



BA(HONS) DESIGN COMMUNICATION
FINAL YEAR PROJECT REPORT

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Abstract

Today, Malaysian Gen Z are less engaged with intangible cultural heritage and often perceive them as outdated or unrelatable. The dominance of Western nostalgic aesthetics, combined with the lack of modern reinterpretations of local tradition, has contributed to this decline of interest in today's multimedia world. *Potehi* puppetry, an old puppet show that Hokkien communities once loved, is slowly being forgotten by younger generations.

Local practitioners have tried to keep *Potehi* alive by adding new characters from local stories, using multilanguage narratives, and performing in art venues. Despite these efforts, *Potehi* still struggles to capture the attention of Gen Z. This highlights the need for alternative approaches to better align with current visual trends and how individuals consume media and technology today.

The project was an intangible cultural heritage preservation efforts that seeks to redefine how traditional *Potehi* puppetry can be presented through modern mixed media in order to provide greater attractiveness, relatability, and engagement among Gen Z audience. By combining live action puppetry, motion graphic animation and mixed media, the design will present examples of *Potehi* in a more modern, experimental way. To better understand how young audiences perceive traditional cultures and the factors which contribute to the feeling of distance from culture, surveys and interviews were conducted with young people to inform the conceptual and design direction of the project .

This project will show why blending visual storytelling with new media is important. It helps younger audiences connect more deeply with their traditional roots. *Potehi* shouldn't just be kept as a memory, it needs creative interpretations to stay culturally important. This will inspire young people to view tradition as expressive, engaging, and alive, leading to a new appreciation for local heritage.

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I want to sincerely thank my friends and classmates, for their feedback and encouragement helped me improve my project; my family, especially my mom, for making the puppet clothes with me; and my boyfriend, for assisting me with the background projection while doing the live-action puppetry.

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Jolyn Tay

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Acronyms

List of acronyms	Definition
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Augmented Reality
FYP	Final Year Project
Gen Z	Generation Z
MRP	Major Research Project
PILI	Puppet Legend (Taiwanese puppet TV series)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VHS	Video Home System

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1.0 Introduction

Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage plays a key role to its varied culture. Still, some traditions aren't well known, especially among Malaysian Gen Z today. They are more attracted to global Western trends, finding it more bolder, more expressive, and more relatable.

Potehi, a traditional Hokkien puppetry often performed in temples, has been impacted. It traditionally tells myths and entertains the Hokkien community in Penang. But with fewer young practitioners wanting to continue it, this art form is in danger (Ferrarese, 2018).

To address this, the project uses design-led practices as a cultural preservation strategy to tackle the declining interest in puppetry. It reimagines *Potehi* for a younger audience by creating a modernised puppet and a short film. Live-action puppetry was combined with animated backgrounds, making the performance engaging and easy for Gen Z to access.

The main goal is to preserve cultural heritage by incorporating new, modern aspects. This effort aims to demonstrate to young people that tradition can be artistic and change over time. By doing this, the author hopes to spark their interest and make them feel a stronger tie to Malaysia's cultural roots.

1.1 Motivations

Malaysia youth are not seeing much of our local intangible heritage, especially *Potehi* puppetry. This is a problem because these traditions, which were once central to the Penang Hokkien community's life, are now mostly ignored by Gen Z. It's not that these traditions lack value, but rather that the traditional ways they are presented don't connect with how young people prefer to engage with things today.

Insights from the author's Major Research Project (MRP) indicated that although many young people remain emotionally connected to their cultural roots, local cultural practices are often perceived as less engaging compared to Western visual culture, which is more bold, expressive, and prominent in digital spaces. However, the research also showed that Gen Z respond positively when heritage is presented through modern and creative approaches.

This project also stems from the author's personal interest in mixed media, craftsmanship, and unseen local stories. As someone from a Chinese–Peranakan background, fabric and handmade objects have always brought feelings of warmth, familiarity, and a link to one's own culture. This inspires the author to reimagine *Potehi* puppetry through new, artistic methods, rather than sticking only to old traditions.

Given these observations, the author plans to find new ways to present *Potehi* puppetry using modern design and mixed-media technique, connecting tradition with modern visual culture. Thus, making the heritage meaningful and attractive to younger audiences.

1.2 Objectives and Scope

Potehi puppetry, even though deeply rooted in Penang Hokkien culture, has been neglected as traditional performances do not fit well with modern tastes anymore. This project aims to address this by finding ways to present *Potehi* in a modern, creative, and engaging manner for Gen Z audiences.

Objectives :

1. Modernize traditional puppetry: Reimagine *Potehi* puppetry by blending live puppetry with mixed-media animation to create an engaging experience.
2. Engage Gen Z: Present heritage to youth through contemporary visual and digital aesthetics.
3. Foster cultural appreciation: Raise awareness of the relevance of local heritage in contemporary society.
4. Explore different techniques: Experiment with mixed media, craftsmanship and modern narratives to bring tradition to life.

Scope :

1. Cultural focus: *Potehi* as the representative of Penang's intangible cultural heritage.
2. Target audience: Gen Z aged 18–25, who were familiar with digital media and creative interpretations.
3. Medium and format: Make modernised puppet and short film which combines live puppetry with background animation.
4. Creative approach: Draws inspiration and reinterprets *Potehi* through a modern, experimental lens, rather than replicating the traditional form.
5. Time and resource limitations: Complete within Final Year Project timeline and resource limits. Large-scale productions or professional live performances are not included.

2.0 Literature Review

In this study, the related literature on intangible cultural heritage, the origin of *Potehi*, the issue of engaging Gen Z, and the mixed media approaches being used in the project will all be discussed.

2.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage and *Potehi* Puppetry

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) includes culture and expressions that are carried down from past generations that give identity to culture, such as folklore, music, drama, and dances among others. To sustain, culture engagement is needed (UNESCO, n.d.).

Potehi puppetry, or Budaixi (in Chinese), began in Fujian, China, and reached Southeast Asia through migration. In Penang, it grew into a key cultural activity for the Hokkien community, often seen at religious celebrations and temple events (Ferrarese, 2018). These puppets, usually made from cloth and wood, are recognized for their expressive movements and detailed

craftsmanship, showing both artistic talent and cultural meaning. But with shifts in society and how people prefer to be entertained, *Potehi* puppetry has become less common, especially among younger people.

2.2 Decline of Traditional Heritage Engagement Among Gen Z

Research has shown that the Malaysian practice of *Potehi* has little support institutionally and in the community. Despite being of great significance in the culture, the practice has received very little support from the authorities and has instead been overshadowed by lion, dragon, and 24 festive drums, and getai dance forms (Chang, 2018). Lack of support has ensured that the practice has very few young practitioners, and Prof. Tan Sooi Beng emphasizes that, should *Potehi* fail to preserve communication through values, the practice might soon be replaced by modern technology in the form of digital media (Ferrarese, 2018).

At the same time, urbanization, globalization, and digital media are contributing to the widening gap among generations. Traditional art that is static and lengthy is challenged by the fast-paced and visually driven information preferred to be interactive and easily accessible by Gen Z individuals (Surya, 2021). The dominance of Western aesthetics further diminishes cultural uniqueness. The limited engagement suggests a mismatch between how something is presented and how people consume it.

2.3 Reinterpreting Traditional Through Contemporary Visual Strategies and Mixed Media

Studies indicate that the reinterpretation of traditional arts with current design and the use of mixed media helps to appeal to young generations without losing the traditional meaning behind it. Gen Z prefers visual and interactive information that they can also relate to on the emotional level.

To see how this works in practice, consider Ombak Potehi in Malaysia. This organization is revitalizing *Potehi* puppetry by blending traditional performance with contemporary stories, educational programs, and community initiatives. As Keith Song notes, cultural traditions evolve over time, allowing new ideas to engage new generations (Khoo, 2025). Even with all this, they still face trouble getting Gen Z interested. This is partly because of how quick digital media is and how much Western visual culture is around.

In Taiwan, PILI Puppet Legend uses a strategy that fuses technology with traditional puppetry. The "PILI Universe" was created, combining elements of sci-fi, visual effects, and Budaixi (黃其安, 2021). The TV show series are able to reach younger audiences while providing a culturally authentic experience (Cheung, 2025). This shows tradition can reach youth through modern storytelling and technology.

To sum up, these cases have established that by integrating mixed media, modern visual strategies and creative reinterpretation, practices of heritage can remain contemporary, attractive, and relevant to culture. Such findings directly apply in the design approach taken for this project, which aims to reinterpret *Potehi* through mixed media that appeals to Gen Z while maintaining cultural identity.

3.0 Final Outcome Design/Work

The author is doing an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation effort project to reimagine *Potehi* in a contemporary way. In this section, there are 4 main sectors: Branding, Modernised *Potehi* Puppet Design, Short Film, and Exhibition Presentation.

3.1 Branding

3.1.1 Introduction

Pote Pote 布連 is the visual identity created to support this heritage preservation project, which reinterprets traditional *Potehi* puppetry for contemporary Gen Z audiences. Rather than being positioned as a commercial brand, the branding functions as a cohesive visual system that unifies the puppet design, short film, zine, and exhibition presentation.

The phrase “Pote Pote” is a playful nickname derived from *Potehi*, giving the brand a friendly and youthful appeal aimed at engaging Gen Z audiences. While the term “布連” means “cloth connection” and represents the use of cloth to bring together the past and present, as well as the tradition and modern generations. Both combined, the brand name reflects an intention to link traditional culture with contemporary design using cute and appealing aesthetics to attract and resonate with youth.

3.1.2 Vision and Mission

Vision

Pote Pote 布連 envisions the revival of an appreciation for local intangible through presenting *Potehi* puppetry in a manner that has a fresh, expressive, and young appeal for the youth of the current generation. Thus, the project aims to look back at the heritage through the lenses of the present and revive *Potehi* in the context of a living art rather than just a fixed tradition.

Mission

Pote Pote 布連 mission is to reinterpret *Potehi* using fabric and mixed-media technique. The art form will be reinterpreted using modernized puppet design, live-action performance, and background animations. The work also plans to use the puppet character Ah Lin to bridge heritage with Gen Z viewers by making the heritage in a way that is appealing and relevant to them.

3.1.3 Brand Logo

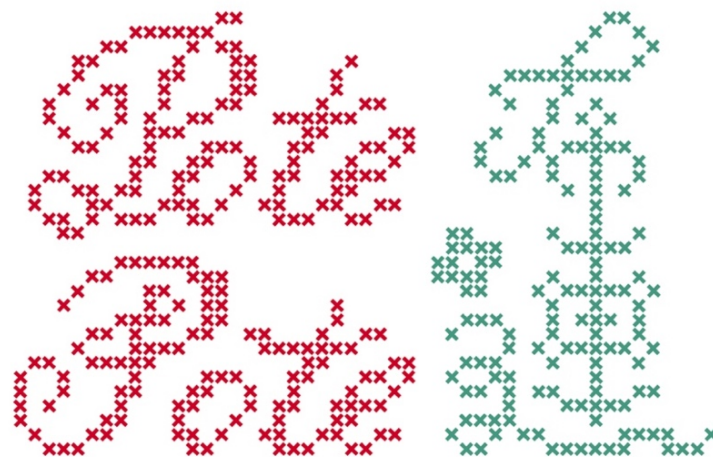


Figure 3.1.3 Brand logo

The main visual of the logo is the word “Pote Pote 布連”, formed using a cross-stitch pattern. The characters are designed in line with the flow of calligraphy to display rhythm and harmony instead of perfecting the design. Such design makes this logo very expressive and connects to Chinese artistry in terms of its creativity.

The cross stitch pattern signifies patience and the craftsmanship we value in traditional practices like *Potehi* puppetry. Each stitch signifies the time spent and the care taken to create a handmade object, highlighting the ways in which cultural heritage can continue to exist through the hard work of many people.

In addition, “Pote Pote” is shown in red to represent Chinese culture and “布連” in green to represent Peranakan culture. The flower motif in the middle highlights growth and new birth, indicating traditions have the potential to rebloom with new life through revival in a new generation and new context.

3.1.4 Colour Palette



Figure 3.1.4 Colour Palette

There are two primary colours : Red symbolizes the Chinese culture, passion, and vitality; Green symbolizes the Peranakan culture, harmony, and continuity. Together, they represent both aspects of the author's cultural background and also form the heart of the brand. Pink has been added as an accent to create warmth and make it feel more inviting and approachable for Gen Z. The calico texture also provide as a neutral base background, and a nod to the traditional craftsmanship as well as allowing for the colours to be highlighted along with the stitches.

3.2 Modernised Potehi Puppet Design

The modernised *Potehi* puppet, Ah Lin was named after my own nickname. Designed to appeal to Gen Z audience, it bears a cute, kawaii face inspired by Japanese anime dolls. This makes it look soft and approachable, far from the usual "intimidating" impression one would get from a traditional *Potehi* puppet.



Figure 3.2.1 Close up of the puppet



Figure 3.2.2 Modernised puppet design

Ah Lin is costumed in pastel pink and lavender fabrics with hints of Malaysian Chinese and Peranakan crafts, such as the *Baijiabu*-patterned skirt made from thrifted cloth, a ruffled top with *Pankou* details that are symbolic of Chinese heritage, and tiny bead flowers that represent Peranakan beadwork. Hair is tied up in two Chinese-styled buns, while its neck and hands are air-dry clay instead of wood, giving it a playful, contemporary touch. The puppet not only symbolises the modern generation, but it also connects with cultural heritage.



Figure 3.2.3 Process of making the puppet

3.3 Short Film

The short film is a modern storytelling film combining background animation with live-action puppetry. The digital environment creates a connection for Gen Z to experience their culture through a contemporary lens influenced by their digital realm.



Figure 3.3.1 Title card of the short film

Concept & Narrative

Ah Lin is the main puppet character and is brought to life by a young puppeteer. In the rising scene, the background has shown cultural motifs, including Teochew lanterns, phoenix, peonies, and peranakan mansions. Further into the storyline, Ah Lin finds herself questioning her identity. The background changes to an eerie and digitalised world filled with neon green colours, collapsing heritage architecture, and digital devices. This scene represents the fast-paced modern world and how traditional culture is seen as “old-fashioned.” Falling into an infinite tunnel, Ah Lin becomes lost in her identity, similarly to how Gen Z in real life as they are exposed to modernity and tradition.

The final resolution of this film emerges with a hand outstretched to save Ah Lin, leading her back into a vibrant cultural environment. Ah Lin realises that her traditions should be exhibited, not hidden, and her traditions give her strength and define her identity. The final act of holding hands symbolizes the responsibility of a newer generation to keep those traditions alive.



Figure 3.3.2 Some stills from the film

Visual & Audio Style



Figure 3.3.3 Process of water colouring on calico fabric and scanning

Cultural motifs are all hand-drawn sketches and watercolour paintings on calico fabric. These were scanned and animated digitally, showing how traditional craft can merge with digital art. The digital backgrounds use a VHS and 8-bit game style to create a sense of tension and confusion. This visual contrast symbolises the conflict that Gen Z experiences when balancing cultural roots with modern society.

Sound design further supports the emotional journey. Two instrumental tracks were used: a soft, dreamy soundtrack featuring guzheng and pipa accompanies cultural and resolution scenes, evoking nostalgia and warmth, while a darker, VHS-inspired track intensifies tension during the digitalised climax and falling scenes.

Process & Production



Figure 3.3.4 Live-action puppetry filming setup

The original plan was to film with real-time background projection and live-action puppetry. However, problems like blurry images and trouble with lighting, especially while keeping the puppets still, led to a change in that approach. After this, live-action puppetry was shot in front of a green screen background; projected cloth animation was shot in separate sessions and integrated in post-production work.

The cultural patterns were meticulously hand-painted with watercolor on calico fabric. This approach shows the importance of craftsmanship in making modern animation. The author did the live-action puppetry without much prior experience, focusing on conveying emotion instead of mastering the technique. This highlights the project emphasis on storytelling and its cultural message.



Figure 3.3.5 First time performing live-action puppetry

3.4 Fabric Zine

The fabric zine is heat-pressed onto calico cloth and bound using Japanese 4-hole binding. This helps preserve the artwork while strengthening its connection to traditional craftsmanship and textile-based puppetry. With the zine, it also serves as a direct and hands-on way for audiences to interact with the exhibition.

The front cover features the brand logo Pote Pote 布连 with the slogan “By Hand, By Heart”, while the back cover displays two puppets: the modernised puppet Ah Lin and a traditional practice puppet, highlighting the contrast between contemporary and traditional aesthetics.

The zine is structured as a brief, 10-page narrative. Pages 1–2 introduce how the author discovered *Potehi* and observed its quiet decline, positioning the zine as an attempt to keep these stories alive; Pages 3–4 explain Potehi’s origin and the anatomy of the puppet; Pages 5–6 discuss existing troupe groups and their limited appeal to Gen Z audiences; Pages 7–8 describe the project itself, including the naming of Pote Pote 布连, the modernised puppet, and the short film; Pages 9–10 provide a brief synopsis of the short film and conclude with the author’s hope that the initiative inspires audiences to view tradition as fun, evolving, and alive.



Figure 3.4.1 Fabric Zine (Front cover)



Figure 3.4.2 Fabric Zine (Back cover)



Figure 3.4.3 Fabric Zine (Central spread)

3.5 Fabric Postcard

A set of four heat-pressed fabric postcards was made for the exhibition. Each one features an image from key scenes of the short film, showing Ah Lin's journey and its cultural themes. The back design includes the project's logo, slogan, and some cultural motifs, all coming together for a consistent look.



Figure 3.5.1 Fabric Postcards (Front)



Figure 3.5.2 Fabric Postcards (Back)

Rather than just souvenirs, they offer a small, interactive part of the project. When viewers scan them with augmented reality, the characters and scenes will come to life, and a 4-word blessing will appear. Each blessing carries symbolic meaning: 相遇是緣 (‘fated to meet’) symbolise that every encounter happens for a reason; 隨心前行 (‘follow your heart’) encourages one to listen to own voice and pursue own path ; 舊中生新 (‘old meets new’) conveys that tradition continues to evolve with new trends; 手心相傳 (‘hand to heart’) represents passing on to the next generation. This blend of physical material, digital interaction, and hidden blessings transforms the postcard into more meaningful, immersive experiences that connect heritage, narrative, and younger audiences.



Figure 3.5.3 Augmented Reality (AR) interactions of the postcard

3.6 Exhibition Presentation

Film showcase booth

The exhibit booth draws inspiration from the classic *Potehi* stage, offering an interactive space to view the short film and puppet exhibit. Projected subtitles on a front fabric supports clear storytelling, with the film in English and Chinese subtitles for both in-person and online viewers. A monitor screen at the back continuously plays the film, so those who stand outside the booth can see it.

Potehi was once overshadowed by television as a form of entertainment. Reintroducing a monitor screen to showcase the film suggest a shift of their relationship. Once contributed to its decline is now used as a tool to revive and extend the reach of this traditional art form. Through puppets, projections, and digital media, audiences can experience *Potehi* in a new, accessible format, while still keeping the cultural importance of the traditional stage performance.



Figure 3.6.1 Exhibition booth (Outside view)



Figure 3.6.2 Exhibition booth (Inner view)



Figure 3.6.3 Calico motifs for exhibition display



Figure 3.6.4 Fabric postcard display with QR-coded AR cards

Interactive sections



Figure 3.6.5 Puppet showcase with QR-coded Figma manual guide



Figure 3.6.6 Figma manual guide viewed on phone

In the puppet showcase section, there is a digital guide on how to play with Ah Lin puppet. Visitors can have a straightforward understand on the puppet's anatomy and a chance to try it out for the first time. They can read the Figma manual guide on their phones while operating the puppet, making the learning experience easy, fun, and interactive.



Figure 3.6.7 Baijiabu feedback section

While in the *Baijiabu* feedback section, people can write their messages on thrifted cloth pieces and pin them onto the cloth-covered walls. Each piece is placed accordingly to form a collective *Baijiabu* patchwork. The more people who participate, the more the pattern grows, symbolising community's unity and collaborative efforts to preserve the heritage.

Additional merchandises

The exhibit also features handmade *Pankou* buttons and a *Pankou*-making workshop, expanding the project's study of textile-based heritage. Although they are not the project's main focus and only appear on Ah Lin's puppet clothe, the Chinese knot button still represents a traditional handcraft that many Gen Z engage with primarily for aesthetic or styling purpose, rather than with an understanding of the process of making it.

By including *Pankou* as both a handcraft item and hands-on craft activity during the exhibit, audiences could understand the effort, materials, and cultural meaning behind the craft, while valuing handcraft labour and skill. Its inclusion strengthens the project's concept of 布連 (“cloth connection”), linking *Potehi* puppetry with other fabric-based cultural practices.



Figure 3.6.8 Self-handmade Pankou buttons



Figure 3.6.9 Pankou button hairclip and keychain display

Furthermore, a fabric-made keychain was included as a supporting handmade object for the exhibit. The corner was stitched using a blanket stitch, and the logo was heat-pressed onto it. Leftover thrifted fabric pieces from the puppet's clothing were stuffed into the keychain to make it look "soft and puffy." The reuse of fabric ties back to the project's focus on textile, handcraft, and sustainability.



Figure 3.6.10 Fabric-made keychain



Figure 3.6.11 Fabric-made keychain display

4.0 Conclusions and Future Work

4.1 Conclusions

Based on research, the author observes that Malaysia's Gen Z audience is getting disconnected to their local intangible cultural heritage. Even with its strong historical and cultural significance, *Potehi* puppetry is viewed as outdated because of a lack of contemporary reinterpretation in this fast-moving media world.

This research uncovers the potential of a design-led approach to redesign *Potehi* in a more understandable and engaging form. It is shown within this research how the fusion of the new puppet design, storytelling, and digital media in the form of an animated film and an interactive artifact, among others, can transform puppetry into a form more engaging to the youth.

However, the author has noticed that maintaining cultural authenticity and modern expression has not been an easy task. Although modernization has resulted in more engagement, modernization needs to be done with caution so that the traditional form of art is not misunderstood or lost.

In response to these challenges, the project will show design as a means of maintaining the continuity of cultural expression. By utilizing a creative process to interpret tradition, the cultures in question will be able to adapt and continue to live on in ways that will maintain an active and appealing connection with future generations.

4.2 Recommendation in Future Work

The author of this project has suggested that future projects should develop and research how to use interactive/digital components. Although this project introduced a new concept to the idea of exhibition based engagement and Augmented Reality; future projects could build upon these concepts to create an even greater level of immersion or participation for Gen Z audiences, ultimately providing an opportunity for Gen Z audiences to develop a stronger sense of belonging to their culture and become more actively involved with *Potehi* Puppetry.

Additionally, the author suggests collaborating with and supporting local *Potehi* practitioners and cultural organisations. This is because, by working with the locals who have background knowledge as practitioners, it is possible for the designers to have an understanding of the traditional techniques of performance involved in this tradition, which will allow the designers to develop new interpretations and design with respect for the tradition. Collaborating with and supporting local traditional practitioners will also increase the visibility of the traditional practitioners and create a mutually beneficial relationship between the designers and the traditional practitioners.

Besides, the author suggests increasing the amount of feedback received from the audience through exhibitions, workshops and digitally. It is by listening to the responses and preferences of the audience that future projects could be emended and adapted closer to the needs of Gen Z audiences. Therefore, producing visual cultural works that are also meaningful and relevant to their daily lives.

Finally, the author hopes that the strategies used in this FYP project can be applied to reimagine other Malaysian traditions. By showing how cultural heritage can change and adapt over time, the work here demonstrates that future projects can help shift the perception of culture as just a "dead" history, but rather a way to inspire people to see culture not as static history, but as a living source of inspiration. The author believes that such methods could help the new generation connect with heritage more readily.

Reflection on Learning Outcome Attainment

This Final Year Project has really been quite an enlightening and engaging process in showing me the many roles that a designer plays. It went beyond doing aesthetically pleasing work to show me how design can create cultural connections and give heritage its meaning for generations to come. After completing this project, I come to realise that the role of the designer can truly impact the ways in which we impart our heritage to future generations not only by continuing the way in which practices have always been done, but by also communicating that significance in an engaging way to the audience.

Apart from creative design approaches, I also learned important experience and skills with respect to project management, problem-solving, and decision-making. With live-action puppetry, projected animated background, limitations of technicalities, and utilizing multiple mediums, many obstacles had to be faced, and through it all, I learned how to adapt my creative design process based on the various situations I came across. Tools like After Effects and SUNO AI helped me finish the project on time and within my skill set. It made me realise how important flexibility and new solutions are in design.

Moreover, I also improved my communication and collaboration skills. Connecting with the practitioners of Ombak Potehi, feedback provision, and sharing ideas with peers taught me how to present cultural and creative concepts effectively, creating engaging and memorable experiences for audiences. Overall, this journey not only improved my design skills but also helped me develop abilities that cannot be learned in class: the ability to solve problems creatively; being culturally sensitive; the ability to communicate effectively, skills which I believe will be important in my future practice as a graphic designer.

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