



Designing the *Bala Anjani* alternate universe through the integration of Sasak cultural heritage and gender equality narratives



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ABSTRACT

The *Bala Anjani* dance is a traditional performing art from Lombok that embodies values of women's empowerment and gender equality. Previous studies have adapted *Bala Anjani* into webtoon characters; however, these adaptations were limited to a single storyline and did not support sustainable narrative development. Moreover, studies on Alternate Universe (AU) have primarily focused on fan fiction and literary works, with limited application to traditional performing arts. This study aims to design an AU for the *Bala Anjani* webtoon by integrating *Sasak* cultural heritage and gender equality narratives. The novelty of this study lies in applying the AU approach to expand a traditional dance based narrative into five interconnected story worlds that enable broader cultural exploration and diverse gender representations. Using a qualitative and design based approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, documentation, and literature review, while the design process employed a modified design thinking model. The study produced five alternative story synopses and character designs incorporating *Sasak* cultural elements such as *songket*, traditional textiles, *keris*, and *klewang*. Expert validation and user testing indicated that the designs were culturally relevant, gender-sensitive, visually feasible, and positively received by young readers.



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1. Introduction

The *Bala Anjani* dance is a traditional art form originating from Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. This dance portrays the battle between female warriors of the *Sasak* ethnic group and colonial forces. Unlike most dances that emphasize feminine movements characterized by grace and fluidity, the *Bala Anjani* dance highlights masculine qualities through movements that are firm, powerful, and full of spirit [1]–[5]. In its development, the *Bala Anjani* dance has evolved beyond being merely a medium of aesthetic expression, it also serves as a representation of values and moral messages concerning gender equality, emphasizing that women and men hold equal position [5]–[11]. The moral message of the *Bala Anjani* dance has previously been promoted through media transformation the dance into Webtoon comic characters [12]. This transformation aimed to expand audience reach and optimize message delivery [13], [14]. The findings of that study indicated that the majority of respondents agreed that the *Bala Anjani* Webtoon comic design was highly effective in campaigning for gender equality issues. Despite these findings, previous research primarily focused on the visual design of the Webtoon characters and audience responses toward the comic as a communication medium. Limited attention has been given to the development of narrative structures as a strategy for sustaining and reinforcing gender equality messages within digital comics [15]. In particular, there remains a lack of studies examining how local cultural values and gender equality messages can be translated into a sustainable storyline capable of maintaining audience engagement over an extended period [16], [17]. This gap is important because narrative continuity plays a central

role in shaping readers' emotional involvement and in strengthening the long-term effectiveness of message delivery [18], [19].

The limitation of the previous study lay in the aspect of sustainability, particularly in the scope of story development and the exploration of gender equality messages to be conveyed. The *Bala Anjani* Webtoon comic included only one short original alternative story, which did not allow for the creation of multiple extended story series [12]. Audiences today, particularly the younger generation, tend to avoid reading the same story repeatedly [20]–[23]. However, repetition is one of the key aspects of effective message delivery, as it reinforces meaning and strengthens audience recall. Alternatively, messages need to be conveyed repeatedly and consistently in order to achieve optimal impact [24]–[27]. Therefore, it is necessary to further develop the *Bala Anjani* comic storyline. In addition to optimizing message delivery, the development of the *Bala Anjani* Webtoon comic series also holds the potential to strengthen the national creative industry and to serve as a creative medium for promoting culture on an international scale [28], [29]. Similar practices can be observed in Korea and Japan, where comics have been used to introduce cultural elements such as traditional clothing, folklore, social values, and historical narratives to readers beyond their countries of origin [30]–[32]. One notable characteristic of many successful manga and manhwa titles is their ability to develop extensive story worlds through multiple story arcs, interconnected narratives, and diverse character developments [33]. Such narrative expansion not only sustains audience engagement but also creates opportunities for adaptation into other creative sectors, including film, animation, and fashion [34]–[36]. This phenomenon highlights the need for further study to explore the potential development of the *Bala Anjani* Webtoon comic storyline.

One of the solutions is to create an alternate universe (AU) of the *Bala Anjani* story. An alternate universe is a narrative development method that generates a storyline different from the original, such as producing new versions of existing characters, exploring the story from alternative perspectives, and constructing a unique world setting [37]–[41]. The creation of an alternate universe is highly suitable for continuous message delivery [42]. This is supported by the findings of this study indicating that alternate universe storytelling can enhance reading interest among young people in Indonesia [43]–[45]. The creation of alternate universes is also highly relevant to the contemporary comic industry. For example, Marvel Comics has successfully expanded its industry through adaptations into numerous films by developing multiple story versions of the same characters, such as Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Captain America, each presented in different timelines, settings, and even personalities [46]–[50].

Table 1 demonstrates that previous studies have examined either the *Bala Anjani* dance as a cultural performance and adaptation source or the concept of alternate universes as literary and fan-cultural phenomena. However, none of these studies have focused on the systematic design of an alternate universe derived from local cultural heritage. Existing *Bala Anjani* studies do not extend the narrative beyond its original storyline, while alternate universe studies primarily analyze existing works rather than develop new narrative systems [51]–[53]. Therefore, a gap remains in understanding how local cultural narratives can be transformed into an interconnected alternate universe through a structured design process. This study addresses that gap by developing an alternate universe framework for the *Bala Anjani* story that integrates local cultural elements, character redesign, and gender-related themes into a cohesive narrative ecosystem.

To design an alternate universe of the *Bala Anjani* story, it is necessary to explore the potential development of both the original narrative elements and elements beyond the story. The original narrative elements include characters, settings, conflicts, and moral messages such as gender equality [54]. Meanwhile, elements beyond the story can be developed through the exploration of local cultural potential, particularly from *Sasak* culture. For instance, this may involve adding characters from other folktales, designing character attributes inspired by traditional clothing, and implementing values of local wisdom [55]–[57]. The combination of these elements was realized in the design of an alternate universe consisting of five alternative story scripts of the *Bala Anjani* tale. These scripts included the character backstories, character designs, attribute designs, and interconnected storylines.

Tabel 1. State of The Art

Study	Research Focus	Main Findings	Final Outcome Report	Limitations	Research Gap
Present Study	Designing an alternate universe (AU) for the <i>Bala Anjani</i> story through local cultural exploration and gender based narratives	Produces five interconnected alternative story scripts, character designs, attributes, and narrative structures	-	Develops a systematic model for AU design based on local cultural heritage	Designing an alternate universe (AU) for the <i>Bala Anjani</i> story through local cultural exploration and gender based narratives
[12]	Adaptation of <i>Bala Anjani</i> dance into webtoon characters	Identifies visual and narrative transformation of dance elements into comic characters Explains movement structures, symbolism, and performance characteristics	Focuses only on character adaptation and does not expand the story world	Does not design an interconnected alternate universe narrative	Adaptation of <i>Bala Anjani</i> dance into webtoon characters
[5]	Choreographic analysis of <i>Bala Anjani</i> dance		Limited to dance performance analysis	Does not explore narrative development or digital adaptation	Choreographic analysis of <i>Bala Anjani</i> dance
[40]	Application of alternate universe concepts in the literary work <i>Tangisan Laut Berdarah</i>	Demonstrates how AU elements reshape literary narratives	Examines AU as an analytical object rather than a design product	Does not provide a framework for creating an AU	Application of alternate universe concepts in the literary work <i>Tangisan Laut Berdarah</i>
[49]	Fan created alternate universe characters in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	Explains fan reinterpretation of established characters	Focuses on audience-produced content	Does not address systematic AU design based on local culture	Fan created alternate universe characters in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
[50]	Transmediation of alternate universe stories from social media into novels	Explains narrative transformation across media platforms	Focuses on adaptation processes after an AU already exists	Does not examine the initial design and development of an AU narrative system	Transmediation of alternate universe stories from social media into novels

The scientific contribution of this study lies in the development of a systematic framework for transforming local folklore into an interconnected alternate universe narrative while preserving its cultural identity and educational values. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on adapting folklore into single, linear digital narratives, this research proposes a model that integrates narrative expansion, character redesign, and local cultural exploration into a cohesive transmedia storytelling structure. Through the *Bala Anjani* case, the study demonstrates how indigenous cultural heritage can be reinterpreted into contemporary digital formats without losing its core cultural meanings, thereby contributing both to folklore adaptation studies and to the development of culturally grounded digital storytelling practices.

2. Method

The process of designing the alternate universe of the *Bala Anjani* story generally employs a qualitative approach and a design approach. As can be seen in Fig. 1.

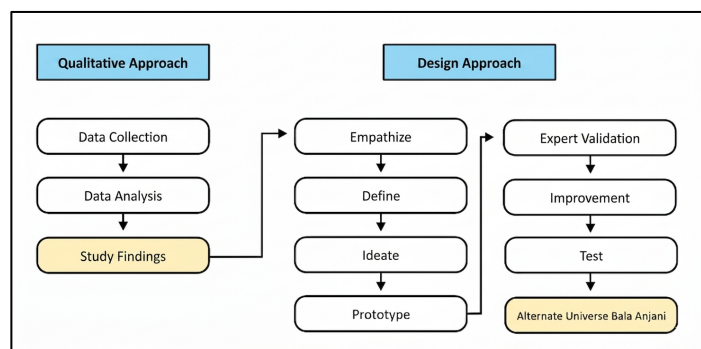


Fig 1. Research Framework

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the process of designing the *Bala Anjani* alternate universe integrated a qualitative research approach and a design thinking approach. The qualitative approach consisted of data collection, data analysis, and the identification of research findings, which subsequently informed the design thinking stages, including empathize, define, ideate, prototype, expert validation, improvement, and testing.

2.1. Qualitative Approach

The qualitative approach employs a descriptive method to collect and analyze preliminary information that serves as the foundation for the design stage. This information includes a comprehensive review of the original *Bala Anjani* story, as well as an exploration of Sasak cultural potential and gender related issues. Data collection at this stage involves observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted in Bayan Traditional Village, North Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, as one of the regions that continues to preserve Sasak cultural traditions and local wisdom. The observation focused on traditional architecture, clothing, ornaments, rituals, cultural symbols, and social values that could inform the development of character attributes, visual identities, environmental settings, and narrative elements within the *Bala Anjani* alternate universe. Semi structured interviews were conducted with Sasak cultural experts, arts scholars, *Bala Anjani* dance practitioners, and gender studies experts. The interviews aimed to gather information regarding cultural values, historical narratives, symbolic meanings, local wisdom, and gender representations relevant to the development of alternative storylines and character constructions. In addition, a literature review was undertaken to collect supporting data on Sasak culture, alternate universe narratives, and gender related issues from scholarly sources.

Data analysis in this stage follows the Miles & Huberman model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing [58], [59]. Data obtained from observations, interviews, documentation, and literature studies were reduced by selecting information relevant to the development of the *Bala Anjani* alternate universe, particularly data related to Sasak cultural elements, character representations, narrative structures, local wisdom values, and gender issues. The reduced data were then categorized into thematic groups and organized in the form of matrices, concept maps, and design notes to identify relationships among cultural attributes, characters, settings, conflicts, and gender representations. Finally, conclusions were drawn through the interpretation and synthesis of these findings to construct alternative storylines, character designs, visual attributes, and world building elements. To ensure data credibility, source and method triangulation were employed by comparing information obtained from observations, interviews, documentation, and literature sources [60], [61].

2.2. Design Approach

The design approach employs a modified Design Thinking method to produce an alternate universe of the *Bala Anjani* story in the form of character designs, attribute designs, and interconnected story series. This method was chosen because each stage of Design Thinking offers a structured yet flexible process, allowing the researcher to think creatively and innovatively [62], [63]. In this study, the Design Thinking method is modified by adding two additional stages, namely expert validation and pre-trial revision, in order to optimize both the process and the research outcomes. The stages of Design Thinking in this study include:

2.2.1. Empathize

This stage aimed to identify user needs and preferences related to digital comics, including preferred genres, storylines, settings, character types, and visual styles. Data were collected through interviews with 20 young readers aged 19–24 years and supported by a literature review of studies on digital comic readership. Participants were selected purposively based on their experience as active readers of digital comics, particularly Webtoon and similar platforms. This age group was chosen because it represents one of the primary audiences of digital comics and is highly engaged with contemporary digital storytelling and visual media. The outcome of this stage was a compilation of user preference data that informed the development of the alternate universe concept, character designs, and narrative themes [64].

2.2.2 Define

This stage aimed to analyze and formulate the data obtained during the empathize stage [65]. Interview and literature review data were categorized and synthesized to identify recurring patterns related to genre preferences, settings, character representations, conflicts, cultural elements, and social issues. The findings were then interpreted and translated into design considerations that guided the development of the alternate universe concept. The outcome of this stage was a set of formulated reader preferences and thematic directions for the narrative and character design.

2.2.3 Ideate

This stage aimed to generate creative solutions in the form of alternate universe concepts, including story series, character designs, and narrative settings [66]. The brainstorming process was conducted by the research team through a series of structured discussion sessions that integrated findings from the previous stages. Reader preferences identified during the empathize and define stages were combined with data on *Sasak* cultural elements and gender issues to explore potential narrative themes, character roles, conflicts, and visual directions. The proposed ideas were then reviewed and refined based on their relevance to audience preferences, cultural authenticity, and the representation of gender equality. The outcome of this stage was an initial concept outlining the narrative setting, characters, conflicts, and visual direction to be further developed in the prototype stage.

2.2.4 Prototype

The prototype stage involved translating the alternate universe concepts developed in the ideate stage into visual and narrative representations. At this stage, the research team produced character designs for the protagonist, supporting characters, and antagonist, including costumes, attributes, and visual identities adapted to each thematic setting. Story synopses and character backgrounds were also developed to define the narrative structure, conflicts, and relationships among characters. In addition, visual illustrations of the alternate universe settings were created to represent the environments and cultural elements embedded within each story concept. These components were compiled into a prototype consisting of character sheets, narrative descriptions, and visual concept illustrations, which were subsequently evaluated by experts during the validation stage.

2.2.5 Expert Validation

This stage aimed to assess the feasibility of the prototype in terms of visual design, cultural content, and gender representation [67]. The validation process involved three experts selected purposively based on their academic and professional expertise relevant to the research objectives. Visual design validation was conducted by Gozin Najah Rusyada, M.Pd., an academic specializing in art and design education with expertise in visual media and character design. Cultural validation was conducted by Sasi Gunalan, M.Sn., a cultural practitioner and art scholar with extensive knowledge of *Sasak* culture and local heritage. Gender representation was evaluated by Rina Komala, S.Sos., M.Ak., an academic whose research focuses on gender issues and social studies. Each validator assessed the prototype according to their area of expertise using a structured validation instrument developed from the research indicators. The validation instrument consisted of three main aspects, namely visual character, cultural content, and gender issues. The framework of the validation instrument, including the indicators assessed in each aspect, is presented in Table 2.

Tabel 2. Validation Instrument Framework [68], [69]

Aspect	Indicator	Number
Visual Character	Esthetic	1-3
	Originalities	4-6
Cultural Content	Presence of local nuances	7-9
	Accuracy of detail	10-12
Gender issues	Relevance of gender issues	13-15
	Consistency	16-18

2.2.6 Revision

This stage was carried out to revise the prototype based on the feedback provided by experts during the validation stage. Revisions focused on refining the accuracy of *Sasak* cultural elements, improving the consistency of character designs with their respective themes, and strengthening the representation of gender equality within the narratives and character portrayals. The revised prototype was then prepared for testing with digital comic readers.

2.2.7 Test

This stage was conducted to test the developed prototype and obtain user feedback regarding its visual design, cultural content, and gender representations. The participants consisted of 40 young people aged 19–24 years who had prior experience reading digital comics, particularly through Webtoon and similar platforms. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on two criteria: being within the target audience age range and having experience as active digital comic readers. This age group was chosen because it represents one of the primary audiences of digital comic platforms and is highly engaged with contemporary digital storytelling and visual media. During the testing process, participants were presented with the developed *Bala Anjani* alternate universe designs and subsequently completed a questionnaire evaluating visual appeal, cultural relevance, and gender related messages. Data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative techniques. The outcome of this stage was a refined alternate universe design of the *Bala Anjani* story that was considered suitable for further implementation in digital Webtoon comics.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Qualitative Research

3.1.1. Digital Comic Reader Preferences

To obtain information related to digital comic reader preferences, interviews were conducted. Participants were selected from the 19–24 age group because they constitute one of the primary audiences of digital comics and Webtoon platforms. Their familiarity with digital storytelling, visual media, and contemporary popular culture made them an appropriate source of information regarding genre preferences, character representations, visual styles, and narrative expectations relevant to the development of the *Bala Anjani* alternate universe. The scope of data collected included genre preferences, characters, visual styles, and narrative patterns. The findings at this stage are as follows:

- In terms of genre, most respondents showed a strong interest in stories with elements of fantasy, action, sports, mystery, and social drama.
- Respondents expressed an interest in protagonists portrayed as strong, independent, and rooted in historical or cultural backgrounds. Characters with such traits were considered to build stronger emotional connections with readers compared to weaker characters.
- Regarding visual style, respondents indicated a preference for traditional elements combined with modern touches. The integration of both was perceived as capable of creating a unique visual identity.

3.1.2. Exploring Local Cultural Potential and Gender Issues

Data on local cultural potential were collected through observations conducted in Bayan Traditional Village, North Lombok Regency, and semi-structured interviews with *Sasak* cultural experts Mr. Sasih Gunalan, M.Sn., a lecturer specializing in art studies and a national art curator affiliated with the NTB Provincial Cultural Center, and Mr. Irfan Hidayat, M.Pd., a lecturer with expertise in arts and cultural studies. Observation findings and interview results identified

several aspects of *Sasak* culture that could be integrated into the construction of the Bala Anjani alternate universe. These include traditional clothing such as *lambung*, *sapuq*, *songket*, and other distinctive *Sasak* woven textiles. Beyond their aesthetic function, these cultural attributes symbolize dignity, social values, and the cultural identity of the *Sasak* people. As noted by Sasih Gunalan, "Traditional attire is not merely clothing; it represents the dignity, identity, and cultural memory of the *Sasak* community." The observations also highlighted the presence of traditional architectural forms, ornaments, and cultural symbols that could be adapted into environmental settings and visual world-building elements. In addition, the *gendang beleq*, a prominent instrument in *Sasak* ceremonial traditions, was identified as representing the spirit of struggle and collective solidarity. Traditional weapons such as the *keris*, spear, *selarik*, and *ende* shield were also recognized as symbols of bravery, honour, and resistance, providing references for character attributes and narrative conflicts within the alternate universe design. Similarly, Irfan Hidayat emphasized that "local cultural symbols should not be treated merely as decorative elements but as meaningful components that shape narrative identity."

Information on gender issues was obtained through semi-structured interviews with Mrs. Rina Komala, S.Sos., M.Ak., an academic whose research focuses on gender studies, and Mrs. Bagiarti, S.H., Chairperson of the Child and Women Protection Institution. The findings emphasized the importance of integrating gender perspectives into culturally based creative works. Three key issues emerged from the interviews. First, stereotypes that continue to position women in subordinate roles remain prevalent in many forms of cultural representation. Second, there is a need to present female characters as critical, independent, and empowered agents who actively shape the narrative rather than merely supporting it. Third, values of equality in access, participation, and opportunity across social, educational, and technological domains should be embedded within cultural narratives. As Rina Komala stated, "Female characters should be represented as active subjects with agency, not merely as supporting figures within the story." Likewise, Bagiarti argued that "cultural products can serve as educational media for promoting gender equality when they provide balanced opportunities and representations for both women and men." These findings informed the development of female characters and storylines in the Bala Anjani alternate universe, ensuring that the resulting narratives not only preserve local cultural values but also promote more inclusive and equitable representations.

3.2. Design

The design stage was carried out by modifying the Design Thinking method, which included the following steps: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, expert validation, revision, and testing.

3.2.1. Empathize and Define

At this stage, the data collected during the qualitative phase were processed, including the preferences of digital comic readers, the potential of *Sasak* local culture, and gender issues. The outcome of this stage was the formulation of five major themes to be developed into synopsis and character designs for the alternate universe of the *Bala Anjani* story. These themes included: (1) supernatural magic; (2) sports; (3) mystery; (4) slice of life in school settings; (5) cyberpunk digital.

3.2.2. Ideate

Based on the formulation obtained in the previous stage, the ideas were then developed into the alternate universe of *Bala Anjani*. Five story synopses were designed, including:

- Anjani: The Last Dancer: The *Bala Anjani* dance was depicted as a unique yet forbidden form of ancient magic. This dance could only be performed by women and was believed to summon the spirits of female warriors from the astral world. The dominance of the Male Council of Sorcerers, led by Bumi, positioned the *Bala* dance as a symbol of resistance against the ruling power, resulting in the suppression and eradication of all forms of female magic. However, the knowledge did not entirely vanish. Anjani, as the last dance sorceress, lived in hiding with four Spirit Guardians: Sekar, Warni, Sri, and Ayu. When an astral catastrophe arose that male sorcery could not overcome, Anjani broke the prohibition and performed the *Bala* dance. Through this ritual, the ancestral power of women reemerged, seeking to restore balance to the world.

- *Bala Combat*: In the future, martial arts evolve into a prestigious international sport called *Bala Combat*. This competition blends martial techniques with traditional dance elements from cultures around the world. For the very first time, a women's team from the *Sasak* tribe steps onto the stage, carrying their ancestral legacy, the *Bala* dance, graceful yet deadly. Led by Anjani, the team showcases a unique style that fuses the elegance of their ancestral dance with ancient combat techniques. Their presence, however, faces resistance from the international federation led by Bumi, a conservative figure who dismisses their style as "unstandardized." Despite discrimination and mounting pressure, Anjani and her team persist. Through resilience, solidarity, and courage, they prove that elegance and cultural heritage can be a true competitive power.
- *Detective Anjani*: Anjani, a cultural detective dedicated to preserving traditional arts. One day, she receives a mysterious case: the disappearance of *Bala* dancers, practitioners of an ancient dance that once symbolized women's resistance in *Sasak* culture. The cases occur repeatedly in remote Lombok villages, hinting at a systematic pattern. In her investigation, Anjani joins forces with four former *Bala* dancers who now work as field agents. Together, they uncover a trail leading to a secret organization determined to erase all traces of militant women's dance. What begins as an investigation soon turns into a struggle to defend identity, culture, and women's power against a hidden threat
- *Bala Reborn: Spirit of the Youth*: Anjani, a high school student in Lombok, takes the initiative to revive the *Bala* Dance as an extracurricular activity. Historically, this dance symbolized women's strength and resistance, and Anjani sees it as vital both for cultural preservation and as a space for young women's self-expression. However, her efforts face resistance from the school principal and the student council president, Bumi, who argue that the *Bala* Dance does not fit the school's image and is "too aggressive" for young women. Refusing to give in, Anjani and her friends organize a performance that fuses the *Bala* Dance with contemporary social issues surrounding women. When the performance is shared on social media, it receives overwhelming support and quickly goes viral, inspiring a new wave of youth activism.
- *Bala Code: The Last Rhythm*: In the future, women's history has been deliberately erased by a powerful corporation under patriarchal control. Anjani leads a rebel group called *Virtuana*, composed of young women who refuse to submit. They use the *Bala* Dance as a code of resistance, its movements translated into augmented reality to breach digital security systems. When Commander Bumi, the leader of male enforcers representing the old regime, fails to stop a satellite network breach, Anjani and *Virtuana* launch a daring cyber infiltration using the rhythm of the *Bala* Dance. Through courage and ingenuity, they fight to save the erased archives of Nusantara's history before they are lost forever.

3.2.3. Prototype

The synopsis that had been formulated was then realized in the form of main and supporting character designs, as well as attribute illustrations with the implementation of *Sasak* cultural elements in their forms. Each theme maintained the same number of characters as the original story, namely six characters: one main protagonist, four supporting characters, and one main antagonist. The outcome of the prototype stage consisted of five alternative character designs representing different thematic settings. Characters from the alternate universe with magic and occult themes can be seen in Fig. 2.



Fig 2. The Characters of Alternate Universe with Magic Supranatural Theme

For the supernatural fantasy theme, the prototype adopted a magical narrative setting centered on female empowerment. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the character designs employed dark-toned witch costumes in the form of robes, complemented by woven and traditional motifs inspired by *Sasak* textiles. The fantasy visual style was selected to reinforce the magical atmosphere, while the female-centered magical abilities reflected the core values of women's empowerment embedded in the original *Bala Anjani* narrative. Then, the characters from the alternate universe with a sports theme can be seen in Fig. 3.



Fig 3. The Characters of Alternate Universe with Sport Theme

The sports themed alternate universe emphasized competitiveness, resilience, and leadership among female characters. As shown in Fig. 3, the visual designs combined pencak silat attire with an edgy contemporary style. Traditional *Sasak songket* motifs were integrated into the costumes to strengthen cultural identity while maintaining a modern aesthetic appropriate for a competitive sports setting. Then, the characters of alternate universe with mystery theme can be seen in Fig. 4.

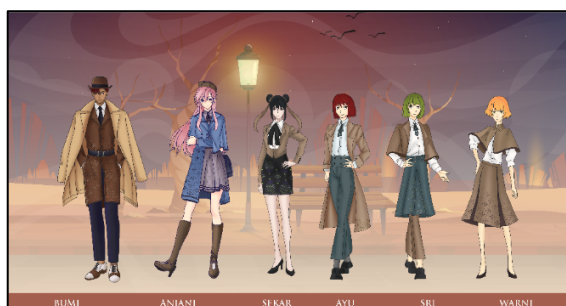


Fig 4. The Characters of Alternate Universe with Mystery Theme

The mystery-themed prototype portrayed women as active agents in preserving culture and solving complex problems. As presented in Fig. 4, the characters were designed using semi-formal clothing such as shirts, skirts, trousers, blazers, and long coats inspired by classic detective fiction. *Sasak* cultural elements were incorporated through costume details and character backgrounds, reinforcing both local identity and narrative authenticity. Next, characters from alternate universes with everyday life themes can be seen in Fig. 5.



Fig 5. The Characters of Alternate Universe with Slice of Life Theme

The slice of life theme situated the *Bala Anjani* narrative within a contemporary educational environment. As depicted in Fig. 5, the characters wore school uniforms consisting of white shirts, dark vests, and light beige trousers or skirts. The inclusion of woven motifs inspired by

Sasak textiles maintained a cultural connection within a modern school setting. Furthermore, the narrative emphasized equal opportunities for male and female students in demonstrating leadership and creativity. Fig. 6 shows characters from an alternative universe with a futuristic cyberpunk theme.

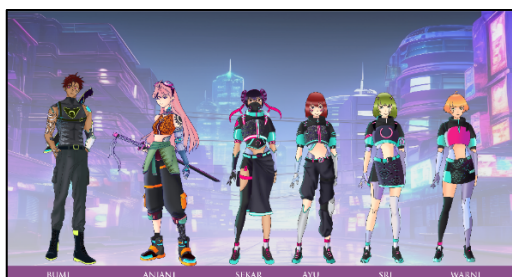


Fig 6. The Characters of an Alternate Universe with a Cyberpunk Futuristic Theme

The cyberpunk-themed alternate universe integrated local cultural identity with futuristic imagination. As illustrated in Fig. 6, the character designs incorporated wearable technologies, including mechanical gloves and bionic arms, combined with traditional woven motifs from Lombok. Traditional weapons such as the *keris* and *klewang* were reinterpreted as symbolic cultural attributes within a futuristic context. The portrayal of female characters as leaders of technological resistance further reinforced the study's commitment to promoting gender equality and empowerment.

3.2.4. Expert Validation and Revision

The validation process involved three groups of experts: (1) design academics to evaluate character visuals; (2) *Sasak* cultural experts; (3) social science academics to review gender-related content. The validation produced several key findings. First, in terms of visual design, the experts assessed the illustrations as having strong aesthetic quality, though they noted that the details of traditional textile motifs still needed adjustments to achieve greater authenticity in line with *Sasak* cultural standards. Second, the cultural narratives were considered sufficiently representative for presenting a local nuance, yet the experts suggested expanding the exploration of symbols and traditional elements to enrich the story's cultural context. Third, the gender dimension was found to be relevant and contextual, but it required greater consistency so that it would not merely serve as an additional element but instead function as a thematic thread that ties the entire storyline together. Overall, all validators confirmed that the synopses and character designs of the Bala Anjani alternate universe were valid and ready to be tested.

3.2.5. Test

The testing phase was carried out to evaluate the product and at the same time collect feedback from users. In this study, the trial focused on two aspects: (1) the comic characters, covering illustration aesthetics, originality, and alignment with the theme; and (2) the synopses, covering narrative clarity, cultural relevance, and the integration of gender messages. The results of the user evaluation are summarized in Table 3.

Tabel 3. Trial Results

No	Indicator	Strongly Agree		Agree		Somewhat Disagree		Disagree		Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1.	Illustration Aesthetic	35	87,5	5	12,5	-	-	-	-	40	100
2.	Design Originality	31	77,5	6	15	3	7,5	-	-	40	100
3.	Character Theme Alignment	37	92,5	3	7,5	-	-	-	-	40	100
4.	Narrative Clarity	38	95	2	5	-	-	-	-	40	100
5.	Cultural Relevance	32	80	7	17,5	1	2,5	-	-	40	100
6.	Inclusion of Gender Messages	35	87,5	5	12,5	-	-	-	-	40	100

The trial results indicate that the developed alternate universe prototypes were positively received across all evaluation indicators. Narrative clarity obtained the highest rating, with 95% of respondents strongly agreeing that the story concepts were easy to understand. This result may be attributed to the use of familiar contemporary genres, including fantasy, sports, mystery, slice of life, and cyberpunk, which enabled respondents to readily engage with the narratives despite their adaptation from a traditional cultural source. Character theme alignment also received a high level of agreement (92.5%), suggesting that respondents perceived a strong consistency between the visual appearance of the characters and the thematic direction of each alternate universe. The integration of genre-specific visual elements with cultural attributes contributed to the coherence of the character designs and strengthened their narrative roles. The aesthetic quality of the illustrations (87.5%) and the inclusion of gender messages (87.5%) were similarly evaluated positively. These findings indicate that the visual designs were considered appealing while also successfully communicating the intended values of women's empowerment and gender equality. The positive assessment of gender-related messages suggests that respondents were able to recognize female characters as active agents, leaders, and decision-makers rather than merely supporting figures within the narrative. Cultural relevance received a strong positive response, with 80% of respondents strongly agreeing that the designs reflected Sasak cultural identity. This result demonstrates that the incorporation of songket motifs, traditional weapons, cultural symbols, and references to local traditions remained recognizable despite being adapted into contemporary visual genres. The finding supports the possibility of presenting local cultural heritage in forms that are more accessible and appealing to young audiences without losing its cultural significance.

Among all indicators, design originality received the lowest score, although the overall assessment remained positive. This finding may be related to the adoption of visual conventions derived from popular genres such as fantasy, detective fiction, and cyberpunk. While these conventions enhanced familiarity and audience engagement, they may also have reduced the perception of novelty among some respondents. This suggests the need for further exploration of distinctive visual elements derived from *Sasak* culture to strengthen the uniqueness of future character designs. Overall, these findings demonstrate that the research objectives were successfully achieved. The developed alternate universe designs were able to integrate Sasak cultural elements and gender equality values into contemporary digital comic narratives that were positively received by young audiences. Furthermore, the results indicate that cultural heritage and gender related messages can be communicated effectively through popular visual media, providing a promising approach for the development of culturally grounded and socially responsive digital storytelling. Future research should move beyond prototype development by examining the effectiveness of the alternate universe comics in improving cultural awareness, gender sensitivity, and audience engagement through experimental or quasi-experimental studies. In addition, the proposed design framework may be further developed into a model for culture-based digital storytelling and implemented across different cultural contexts to evaluate its adaptability, scalability, and educational potential.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the alternate universe approach can serve as an effective strategy for recontextualizing local cultural heritage and gender equality values within contemporary digital storytelling. Through the adaptation of the *Bala Anjani* narrative, *Sasak* cultural elements and gender related values were transformed into story concepts and character designs that remain relevant to the interests of contemporary young audiences while preserving their cultural significance. The main contribution of this study lies in the development of a design framework that integrates local cultural identity, gender perspectives, and audience preferences into the creation of digital comic narratives. The findings extend previous studies on the *Bala Anjani* dance by moving beyond cultural documentation and representation toward the development of a creative adaptation model that connects traditional culture with contemporary visual media. This framework may serve as a reference for future cultural adaptation projects that seek to communicate social values through popular digital platforms. Future research may focus on evaluating the educational and social impacts of the developed alternate universe through experimental studies involving readers from

different age groups and cultural backgrounds. Further studies may also explore the implementation of interactive digital formats, such as webtoon platforms, visual novels, or immersive storytelling technologies, to examine how cultural values and gender perspectives are interpreted, negotiated, and internalized by audiences in contemporary digital environments.

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Declarations

- Author contribution** : N played a role in the entire research process, from design to implementation, as well as compiling the introduction and methodology sections using a performing arts approach. NKP was tasked with formulating the theoretical framework and contributing to the refinement of the methodology. H was responsible for creating the Alternate Universe illustrations and writing the literature review.
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