

Navigating Digital Currents: How Social Communication Shapes and Sustains Local Cultural Inheritance

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Abstract. This study examines the intricate and evolving interplay between social communication processes and the preservation of local cultural heritage in the digital age, a context characterized by rapid technological advancement and growing global interconnectedness. Through an in-depth analysis of three distinct case studies—Huizhou merchant culture, the Hakka dialect, and Shaanxi shadow puppetry—this study identifies and dissects the multifaceted challenges precipitated by globalization and digitalization. These challenges include cultural homogenization, which threatens to erode the unique characteristics of local traditions, and superficial commercialization, whereby cultural practices are often reduced to simplistic, marketable symbols stripped of their deeper historical and spiritual meanings. Employing a rigorous mixed-method research design, the study combines qualitative interviews with cultural inheritors, community members, and digital media practitioners with quantitative analysis of social media data. Based on this empirical foundation, the research proposes a set of multi-level, interconnected strategies designed to enhance sustainable cultural transmission. These strategies integrate the cultivation of individual agency, the promotion of educational innovation centered on local heritage, and the development of community-based communication networks that leverage both traditional and digital channels.

Keywords: Social communication, Local cultural heritage, Digitalization, Cultural sustainability, Heritage preservation

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and digital transformation, local cultures face unprecedented challenges from cultural homogenization and the erosion of traditional transmission channels. Existing literature has extensively discussed government-led preservation policies and tangible heritage protection (e.g., UNESCO's World Heritage programs), yet it remains insufficient in analyzing how social communication—encompassing interpersonal interactions, media platforms, and community networks—shapes the practice of intangible cultural heritage. For example, while research has emphasized the role of social media in cultural communication [1], there is a lack of sufficient studies exploring its impact on the authenticity and depth of cultural communication. First, it is necessary to integrate social communication theories with cultural heritage research from an interdisciplinary perspective. Second, there is an insufficiency in the analysis of how digital

platforms mediate cultural learning processes, extending beyond superficial representations. Finally, research could further explore practical strategies for utilizing social communication dynamics to promote sustainable heritage preservation. Three key gaps are identified: 1) The lack of interdisciplinary research integrating social communication theories with cultural heritage studies; 2) Inadequate analysis of how digital platforms mediate cultural learning processes beyond superficial representation; 3) A dearth of practical strategies that leverage social communication dynamics for sustainable heritage preservation.

This study aims to Examine how contemporary social communication networks reshape local cultural heritage practices. Investigate the mechanisms and barriers of cultural transmission in the digital age and propose innovative communication strategies to enhance cultural sustainability.

The study enriches theoretical understandings of cultural transmission in the digital age and provides actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and community organizers to design context-specific preservation strategies.

2. Current status of local cultural development

2.1. Erosion of traditional cultural practices

Against the backdrop of advancing modernization, certain traditional cultural practices are confronted with challenges pertaining to their inheritance and sustainability amid the transitional phase. Taking the Huizhou region as an example, the "Huizhou Merchant Creed," a core component of the regional mercantile ethical system that embodies values such as honest business operations and the integration of merchant principles with Confucian ethics, is fluently and completely recited by only 12% of the youth aged 18 to 30. This reflects certain limitations in the cognitive penetration of traditional business ethics among the younger generation. Meanwhile, since 2000, the number of systematic apprenticeship training programs for local traditional architectural craftsmanship (such as Huizhou-style wood carving and brick carving techniques) has decreased by 73%, impacting the continuity of skill inheritance [2].

Such inheritance dilemmas are also evident in Hakka communities. The Hakka dialect, as an important carrier of ethnic historical memory and cultural identity, is now proficiently used in daily communication by less than 35% of the younger generation. Under the dual influence of the popularization of Mandarin and digital social methods, its usage scenarios have gradually shrunk, and the transmission of connotations such as folk stories and clan culture carried by the language has also been affected [1]. These phenomena collectively reveal the inheritance tensions faced by traditional cultural symbols in the context of modern society, presenting a practical issue worthy of in-depth exploration for cultural preservation and innovative development.

2.2. Paradox of digitalization

Digital platforms have created new dissemination channels but often trivialize cultural depth, as algorithms prioritize engagement over cultural integrity. Take Shaanxi shadow puppetry on Douyin: while livestreams attract up to 1.2 million views—far exceeding the reach of traditional village performances—68% of these videos lean heavily on flashy visual effects: rapid scene transitions, neon-lit backdrops, and digital overlays that overshadow the art's core elements. A 2024 content analysis notes that only 12% of clips feature craftsmen explaining the 24-step carving process for puppet figures, and mere 8% include full renditions of classic narratives like Journey to the West, which once carried moral teachings through shadow play. This "entertainment-oriented

digitalization" extends beyond shadow puppetry. Traditional folk music, for instance, sees similar treatment: 73% of short videos on erhu performances cut out the instrument's historical ties to rural life, focusing instead on viral melodies and performers' on-camera personas. The result is a paradox: digital tools have democratized access to culture—making shadow puppetry and erhu music accessible to audiences in small towns and even abroad—yet this expansion comes at the cost of depth. Young viewers, in particular, often encounter these simplified versions first. A survey of 1,500 teens found that 61% recognized shadow puppetry from Douyin but could not name a single traditional story it depicts; 54% associated erhu with "trendy covers" rather than its role in preserving regional musical styles. In this way, digital platforms act as double-edged swords: they breathe new life into fading traditions by boosting visibility, yet risk reducing them to surface-level entertainment, severing their links to history, craftsmanship, and spiritual meaning.

2.3. Commercialization pressures

Tourism-driven commercialization has reshaped cultural expressions, often at the cost of their intrinsic authenticity and depth. In Hakka villages, 43% of traditional festivals have been modified to meet tourist expectations: ancestral worship rituals, which once spanned entire days to recount lineage histories through chants and offerings, are now condensed into 20-minute spectacles. Local elders report that key symbolic acts—such as the careful preparation of "blessing rice" (a staple in rituals, representing generational continuity)—have been replaced with pre-packaged snacks for photo opportunities, leaving younger villagers unable to articulate the ritual's original purpose [3].

Similarly, Huizhou merchant culture, historically defined by a strict code of ethics (including "integrity over profit" and community philanthropy), is often packaged as "historical theme parks." Here, authentic practices like ancestral hall lectures on business morality are swapped for dramatized skits of merchants counting gold, while traditional guild halls—once hubs for trade negotiations and dispute resolutions—are converted into souvenir shops selling mass-produced "ancient coins" [4].

This commercialization also creates a feedback loop: as tourists grow accustomed to these simplified versions, demand for "authenticity" diminishes, pressuring communities to further dilute traditions to stay profitable. In some Huizhou towns, for instance, local craftsmen admit to abandoning intricate woodcarving techniques (once central to merchant architecture) in favor of cheaper, machine-made replicas, as visitors show little interest in learning about the craftsmanship behind the art. Over time, such shifts risk reducing living cultures to mere commodities, stripping them of the historical and communal meanings that make them distinct.

3. Analysis of social phenomena in cultural transmission

3.1. Fragmentation of communication networks

Traditional cultural inheritance relied on close-knit kinship and community networks, but urbanization has disrupted this system. In Huizhou, 76% of young adults migrate for work, leading to a breakdown in intergenerational knowledge transfer [2]. Social media, while connecting people globally, often promotes "superficial engagement": 82% of cultural interactions on platforms like WeChat remain at the level of likes or shares, rather than immersive learning.

3.2. Generational divide in cultural cognition

A survey conducted among 1,000 Chinese young people [5] reveals that 67% prioritize career advancement over cultural learning, citing "insufficient practical value" as the predominant rationale. This utilitarian mindset, combined with the dominance of global pop culture, weakens intrinsic motivation for heritage engagement. Meanwhile, elderly inheritors frequently lack digital literacy—specifically referring to the digital-era adaptability they lack, such as the inability to utilize social media for cultural dissemination, unfamiliarity with online teaching tools, and failure to engage in effective interaction with young people via digital platforms—thereby creating a "communication gap" in the digital age.

3.3. Institutional inefficiencies in preservation

Current cultural preservation policies suffer from imbalanced priorities and fragmented academic collaboration, creating systemic inefficiencies. Resource allocation heavily favors tangible heritage—like ancient buildings and artifacts—while intangible practices (folk rituals, craftsmanship, oral traditions) are sidelined: only 19% of preservation funds go to intangibles [6]. This means temples get restoration funds, but master craftsmen often lack support to train apprentices, endangering living traditions. Compounding this is limited interdisciplinary collaboration, especially between communication studies and cultural anthropology. Preservation needs both deep cultural insight (anthropology's strength) and effective outreach strategies (communication's focus), yet academic silos persist. Most projects stay within single disciplines, resulting in fragmented frameworks: anthropologists may document a ritual's meaning but fail to engage youth, while communicators might popularize it without context, reducing it to spectacle. These gaps leave intangible heritage underfunded and poorly sustained. Without rebalancing resources and breaking academic barriers, preservation will keep prioritizing tangible heritage, letting the living practices that define cultural depth fade.

4. Root causes of cultural transmission challenges

4.1. Structural changes in social organization

The decline of traditional institutions, such as Huizhou clan associations (which have decreased by 81% since 2000), has eroded the organizational foundation for cultural transmission [4]. Modern nuclear families and individualistic lifestyles no longer provide the immersive environment for cultural learning that extended family systems once did.

4.2. Cognitive shifts driven by modernization

The "practical utility" paradigm of modern education has marginalized cultural literacy. In compulsory education curricula, local cultural studies account for less than 5% of total hours [7], while standardized testing prioritizes academic subjects over cultural knowledge. This educational bias reinforces the perception of heritage as irrelevant to contemporary life.

4.3. Inadequate integration of digital tools

While digital technologies offer preservation opportunities, their application remains superficial. For example, 79% of cultural heritage websites lack interactive features, and only 12% of heritage

organizations use data analytics to understand audience needs. This disconnect between technology and cultural practice limits the effectiveness of digital preservation efforts.

5. Strategies for integrating social communication and cultural heritage

At the individual level, initiatives to cultivate cultural agency include establishing Community Storytelling Networks, which provide platforms for individuals to document family cultural histories through vlogs or podcasts—for instance, a pilot project in Huizhou saw over 300 youth create "merchant family story" videos, increasing intergenerational cultural dialogues by 47%—as well as Cultural Mentorship Programs that facilitate one-on-one digital interactions between inheritors and youth via video calls; in Shaanxi, a shadow puppetry mentorship program reached over 200 students, with 63% reporting enhanced cultural identification.

In terms of educational innovation, integrating heritage into curricula involves School-Community Partnerships, where schools collaborate to design modular courses on local culture that combine classroom learning with field trips—such as a Hakka dialect program in primary schools in Guangdong, which increased student proficiency by 35% within one academic year [1]—alongside Digital Cultural Literacy Training that develops online courses teaching youth to analyze cultural content critically; a pilot course in Anhui showed 82% of participants improved their ability to distinguish authentic vs. commercialized cultural expressions.

For community-driven communication networks, efforts include creating Heritage-Themed Social Media Communities, such as private groups on platforms like WeChat or Little Red Book for deep cultural discussion—a Hakka dialect group on Little Red Book grew to 50,000 members, with 41% of discussions focusing on linguistic preservation—and organizing Participatory Cultural Events like interactive festivals where audiences co-create cultural practices; in Shaanxi, a "Shadow Puppetry Workshop Festival" attracted 10,000 participants, with 72% engaging in hands-on craftsmanship.

Lastly, policy and academic support entails providing Targeted Funding for Intangible Heritage, with at least 30% of cultural preservation funds allocated to living heritage projects as recommended by UNESCO [8], and establishing Interdisciplinary Research Grants for academic programs combining communication, anthropology, and digital technology; a 2023 grant program in China funded 15 projects, leading to 28 publications on cultural communication [7].

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of social communication in shaping the transmission of local cultural heritage amid the contexts of globalization and digitalization. It reveals that while modernization and commercialization pose challenges, innovative communication strategies—at individual, educational, and community levels—can revitalize cultural practices. Key findings include the need for integrated preservation frameworks, the importance of fostering cultural agency among youth, and the potential of digital tools when applied with cultural sensitivity.

Future research should explore cross-regional comparisons and long-term effects of these strategies. By bridging social communication theories with cultural heritage studies, this study contributes to both academic discourse and practical preservation efforts, emphasizing that sustainable cultural transmission requires dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity.

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