

Developing a Digital Communication Model for Cultural Heritage: Case Study of Zhuang and Thai-Isan Ethnic Groups

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to design and implement an effective digital communication model that leverages emerging technologies for the preservation and dissemination of Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage in the digital environment. The increasing reliance on social media, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality (VR) has transformed traditional methods of cultural dissemination, necessitating a structured Digital Communication Model for Cultural Heritage to bridge generational and technological gaps. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, surveys, and digital analytics to examine digital engagement with Molan and Molam performances. The study was conducted in Nanning and Jingxi, China, and Mahasarakham and Roi-Et, Thailand—regions where these performances are culturally significant. Data collection included participant surveys, structured interviews with cultural experts and performers, and digital platform analysis. The findings reveal a generational divide in cultural engagement, with younger audiences preferring digital platforms like TikTok and YouTube, while older generations rely on live performances and television. The results highlight the risks of cultural misrepresentation and dilution when heritage content is adapted for digital media without proper contextualization. The study proposes a hybrid digital communication model incorporating professionally generated content (PGC), user-generated content (UGC), and AI-generated content (AIGC) to ensure authenticity and sustainability. Recommendations include integrating digital literacy programs, immersive storytelling, and interactive media to enhance engagement. This research provides a replicable framework for digital heritage management, contributing to the evolving discourse on cultural sustainability in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Communication Model, Cultural Heritage, Zhuang and Thai-Isan, Digital Engagement, Hybrid Transmission.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage serves as an essential foundation for the identity and continuity of ethnic communities, preserving traditions, beliefs, and practices across generations. In the digital age, technological advancements have reshaped the methods of cultural documentation, dissemination, and preservation. Digital communication platforms, including social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, offer unprecedented opportunities to enhance cultural engagement and accessibility [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. The Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups, known for their rich artistic traditions, oral literature, and musical expressions, have long relied on face-to-face transmission to pass down their cultural heritage. However, these traditional methods are increasingly challenged by societal transformations such as urbanization, globalization, and shifting generational interests, necessitating innovative approaches to sustain and promote cultural practices in the modern era [6], [7], [8].

One of the critical problems in preserving and transmitting the cultural heritage of the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups is the decline of traditional knowledge due to a lack of systematic digital documentation [9], [10], [11]. Younger generations are becoming more disconnected from their cultural roots, as their engagement shifts toward modern entertainment and digital media platforms. Furthermore, the risk of cultural misrepresentation or dilution increases when heritage content is adapted for digital consumption without proper contextualization [12], [13]. The lack of efficient digital models for heritage communication also means that existing cultural resources are not being

effectively leveraged for education, tourism, and community engagement [14], [15]. Addressing these issues requires a structured digital communication model that integrates emerging technologies while ensuring the authenticity and sustainability of traditional cultural expressions [16], [17].

This study aims to design and implement an effective digital communication model that leverages emerging technologies for the preservation and dissemination of Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage in the digital environment. By incorporating artificial intelligence, interactive media, and social networking tools, the model seeks to enhance the visibility, accessibility, and engagement of these cultural traditions. The research explores various digital communication strategies, including the role of Professionally Generated Content (PGC), User-Generated Content (UGC), and AI-Generated Content (AIGC) in heritage transmission. It also evaluates how different platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and immersive digital storytelling methods can be utilized to create meaningful and interactive cultural experiences [18], [19], [20], [21].

The significance of this research lies in its potential to offer a replicable framework for preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage through digital means. A well-structured digital communication model will not only support cultural sustainability but also empower ethnic communities by providing them with tools to actively participate in and control their digital heritage representation. Additionally, it will enhance cultural tourism and educational initiatives by offering immersive and interactive cultural experiences to a broader audience. By integrating modern technology with traditional practices, this study contributes to the evolving field of digital heritage management, offering a blueprint for safeguarding cultural expressions in the 21st century [22], [23], [24], [25].

OBJECTIVES

To design and implement an effective digital communication model that leverages emerging technologies for the preservation and dissemination of Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage in the digital environment.

METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the role of digital communication in preserving and disseminating the Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage. It integrates ethnographic fieldwork, survey research, and digital analytics to explore how emerging technologies can enhance engagement with traditional cultural expressions [26], [27]. Data collection was conducted in Nanning and Jingxi (China) and Mahasarakham and Roi-Et (Thailand), regions where Molan and Molam performances are integral to cultural identity.

1. Research Design

This study employs a multi-faceted research design to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis. The approach combines:

- Quantitative surveys to assess the awareness, perception, and engagement levels of participants regarding digital cultural heritage.
- Qualitative interviews with cultural experts, performers, and digital content creators to explore the challenges and opportunities in digitalizing traditional cultural expressions.
- Digital analytics to evaluate social media engagement and the impact of user-generated and professionally curated content.

Table 1: Research Methods and Their Applications

Research Method	Application in the Study
Survey Research	Quantitative assessment of awareness and engagement
Interviews	Qualitative exploration of cultural transmission practices
Digital Analytics	Evaluation of social media trends and online audience reach

2. Research Design

The study integrates three primary data collection methods.

Surveys and Questionnaires: A structured survey was conducted with 100 participants representing various age groups, occupations, and cultural backgrounds. The survey assessed:

- General awareness of Molan and Molam as digital heritage.
- Preferences for traditional vs. digital modes of cultural engagement.
- Interact with digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and WeChat.

Table 2: Distribution of Survey Participants by Location

Location	Percentage
Nanning, China	30%
Jingxi, China	20%
Mahasarakham, Thailand	30%
Roi-Et, Thailand	20%

The locations were selected based on Molan and Molam’s historical and cultural relevance to the communities in these regions.

In-depth Interviews: Structured interviews were conducted with cultural leaders, Molan and Molam performers, and digital content creators to explore:

- The impact of digitalization on traditional cultural performances.
- Audience engagement trends and challenges in online heritage preservation.
- Perceptions of digital media’s role in cultural sustainability.

Table 3: Key Informants in the Interview Process

Category	Participants	Topics Discussed
Cultural Experts	5	Challenges in digitalizing traditional music
Performers	6	Adaptation of performances for digital platforms
Digital Content Creators	4	Social media engagement strategies

Participants provided valuable insights into the evolution of cultural heritage in the digital space, offering recommendations on how digital platforms can enhance accessibility and engagement.

Digital Analytics and Social Media Data: To evaluate the effectiveness of digital platforms in promoting cultural heritage, data from Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok were analyzed. Key metrics examined included:

- Viewership trends, engagement rates (likes, shares, comments).
- Role of algorithm-driven recommendations in cultural dissemination.
- Comparison between user-generated content (UGC) and professionally produced cultural materials (PGC).

Figure 1 illustrates the study's conceptual framework, demonstrating the relationship between digital platforms, cultural engagement, and technological adaptation in heritage transmission.



Figure 1. The study's conceptual framework

This study integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of digital communication models for preserving and promoting the Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage in the digital environment.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings on the digital awareness, engagement, and communication preferences of different age groups regarding Molam and Molam performances. The survey results, illustrated in Figures, highlight generational differences in cultural awareness, preferred modes of cultural transmission, and digital engagement trends. The discussion also explores the effectiveness of digital media as a communication tool. It proposes a comprehensive digital communication model for preserving and disseminating the Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage.

1. Digital Awareness and Engagement with Molam and Molam

The survey results indicate a clear generational divide in awareness and engagement with Molam and Molam performances. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate how different age groups have been exposed to these traditional art forms.

The data for middle-aged and elderly participants (Figure 2) reveal a decline in awareness as age increases. This suggests that while these groups may have encountered Molam and Molam in earlier decades, their current level of engagement has diminished due to a lack of digital adaptation. Many older participants rely on traditional forms of cultural transmission, such as live stage performances and television broadcasts, which have become less prominent than digital media platforms.

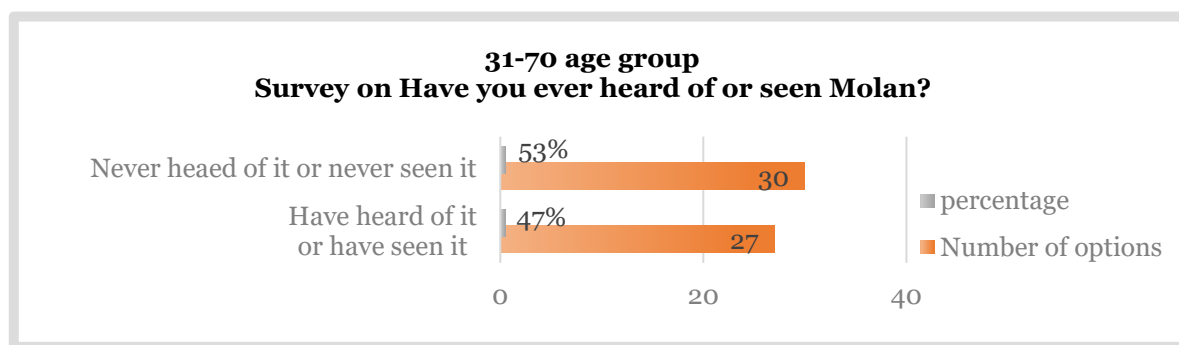


Figure 2. Survey results for middle-aged and old people

Conversely, Figure 3 presents findings from adolescents and young adults, demonstrating significantly higher exposure to Molam and Molam. This increased awareness can be linked to greater access to digital platforms, where content related to folk performances is actively shared and consumed. Younger generations frequently engage with

short-form videos on TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms, making them more likely to encounter and interact with these cultural expressions online.

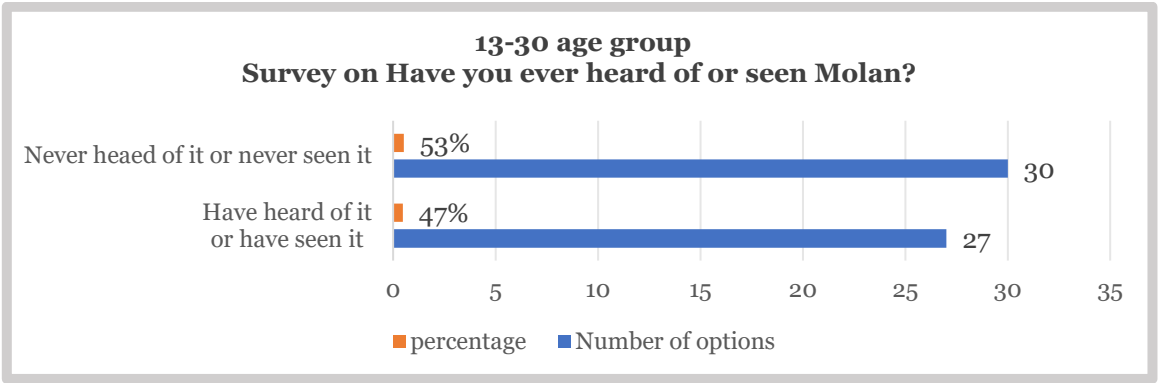


Figure 3. Survey results for adolescents and young People

A further breakdown of the findings suggests that middle-aged and elderly respondents are more familiar with Molan, while younger audiences are more aware of Molam. This difference can be attributed to three key factors:

- Regional Exposure: Molan has historically been performed in specific localities, where older generations were more likely to witness it in traditional settings. Meanwhile, Molam has undergone modernization, increasing its reach among younger audiences.
- Generational Shifts: Cultural interests evolve, and younger generations may engage selectively with performances more adapted to contemporary formats.
- Digital Media Influence: The rise of social media and streaming platforms has made Molam more visible online, leading to greater awareness among digital-native generations.

Overall, the findings emphasize the critical role of digital media in shaping cultural awareness. As traditional performance arts like Molan and Molam transition into the digital landscape, younger audiences are likelier to encounter and engage with them. At the same time, older generations who rely on conventional modes of transmission may experience declining exposure. This underscores the need for hybrid cultural dissemination strategies that bridge traditional and digital platforms to ensure intergenerational cultural continuity.

2. Audience Preferences for Digital vs. Traditional Cultural Transmission

The results highlight a generational divide in preferences for cultural transmission, emphasizing how audiences engage with Molan performances differently based on age. Figures 4 illustrate these varying preferences, revealing a contrast between younger and older generations in how they appreciate and access traditional performances.

Figure 4 presents data from adolescents and young adults, showing that while they generally enjoy Molan, their preferred mode of engagement is through digital platforms. With the rise of social media, streaming services, and online cultural content, younger audiences are likelier to watch performances on TikTok, YouTube, or other digital channels rather than attend live stage performances. This aligns with broader trends in digital entertainment consumption, where convenience, accessibility, and interactive features play a critical role in engagement.

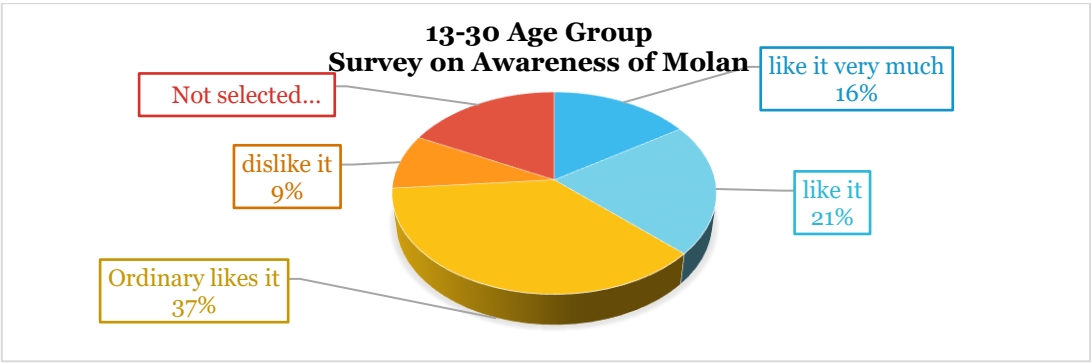


Figure 4. Survey results for adolescent and young people

Conversely, focuses on middle-aged and elderly participants, reveals a stronger preference for traditional performances. Older generations favor live stage experiences, likely due to cultural nostalgia, firsthand exposure in their youth, and a deeper appreciation for in-person artistic expression. Many respondents in this group associate Molan with community gatherings, rituals, and celebrations, reinforcing the importance of physical spaces in cultural preservation.

Further examines the level of understanding of Molan's performance structure among younger audiences. The results indicate that while young participants engage with Molan through digital channels, their knowledge of its artistic and historical significance remains limited. This suggests that although digital media increases exposure, it does not always translate into a deeper appreciation or comprehension of the art form. The lack of contextual and educational materials in short-form digital content may contribute to this superficial engagement.

Key Insights:

- Older audiences prefer traditional live performances, viewing them as more authentic and immersive.
- Younger generations engage primarily through digital platforms, valuing convenience and accessibility.
- Despite higher digital engagement, young audiences lack deeper knowledge of Molan’s cultural significance, indicating the need for more interactive and educational digital content.

Implications:

- Hybrid transmission models are necessary to bridge generational engagement gaps—combining live performances with digital outreach.
- Digital platforms should integrate interactive elements, such as documentary-style storytelling, educational videos, and immersive VR experiences, to enhance cultural appreciation.
- Efforts should be made to contextualize Molan performances in digital formats, ensuring that exposure leads to cultural literacy rather than passive entertainment.

This analysis underscores the importance of balancing digital innovation with cultural education to effectively preserve and transmit Molan to future generations.

3. Digital Media as the Dominant Communication Channel

The study reveals that digital platforms have become the primary medium for cultural engagement, particularly among younger audiences. Figures 5 and 6 examine the most common channels where audiences have encountered Molan and Molam performances, highlighting significant differences in cultural consumption patterns across generations.

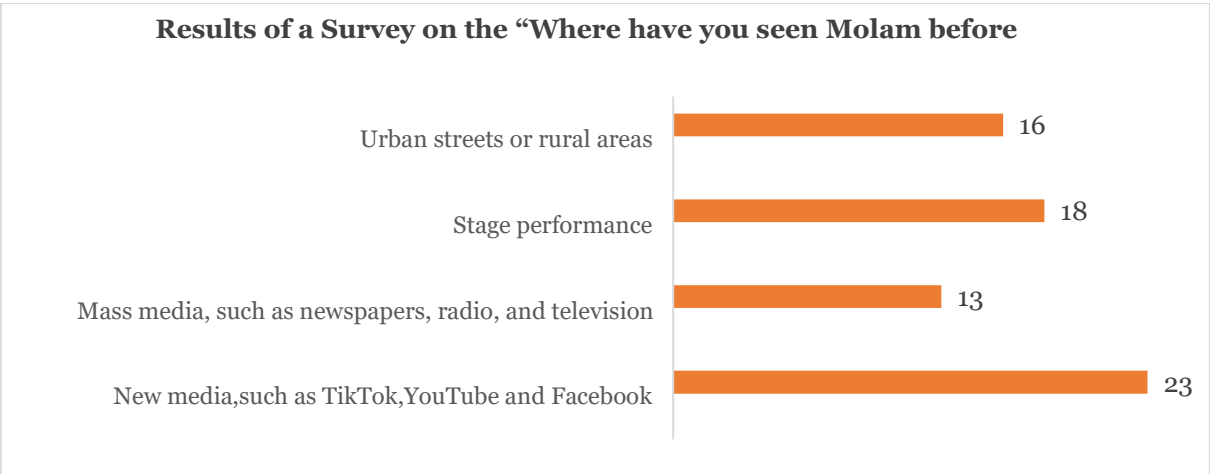


Figure 5. Survey reslts on the where have you seen Molam before

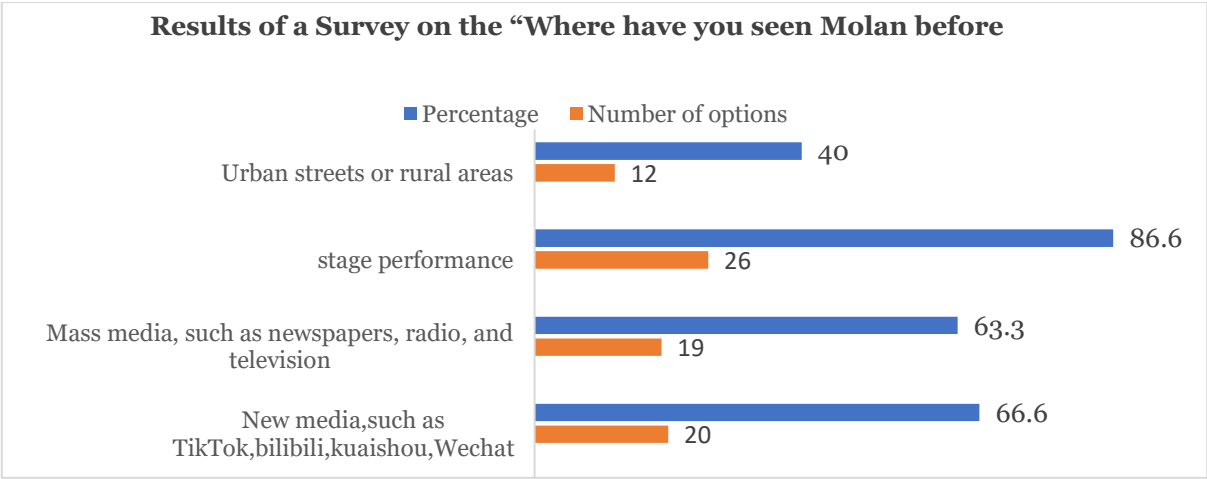


Figure 6. Survey results on the where have you seen Molan before

The findings show that younger participants predominantly engage with Molan and Molam through digital media platforms, including TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. The preference for short-form videos, social media interactions, and on-demand streaming has significantly reshaped how traditional performances are accessed and appreciated. These platforms provide instant accessibility, interactive features, and personalized content recommendations, making them the preferred choice for the younger demographic.

In contrast, older generations rely more on television broadcasts and live performances as their primary sources of cultural engagement. This reflects a traditional mode of cultural consumption, where rituals, festivals, and community-based performances play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting folk traditions. Television remains an important medium for reaching middle-aged and elderly audiences, particularly in regions where digital literacy is lower or where internet access is limited.

Digital communication model that integrates various digital platforms to enhance audience engagement. This model emphasizes multi-platform integration, ensuring that different audience segments are effectively reached. Key elements of the model include:

- Interactive social media engagement, enabling users to participate in cultural discussions.
- Short-form video content, catering to the fast-paced consumption habits of younger audiences.
- Live streaming of performances, bridging the gap between traditional stage-based experiences and digital accessibility.
- User-generated content (UGC), allowing audiences to actively contribute to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

Increasing Reliance on Social Media and Video Platforms: The rise of social media, video-sharing platforms, and digital storytelling techniques has transformed how cultural heritage is transmitted. Younger generations, in particular, favor interactive and immersive experiences, making social media integration essential for the continued relevance of Molan and Molam.

Key Insights:

- Younger audiences primarily engage with Molan and Molam through social media and video-sharing platforms, emphasizing the shift from traditional performances to digital content consumption.
- Older generations continue to rely on television and live performances, reflecting a preference for more conventional cultural experiences.
- The digital communication model underscores the importance of multi-platform engagement, ensuring that both digital-native and traditional audiences can access cultural heritage effectively.

Implications:

- Cultural organizations should invest in digital content creation, focusing on short videos, live streaming, and interactive media to attract younger audiences.

- Hybrid engagement strategies that combine digital outreach with live performances will be essential for preserving and promoting traditional cultural expressions.
- Educational content should be incorporated into digital platforms to enhance cultural literacy while maintaining entertainment value.

The increasing dominance of digital media in cultural heritage transmission signifies a major shift in audience engagement, requiring innovative approaches to keep traditional performances relevant in the digital era.

4. Digital Communication Model for Zhuang and Thai-Isan Cultural Heritage

To address the challenges of cultural preservation in the digital era, a comprehensive digital communication model tailored for Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage transmission. The model incorporates:

- Interactive social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, TikTok) to increase visibility and engagement.
- User-generated content (UGC) and professional content (PGC) to ensure a balance between authenticity and innovation.
- Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) applications for immersive cultural experiences.

This model leverages emerging technologies to create a sustainable and scalable framework for preserving intangible cultural heritage. The integration of AI-driven recommendations, interactive storytelling, and digital archiving ensures that both younger and older generations can engage with traditional performances in meaningful ways.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the growing importance of digital communication in preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage, particularly among the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups. The increasing reliance on digital platforms for cultural engagement aligns with research emphasizing the transformative role of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and social media in heritage conservation [13]. As younger generations shift towards modern entertainment and online platforms, traditional knowledge transmission faces challenges, highlighting the necessity for structured digital documentation methods [5]. The results confirm prior findings that cultural misrepresentation and dilution are risks associated with digital adaptation, particularly when heritage content is presented without contextual depth [20].

This research supports studies advocating for structured digital communication models that integrate traditional and digital transmission methods to sustain cultural practices in the modern era [8]. By leveraging social media and interactive media, this study affirms that platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube play a crucial role in increasing cultural visibility among younger audiences [16]. However, these digital interactions do not always lead to a comprehensive understanding of cultural heritage, reinforcing prior concerns that digital exposure alone may not develop deep cultural literacy [3]. The incorporation of professionally generated content (PGC), user-generated content (UGC), and AI-generated content (AIGC) in heritage transmission reflects contemporary digital heritage strategies, balancing authenticity with innovation [25].

The mixed-methods research design, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, survey research, and digital analytics, provides a comprehensive view of how emerging technologies can support traditional cultural expressions [11]. The study's findings illustrate a generational divide, where younger individuals engage predominantly through digital platforms while older generations continue to favor live performances and television broadcasts [7]. These results align with research emphasizing that digital literacy and technology accessibility influence cultural engagement behaviors [18]. A hybrid approach that merges traditional performances with digital outreach is necessary to ensure intergenerational cultural sustainability [2].

Furthermore, the study confirms that the effectiveness of digital communication for heritage preservation depends on audience preferences and platform-specific characteristics. The preference for short-form video content among younger users, compared to long-form or live performances preferred by older generations, supports prior research on digital media consumption trends [23]. The influence of social media algorithms on cultural content visibility further validates theoretical models suggesting that digital platforms actively shape heritage engagement patterns [9]. However, despite the advantages of digital engagement, this study highlights risks related to authenticity loss and commercialization, reinforcing previous studies that caution against the commodification of cultural heritage in digital spaces [4].

By proposing a digital communication model that integrates AI-based recommendations, immersive storytelling, and multi-platform engagement, this study contributes to digital heritage management research [21]. These findings support literature emphasizing that well-structured digital initiatives empower ethnic communities by enabling them to control their cultural narratives online [10]. The integration of digital archives and interactive media is critical for ensuring the long-term sustainability of intangible cultural heritage [6]. Future studies should further explore how machine learning and immersive digital storytelling can enhance audience engagement and cultural appreciation in digital spaces [19].

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the critical role of digital communication in preserving and promoting the Zhuang and Thai-Isan cultural heritage. The study identifies a clear generational divide in engagement and consumption patterns, with younger audiences favoring digital platforms and older generations preferring live performances. This underscores the need for a hybrid communication model integrating stage performances and digital engagement.

The results indicate that cultural transmission strategies must evolve to accommodate shifting audience preferences. By expanding digital archives, enhancing social media outreach, and incorporating immersive technologies, the study proposes a sustainable digital communication model that ensures the long-term preservation and accessibility of cultural heritage.

Future research can leverage artificial intelligence, machine learning, and interactive digital storytelling to further enhance cultural engagement and accessibility, making traditional performances more interactive and inclusive for global audiences.

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