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Pop-Culture Reimagined Folklore: Interactive Educational Pedagogy for Cultural Empathy & Moral Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Traditional folklore holds profound moral and cultural value, still traditional transmission methods fail to engage digital-native learners, creating a disconnect from cultural heritage. POP-LORE addresses this gap by combining modern visual re-interpretations with interactive digital technology to enhance cultural empathy and moral literacy in contemporary education. The innovation transforms classic folklore figures such as Bota, Penanggalan, and the seven princesses of Ulek Mayang into relatable pop-culture posters integrated with Web-based Augmented Reality (WebAR) and gamified moral-reflection toolkits. By subverting traditional "fearsome monster" tropes into relatable modern roles such as tailors, rock stars, and students, POP-LORE reduces emotional resistance and fosters critical thinking about empathy, anti-bullying, and ethical behaviour. The novelty lies in its pioneering design framework and creative guidelines, which provide a structured methodology for students and creative industry professionals to systematically deconstruct traditional folklore and re-imagine it into contemporary visual posters. By bridging cultural heritage with modern pop-culture aesthetics, this framework converts abstract mythologies into accessible, market-ready visual assets. Enhanced by a "phygital" (physical-digital) delivery system, it pairs fine-art adaptations with WebAR overlays that require no application downloads, offering interactive storyboards, dialect audio, and moral reflection quizzes directly from the physical print. POP-LORE offers high commercialization potential across educational institutions, design agencies, museums, and cultural tourism sectors as both a professional ideation tool and a scalable gallery-walk kit. By modernising heritage preservation through cross-disciplinary art, technology, and ethics, POP-LORE establishes an inclusive, future-ready pedagogical tool that transforms static classroom walls into immersive, value-driven learning environments for secondary and tertiary educational ecosystems.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and digitally driven society, traditional intangible cultural heritage faces significant threats of marginalization among digital-native generations, specifically Generation Z and Generation Alpha [10,13]. Traditional folklore carries essential historical, ethical, and socio-cultural values; however, conventional pedagogical delivery methods relying on static textbooks, passive classroom decor, and rigid narratives fail to capture the interest of modern learners [3]. To address this cultural disconnect, POP-LORE introduces an innovative "phygital" (physical-digital) educational framework for higher education and secondary school learning environments. Inspired by contemporary pop-culture visual aesthetics such as anime, comic book art, and pop-music iconography, POP-LORE systematically reimagines classic local legends (including Bota, The Were-Tiger / Harimau Jadian, Penanggalan, and Ulek Mayang) as contemporary visual art posters.

To systematically analyze and validate this visual translation, this study employs a non-empirical, desk-based conceptual research design driven by Qualitative Narrative and Semiotic Analysis. By synthesizing Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory (2006), Vladimir Propp's Trope Inversion (1968), and Bolter and Grusin's Remediation Theory (1999), this research examines how traditional folklore narratives can be systematically deconstructed and remediated into modern pop-culture story worlds. Furthermore, by pairing these fine-art illustrations with an accessible, app-less Web-based Augmented Reality (WebAR) ecosystem [1,12], POP-LORE establishes a theory-backed design methodology that revitalizes heritage through a medium aligned with contemporary visual literacy.

1.1 Problem Statement

The POP-LORE framework addresses three critical challenges in contemporary educational and cultural preservation landscapes.

First, profound cultural disconnect and heritage erasure exist because digital-native learners demonstrate diminishing engagement with traditional folklore due to unappealing and static delivery media. This lack of engagement contributes directly to the gradual erosion of regional cultural identity and heritage awareness among contemporary youth [9,13].

Second, superficial character perception and narrative stereotyping remain prevalent, as traditional folklore figures are frequently reduced to unidimensional, terrifying monsters or bad omens. This superficial categorization overlooks the complex social, psychological, and ethical nuances such as isolation, moral dilemmas, and societal judgment embedded within original oral traditions [11,15].

Finally, passive and static learning environments hamper modern education because conventional visual learning aids, such as standard printed charts and posters, function merely as passive wall decoration. These traditional tools lack the interactive, reflective, or gamified mechanisms necessary to promote active critical thinking, cross-disciplinary analysis, and deep cognitive engagement among learners [3,4].

1.2 Research Objectives

To address the identified problem statements, this study is guided by three primary objectives:

- i. To establish a conceptual design framework that systematically guides the transformation of traditional folklore narratives into contemporary visual posters through narrative deconstruction, trope inversion, and pop-culture remediation.

ii. To analyze the visual and narrative transmutation mechanisms of local folklore characters across exemplar posters using Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory, Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory, and Vladimir Propp's Trope Inversion.

iii. To integrate an interactive "phygital" (physical-digital) WebAR pedagogy that removes technical and cognitive barriers, transforming static visual displays into engaging, value-driven educational tools for cultural empathy and moral literacy.

1.3 Novelty and Originality

The innovation of POP-LORE is established through three distinctive design strategies. The Pop-Culture Archetype Subversion framework introduces a novel, theory-driven methodology for deconstructing traditional folklore tropes and inverting them into recognizable modern archetypes. Scary mythologies are recoded into relatable figures, such as pop rock stars (Ulek Mayang), pro wrestlers (The Were-Tiger), or high school students facing academic stress (Spook Academia) [2,5]. The 3-Tier Pedagogical Architecture integrates modern visual aesthetics (Tier 1: Physical Poster Art), immersive interactive technology (Tier 2: Cloud WebAR Layer), and a gamified "Moral Compass" reflection toolkit (Tier 3: Constructivist Reflection) into a single cohesive learning ecosystem [14][8]. The framework operates as an open, expandable ecosystem where local artists, historians, and educators can contribute regional narratives, ensuring long-term community ownership and ongoing heritage preservation [6].

2. Methodology

This study employs a non-empirical, desk-based research design utilizing Exploratory Conceptual Synthesis and Qualitative Narrative & Semiotic Analysis. The primary goal is to establish a normative design framework by synthesizing storytelling theories with systematic structural analysis of exemplar narrative-driven visual posters.

2.1 Conceptual Synthesis and Narrative Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of the framework is derived by synthesizing three core academic domains centred on storytelling and narrative transformation:

i. Linda Hutcheon / Story Adaptation Theory: Used to model how narrative arcs, themes, and cultural motifs are preserved, shifted, or re-contextualized when moving from traditional oral/written mediums to modern visual mediums.

ii. Vladimir Propp / Narrative Semiotics: Used to establish structural rules for deconstructing traditional folklore functions (e.g., the villainous antagonist, the tragic curse) and re-framing their underlying narrative motivations (e.g., misunderstood choices, modern social pressures).

iii. Bolter & Grusin / Remediation Theory: Applied to explain how the original cultural lore's core message is remediated into a modern visual story world (e.g., translating traditional folk rituals into modern pop-culture scenarios).

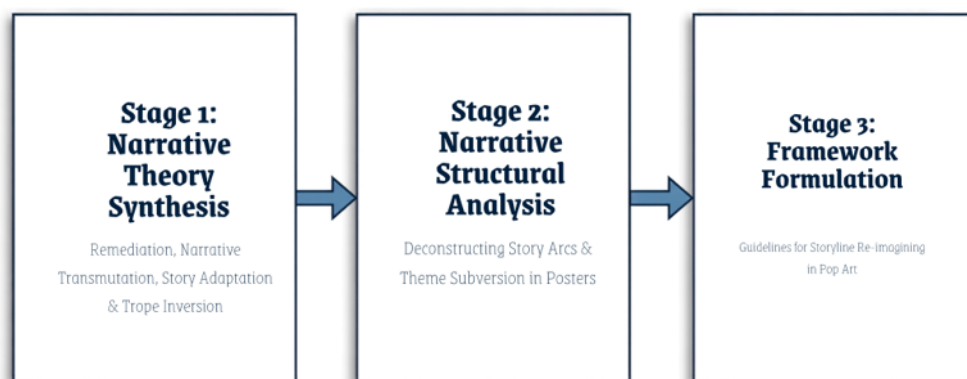


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework development and narrative analysis (Pop-Lore framework)

2.2 Case-Based Narrative and Structural Analysis

To demonstrate and refine the framework, a qualitative analysis is conducted on four exemplar poster storylines (Bota, The Were-Tiger, Ulek Mayang, and Spook Academia) treated as conceptual case studies.

The analysis focuses on Storyline & Thematic Transformation:

- i. Traditional Narrative Baseline: Documenting the original plotlines, primary moral lessons, and traditional character roles from classical folklore records (e.g., Bota as a child-hunting giant; Ulek Mayang as a mystical healing sea ritual).
- ii. Narrative Subversion Analysis: Analyzing how the posters reframe the core narrative conflict into contemporary story worlds (e.g., shifting Bota's narrative from monster-hunting to a peaceful tailor's domestic story; re-imagining Ulek Mayang's ritual as a modern musical group's performance arc; turning haunting legends into a high-school academic setting in Spook Academia).

2.3 Inductive Storyline Framework for Formulation

By cross-referencing narrative adaptation theories with findings from the storyline structural analysis, the procedural steps for narrative transformation are formalized. The resulting POP-LORE Storyline Framework provides a structured, theory-backed guideline for students and industry professionals to systematically re-conceptualize traditional folklore narratives into fresh, story-driven contemporary visual posters.

3. Analysis

The visual analysis demonstrates how traditional folklore narratives undergo a systematic three-stage narrative transformation. First, the process begins with narrative deconstruction, wherein the original folklore plotline is systematically broken down into its core thematic elements and cultural values. Second, trope inversion is applied to shift the traditional protagonist and antagonist dynamics, re-framing feared or mystical entities into relatable visual characters. Finally, through pop-culture remediation, these traditional motifs are translated into accessible, modern visual genres such as shonen manga, K-pop idol band aesthetics, and slice-of-life classroom comedies. Ultimately, this framework allows creators to preserve core cultural identities while removing narrative barriers, which drives deeper cultural empathy and moral engagement among contemporary audiences.

Table 1

Analysis of the poster using theory of narrative and semiotics

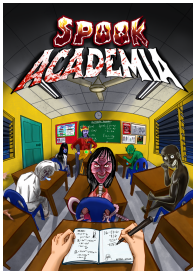
Poster Title & Artwork	Traditional Narrative Baseline	Narrative Adaptation & Trope Inversion (Propp / Narrative Semiotics)	Pop-Culture Genre Remediation (Bolter & Grusin)	Pedagogical & Moral Shift
Bota: Not a Monster, just a Tailor 	Monstrous Threat: In Perak folklore, <i>Bota</i> is a terrifying giant that lives underground and eats disobedient children.	Antagonist to Caregiver Inversion: Inverts the villainous "child-eating giant" trope into a gentle, solitary artisan tailoring clothes for a child.	Children's Storybook Illustration: Remediates horror folklore into a warm, soft-lit, whimsical picture-book aesthetic.	Empathy & Anti-Prejudice: Challenges stereotypes and surface-level judgments; teaches students empathy toward those who appear intimidating.
The Were-Tiger (Untamed Power) 	Terrifying Curse: The <i>Harimau Jadian</i> is a dark shapeshifter who terrorises villagers through black magic or inherited curses.	Tragic Curse to Heroic Strength: Re-frames malevolent shapeshifting into an athletic display of raw power, discipline, and emotional intensity.	Action Comic / Pro-Wrestling Poster: Employs dynamic angles, bold typography, and superhero/shonen manga visual tropes.	Emotional Regulation: Re-contextualizes "untamed anger or power" as energy that can be harnessed positively rather than feared.
Spook Academia 	Haunting & Taboo: Local entities (<i>Penanggalan</i>, <i>Pocong</i>, <i>Toyol</i>, <i>Pontianak</i>) represent death, fear, and bad omens.	Terrifying Entities to Relatable Peers: Removes the horror barrier by placing monsters in a mundane, high-stress human scenario studying Additional Mathematics.	Anime / High-School Comedy: Uses perspective-driven cartooning and comedic slice-of-life tropes (e.g., <i>My Hero Academia</i> style).	Stress Normalization: Reduces fear of traditional folklore while using humor to destigmatize academic pressure among modern students.

Table 1 (Continued)

Poster Title & Artwork	Traditional Narrative Baseline	Narrative Adaptation & Trope Inversion (Propp / Narrative Semiotics)	Pop-Culture Genre Remediation (Bolter & Grusin)	Pedagogical & Moral Shift
Ulek Mayang: Seven Rockstars from the Sea 	Mystical Ritual: A traditional Terengganu dance/healing chant invoking seven sea princesses to cure an ailing fisherman.	Spiritual Spirits to Modern Idols: Reimagines the seven ocean princesses from distant, ethereal spirits into a cohesive, energetic musical ensemble.	J-Pop / K-Pop Idol Band Poster: Uses comic paneling, keytars, microphones, and vibrant stage-lighting aesthetics.	Cultural Heritage Engagement: Connects traditional music and performing arts to youth pop culture, making ancient rites appealing to Gen Z/Alpha.
Whispers Beneath the Grains 	Ominous Warnings: Supernatural warnings used by elders to prevent wastage, often framed around shadowy spirits lurking near food.	From Looming Fear to Environmental Awareness: Transforms a scary shadow monster into a physical representation of the consequences of food waste.	Horror-Thriller / Graphic Novel: Uses high-contrast duotone red/blue lighting and movie poster typography to build suspense.	Food Security & Ethics: Teaches moral responsibility, gratitude, and mindfulness regarding food consumption and waste.

The visual analysis presented in the table operationalizes three primary theoretical constructs by Linda Hutcheon's Narrative Transmutation, Vladimir Propp's Trope Inversion, and Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's Remediation Theory to demonstrate how traditional folklore is systematically re-conceptualized into contemporary visual media. Across the five analyzed case studies, the framework first isolates the traditional narrative baseline and alters its emotional polarity through narrative deconstruction and trope inversion. For instance, in *Bota: Not a Monster, just a Tailor*, the classical child-eating giant archetype is inverted from a fearsome antagonist into a gentle, domestic artisan. Similarly, in *The Were-Tiger*, the tragic and feared curse of the Harimau Jadian is transformed into a display of athletic discipline and controlled power.

Furthermore, the framework relies on pop-culture remediation to translate ancient oral and ritualistic traditions into recognizable modern genres. In *Ulek Mayang: Seven Rockstars from the Sea*, a mystical ocean healing ritual is remediated into a vibrant K-Pop or J-Pop idol group poster complete with comic panelling and contemporary musical instruments. In a similar manner, *Spook Academia* places traditionally terrifying entities, such as the Penanggalan and Pocong, into a slice-of-life anime setting where they function as relatable students struggling through Additional Mathematics.

Ultimately, this narrative transformation achieves a vital pedagogical re-contextualization, shifting the educational outcome from passive fear to active moral reflection. As seen in *Whispers Beneath the Grains*, ominous cultural warnings about shadowy spirits are translated into a graphic-novel-style thriller that addresses food waste, thereby utilizing visual tension to cultivate

environmental ethics and personal responsibility. Together, these visual case studies prove that modernizing folklore does not erode cultural heritage; instead, by reframing ancient narrative tropes through contemporary pop-culture languages, the underlying moral lessons become deeply accessible, empathetic, and engaging for digital-native audiences.

4. Findings and Discussion

The application of the POP-LORE Adaptation Framework across the analyzed visual cases yields three core findings regarding the transformation of intangible cultural heritage into contemporary educational visual assets.

4.1 Preservation through Narrative Subversion

The primary finding reveals that preserving traditional folklore among digital-native generations does not depend on maintaining rigid historical visual forms. Instead, heritage retention is optimized through a structured process of narrative subversion, wherein the external narrative medium is modernized while the internal moral nucleus remains intact. By deconstructing classical plotlines and inverting character roles such as shifting Bota from a terrifying giant into a gentle tailor that the framework demonstrates that subverting narrative tropes does not dilute cultural identity. Rather, this adaptive transformation refreshes the lore's societal relevance, proving that cultural preservation thrives when historical narratives are allowed to evolve alongside contemporary youth culture.

4.2 Elimination of Cognitive and Emotional Barriers to Cultural Empathy

A significant finding of the visual narrative analysis is the systematic removal of cognitive and emotional "fear barriers" traditionally inherent in folklore education. Classical myths frequently rely on horror, taboos, or threat-based warnings, which often create emotional detachment, anxiety, or disinterest among modern learners. By utilizing pop-culture remediation to recontextualize frightening entities into recognizable, modern archetypes such as high school students in Spook Academia or pop rockstars in Ulek Mayang, the framework replaces fear with humour, curiosity, and aesthetic appreciation. This cognitive shift transitions the learning experience from passive intimidation to active moral literacy, enabling students to evaluate underlying themes of anti-prejudice, emotional regulation, and social responsibility with empathy.

4.3 Codification of Scalable Ideation Framework for Academia and Creative Industries

Finally, the research establishes a standardized, repeatable ideation matrix structured around three sequential stages: Narrative Deconstruction, Trope Inversion, and Pop-Culture Remediation. The empirical application of this three-tier process proves that visual art creation can transition from an intuitive, ad-hoc artistic endeavour into an explicit, teachable design methodology. For educational institutions, this framework provides a clear pedagogical blueprint to integrate literature, ethics, and visual arts. For the creative design industries, it serves as a scalable, theory-backed engine for conceptualizing culturally rooted, market-ready intellectual properties across global design and media sectors.

5. Conclusion

The analysis and findings derived from the development of the POP-LORE framework led to three fundamental conclusions regarding cultural pedagogy, visual communication, and creative ideation.

First, the study concludes that traditional folklore can be effectively revitalized for digital-native generations without sacrificing its underlying cultural integrity. By shifting from static, historically rigid presentations to a dynamic model of narrative subversion and pop-culture remediation, the framework successfully bridges the generational divide between ancient oral heritage and modern visual literacy. Modifying external visual tropes while preserving the core moral essence allows historical narratives to remain relevant, resonant, and meaningful in contemporary educational settings.

Second, the findings demonstrate that altering the emotional lens of folklore, moving away from traditional fear-based warnings toward empathy, humour, and subverted archetypes and fundamentally transforms the pedagogical impact on learners. By neutralizing the cognitive and emotional barriers imposed by traditional horror and taboos, the POP-LORE framework shifts student engagement from passive dread to active critical reflection. This emotional realignment fosters deeper moral literacy, encouraging learners to explore complex ethical concepts such as anti-prejudice, empathy, and environmental mindfulness through approachable visual story worlds.

Finally, this research establishes that cultural adaptation can be operationalized into a structured, repeatable, and scalable design methodology. The three-stage process- Narrative Deconstruction, Trope Inversion, and Pop-Culture Remediation provides educators, students, and creative industry professionals with a theory-backed blueprint for conceptualizing original visual art assets. Ultimately, POP-LORE proves that combining physical artwork with cloud-hosted digital overlays creates an adaptable, sustainable, and future-ready pedagogical system capable of turning static learning environments into immersive, value-driven cultural experiences.

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