

The Spectacularization of Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age: From Cultural Landscapes to Digital Consumption

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Abstract. With the development of digital media, the form of expression, dissemination and perception of cultural heritage has been changing. This paper studies the role of digital platforms in the spectacularisation of cultural heritage and how this phenomenon has changed contemporary cultural consumption. Based on Guy Debord's theory of the Society of the Spectacle, the four links in the process of spectacularisation are selected for this paper: selection, visualisation, circulation and consumption. Through the presentation of examples of heritage sites, traditional cultural practices and user-generated cultural content, this study explores how heritage is being transformed into visually appealing and shareable digital forms. Research shows that the function of digital media in preserving and transmitting culture is also to create visual and symbolic cultural spaces. This change increases public awareness and fosters new ways of cultural participation, as well as the consumption of heritage in the form of experiences, symbols and identity. At the same time, there is a conflict between cultural visibility and cultural depth; a visually attractive presentation may reduce the complexity of the historical and cultural background. Therefore, in learning about digital heritage, we need to pay attention not only to preservation and access but also to changes in representation, spectacle, and cultural consumption.

Keywords: cultural heritage, digital media, spectacularization, cultural landscape, cultural consumption

1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies, social media, and mobile platforms has significantly transformed the ways in which cultural heritage is preserved, represented, and experienced. Traditionally, cultural heritage was mainly passed down through museums, historical and cultural sites, festivals, etc. [1]; however, in the digital era, people are increasingly participating in the inheritance of culture through photos, short videos, live-streaming, virtual exhibitions and other forms of visual media. As a result, historical architecture, traditional festivals, costumes, handicrafts and cultural landscapes have not only been saved but have also become highly visually appealing and shareable forms of digital content [2, 3].

Thus, more paths have opened for the public to experience the culture of national heritage and different forms of presentation and enjoyment have also emerged. Social media will probably spread

pictures and emotions that are easy to share. As a result, the complex cultural connotations may be reduced to simple visual symbols; for example, historical sites are turned into "check-in" spots, traditional customs are presented as digital performances, and cultural traditions are incorporated into life and tourism materials [4]. Therefore, the experience of cultural heritage is gradually changing into an activity of viewing, sharing and consumption.

Most existing research focuses on problems of digital heritage preservation and dissemination, and studies of social media tend to concentrate on visual culture, platform interactions, and digital consumption. Few studies have explored the combination of the above processes in converting cultural heritage into "spectacles" through digital media. Based on Guy Debord's idea of the "Society of the Spectacle", this paper defines the "spectacularisation" of cultural heritage as a process of selection, visualisation, dissemination and consumption in the digital media environment [5]. Therefore, this paper will examine how digital media will contribute to the spectacularization of cultural heritage and how this process will reshape contemporary cultural consumption. It will focus on how cultural heritage will shift from being primarily understood through its historical and cultural meanings to being experienced through visual representations, while audiences will increasingly become participants and producers in the creation and circulation of digital cultural content.

2. Literature review and theoretical basis

2.1. Digital cultural heritage

Digital technology has been gradually applied to the preservation, dissemination and promotion of culture and tourism. Previously, some research has explored how digital archives, virtual exhibitions, 3D modelling, and digital storytelling can enhance the conservation and dissemination of cultural heritage [6]. For example, historical buildings can be modelled in three dimensions, museum collections can be displayed online in a virtual exhibition, and traditional stories can be presented through digital storytelling [7]. The above technologies have enabled the spread of cultural heritage to more distant areas and created new forms of cultural experience.

Digitisation is not about reproducing cultural heritage in a digital form. At the same time, one must also determine what parts of the heritage to record and display for the public. For example, a traditional festival can be recorded in pictures and sounds to create a virtual exhibition, or a traditional craft can be taught through online demonstrations. While such digital means make the culture more accessible, they may fail to present the full breadth of the tradition and omit some important historical contexts [8]. Therefore, digital heritage should be viewed not only as the result of preservation but also as a medium for cultural expression and renewal.

2.2. Social media, visual culture and cultural consumption

With the development of social media, the dissemination and application of culture have also changed. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Xiaohongshu are all highly visual, contain many pictures and short videos, so they need to be eye-catching to attract the attention of the public [4]. Therefore, cultural heritage can be presented in a visually attractive and easily shareable form. Historical sites will be popular travel and check-in spots, and traditional costumes, festivals, handicrafts, and food culture can be turned into popular digital content.

At the same time, cultural consumption is increasingly linked to tourism, identity expression, lifestyle and socialisation. Audiences will be interested in learning about the history of cultural

heritage, visiting heritage sites, taking pictures, sharing their experiences and participating in online trends [9]. Therefore, cultural consumption is increasingly about grasping the connotations of culture and experiencing and expressing it. Therefore, cultural heritage can also have visual, symbolic and social values in addition to its historical and cultural significance. A link has been established between visual representation and cultural consumption to provide strong support for the research of how to turn cultural heritage into a digital spectacle.

2.3. Debord and the spectacularisation of cultural heritage

Guy Debord's concept of the "Society of the Spectacle" can be used to study this change; the spectacle, according to Debord, is a type of social relations mediated by images [5]. Therefore, the increase in the presentation of cultural heritage through digital images, videos and symbols can be viewed as a process of spectacularisation.

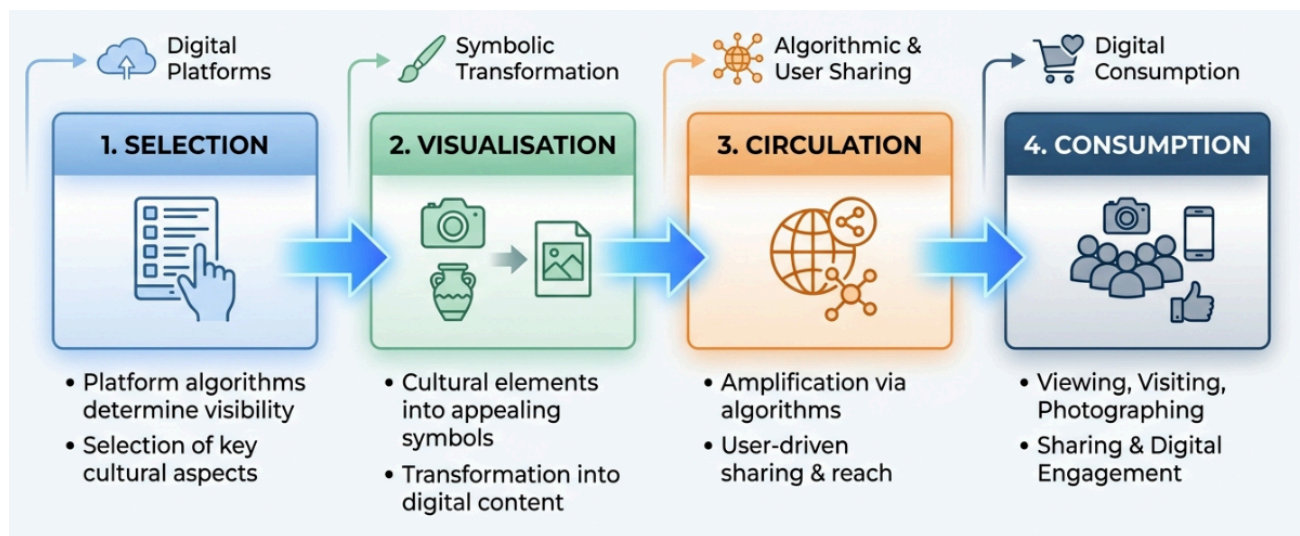


Figure 1. Flowchart of the spectacularization process for cultural heritage

In this paper, spectacularization refers to the process through which cultural heritage is selected, visualised, circulated, and consumed as digital cultural content. As illustrated in Figure 1, this process comprises four interconnected stages: selection, visualisation, circulation, and consumption. Specifically, digital platforms govern which aspects of heritage become visible (Selection); visualisation transforms complex cultural elements into identifiable and appealing symbols (Visualisation); circulation amplifies their reach through algorithmic mechanisms and user sharing (Circulation); and consumption unfolds through viewing, visiting, photographing, sharing, and other forms of digital engagement (Consumption). Through this analytical framework, this study examines how cultural heritage transitions among cultural meaning, visual representation, and digital consumption.

3. Illustrative examples of cultural heritage spectacularization

Based on Debord's concept of the spectacle, the following section will explore how cultural heritage is presented in images, representations and consumption within digital spaces [5]. Instead of just increasing the exposure of heritage, digital media will change how people are connected to it by

offering more visually rich cultural experiences. The following are some examples of how this process will be applied to all kinds of cultural heritage.

3.1. Heritage sites as spectacles

The Palace Museum in Beijing will be one of the first to convert a historical site into a digital spectacle. Although the Forbidden City has a long history and rich culture, most people's awareness of it on social media now comes in the form of pictures and short videos [10]. Architectural details, seasonal scenery, traditional-style spaces and other visually appealing parts will be popular on the Internet. According to Debord, the necessary change will not be merely to allow more people to see the heritage site. Instead, the connection between the audience and the site will be increasingly mediated by its representations. Visitors may take pictures of the place to recreate an image that can be seen and shared online later. Thus, the physical heritage site will be linked to a larger digital spectacle, and sight, photography, sharing and consumption of representations will all become part of the heritage experience.

3.2. Cultural practices as spectacular performances

The same changes can be observed in traditional festivals, costumes, handicrafts and folk performances. With the development of digital media, these cultural activities can be recorded and organised into short videos, pictures, and other kinds of visual materials for broad dissemination. For instance, a traditional festival can be shown through its costumes, dances, decorations, music and ceremonial activities, and traditional handicrafts can be presented at various stages of the production process. These forms of representation focus on the visual and performative attributes of cultural activities, making them easier to communicate, recognize and spread in the digital world [8].

Debord's concept of the spectacle can be used to explain this change because cultural practice will be presented to us increasingly through mediation. Audiences who see something online may not be fully aware of the original culture of that behaviour. Instead, some special parts will be selected and arranged to draw people's attention and make them want to watch and share more. Therefore, the cultural practice will be both a lived tradition and a reproducible digital spectacle.

3.3. From spectators to producers of cultural spectacles

Digital media will also change the traditional relationship between spectators and spectacles. Debord originally believed that the audience was mainly a spectator of social life through representation. However, users will also begin to produce and spread these representations themselves on social media. Hanfu is a typical example. Users can wear traditional clothing, visit historical sites, take pictures and videos, and share them with others who have the same interests [11]. Consequently, audiences of cultural performances are not merely passive recipients; they can utilize photos, videos, and other forms of digital content to reproduce and disseminate the ways in which cultural heritage is presented. This fosters increasingly interactive connections between audiences and cultural spectacles, creating a continuous cycle that integrates viewing, creating, sharing, and experiencing culture. Thus, digital platforms blur the traditional boundaries between audience and creator, enabling audiences to participate in the reproduction and dissemination of cultural spectacles; at the same time, users contribute to the propagation and evolution of cultural heritage within the context of digital culture.

4. Cultural consumption in the digital age

Spectacularisation of cultural heritage will change the conditions of consumption for heritage in an all-over way. As cultural heritage is increasingly presented in digital form, its value will be based not only on history, culture and society. It will also be affected by its visibility, symbolic value and capacity to create cultural experiences. Therefore, cultural consumption will shift from direct participation in heritage to the consumption of mediated meanings, experiences and symbols.

The first change is an increase in the experience-based consumption of culture. Heritage sites, cultural activities and traditional practices will be increasingly incorporated into tourism and commerce to create cultural experiences for tourists. Consumers will not only wish to learn about the history of the culture but also want to experience something beautiful, moving, and meaningful to society. Heritage will therefore be a resource for the production and consumption of specific experiences. It does not mean that the cultural connotations have disappeared; instead, they now have experiential and economic functions.

A second change is the increase in the demand for symbols. In the present day, consumption culture also includes consuming what cultural objects and places represent. A heritage site, cultural product or traditional aesthetic can serve as a symbol of a particular identity, value, way of life or social group. Therefore, cultural consumption is also a way for people to create meaning and situate themselves in society and culture. The object of consumption is not only the cultural heritage but also the identity and social value associated with it.

As more and more of society is organised around representations, consumption has expanded beyond material goods to include images, experiences and symbols. Digital Platforms also increase the spread of cultural meaning through continuous online dissemination. Heritage can thus obtain value through its function as a recognisable cultural symbol, and consumers may engage in cultural consumption by means of the meanings attached to these symbols.

Spectacularisation has also created a conflict between cultural values and consumer demands. The parts of the heritage that are more suitable for digital dissemination may not always be the most historically or culturally significant parts of a tradition. As more heritage is organised for display and consumption, the rich cultural background may be lost in the process of simplification and easy recognition. Therefore, the problem is not merely that heritage is being commercialised; rather, the environment of cultural consumption itself has been altered by digital mediation.

5. Discussion

Based on the above analysis, the digitalisation of cultural heritage is not merely about preservation and transmission; it is also a process of cultural landscape creation and spectacle. Heritage is gradually being organised into visual landscapes consisting of recognisable buildings, cultural symbols, performances and aesthetic features. Although the new environments are more accessible to the public, there may be some changes in the meaning of culture.

Debord would consider the current cultural system of pictures and signs as a form of spectacle. Heritage is now often shown in images without being fully connected to its history and society. After several selections and applications in different places, some pictures begin to serve as symbols of that culture. Therefore, what is most prominent online may not always be the whole story of the heritage.

Therefore, there is a conflict between cultural exhibition and cultural essence. Digital spectacularisation can gain more attention from the public and new types of participation, and at the same time, complex cultural meanings are reduced to recognisable visual symbols. Cultural heritage,

therefore, is not only to be protected but also to be visually created and spread in the context of digital culture.

6. Conclusion

This paper has investigated how digital media are transforming cultural heritage in the process of spectacularisation. Digitalisation will also enhance the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. Through selection, visualisation, circulation and consumption, cultural heritage is being increasingly reconstructed as a visual and symbolic landscape. Thus, heritage will be more visible and accessible, and the expression and experience of cultural connotations will also change. Heritage can be converted into an identifiable digital show of culturally rooted practices or historical objects that is spread, experienced and used. Based on the above data, the process of digital spectacularisation has presented a problem: it has focused too much on visibility and spread and thus reduced the depth of cultural heritage.

This study has some defects. First, based on the existing literature and illustrative cases, it is a theoretical study without systematic empirical data. Second, most of the previous studies have focused on social media and digital visual culture, and there have been few large-scale cross-platform or cross-cultural comparative studies. Future research can conduct specific platform case studies to examine how different algorithms and user behaviours contribute to the spectacularisation of heritage. More studies can be conducted to explore people's feelings and how artificial intelligence, virtual reality and augmented reality will change the mode of transformation for digital cultural landscapes.

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