Reading Javanese Ethics in Design Practice: A Hermeneutic Analysis of Serat Wulangreh on Humanity, Empathy, and Tolerance

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ABSTRACT

Ethical issues in contemporary visual communication design practice increasingly demand a reflective approach that goes beyond the procedural guidelines and rhetoric of human-centred design. While empathy and inclusivity are often considered the foundations of design ethics, the cultural assumptions and interpretive limits of these concepts are usually under-examined. This study aims to explore how ethical reflection in design practice can be enriched through dialogue with culturally rooted moral traditions by examining Serat Wulangreh, a 19th-century Javanese literary manuscript. This study uses a hermeneutic approach to selected verses to identify the ethical orientations expressed in *Serat Wulangreh*'s moral teachings. The analysis is supported by consultations with a Javanese cultural expert and a Javanese literary academic to maintain the accuracy of the historical and cultural context. The results reveal three dominant ethical orientations: humanity, empathy, and tolerance, understood as ethical dispositions based on inner discipline, relational awareness, and moral restraint in the context of Javanese court culture. Rather than offering a normative ethical transference, this study positions Serat Wulangreh as a contextual ethical interlocutor that complements contemporary design ethics discourse by emphasising intention, power awareness, and self-restraint. This study contributes to the study of communication and design ethics by demonstrating how non-Western moral texts can enrich ethical reflection through a dialogical approach sensitive to cultural context.

Keywords: Cultural communication, empathy and tolerance in visual communication, ethical meaning-making, *serat wulangreh*, visual communication ethics

INTRODUCTION

Ethical issues in contemporary visual communication design have become increasingly visible as design practices play a decisive role in shaping meaning, emotion, and public behaviour through persuasive and symbolic strategies. Design is no longer understood merely as an aesthetic or technical activity but as a social practice embedded in moral intention, power relations, and social consequences (Auxtova et al., 2021; Aylsworth, 2022; Kane, 2010; Parsons, 2015). Empirical studies in advertising and digital communication further demonstrate that manipulative visual strategies, hyperbolic claims, and affective persuasion may undermine audience autonomy, marginalise vulnerable groups, and provoke public controversy despite regulatory oversight (Akmal et al., 2024; Ferrucci & Schauster, 2024; Kim et al., 2021; Paradis et al., 2020). These recurring cases suggest that ethical problems in visual communication design cannot be resolved solely through regulation, technological intervention, or procedural compliance.

In response to such challenges, human-centred design and design thinking have been widely promoted as ethical and operational frameworks that emphasise empathy, inclusivity, and social responsibility (Foster, 2021; Liedtka & Locatelli, 2023; Thomas et al., 2020). These approaches have contributed to greater sensitivity towards user needs and participatory processes in design practice. However,

critical scholarship points out that empathy and tolerance within these frameworks are often treated as methodological tools, assumed to be universal, ahistorical, and culturally neutral, thereby obscuring power relations, moral intention, and symbolic authority embedded in design practices (Horton, 2021; Leary et al., 2022; Li & Hölttä-Otto, 2022). As a result, ethical reflection risks remaining procedural rather than interrogating how designers position themselves ethically within complex social contexts.

This limitation has prompted scholars to seek alternative ethical perspectives that can enrich design ethics without imposing prescriptive norms. Rather than proposing universal ethical principles, recent work in design ethics and cultural studies emphasises the value of contextual and culturally situated moral traditions as dialogical partners in ethical reflection (Parsons, 2015; Pata, 2021). Within this context, *Serat Wulangreh*, a 19th-century Javanese didactic manuscript composed by Pakubuwono IV in *macapat* poetic form, presents a compelling yet underexplored site of inquiry. The text articulates ethical orientations through metaphor, symbolic language, and disciplined inner conduct within the moral and political structure of the Javanese court. Previous studies have predominantly examined *Wulangreh* in relation to character education, leadership, moral philosophy, and Javanese cultural values (Ismawati et al., 2022; Ismawati & Anindita, 2020; Panani, 2019;

Zuhri, 2017). while its potential contribution to contemporary discussions on design ethics and visual communication remains largely unexplored.

Importantly, this absence does not imply that *Serat Wulangreh* offers ready-made ethical solutions for modern design practice. Instead, it raises a critical question: what happens when an eighteenth to nineteenth-century Javanese moral text encounters contemporary ethical concerns in the design of visual communication? Addressing this question requires moving beyond validation or moral alignment and towards a dialogical engagement between distinct ethical worlds. Accordingly, this study positions *Serat Wulangreh* not as a normative guide for design practice, but as an ethical interlocutor that enables reflective dialogue with contemporary design ethics discourse.

Using a contextual hermeneutic approach, this study examines how orientations towards humanity, empathy, and tolerance are articulated in selected *pupuh* (stanza) of *Serat Wulangreh* and reflects on their relevance for understanding ethics in visual communication design as a practice grounded in self-discipline, relational awareness, and moral restraint. Rather than assuming harmony between Javanese moral philosophy and modern design frameworks, this study explores points of resonance and tension, thereby contributing to communication and design ethics scholarship through a culturally sensitive, historically grounded perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Design Ethics, Persuasion, and Moral Responsibility in Visual Communication

Research on design ethics and visual communication has consistently emphased that design practices are not value-neutral but actively shape meaning, perception, and social behaviour through persuasive and symbolic strategies. Scholars argue that ethical problems in design often arise from asymmetrical power relations and the capacity of visual communication to influence audiences beyond conscious awareness (Kane, 2010; Parsons, 2015). Studies in advertising and digital media further demonstrate how affective persuasion, emotional manipulation, and commercial imperatives can undermine audience autonomy and reproduce social inequalities, even when designs comply with professional regulations (Akmal et al., 2024; Auxtova et al., 2021; Aylsworth, 2022; Ferrucci & Schauster, 2024). These findings suggest that ethical concerns in visual communication design extend beyond technical execution and require deeper reflection on moral intention and symbolic authority.

In response, ethical frameworks within design studies increasingly foreground responsibility, accountability, and social impact. Design ethics scholarship emphasises the need for reflective judgment rather than procedural compliance, particularly in contexts involving vulnerable audiences and persuasive communication (Devon & Van de Poel, 2004; Hoffenson et al., 2013).

However, while these frameworks identify ethical risks, they often remain abstract and lack culturally grounded perspectives that address how moral orientation is formed within specific social traditions.

Empathy, Human-centred Design and their Limitations

Human-centred design and design thinking have emerged as influential approaches that operationalise ethics through empathy, participation, and user-oriented problem-solving (Foster, 2021; Liedtka & Locatelli, 2023; Thomas et al., 2020). These approaches posit empathy as a moral capacity that enables designers to understand user needs and mitigate harm. Empirical studies suggest that participatory methods can enhance social sensitivity and inclusivity in design practice. Nevertheless, critical scholarship cautions that empathy within these frameworks is frequently instrumentalised as a methodological step rather than examined as an ethical disposition.

Several studies argue that empathy in design is often treated as universal, psychologically oriented, and culturally neutral, thereby masking power relations and privileging the designer's interpretive authority (Leary et al., 2022; Li & Hölttä-Otto, 2022). Horton (2021) further contends that tolerance and inclusivity in design discourse are frequently framed as normative ideals, with insufficient attention to conflict, moral restraint, or social consequences. These critiques highlight the need to reconsider empathy and tolerance as

context-dependent ethical orientations rather than transferable techniques.

Contextual Ethics and Culturally Situated Moral Traditions

Recent scholarship in design ethics and cultural studies has called for greater engagement with culturally situated moral traditions to enrich ethical reflection in design practice. Rather than seeking universal ethical principles, scholars emphasise dialogical approaches that recognise ethical reasoning as historically and culturally embedded (Parsons, 2015; Pata, 2021). Social design studies further underscore that ethical judgment emerges through relational awareness, power negotiation, and sensitivity to local values (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Shinohara, 2012). Within this perspective, ethical reflection is understood as a situated practice shaped by moral traditions rather than abstract rules.

In Southeast Asian and Indonesian scholarship, *Serat Wulangreh* has been examined primarily as a moral and educational text within Javanese court culture. Studies highlight its role in character formation, leadership ethics, self-discipline, and social harmony through symbolic and poetic instruction (Ismawati et al., 2022; Ismawati & Anindita, 2020; Panani, 2019; Zuhri, 2017). However, these studies rarely engage *Wulangreh* in dialogue with contemporary design ethics or visual communication, leaving its potential relevance for modern ethical debates largely unexplored.

Positioning *Serat Wulangreh* as an Ethical Interlocutor

Building on these gaps, recent interdisciplinary work suggests that traditional moral texts need not function as normative guides to be relevant for contemporary ethical reflection. Instead, they can serve as ethical interlocutors that introduce alternative ways of thinking about humanity, empathy, and restraint (Parsons, 2015; Pata, 2021). This study adopts this position by engaging *Serat Wulangreh* not as a source of design principles, but as a dialogical partner that complicates, questions, and enriches dominant ethical assumptions in visual communication design.

By situating *Wulangreh* alongside design ethics literature, this research responds directly to calls for culturally grounded, reflective, and non-prescriptive approaches to ethics in design. The literature thus points to the need for a hermeneutic engagement that allows ethical tension, historical difference, and cultural specificity to remain productive rather than be prematurely resolved.

METHODS

This research focusses on the interpretation of ethical orientation in *Serat Wulangreh* and its relevance for the ethics of visual communication design. The material object of the study is *Serat Wulangreh*, which contains moral teachings in the form of 13 Javanese *macapat* songs: *Dhandanggula, Kinanthi, Gambuh, Pangkur, Maskumambang, Megatruh, Durma, Wirangrong, Pucung,* *Mijil, Asamaradana, Sinom, and Girisa*. The unit of analysis for this research is selected stanzas that explicitly articulate moral values, represented through ethical terms and metaphors in Javanese. The analysis focusses on the relationship between ethical expressions in the text, the cultural-historical context of the Javanese palace, and its implications for ethical reflection in contemporary visual communication design practices.

This research was designed as an interpretive qualitative study with a hermeneutic approach. This type of qualitative research was chosen because the research objective was not to measure or test the relationship between variables, but rather to understand the ethical meaning contained in the text and its relevance to the context of visual communication design. The hermeneutic approach was used to interpret *Serat Wulangreh* as a moral text whose meaning is shaped by the relationships among language, historical-cultural context, and the interpreter's horizon (Parsons, 2015; Pata, 2021). This approach allows for a reflective reading that is not normative but dialogical, positioning *Serat Wulangreh* as an ethical interlocutor that enriches understanding of design ethics in the context of visual communication (Foster, 2021; Leary et al., 2022).

The data types in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data is the Serat Wulangreh text, analysed through selected stanzas that contain ethical teachings, particularly the values of humanity, empathy, and tolerance. This

data was obtained from the manuscript and the transliterated edition of *Serat Wulangreh*, which were consistently used as the primary references for the study. Secondary data includes literature on design ethics and visual communication, hermeneutic studies, and previous research on *Serat Wulangreh* and Javanese literature. In addition, supporting data were obtained through in-depth interviews with a Javanese cultural expert (expert 1) and a Javanese literary academic (expert 2), who served as interpretive sources to strengthen the understanding of the cultural context and limit the subjectivity of interpretation.

This research's analytical model employs hermeneutic analysis, integrating textual reading, contextual interpretation, and conceptual dialogue with design ethics. The analysis begins with a close reading of selected poems from *Serat Wulangreh* to identify the terms and structures of ethical teachings in Javanese. This stage is followed by a contextual interpretation that links the text to its Javanese cultural and moral background through the hermeneutic circle, namely, the iterative dialogue among textual parts, the overall meaning, and the interpreter's horizon (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014; Parsons, 2015). Next, the identified ethical orientations are placed in reflective dialogue with design and visual communication literature to assess conceptual resonance (Foster, 2021; Kane, 2010; Leary et al., 2022; Pata, 2021). Validity is strengthened through interpretive triangulation with expert perspectives as a cultural context control.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Humanity as Inner Discipline and Ethical Orientation of Action

The analysis shows that *Serat Wulangreh* positions humanity as an inner discipline that precedes social action, as summarised in Table 1. *Kinanthi* stanza 1 and *Durma* stanza 1 state that ethics are not taught through normative rules or explicit prohibitions, but rather through the formation of self-control practices (*ngendhaleni hawa nepsu*), so that humans do not live according to instinctive urges that are analogous to those of stupid animals (*kebo*). This perspective views humanity in *Wulangreh* as an internal moral readiness that shapes how a person acts, speaks, and positions themselves in social relations.

Wulangreh emphasises that arrogance stemming from physical strength, power, and intelligence (*adigang, adigung, adiguna*) is the primary source of ethical failure. At the same time, humility (*andhap asor*) is positioned as a moral buffer that maintains the balance of relationships (*Gambuh* stanzas 4-6). Humanitarian values are also manifested through the concept of devotion, namely the awareness of preserving social relations responsibly, where violations of these relations are understood as ethical failures, not merely personal mistakes (*Maskumambang* stanzas 5; 7-9; 18). These findings show that humanity in *Wulangreh* is always tied to social structures and positional awareness, as summarised in Table 1.

This interpretation is supported by the views of experts who assert that *Wulangreh*

Table 1

Human values as inner discipline in Serat Wulangreh

Interpretation of Songs and Stanzas	Design Ethics	Expert 1	Expert 2
Ethics is taught as inner control (*ngendhaleni hawa nepsu*) so that humans do not live following instincts (*kebo*) (*Kinanthi* stanza 1; *Durma* stanza 1).	Ethics precedes the act of design as a reflection of intention, not simply procedure (Foster, 2021; Leary et al., 2022).	*Wulangreh* teaches a sense of self-control and knowing limits, not rules of dos and don'ts.	*Wulangreh* ethics are reflective and symbolic, not legalistic.
Arrogance (*adigang, adigung, adiguna*) is positioned as a source of moral destruction; humility (andhap asor) becomes an ethical buffer (*Gambuh* stanzas 4-6).	Humility corrects the dominance of designer authority in human-centred design (Liedtka & Locatelli, 2023; Thomas et al., 2020).	Javanese ethics assess maturity from the ability to restrain oneself and be humble.	*Andhap asor* is the axis of Javanese personal ethics, grounded in self-mastery.
Humanity is manifested through devotion to others; the violation of this relationship is seen as an ethical failure (*Maskumambang*, stanzas 5, 7-9, 18).	Design responsibility is understood as moral accountability (Devon & Van de Poel, 2004; Hoffenson et al., 2013).	*Wulangreh* ethics maintain order through awareness of social position.	Personal ethics are always intertwined with the palace's power structure.

does not teach morality as a set of rules on what is permissible or not, but rather forms character so that a person "knows himself and knows his limits" (expert 1). Ethics is understood as a reflective and symbolic practice that works from within to maintain social order within the palace's hierarchical order (expert 2). In dialogue with the design ethics literature, this interpretation of humanity as an inner discipline resonates with criticisms of design ethics approaches that are overly procedural and fail to adequately examine the designer's intentions and moral orientation (Foster, 2021; Kane, 2010; Parsons, 2015). Thus, *Wulangreh* enriches the ethics of visual communication design by positioning humanity as a reflective orientation before any persuasive action is taken.

Empathy as Moral Vigilance and Control of Power Relations

As summarised in Table 2, research shows that empathy in *Serat Wulangreh* is not interpreted as emotional or affective empathy, but rather as moral awareness of the impact of actions and power relations. The teachings of *tepa sarira* emphasise the importance of weighing one's actions against oneself to avoid harming others (*Asmaradana* stanza 11). Empathy is primarily directed towards those in power through the prohibition against burdening commoners and the encouragement to yield for the sake of a sustainable communal life (*Asmaradana* stanzas 23-24). Within this framework, empathy functions as an ethical mechanism to restrain domination and prevent arbitrariness.

Table 2

The value of empathy as moral awareness and power awareness in Serat Wulangreh

Interpretation of Songs and Stanzas	Design Ethics	Expert 1	Expert 2
Empathy is taught as tepa sarira, namely measuring actions with oneself and avoiding hurting others (*Asmaradana* stanza 11).	Empathy is understood as an ethical awareness of the relational impacts of design, not simply an emotional understanding of users (Kamińska et al., 2023; Li & Hölttä-Otto, 2022).	*Tepa sarira* means thinking about the impact on others before acting, not getting carried away by feelings.	Javanese empathy is closer to moral reflexivity than modern psychological empathy.
A leader's empathy is demonstrated by prohibiting the burdening of commoners and by recommending prioritising others for the sake of the people's continued lives (*Asmaradana*, stanzas 23-24).	Strengthening criticism of designs that ignore power inequalities and social burdens on vulnerable groups (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016).	Empathy in *Wulangreh* primarily targets those in power to prevent them from acting arbitrarily.	Empathy serves as an ethical brake in hierarchical power relations.
Collective empathy is manifested *through golong-gilig* (*rukun lan manunggal pamikir*), emphasising togetherness and mutual support (Pucung stanza 4-5).	Affirming empathy as relational awareness in social and community design practices (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016).	Harmony makes the burdens of life feel lighter because they are carried together.	Javanese relational ethics places togetherness above individual expression.
Abuse of power is prohibited through the teachings of *aja dumeh* and careful language (gemi ing lathi) (*Wirangrong* stanza 6).	Empathy is associated with awareness of the designer's position and responsibility in power relations (Shinohara, 2012).	*Aja dumeh* is a stern warning for those in power not to belittle others.	*Aja dumeh* functions as a mechanism for controlling symbolic and social domination.

The collective dimension of empathy is also manifested through the principle of *golong-gilig*, which emphasises togetherness and unity of thought in facing life's burdens together (*Pucung* stanzas 4-5). In addition, the teachings of aja dumeh and careful language (*gemi ing lathi*) function as a control over symbolic power so that it is not used to demean or harm others (*Wirangrong* stanza 6). All of these empathetic orientations show that empathy in *Wulangreh* is reflective and preventative.

Experts' perspectives reinforce this interpretation by asserting that Javanese empathy is closer to moral reflexivity than modern psychological empathy. *Tepa sarira* is understood as the habit of thinking about social impact before acting, especially for those in dominant positions (expert 1). The teaching of *aja dumeh* is seen as a mechanism for controlling symbolic domination in hierarchical relations (expert 2). This interpretation of empathy deepens the critique of empathy in human-centred

Table 3
The value of tolerance as a strategy for social harmony in Serat Wulangreh

Interpretation of Songs and Stanzas	Design Ethics	Expert 1	Expert 2
Tolerance is described as a broad mind (*jembar ing ati*) which is able to accommodate differences without excessive emotional reactions (*pindha segara*) (*Pucung* stanza 12).	Tolerance is understood as the control of judgment and emotions in responding to the diversity of design audiences (Horton, 2021; Sandman et al., 2022).	Javanese tolerance emphasises patience to prevent conflicts from escalating, but it does not mean agreeing with everything.	Tolerance functions as a strategy to maintain harmony, not solely because of rights.
The prohibition against criticising or belittling others (*aja mamaoni*) emphasises refraining from open moral judgment (*Durma* stanzas 5-7).	Avoiding design practices that are judgmental or reinforce social stigma (Hoffenson et al., 2013).	Criticism is easy to do, but it damages social relationships.	Withholding judgment is an ethical mechanism for maintaining social stability.
Careful language (*gemi ing lathi*) is positioned as a form of tolerance in social interactions (*Wirangrong* stanza 6).	Relevant to the ethics of design communication that avoids symbolic violence and language exclusion (Shinohara, 2012).	Holding back opinions is vital to avoid hurting other people's feelings.	Language functions as a medium of power that must be controlled ethically.
The suggestion to hide intelligence (*pintere den alingi*) functions to protect feelings and prevent symbolic domination (*Sinom* stanza 1).	Reminding designers to refrain from symbolic superiority and professional expertise (Pata, 2021).	Intelligent people should not show off to maintain a harmonious atmosphere.	This ethical strategy suppresses symbolic hierarchies in social relations.

design, which is often instrumental and risks reproducing the designer's perspective (Horton, 2021; Kamińska et al., 2023; Li & Hölttä-Otto, 2022). Thus, Wulangreh offers an empathetic orientation that emphasises the limitations of power and relational responsibility in the practice of visual communication design.

Tolerance as an Ethical Strategy to Maintain Social Harmony

Tolerance in *Serat Wulangreh*, as presented in Table 3, is positioned as an ethical strategy for maintaining social harmony through self-control and restraint of judgment. Tolerance is described as an inner spaciousness (*jembar ing ati*) that can accommodate differences without excessive emotional reactions, analogous to the vastness of the ocean (*pindha segara*) (*Pucung* stanza 12). This interpretation indicates that tolerance does not function as a normative affirmation of all differences, but rather as a practice of self-restraint to prevent open conflict.

The prohibition against criticising or belittling others (*aja mamaoni*) emphasises

the importance of withholding open moral judgment to maintain social relations (*Durma* stanzas 5-7). Careful language (*gemi ing lathi*) is positioned as a symbolic practice of tolerance that prevents social injury in everyday interactions (*Wirangrong* stanza 6). The recommendation to *pintere den alingi* emphasises concealing one's intelligence as an ethical strategy to avoid symbolic domination and protect the feelings of others (*Sinom* stanza 1). These overall orientations emphasise tolerance as a mechanism for stabilising social relations, as summarised in Table 3.

Experts interpret Javanese tolerance as an effort to maintain social harmony and stability within a hierarchical order. Patience and openness of mind are seen as more important than overt expressions of judgment (expert 1). At the same time, concealing intelligence is understood as a way to suppress symbolic hierarchies to maintain social balance (expert 2). This perspective resonates with criticisms in the design literature that highlight the tendency to treat tolerance abstractly and ahistorically, without considering power relations and the risk of stigma (Hoffenson et al., 2013; Sandman et al., 2022). Tolerance in *Wulangreh* enriches design ethics by emphasising moderation, symbolic prudence, and the sustainability of social relations.

The results of this study indicate that humanity, empathy, and tolerance in *Serat Wulangreh* function as ethical orientations rooted in inner discipline, relational awareness, and self-control. These values do not exist as ready-to-apply normative principles, but rather as reflective lenses for understanding intention, power, and the social consequences of actions. In dialogue with the design ethics literature, *Wulangreh* complements the human-centred design and design thinking frameworks with a reflective dimension that emphasises moral intention, power limitation, and self-restraint as the ethical foundations of visual communication design practice (Foster, 2021; Parsons, 2015; Pata, 2021).

In relation to design, *Serat Wulangreh* constructs an ethical framework that serves as a reflective orientation before action, rather than as a set of normative rules ready to be implemented. Humanity is positioned as an inner discipline that cultivates intention and self-control before taking persuasive action. Empathy is understood as moral awareness of power relations and social impacts, while tolerance functions as a symbolic control strategy to maintain harmony and stability in social relations.

This orientation forms an ethics that works preventively and reflectively, in line with criticisms in the design ethics literature against approaches that are too procedural and solution-oriented. In the context of visual communication design, *Wulangreh* serves as an ethical interlocutor, enriching human-centred design and design thinking with dimensions of awareness of intention, power limitation, and self-restraint. The primary significance of this research lies in its contribution to expanding design ethics in a more contextual, cultural, and reflective direction, without shifting design practice, but rather complementing it through dialogue across moral traditions.

CONCLUSION

Findings

This research shows that *Serat Wulangreh* can be read productively as a source of contextual ethical reflection that enriches the ethical discourse in contemporary visual communication design practice. Through a contextual hermeneutic approach, this research reveals that the values of humanity, empathy, and tolerance in *Serat Wulangreh* do not appear as normative moral principles or universal rules of behaviour, but rather as ethical orientations rooted in inner discipline, relational awareness, and self-control in the Javanese socio-cultural order. This finding confirms that ethics in the Javanese teachings tradition operates through the formation of character and inner behaviour, rather than through the formulation of explicit prohibitions or obligations.

The value of humanity in *Serat Wulangreh* is understood as an ethical inner discipline that precedes social action. Teachings such as ngendhaleni hawa nepsu and andhap asor place moral maturity in the ability to control oneself, recognise boundaries, and understand social position. In this context, humanity is not separate from the palace's hierarchical structure; rather, it manifests through role awareness, moral responsibility, and appropriate behaviour. This perspective provides a critical lens on contemporary design ethics, which often emphasise procedures, compliance, or professional standards without in-depth reflection on the designer's intentions and moral orientation.

Empathy in *Serat Wulangreh* is interpreted not as emotional or affective empathy as commonly understood within the framework of human-centred design, but rather as moral vigilance and awareness of power relations. The teachings of *eling lan waspada* and *aja dumeh* emphasise the importance of caution in action and speech, especially for those in power or dominant positions. Empathy, in this sense, functions as a self-control mechanism and an ethical brake against potential abuse of power, not simply the ability to understand another party's feelings. This finding enriches the critique of empathy in design, which is often instrumental and psychological, and risks reproducing the designer's perspective as the centre of interpretation.

Tolerance in Serat Wulangreh is presented as an ethical strategy to maintain social harmony and stability, rather than as normative pluralism grounded in the recognition of individual rights. Concepts such as jembar ing ati, the prohibition of criticising, careful language, and the recommendation to conceal intelligence demonstrate that tolerance works through withholding judgment, controlling emotions, and reducing symbolic domination. Tolerance is understood as the practice of self-restraint for the sake of harmony, situated and contextual, oriented Towards the sustainability of social relations. This understanding challenges the approach to tolerance in design ethics, which is often treated abstractly and universally without considering the social tensions and power relations that underlie it.

This research confirms that *Serat Wulangreh* is better positioned as an ethical interlocutor than as a source of applicable ethical guidelines for visual communication design practices. Hermeneutic dialogue with this text is not intended to transfer moral values directly, but rather to enrich ethical reflection with a cultural perspective that emphasises intention, self-awareness, power management, and self-restraint. Thus, this research contributes to the study of design and communication ethics by demonstrating that non-Western moral texts can broaden the horizon of ethical meaning in a dialogical and contextual manner, while avoiding ahistorical and culturally universalist ethical claims. These findings open up space for a more reflective approach to design ethics, sensitive to cultural context, and aware of power relations in contemporary visual communication practices.

Implications of the Study

This research has several important implications for the development of studies on the ethics of visual communication design, cultural communication studies, and interdisciplinary approaches between design and the humanities. The primary significance lies in expanding the conceptual framework of design ethics, which has tended to be dominated by normative and universally oriented approaches, towards an understanding of ethics as a contextual, reflective practice rooted in cultural moral traditions.

Theoretically, the findings of this study strengthen the argument that design ethics cannot be reduced to a set of ahistorical, cross-cultural principles or operational guidelines. By positioning *Serat Wulangreh* as an ethical interlocutor, this study shows that traditional moral texts can serve as conceptual dialogue partners that enrich ethical reflection without being used as sources of normative legitimacy. This implication is essential to the study of design ethics because it offers an alternative perspective on key concepts such as humanity, empathy, and tolerance, which have often been treated as universal and culturally neutral. This approach encourages a shift from compliance-based ethics to an ethics grounded in inner orientation, intention, and relational awareness.

Another conceptual implication relates to the critique of the use of empathy and tolerance in the discourse of human-centred design and design thinking. The findings of this study suggest that empathy need not always be understood as an affective or psychological capacity, but rather as a moral awareness of power relations and the social impact of communication actions. Similarly, tolerance does not merely function as a normative affirmation of diversity, but can be understood as an ethical strategy for managing tensions and preventing symbolic domination. These implications enrich the discourse on design ethics by offering a more reflective lens sensitive to cultural and historical contexts.

From a methodological perspective, this study underscores the potential of a contextual hermeneutic approach as a relevant method in the study of design ethics

and visual communication. This approach allows researchers to read design texts, practices, and artifacts as spaces for the production of ethical meaning, inseparable from language, culture, and power relations. The methodological implications of this study encourage the use of a more reflective interpretive approach in design studies, especially when dealing with complex ethical issues that cannot be resolved through measurement or generalisation alone.

This research has implications for cultural communication and humanities studies by demonstrating that literary texts and traditional teachings are not only relevant as objects of historical study or character education, but also as sources of interdisciplinary ethical reflection. A dialogical reading of *Serat Wulangreh* opens new possibilities for using non-western moral texts in contemporary discourse without subjecting them to Western epistemological frameworks or treating them as static tools of moral legitimacy. This implication strengthens the position of literary and cultural studies as active contributors to modern ethical debates.

Overall, the implications of this research underscore the importance of a more reflective, contextual, and culturally conscious approach to design ethics. By bringing together visual communication design ethics and Javanese moral traditions through hermeneutic dialogue, this research not only enriches conceptual understanding of ethics but also opens up space for the development of a design ethics framework

that is more epistemologically inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of social and cultural experiences.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has limitations primarily related to the interpretive nature of the contextual hermeneutic approach used. The interpretation of *Serat Wulangreh* in this study is not intended to produce a reading that represents the entire Javanese ethical tradition. Although the validity of the interpretation is strengthened through triangulation with Javanese literary scholars and cultural experts, the study's results are still influenced by the interpreter's horizon, the purpose of the conceptual dialogue, and the context of contemporary design ethics, which serves as the meeting point of the analysis. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalised as a universal representation of Javanese ethics, but must be understood as a situational construction of meaning.

The second limitation concerns the scope of the text and the unit of analysis. This study consciously focuses on selected stanzas in *Serat Wulangreh* that explicitly express the values of humanity, empathy, and tolerance. Consequently, other significant ethical dimensions in *Wulangreh*, such as religiosity, asceticism, and Javanese metaphysics, are not analysed in depth. This limitation is intended to maintain focus and depth of analysis, but it also limits the breadth of the Javanese ethics that can be uncovered. Thus, the results of this study

represent a portion of *Wulangreh's* ethical orientation, not the entire moral framework contained in the text.

A further limitation lies in the conceptual and reflective nature of the dialogue between *Serat Wulangreh* and the ethics of visual communication design. This research was not intended to examine the application of *Wulangreh* values in concrete design practices through case studies, field observations, or analysis of visual communication artifacts. Therefore, the resulting implications are theoretical and interpretive, rather than empirical and applicable. This research does not claim that the identified ethical orientations directly influence contemporary design practice, but instead offers a reflective framework that can enrich the meaning of design ethics. This limitation needs to be noted so that the research findings are not read as normative guidelines or practical recommendations.

Based on these limitations, further research is recommended to broaden and deepen the dialogue between design ethics and cultural moral traditions. Comparative studies with other Javanese teaching texts or non-Western ethical traditions from different cultural contexts can enrich understanding of the diversity of ethical orientations. Future research could combine a hermeneutic approach with qualitative empirical methods, such as interviews with design practitioners or analysis of specific design projects, to explore the reflective resonance of these values in real-life practice. Further studies could also examine their pedagogical implications in design education as a contextually and dialogically grounded source of ethical reflection.

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