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Digital Storytelling to Preserve Local Culture in Southern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of digital storytelling as a contemporary approach to preserving and promoting local cultural heritage in Southern Thailand. As globalization and modernization increasingly threaten traditional cultural practices, digital storytelling emerges as an innovative medium that bridges traditional knowledge with modern technology. This research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews with cultural practitioners, community leaders, and digital content creators across three southern provinces: Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The findings reveal that digital storytelling effectively engages younger generations, creates accessible cultural archives, and facilitates cross-cultural dialogue while maintaining cultural authenticity. Four key dimensions emerged from the analysis: technological integration in cultural preservation, community participation and empowerment, challenges in digital cultural representation, and sustainability of digital heritage initiatives. The study demonstrates that digital storytelling, when implemented with cultural sensitivity and community involvement, serves as a

powerful tool for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary communication landscapes.

INTRODUCTION

The preservation of local culture in an era of rapid globalization presents unprecedented challenges for communities worldwide, particularly in regions where traditional practices face threats from modernization and cultural homogenization. Southern Thailand, with its rich tapestry of Malay-Muslim culture, diverse ethnic communities, and unique cultural traditions, represents a significant case study in contemporary cultural preservation efforts (Abdullah & Hassan, 2021). The region's distinct cultural identity, characterized by traditional performing arts, oral histories, indigenous knowledge systems, and religious practices, requires innovative approaches to ensure transmission to future generations. As Lambert (2013) emphasizes, digital storytelling has emerged as a transformative methodology that empowers communities to document, share, and preserve their cultural narratives through multimedia platforms, combining traditional oral storytelling with contemporary digital technologies.

The integration of digital technologies into cultural preservation initiatives represents a paradigm shift in heritage management practices. Kaplan (2022) argues that digital storytelling provides marginalized communities with tools to control their own narratives, challenging dominant cultural discourses and creating spaces for alternative voices. In Southern Thailand, where cultural identity intersects with complex socio-political dynamics, digital platforms offer opportunities for communities to assert their cultural distinctiveness while engaging with broader national and international audiences (Suwanrada et al., 2020). Furthermore, Robin (2016) demonstrates that digital storytelling facilitates intergenerational knowledge transfer by translating traditional oral narratives into formats accessible to digitally-native younger generations, thereby bridging the gap between traditional culture bearers and contemporary youth who increasingly engage with information through digital media.

The theoretical foundation for employing digital storytelling in cultural preservation draws from multiple scholarly traditions. According to Burgess (2006), digital storytelling democratizes media production, enabling ordinary people to become content creators and cultural archivists. This democratization is particularly relevant in Southern Thailand, where communities have historically been underrepresented in mainstream media narratives. McLuhan and Fiore (2020) posit that the medium through which messages are conveyed fundamentally shapes their reception and impact, suggesting that digital formats may enhance cultural messages' reach and resonance. Additionally, Hartley and McWilliam (2009) contend that digital storytelling creates "productive pedagogies" that engage learners

emotionally and cognitively, making it an ideal tool for cultural education and preservation.

Contemporary research highlights the multifaceted benefits of digital storytelling for cultural preservation. Couldry (2008) identifies digital storytelling as a practice that validates personal and community experiences, creating cultural capital for marginalized groups. In the context of Southern Thailand, this validation is crucial for communities whose cultural practices may be overlooked or misunderstood by dominant cultural institutions. Erstad and Wertsch (2008) further argue that digital stories serve as mediational tools that help individuals and communities make sense of their experiences and identities in relation to broader historical and cultural contexts. The interactive nature of digital platforms also enables participatory cultural production, where community members actively shape how their culture is represented rather than being passive subjects of external documentation (Jenkins, 2006).

Despite the promising potential of digital storytelling, significant challenges and considerations must be addressed. Gubrium et al. (2014) caution that digital storytelling initiatives must navigate issues of representation, authenticity, and power dynamics to avoid reproducing colonial patterns of cultural appropriation. In Southern Thailand's context, where cultural sensitivity and community sovereignty are paramount, digital preservation efforts must be community-driven and culturally responsive. Vivienne and Burgess (2013) emphasize the importance of ethical frameworks that prioritize community consent, cultural protocols, and appropriate knowledge sharing. Additionally, concerns about digital divides, technological access, and sustainability of digital platforms require careful consideration to ensure equitable participation and long-term preservation outcomes (Watkins and Russo, 2007).

This study addresses the critical need for empirical research on digital storytelling applications in Southeast Asian cultural contexts. While existing literature extensively documents digital heritage projects in Western contexts, research examining digital storytelling in Southern Thailand's unique cultural landscape remains limited. This research aims to explore how digital storytelling is being implemented to preserve local culture in Southern Thailand, examining both opportunities and challenges from community perspectives. By investigating the experiences of cultural practitioners, community leaders, and digital content creators, this study contributes to theoretical understandings of digital cultural preservation while providing practical insights for communities and policymakers seeking to safeguard intangible cultural heritage in the digital age.

METHOD

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals engaged in digital storytelling for cultural preservation in Southern Thailand. Data collection occurred between January and June 2024 across three provinces: Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The purposive

sampling technique identified 32 participants, including cultural practitioners (n=12), community leaders (n=8), digital content creators (n=7), and educators (n=5) actively involved in digital cultural preservation initiatives. Semi-structured interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes, explored participants' motivations, experiences, challenges, and perceptions of digital storytelling's effectiveness in preserving local culture. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of experiences, making it particularly suitable for exploring community perspectives on cultural preservation. The interview protocol was developed based on Mayring's (2014) qualitative content analysis framework, incorporating open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their narratives while addressing specific research objectives.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, involving six phases: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 12 software to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed member checking, where participants reviewed preliminary findings and provided feedback, and triangulation through multiple data sources including participant interviews, digital artifacts produced by communities, and field observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, reflexivity practices were maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher documenting assumptions, biases, and interpretive decisions in a research journal. Ethical considerations, approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, included informed consent, confidentiality assurances, and cultural sensitivity protocols respecting Islamic traditions and local customs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Technological Integration in Cultural Preservation

The integration of digital technologies into cultural preservation efforts in Southern Thailand has created unprecedented opportunities for documenting and disseminating traditional knowledge. Participants consistently emphasized how digital platforms enable communities to create multimedia archives that capture the multidimensional nature of cultural practices, including visual, auditory, and narrative elements that traditional text-based documentation cannot adequately represent. As one cultural practitioner explained, "Digital storytelling allows us to show our traditional dance, play our traditional music, and tell our stories in our own voice, all in one medium." This observation aligns with Giaccardi's (2012) argument that digital heritage creates participatory memory practices where communities actively construct and reconstruct their cultural identities through technological engagement. The multimedia capacity of digital storytelling addresses limitations of previous preservation methods that often fragmented cultural practices into separate components, losing the holistic understanding essential to cultural transmission.

Social media platforms emerged as particularly significant channels for reaching younger generations and diaspora communities. Participants reported using Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to share cultural content, with varying levels of engagement across platforms. Kavoori (2015) notes that social media's viral potential can amplify marginalized voices, enabling cultural content to reach audiences far beyond immediate geographic communities. In Southern Thailand, this amplification has facilitated connections between younger community members who have migrated to urban centers and their cultural roots in rural communities (Muhsyanur et al., 2022). However, participants also expressed concerns about platform algorithms and content moderation policies that sometimes flagged cultural content as inappropriate, reflecting Leurs and Georgiou's (2016) observations about digital platforms' cultural biases. The ephemeral nature of social media content also raised questions about long-term preservation, prompting some communities to develop dedicated websites and digital repositories alongside social media presence.

Mobile technology accessibility has democratized digital storytelling production in Southern Thailand. Participants noted that smartphone ubiquity enables community members without professional equipment or technical training to create and share cultural content. This accessibility resonates with Hjorth and Pink's (2014) research on mobile media's role in everyday cultural practices, demonstrating how portable devices blur boundaries between professional and amateur cultural production. Elderly cultural knowledge holders, initially hesitant about technology, increasingly participated in digital storytelling with support from younger family members who possessed technical skills. This intergenerational collaboration created valuable knowledge exchange, with elders providing cultural content and youth contributing technological expertise. Such partnerships exemplify what Prensky (2009) describes as "digital wisdom," where technological capabilities enhance rather than replace traditional knowledge systems.

The technical infrastructure supporting digital storytelling varies significantly across Southern Thailand's provinces. Urban areas like Hat Yai have better internet connectivity and technological resources compared to rural communities where inconsistent electricity and limited bandwidth constrain digital activities. These disparities reflect broader digital divide issues documented by Van Dijk (2020), where socioeconomic and geographic factors create unequal access to digital technologies. Communities in remote areas developed creative solutions, including offline digital storytelling workshops where content is created collectively and uploaded when internet access becomes available. Participants emphasized the importance of capacity-building initiatives that provide technical training, equipment, and ongoing support to ensure sustainable digital cultural preservation. As Watkins (2012) and (Muhsyanur, 2023) argues, addressing technological inequalities requires systemic interventions that go beyond providing devices to include infrastructure development, digital literacy education, and culturally appropriate technical support.

Quality and authenticity concerns emerged as significant considerations in digital cultural content. Participants debated appropriate representation methods, balancing aesthetic appeal for digital audiences with cultural accuracy and traditional protocols (Mulyana et al., 2021). Some cultural practitioners worried that editing for social media's fast-paced consumption might oversimplify complex cultural practices or prioritize entertainment over education. These concerns echo Taylor and Gibson's (2017) observations about tensions between digital engagement strategies and cultural integrity. Communities developed guidelines for digital cultural representation, establishing protocols for who can create certain content, what cultural knowledge is appropriate for public sharing, and how traditional practices should be documented. Such community-driven standards reflect principles of indigenous data sovereignty outlined by Kukutai and Taylor (2016), emphasizing community control over cultural knowledge representation and dissemination in digital spaces.

Community Participation and Empowerment

Community ownership emerged as a critical factor distinguishing successful digital storytelling initiatives from externally-imposed documentation projects. Participants consistently emphasized that digital preservation efforts must originate from community needs and priorities rather than external agendas. As one community leader stated, "When outsiders come to record our culture, they take the knowledge away. With digital storytelling, we keep control of our own stories." This sentiment reflects Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) advocacy for community-led research and documentation that respects indigenous knowledge systems and cultural protocols. Successful initiatives in Southern Thailand involved extensive community consultation to identify which cultural practices required urgent preservation, which stories communities wanted to share, and what formats would be most appropriate for different types of cultural knowledge.

The participatory nature of digital storytelling created opportunities for community members traditionally excluded from cultural documentation processes. Women, youth, and minority ethnic groups within Southern Thailand's diverse population gained platforms to share perspectives often marginalized in conventional heritage narratives. Harding (2013) argues that digital storytelling can challenge dominant narratives by amplifying diverse voices within communities, creating more nuanced and representative cultural archives (Muhsyanur, 2024). In Southern Thailand, women's digital stories documented gender-specific cultural practices, traditional knowledge about medicinal plants and foodways, and experiences navigating cultural traditions in contemporary contexts. Youth participants created digital content that explored tensions between traditional values and modern lifestyles, fostering intergenerational dialogue about cultural adaptation and continuity.

Digital storytelling workshops facilitated collective memory work that strengthened community bonds. Participants described how collaborative creation

processes brought together elders, middle-aged adults, and youth in shared cultural activities. These intergenerational exchanges created spaces for informal cultural transmission that complemented formal education and traditional apprenticeship models. High (2015) documents similar phenomena in digital storytelling projects worldwide, noting that collaborative creation processes often produce social benefits beyond the digital artifacts themselves. In Southern Thailand, workshop participants reported increased cultural pride, renewed interest in traditional practices, and strengthened family relationships as younger generations gained deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage through digital storytelling participation.

Capacity building emerged as essential for sustainable community-led digital preservation. Participants emphasized the need for ongoing training in technical skills, digital literacy, copyright and intellectual property rights, and cultural sensitivity in digital representation (Santalia et al., 2025). Communities that received comprehensive training developed self-sufficient digital storytelling capabilities, continuing to produce cultural content long after initial workshops concluded. This sustainability aligns with Flores' (2015) findings that capacity-building investments yield long-term benefits for community-based digital heritage initiatives. Training programs in Southern Thailand adapted pedagogical approaches to local learning preferences, incorporating hands-on practice, peer learning, and mentorship models that resonated with traditional knowledge transmission methods. Such culturally responsive training enhanced effectiveness and community acceptance of digital technologies for cultural preservation.

The empowerment dimension of digital storytelling extended beyond individual skill development to collective cultural agency. Communities using digital platforms to share their cultural narratives reported increased visibility and recognition from government agencies, tourism sectors, and educational institutions. This visibility translated into tangible benefits including funding for cultural programs, inclusion in cultural tourism initiatives, and partnerships with universities for cultural documentation projects. Rodriguez (2016) describes this process as "citizens' media," where marginalized communities use media production to advocate for their rights and interests. In Southern Thailand's context, digital cultural content has supported communities' efforts to secure recognition for intangible cultural heritage, access resources for cultural preservation, and challenge stereotypes about Southern Thai culture prevalent in mainstream Thai media.

Challenges in Digital Cultural Representation

Authenticity concerns represented a persistent tension in digital cultural storytelling. Participants grappled with questions about what constitutes authentic cultural representation in digital formats that require editing, curation, and translation for broader audiences. Traditional cultural practices often contain spiritual, ceremonial, or sacred elements that communities debated sharing through public digital platforms (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). These dilemmas reflect broader discussions in heritage studies about public versus private knowledge and

appropriate dissemination of cultural information (Brown, 2005). Some communities established protocols restricting certain cultural content from digital platforms, designating specific practices as community-internal knowledge unsuitable for external consumption. Others created tiered access systems where general cultural information was publicly available while detailed ceremonial knowledge remained restricted to community members, similar to approaches documented by Christen (2012) in indigenous digital archives (Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, 2023).

Cultural appropriation and misrepresentation risks intensified with digital dissemination. Participants expressed concerns that cultural content shared online could be extracted from context, misused, or commercialized without community consent or benefit. These fears are well-founded given documented cases of cultural content being appropriated for commercial purposes without attribution or compensation to source communities (Ziff & Rao, 2022). In Southern Thailand, where distinctive cultural practices like traditional textiles, music, and dance have commercial value, communities worried about losing control over cultural intellectual property once shared digitally. Some initiatives incorporated visible watermarks, copyright notices, and clear attribution requirements to protect cultural content, though participants acknowledged limitations of such measures given internet content's fluid nature and global accessibility.

Language posed complex challenges for digital cultural storytelling in Southern Thailand's multilingual context. Many traditional cultural practices are embedded in Pattani Malay language and local dialects, yet broader dissemination often requires Thai or English translation. Participants debated whether translations adequately conveyed cultural meanings or whether linguistic translation inevitably resulted in cultural loss (Muhsyanur, 2020). This challenge resonates with Alia's (2010) research on indigenous language revitalization, highlighting language as carrier of cultural worldviews and knowledge systems. Some digital storytelling initiatives presented content multilingually, providing Pattani Malay narration with Thai and English subtitles to maximize accessibility while preserving linguistic authenticity. Others prioritized local language preservation, accepting limited audience reach to maintain linguistic integrity and support language revitalization efforts.

Generational differences in cultural knowledge and digital literacy created both opportunities and challenges. While youth possessed technical skills for digital content creation, elders held deep cultural knowledge essential for authentic representation. Successful collaborations required negotiating different epistemologies and communication styles. Older participants sometimes felt their cultural knowledge was simplified or distorted in digital formats designed for young audiences, while youth creators struggled to convey complex cultural concepts within social media's brevity constraints. These tensions echo Brough and Shresthova's (2012) observations about intergenerational media production, where different age groups bring complementary but sometimes conflicting expertise to collaborative projects. Communities addressed these challenges through mentorship

structures, iterative review processes where elders approved final content, and explicit discussions about balancing cultural depth with digital accessibility.

Sustainability concerns extended beyond technical infrastructure to encompass financial, human, and institutional resources necessary for ongoing digital preservation efforts. Initial enthusiasm for digital storytelling projects sometimes waned when communities faced realities of sustained content production, platform maintenance, and continuous community engagement. Participants noted that grant-funded projects often ended when external support ceased, leaving communities without resources to continue digital activities. These sustainability challenges reflect patterns identified by Rigby et al. (2020) in community-based digital heritage projects worldwide. Communities that successfully sustained digital storytelling efforts integrated these activities into existing cultural institutions like community centers and religious schools, established revenue generation through cultural tourism partnerships, and developed volunteer networks distributing workload across multiple community members to prevent burnout (Muhsyanur, 2025).

Impact on Cultural Transmission and Identity

Digital storytelling demonstrably increased cultural engagement among youth populations who showed declining interest in traditional cultural practices. Participants reported that presenting cultural content through familiar digital formats captured young people's attention in ways traditional transmission methods did not. As one educator noted, "Students who fell asleep during traditional cultural lectures became excited when creating TikTok videos about the same cultural practices." This observation aligns with Ito et al.'s (2020) research on youth media engagement, demonstrating how participatory digital culture can motivate learning when young people see personal relevance and creative agency (Muhsyanur et.al, 2025). Youth-created digital cultural content often incorporated contemporary music, humor, and aesthetic styles that resonated with peer audiences while conveying traditional cultural messages, creating hybrid cultural expressions that honor heritage while embracing modernity.

Table 1. Impact Assessment of Digital Storytelling on Cultural Transmission Dimensions

Cultural Transmission Dimension	Traditional Methods Impact Score (1-10)	Digital Storytelling Impact Score (1-10)	Change Percentage
Youth Engagement	4.2	8.6	+105%
Geographic Reach	3.1	9.2	+197%
Intergenerational Dialogue	6.8	8.9	+31%
Cultural Pride	7.5	9.1	+21%
Knowledge Retention	7.9	8.3	+5%
Community	5.6	8.7	+55%

Cultural Transmission Dimension	Traditional Methods Impact Score (1-10)	Digital Storytelling Impact Score (1-10)	Change Percentage
Participation			

Note. Scores represent participant assessments (n=32) based on their experiences with both traditional and digital cultural transmission methods. Traditional methods include oral storytelling, apprenticeships, and formal cultural education. Digital storytelling encompasses social media content, digital archives, and multimedia documentation.

The data reveals digital storytelling's particular strength in reaching dispersed audiences and engaging youth, while traditional methods maintain advantages in deep knowledge retention. Participants emphasized that digital and traditional approaches complement rather than replace each other, with optimal cultural transmission utilizing both methods strategically.

Identity formation processes were profoundly influenced by digital cultural storytelling. Participants described how creating and consuming digital cultural content strengthened cultural identity among Southern Thai youth navigating multiple cultural influences. This identity work resonates with Hall's (2019) theorization of cultural identity as ongoing production rather than fixed essence, where individuals actively construct identity through engagement with cultural resources. For young Southern Thais living in multicultural urban environments or studying abroad, digital cultural content provided connection to cultural roots and affirmation of cultural heritage value. Second and third-generation diaspora members reported that digital stories helped them understand family heritage and maintain cultural connections despite geographic distance, supporting findings by Leurs (2015) on digital media's role in transnational identity formation.

Cross-cultural dialogue emerged as an unexpected benefit of digital cultural storytelling. Participants reported that publicly sharing cultural content attracted interest from other Thai regions and international audiences, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. In Southern Thailand's context, where cultural differences sometimes contribute to social tensions, digital stories that humanized cultural practices and shared personal narratives helped challenge stereotypes and build empathy. This dialogic potential aligns with Dreher et al.'s (2009) concept of "listening cultures," where digital storytelling creates spaces for encounters with cultural difference that can foster understanding. Educational institutions outside Southern Thailand incorporated digital cultural stories into curricula, exposing students to regional cultural diversity and promoting more inclusive national cultural narratives.

The archival function of digital storytelling provided communities with accessible cultural repositories for future generations. Unlike physical archives requiring geographic access, digital collections enabled anyone with internet connectivity to explore cultural heritage. Participants valued this accessibility while recognizing responsibilities to maintain and update digital archives, ensure technological migration as platforms evolved, and curate collections for navigability.

These archival considerations reflect principles outlined by Conway (2015) regarding digital preservation requiring active management rather than passive storage. Communities collaborated with universities and cultural institutions to establish protocols for long-term digital preservation, balancing community control with technical expertise and infrastructure provided by institutional partners.

Critical consciousness about cultural representation increased through digital storytelling participation. Creating cultural content required communities to articulate what distinguished their culture, what values they wanted to communicate, and how they wanted to be perceived by external audiences. This reflexive process fostered meta-cultural awareness, prompting discussions about cultural authenticity, adaptation, and transmission that might not occur otherwise. As Avruch (2018) argues, cultural preservation is not merely maintaining static traditions but actively negotiating cultural continuity and change. Digital storytelling became a vehicle for these negotiations, with communities using content creation as opportunity to deliberate about cultural priorities, boundaries, and futures. Such critical engagement positions communities as active cultural agents rather than passive tradition bearers, supporting dynamic and resilient cultural continuity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital storytelling represents a viable and effective approach to preserving local culture in Southern Thailand when implemented with community leadership, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable support structures. The research reveals that digital platforms enable communities to document multidimensional cultural practices, engage younger generations through familiar media formats, amplify marginalized voices, and extend cultural transmission beyond geographic boundaries. However, successful implementation requires addressing challenges including technological access disparities, authenticity and appropriation concerns, language preservation, and long-term sustainability. The findings suggest that digital storytelling works best as complement to rather than replacement for traditional cultural transmission methods, with optimal preservation strategies integrating both approaches. Future research should examine long-term impacts of digital cultural preservation on identity formation, explore comparative studies across different cultural contexts, and investigate evolving technological platforms' implications for cultural heritage. As digital technologies continue transforming communication landscapes, communities must maintain agency over cultural representation while embracing innovation that serves cultural continuity and vitality for future generations.

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