

Participatory Documentary-Making and Malaysian Chinese Youth Engagement with Lion Dance Craftsmanship

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The study explores how participatory documentary-making facilitates Malaysian Chinese youths' engagement with lion dance craftsmanship, with particular attention to cultural understanding, emotional connection, and perceived responsibility toward heritage preservation. It also examines differences between youth who participated directly in documentary production and those who engaged through discussion and selected documentary materials.

Methodology: The study employed a qualitative comparative design situated within a participatory research approach. Twenty Malaysian Chinese youths aged 16–18 were purposively recruited. All participants first attended the same introductory documentary-making workshop to establish a comparable baseline of documentary knowledge. Ten youths subsequently participated in an eight-week documentary-making process involving filming, interviews with lion head artisans, and documentation of craftsmanship, while ten comparison participants did not participate directly in production. Three rounds of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted at the beginning, during, and after the project. The transcripts were analysed thematically, supplemented by observational notes and documentary materials.

Findings: Three themes emerged: (1) moving from superficial recognition towards cultural identity recognition; (2) moving from spectatorship towards emotional connection; and (3) empowerment through storytelling. Participants involved in documentary production described greater appreciation of the knowledge, labour, and cultural meanings embedded in lion head-making. They also articulated stronger personal connections with the craft and a greater sense of agency in

Article History

Received:
June 23, 2026

Revised:
August 19, 2026

Accepted:
September 11, 2026

Online:
September 30, 2026

communicating its cultural significance. Comparison participants generally described increased awareness but more limited narrative ownership.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that participatory documentary-making can provide a meaningful context for youth to encounter, interpret, and communicate intangible cultural heritage. Rather than establishing causal impact, the study demonstrates how active media participation may facilitate cultural learning, narrative ownership, intergenerational engagement, and youth agency in heritage communication.

Keywords: Participatory documentary-making; Youth engagement; Lion dance craftsmanship; Intangible cultural heritage; Cultural identity; Heritage preservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lion dance is one of the most visible expressions of Chinese cultural heritage in Malaysia. Introduced through Chinese migration and subsequently developed within Malaysia's multicultural environment, the practice has evolved from a ritual performance associated with auspicious occasions into an internationally recognised performance tradition (Loo & Loo, 2016; Looi, 2023; Zhang & Ma, 2020). Its development in Malaysia demonstrates how cultural traditions can retain historical meanings while adapting to changing social and cultural contexts.

Beyond performance, lion dance encompasses specialised forms of craftsmanship, particularly the construction of lion heads. This process involves artisanal knowledge relating to structure, materials, painting, decoration, symbolism, and adaptation to different performance requirements. Such knowledge forms part of the broader intangible cultural heritage surrounding lion dance because its continuity depends substantially on intergenerational transmission.

The sustainability of traditional craftsmanship is increasingly challenged by changing lifestyles, educational aspirations, economic expectations, and young people's relationship with cultural traditions. Studies of craft and heritage engagement have identified difficulties in maintaining younger generations' sustained involvement with traditional knowledge and practices (Kasinathan et al., 2024; Mazur-Włodarczyk et al., 2024). Within Malaysia, these concerns are particularly important because cultural practices such as lion dance function not only as community traditions but also as expressions of cultural identity within a multicultural society (Loo & Loo, 2016; Lyu et al., 2024).

Digital and participatory media provide alternative ways of engaging young people with cultural heritage. Rather than positioning youth solely as audiences receiving information about heritage, participatory media practices allow them to document, interpret, and communicate cultural narratives. Participatory documentary-making is particularly relevant because the process can involve direct interaction with cultural practitioners, observation of cultural practices, interviewing, audiovisual documentation, collaborative interpretation, and storytelling.

Research on participatory visual practices has highlighted their potential to support youth voice, collaborative knowledge production, reflection, and agency (Lam et al., 2021; Lenette, 2019; Mitchell & de Lange, 2013). Recent scholarship on youth participation in cultural heritage management similarly emphasises that young people should not be regarded merely as recipients of heritage education but as participants capable of contributing perspectives, knowledge, and cultural narratives (Zhang et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, participation should not automatically be assumed to produce empowerment or stronger cultural attachment. The meaning and outcomes of participation depend on how young people are positioned within the activity, the opportunities available for meaningful involvement, and how they interpret their experiences. Therefore, empirical examination of the participatory process itself is necessary.

Existing research on Malaysian lion dance has primarily examined its performance, cultural identity, historical development, and socio-political significance (Carstens, 2005; Loo & Loo, 2016; Zhang & Ma, 2020). Comparatively less attention has been given to how young people encounter the artisanal knowledge involved in constructing lion heads and how participatory media practices might facilitate such engagement.

Against this background, the present study explores the experiences of Malaysian Chinese youth participating in a documentary-making project centred on lion dance craftsmanship. It examines how participants described their understanding of the craft, emotional connection to heritage, and perceived role in communicating and preserving cultural knowledge across different stages of participation.

1.1 Problem Statement

The continued visibility and international recognition of Malaysian lion dance do not necessarily ensure the transmission of the artisanal knowledge that sustains the tradition. While lion dance performances remain highly visible during festivals, competitions, and public events, knowledge concerning the construction of lion heads is less visible to younger audiences. The distinction between recognising a cultural performance and understanding the craftsmanship underlying that performance therefore represents an important issue for heritage continuity.

Existing research has documented challenges surrounding youth engagement with traditional cultural practices as social expectations, technologies, educational priorities, and career aspirations change (Kasinathan et al., 2024; Mazur-Włodarczyk et al., 2024). Within the context of lion dance, previous scholarship has examined cultural identity, group values, performance, and the socio-political meanings associated with the tradition (Loo & Loo, 2016; Zhang & Ma, 2020). However, considerably less attention has been directed towards youth engagement with the specialised craftsmanship involved in producing the lion itself.

At the same time, digital media have expanded opportunities for young people to participate in documenting and communicating cultural heritage. Participatory documentary-making differs from conventional heritage communication because young participants are involved in producing cultural narratives rather than simply receiving them. Through interviewing artisans, observing craftsmanship, recording cultural practices, and constructing audiovisual narratives, participants encounter heritage through a combination of interpersonal interaction, media production, interpretation, and storytelling.

However, the potential value of such participation should not be assumed in advance. There remains a need to understand how young people themselves experience the process and whether different forms of engagement correspond with different ways of understanding and relating to cultural heritage. In particular, limited empirical research has examined participatory documentary-making in relation to Malaysian lion dance craftsmanship.

Accordingly, this study addresses two interconnected gaps. First, it shifts attention from the highly visible performance of lion dance to the less visible artisanal knowledge associated with lion head-making. Second, it examines participatory documentary-making as a process of youth cultural engagement rather than assuming that exposure to heritage automatically produces cultural identification or preservation behaviour. By comparing the accounts of youth directly involved in documentary production with those of youth who did not participate in production, the study explores how different forms of engagement are reflected in participants' cultural understanding, emotional connection, and perceived agency in relation to heritage.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore Malaysian Chinese youths' engagement with lion dance craftsmanship through participatory documentary-making. Specifically, the study seeks to:

RO1: Explore how Malaysian Chinese youth understand and interpret lion dance craftsmanship before and during their engagement with the documentary project.

RO2: Examine how participation in documentary-making is reflected in youths' emotional connection, cultural identification, and perceived relationship with lion dance craftsmanship.

RO3: Compare the experiences and perceptions of youth directly involved in documentary production with those who did not participate in the production process, particularly in relation to cultural understanding, engagement, and perceived agency in heritage preservation.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Participatory Media and Youth Agency

This study is informed by a participatory media perspective, which conceptualises media production as a process through which participants contribute to the creation and interpretation of narratives rather than functioning solely as audiences. In participatory visual research, the significance of media therefore extends beyond the completed media product. The process of deciding what to document, interacting with participants, conducting interviews, recording experiences, and constructing narratives can itself become a site of reflection and knowledge production (Lenette, 2019; Mitchell & de Lange, 2013).

Within youth contexts, this distinction is particularly important. Conventional heritage communication frequently positions young people as audiences who receive cultural information from institutions, educators, elders, or media producers. Participatory approaches reposition them as contributors to cultural narratives. Their involvement may create opportunities to ask questions, interpret cultural meanings, communicate their perspectives, and develop a sense of agency concerning the stories being represented.

Research involving youth-produced documentary and participatory visual practices has demonstrated that collaborative media production can provide spaces for young people to connect personal experiences with wider social and cultural narratives (Lam et al., 2021). From this perspective, agency does not simply mean acquiring technical media-production skills. It refers to participants' perceived capacity to contribute to meaning-making and communicate cultural knowledge to others.

2.2 Youth Participation in Cultural Heritage

The participatory media perspective is complemented by scholarship on youth participation in cultural heritage management. This scholarship challenges approaches that conceptualise young people merely as recipients of heritage education. Instead, youth can occupy more active roles in interpreting, documenting, communicating, and potentially contributing to decisions concerning cultural heritage.

Zhang et al. (2024) conceptualise youth participation in cultural heritage through dimensions that include purpose, positioning, perspectives, and power relations. Their framework is useful for the present study because it cautions against treating participation as a simple linear progression towards empowerment. Participation is dynamic and depends on how youth are positioned, whose perspectives are recognised, and what opportunities they have to contribute.

This perspective is especially appropriate for the present study because documentary-making creates several forms of participation simultaneously. Youth participants encounter artisans directly, observe the craftsmanship process, ask questions, record cultural knowledge, make audiovisual decisions, and construct a narrative for an audience. The process therefore moves beyond cultural exposure towards active engagement with the production and communication of heritage knowledge.

2.3 Conceptualising Participatory Documentary-Making in This Study

Based on these perspectives, the present study conceptualises participatory documentary-making as a process that creates opportunities for three interrelated forms of youth engagement.

First, cultural understanding refers to participants' interpretation of the knowledge, meanings, skills, history, and cultural significance associated with lion dance craftsmanship. Second, cultural connection refers to participants' expressions of emotional attachment, identification, pride, empathy, or personal relevance arising from their encounters with artisans and cultural practices. Third, perceived agency refers to participants' sense that they can communicate, document, share, or contribute to the continuation of cultural knowledge through storytelling and media production.

These dimensions are treated as analytical sensitising concepts rather than predetermined outcomes. The study does not assume that participation necessarily produces cultural connection or agency. Instead, it examines whether and how these dimensions appear in participants' accounts across the different stages of the project and how the experiences of participants involved directly in documentary production compare with those of participants who were not involved in production.

Participatory Documentary-making → Encounters with Artisans and Craftsmanship → Collaborative Documentation and Meaning-making → Cultural Understanding, Cultural Connection, and Perceived Agency

The arrows represent an analytical process rather than a deterministic causal relationship. The framework guides interpretation of participants' experiences while remaining consistent with the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative comparative design to explore how different forms of engagement with lion dance craftsmanship were reflected in Malaysian Chinese youths' cultural understanding, emotional connection, and perceived agency. The study incorporated participatory documentary-making as the primary engagement activity for one group of participants.

The comparative component was not intended as an experimental or quasi-experimental design and did not seek to establish causal effects. Rather, comparison was used to examine similarities and differences between the accounts of youth who participated directly in documentary production and those who did not participate in the production process. For clarity, the groups are referred to as the Documentary-Making Group and Comparison Group.

3.2 Participants, Sampling, Workshop and Group Allocation

Twenty Malaysian Chinese youths aged between 16 and 18 years participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had general familiarity with lion dance as a cultural practice but had no substantial prior involvement in lion head-making craftsmanship.

Prior to group allocation, all 20 participants attended the same introductory workshop on documentary-making fundamentals. The workshop was designed to establish a comparable baseline of documentary knowledge and technical understanding among participants. Following the workshop, participants were organised into two groups of ten.

The Documentary-Making Group subsequently participated in an eight-week participatory documentary-making process involving filming, interviews with lion head artisans, observation of craftsmanship, and documentation of the lion head-making process. The Comparison Group did not participate directly in these production activities. Both groups participated in the three rounds of FGDs.

This arrangement enabled the study to explore differences in participants' accounts following different levels of engagement while reducing the possibility that such differences simply reflected unequal initial exposure to documentary-making knowledge. The comparison was interpretive rather than experimental and was not intended to establish causal effects.

The sample size was considered appropriate for the study's qualitative purpose because the research prioritised depth of engagement and repeated data collection rather than statistical representation. Each participant contributed to multiple rounds of discussion, allowing perceptions and experiences to be examined across different stages of the project.

3.3 Participant Profile

The participants comprised 12 males (60%) and eight females (40%). Both groups consisted of ten participants and had the same gender distribution, with six males and four females in each group. To protect participants' identities, participant codes were used throughout the analysis. Participants in the Documentary-Making Group were coded T1–T10, while participants in the Comparison Group were coded C1–C10. Table 1 presents the demographic profile.

Table 1: *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Participant	Group	Age	Gender
T1	Documentary-Making	16	Male
T2	Documentary-Making	16	Male
T3	Documentary-Making	16	Male
T4	Documentary-Making	16	Female
T5	Documentary-Making	18	Female
T6	Documentary-Making	17	Male
T7	Documentary-Making	17	Female
T8	Documentary-Making	16	Female
T9	Documentary-Making	16	Male
T10	Documentary-Making	17	Male
C1	Comparison	17	Male
C2	Comparison	17	Female
C3	Comparison	16	Female
C4	Comparison	16	Male
C5	Comparison	16	Male
C6	Comparison	17	Male
C7	Comparison	17	Female
C8	Comparison	16	Female
C9	Comparison	16	Male
C10	Comparison	17	Female

Note. T denotes participants who subsequently participated in documentary-making activities; C denotes participants in the comparison group.

3.4 Participatory Documentary-Making Process

Over eight weeks, Documentary-Making Group participants were involved in audiovisual recording, interviews with lion head artisans, observation of craftsmanship, and documentation of the processes involved in producing lion heads. Rather than simply watching representations of the tradition, participants encountered artisans and craftsmanship through the process of producing their own cultural narrative.

The documentary-making process therefore provided the experiential context through which the study examined youth engagement with lion dance craftsmanship.

3.5 Focus Group Discussions

FGDs constituted the primary method of data collection. They were selected because group interaction allows participants to articulate individual experiences while responding to, extending, or questioning the

perspectives of others (Hall, 2020). This was particularly relevant for exploring shared and differing understandings of cultural identity, heritage, craftsmanship, and youth involvement.

Three rounds of FGDs were conducted with both groups. Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and followed a semi-structured discussion protocol. The first FGD established participants' initial knowledge and perceptions; the second explored developing interpretations during the project; and the third examined post-project reflections concerning cultural understanding, personal connection, and perceived capacity to communicate heritage knowledge.

Stage 1: Initial FGD

- What does lion dance mean to you?
- What do you know about how lion heads are made?
- How important is lion dance to your cultural identity?
- Do you think lion dance craftsmanship is relevant to young people today? Why?
- Who do you think is responsible for ensuring that this knowledge continues?

Stage 2: Mid-Project FGD

- What have you learned about lion head-making that you did not know previously?
- Has anything surprised you during the project?
- How have your interactions with artisans influenced the way you understand the craft?
- Has your perception of lion dance changed? If so, how?
- What challenges do you think artisans face in transmitting this knowledge to younger generations?

Stage 3: Post-Project FGD

- How would you describe lion dance craftsmanship now?
- Has your relationship with or perception of this heritage changed during the project? How?
- Do you feel differently about the people who preserve this craftsmanship?
- Do young people have a role in preserving or communicating this cultural knowledge?
- Would you share what you learned with other people? Why or why not?
- What role, if any, can documentary-making play in helping young people engage with cultural heritage?

Follow-up prompts were used where necessary to encourage clarification and elaboration rather than directing participants towards predetermined responses. All FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.6 Supplementary Data

In addition to FGD transcripts, observational notes recorded during documentary production and documentary materials generated during the project were used as supplementary sources. These materials provided contextual information that assisted the researchers in interpreting participants' descriptions of their experiences. The FGDs remained the primary analytical dataset; supplementary materials were used for contextualisation and triangulation rather than being treated as equivalent independent datasets.

3.7 Data Analysis

The FGD transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, development of candidate themes,

review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytical account (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis involved both descriptive and interpretive coding. During the first phase, descriptive codes were assigned to statements concerning participants' existing knowledge, perceptions of craftsmanship, cultural meanings, encounters with artisans, emotional responses, storytelling experiences, and perceptions of heritage responsibility.

During the second phase, related codes were compared within and across the two groups and across the three FGD stages. Patterns were clustered into broader interpretive categories. Candidate themes were reviewed against the transcripts to ensure that they represented participants' accounts rather than assumptions established before analysis. Through this iterative process, three overarching themes were developed: (1) From Superficial Symbol to Cultural Identity Recognition; (2) From Spectatorship to Emotional Connection; and (3) Empowerment Through Storytelling.

Comparison between the Documentary-Making Group and Comparison Group was used to identify similarities and differences in participants' accounts. Because the study was qualitative, differences between groups were interpreted as patterns in participants' reported experiences rather than statistically significant effects.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were implemented through an informed consent process prior to participation. All participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research and provided written consent to participate. Written parental or guardian consent was additionally obtained for participants who were minors. Participation was voluntary.

To protect privacy and confidentiality, participants' real names are not reported. Participant codes (T1–T10 and C1–C10) are used in transcripts and in the reporting of findings.

The study did not obtain separate institutional ethics committee approval. The manuscript therefore reports the consent and confidentiality procedures actually implemented and does not claim formal institutional ethical approval.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the three rounds of FGDs identified differences in how participants described lion dance craftsmanship across the different stages of the project. At the initial stage, participants in both groups generally recognised lion dance as a familiar cultural practice but demonstrated limited knowledge of the craftsmanship involved in producing lion heads. As the project progressed, the accounts of Documentary-Making Group participants increasingly reflected direct encounters with artisans, greater attention to the meanings embedded in craftsmanship, and a stronger sense of personal involvement in communicating the tradition.

Three overarching themes were developed from the analysis: (1) From Superficial Symbol to Cultural Identity Recognition; (2) From Spectatorship to Emotional Connection; and (3) Empowerment Through Storytelling. Comparison with the Comparison Group provided an interpretive reference for examining how participants experiencing different forms of engagement described their relationship with the heritage.

4.1 Theme 1: From Superficial Symbol to Cultural Identity Recognition

During the initial FGD, participants in both groups commonly associated lion dance with Chinese festivals and cultural celebrations. Although they recognised lion dance as part of Chinese cultural heritage, their understanding centred primarily on the visible performance rather than the craftsmanship involved in constructing the lion heads.

“I always see lion dance during Chinese New Year, but honestly, I didn’t know who makes the lion heads or how it is done. I only thought of it as a performance, not a craft.” (T1, Male, 16)

“I grew up watching lion dance, so I know it belongs to us as Chinese. But honestly, the making process was a mystery—I assumed they just buy from China.” (T6, Male, 17)

“It feels like something only for Chinese people. I don’t see how it’s connected to my life.” (C3, Female, 16)

These initial accounts indicate an important distinction between recognising lion dance as a cultural symbol and understanding the artisanal knowledge underlying the performance. Participants were familiar with the visible cultural representation of lion dance but had comparatively little awareness of how lion heads were produced or of the knowledge transmitted through the craft.

As participants in the Documentary-Making Group began interacting with artisans and documenting the production process, their descriptions became more detailed. Their accounts increasingly referred to the skills, experiences, adaptations, and cultural meanings involved in lion head-making rather than to lion dance solely as festive entertainment.

The theme therefore represents a movement in participants’ accounts from familiarity with the symbolic and performative dimensions of lion dance towards greater recognition of the craftsmanship and cultural knowledge supporting that performance.

4.2 Theme 2: From Spectatorship to Emotional Connection

The second theme concerned the increasingly personal and emotional ways in which Documentary-Making Group participants described lion dance craftsmanship during the project. Their direct encounters with artisans exposed them not only to technical processes but also to the experiences of people maintaining the craft.

Participants also became aware that innovation formed part of the continuing development of the tradition. They learned how changes in materials and construction could produce lighter and more durable lion heads suitable for increasingly demanding contemporary performances and competitions.

“I thought lion dance was only for Chinese New Year, but after hearing about the competitions and how the lions are specially designed for acrobatic moves, I realized it’s actually modern and exciting.” (T3, Male, 16)

“The stories from the craftsmen really touched me. They didn’t just teach skills; they showed us how the lion dance has changed over time, yet still keeps its cultural meaning. It made me proud to see how our tradition can grow and still stay alive.” (T6, Male, 17)

“When I listened to the lion dance players talk about their international competitions, I felt amazed. I didn’t know Malaysia was so famous for this. It changed the way I see lion dance—from just a cultural show to something that represents us to the world.” (T8, Female, 16)

“The craftsman said he had to change the design many times to keep up with the performances. That made me realize that tradition is not about staying the same but about adapting. It made me connect more because I also feel we have to adapt as young people.” (T2, Male, 16)

The Comparison Group demonstrated interest in the craftsmanship but generally described it from the position of an observer.

“It looks really detailed and complicated, but I think I would still just enjoy the dance rather than try to learn about the making process.” (C3, Female, 16)

The contrast between these accounts suggests different forms of engagement. Documentary-Making Group participants frequently related the craft to personal feelings, identity, artisans' experiences, and cultural continuity, whereas Comparison Group accounts tended to remain focused on observation and general appreciation.

Rather than demonstrating a causal effect, this pattern indicates that direct encounters with artisans and active involvement in documenting their stories were associated with richer and more personally situated descriptions of the heritage among Documentary-Making Group participants.

4.3 Theme 3: Empowerment Through Storytelling

The third theme emerged most clearly during the post-project FGD and concerned participants' perceptions of their capacity to communicate cultural knowledge to others. Documentary-Making Group participants described documentary production as providing them with an opportunity not simply to learn about lion dance craftsmanship but also to construct and communicate a cultural narrative.

"Before this, I didn't think I could do anything to help our culture. But after making this documentary, I feel like I can show others why lion dance is important. It's like we are part of keeping it alive." (T1, Male, 16)

"Now I feel proud to tell my friends that lion dance is not just a show. It's our heritage, and if we don't care, it will disappear." (T3, Male, 16)

"Learning how to use the camera and edit interviews made me feel like my voice mattered. I wasn't just learning about the lion dance, I was also creating something to share with others." (T4, Female, 16)

"When we showed the final video, I felt proud because it wasn't only our project—it was a message to the community. We were telling people that this tradition is worth saving." (T7, Female, 17)

In comparison, participants who were not directly involved in documentary production expressed more limited ownership of the narrative.

"The video was nice to watch, but I don't feel like it's my story to tell. I just learned a bit, but I wouldn't say I could explain it to others." (C4, Male, 16)

"It's good to learn about, but I don't think I can be part of preserving it. It feels far from me." (C2, Female, 17)

These accounts illustrate perceived agency: Documentary-Making Group participants increasingly positioned themselves as capable of documenting, interpreting, and communicating cultural knowledge rather than simply receiving information about heritage.

The comparison does not establish that documentary participation independently caused greater agency. However, participants directly involved in production more frequently positioned themselves as storytellers and potential contributors to heritage communication, whereas Comparison Group participants tended to position themselves as audiences or learners.

4.4 Patterns Across the Three FGD Stages

Taken together, the three themes demonstrate a progression in how Documentary-Making Group participants described their engagement with lion dance craftsmanship. At the initial stage, participants in both groups predominantly recognised lion dance through its visible performance and cultural symbolism, while knowledge of lion head-making was limited. During the documentary-making period, participants directly involved in production increasingly discussed the knowledge, labour, personal histories, and adaptations associated with the craft. By the post-project stage, several participants described themselves as capable of communicating this knowledge to others through storytelling and documentary production.

The Comparison Group also demonstrated awareness of the cultural value and complexity of lion dance craftsmanship. However, their accounts generally reflected appreciation and learning rather than the stronger narrative ownership expressed by Documentary-Making Group participants.

The findings therefore suggest three interconnected dimensions of engagement: cultural understanding, cultural connection, and perceived agency. These dimensions correspond with the conceptual framework guiding the study but were identified through patterns within participants' accounts rather than treated as predetermined consequences of participation.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored how Malaysian Chinese youth engaged with lion dance craftsmanship through participatory documentary-making. Three interconnected patterns were identified: movement from superficial recognition towards greater cultural understanding, the development of more personally situated and emotional connections with the craft, and an increased sense of agency through storytelling. These findings are interpreted as patterns in participants' accounts rather than evidence of a deterministic causal relationship between documentary-making and heritage engagement.

5.1 From Cultural Recognition to Cultural Understanding

The first finding demonstrates an important distinction between being familiar with a cultural tradition and understanding the knowledge underlying that tradition. During the initial FGD, participants in both groups readily recognised lion dance as part of Chinese cultural heritage, particularly in relation to Chinese New Year and cultural celebrations. However, their knowledge of lion head-making was limited.

This distinction is significant because cultural visibility does not necessarily ensure the transmission of cultural knowledge. Lion dance can remain highly visible as a performance while the artisanal processes supporting that performance become increasingly distant from younger generations. Similar concerns have been identified in research on traditional cultural practices, where younger generations may recognise heritage symbols without necessarily possessing deeper knowledge of their production, meanings, or transmission (Kasinathan et al., 2024).

For Documentary-Making Group participants, direct interaction with artisans provided access to aspects of the tradition that were largely invisible from the position of an audience member. Participants encountered the labour, skills, materials, personal histories, and adaptations involved in producing lion heads. Documentary-making therefore functioned not merely as a method of recording heritage but as a context through which participants encountered cultural knowledge.

This finding supports the broader argument that youth heritage engagement can move beyond informing and educating young people towards more participatory forms of involvement. Youth participation in cultural heritage is increasingly conceptualised as a dynamic process in which young people can contribute to interpreting cultural values rather than simply receiving established heritage narratives (Zhang et al., 2024).

The present study extends this argument to lion dance craftsmanship by demonstrating the importance of distinguishing between visibility of heritage and engagement with the knowledge underlying heritage. The preservation challenge surrounding lion dance is therefore not limited to maintaining public interest in performances; it also concerns opportunities through which younger generations can encounter the less visible artisanal knowledge sustaining the tradition.

5.2 From Observation to Cultural Connection

The second theme demonstrates how participants directly involved in documentary-making increasingly described lion dance craftsmanship through emotional and personally meaningful language. Their encounters with artisans exposed them not only to technical knowledge but also to personal narratives concerning learning, persistence, adaptation, and cultural continuity.

This finding is consistent with participatory media scholarship that positions media production as a process of collaborative meaning-making rather than merely the creation of a final media product. Participatory visual approaches create opportunities for participants to interact with people and experiences that become the subject of their storytelling (Lenette, 2019; Mitchell & de Lange, 2013). Youth-produced documentary practices can similarly connect personal interpretation with wider social and cultural narratives (Lam et al., 2021).

The participants' recognition of innovation within lion dance craftsmanship is particularly important. Several participants initially associated lion dance primarily with traditional festivals. Through conversations with artisans and performers, however, they encountered changes in materials, design, performance requirements, and international competition. Consequently, tradition was increasingly described not as something fixed in the past but as a cultural practice capable of adapting while maintaining cultural meaning.

This interpretation is consistent with the understanding of heritage as a living cultural process rather than a static object requiring preservation in an unchanged form. In the Malaysian context, this is particularly relevant because lion dance itself has developed through adaptation and negotiation within a multicultural social environment (Loo & Loo, 2016; Lyu et al., 2024).

The comparison between the groups further illuminates this point. Comparison Group participants could appreciate the complexity of the craftsmanship after exposure to information and documentary materials, but their accounts generally remained more observational. Documentary-Making Group participants more frequently connected artisans' experiences with their own identity, pride, and understanding of cultural continuity. The value of participatory documentary-making may therefore lie not simply in increasing access to cultural information but in creating relational encounters through which cultural knowledge becomes personally meaningful.

5.3 Storytelling and Perceived Youth Agency

The third finding concerns participants' perceived agency in relation to cultural storytelling. By the post-project FGD, several Documentary-Making Group participants no longer described themselves solely as individuals learning about lion dance. Instead, they described their ability to explain, document, and communicate its significance to others.

This distinction corresponds with contemporary conceptualisations of youth participation in cultural heritage. Zhang, Ikiz Kaya, van Wesemael, and Colenbrander (2024) emphasise youth roles, perspectives, positioning, and opportunities to contribute rather than viewing youth simply as recipients of heritage education. The related digital participation framework developed by Zhang, Ikiz Kaya, and van Wesemael (2024) likewise highlights youth agency, engagement, initiatives, and digital citizenship.

The present findings provide an example of how such agency can emerge at the level of cultural communication. Participants did not acquire institutional authority over heritage management, nor can the findings demonstrate that they subsequently became long-term heritage practitioners. Their agency was more specifically expressed through narrative ownership: the perception that they could contribute to how lion dance craftsmanship is represented and communicated.

This distinction is theoretically important. Empowerment should not be assumed merely because young people participate in a project. In the present study, the term perceived agency is therefore more appropriate than claiming that participants became fully empowered custodians of cultural heritage.

The contrast with the Comparison Group supports this interpretation. Comparison participants generally acknowledged the value of the craft but were less likely to position themselves as people capable of communicating or contributing to its continuation. Documentary-Making Group participants more frequently described the documentary as something they had produced to communicate a message to

other people. Thus, the significance of documentary-making appears to lie partly in the transition from receiving a heritage narrative to participating in the construction of that narrative.

5.4 Participatory Documentary-Making as a Process of Heritage Engagement

Taken together, the findings suggest that participatory documentary-making can be understood as a process comprising several interconnected forms of engagement: encounter, interpretation, connection, storytelling, and perceived agency.

The process begins with direct encounters with cultural practitioners and craftsmanship. These encounters provide opportunities to interpret cultural knowledge that may previously have been invisible to participants. Interpretation can become personally meaningful through emotional connection and identification. Documentary production subsequently provides a mechanism through which participants organise and communicate these interpretations to others. Through this process, some participants begin to perceive themselves as contributors to cultural storytelling.

These stages should not be interpreted as a universal or linear pathway. Not every participant necessarily experiences each dimension in the same way, and participation alone does not guarantee cultural identification or empowerment. Rather, the model provides an analytical explanation of the patterns identified within the present study.

The findings therefore support a process-oriented understanding of participatory media. The educational and cultural value of documentary-making lies not solely in the documentary produced at the end of the project but in the interactions, decisions, interpretations, and storytelling practices occurring during its production.

This distinction has particular significance for intangible cultural heritage. Because practices such as lion head-making depend heavily on embodied knowledge and intergenerational transmission, simply digitising or recording the final cultural product may be insufficient. Participatory documentation creates opportunities for younger generations to engage directly with the individuals, knowledge, and meanings associated with the practice.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the intersection of participatory media and youth cultural heritage engagement in three ways.

First, it extends participatory media perspectives by demonstrating that the significance of documentary-making in a heritage context can be understood through the process of cultural meaning-making rather than solely through media production or the completed documentary. Participants encountered artisans, interpreted their experiences, negotiated cultural meanings, and subsequently communicated those meanings through audiovisual storytelling. Participatory documentary-making therefore functions simultaneously as media practice and cultural engagement.

Second, the study refines the concept of youth empowerment within participatory heritage research. Rather than assuming that participation automatically produces empowerment, the findings support a more specific concept of perceived narrative agency. In this study, participants' agency was reflected in their perceived ability to document, interpret, and communicate heritage narratives. This distinction avoids overstating their influence over heritage management while recognising meaningful differences in how participants positioned themselves in relation to cultural storytelling.

Third, the study proposes a process-oriented conceptualisation of youth engagement with intangible cultural heritage: participatory engagement → cultural understanding → cultural connection → narrative agency. The proposed relationship is not deterministic. Instead, it identifies interconnected dimensions through which participatory documentary-making may facilitate heritage engagement.

Within the specific context of lion dance craftsmanship, the study further demonstrates that youth heritage engagement should address not only highly visible cultural performances but also the less visible artisanal knowledge that sustains them. This expands the application of participatory heritage perspectives from heritage awareness towards the intergenerational communication of specialised craft knowledge.

6. CONCLUSION

This study explored Malaysian Chinese youths' engagement with lion dance craftsmanship through participatory documentary-making. The findings identified three interconnected dimensions of engagement: cultural understanding, cultural connection, and perceived agency through storytelling.

At the beginning of the project, participants generally recognised lion dance as a familiar cultural practice but demonstrated limited knowledge of the craftsmanship involved in producing lion heads. As the project progressed, participants directly involved in documentary-making described increasingly detailed understandings of the craft, including the skills, experiences, adaptations, and cultural meanings associated with its production. Their accounts also reflected stronger personal and emotional connections with the artisans and the cultural practice they documented.

Most notably, participants involved in documentary production increasingly positioned themselves as capable of communicating cultural knowledge to others. Rather than describing themselves only as audiences of cultural heritage, several participants perceived that documentary storytelling provided them with a means of contributing their voices to the communication of heritage.

The study does not establish that participatory documentary-making causes long-term changes in cultural identity or heritage preservation behaviour. Instead, it demonstrates how active involvement in cultural documentation can provide a meaningful context in which young people encounter, interpret, and communicate intangible cultural heritage.

The findings highlight the importance of creating opportunities for youth to engage not only with visible cultural performances but also with the less visible artisanal knowledge that sustains them. In this sense, participatory documentary-making provides a useful approach for connecting contemporary media practices with intergenerational cultural learning.

6.1 *Practical Implications*

For educators, participatory documentary projects can provide an experiential approach to heritage learning. Rather than teaching cultural heritage solely through classroom materials or existing media content, students can be encouraged to interact with cultural practitioners, document traditional knowledge, and produce their own interpretations through audiovisual storytelling.

For cultural organisations and heritage practitioners, involving young people in documentation can serve two complementary purposes: recording cultural knowledge and creating opportunities for intergenerational interaction. This may be particularly useful for traditional crafts where specialised knowledge is held by a relatively small number of practitioners and remains largely invisible to younger audiences.

For youth media programmes, the findings suggest that technical media training can be connected with culturally meaningful content. Camera operation, interviewing, editing, and storytelling can become tools through which young people explore cultural knowledge while developing communication and media-production skills.

Participatory documentary-making should not, however, be treated as a substitute for broader heritage safeguarding strategies. Its value lies primarily in providing a platform for cultural encounter, documentation, interpretation, and communication.

6.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved 20 Malaysian Chinese youths within a specific participatory documentary project. The purpose of the qualitative design was to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than to produce findings statistically representative of Malaysian youth more broadly.

Second, the study focused on participants' accounts across the duration of the documentary project. It therefore captures perceptions and experiences associated with the immediate project period but does not establish whether the cultural connections and perceived agency described by participants were sustained after the project ended.

Third, the study relied primarily on FGDs. Although observational notes and documentary materials provided supplementary contextual information, participants' accounts remain the principal basis for interpreting cultural understanding, connection, and perceived agency.

Finally, the comparison between the Documentary-Making Group and Comparison Group was qualitative and interpretive rather than experimental. Although all participants received the same introductory documentary-making workshop before group allocation, the study was not designed to isolate or statistically test the independent effect of documentary participation. Differences between the groups should therefore be understood as patterns within participants' reported experiences rather than evidence of causal effects.

6.3 Future Research

Future research could examine whether the cultural connections and perceived narrative agency identified in this study are sustained beyond the duration of a participatory documentary project. Longitudinal qualitative research could follow participants after project completion to explore whether they continue to engage with lion dance craftsmanship, heritage documentation, or other forms of cultural participation.

The approach could also be examined in relation to other Malaysian intangible cultural heritage practices and traditional crafts. Comparative research across different cultural communities and heritage forms could provide a broader understanding of how participatory media practices operate within different cultural contexts.

Future studies may also examine the dissemination stage of participatory documentary-making. Research could explore how youth-produced heritage documentaries are received by peers, artisans, cultural communities, and online audiences, thereby extending attention from the experiences of documentary producers to the circulation and interpretation of the cultural narratives they create.

Acknowledgments

This article is an output of research supported by Geran Penyelidikan Universiti (Kecemerlangan@UPSI), grant number 2025-0023-109-01.

During the revision of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language refinement, structural organisation, and improvement of clarity and readability. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript. Generative AI was not used to generate research data, participant responses, or research findings.

Authors Contribution

Loh Yoke Ling contributed to the study design and data collection. Loh Yu Chiang, Tey Kok Hau, and See Hwa Win contributed to data collection. Mohd Haniff Mohd Tahir conducted the data analysis. Muhammad Naeem proofread and revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding Source

This research was supported by the Geran Penyelidikan Universiti (Kecemerlangan@UPSI), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), under Grant No. 2025-0023-109-01.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this comparative study are not publicly available and will not be deposited in any repository to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The data, including interview transcripts and other relevant research materials, may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

Ethical Approval

This study did not obtain separate institutional ethics committee approval. Ethical safeguards were implemented through an informed consent process prior to participation. All participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, their voluntary participation, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional written parental or guardian consent obtained for participants who were minors. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, no identifying information or real names are reported in the manuscript. Participant codes (T1–T10 and C1–C10) are used in the transcripts and reporting of the findings. The manuscript therefore reports the consent and confidentiality procedures actually implemented and does not claim formal institutional ethical approval.

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