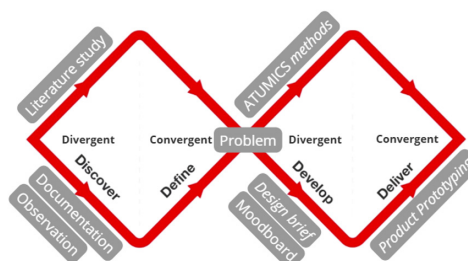


Figure 1. Research Method
(Source: Personal research documentation)

This research uses a qualitative research method, which was chosen because it allows for a more in-depth exploration of design to find unique and novel product design innovations. The product design process uses the double diamond method, which consists of two thinking approaches: divergent and convergent. It also has four stages: discover, define, develop, and deliver (Jedraszcyk, 2023). In the discovery stage, data is collected through a literature review, observation, and documentation. After obtaining data such as problems, parts and functions of QR Codes, and batik motifs, the next step is the define stage using the Atumics method. In the development stage, the analysis results are developed into motif exploration. The results of this exploration are presented in the delivery stage with product prototyping into a bag product.

Result

One of the problems faced by fashion MSMEs at exhibitions is that the items sold are very diverse. Starting from head accessories such as hats, hijabs, and scarves; tops such as t-shirts, shirts, and outerwears; bottoms such as trousers, skirts, and sarongs; to various bags. However, the products that MSMEs can bring to exhibitions are limited. To overcome

this, a product catalog is needed to serve as a representation of the products that cannot be brought.

Meanwhile, the Pekalongan Batik Museum has three batik motifs that are interesting because they have a suitability to be combined with QR Codes. The following are images of the batik collections in the Pekalongan Batik Museum:

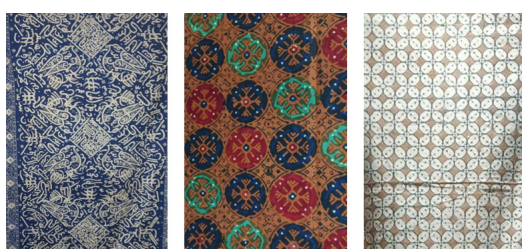


Figure 2.
Besurek
Batik

Figure 3.
Jlamprang
Batik

Figure 4.
Kawung
Batik

(Source: Personal research documentation)

The first motif is the besurek batik motif from Bengkulu. This batik motif is unique because it is a combination of batik techniques and the calligraphy of Hijaiyah letters, both readable and unreadable. The second motif is a typical Pekalongan batik motif, namely Jlamprang batik, which has a distinctive circular motif like a coin. If the circle is changed to an oval shape, it will form like the third motif, which is the typical Central Javanese Kawung motif. If observed, the three batik motifs have a similarity in the form of square gaps that are similar to QR Codes.

The next step after collecting data is analysis using the Atumics method, which divides an artifact into seven elements: Element, Technique, Utility, material, icon, concept, and shape. This aims to obtain a product concept that combines tradition and is relevant to the times (Nugraha, A. 2018). The blue part is the selected part, while the white part means the unselected part. After performing the analysis using

the Atumics method.

Table 1. Atumics Method
(Source: Personal research documentation)

MIXTURE IDEA		
Artefact	Batik QR Code	
Technique	Hand-drawn & stamped batik (using wax)	Digital Printing, Screen Printing
Utility	Specific events (exhibitions) and daily products	Product catalog, game, Digital products, website, payment methods
Material	Mori fabric, primissima cotton	Polymicro fabric
Icon	Besurek, Jlamprang, Kawung	Dot matrix, pixelated
Concept	Traditional, Philosophical, Artistic	Digital information Storage
Shape	Handbag and sling bag	Sticker, standee, banner

The results of the analysis will be packaged in a design brief. The design brief is presented as a crucial, well-informed starting point for designers that defines the core details of a project (Hanington, 2017).

Table 2. Design Brief
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Client	Rumah BUMN Telkom Pekalongan
Service Name	UMKM Batik QR Product Catalog
Objective	Design a pair of batik products combined with a QR Code

Target Consumer	Teenagers aged 12 and above and fostered UMKM of Rumah BUMN Telkom Pekalongan
Product List	Kawung-patterned batik QR sling bag for men and handbag for women
Material	Batik printing fabric with polymicro material, canvas fabric to add texture and thickness, and foam for bag structure reinforcement.

Based on the Design Brief Table, the products designed are a Batik QR sling bag and a handbag. These products are a combination of traditional elements (Kawung and Jlamprang batik motifs) and QR code elements. The client in this design project is Rumah BUMN Telkom Pekalongan. The target consumers are teenagers aged 12 and over and MSMEs fostered by Rumah BUMN Telkom Pekalongan. It can be used to store product catalogs and be worn at exhibitions. It uses a digital printing technique on polymicro fabric and canvas fabric to add texture and thickness, and foam to strengthen the bag's structure.

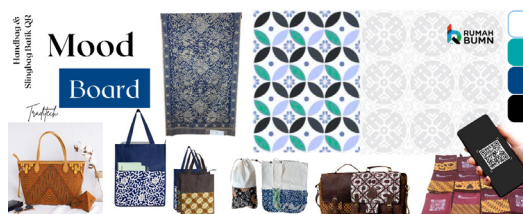


Figure 5. Batik QR Code Product Moodboard
 (Source: Personal research documentation)

Based on the design brief and moodboard for the batik QR product design, the products to be designed are one batik sling bag for men and one handbag for women.

They have a “Traditech” feel, a combination of traditional batik motifs and QR code technology, with a large capacity to carry MSME items to exhibitions. They have a blue and green color palette typical of Rumah BUMN and have a QR code combined with batik motifs inspired by besurek, kawung, and Jlamprang batik.

Before designing the Batik QR Code product, it is important to know the parts of a QR Code. The structure and components of a QR Code consist of black and white patterns in a square shape that store data in binary format. The colors white and light blue represent 0, and dark blue represents 1. The faded parts are the unhighlighted parts of the QR. The following are the components that make up a QR Code and their placement.



Figure 6. Parts of a QR Code
 (Source: www.qr-code-generator.com)

Finder Patterns: Tell the scanner the location and orientation of the QR Code.

Alignment Pattern: Helps adjust the scan if there is distortion or tilt.

Timing Patterns: Determine the coordinates of each data module in the QR Code.

Version Information: Contains information about the version of the QR Code used, which affects the size of the matrix.

Format Information: Contains details on the error correction level and data masking pattern for accurate scanning.

Data and Error Correction Keys: The core part that stores the actual information and backup data for damage recovery.

Quiet Zone: The empty area around the QR Code that helps the scanner cor-

rectly identify its boundaries.

After knowing the parts of the QR code and their locations, the Batik QR Code product design process begins with motif design & QR readability testing.

Discussion

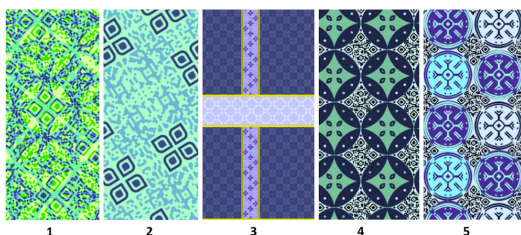


Figure 7. Motif Exploration
 (Source: Personal research documentation)

Motif exploration begins with four dark blue QR codes arranged in a circle with a turquoise green background, overlaid with a bright green kawung motif for a modern and unique impression (motif 1). Next, in motif 2, four QR codes with light blue data and a turquoise green background are simplified by changing the finding pattern to a dark blue kawung shape, giving a futuristic and modern impression. The third trial (motif 3) is a development of the previous motif, where the fabric is designed to be a QR batik sarong with a composition of 80% kawung batik motif and 20% QR Code. This sarong design was initially considered a suitable product to be executed because it was in line with the habits of the people of Pekalongan, but it was considered less comfortable to scan. Motifs 4 and 5 were chosen as the selected designs because of their success in combining modern and traditional elements in a balanced way and ensuring the readability of the QR Code. In motif 4, black QR codes are arranged in the gaps of the dark green kawung motif typical of Central Java, with a background combination of light blue, bright blue, and dark blue with green. In addition, black QR codes

are also inserted between the Jlamprang motif typical of Pekalongan with a background combination of bright blue, dark blue, and light blue.

There are QR readability testing results carried out in 10 trials.

Table 3. QR readability testing.
 (Source: Personal research documentation)

Motifs	Scan time
1	7-15 seconds
2	5-12 seconds
3	5-12 seconds
4	3-7 seconds
5	3-7 seconds

Designs motifs 4 and 5 will be used as material for making the batik QR bags. The following are the results of the batik QR bag products after the production process is complete.



Figure 8 & 9. Kawung & Jlamprang Batik QR Bag
 (Source: Personal research documentation)

Conclusion

This research successfully explored the Batik QR Code, which originated from the batik collection at the Pekalongan Batik Museum. It used the Atomics method as an innovative solution to increase the functional value of batik and overcome the challenges of fashion MSMEs in Pekalongan. Through motif exploration, it produced the selected designs (motifs 4 and 5). It successfully harmonized the traditional kawung and jlamprang motifs with the QR Code aesthetically and functionally, had good QR Code readability, and achieved a balanced combination of modern and traditional elements. This Batik QR Code bag is expected to provide a functional value that is in harmony with the aesthetic value of batik, while also becoming an additional product alternative for MSMEs at exhibitions.

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THE DIRECTOR AS ETHICAL MEDIATOR: INSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE IN RUMAH KEJUJURAN

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Received Feb. 09, 2026; Revised Feb. 26, 2026; Accepted Mar. 05, 2026.

Abstract: *This research explores how the ethics can be preserved in institutional documentary practice by the conception of the director as an ethical intermediary. The research uses a qualitative, practice-based approach and focuses on a collaborative project between UMN and KPK called Rumah Kejujuran on the basis of a documentary. It is the process of creative work that will be the principal object of investigation and the primary source of data. As a practitioner-researcher, the director will have to reflect on ethical considerations during the entire production process. There are all phases of documentary film making that are used to gather data: development until post-production. Such data include audiovisual information, anecdotal commentaries and subjective access to the subject, and institutional records of production limitations. Reflective interpretative analysis of the data is done using thematic interpretation including the tension of ethics, creative negotiation, humanistic representation and institutional constraint. The results demonstrate that the ethical issues are mainly brought about by structural circumstances to define what is possible to be represented, but not through direct interventions. Imaginative bargaining in documentary mode, narrative format, and visual characteristics helps in maintaining morality. The analysis shows that by depicting the subjects as social actors in daily situations, humanistic representation does not allow the decrease of the subjects to the status of institutional symbols. The study redefines institutional documentary practice as a reflective and ethical negotiation space by framing the filmmaking process as an ethical space.*

Keywords: *institutional documentary; ethical mediation; documentary ethics*

Introduction

The documentary film is closely linked to reality because of the basis that it is founded on facts. Ayawaila (2008) argues that documentary storytelling is formed based on actual facts of life, individuals,

events or social circumstances, which are then influenced by the filmmaker (Sasongko et al., 2024). Nichols (2017) however argues that documentaries film cannot be taken as an objective representation of reality. Rather, it is a figurative form created based on the aesthetic of

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the filmmaker, its storyline, and its interpretation (Mulia & Sitepu, 2024). This in turn, implies that documentary practice contains a component of mediation and therefore, ethical considerations are also part and parcel of the filmmaking process.

When the documentary production is carried out through an institutional context, the ethical issues are increased. Creative films, especially those made in cooperation with government agencies tend to be caught between creative expression and organizational communication (Nichols, 2017). Despite the legitimacy, access, and resources it provides, institutional support also provides narrative restrictions that follow institutional agendas and communicative goals. Under such situations, the filmmaker experiences a major dilemma that he/she must be ethically responsible to both the subject and the audience and at the same time comply with the institutional requirements that establish the limits of representation.

According to Nichols (2017), institutional documentary refers to a type of nonfiction film created in particular institutionalized settings, like a government agency, an educational institution, or a media organization, which shape how it is produced, how it is represented, and what it means. In such situations, there is a greater risk of barring the ideological instrumentalization in case the filmmakers do not remain critically distant to the institutional interests. Winston describes this state as complicity, which eventually places documentary practice in a situation of losing critical autonomy and instead, making institutional legitimacy by means of narrative framing. Consequently, institutional documentary photography raises important inquiries about ethical accountability, representational sincerity and creativity.

These issues are particularly relevant in the case of the Indonesian documen-

tary, in which the cooperation between the educational institutions and the state agencies has become a more common phenomenon (Eryanto et al., 2022). An example is the production of *Rumah Kejujuran* (2022) by Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN) and Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) as a part of a national anti-gratification educational campaign (Banten Satu, 2022; Sitepu et al., 2024). The film shows a civil servant who is continuously ready to refuse gratuities and makes honesty a value that he is part of his everyday life and not a simple rhetorical motto. In spite of its inspirational story the process of production presents ethical conflicts: the central topic was institutionally chosen, the moral message was caused by campaign goals, and the production was harshly bounded by institutional and temporal conditions. At the same time, the director also tried to remain morally upright and depict the subject as a complex person and not a symbolic projection of institutional message.



Figure 1. Opening title *Rumah Kejujuran*
(Source: Film *Rumah Kejujuran*, 2022)

This research does not consider *Rumah Kejujuran* as only an institutional product but rather, images the filmmaking process as a reflective space of negotiating ethical decisions. Based on the concept of documentary as a negotiation between fact, ethics, and interpretation proposed by Nichols (2017), the idea of documentary as a performative discourse formed through the interactions between the filmmaker, the subject and the insti-

tution suggested by Bruzzi (2006), this research prefigures the creative process as a key subject of inquiry on ethics. This research will argue that the production of films and especially in institutional setting is a dynamic and reflective location where ethical integrity should be actively bargained upon in the face of the external limitations, rather than assumed. The research aims to show how documentary film makers can carry out representational honesty without incumbent institutional pressures through a practice based inquiry.

In this connection, this research is based on the practice-based approach, making the director a filmmaker and a researcher. The creative activity of Rumah Kejujuran is not only examined as a tool of creating a documentary film but also as a place of consideration of ethical issues, representational tactics, and institutional discourses. The research is structured around the research question which is as follows How can a documentary director act ethically and be factual when he or she is making his or her film in a state institution? This query is further explored in two related fields, to begin with how the director is able to bargain the balance between the institutional requirements and the representational sincerity in documentary practice; and, second, what imaginative technique can be employed to maintain the reflective liberty and a humanistic depiction within the institutional restriction. With this question, this research places institutional documentary as a means of communication and ethical, reflective area in the present-day documentary practice.

Methodology

The qualitative and practice-based research approach was utilized with the documentary filmmaking process being both the location of inquiry as well as the main source of data. As a practitioner-research-

er, the director was in a position to perform reflective analysis continuously as the documentary Rumah Kejujuran was being produced. Such a methodological strategy is quite appropriate to analyze the ethical representation of institutional documentary practice because ethics is implied by creative decision-making, interaction with the subject, and dealing with institutions instead of quantifiable variables (Susanto et al., 2025).

The study was conducted in the context of a project in collaboration between Universitas Multimedia Nusantara (UMN) and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) which was a documentary project. A group of lecturers and students created five documentaries based on a common institutional framework and schedule. Rumah Kejujuran (2022) has been selected as the key object of analysis because it is dedicated to the ethical practice and negotiation at the institutional level. The other four movies provide some contextual comparison as they are more or less of the same production conditions, but they are not the main point.

The main data used in This research was the documentary production process itself gathered throughout the development, pre-production, production and post-production processes. These records were containing audiovisual and other material created in filming and editing, observational records of being involved in production process and notes made by director during and after major production phases. Additional first-hand information was collected in participative interaction with documentary subjects, especially during interviews, and in passing conversations that enlightened narrative construction. Secondary data materials contained institutional reports like project outlines, campaign specifications and coordination files which described the purposes and limitations of the UMN-

KPK partnership.

The analysis of data was done in a reflective thematic approach. Audiovisual sources, contemplative notes and institutional records were thoroughly assessed in order to specify common patterns in ethical conflict, creative negotiation, representational approach, and institutional restraint. All these patterns were divided into thematic categories and these categories make the Results and Discussion section. Through a process of analysis, there was an iterative motion between empirical observation and theoretical interpretation using such concepts of documentary ethics and representation theory as a means of analysis and not as a means of prescription. Such a methodology was necessary to make the analysis consistent with creative practice and critical involvement with pertinent scholarly discourse. This research will allow the audience to assess the suitability of the methodology and the validity of the results by identifying the context of the research, the source of data, methods of data collection, and interpretation of the data. Although the study has no aim of statistical generalisation, the framework of the research methodology allows an analytical replication in the similar institutional documentary setting, specifically in the environment of educational or state-funded production where the same ethical and representational issues may occur.

There were ethical issues involved in the research process and filmmaking practice. Documentary subjects were informed and representational decisions were informed by the desire to maintain dignity, agency and complexity of context. Positionality as a filmmaker and as an academic was reflexively observed, and a clear recognition of how institutional collaboration had to be applied to creative and ethical decisions made in the course of the research.

Result and Discussion

This part contends that the use of creativity in decision-making, maneuvering ethical challenges and negotiating institutional pressures form part of the ethical representation in Rumah Kejujuran beneath the filmmaking process. Instead of representing the results as quantitative data, the study introduces them as reflective substances pegged on such creative and ethical activities. One is based on the practical observations during production, another one on theoretical explanations of documentary ethics and documentary representation.

Ethical Dilemmas of Institutional Documentary Practice

This research establishes that there is a long held ethical conflict in institutional documentary production, especially whereby the filmmaking is incorporated in a state sponsored campaign (Aufderheide, 2011). In Rumah Kejujuran, such tension occurred because the country incorporated it into an anti-gratification program that was spearheaded by a government agency. Institutional intervention affected the thematic focus, choice of subject and moral message, which offered legitimacy, access, and logistical back-up and at the same time, it posed ethical limitations with which the director had to grapple continuously.

This case shows that ethical issues in institutional documentary practice lie not necessarily in the open censorship or direct intervention, but structural preconditions of the production process (Aufderheide et al., 2009). An example of how these difficulties occur is in the supply of pre-identified list of possible subjects. People on this list were already in place as good examples that fit the narrative and campaign goals of the institution. As a result, the director was faced with an ethi-

cal dilemma, choosing between making a critical representational inquiry or letting the documentary serve as an institutional validation tool first and foremost (Walsh, 2024).

This situation questions the belief of utter autonomy of documentary directors. Nichols (2017) also argues that documentaries are necessarily associated with decisions that are influenced by power relations and viewpoint. In institutional contexts, the creativity of decisions is also determined by the organisational interests that create a limit to the story (Ishaque, 2025). Hence, the issue of ethics by the director went beyond the selection of subjects to the presentation and humanisation of the preferred institutional narrative.

Rumah Kejujuran had institutional influence that was not based on explicit directives, but on unspoken expectations of moral clarity. Positive representation and campaign alignment are part of film documentary (Maccarone, 2010). This finding confirms the idea of complicity suggested by Winston, where documentary practice becomes deprived of critical autonomy not under the direct pressure, but rather through various subtle and unconscious mechanisms of alignment with stories promoted by the dominant institutions (Winston et al., 2017). Here, ethical compromise is not a single event as such, but a collection of successive creative decisions arising, due to which the final product is formed (Walsh, 2024).

It is in this context that the concept of ethical responsibility is viewed as a dynamic and reflective process as opposed to a fixed moral stance. The director must maintain the ethical consciousness all along the production process, narrative formulation, visual framing, and editorial choice (Rabiger & Hermann, 2020). Ethical negotiation is concerned with decisions on emphasis, omission and the relative

place between institutional ground and individual view point. This observation supports the main thesis of the study ethical integrity in institutional documentary practice does not rely on the kind of resistance to institutional influence but rather on a reflective and critical approach by filmmakers to the impact of institutional influence (Aburghif, 2022). By considering the problem of ethical tension as a structural state, instead of a one-dimensional conflict, the research places institution documentary filmmaking as a process of ongoing negotiation. Here, ethical integrity does not come as the result of neutrality or detachment, but rather as a deliberate and thoughtful involvement with power relations that determine documentary representation.



Figure 2. Rifki Abdilah, the main subject of the film
(Source: Film *Rumah Kejujuran*, 2022)

Creative Negotiation as Ethical Strategy

The main finding of this research is that creative negotiation is one of the key ethical approaches employed by the director to overcome institutional limitations. The director did not resort to open opposition to institutional intervention or passively accepted the role of a subordinate partner in the process of making the film but maintained the principle of negotiation. This was negotiated at several levels such as narrative design, visuality and the relationship with the subject matter. Ethical integrity is defined in this context not as a principle, but as a practice, which is perpetuated by reflective

decision-making as part of creative work (Ishaque, 2025).

Creative negotiation in Rumah Kejujuran was a pragmatic reaction to documentary production of institutions. The director needed to fulfill the goals of the campaign and at the same time not to lose sincerity and human dimensions. The principles approach did not deny the mandates, but selective involvement. The director chose when to match, reposition or shift to lived experience. This demonstrates that morally upright institutional documentary is not antagonistic but a cautious decision-making process (Nichols, 2017).



Figure 3. Final preview film Rumah Kejujuran
(Source: Visual documentation author, 2022)

One of the more important types of creative negotiation was the use of observational and participatory modes of documentary. On-the-job sequences allowed the daily life of the subject to progress without such an excessively narrative intrusion as might have been created by a moralizing narrative, focusing on the habitual behavior of the subject and his interactions with others rather than on articulating moral moralities. Foregrounding ordinary habits led to the film opposing reductive moral symbolism, to enable the creation of ethical values to develop naturally out of behaviour. This is in line with (Nichols, 2017) statement that observational practices may establish the ethical space through the reduction of the authoritative framing and portraying subjects as

social actors, but not as the instruments of the story.

Participatory aspects, including the reflective interviews, provided additional dialogue between the director and the subject (Nichols, 2017). The director was not an omniscient storyteller, but a contemporary, active subject. Nichols (2017) observes that the participatory modes emphasize the relationship between the ethical relationship by rendering the interaction visible. Here, in Rumah Kejujuran, this allows the director to have a conversation but not to foist institution rhetoric over them but to balance between directives and exposure.

Ethical negotiation also took place in narrative structure as an important location (Aufderheide et al., 2009). The decision to use the three-act structure indeed gave the narrative coherence without making the institutional message dominant over the narrative (Bordwell et al., 2024). The story development was not about the results of the policy or the success of the institution but on how the individual values of the subject and his or her everyday activities were carried on (Renov, 2004). This formal choice allowed the film to comply with the institutional demands of comprehensibility and availability and also retain interpretive space on behalf of the audience.

Bernard (2016) stresses the notion that ethical narrative in documentary does not just rely on the accuracy of the facts but also on the way narrative formulas influence the ways viewers perceive the information and form meanings. Narrative form was used as an ethical instrument in this case as opposed to a neutral vessel (Bordwell et al., 2024). The director, by centering the film on a personal experience instead of institutional validation made the goals of the campaign congruent with a humanistic form of representation (Rabiger & Hurbis-Cherrier,

2020). Creative negotiation was, therefore, a mediating approach that harmonized institutional intent and ethical responsibility towards the subject (Bernard, 2016; Nichols, 2017).

Combining all these results, it can be concluded that creative negotiation is a proactive ethical approach towards institutional documentary practice. Ethical integrity is not maintained by working to strict adherence to external ideals, but by being contemplative of the limitations and opportunities of the production situation (Ishaque, 2025). Negotiation between modes, structures and relational practices in Rumah Kejujuran helped the director to be representative with institutional requirements and thus, putting documentary filmmaking as an ethical practice based on creative reflexivity.

Humanistic Representation and the Rejection of Institutional Symbolism

One of the important results of this research is a deliberate attempt on the part of the director to show the topic under institutional symbolism (Piotrowska, 2025). The main character facing every challenge and hardship in Rumah Kejujuran is represented once more as a person rather than an ethical role model or a model campaigner, but as a person existing in the context of kinship, workplace, and social life. The film does not focus on institutional acknowledgement or formal success, but rather lays emphasis on ordinary experiences both at home, in day-to-day management and in more casual social environs. This representational approach is based on ethical values that are grounded in daily lived experience as opposed to being based on abstract moral principles that are promoted by institutional discourse.

Such a method shows the ethical lev-

el of faithfulness to the dignity and complexity of the subject (Piotrowska, 2025). Placing the concept of honesty in the context of family life and everyday tasks, the film does not want to turn people into icons of right values. The ethical position of the subject is not depicted as extraordinary or heroic. Rather, it manifests itself as a regular behavior that is the result of individual background, interpersonal obligation, and the social context. The documentary is a re-enactment of integrity more as a condition of experience, a condition of relationship instead of a performative identity that is forced by institutions (Bernard, 2016; Nichols, 2017).



Figure 4. Screenshot of Rifky Abdilah's family
(Source: Film *Rumah Kejujuran*, 2022)

Visual strategies are main determinants in maintaining this humanistic representation (Rabiger & Hermann, 2020). The film relies on the lighting of nature, the slow pace of the editing rhythm, and the long observing shots. These decisions create a feeling of closeness and allow viewers to interact with the matter without meddling with obtrusive framing. The camera does not emphasize spectacle and drama. Rather, it pursues the subject in the course of normal activity that slowly discloses ethical coherence (Rabiger & Hermann, 2020). Visual restraint is an ethical option that makes the representation not to be exploitative and overestimate the moral importance (Lester et al., 2022).

This approach to the representation is especially pertinent to Bruzzi (2006) conception of documentary as the performative discourse. Bruzzi (2006) explains

that meaning in documentary is created by the interaction of the filmmaker, the subject and the context, and not by the imposition of meaning. The subject of Rumah Kejujuran defines the ethical values based on the behavior and thoughts of the subject as they transpire in the actual context enabling meaning to be created as opposed to imposed. This performative aspect allows the documentary to be open to the audience so that they can interpret its ethical meaning without being guided towards one particular moral answer (Bruzzi, 2006).

The conclusions also indicate that proximity and distance between the subject and the institutional discourse are important factors in ensuring ethical representation in an institutional documentary practice (Piotrowska, 2025). The institutional values are the contextual background, in which there is a larger social meaning of honesty and anti-gratification endeavors. Yet, these values are strategically placed in order to frame the personal story as opposed to owning it. This balance helps the film not to subjugate individual experience to institutional messages thus ensuring representational integrity (Jurriens, 2023).

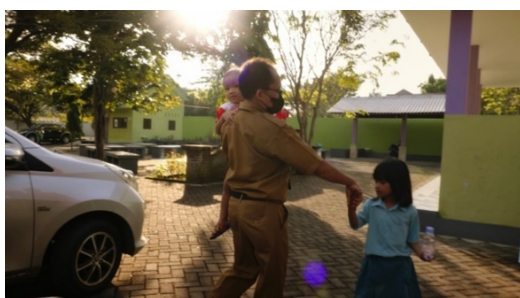


Figure 5. Screenshot of Rifqi Abdillah taking his child to school
(Source: Film *Rumah Kejujuran*, 2022)

This approach is consistent with the idea that Nichols (2017) considers the ethical duty toward the represented people and especially the need to not turn social actors into a means of rhetoric persua-

sion. The subject in Rumah Kejujuran continues to be a social actor and its ethical agency is therefore realized in lived practice and not in symbolic capacity. By striving to keep the formal aspects of institutions under wraps, the documentary continues to enjoy critical receptivity and humanistic elegance to show that institutional documentary can retain its ethical acuity when that representation is based on daily human experience (Jong et al., 2013).

Institutional Constraints as Sites of Ethical Reflection

The last conclusion of the research shows that institutional limitations were not only a restraint to creative practice. They also proved to be fruitful spheres of moral thinking during the film production process. In Rumah Kejujuran, the limited production schedules, the need to project the narrative direction and institutional messages as well as the coordination with various stakeholders always determined the representational choices of the director. These limitations were turned into conditions of heightened ethical awareness in every production step, and they should not be perceived as outside barriers only (Walsh, 2024).

Time limitations, especially, made regular creative choices the points of ethical reflection. The scale of production brought the director to the problem of evaluating the elements that could be effectively captured through depicting the life of the subject without falsifying the plausibility of the experience (Nichols, 2017). Inclusion, omission and emphasis choices on narrative became then ethical and technical. In this regard, editing was a reflective process. It demanded a trade-off between the narrative and the danger of oversimplification or even a reduction in morality (Bernard, 2016; Sitepu et al., 2024)

Equally, the necessity to stay consistent with the institutional goals increased the ethical aspect of visual representation and story presentation. Though the institutional requirements emphasised the importance of clarity and positive moral framing, the director was trying to retain the representational openness of the situation by enabling the rise of ethical values out of observation and interaction, instead of the declarative process (Nichols, 2017; Rabiger & Hermann, 2020). Such negotiation repackaged institutional limitations as reasons to consider ethical alternatives, which meant that the director had to be critically interested in intersecting the institutional discourse and personal narrative (Nichols, 2017).

This conclusion overturns the conviction that institutional entanglement always subverts the creative independence. Rather, *Rumah Kejujuran* shows that authorship in institutional documentary practice is reformed as a negotiated process of ethical mediation. The work of a director is transformed to be an ethical agent rather than a free story-teller (Maccarone, 2010). The director works between institutional intention, subject experience and audience interpretation. Here, authorship is not lost, but dispersed in a network of relationship that can shape the results of representations (Nichols, 2017).

This attitude is in line with the modern concepts of documentary ethics as a processual, dynamic practice instead of a rigid moral position (Piotrowska, 2025). The lack of institutional influence does not make ethical integrity. Rather, it is characterized by the ability of the filmmaker to interact with such influence reflectively and critically (Aburghif, 2022). This research supportively declares that institutional documentary can be an ethical and reflective venue, as opposed to an instrumental one, by predetermining the creative process as a form of ethical negotiation (Bernard, 2016; Jurriëns et al., 2026).

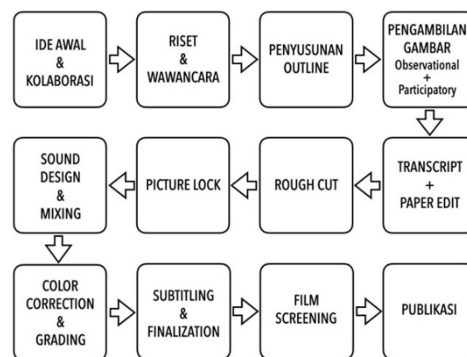


Figure 6. The production process of the film *Rumah Kejujuran*
(Source: Visual documentation authors)

In this regard, *Rumah Kejujuran* adds to the larger discourse of documentary ethics by demonstrating that the institutional constraints can be fruitfully utilized in the context of practice-based filmmaking. Ethical accountability is not ensured by declining institutionally collaborative practice, but through a deliberate discussion of its effect on representation, narrative form, and relational action (Maccarone, 2010; Piotrowska, 2025) This result answers the main research question of the study. It demonstrates that ethical integrity of institutional documentary practice is maintained on the level of reflective mediation which is incorporated within the creative decision-making.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that ethical integrity in institutional documentary practice is not the simple abhorrence of any institutional involvement, or the unthinking observation of institutional agendas, but through proactive creative negotiation in the process of filmmaking. Ethical responsibility in *Rumah Kejujuran* is presented as a dynamic reflective undertaking, which is influenced by the decisions in representation, institutional limits and the continued relations with the subjects. According to the study, institutional doc-

umentary production intrinsically creates an ethical friction, especially when the decisions of the narratives are biased by the state agendas.

In Rumah Kejujuran, these tensions were the results of the effect of subtle, structural factors, and not open censorship, which explains that ethical dilemmas are always present and must be noted during the production. This research finds innovation in negotiation to be the primary tactic of maintaining moral honesty in the face of agency requirements. The director could preserve an honest representation without compromising on the expectations by being selective on navigating through institutional demands, i.e. documentary mode, narrative form, and visual style. It is characterised by the use of mixed modes and a three-act format that focuses on lived experience and puts forward ethical values as everyday practices instead of as institutions.

Another, conclusion is the emphasis on humanistic nature of representations in the rejection of reductive institutional symbolism. Rumah Kejujuran proves that ethical representation can be attained through summarizing the subject as a rounded person living in the families, professional, and social settings. Inventory focus on mundane scenes, social flows, day-to-day affairs imparts on the documentary the effect of an attack on turning the subject into either a moral figure or a campaign tool. This way keeps the dignity of the subject and moral requirements toward the individuals being represented in the practice of documentary.

The research also proposes that ethical reflection can be encouraged by institutional constraints. Time, alignment, and stakeholder constraints also pushed the director to think more critically about every decision. In this case, authorship turns into a healthy mediation and the director is placed to negotiate between in-

stitutional intents, subjective experiences and viewpoints. In such a way, creative conditions of reflection determine ethical integrity.

This analysis makes its contribution to the study of documentary by presenting institutional documentary as a place of ethical exploration through foregrounding the filmmaking process and redefining institutional documentary as an ethical and reflective practice. The research confirms that the practice-based filmmaking provided useful information concerning the negotiation of ethics, representation, and the creative responsibility in the actual production conditions. By doing so, Rumah Kejujuran becomes a well-grounded example of how ethically conscious and humanistically representative institutional cooperation can be in place even in the modern documentary practice.

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SOCIAL CAMPAIGN DESIGN SUPPORTING RECOVERY FROM CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AMONG LATE ADOLESCENTS

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Received Jan. 23, 2026; Revised Mar. 10, 2026; Accepted Apr. 21, 2026

Abstract: *Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) is a form of adverse childhood experience characterized by the consistent lack of emotional responsiveness from caregivers, which often remains unrecognized yet significantly affects long-term emotional and interpersonal development. In late adolescence, unresolved CEN may manifest as emotional dysregulation, difficulty forming healthy relationships, and impaired social functioning. In the Indonesian context, public awareness of CEN remains limited, and design-based social interventions addressing its interpersonal impacts are still scarce. This study aims to develop a visual communication-based social campaign that supports interpersonal recovery from the negative effects of Childhood Emotional Neglect among late adolescents. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, utilizing literature review, questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and observational analysis of existing social campaigns. The campaign was developed through a Design Thinking framework and structured using the AISAS communication model (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, Share), emphasizing empathetic storytelling and emotional engagement. The study resulted in a social campaign titled *Anak Bawang Berhak Disayang (Every Underdog Deserves to Be Loved)*, which integrates digital and physical media to foster emotional awareness, encourage reflection on past experiences of emotional neglect, and support sustained interpersonal recovery, particularly through emotional reconnection with parents. The campaign utilizes a website and social media as its primary platforms to guide users through awareness, reflection, and recovery stages. Future research is recommended to evaluate audience impact, emotional outcomes, and behavioral changes using quantitative or mixed-method approaches.*

Keywords: *childhood emotional neglect; social campaign; emotional appeal; interpersonal recovery; late adolescents*

Introduction

Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) is conceptualized as a condition in which caregivers consistently fail to provide ad-

equately emotional responsiveness, resulting in unmet developmental needs despite the absence of explicit maltreatment (Webb & Musello, 2013). Worldwide esti-

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mates suggest that close to 18% of children encounter emotional or physical neglect during their developmental years prior to age 17 (Stoltenborgh in Yang et al., 2025). In Indonesia, documented similar concerns through a nationwide survey involving over 73,000 children from more than 42,000 households, identifying 16,189 cases of neglect and indicating that multiple children within the same household are often affected. Similarly, Paramita & Faradiba (2020) identified CEN as one of the most frequently reported adverse childhood experiences among Indonesian adolescents.

Children who experience emotional neglect often face difficulties in recognizing, expressing, and regulating emotions, which may persist into adolescence and adulthood (Ye et al., 2026). These difficulties can manifest as psychological and interpersonal challenges, including depressive symptoms, heightened anxiety, reduced self-esteem, impaired social functioning, and difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships (Rahma et al., 2024). In more severe cases, unresolved CEN has been associated with social isolation, antisocial behavior, and an increased risk of criminal involvement in adulthood (Franz, 2022; Haslam & Taylor, 2022).

The interpersonal impacts of CEN become particularly salient during late adolescence (ages 18–22), a developmental stage characterized by identity formation and increasing social demands (Ristyanda et al., 2024). Late adolescents with CEN histories often report feelings of invisibility and unworthiness due to a lack of emotional validation in childhood, which may hinder the development of social networks and emotional support systems. Consequently, these individuals may experience difficulties in forming healthy romantic, social, and professional relationships (Logan-Greene & Semanchin Jones, 2018;

Rahma et al., 2024).

Despite its significant interpersonal consequences, CEN among late adolescents remains underexplored in the Indonesian context. Existing research largely focuses on clinical or psychological outcomes, while studies addressing the interpersonal dimension of CEN particularly through design-based social interventions are still limited (Berliana et al., 2019). Moreover, social campaigns in Indonesia that explicitly address CEN are relatively scarce, resulting in limited public awareness and insufficient psychosocial support for affected adolescents (Kumari, 2020).

Social campaigns offer a potential strategy to address this gap by functioning as reflective and educational communication tools. According to Jackson (as cited in Danurdara et al., 2024), social campaigns aim to raise awareness, convey information, and influence audience attitudes and behaviors through effective communication. Within the field of visual communication design, emotionally appealing and empathy-driven messages can facilitate reflection, reduce negative perceptions of mental health issues, and increase the likelihood of help-seeking among those affected by unresolved childhood trauma (Kumari, 2020; Yap et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to develop a social campaign design that supports interpersonal recovery from the negative impacts of Childhood Emotional Neglect among late adolescents aged 18–25 by increasing awareness, reducing mental health stigma related to childhood trauma, and encouraging supportive help-seeking behaviors. This research contributes to the field of visual communication design by proposing a campaign framework that integrates the Design Thinking process and AISAS communication to address

the interpersonal consequences of CEN through emotional appeal and reflective visual storytelling.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm to examine how late adolescents experience and interpret the interpersonal impacts of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN), and how these lived experiences can inform the design of an empathy-driven social campaign. Emphasizing subjective meaning-making, emotional experiences, and social contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), the research adopts a design-based research method grounded in the design thinking framework, applying the stages of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test to translate insights into a practical campaign solution (Interaction Design Foundation, 2016).

Data are collected from primary and secondary sources to ensure depth and contextual richness. Primary data include the Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionnaire (Webb & Musello, 2013) and in-depth interviews, while secondary data are obtained through document analysis of relevant literature and observational studies of previous social campaigns. All data are analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to emotional regulation, interpersonal difficulties, recovery needs, and media preferences among late adolescents. These insights inform the development of a conceptual social campaign that integrates a creative brief and the AI-SAS (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, Share) communication model (Sugiyama & Andree, 2011) to structure audience engagement through emotional appeal and

reflective visual storytelling. Research credibility is ensured through triangulation, member checking, and expert review.

Empathize

The empathize stage aimed to develop a deep understanding of the emotional experiences, interpersonal challenges, and media behaviors of late adolescents aged 18–25 who have experienced Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) and are actively engaged with digital culture. This stage began with the administration of the Childhood Emotional Neglect Questionnaire (CENQ) developed by Jonice Webb (Webb & Musello, 2013) to identify specific indicators of emotional neglect based on participants’ lived experiences and to select participants for in-depth interviews. Questionnaire results indicated recurring experiences of emotional detachment, discomfort in social settings, difficulty seeking support, excessive self-reliance, people-pleasing tendencies, and social withdrawal.

Following the questionnaire phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with four late-adolescent CEN survivors and three psychologists specializing in child and adolescent mental health. Insights from the psychologists indicated that many late adolescents affected by CEN tend to rely on maladaptive coping strategies, such as overworking, social withdrawal, addictive behaviors, or externalizing blame. Despite increasing public awareness of CEN, both experts and respondents emphasized that effective coping strategies remain poorly understood and insufficiently practiced among affected individuals.

Interviews with respondents revealed that most respondents first encountered information about CEN through social



Figure 1. In-Depth Interview with Psychologists
(Source: Personal research documentation, 2025)

media, though often in superficial and fragmented forms. This reflects broader patterns among adolescents and young adults, who engage with mental health content through creative and expressive digital formats. Platforms such

as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook were most frequently accessed, with a clear preference for short-form content featuring implicit emotional appeal, relatable storytelling, and non-preachy messaging. Streaming services and podcasts were also identified as complementary media that foster emotional resonance and reflection.

To inform the creative strategy, this stage also included an observational analysis of previous social campaigns addressing neglect, trauma, and loneliness. Campaigns such as *Sound of Violence* by Save the Children Hong Kong (Staff, 2024), *Neglect Hides in Plain Sight* by SPCA Singapore (Shaw, 2024), and *Holiday Home* by Airbnb (D&AD, 2024) demonstrated the effectiveness of empathy-driven approaches, interactive elements, and emotionally resonant storytelling in fostering personal connection and encouraging behavioral reflection. These campaigns

highlighted the importance of presenting sensitive issues through familiar media environments, experiential engagement, and solution-oriented narratives.

Define

Synthesizing insights from questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and observations of prior social campaigns, this study defines the core problem as the limited availability of empathetic, accessible, and relatable interventions that address the interpersonal impacts of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) among late adolescents. In response, the campaign is defined around three strategic priorities:

1. emotional validation as an entry point for acknowledging lived experiences of CEN;
2. emotional regulation through practical and accessible tools such as journaling, emotion identification aids, mindfulness, and grounding techniques;
3. and the development of healthy interpersonal relationships supported by community engagement and professional guidance.

To ensure relevance and reach, the campaign adopts a mixed-media approach that integrates traditional media with digital platforms, particularly social media, while prioritizing empathy, relational sensitivity, audience confidentiality, and cultural–emotional contexts to deliver an ethically grounded and emotionally resonant intervention.

Ideate

At the ideation stage, research insights were translated into creative solutions through focused brainstorming, result-

ing in the campaign's big idea, "Connecting the Past, Healing the Present." This concept frames interpersonal recovery in late adolescence as a reflective process that begins with acknowledging previously unrecognized experiences of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN). These insights were consolidated into a creative brief that defined the campaign's strategic direction, visual approach, and narrative framework.

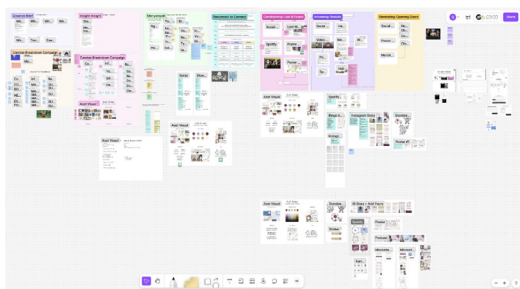


Figure 2. Brainstorm & Ideate Stage
(Source: Personal research documentation, 2025)

The campaign adopts a bittersweet, nostalgic, and homey tone, delivered through relatable and non-preachy storytelling to create emotional safety and encourage reflection. This approach is embodied in the campaign title "Anak Bawang Berhak Disayang" (Every Child Deserves to Be Loved) and the tagline "Dulu Dia-baikan, Kini Dirayakan" (Once Neglected, Now Celebrated). The metaphor of "anak bawang or onion kid," a popular Indonesian term referring to individuals who feel overlooked or unimportant, particularly in childhood social contexts is used to represent emotional neglect in an accessible and culturally familiar way.

At the same time, onions are widely associated with resilience and inner value, as strength and usefulness are revealed beneath their layered skin. This metaphor aligns with the emotional recovery process, which involves uncovering hidden wounds, processing emotional pain, and integrating past experiences into a more

whole and empowered sense of self. Through warm, reflective, and relatable language, the "anak bawang" narrative enables the campaign to communicate the complexity of CEN in a manner that resonates deeply with the target audience.

Prototype

The prototyping stage translated conceptual and strategic insights into tangible campaign outputs through a structured development process, progressing from rough sketches and refined visual explorations to high-fidelity prototypes. A cohesive visual identity was established to ensure consistency across all media touchpoints, including the formulation of a color palette, moodboard, logo, key visual, typography, and illustration style aligned with the campaign's emotional tone and narrative intent. The campaign prototype integrates multiple media formats, with a website positioned as the primary platform, supported by social media visuals, posters, outdoor activations, merchandise, and digital content.

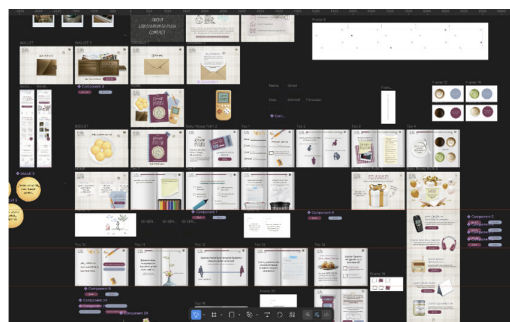


Figure 3. Prototype Stage
(Source: Personal research documentation, 2025)

Test

The testing stage was conducted iteratively to evaluate the effectiveness, clarity, and emotional resonance of the campaign prototypes. Evaluation involved feedback

sessions with representatives of the target audience and expert reviews from visual communication design practitioners, focusing on visual quality, narrative coherence, cultural sensitivity, emotional appeal, and audience engagement. Insights from each testing round were used to refine the campaign’s visual execution and messaging. A final evaluation was conducted with three campaign experts to assess the overall concept, media integration, and simulated implementation. Due to time constraints that limited full-scale implementation, the final expert evaluation was used to consolidate recommendations that strengthen the campaign concept and support future development and potential implementation.

six months (24 weeks) through three sequential stages: conditioning, informing, and reminding. The conditioning stage focused on raising awareness and self-reflection by helping audiences recognize unacknowledged emotional wounds and their impact on current interpersonal relationships. The informing stage provided empathetic and accessible education about Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN), equipping audiences with coping strategies while fostering empowerment and hope for recovery. The reminding stage functioned as an affirmation phase, reinforcing that emotional healing is both possible and worthy of social acknowledgment, and emphasizing the role of healthy interpersonal connections in sustaining recovery. These stages were strategically aligned with the AISAS framework (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, and Share) which was applied to guide audience engagement from initial emotional awareness, through active information-seeking and self-reflective actions, to sustained participation and message sharing within social contexts.



Figure 4. Test Stage
(Source: Personal research documentation, 2025)

Result

The campaign was implemented over

Table 1. Campaign Stage Details
(Source: Personal Document, 2025)

Stage	What to Say	AISAS Method
Conditioning	Peeling the Layers of Emotional Neglect	Attention, Interest, Search
Informing	Turning Pain into Healing	Search, Action, Share
Reminding	Every Underdog Deserves to Be Loved	Interest, Search, Action, Share

1. Visual Concept

The logo combines a logogram depicting a layered onion with a small heart supported by hands, symbolizing

emotional neglect and the need for care with a handwritten logotype that conveys warmth and sincerity. A monochromatic logo application ensures flexibility and reinforces the campaign's intimate, childlike tone. Supporting visuals employ a muted color palette dominated by soft purples and blues, accented with light green and brown to evoke calm melancholy, hope, and nostalgia. Typography blends child-like handwritten fonts with clean modern typefaces, while simple, hand-drawn illustrations resembling children's sketches are used to evoke childhood memory.



Figure 5. Logo & Color Palette
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

These elements are unified through a key visual system that incorporates negative space, silhouettes, aged paper textures, and loosely structured layouts to visually represent emotional absence, vulnerability, and childhood spontaneity.



Figure 6. Campaign Key Visual
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

2. Instagram Post



Figure 7. Instagram Post
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

Instagram posts are structured into sequential rows that visually and narratively guide audiences from childhood memory recall to emotional awareness

and basic education about Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN). Each post includes a clear call to action directing audiences to the campaign website, with later posts introducing recovery-oriented content and campaign activations as part of the informing phase.

3. Instagram Story



Figure 8. Instagram Story
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

Instagram Stories present the “Anak Bawang” narrative through short-form storytelling that introduces indicators of emotional neglect in an accessible and personal manner. The sequence concludes with an interactive bingo feature that encourages self-reflection and sharing, supported by clear calls to action linking to the main campaign account and website.

4. Broadcast Message



Figure 9. Broadcast Message
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

Broadcast messages distributed via WhatsApp and Facebook target parents as a secondary audience by delivering awareness-focused messages about emotional neglect in a familiar and relatable communication style. Each message includes calls to action directing recipients to the campaign’s digital platforms and encouraging peer-to-peer sharing to broaden awareness.

5. Spotify

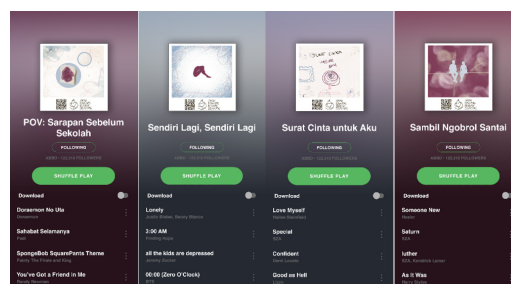


Figure 10. Spotify
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

The campaign utilizes Spotify playlists curated with nostalgic and emotionally reflective music to evoke childhood memories and support emotional engagement among late adolescents. These playlists are promoted through Spotify Ads and linked to the campaign’s social media and website as part of a cross-platform activation strategy.

6. Interactive Standee

Interactive standees placed in public spaces attract attention through emotionally evocative visuals and invite engagement via QR code scanning. The QR code directs audiences to a microsite for sharing personal stories related to emotional neglect, followed by calls to action leading to the campaign’s official digital platforms.

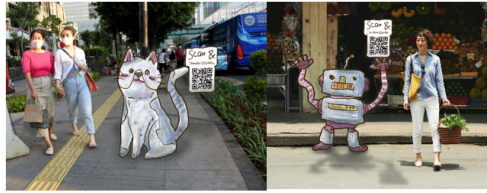


Figure 11. Interactive Standee
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

7. Sticker



Figure 12. Sticker
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

Stickers designed to resemble wound plasters were placed on cracked or damaged surfaces to visually symbolize hidden emotional neglect and attract public attention. Each sticker includes a QR code

directing audiences to an anonymous microsite for written emotional expression, followed by calls to action linking to the campaign’s website and social media.

8. Tarot Booth



Figure 13. Tarot Booth
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

The tarot booth functions as a reflective installation that uses custom-designed tarot cards to guide audiences in revisiting childhood experiences and interpersonal wounds. Tarot is positioned as a narrative and self-awareness tool rather than fortune-telling, with each session concluding with a keepsake card containing a QR code to the campaign’s digital platforms.

9. Website & Voucher



Figure 14. Website & Voucher
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

The campaign website serves as a central safe space where users complete self-assessments, interactive quizzes, and receive personalized recovery recommendations related to Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN). Engagement is incentivized through recovery-based vouchers and tools, including digital support resources and interpersonal healing activities that require shared participation.

10. WhatsApp Bot, Community, and Notification Push



Figure 15. WhatsApp Bot, Community, and Notification Push
(Source: Personal documentation)

A WhatsApp Bot and Community were developed to provide continuous emotional companionship, peer support, and guided reflection, particularly during vulnerable hours. The system delivers personalized messages, affirmations, and reminders, integrated with Google Calendar to support consistent self-care routines.

11. Interactive Installation

The “Healed Home” or “Rumah Pulih” installation is a password-protected mini house containing self-healing tools such as journals, affirmation cards, and therapeutic objects. Access is tied to campaign assessments, and activities are designed to be completed collaboratively to encour-

age interpersonal reconnection.



Figure 16. Interactive Installation
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

12. Podcast



Figure 17. Podcast
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

The podcast series consists of five cross-disciplinary episodes exploring creative and embodied approaches to processing childhood emotional neglect, featuring public figures from various fields, including writing, music, physical activity, and visual arts. The episodes are distributed through Spotify and YouTube Ads to extend the campaign’s reach and engagement.

13. Poster

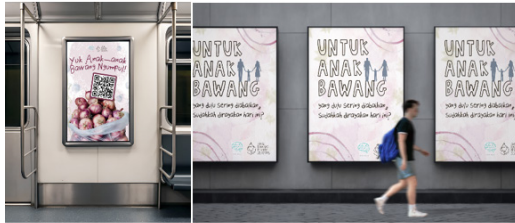


Figure 18. Poster
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

Campaign posters deliver empathetic messages encouraging late adolescents to rebuild emotional connections with themselves, others, and their parents. These visuals are placed in high-traffic public spaces to reinforce campaign presence and reflection.

14. Merchandise & Social Media Challenge



Figure 19. Merchandise & Social Media Challenge
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

Campaign merchandise in the form of nostalgic aromatherapy candles functions

as both a personal emotional reminder and a fundraising medium for children’s welfare. The closing social media challenge, #LangkahKecilku or #MyBabySteps, invites participants to share recovery journeys and interpersonal reconnection stories, reinforcing collective healing and visibility.

Discussion

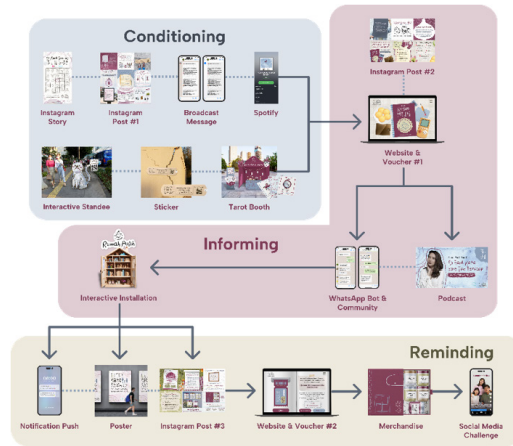


Figure 20. Media Integration
(Source: Personal design documentation, 2025)

The Anak Bawang Berhak Disayang campaign demonstrates how an integrated, multi-platform strategy can support emotional awareness, reflection, and recovery related to Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) among late adolescents through a structured conditioning–reminding flow. During the conditioning stage, media execution was divided into online and offline channels. Online activation began with Instagram Stories introducing the “Anak Bawang” narrative through emotional storytelling about indicators of CEN, followed by interactive bingo templates that encouraged self-recognition and peer sharing. These activations were supported by Instagram Ads and complemented by awareness-ori-

ented Instagram feed content. Reflective engagement was further strengthened through a nostalgic Spotify playlist, promoted via Spotify Ads, directing audiences to the campaign's social media and website. To reach parents as a secondary audience, educational WhatsApp and Facebook broadcast messages were distributed, highlighting emotionally neglectful behaviors that are often unrecognized and encouraging peer-to-peer dissemination as a form of collective support.

Offline, the campaign extended emotional engagement through interactive standees and stickers featuring QR codes that linked to reflective microsites, including platforms for sharing stories about silent witnesses of CEN and unspoken messages addressed to parents. A reflective tarot booth was also introduced to guide personal contemplation of childhood experiences and interpersonal relationships through symbolic interaction. All offline touchpoints directed audiences back to the campaign's digital ecosystem. These activations converged on the campaign website, where users completed a self-assessment to identify the severity and potential causes of CEN and received personalized recovery guidance. Engagement was further reinforced through the discount voucher, which incentivized shared healing experiences at partner cafés using recovery kits accessed through personalized passwords. Additional support systems, including a WhatsApp Bot companion, community groups, and reflective podcasts, emphasized continuity of care and social support.

At the reminding stage, sustained engagement was maintained through periodic digital reminders, affirmations, and progress-based rewards delivered via WhatsApp Bot and Google Calendar. The discount voucher program reframed recovery as a measurable and ongoing

process by linking emotional progress to counseling sessions or shared healing experiences with parents, thereby encouraging emotional reconnection and intergenerational dialogue. The campaign concluded with the participatory #LangkahKecilku (#MyBabySteps) challenge, inviting late adolescents to share personal recovery narratives, particularly those involving parental engagement to normalize emotional conversations surrounding CEN.

Despite its strengths, this study is limited by its conceptual and design-based nature, as audience impact and behavioral outcomes were not empirically tested through longitudinal evaluation. Future research should examine user responses, emotional outcomes, and relational changes over time to validate the campaign's effectiveness. Further development should also strengthen organizational identity visibility across media and expand large-scale offline activations to foster collective healing. Attention to visual visibility, consistency, and audience-centered research remains essential to ensure clarity, credibility, and scalability of the campaign.

Conclusion

This study reveals that awareness of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) among late adolescents remains low, despite its significant long-term impact on interpersonal relationships. Findings from literature review, questionnaires, observations, and in-depth interviews indicate that effective intervention requires emotional validation as an entry point for acknowledging lived experiences of CEN, emotional regulation supported by practical and accessible tools, and the development of healthy interpersonal relation-

ships through community engagement and professional guidance.

In response, the Anak Bawang Berhak Disayang campaign was designed as a visual communication-based intervention. Employing a Design Thinking approach through the stages of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test, the campaign integrates emotional storytelling, culturally resonant metaphors, and participatory media. Guided by a bittersweet, nostalgic, and homey tone and structured using the AISAS framework, the campaign translates research findings into three sequential stages: Conditioning, Informing, and Reminding derived from the big idea “Connecting the Past, Healing the Present.” Implemented across integrated media platforms, including a campaign website, discount vouchers, a WhatsApp bot, public activations, social media, and reflective merchandise, the campaign functions both as an educational platform and a safe space for late adolescents to recognize emotional wounds, validate their emotional needs, and initiate healthier interpersonal connections.

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CRAFTING EXPERIENCE: THE ROLE OF SENSORY AND EMOTIONAL DESIGN IN E-LEARNING NARRATIVES

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Received Jan. 25, 2026; Revised Apr. 18, 2026; Accepted May. 07, 2026.

Abstract: While digital storytelling tools increasingly incorporate sensory and emotional design elements, the effectiveness of these elements in an experiential learning environment remains less clear and needs to be explored further. This research enhances the investigation of this topic through a qualitative multiple case study of three platforms: Gentlerain.ai, The Blue Desert, and Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion. These platforms were chosen for their story-driven e-learning features and emphasis on narrative frameworks. Data were produced by conducting a series of methodical UI/UX walkthroughs and observing the primary platforms. Each instance was evaluated based on a framework that included narrative composition, sensory details, emotional connection, interaction design, consistency with Kolb's experiential learning cycle, and management of cognitive load. The findings indicate that visual design serves as a primary element but not yet standardized across platforms. While it serves as a medium to direct attention, emotional and argumentative burdens can sometimes reduce the engagement effectiveness. Tactile interactivity, in contrast, was not strongly associated with affective engagement; for example, The Blue Desert evoked emotional responses despite minimal tactile interaction. Cross-case comparisons further illustrate that narrative structure is fundamental for sustaining overall engagement with design attention and impact, thereby influencing the learning outcomes achievable through Kolb's experiential learning cycle. This research presents the Narrative Sensory Experiential Learning Model along with a design checklist for designers. This contribution is framed not only in relation to the model itself but also concerning the cross-case process that demonstrates the value of qualitative and structured analysis of digital platforms. Such an approach serves as a pathway for translating design-focused theoretical insights into Visual Communication Design and digital education, contributing toward Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Keywords: digital storytelling; experiential learning; sensory design; emotional design; visual communication design; e-learning

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Introduction

Digital storytelling emerges as an increasingly relevant practice in education today, combining storytelling structures with various multimedia and interactive technologies to promote student involvement and knowledge formation (Smeda et al., 2014; Tamimi, 2024). By this method, the learning is no longer delivered passively but becomes immersive as active engagement is developed which reflects through reflection and critical thought (Yang & Wu, 2012). Moreover, some researches show that integrating a visual, an auditory, and an interactive factor can enhance learners' motivation and their learning, especially in digital learning environments (Smeda et al., 2014; Tamimi, 2024; Yang & Wu, 2012).

In recent times, digital storytelling has become a lot more than a traditional media presentation but rather engaging experiences consisting of emotional involvement, multisensory interaction, and narrative-based learning contexts (He, 2024; Susanto, 2023). The above developments align with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the process and progression of learning through experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation (Susanto, 2023). Immersive storytelling, when utilized by explorers, renders them active participants, rather than passive recipients, connecting emotionally and cognitively to the material being learned (Robin, 2016). In such immersive learning experiences, sensory design is crucial (Wu et al., 2023). Multisensory aspects of visual aesthetics, sound design, interactive interfaces, and other facets of user engagement can impact the way we learn (Santi et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2023). Equally, emotional design improves motivation and retention, as providing meaningful learning experiences encourages linking of learners with content at cognitive and affective dimensions (He, 2024). Multi-

sensory participation (e.g., using visual, auditory, and tactile) enhances attention, emotional engagement, and cognitive functioning, increasing attentional capacity and increasing the learners' cognitive function with this multimodal approach (Schifferstein, 2011; Wu et al., 2023). Visual cues favour spatial comprehension and information processing (Wu et al., 2023), auditory cues increase emotional involvement and attention (He, 2024; Wu et al., 2023), while tactile interaction facilitates active participation and experiential learning (Susanto, 2023; Wu et al., 2023). The properties of these sensorial stimuli in digital learning environments are depicted in Table 1 (Wu et al., 2023).

Table 1. Sensory characteristic
 (Source: Wu et al., 2023)

Characteristics	Vision Sensor	Auditory Sensor	Tactile Sensor
Expression dimension diversity	Extremely high	General	Singular
Reaction time of attention	Relatively slow	Rapid	Extremely responsive
Time change sensitivity	Insensitive	High sensitivity	Low sensitivity
Perceived range size	Limited range, strongly related to visual field range	360° omnidirectional spatial perception	Limited range, strongly related to visual field range
Expression of emotional changes	Difficult to express emotional changes	Easy to express emotional changes	Inability to express emotional changes
Spatial positioning accuracy	High accuracy	Low accuracy	Low accuracy
Multiple concurrent interference intensity	Weak interference	Strong interference	Strong interference
Environmental relevance	Weak correlation	Strong correlation	Weak correlation

No single sensory modality offers immersive learning experiences, as evidenced in Table 1 (Wu et al., 2023). Instead, multi-sensory input increases engagement and retention of knowledge (Wu et al., 2023). And according to such learning theories (Susanto, 2023), it is based on the multisensory approach that promotes active experience and reflective learning. In addition, emotional design (which is more important than sensory engagement) is also crucial in the digital storytelling context (He, 2024; Schifferstein, 2011). Emotional design creates motivation, empathy, and learner engagement (He, 2024; Robin, 2016) by providing meaningful learning experiences. Multisensory use together with emotional design can enhance experiential learning by integrating cognitive and affective processes (Susanto, 2023; Wu et al., 2023). In Table 2, sensory and emotional design attributes for immersive e-learning environments are compared.

Sensory design is concerned with multi-modal involvement, while emotional design concerns motivation and affective learning (Table 2). With those, and in conjunction with digital tech tools or gamut devices, it has become an option to develop immersive digital learning environments that are designed in a way that is exactly what experiential learning does in practice. However, with much interest in digital storytelling, there is a lack of research that explores their co-embedding in narrative-based e-learning environments even as the landscape of immersive technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), interactive storytelling platforms, and virtual environments, has expanded rapidly (Doumanis et al., 2018). This gap indicates one might wish to make cross-case comparisons or frameworks that lead us towards instructional designers. Filling this research gap, the current paper investigates the role and suitability of sensory and emotional design in experiential learning through digital storytelling platforms. It uses Kolb’s experiential learning theory as a theoretical basis and defines three platforms with immersive storytelling and multi-sensory interaction: Gentlerain.ai, The Blue Desert, and Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion (Susanto, 2023). The objectives of this study are:

Table 2. Multisensory Approach

Aspect	Sensory Design	Emotional Design
Focus	Multi-sensory engagement (sight, sound, touch, etc.)	Evoking positive emotions to enhance motivation and learning
Techniques	Multimodal interaction, sensory exploration, immersive environments	Positive emotional design, user-centric design, gamification, personalized feedback
Impact on Learning	Enhances immersion and engagement, improves learning performance	Increases motivation, reduces stress, improves learning outcomes and user satisfaction
Examples	Collaborative virtual environments, sensory data integration in multimedia	Emotionally designed materials, tailored feedback systems, gamified learning tasks

1. Explore the ways in which sensory and emotional design aspects play out in digital storytelling spaces
2. To examine how these components facilitate experiential learning as defined by Kolb’s model of learning
3. Design patterns that improve user engagement and comprehension. Using Visual Communication Design, experiential learning theory and multisensory storytelling, this paper contributes to the existing literature related to immersive digital learning contexts (Susanto, 2023; Wu et al., 2023).

These results provide theoretical and

practical implications for instructional designers, educators, and those in the field of digital media to improve engagement and influence the creation of purposeful experiences designed, relevant, and meaningful (Smeda et al., 2014). The study therefore contributes to the literature on Visual Communication Design and digital learning by examining cross-case data on sensory and emotional design of digital storytelling environments. It also defines a Narrative Sensory Experiential Learning Model and a checklist of best practices for design for educators and designers of visual communication experiences to assist project designers of e-learning experiences with new learning.

Methodology

The design approach for this research was based on a qualitative multiple case study. The researchers aimed to investigate the impact of design-oriented aspects of sensory and emotional design on experiential learning within digital storytelling spaces. An engaging qualitative design was selected to provide intensive insights into visual communication strategies, as well as the ways in which narrative construction and multisensory interactions occur across real-world digital learning platforms.

Research was undertaken in accordance with Visual Communication Design principles and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Based on this theoretical framework, the case study selection guided the analysis. The methodology aided cross-case comparisons, emphasizing recurrent design trends, commonalities, and differences between sensory and emotional storytelling strategies across several e-learning environments. The purpose of these ob-

servations was to capture, in detail, how the design of visual communication could increase affective involvement and cognitive processing in various online educational settings (Sahraie et al., 2024).

Purposive sampling was used to three case studies. We selected the following case based on the following criteria:

Table 3. Case Selection Criteria

Criteria	Description	Selected Case Studies
Narrative-based learning	Platform uses storytelling as primary learning approach	1. Gentlerain.ai (Interactive workplace simulation) 2. The Blue Desert (Climate storytelling experience) 3. Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion (Immersive historical learning environment)
Multisensory interaction	Platform includes at least two sensory modalities (visual, auditory, tactile/UI)	
Educational purpose	Platform designed for learning or knowledge transfer	
Accessibility	Platform publicly accessible for observation	
Innovation	Platform demonstrates innovative storytelling design	

All of these platforms reflect various narrative approaches and multisensory strategies in the digital learning process.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through systematic observation of the interface, features, and user experience of each platform and analysis of the content narrative struc-

tures, aspects of visualization, and interactive features (Patiño et al., 2023). This was complemented by observational data on multimedia components, such as photographs, video, audio, and virtual reality captures (leBrasseur, 2023), textual elements, and user interface/animations to analyze how these design elements enable sensory engagement and emotional within the context of digital storytelling.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using a thematic coding approach. Observational data, screenshots, and documentation were coded based on categories through an evaluation rubric, including narrative structure, sensory design, emotional engagement, and experiential learning alignment. Patterns were identified within each case and then compared across cases to identify similarities and differences.

A cross-case synthesis was used to develop design patterns that form the basis of the proposed model. This analytical process ensured systematic interpretation and strengthened the validity of the findings.

Structured UI/UX Walkthrough

The qualitatively rich exploration of the digital interfaces of the educational environments was used to decompose in an obvious manner (Sahraie et al., 2024), following a step-by-step guideline for UI/UX walkthroughs, ensuring triangulation and a methodological robustness to the evaluation process. This approach allows me to do so while critically reflecting on the potential of sensory and emotional design to give the experience of experiential learning aligned with Kolb's cycle (Susanto, 2023). Key components included:

1. Navigation structure analysis for

mapping user flow and uncovering obstacles to immersion

2. Interaction design observation to explore multimodal affordances and user agency (Wu et al., 2023)

3. Sensory design identification, encompassing visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli for multisensory engagement (Schifferstein, 2011; Wu et al., 2023)

4. Narrative flow mapping to track narrative structure and emotional arcs (Robin, 2016)

5. Emotional engagement assessment via design cues that evoke motivation, affective responses, and retention (He, 2024)

Screenshots, video recordings, and detailed observational notes during each session were documented for cross-case comparison and thematic coding for validity (Sahraie et al., 2024). This method of documentation helped us give a good representation of all design elements in a comprehensive manner, thereby allowing a rounded record of the qualitative approach for the future quantitative study.

Direct Platform Observation

The researcher performed repeated direct observation on each platform for several hours (2-3 hours per platform) and entered the natural flow of usage to make systematic work of identifying:

1. Progression of narrative and immersive imagery

2. Sensory interaction elements such as multimodal cues (e.g., auditory, subtle animations)(Schifferstein, 2011; Wu et al., 2023)

3. Cues of emotional design (affective visuals and motivational feedback loops) (He, 2024)

4. Features of learning engagement (participatory branching, reflective pauses), followed Kolb’s cycle (Susanto, 2023)

These insights prompted us to view design components as levers of experiential learning through tangible experiences, emotional connections and active participation, as well as effects on user experience, motivation and cognition (Robin, 2016; Sahraie et al., 2024). Detailed field notes, screenshots and video clips were collected to analyse thematically and triangulate with UI/UX walkthroughs, allowing for methodological rigour (Sahraie et al., 2024). This process entailed not only dealing directly with such sources as documentation of the platform and developer statements available to the outside world but also using data to interpret design choices made based on observation; where the justification for platform design was presumably implicit.

Supporting content, including platform descriptions, developer documentation, published articles, technical whitepapers, user manuals, and interaction logs were systematically reviewed, focusing on design rationales, intended educational objectives, and user experiences. Supporting the UI/UX walkthroughs and observations to triangulate collected data with other study tools through qualitative document analysis that was able to strengthen the methodological rigor, validity, and reliability when attempting to uncover sensory and emotional design patterns, in accordance with Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Lorenz et al., 2025; Sahraie et al., 2024; Susanto, 2023). Primary material was official platform websites, (Baceviciute et al., 2021; Robin, 2016).

Evaluation Rubric

The case studies were scored on a rubric based on experiential learning and sensory-emotional design principles.

Each dimension was graded on a three-point scale: Ratings were determined by the researcher based on accumulated evidence obtained through UI/UX walkthroughs, observational notes, and document analysis, and cross-referenced with documented design features.

Table 4. Evaluation Rubric

Dimension	Indicators	Indicator	Rating Scale
Narrative Structure	Story clarity, learner role, narrative progression	Story clarity, learner role, narrative progression	Low: No clear story arc or learner positioning; Moderate: Narrative present but fragmented; High: Coherent story with learner as active agent
Sensory Design	Visual, auditory, tactile integration	Visual, auditory, tactile integration	Low: Single modality; Moderate: Two modalities, loosely coordinated; High: Three modalities, purposefully aligned with learning goals
Emotional Engagement	Emotional cues, empathy, immersion	Emotional cues, empathy, immersion	Low: Neutral or absent affective design; Moderate: Emotional cues present but

			surface-level; High: Sustained emotional arc tied to content meaning
Kolb Alignment	Experience, reflection, conceptualization, experimentation	Experience, reflection, conceptualization, experimentation	Low: Supports one stage only; Moderate: Two to three stages addressed; High: All four stages accessible through design
Interaction Design	User control, branching decisions, feedback	User control, branching decisions, feedback	Low: Passive or linear only; Moderate: Some user control, limited feedback; High: Meaningful agency with responsive feedback loops
Cognitive Load	Pacing, segmentation, usability clarity	Pacing, segmentation, usability clarity	Low: Overwhelming or unclear interface; Moderate: Manageable but inconsistent pacing; High: Well-segmented, with pacing mechanisms that prevent overload

Validity & Reliability

To optimize methodological rigor, validity, and reliability, this study triangulated data from three complementary qualitative methods: structured UI/UX walkthroughs for an in-depth interface analysis (Sahraie et al., 2024); direct platform observations using field notes, screenshots, and video recordings to capture natural user flows (Lorenz et al., 2025; Sahraie et al., 2024); and a document review of developer documents, whitepapers, and related publications for contextual verification (Lorenz et al., 2025; Sahraie et al., 2024). Cross-case comparisons among Gentlerain.ai, The Blue Desert, and Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion also confirmed insights emerging through commonalities in sensory-emotional design and coherence with Kolb’s experiential learning (Robin, 2016; Susanto, 2023). Development documentation and published platform evaluations were used to corroborate observed design rationales (Lorenz et al., 2025) and data were rigorously documented with case selection criteria, evaluation rubric, data collection protocols and thematic coding processes per sensory, emotional and Kolb cycle principles (He, 2024; Susanto, 2023) leading to transparency, reproducibility and trustworthiness.

Case Studies

Three digital storytelling platforms have been chosen based on their narrative-based learning, multisensory engagement, and experiential interaction. The platforms are chosen based on storytelling approaches and learning contexts: workplace simulation, environmental storytelling, and historical immersive learning. This comparative framework provides a means to explore sensory and emotional design features that support experiential learning as part of this research. Platforms such as Gentlerain.

ai, The Blue Desert and Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion were selected, since they offered unique methods of pedagogical application of immersive technology as well as narrative framing (Kee et al., 2023; Recke & Perna, 2021). They assess the extent to which these sites facilitate embodied knowledge and attitudinal change via 360° VR storytelling and multimodal engagement (Lin et al., 2025; Palmieri et al., 2025), aligned with the existing literature that outlines immersive educational technologies (Lin et al., 2025; Palmieri et al., 2025).

Case Study 1: Gentlerain.ai (Interactive Workplace Simulation)

Gentlerain.ai (www.gentlerain.ai) is an interactive digital learning platform designed to simulate workplace scenarios through narrative-driven experiences. The platform integrates artificial intelligence, branching dialogue, and interactive storytelling to support experiential learning in professional training contexts. Users engage with workplace challenges such as leadership communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making. This type of platform focuses on learner participation through dialogue and scenario-based decision-making. With every reaction, users are led through different ways to respond from the basis of an experiential learning environment for reflection and skills. The interface is modern in terms of visual design, interactive UI elements, and feedback that is created to guide the learners through narrative. Key Features: Decision-based interactive storytelling, AI-driven branching dialogue, Scenario-based workplace simulation and interactive feedback mechanisms.

These features of simulated professional environments present the learner as being players in the professional environment.



Figure 1. Gentlerain.ai Interface Showing Decision-Based Interaction
(Source: Author screenshot (2026))

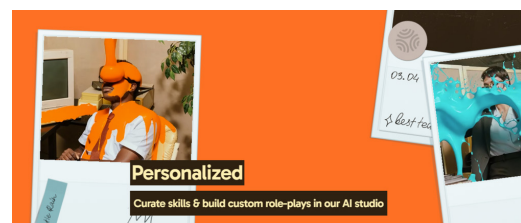


Figure 2. Gentlerain.ai Layout and Interaction
(Source: Author screenshot (2026))

Case Study 2: The Blue Desert (Climate Change Narratives)

The Blue Desert is the ultimate digital storytelling and environmental education platform for climate. With a mix of visual storytelling, ambient sound design, and interactive navigation, the platform provides a highly emotive learning experience. Using visual storytelling and interactive visual elements, users encounter environmental narratives. The platform encourages reflective learning by providing an opportunity for users to explore and engage with climate-related scenarios and interpret environmental data through narrative experiences. The interface creates layers of immersion through illustrated environments, subtle animations, and ambient soundscapes. The navigational aspect is exploratory, offering learners ample opportunities to interact with narrative elements at their own pace. Key Features: Environmental storytelling, exploratory navigation, visual metaphor and symbolic narrative and ambient audio immersion.



Figure 3. Blue Desert, learning on water consumption (Source : Author screenshot (2026))

Case Study 3: Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion (Historian Reconstruction)

Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion is an immersive digital museum platform for reconstructing historical environments using interactive 3D visualization. It combines spatial storytelling, archival materials, and interactive exploration. This is spatial, rather than linear learning. You are invited to discover and immerse yourself in the environment. We showcase a 360-degree visual environment, ambient audio, and interactive artifacts to establish an immersive learning environment. Key Features: Spatial storytelling, 3D historical reconstruction, Interactive artifacts and Exploratory navigation.

Spatial immersion in experiential learning is supported through these features.

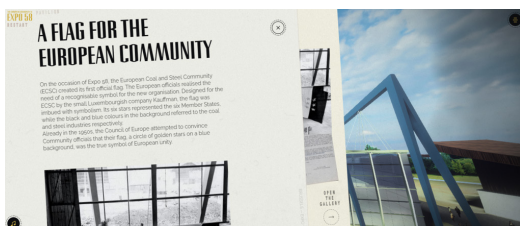


Figure 4. Expo 58 Information Page (Source : Author screenshot (2026))

To enable a systematic comparison among the selected platforms, three case studies were explored through a structured analytical framework. Some of the assessment areas were narrative design, sensory engagement, emotional design, interaction patterns and alignment to

Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. It provides a systematic comparison that seeks to indicate common design strategies and elucidates how sensory and emotional storytelling is leveraged to support experiential learning in the digital space across platforms. The cross-case analysis results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Case Study Comparative Analysis (Source: Author)

Dimension	Gentlerain.ai	Blue Desert	Expo 58
Platform Type	Workplace simulation	Climate storytelling	Virtual museum
Narrative Structure	Branching scenario	Symbolic narrative	Spatial storytelling
Sensory Design	Visual, Auditory, UI interaction	Visual, Auditory	Visual, Auditory, Tactile
Emotional Design	Workplace empathy	Environmental empathy	Historical immersion
Interaction Type	Decision-based dialogue	Exploratory scrolling	Spatial navigation
Kolb - Concrete Experience	Simulated workplace	Narrative immersion	Spatial immersion
Kolb - Reflection	Feedback loops	Symbolic interpretation	Artifact analysis
Kolb - Conceptualization	Strategy learning	Climate understanding	Historical learning
Kolb - Experimentation	Decision branching	Exploratory navigation	Path selection
Learning Impact	Soft skill development	Environmental awareness	Historical understanding

The comparison indicates that although all of the given platforms use some form of narrative-based learning, they are being constructed around different design centricities. Gentlerain.ai promotes decision-making interaction and

workplace simulation and is recognised for experimentation and learning skills through active experiments. The Blue Desert, in essence, encourages emotional storytelling and reflective learning based on storytelling with symbolic environmental stories. In contrast, Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion emphasizes spatial engagement and exploratory learning through historical reconstruction. These differences imply what sensory and emotional design can have a way to enhance experiential learning but that there are some narrative strategies available at the design stage. But the platform also has different sensory and emotional design themes beyond narrative and interaction modes. In that, the presentation of each case is a different visual, auditory, and tactile interaction that ultimately determines student involvement and affective involvement. To examine contrast in this design, we studied the sensory and emotional design attributes of each platform and compared them (Table 6). In the sensory representation it is shown that a visual design component was better than all the platforms and the aural one supported to immersion the environment. Gentlerain.ai is the preference for the tactile experience of UI-centric decisionmaking, whereas Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion prefers spatial immersion. The Blue Desert, however, embraces visual storytelling and its emotional register to encourage reflection. With the integration of these learning objectives based on how a story unfolds in narrative form through multimedia, experiential learning is attained.

Table 6. Sensory and Emotional Design Comparison

Platform	Visual	Auditory	Tactile	Emotional Tone	Engagement Type
Gentlerain.ai	High	Medium	High	Professional realism	Decision-driven
Blue Desert	Very high	High	Low	Reflective emotional	Narrative-driven
Expo 58	Very high	High	Medium	Historical immersion	Exploration-driven

To achieve systematic comparison, the three platforms were examined through a structured analysis considering narrative design, sensory engagement, emotional design, and experiential learning alignment.

Result

The comparison of these three online storytelling platforms Gentlerain.ai, The Blue Desert, and Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion illustrates how sensory and emotional design is part of educational experiences if we consider digital learning in digital media in the light of other digital technologies. All platforms implement different strands for storytelling strategies; however, these platforms all provide the general understanding that from an overall narrative-oriented interaction, a narrative-centric communication and multi-sensory interactions, narrative and narrative modes are used across the platforms, which is the story on which learners immersive and participatory immersive interaction is carried out. A strict rubric was used for systematic comparison on all platforms (systematic scoring in the methodology) to ensure consistency among different platforms and methods. Analysis: Narrative, sensory, emotional, type of interaction, Kolb theory (or Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle). What Table 3 shows is not only how the three platforms differ in ways we would expect, but why that separates us in terms of learning design. Gentlerain.ai's branching dialogue, exposing learners to major questions; all decisions have cognitive implications. This is qualitatively different from The Blue Desert's exploratory scrolling, when the learner can just give the task up without payback. That absence of that pressure isn't a design disadvantage in context here; it's a deliberate emotional strategy: climate grief is poorly suited to mechanics of urgency. Expo 58 is on yet another level:

here spatial motion supplants narrative agency.

Learners do not select outcomes; instead, they construct meaning from fragments of a historical context. This variability indicates that narrative structure serves not only an aesthetic purpose but also a pedagogical function, making it more than just a method of presentation. The emphasis on which stage of Kolb’s cycle to examine is influenced by the type of interaction involved. Gentlerain.ai effectively combines experiential learning with practical experimentation, whereas The Blue Desert distinctly separates these elements. Neither approach is superior to the other; however, it is essential to recognize that different methodologies yield varying expectations for learning outcomes.

Table 7. Cross-Case Comparison of Digital Storytelling Platforms

Dimension	Gentlerain.ai	Blue Desert	Expo 58
Narrative Structure	Decision-based storytelling	Symbolic storytelling	Spatial storytelling
Sensory Design	Visual, auditory, interactive UI	Visual and auditory	Visual, auditory, spatial
Emotional Design	Workplace empathy	Environmental empathy	Historical immersion
Interaction Type	Branching dialogue	Exploratory navigation	Spatial navigation
Kolb Concrete Experience	Workplace simulation	Narrative immersion	Historical immersion
Reflection	Feedback loops	Symbolic reflection	Artifact exploration
Conceptualization	Skill development	Climate awareness	Historical learning
Experimentation	Decision branching	Exploration	Navigation choices
Learning Impact	Soft skill development	Environmental awareness	Contextual understanding

Sensory & Emotional Design Integration.

Sensory and emotional design considerations vary, not only regarding narrative tactics, across venues. Every one of these is a combination of visual, aural, and interactive elements which affects the way learners engage.

Given the screen-based nature of the medium, the strong visual dominance of the three is hardly to be disfavored, the way visual design works is rather mixed. In Gentlerain.ai, the interface utilizes a polished, corporate-like design featuring neutral backgrounds, clear typography, and color-coded responses that enhances the professional authenticity of the simulation visually. These design elements prepare learners to view their interactions as significant, grounding the emotional experience in a sense of responsibility rather than sentiment.

In The Blue Desert, color scheme and illustration can also be loaded with an emotional meaning that even text cannot offer. There are several deliberate visual metaphors that The Blue Desert uses to carry its emotional and logical weight. The platform’s desaturated blue-grey color palette visually enacts ecological loss: the lack of warmth in the color register becomes its own argument about environmental depletion before a word is even read. The landscapes portrayed are stylized, semi-abstract: familiar enough to evoke recognition, yet sufficiently distorted to induce unease, evoking an experience that reminds us of the emotional dissonance of climate grief. Navigation itself is cast as wandering through a diminished landscape, and user movement is rendered a mode of embodied testimony. These visual and navigational choices work seamlessly to externalize an emotional stance to make the case for environmental urgency through aesthetic experience, not just the data.

Expo 58's dedication to maintaining archival precision including textures reflective of the period, accurate spatial dimensions, and careful arrangement of artifacts, it serves as a type of visual rhetoric. This approach convinces users of the historical validity of the experience even before they engage with any explanatory content.

Expo 58's 3D reconstruction wields visual fidelity to construct historical trust; the detail itself is the argument. In the tactile column the most fascinating result lies. Gentlerain.ai receives very high scores for tactile interaction of UI mechanics, and The Blue Desert has a very low score, although elicits the strongest emotional feedback across observations. Even symbolic and atmospheric design can encourage similar emotional investment in a different way and this is something we have been forgetting in our multisensory frameworks (Schifferstein, 2011; Wu et al., 2023). Meaning that greater interaction density does not equal more emotional engagement.

The Impact of Sensory Design on Experiential Learning

The model originally formulated by Kolb relates the four stages sequential experience that is followed by the reflection stages then eventually conceptualization (Susanto, 2023). And the case study evidence renders this even more complex. As we are at Expo 58, the three processes of artifact exploration and conceptualization take place simultaneously: a learner considering a photograph drawn from the archives is both experiencing and interpreting. The stages themselves are less a pipeline than an entire ensemble of affordances that good environments can expose along with them. Sensory design looks to play a gating role here. When sensations are coherent and relevant like in Gentlerain.ai's feedback sounds or The

Blue Desert's ambient score, and both decrease the cognitive threshold for emotional involvement and allow students to more readily transition into reflective processing. When sensory input conflicts or overwhelms (often happening in places that are spatially complicated such as Expo 58), cognitive load increases and the reflective phase fails to ensue. Sensory design, then, is not decorative, it is structurally significant for experiential learning. The cross-case findings demonstrate that all three platforms make a partial contribution to Kolb's cycle, although not always uniformly. Of the three platforms, The Blue Desert case is the most limited in supporting the active experimentation. Its exploratory structure allows repeated passages but does not enable consequence based course correction. This represents a significant design gap without meaningful stakes, the exploratory experience risk functioning as passive browsing rather than purposeful learning. For narrative-driven environmental technologies, another way to fill this gap would seem innovating with low-stakes decision points. Conversely, while Gentlerain.ai is pedagogically valid in active experimentation it needs some features that encourage students to reflect in depth, aligning it with the Mezirowian theory of perspective transformation (Zhang et al., 2025). Bringing these two environments together by leveraging experiential learning strengths on decision-driven platforms to enable instant feedback, and narrative environments that give more space for participants to reflect as experiential knowledge grows holistically (Kimura & Nakajima, 2023; Srikasem et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2024) would allow for not only active experimentation for students, but also healthy reflective and conceptualization skills to emerge. The proximity of Kolb stages to specific design elements as well demonstrates reverse-engineering potential: instructional designers may begin with the cycle of learning from the

initial phase and then work backwards to find the sensory and narrative constituents of the design instead of attempting to put theory onto existing design.

Relationship Between Sensory Design and Experiential Learning

The model as first developed by Kolb describes the four stages as sequential experience followed by reflection prior to conceptualization (Susanto, 2023). And the case study evidence only complicates matters. At Expo 58 the process of exploration and concept-making of artifacts is experienced and interpreted at the same time as a student reflecting over a photograph from the collection of archives. In fact, the stages aren't so much a pipeline as an entire hodgepodge of facilitations affordances that good environments can open up together in parallel. In a sense, sensory design plays one small but gating role. When sensory stimuli are coherent and meaningful (eg, Gentlerain.ai's feedback sounds, or The Blue Desert's ambient score, both serve to decrease the cognitive threshold for emotional engagement and to help students enter into reflective processing that is less painful and encourage the less intense cognitive level of reflection. When sensory inputs (like colour, volume, temperature and depth) overpower or get in the way (which they do whenever they work in a spatially complex setting like Expo 58), cognitive load jumps up; this is where the reflective phase disappears. Instead, sensory design becomes a structural issue, one that determines whether experiential learning occurs.

Experiential Learning Alignment

The cross-case results suggest that all three platforms make an uneven contribution to Kolb's cycle. The Blue Desert is the least conducive to active experimentation; the exploratory phase of the des-

ert allows you to repeat a passage, but in this case you cannot take any real consequence-based course correction. That is a serious gap, because without exploring the cost involved, the experimental quest will almost certainly become more of a tourism experience than an educational one. But with more narrative-based environmental technologies, an additional way a potential solution could be explored seems like innovating with low-stakes decision-points. Conversely, while Gentlerain.ai is a great pedagogical sound force for active experimentation, it requires some features to encourage a more intentional reflective observation, thus aligning itself with the Mezirowian theory of transformation of the perspective (Zhang et al., 2025). This combination of decision-driven platforms that offer immediate feedback with narrative environments that create space for more reflective experience—all of which would serve the holistic growth of experiential knowledge (Kimura & Nakajima, 2023; Srikasem et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2024) would provide an area of strengths across experiential learning models since, far from having to engage in active experimentation, students would be able to also cultivate healthy reflective and conceptualization skills. This concordance of Kolb's stages with design elements can also indicate reverse-engineering potential: instruction designers may begin with learning cycle patterns and work backwards to discover the sensory and narrative elements essential for these design solutions, rather than using a retrofit technique of theory on top of existing designs.

Discussion

This section describes the findings and analysis of the research data and explains the limitations of the study. It can also describe what the results of the study implies, why does it matter, and the per-

spective for future research.

Integrating Previous Experiential Learning Model

Susanto (2023), which has integrated sensory design into experiential learning in digital storytelling. Susanto (2023) developed the experiential learning model to link the experiential use of stories and sensory activities in online learning environments.

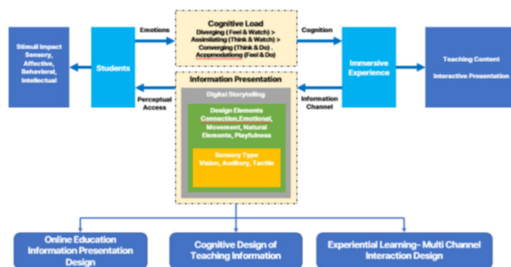


Figure 5. Experiential Learning Model (Source: Susanto, 2023)

Narrative interaction and sensory involvement are identified as important elements that encourage experiential learning through the model. Although the framework is built upon sensory interaction and narrative engagement, it does not consider emotional design and cognitive load factors. In addition, the model is not directly related to practical implementation strategies for instructional designers. These restrictions hint at the limitations of a cohesive framework.

Proposed Narrative Sensory Experiential Learning Model

The proposed model supplements cross-case insights and earlier theoretical constructs—such as Susanto’s (2023)—by extending beyond sensory interaction and narrative engagement to incorporate emotional design and cognitive load management (Albeedan et al., 2024; Kimura

& Nakajima, 2023; Schifferstein, 2011; Wong et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2023; Radović et al., 2021; Srikasem et al., 2025.

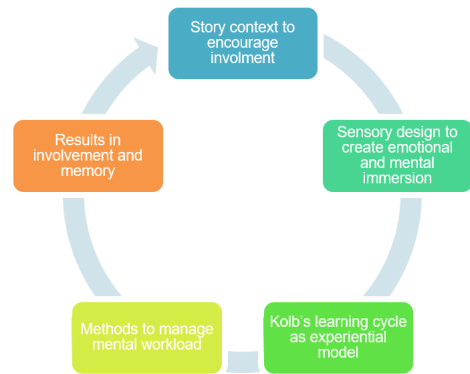


Figure 6. Narrative Sensory Experiential Learning Model (Source: Author)

The five parts of the model are interlinked and well-evidenced in digital venues:

1. Narrative Design: Motivational and relevant (e.g. metaverse-based simulations) (Wong et al., 2024)) to story-driven learning environments that keep learners engaged.
2. Sensory Design: Utilise a diverse range of visual, auditory and interactive content which enables coherent perceptual experiences (Schifferstein, 2011; Wu et al., 2023) and enables increased product and learning outcomes.
3. Emotional Design: Emotionally engaging and motivational storytelling which could also support motivation, empathy and perspective transformation, confirming Kolb’s cycle with the reflective depth provided by Mezirow (Zhang et al., 2025).
4. Experiential Learning Cycle: Utilize Kolb’s stages (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation), this will contribute to cycles of learning

during authentic activities (Albeedan et al., 2024; Kimura & Nakajima, 2023; Radović et al., 2021).

5. **Cognitive Load Management:** Balanced pacing and the appropriate placement of pacing and interaction design to minimize overload as much as possible, thus avoiding excessive complexity and maximizing experiential depth (Radović et al., 2021; Srikasem et al., 2025).

These components provide a unified framework that deliver immersive learning experiences designed through a reverse engineering process to environments to align with the affordances of Kolb while minimizing common pitfalls like excessive cognitive load.

The NSELM will provide visual communicators and instructional designers with practical advice through case studies implementation. Digital storytelling contexts integrating narrative, sensory, and emotional elements all add to the experiential learning outcomes (Wong et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025), and by doing so, not only allow participants to learn about the world, but also develop cognitive and affective skills which are pivotal in solving complex problems in authentic situations (Fadli, 2025). It is important for designers to have their sights set on the creation of similar immersive environments capable of affording parallel access to Kolb's stages, employing symbolic visuals for reflection (e.g., The Blue Desert) and decision feedback for experimentation (e.g., Gentlerain.ai). Not only does this integration increase engagement, but it results in knowledge transfer as was verified in VR and metaverse platforms (Radović et al., 2021; Srikasem et al., 2025).

Theoretical Contribution

The proposed Narrative Sensory Experiential Learning Model contributes to the existing literature by expanding previous

experiential learning frameworks in three key ways. First, the model integrates sensory and emotional design as central components rather than supporting elements, positioning multisensory interactions as mediating mechanisms that influence transitions between stages in Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Second, the model incorporates narrative design as a structured framework that organizes learning experiences into meaningful sequences.

Unlike previously proposed models that primarily focus on interaction and engagement, this framework provides a more holistic integration of narrative, sensory, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. This contribution offers a structured approach to designing immersive digital storytelling experiences that support both cognitive and affective learning processes.

Practical Design Checklist

To support implementation, this study proposes a checklist based on the proposed model.

Table 8. Proposed Design Checklist

Design Area	Checklist Questions
Narrative	Does the story reflect realistic, speculative, or historical relevance to the learning topic? Is the learner positioned as an active agent in the story?
Sensory Design	Are multiple senses (visual, auditory, tactile/UI) activated coherently? Are sensory cues aligned with cognitive or emotional objectives?
Kolb Alignment	Does the design clearly offer a concrete experience, opportunities for reflection,

	conceptual insights, and decision-based experimentation?
Cognitive Load	Is content segmented logically? Are there pacing mechanisms to avoid overload (e.g., episodic scenes, pause options)?
Emotional Engagement	Are aesthetic and narrative elements crafted to evoke meaningful emotional responses? Is feedback personalized and supportive?
Usability	Is the UI intuitive and responsive? Are users guided without cognitive dissonance? Can learners control pacing and interaction?

The checklist provides practical guidance for instructional designers in developing immersive digital learning environments.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of sensory and emotional design elements applied to digital storytelling environments in facilitating experiential learning for e-learning tools. With qualitative multiple case analysis of Gentlerain.ai, The Blue Desert, and Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion, the results show that not only emotion engage through narratives, but also multi-sensory experiences contribute to learner immersion, reflection, and engagement. The cross-case analysis illuminated varying ways in which the narratives of these e-learning platforms can assist experiential learning through a diversity of sensory and emotional tactics. Gentlerain.ai promotes decision-driven learner interac-

tion, and interactive learning experiences are supported, The Blue Desert engages reflective inquiry through symbolic story, Expo 58 Virtual Pavilion encourages spatial immersion and context investigation. These differences reflect the need to consider the design of the digital learning environment of the design of multiple storytelling modes so that various experiences complement each other. Similarly, multisensory integration offers optimal results in terms of supporting learner interaction when integrated with cognitive, emotional and social aspects with a view of supporting engagement. Across platforms, visual design became the predominant sensory modality, while auditory and interactive elements contributed to emotional engagement and learning motivation. These findings emphasize the importance of combining a sensory and emotional dimension in digital narrative modalities.

This study extends these findings and previous work by suggesting the Narrative Sensory Experiential Learning Model. Based on previous frameworks, the model adapts elements of narrative design, multisensory interaction, emotional engagement, principles of experiential learning, and cognitive load considerations to form a holistic learning design framework. Therefore, this model provides theoretical and practical considerations for the construction of immersive digital learning environments. Additionally, this work provides a utilitarian design checklist for teachers and those engaged in visual communication. This checklist links theoretical constructs to practical strategies for the concept creation of stimulating and learner-centred e-learning environments. The results presented in this study contribute to visual communication design by showing how storytelling, multi-sensory and emotional design are interconnected to generate an experiential learning process.

They also provide a blueprint for creating inspiring and significant learning experiences, in turn extending the relevance of this work to digital pedagogy. However, this study has not been without limitations. A qualitative study design limited the generalizability of these three case studies that were selected. In future studies, user testing (via user test), eye monitoring, and measuring engagement metrics and engagement would likely be used to prove the proposed theory. Future research should similarly investigate integrating new forms of technology (i.e., AI, VR, adaptive learning systems). It is not yet possible, however, to explore their potential to stimulate more intensifying sensorily emotional responses closer to the human mind and emotions in digital storytelling scenarios. This approach is representative of the emphasis on sensory experience and emotional depth in digital teaching and learning a development that is growing increasingly important in this era we're living to this day. Digital platforms have full potential to make learning experiences that are joyful, fun, changeable, enriching and transformative, embedded in story-based learning with narrative storytelling and multimodal storytelling and experiential methods of learning pedagogies.

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GENDER GAZE REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN AND SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA (A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS)

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Received Dec. 29, 2025; Revised Apr. 30, 2026; Accepted May. 18, 2026.

Abstract: This research is conducted to examine various representations of the gender gaze in cinema, specifically in American and South Korean cinemas, through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The objective of this study is to analyze how both the male gaze and the female gaze are visualized and communicated through various cinematographic perspectives, such as visual signs and symbols, narrative structures, and even the cinematic techniques. Specifically, Barthes' method of signification is used to interpret both explicit and implicit meanings constructed in the selected films from both countries. The results provide findings that American cinema tends to show more patriarchal visual ideology, which puts women as objects of the gaze, while South Korean cinema leans more toward women's incremental transformation toward representations that are more balanced. Furthermore, this research concludes that the gender gaze in cinemas is mostly influenced by cultural and social aspects of the signified countries, as it represents the ideology that has been implemented in the society. In conclusion, this research provided complex insights into how cultural and social settings influence the cinematic gender gaze, therefore enhancing the understanding of gender representation and cross-cultural visual studies and offering valuable contributions to contemporary film production and analysis.

Keywords: gender gaze; cinema; semiotics; Roland Barthes; cultural representation

Introduction

In contemporary cinema, the concept of the gender gaze refers to the representation of gendered perspectives and power

relations in film, as constructed through the viewpoints of characters, filmmakers, and implied spectators, which often serves as a reflection of recurring social

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dynamics. This concept is commonly divided into the male gaze and the female gaze, which are central to understanding how gendered perspectives shape visual narratives and creative processes, as they are often reflecting and shaping social dynamics through the viewpoint of directors, characters, or implied audiences. According to Mulvey (1975), the male gaze is a visual model where a female is placed as the “object” of any heterosexual male’s desires, whereas a female’s emotions, thoughts, and agency are frequently overshadowed by her beauty and obedience towards a male’s masculinity. In addition to that, such representation also speaks to and reinforces the patriarchal norms that put women in a “weak” position and as subordinates to men (Veselinović, 2021; Dirze, 2013). The male gaze has long been considered dominating American cinema, where plotlines, cinematography, and character dynamics are focused on masculine desire and control. Responding to that, feminist scholars and creative actors challenged this paradigm through the “female gaze,” which provides an alternative approach that focuses on the female experience and subjectivity over objectification. The female gaze shifts the focus from objectification to female subjectivity, emphasizing women’s lived experiences, emotional depth, and narrative agency. Furthermore, the female gaze often highlights how women perceive and see the world despite the gendered constraints. For example, the film *Magic Mike* (2012) foregrounds male bodily display, repositioning men as objects of visual desire, while *Maleficent* (2014) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) emphasize emotional development and maternal subjectivity over traditional masculine power. According to Mulvey (1975), the male gaze refers to a way of seeing that positions women as objects of heterosexual male desire. Within this framework, women’s emotions, thoughts, and agency are often sidelined, with greater emphasis placed on their

physical appearance and conformity to male-defined standards of femininity. Such representations both reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms that frame women as weaker and subordinate to men (Veselinović, 2021; Dirze, 2013). In American cinema, the male gaze has long been dominant, evident in storylines, cinematographic techniques, and character relationships that center on male desire and control.

In response, feminist scholars and creative practitioners have introduced the concept of the female gaze as an alternative approach that prioritizes women’s experiences and subjectivity rather than reducing them to objects. This perspective shifts attention toward women’s lived realities, emotional depth, and active roles within narratives. It also highlights how women perceive and interpret the world within the constraints of gendered expectations. For example, *Magic Mike* (2012) presents the male body as an object of visual desire, while *Maleficent* (2014) emphasizes emotional development and maternal subjectivity over traditional forms of masculine power.

Since Mulvey’s initial formulation, feminist film theory has continued to evolve, offering more nuanced understandings of gender relations in cinema. Mulvey herself later acknowledged the possibility of viewing positions that are not entirely confined to a male-centered perspective. Building on this, E. Ann Kaplan introduced the idea of the female director’s gaze, emphasizing how women filmmakers create distinct visual narratives that challenge patriarchal representations. Meanwhile, Carol Clover argued that female audiences are not passive spectators but active interpreters of film. These developments suggest that the concept of the “gaze” is fluid and shaped by social and cultural contexts. Therefore, this study extends these perspectives by examining how gendered gaze is

constructed differently in American and South Korean cinema through a semiotic approach. These changes of focus contribute to the narrative representation of how gender, power, and subjectivity are displayed on the screen and heavily centered on the female subject. In addition to that, this concept offers critical discourse that challenges the dominance of masculine views in cinematography and provides a space for more complex representations from a female perspective.

In contrast, South Korean cinema operates within a context of rapid modernization where shifting gender roles and global culture build a significant cinematic evolution. The gender gaze used in South Korean cinema often shows broader social culture and function. While in the earlier era, such as, the Cold War era, sometimes featured intimate displays of the female body as a form of social control and entertainment (Namhee, 2020), contemporary South Korean cinema has shown significant evolution, such as being increasingly active in exploring and experimenting with themes of identity and visual representation that reflect the sociocultural shifts. A notable example is *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2019), which explores the struggles faced by women in South Korea, including the male gaze, patriarchy, and social discrimination, through the specific lens of mental health (Tian, 2024).

This study examines how the male and female gaze are constructed and represented in contemporary American and South Korean cinema through a Barthesian semiotic framework. The male gaze concept refers to the visual representation where a woman is being seen as 'an object' for a man's eyes, as described in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1975). Furthermore, Scott MacKenzie also highlighted that a cinema could be treated as a resistance through an alternative representation that introduces the female gaze, which is a concept where a woman

is no longer 'an object' but an active subject who has agency to act as an individual (MacKenzie, 2014). Using Barthes' semiotic approach, both male gaze and female gaze can be depicted in 3 levels: denotation (gender gaze is shown through various visual techniques, such as camera angles), connotation (what the techniques represent implicitly, such as voyeurism and male domination), and myth (the ideology that normalizes patriarchy in female objectification). In contrast, the female gaze can also be presented in a similar manner, but with more highlights on the female subjectivity so that the myth is possible to provide more equivalent narratives. Using this visual semiotic as the approach, this research investigates the methods being used by cinematographic creators to encode gendered perspectives and how they communicate certain meanings to the audience. It is also focused on how these perspectives are embedded within the production process, and it evaluates their influence on audience perception and cultural impact. This research generated a few comparative questions to learn how a woman's agency is being visually constructed in such various cultural contexts, specifically in American and South Korean cinemas. Focusing on the visual techniques and narrative differences in shaping a female representation and subjectivity, this research looks deeper into how these differences influence the gender ideology in the community. Therefore, the focus in this research not only highlights the representation itself but also the relation between a context in a film and the socio-cultural influences surrounding it.

Methodology

This study conducts a descriptive qualitative research method to investigate the representation of the male and female gaze in American and South Korean cine-

ma. The qualitative research is conducted to identify and analyze the implicit content of communication within a film. Furthermore, it has been defined that descriptive research provides a comprehensive overview or description of a phenomenon in its natural state without any manipulation of the subject under study (Janitra Dewanta, 2020; Deckert & Wilson, 2023). This approach is selected because it allows for a wider depiction of the semiotic analysis present in both American and South Korean films. Furthermore, the concept of male gaze itself is presented by Laura Mulvey (1975), which focuses on female objectification in cinema, while Scott MacKenzie (2014) plays a role in paving the way of more equivalent female representation in film and other media. Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is being used as it is decoding the sign system using denotation, connotation, and myth (1977), more accurately proving and explaining the gender gaze being constructed and told in the forms of visual and cultural signs.

The objects of this research are the films *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season*, as they were chosen because of their contemporary relevance with distinct cultural contexts (Western versus Eastern) and their explicit engagement with themes related to the male and female gaze, thereby offering a rich basis for semiotic analysis, particularly with regard to the portrayal and revolution of female agency. In addition to that, the focus of study will include the character expressions (eyebrow motion, gaze direction, and facial muscle tension), body language, vocal intonations, and costume designs; this research extends to cinematographic elements such as camera movement, color grading (tone and grading) within specific scenes, and the selection of settings, including both physical locations and atmospheric backgrounds that support the representation of male and female gaze.

To ensure the criticality and transpar-

ency of the methodology, the films are curated based on specific criteria, such as representing a distinct cultural context comparison, especially between Western and Eastern cultures; thus, American and South Korean films are chosen as the suitable film origins. The perception exists because American cinema offers a loud, clear, globally dominant template for individualistic, modern Western values, while South Korean cinema offers a critically acclaimed, emotionally potent, and accessible template for collectivist, trauma-informed, modern Eastern values. They serve as the two most powerful and successful national cinematic brands for their respective cultural spheres in the global marketplace of ideas. Then, several American and South Korean films were selected, as they are considered to have relevance to the gender representations and have a strong semiotic influence. Finally, *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* are chosen, as they both have a contrasting female gaze subjectivity and significant relevance to the gender representation influenced by sociocultural context in such different film genres. While *Birds of Prey* reflected more of a female gaze in modern action film, *If We Were a Season* showed dynamics in romantic relationships in a more subtle and emotional way.

The data collection was conducted by tracing and analyzing documents related to the selected film, especially through scene fragments that represent the gender gaze as responses to various conflicts the character is experiencing. The data collection process is categorized into two stages as follows:

1. Primary Data: It includes the original data collected directly from *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season*. The authors specifically obtained scenes that contain semiotic significance that is essential to the research.

2. Secondary Data: It includes other data obtained from other sources, such as academic articles, internet resources, and books that are relevant to the research topic.

Using the approach from Roland Barthes, the semiotic analysis is conducted in three stages: denotation, connotation, and myth.

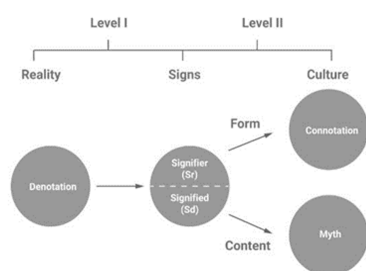


Figure 1. Roland Barthes Semiotic Model

In the denotative stage, which constitutes the first-order semiotic system, the structure consists of a chain of the signifier and the signified. According to Barthes, the language used at this stage shows social codes where the meaning of a sign is direct and clearly visible. Conversely, the connotative stage shows a deeper understanding of using implicit meanings behind the codes. Barthes' semiotic analysis involves denotation (literal meaning), connotation (associated cultural meaning), and myth (underlying ideology). While these categories apply broadly, in images or photographs denotation refers to what is objectively depicted, whereas connotation refers to the subjective interpretation of how the image is framed or captured (Rosita, 2019). Furthermore, the primary research data is based on documentation records that are analyzed systematically. Building upon the descriptive qualitative method outlined above, the scenes in *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* are analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach through the following procedural steps:

1. Observation and Monitoring: It

includes a thorough viewing of the scenes, settings, dialogs, and characters within the films.

2. Recording and Visual Selection: It includes collecting screenshots from the films at specific scenes and providing descriptive annotations for these visuals to be analyzed through the selected semiotic approach.

3. Documentation Study: It includes a comprehensive review of various literature related to the research topic and its findings to validate the analysis.

To enhance analytical rigor and ensure reproducibility, this study provides operational definitions for key analytical concepts. A "semiotically significant" scene is defined as one that fulfills at least one of the following criteria: (1) it represents a key turning point in the narrative, (2) it contains camera techniques that suggest gendered power relations, such as close-ups, framing, or point-of-view shots, or (3) it includes prominent visual symbols related to gender representation.

As previously stated, the focus on this research will also include a deep observation of some visual elements in the films used, such as character expressions and gestures. 'Character expression' refers to observable facial and emotional indicators, including eyebrow movement, gaze direction, and facial muscle tension, which reflect a character's internal state and relational positioning. Furthermore, 'gesture' is defined as bodily movement, including posture, spatial positioning, and physical interaction with other characters, which may indicate dominance, submission, or emotional proximity. These operational definitions are applied consistently across the analysis to reduce subjectivity and ensure transparency in the interpretation process.

Findings

This research discusses a comparative study of two films, the American film *Birds of Prey* and the South Korean film *If We Were a Season*, that highlight the gender gaze. Despite the cultural and background differences, both films deliver meaningful narratives about what women are experiencing in their lives. This comparative study shows how these films address gender issues, pointing out the similarities and differences built by their specific social and regional contexts.

1. *If We Were a Season* (2017)



If We Were a Season (2017) is a South Korean film that is released as part of the KBS Drama Special anthology series. The story centers on the lives of two adolescents, Yoon Hae-rim and Uhm Gi-seok, who have been childhood friends and have grown up together ever since. As they mature, their relationship eventually develops into feelings that cross the boundaries of their friendship. It is then tested by the unexpected arrival of a new person, causing both Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok to question the nature of their relationship. This part discusses the semiotic analysis of the manifestations of the gender gaze, both female and male, within *If We Were a Season*, particularly as they are shaped by Eastern cultural values.

1.1 Childhood and Teenagerhood

Yoon Hae-rim and Uhm Gi-seok have been together since birth. They've grown up together as neighbors as their friendship naturally grew over time. In the early stage of life, Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok were frequently involved in activities that deepened their friendship. However, as they transitioned into adolescence, their friendship was slowly turning into something more complicated as they now have more restrained interactions and feelings toward each other, which also caused a

more awkward situation.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis on Behavioral Evolution of Hae-rim & Gi-seok

(1.A) Change of Reaction (A)	
	
Denotation	Young Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen with sweet, smiling faces as they laugh and play
Connotation	This scene reflects a natural connection formed between two childhood friends.
Myth	It is often to find the untainted and unrestrained innocence of childhood dynamics as it hasn't yet been influenced by social burdens in South Korea; however, this representation reflects a romanticized cinematic myth, as sociological studies demonstrate that childhood in East Asian contexts is deeply shaped by early socialization processes, Confucian cultural values, and institutional pressures, where children actively internalize and reproduce societal norms rather than existing as socially unburdened individuals. (Jung & Honig, 2000)
(1.B) Change of Reaction (B)	
	
Denotation	Hae-rim seems to be visibly annoyed and irritated whenever she encounters Gi-seok.
Connotation	This scene shows typical childlike emotions, such as easily getting sulked at by someone they're close to. This

	close-up of a face captures the typical emotions of children, such as a face that easily looks downcast when facing someone close to them. This scene also shows signs of the transition from childhood to adolescence.
Myth	It suggests a sign of deep connection and familiarity, which also could be a defensive mask that covers affection through acts of defiance, mirroring how Asian mythological structures frame conflict and rebellion as narrative mechanisms that both conceal and reveal underlying relational bonds within culturally codified mythic theory. (Cheng'en, 1977)

(1.C) Change of Behavior (A)



Denotation	Young Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen riding bicycles together during their childhood.
Connotation	Their constant presence in each other's lives suggests a strong friendship bond, reaching a state of familial domesticity.
Myth	This shows signs of friendship that is portrayed as sacred, as in we had with siblings that exceeded the complications of romantic love, reflecting how Asian mythological narratives encode kinship bonds as culturally sanctioned ideals grounded in early written cosmology and social order. (Yasumaro, 1982)

(1.D) Change of Behavior (B)





Denotation	Gi-seok and Hae-rim meet in the morning to go to school together, but keeping their distance and talking politely to each other.
Connotation	This scene shows the significant change from unrestrained intimacy into awkwardness because of social etiquette and personal boundaries.
Myth	In South Korean social culture, this transition reflects the internal struggle between deep familiarity and the emerging need for individual space and romantic hesitation, echoing kinship tensions codified in Korean mythological tradition where familial bonds and personal destiny are theorized through historically recorded narratives. (Iryeon, 1512)



The shift of behaviors between Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok represents the deconstruction of “Inevitable Relationships,” whereas the boundaryless childhood friendship is shifting into a restrained adolescence due to the emerging social norms. The need of privacy and awkwardness from the two characters is not necessarily weakening their bond, but it is evidence of the change they are having due to maturing and discovering new identities as young adults. This also confirms that in a South Korean cultural context, maturity is often marked by the change from blatant honesty to emotional restraint to maintain social boundaries.

1.2 From Platonic to Romantic

In the beginning, Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok's relationship is constructed by a stable routine that they do on a daily basis, as their bond is shaped by the nature of their childhood. However, this sanctuary is challenged by the emerging feelings that threaten their platonic relationship. This shift highlights a critical moment of emotional awakening, where both Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok must choose between their strong friendship or the newly found and vulnerable romance potential.

Table 2. Semiotic Analysis on Behavioral Changes of Hae-rim & Gi-seok

(2.A) Change in Tone and Expression (A)	
	
Denotation	This scene shows Gi-seok, who is being irritated and speaking in a raised tone while physically helping Hae-rim climb a wall after arriving late to school.
Connotation	His frustration shows that even in close friendships, requests for help can become a burden.
Myth	The display of annoyance in this scene shows a secure level of comfort that only exists in close relationships like friendship, rather than a formal one, resonating with relational dynamics embedded in Korean mythological where informality within close bonds reflects culturally theorized social intimacy grounded in early written tradition. (Iryeon, 1512)
(2.B) Change in Tone and Expression (B)	
	
Denotation	Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen being engaged in conversation as Gi-seok begins to show romantic interest in her.
Connotation	The shift of his facial expression to a gentler one and a softer vocal tone suggests a transition from a platonic relationship to a romantic interest.


Myth	It suggests that romantic attraction acts as a behavioral filter, where individuals suppress their harsher traits to present a kinder and better version of themselves, reflecting moral self-regulation embedded in Korean mythic frameworks that interpersonal conduct is shaped by culturally theorized ideals grounded in recorded narratives. (Han, 1970)
(2.C) Behavioral Change (A)	
	
Denotation	The scene depicts Gi-seok giving a scarf to Hae-rim with visible irritation.
Connotation	The display of aggression acts as a mask to cover affection and care. It also shows gesture transitions from a platonic one to a more intimate one.
Myth	This suggests that usually in a close friendship, one can feel a strange feeling as to show care and will try to cover it with some normalcy so as to not make them seem vulnerable by being oversentimental, reflecting restrained emotional expression encoded in East Asian mythic traditions. (Iryeon, 1512) Affect is regulated through culturally theorized relational norms grounded in early written narratives.
(2.D) Behavioral Change (B)	
	
Denotation	Hae-rim seems to have fallen asleep, and Gi-seok carefully shields her head to prevent it from hitting a hard surface.

Connotation	This silent action from <i>Gi-Seok</i> shows that even when he treats his friend roughly, his sincerity is genuine enough to show a selfless desire to give comfort and security, even when Hae-Rim is unaware of it.
Myth	Within the romance genre, this act functions as a "soft revelation" marking a shift from adolescent ego to protective love, paralleling moral and relational maturation encoded in East Asian mythic texts. That says emotional transformation is grounded in culturally theorized and historically recorded narratives. (Birrell, 2000)

1.3 Shifts in Relationships and Feelings

The introduction of Oh Dong-Kyeong shows a significant disruption of the current domestic order. While *Gi-Seok* represents 'comfort from the past,' Dong-Kyeong represents 'spontaneous possibility for the future.' This dynamic situation changes Hae-Rim's state of mind and behavior where she has to choose between her childhood safety and comfort or the possibility of a risky yet exciting new romantic relationship.

Table 3. Semiotic Analysis on the Introduction of the New Friend (The Disruptor)

(3.A) Shifting in Relationships (A)	
	
Denotation	The scene shows a heated argument between Hae-rim and Gi-seok fueled by confusion over the status of their current relationship.
Connotation	The argument reflects the burst of internal conflict and unexpressed feelings from both parties as they show frustration from the shift in their friendship.

Myth	This scene shows that unexpressed feelings in a relationship are destructive, while conflict signifies emotional progress toward honesty; however, this reflects a modern psychological myth rather than a universal truth, showing that emotional restraint and indirect communication are culturally structured practices where harmony is often valued over confrontation, meaning that suppressed expression does not inherently equate to relational dysfunction. (M.Kim, 2026)
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(3.B) Shifting in Relationships (B)



Denotation	Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen to share a hug after confessing and accepting their mutual romantic feelings.
Connotation	The hug marks their physical change in relationship as they accept each other's feelings, which are more than friendship, and move to something more intimate.
Myth	This suggests that a strong romantic bond can be built on a friendship, with the embrace symbolizing a transition from friends to lovers; however, this reflects a culturally mediated myth, indicating that romantic relationships in many Asian societies are historically structured through social norms, family expectations, and gradual emotional negotiation, rather than emerging solely from organic friendship-based development. (Deuchler, 1992)

(3.C) The Presence of Someone New (A)



Denotation	Hae-rim and Dong-kyeong seem to have a deep conversation after discovering something about their parents' lives.
Connotation	The physical closeness between the two of them represents a shift from curiosity to emotional solidarity and mutual empathy by sharing a secret.
Myth	In many narratives across Asian societies, there is a myth that shared suffering can instantly forge emotional bonds stronger than those formed through long-term friendships; although this idea is often portrayed in films as a "deep and authentic" connection, scientific studies show that emotional closeness remains the result of a gradual social process and is influenced by cultural norms such as relational harmony and emotional regulation. Intimate relationships in an Asian context are shaped through social construction and cultural practices, not solely by the intensity of fleeting experiences. (Benson, 2001)

(3.D) The Presence of Someone New (B)



Denotation	Oh Dong-kyeong is seen to confess his feelings to Yoon Hae-rim, but she rejects him and finally realizes her true feelings.
Connotation	Dong-kyeong's confession serves as a catalyst for Hae-Rim to shake off her hesitation and take a clear action.
Myth	In Asian societies, there is a myth that emotional clarity and self-identity emerge precisely through moments of crisis or urgent decisions; this narrative is often portrayed in films as a turning point in a character's development, but academically, it can be explained through the concepts of emotional construction and social regulation, in which emotions do not arise spontaneously but are shaped by cultural norms, situational pressures, and practices of self-reflection. Extreme

decisions such as rejection are not merely "revelations of inner truth," but the result of complex interactions between the individual and the social structures that shape how a person understands and expresses their emotions. (Ko, 2025)



2. Birds of Prey (2020)



Birds of Prey is an American film released in 2020 as a sequel to *Suicide Squad* (2016), centering on the journey of Harley Quinn after her broken relationship with the Joker. This part discusses the manifestation of the gender gaze within the film using Barthes' semiotic theory. By analyzing the semiotic signs, this part explores how the gender gaze is implemented through the Western gaze culture that often emphasizes individual rebellion and physical liberation. In contrast to the shifts found in Eastern cinema, as mentioned before, the Western female gaze in *Birds of Prey* appears to be loud, colorful, and disruptive to patriarchal structures.

2.1 The Impact of Major Life Transitions

The story begins with a brief overview of Harley Quinn's early life, which can only be described as a disturbing and sad life. Despite these hardships, she successfully granted an academic achievement by earning a doctorate degree in psychology. She also works as a professional psychiatrist at Arkham Asylum, where she falls in love with one of her patients, the Joker. Her early times with the Joker reflect the male gaze, where the female is viewed as a complementary object. However, she starts her journey of self-liberation when their relationship ends and the Joker leaves her. This marks her transformation from just a passive object of someone else's into an active subject of her own.

Table 4. Behavioral Analysis of Harley Quinn

(4.A) The Post-Breakup Transition	
	
Denotation	The scene depicts Harley standing outside a house, looking through a window while crying.
Connotation	This scene suggests emotional and social separation. The physical barrier of the window symbolizes her exclusion from a space to which she once belonged. Her visible distress reflects a loss of relational status and emotional attachment, indicating a transition from intimacy to marginalization.
Myth	This incident exemplifies a larger patriarchal mentality where a woman's worth is determined by how valuable she is in a romantic partnership. The cultural idea that female identity and social placement depend on male recognition—a pattern frequently linked to the logic of the male gaze—can be seen as being reinforced by Harley's exclusion (Mulvey, 1975).
	
Denotation	The scene depicts Harley stabbing a portrait of the Joker, followed by her relaxing in a disordered room.
Connotation	This sequence suggests an emotional release and a symbolic detachment from a prior relationship. The act of stabbing the portrait represents the rejection of a former emotional attachment, while her relaxed posture within a messy environment indicates a shift away from imposed expectations of order, control, and relational dependency.

Myth	A larger story of female autonomy and struggle within a patriarchal framework is reflected in this scene. By focusing on autonomy and self-definition, Harley's activities might be seen as a rejection of the conventional view of women as passive objects in love relationships. This change is consistent with criticisms of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), in which female characters transition from objectification to active subjectivity.
(4.B) The Shift in Personal Aesthetics	
	
Denotation	The scene depicts Harley Quinn cutting her hair in an erratic manner while looking into a mirror, displaying shifting emotions between crying and visible distress.
Connotation	This act suggests a symbolic rupture with her former identity. The cutting of hair, often associated with traditional markers of femininity, indicates a rejection of previously constructed roles. Her fluctuating emotional expression reflects an internal conflict and a process of detachment from past relational dependency.
Myth	Cutting her hair represents a shift away from a previous identity in this moment, which depicts a culturally identifiable act of personal regeneration. The act might be interpreted as signifying emotional closure and the process of moving on rather than merely rejecting normative femininity. This is consistent with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 2002), which holds that identity is constantly rebuilt through embodied behaviors.
	



Denotation	Harley Quinn is seen visiting an exotic pet shop to adopt a predatory animal rather than a conventional pet.
Connotation	This signifies a desire to reduce emotional isolation. Her choice of a wild beast reflects her eccentric identity and shows that she needs an untamable companion to match her personality.
Myth	One's ability to control their emotions is sometimes implied by having a pet, but when someone picks a sign of chaos instead, they are probably further separating themselves from the customs and traditions of the home.
	
Denotation	The scene shows Harley Quinn enjoying a festive party with some acquaintances and drinking a heavy amount of alcohol.
Connotation	This act serves as an escape to temporarily forget grief and emotional trauma from the real world.
Myth	Alcohol drinking in this scene might be seen as an assertion of agency and a claim to personal freedom rather than just as carelessness. According to feminist viewpoints on female subjectivity and lived experience, this act represents a negotiation of autonomy and emotional coping within the context of the female gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983).
(4.C) Taking Extreme Action	
	
Denotation	The scene shows Harley Quinn walking calmly away from the massive explosion at the site of her memorable place with the Joker confidently.


Connotation	The explosion represents the destruction of her emotional dependency, and her composure in the middle of the chaos demonstrates a newfound control and the courage to leave the past without regret.
Myth	This scene illustrates a story of female empowerment when self-definition is sparked by emotional upheaval. In line with criticisms of the masculine gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and postfeminist viewpoints on identity reconstruction (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), Harley's departure from the explosion represents a rejection of relationship dependency and the formation of independent subjectivity. At this point, Harley also symbolically ends her relationship with the Joker by giving up the identity of "the Joker's girlfriend," which had previously served as evidence of their relationship. She shows a deliberate act of letting go by deliberately demolishing this common area, turning the remains of that relationship into a place of personal closure and redefining.

2.2 Disparities in Social Perception and Treatment

Social treatment critically shapes the perception of female figures who have experienced a significant loss, such as a failed relationship and abandonment by a loved one. In this film, once Harley Quinn destroys the physical symbols of her relationship with the Joker, society views her as vulnerable and stripped of his protection. Consequently, individuals who were previously aggrieved by her (or who held grievances against the Joker) perceive her as an exposed target, feeling empowered to pursue her and exact their revenge. This section examines how society's perception of the female subject shifts based on her association with male power. It also indicates that in a patriarchal social structure, a woman's safety is often viewed as "borrowed" rather than inherent.

Table 5. Semiotic Analysis of *Birds of Prey* as of the Disparities in Social Perception and Treatment


(5.A) The Hunt for Harley Quinn	
	
Denotation	Harley is surrounded by enemies and then shown restrained and captive in a dark, confined space.
Connotation	This signifies the shift from "untouchable" to "vulnerable" and reveals that her previous safety was not her own but was "borrowed" from the Joker's reputation.
Myth	This scene illustrates a patriarchal system where a woman's security is created by her affiliation with male authority. In line with the idea of women as the "Other" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011) and the idea of hegemonic masculinity, where male dominance structures social power relations, Harley's vulnerability after losing this association reinforces gendered assumptions of female dependency (Connell, 2005).
(5.B) The Absence of "the Master"	
	
Denotation	The scene depicts Harley Quinn confiding in Black Canary, explaining that she has lost the "master" figure in her life.



Connotation	This represents the realization of lost identity. Harley acknowledges that she was previously a "jester" defined only by her proximity to the Joker. It highlights the disorientation of a subject moving from a male-defined existence to sudden autonomy.
Myth	A larger patriarchal structure, in which female identity is created via devotion to male authority, is reflected in this scene. In line with the idea of women as the "Other" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011) and feminist viewpoints on identity formation outside of male-defined systems, Harley's loss of this defining relationship represents both bewilderment and a crucial moment of reconfiguration.
(5.C) The Hunt for Harley Quinn (2)	
	
Denotation	Harley grieves her breakup and is later shown being held by a predatory stranger while semi-conscious.
Connotation	Harley is at her "lowest point." Her loss of external protection and her internal grief are weaponized by others. This illustrates how a woman's lack of agency is often viewed as an opportunity for exploitation.
Myth	This scene illustrates a patriarchal system where women's vulnerability, especially during times of emotional upheaval, becomes a condition that encourages exploitation. Harley's loss male affiliation frequently determines social legitimacy and safety. By exposing how women's lessened agency is not merely unprotected but actively exploited inside such frameworks, this representation challenges gendered power relations through the female gaze.


2.3 Masculine Dimensions of Female Identity

In discussing the manifestation of masculinity within the female subjects of this film, a significant shift in perspective is observable across various characters, not limited to Harley Quinn alone. Furthermore, several other instances that illustrate this transition toward masculine-coded agency are explained in Table 6.

Table 6. Semiotic Analysis of Female Masculinity in *Birds of Prey*

(6.A) Courage and Determination	
	
Denotation	Harley infiltrates a police station with an exuberant smile, followed by a close-up of her face against a backdrop of thick blue and magenta smoke.
Connotation	This imagery signifies playful subversion of authority. Her smile during the destabilization of a power structure represents a celebration of "freedom of action." The blue and magenta smoke serves as a visual marker of her reconstructed identity, suggesting she has found clarity and selfhood within chaos.
Myth	It presents her antisocial behavior as an act of regaining autonomy and self-definition, reflecting a narrative in which female liberation is linked to the disruption of established social standards.
(6.B) Canary Saved Harley	

	
Denotation	Black Canary observes a semi-conscious Harley being cornered by male strangers in an alley; Canary intervenes, using physical combat to rescue her.
Connotation	It represents an acute recognition of a "shared emergency," where danger is a collective reality for women, necessitating a protective and immediate response.
Myth	It supports the notion that women will put one another's safety first in an emergency, using "masculine-coded" violence to challenge conventional notions of female passivity.
(6.C) Assembling Strength	
	
Denotation	Harley Quinn negotiates with her former adversaries (Black Canary, Huntress, and Renee Montoya) to rescue Cassandra and confront a common enemy.
Connotation	Personal conflicts are marginalized in favor of a shared objective. It demonstrates that under extreme pressure, mutual reliance becomes the only viable path to survival.
Myth	By emphasizing a kind of strategic solidarity and arguing that female strength results from the alignment of individual agency within a collective dynamic, it undermines the patriarchal cliché of women as innate rivals.

	
Denotation	The scene depicts Harley and her newly formed team directly engaging with the challenges and physical confrontations initiated by their enemies.
Connotation	The characters' expressions of enjoyment during the conflict signify a shift from victimhood to active agency.
Myth	It suggests that, within hostile environments, physical resistance can function as a means of asserting safety and autonomy. This representation challenges the traditional "damsel in distress" trope by portraying women as active agents who derive empowerment from their capacity to resist.

2.4 The Inherent Feminine Dimension


Although Harley and her companions appear predominantly dominant and masculine in this film, they remain female characters who possess an inherent "soft side" or feminine sensibility. This multidimensionality demonstrates that the female gaze does not merely seek to replicate masculine traits but rather to present a complete emotional spectrum where strength and vulnerability coexist.

Table 7. Semiotic Analysis of the Inherent Feminine Dimensions in *Birds of Prey*


(7.A) The Domestic Act	
	
Denotation	Harley and Cassandra Cain engage in a casual shopping excursion, browsing for items like a typical guardian and child.

Connotation	It portrays a mundane, nurturing side of Harley, signifying that she retains a capacity for caretaking and traditional social behaviors despite her chaotic lifestyle.
Myth	It suggests that Harley's identity is not fixed or singular but composed of multiple and shifting roles. By integrating maternal and domestic elements into her independent life, the scene challenges the trope of the "lone outlaw" and reflects the fluid construction of gendered identity (Butler, 2002; McRobbie, 2009).

(7.B) Signs of Affections

	
Denotation	Harley affectionately kisses the cheek of Doc, the elderly shopkeeper who provided her with food and refuge.
Connotation	It reveals that Harley's aggressive persona is a situational response to a hostile environment, rather than a total loss of her emotional humanity or capacity for genuine gratitude.
Myth	It suggests that feminine-coded qualities such as tenderness can coexist with expressions of strength or violence, rather than being mutually exclusive. This representation challenges binary constructions of gender roles and reflects the fluid and performative nature of identity (Butler, 2000; Connell, 2005).

(7.C) The Hollowness of the Lost One

	
Denotation	Harley is running in distress; she is weeping openly with smeared, ruined makeup and a facial expression of deep sorrow.
Connotation	The ruined makeup serves as a metaphor for the downfall of her "tough" persona and exposes her raw emotional state that reflects fear and loss.

Myth	This scene suggests that a female character who displays dominance or traditionally masculine traits remains a complex subject with internal conflict. Within the framework of the female gaze, emotional expression, such as tears, is not positioned as weakness, but as an articulation of authentic subjectivity and lived experience.
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Discussion

This section discusses the visual semiotic findings presented previously, focusing on the manifestation of the gender gaze through *If We Were a Season* and *Birds of Prey*.

1. Socio-Cultural Influence and Ideology

In general, feminine women are described as graceful and elegant (Khansa, 2022) and often are depicted with specific attributes, such as poise, unique skill sets, a sophisticated fashion sense, and an approachable demeanor. Moreover, these women are highly associated with self-hygiene, diligence, a high sense of empathy, a distinct aesthetic aura, sharp intuition, patience, and emotional sensitivity. Beyond physical appearance, the modern visualization of feminine women could be recognized from several marks, including having the rejection of restrictive beauty standards, a high regard for education, freedom in career choices, gentle emotional control, and a tendency to have a large circle of female friends.

In *If We Were a Season*, the female protagonist is portrayed through the lens of this traditional femininity. Through Hae-Rim, the femininity is manifested through a girl that is elegant, graceful, and polite, which allows these standards to dominate the plot. Hae-Rim radiates feminine energy as the main catalyst for the romantic connection between the characters. Mean-

while, *Birds of Prey* features female characters who are crucial within the realms of action and adventure. It showcases the strength, independence, and courage of women to dismantle existing patriarchal systems. Through the heroine and her allies, the film highlights both physical powers and strong sisterhood.

In comparison, while *Birds of Prey* challenges the gender stereotypes through an overt female gaze that emphasizes women's autonomy, *If We Were a Season* employs a more subtle female gaze focused on interpersonal dynamics (as seen in Tables 1, 2, and 3). The film revolves around the feelings, vulnerabilities, and complexities of the female emotional experience within a more traditional society. Moreover, the film also pivots on the struggles and conflicts in relationships faced by women, indicating the length of gender roles in a social environment that often prioritizes tradition, which still heavily revolves around masculine patriarchy.

The differences between the two films are influenced by regional ideologies dictating the construction of the gaze:

A. Cinematic Ideology in American Cinema

In *Birds of Prey*, the "female gaze" is used as a tool to dismantle the typical male gaze of the superhero film genre. It centers on individual control and liberation. Visually, they are encoded through the use of vibrant colors, female fatale energy, and even the physical capabilities of a woman. The heroine and her allies are the "subjects" of their own action as a response to reject the role of "passive objects" of the male gaze.

B. Socio-Cultural Dynamics in South Korean Cinema

In *If We Were a Season*, the gender gaze is deeply represented in a collection

of traditional values and cultural morals. The female gaze in this film is not manifested as a direct rebellion but as an exploration of emotional liberty by women. The traditional moral structure in South Korea acts as a signifying system that dictates physical distance and silence over speech, yet the plot focuses on the female experience, acknowledging females as people with minds and will, not as objects of obedience.

2. Deconstructing the Passive Object and the Evolution of Agency

As has been mentioned before above, the manifesting of feminine characters through the gender gaze in cinematography is often to position women as passive objects (Sari, 2022). Mulvey's concept of the male gaze supports this claim by pinpointing that the female is often seen and constructed from a masculine perspective so as to emphasize male dominance in society (Chen, 2024). Initially, *Birds of Prey* demonstrates how Harley Quinn is framed within conventional gendered roles, as shown in Table 4 and Table 5, particularly through her relation to the Joker. However, the film subverts these stereotypes and traces her transformation into an autonomous subject. Such portrayals are in line with common gender stereotypes, where women are assigned to have conventional roles, such as being the romantic interest, someone who needs saving, and merely being the supporting characters for male heroes in films (Afifah & Febriana, 2024). Initially, the film starts with how Harley Quinn is being treated as someone whose success and existence are defined only by her relationship with the Joker, despite her advanced educational background and excellent combat skills. According to Wilk (2024), these kinds of representations often fail to capture the real diverse living experiences and identities of women in the real world.

However, in modern American cinema, the representation and visualization of female characters are already significantly evolving. Nowadays, women are being depicted as having more power and freedom compared to their male counterparts (Chen, 2024). Women's typical traits as seen in the male gaze, such as innocence and being submissive, are now being reconstructed as a strategic tactic for women to achieve certain goals, effectively strategically utilizing men's masculine arrogance and their tendency to underestimate women's capabilities (Mustafaj, 2023). As can be seen in Table 6, this shift in character traits and the manifestation of female resistance redirect both physical and emotional behavioral changes. This shift is often triggered by environmental pressure that implies women are no longer represented in the traditional femininity, which is being gentler and dependent on men, but rather as individuals who have problem-solving abilities and intelligence that often surpass men's. And as can be seen in *Birds of Prey*, this characterization is emphasized directly, as the storyline focuses on character growth, the evolution of female traits, and the transformative power of female solidarity.

The difference between *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* highlights the cultural changes affected by the female gaze. In the American context, power is represented through the display of intelligence, as women strategically leverage both perceived vulnerability and inherent strength to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures in modern society. Meanwhile, South Korean cinema defines power as being represented through internal conflict and subjectivity, where the female character is constructed by being able to manage her emotional surge and struggles with the tradition. Both films have successfully shifted the perspective of seeing a woman as 'an object to be looked at' to 'someone who feels and

acts,' as in line with the concept of a modernized gender gaze. The analysis of visual semiotics of *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* show that the female gaze is not just about the aesthetic, but also a deeper understanding of a woman's mind and subjectivity. Whether it's seen through the rebellion acts, as can be seen in *Birds of Prey*, or through the depth of internal emotional strength, as can be seen in *If We Were a Season*, these cinematic experiences have reflected the movement of true diversity and potential female identity.

Conclusion

This study proves that the representation of the gender gaze in modern cinema is complex and heavily influenced by the ideology from a certain culture. Furthermore, it is evident that both American and South Korean cinemas are increasingly engaging with the gender gaze to be used as satire and criticism towards the patriarchal narratives of a society. The findings in this study also show that American cinema, as seen in *Birds of Prey*, highlights the female gaze, where the freedom and reclamation of power of a woman are the priority rather than mere objectification. In contrast to that, the South Korean methods in *If We Were a Season* mainly highlight emotional growth rather than the traditional masculine display of power. And while the former focuses on the female gaze that overthrows the male gaze, the latter pivots to internal experience and interpersonal intimacy. The semiotic model of Roland Barthes demonstrates how cinematic signs are more often than not embedded with gendered meanings. These research findings suggest that the "gaze" is a more complex tool to define or redefine power, identity, and other representations. By providing a space for female subjectivity and highlighting how women perceive the world, contemporary cinema continues to

evolve as a medium for critical social reflection and narrative reconstruction. The present study provides a snapshot based on films released in 2017 and 2020 but does not address the historical evolution of gendered visual representation over time. Although the analysis of two films is valuable as a case study, it has inherent limitations in supporting broader generalizations about trends across the film industry. Lastly, it is recommended for future research to examine films from the 1970s onward in order to trace changes in the gender gaze across time and across shifting sociocultural contexts and apply more theoretical frameworks that would be potentially useful, such as feminist criticism, psychoanalytic gaze theory, and others.

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ART OF VISUALIZATION IN BUILDING CONSTRUCTION: DRAFTING AS COMMUNICATION, COORDINATION, REGULATION, AND BUDGETING

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Received Apr. 26, 2026; Revised May. 15, 2026; Accepted May. 25, 2026.

Abstract: This study investigate the importance of drafting in AEC (architecture, engineering, and construction) industry. The article goes beyond seeing drafting as a technical task of producing drawings, but as a visual art, as it transform abstract ideas into visual construction knowledge. It is interpretive as drafting requires judgment to select, organise, and to communicate technical, legal, spatial, and financial information. At the same time, drafting is also a synthesis as it brings those four different forms of knowledge altogether to become a unity of coordinated visual medium. Construction industry becomes multifaceted and more dependent on digital tools. Thus, this study brings literatures review from several fields to look at how drafting works in four significant areas. Firstly, it helps diverse professionals communicate. Second, it solves coordination problems. Third, it shows legal compliance. Last, it also supports budgeting. While each of these areas has been studied on its own, few studies connect them all through the role of drafting. This study suggests that drafting is not merely a technical task, but also shapes how construction projects happen. Because of this, the paper argues that professionals in the AEC field need to better understand how drafting affects teamwork, legal processes, and financial planning. The model shown in this paper can be a platform for new research, policy, and training to understand the influence of graphical representations, such as drafting, on the physical construction of buildings.

Keywords: drafting; AEC; visual instrument; building construction

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Introduction

Drafting play a variety of central roles in the AEC (architecture, engineering, and construction) industry. We propose that drafting be understood as a means of visualizing ideas as well as something that shapes team communication, coordination, regulatory navigation, and budget management. As AEC work has become increasingly complex and dependent on digital information, drawings have shifted from static drawings to more integrated, systems-based practices (Succar, 2009; Becerik-Gerber & Kensek, 2010). Tools like Building Information Modeling (BIM) have essentially turned engineering drawings into a common platform linking people, decisions, and data in real time (Bryde, Broquetas, & Volm, 2013). Increasingly these drawings have been a part of nearly every key decision in the building life cycle (Eastman et al., 2008).

Visual documents really help communication between parties from different backgrounds by clarifying things and bringing teams closer together (Whyte, 2011). This is a key point especially in projects where there are a lot of changes coming from different people the architects, engineers, contractors, and regulators who all have to work together and combine their diverse points of view (Sebastian, 2011). Drafting is one of the ways that best supports communication among different groups of people and prevents the problems of misunderstanding (Porwal & Hewage, 2012). Digital tools like BIM are capable of merging the shape of a building (geometry), the information related to it (metadata), simulations of how the building will perform, and the way in which its construction will be done, all in one single model (Azhar, Khalfan, & Maqsood, 2012). Apart from that, these tools make it easier to find areas where the different building elements clash with each other; they can also do automatically checking whether the building is up to code and

get the cost of the building in real-time (Sacks, Eastman, Lee, & Teicholz, 2018). Therefore, making technical drawings is not just making a piece of paper but it is actually a way of helping the design process (Cao, Li, & Wang, 2017).

Many countries have gradually started using performance-based codes. (Foliente, 2000). This means a more thorough visual demonstration of safety, environmental friendliness, and accessibilities is needed (Foliente, 2000). Besides a technical purpose, drawings have become a legal reference as well (Ding, 2008). This double function is a source of both opportunities and difficulties for those working in the construction industry. Drawings in planning and heritage conservation work like records showing where a person has come from, what a person has done, and where a person is going (Rodwell, 2003; Tiesdell, Oc, & Heath, 2012). Drawings are policy as well as design tools (Imrie & Street, 2009; Alwan, Jones, & Holgate, 2017).

The integration of cost data with design models enables accurate pricing at early project stages, thereby reducing financial risk (Monteiro & Martins, 2013). The relationship between visual data and economic outcomes constitutes a central focus of Building Information Modeling (BIM)-based project delivery (Barlish & Sullivan, 2012). As a result of these advancements, design is no longer viewed solely as a representational output; instead, it functions as a visual operating system for construction (Volk, Stengel, & Schultmann, 2014). Nevertheless, the current literature remains fragmented, frequently isolating design within discipline-specific frameworks.

This study aims to address this fragmented discussion by analyzing drafting as a fundamental visual tool across four interrelated domains: communication, coordination, regulation, and budgeting.

Each domain reflects its own drawing function. Communication refers to how drawings enable understanding among stakeholders. Coordination encompasses system integration and workflow. Regulation encompasses code compliance and legal traceability. Budgeting involves cost prediction, planning, and resource control. Current research indicates that, despite the widespread use of engineering drawings across these four domains, research tends to explore each separately. There is limited research linking these roles through an integrated framework (Love, Matthews, Simpson, Hill, & Olatunji, 2014; Hartmann, Gao, & Fischer, 2008). Consequently, the systemic value of engineering drawings in the construction process remains under-theorized.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that repositions drafting as multi-scale visual infrastructures. Drafting is conceptualized here not as neutral representations, but as driving forces that organize actions, materials, policies, and finances (Latour & Yaneva, 2008; Henderson, 1999). This framework draws inspiration from visual studies, information systems, construction law, and project management literature. By combining insights from these diverse literatures, this paper offers an integrated reading of engineering drawing practices. Furthermore, this paper highlights the need for engineering drawing literacy across the AEC profession, not only for drawing production but also for understanding its implications.

Methodology

This study uses a conceptual research approach to investigate the functional role of drafting in building construction. Conceptual research is used to integrate diverse theoretical and empirical insights into a new understanding of a topic (Jabareen, 2009). This approach is particular-

ly well-suited to contexts where practice transcends unified academic theory, as is the case with engineering drawings in the AEC industry (Meredith, 1993). The relevant literature was extracted using keywords including “drafting”, “construction communication,” “visual coordination,” “building regulations,” “cost estimating” and building information modeling (BIM).

This study use relevant source namely Elsevier, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley, ASCE Library, SpringerLink, IEEE Xplore, and MDPI. This study primarily focus on articles published from 2000 to 2024, as this timeframe apprehend the development of contemporary discussions on Building Information Modeling (BIM) and digital drafting. Some of foundational sources are between 1993 and 1998 because they offer significant conceptual grounding for project management, construction processes, and visual representation in design and engineering. Some recent sources are from 2025 supporting the discussion on current project management practices.

Thematic coding was used to extract key insights. This aligns with the method used by Thomas and Harden (2008) in their thematic synthesis of qualitative studies. The aim was to explore how engineering drawings operate across distinct but interrelated construction activities. The articles were looked into by the way they handle visual information, design artifacts, or digital models as tools for implementation. These articles describing the fields of engineering and construction featured architecture (Groat & Wang, 2013) and construction engineering (Oberlender & Trost, 2001).

In the review, a conceptual mapping approach was used to create a framework relating drafting to project outcomes. In careful work on construction innovation, this has been employed to better define

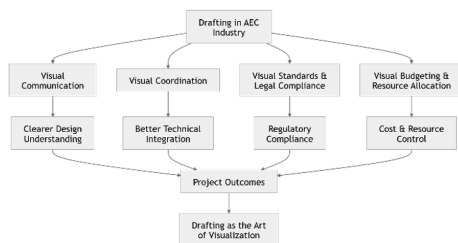


Figure 1. Conceptual Mapping of Framework Relating Drafting to Project Outcomes (Source: Personal)

underlying relationships between layers of projects (Harty 2005; Winch 2012). This results in a framework that positions engineering drawings within four domains of communication, coordination, regulation and budgeting.

This method does not aim to generate statistical generalizations. Rather, it provides a synthesized perspective on drafting as an under-theorized yet operationally crucial practice. This study lays the groundwork for future empirical research and policy design in construction visualization, particularly in the context of digital transformation (Hartmann, Van Meerveld, Vosseveld, & Adriaanse, 2012).

Result and Discussion

1. Drafting as a Visual Communication Medium in Building Construction Industry

The role of drafting as a communication medium in the construction industry is widely discussed across several key areas. Sketches, diagrams, and annotations facilitate clear design communication and collaboration among stakeholders (Baltes & Diehl, 2014; Hisarciklilar & Boujut, 2007; Détienne, 2006; Maher, Simoff, & Cicognani, 2012). Effective communication through drafting is shown to improve project management outcomes by preventing misunderstandings, enhancing

coordination, and increasing participant satisfaction (Kerzner, 2025; Leung, Ng, & Cheung, 2004; Ling & Lau, 2002; Manley, 2008; Mansfield, Ugwu, & Doran, 1994; Meng, 2010). The adoption of digital tools such as Building Information Modeling (BIM) further advances communication accuracy and collaboration across construction phases (Sacks, Koskela, Dave, & Owen, 2010; Eastman, Teicholz, Sacks, & Liston, 2011; Lee, 2001). Growing trend toward distributed and remote project teams emphasizes the importance of managing communication flows through drafting in geographically dispersed contexts (Staple, Knauss, Schneider, & Zazworka, 2021).

Sketches and diagrams are essential tools that help designers externalize ideas and share design intent clearly (Baltes & Diehl, 2014). Annotations in technical drawings improve communication by providing context and supporting mutual understanding among individuals involved (Hisarciklilar & Boujut, 2007). In collaborative design processes, these visual devices are essential as they serve to control complex task dependencies over a period of time and bring many perspectives together (Détienne, 2006). In addition, Maher, Simoff & Cicognani (2012) also describe virtual design studios as applying digital image-making techniques to enable designers to work together in real-time across geographic boundaries. These conditions highlight the need for shared visual representations around communication (Maher et al., 2012).

The sequence of previous research contained herein examines the relationship between communication and the results of construction projects. Project communication has a significant impact on project success (Kerzner, 2025); thus, effective communication can help assure that project planning, scheduling, and control are performed correctly. Participant satisfaction is another indicator

of the quality of communication. This is positively related to the degree of collaboration established during the construction process and therefore influences the performance of the construction project (Leung, Ng, & Cheung, 2004). Numerous case studies of major construction projects (i.e., power plants) have demonstrated that when communication fails, the project can be delayed and/or incur costs beyond the original budget (Ling & Lau, 2002; Mansfield, Ugwu, & Doran, 1994). Finally, the way a subcontractor communicates with a general contractor will influence the level of innovation that a subcontractor is willing to provide, which impacts the overall completion date and quality of the project (Manley, 2008). In addition, maintaining effective supply chain relationships requires that all relevant parties have a solid understanding of their interdependencies so that communication can be maintained throughout the course of the project (Meng, 2010).

Several studies have focused on the role of digital tools, particularly Building Information Modeling (BIM), in improving construction communication. BIM combines different data sources to improve clarity and cut down on mistakes during design and construction (Eastman, Teicholz, Sacks, & Liston, 2011). BIM makes construction work smoother and more efficient by boosting teamwork and lowering errors or material waste (Sacks, Koskela, Dave, & Owen, 2010). Digital drawing tools also help project stakeholders share information more accurately and quickly, which helps reduce delays and misunderstandings between teams (Lee, 2001).

Today, an increasing amount of research is dedicated towards understanding how remote teams communicate. Digital technology is on the rise and making it more important for project teams to have a comprehensive communication plan since these teams are becoming

more geographically dispersed (Stapel, Knauss, Schneider & Zazworka, 2011). One suggested method for achieving this is through FLOW mapping, which allows team members to visualize and manage communication, ensuring that the correct information gets to the right person at the appropriate time (Stapel et al., 2011). Currently, there are still issues relating to clarity and consistency with virtual communication; this can cause disruptions in coordination for design and construction project teams. This highlights the need for an established clear communication strategy to aid project teams with their collaborative efforts when members are not located within the same geographical region.

2. Drafting for Visual Coordination in Building Construction Projects

Research on BIM-enabled clash Researches show that BIM helps different teams in construction work together better. For example, it helps architects, engineers, and plumbers make sure their parts of the building don't bump into each other. Akhmetzhanova et al. (2022) show that in the case of Kazakhstan construction sector, BIM adoption enhances design precision and facilitates smoother construction sequences if applied as early as possible. Chahrour et al. (2021) also highlight the financial benefits from preserving resources due to clashes being detected beforehand, thus allowing proper scheduling of resources for construction stages. From some technical point of view, Hu et al. (2019) claim that devising a complete method toward modeling dependencies among various components of a building improves detection of clashes significantly helps precise clash detection. Wang and Leite (2016) support this by proposing structured approaches to cope with spatial conflicts occurring in MEP systems which are often handled in

unorganized ways.

Due to the fact that MEP systems coordination poses a major problem in construction, many scholars are attempting to improve it. For example, Hassanain et al. (2019a) recommend checklists with all DICP inclusions as one way to improve collaboration and minimize errors. In a later study, Hassanain et al. (2019b) present an advanced knowledge-based framework in Saudi Arabia designed specifically for the construction industry with the goal of aiding MEP coordination management. Both studies remind us how having concrete approaches aimed at improving collaboration between teams reduces system conflicts as well as meshing problems. Korman, Fischer, and Tatum (2003) in a previous project examined how knowledge representation and reasoning can assist in a decision-making process on how to integrate several different MEP components. Lee, Park, and Won looked at a specific project that demonstrated that there were issues with conflict resolution, as well as conflicts in scheduling, based on whether workflows were coordinated in parallel or in sequence.

The widespread use of Building Information Modeling (BIM) has transformed many aspects of construction project management. Azhar (2011) describes the benefits and challenges of BIM use. He points to improved visualization and coordination, but also notes issues such as high initial costs and reluctance within companies to adapt. Hardin and McCool (2015) explain that BIM tools help improve communication, planning, and cost control, which can prevent delays and unexpected expenses.

Using digital tools, working more collaboratively, and focusing on method (rather than tool) will help to improve construction efficiency. Freire & Alarco (2002) suggest using a method called Lean Design, which seeks to reduce waste

and enhance collaboration among employees in several fields. According to Griffin & Evans (1994), STEP technology helps to create a better connection among various parts of the construction phase, especially, connecting the design phase to the actual phase of finishing the construction. Teams that do not work effectively together can make mistakes and require rework, according to Kakitahi et al. (2014). This demonstrates why coordination and communication between teams are important.

The previously mentioned studies demonstrate that drafting and coordination are vital components of today's intricate construction projects, with BIM-based clash detection being effective as it helps to improve the accuracy of models and decrease errors in these projects (Akhmetzhanova et al., 2022; Chahrour et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2019; Wang & Leite, 2016). In addition, additional tools can help in the organization of MEP systems as well as assist different teams to collaborate more efficiently than before (Hassanain et al., 2019a, 2019b; Korman et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2014). While BIM has numerous advantages, not all construction companies are currently utilizing it due to its high costs and some individuals resisting the transition to newer working methods (Azhar, 2011; Hardin & McCool, 2015). Furthermore, research has shown that using lean construction principles combined with better sharing of data, teamwork development and encouraging the use of these principles will significantly reduce the likelihood of any errors on projects and improve the flow of systems (Freire & Alarco, 2002; Griffin & Evans, 1994; Kakitahi, et al., 2014)

3. Visual Standards and Legal Compliance in Building Construction Drafting

Visualization in AEC industry is stan-

standardized on international level. ISO 128-1:2020 standards worldwide principles of technical drawing, both in 2D and 3D formats, as well ISO 19650-1:2018 posits BIM as a framework among construction stakeholders (ISO, 2018, 2020). ISO 16739-1:2024 also outlines standard for BIM data to be shared across software platforms and throughout all building life cycles (ISO, 2024).

Architectural and technical drawings are essential legal documents within the building permit process. According to Chynoweth (2008), careful examination of these drawings is required to determine their adherence to the building codes associated with construction. These drawings will be used as official evidence when plans are examined and either approved or rejected.

Smith and Tardif (2012) describe BIM as a useful strategy that supports more than just automated rule checking. BIM also improves documentation consistency across projects. Their study demonstrates that the use of digital tools such as Building Information Models (BIM) reduces errors caused by humans and makes it easier for people to understand how processes work because the electronic format promotes transparency in the process. Emmitt (2014) further supports the claim that using Building Information Models (BIM) is also beneficial for design management by helping to clearly document the design and ensure that what is built meets the intent of the original design.

Various researchers have researched the influence of rule and regulation on design process especially the drawing exposure. Imrie and Street (2009) explain that planning systems often employ some form of pictorial control regarding the operation and appearance of structures. In this case, drawings serve an additional function beyond demonstrating design concepts; they are used to verify compliance with

established requirements. Their findings demonstrate that drawings have a regulatory as well as an imaginative purpose. Lawson (2005) takes a more balanced position and indicates that in addition to being able to develop and produce designs that comply with myriad of regulatory and zoning constraints are many pathways, although limited by the rules and regulations, for designers to imagine or develop/disclose new ideas or modifications to their designs.

In construction projects involving historic buildings and restoration, drawings carry a greater responsibility. Murtagh (2005) emphasizes the importance of producing detailed and accurate drawings that reflect a full understanding of the building's history. These drawings help guide the restoration process and also serve as legal evidence that the work respects the original structure and meets required standards. Yung and Chan (2012) discuss several issues associated with the management of documentation and approvals in the context of cultural heritage projects. In these cases where technically sound drawings have been produced, they clearly aid architects, officials and members of the community in communicating about the cultural heritage project as well as working together towards its completion.

This collection of research shows how important architectural and engineering drawings are to the legal and regulatory aspects of construction projects. These drawings assist with obtaining building permits, determining who is responsible for what, and demonstrating compliance with the applicable regulations and standards (Chynoweth, 2008). As digital tools become more prevalent, BIM adds value to project delivery through automated inspection capabilities and improving the collaboration between diverse teams (Smith & Tardif, 2012; Emmitt, 2014). Drawings are also instrumental in the

design process today and can limit design creativity due to the constraints imposed by legal and administrative regulations (Imrie & Street, 2009; Lawson, 2005). With respect to heritage conservation and reuse projects, accurate drawings are legally required and will help all parties involved achieve a common goal and understanding (Murtagh, 2005; Yung & Chan, 2012). In summary, drawings are more than just visual representations; they provide direction for the legal process, assist in obtaining approvals, and serve as guides throughout the entire building process for the project by providing an action plan for managing tasks/responsibilities.

4. Drafting as a Visual Aid in Construction Budgeting and Resource Allocation

Research shows that architectural & technical drafting is essential to financial management and cost estimating in construction projects. Accurate preliminary drawings are typically the basis of most building cost estimation (Brook 2015), allowing contractors to create an accurate estimate of labor and materials, assess the related risks for the project and develop prices for their services. Additionally, Cartlidge (2011) describes the changing nature of the quantity surveyor's role as it relates to the construction industry and explains that the use of detailed drawings is a critical part of planning and estimating project costs.

According to Dutta (2022), accurate material and labor estimates are contingent upon having clear and complete drawings available. Both Peurifoy and Oberlender (2013) support this statement by remarking that cost estimations utilize drawings to convert ideas into quantities that may be measured and worked with. More specifically, Holm et al. (2021) state that estimating is not an isolated step; however, it starts with producing

good drawings and is an ongoing process during the scheduling and planning of a project. Therefore, all of these references provide compelling evidence that producing high-quality drawings at the beginning of any project is critical in order to maintain control over the project's budget and schedule.

As the use of digital technologies grows in our global society, the role of the drafter is shifting into more digital drafting. As an example of this trend, Building Information Modeling (BIM) can automate some processes, create efficiencies for people and organizations by reducing time spent completing tasks, and reduce the risk of creating errors through automation (Taghaddos, Mashayekhi & Sherafat, 2016). Additionally, BIM allows for a more consistent and accurate cost estimate for complex tasks (Çepni, Akcamete & Klein, 2020). Elmousalami (2020) provides evidence that the cost prediction capabilities provided by AI are more timely and reliable than those produced through traditional means. Jiang, Li, Lin, Liu & Ma (2023) found that advanced AI technologies such as deep reinforcement learning can adapt cost and resource planning based on actual job conditions in real-time, thus providing a more up-to-date picture of the project site.

Structural design work has a clear connection between drafting and cost planning as well. According to a study conducted by Cho & Chun (2015) on reinforced concrete structures, there was a direct correlation between creating high-quality (i.e., accurate) engineering drawings during the design phase, resulting in reasonable estimates of construction costs. In this way, design decisions can be made in accordance with actual budget limitations. When teams used engineering drawings combined with estimate tools, they were able to eliminate confusion and transfer their ideas from design to concrete financial plans more

seamlessly. Therefore, accurate drawings are critical for resource management, cost control, and reducing risk.

The focus of Sherafat; et.al (2019), was to take a look at site conditions and the impact on site equipment tracking by integrating multiple sources of information. In their findings, the authors indicated that if good data were used, it would be possible to make real-time changes to the schedules and resources, Therefore it was necessary for the project to be well-planned synchronously to facilitate use of these systems. Finally, the actual data determined can be directly associated with the draws and plans from the initial documents to conduct the field verification of work performed.

Documentation also plays a crucial role in the business side of construction, especially when companies compete for projects through bidding. Mohemad et al. (2010) explain that tendering systems, which help teams decide whether and how to bid, depend on clear, up-to-date, and accurate documentation. These documents enable teams to make faster and better decisions in a highly competitive environment. Their study shows that well-structured documentation not only supports internal project planning but also helps make the bidding process fairer and more transparent for all parties involved.

All these existing studies highlight that engineering drawings are a core component of the financial and operational aspects of construction. From estimating costs and measuring quantities to managing risks and maintaining schedules, most processes begin with accurate drawings and well-prepared documents (Brook, 2015; Cartlidge, 2011; Dutta, 2022; Peurifoy & Oberlender, 2013; Holm et al., 2021). Digital technologies and emerging technologies, such as BIM, further enhance this by automating critical tasks and helping teams remain flexible

and adapt to change (Taghaddos et al., 2016; Çepni, Akcamete & Klein, 2020; Elmousalami, 2020; Jiang et al., 2023). In areas such as reinforced concrete design, high-quality drawings enhance early cost planning (Cho & Chun, 2015). On the construction site, it helps teams coordinate work in real time (Sherafat et al., 2019). And at the bidding stage, it supports faster and more informed decision-making (Mohemad et al., 2010). At every stage of a project, drafting serves as a key tool for successful planning, budgeting, and implementation.

5. Synthesis: The Interconnectivity of the Four Domains

The four aspects described above show that drafting in the construction of buildings is not only an activity that creates drawings. In other words, drafting plays a crucial role as a key visual tool for communication, coordination, compliance, and cost estimation in the process of building construction. It seems that each aspect has its own significance, but at the same time, they are interrelated. Drafting serves as a medium of communication for transmitting design intentions to various parties involved, acts as a coordinator for integrating technical systems across different professions, acts as a medium for legal requirements and regulations, and provides data for cost estimation in the form of construction details.

As for the first sphere, drafting is the medium of visual communication since it allows to externalize thoughts and concepts, explain design choices, minimize misunderstandings, and communicate them to people using sketching, diagramming, annotations, technical drawings, and modeling. This communicative aspect acquires utmost importance in this particular case owing to the fact that the construction project involves numerous stakeholders, each of whom does not nec-

essarily possess a single language, or rather, the language specific to this sphere of activity. Therefore, there is a need for all the participants involved in the process to have a means to discuss design intent and approve it, thus, making drafting a language of construction.

In the second domain, drafting acts as a coordination tool because of the necessity of technical alignment in visual data. Drawings and BIM models serve as mechanisms for different building systems coming together in the same spatial and technical context, specifically in architectural, structural, and MEP systems coordination. Clash detection, MEP coordination, lean design, and integrated BIM approaches prove that drafting is helpful to teams in finding potential issues before the start of construction. By coordinating, drafting does not limit itself to presenting design decisions already made but becomes involved in resolving technical relations between building elements. This function is also closely associated with the third domain of drafting, which is the documentation of visual standards and compliance. Architectural and engineering drawings are used in the process of building permits, code check, heritage conservation permits, and administrative review. The importance of the ISO standards in this regard is increased due to ISO 128-1:2020 that standardizes the technical representation, ISO 19650-1:2018 that defines the nature of BIM as information management structure, and ISO 16739-1:2024 that facilitates data interoperability between BIM software applications.

The fourth domain, drafting serves an important role in construction cost estimating and budgeting in the fourth domain. Accurate cost estimating, quantity surveying, bid preparation, procurement planning, manpower estimating, risk estimation, and construction resource management all rely extensively on accurate drawings. Visual representation becomes

financial representation here since not only is the drawing read, but it is also quantified, priced, and scheduled, and serves as a foundation for decision-making. BIM and AI-based technologies take this idea even further by integrating the drawing with automated cost estimating, real-time resource planning, and project management processes. Therefore, drafting helps with the economic rationale behind construction projects in that not only design can be judged for its visual and functional merits, but for its economic feasibility and efficiency as well.

This synthesis reinforces the notion that drafting should be considered the art of visualization within the context of construction work. However, in this case, the use of the word “art” does not imply any notion of expression or creative freedom. In this instance, “art” stands for a disciplined form of making the information of construction visible, legible, coordinated, compliant, and practical. The art of drafting is in the fact that the information that is relevant for construction is rendered visually accessible. By bringing together communication, coordination, compliance, and finance in the form of drawing, drafting becomes the visual infrastructure of construction. Through this, construction projects become possible as buildings move from being conceptualized to being documented, from documents to being approved, from approval to costing, and from costing to being physically constructed.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore how drafting function in construction, not only as a drawing tool but also as a key support for communication, coordination, regulation, and budgeting. After reviewing research in a variety of academic fields, this research provides convincing evidence of how important the role that engineering

drawings play in all aspects of construction project management. Engineering drawings facilitate collaboration between construction team members, provide a basis for decision making and assist in the efficient execution of construction projects.

By combining previously unlinked concepts, this paper will provide an integrated view of the use of engineering drawings throughout the various phases of a project. This unifies knowledge about the process; furthermore, it also demonstrates the necessity of professionals within the construction field to understand engineering drawings and their uses for creating engineering drawings and for satisfying legal obligations, working together as members of a team, and developing budgets for construction work that is done in practice.

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VISUAL AND NARRATIVE CONTENT VARIATION IN BUILDING CONSUMER TRUST: A CASE STUDY OF ECINOS' SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

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Received Nov. 25, 2025; Revised Apr. 27, 2026; Accepted June. 02, 2026.

Abstract: *This study examines how visual and narrative content variation contributes to consumer trust and purchase intention in local fashion branding. Focusing on Ecinos as a case study, the research explores how promotional content, informative posts, storytelling, and value-driven campaigns operate as communication strategies on social media. This study employs a qualitative single-case study approach grounded in a qualitative constructivist paradigm and supported by descriptive data triangulation. Data were collected through a preliminary perceptual survey involving 55 Instagram users, in-depth interviews with two digital content practitioners and two fashion content creators, and observational analysis of Ecinos' social media content. The survey was used only to identify general audience tendencies and was not intended for inferential or causal claims. The findings indicate that varied content supports trust formation when it combines visual consistency, process transparency, relevant information, and humanized storytelling. Behind-the-scenes content helps reduce audience uncertainty by revealing production processes and product value, while inclusive and socially meaningful narratives foster emotional connection and community identification. The study concludes that, in local fashion branding, social media content design functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a trust-building communication strategy. The findings contribute to visual communication design studies by showing how content variation can transform product-centered communication into a more authentic and relationship-oriented brand experience.*

Keywords: *brand trust; case study; content variation; fashion branding; purchase intention; social media content design; visual narrative*

Introduction

In the post-pandemic digital fashion market, many local fashion brands rely heavily on product-display content, discount announcements, endorse-

ment-based visibility, and repetitive promotional messages. While these strategies may generate short-term attention, they can also create promotional fatigue because audiences encounter similar sales-oriented content across multiple

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brand accounts. This condition creates a challenge for local fashion brands: visibility alone is no longer sufficient to build trust. Brands must also communicate authenticity, product value, and emotional relevance through the design of their social media content (Adya, 2024; Nugroho et al., 2024) (Buditomo, 2024; Wibowo et al., 2021).

In this context, several local fashion brands have begun to shift from purely promotional communication toward more humanized and value-driven content. This shift can be seen through the use of behind-the-scenes production stories, styling education, body positivity messages, personal narratives, and community-oriented language. From a Visual Communication Design perspective, this phenomenon is important because trust is shaped not only by what a brand sells, but also by how the brand designs visual, verbal, and narrative experiences that appear authentic, consistent, and relevant to its audience (Kikelomo Fadilat Anjorin et al., 2024; Sutrisno et al., 2024; Fitriyana et al., 2025).

Previous studies have discussed the relationship between social media marketing, brand trust, and purchase decision (Ruli Kuniawati & Ariyanti, 2024; Yen & Fahlevi, 2023). Other studies have also emphasized storytelling, informative content, and relationship marketing as important elements in digital branding (Hayati et al., 2025; Kikelomo Fadilat Anjorin et al., 2024; Sutrisno et al., 2024). However, many of these studies still approach social media primarily from a marketing effectiveness perspective and pay limited attention to how specific variations of visual and narrative content operate as trust-building mechanisms in local fashion branding. (Hayati et al., 2025; Fajariah, 2025; Diansyah et al., 2025)

Ecinós was selected as the case in this study because the brand demonstrates a

visible departure from purely transactional product promotion. As a local fashion brand, Ecinós communicates through varied social media content that combines product display, behind-the-scenes production narratives, styling education, inclusive messages such as body positivity, community-oriented language such as 'besties,' and soft-selling humor. The brand also shows cross-platform visibility through social media channels such as Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu, while using direct and comparative communication to differentiate its products from competitors. These characteristics make Ecinós relevant for examining how content variation may contribute to perceived authenticity, credibility, emotional connection, and purchase intention among audiences of local fashion brands (Nugroho et al., 2024; Sutrisno et al., 2024).

Given the complexity of Ecinós' content strategy, which departs from conventional product-centered promotion, this study aims to examine how variations in visual and narrative content contribute to the development of consumer trust and purchase intention. Specifically, this study analyzes how promotional, informative, storytelling, and value-driven content operate as communication mechanisms that shape audience perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and emotional connection. The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How does Ecinós vary its visual and narrative content on social media? (2) How do audiences and practitioners perceive the role of content variation in building consumer trust? (3) How does content variation contribute to purchase intention through trust formation (Ruli Kuniawati & Ariyanti, 2024; Yen & Fahlevi, 2023; Cai et al., 2025)?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative sin-

gle-case study approach supported by descriptive data triangulation. The study is grounded in a qualitative constructivist paradigm, which views consumer trust and brand perception as meanings constructed through audience interpretation, visual experience, and interaction with brand communication. Therefore, the survey, interviews, and case observation were not positioned as separate quantitative and qualitative strands, but as complementary sources for understanding how content variation operates as a trust-building communication strategy. The preliminary perceptual survey was used only to provide contextual insight into general audience preferences and was not intended to support inferential, causal, or population-level claims (Poth, 2023; Taherdoost, 2022).

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns related to content variation, visual consistency, storytelling, information transparency, perceived authenticity, trust, and purchase intention. The process included familiarization with interview transcripts and Ecinos' social media content, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation of the relationship between audience perception, practitioner insight, and case observation. This approach allows the study to explain how meaning and trust are constructed through visual and narrative communication practices (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2024).

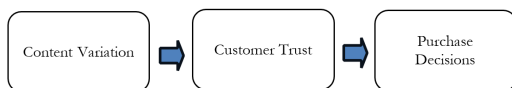


Figure 1. Relationship diagram between variables (Source: author's documentation)

This research was conducted from September to October 2025. Ecinos was selected through purposive case selection because it represents a local fashion brand

that actively combines promotional, informative, storytelling, and value-driven content. The brand was considered relevant because its communication strategy does not rely solely on product display, but also includes behind-the-scenes narratives, styling education, inclusive body-related messages, community-oriented interaction, cross-platform visibility, and direct comparative positioning. These characteristics make Ecinos suitable for examining how content variation works in trust-building communication. A preliminary perceptual survey involving 55 respondents was conducted using Google Forms. Respondents were Instagram users in Indonesia, primarily Surabaya, aged 18-28, who follow or are familiar with local fashion brand accounts. The survey results were treated as descriptive tendencies and were not intended for inferential statistical claims or population-level generalization (Utomo & Wardaya, 2023).

1. Two expert users, practitioners in the field of digital content strategy.
2. Two extreme users, content creators who actively produce and consume fashion content on social media.

The instruments used were a preliminary perceptual questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and case observation of Ecinos' social media content. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale and yes-or-no questions to identify general audience preferences toward promotional, storytelling, informative, and value-driven content. Interviews were used to explore respondents' perspectives on visual elements, communication style, storytelling, transparency, and trust formation. The Ecinos' content observation was used to identify concrete examples of how content variation appears in actual brand communication. The three data sources were then triangulated inductively: the survey provided contextual audi-

ence tendencies, the interviews provided interpretive explanations, and the case observation provided empirical grounding for the analysis.

Result and Discussion

This section integrates the preliminary survey findings, interview insights, and Ecinos case observation. The analysis focuses on three dominant forms of content variation: product promotion, informative content, and storytelling or value-driven narratives. Rather than treating these data sources separately, the discussion explains how audience preferences, practitioner interpretations, and Ecinos' content practices intersect in the formation of trust and purchase intention (Arya et al., 2022; Yulinda & Iskandar, 2023).

Brand Trust

Brand trust is a consumer's belief that a brand is reliable and has good intentions to fulfill promises and serve their interests (Setyawan et al., 2024). As a result, developing enduring relationships between customers and brands depends heavily on brand trust. When customers believe a brand to be genuine, dependable, and consistent, trust develops (Setyawan et al., 2024).

Purchasing Decision

Purchasing decisions are characterized as a complicated process in which people or organizations obtain and combine information and knowledge prior to selecting one of numerous competing goods or services. (Hayati et al., 2025). This occurs when consumers have considered at least two product brand options that can meet their needs (Putri, 2022). The stages of purchasing decisions include pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase, each

of which involves need awareness, transaction, and product evaluation (Regina et al., 2024).

Content Variation

As introduced earlier, Ecinos provides a relevant case of content variation in local fashion branding. The brand balances product promotion with storytelling, educational information, and value-driven communication to support audience trust and engagement. Figure 2 shows how Ecinos presents behind-the-scenes content by displaying the product production process, including material selection, sample creation, quality control, and revision. By revealing these processes, the content does not merely entertain audiences but also reduces uncertainty about product value and brand seriousness. In this way, behind-the-scenes content functions as process transparency that helps audiences understand why the product has value.

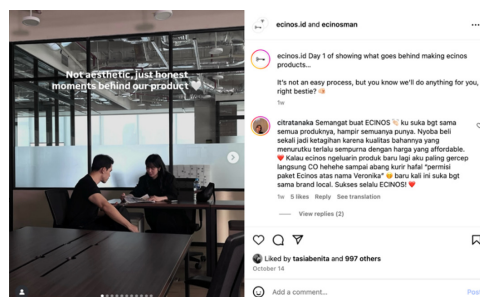


Figure 2. Storytelling behind the scenes (Source: Ecinos, Instagram)



Figure 3. Informative styling tips (Source: Ecinos, Instagram)

Another example can be seen in Figure 3, where Ecinos actively displays social-themed content such as self-confidence and body positivity campaigns. This type of content is more value- and emotion-oriented, rather than simply selling products. The content itself is packaged in a way that doesn't seem discriminatory, such as styling tips. They also often use a more relaxed approach with soft-selling content, as in the example in Figure 4. They leverage existing memes or trends to create relevant and entertaining content.

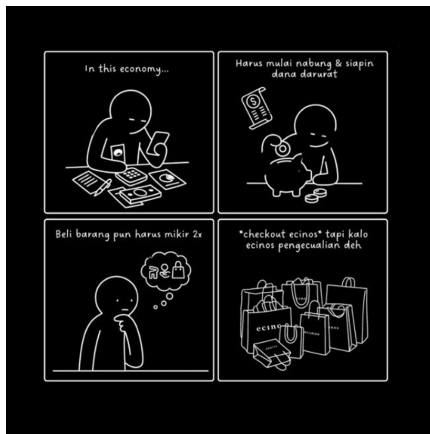


Figure 4. Fun soft selling content (Source: Ecinos, Instagram)

The preliminary perceptual survey involving 55 respondents provides descriptive context for understanding how audiences respond to different types of fashion brand content on Instagram. These findings are not treated as statistical generalization, but as audience tendency data that support the interpretation of the Ecinos case and interview findings.

Apakah kamu pernah membeli produk fashion karena terpengaruh konten di Instagram?
 55 responses

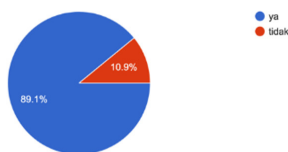


Figure 5. Evidence of respondents' answers (Source: author's documentation)

Based on the results in Figure 5, when asked whether they had ever purchased a fashion product influenced by social media content, 89.1% of respondents answered yes. This indicates that social media visuals and narratives may play an important role in shaping both impulsive and emotionally driven purchase intention.

When given two feed styles to choose from (promotional versus storytelling), 63.6% of respondents preferred storytelling-oriented content, stating that it felt more human and personal. Content featuring behind-the-scenes processes, campaign insights, or styling tutorials made respondents feel closer to the brand than posts that only emphasized selling. These results support the argument that emotional narratives can increase consumer engagement and support long-term trust and loyalty (Hayati et al., 2025).

Seberapa besar pengaruh cerita atau makna di balik campaign terhadap persepsimu pada brand?
 55 responses

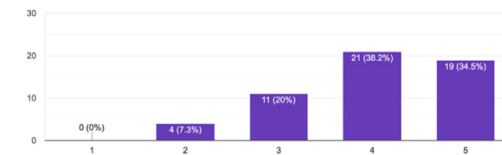


Figure 6. Evidence of respondents' answers (Source: author's documentation)

Furthermore, 74.5% of respondents preferred campaigns with social or emotional meanings, such as self-confidence and body positivity, compared to content that focused solely on the product. Figure 6 also shows that brand storytelling can make a brand appear more authentic. A total of 34.5% of respondents strongly agreed (scale 5) that the message or meaning behind the campaign influenced their perception of brand authenticity, while 38.2% agreed (scale 4). This suggests that storytelling-based campaigns are not only entertaining but also contribute to perceptions of brand integrity, in line with the theory of brand authenticity (Fajariah, 2025).

Integrated Discussion: From Content Variation to Trust Formation

Trust Formation and Purchase Intention

The majority of respondents (94.5%) stated that their purchasing decisions were influenced by trust in the brand. Fur-

thermore, 80% of respondents stated that once they trust a brand, they prefer to re-purchase from that brand even if competitors offer similar prices. These descriptive findings suggest that trust functions as a bridge between content experience and purchase intention, consistent with consumer-brand relationship quality theory (Diansyah et al., 2025). In the Ecinós case, this bridge is built through a combi-

Table 1. Expert interview question
 (Source: author's documentation)

No	Category	Interview Questions
1	Background and Experience	Could you tell me a bit about your role and experience in managing social media content for brands, especially fashion brands?
2		What are your main responsibilities in handling content (visuals, narrative, engagement strategy, or others)?
3		In your view, what is the role of visual content design in building brand identity and image?
4	Design Strategies and Content Variation	How do you differentiate strategies between product promotional content and non-promotional content such as storytelling, tips, or value-based campaigns?
5		Why is content variation important for maintaining relationships with the audience?
6		Have you ever observed a direct impact of content variation on audience engagement or trust? Could you share an example?
7		How much attention do you give to visual aspects such as color, tone, and typography in fostering audience trust?
8	Perceptions of Trust and Relationship	In your opinion, what are the main factors that make a brand's content appear trustworthy to the audience?
9		How do you evaluate the success of content in building trust — through comments, DMs, repeat engagement, or other indicators?
10		Do you observe differences in audience behavior when the content is more humanistic/informative compared to promotional content?
11		In your perspective, what is the ideal balance between aesthetic content, informative content, and sales-driven content on a fashion brand's social media?
12	Professional Challenges and Insights	What is the biggest challenge in maintaining audience trust in the fast-changing social media landscape?
13		Do you see a future trend where brands will increasingly focus on value-driven content (not just promotion)?
14		If you could give advice to a new brand, what are the three main things they should pay attention to in content design to build long-term trust?

nation of product visibility, visual consistency, information transparency, inclusive narratives, and direct audience interaction. (Diansyah et al., 2025)

Interview Insights from Practitioners and Extreme Users

The first expert user is Samuela Yosafa Isabel Anritan, a Brand Strategist with two years of experience in brand communication strategy and digital content design. The second expert user, Michelle Christina, is a former Brand Strategist who now has a career as a wedding content creator, still focusing on storytelling and personal branding in the context of visual social media. Meanwhile, two extreme users are Shienni Susanto and Yesica Suyanti, both active as fashion content creators and fashion enthusiasts who have experience in creating, observing, and interacting with fashion content on Instagram.

From the first interview category, Samuela and Michelle both emphasized that the role of a brand strategist is not limited to producing visually appealing content. A strategist must also develop focused communication between the brand and its target audience. Both informants have experience in digital strategy, content planning, copywriting, and community interaction. Samuela explained that “the human eye is sharp; even small details like color and copywriting can determine whether people want to learn more about a brand.” This supports the idea that visual appearance and verbal tone in the first few seconds can influence whether audiences continue exploring a brand (Hayati et al., 2025).

Then, in the next category, the two differentiate promotional and non-promotional content based on the focus of the message. Promotional content emphasizes product advantages, while non-promotional content focuses on social issues or

audience needs to build emotional relevance. Samuela stated, “Variety is important because trends change rapidly; brands must have consistent content pillars so that audiences know they specialize in a particular field.” Michelle added that storytelling content and educational tips create a sense of “togetherness,” where audiences feel involved and trust the brand. This statement aligns with the theory of content diversification (Sutrisno et al., 2024), which emphasizes that content variation can extend the engagement cycle and strengthen emotional connections with audiences.

Entering the third category, both experts once again agreed that visual elements such as color, tone, and typography, while not the primary pillars, still significantly influence brand credibility. For fashion brands, visual harmony is considered a representation of seriousness and professionalism. Michelle explained that audiences can judge “how serious or high-quality a brand is from its color balance. Because quality can’t be haphazard. Attention to detail is what differentiates a brand.” This reinforces the theory of aesthetic credibility (Fajariah, 2025), which states that perceptions of digital trust are often shaped by aesthetic clarity and visual harmony.

For the next category, both experts believe that “raw” content that showcases the brand’s human side is key to building trust. Samuela cited the trend of brand owners appearing directly in content, such as with brands like Jelita or Skin-game. According to her, “people trust because they see the face and authenticity of the brand owner; there’s a stake in reputation.” According to them, the indicator of content success is no longer the number of followers, but rather engagement rate and meaningful comments from the audience. These findings support the consumer-brand relationship quality theory (Setyawan et al., 2024), where trust is

Table 2. Extreme interview question
 (Source: author's documentation)

No	Category	Interview Questions
1	Social Media Habits & Interactions	How often do you use Instagram in a day, and what do you usually use it for?
2		Do you follow fashion brand accounts on social media? Which brands do you follow?
3		What is your main reason for following those brand accounts (content style, design, promotions, brand values, etc.)?
4	Perceptions of Content Types	When viewing a fashion brand's account, what type of content catches your attention first?
5		What is the difference between promotional content and storytelling/informative content?
6		Which one makes you more interested in learning more about the brand?
7		Does content variation help you feel more connected to the brand?
8	Perceptions of Visual Design & Aesthetics	In your view, how important are visual elements (colors, tone, layout, fonts, photography style) in making a brand look professional and trustworthy?
9		Which visual elements make a brand appear trustworthy?
10		How does design aesthetics influence your desire to purchase the brand's products?
11	Trust & Relationship with the Brand	What makes you feel confident in a brand on social media?
12		Can honest and transparent content increase your trust in a brand?
13		How do you know a brand genuinely cares about its audience?
14		If you already trust a brand, are you more likely to buy its products?
15		Would you recommend the brand to others?
16	Reflections & Suggestions	Have you ever felt bored because a brand posts promotional content too often?
17		What type of content makes you feel emotionally connected to a brand?
18		If you could give advice to a local fashion brand, what type of content would be ideal to stay engaging and build trust?

built through emotional interactions and perceptions of authenticity, not just one-way communication.

And in the final category, Samuela and Michelle mentioned that the biggest challenge today is maintaining consistency

and relevance amidst rapidly changing algorithms and trends. According to Samuela, "social media is about the moment; if you're even a little late, you can be left behind." Meanwhile, Michelle believes that going forward, brands must focus

on value-driven content rather than solely promotions. These findings reinforce the research that the success of brand trust is determined not only by the frequency of promotions, but also by narrative continuity, visual honesty, and communication consistency.

In the first category of interviews, both interviewees used Instagram as their primary platform for fashion references and inspiration. As active content creators, they needed to stay updated with current trends. This finding suggests that fashion enthusiasts consume brand content not solely to purchase, but also to gain ideas and inspiration. This supports the theory of consumer engagement through content consumption (Regina et al., 2024), which states that social media users actively engage with brands that provide visual and referential value.

Both interviewees indicated that try-on videos, mix-and-match concepts, and brief yet impactful advertisements were their favored types of material in the second category. According to Yesica, she usually only watches narrative content once she has “fallen in love with the brand,” but Shienni favored content that made decisions easier by clearly displaying costs and discounts. This is consistent with a study. (Arya et al., 2022) which found that consumers respond differently to storytelling and informative content depending on their emotional connection to the brand.

Both interviewees in the third category agreed that content diversity is important, but they also stated that content alone does not automatically create emotional relationships. Yesica noted that positive interaction with the administrator and a satisfying purchasing experience strengthen intimacy with the brand. Meanwhile, behind-the-scenes or creative process content was perceived as a way to improve authenticity. This supports relationship marketing theory (Kikelomo Fadilat An-

jin et al., 2024), which argues that two-way interaction between consumers and brands plays an important role in building emotional attachment. Content variety is therefore important, but it must be supported by customer experience and consistent communication (Kikelomo Fadilat Anjin et al., 2024).

In the fourth category, both interviewees emphasized the importance of visual appearance in building trust. Yesica explained that she can judge a brand owner's “taste” simply from their brochure design or Instagram feed.

Important markers of a brand's professionalism include natural tones, consistent colors, and well-composed photography. Shienni argued that aesthetically pleasing images can communicate quality, while brands such as Orgeo appear more down to earth by balancing visual style and brand personality. These findings support the notion of visual coherence in branding (Sutrisno et al., 2024), which states that consistency in color tone and visual style can improve brand memory and credibility on social media.

In the next category, the main factors that build trust for both respondents were transparency, product quality, and human interaction.

Both respondents trusted brands that displayed real testimonials, videos of the production process, or direct involvement from the brand owner. However, Shienni stated that true trust emerges when “the product is in hand,” while Yesica considered transparent content such as “upgraded materials” to be very effective in demonstrating a brand's concern for customers.

Finally, in the sixth category, both respondents rarely felt bored with promotional content as long as the product and its presentation remained relevant.

Live try-ons, styling advice for differ-

ent body shapes, and mix-and-match ideas were the content types that most strongly created emotional connection. According to both respondents, local brands should highlight product honesty through actual photos, material information, and sizing clarity, feature models with varied body types, and maintain a consistent visual tone and friendly interaction. These interview findings support Hayati et al. (2025), who argue that inclusive and authentic content encourages consumers to perceive brands as more human, thus strengthening trust and purchase intention (Hayati et al., 2025).

The survey, interview, and case observation data were analyzed through descriptive triangulation. The preliminary survey provided contextual information

about audience preferences, the interviews provided interpretive insights from practitioners and active fashion content users, while the Ecinós case observation provided concrete examples of how content variation appears in actual social media practice. Therefore, the findings are not presented as separate quantitative and qualitative results, but as an integrated interpretation of how content variation functions as a trust-building strategy.

Based on this triangulation, Table 3 summarizes how the preliminary survey, Ecinós case observation, and interview insights connect to form an integrated interpretation of trust-building content variation.

The integrated findings indicate that

Table 3. Triangulation of survey, interview, and case observation findings (Source: author's documentation)

Survey Tendency	Triangulated Evidence from Ecinós Observation and Interviews	Integrated Interpretation
89.1% of respondents had purchased fashion products because of social media content.	Ecinós combines product display with styling tips, campaign narratives, and soft-selling content. Practitioners stated that consistent visual content and tone make a brand appear more professional and trustworthy.	Visual and narrative content may trigger purchase intention when it functions as a credibility signal, not only as product exposure.
63.6% of respondents preferred storytelling content over purely promotional content.	Ecinós uses production narratives, behind-the-scenes processes, and humanized captions. Experts explained that storytelling creates a sense of togetherness and authenticity between the brand and its audience.	Storytelling works as a transparency mechanism that reduces uncertainty and supports trust formation.
74.5% of respondents preferred campaigns with social or emotional meanings.	Ecinós uses body positivity, styling inclusivity, and community-oriented language such as 'besties'. Extreme users stated that inclusive and honest communication makes a brand feel more attentive to its audience.	Value-driven content supports emotional relevance and helps transform audiences into a participatory brand community.
94.5% of respondents stated that purchase decisions are influenced by brand trust.	Ecinós displays product processes, testimonials, and direct communication to show product honesty. Interviewees emphasized transparency, real testimonials, and visible brand-owner or admin interaction as trust indicators.	Trust functions as a bridge between content experience and purchase intention.
80% of respondents preferred to repurchase after trusting a brand.	Ecinós maintains repeated audience contact through varied content pillars and community interaction. Respondents noted that friendly interaction, honest communication, and product experience strengthen loyalty.	Long-term relationship is built through visual consistency, process transparency, and humanized communication, not merely through product quality.

content variation is not only a matter of posting different types of content. In the Ecinos case, content variation works as a layered communication strategy: promotional content introduces the product, informative content clarifies product relevance, behind-the-scenes storytelling legitimizes product value, and inclusive narratives help audiences identify with the brand community. This mechanism explains why varied content may support trust formation more effectively than content that is solely sales-oriented.

Conclusion

This study shows that Ecinos' content variation contributes to trust formation through several communication mechanisms. Promotional content introduces product features and maintains product visibility. Informative and styling content helps audiences evaluate product relevance in everyday use. Behind-the-scenes content reduces information asymmetry by showing material selection, production processes, and quality considerations. Meanwhile, inclusive narratives such as body positivity position the brand as more emotionally relevant and community-oriented.

The contribution of this study lies in explaining content variation not merely as a way to increase engagement, but as a layered communication mechanism in local fashion branding. In this mechanism, visual consistency functions as an aesthetic credibility signal, storytelling functions as a transparency device, and value-driven content functions as a bridge between brand identity and audience identification. These mechanisms help explain why audiences may develop stronger trust and purchase intention toward brands that communicate beyond transactional product promotion.

Practically, local fashion brands should

avoid relying exclusively on product-display and discount-based content. Instead, they can develop a balanced content strategy that includes product information, styling education, behind-the-scenes processes, customer interaction, and value-based narratives. For resource-constrained brands, process-based and community-oriented content can become a low-cost trust-building alternative to high-cost endorsement because credibility is developed through transparency rather than borrowed popularity. Brands may also evaluate communication performance beyond likes and follower growth by considering trust-related indicators such as meaningful comments, saved posts, direct messages, repeat purchase behavior, and audience-generated recommendations.

This study is limited by its focus on a single case and a preliminary perceptual survey of 55 respondents. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all fashion brands or all social media users. Future research may compare several local fashion brands, expand the number of respondents, or examine other platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu to understand how trust-building content strategies operate across different digital environments.

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CULTURE-BASED CHARACTER DESIGN AS STRUCTURED VISUAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR MEDIA

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Received Mar. 04, 2026; Revised May. 25, 2026; Accepted June. 08, 2026.

Abstract: *The global development of the comic, game, and animation industries has increased the demand for character designs that are not only visually appealing but also possess strong and communicative cultural identities. The problem identified is that local practices of culture-based character design often remain trapped in superficial aesthetic approaches, where cultural elements are used merely as visual ornaments without deep meaning. This research aims to formulate a culture-based character design strategy as a structured visual communication practice, positioning culture as a meaning system translated into visual decisions. The study employs a qualitative approach through theoretical review and in-depth interviews with three professional creators and two design educators active in the creative industry ecosystem. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to map strategic patterns emerging from character design practices. The results formulate four strategic stages: in-depth cultural research, semiotic translation through a symbol bank, inside-out character construction, and interpretative adaptation to popular media. This research concludes that characters function as communication media bridging local cultural identity with global audiences through consistent sign systems, with the main contribution being a perspective shift from aesthetic activity to cultural interpretation practice. Further research is recommended to test the effectiveness of this strategic framework on audience reception and its broader impact on the creative industry.*

Keywords: *culture-based character design; visual communication strategy; design semiotics; contemporary creative industry; inside-out character design*

Introduction

Character design stands as one of the most powerful forms of visual communication in popular culture. Within comics, games, and animation, characters function not merely as aesthetic elements but as carriers of identity, values, and cultural narratives. Characters become the

face that mediates relationships between creative works and their audiences. They serve as easily remembered markers, frequently reproduced through merchandise, fan art, and promotional icons, while rapidly building emotional connections with viewers (Saputra & Januarsa, 2025). At this point, character design can no longer be understood simply as drawing

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skills or arranging visual styles. Character design is more accurately understood as a visual communication practice that constructs meaning through sign systems.

In recent decades, young people across numerous countries have experienced intensive exposure to global popular media including comics, games, animation, and digital creator content. This exposure shapes how they understand culture, identity, and imagination (Cai et al., 2023). Various studies demonstrate that popular media can introduce traditional values and mythology through accessible visual and narrative representations. Culture can thus present itself as a living experience (S. Kim, 2012; Y. Wang, 2024). Frequently discussed examples include world-building strategies in popular games that construct fictional regions drawing inspiration from diverse cultures. Such approaches reveal how cultural elements can function as identity structures while simultaneously serving as global attractions (Gao et al., 2025; Y. Wang, 2024).

Within this context, cultural integration into characters becomes a crucial aspect. Specific characters can represent translations of cultural values through costume, music, gestures, and storytelling styles. Such approaches open possibilities that popular media functions not only as entertainment. Popular media can also serve as channels for cultural exchange or soft power and value preservation through representations that resonate with younger generations (Sutanto, 2024). In other words, exposure to popular media can provide initial entry points for understanding culture before formal study occurs (Y. Kim, 2021; Nye & Kim, 2019).

However, problems emerge when cultural integration stops at the surface level. When characters are designed solely

with aesthetic considerations, culture becomes reduced to ornaments such as motifs, accessories, or silhouettes without adequate conceptual foundation (Chand, 2016). Consequently, characters may appear visually appealing yet remain impoverished in meaningful context. Cultural identity that should function as strength instead appears as stylistic decoration. This situation aligns with critiques that many studies of cultural representation in final products have insufficiently examined how educational frameworks can guide creators in systematically translating cultural identity into design practice (Ivanytska et al., 2024).

From a Visual Communication Design perspective, the problem of superficial cultural treatment in character design extends beyond insufficient references or minimal research. This problem relates to the disconnection between culture as a sign system and design as a meaning-making practice (Yu et al., 2025). Visual Communication Design views visual communication as a meaning construction process where visuals function not merely as forms but as language. Therefore, when culture is presented through characters, what actually occurs is a translation process. Values, myths, social structures, and collective memory are processed into visual decisions ranging from color, texture, form, gesture, proportion, to how characters behave within narratives (Sattayasai et al., 2023).

This is where visual semiotics becomes relevant. Semiotics helps understand how visual elements function as signifiers pointing to signified meanings including cultural values, moral values, myths, or specific social structures. Costumes, accessories, body postures, facial expressions, even material choices such as metal, fabric, and wood, as well as

decorative patterns, can be understood as visual codes shaping cultural legibility (Wen-ting et al., 2018). Within this framework, culture-based character design demands processes of meaning interpretation and curation rather than mere appearance reproduction (Hidayat & Rosidin, 2018).

Simultaneously, character design also demands internal consistency. Effective characters unite internal aspects including personality, motivation, and values with external expressions or visual forms. The inside-out thinking approach positions psychological profiles and archetypes as foundations directing visual decisions, ensuring silhouettes and details do not stand alone but instead represent who the character truly is (van Rooij, 2019; Zaini et al., 2025).

Based on this background, this research positions culture-based character design as a visual communication strategy within contemporary popular media. This research seeks to answer the following question:

How can culture-based character design be formulated as a structured visual communication strategy so that culture does not stop at ornamentation but becomes a meaning system that can be translated into visual decisions, remaining authentic while adapting to the demands of contemporary popular media?

To address this research question, the study aims to achieve several objectives. This research aims to map culture-based character design strategies from a Visual Communication Design perspective. Furthermore, this research aims to formulate strategic stages that balance cultural authenticity, aesthetic innovation, and global legibility. Additionally, this research aims to develop design implications in the form of visual communication strategies

applicable by practitioners and educators for building culture-based characters as intellectually property relevant to the creative industry.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, which aims to understand phenomena in depth through interpretation of meaning, context, and experiences of research subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This approach was selected because it offers flexibility in theoretical approaches, sampling techniques, and data collection strategies (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024), making it highly suitable for examining character design practices and cultural application in design within the creative industry context. The methods employed refer to qualitative data collection practices through literature review, in-depth interviews, and visual analysis. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis to map recurring meaning patterns and strategies within culture-based character design practices.

Data Sources

Data were collected through two primary sources. First, a literature review examining culture-based character design practices in comics and illustration works, focusing on how culture is translated into visual elements and how characters are constructed within cultural narratives (Abqari & Resmisari, 2025; Marsha et al., 2023). Second, in-depth interviews, which involve question-and-answer processes between researchers and informants to explore their experiences, understandings, and practices thoroughly (Knott et al., 2022). Interviews were

conducted with two informant groups: professional creators and design educators. Professional creators are comic and illustration practitioners with experience in modernizing Indonesian folklore and mythology while presenting works in national and international contexts. Design educators are Visual Communication Design lecturers who actively create works and engage in comic communities and the creative industry ecosystem.

This composition was selected to achieve balanced perspectives from two distinct realms. Three creators represent the industry perspective facing market demands, global legibility, and direct production practices. Meanwhile, two educators represent the cultural research perspective within Visual Communication Design, providing conceptual foundations for translating culture into design practice. Through this strategy, the study obtains both industry-facing and cultural research perspectives within Visual Communication Design, enabling synthesis of strategies that are simultaneously applicable and structured.

Interview Focus

Interviews were directed to explore creative processes and visual decisions in adapting culture. Interviews also examined challenges creators face in maintaining balance between cultural authenticity and market preferences. Furthermore, interviews aimed to understand semiotic and narrative strategies employed to keep characters communicative for contemporary audiences. Another aspect explored was pedagogical needs, specifically how to help students move beyond merely imitating external aesthetics toward building characters rooted in cultural identity.

The interview instrument was struc-

tured following four stages of the character design process: research and ideation, character development, character expression, and design elements and principles. These four stages focus on cultural, semiotic, and mythological aspects in character design (Peebles et al., 2023; Son & Son, 2024).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through several stages. These stages included data familiarization, initial coding, forming initial themes, reviewing established themes, and finally defining and interpreting themes (Peebles et al., 2023). Within the context of this article, the resulting themes were directed toward formulating visual communication strategies. These strategies explain how culture is transformed into visual decisions that can be read, remembered, and felt by audiences.

Result

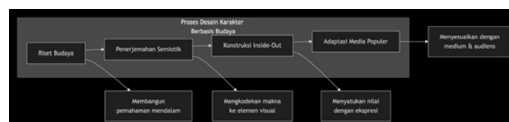


Figure 1. Four Strategic Stages of Culture-Based Character Creation

(Source: processed by the researcher)

This study focuses on formulating culture-based character design strategies as a Visual Communication Design practice applicable to popular media production. Research findings formulate culture-based character creation into four sequential and mutually constructive strategic stages. These four stages form a systematic workflow guiding designers in translating culture as a meaning system into communicative visual decisions. As

seen in Figure 1, the four stages illustrate this workflow before detailed explanation.

Cultural Research as Conceptual Foundation

Findings from literature review and interviews with creators and educators indicate that the first stage in culture-based character design is in-depth cultural research. This research serves as a conceptual foundation distinguishing characters truly rooted in cultural identity from those merely using culture as aesthetic decoration.

Creator informants emphasized that culture should not be understood as mere decorative material. Culture should instead become a concept source determining various fundamental character aspects such as roles, conflicts, and internal logic that construct the character (Sattayasai et al., 2023). Educators interviewed added that a common weakness frequently encountered among students is dependence on popular visual references without examining cultural meaning roots. Consequently, resulting designs tend to be ornamental and lose the cultural context that should be the character's main strength.

Cultural research in character design practice is not merely an activity of collecting reference images. Cultural research constitutes an effort to build deep understanding of several main aspects. The first aspect is local narratives and folklore encompassing story structure, moral values, and key symbols living within society (Muharam et al., 2023). The second aspect is mythology including understanding of mythological figures, emerging archetype patterns, power relations within myth structures, and cosmology or societal worldviews. The third aspect is socio-historical context explaining symbol

functions in past societal life, how symbol meanings shift over time, and representation sensitivity that must be maintained when presenting these cultural elements. The fourth aspect is contemporary context considering how cultural values can be positioned to remain relevant and communicative for today's audiences.

Reviewed literature supports these findings by affirming that culture-based character design requires integration of traditional values, cultural symbols, and mythological figures so character identity is truly rooted in its original culture (Wen-ting et al., 2018). Visual studies on cross-media mythological characters also affirm that reinterpretation of mythological figures into modern designs allows these characters to remain contemporarily relevant without losing original narratives (Warda-Tun-Naeem & Areej Agha, 2025). This can be achieved as long as designers understand the meaning structures underlying these figures and do not merely transfer visual forms superficially (L. Wang, 2022).

In design practice, cultural research functions as a meaning bank to be selected, filtered, and translated into visual decisions. The main strategy emerging from interviews with practitioners is that research depth determines the quality of resulting characters. The deeper the research conducted, the stronger the character's potential to build unique and authentic identity. Characters built with deep research will not become merely local-motif versions of popular global styles (Ivanytska et al., 2024; Nugraheni et al., 2021).

Cultural Translation through Visual Semiotics

The second finding of this study af-

firmly that cultural values cannot be directly transferred into visual appearance. Professional creators undertake processes of selection, abstraction, and recoding through visual semiotics approaches in their work. This process addresses the main problem in culture-based character design: how to make characters remain culturally authentic while remaining legible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

Research in communication semiotics affirms that symbol use in cross-cultural contexts requires understanding of visual communication principles. Visual signifiers must have logical relationships with signified meanings to enable audiences to grasp these meanings accurately (Travere, 2023). In character design practice, visual codes used to convey cultural meaning can include costumes and adornments, patterns and ornaments, color palettes, materials and textures, attributes such as weapons, tools, or sacred objects, gestures and postures, and character expressions and movement rhythms. All these visual elements work together forming sign systems that can be read and interpreted by audiences.

Visual codes such as costumes, accessories, and attributes prove effective for communicating cultural narratives and aiding character recognition across cultures, affirming that visual elements in characters function not only as aesthetic forms but also as message carriers recognizable and felt by audiences (Sattayasai et al., 2023). However, interview findings with educators reveal problems in cultural translation practice into character design. From a research perspective, educators frequently find errors in applying cultural research results to the design process. Many cultural symbols used in character design are selected solely based on aesthetic considerations, namely visual ap-

pearance considered attractive or aligned with current trends, without understanding the meanings behind these symbols. Consequently, cultural symbols that should carry specific values and identities become decorative additions losing their sign functions. This condition potentially causes misinterpretation when characters are presented to audiences understanding the original cultural context of these symbols.

Therefore, the key strategy emerging at the cultural translation stage is building a symbol bank in the character design process. A symbol bank differs from aesthetic moodboards that merely collect visual references based on style or appearance similarity. A symbol bank comprises curatorial selected visual elements because they have clear sign functions. In practice, a symbol bank maps relationships between three important aspects: visual elements as signifiers, cultural meanings as signifieds, and character narrative contexts explaining how these meanings work within the story. With this mapping, every visual decision taken has conceptual justification connecting appearance, meaning, and narrative function in an integrated manner.

At this point, the research affirms the fundamental difference between ornamentation and semiotization in character design practice. Ornamentation is the practice of adding motifs or decorations to characters without considering underlying meanings. Meanwhile, semiotization is the practice of constructing meaning through consciously and structurally selected visual elements. Within visual communication frameworks, semiotization can be understood as an encoding process of cultural messages into structured visual forms so these messages can be accurately decoded or read back by audiences (Travere, 2023).

Inside-Out Character Construction

The third finding of this study affirms that effective culture-based characters are built through an inside-out approach. This approach places internal character aspects such as personality, motivation, archetypes, and carried values as foundations that subsequently determine visual expression. Literature in character design summarizes four main components in designing characters. The first component is research and ideation as the initial foundation. The second component is inside-out thinking for constructing in-depth character profiles. The third component is exploration of expression and gesture as forms of nonverbal communication. The fourth component is harmonization of visual elements with previously formulated psychological and cultural attributes.

From interview results with creators, they emphasized that characters feeling alive are not sufficient with merely culturally patterned costumes. Living characters must possess moral logic, inner tension, clear goals, and social relationships all rooted in cultural values serving as concept sources. Educators interviewed strengthened this finding by conveying their observation results of character design practices in educational and industrial environments.

Observation and research findings show that many character design practices still begin from the outside. This approach is done by starting the process from silhouette or visual appearance first, then attaching story and cultural values afterward. The consequence of this reversed approach is that story and cultural values become unintegrated additions, resulting in characters feeling empty and lacking depth.

The inside-out strategy in cul-

ture-based character design requires understanding of at least three layers that must be built sequentially. The first layer is the value layer questioning what cultural values are to be realized through the character. These values can include courage, devotion, harmony with nature, respect for ancestors, or even criticism of power depending on the cultural narrative to be conveyed. The second layer is the archetype and psychology layer determining basic character types such as hero, guardian, trickster, priest, or liminal figures existing at world thresholds (Morsi & Hidayatullah, 2021; Wen-ting et al., 2018).

The third layer is the visualization or embodiment layer translating how these values and archetypes become character bodies through distinctive proportions, gestures, expressions, and movement rhythms. At this stage, form and body language become the most powerful and effective tools for communicating character values and personality instantly to audiences. As seen in Figure 2, shape language examples demonstrate how visual forms communicate character personality.

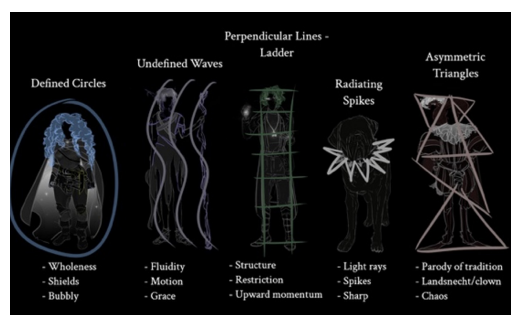


Figure 2. Examples of Shape Language in Character Design

(Source: <https://just-write-studios.itch.io/>)

Silhouettes, postures, and gestures can convey character essence such as courage, gentleness, authority, or vulnerability

even before the character speaks or shows facial expressions. Consciously designed body language enables audiences to read character values through how characters stand, move, respond to environments, or interact with other characters. Thus, visualization not only makes characters visible but also makes the values they contain feelable and experienceable by audiences.

At this stage, nonverbal communication plays a very important role. Facial expressions, gestures, and body language function as meaning delivery channels often more powerfully influential than costume ornaments. This is because these nonverbal elements show who the character is instantly to audiences without requiring verbal explanation (Tamir et al., 2004). Creator informants emphasized that gestures and expressions can also carry specific cultural codes. Ways of greeting, standing, holding objects, and showing respect in various cultural traditions are forms of nonverbal communication that cannot always be replaced by visual motifs alone (Murti et al., 2020).

Adaptation to Popular Media

The fourth finding of this study affirms that cultural authenticity does not always have to conflict with market demands in the popular media industry. Tension between cultural demands and market demands is indeed real and felt by practitioners. Creators stated that audience tastes and market demands often push them toward compromise in the character design process.

Meanwhile, educators remind that compromise made without clear meaning frameworks will actually produce shallow designs losing identity. Nevertheless, solutions emerging from creator best practices are not choosing exclusively between

culture or market. The solution found is an interpretative adaptation strategy, not merely imitation or superficial copying of popular styles.

Popular media products successfully processing cultural inspiration in their works tend to share similar approaches. Culture in these works is treated as a world-building structure constructing the entire story world, not merely decorative accessories beautifying appearance. This means culture does not appear only as motifs or ornaments adorning character surfaces. Culture becomes a system shaping environments where characters live, behaviors characters display, and aesthetic logic consistent across all work elements.

One example of this approach application can be seen in the character Yun Jin from the game Genshin Impact. This character is positioned as a cultural ambassador introducing traditional Chinese opera into the game storyline. Through Yun Jin's character, players can see the deep connection between Peking opera performance and costume and cultural identity in Chinese traditions. This demonstrates how game storytelling can become a powerful tool for cultural representation and education, while affirming that culture can be presented organically as part of character narrative and world (Ge & Chen, 2023). As seen in Figure 3,

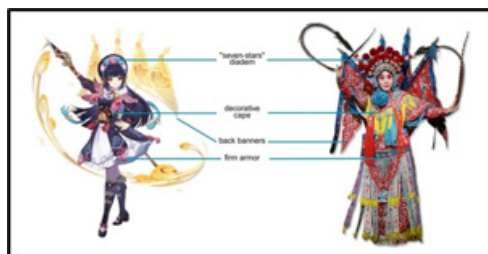


Figure 3. Visual Comparison of Yun Jin Costume and Peking Opera
(Source: processed by the researcher from pekingopera.eu)

visual comparison shows the relationship between Yun Jin's costume and traditional Peking opera.

In general character design context, this approach means that characters must suit the medium where they appear, the genre framing their story, and audience expectations of the target market. Yet simultaneously, characters must still carry cultural meaning systems consistent with the value sources forming their foundation.

Interpretative adaptation in culture-based character design practice includes several important aspects requiring attention. The first aspect is visual style adaptation such as applying modern stylization appropriate to contemporary tastes, while maintaining symbolic structures forming cultural meaning cores. The second aspect is narrative adjustment to remain relevant to contemporary issues faced by today's audiences, without erasing cultural roots serving as character value sources. The third aspect is legibility testing to ensure audiences can understand designed characters and whether main symbols used can be accurately read by target audiences. The fourth aspect is cultural sensitivity testing to ensure presented representations respect original cultural contexts and do not cause misinterpretation or violation of values held by culture-owning communities (Bourke et al., 2019).

In interview findings with creators, they mentioned that young audiences, who are the main targets of current popular media, require concise and communicative design. Characters must be quickly understandable at a glance. Therefore, symbols used must be selected for strongest visual and meaning impact, not for highest quantity. Educators added implications of these findings for design

learning development. Learning modules should be designed to train students in making design decisions based on meaning and context considerations, not based on ornament abundance or merely popular visual trends.

Discussion

This section describes the findings and analysis of the research data and explains the implications of the study. It also describes what the results of the study imply, why they matter, and perspectives for future research.

3.5 Culture-Based Character Design Strategy

Synthesis of findings from the entire research shows that culture-based character design is essentially a mediation practice. This practice bridges local culture as a meaning system with global visual systems as popular language acceptable across geographical and cultural boundaries. As seen in Figure 4, the six strategic implications formulated from research findings can be visualized as an integrated framework placing culture-based character design at the core of visual communication practice.

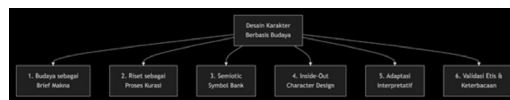


Figure 4. Six Strategic Implications of Culture-Based Character Design

(Source: processed by the researcher)

Within the Visual Communication Design context, designers no longer merely function as image makers but as communicators performing a series of complex tasks. These tasks include cultural interpretation, namely the ability to read

meanings contained in cultural sources. Furthermore, designers perform sign translation, the process of encoding these meanings into understandable visual forms. Designers also undertake message composition by building visual hierarchies guiding audiences to read characters accurately. Additionally, designers need to negotiate context considering market demands, medium used, and audience characteristics. Finally, designers need to conduct legibility evaluation to ensure cultural messages intended to be conveyed truly reach audiences.

This mediation role explains why merely aesthetic approaches in culture-based character design always fail to build strong identity. Aesthetics without meaning cannot build identity because identity requires value roots felt by audiences. Conversely, identity without communication strategy cannot build global legibility because even deep meanings will not reach audiences if not packaged with appropriate visual language. Therefore, culture-based character design strategy must be understood as a structured work system from the research stage to the popular media adaptation stage.

Design Implications

This section formulates design implications as visual communication strategies for culture-based character creation while ensuring the research problem formulation has been answered. The research problem formulation asks how culture-based character design can be formulated as a structured visual communication strategy so culture does not stop at ornamentation but becomes a meaning system that can be translated into visual decisions, remaining authentic while adapting to contemporary popular media demands.

To answer this research problem, the study has mapped culture-based character design strategies from a Visual Communication Design perspective, formulated strategic stages balancing cultural authenticity, aesthetic innovation, and global legibility, and developed design implications in the form of visual communication strategies applicable by practitioners and educators for building culture-based characters as intellectually property relevant to the creative industry. The following are six strategic implications formulated from research findings as summarized in Figure 4.

First, culture as meaning brief not motif brief. The most fundamental strategy in culture-based character design is changing work methods from the beginning of the design process. Culture should not be positioned as a list of motifs that can simply be attached to character appearance. Culture must be positioned as a meaning brief to be communicated through characters. Designers need to define from the start what core values are to be carried, what key myths are to be told, and what cultural identity messages are to be conveyed through the character (Ivanytska et al., 2024). This step moves character design from decorative activity to communication activity with clear purpose and direction.

Second, research as curation process not reference compilation. Cultural research in character design needs to be directed toward curation activities, namely selecting the most relevant elements for building character identity. Research is not merely collecting as many symbols and visual references as possible without strict selection. Good curation encourages focus on key elements, avoids visual noise that can interfere with character legibility, and makes it easier for audiences to read character identity accurately.

ly (Wen-ting et al., 2018). In practice, the research process must always include the question of why this symbol is chosen, not merely recording what symbols are used.

Third, semiotic symbol bank as coherence control tool. A symbol bank explicitly including relationships between signifiers and signifieds helps designers maintain meaning coherence across all design elements. A symbol bank also functions as an effective evaluation tool. When designs undergo changes in subsequent iterations, designers can recheck whether meanings intended to be conveyed remain consistent with visual decisions taken (Rose, 2022). This tool prevents unintended meaning shifts during character development processes.

Fourth, inside-out as strategy making identity felt not just seen. The inside-out approach ensures characters carry cultural identity at behavior and expression levels, not merely at costume and accessory levels. This is very important for popular media demanding characters feel alive and capable of building emotional connections with audiences. Strengthening culturally logical expressions and gestures also increases character narrative power because audiences can read character personality and values through body language (Tamir et al., 2004).

Fifth, interpretative adaptation to address markets without erasing meaning. Tension between market demands and cultural demands can be addressed with interpretative adaptation strategies. This strategy includes simplifying visual signs to be more concise and communicative, modernizing styles to suit contemporary tastes, and conducting legibility testing with target audiences. However, all these adjustments are made while maintaining core symbolic structures forming the foundation of character cultural meaning

(Morsi & Hidayatullah, 2021; Y. Wang, 2024). This approach enables characters to compete globally while maintaining strong and recognizable identity roots.

Sixth, ethical validation and legibility as part of design pipeline. Research efforts in culture-based character design need to include validation to ensure accurate and ethical representation. Ethical validation is done by examining visual sources used, ensuring no disrespectful appropriation of sacred elements, and checking representation sensitivity toward culture-owning communities. Legibility validation is done through limited audience testing to ensure main symbols used can be accurately read by target audiences. Both types of validation need to be integral parts of the design pipeline, not additional activities conducted after design completion.

With these six strategic implications as illustrated in Figure 4, culture-based character design can be implemented as a systematic and structured visual communication strategy. The process begins with determining cultural messages through meaning briefs, followed by selective research curation, compiling symbol banks as coherence control tools, building characters with inside-out approaches, interpretative adaptation to popular media, and ethical and legibility validation as quality assurance. This strategy directly answers the research problem formulation by affirming that culture can be translated into structured visual decisions, remaining authentic and adaptive to contemporary popular media demands. Thus, the research objectives to map culture-based character design strategies from a Visual Communication Design perspective, formulate strategic stages balancing cultural authenticity, aesthetic innovation, and global legibility, and develop applicable design implications for practitioners and

educators have been achieved.

Conclusion

This study concludes that culture-based character design constitutes a complex visual communication practice requiring structured approaches. The main findings indicate that character design effectiveness is not determined by how many cultural elements are displayed visually, but by how deeply those cultural meanings are translated into coherent sign systems. Culture within this framework is no longer understood as a collection of ornaments that can be attached to character surfaces, but rather as a meaning system directing all visual decisions from the earliest stages through to completion.

Characters built with this approach function as communication media bridging local cultural identity with global audiences. They not only display culturally patterned costumes or accessories, but also present values, moral logic, and behavioral patterns rooted in those cultural meaning systems through gestures, expressions, and accompanying narratives. Thus, characters become living cultural emissaries that can be felt, not merely seen as aesthetic objects.

The main contribution of this article lies in shifting perspectives toward culture-based character design practice. This shift directs character design from mere aesthetic activity toward cultural interpretation practice and meaning encoding in visual language readable across boundaries. The strategic framework formulated in this study answers the research problem by demonstrating that culture can be translated into structured visual decisions, remaining authentic while adaptive to contemporary popular media demands through four stages: in-depth cultural re-

search, semiotic translation, inside-out construction, and interpretative adaptation.

The strategic framework along with its design implications is expected to serve as a reference for Visual Communication Design practitioners and the creative industry in developing local cultural wealth into communicative, relevant, and competitive intellectual property in the global market. For future development, the research recommends broader testing to measure this framework's effectiveness on learning outcomes or audience reception. Testing with mixed methods approaches, for example, could help validate the application scale of this strategy across disciplines and across media platforms.

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PRACTICE-LED IP DEVELOPMENT FOR VISUAL NARRATIVE EDUCATION: THE SUKAWALI VILLAGE MANGROVE MASCOT

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Received Mar. 02, 2026; Revised June. 09, 2026, Accepted June. 15, 2026.

Abstract: *This study documents the practice-led development of “Mangu,” a locally designed intellectual property (IP) representing a mangrove seedling, and its accompanying children’s storybook “Si Kecil Mangu” (Little Mangu), created as an educational visual narrative for children aged 6–7 years in Sukawali Village, Pakuhaji District, Tangerang Regency. Sukawali Village faces significant environmental and social challenges, including coastal abrasion, mangrove destruction, and limited access to educational media for children. Through collaboration with the Kampung Bahari Nusantara (KBN) community and Rumah Pintar volunteers, this research employs a qualitative and practice-led research approach to document the full IP creation process — from character design and social media audience testing to the production of a finalized storybook grounded in Dual Coding Theory, Visual Literacy Theory, and Narrative Transportation Theory. The findings demonstrate that theory-informed visual narrative design produces educational media that is both locally grounded and academically rigorous. Beyond its immediate educational function, “Mangu” offers a replicable model for how mascot-based IP can be developed through participatory, practice-led processes to support community-based environmental education in coastal conservation contexts.*

Keywords: *community education; environmental literacy; intellectual property; mangrove conservation; visual storytelling*

Introduction

Sukawali Village, Pakuhaji District, is one of the villages located on the northern

coast of Java Island that is striving to enhance the resource potential of mangrove plants. Residents living around the village do not yet fully understand the benefits of

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the existence of the mangrove forest. Many parties are focusing attention on conducting conservation of mangrove forests in this area (Sulaiman et al., 2023). The local government, in cooperation with the Indonesian Navy and the local community, Kampung Bahari Nusantara (KBN), is implementing a program to assist in cultivating mangrove plants in the coastal area (Pengadilan Negeri Cilacap, 2023). At the end of 2024, the researchers carried out Community Service activities in the area (mnpadmin, 2025). Several problems faced by the KBN at KSS Beach were mapped, such as the large amount of trash, the community's lack of understanding of mangrove plants, and the rough coastal waves that make it difficult for mangrove plants to grow in the area. The educational profile of the Sukawali Village community is predominantly composed of elementary and junior high school graduates, with limited access to environmental education media tailored for children.

Efforts to address these challenges have been led by the KBN community in collaboration with the local government and the Indonesian Navy, focusing primarily on mangrove planting and coastal rehabilitation. At the end of 2024, the researchers conducted Community Service (Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat) activities in the area, identifying key obstacles including low public awareness, limited literacy resources, and the absence of child-friendly educational media that communicates the importance of mangrove conservation in a culturally grounded and accessible way. While conservation programs have made physical progress, the lack of narrative-based educational tools means that long-term behavioral change — particularly among the youngest residents — remains difficult to sustain.

The presence of the character “Mangu” as an Intellectual Property (IP) developed by the Animation Study Program at MNP serves as a local mascot that can strength-

en the identity of Sukawali Village as an educational and mangrove tourism area. The “Mangu” IP, developed in the form of a storybook and short animations, opens opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration between higher education institutions and local communities. This activity represents a tangible contribution of educational institutions in fulfilling their social and environmental roles through creative, relevant, and community-impactful approaches (Suprpto et al., 2021). By leveraging local potential and developing educational content based on local culture and the surrounding environment, this program has the potential to enhance literacy, broaden perspectives, and gradually improve the quality of life of the village community (Lustyantie et al., 2019).

The development of a storybook is one of the key elements of this literacy program, as storybooks play a strategic role in instilling moral, social, and environmental values through an approach that is enjoyable and easily understood by children (Aji et al., 2025). Through stories that are closely related to their daily lives, children can more easily understand the importance of protecting mangrove forests and coastal ecosystems in general (Sunkur et al., 2023).

The storybook can be used by volunteers as teaching material, by parents as bedtime reading, and by children for independent reading or shared reading with their peers. Beyond serving as a learning aid, the storybook also functions as a form of documentation of local culture and environmental heritage, particularly for children aged 6–7 years (Simionova-Ingilizova, 2023). The story “Si Kecil Mangu”, translated as Little Mangu, which is based on real issues in Sukawali Village, represents an effort to preserve local knowledge and natural heritage, presented in an engaging and accessible format.

Several prior studies have examined storytelling, folklore, and children's literature as media for environmental education in coastal communities. Anggraeni and Rafiyanti (2022) demonstrate how folktales shape early character education, while Rawanda et al. (2020) and Suwandi et al. (2025) show how place-based narratives support mangrove and ecosystem conservation. Aji et al. (2025) further confirm the strategic role of children's literature in building literacy and character. However, these studies predominantly evaluate existing or generic narrative forms rather than documenting the process of designing and developing a new, locally grounded visual narrative IP. No study to date has recorded how a mascot-based IP and an accompanying storybook are co-created with a specific coastal community, from initial character design and audience testing through to a finalized children's literacy product grounded in visual narrative theory. This study addresses that gap.

In response, this study documents the practice-led development of "Mangu," a locally designed intellectual property (IP) representing a mangrove seedling, and the accompanying storybook "Si Kecil Mangu" (Little Mangu), created as an educational visual narrative for children aged 6–7 years in Sukawali Village. The development process encompasses character design, social media audience testing among users aged 11–23, community collaboration with KBN and Rumah Pintar volunteers, and the production of a storybook grounded in Dual Coding Theory, Visual Literacy Theory, and Narrative Transportation Theory. Beyond its immediate educational function, the "Mangu" IP represents a model for how academic institutions can develop locally embedded creative media that serves both conservation and community empowerment goals.

Based on this background, the present study formulates the following research

questions: (1) how is the "Si Kecil Mangu" storybook designed and developed as an educational visual narrative IP through a practice-led research process grounded in the social and environmental context of Sukawali Village, and (2) how do the principles of Dual Coding Theory, Visual Literacy Theory, and Narrative Transportation Theory inform the visual and narrative design choices of "Si Kecil Mangu" in supporting early environmental literacy among children aged 6–7 years? By answering these questions, this study aims to offer a theory-informed, replicable model for developing community-based educational visual narrative IP in coastal conservation contexts.

Methodology

This study employs two main approaches: a qualitative method (Bazen et al., 2021) and a creation-based method (practice-led research) as the foundation for the data collection process and the development of an educational storybook (Engen, 2021). The qualitative method is used to explore in depth the social, cultural, and environmental contexts and issues present in Sukawali Village. This approach involves field observations, in-depth interviews with community leaders and members of the KBN, as well as documentation of educational activities and mangrove conservation efforts.

The purpose of this qualitative approach is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of several key aspects, including the conditions of coastal environments and mangrove forests, the challenges faced by the community related to children's literacy and education, and the role of local communities in preserving ecosystems and promoting environmental awareness. The qualitative data collected serve as the primary foundation for developing the narrative, characters, and educational messages incorporated into

the storybook.

Practice-led research is an approach in which creative practice, both the process of making and the resulting artefact, functions as a principal mode of inquiry, generating knowledge that is documented, reflected upon, and articulated alongside conventional academic argument (Engen, 2021). Rather than treating the creative output solely as an illustration of pre-existing theory, practice-led research positions the act of creating as a source of new understanding in itself. In this study, the act of creating includes designing the “Mangu” character, drafting the narrative, producing illustrations, and testing the storybook with its intended audience. The knowledge generated through this process, design iterations, feedback from KBN members and Rumah Pintar volunteers, and children’s responses during pre-testing, forms part of the data analyzed and discussed in this article.

In addition to the qualitative approach, this research also applies practice-led research, which emphasizes creative practice as an integral part of the research process itself. Within the context of this study, the process of creating the storybook becomes a central component of academic exploration and reflection. The steps involved in the creation-based method include the identification of ideas and main themes based on field data from Sukawali Village; the development of the story concept and character design (Mangu); scriptwriting and illustrations based on narratives that have been validated through input from the community and experts; and the pre-testing of the book’s use at the Rumah Pintar to observe responses from children and volunteer educators. The process concludes with the registration of intellectual property rights, the finalization of the storybook, and the preparation of a scientific article.

The following section presents a flow-

chart illustrating the storybook development process.

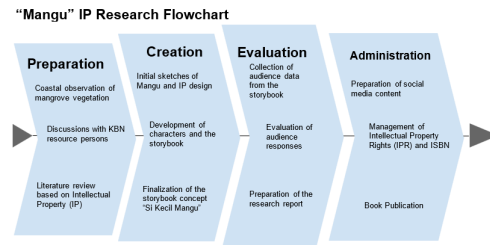


Figure 1. Mangu IP Research Flowchart (Source: Personal research documentation)

Literature Review

According to Dual Coding Theory by Allan Pavio in 1971, information is processed through two interconnected systems: verbal and non-verbal (visual). Learning becomes more effective when both systems are activated simultaneously. In the context of early literacy, illustrated narratives allow children to associate textual elements with images, strengthening comprehension and memory retention. (Khabarova, 2025).

Visual literacy theory emphasizes the ability to interpret, negotiate, and create meaning from visual information. For early readers, visuals are not merely decorative but serve as primary carriers of meaning. Through consistent visual motifs, color symbolism, and character design, Mangu helps children interpret cause-and-effect relationships, such as the link between waste, abrasion, and mangrove degradation, without relying solely on textual explanations. This supports the development of visual literacy as a foundational component of broader literacy skills (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011). According to the theory, visual literacy includes multiple interrelated components such as visual perception, visual language, visual learning, visual thinking, and visual communication. The authors argue that visual literacy must be learned,

is not universal, often interacts with verbal literacy, and can enhance learning and communication. According to Avgerinou & Pettersson, visual literacy involves competencies that go beyond simply seeing images. These include the abilities to interpret, evaluate, produce, and communicate meaning using visual elements. The theory highlights that visual literacy incorporates both cognitive and communicative skills and is interconnected with other forms of literacy.

Narrative Transportation Theory, proposed by Green and Brock (2000), explains how individuals become mentally and emotionally immersed or “transported” into a story world. When narrative transportation occurs, audiences temporarily suspend disbelief, focus their attention on the story, and emotionally connect with characters and events. This immersive experience increases the persuasive power of narratives, as audiences become less likely to critically counterargue the message and more receptive to the values embedded within the story. Green and Brock (2000) argue that transported audiences are more likely to adopt beliefs consistent with the narrative.

In Albert Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), a mascot also serves as a role model. Essentially, education that utilizes storytelling must also be supported by positive behavioral aspects inherent in the mascot. This will eventually encourage behavioral change in students or learners (Chanakya, 2024). Therefore, designing a mascot requires several stages, such as observation, data collection, and analysis of the mascot idea’s core visual (Ernawati, 2016).

In addition to the psychological aspects of form and color, there is a crucial aspect in designing a mascot for education: anthropomorphism. This is further strengthened in discussions concerning the anthropomorphism and persona as-

pects present in an educational mascot. Anthropomorphic design can stimulate the cognitive aspects of its audience. In this context, the positive aspects embedded in the mascot are also personified through attitudes and actions similar to those of humans (Yang, 2023).

Result

The approach employed in this study uses a storybook featuring the main character “Mangu,” a mangrove seedling that struggles to grow on its own because other mangrove trees have died due to excessive waste, coastal abrasion, and extreme weather caused by global warming. The following is the initial sketch of the character “Mangu,” which is inspired by the form of a propagule-type mangrove seedling.

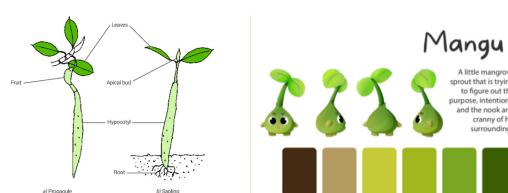


Figure 2. Mangu Early Design
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Animation Study Program Team develops the “Mangu” intellectual property by creating content on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Efforts are made to produce content not only in Indonesian but also in English in order to reach a wider audience. Nevertheless, the content is designed with illustrations that reflect local wisdom, using KSS Beach as the main visual reference (Syarmilah et al., 2022).

Educational media on environmental conservation are predominantly delivered through formal approaches such as seminars, posters, or documentary videos, which are generally targeted at adolescents and adults. Moreover, the use of

mascots as a medium for environmental education in the form of intellectual property (IP) developed by educational institutions remains relatively uncommon, particularly those specifically designed to be integrated into literacy activities and community service programs. This storybook was developed based on direct observation and collaboration with the local community (KBN) and is designed as a relevant learning aid that integrates literacy, environmental education, and the development of local characters as part of a long-term conservation strategy. Beyond functioning as an educational tool, the book also serves as a creative product that bridges the academic community, local stakeholders, and environmental conservation through a participatory and contextual approach.

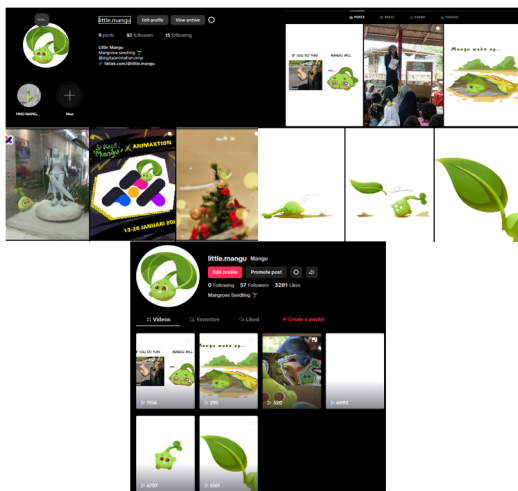


Figure 3. Mangu Instagram & TikTok (Source: Personal research documentation)

After several trials, “Mangu” was found to successfully capture the attention of audiences aged 11–23 years. The problem-solving approach through education using books is expected to increase awareness of the importance of mangrove forest cultivation by utilizing social media as a supporting medium. This is based on the fact that the knowledge of the Sukawa-

li Village community is largely centered on narratives related to mangrove forests (Moore et al. 2022)(Gerona-Daga et al., 2022).

The discovery of highly enthusiastic audiences engaging with “Mangu” content on social media encouraged the Animation Study Program to begin planning the development of the “Mangu” storybook. While the social media content of “Mangu” focuses on audiences aged 11–23 years, the storybook to be developed is intended for a younger audience aged 6–7 years. This age range represents a developmental stage in which children learn extensively through visual stimuli and simple reading materials (Simeonova-Ingilizova, 2023).

The practice-led research approach enables this study not only to produce a final product in the form of a book but also to generate new insights into the collaborative process between academics and communities in creating locally based educational media. The aspect of locality emphasized in the book’s development is conveyed through visual narratives (Riyanto et al., 2024). Activities conducted as part of the Tridharma specifically Community Service (or Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat, PkM), also generated data for the visual development of the storybook, based on the responses of children who participated in storytelling sessions and the “Mangu” coloring competition.



Figure 4. “Belajar dan Bermain Bersama Si Mangu” Activity in Rumah Pintar

(Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/DGN-bWrPzz9I/?img_index=2)

After obtaining findings from KSS Beach, Rumah Pintar, and information from KBN members, a draft of the story and preliminary sketches were developed for the storybook entitled “Si Kecil Mangu.” The next step in this process was the sketching of storyboards and the creation of key visuals to serve as the standard visual reference.

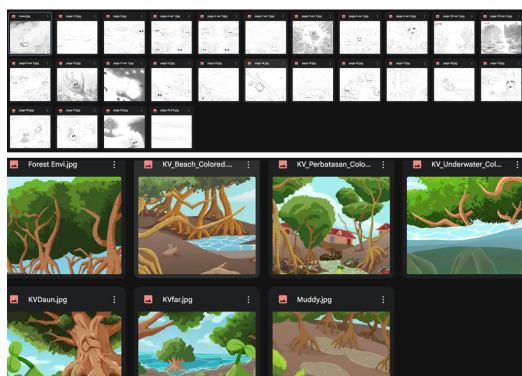


Figure 5. Sketches and Key Visual for “Si Kecil Mangu” (Source: Personal research documentation)

Discussion

In “Si Kecil Mangu” storyboard, illustrations of mangrove ecosystems, environmental degradation, and the character’s emotional expressions function as visual anchors that support children’s understanding of the narrative, particularly when their reading skills are still developing. This approach aligns with Dual Coding Theory, which posits that learning is enhanced when verbal and visual information are processed simultaneously. Through this dual-channel processing, children are able to grasp complex environmental concepts—such as pollution, coastal abrasion, and ecosystem vulnerability—through imagery before fully decoding textual language.

From the perspective of Visual Literacy Theory (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011), visuals in children’s storybooks are not merely decorative elements but constitute a structured visual language that conveys

meaning, values, and relationships. Visual literacy emphasizes the ability to interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning from images. The visual of “Si Kecil Mangu”, consistent visual symbols, character expressions, and environmental settings guide children in interpreting cause-and-effect relationships between human behavior and environmental damage. This supports the development of visual literacy as a foundational competence that complements verbal literacy in early childhood learning.

By personifying a mangrove seedling as a struggling yet resilient character, Mangu also fosters emotional engagement, empathy, and identification. According to Narrative Transportation Theory, such emotional immersion allows audiences to become cognitively and affectively absorbed in the story world. The expressive illustrations strengthen this transportation by providing emotional cues and visual continuity, enabling young readers to visualize the narrative and connect with its messages. As children become transported into Mangu’s journey, environmental values are internalized more naturally, reducing resistance to persuasive messages and transforming literacy activities into meaningful, experience-based learning rather than didactic instruction.

Taken together, the integration of visual literacy, narrative immersion, and dual coding positions “Si Kecil Mangu” as a strategic communication medium that translates complex environmental discourse into accessible, emotionally resonant narratives. This demonstrates how visual narrative literacy can function not only as an educational tool but also as an effective form of environmental communication that fosters early awareness and pro-conservation attitudes.

Therefore, here are Theoretical Framework of Visual Narrative in the sto-

ry “Si Kecil Mangu” storybook development.

Table 1. Dual Coding Theory
(Source: Paivio, 1986)

Key Concept	Verbal–visual dual processing
Story Application	Text and illustrations work together to explain mangrove ecosystems and environmental damage
Contribution	Helps children understand complex environmental issues before full reading fluency

Table 2. Visual Literacy Theory
(Source: Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011)

Key Concept	Images as meaning-making language
Story Application	Visual symbols, character expressions, and environmental settings guide interpretation
Contribution	Develops children’s ability to read and interpret visual information as part of early literacy

Table 3. Narrative Transportation Theory
(Source: Green & Brock, 2000)

Key Concept	Emotional immersion in narratives
Story Application	Anthropomorphic character “Mangu” creates empathy and emotional engagement
Contribution	Increases receptiveness to environmental values and conservation messages

Table 4. Visual Narrative Strategy

Key Concept	Story-based communication
Story Application	Environmental issues presented through a child-friendly narrative
Contribution	Shifts environmental education from didactic instruction to experiential learning

Table 5. Place-Based Communication Approach

Key Concept	Local visual context
Story Application	Coastal imagery inspired by KSS Beach
Contribution	Strengthens place attachment and local environmental awareness

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the integration of qualitative methods and practice-led research provides a robust framework for developing locally grounded environmental literacy media for children. Through field observations, collaboration with the KBN community, and educational activities in Sukawali Village, the creation of the storybook “Si Kecil Mangu” functioned both as a creative output and a communication intervention. The findings indicate that environmental education for young audiences becomes more effective when delivered through narrative-driven and visually rich media that reflect local ecological conditions and lived experiences.

The use of visual narratives in “Si Kecil Mangu” supports early literacy development by enabling children from aged 6 years to understand environmental concepts through imagery prior to full textual mastery. In line with Visual Literacy Theory and Dual Coding Theory, illustrations serve as visual anchors that enhance comprehension and memory. The personification of Mangu as a resilient mangrove seedling encourages emotional engagement, allowing children to develop empathy toward environmental issues rather than perceiving them as abstract phenomena.

From the perspective of Narrative Transportation Theory, the emotional immersion created through Mangu’s story increases children’s receptiveness to conservation messages. The combination of expressive illustrations and narrative structure facilitates deeper engagement with the story world, transforming literacy activities into experiential learning processes. This emotional transportation is essential in shaping early environmental awareness and pro-environmental attitudes.

Additionally, this study underscores the significance of place-based communication in environmental education. By situating the narrative and visual elements within the specific coastal context of KSS Beach and Sukawali Village, “Si Kecil Mangu” strengthens place attachment and reinforces the relevance of mangrove conservation. The development of the “Mangu” intellectual property as a local mascot further highlights the potential of creative media to bridge academic research, community participation, and long-term environmental communication strategies.

Future research may extend this study by examining the long-term impact of storybook-based environmental literacy on children’s attitudes and behaviors toward environmental conservation. Quan-

titative or mixed-method approaches could be employed to measure changes in environmental knowledge, empathy, and pro-environmental behavior over time. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions or ecological settings could explore how place-based visual narratives influence children’s environmental understanding in diverse cultural contexts. Further research may also investigate the adaptation of the “Si Kecil Mangu” narrative into other media formats, such as interactive digital books, animations, or classroom-based learning modules, to assess their effectiveness in expanding audience reach and educational impact.

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the KBN community of Sukawali Village for their collaboration, support, and valuable local knowledge throughout this research. Appreciation is also extended to the children, volunteers, and educators at Rumah Pintar for their enthusiastic participation during the literacy and storytelling activities. The authors acknowledge the support of the Animation Study Program for facilitating the development of the “Mangu” intellectual property and the implementation of this practice-led research. Special thanks are also given to colleagues and reviewers who provided constructive feedback during the research and writing process.

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DARK FANTASY AESTHETICS IN INDONESIAN ANIMATION: VISUAL ANALYSIS AND CHARACTER REPRESENTATION IN THE FILM PANJI TENGGORAK

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Received Apr. 06, 2026; Revised June. 10, 2026; Accepted June. 17, 2026.

Abstract: *The animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), produced by Falcon Pictures, presents a distinctive visual approach within the development of Indonesian animation through its application of dark fantasy aesthetics and a narrative aimed at adult audiences. This study aims to analyze the construction of dark fantasy visual aesthetics and the reinterpretation of the traditional Indonesian jawara figure as represented through the visual attributes of the main character. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach using formalist aesthetic analysis and Roland Barthes' visual semiotics. The research data consist of 12 visual excerpts (film stills) selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to elements of color, lighting, visual texture, character attributes, and the main narrative conflict. The findings reveal that the dominance of an earth-tone color palette, chiaroscuro lighting, and rough visual textures creates a dark fantasy atmosphere characterized by gloom and psychological tension. The semiotic analysis indicates that the character's visual attributes, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, generate denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that represent the jawara figure as a traumatized survivor, socially alienated, and morally ambiguous individual. These findings demonstrate that visual aesthetics function not only to establish narrative atmosphere but also to reconstruct the meaning of heroism within the context of contemporary Indonesian popular culture.*

Keywords: *Indonesian animation; dark fantasy; visual aesthetics; visual semiotics; jawara figure*

Introduction

The Indonesian animation industry has experienced rapid growth over the past decade. However, most local animation productions remain oriented toward children's and family genres, featuring relatively bright visual styles and adhering

to main-stream animation aesthetic standards. The animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), produced by Falcon Pictures, offers a different approach. The film not only targets adult audiences (17+) but also presents a dark fantasy aesthetic that has rarely been explored in Indone-

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sian animation.

Dark fantasy is a fantasy sub-genre that combines fantasy elements with horror, tragedy, and complex psychological conflicts. Visually, this genre is characterized by the use of muted color palettes, high-contrast lighting (*chiaroscuro*), bleak environments, and characters that embody trauma and moral ambiguity. Visual elements such as color, character design, and visual expression play an important role in shaping the artistic identity of an animated work (Chen, 2025), while lighting and environmental design function as visual signs that construct narrative atmosphere and ideological meaning (Saputri & Rahmawati, 2025).

As an adaptation of the legendary comic created by Hans Jaladara (1968), Panji Tengkorak faces the challenge of transforming the visual language of a classic comic into a contemporary animation medium. Adaptation from a static medium to an audiovisual medium involves not only the transfer of narrative content but also the transformation of aesthetics and systems of visual representation (Hutcheon, 2006; Wells, 1998). In this film, such transformation is evident through the use of a limited color palette, dramatic lighting, and character designs that emphasize rough textures to create a dark atmosphere filled with psychological tension.

Beyond being a comic adaptation, Panji Tengkorak is also noteworthy because it presents a reinterpretation of the traditional Indonesian jawara figure. Reinterpretation refers to the process of assigning new meaning to an existing concept through a new perspective or within a different historical context (Gadamer et al., 2004). In classical heroic traditions, a hero is understood as a figure possessing courage, moral integrity, and a willingness to sacrifice for a greater cause (Campbell, 1949). However, this film portrays Panji as a traumatized, alienated, and morally

ambiguous character, thereby offering a new reading of the jawara figure within contemporary popular culture.

To understand this phenomenon, the present study uses formalist aesthetics and visual semiotics as its analytical framework. Formalist aesthetics focuses on the organization of visual elements and the relationships among artistic components in constructing the visual quality of a work (Bell, 1914). In the context of film, color, lighting, and visual texture are formal elements that contribute to the formation of mood, visual identity, and the audience's cinematic experience (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). Visual aesthetics is not solely concerned with formal beauty but also with how visual elements communicate messages, emotions, and deeper meanings (Prasetyo & Masyhudi, 2024). Therefore, the analysis of visual aspects in film should be conducted not only at the level of form but also at the level of meaning. A semiotic approach enables the analysis of symbolic and ideological meanings embedded in visual elements of animation, including character attributes and visual objects (Yunus & Aswar, 2024). Furthermore, Barthes' visual semiotics (1977) is used to understand how character visual attributes function as signs that generate denotative, connotative, and ideological mythological meanings.

Previous studies on Indonesian animation have primarily focused on aspects of industrial production (Daulay & Kusumawardhani, 2020), character representation (Ekawardhani et al., 2020), and the visual identity of local culture (Mudana et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies on dark fantasy have tended to develop within the contexts of anime and Western animation (Saputri & Rahmawati, 2025), while research on comic-to-animation adaptation generally focuses on medium transformation and narrative structure (Hutcheon, 2006; Wells, 1998). Although these

areas of scholarship have advanced independently, the relationship between dark fantasy aesthetics, local comic adaptation, and the reinterpretation of traditional Indonesian heroic figures has rarely been examined collectively. No study has been found that specifically analyzes how dark fantasy aesthetics are used in local comic adaptations to reinterpret and represent the Indonesian jawara figure.

Based on this gap in the literature, the present study seeks to analyze how dark fantasy visual aesthetics are constructed through color, lighting, and visual texture in *Panji Tengkorak* (2025), as well as how the visual attributes of the character, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, are used to reinterpret the jawara figure within the context of contemporary Indonesian animation.

Research Questions

1. How are visual aesthetics constructed through the elements of color, lighting, and visual texture in building the dark fantasy atmosphere of the animated film *Panji Tengkorak*?
2. How do the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings generated through the visual attributes of the character *Panji Tengkorak*, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, contribute to the reinterpretation of the traditional Indonesian jawara figure?

Research Significance

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the fields of visual communication design and animation studies, particularly in relation to the construction of dark fantasy aesthetics in local comic adaptations and the representation of the traditional

Indonesian jawara figure through the perspectives of formalist aesthetics and visual semiotics.

Practically, the findings of this study may serve as a reference for animation practitioners in transforming classical intellectual properties (IPs) into visual works that remain relevant to contemporary developments while preserving their cultural essence.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach using formalist aesthetic analysis and visual semiotics. The qualitative approach is utilized to understand and interpret the visual meanings presented in the animated film *Panji Tengkorak*, particularly those related to dark fantasy aesthetics and the representation of the main character. This approach enables a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the visual phenomena depicted in the film. The analysis is conducted by examining aesthetic elements in detail to understand how the dark fantasy atmosphere and character reinterpretation are constructed.

Research Object

The object of this study is the animated film *Panji Tengkorak* (2025), produced by Falcon Pictures. The data focus on units of analysis consisting of scene excerpts (film stills), the visual attributes of the main character, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, as well as visual elements such as color, lighting, and visual texture that represent the research theme.

This study analyzes 12 visual excerpts selected through purposive sampling because they are considered the most rep-

representative in displaying the construction of a dark fantasy atmosphere and the visual attributes of Panji Tengkorak that are associated with the reinterpretation of the jawara figure. The selection of the stills was based on the appearance of the main character, the dominance of specific color palettes, the use of dramatic lighting (chiaroscuro), the presence of prominent visual textures, and the representation of the film's primary narrative conflicts.

Table 1. Selected Film Stills and Analysis Elements

No	Timestamp	Scene Description	Analysis Element
1	00:01:02	Panji's Battle	High-Contrast Colors
2	00:01:31	Silhouette of Panji Tengkorak	Rough Visual Texture
3	00:34:22	Stabbing an Enemy with a Sword	Weaponry
4	00:45:55	Holding Murni's Body	Clothing and Bodily Scars
5	00:57:12	Holding a Skull	Skull Mask
6	00:57:37	holding a staff weapon	Earth-Tone Colors
7	01:09:57	Panji Tengkorak in Combat	Clothing and Bodily Scars
8	01:10:00	Holding a Sword	Skull Mask
9	01:12:26	Weapon Duel with an Opponent	Weaponry
10	01:24:50	Panji's Battle with the Main Antagonist	Rough Visual Texture
11	01:28:59	Skull Mask	Chiaroscuro Lighting
12	01:29:43	Holding a Torch	Chiaroscuro Lighting

Data Collection Techniques

The data in this study were collected from two sources:

1. Primary Data

Primary data were collected through textual observation. This process involved watching, observing, and documenting film scenes through screen capture techniques to identify visual elements relevant to the research focus. Some of the visual

excerpts used as analytical illustrations were obtained from publicly available documentation on IMDb due to technical limitations in capturing screenshots directly from the film.

2. Secondary Data

Secondary data were obtained through a literature review of scholarly journals, books on aesthetic theory, film criticism articles, and supporting documents related to the original Panji Tengkorak comic by Hans Jaladara.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument in this study is the researcher as a human instrument. The researcher acts as an observer who identifies, classifies, and interprets visual elements based on the theories of Formalist Aesthetics and Visual Semiotics.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed through the following stages:

1. Data Reduction

Relevant film stills were selected and categorized based on visual elements such as color, lighting, visual texture, and the visual attributes of the main character, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and weaponry, which contribute to the construction of character meaning.

2. Data Presentation

Selected visual excerpts were presented and described by examining formal elements, including color, lighting, and visual texture, as well as the character's visual attributes depicted in the selected scenes.

3. Theoretical Interpretation

The visual findings were interpreted

using aesthetic theory to explain how the dark fantasy atmosphere is constructed. Roland Barthes' visual semiotics was used to identify the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings that contribute to the reinterpretation of the jawara figure through the visual attributes of the character Panji Tengkorak.

4. Conclusion Drawing

Final conclusions were formulated regarding the construction of dark fantasy aesthetics and the reinterpretation of the jawara figure as a form of visual innovation in the animated film Panji Tengkorak.

Research Analysis Framework

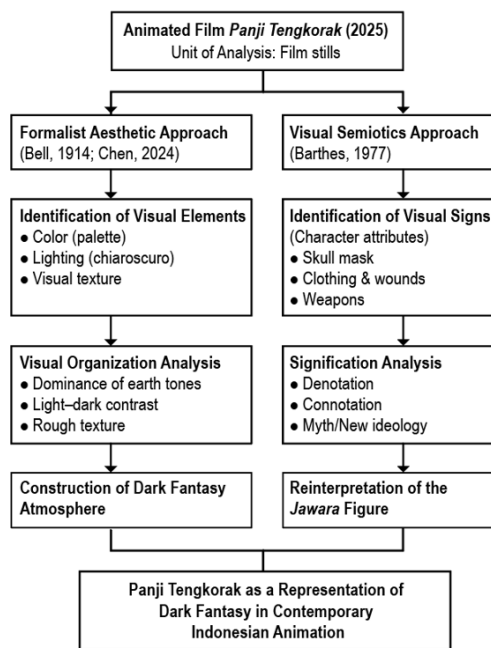


Figure 1. Research Analysis Framework (Source: Author's elaboration, 2025)

Result

Formalist Aesthetic Analysis: Constructing the Dark Fantasy Atmosphere

The formalist aesthetic analysis shows that the dark fantasy atmosphere in Panji Tengkorak is constructed through the consistent organization of visual elements, particularly color palette, lighting, and texture. These three elements work together to create a bleak narrative world filled with tension while representing the psychological conflicts experienced by the characters.

1. Dominance of Earth-Tone Colors



Figure 2. Earth-Tone and Muted Color Palette (Source: Panji Tengkorak film, produced by Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 3. Use of Contrasting Colors (Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

In contrast to mainstream animation, which tends to employ bright and vibrant color schemes, Panji Tengkorak is dominated by an earth-tone palette consisting of dark brown, gray, and black, while red appears only as a contrasting color in specific elements such as blood and fire. From a formalist aesthetic perspective, this organization of color shapes the emotional quality of the work through the relationships among visual elements (Bell, 1914; Chen, 2025). The dominance of muted and dark colors creates the impression of a bleak, alienated world marked by moral decline, thereby reinforcing the film's

dark fantasy atmosphere.

2. Chiaroscuro Lighting

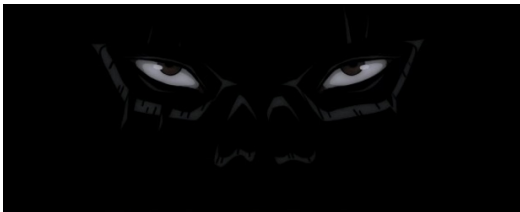


Figure 4. Dark-Light Contrast Through Chiaroscuro Lighting
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 5. Lighting That Creates a Sense of Mystery
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

The study found the use of extreme dark-light contrast in many scenes. Shadows function not only as indicators of dimension but also as artistic elements that partially obscure the characters' faces or bodies. This lighting creates spatial depth and enhances a sense of mystery while reflecting Panji's inner psychological darkness. These visual findings reinforce the characteristics of dark fantasy, in which a bleak atmosphere is constructed through the dominance of muted colors, high-contrast lighting, and the representation of the characters' psychological conflicts.

3. Rough Visual Texture



Figure 6. Sharp and Irregular Visual Textures
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 7. Fight scene with rough visual texture
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Visual texture is constructed through the use of sharp lines, irregular forms, and rough-looking surfaces across environmental elements such as rocks, soil, and character costumes. The organization of these elements creates the impression of a harsh, brutal, and unstable world. Rough textures and irregular lines function as visual strategies that reject the romanticization of the martial world. The world constructed by the film appears brutal and unstable, thereby reinforcing the dark fantasy ideology that positions violence as an inherent part of narrative reality.

Semiotic Analysis: Reinterpreting the Jawara Character

This section examines how the identity of the traditional jawara (warrior-hero) is fundamentally transformed into a darker and more complex figure.

1. Symbolism of the Skull Mask



Figure 8. A skull mask covers Panji's face
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 10. Panji in Combat
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 9. Skull Mask Details
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 11. Panji as a Survivor
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Denotative: The mask is a representation of a human skull.

Connotative: The mask signifies symbolic death, loss of identity, and the character's alienation from social life.

Mythological: The jawara is no longer represented as a symbol of moral victory but rather as a survivor burdened by trauma and the violence of the past. The skull mask symbolizes not only death but also the obscuring of Panji's personal identity, so that heroism is no longer defined by honor or moral exemplarity. At the mythological level, this attribute represents a transformation of the jawara figure from an ideal hero into a traumatized, alienated, and morally ambiguous character.

2. Clothing and Bodily Scar

Denotative: The worn clothing, torn fabric, and scars on Panji's body indicate the physical condition of a fighter who has endured numerous battles.

Connotative: These elements construct the image of a character shaped by traumatic experiences and prolonged violence.

Mythological: The bodily scars represent not only the physical consequences of combat but also a visual archive of traumatic experiences that remain inscribed on Panji's body. Unlike traditional representations of the jawara, which are commonly associated with strength and honor, Panji is portrayed as a figure who is both vulnerable and capable of survival. Through this visual strategy, the film reinterprets heroism not as a symbol of perfection but as the capacity to endure and confront suffering.

3. Weaponry

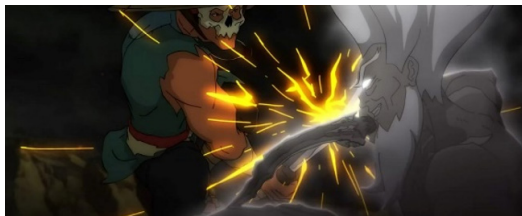


Figure 12. Representation of Weaponry in a Combat Scene
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)



Figure 13. Brutalism and Physical Reality
(Source: Panji Tengkorak (2025), Falcon Pictures, via IMDb)

Denotative: The weapon is depicted as a simple, functional, and lethal tool of combat. Unlike weapons in traditional fantasy, which are often portrayed with magical auras or elaborate ornamentation, the weapon in Panji Tengkorak emphasizes practicality and effectiveness.

Connotative: This representation conveys the idea that strength does not originate from magical forces but from lived experience, suffering, and the protagonist's ability to endure. The weapon functions not only as a tool for combat but also as an extension of Panji's identity as a survivor living in a harsh and brutal world. In this context, the weapon signifies the close relationship between violence and survival.

Mythological: Through the representation of weaponry as functional and largely devoid of romanticization, the film shifts the image of heroism from a figure endowed with extraordinary power to a character who must confront the real consequences of every conflict. The weapon is not positioned as a sacred artifact or a symbol of magical power, as is common-

ly found in heroic fantasy. Instead, it is presented as a tool for survival that represents the harsh realities of the narrative world. This visual strategy reinforces the reinterpretation of the jawara figure as a traumatized and morally ambiguous character who nevertheless possesses the resilience to endure violence and suffering.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings indicate that the construction of the dark fantasy atmosphere and the reinterpretation of the jawara figure in Panji Tengkorak are two closely interconnected visual aspects. The dark fantasy atmosphere is constructed through the dominance of earth-tone colors, chiaroscuro lighting, and rough visual textures, while the reinterpretation of the jawara figure is realized through the character's visual attributes, including the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and simple, functional weaponry.

The relationship between these two aspects demonstrates that visual aesthetics in the film function not only to establish narrative atmosphere but also to serve as a means of character representation. The dark, harsh, and oppressive visual environment provides the context for the emergence of Panji as a traumatized, alienated, and morally ambiguous survivor. Consequently, Panji is no longer represented as an ideal hero associated with courage and moral victory, as traditionally portrayed in classical heroic representations of the jawara. Instead, he is depicted as a character who must confront the psychological and physical consequences of every conflict he experiences.

These findings suggest that the adaptation of the Panji Tengkorak comic into an animated film involves more than a visual transformation. It also offers a new

interpretation of the jawara figure within Indonesian popular culture. Dark fantasy aesthetics are used as a visual strategy to reconstruct the meaning of heroism, making it more closely aligned with character complexity and the realities of conflict faced by modern individuals. In a broader context, Panji Tengkorak demonstrates how local intellectual property can be adapted into contemporary visual forms without abandoning its cultural roots, while simultaneously expanding the possibilities of representation in Indonesian animation, which has traditionally been dominated by narratives and aesthetics oriented toward children and family audiences.

Conclusion

Based on the visual and aesthetic analysis of the animated film Panji Tengkorak (2025), several key conclusions can be drawn:

First, the application of formalist aesthetic elements successfully constructs a consistent dark fantasy atmosphere. The use of a muted earth-tone color palette and chiaroscuro lighting techniques does not function solely as an artistic device but also as a narrative strategy for creating a bleak, oppressive, and mysterious world. This finding demonstrates that local animation is capable of moving beyond the bright aesthetic conventions that have long dominated the industry and can establish a more mature and cinematic visual identity.

Second, the semiotic analysis reveals a significant reinterpretation of the traditional jawara figure. Panji is no longer represented as a heroic martial arts warrior who is brave and flawless. Instead, he is portrayed as a traumatized figure who bears visible signs of suffering. The symbolism of the skull mask, clothing and bodily scars, and simple, functional weap-

ony constructs a reinterpretation of the jawara as a traumatized, alienated, and morally ambiguous survivor. This visual strategy successfully revitalizes a classic Indonesian intellectual property (IP) by presenting a more complex and humanized interpretation of the jawara figure.

The dark fantasy aesthetics of Panji Tengkorak function not only to construct a visual atmosphere but also as a representational strategy that reinterprets the jawara figure within the context of contemporary Indonesian popular culture.

Recommendation

This study is limited to the analysis of visual elements and character design from the perspectives of formalist aesthetics and semiotics. Future researchers are encouraged to explore other aspects, such as sound design and musical score, in constructing tension within the dark fantasy genre. In addition, studies on audience reception of the visual transformation of this legendary character would provide valuable insights into the extent to which Indonesian audiences accept the reinterpretation of their cultural icon.

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ULTIMART

Vol. 19, No.1, June 2026

JURNAL KOMUNIKASI VISUAL

ISSN : 1979 - 0716

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