

Exploration of Audience Engagement and Activation Paths of Intangible Cultural Heritage Under Media Representation on Short-Video Platforms

Xueli Cao

Institute of Archaeology, University College London, London, UK, WC1H 0AW

Abstract

The rapid development of short-video platforms has fundamentally changed the communication landscape, bringing unprecedented opportunities and major challenges to the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). This research conducts a comprehensive theoretical and critical analysis on the mechanism of audience engagement and sustained activation pathways of intangible cultural assets within the framework of media representation of contemporary short video platforms. Based on critical heritage studies, participatory culture theory, platform studies, algorithmic governance research, surveillance capitalism frameworks and communicative mediatisation paradigms, this study explores how algorithmic curation, micro-narrative visual framing and interactive participatory dynamics reconfigure the public perception, emotional resonance and cultural consumption of traditional heritage practices. It also responds to fundamental concerns about commodification, shallow decontextualisation and marginalisation of legitimate community knowledge bearers. The paper proposes a multi-dimensional activation framework, consisting of community-centred digital stewardship, transmedia narrative contextualisation, co-creative audience engagement, and platform-mediated value co-creation, to keep living heritage vibrant, resilient, and socially meaningful in the digital era.

Keywords

Intangible cultural heritage; short-video platforms; audience engagement; media representation; cultural activation; participatory culture.

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses oral traditions, performing arts, social behaviours, rituals and festive events and traditional crafts. It is the living memory, the communal identity, and the creative wisdom of human societies. Intangible heritage, unlike tangible monuments and physical objects, is by its very nature dynamic, process orientated and relies on embodied human transmission from generation to generation. But in current industrial and post-industrial countries, rapid urban transformation, changing lifestyles and generational replacement have caused considerable limits on the survival of many old practices, which thus need new methods of protection and revitalisation.

The emergence and ubiquity of mobile short-video platforms (e.g., TikTok, Douyin, Instagram Reels, and Kuaishou) have changed contemporary media ecologies and digital culture. Short-video platforms have democratised cultural broadcasting, changing the public's encounter with, interpretation of, and participation in cultural phenomena, via high-speed algorithmic recommendation feeds, ultra-condensed visual storytelling, immersive audiovisual aesthetics, and frictionless user interaction channels. Master artisans, grassroots tradition-bearers, creative content creators and cultural institutions are turning more and more to short video to

document, perform and transmit traditional crafts, folk performances and indigenous rites to vast global audiences.

However, this digital shift involves basic theoretical and practical obstacles. The algorithmic demand for instant visual gratification can often lead to the aestheticisation, the fragmentation and the commercialisation of complex cultural traditions, depriving them of their original spiritual and communal settings. Thus, mediated representation and its repercussions on public engagement and on the development of balanced and authentic routes of activation are among the key preoccupations of current digital heritage studies.

In this study, we methodically and literature-based analyse the mechanics of short-video media representation that redefines audience involvement with intangible cultural property. This study combines core paradigms of heritage, media involvement theory and digital platform mechanics. It discusses the dialectical relationship between technology mediation and cultural preservation and proposes a sustainable activation framework of living heritage in the digital era.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Heritage, Mediatization, and Digital Participation

The conceptual basis for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage was laid down by the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which gave the official definition of ICH as living practices, representations, expressions and knowledge recognised by communities and groups as part of their cultural heritage [1]. The Convention emphasises that intangible heritage is being constantly built up by communities in response to their environment, history and social interaction. Community engagement and sustainable viability are the main criteria of authentic safeguarding.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [2] understands intangible legacy as a form of metacultural production from a critical sociological perspective by which conventional actions are reflexively produced and presented as heritage through institutional, media and educational apparatuses. The framework is a process of transformative translation: the recording and broadcasting of traditional craft or performance involves a distancing from the living everyday practice and its carefully calibrated framing and performance for observation by others, and a re-orientation of the locus of cultural meaning toward communicative representation.

Building on this critical inquiry, Smith formulated the concept of the authorised heritage discourse (AHD), demonstrating that heritage is not a stable stock of inherited objects and practices, but a fluid, emotionally charged cultural process of identity construction, memory negotiation and meaning-making [3]. The digital transfer of Smith's discourse demonstrates how the historic value is being negotiated by a variety of public participants, rather than defined just by institutional specialists or custodians.

The core participatory culture theory of Jenkins explains the blurred barrier between cultural producers and cultural consumers in convergence culture, through the media environment in which audience engagement is taking place [4]. In participatory digital cultures, viewers are active participants, prosumers and co-creators who annotate, remediate, share and change media information to express personal and collective identities.

The contested and community-led character of heritage management was highlighted by Smith and Akagawa who used heritage and digital communications to frame intangible heritage within emerging international policy discussions [5]. This view raises the question, in the digital world, of how new communication contexts are changing involvement and representation of heritage. The digital interface both documents traditional knowledge; it also generates new places for cultural contestation and collaborative conservation.

To understand such a participatory dynamic in today's digital infrastructure, the edited volume by Giaccardi explores heritage within the framework of participatory culture, showing how social media and interactive networks can make heritage a networked space for social connectivity, co-curation and public engagement [6].

van Dijck's theory of connectedness, based on social media infrastructure, addressed how digital platforms transformed sociality and cultural transmission via programd algorithms and commercial platform mechanics [7]. Digital platforms are therefore not neutral public spaces, but are designed to maximise automated participation and the monetisation of data.

They are the originators of the notion of the mediated construction of reality, demonstrating how modern social life and cultural institutions are primarily organised by communicative media infrastructures and algorithmic data systems [8]. Digital platforms are not neutral pipes. Their technical architecture, the affordances of the interface and the rules of algorithmic selection actively impact the ways in which cultural practices are formed, perceived and valued in everyday life.

In addition to analysing platform institutions, Gillespie examined the governance and moderation mechanisms of online platforms and showed how algorithmic distribution rules and content moderation judgements create invisible borders which impact public cultural visibility [9].

Finally, Zuboff created the notion of surveillance capitalism, demonstrating how commercial digital platforms appropriate behavioural surplus from user interactions in an effort to predict and influence customer behaviour [10]. When contemplating the diffusion of the digital heritage, this logic imposes the demands of optimisation of commercial traffic and of commodification on traditional cultural manifestations.

3. Media Representation Mechanics of Short-Video Platforms in Heritage Transmission

Intangible cultural legacy is embodied through distinct semiotic, aesthetic and algorithmic devices that differentiate short-video platforms from traditional documentary cinema or linear broadcasting.

In terms of representation, a major element is the framing of micro-narratives and the sensory aestheticization. Short films turn the painstaking traditional skills (such as woodblock carving, ceramic firing, embroidery, lacquer polishing) into fast visual spectacles in brief, attention-deficit frames. Short videos foreground the tactile, aural and visual beauty of artisanal labour with ASMR-led sensory sound effects, rhythm-synched backing music, accelerated time-lapse sequences and close-up macro cinematography. Such a sensory rich presentation could attract audience attention, help demystify complex artisan techniques and encourage aesthetic interest among digitally-oriented consumers.

The second structural mechanism is algorithmic curation and niche personalisation of dissemination. Short-video platforms adopt algorithmic recommendation systems to determine the content presentation based on user engagement and the rating processes provided by the platform. Far from being neutral means of dissemination, these technologies shape the visibility and repeated circulation of heritage content. This technical architecture allows rapid distribution of intangible heritage content to highly targeted communities of interest (e.g. traditional fashion lovers, craft hobbyists or cultural tourism circles), breaking down institutional barriers to cultural distribution, and potentially increasing the circulation of heritage content without the need for traditional mass media channels.

Thirdly, there is the feature of democratisation of speech and emotional co-presence. Short-video media representations bridge the physical and psychological distance between expert

artists and ordinary viewers. Inheritors and inventors speak straight to camera describing personal life stories, technological issues, historical lineages, everyday domestic routines. This direct appeal to the individual produces a sense of real intimacy and relational proximity, turning abstract categories of national heritage into accessible, human-centered stories that can inspire empathy and cultural engagement.

4. Manifestations of Audience Engagement and Underlying Dilemmas

The media portrayal of short-video platforms allows audience participation to be expressed in many behavioural, emotional and cognitive layers, from passive observation to active cultural co-creation.

The first degree of engagement is interactive reception and emotional approval. The audience's immediate emotive alignment is in the form of real-time commenting, like, storing and forwarding. Comment sections are vibrant virtual open forums in which viewers ask incisive questions about artisan skills, debate historical authenticity, share localised recollections of youth and enact collective cultural belonging. Such feedback loops in response can provide visible means of recognition and social encouragement.

That higher level of interaction is expressive co-creation and user-generated remediation. Active users utilise the platform's built-in duet, stitch, and challenge capabilities to remix cultural materials into their own creative outputs [4], drawing on Jenkins's participatory culture framework. Young innovators combine melodies of traditional folk music with electronic dance tracks, or traditional dance choreography with urban street settings, or traditional Hanfu clothes with current lifestyle vlogs. This process of imitative co-creation and secondary transmission changes intangible legacy from a stored remnant of history to an active and flexible feature of modern youth culture.

Yet such platform-mediated involvement is fraught with significant structural dilemmas:

The basic problem is the superficial decontextualisation and distortion of spectacle. The relentless search for platform traffic, click-through rates and algorithmic thumbs-up favours writers who prefer stunning visual tricks, sensationalised plotlines or overdone aesthetic filters over rich historical and theological underpinnings [2, 6]. Deep living traditions can be turned into superficial visual goods for a momentary pleasure and intangible rituals can be removed or abbreviated. The intricate ritualistic meanings, holy taboos and communal histories that sustain them may be left out.

A further problem is commercialisation and the loss of authenticity. As pointed out by platform political economy researchers, short-video platforms are functioning within the logic of surveillance capitalism and commercial monetisation, where user engagement is constantly transformed into consumer transactions through live-stream e-commerce and branded marketing [7, 10]. Commercial monetisation can generate income for struggling craftsmen, but excessive marketisation can lead to mass-produced, counterfeit artisanal goods, aggressive pricing wars and the alteration of traditional craft standards to satisfy undifferentiated consumer tastes.

Third challenge: communication imbalance and marginalisation of grassroots tradition holders. The level of participation and exposure on short video platforms can be uneven, as the platform governance and discrepancies across stakeholder groups influence the production, presentation and sharing of historical information [9, 11]. This may lead to a progressive transfer of representational authority to professional artists, MCN agencies and other intermediaries, possibly at the expense of direct visibility and discursive action by community-based heritage practitioners [12].

5. Multi-Dimensional Activation Pathways for Intangible Cultural Heritage

To successfully address the difficulties of platform representation and to achieve authentic, sustained cultural activation we require a concerted strategy that combines digital innovation with heritage ethics and community participation.

5.1. Community-Centered Digital Stewardship

In accordance with the core values of the UNESCO 2003 Convention, the protection of intangible cultural assets must put the original communities, tradition bearers and local practitioners at the very heart of digital initiatives [1]. Digital activity should not turn tradition bearers into just visual objects or content producers for external media businesses. Municipal cultural departments, colleges and technology platforms should formulate special digital inclusion and training programs to improve video production, live-streaming and intellectual property management skills of master artisans and grassroots inheritors directly. Empowering heritage communities with more control over their digital stories can empower cultural agency, contribute to the protection of procedural knowledge, and establish more transparent channels for distributing profits gained from the platform to the communities that practise living traditions.

5.2. Transmedia Narrative Contextualization and Deep Interpretation

Given the shallow fragmentation of micro-videos, cultural communicators may want to consider transmedia narrative frameworks that connect small format audiovisual hooks to deep rich-context instructional resources [4, 6]. Short films should be dynamic visual gateways, leading interested spectators into serialised mini-documentaries, interactive digital archives, virtual museum exhibitions and community oral history repositories. Educational annotations, historic contextualisation and artisan commentary via video explanations and interactive pinned comments ensure visitors understand the visual outcome and profound cultural ethos of traditional handcraft.

5.3. Fostering Co-Creative and Responsible Participatory Ecosystems

In the philosophy of participatory culture, cultural activation has to deliberately stimulate the audience to jointly participate in more extensive involvement, linking online passion with offline physical participation [4]. Heritage institutions and platform organisers could develop campaigns for co-creation, young creative design competitions, and cultural challenges to stimulate constructive reinterpretation, with clear ethical boundaries to avoid disrespectful distortion or cultural misappropriation. Platforms could also facilitate direct links with online audiences and actual cultural locations through experiential craft workshops, heritage tourism routes and community apprenticeships, so transforming virtual audiences into dedicated and lifelong practitioners and defenders of culture.

5.4. Ethical E-Commerce and Sustainable Value Co-Creation

Short-video platforms and cultural firms need to build transparent high-trust value co-creation networks [7, 10] to realise long-term commercialisation without sacrificing cultural integrity. Traceable geographical indicator certification, artisan copyright verification procedures, and fair-trade cultural e-commerce platforms defend authentic craftsmanship from low-quality counterfeit products. The material basis for cross-generational transmission can be established through digital activation, which can position intangible heritage products as high-value, bespoke and culturally meaningful items in modern sustainable consumption markets and thus generate dignified livelihoods for traditional artisans.

6. Conclusion

The media presentation of intangible cultural materials on short video platforms has a profound structural alteration in today's cultural transmission. Short-video platforms have tremendous potential to democratise cultural visibility, engage diverse youth and energise creative involvement in global digital networks.

But genuine artistic production is not reducible to algorithmic virality or shallow commercial consumption. When the digital depiction of culture replaces living traditions from their community context or marginalises real tradition-bearers, it undermines the essential aims of cultural sustainability.

The path of progressive and sustainable development requires an integrated worldview that synthesises technical innovation and critical heritage ethics. Through the adoption of community-oriented digital ownership, transmedia contextual storytelling, responsible co-creative engagement and ethical value co-creation, short-video platforms can move beyond transient spectacle and ensure that intangible cultural heritage remains a vibrant, dynamic and meaningful force in contemporary human civilisation.

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