# The
# Future
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**edited by
Natalia Grincheva**

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# *Notes on Contributors*

**Lim Li Juan Shalyn** is an aspiring arts manager. She is passionate about working with communities and exploring art as a tool of bridging those communities. With experiences at STPI, Art & Market and leading Project Rediscover Kampong Gelam 2022, she constantly seeks fresh perspectives and explores strategic initiatives for the engagement of arts, heritage, and culture. Her research on 'Museums without Walls in Southeast Asia' has been presented at the 9th Asian Undergraduate Research Symposium, Trans/Mission Seminar 2023 and 28th International Conference of International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies. With a focus on critical global issues and heritage management, she hopes to work with communities to preserve both tangible and intangible cultures.

**Jordan Tham Jun Hui** is a highly accomplished creative manager with a wealth of experience in marketing for the arts, culture, and entertainment industries. He has worked with a diverse range of clients, including advertising agencies, artists, and arts organizations such as SAtheCollective to develop and execute innovative marketing campaigns to draw public attention to various art forms. Jordan's outstanding contributions to the field of arts, culture and communications have earned him invitations to speak at several prestigious conferences. These include the LASALLE College of the Art's TRANS/MISSION, 9th Asian Undergraduate Research Symposium, and the 28th International Conference of International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies.

**Kenix Tan Hui Min** is an up-and-coming Arts Manager. Driven by her passion for the arts, she has a wide range of experiences in arts volunteering and working with organisations such as Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Theatre Today and ART:DIS Singapore. While studying at LASALLE College of the Arts, she spearheaded the Arts Management Committee that united different cohorts through an array of engaging events and activities. She also presented her Dissertation research at the 28th International Conference of International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies. Ultimately, Kenix wants to design accessible arts experiences for people of all backgrounds. Along the way, she hopes to work with individuals who share the same dedication and eagerness to deliver the arts to various audiences.

**Eunice Goh Yee Yu** is a highly motivated and outspoken individual with a strong passion for the arts and entertainment media industry. While studying at LASALLE College of the Arts, Eunice showed proactive leadership in the Arts Management Committee (AM-CO), which has organised initiatives to cultivate camaraderie in the cohort. Her professional aspirations are rooted in arts management, as she collaborated with esteemed organisations including Mediacorp and The Esplanade Co. Ltd. Through her work experiences, Eunice has honed valuable skill sets across the media, theatre, and film sectors. Notably, Eunice was actively involved in the Stars on Symphony project with Symphony 924, as she demonstrates and further develops her skills in project management. Eunice is convinced that mainstream media plays a fundamental role in shaping a better society. Driven by this conviction, she continues to be involved behind the camera, connecting the right content to the proper audiences.

**Athira Binte Maswan** is an aspiring arts and cultural manager with experience in the performing arts scene, as an occasional vocalist and former Malay dancer. A Psychology diploma graduate, Athira's primary area of interest was in Special Education, leading to her placement as an Autism Coach Intern at St. Andrew's Autism Centre. Passionate about facilitating accessibility and inclusivity in the arts in a pan-disability setting, she then joined Very Special Arts (presently known as ART:DIS) as a Programmes Intern (Performing Arts). There, Athira had the opportunity to be the technical in-charge for in-centre gigs, as well as for larger collaborations with National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Land Authority, and Prudential. Athira also served as a Programmes and Administration intern at The Red Pencil (Singapore), a non-profit charity organisation that provides creative arts therapy for the less privileged.

**Mruthika Priya Raman** is a growing cross-disciplinary arts practitioner and manager with an inclination towards accessibility and inclusive art practice. Despite receiving formal training in multiple art forms, she advocates for a movement practice unlimited by labels or categorization. Thika most recently had the opportunity to present her research on Singapore's cultural policy at the 9th Asian Undergraduate Research Symposium. Her most recent work experience includes being a Project Manager and Marketing Assistant for StoryFest 2022, as well as part of the five-person organising team for 2022 ARTWALK, an annual multidisciplinary public arts festival organised by LASALLE College of the Arts and Singapore Tourism Board. She hopes to facilitate the convergence of diverse voices and promote a more fluid artistic landscape, fuelled by understanding and sensitivity.

**Jyothsna Akilan** is an aspiring arts manager with a penchant for communications and project management. As a trained Bharatanatyam practitioner and a Cultural Scholarship awardee by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Jyothsna is driven by the vision to create alternative inclusive platforms for traditional Indian artists to develop and showcase their work. Over the past two years, Jyothsna has worked on diverse arts projects in Singapore and India. Notable ones include her roles as the Logistics Head for Artwalk 2022, an annual multidisciplinary festival organised by LASALLE College of the Arts and Singapore Tourism Board, and the Project Lead for a research study undertaken by ArtSpire, India, to study the impact of COVID-19 on Indian Classical artists in India.

**Natalia Grincheva** is a Programme Leader in Arts Management at LASALLE College of the Arts, University of the Arts Singapore and an Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the Digital Studio at the University of Melbourne. She is an internationally recognised expert in innovative forms and global trends in contemporary museology, digital diplomacy and international cultural relations. Her publication profile includes over 40 research articles, book chapters and reports published in prominent academic outlets. Her professional engagements include her dedicated work for the International Fund for Cultural Diversity at UNESCO (2011) and International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity (2011–2015), her research industry placement at ACMI X creative hub at the Australian Center for the Moving Image (2017–2019) as well as service for the international Cultural Research Network (2018–2020) and research consultancy for ICR Research, based in London (2020-present).

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# Introduction

# Reimagining the Future of Heritage
## *Natalia Grincheva*

*The Future of Heritage* is an inaugural edition of the research collections starting in 2023 to celebrate research achievements of the BA (Honours) Arts Management Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts, University of the Arts Singapore. This series of Edited Collections, published annually, is envisioned to be a research development and sharing platform to give voice to the next generation of art managers, cultural leaders, and changemakers in the creative industries sector. It started with an observation that each year the programme generates a massive volume of incredibly useful and illuminating research findings and invaluable insights shared by our graduating students, who have a fresh outlook, bold strategic vision, and highly optimistic inspirations for the future of the arts industry in Singapore and beyond.

These innovative ideas, future visions, cultural autoethnographic reflections, and pure research findings should have a space for democratic presentation and sharing within larger discourses, both professional and academic, which are currently dominated by more senior actors. With all respect to the current epistemic tradition and knowledge sharing practices in the field, this issue opens up a new avenue for the future-making of the arts industry sector. It advocates for a more inclusive approach, giving the next generation of cultural thought-leaders opportunities to contribute to the evolving discussions reimagining the creative industries, and to openly share their views and perspectives.

This issue of the edited collection focuses on the future of heritage. It documents the heritage sector developments in Singapore and Asia in a very interesting moment in history: a time of unprecedented technological developments, innovative experimentations, and revolutionary advancements happening right after the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis. With much hype created around the metaverse developments, new blockchain-facilitated arts markets and heritage networks growth, not to mention the increasing ubiquity of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools and chatbots in our daily routines, the volume offers a critical view on the future of the heritage sector in Asia. It returns us to the ground, exposing current challenges and opportunities existing in the new developments which transform, innovate, contest, and reimagine our heritage by suggesting new ways to celebrate and preserve it.

*The Future of Heritage* compiles a diverse kaleidoscope of case studies that discuss current practices of heritage institutions or delve into new developments in heritage traditions and artistic practices, offering a fresh account of the heritage development trajectory into the future. The edited collection consists of two key parts, moving from institutionalised heritage preservation practices to free flow of various art forms, including contemporary dance and music, which deeply engage with cultural heritage traditions. *Part I: From Museums to Multimedia* presents four case studies that explore cultural heritage, either from the perspective of its developments within and beyond contemporary museums and museological practices, or from the angle of its technologically enabled presentation and manifestation in contemporary media practices. *Part II: Performing the Tradition* features three chapters that are devoted to new avenues for heritage preservation for the generations to come, which evolve in contemporary artistic practices and are highly dynamic and responsive to new environments.

Research in both parts is representative of a qualitative methodological approach with a particular focus on interviews, as one of the most frequently employed methods by the authors in the book. In this way, the edited collection documents important conversations happening in the heritage and creative industry sector in Singapore and beyond, sharing wisdom, insight, and unconventional advice for younger generations on how to preserve cultural heritage in a responsible and sustainable manner.  Moreover, several chapters—especially in the second part of the book—offer unique autobiographical accounts of analysed cultural phenomena, supporting focused explorations of heritage practices in contemporary society. Autobiography as a method utilised by contributors evidences the cultural "maturity" of future generations of art managers, who despite their tender age have accumulated valuable and extensive cultural and artistic experiences by engaging closely with heritage and traditional art forms.

*Part I: From Museums to Multimedia* opens the book with research on "Museums without Walls" in Southeast Asia, conducted by Lim Li Juan Shalyn. This is a fascinating account of ecomuseologial practices happening in different communities in Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia. The chapter identifies and analyses effective heritage preservation technologies which help local communities to preserve their tangible and intangible heritage, especially under conditions of limited resources and infrastructure. These models of ecomuseums, which exist due to—or even despite—the lack of institutionalised interventions, are illuminating forms of heritage survival that are emerging in more virtualized and hyperconnected environments. While the chapter does not explicitly bring up the issue of these ecomuseological models' applicability to online contexts, there is a strong potential of transferring best practices of grassroots heritage initiatives to the current development of Decentralised Autonomous

Organisations (DAOs) on blockchain networks or activities of ad hoc online collectives of artists. There are interesting parallels one could draw between "Museum without Walls" that survive and even thrive as community-based initiatives in rural neighbourhoods, with purely digital networks of media artists who establish new avenues of sustaining and preserving their artistic practices through more democratised yet still fuzzy and unstable blockchain practices.

Jumping into a more institutionalised context of contemporary museology, the following chapter features the research of Jordan Tham Jun Hui, who excellently brings together the world of museums and heritage and technological advancements in Augmented Reality (AR). Not only does the chapter feature illuminating insights from the creative tech sector in Singapore, discussing the role of AR experiences in contemporary audience engagement with the cultural heritage, it goes much further to propose a new assessment framework to evaluate these AR encounters with heritage. Stressing both quantitative and qualitative criteria, the research offers a model to measure the impact of AR filters created by museums to educate and entertain contemporary audiences through a close engagement with heritage. Applying the new evaluation framework to a case study of the Escape Batik Shop AR filter developed by the National Heritage Board in Singapore, the chapter offers a step-by-step guide for heritage institutions. This guide can help museums better understand audiences' AR experiences with the heritage, by looking at a wide array of factors from aesthetics to edutainment. The framework, in fact, could also be useful in evaluating the practices of heritage institutions which go far beyond engagements with AR, but also involve audiences in experiences developed with the help of Virtual Reality (VR) and Metaverse technologies.

Continuing the topic of museums and digital technologies, the chapter of Kenix Tan Hui Min interrogates

the value of Google Arts and Culture (GAC) platform for museums in Singapore. This chapter boldly reveals important developments in the local cultural heritage ecosystem, which contests a perceived high value of services provided by global media giants, such as Google, who dominate the international media landscape and successfully push into cultural heritage markets across borders. In fact, Google has been very proactive in the past decade, sealing agreements with 2000 cultural institutes across 80 countries. After the COVID-19 global pandemic, GAC has become "a go to" platform for culture and heritage, generating millions of unique visits every month. With such services as YouTube, Google+, GMail, Google, Docs and Google Maps directly attached to GAC, the platform positions itself as a free resource available for global audiences to connect with cultures from different parts of the world. While some countries in Southeast Asia, like Vietnam, were quick to capitalise on the platform's capabilities to expose their arts, heritage and culture for international consumption, Singapore takes a different approach. The chapter shares insightful conversations with heritage professionals in Singapore to reveal that local museums put stronger emphasis on developing their own local institutional partnerships and online resources to garner a stronger control over their brand identity and value communicated on the global scale.

The following chapter keeps a critical conversation going around the involvement of transnational mega-corporations in the practices of media presentation of cultural heritage, especially if it concerns the indigenous heritage of non-Western cultural communities. Eunice Goh Yee Yu explores Walt Disney Company's approaches in creating highly engaging and captivating media products featuring cultural heritage and traditions from different countries around the world, including Asian ones, which keep breaking global box-office records. The research illuminates how cross-cultural sensitivity, cultural glocalisation practices across local markets,

and a diversified workforce within the company generate economic value for Disney in their production of Animated Cultural Representative (ACR) films. The research draws on interviews with current and former employees of the Walt Disney Company, including its offices located in Singapore, to demystify its global media attraction power. The chapter is evidence that in the contemporary international media environment, an accurate cultural heritage presentation that—through diversity and inclusivity—respects and demonstrates cultural sensitivity to the source communities has become a foundational factor of success. Making cultural heritage a central pillar of its animated storytelling practices in ACR films helps the company retain a wide and diverse global audienceship across geographies.

*Part II: Performing the Tradition* moves forward to explore the contemporary heritage landscape beyond institutionalised practices which rather manifests itself in new forms of artistic production. It starts with a research paper contributed by Athira Binte Maswan who explores such a critical cultural studies phenomenon as cultural amnesia. Also touching upon the questions of media ubiquity which could result in cultural heritage misrepresentation, underrepresentation, or even nihilation, the chapter questions the status quo of Malay culture in Singapore. It identifies two critical factors of cultural amnesia among Millennials and Gen Zs of local Malays: lack of cultural knowledge and lack of cultural connection. On the one hand, the chapter captures a loss of heritage knowledge and connection among cultural minority communities. This is prevalent in highly multicultural societies, like Singapore, where the government agenda prioritises the creation of a unified citizen identity to foster social cohesion and control. The research alerts and calls for recovering, reintroducing, and strengthening the links between contemporary cultures of young generations with their heritage roots and traditions. On the other hand, the chapter is an

illustration that Malay Millennials and Gen Zs in Singapore are highly conscious and sensitive to the negative effects of cultural amnesia and express a deep and genuine interest in reconnecting with their cultural heritage.

This situation once again stresses the foundational place of cultural heritage in the future of humanity, despite its uncertainty under the pressure of technological revolutions, economic instabilities, and geopolitical cataclysms. The following two chapters are evidence that heritage traditions thrive in contemporary practices which reincarnate traditional dance and music, while innovating and transforming them. The chapter contributed by Mruthika Priya Raman, who excellently employs autoethnography along with other qualitative methodologies, explores the transformations of the traditional Indian dance Bharathanaatyam in Singapore. This research depicts many factors, including technological advancements, which help the traditional dance practice to eventually find new forms. These new manifestations of heritage resonate stronger with contemporary dancers in Singapore, who reimagine the dance for future generations. Gaining more ownership over the form, democratising its practices and relationship among teachers and students, contemporary Bharathanaatyam becomes a living legend of the heritage tradition. It thrives not necessarily through the "purity" of the form, but instead finds new life through dedicated dancers, like Mruthika, who have the courage and express deep commitment to keep the heritage tradition going.

The book concludes with a chapter by Jyothsna Akilan, on the Carnatic music tradition from South India that eventually welcomed musical influences from different corners of the world. It continues the topic of traditional cultural forms transformations under the pressures of globalisation and technological developments by focusing on the processes of the music fusion, challenging the boundaries of heritage

purity without destroying its authenticity and beauty. Exploring Carnatic fusion practices of contemporary musicians in Chennai, the chapter brilliantly documents virtuose metamorphoses of traditional Carnatic music through genres, styles and, even sounds, emphasising the music's unique fluidity and flexibility, which offer it a new identity with every new performance. The chapter illuminates how the fusion phenomenon of traditional Carnatic music helps it to constantly evolve and find new avenues to engage contemporary audiences. As a concluding chapter in the edited collection, it demonstrates that the cultural heritage is a dynamic, living "mechanism" adaptive and responsive to emerging realities and evolving environments in local and global cultural, social and economic contexts. It exists and develops through contemporary artists, their practices, and their artistic and even human responses to new conditions as a continuous process leading to the future.

The inaugural issue of the annual edited collection, *The Future of Heritage*, commences the future of the arts management research conducted by a young generation of cultural leaders. It starts the journey towards a more proactive and strategic development and professionalisation of the Arts Management field in Singapore and in the region. It convenes a forum for bold ideas to be exposed and introduced to a wider community, new management models and innovations to be discussed and critically reflected upon, as well as social and political controversies or urgent questions to be boiled up to the surface. Thanks to the great efforts, enthusiastic contributions, and dedicated commitment of many people, this edition will hopefully start a new tradition of the best practices in art management research, bringing together the world of academics, students and practitioners in the field. Special thanks go to Dr. Jonathan Gander, Head of the School of Creative Industries at LASALLE College of the Arts, and the

BA Arts Management Program team of academic supervisors, Dr. Amin Farid and Michelle Loh.

# Part I:
# From Museums to
# Multimedia

# Museums without Walls in Southeast Asia
## *Lim Li Juan Shalyn*

## Introduction

Over the past decades, museums have evolved into new heritage spaces which are no longer bound to their physical locations. Historically, especially in Western contexts, museums have emerged as "cabinets of the curiosity," "closed spaces," "sacred store houses" and "realms of the elites" (Ariese and Wróblewska 2021) The birth of contemporary museology has seen a paradigm shift demonstrating that exhibitions, cultural and heritage experiences, and cultural practices can exist as "Museums without Walls," or ecomuseums. They emerged as local centres for communities to gather, display and celebrate their identity, rooted in local heritage and cultural traditions while addressing development goals (Graybeal 2010, 158). The main aspiration of ecomuseums, especially in rapidly evolving developing countries, is to cherish places and local cultural practices, and to sustain communities that live there (Borrelli and Davis 2012). From the 1970s, ecomuseums have been promoted on the global level as a way to decolonise the established field of museology, heavily based in colonial practices of Western museums.

This research seeks to critically evaluate, assess, and define a framework of contemporary ecomuseums across various practices, some of which include heritage festivals, community heritage preservation efforts, or intercultural celebrations. Exploring three different cases of "Museums Without Walls" in Southeast Asia, this research analyses

different manifestations of ecomuseology in the 21st century. It identifies common characteristics that define ecomuseum practices across Southeast Asia and brings them together under one umbrella term. This investigation draws on three case studies of "Museums without Walls" existing in local communities across three countries: Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia.

The first case study features Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts & Culture (BNCAC), an artist-run space located in Nongpho, Thailand. This organisation is dedicated to developing strategies for community development and enhancing cultural production and participation. One of their main goals is to achieve community cohesion and engagement. For instance, BNCAC has initiated the 'NPKD Pop-up Museum' project, which seeks to engage the community to reflect on and discuss its history and culture (Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts & Culture 2020). The second case study explores Jatiwangi Art Factory (JaF), based in West Java, Majalengka, Indonesia. Presently, Indonesia has no designated ecomuseums. Yet there are examples of inclusive museological practices, such as the JaF Land Culture Museum, public festivals, and a studio for activities and workshops aimed at community engagement (Jatiwangi Art Factory 2022). Finally, the third case study investigates Kon Len *Khnhom*, an independent space located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The space is dedicated to the idea of "a shared living room for the arts and culture in Phnom Penh" and aims to connect, share ideas, and facilitate the exchange of artistic knowledge among community members (Kon Len *Khnhom* 2017).

The research analyses different manifestations of ecomuseums in three distinct communities in Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture (Nongpho, Thailand), Jatiwangi Art Factory (Majalengka, Indonesia) and Kon

Len *Khnhom* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia) to investigate their implications for creating a community symbiosis, facilitating cultural education, and contributing to local revitalisation amongst different communities. Employing a purposive case study approach, the research project compares and contrasts three forms of "Museum without Walls" to expand the definition of contemporary eco-museology in Southeast Asia. Complementing desk research on existing empirical materials documenting three case studies, the project also employs focused semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with representatives from each of the selected ecomuseums and their communities. These interviews reveal how different communities across Southeast Asia utilise their cultural resources to interact with local communities to perform museological practices that help to sustain, preserve, share, and celebrate local heritage and cultures.

The chapter begins with a literature review section that identifies three common central tasks of ecomuseums—*Community Symbiosis*, *Cultural Education* and *Local Revitalisation*—and three key parts redefining the existing framework. Drawing on the selected case studies, the chapter identifies and explores three new models or manifestations of ecomuseums in local Southeast Asian communities, namely *Ecomuseum as Mobilisation*, *Ecomuseum as Territory,* and *Ecomuseum as Home.* These new models of ecomuseums provide fresh perspectives on the overlooked tasks, functions, and expectations of contemporary "Museums without Walls," suggesting new possibilities for these institutions to grow and serve their communities.

## Museums without Walls

The shift from "old" to "new" museology is based on a paradigm shift of key museum functions. A museum is no longer seen as a mere repository of collections and artefacts on display, but a place of cultural preservation and dissemination and a centre of social cohesion (Magliacani 2015, 21). Devised by Hughes de Varine, the 'New Museology' conception emerged in the 1970s to promote a radical transformation of museum practices and ideologies (Vergo 1997, 445). It has become an international movement advocating for "a community-driven museum or heritage project that aids sustainable development" (Davis 2007; Soares 2021, 199). According to this conception, museums are important focal points for their communities, facilitating engagement with the public for heritage preservation and sharing (Ariese 2022; Kreps 2020; Davis 1999).

The ecomuseum could be defined as a cultural space that is more inclusive of the natural and cultural contexts for education and preservation through the participatory process, focusing on community development and celebration of cultural identity (Miller-Lane 2006; Biseth 2009). In the academic scholarship, ecomuseums are also known as "Museums without Walls," an umbrella term for the phenomenon that covers such commonly used titles as "Social Museums," "Open-Air Museums," "Environmental Museums," "Community Museums," "Fragmented Museums," "Neighbourhood Museums," "Integrated Museums," and "Folk Museums" (Davis 2011). Despite the diversity of interpretations and definitions of ecomuseums among different academic sources, it is possible to identify similar characteristics and components that unite them.  Firstly, an ecomuseum represents a unique cultural phenomenon that exists in an open space rather than within traditional brick-and-mortar settings (Magliacani 2015). Ecomuseums aim to safeguard local "cultural authenticity" (Nitzky 2014), that

could be achieved by pursuing three foundational trajectories: *Community Symbiosis*, *Cultural Education,* and *Local Revitalisation*.

*Community Symbiosis* refers to the relationship observed between the organisation and community. Local communities and groups set up experimental museums to negotiate their representation by focusing not only on the preservation of material collections or heritage artefacts, but also on community practices which unite the local community and help its members to celebrate their history, traditions, and identity (Soares 2021, 445). Kazior (2018) argues that the ecomuseum is a vehicle for public participation in community planning and development. Communities can participate in ecomuseological practices if they can represent themselves and participate in heritage resources management, ownership, and decision-making, while contributing to urban regeneration, sustainable development, and responsible tourism (Ghorbanzadeh 2018). This shows that community symbiosis is one of the core foundations of an ecomuseum, as it focuses on the integration of relationships between the organisation and local publics and stakeholders.

In fact, ecomuseums can enhance knowledge of local resources and provide wider opportunities for increased social and territorial cohesion by making local communities more proactive in managing natural and cultural heritages through *Cultural Education* (Imperiale and Vanclay 2016). Isar (1985) describes the ecomuseum as a conservation centre, laboratory, and school. It contributes to the study of the past and present, preserves and develops the natural and cultural heritage of the population, and involves the community in studying for its own future. The prefix "eco" in the term "ecomuseum" emphasises environmentalism that allows an incorporation of a broader context for community heritage conservation and education (Davis 1999).

Finally, academic scholarship discusses Ecomuseums in terms of their contribution to *Local Revitalisation*. This can be defined as the cultivation of the environment for the local community by supporting nontraditional forms of local economic sustainability. Kazior (2018), argues that in its most extreme form, the ecomuseum includes everything within its territory, such as intangible local skills, behaviour patterns, social structure, and traditions, all of which could generate jobs and economic profit for communities. Ecomuseums share heritage resources and preserve community practices, enacting them for the generation of local income. By doing so, ecomuseums empower socially responsible business enterprises and aid sustainable economic and tourist development. Since most ecomuseums can be found in rural landscapes, one of the main purposes of ecomuseums is to cultivate opportunities for the locals to strengthen their local cultural ecosystem (Imperiale and Vinclay 2016).

Despite a large volume of research on the phenomenon, there is still not a universal ecomuseum model. Examples of the phenomena differ greatly from one another and vary from place to place in terms of organisational structure, funding, and inherited environment (Isar 1985). Ghorbanzadeh (2018) acknowledges that the definition of an ecomuseum is ambiguous, and that it is better to describe the function of an ecomuseum rather than what it is (1408). By exploring current museological forms in rural communities across Southeast Asia, this research proposes to bridge the gap and start a conversation on the possible forms and manifestations of ecomuseums that exist in rural communities across Southeast Asia. Considering the great cultural, linguistic, and artistic diversity of the region, the chapter presents three unique cases of "Museums without Walls," offering new models to conceptualise the phenomenon of ecomuseology and explore its potential in relation to emerging community practices and heritage preservation paradigms.

## Ecomuseum as Mobilisation

Ecomuseums have the capability to mobilise a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to encourage rural-urban participation and conversations based on local knowledge and practices (Belliggiano, Bindi, and Levoli 2021, 1). Located in the Nongpho district, Ratchaburi, Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture (BNCAC) is a convincing illustration of an ecomuseum that manifests itself in the mobilisation of dedicated places and social enterprises supporting local farming. Founded in 2011, BNCAC is dedicated to developing strategies for community development and cultural production for the local and global community (BNCAC 2022). Over the years, BNCAC has hosted several festivals, programmes, workshops, and residencies to cultivate culture and facilitate community development among the youth and elderly of the Nongpho area. It aims to explore possibilities for exchange, integration, and co-existence within the local and global community, and to build up community sustainability (Lumbung Gallery 2023). During its operation, the organisation has developed several important international connections. For example, in 2022, it brought Nongpho culture to Documenta-fifteen in Kassel, Germany, one of the biggest international art exhibitions in Europe (BNCAC 2023). BNCAC initiatives led to the promotion of sustainable economic development in the local community. By safeguarding intangible heritage such as dairy agriculture, as well as local and natural resources, the institution contributed to the development of socially responsible business enterprise practices.

For instance, BNCAC founded a non-profit social engagement initiative called 'NongpoKiDdee' (NKPD) or 'Baan Noorg - NPKD'. This initiative is a platform for projects that focus on the exchange of cultural and community knowledge in Nongpho. NKPD helps create sustainable practices and opportunities for dairy farming, the main industry in Nongpho.

The programme is a model of a small enterprise that serves as a knowledge hub, in which individuals can engage and take part in product development for the community and by the community (BNCAC 2022). This initiative by BNCAC is highly practical, as it contributes to the development and revitalisation of their neighbourhood, while promoting their intangible heritage locally and globally. For example, in 2022, BNCAC participated in Documenta Fifteen with their NKPD programme titled, "Churning Milk: the Rituals of Things." Bridging the social network of the next generation of dairy farmers in Nongpho from Charoen Raksa Farm, Lung Nuad Farm, Dee Kham Farm, and surrounding communities, this programme was also instrumental in exchanging the agricultural knowledge with farmers from Biolandhof and Chreibers Farms in Kassel.

Remarkably, this mobilisation of practices takes place without formal infrastructure. For example, BNCAC community members lack the government funding to construct a physical museum in their village. As a result, scholars and village elders have mobilised their own dedicated spaces, utilising public areas for museum activities (Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture 2023). For instance, CommuLab—a public space for meetings, exhibitions, and experimentation—is situated in a small lodge with a living room and bedroom. Opened in 2014, CommuLab emerged as a result of the community's need for a dedicated space for community development and experimentation. By opening this space to artists, researchers, and the public, BNCAC created a knowledge hub that encourages individuals to co-design and implement community projects. As a result, the social engagement of the Nongpho community has increased, allowing people to share their concerns, existing projects and tasks, and mobilise the neighbourhood for social and cultural development.

Rather than limiting itself to a small lodge, BNCAC brings its activities and initiatives to the public spaces through a mobilisation practice known as DAY OFF LABoratory or OFF LAB. This practice is a flagship post-studio and participatory practice of the Nongpho community, which is a site-specific "pop-up museum" or local workshop that gathers students, practitioners, and other community members to curate and create an exhibition of their choice. Stretching beyond community conversations and celebration practices happening in the streets, one of the most important outcomes of this programme is a dedicated exhibition happening at various public spaces such as the local community theatre, temples, schools, bus stops, and even a police station. According to BNCAC members, the "pop-up museum" initiative is one effective way of garnering and mobilising community education and symbiosis.

BNCAC is an interesting case of an ecomuseum that focuses on local revitalisation, as well as the active mobilisation and sharing of intangible heritage. As the town's main industry, dairy farming is fundamentally intertwined with Nongpho's cultural heritage resources, affecting people's daily practices, community activities, traditional lifestyles, local skills, and oral history. All this intangible heritage can be preserved only through shared human experiences and enterprise practices in dairy agriculture. The production of dairy has always been a livelihood for local farmers. However, preservation of this intangible heritage is not possible without locals who act as the main curators, preservers, and communicators of their heritage (Davis 1999). In the absence of a dedicated infrastructure, the ecomuseum—which works through the mobilisation of resources, spaces and people—facilitates a natural ecosystem where intangible heritage is not merely preserved but thrives and develops in community symbiosis.

**Figure 1.1:** DAY OFF LABoratory, Pop-Up Museum. Photograph by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, 2014. Ratchaburi, Nongpho, Thailand.

## Ecomuseum as Territory

Stevenson (1982) defines the ecomuseum as a "territory museum". It replaces the traditional museum building with the region itself, embracing its collective heritage as its key collection, and the local population as its primary audience. The ecomuseum's "sense of territory" is an inclusive phenomenon that goes far beyond just a building and instead focuses on ownership by the community. *Jatiwangi Art Factory* (JaF) is a fascinating example of an ecomuseum where its programmes are deeply rooted in land, culture, and tradition. Located in West Java, Majalengka, Indonesia, JaF is a community-based organisation that focuses on contextualising contemporary art and cultural practices with the local life in a rural area (Jatiwangi Art Factory 2018). A sub-district of Majalengka, Jatiwangi District is the largest producer of clay tiles and bricks in Indonesia. As such, the community depends on existing tile factories for its livelihood (Sugiarti 2021). JaF is an art and cultural organisation that seeks to develop creative products made of clay, not only for economic gain but also to develop and sustain Jatiwangi's artisanal traditions. Using

the term "Gotong Royong" (the spirit of working together and helping each other), JaF organises several cultural activities and programmes to gather the community and revitalise its surrounding lands.

For instance, JaF founded Ceramic Music Consortium to contribute to the research and development of music and ceramics made from local resources of Jatiwangi Clay. It has been more than a decade since JaF began its research on Jatiwangi tile-making traditions through its interactive and participatory engagement with the villagers. Jatiwangi residents are known as unique experts in production of roof tiles, combining traditional and modern methods of working with clay (Jatiwangi Art Factory 2018). One of the programmes that they frequently host is Rampak Genteng, the ritual of ringing the roof tile instruments together as a collective statement. Since 2012, Rampak Genteng has been performed as a triennial in Jatiwangi, starting with modest 1,000 participants in the very beginning but inviting more than 11,000 musicians in 2018 (Documenta fifteen 2022).

Rampak Genteng is a significant local ritual for the Jatiwangi community, helping people to sustain connections with their land. It manifests through a collective effort of creating a sense of belonging and enhancing a sense of place within the community. Every iteration of the festival garners a strong turnout. By championing local arts and creativity, the ritual improves the quality and vitality of the clayworking tradition, not to mention its economic benefits (Hoe 2019). In recognition of its cultural uniqueness and economic sustainability, the local government has named the Jatiwangi District "Terracotta City", which aims to increase local wisdom and regional economic development by preserving local cultural assets, such as the diversification of terracotta products for cultural recognition (Bunga Siagian 2023).

**Figure 1.2:** Gotong Rumah Ritual. Photograph by Jatiwangi Art Factory, 2017. Kampung Wates, Majalengka, West Java, Indonesia.

Ecomuseums usually symbolise their territory by integrating residents and visitors in the cultural landscape while animating specific tangible and intangible components of local heritage (Ghorbanzadeh 2018). In September 2018, JaF inaugurated the Land Culture Museum to preserve and celebrate cultural assets related to the land. The ultimate goal of every ecomuseum is to strengthen the "sense of place" and promote a positive and dynamic relationship between communities and their environment (Davis 1999). Indeed, the main purpose of the Land Culture Museum is not merely storing mementos, but creating the future through the practice of local rituals in the natural environment (Hasyim 2018). The Land Culture Museum manifests JaF's commitment to consolidating local inhabitants' tangible and intangible heritage for wider sharing and celebration, while also preserving traditions from the past. However, an ecomuseum's practices become genuine and meaningful only if they are performed by the local community, who should take true ownership and

control of heritage resources to create a strong sense of place (Davis 2005). For instance, the Land Culture Museum organises the annual commemoration ritual *Gotong Rumah (Wakare).* In the ritual, Kampung Wates villagers carry bamboo houses on slats over their shoulders and walk across the village with the Wakare procession behind them. The procession is preceded by theatrical action that depicts the Japanese colonial army expelling the natives from their farmland (Republika 2019). This traditional artistic ritual, telling the stories from the past, is a strong public statement and an affirmation of the Kampung Wates villagers that the land belongs to them (Bunga Siagian 2023).

Ecomuseums stress the importance of territory as a special place for people to co-create, share, and constantly reimagine their cultures and traditions (Borrelli and Davis 2012). The ecomuseum, albeit without a hard infrastructure, becomes an important agency that in Bourdieu's (1991) terms legitimises and reinforces the system of norms, beliefs, and values which shape the "habitus". In the context of the local Jatiwangi community, the ecomuseum indeed manifests itself in the celebration of land and environmental resources which strongly define how the community participates and contributes to their existing culture. The territory in Jatiwangi is not merely a geographical landscape. It is a complex whole that comprises a way of life, culture, occupation, and set of traditional customs. JaF is a manifestation of an ecomuseum that includes everything within its territory, such as intangible local skills, traditions, and local resources. JaF's contribution to the community has led to positive revitalisation of the land, cultivation of opportunities, and educational programmes.

## Ecomuseum as Home

The prefix "eco" in "ecomuseum" comes from the Greek word "oikos," meaning "household" (Odum and Barrett 2005). As

such, an ecomuseum is not limited to buildings and territories but primarily refers to key sites within designated landscapes (Davis 2005). A good example of an ecomuseum that could be understood as a community's "home" is Kon Len Khnhom (KLK) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. KLK is an independent space dedicated to the idea of a shared living room for the arts and culture in Phnom Penh. The organisation aims to connect individuals, share ideas, and cultivate artistic knowledge in the community (Kon Len Khnhom 2017). The building's two rooms are named Kon Len Khnhom, meaning "my place," and Dambaul, which means "rooftop." These two spaces differ in terms of functions and goals, but ultimately share the idea of a home.

KLK adopts a shared living room concept. This space offers a nurturing and welcoming hub for local residents to explore new forms of community building and to promote horizontal modes of information sharing (Hao 2018). The "shared living room" initiative has been receptive and welcoming to new people (Moeng 2018). It provides a dedicated space for the community to grow organically, without control or oversight from authorities. The "shared living room" concept not only welcomes anyone to enter the space but also encourages the community to open up to cultural education. For example, the local community in Phnom Penh takes pride in Cambodian architecture as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, one of the residencies facilitated by and housed in KLK includes programmes with Cambodian cultural architecture students who come as educators to share their architectural knowledge with members of the community.

Residing under the same roof as KLK, Dambaul is accessible to the community reading room. It is a dedicated community home for a valuable collection of Cambodian literature and archives. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, literature, libraries, and archives were destroyed in an attempt

to erase all vestiges of the past (Clayton 1998). Overcoming this historical turmoil, Dambaul places a strong emphasis on restoring and archiving all forms of Cambodia-related literature and valuable records.  One of the core functions of ecomuseums is to preserve and document the collective memory of the community by facilitating the direct participation of the local population (An and Gjestrum 1970). However, this is not possible without dedicated educational efforts. For example, several years ago, Dambaul organised an archival workshop where community members were invited to learn the importance of cultural documentation and preservation. This workshop offered an important learning step in the journey to a responsible and sustainable future of local cultural preservation, safeguarding collective memory and oral traditions told in the community's own language.

Another example of community education is Santhi, a small store within KLK that was opened to display the community's artwork, as well as organise "open-house" workshops and events that allow members to share and develop their craft skills. The essential defining factor of a community is the sense of belonging that comes to those who are part of it (Kavanagh 1990). Kon Len Khnhom and Dambaul demonstrate that a "shared living room" space indeed fosters and develops a sense of belonging among the local population. KLK's founder Meta Moeng emphasises that this community's cultural "home" operates on the belief of trust, with keys placed outside the door of the KLK for anyone to enter the space at any time during the day or night (Moeng 2023). In the interview, Meta Moeng stresses that she is committed to establishing an "invisible infrastructure" for the local community. She understands it in terms of the "open-house" concept, where there is full transparency between the community and the projects that are ongoing in Kon Len Khnhom and Dambaul.

Transparency and horizontal modes of knowledge sharing between an organisation and its community forge important links to assure the continuity of culture through a constant recreation of cultural habits and traditions (Stevenson 1982). KLK has provided a cultural home to its community, offering opportunities for locals to engage in valuable educational and preservational cultural practices. Based on immense trust and transparency, this ecomuseum offers a shared space that promotes a sense of belonging and preserves tangible and intangible heritage for the generations to come.

## Conclusion

Three case studies offered in the chapter appear as distinct manifestations of an ecomuseum in different communities in Southeast Asia. Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture illustrates the model of *Ecomuseum as Mobilisation*. Its programmes are shaped by community participation and mobilisation of public spaces and local practices. Jatiwangi Art Factory exemplifies *Ecomuseum* as a Territory model. The organisation is characterised by strong rootedness in the community land that helps sustain local cultures and traditions. Finally, Kon Lenn Khnhom represents the model of an *Ecomuseum as Home.* It builds upon a shared space that is open to the community as a safe and open cultural "home" to enjoy, learn, share, and preserve local cultural knowledge. While all these models are quite distinct, there are important similarities among these ecomuseums.

First, in all three cases, ecomuseums work to establish long-lasting, trustful, positive, and dynamic relationships with their local communities and environments, exemplifying the importance of *Community Symbiosis* as a foundational trait of the ecomuseum. Second, strengthening the sense of place and culture, all three ecomuseums thrive on high

community involvement to practise local traditions and cultural rituals, ranging from agricultural dairy production to mastering clay tiles and archival preservation. These practices help to generate economic activity and contribute to *Local Revitalisation.* Finally, interviews with local members in all three cases revealed that ecomuseums serve as role models for the local communities to generate self-sustainable cultural practices through *Cultural Education*.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that while ecomuseums share key characteristics across diverse communities and nations, these museums manifest their cultural influence in completely diverse forms and activities, each focusing on foundational tasks that make a special impact on to their local communities.This chapter only starts a conversation on ecomuseum models. More research across geographies would certainly bring more insight to how "Museums without Walls" evolve, transform, and establish required community infrastructures to sustain and celebrate cultural practices, in cases where traditional museology—with its vertical bureaucracy and resource-demanding structures— fail to provide sustainable avenues for heritage preservation.

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# Cultural Heritage and Digital Communications: Measuring Augmented Reality Experiences

## *Jordan Tham Jun Hui*

## Introduction

Contemporary museums aim to overcome the physical and environmental limitations of their exhibition experiences by virtualising and augmenting traditional visitor experiences (Trunfio et al. 2021). In the past decade, many museums have designed and implemented exciting, augmented reality (AR) projects through social media to engage with audiences online and prompt physical visits. As museums invest more time, employees, and resources into digital engagement, museum staff must design these new marketing experiences with an evaluation process in mind. The work and time museums spend on these programs must be meaningfully accounted for to ensure resources are used effectively and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are met (Adamovic 2013).

In the past years, academic scholarship in museum management has proposed general frameworks to measure the success of social media posts using Meta's engagement metrics such as the number of likes, shares and comments (Chung et al. 2014; Drotner and Schrøder 2017; Fletcher and Lee 2012; Romolini et al. 2020; Ryder et al. 2017). However, a one-size numeric measurement is unreliable, and the evaluation needs to go beyond numbers (Cantalapiedra 2016). Quantitative data could be helpful to indicate the impact of museums, but without understanding visitors' motivations, inspirations, and interests, it does not provide a deep insight into the audience engagement with museum contents (Gerrard, Sykora and Jackson 2017). Addressing

these complexities, this research aims to pursue two research goals. First, it explores qualitative dimensions for measuring the effectiveness of augmented reality filters on social media. Second, it questions whether Meta's numeric metrics are still relevant for museums. To answer these questions, the research proposes a new framework for museums and heritage institutions to measure the effectiveness of their AR filters. To develop the framework, it draws on open-ended interviews with marketing agencies and creative technologists in Singapore as well as a case study of the National Heritage Board's Instagram AR filter. To understand the importance and impact of AR in museums, these research interviews targeted professionals who work across AR technology, the arts, and digital communications.

The interviews were conducted with directors or CEOs of creative tech agencies in Singapore, who are known in the field as trend-setters and innovative developers or first adopters of digital technologies innovations. Interviewees include Kay Vasey, founder of MeshMinds; Timothi Lim, Creative Director of The Doodle People; Jake Tan, co-founder of SERIAL CO; Race Krehel, Creative Director of Metamo Industries; and several Singaporean AR artists who wished to remain anonymous. These interviews were particularly valuable in proposing a new framework for measuring the impact of AR experiences in museums. To test this newly developed framework, I collaborated with the National Heritage Board (NHB) in Singapore to apply it to their AR project on Instagram called "Escape Batik Shop", a digital experience aimed to educate the Singaporean public on Malay Heritage. In consultation with Nicholas Chen, Wang Shimeng, and Norfaiz Noeryamin from the NHB marketing team, I assessed the AR filter of the "Escape Batik Shop" project to explore its potential meaning and value to the museum audiences. Before the chapter proceeds to share these results, it is valuable to spend some time conceptualising the AR measurements.

## Measuring AR experiences

There are currently no holistic frameworks for museums to measure the effectiveness of augmented reality (AR) filters museums used for social media marketing. To develop one, we must explore across disciplines to piece together existing metrics and frameworks from digital communications, creative marketing, and museology scholarship. This section analyses the frameworks found in academia which measure the qualitative effectiveness of a museum's social media marketing or museum technology, as well as the effectiveness of augmented reality filters on social media. AR effectiveness has been measured in the context of how it can enhance the quality of the museum visit (Serravalle et al. 2019). Jung et al. (2016) measured the effectiveness of AR technology through the Social Presence Theory and the 4Es of The Experience Economy (Education, Esthetic, Entertainment and Escape). Different scholars also employed such measuring frameworks as the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO) Model (Ghouaiel et al. 2017; Foster et al. 2020), the MUSETECH Model (Damala et al. 2019), as well as the User Engagement Scale (Li et al. 2022). These frameworks take the common approach of measuring the learning outcomes of the user's experience, satisfaction, and level of immersion in order to test the effectiveness of an AR programme. These experience characteristics can be grouped across four main trajectories: *Education*, *Usability*, *Aesthetics,* and *Entertainment*.

Damala et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of *Education* in heritage and museum experiences. Their MUSETECH framework includes "Learning and edutainment" as factors for evaluation, which concerns how effectively a creative narrative engages visitors physically, intellectually, and emotionally and stimulates meaning-making processes. Building on this idea, Foster et al. (2020) argue that visitors to museums seek cultural experiences and informal education

to satisfy their general interests and curiosity. To measure the effectiveness of such visits in imparting new knowledge, the researchers adopt the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO) framework. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) incorporate an Education dimension in their Engagement Scale to assess how well museum AR or VR technology aids in the comprehension of new material.

Beyond educational experiences, the MUSETECH framework highlights the importance of *Usability*, which includes intuitiveness, learnability, responsiveness, and clarity of navigation to ensure a positive audience attitude towards AR filter content (Sukmawati 2022; Johnson 2022). This aligns with the Perceived Usability dimension of the Engagement Scale, which measures the level of user control over interactions. Similarly, the Convenience component of the AR filter measurement model by Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. (2022) assesses the ease and simplicity of using the filter, with the findings indicating that convenience is a significant determinant of user satisfaction and subsequent electronic word-of-mouth recommendations on social media.

The *Aesthetics* dimension appears frequently across various measurement frameworks, from MUSETECH to the User Engagement Scale and to The Social Theory + 4Es of the Economy Experience. According to Damala et al. (2019), aesthetics refers to the quality of the look and feel of digital images. Jung et al. (2016) adopt Pine & Gilmore's definition, which emphasises the visceral meaning of aesthetics in creating an immersive experience for visitors. In their work, Jung et al. (2016) measure the level of a user's immersion into the museum's augmented reality-enhanced real world. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) incorporate the aesthetic dimension of the User Engagement Scale by O'Brien to evaluate the attractiveness and visual appeal of various museum technologies, including interactive games, video instructions,

and 3D virtual exhibitions. The inclusion of aesthetics in these assessments is crucial as it plays an integral role in the design of digital museum experiences. The quality of graphics, user interface design, and the digitisation of artefacts can all impact the effectiveness of museum technology.

Finally, *Entertainment* is a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of AR filters. For instance, Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. (2022) utilise the Uses & Gratification + Playability Theory and the concept of playability to measure the satisfaction of AR filters. They argue that playability is influenced by entertainment, because consumers who find the product entertaining are more likely to feel satisfied. A possibility for entertainment creates a positive impression, so that consumers are more motivated to act on the brand's call to action (Dodoo and Youn 2021). In the MUSETECH framework (Damala et al. 2019) and the GLO model, there is an emphasis on learning, entertainment, and edutainment, with the notion that enjoyable activities or games can inspire creative thinking and offer an enjoyable experience. The User Engagement Scale includes a dimension of Felt Involvement, measuring the sense of being "drawn in" and having fun, while Jung et al.'s (2016) Measurement Model has an Education dimension that measures how much fun visitors are having with AR or VR technology in a museum. Indeed, a heightened sense of entertainment during a museum experience can lead to increased engagement and motivation to return to the museum. As such, visitor entertainment and enjoyment should be included in the assessment of museum technology.

Drawing on these four pillars in AR experiences, the chapter proceeds to enhance, deepen and elaborate existing AR measurement criteria by discussing them with professionals from the creative tech industry in Singapore. The next section contextualises these discussions to propose a new AR experience assessment framework for museums.

## Developing a New Framework

Focused conversations with creative tech companies in Singapore were illuminating in identifying and discussing several qualitative and quantitative criteria for measuring AR filter experiences in a museum context. In terms of the quantitative dimension, respondents stressed the importance of using numbers as a direct way to measure the success of AR filters. While quality does matter, only numbers can provide direct evidence for active audience usage. Quantitative metrics are also helpful to measure the achievement of specific organisational KPIs, especially if they are associated with a specific call-to-action. For example, the Creative Director of the Doodle People shared that they use such quantitative metrics such as the number of impressions, opens, and shares to justify the client's expenditure on AR marketing projects (Lim 2023).

The co-founder of SERIAL CO also indicated that numbers help prove that the client's budget was well spent. If, for instance, one seeks to increase brand awareness of an exhibition by 10%, a KPI set for the number of "opens" on Meta's SparkAR metrics is helpful for comparison and reporting. In the museum sector, numeric values can also help track statistics to report to relevant stakeholders and government bodies (Chen and Wang 2023). Using numbers is an efficient way to measure success, especially if complemented by qualitative metrics. Indeed, all respondents stressed the importance of four qualitative factors that should be evaluated to understand audience experience with AR filters in museum social media. Specifically, they identified *Message*, *Edutainment*, *Usability,* and *Aesthetics* as core factors that should be taken into consideration.

*Message* is an important dimension of AR experience, as the narrative of the filter determines whether a user understands the cultural experience and internalises the message. It can be defined as the intention of the filter, which could range from encouraging visitors to purchase tickets to spreading awareness about a cause or issue. For example, the founder of MeshMinds stresses that the design of AR filters could differ depending on the intended purpose. Environmental agencies might focus on behavioural change, while arts organisations could be more concerned with engaging audiences through a compelling narrative (Vasey 2022). The co-founder of SERIAL CO also emphasises the importance of storytelling in creating a sense of purpose and context for the user, which could help better understand the message behind the AR filter (Tan 2022). Indeed, a successful AR filter, according to the Creative Director of Metamo Industries, should convey the intended message in a concise and engaging way. This could be achieved through the use of a narrative or story that is carefully crafted to deliver the message (Krehel 2023).

Although Education and Entertainment are discussed in the academic scholarship as two separate dimensions, the interviews with the creative tech sector in Singapore proved the value of combining both into a single *Edutainment* factor. It could be understood as the ability of the filter's content to educate the users in a fun and interactive manner. The Senior Digital Manager of the National Heritage Board explained that the purpose of AR filters uploaded by cultural institutions on Instagram is to provide an enjoyable and engaging learning experience for users (Noeryamin 2023). The co-founder of SERIAL CO also pointed out that the primary goal of AR art experiences is education, complemented by entertainment (Tan 2022). The founder of MeshMinds seconded these points, stressing that for an AR filter to be engaging and educational, it must also be entertaining (Vasey 2022). Indeed, a

contemporary museumgoer demands an immersive, engaging, and interactive experience, which—in a museum industry with a strong focus on public education—translates to edutainment.

As stressed in the academic literature, *Usability was* also weighted quite highly by tech professionals in the assessment of the AR filter experiences. Usability refers to the intuitiveness of navigation when using the filter. This dimension measures the ease of interaction with the filter, which includes the clarity of instructions, responsiveness, and intuitiveness of the user interface. According to Tan (2022), a well-designed AR filter should provide clear instructions on how to interact with its content while considering the user's preferences and needs. The filter should also be responsive and provide real-time feedback to enhance the user experience. Krehel (2023) emphasised the importance of the filter's user interface (UI/UX), explaining that users should be able to use the filter easily and intuitively within seconds. The creative director of the Doodle People shared that they measure the qualitative aspect of AR filters primarily by focusing on UI/UX user experience goals, and conducting a lot of testing with the end users (Lim 2023).

Finally, *Aesthetics* proved to be an important factor that influences users' AR experiences among the respondents from the creative tech sector. Specifically, interviewees stressed that aesthetics is crucial for digital natives, who are concerned with the design of the AR environment and play a principal role in immersing the users into the narrative of the filter (Tan 2022). Krehel (2023) even associated aesthetics with the authenticity of the AR experience, which include both artistic integrity and attention to cultural nuances and details, especially when digitalising heritage artefacts. While aesthetics was only associated with the "look and feel" of the content in much of the academic scholarship (Spöhrer 2022), interviewees identified auditory aspects as well. For instance,

Lim (2023) pointed out that the audio quality plays a significant role in AR filter user experience, as it adds an additional layer of immersion and engagement and could be a powerful factor to enhance aesthetics. In this work, "aesthetic" refers to both the visual and auditory qualities of the AR content, which ensure artistic integrity and authentic cultural experience.

Based on these considerations, the research proposes a framework for AR Filter experience assessment in museums.
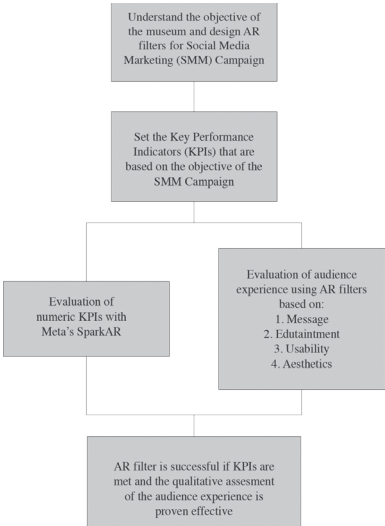


**Figure 2.1:** Framework for assessing AR filter experience in museums. Source: Created by the author.

Figure 2.1. indicates that the proposed framework incorporates both quantitative and qualitative criteria, including *Message, Edutainment, Usability,* and *Aesthetics*. In order to use the framework, a museum has to set its marketing objectives and determine specific KPIs that could be used to assess quantitative and qualitative aspects of AR filters. While numeric metrics are straightforward, the assessment of qualitative data requires scoring. This research employs the scoring method that follows the analytic approach and uses pre-set criteria and defined levels of performance in a matrix. The judgements on individual criteria and deriving marks can be guided by rubrics (Tomas et al. 2019). This method offers greater detail and better feedback on qualitative assessments of each criterion, allowing museums to identify specific points in AR design that require improvement in the future (Chowdhury 2018, Tomas et al. 2019).

Figure 2.2. presents a scoring table with four dimensions—*Message, Edutainment, Usability, and Aesthetics*—as key criteria for assessment, as well as three stages of marks allocation, ranging from poor (max score 4) to excellent (max score 10) with a detailed description of the rubrics on each mark. Scores of 19 and below suggest that the AR filter design is ineffective. Scores ranging from 20 to 29 point to a rather successful and effective AR filter, while scores above 29 suggest one that is very effective. While the scoring method of evaluating qualitative criteria is convenient, one problem remains: who should be the one to actually assess these highly subjective factors. Creative tech professionals stressed that the end users' input is required in these assessments.

| Dimension | 1-4<br>Poor | 5-7<br>Good | 8-10<br>Excellent | Score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Message**<br><br>Clarity of the intended message communicated by the filter. | The message communicated by the filter is unclear and weak. | The message communicated by the filter is moderately clear and average. | The message communicated by the filter is very clear and strong. | 8/10 |
| **Edutainment**<br><br>The filter's level of enjoyment, as well as its educational value in terms of imparting knowledge. | The filter is uninteresting and unpleasant, and it has little to no educational value. | The filter is moderately enjoyable, and it offers some educational value. | The filter is highly enjoyable, and it provides substantial educational value. | 6/10 |
| **Usability**<br><br>Ease of use and accessibility of the filter. | The filter is difficult to use. | The filter is somewhat easy to use. | The filter is very easy to use. | 6/10 |
| **Aesthetics**<br><br>Visual and sound and quality of the content (any digitized artworks, artefacts or environment) in the filter. | The design and audio quality of the filter's content are unappealing and poor. | The design and audio quality of the filter's content are somewhat appealing and average. | The design and audio quality of the filter's content are very appealing and excellent. | 6/10 |
| **Total Score** | | | | **26/40** |

**Figure 2.2:** The Scoring Rubric for the qualitative assessment of the AR content. Source: Created by the author.

For example, Lim (2023) explained that the user's comments are the best way to gauge the response of the filter. Museums can collect these data in a few different ways. They may choose to conduct focus groups before the release of the filter to the public. This corresponds to Tan's (2023) reasoning for collecting feedback to help make final tweaks to the filter. On the other hand, they may also conduct focus groups after the launch, as Vasey (2022) did for her latest project with Meta's ART Reimagined. Apart from focus groups, museums can collect data through surveys linked on their Instagram page or interviews with users through the messaging function. These interviews provide valuable information to inform the scoring model and provide valid data for museums to determine their success on its qualitative dimensions. While

collecting these data from audiences was beyond the scope of the present research, the next section offers a case study that tests the proposed measurement framework in collaboration with the National Heritage Board professionals.

### Escape Batik Shop: Evaluating AR experience of the National Heritage Board Filter

Established in 1993, the National Heritage Board (NHB) is a statutory board in Singapore that aims to promote and preserve the nation's cultural heritage. The board is responsible for the management of various heritage institutions, monuments, and sites, as well as the development of policies related to heritage conservation and promotion in Singapore. The NHB's primary role is to promote and preserve Singapore's heritage and culture by developing and implementing various initiatives and programs aimed at educating the public about Singapore's heritage and culture. These include exhibitions, guided tours, educational programmes, and digital programmes (NHB 2023). The "Escape Batik Shop" AR filter on NHB's Instagram account is a part of their digital programmes called DigiMuse (NHB 2023), an initiative by NHB to bring together artists, cultural practitioners, and technologists to engage with and present Singapore's culture and heritage in new ways. The ongoing series on Instagram, DigiMuse Kampong Glam, is aimed at educating the public on Malay culture and heritage (Chen and Wang 2023).

This AR filter on NHB's Instagram aims to facilitate "highly digestible and engaging" experiences to facilitate an easy entry to heritage education" (Chen and Wang 2023). NHB strives to make information about culture more accessible to the public by using social media. They aim to motivate Singaporeans to engage more with their local heritage and fulfil the mission of NHB, which is to preserve and celebrate

the local shared heritage. To measure the effectiveness of the National Heritage Board's (NHB) "Escape Batik Shop" AR filter on Instagram, I collaborated with Nicholas Chen and Shimen Wang from NHB's marketing department to apply the proposed measurement framework and to discuss its value for the heritage sector. Specifically, we explored how the evaluative criteria of *Message, Edutainment, Usability,* and *Aesthetics* could be used to better understand a user experience with their AR Batik filter. The following sections share more insights from these valuable conversations, which shed light on the considerations that arise when evaluating the AR filter experience in a museum context.

In terms of the clarity and effectiveness of the *Message,* the AR filter's title and environment design convey information about a specific cultural experience related to the Batik fabric. Its description informs audiences about the history of Batik fabric and how it relates to the Malay community in Singapore. For example, the filter has three different facts on Batik that describe its uses, history, and relationship with the indigenous ethnic group of Central Java. This information allows users to learn the beliefs and traditions inherent in this cultural expression (NHB 2023). It aligns well with the NHB's mission to promote intercultural understanding in Singapore. Thus, the message of the filter is clear and effective in conveying the exhibit's intended meaning.

The *Edutainment* quality of the AR filter appears to be quite contradictory. On one hand, the filter offers a rich educational experience about the history of Batik. For example, the filter teaches users what Batik is: "a traditional art form that involves using wax and dye to create intricate patterns on cloth" (NHB 2022). It showcases different types of Batik, which can be enriched with gold leaves and are used for special ceremonies (NHB 2022). These details about Batik

offer rich educational opportunities for audiences and immerse them in the Malay culture.

On the other hand, the filter does not augment these learning experiences with an entertainment component. An appealing gamification has to be based on the human-focused design instead of being merely function-focused (Lim 2023). The filter asks users to complete the game by merely following instructions, leaving no room for personal decision-making and creative autonomy. For example, the gameplay requires users to complete actions such as selecting the correct Batik fabric pattern indicated by a cluecard. They are limited to the actions and choices pre-set by the experience journey. As a result, the experience feels repetitive and lacks excitement or a sense of discovery. This imbalance between education and entertainment in the Batik AR filter raises the question of whether the *Edutainment* criterion in the framework makes sense for heritage institutions and museums. However, when asked about the value of the entertainment component in comparison to the educational one, NHB professionals confirmed that it is essential to avoid creating something that is overly educational but dull or something that is entertaining but lacking educational value. Only with this balance can NHB create impactful AR filters that reflect and advance its institutional mission (Noeryamin 2023). Relying on their own audience research findings, NHB came to the conclusion that the educational aspect is not enough to appeal to contemporary audiences. A successful AR filter should strike a balance between education and entertainment.

In terms of *Usability,* the AR filter is quite easy to navigate. Text instructions, prompts, gestures, colour feedback, and haptic feedback guide users through their Batik exploration journey. For example, the postcards have a glowing light to indicate that they should be interacted with. If a user clicks the wrong fabric, a red light and a vibration signal

that the choice was incorrect, and visual prompts appear to guide the user in the right direction. All clues are clear and simple. The instruction "*look around* and *tap* on the batiks matching their Javanese letters" uses simple verbs to signify the action required from the user (National Heritage Board 2022). While the overall user experience is straightforward and intuitive, the total experience lasts more than a minute. Filters on Instagram are usually experienced as recordings with a stipulated time of one minute before the recording stops. However, the game offered through the Batik filter is too lengthy to be completed within such a short window.

Furthermore, the clues on the wall that correspond to the Batik fabric are visually similar and as such confusing to decipher. As a result, matching the Batik pattern on the walls to specific fabric samples is a challenging and time-consuming exercise. After collecting all Batik stamps, the user is required to turn two knobs on the door to align the patterns. However, attempting to do it with one hand on the recording button while simultaneously turning the knobs in the game is a counterintuitive and awkward experience. Due to the length of time required to complete the game, a user might also need to use the filter more than once, which could turn off contemporary audiences with a very short attention span. NHB representatives agreed that *Usability* may have been overlooked in the design of the filter, while the *Message* and *Education* components were prioritised.  However, both Chen and Wang (2023) agreed that usability is an important factor in designing an AR experience that effectively engages and retains loyal visitors.

On the *Aesthetics* dimension, the AR filter offers a high-quality authentic experience with the Malay Batik. For example, the intricate Batik patterns are well-digitised. The graphics are of a high enough quality and resolution to visually transmit the reflective sheen observed on the surface of the

golden Batik. Moreover, the experience is enhanced with traditional Malay background music, enhancing users' cultural experience by connecting their senses to the Malay heritage. However, the environment design of the Batik Shop is not immersive enough to convince a user that they are escaping into a Batik Shop. The room in the shop has no windows, and the environment is not animated with characters—such as a shopkeeper—that could have enhanced the immersion experience. While the game's mission was to escape the Batik shop, a user ends up being transported into another room, which looks like a dilapidated storage room with black walls and a green overhead lamp. The environment design thus creates a disconnection with what the filter promises in its title and description. These discrepancies in design could be explained by the main focus of the filter, which prioritises the delivery of knowledge about Batik over presenting the environment in an authentic way. As part of the DigiMuse Kampong Glam exhibition, which focuses on Malay history and its cultural expressions (NHB 2023), the filter focuses not on the design of the Batik shop but on the Batik patterns and the historical details shared about it.

In conversations with Chen and Wang (2023) from the National Heritage Board, *Innovativeness* emerges as a new criterion to assess AR filter experience. It could be defined as the originality and suitability of the content as an AR filter. The NHB actively seeks out new narratives and unique use of AR filters to bring cultural experiences online (Noeryamin 2023). The AR artists who participated in the interviews for this research also believe that successful AR filters are those that "break new boundaries". Innovative approaches and solutions can help an AR filter stand out in the competitive media environment and generate buzz, which can help increase shareability and brand awareness and is highly favoured for digital marketing. Innovativeness also goes beyond originality, as Chen and Wang explain (2023). Although new narratives

may engage users, the narrative and content must be well integrated with the technological capability of Instagram. To assess innovativeness, one has to measure how unique the filter is in the media environment and whether the narrative could be designed as an AR filter experience in the first place, without compromising the key message.

In the application of this new criterion to the AR Batik filter, though, one could question whether the narrative of the filter is really suitable for Instagram. The interactive gameplay requires more than a minute to fully complete, and demands mental concentration to look for and match the right patterns. However, Chen and Wang (2023) from NHB disagree. They explained that the DigiMuse programme understands innovativeness in terms of a creator's ability to present culture on digital platforms in an original way. This experience should go beyond an online game; it should communicate the value of culture and heritage. Bringing together both things—heritage and digital innovation—is not easy.  The right content and technological originality might not necessarily result in the perfect "usability" that one might expect in the gaming experience, where market demands shape product delivery. Nevertheless, the AR filter created by the NHB is original and unique in the way it presents a game aimed at learning about the Malay culture. Compared to other museums and heritage institutions such as the MET Museum (Diamond and Lanier 2020) and Smithsonian Institution (Charr 2021), whose AR filters primarily allow users to place their collection items in new environments of their choice, the NHB's AR filter is more immersive and engaging. The gamification of the cultural experience allows the audience to learn about Batik in a fun and interactive way, making it more accessible and interesting to a wider range of users.

This case study demonstrates the high applicability of the proposed framework to the museum and heritage context. NHB marketing professionals agree that the framework has special value in their work, and that it could be useful to assess the performance of their AR filters in the future (Chen and Wang 2023). As museums try to follow social media trends and innovations in interactive AR and VR experiences, the chapter shares some valuable insights on how to comprehensively measure these new audience experiences against contemporary users' expectations.

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that qualitative assessment is essential in measuring the effectiveness of augmented reality (AR) filters for arts and culture engagement, and numeric metrics should go beyond likes, shares, and comments. The engagement numbers, such as opens, impressions, and shares, are useful for determining the return on investment and provide valuable statistics for reporting purposes. However, these numerical criteria measure only a few aspects of a user's experience with museums and heritage. This chapter proposes a new framework that enhances quantitative assessments with five qualitative dimensions: *Message, Edutainment, Usability*, *Aesthetics,* and *Innovativeness. Message* measures how well the narrative of the filter communicates its key vision and goals. *Edutainment* focuses on how well the narrative educates and simultaneously entertains. *Usability* assesses the ease of use of the AR filter. *Aesthetics* concerns the audio and visual quality of the environment and artefact design. Finally, *Innovativeness* measures the originality and suitability of the content as an AR filter.

By using this framework, museums, cultural institutions, and marketing agencies can better understand how their AR filters are engaging users and identify areas for improvement. For example, if an AR filter scores low in the *Message* dimension, a museum or cultural institution could recraft the main narrative to better communicate the bigger vision of the filter. Alternatively, if an AR filter scores low on *Aesthetics*, changes could be made to improve the quality of the audio and visual elements. In addition, the framework can help heritage institutions to better evaluate the effectiveness of their social media strategy to improve the design of AR filters.

Future research could explore ways to further enhance the dimensions for qualitative measurement. For instance, scholars might want to explore the use of natural language processing to analyse user feedback and comments as a supplement to the proposed dimensions. Additionally, research could investigate the role of emotion in user engagement with AR filters and how this can be incorporated into the qualitative assessment framework. Overall, the proposed framework provides a comprehensive approach for museums, cultural institutions, and marketing agencies to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their AR filters. As AR technology continues to evolve, the framework can serve as a valuable tool for ongoing evaluation and improvement of AR filters for arts and culture engagement.

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# Singapore Museums Experimenting with and Questioning Google Arts & Culture

*Kenix Tan Hui Min*

## Introduction

In recent years, museums worldwide have embraced the use of innovative technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) to expand their reach beyond their physical spaces and host events virtually (Giannini and Bowen 2018). This has become even more crucial with the ongoing impact of COVID-19, which has forced museums to reimagine their engagement strategies due to the imposed restrictions on physical spaces and social distancing requirements. Digital placemaking has emerged as a new strategic task for museums to engage audiences in public space around their heritage sites and institutional facilities, by using innovative digital technologies to create a sense of place and contextualise their creative offerings. The integration of AR and VR technologies in digital placemaking activities has recently got traction among museums around the world as a unique and immersive way for local and international audiences to experience museums, their collections and sites (Basaraba 2021). By leveraging these innovative technologies, museums can engage with audiences in ways that were not previously possible, offering a whole new level of interactivity and accessibility.

Google Arts & Culture (GAC), formerly Google Arts Project, is an excellent example of such technology integration. The largest free online platform in the world, GAC brings together collections and resources from 2000 cultural institutes in 80 countries, covering all continents

except Antarctica (Google LLC 2023). It enables museums to showcase their cultural heritage using street view technology and make it digitally accessible to anyone, anywhere (Wani, Ali, and Ganaie 2019). This platform has become a significant driver of digital placemaking, enabling the public not only to explore any museum worldwide for free virtually but also visit different heritage sites and explore urban cultural landscapes. As such, museums have expanded their reach and created new opportunities for visitors to engage with cultural artefacts, exhibits, and events regardless of location. By leveraging technology in this way, museums can offer an immersive and accessible audience experience that transcends traditional boundaries and enhances engagement with cultural heritage. Overall, the use of AR, VR, and other digital technologies in the museum space is a growing trend that offers tremendous potential for enhancing engagement with cultural heritage.

This chapter analyses the digital curation process behind GAC, focusing on three local institutions: National Gallery Singapore (NGS), National Heritage Board (NHB), and Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LCKNHM). The chapter also examines the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore to better understand its city branding and digital placemaking strategies. The research explores the limitations of GAC for a shared understanding of how one can better navigate the platform to their advantage. It also aims to investigate how museums in Singapore utilise GAC, discussing the implications of these usages from the perspectives of city branding, museum branding, and user experience. Lastly, while focusing on their usage of GAC or other digital placemaking interventions from 2019 to 2022, this research employs a qualitative approach by conducting a purposeful cross-case analysis across the only three institutions in Singapore who are currently on GAC: NGS, NHB and LCKNHM.

All three institutions joined GAC while actively using other digital placemaking strategies. However, they differ in their roles and place in the Singapore arts and heritage ecosystem. NGS positions itself as a progressive art museum that fosters a thoughtful, creative, and inclusive society (NGS 2023). It aspires to create dialogues between local and international art by providing memorable experiences through its collections and programming (NGS 2023). NHB is a government organisation that promotes pride in Singapore's past, safeguards its cultural heritage, and creates a sense of community among Singaporeans (Government of Singapore 2023). LCKNHM stands out in the group of three, as it mainly focuses on Southeast Asian biodiversity, nurturing public interest in environmental issues, encouraging scientific research, and maintaining a natural heritage knowledge base for Singaporeans (NUS 2022a).

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with museum professionals from all four organisations, the exploration of the cases focuses on the experiences, possibilities and limitations of using GAC and other strategies for digital placemaking, city branding, museum branding, and enhancing user experiences. The interviews were mostly conducted with upper management staff from all organisations with the most relevant experience to discuss the institution's engagement with GAC. These include Dr. Kevin Lim, Acting Director for Research & Development, Innovation & Technology at the National Gallery Singapore; Mr. Martyn E. Y. Low, Research Associate (Biodiversity Histories and SIGNIFY: A Digital Archive of Singapore's Historical Biodiversity) from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum; Mr. Norfaiz Noeryamin, Senior Manager (Digital), Strategic Communications & Digital at the National Heritage Board; and Mr. Colin Lauw, Senior Manager (Strategic Communications & Outreach Group) at the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

This research aims to investigate the potential impact of GAC on digital placemaking in Singapore museums. Specifically, the study examines whether sharing resources on GAC enables museums to contribute to digital placemaking and how this contribution can be measured. In addition, the project seeks to assess whether GAC is a viable tool for museums to enhance their online brand and increase their global visibility. Finally, the research reveals whether and how these institutions leverage GAC to improve their online audience experiences. This chapter first conceptualises digital placemaking, discussing its three functions in relation to museums and their digital efforts to engage with a wide and diverse audience. Then, it shares insights on the stipulated research questions, derived from a comparative case study analysis of the four institutions studied.

## Digital Placemaking

Digital placemaking is an emerging field that uses immersive technologies to create a sense of place and remotely enhance human understanding of environmental surroundings. Considering the nature of this research and its focus on GAC and its role in museums in Singapore, this section discusses digital placemaking in terms of three functions that it performs to enhance museums' connectivity with their local and international audiences. They include *City Branding*, *Museum Branding,* and *User Experience*.

*City Branding* is a strategic technique urban planners employ to project a positive and distinct image of their location (Chan et al. 2021). This approach integrates images and meanings associated with a city, and influences people's beliefs, thoughts, and impressions of a particular place (Castillo-Villar 2018). By emphasising a location's cultural, historical, and social distinctiveness, city branding becomes an urban economic strategy for promoting tourism (Kavaratzis

2004; Castillo-Villar 2018; Chan, Suryadipura, and Kostini 2021). Well-executed city branding activities can contribute to sustainability (Castillo-Villar 2018; Lestari, Dali, and Che-Ha 2022). Due to technological advancements, creative placemaking is a city branding technique that has evolved into digital placemaking. The imposed constraints resulting from the pandemic have driven new and improved branding techniques for museums to remain less reliant on tourism while reaching a broader audience (Lestari, Dali, and Che-Ha 2022). As museums are naturally located in the urban environment and serve as important cultural symbols of the cities they inhabit, city branding is an inescapable component of digital placemaking performed by a museum's PR, marketing, and audience development activities.

    *Museum Branding* focuses on practical and emotional factors that influence visitors' perceptions of the institution and extends beyond the scope of cities. The four dimensions of museum branding are museum assets or resources, audiences, creative force, and symbols, which include the museum's name, physical premises, exhibition spaces, and cultural and professional networks (Pusa and Uusitalo 2013). To achieve positive branding, museums must create a special value for their audiences across all these dimensions to secure vital resources for sustainability and expansion (Pascoal, Tallone and Furtado 2019). GAC, a free platform, could significantly contribute to museum branding online, especially for institutions who lack resources of their own to conduct large-scale promotional campaigns. For instance, GAC offers a virtual experience that allows people to freely tour institutions worldwide from the comfort of their homes. These museums are thus able to enter the global information landscape, increasing their institutional recognition among their audiences (Pascoal, Tallone, and Furtado 2019; Wani, Ali, and Ganaie 2019). Furthermore, Wani, Ali, and Ganaie (2019) stress that maintaining art and culture through GAC contributes to the

long-term viability of artworks, while raising cultural awareness through the dissemination of cultural heritage information. Finally, GAC raises the international visibility of museums by offering easy access to information (Pascoal, Tallone and Furtado 2019).

The emotional components that shape visitors' impressions of institutions extends beyond museum branding and into *User Experience* (Battarbee and Kokskinen 2005). This refers to an individual consumer's response to a product or service (Allam, Hussin and Dahlan 2013). Factors such as user expectations, the location of the engagement, and the product or service's capacity to meet the user's current needs all contribute to the overall experience. In a museum context, the pragmatic approach—in which cognition and emotions impact a visitor's involvement—is strongly related to how museums develop user experience methods (Battarbee and Kokskinen 2005). Furthermore, the term "co-experience," which refers to the process by which people build meaning, exchange talks, or share experiences, has been added to the equation, opening up endless possibilities (Battarbee and Kokskinen 2005). Co-experience can foster a greater engagement and knowledge of cultural heritage by encouraging increased interaction between visitors and museum exhibits. Therefore, applying the pragmatic technique and co-experience can improve user experience and lead to a more meaningful engagement with the museum's displays or even with other visitors.

As a museum transitions from a collection-centred to a user-centred institution, it becomes a meaningful shared spaces for local and international communities (Giannini and Bowen 2018; Povroznik 2020; Basaraba 2021; Giannini and Bowen 2022; Degen and Ward 2022). This user-centeredness motivates audiences to further explore museums through their emotional engagements with the museum's offerings

(Tsichritzis and Gibbs 1991; Wilken et al. 2020; Degen and Ward 2022; Giannini and Bowen 2022). Furthermore, the virtual environment allows people worldwide to build meaningful connections with the museum or other visitors, regardless of where they are located (Giannini and Bowen 2018). For example, GAC's visitors can curate a customised artwork collection using a Google account to combine their favourite artworks from different galleries around the world (Pascoal, Tallone, and Furtado 2019). Furthermore, they can zoom into a piece of artwork to view its finer details. This can convey additional information about the physical qualities or history of an artefact (Pascoal, Tallone, and Furtado 2019). These positive user experiences contribute to both museum and city branding.

As this section illustrates, digital placemaking is an innovative field that capitalises on digital technologies to develop a sense of place and deepen a visitor's comprehension of the environment. However, the significance of effective placemaking in a museum and heritage context must be balanced across three foundational components: *City Branding, Museum Branding,* and *User Experience*. There are many instances where GAC is widely praised as a platform that promotes digital placemaking by granting a global audience access to cultural assets. This chapter examines these claims, investigating GAC's limitations and actual potential to offer museums a meaningful platform to engage their users, enhance their institutional brands, and contribute to city branding. The next sections offer insights from the comparative case studies, exploring how GAC could help museums in Singapore to perform these three key tasks.

## Singapore Branding: URA vs GAC

Singapore is a young city-state that is significantly limited in its space and natural resources. City branding is therefore

a significant task for the state, directly affecting its political position and economic performance both in Southeast Asia and globally. Therefore, the small city-state has invested heavily in building a robust infrastructure, to promote its brand and to leverage digital interventions to expand its recognition and visibility in global media environments.

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore is a government body responsible for urban design and management. It aims to create a vibrant city for residents, workers, and visitors (URA 2023). The Singapore City Gallery is a prime example of URA's efforts to showcase Singapore's transformation into one of the most liveable cities in Asia over the past 50 years (URA 2023). The museum's interactive and immersive exhibits attract up to 150,000 visitors yearly, who come on site to learn about the city's planning challenges and the innovative solutions implemented to meet them (URA 2023). More than 11,000 followers on Instagram and 39,000 followers on Facebook consume the City Gallery's creative content, which showcases Singapore history, current developments, and constant urban innovations. According to Mr. Colin Lauw, Senior Manager at the URA, the majority of these online and onsite visitors to the Singapore City Gallery are foreigners, underscoring the success of this global branding strategy. Lauw adds that in each successive revamp of the Singapore City Gallery, the URA has consistently incorporated more technical aspects to enhance visitor experience and showcase Singapore's urban transformation over the past 50 years. The URA is currently exploring opportunities to create a digital twin of the city for the upcoming revamp, expanding the city branding into metaverse environments (Lauw 2023).

Simultaneously, the URA recognises the importance of incorporating digital elements into the physical space of its City Gallery with a user-centric approach (Lauw 2023).

To achieve this, it collaborates with institutions such as the National University of Singapore to maximise local resources and expertise. These collaborations reflect URA's commitment to promote Singapore's urban heritage and history while leveraging digital technologies. In the past few years, the URA has made significant investments in the development of their City Gallery's exhibition, amounting to $4.6 million at an estimated cost of $4,000 per square metre. Up to $200,000 is spent on maintaining the gallery each year, with adjustments made for manpower and venue imputed cost (Lauw 2023). These expenditures demonstrate URA's commitment to developing and maintaining a successful city branding strategy.

This approach to leveraging local resources and infrastructure—including the Singapore City Gallery and other interactive exhibits—to promote urban heritage and culture demonstrates that Singapore relies predominantly on its own expertise and authority to execute city branding, which proves to be quite successful. For example, Singapore recorded its highest ever number of visitor arrivals— 19.12 million—in 2019 (GoS 2022). Since the nation's borders reopened in 2022, the first year after the global pandemic crisis, Singapore has already received more than six million international visitors (GoS 2022). The robustness and resourcefulness of the URA's digital interventions suggest that activities performed by museums on GAC might only have a marginal effect on Singapore city branding.

Indeed, the conversations with senior managers from three museums in Singapore illuminate that none of the institutions actually make use of GAC to contribute to city branding efforts. The LCKNHM's representative mentioned that GAC could be a valuable tool for providing an overview of Singapore's diverse museums, as the platform allows visitors to easily hop from one virtual space to another (Low

2023). However, only three museums in Singapore among 200 are on GAC. According to NHB representative Mr. Norfaiz Noeryamin, the institution prefers to collaborate with other government agencies to promote Singapore's cultural heritage to the outside world (Noeryamin 2023). It partners with the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to provide content for tourist promotional materials, and collaborate with the URA and the National Parks Board (NParks) to enhance the accessibility of NHB's resources online and on site (Noeryamin 2023). NHB's commitment to engaging with various stakeholders reflects its dedication to promoting Singapore's cultural heritage in a broader context, and its emphasis on collaborative efforts to preserve and promote cultural heritage.

Dr. Kevin Lim, the representative from NGS, also takes a sceptical view on the potential contribution of GAC to museum activities. Lim recognises the popularity of Google Maps as a tool for individuals to navigate and explore the world. NGS has been visible on Google Maps and GAC to showcase its example artworks to potential visitors (Lim 2023). Lim likens this approach to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) tactics, as it relies on users' curiosity to motivate them to visit the physical space. While NGS has considered offering online festival editions, the gallery met significant challenges and limitations in providing a full experience through a virtual platform. To date, livestreaming of events has been the closest NGS has come to replicating a physical experience online (Lim 2023). However, Lim remains uncertain as to the feasibility of fully replicating such an experience online, as it would require considerable effort and energy and might not match the quality of the real experience. Overall, NGS recognises the importance of utilising digital platforms to enhance the visibility and accessibility of their institution, while also acknowledging the limitations of online platforms to fully replicate the experience of visiting a physical space.

The case studies of Singapore's city branding strategies through digital interventions demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for promoting cultural heritage. While GAC could offer a free platform for cities to share their museums, heritage sites and cultural resources for global consumption, this platform may not appeal to every city. Singapore's success in leveraging its infrastructure and digital interventions through agencies like URA and NHB demonstrates the importance of institutional collaborations, and the effective use of local resources and expertise to promote cultural heritage to regional and international audiences.

## Museum Branding: Facing GAC Limitations

What is a museum brand and how one could describe its value to targeted audiences? Conversations with representatives from Singapore museums reveal that each understands its value in different ways and measures their brand visibility by different factors.

For example, Mr. Martyn Low, Research Associate with LKCNHM, strongly emphasised the museum's status as a research institute, making it essential for them to maintain a high impact factor (Low 2023). However, the museum's latest annual report also demonstrates that the "impact factor" covers not only the quality of their publications, research, and collections as important components of the museum brand but extends to audience outreach and education (NUS 2022b). NHB prides itself as the custodian of Singapore's national collections. However, its success is contingent upon the institutional ability to bring people together to contribute to their exhibitions (Noeryamin 2023). NHB Senior Manager Mr. Noeryamin pointed out that the museum frequently engages Singaporeans on social media platforms through open calls to share public memories. This collaborative approach not only allows NHB to create exhibits that reflect Singapore's living heritage, but helps it retain a high visibility among their

target audience (Noeryamin 2023). NGS measures its success through high visitorship and media mentions from prominent art press and media venues (Lim 2023). A comparison of the annual reports from recent years shows that the NGS has recently shifted its focus in response to changing pandemic conditions. The 2019/2020 annual report highlights brand awareness and on-site visitors as critical components of the museum overall strategy (National Gallery Singapore 2020). However, the 2020/2021 report already reflects the institution's increasing focus on digital engagement, including more digitised aspects such as online visitation (NGS 2022).

Interestingly, when asked about museum branding strategies, none of the respondents mentioned or recollected their institutional presence on GAC. When prompted to reflect on a potential contribution of the GAC platform to their museum branding efforts, interviewees pointed out numerous limitations of the platform to help with a successful branding. For example, while LCKNHM representative Dr. Low views GAC as an excellent way to present information to the global public, he also acknowledges that GAC requires significant time to manage, research, and curate information. Many museums cannot afford to dedicate personnel or resources to the platform. Moreover, the image selection process can be lengthy, and the platform requires specific formatting that may limit the room for personalisation (Low 2023). Sceptical about the platform's ability to draw people into their spaces, Low shared that his institution is now prioritising their own website and social media platforms, in order to disseminate research information and engage with targeted audiences (Low 2023).

Similarly, NHB representative Mr. Noeryamin pointed out that his agency stopped using GAC in 2018 and has instead invested in curating its resource portal, Roots.gov. sg. This shift was partly due to the museum's concern that it was driving its audiences to a Google product rather than its existing resources. Moreover, NHB does not consider GAC as the platform of mass adoption, particularly among audiences who don't belong to the arts and culture sector and efforts of managing GAC are not worth their investments (Noeryamin

2023). For example, in 2022 the museum received only 5,000 views on GAC, while its resource portal generated more than 400,000 views, which shows a vast difference between the two platforms (Noeryamin 2023). Furthermore, museums shared that Google treats GAC as its own curated showcase, which means there is a limit in institutional control over their content, confining their ability to stand out and pursue their unique brand narrative. For instance, the standard formatting on GAC does not allow LCKNHM to italicise the scientific names of animals and plants, compromising the content's authenticity (Low 2023). While GAC provides a unique approach to presenting arts and culture content, LCKNHM believes museums should re-evaluate their priorities before adopting GAC as part of their strategy. NGS shares the same sentiment by stressing that GAC is Google's curated showcase which does not allow museums freely augment their own brand narrative. As a result, "the platform is not as free as, for example, YouTube, and is actually not very inclusive" (Lim 2023).

This suggests that museums in Singapore do not see GAC as a platform that can help with branding strategies to target their desired audiences. The platform's key limitations include the time-consuming process of collections' digitisation, curation, and management on GAC, as well as limited institutional control over the platform's standardised online presentation practices. Concerned about leading their audiences away from their own collections and online resources, Singapore museums prefer to maintain full control over their value and identity presentation. Museums therefore place a higher value on maintaining and promoting their own institutional websites and managing their presence on social media.

## User Experience on GAC

While GAC may provide a platform for museums worldwide to showcase their cultural assets and make heritage digitally available, the standard format of GAC does not allow

institutions to stand out, decreasing their appeal towards their target audience. Interviews with three museums' representatives proved that similarly to museum branding, each of the institutions put different priorities on how they envision an ideal user experience engaging with their digital resources. As a result, all of them indicated that GAC might provide very limited opportunities to deliver enjoyable and meaningful user experiences that align with their institutional vision and goals.

For example, NHB stresses the value of engaging and personalised visitor experience that caters to its audience's interests (Noeryamin 2023). The institution incorporates play in its content curation, evident through Roots.gov.sg, allowing visitors to embark on two different routes, examining and exploring (Noeryamin 2023). Furthermore, NHB favours the participatory component of a user experience. That is why they frequently do open calls to collect stories and memories from the public relating to Singapore places. NHB sees this user experience as empowering and enriching because it provides visitors with opportunities for collaboration and sharing (Noeryamin 2023). Moreover, NHB tries to combine digital and physical resources through its self-guided heritage trail (Noeryamin 2023). Participants can physically explore the space while obtaining information from the website (Noeryamin 2023). In addition, another play element is the Heritage Hunter game, a form of heritage gamification that encourages users to explore the website in a fun way (Noeryamin 2023).

NGS approaches visitor experience in a more holistic way and makes a special stress on a hybrid approach to engage visitors as they view digital placemaking as a value add-on. They invest a lot of effort in conducting focus groups with their online and on-site visitors and do observational studies to gather valuable feedback to champion a successful visitor experience (Lim 2023). For instance, in the NGS

different departments cater to different audiences and often approach the technology team to help execute digital interventions to enhance the visitor experience (Lim 2023). In the past NGS, the Research & Development, Innovation & Technology Department facilitated several important digital interventions, including using technology to improve visitor experiences in physical spaces. For example, NGS introduced Temi, a robot tour guide, in the museum to offer onsite visitors a unique engaging and interactive exploration of their exhibitions and collections (Lim 2023). Similar to NHB, NGS also incorporates gamification to enhance user experience. One of the illustrations is gamifying its famous Light to Night festival, where digital technology is viewed only as a facilitator of what is going on the ground in the real physical environment (Lim 2023).

It appears that, among three museums, only LKCNHM has recognized some value of using GAC for improving their user experience. First, LKCNHM representative Mr. Martyn Low pointed out that Google's street view technology is still among the most powerful ones to allow audiences to experience a museum and urban environment especially when visitors do not have an opportunity to visit Singapore (2023). Second, Low identified the original way of employing GAC as a supplementary resource to archive their old exhibitions on the platform, while utilising their own website for promoting ongoing and new shows and events. For instance, Low expressed concerns that exhibiting museum collections on GAC could decrease physical attendance, as audiences may feel that viewing the displays online is sufficient (2023). Hence, archiving old resources on GAC does not seem to be threatening to the ability of museums to drive onsite visitation. Instead, GAC is used as a free platform to store the museum history that can introduce larger audiences to their activities and exhibitions from the past, inciting curiosity and a potential interest to visit the museum. Despite these implications, Low

still pointed out that he views GAC only as a supplement to enrich the visitor experience rather than a primary tool (2023).

GAC is known worldwide for its high-resolution gigapixel photo-capturing technology and Google's Street View technology, allowing users to explore museums virtually and zoom into famous paintings up-close. However, as this section demonstrates, all museums in Singapore seem to prioritise gamification, cultural participation, and a hybrid (online-onsite) mode of engagement that they believe offers a unique visitor experience. Furthermore, all museums, guided by their own institutional visions and missions, see personalised user experiences in their own way, which requires purposeful and targeted interventions to cater to their targeted audiences' expectations and demands. GAC, with its standardised approaches to users' experience, has significant limitations, including in its functions and accessibility, which may not align well with the museums' goals.

## Conclusion

The case studies in the chapter demonstrate that GAC is not a vital platform for digital placemaking among Singapore museums, across the three foundational components of *City Branding, Museum Branding,* and *User Experience*. The success of URA's city branding strategies in Singapore points to GAC's low potential to contribute to existing efforts. While GAC offers a free platform to share heritage knowledge and resources, Singapore museums rely on their own institutional collaborations and targeted interventions to promote the city's urban attractiveness and achieve global visibility. Moreover, these museums prefer to maintain control of their own brand identity through their websites and social media presence. GAC's standardised online presentation practices do not align well with local museums' approaches to maximising audience participation and personalisation of user experience.

While the literature has stressed GAC's high potential for digital placemaking, the chapter highlights its limitations in the context of Singapore museums. These insights can help museums make important institutional decisions regarding collaborations with global media platforms, like Google, to share their own digital heritage resources and populate the platforms' content with their own narratives and imagery. These findings could suggest some avenues for museums to better navigate the digital landscape, tailor their approach, leverage unique resources and expertise, and engage with their targeted audiences.

Future research could explore several avenues related to digital placemaking and its potential for promoting cultural heritage beyond Singapore. One such avenue could be the investigation of emerging technologies, such as AR and VR, and their potential for enhancing digital placemaking initiatives. Further research could explore the role of user-generated content and social media in shaping place identity and fostering community engagement. Another fascinating area for investigation is the evaluation of digital placemaking interventions, including developing metrics and indicators to assess their success or failure. It could involve exploring the effectiveness of different types of digital placemaking initiatives in promoting cultural heritage and identifying the factors that contribute to their development. Finally, scholars could also explore the ethical and social implications of digital placemaking, particularly concerning power, access, and inclusivity. For example, it could involve examining who has the power to shape the narrative of a place through digital interventions, and how various groups may have differential access to these interventions. By exploring these and other questions, future research can continue to advance our understanding of the potential of digital placemaking to promote cultural heritage and shape our collective understanding of place.

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# Value Creation in Animated Films: Disney Cultural Storytelling

## *Eunice Goh Yee Yu*

### Introduction

The Walt Disney Company (Disney) has long been renowned for its engaging characters and storytelling, which have successfully transcended cultural barriers and resonated with diverse audiences across the globe. The massive popularity of Disney's characters and storytelling has also led to a loyal fan base that drives sales across Disney's various businesses (Carvalho 2021). The businesses that derive their appeal from the Disney characters and storytelling capabilities include film, television, theme parks, streaming services, and consumer products (Lyu, Han, and Zheng 201). As the company's greatest assets, Disney has been continuing to develop characters and storytelling that are relevant and appealing for its diverse audiences (Carvalho 2021). However, as the concept of diversity and inclusion has gained prominence in recent years, the demand for and sensitivity toward accurate and inclusive cultural content has also risen.

Disney's Animated Cultural Representative (ACR) films portray real-life culture as the narrative's background. They are a revealing case study through which to examine Disney's response to heightened cultural sensitivities. For example, films such as *Coco* (2017) have been praised for their respectful and authentic portrayal of different cultures while also achieving commercial success (Du 2018; Edwards 2020). Compared to earlier days, more initiatives have been established by Disney to ensure accurate cultural

representations in their animated films storytelling (Carvalho 2021). These efforts are explored in this paper, covering Disney's internal resources, globalisation of cultural stories, and content localisation via its streaming services. The various initiatives have enabled Disney to make films that are both culturally accurate and globally relevant. With ACR films released from 2017 to 2022 as case studies, this paper has identified the strategic activities Disney used to ensure accurate cultural representations on-screen.

The purpose of this paper is to identify Disney's strategies to achieve the balancing act of cultural and economic value in its ACR films. The research outcome will be to develop a framework that captures the balancing act between cultural accuracy and commercial appeal. The proposed framework aims to help optimise the value creation process for media organisations. The model further draws boundaries between internal production and external distribution activities, giving readers a clearer view into the links between these strategic activities. This chapter uses a multiple-case study design to examine Disney's strategies to balance cultural accuracy and commercial appeal behind Animated Cultural Representative (ACR) films. The author selects case studies of ACR films released from 2017 to 2022, which are inspired by and portray a specific culture that exists in real life. The author identifies common patterns across these case studies to analyse and understand the key strategies behind ACR films. The data collection for this study involves primary resources, including interviews with current and former employees of the Walt Disney Company based in Singapore or Florida, United States, primarily involved in delivering Disney's film and television content. The author conducts semi-structured interviews with Tao Huang, a current project manager in Disney Future APAC Storyteller (FAST) Programme; Carlene Tan, former Senior Manager of Animation Development department at The Walt Disney Company; and

Raul Garcia, a former animator based at Disney Florida, to gain personal insights on how Disney handles culture in their respective roles.

Drawing on these insights the chapter unpacks cultural representation strategies in value creation in Disney. The research findings presented in this chapter are organised into three sections: the *Workforces*, *Storytelling*, and *Streaming Channels*. The three segments illustrate how Disney creates cultural and economic value in its ACR films. The research findings are valuable for media organisations to optimise their business models by satisfying the public's growing demand for diversity and representation. By identifying Disney's strategies for creating value for both consumers and the firm, this study provides insights into the successful development of culturally inclusive content that can resonate with diverse audiences worldwide. Before sharing these findings, the chapter proceeds with a conceptual framework to deconstruct and analyse the process of value creation.

## Cultural Representation in Value Creation

Value creation is the process of generating value for consumers through the delivery of products or services that meet their needs and preferences. Looking at Disney's ACR (Animated Cultural Representation) films, cultural value is created through the fulfilment of consumers' symbolic needs. Symbolic needs refer to the social needs that global consumers have for their identity, belonging, and self-expression (Smith and Colgate 2007). In Disney's ACR films, cultural value is created in various ways such as the building of emotional connections, a sense of identity, and cross-cultural understanding through storytelling. Building a sense of identity is important for consumers to connect with the brand and feel validated in their experiences, values, and beliefs.

For individuals of marginalised communities, Disney's ACR films can play a significant role in helping them develop a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their cultural identity. With accurate and respectful representation of cultural elements, audiences can gain a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities of different cultures and develop a greater appreciation for diversity. By addressing the symbolic needs of consumers, Disney has built a loyal fan base by creating cultural value for its global consumers that goes beyond mere entertainment.

Film is "a mirror of culture" that has the ability to both reflect and shape cultural values and perspectives (John 2017). To define "culture", scholars explain it as "a set of meaningful social behaviours" or "customs" that characterises a group or society (Hall 1997; Jackson and Hogg 2010; Kaul 2011; Spencer-Oatey 2012). In an engaging way, film introduces its consumers to various cultural identities and creates cultural bridges that promote a sense of unity amidst our diversity (John 2017). In today's globalised society, films play a crucial role in cultural exchange and cross-cultural understanding through the widespread distribution of movies and the messages they convey. Globalisation has also led Western media conglomerates such as Disney to dominate the global film market and increasingly produce films that are designed to appeal to a worldwide audience. For example, multicultural content in films has increased with a heightened sensitivity to cultural diversity (Isaar 2006; Carvalho 2021). With the growth of cultural narratives, the way major film companies such as Disney represent culture becomes a critical issue, as it affects how different cultures are translated, understood, and communicated across the world (Isaar 2006). In order for media companies to avoid backlash for appropriating a foreign culture, it is crucial for them to ensure respectful portrayals on-screen (Casadesus-Masanell and Ricart 2010).

Storytelling and character development have always been at the core of Disney's business, providing the company financial gains through merchandise, spinoff media products, theme parks, and other related franchises (Artz 2014; Edwards 2020). With strong emphasis on character development and storytelling, Disney creates films that are entertaining and meaningful to connect with audiences on a deep emotional level (Carvalho 2021; Benhamou 2014). This has contributed to the success of Disney's characters and stories and enabled them to become a mainstay of popular culture. Aware of its influence, the Walt Disney Company has responded to the increasing demand for diversity and inclusion in media (Carvalho 2021). Scholars have identified the shift towards inclusive storytelling in contemporary Disney films, with particular emphasis on multicultural representations (Benhamou 2014; Carvalho 2021; Law 2018). This includes recent animation films such as *Coco* (2017), *Encanto* (2021), and many more. While the recent films are considered as culturally respectful, there are still great risks for cultural narrative to be dislodged from its original context during the representation process (Isaar 2006).

In a film's context, cultural representation is the process of "giving meaning" through depictions of cultural elements on screen (Hall 1997; Byrne 2015). Meaning is built and constructed by people (Hall 1997), and a film's creative team chooses how its on-screen depictions are used to produce "meaning" in the films. With this, it is crucial that we understand how it is done by the individuals to prevent meaning from being misunderstood. Looking at Disney, scholars have identified the studio's activeness in representing culture in its recent animation films such as *Coco* (2017) and *Encanto* (2021) (Benhamou 2014; Carvalho 2021; Edwards 2020; Law 2018). Disney's *Coco* (2017) is widely praised by scholars as a "culturally mindful production of Mexican culture" for its respectful portrayal of the Mexican holiday *Día*

*de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) (Edwards 2020; Du 2018). It can be concluded that the film's accurate grasp of Mexican cultural themes and visual elements contributed to its positive reception and financial success (Du 2018). However, while *Coco* is considered a successful example, there are still great risks for cultural narrative to be dislodged from its original context in the translation and dissemination process (Isaar 2006). The act of inaccurately depicting a culture brings us to the topic of cultural appropriation.

The term "cultural appropriation" is widely used to criticise "the unacknowledged or improper use of a culture's symbols, artefacts, and customs by members of another dominant culture" (Rogers 2006). In a film's context, cultural appropriation refers to improper or stereotypical depictions. Such acts are found in Disney's classic films. In *Peter Pan* (1953), a song titled "What makes the red man red?" refers to indigenous people as "redskins"—a slur against Native Americans (Evans 2020; Oxner 2020). Depicting harmful stereotypes in films can lead to negative critical reception and decreased audience appeal, resulting in lower box office revenue and the destruction of cultural and economic value. Therefore, it is crucial for entertainment films to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and to strive for respectful cultural representation. From *Dumbo* (1941) to *Encanto* (2021), Disney has demonstrated cultural sensitivity and extensive research in creating respectful portrayals on screen. The chapter aims to optimise future ACR films by uncovering the useful strategies applied by Disney to ensure the creation of cultural and economic value.

The Yin-Yang framework is a Chinese philosophical principle that emphasises the reframing of two forces with opposing goals into a complementary relationship (Fang 2012; Li 2014). The chapter proposes a Yin-Yang framework to visualise the balancing act between the creation of cultural and

economic value in Disney's ACR films (see Figure 4.1). This framework highlights the interrelated components of cultural and economic value and provides a useful perspective for businesses to balance opposing forces in their value creation process. By utilising and building resources strategically, businesses can successfully create value for their consumers and generate economic value for the firm.



**Figure 4.1:** Yin-Yang Framework: Balancing Act of Cultural and Economic Value. Source: Created by the author.

To unpack the interrelated components of cultural and economic value creation, the next three sections of the chapter proceed to share the key findings of the research, pertaining to three foundational components: the *Workforces*, *Storytelling*, and *Streaming Channels*.

# The Workforces: Diversity and Inclusion

The research has outlined three strategic activities that Disney uses internally to ensure the creation of cultural value in their ACR films. They include *Disney's Internal Story Trusts*, the company's *Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives*, and its *International Divisions* across the world.

As one of Disney's *Internal Story Trusts,* Pixar's Cultural Trust is a group within Disney's Pixar Animation Studios that works to ensure that its films "accurately represent diverse cultures and communities" (Catmull 2018, 6). In addition to hiring external cultural consultants, Disney's Cultural Trusts play a key role to ensure that their films are not only entertaining but also culturally authentic and relevant. Some examples of the films that have benefited from the Story Trust include *Soul* (2020) and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). With an emphasis on accurate cultural representation, *Soul*'s cultural trust was composed of Pixar's African-American employees who guided the team by providing feedback from their personal cultural experiences (Wiggum et al. 2021). In addition, the Cultural Trust also partnered with advisors such as musicians, jazz experts, and cultural consultants who helped to shape the story, characters, and visuals of the film (Serpell 2021).

Disney also formed the Southeast Asia Story Trust for *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) to ensure the respectful treatment of the various Southeast Asian cultures portrayed in the film (Moon 2021). With the film's fictional setting inspired by multiple Southeast Asia cultures, the trust guided the film's portrayal of traditional clothing, architecture, and customs. The trust was formed with Southeast Asian cultural experts with areas of expertise ranging across language, music, choreography, architecture, and martial arts (Koeppel 2021). Disney's Cultural Trusts are an important part of the film value

creation process to ensure the respectful representation of diverse communities. By working with internal employees and advisors who are experts in various cultural traditions and experiences, it helps ensure that the films are authentic and nuanced in their portrayal of different communities.

Disney's Corporate Social Responsibility Report (2021) emphasised the company's commitment to facilitating *Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives* both in front of and behind the camera. Disney's commitment to foster a diverse workforce was also emphasised by interviewee Tao Huang of Disney's FAST Programme. As Tao (2023) supports, fostering a diverse workforce allows Disney to bring authentic and varied perspectives to its cultural storytelling, while creating a sense of belonging with members of the culture represented on-screen. As an effective strategy that contributed to the creation of cultural value, Disney established its internal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives to "encourage diverse perspectives and backgrounds in its content and workforce" (The Walt Disney Company 2021,18). Disney's DEI initiatives are a key part of the company's overall strategy to create content that reflects the diversity of its audiences and promote a culture of inclusion within the company. The range of DEI programs include employee resource groups, as well as training and education programs that support underrepresented communities. These initiatives are crucial to raising sensitivity and awareness of diversity and inclusion, as well as to learn how cultural portrayals are interpreted by individuals of various backgrounds.

Behind every on-screen cultural representation is a series of decision-making processes that contributes to the final product. The decision-making processes that may affect cultural portrayal include the selection of directors, playwrights, and other creative team members who play a significant role in ensuring accurate cultural portrayals. By

developing a diverse workforce, Disney works to eliminate biases behind its decision-making process when developing ACR films. The company is thus able to improve on-screen cultural representations and develop more inclusive content by bringing together individuals with unique perspectives and ideas.

Disney's *International Divisions* also play a crucial role in the cultural value creation process of its ACR films. With a global reach, Disney has a wide network of international offices responsible for managing Disney's operations in respective regions. The international divisions are spread across the globe, covering areas of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA), as well as Latin America and the Asia Pacific (APAC). Disney's international divisions play a key role in helping the firm understand its global markets for the creation of cultural value. The international divisions often collaborate with the creative teams behind Disney's films, TV shows, and other content to ensure that their products resonate with local audiences and reflect the cultural nuances of each region. This includes the recent web animated series *Mickey Go Local* (2020), produced by Disney's Singapore division, which showcases various Southeast Asian cultures with engaging storytelling.

For *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), Disney's Singapore division also played a crucial role in facilitating cultural research trips across Southeast Asia for its creative team. Carlene Tan, former Senior Manager of the Animation Development Department for Disney's Southeast Asia division, shared insights on these research trips. As facilitator of the research trips, Carlene provided the team with various contacts and cultural locations across the region that are significant to their cultural research (Tan 2023). With varying scope depending on their location and function, Disney's international offices provide significant cultural insights in the

production of the ACR films. This helps Disney to create films that are culturally sensitive and accurate and resonate with its global audiences.

Ensuring accurate cultural representation in ACR films is critical for the creation of cultural value, as it fulfils the symbolic needs of its represented groups. The symbolic needs are achieved by the sense of belonging, identity, and cross-cultural understanding made possible by respectful cultural portrayals in Disney's ACR films. Disney's internal Story Trusts have ensured that their creative teams have a deep understanding of the cultural aspects of the stories they are telling. By building a diverse workforce within the company, Disney is able to bring in varied perspectives to optimise and enrich cultural representation in ACR films. Having diverse perspectives in the company may also avoid the risks of biases in the decision-making process that may affect on-screen cultural portrayals (e.g. the selection of a director). The international divisions provide Disney with market knowledge and cultural insights, enabling the company to develop content that specifically caters for its diverse audiences. Overall, Disney's internal Story Trusts, diverse workforce, and the international divisions play a critical role in ensuring accurate cultural representation in its films. With respectful cultural representation, Disney is able to build emotional connections, a sense of resonance and promote cross-cultural understanding which forms cultural value for consumers.

## The Storytelling Mix: Universal Stories through Diverse Lens

Globalisation and media advancements have led to a greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion, highlighting the interconnectedness between individuals. However, it is important to recognise that diversity is not just about inclusion and representation. It involves celebrating our differences while also recognising the common values we have that unite us as human beings (Carvalho 2021). Disney has been successful in globalising cultural narratives, as its films integrate universal themes with cultural values in their storytelling. Responding to a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion, Disney has created ACR films that feature characters of diverse cultural backgrounds with universal storytelling.

In ACR films, culture is portrayed in several ways. The depictions may be through tangible forms of clothing, symbols, architecture, or the intangible language, music, customs, and traditions. For instance, *Coco* (2017) portrays Mexican culture with the use of vibrant colours, intricately patterned traditional clothing, Mexican colonial architecture, and Spanish language and music (Edwards 2020). Similarly, *Encanto* (2021) prominently features bright colours, music, and dance, which are integral parts of Colombian culture (Du 2018; Edwards 2020). *Frozen 2* (2019) also takes inspiration from the Sámi people, indigenous to Scandinavia. The Sami culture is incorporated through the character of Kristoff, who is revealed to be of Sami descent. The culture further inspired the film's landscape as well as the attire and mannerisms (love for reindeers) of the fictional Northuldra people (Roesch 2020).

Catering to a worldwide audience, ACR films have been integrating universal values in their storytelling by highlighting the shared experience of cultures around the

world. This is supported by Garcia (2023), as he highlights that the universality of Disney's ACR films goes beyond cultural identities, with more emphasis on the common experiences we face as human beings. This includes themes such as family, love, and life that transcend cultural boundaries and are experienced by all individuals. The universal themes Disney addressed in its ACR films include afterlife and perseverance in *Coco* (2017), as well as sisterhood and self-discovery in *Frozen 2* (2019). In *Coco*, the universal theme of afterlife and perseverance was explored from the perspective of Mexican culture. The Day of the Dead is a Mexican celebration that honours those who have passed, reflecting the culture's belief that death is not the end, but a continuation of life in a parallel world (Brazel 2019). This is mirrored in the film, where the animated city, the Land of the Dead, was illustrated as "colourful and bizarre", with much resemblance to a metropolis with convenient living facilities (Du 2018, 256). In addition, *Coco portrays* Miguel's perseverance in pursuing his musical dreams in the face of obstacles and opposition from his family. The value of perseverance in chasing one's dreams is another example of a shared life experience that individuals across the world share.

*Frozen* (2013) explores the power of sisterhood between two sisters, Elsa and Anna. As a prequel to the later *Frozen* movies, the film highlights the values of change and personal growth as the protagonists embark on a journey of self-discovery and save the kingdom from another threat. Moreover, the idea of change and adolescence is reflected in the character Olaf, as the snowman starts to develop emotional complexities about his self-identity and the changing environment. In the film, the character experiences both physical and emotional change as he grapples with the idea of growing up. With a song titled "When I am Older", Olaf voices his fear and the feeling of being overwhelmed by uncertainties in life. The character development of Olaf reflects the universal

experience of change that relates to audiences of all ages and backgrounds. The film also addresses the universal theme of environmentalism to protect natural resources. In the film, Elsa comes across the Northuldra people, who are based on the indigenous Sami people of Northern Europe. It is the unique beliefs of Sami people that nature is ruled by various souls of living objects including spirits of earth, water, wind, and fire (Guillaume 2017). The Northuldra people are portrayed to share the same belief, as they protect the enchanted forest and its resources. By portraying the tribe's deep respect for nature, the film was able to create cultural value by promoting environmentalism as a universal and critical issue relevant to its worldwide audiences.

Disney's characters and storytelling play a significant role when it comes to the creation of cultural and economic value in its business model. By integrating universal themes with cultural narratives, Disney is able to create relevance in its content, enabling audiences to empathise with the characters and their experiences. This allows Disney to create cultural value and establish deeper emotional connections with its diverse audiences. With the successful creation and delivery of cultural value, Disney forms a long-term relationship with its loyal consumers, building a massive global fan base. Disney fans' commitment to the brand and its products have since generated enormous amounts of revenue for Disney, translating cultural value to economic value for the company. The economic gains can benefit Disney financially, growing sales across Disney's various business sectors across box offices, theme parks, licensing, and merchandise.

*Coco* was praised by Mexicans as a "culturally mindful production and celebration of Mexican culture" (Edwards 2020, 122). The film's accurate grasp of cultural themes and nuances enabled Disney to tap into the Mexican market, marking history with *Coco* being the "highest-grossing film in

the country's box-office history" (Du 2018; Edwards 2020). The success of *Coco* demonstrates how Disney expands its reach and appeal to a wider market, as it continues to translate cultural value into economic gains for the company (Nieuwboer 2019, 25; Edwards 2020, 123). By creating cultural value, the success of Disney's storytelling has built a global fan base that supports not only the company's films but its various spinoff franchises as well. The economic value Disney gains from its global fan base include its enormous sales across box offices, theme parks, and merchandise. With *Coco* as an example, this paper showcases how accurate cultural representation on-screen has also allowed Disney to create cultural value and generate economic value by expanding into diverse markets.

## The Channel: Achieving Global Reach

As a business under the Disney Media and Entertainment Distribution (DMED) division, Disney launched *Disney+*, a subscription-based streaming service, in 2019. The streaming platform features a wide collection of content across Disney and its media acquisitions— Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars, National Geographic, and Star. Consequently, Disney launched Disney+ Hotstar (hereby referred to as Hotstar) in 2020 as a co-branded streaming service of Disney+, catering to specific Southeast Asia regions. With the two streaming platforms, Disney is able to create cultural value and provide convenience for its consumers, while generating economic value for the firm. Disney has been actively developing regional content exclusively on Disney+ as part of their DEI initiative to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion through storytelling.

Exclusive Disney+ content covers films, feature documentaries, and shorts that showcase regional and local content. For instance, Disney premiered *Luca* (2021), which narrates the story of two young sea monsters and

their summer adventure in a seaside town in Italy. The film incorporates universal themes of friendship and acceptance, with visual portrayals of Italian culture. Another Disney+ original ACR film is *Turning Red* (2022). The film navigates the challenges of adolescence and the core message of self-acceptance. Furthermore, Disney's *Mickey Go Local* (2019) is an animated short film on Disney+ that showcases Southeast Asia cultures. The shorts feature light-hearted short stories of classic Disney characters such as Mickey Mouse in various Southeast Asian countries. With different themes for each episode, the shorts feature locations in Singapore and Malaysia, showcasing the local customs, food, and traditions of the region. To ensure the accurate portrayals of culture and its relevance, the shorts recast the iconic Disney characters with Malay-speaking voice actors. Common Malay terms such as *alamak* and *sayang* are used occasionally across the series. With accurate portrayals and engaging storylines, the shorts are able to create cultural value by showcasing and educating its young audiences on the various regional cultures.

Feature documentaries showcasing the behind-the-scenes process of ACR films' making are also available on Disney+. For example, *Inside Pixar* (2020) and *Embrace the Panda: Making of Turning Red* (2022) exposes audiences to the efforts Disney took to ensure accurate cultural representation in *Soul* (2020) and *Turning Red* (2022). By transforming the making of ACR films into content, Disney is able to engage its audiences, while creating both cultural and economic value (Gander 2017). The documentaries are also an effective way to engage audiences, exposing the consumers to the efforts Disney took to ensure accurate representation. Disney thus strengthens its brand reputation as a culturally conscious and inclusive brand and builds stronger emotional connection with its diverse audiences. The documentaries translate cultural value into economic revenue

for Disney, as it increases the appeal of ACR films and stimulates sales for Disney+ subscription and merchandise based on the ACR characters. By developing and localising regional content, Disney is able to expand its market and more diverse audiences in international markets.

As a strategy to expand its reach into the Southeast Asia (SEA) region, Disney launched *Disney+ Hotstar* (hereby referred to as Hotstar) that specifically caters to audiences in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. A co-branded streaming service under Disney+, Hotstar shares a similar global and international content mix with Disney+, but puts greater emphasis on delivering local content. Disney's Hotstar offers regionally specific content libraries across the four SEA countries in which it is available. Disney+ Hotstar's partnerships with regional film companies have been instrumental in the platform's success and the company's efforts to cater to its diverse audiences. Examples of original local productions that Hotstar showcases include numerous Bollywood films such as *Dil Bechara* (2020) and *Gulmohar* (2023) in India; Indonesian-language romantic dramedy *Sabar, It's a Test* (2020) in Indonesia; and Malay-language action film *J Revolusi* (2021) in Malaysia. The original content on Disney+ Hotstar also comes in various languages of the regions, including Hindi, Tamil, Thai, Indonesia, and Malayalam. The diverse languages of Disney+ Hotstar plays a key aspect in creating cultural value, as it allows the platform to cater to diverse audiences of different regions and languages.

The streaming business of Disney not only provides the company with opportunities in creating more global content, but it diversifies Disney's revenue streams as well. Disney+ and Hotstar offer a subscription-based model that generates recurring revenue for the company. As a new income stream of the Disney business, the streaming platform has become an essential tool for Disney to earn financial gains and expand its

global market. The creation and popularity of local content has led Disney+ and Hotstar to establish a loyal subscriber base both regionally and globally. As of February 2023, Disney+ has over 161 million subscribers globally (Stoll 2023). According to Disney's *Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Financial Report*, Disney+ subscribers have generated over $15 billion for the company as of October 2022 (29).

This section demonstrates how Disney is able to generate cultural value and economic value by delivering localised content through Disney+ and Hotstar. With the services, Disney is able to expand its market and provide audiences across the globe with content that is accessible and relevant. Not only are the platforms effective in demonstrating Disney's commitment to creating culturally inclusive content, it also showcases the company's efforts to ensure the delivery of cultural value for its consumers. The success of the streaming platforms is able to help Disney establish strong brand presence in the regional market, while contributing financial gains via sales from subscriptions as a global entertainment conglomerate.

## Conclusion

This research paper explores how Disney balances cultural accuracy and commercial appeal in its Animated Cultural Representative (ACR) films. It identifies three key strategies that contribute to this balancing act: building diverse workforces, integrating cultural and universal themes in ACR storytelling, and using streaming channels to localise content and expand market reach. By creating ACR films with accurate representations and universal themes, Disney is able to appeal to a global market and promote cross-cultural understanding amongst audiences. This approach creates cultural value and builds a massive fan base that generates huge economic value for the company through sales.Streaming platforms such

as Disney+ and Hotstar increase the appeal of the channel with its content and drive subscription sales, which generates revenue for the company through its subscription sales.

As demonstrated by Disney in its ACR film, the balancing act between cultural accuracy and commercial appeal is critical in the value creation process. This paper proposes that integrating cultural value into the business model canvas can help companies track its impact on a personal level, beyond just functional value. The improvement in business approach may lead to higher customer satisfaction, building long-term relationships and loyalty amongst diverse customers with its products and services. The proposed Yin-Yang framework, as the research outcome of this paper, intends to give a beneficial viewpoint and help optimise the creation of cultural and commercial value of creative businesses. Moving forward, future research should expand this study by examining how Disney's balancing act of cultural and economic value has influenced audience experiences. The potential of business models in capturing cultural value (rather than only economic value) is also a key topic worth exploring by business organisations. With the limitations addressed, this paper has paved the way for future research as it highlights the potential for creative businesses to capture both economic and cultural value in its business model.

## Acknowledgements

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# Part II:
# Performing the
# Tradition

# Cultural Amnesia:
# Reclaiming Malay Identity

*Athira Binte Maswan*

## Introduction

Cultural amnesia… Even without the provision of a scholarly definition, you probably would be able to guess what it means. It treads along the line of forgetting and losing touch with one's culture. In the Singaporean Malay context, we know that the population is afflicted with cultural amnesia, but to what extent? How do we attenuate its effects? The first and the largest factor contributing to my interest in the topic would be seeing and experiencing first-hand, people my age and even those older than me being out of touch with the Malay culture. The extent to which most Malay Millennials and Gen Zs practise the culture now is at its bare minimum, causing my interest to come from a place of fear and concern. With less knowledge coming in with each generation, will we have enough to preserve our culture in the far future?

For Millennials and Gen Zs like myself, involvement and engagement in social media is inevitable and has increasingly become part and parcel of our lives (CF 2023). As such, the second factor leading to my interest is the increased exposure to and awareness of cultural and heritage content on social media. Having come across videos on TikTok where Gen Zs in other parts of the world are able to trace their ancestry online at a click of a button, this made me wonder why there was little to no information online about my ancestry or Malay ancestry in general. We know of our ancestors purely through intergenerational stories. The study of cultural amnesia is one that has become increasingly relevant and

important as the younger generations are more educated and technologically proficient, yet culturally disconnected. Additionally, alongside other individuals who identify as Malay, there is an urgent need to reclaim the identity that has long been lost in the shadows of colonialism (Saat 2020). This will lead to a better understanding of what the social landscape was like, the cultural history of Malays, and how negative stereotypes about the Malay community sprung up and what could be done to counter them.

The case study in this chapter contains interviews with five Malay Millennial and seven Gen Z Malay individuals, who have shared with me their knowledge of Malay culture and their connection with it, as well as provided suggestions to deepen one's connection with culture in order to attenuate the effects of cultural amnesia. The primary research goal is to explore factors contributing to cultural amnesia within the Singaporean Malay Millennials and Gen Z population. The secondary research goal is to determine what can be done by us, the government, and schools to attenuate the impact of cultural amnesia. To address these goals the study employs a mixed methodology, including autoethnography and semi-structured interviews.

Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). This makes autoethnography a good match for topics like mine, which take into account personal lived experiences and emotions. Ellis and Bochner (2000) also mention the importance of incorporating personal narrative and reflexivity, in order to fully capture the complexity and richness of qualitative research. To advance and complement this methodological approach, I also employed semi-structured interviews to facilitate additional exploratory and probing

questions (Adams 2015). Interviews gave me more leeway to interpret the responses given, especially when coupled with observations of respondents' non-verbal communication. I used purposive homogeneous sampling to receive the most relevant responses from individuals who are representative of the population of interest. The research sample consisted of 12 individuals: 5 Singaporean Malay Millennials born between 1981 to 1996, and 7 Singaporean Malay Gen Zs born between 1997 and 2012.

I foresaw that the age and racial and cultural similarities would make me identify with some participants more closely, leading me to interpret their experiences in a certain way. This would result in an over-reliance on my own personal experiences and biases, and therefore a potential lack of objectivity in the analysis of the data. To address this, I remained critical and evaluative throughout the research process, continually acknowledging any personal biases that arise from my own lived experiences and how they might impact the interpretation of the data. I have also referenced other researchers and both academic and non-academic materials in the research process to provide additional perspectives and to ensure that it is free from my own biases and assumptions. This chapter explores negative effects of cultural amnesia on the formation of the Malay identity among Millennials and Gen Zs.  This research aims to add value to not only the study of cultural amnesia but also of Malay identity and other interrelated topics, and it is hoped that this paper would encourage further research in the field. The next section opens the chapter with a conceptual framework, revealing some complexities about and contextualising cultural amnesia as a phenomenon in the Singapore society.

## Cultural Amnesia

Much has to be considered when writing about cultural amnesia. More often than not, studies of cultural amnesia especially in the Singaporean Malay community are intertwined with studies of the Malay identity with a focus on pre- and post-colonial eras. As such, the theoretical underpinnings of the topic include cultural memory, identity, and globalisation. Upon review of the literature, a few key areas and recurring themes can be identified.

Cultural amnesia is defined by various authors in differing ways. Jerlei (2015, 4) defines it as the "widespread ignorance of and indifference to what used to be important but has now fallen into forced displacement, resulting in a possible 'dystopian future'", while Mulawarman (2021, 117) explains it as a phenomenon that "will make people forget and lose the way to understand the meaning of their past history as well as lose the way to understand complexities outside themselves which has an impact on losing the ability to see the future". In a local context, Yeoh and Lau (1995) describe cultural amnesia as a situation where people are no longer in touch with their own cultural roots. This makes it easy for the state to displace actual history in favour of presenting a biased version of the cultural past (Tajudeen 2007). For Singapore, material advancement brought about intellectual and cultural sterility (Trocki 2006). Alfian Saat also brings up the practice of selective memory by the state and dominant culture in general and focuses on the gaps in memory, the censored histories or stories that have slipped from public consciousness (Poon 2005; Abdullah 2017; Chua 2003).

Colonialism and colonial ideas emerge as one of the larger recurring themes and is postulated to have links to cultural amnesia (Widodo 2005). Shamsul (1999) argues that the colonial conquest involved more than powerful

weapons and militaries, political dominance, and wealth. It saw colonisers dismantling the way people think and replacing it with their own worldviews, making it impossible for the natives to define things their own way. Colonialists also capitalised on smaller nations' commercial and financial interests, ideology, religion, military power, and political intelligence (Mulawarman 2012). For example, British colonial governments banned the circulation of syair—sung poems that were testimonies to the suffering of indigenous people—in order to control the memory of the colonised (Ibrahim 2014). Colonialism also affected the Malay identity, imposing negative stereotypes such as being lazy, not driven, and exclusivist onto the Malay people, which persist to date (Saat 2020; Alatas 1977; Goh 2007).

The Singapore school curriculum, guided by the government's approach towards multiculturalism, is also rather questionable. Multiracialism in Singapore is focused on racial and religious harmony, and the government promotes it through the formal and informal school curriculum. The formal curriculum includes a compulsory subject called Civics and Moral Education (CME), which aims to teach students about the customs, traditions, and beliefs of different races in Singapore, and to develop good interpersonal skills and respect for people from different racial groups and their cultures. However, Tan (2012) argues that the current approach to multiracialism in schools is inadequate as it only focuses on surface culture, such as food, attire, and religious and cultural festivals. Multiple authors have also discussed the government's essentialization of cultural identities by investing each race with specific cultural characteristics through homogenization and erasure (qtd. in Tan 2012), and the erasure of differences within ethnic groups to create commonality (Tan 2012). Such active intervention by the government to preserve racial and religious harmony reflects "hard multiculturalism" (Vasu 2008). The aforementioned approach perpetuates racial stereotypes and does not

encourage in-depth understanding of other cultures and religions (Tan 2012).

A number of factors, both studied and not yet studied, can contribute to one's lack of connection to their culture. Some general strategies to mitigate it—and therefore reduce the effects of cultural amnesia—include preserving history, retelling the heroic struggles of a nation's founding fathers, and retracing history (Mulawarman 2012). Additionally, members of a group must also rediscover and remember their values, customs, and rituals (Erll and Nunning 2008; Kashima 2000). In the local context, Ibrahim (2004) posits that the narration of cultural and social history and the presentation of contemporary concerns is central to resisting cultural amnesia. For Singapore schools, Tan proposes a dialogical education that serves to promote multiculturalism through surface culture and deep culture (2012). A dialogical education aims to balance openness and rootedness with perspectives from inside and outside the cultural traditions (Tan 2010). An ethos of openness is needed for participants to critically explore the domains of culture.

It is evident that cultural amnesia lacks clear definition and instead, its description adjusts to varying contexts. Cultural amnesia-specific literature tends to uncover forgotten stories (Ibrahim 2014; James 2007). Yet, despite containing undoubtedly useful information, it still leaves questions unanswered. No empirical studies on the topic have been carried out locally, and more specifically so in the Millennial and Gen Z age group. There is an absence of input from the Malay population in research to discover if they are aware of the existence and effects of cultural amnesia and what their potential responses would be. This chapter addresses these gaps in the academic scholarship. Drawing on interviews with young Malay people in Singapore it reveals two foundational

aspects of cultural amnesia of the Malay identity, the *Lack of Cultural Knowledge* and *Lack of Cultural Connection*.

## Lack of Cultural Knowledge

I asked the interviewees what they knew about Malay culture, and traditional artforms and values were popular answers. Some examples of data for traditional artforms include "*Kompang* at weddings" (Haikel 2023) and "Know about *Dikir Barat*, Malay dance, and *Kompang* through past involvement" (Lukman 2023). Four out of five responses for traditional artforms came from Millennials. It is possible that they are more familiar with these artforms due to exposure in school, but more plausibly, it could be because Millennials experienced the peak of the *Dikir Barat* wave in Singapore. First becoming popular in the 1980s, *Dikir Barat* albums rapidly sold out in the 1990s. In 1993, the Singapore *Dikir Barat* Federation was established (Ho 2015). In an interview with my classmate Anna Khairyna and I, Singaporean artist, producer, and *Dikir Barat* practitioner Daly Filsuf mentioned that it was compulsory to join a cultural co-curricular activity (CCA) in the late 1980s (ArtsEquator 2021). Based on the timeline and Daly's input, the *Dikir Barat* hype definitely spilled over to the time where older Millennials were in school, impacting them in a more lasting way than it did for Gen Zs.

Reflecting on cultural values, respondents focused on family-infused traditions. They included, "Malay culture revolves around politeness and respect" (Izzat 2023), "*Salam* as a form of respect" (Haikel 2023), "Families are very close knit" (Haziyah 2023), and "Modesty, which stems from Islam" (Haikel 2023). Malay families place a lot of importance on such values, to the extent that these values have given rise to the coining of terms that I feel are strictly Malay. For example, the word *sopan-santun* refers to values of politeness, modesty, and carrying oneself with grace; while *silaturrahim*, an Arabic compound word, relates closely to having or maintaining

strong familial ties and—in more modern times—community ties. Notably, *silaturrahim* is an Islamic concept that applies largely to the Malay population (Adzmi and Bahri 2021). These values are strongly instilled in Malay children, not necessarily by direct teaching. It is almost an unsaid rule in most Malay households to walk with a slight bow and hands leading in front when walking past someone in a way that obstructs their view; and to say "*Jemput makan*", inviting the people around you to eat together with you, though it is usually said for courtesy sake. Both actions are done in social settings, which further shows that *silaturrahim* is the core of the Malay culture.

Parents often allow the acquisition of cultural knowledge to happen organically. For instance, in exploring the role of the parent in fostering cultural awareness, Blitch (2013) indicated that parents did not exclusively incorporate either racial or ethnic content into the teachings of surface culture and deep culture. Instead, parents used organic opportunities to engage in intentional teaching. Furthermore, my interviews revealed that school and teachers were the primary source of my interviewees' cultural knowledge, followed by parents, then grandparents. This could be attributed to the teaching styles practised by these three groups of people. Students spend most of their time in school, where teaching and learning happens more systematically, with dedicated subjects like Civics and Moral Education (CME) at both primary and secondary levels teaching students to "know some of the customs, traditions and beliefs of the different races in Singapore," "demonstrate good interpersonal skills with others including people of different races and different abilities," and "have respect for people from different racial groups and their cultures" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division 2000).

Indeed, stronger cultural connections could be further facilitated in schools in Singapore. Respondents expressed

interest in expanding cultural activities facilitated in schools throughout all educational stages. For certain subjects such as social studies and history, which are part of both primary and secondary school curriculums, the subject syllabus could reflect more on the contributions and successes of the Malay community in Singapore. Campaigns such as Bulan Bahasa (Malay Language Month) (Malay Language Council Singapore 2023) are good examples of dedicated linguistic and cultural activities in school that can teach students more than just the surface-level knowledge. Facilitating more focused cultural workshops and employing a participatory approach can help schools in Singapore to introduce or reintroduce cultural CCAs, increasing Malay students' interests and connections with their culture.

In an attempt to link interviewees' cultural knowledge with their level of connection with the culture, I decided to include a short five-question quiz to aid in quantifying the interviewees' level of cultural knowledge. Mean scores were obtained from the quiz for each of the generations. Millennials' scores averaged 3 out of 5, while Gen Zs averaged 2.14 out of 5. These scores were expected as Millennials had a higher average self-ranking score for their knowledge of Malay culture. When asked what about the Malay culture they wished to know more about, a majority of participants wanted to know more about the Malay culture in its entirety, though they already knew some elements. Interviewees cited reasons such as "Wanting to pass down knowledge to future generations" (Afiq 2023; Nizam 2023; Syikin 2023), "Needing to apply cultural practices to future life events" (Lukman 2023), "Wanting to be in touch with culture" (Haziyah 2023), and "Wanting to be proud" (Haziyah 2023). Additionally, it could also possibly be attributed to the lack of cultural memory. Cultural memory refers to the collective memory of a group or society, encompassing shared experiences, knowledge, and traditions that are passed down from one generation to

the next (National Geographic 2022). It includes the stories, customs, beliefs, and practices that shape a group's identity and understanding of the world around them. Cultural memory thrives when robust connections are established among communities and their local environments, facilitating and sustaining their traditional cultural practices. The next section reveals what happens when these cultural connections are jeopardised.

## Lack of Cultural Connection

The interviewees unanimously agreed when asked if their parents' generation has better knowledge of Malay culture, with the most cited reason being that their parents had lived in a kampung environment. The physical kampung environment facilitated the development of relations and camaraderie, forming a strong kampung spirit which persisted even in a mixed kampung of Malay and Chinese dwellings. In kampungs, there was little privacy with doors and gates left ajar, inviting interactions and the exchange of small favours. The spirit of gotong-royong, or communal helping, was prevalent, and neighbours looked out for each other (NLB 2014).

When asked what they felt contributed to their respective generation's lack of connection to Malay culture in this day and age, there is a tie in the two largest themes arising from their answers – Westernisation and the underutilisation of the Malay language. Some examples of data for Westernisation include: "Media will show how the westerners live their lives" and "Adopted western lifestyles through media". Indeed, most of the media that Singaporeans consume portray American pop culture. Various trends in music, fashion, and art are also generally known to come from the United States (Craig and King 2002). The impact of western influence is potent and far-reaching, penetrating

most, if not all, areas of social lives (Cukalevska and Dragović 2023).  Westernisation in this context can be tied closely to globalisation. It is defined as the "worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, the organisations of social life on a global scale, and the growth of a shared global consciousness" (Ritzer 2007, 4). Westernisation and globalisation exist symbiotically, because globalisation not only includes a worldwide expansion of business practices and technological innovations stemming from the West, but also facilitates the global transfer of Western values. The representation of Western ideals and lifestyle dominates the current international media landscape and threatens the survival of indigenous cultures, which cannot compete in the global media environment (Xaphakdy 2000).

For example, there is only one free-to-air Malay television channel in Singapore, Suria (Mediacorp 2023). This channel airs news segment *Berita* and variety talk shows such as *Manja,* which promote Malay language and cultural content. The channel also popularises free online resources like Wan's Ubin Journal and Orang Laut SG, which seeks to preserve stories and memories of the ex-residents of Pulau Ubin and Pulau Semakau. Furthermore, Suria screens educational educational shows like *Bahas4pm*, featuring students from local schools debating certain topics in Malay; and *Cepat Tepat*, a quiz show testing students' knowledge of the Malay language and culture. The diversity of cultural content on popular media can offer valuable opportunities for Malay communities to sustain their cultural memory.

Furthermore, social media and mass media consumption preferences and habits could play a foundational role in attenuating the effects of cultural amnesia. Social media democratises the cultural consumption practices (Arnaboldi and Diaz Lema 2021). Considering the very short attention span of younger generations, social media channels that

feature short-form videos, like TikTok, Twitter, Instagram Reels, Facebook, and Youtube Shorts can provide an engaging way to educate young Malay people about their culture.  For instance, "10 facts" video formats and skits are most engaging and easy to follow due to the short duration and relatability of the content. A good example of the "10 facts" format for Malay culture is presented by Soultari Amin Farid and ArtsEquator, where the facts are presented through text and videos up to three minutes long (Farid 2022). Currently, the series features six episodes that covers facts on Malay dance, *baju melayu*, *wayang kulit*, *batik*, *keris*, and *gasing*. There are also YouTube videos where Malay individuals are tested on their knowledge of Malay proverbs and translations.

Finally, underutilisation of the Malay language is another factor that is rather difficult to tackle, and directly contributes to the processes of globalisation increasing linguistic homogenization (Vaish 2006). Respondents' concerns regarding the underutilisation of the Malay language include: "More importance given to English" (Lukman 2023) and "It's not a working language" (Anna 2023). Culture cannot exist without language, and language cannot exist without culture (McIvor, Napoleon, and Dickie 2009). In Singapore, according to language promotion councils, the increasing prevalence of English as the most commonly spoken language at home does not necessarily mean that native languages are being displaced. Rather, it suggests that bilingualism is being maintained at a satisfactory level (Lin 2021). According to census data, nine in 10 Malay respondents who primarily spoke English at home reported that Malay was their second most frequently used language.

Associate Professor Faishal Ibrahim, chairman of the Malay Language Council, says that "the preferential usage of English does not signal a languish of the Malay language".  However, this statement undermines the cultural

implications inherent in people's preferences for speaking English. Preserving language is vital for intergenerational communication, spiritual communication, and transmitting cultural, spiritual, and religious values, including concepts, symbolism, and oral stories (Gonzalez et al. 2017). The use of language in these practices impacts the identity, culture, and health of Indigenous communities (King, Smith, and Gracey 2009). If language is lost, the transmission of values and belief systems across generations is hindered (Gonzalez et al. 2017). The increasing preference for English over the Malay mother tongue in the context of Singapore also points to a declining cultural connection.

I asked the interviewees whether living in Singapore affects their connection to Malay culture, and multiculturalism was revealed as the highest-occurring response. Examples of data include "Emphasis on Singaporean culture over individual cultures" (Haikel 2023; Izzat 2023) and "Mixed social groups" (Indra 2023; Zul 2023). At the opening of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong talked about Singapore's diversity as a fundamental aspect of each group's identity (The Straits Times 2017). The product of Singapore's multiculturalism and cultural cross-influence in the nation is the linking up of our distinct individual identities and ethnic cultures. Mr. Lee says that "Singaporeans now speak of a Singaporean Chinese culture, and, in the same way, a Singaporean Malay and Singaporean Indian culture" (The Straits Times 2017). The collective Singaporean identity is crucial in strengthening patriotism, creating a cohesive society, and helping the nation grow. However, it may blur and erase each ethnic group's knowledge of their culture and history. This problem is not unique to Singapore as countries with a multiracial and multicultural population, such as the U.S., also struggle to find a balance (Giroux 1995). Democracy should shape nationalism through diverse cultural groups' access to shared structures of power, but a civic

nationalism which claims to respect cultural differences does not assure that coercive assimilationist policies will not be enforced (Giroux 1995). While Singapore is currently handling nationalism fairly well, improvements can always be made to ensure democracy and equity in forging a Singaporean identity.

According to the interviewees, a connection to culture can be developed, with the baseline for cultural connection being interest. It can refer to experiences that are co-occurring: a brief moment of captivation, or a more lasting feeling triggering exploration (Harackiewicz, Smith, and Priniski (2016). Situational interest is characterised by increased attention, effort, and affect experienced in a particular moment, while individual interest is characterised by a lasting predisposition to re-engage with something over time (Hidi and Renninger 2006). It is only possible for one to develop a connection to culture if they enjoy it and want to explore it more and continuously re-engage with culture over time. While we cannot control the interest one has towards culture, different factors in our social environment and in our cultural content consumption practices can expose people to cultural knowledge and cultivate greater respect for and interest in one's own cultural history and traditions.

## Conclusion

Cultural amnesia does affect Malay Millennial and Gen Z Singaporeans, but not in totality. It is heartening to know that Millennials and Gen Zs still do remember and know about their culture through artforms they have learnt about and values that have been imparted to them. Schools have been a large contributor to their cultural knowledge, and it is hoped that the educational syllabus will continue to improve in order to cultivate future generations to be more culturally aligned. Further, a positive shift in cultural knowledge is predicted,

with many young people showing interest in Malay culture. We have to be increasingly aware of the pros and cons of globalisation and continue our efforts to be global citizens who are in tune with our individual cultures.

Similarly, living in a multicultural country like Singapore, we have to be increasingly involved in learning, understanding, and preserving our culture. A good first step would be to practise the use of the Malay language in our daily lives. The most important thing to remember is that mitigating cultural amnesia requires a shared effort. Individuals, schools, and civil society each have a part to play in attenuating the effects of cultural amnesia. Social media and mass media are big players in this and can be especially powerful in their impact on younger generations. Further research may identify the true extent of cultural amnesia and its effects on the Singaporean Malay population, in order for timely interventions to be implemented. Malay culture is not just another subset of our identity. It *is* our identity, and we have to do our best to preserve it for generations to come.

## Acknowledgements

# Glossary

**Dikir Barat:** A style of Malay choral singing that incorporates singing, poetry, movement and music.

**Kompang:** A hand-frame drum that is played as part of an ensemble.

**Salam:** A gesture made upon meeting and taking leave. It involves a slight handshake, followed by a slight bow, and place their own right hand on their heart. With elders, place the forehead or the tip of the nose on the back of the elder recipient's hand.

**Sopan-santun:** Relating to values of politeness, modesty, and carrying oneself with grace.

**Silaturrahim:** Relating to having or maintaining strong familial ties and in more modern times, community ties.

**Kampung:** Village.

**Gotong-royong:** Cooperation in a community, communal helping of one another, mutual aid. Gotong-royong involves the spirit of volunteerism.

**Baju Melayu:** A form of traditional wear worn by the Malay community. In the wider Malay archipelago, Baju Kurung particularly refers to female traditional wear, while Baju Melayu is worn by males.

**Wayang Kulit:** A shadow puppetry tradition that is found in maritime Southeast Asia.

**Batik:** Both a type of textile and a wax-resist technique used to create designs on textile.

**Keris:** A dagger that is unique to maritime Southeast Asia.

**Gasing:** A Malay spinning top and a game of top spinning.

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# Contemporary Bharathanaatyam among Singapore-based practitioners

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## Introduction

Bharathanaatyam (buh-ruh-dhuh-NAA-tee-yum) has been the most popular Indian classical dance form practised in Singapore in the last fifty years. In recent years, diverging perspectives have arisen about how the form is and should be practised, as well as the position Bharathanaatyam occupies in the broader dance and arts ecosystem. This chapter offers some insights on how contemporary Bharathanaatyam in Singapore is practised today, and what it means to its practitioners.

For the purposes of this chapter, Bharathanaatyam refers exclusively to the dance form practised after the style's renaming in the 1950s (Ganesh 2015). The term encompasses various different schools and styles of Bharathanaatyam. Though the history of the form vastly predates the name "Bharathanaatyam," the institutionalised and codified version of the form practised globally today follows the restructuring by Rukmini Devi Arundale, founder of the Kalakshetra Foundation, the site of the codification of Bharathanaatyam in the 1940s and 1950s, more than preceding forms known as Sadir or Dasiattam (Ganesh 2015; McCann 2019). "Traditional" forms refer to Bharathanaatyam that follows the norms prescribed by these styles. The term "contemporary" in a dance context often carries distinctly Western baggage (Katrak 2011; Kwan 2017), relating closely to modern dance or ballet. However, for this chapter, the term "contemporary" is used in the temporal sense, referring to a Bharathanaatyam

that presents intentional responses to or deviations from prescribed aesthetic, structural and thematic norms. This can include both the fusion of Bharathanaatyam with other dance forms/disciplines, and innovations within the form itself. In using the term "contemporary", I emphasise the agency of practitioners and pedagogues, whose conscious choices guide the evolution of Bharathanaatyam.

The chapter explores functions of contemporary Bharathanaatyam and how they are changing for its practitioners in Singapore. It identifies ways in which the narrative messaging, aesthetics, and structural practice of Bharathanaatyam are transforming, and explores various factors shaping these changes. The chapter aims to define the meanings of contemporary Bharathanaatyam for those who practise it.

The chapter employs an autoethnographic approach. My background in Bharathanaatyam allows me to recognise that my plural positionality as a researcher draws substantially from my own experiences with the form. All of my experiences have been markedly different from one another. No two schools, class environments, or methodologies were the same, though the common thread is that they drew primarily from the Kalakshetra style. I have also been very fortunate to have been provided some level of autonomy and independent learning at all of these institutions, allowing me to broaden my perspectives beyond the delineations of Kalakshetra-style Bharathanaatyam.

I will be drawing observations and inferences regarding narratives, pedagogy, and class structure from my time at all of these institutions, and my own independent creative and performative experiences. Through this, I aim to draw connections between scholarly findings, my interviews,

and my experiences, in order to identify ways in which the functions of Bharathanaatyam are changing for practitioners locally. I choose to use autoethnography because I recognise that my perspective as a researcher is not divorced from my background and lived experience as a dancer. My perspective is as someone that is able to consider perspectives from scholars and situate them within the practical realities of dancers in Singapore today. I supplement my autoethnography with three semi-structured interviews with practitioners, one of whom was also a researcher studying Indian art forms in Singapore and Malaysia. One interview was conducted via Zoom with a young local dance practitioner, trained in Bharathanaatyam and ballet, and practising contemporary dance. My second interview was conducted in-person with a dance and theatre practitioner and researcher. My third interview was conducted in-person with a local dance practitioner who runs a dance theatre collective rooted in Bharathanaatyam.

These interviews explore the past, present and future of Bharathanaatyam as a dance form. Some questions focus on the journey of the practitioners and their relationship with Bharathanaatyam. Others investigate the dancer's current practices. Finally, some questions seek the dancer's opinions on the future of the dance form. Before the chapter shares the insights of my research interviews and autoethnographic observations, the next section presents valuable findings from the academic scholarship highlighting key factors that shaped Bharathanaatyam.

## Transformations of Bharathanaatyam

While the broadly accepted practice of Bharathanaatyam stems from the Kalakshetra codification of the dance form, some scholars assert that this overshadows the longstanding practice of older iterations practised by the Devadasi

community and reframes it as a means to reclaim moral power in the face of British colonisers (Ganesh 2015; Johar 2016). Scholars argue that this reclamation effectively erases the Devadasis' practice by removing the sensuality inherent to the dance form, and repositions it as a means of exercising ascetic spirituality, which is seen as morally superior (Johar 2016). Some scholars further argue that this moral framework, widely understood to be a Brahmin one, actually stemmed from Christian puritanical ideals (Johar 2016).

A related area of controversy is the colonial hangover present in the dance form, and decolonisation as a response to this baggage (Banerji 2021; Ganesh 2015; Johar 2016; McCann 2019; Meduri 2008; O'Shea 2007; Ramnarine 2019). While some scholars assert that the Kalakshetra codification revolutionised the form, others argue that the colonial baggage of codification reproduces social inequalities (Ganesh 2015; Meduri 2008). Reflecting on more recent transformations of Bharathanaatyam as a form of "contemporary" dance, specifically in Singapore, academic scholarship demonstrates that Bharathanaatyam has often evolved in different ways in response to various factors. These changes can be categorised broadly as changes happening due to the evolution of *Cultural Tradition*, localisation of *National Identity,* and responses to *Global Political Economy*.

In relation to the constant evolution and transformation of *Cultural Tradition*, dance educators in Singapore follow particular styles or schools of thought that they grew up learning. These forms come with their own aesthetic guidelines and rules, though many defining characteristics are shared through the adherence to the principle Indian performance treatise: the Natyashastra (Banerji 2021). The general structure comprises three key elements: *abhinaya* (expression), *laya* (narratives conveyed through music or words), and *nritta* (pure dance comprising gestures and

footwork) (O'Shea 2003). *Nritya*, or "dramatic dance" (O'Shea 2003, 176), refers to the coming together of these elements to convey a narrative, often a religious one. Research shows that contemporary Bharathanaatyam is often characterised by its variance from these prescribed aesthetic and thematic norms (Chatterjea 2013). Contemporary Bharathanaatyam can thus also be characterised by agency, and the conscious decision to break from these prescriptions.

By stepping out of both class implications in traditional settings and nationalist implications in transnational settings, research suggests that the Bharathanaatyam dancer becomes a global citizen by looking at concepts outside of religion, culture and nationhood (O'Shea 2007). This opens the form to being used outside of its prescribed guidelines, as a secular aesthetic medium of expression (O'Shea 2003). Additionally, by moving away from the *guru shishya parampara*, where a student is guided by a single teacher or institution, dancers practising independently and/or transnationally bring various schools of thought together to create a new movement quality and vocabulary (Kedhar 2014).

Furthermore, contemporary Bharathanaatyam has evolved as a localised expression of *National Identity*. Research into the development of contemporary Bharathanaatyam in Singapore is limited mostly to its historical accounts. Due to these limitations, two patterns related to the key functions of Bharathanaatyam emerge: asserting primordial identity, and asserting national identity. In Singapore, as early as the 1970s, Indian dance—encompassing Bharathanaatyam and some South Indian folk styles—were co-opted as part of multicultural representation (Rama 2014; Yeoh 2019). Researchers also suggest that Singapore used art forms belonging to certain ethnic groups as a way to re-orientalise the country, thereby asserting hegemonic dominance over Western influences (Ooi 2005).

This may have contributed to the influx of Asian performing art forms taking centre stage as a means of performing nationalised values of unity and multiculturalism (Nambiar 2021). The idea of fusion and the interweaving of two or more dance forms, often those of other ethnic groups, was prevalent in Singapore at the time. During a time when Bharathanaatyam was largely passed down from one generation to another without active questioning by teachers from India (Nambiar 2021), the melding of different forms symbolised the coexistence of different cultures and the creation of a distinct national identity (Rama 2014). This idea of fusing art forms has persisted (Nambiar 2021), and now includes Western forms.

Bharathanaatyam in Singapore currently serves a few purposes (Rama 2014). Firstly, it is an expression of ethnic identity, both in its practice and performance. Secondly, over the last two decades, it has served as a way for the Indian diaspora to connect to their roots and stay in touch with their identity in a foreign land (Rama 2014). Other than being a mode of performance, Indian dance functions as a platform in which Singaporean Indians and new immigrants can convene and connect with one another (Iyengar and Smith 2020; Rama 2014). Indian children are introduced to Bharathanaatyam as young as two years old, through classes offered by companies such as Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Temple of Fine Arts, and Apsaras Arts, or through individual teachers operating in the heartlands (Rama 2014). Contemporary Bharathanaatyam can be seen as a natural extension of this performance of identities, as practitioners continue to negotiate their position within the local, the primordial, and the in-between.

Finally, contemporary Bharathanaatyam dance forms have evolved as a response to the *Global Political Economy*. From the restructuring of the art form known as

Sadir in response to colonial rule and the Indian nationalist movement (McCann 2019; Meduri 2008), to the adaptation of the art form by various Indian diaspora as a result of mass migration (Kedhar 2014; Nambiar 2021; Srinivasan 2012), Bharathanaatyam has been no stranger to changes in response to its circumstances, giving each notable period in Bharathanaatyam history some elements that were contemporary for its time. Global market flows necessitate rapid and exponential change for artists to stay relevant and acquire basic necessities for an art form's survival such as funding and space (Nambiar 2021). Bharathanaatyam is now also viewed through a capitalist lens, where practice is seen as labour and creation or production as a service (Kedhar 2014; Nambiar 2021; Srinivasan 2012). This is further cemented by local cultural policy delineating the arts as an industry and monetising artistic practice as commodified labour (Chong 2010; Hoe 2018; Kong 2000; Ooi 2010). Dancers are driven by an additional economic incentive to survive and stand out against the increasing competition for money and resources such as space (Chang and Mahadevan 2014). This shapes the dance landscape, as companies and individuals alike are more incentivised to adhere to funding guidelines and policy priorities to be profitable.

These academic factors help to understand the transformations of the Bharathanaatyam as a dance form from a broader global perspective. However, they fail to provide a full picture of the changes in the current choreographic processes of local dancers, the direct impact of cultural policy and urban context on Bharathanaatyam in Singapore. To address these knowledge gaps, this chapter adopts a three-dimensional framework to explore the functional changes in "contemporary" Bharathanaatyam from three interrelated perspectives: *Narratives*, *Aesthetic,* and *Form* (See Figure 7.1.). The following sections unpack each of these fundamental changes by sharing key findings from my research.
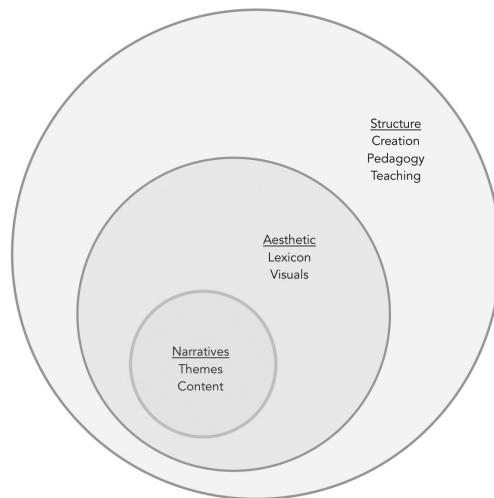


**Figure 6.1:** Changes in function of contemporary Bharathanaatyam. Source: Created by the author.

## Natya—The Narratives

The most commonly cited identifier of contemporary development was the evolution of themes. Namely, my

interview participants all agreed that the kinds of stories told using the form have been changing. The literature review identifies one primary function of Bharathanaatyam as the transmission of cultural and religious values. In the last two decades, this function has slowly shifted away from the unquestioning transmission of religious narratives towards a critical secularisation of Bharathanaatyam. One interpretation of secularisation is literal, in that practitioners are choosing to look past religious narratives. Another interpretation is to do with the shift away from artistic categorisation (i.e., not being limited by labels of genre or discipline), reframing the form as the practice of an art form rather than a craft. Though this is by no means a new development (Rajan 2012), that it has become more accepted in the mainstream reflects a change in Bharathanaatyam's core function towards more social storytelling.

For example, one of my respondents shared that he valued this critical examination of traditionally performed stories. He re-envisions well-known religious tales in his works, often through a different character's lens (IA C 2023). This reimagining may be seen as an effort to shed new light on subliminal values that may have been propagated by the story, and provide some commentary on certain cultural blind spots that may have emerged as a result of replicating routine repertoires unquestioningly. Reframing a known epic through a female protagonist's lens, for example, may accord the audience new insight on the agency of women in society (Chakraborti 2022). The shift in narratives may also come in the form of questioning the values taught in pedagogy and in the classroom. The very base text for Bharathanaatyam, the Natyashastra, reflects social inequalities of the time (Banerji 2021). As such, the mere choice to develop more rounded characters and stories instead of archetypes can be seen as contemporary development, as it reflects a current and relevant take on old stories.

Furthermore, contemporisation may also come in the form of adopting new narratives outside of literary, mythical, and religious canon, and creating new ones entirely. One reason for this shift is the changing sociopolitical landscape. There has been a reckoning in recent years with issues regarding the rights of various marginalised groups. Issues related to gender, class, and other social identity markers have risen to the forefront, and dance has increasingly moved towards discussing such pertinent social issues. Technology also contributes to the ready availability of knowledge about these sociopolitical issues. This may explain the rise in socially conscious works and practices. Recent proliferation of social justice movements has highlighted a need to critically re-evaluate long-standing traditions and the narratives within them. This is not necessarily a new development, but rather a newly visible one, in that these reframed narratives are becoming more prominent and less taboo.

There is also a move towards more abstract or nonlinear presentations of Bharathanaatyam, drawing from a central theme or concept, as opposed to the linear, emotive storytelling preferred by traditional Bharathanaatyam repertoires (more on this in the next section). Examples of more abstract concepts and themes that have been explored as productions in Singapore include architecture (Nirmanika by Apsaras Arts), time (Kaala Chakra by National University of Singapore Indian Dance), and identity (TranscenDance by Temple of Fine Arts).

One of my interviewees characterises this shift away from linear storytelling as "rhizomatic" (IA B 2023), referencing a non-linear thinking philosophy theorised by Deleuze and Guattari (Honan and Sellers 2006). Dance and movement lend themselves to more abstract, multiplicitous kinds of storytelling (Chatterjea 2013). The respondent suggests rhizomatic thinking in the sense that it allows the creator

more room for nuance and multiplicity, as compared to linear stories, which are usually from a fixed perspective. The trend of linearity of storytelling in Bharathanaatyam can likely be attributed to the dramatic precept of *natya*, stemming from the Natyashastra as a guide text broadly for performance rather than dance exclusively (Banerji 2021). The guiding principles of Bharathanaatyam as adopted from the Natyashastra are informed by rules more suited to the idea of "performance" rather than exclusively to dance. Thus, removing it from its linear narrative context and extrapolating movement qualities to present in a rhizomatic fashion may be considered a way in which Bharathanaatyam has contemporary usage. This opens a world of possibilities for practitioners to rethink didactic storytelling and move towards more exploratory forms of meaning creation.

## Nritta—The Aesthetic

There has been a notable change in the aesthetics of Bharathanaatyam. What has largely been practised as a linear, arborescent form is becoming more rhizomatic in nature, notably influenced by individual practitioners and their embodied experiences. This is perhaps most visible in its aesthetic evolutions, as creative paths become more convergent and unique. I consider myself an anomaly when it comes to my experience with Bharathanaatyam. I have almost always had the freedom to approach dance choreography and performance from various angles, without much stigma or judgement from my family, teachers, and peers. Within the classroom, however, there has always been an outright expectation of "cleanness" from my pedagogues. This is often with explicit reference to the Kalakshetra style, and as one of my interviewees shared, "extreme rectilinear" is the standard with little to no room for individual adaptation and interpretation (IA B 2023). I find myself having to reconcile these sometimes-contradictory expectations as a dancer,

wanting to be technically proficient, yet creative and authentic in my expression. I, like many dancers in Singapore today, am consciously negotiating these aesthetic boundaries.

First, and perhaps the most commonly attributed identifier of contemporary Bharathanaatyam, is the influence of dance forms such as ballet, modern, and hip hop, more commonly termed "fusion". As seen in the literature review, fusion or "multicultural" dance has been prevalent since Singapore gained independence, with Bharathanaatyam creators frequently collaborating with practitioners of other ethnic dance forms. This practice continues even today, with a much more community focus. Grassroots organisations such as community centres and People's Association continue to encourage multicultural dance as a marker of national identity and harmony. The concept of fusion has also grown globally with the rise of social media, where fusion covers of popular songs—often taking influence from Western lyrical and hip hop forms—are extremely commonplace. What makes contemporary Bharathanaatyam as such, however, is the blurring of borders delineating Bharathanaatyam and the other form(s), allowing for much more fluidity.

This may happen when creators draw from Bharathanaatyam methodology to do more artistically secular work, using aesthetic principles such as *rasa*, or employing lexicon such as the codified gestures, rhythm, and footwork, in tandem with other movement forms. This is also increasingly removed from the multiculturalist lens through which much of early Singaporean fusion operated, and is becoming more about negotiating or breaking boundaries, aesthetic synergy, and the intentional development of a new movement lexicon. A known example in this regard is Maya Dance Theatre (MDT), for its creative process drawing primarily from Bharathanaatyam, but whose end products are termed "contemporary". This is partly due to embodied practices of

its dancers, who each bring in their own training and somatic knowledge, ultimately creating work that is informed by Bharathanaatyam and other forms they have been exposed to. It could be argued that MDT represents an evolutionary path of contemporary Bharathanaatyam, one that draws from the aesthetic principles and lexicon of Bharathanaatyam to create works which are ultimately relevant in modern Singaporean and Southeast Asian society, thereby enriching the form of Bharathanaatyam.

Another evolutionary path for contemporary Bharathanaatyam is the move from exclusively arborescent styles or *banis* towards convergent or new unique styles. Through innovations in existing styles (e.g., explorations with tempo, dynamics, and quality of movement), we see developments in Bharathanaatyam not specific to any one *bani*, or innovations within stylistic niches. The shift from strict adherence to any one particular pedagogy towards the sharing of different styles may lend creators a much broader expanse of ways to choreograph, giving the form more dynamism and relevance in an ever-shifting hyperglobal environment. With particular regard to innovations within the visual Bharathanaatyam aesthetic itself, Interviewee B discussed the potential for critical exploration of the quality of movement, illustrating that even varying the dynamics could create room for new interpretation of repertoires or choreographic material (2023). This also ties into the discussion about heterogeneity in dancing bodies and allows for more accessibility of the art form itself, without subjecting different types of bodies to a harmful standardised synchronicity.

Finally, the use of Bharathanaatyam lexicon purely for its aesthetic value is another way in which the form is evolving contemporarily. This also furthers the thematic evolution of moving Bharathanaatyam from purely religious and spiritual settings into a more artistic sphere, to be utilised

as a medium for artistic expression. One contributing factor for these shifts may be the changing interests of audiences and patrons. Bharathanaatyam is often categorised as "traditional arts", especially with regards to policy and funding. Recent reports from the National Arts Council (2022, 2023) show that revitalising audienceship for "traditional" arts is a priority in policy, and one way to achieve this is through innovating within the form.

## Nritya—The Form

The last major way that Bharathanaatyam has evolved is in its structure. Both the changing narrative and aesthetic functions of Bharathanaatyam contribute to the larger structural changes happening now, making it contemporary. The changes in narratives and aesthetics in turn affect the values of pedagogies and classrooms, as they reflect shifts in priorities of what is to be taught and how. Structural changes refer to pedagogy, methods of transmission, and the way Bharathanaatyam is created. The dominant social and pedagogical structures have long influenced the stories being told, and vice versa, as they reflect the priorities of that time.

One way in which pedagogy may be contemporised is that it has become more sensitive to anatomy. The emphasis on uniformity and adherence to a particular style has arguably fostered a harmful sense of exclusion. A change that has been more visible recently is the diversity of dancers, shifting away from an "ideal" dancer and becoming more open to drawing in people across genders, ethnicities, and abilities. Uniformity has long been a goal of a classroom, where the teacher shapes their students into clean, precise, and systematic replicators, rather than encouraging individuality. This sentiment is commonly echoed amongst Bharathanaatyam dancers, who are prone to joint injuries or chronic pain, likely

as a result of the strain that uniformity took on them. Structural positions such as the *aramandi* or half-sitting position is often encouraged to be performed as a full 180° turnout, which may not be compatible with all bodies. However, the emphasis on prescribed requirements based on styles or schools of thought, often enforced by the teacher and/or choreographer, leads dancers to have to overcompensate and push past their body's natural limits. This leads to injury and chronic pain and deters practitioner longevity.

Fortunately, pedagogy has evolved in response to the diversity of bodies, and to the body's own natural capabilities. Through contemporisation, pedagogy and teaching mechanisms also become more inclusive, accommodating a much wider variety of dancers across genders, ethnicities, social class, and ability. Initiatives to support body positivity, combat ageism, and promote sensitive teaching are growing in Singapore through organisations such as Mandala Arts. Singapore's postcolonial context may contribute to the contemporisation of pedagogy and structure. Related to decolonisation, there remains an urgent need to de-Brahmanise Bharathanaatyam and decentre it from certain ideological principles that may be homogenous, exclusionary, and even a historically inaccurate reflection of Bharathanaatyam practice (Johar 2016). In Singapore, caste barriers are not as predominant, likely because ethnic identity markers are highlighted over caste. This allows people from across different castes to enter the classroom at similar standings. This introduces more caste diversity into the Bharathanaatyam classroom, thus taking away from Brahmanical dominance and introduces new perspectives into the teaching of the form.

Regardless, the need for uniformity and synchronicity still persists as the norm in most major structured teaching mechanisms (IA A 2022; IA B 2023; IA C 2023). Some

practitioners have a positive take on this, suggesting that a common baseline can be helpful for dancers from across different training backgrounds to ground themselves in for collaborative productions (IA C 2023). Others are more sympathetic to the heterogeneity of dancing bodies, suggesting that difference—particularly, a lack of uniformity—could be an intentional aesthetic choice (IA A 2022; IA B 2023). What was common amongst my interviewees, however, was the acceptance that taste and aesthetic sensibilities are subjective, a distinct development from the unquestioning insistence on uniformity that would otherwise have been an expected norm.

There has also been a notable shift towards more decentralised transmissions of Bharathanaatyam. One common response from the interviews was that the practice of Bharathanaatyam was shifting from a purely classroom and instructor-led approach, to one that was more fluid and rhizomatic (IA A 2022; IA B 2023; IA C 2023). In the classroom itself, students are gaining more independence, and are thus able to negotiate more agency within their respective classrooms. Where questions were once discouraged and unquestioning conformity enforced as the norm, students are now able to be more analytical from the very beginning. This changes the teacher-student dynamic from that of blind obedience to one of mutual learning and respect. This decentralises learning in that students are able to negotiate their own paths with their teachers, and ask for more tailored instruction and attention, rather than uncritically replicating what is passed down. This may be attributed to the fast-paced Singaporean society in which academics and corporate careers precede the arts, which in most cases are pursued as a hobby or freelance (CNA 2022).

Creation is also becoming more decentralised, moving outside of classrooms and into more independent spaces. A notable development is that dancers from different institutions and backgrounds are coming together to create new works outside their own schools. This provides the opportunity for different stylistic fusions and independent learning for dancers involved, who in turn apply these in their own institutional learning (IA C 2023). Two recognisable pioneers of this decentralisation are Bharathanaatyam-trained practitioners Kavitha Krishnan and Ruby Jayaseelan, who use the form as one of many mediums informing their practices. In their independent practices and collaborations with individuals and organisations from all different disciplines, Bharathanaatyam moves beyond the label of "traditional arts" and becomes a means to an end rather than the end itself. Collectives such as TATTVA and VK Arts are also examples of groups of dancers who come together from across a variety of different Bharathanaatyam-based backgrounds to create independent work. Initiatives such as the Indian dance open call by Esplanade allow for dancers to collaborate across different schools for mentorship and performance opportunities (2022).

The decentralisation of creation away from the classroom setting also gives more dancers the freedom to explore creatively and treat Bharathanaatyam as a means of expression, in addition to or instead of only learning set choreography and repertoires. Decentralisation opens up more possibilities for exploration using Bharathanaatyam (IA A 2022; IA B 2023; IA C 2023). This is where we see collectives and independent artists in Singapore truly collaborating across borders to expand the body of knowledge and work, with new insights gained from minds outside the walls of their classroom (IA C 2023). Contemporary Bharathanaatyam then serves as a common language in which practitioners and artists communicate but are able to expand upon using other means of expression. This decentralisation also fosters

critical conversations between people from various institutions and pedagogies, allowing them to compare and contrast experiences and decide independently on the values they find important to them.

## Conclusion

Contemporary Bharathanaatyam functions largely as a response to broader sociopolitical developments, whether that is through reclaiming agency in practice, or through using it as a tool to respond to greater circumstances. Bharathanaatyam becomes contemporary when it proactively and reactively evolves to find its place in the world. All the changes could be attributed to the global political economy. With the growth of technology and media, particularly social media, access to information about social issues has undoubtedly skyrocketed, especially in Singapore. With this knowledge, it becomes harder to ignore overt and covert inequalities present in the very framework of Bharathanaatyam.

Uniting all kinds of changes in the functions of contemporary Bharathanaatyam is the idea that practitioners gain more ownership over the form as a means of expression. For some, this means reclaiming agency that they were barred from before. For others like myself, it means that we deconstruct and democratise systems which were designed for the benefit of some groups of people over others. There is an understandable hesitance amongst many practitioners in Singapore from all generations to question widely accepted narratives related to the "purity" of the form. Regardless, it is one we must push through, to have open and honest conversations with one another about the more insidious narratives perpetuated by our unquestioning acceptance of seemingly innocent norms.

This must begin with destigmatising the word "critical" and being open to questioning tradition. Instead of aiming to keep Bharathanaatyam *alive*, perhaps we can aim to keep Bharathanaatyam *relevant*. To do so, we can collectively deconstruct dominant narratives about purity, which stems from colonial, classist, and sexist value judgments, and embrace change. This chapter scratches the surface of the significance of contemporary Bharathanaatyam in Singapore. I hope this will serve as a starting point for further conversations about the unique evolution of the local Bharathanaatyam practices. For example, future research could have a more detailed look at the perspectives of self-appointed custodians of traditions, who may offer more insight into the hurdles that prevent Bharathanaatyam practitioners from deconstructing dominant narratives.

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CHAPTER 7

# Carnatic Fusion:
# Towards a New Sound

*Jyothsna Akilan*

## Introduction

Carnatic music is a well-established traditional music system from South India (Morris 2004), but its practice has constantly evolved over the years. The evolution has been closely linked to the change in the patronage of the art form (Higgins 1976), along with the advent of globalisation, which led to the form welcoming musical influences from around the world (Ranganathan 2021). The term 'fusion' has been adopted to define this emerging practice in Carnatic music, where barriers are broken and global musical influences are welcomed (Hornabrook 2018). The incorporation of international music influences is, however, not new in Carnatic music. This can be attributed to the inclusion of the violin, originally a Western instrument, into the ensemble of a Carnatic concert; the inclusion of the *Nottuswara Sahityam*, commonly known as the English notes, into the pedagogy of Carnatic music (Durga 2012); and the fusion of Carnatic music and Jazz from the 1950s onwards (Kalmanovitch 2005).

Carnatic music originated in South India, around the regions of the state of Tamil Nadu and its capital city, Chennai. It is, however, practised and performed throughout India as well as in diasporic communities around the world (Morris 2004). What distinguishes Chennai's practice of Carnatic fusion is that it is primarily performed by musicians trained in Carnatic music and contains elements of the genre. In addition to the musicians, both practices in Chennai share performance spaces and audiences. In such a situation, there

is bound to be friction between both practices, as Carnatic fusion complicates the idea of the "middle" while remaining in Chennai, which is known to be the epicentre of Carnatic music (Higgins 2013). As such, many of these tensions in Chennai arise from the genre having rigid boundaries in relation to structure, aesthetics, and values standardised by the Music Academy, Chennai. The practice of this traditional form is also deeply rooted in the values of devotion and spirituality (Ranganathan 2021). These implications impose unsaid pressure on practitioners, necessitating a constant negotiation between adhering to tradition and welcoming novelty in the form's practice. There may be different dichotomies in the practice of fusion music in different regions, but this chapter will only be focussing on the dichotomies in the practice of fusion in Chennai.

I have adopted a qualitative methodology for this research through semi-structured interviews of four musicians based in Chennai. I used purposive and criteria-based sampling to select interview participants with the following criteria. Firstly, participants must be practitioners of both Carnatic music and Carnatic fusion. Secondly, participants must have more than ten years of performing experience. Thirdly, participants must have collaborated in both Carnatic music and Carnatic fusion in Chennai. From this selection criteria, I identified four musicians to be part of the study. The in-depth perspectives of these musicians are central to this research, as they play a vital role in constantly navigating and negotiating their artistic responsibility of upholding tradition as Carnatic musicians yet fuelling their artistic agency to cater to changing audience preferences (Higgins 2013). The interviews were conducted virtually over Google Meet owing to geographical limitations. They covered the following topics: the characteristics, notions, and challenges of Carnatic fusion in Chennai.

At this juncture, it is important that I acknowledge the socio-political tensions surrounding Carnatic music in Chennai. The Carnatic music genre is known to have been "revived" by the Brahmins, an elite community in South India, whose efforts to relocate it from court patronage to the public domain fundamentally altered its structure, form, and practice (Subramanian 1999). As a researcher and practitioner of Carnatic music from the Brahmin community in Chennai, I have attempted to present my findings and arguments without drawing attention to the subjectivity of my class. Rather, I believe that my knowledge and experiences as a practitioner have helped me effectively analyse the data provided by the interviewees, whose responses primarily shape the findings of this research study.

Although there are dichotomies in the socio-political factors affecting the original form, this chapter focuses only on the dichotomies that exist in the current practice of fusion. The propositions of this study are thus focused on the characteristics, intentions, and challenges prevalent in the practice of Carnatic fusion in Chennai from 2013 to 2023. Before the chapter uncovers the fusion of the Carnatic music focusing on these three dichotomies, the next section conceptualises fusion music in relation to Carnatic practices.

## Carnatic Fusion Music

An extensive body of academic literature discusses the evolution of Carnatic music practice (Higgins 1976; Subramanian 1999; Subramanian 2006; Balasubramanian 2009; Ramanan 2014; and Ranganathan 2021). Although several years apart, a few common themes that emerge from the review provide a fundamental basis for understanding the existing dichotomies in the practice of Carnatic fusion in Chennai. Much of the findings emphasise that the introduction of Western influences is not new in Carnatic music. As

Chennai is a former British colony, the evolution of Carnatic music has always been subject to Western scrutiny and ideas of modernity. It is important to note that the inclusion of these Western elements was not necessarily called 'fusion' and was integrated exclusively into the practice of the original form over the years. With respect to the socio-cultural values associated with the genre, the literature highlights devotion and spirituality as two main pillars of the form's revived practice.

The term 'fusion music' has been discussed synonymously with world music (Barendregt and Zanten 2002; Bel and Bel 2008) and hybrid intercultural collaborations (Wren and Vaidyanathan 2020). It has also been defined as an intentional mixture (Sutton 2002) that popularises the traditional genre (Dorter 2004; Hirji 2005). As for fusion in the realm of Indian classical music, Hornabrook (2018) and Higgins (2013) have provided critical insights that are significant to this research. The former argues that while fusion incorporates individual creativity, sought-after music styles, and global music influences, the process mainly involves fusing sounds that are common across the genres.

The features of fusion music across the reviewed literature are inconsistent and have proven to be elusive. The ambiguity surrounding the general meaning of the term is also evident in the lack of discussion about specific constituents of fusion music and the varying degrees of their involvement, which makes fusion a difficult term to define. For the purpose of this research, I have chosen to adopt the definition and features provided by Higgins (2013), as it is specific to the practice of fusion in Chennai. In his view, the distinguishing feature of fusion in Chennai is that it is largely performed by trained Carnatic musicians. According to his research, fusion in Chennai comprises original compositions, an absence of devotional and spiritual associations, and a largely non-vocal and instrumental sound (Higgins 2013, 5). These three

features of Carnatic fusion have given me an insight into the practice in Chennai, and helped me frame my arguments in the subsequent sections of the chapter.

For fusion music in general, Sutton (2002) and Hirji (2005) identify its intention to provide listeners with an opportunity to connect with their heritage, as well as offer better monetary benefits for performers. For notions of fusion in Indian classical music, Manohar (2008) and Pradhan (2004) indicate the need to appeal to a diverse range of listeners by presenting varied programming. Clarke (2013) suggests that a resistance to tradition can spur the creativity of performers, while simultaneously helping them to retain their individual artistic creativity. This point is also discussed in Kamanovitch's study (2005) using empirical evidence. What is lacking unanimously in these studies, except Kalmanovitch's, is the empirical evidence to support and examine the authors' claims. Furthermore, the scholarship reviewed also demonstrates an inconsistency of literature from 2013 postulating the notions of fusion music, more so within Carnatic music.

A number of studies have discussed criticisms of fusion music and its impact on the authenticity, identity, and purity of the original genre. These broadly include a compromise of the familiarity with the traditional genre (Dorter 2004; Sutton 2011), as well as the challenges faced by fusion musicians to gain acceptance since they occupy an inconclusive middle space (Hirji 2005). In relation to criticisms on incorporating fusion in Indian Classical music, authors particularly address dilution of the traditional form (Dogra 2018), the loss of livelihoods of classical musicians due to diminishing popularity (Sharma 2018), and the need to view Carnatic music exclusive of the associated religious, spiritual, and rigorous discipline system in its fusion practice (Mani 2017).

The aforementioned body of literature discussing fusion music in general and fusion music in the space of Indian classical music has been pivotal in devising my research goal and interview questions, as well as in analysing my findings in the following sections of the chapter. However, the points raised from the existing literature focused predominantly on fusion music in general. The only extensive study on Carnatic fusion was authored by Niko Higgins in 2013, who takes a sociological perspective on how Carnatic fusion mirrors the tensions surrounding modernity in India. Similarly, most of the other literature provide generalised arguments about Carnatic and fusion music, and most were published over a decade ago. This chapter, therefore, aims to fill this gap of inconsistency in research by evidencing the relevance of the reviewed literature and exploring dichotomies in the practice of Carnatic fusion in relation to *Characteristics*, *Notions* and *Challenges*. The next sections proceed to unpack these dichotomies, drawing on the key research findings.

## Dichotomy in Characteristics: Art Form vs Performance

The term 'Carnatic fusion', itself a dichotomy, poses confusion related to what the term 'Carnatic' in the practice of Carnatic fusion refers to. Some of my respondents brought up the juxtaposition of art form and performance in response to this question about the attributes of Carnatic music found in Carnatic fusion (MB 2023; MD 2023). In the words of one interviewee: "What we do in Carnatic fusion is just repackage something that already exists. Carnatic music as an art form is constant. I think there is always a misunderstanding that the performance is an art form. The performance is, however, each artist's individual interpretation of the art form" (MB 2023). Another respondent took a similar stance: "It is important to understand that art form is different from performance. So, fusion is the by-product of artistic expression" (MD 2023).

When further probed regarding what is "constant" in Carnatic music, MB (2023) brought up the "fundamental Carnatic value", referring to *raga,* a melodic framework exclusive to Indian Classical music, and *gamaka,* a method of note oscillation specific to Carnatic music. His argument about the *raga* being unique to the identity of Carnatic music is also evidenced by Subramanian (2006) as being the conclusive binding factor of what is unique to Carnatic music as an art form. In addition to bringing up the dichotomy between art form and performance, it is interesting to note how both musicians also foreground the role played by artistic agency in determining which aspects of the art form are carried forward during the performance of Carnatic fusion (MB 2023; MD 2023). What constitutes the "fusion" in Carnatic fusion, other than the inclusion of Western instruments and intonations (MB 2023) therefore cannot be defined. This ambiguity in the inability to determine fixed constituents of fusion is what distinguishes the art form of Carnatic music from the performing of Carnatic fusion, and is the main dichotomy in the characteristics of the latter.

In addition to the role played by individual artistic agency in framing the characteristics of Carnatic fusion, respondents also highlighted the fluidity and flexibility of the art form as advantageous in their practice of fusion (MB 2023; MC 2023; MD 2023). Some referred to the dynamic quality of the art form, which allows musicians to not dilute the art form, but rather gives the composition or performance aspect a new identity (MB 2023). Others pointed out how specific compositions demand a certain musical rigour in execution due to the rigid musical structures and emphasis on the number of repetitions, as per the standard concert structure. These boundaries still exist for some compositions, and musicians purposefully choose pieces with more lyrical and melodic value for their fusion practice, to cater to their artistic freedom (MC 2023). MD (2023) also explained that artists

and audiences in Chennai are conditioned to accept a certain hallmark of how Carnatic music should be presented, which could also be attributed to the existing standards of what is deemed Carnatic music in Chennai.

These discussions evidence how the art form's perceived aesthetic sensibilities are crafted by the Music Academy in Chennai. It plays an integral role in the understanding of what constitutes the art form and performance and could even be argued to be one of the main reasons for the contestation for including novelty in the original form. The calibre set by The Academy placed specific emphasis on melodic segments, shorter concert duration, the advent of medium-paced songs, the use of percussion instruments, and the repertoire of compositions that had to be sung (Subramanian 1999). The universal competence of the art form and its integration with the performance of Carnatic fusion, on the contrary, paves the way for a three-way win where the artist is able to exercise creative agency: the art form, for the most part, remains "undiluted", and audiences are presented with a refreshing version of an existing traditional art form that they are able to enjoy (MD 2023).

This quality of the art form is discussed by Higgins (2013) in his research. He postulates that the universal competence and fluidity of Carnatic music as a genre has allowed musicians to experiment with fusion, while adhering to tradition, owing to its strong technical virtuosity with deep and varied fundamentals. Carnatic fusion, in this instance, could be argued to not necessarily threaten the identity and authenticity of the original art form, as opposed to certain studies in fusion music that claim otherwise (Sutton 2011; Connell and Chris Gibson 2004). What is "authentic" or "pure" in Carnatic music can hence be hypothesised in this context to mean the *raga* and *gamaka* system unique to the art form, as well as its universal competency. As such, it could be argued that

Carnatic fusion in Chennai does not necessarily challenge the authenticity, identity, or purity of Carnatic music.

## Dichotomies in Notions: Music vs Sound

The inclination towards the pursuit of Carnatic fusion for the majority of the respondents included their curiosity to explore new sounds (MB 2023; MC 2023; MD 2023). Some asserted that they are "constantly excited to discover more soundscapes that are unique but within the spectrum of Carnatic music." The intent of Carnatic fusion is to repackage the existing music into a different sound, using influences and elements from other styles (MB 2023). Others expressed their fascination with the new sound yielded by Carnatic fusion, which also garners appreciation from diverse audiences. Finally, some musicians shared that their pursuit of Carnatic fusion stems from the intention to experiment with various sound palettes, and that fusion music is actually the fusing of different sounds (MD 2023).

In this instance, the unanimous intention of the respondents to create new sounds through fusion music ties in with the definition of fusion music provided by Sutton (2002), Hirji (2005), and Hornabrook (2018), whose idea of fusion music is the coming together of sounds from different genres, as opposed to the genres as a whole. However, Higgins (2013) points out that Carnatic fusion in Chennai only refers to instrumental and non-vocal sounds. By contrast, it is interesting to see the current practice in Chennai involving non-instrumental sounds as well. For example, MC (2023) is a vocalist who is currently a part of the fusion soundscape in Chennai. The key intention of contemporary musicians is to create new sounds and ultimately new aural experiences, attracting diverse audiences to Carnatic fusion.

All respondents shared that, in their music practices, they aim to create different aural experiences through Carnatic fusion for audiences in Chennai. (MA 2023; MB 2023; MD 2023). Carnatic music is always associated with a very serious devotional kind of listening which can be deeply personal and spiritual and may differ from person to person. MA (2023) suggests a breakthrough in the way music is being created, performed, and consumed, which means that musicians and audiences should be open-minded to how they listen to Carnatic fusion.

By stating the need to break the notion of Carnatic music being associated with certain performance contexts, MA (2023) refers to the first dichotomy that exists in Chennai in the perception of art form and performance. For him, the notion of Carnatic fusion is to deviate from that mindset prevalent in Chennai, and tailor fresh approaches to listening to Carnatic music through the practice of fusion. MB (2023) expanded on the aim to create experiences by identifying the need to appeal to younger audiences in Chennai.

The emerging avenues for Carnatic fusion as identified by the musicians are cultural events at colleges, as well as resto-bars and pubs (MA 2023; MB 2023; MC 2023; MD 2023). These avenues indicate that a younger audience demographic is listening to Carnatic fusion in Chennai. The musicians further state that these avenues are still growing, but rather slowly due to the cultural stigma surrounding the art form (2023). This shows that despite the art form's rigid religious and spiritual associations (Ranganathan 2021), the practice of fusion in Chennai is moving away from the intrinsic values associated with Carnatic music. In this instance, the argument ties in with the notion of fusion postulated by the author Mani, stating how the Carnatic musicians need to view the genre as exclusive of the associated religious, spiritual, and rigorous discipline system when adopted in its fusion practice (2017).

This section shares three important illuminating insights. First, the idea of what constitutes the "sounds" of Carnatic fusion in Chennai has evolved since 2013. The current practice in Chennai has expanded to include non-instrumental sounds as well. Second, the notion of Carnatic fusion to create new experiences has the potential to lower barriers to entry to Carnatic music, specifically for the younger generation, who have rigid perceptions of the practice and performance of Carnatic music being solely associated with devotional and spiritual contexts. Finally, the main intention of Carnatic fusion is to create new sounds, which is a compelling addition to existing notions discussed in academic literature. This further illustrates how the notions of fusion music, in general, have progressed over the last decade. During the last ten years, the notion for Carnatic fusion has thus changed drastically to go beyond the conservation of "traditional" practices, to the creation of new sounds.

## Dichotomy in Challenges: Replacement vs Reinvention

Respondents discussed that audiences in Chennai are more educated about Carnatic music than any other city in India or the world, leading to difficulty in gaining acceptance for Carnatic fusion (MA 2023; MC 2023). This insight links back to both the dichotomies discussed earlier, as to how criticism of Carnatic fusion is largely tied to the discrepancy between the understanding of art form and performance, as well as how Carnatic fusion as a sound could also open up the practice to wider audiences who actually appreciate it.

Many of the challenges also arise from audiences fearing that Carnatic fusion is "replacing" Carnatic music as a whole (MB 2023; MD 2023). In relation to reinvention over replacement, MB (2023) shared how Carnatic fusion is not a replacement for Carnatic music but can be approached as a

new layer: an added dimension or extension to Carnatic music. Performing spaces and practices of both Carnatic music and Carnatic fusion are co-shared and coexist in the cultural, physical, and educational space. Interestingly, interviewees suggest that many audiences may be threatened by the emergence of the new sound (MB 2023, MD 2023). Other respondents added that the practice of Carnatic fusion is seen as a threat because it is a new format. However, interview findings emphasised the possibility of the coexistence of both these practices in Chennai. MD (2023) elaborated that the practice of fusion does not replace Carnatic music. Furthermore, he suggested that Carnatic fusion "does not need to exist even as a genre" (MD 2023). Carnatic fusion musicians understand music, sound, and instrumentation beyond closed definitions and cultural borders.

Previous discussion on what constitutes the "Carnatic" in Carnatic fusion under the first key finding can be reiterated at this juncture to argue that there is not necessarily a dilution or erosion of the art form when musicians pursue fusion music in Chennai. Fusion is an additional avenue and the assignment of a newer identity—what might be called "reinvention" (MB 2023). It can also be argued that the performance structure of Carnatic music too does not fall short of innovation. Experiments on bringing novelty to the existing format of Carnatic music can be seen in Chennai as well.

For example, T.M. Krishna, a popular and well-established Carnatic musician in Chennai, is known for his earnest endeavours to make the genre more "inclusive" by shifting the performance context of Carnatic music from music halls in the city to public places such as beaches, buses, railway platforms, and other open-air venues to unite different communities together (Tilak 2017). This could now pose a new question as to whether the works of T.M. Krishna could also be considered as Carnatic fusion, as it attempts to

strip away the spiritual and religious values associated with the form and is performed in public spaces for people of all socio-economic classes to engage with. Krishna, however, does not call himself a "fusion musician". Rather, he identifies himself as a "Carnatic vocalist" who uses art to propel social change (Krishna, n.d.). He wishes to address issues that pertain to Carnatic music, as opposed to fusion, and involve the understanding and analysis of prevalent socio-political tensions. While an in-depth analysis of the socio-political issues inherent in the traditional form is beyond the scope of this research, I bring up this example to show that there is simultaneous innovation in the performance structure of the practice of Carnatic music in Chennai as well.

Another challenge for these discussions is that while fusion in Chennai draws audiences unfamiliar with Carnatic music into the space, perceiving fusion as Carnatic music poses a major challenge. MB (2023) acknowledges that this is not within the control of the artists, and the best they can do is adhere to the "fundamental values of Carnatic music" as much as possible in their practice of fusion music. Preconceived notions of audiences in Chennai not only give rise to the dichotomy between replacement and reinvention of the art form, but also incite tensions between the coexistence and confusion between both practices. To elaborate, both Carnatic music and Carnatic fusion have co-existed all these years (Higgins 2013), and continue to coexist as two unique practices despite sharing audiences and performance spaces in Chennai. Carnatic musicians like T.M. Krishna in Chennai include novelty in the practice of the original genre too, and endeavour to lower socio-political tensions. Yet the practice of fusion remains distinct, the main factor being that its sound includes Western intonations.

Carnatic fusion in Chennai occupies the liminal third space amongst the more popular and established practices of Carnatic music and film music in Chennai (MA 2023; MB 2023). His response supports previous studies in Carnatic fusion in Chennai by Hirji (2005), who discusses that the reason for the ambiguity surrounding fusion music, in general, is due to it being neither here nor there; as well as Higgins (2013), who argues that in Chennai specifically, the practice of Carnatic fusion is overshadowed by Carnatic music, as well as film music, both of which are much more popular and established.  Both in the current practices of fusion music in Chennai as well as in the earlier practices a decade ago, Carnatic fusion struggles to find its niche and identity. Carnatic fusion has occupied its liminal third space for over ten years. This explains why many musicians in Chennai do not solely take it up as their career.

Furthermore, Carnatic fusion bands in Chennai such as IndoSoul (IYER, n.d.) and Staccato Live (Staccato, n.d.), perform cover versions of film songs in addition to the "reinterpretation" of Carnatic music compositions. This could also be attributed to the fact that Carnatic fusion is still finding its voice in Chennai. Hence, releasing or performing film songs as part of their band repertoire serves as the bands' strategy to offer an entry point for listeners of film music to be eventually drawn into the band's Carnatic fusion pieces as well. In terms of Carnatic music, Musician C (2023) talks about how advantageous Carnatic fusion is in expanding the audience base for his own Carnatic music practice. Both the above examples call attention to the fact that artists are trying to tap into the established avenues of Carnatic music and film music to draw audiences for their own Carnatic fusion.

Preconceived notions of audiences with respect to expectations and the inability to shift along with the emergence of Carnatic fusion are still prevalent in Chennai, despite the

indication of a slow but sure growth of a niche audience for Carnatic fusion. While the fight for a unique identity poses difficulties, artists can also use this struggle to attract diverse audiences for their own Carnatic music concerts.

## Conclusion

Fusion in Carnatic music has been around for a long time and has gone through various stages of experimentation through the decades. Globalisation and the advent of technology have led to increased access to music styles from around the world, providing opportunities for Carnatic musicians to adapt multiple influences into their artistic practices. With every new collaboration, the technical virtuosity of the musicians advances, resulting in newer interpretations and innovations in the practice of Carnatic fusion. Today, Carnatic fusion is more than just a marriage of Carnatic music with other musical genres, instruments, and styles. Its ethos lies in the creation of a new sound and the creation of new experiences for audiences in Chennai. It may be called Carnatic fusion since the training and background of musicians in Chennai are rooted in Carnatic music, but the ultimate outcome transcends the boundaries of genres, styles, and practices, and is a journey toward discovering new soundscapes.

The findings of the research study indicate that the characteristics of Carnatic fusion are mainly contested in Chennai due to discrepancies in the understanding of what constitutes the art form and its practice. The practice of fusion in Chennai adheres to the intonational factors distinct to Carnatic music, and therefore does not necessarily challenge the authenticity and identity of the original form. The current notion of Carnatic fusion in Chennai to pursue a new sound also lowers the barriers of entry to Carnatic music, specifically to cater to younger audiences who are constantly seeking new forms of engagement. The key challenge for the practice is

its existence in a liminal third space. Carnatic fusion music is still finding its niche in Chennai due to the more established practices of film music and Carnatic music in the city. Despite the emergence of newer avenues for Carnatic fusion, creating a unique identity is still a challenge for the practice.

The limitation of this study is that it only explores the dichotomies in practice using in-depth perspectives from a very small number of interviewees. Future research could explore dichotomies of the socio-political environments affecting the practice, using mixed methodology and on-site observation of practices in Chennai. An additional uncontrollable factor is that the results yielded by four interviewees cannot be generalised to represent the Carnatic fusion scene in Chennai as a whole. In spite of its limitations, the study has proved useful in identifying relevant tensions surrounding the current practices of Carnatic music and Carnatic fusion in Chennai. As the practice and performance of Carnatic fusion develops to create new sounds and applications, further research could be conducted on the musical therapeutic potential of Carnatic fusion in non-arts disciplines, such as neuroscience and psychology.

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