

Original Paper

Digital Mediation and Cultural Value Co-creation in Place-Based Intangible Cultural Heritage: Dongguan Guanxiang

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital media has transformed how regional cultural heritage is represented, circulated, interpreted, and experienced. For place-based intangible cultural heritage, digitalization creates new opportunities for cultural communication and public participation, while also generating challenges concerning authenticity, contextual integrity, cultural authority, and commercialization. This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding these dynamics through the case-informed context of Dongguan Guanxiang, a regional cultural tradition associated with agarwood, craftsmanship, locality, and sensory experience. Rather than treating digitalization simply as a technical means of heritage preservation or cultural promotion, the article conceptualizes it as a process of cultural mediation through which heritage meanings are selected, translated, reconstructed, and negotiated among different stakeholders. Drawing on literature on intangible cultural heritage, cultural meaning, digital mediation, and value co-creation, the article proposes four interconnected dimensions: cultural interpretation, digital mediation, stakeholder participation, and value realization. The framework further considers how digital storytelling, visual communication, online communities, tourism, and digital commerce may contribute to cultural, educational, social, experiential, and economic value. At the same time, these processes require mechanisms that balance accessibility with contextual depth, participation with cultural authority, and commercialization with continuity. The article contributes a conceptual perspective for understanding how place-based cultural heritage can remain culturally meaningful while engaging with contemporary digital environments.

Keywords

Dongguan Guanxiang, intangible cultural heritage, digital mediation, cultural value, value co-creation, digital communication, place-based heritage

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have increasingly transformed the ways in which cultural heritage is documented, represented, communicated, and experienced. Social media platforms, short-video applications, digital exhibitions, online communities, virtual museums, and digital commerce have expanded the circulation of cultural content beyond its original geographical and institutional boundaries. Cultural practices that were previously experienced mainly through local communities can now reach geographically distant audiences and participate in broader cultural, educational, tourism, and commercial networks. This transformation is particularly significant for place-based intangible cultural heritage, whose meanings are often closely connected to local environments, historical memories, craftsmanship, social relationships, and embodied practices.

Digital communication, however, should not be understood as a neutral channel through which heritage is simply transmitted from producers to audiences. When cultural practices enter digital environments, they must be selected, framed, translated, visualized, narrated, and adapted to particular technological formats. What becomes visible online may therefore differ from what is experienced within the original cultural context. The sensory, embodied, and tacit dimensions of heritage may be difficult to reproduce digitally, while platform-based communication tends to privilege content that is visually attractive, concise, emotionally engaging, and easily shareable. Digitalization consequently creates both opportunities for cultural visibility and risks of cultural simplification.

Dongguan Guanxiang provides a useful cultural context for examining these issues. Associated with agarwood and regional cultural traditions, Guanxiang is not simply a material product. Its cultural meaning can be understood through the relationship among materiality, craftsmanship, locality, historical memory, sensory experience, and contemporary cultural practice. The significance of Guanxiang therefore extends beyond the physical properties of agarwood itself. It involves knowledge about materials and production, relationships between people and place, aesthetic preferences, cultural memories, and forms of social recognition.

The emergence of digital media creates new possibilities for communicating these cultural meanings. Short videos can demonstrate production processes; photographs and visual narratives can present objects and landscapes; digital exhibitions can organize historical information; multilingual communication can introduce regional heritage to international audiences; and online communities can facilitate interaction among practitioners, consumers, tourists, researchers, and cultural organizations. At the same time, the translation of Guanxiang into digital formats may privilege particular aspects of the tradition while marginalizing others. Commercial representations may emphasize product appearance or symbolic lifestyle, whereas educational representations may focus on history and craftsmanship. User-generated content may increase participation but may also introduce interpretations that differ from those of practitioners and cultural institutions.

These tensions raise an important conceptual question: how can digital communication contribute to cultural value without reducing heritage to a simplified commercial image? This article addresses this

question through a case-informed conceptual approach. It focuses on three related research questions: (1) How is the cultural meaning of Guanxiang constructed through materiality, craftsmanship, locality, and cultural memory? (2) How does digital mediation transform these meanings when heritage is communicated to audiences beyond its original geographical context? (3) Under what conditions can stakeholder participation contribute to cultural, educational, social, experiential, and economic value while maintaining cultural continuity and contextual integrity?

The article does not attempt to measure audience attitudes, platform performance, tourism outcomes, or commercial effects. Instead, it develops a conceptual framework that connects cultural interpretation, digital mediation, stakeholder participation, and value realization. The purpose is to provide a theoretical basis for future empirical research on digitally mediated regional heritage.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage, Place, and Cultural Meaning

Intangible cultural heritage is closely connected to communities, cultural memory, knowledge systems, and continuing social practices. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). This perspective is important because heritage cannot be reduced to physical objects or historical records. Its cultural significance is maintained through processes of transmission, interpretation, and practice.

Place is particularly important for regional cultural heritage. Cultural meanings are produced through relationships among people, materials, environments, memories, and social practices. For place-based heritage, geographical identity is therefore not merely a background condition but part of the cultural meaning itself. Guanxiang can similarly be understood through its relationship with regional history, material resources, craftsmanship, sensory experience, and local cultural identity.

The meaning of cultural objects is also not fixed. Appadurai (1986) argues that the social lives of things change as objects move across contexts and relationships. This perspective is useful for understanding what happens when a culturally specific product or practice enters digital environments. The same object may function as a material of cultural memory in a local community, an aesthetic object in a museum, a tourism experience for visitors, or a lifestyle product in an online marketplace. Digital circulation can therefore generate new meanings rather than merely reproduce existing ones.

For Guanxiang, this means that its cultural value should be considered as multidimensional. Material qualities provide the physical basis, while craftsmanship connects materiality with knowledge and practice. Locality provides cultural and historical context, while memory and symbolic interpretation connect the tradition to identity. These dimensions together constitute a cultural system rather than a single product attribute.

2.2 Digital Mediation of Cultural Heritage

Digital technologies have changed not only the accessibility of cultural heritage but also the ways in which heritage is interpreted and organized. Digital platforms structure cultural visibility through interfaces, algorithms, formats, categories, and patterns of user interaction. van Dijck (2013) emphasizes that platforms influence how social and cultural content is organized and circulated. Consequently, digital heritage communication involves a process of mediation rather than simple transmission.

This issue is particularly important for sensory and embodied heritage. The experience of fragrance, for example, cannot be fully reproduced through photographs, text, or video. Digital communication may therefore communicate selected dimensions of Guanxiang while leaving other dimensions dependent on physical experience. Digital representations should consequently be understood as interpretive constructions rather than complete substitutes for direct cultural experience.

Digital communication also changes the relationship between cultural institutions and audiences. Jenkins (2006) describes participatory culture as an environment in which audiences increasingly contribute to the circulation and interpretation of media content. In heritage contexts, users can comment, remix, review, reinterpret, and redistribute cultural materials. Such participation can increase cultural visibility and create new forms of engagement, but it may also challenge established forms of cultural authority.

Kietzmann et al. (2011) similarly demonstrate that social media involve multiple forms of participation, including sharing, discussion, relationships, and identity construction. For cultural heritage, these functions create opportunities for practitioners and audiences to interact beyond traditional institutional boundaries. However, increased participation does not automatically guarantee cultural accuracy or sustainability. Digital engagement must therefore be considered together with mechanisms of contextualization, attribution, and cultural responsibility. Recent studies have explored how digital technologies such as digital twins can support intangible cultural heritage transmission and create new forms of cultural value (Peng, 2026).

2.3 Value Co-creation and Cultural Heritage

The concept of value co-creation provides another useful theoretical foundation. Traditional marketing perspectives often treat value as something embedded in products and delivered to consumers. Service-dominant logic instead emphasizes that value emerges through interaction and use (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018) further conceptualize value creation as an interactive process involving multiple actors.

This perspective can be extended to cultural heritage. Heritage value is not necessarily produced by a single institution and delivered to passive audiences. Practitioners contribute knowledge and skills; cultural institutions contribute documentation and interpretation; audiences contribute attention and interpretation; creative actors develop new forms of representation; and tourists and consumers may generate experiential and economic value.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) emphasize interaction, dialogue, access, and transparency as important conditions for co-creation. In cultural heritage contexts, these principles suggest that participation should not simply mean encouraging users to consume or share cultural content. Rather, meaningful participation requires opportunities for different stakeholders to contribute knowledge, interpretation, experience, and resources.

Grönroos (2008) further argues that value emerges through processes of interaction and use. Applied to heritage, this means that cultural value may emerge through experiencing, learning, discussing, practicing, and transmitting heritage. Digital media can support these processes, but they can also transform them. The central issue is therefore not whether digital media create value automatically, but how digital environments organize interactions through which cultural value may emerge. Digital media can also reshape how traditional culture is experienced and reinterpreted, as studies of media-enabled cultural innovation have shown (Xiao & Hou, 2026).

2.4 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Existing studies provide important insights into intangible cultural heritage, digital communication, and value co-creation, but these areas are often discussed separately. Heritage studies emphasize authenticity, transmission, community identity, and safeguarding; digital media studies emphasize platforms, participation, and communication; value co-creation studies emphasize interaction and stakeholder relationships. A conceptual connection among these perspectives remains particularly relevant for place-based regional heritage.

This article addresses this gap by proposing four interconnected dimensions: (1) Cultural interpretation concerns how the meaning of heritage is constructed and communicated. (2) Digital mediation concerns how technologies and platforms transform cultural representation and access. (3) Stakeholder participation concerns how practitioners, institutions, audiences, creative actors, tourists, and other groups contribute to heritage processes. (4) Value realization concerns the cultural, educational, social, experiential, and economic value that may emerge from these interactions.

These dimensions should not be understood as a simple linear sequence. Cultural interpretation influences digital representation; digital mediation shapes participation; participation influences value realization; and the resulting value may in turn affect subsequent interpretations of heritage.

The four dimensions discussed above are not separate categories but interconnected components of a broader cultural process. Figure 1 presents this four-dimensional conceptual framework, showing how cultural context and place inform cultural interpretation, which is then translated through digital mediation, shaped by stakeholder participation, and realized through multiple forms of value. The feedback loop at the bottom indicates that value realization may in turn influence subsequent reinterpretation and renewal of cultural meaning.



Figure 1. Four-Dimensional Conceptual Framework of Digital Mediation and Cultural Value Co-creation for Dongguan Guanxiang

3. Research Approach and the Guanxiang Cultural Context

3.1 Case-Informed Conceptual Approach

This article adopts a case-informed conceptual approach rather than a conventional empirical case study. Dongguan Guanxiang is used as a contextual case through which broader theoretical relationships can be examined. The purpose is not to statistically generalize from Dongguan to all forms of intangible cultural heritage, but to use a culturally specific setting to develop a conceptual framework that may inform future empirical research.

The analysis draws on three broad categories of material: academic literature on intangible cultural heritage, digital media, cultural meaning, and value co-creation; publicly available heritage and

institutional materials; and existing forms of digital cultural communication relevant to regional heritage. These materials are examined thematically rather than through statistical analysis.

The analytical process focuses on recurring relationships among materiality, locality, cultural interpretation, digital mediation, participation, and value. Particular attention is given to tensions that emerge when heritage moves between local cultural contexts and digital environments.

Because the article is conceptual, it does not claim to establish causal relationships between digital communication and cultural or economic outcomes. It also does not measure audience perceptions, social-media engagement, tourism behavior, or commercial performance. These limitations define the scope of the framework and identify directions for future empirical research.

3.2 Dongguan Guanxiang as a Place-Based Cultural Context

Guanxiang is associated with agarwood and regional cultural traditions. It is important to distinguish the material category of agarwood from Guanxiang as a more specific cultural and regional identity. The latter involves not only a material resource but also cultural knowledge, production practices, aesthetic interpretation, historical memory, and relationships between people and place.

The cultural significance of Guanxiang can therefore be considered through four interconnected dimensions. First, materiality refers to the physical characteristics of agarwood and related objects. Second, craftsmanship concerns knowledge and skills involved in processing, producing, identifying, and appreciating the material. Third, locality connects the cultural practice with regional history, environment, and identity. Fourth, memory and symbolism connect material and craft practices with social meanings and contemporary cultural narratives. These dimensions make Guanxiang particularly relevant to research on digital heritage communication. Some dimensions can be represented visually or textually, while others depend on sensory and embodied experience. A digital image can show the appearance of agarwood, a video can demonstrate aspects of craftsmanship, and a narrative can explain historical meanings. Yet none of these formats can completely reproduce the sensory experience of fragrance or the tacit knowledge acquired through long-term practice.

This distinction suggests that digitalization should not be treated as a replacement for physical heritage experience. Instead, digital media can function as an interpretive layer connecting heritage practices with new audiences and forms of participation.

4. Digital Mediation and Cultural Value Co-creation

4.1 Cultural Interpretation and Digital Translation

Digital communication requires cultural translation. Heritage practitioners and institutions must decide which elements of a cultural tradition should be presented, how they should be explained, and which audiences should be addressed. These decisions influence how audiences understand the heritage. For Guanxiang, digital storytelling may combine historical narratives, production processes, regional landscapes, sensory descriptions, practitioner interviews, and contemporary cultural applications. Such

combinations can help audiences understand that the heritage is not simply a commercial object but part of a broader cultural system.

Visual storytelling is particularly important because digital platforms are strongly oriented toward visual communication. Images of materials, workshops, landscapes, tools, and finished products can make cultural heritage more accessible. Short videos can further demonstrate production processes and practitioner skills. However, visual attractiveness may also encourage the selection of simplified or spectacular elements at the expense of contextual information. A central challenge is therefore to maintain a balance between communicative accessibility and cultural depth. Effective digital communication should reduce barriers to understanding without removing the historical, social, and cultural contexts that give heritage its meaning. Digital translation is not a neutral process; it involves selecting, reordering, and re-presenting cultural elements through specific media forms, as shown in studies of digital translation and cultural heritage (Liang et al., 2026).

4.2 Digital Mediation and Platform Transformation

Digital mediation changes both the scale and structure of cultural communication. Traditional heritage communication often relies on museums, local institutions, schools, community organizations, and face-to-face transmission. Digital platforms add new actors and mechanisms, including content creators, social-media users, online communities, and commercial platforms.

This transformation can increase visibility and accessibility. A regional heritage tradition can reach audiences who have never visited its place of origin. Digital archives can support preservation and educational use. Online communities can facilitate discussion and knowledge exchange. Multilingual communication can further expand international accessibility. At the same time, platform logic may influence which forms of heritage receive attention. Content that is concise, visually appealing, emotionally engaging, or commercially attractive may circulate more easily than complex historical explanations. This can create a tendency toward simplification. Digital mediation should therefore be viewed as a process of selection and reconstruction. It does not merely transfer cultural meaning from one place to another. Instead, it reorganizes meaning through technological formats, communicative conventions, and user interactions. Regional cultural heritage can also be communicated through digital practices that connect cultural content with broader audiences and contemporary media environments (Sun & Li, 2026). Multilingual and multimodal communication further shapes how intangible cultural heritage is translated for international audiences (Xie & Pu, 2026).

4.3 Stakeholder Participation and Value Co-creation

The transformation of heritage into digital environments involves multiple stakeholders. Practitioners possess embodied knowledge and cultural authority; cultural institutions provide documentation and organizational resources; researchers contribute historical and theoretical interpretation; creative professionals translate heritage into contemporary media forms; audiences participate through viewing, commenting, sharing, and reinterpretation; and tourists and consumers contribute experiential and

economic resources. From a value co-creation perspective, these actors should not be understood simply as producers and consumers. They participate in different stages of cultural value formation.

For example, practitioners can provide knowledge about materials and craftsmanship. Cultural organizations can provide historical context and verification. Digital creators can translate specialized knowledge into accessible formats. Audiences can contribute questions, interpretations, and experiences. Tourism organizations can connect digital narratives with physical places. These interactions may generate multiple forms of value simultaneously.

The framework emphasizes that value is multidimensional. Cultural value may involve identity, memory, and continuity. Educational value may involve knowledge transmission. Social value may involve community interaction and participation. Experiential value may involve tourism and sensory engagement. Economic value may emerge through products, services, and creative industries.

These forms of value are interconnected but should not be assumed to be automatically compatible. Commercial visibility may support cultural sustainability by generating resources, but excessive commercialization may also reduce cultural complexity. The framework therefore treats value co-creation as a negotiated process rather than a guaranteed positive outcome.

5. Stakeholder Participation, Digital Communication, and Governance

5.1 Digital Communication, Tourism, and Cultural Experience

Digital storytelling provides opportunities to connect cultural heritage with tourism and place-based experiences. A potential communication pathway is to introduce the cultural history of Guanxiang through digital narratives, demonstrate related craftsmanship through video, provide information about local cultural sites, and then connect online audiences with physical experiences.

Such communication can transform tourism from simple sightseeing into a form of cultural learning. Visitors may encounter local history, craftsmanship, landscapes, and community narratives rather than simply consuming cultural symbols.

Digital commerce may create another pathway for value realization. Online platforms allow regional cultural products to reach broader markets and may provide practitioners with new economic opportunities. However, commercial communication can also encourage heritage to be presented primarily through product images, prices, and lifestyle narratives. When this happens, the cultural context of the heritage may become secondary.

The relationship between digital commerce and heritage sustainability is therefore conditional. Commercial activity can contribute to cultural continuity when it supports practitioners, knowledge transmission, and local cultural ecosystems. It becomes problematic when commercial objectives dominate cultural interpretation.

5.2 Stakeholder Roles and Cultural Authority

Stakeholder participation is essential for the legitimacy and sustainability of digital heritage communication. However, participation should not be equated with the assumption that every interpretation has the same cultural authority.

Practitioners possess forms of tacit and embodied knowledge that may not be available in institutional archives. Cultural institutions may possess documentary and historical resources. Researchers contribute analytical perspectives. Digital creators contribute communication skills. Audiences contribute interpretation and experience.

The challenge is to create a system in which these forms of knowledge can interact without erasing their differences.

One possible principle is distributed participation with differentiated authority. This means that multiple actors should be able to participate in cultural communication, while claims concerning historical facts, technical knowledge, and traditional practice should remain subject to appropriate verification and attribution.

This approach can reduce the tension between institutional control and unrestricted user-generated content. Rather than choosing between centralized authority and complete openness, digital heritage governance can establish mechanisms for collaboration, verification, attribution, and feedback.

These stakeholders do not contribute to heritage in isolation. Rather, they form an interconnected ecosystem in which different resources, knowledge, and experiences interact. Figure 2 summarizes this stakeholder ecosystem and its relationship with multiple forms of cultural value.

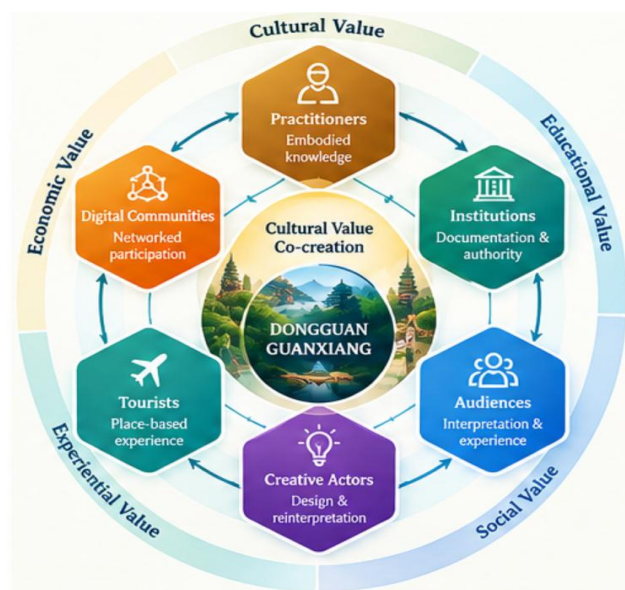


Figure 2. Stakeholder Participation Ecosystem in the Four-Dimensional Framework of Cultural Value Co-creation

5.3 Accessibility, Authenticity, and Contextual Depth

One of the most important challenges of digital heritage is the relationship between accessibility and authenticity. Greater accessibility does not necessarily produce greater cultural understanding.

Digital content must often simplify complex information to communicate effectively. Yet excessive simplification can remove historical context, obscure cultural differences, or transform a living tradition into a static image.

Authenticity should therefore not be defined solely as visual or material accuracy. In the context of intangible cultural heritage, authenticity may also involve the continuity of knowledge, recognition of practitioners, connection to place, and integrity of cultural interpretation.

For Guanxiang, this suggests that digital communication should include contextual information about materials, craftsmanship, regional history, and cultural practice rather than presenting isolated images of products. Practitioner voices and process-based narratives can help maintain this contextual depth.

5.4 Commercialization, Continuity, and Sustainable Governance

Commercialization is neither inherently incompatible with cultural heritage nor automatically beneficial. Its cultural consequences depend on how commercial processes interact with cultural transmission.

A commercially successful heritage product may provide resources for practitioners and increase public visibility. However, if market demand encourages standardized products, exaggerated narratives, or the removal of complex cultural information, commercialization may weaken the relationship between the product and its cultural context.

Sustainable digital heritage governance therefore requires a balance among visibility, participation, cultural authority, and economic development.

The stakeholder ecosystem may include practitioners, local communities, cultural institutions, researchers, digital creators, tourists, consumers, technology platforms, and government or industry organizations. Their relationships are not necessarily symmetrical. Some actors control cultural knowledge, some control technological infrastructure, and others control economic resources or audience access.

Recognizing these differences is important because value co-creation can involve unequal capacities to define cultural meanings. A sustainable framework must therefore consider not only participation but also representation, attribution, and decision-making.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Digital Heritage Communication as Meaning Reconstruction

The analysis suggests that digital heritage communication should be understood as a process of meaning reconstruction. When Guanxiang enters digital environments, its cultural meanings are not simply transferred unchanged. They are reorganized through narratives, images, videos, interfaces, platform conventions, and audience interactions.

This perspective challenges the assumption that digital technology merely increases the visibility of heritage. Greater visibility may also change how heritage is understood. Certain elements become prominent because they fit digital formats, while others remain less visible because they are difficult to represent.

The digital representation of sensory heritage illustrates this problem clearly. Fragrance, embodied craftsmanship, and tacit knowledge cannot be fully reproduced through digital images or text. Digital communication can provide descriptions, demonstrations, and interpretive frameworks, but physical and embodied experience remains important.

Digital heritage should therefore be understood as complementary to rather than simply substitutive of physical cultural experience.

6.2 From Consumer Participation to Cultural Value Co-creation

The second theoretical implication concerns participation. Digital audiences are often described as active users rather than passive consumers. However, activity alone does not constitute meaningful value co-creation.

For cultural heritage, participation becomes culturally significant when users can engage with knowledge, narratives, experiences, and communities in ways that contribute to interpretation and transmission. A comment, share, review, or user-generated video may increase visibility, but deeper participation may involve learning from practitioners, contributing local memories, documenting experiences, or supporting cultural practices.

This distinction helps refine the application of value co-creation theory to heritage. Cultural value cannot be reduced to customer satisfaction or market exchange. It includes identity, memory, education, social connection, cultural continuity, and experiential meaning.

Accordingly, digital platforms should be considered environments for interaction rather than merely distribution channels. Their design and governance influence whether participation remains superficial or develops into meaningful cultural engagement.

6.3 Place-Based Heritage in Digital Environments

A third implication concerns the relationship between digitalization and place. Digital media allow heritage to circulate beyond its geographical origin, but this expansion does not eliminate the importance of place.

For Guanxiang, locality provides historical and cultural meaning. Digital communication can introduce this locality to external audiences, but if digital representations remove the connection between heritage and place, the cultural identity of the tradition may become weaker. The objective should therefore not be to make place-based heritage completely independent of place. Instead, digital media can function as a bridge between remote audiences and the cultural environments from which heritage originates. This suggests a model of digitally extended locality, in which digital communication expands the reach of heritage while maintaining its relationships with communities, landscapes, historical memory, and physical experience.

The preceding discussion has examined cultural interpretation, digital mediation, stakeholder participation, and value realization as four interconnected dimensions of digitally mediated heritage. These dimensions should not be understood as a linear sequence. Cultural experience functions as a mediating process through which digital mediation becomes meaningful to audiences, while cultural continuity operates as both a condition and an outcome of value realization. In other words, cultural experience and cultural continuity are not separate dimensions but cross-cutting elements that connect and sustain the four-dimensional framework. Figure 1 presents the overall four-dimensional framework, while Figure 2 focuses on the stakeholder dimension and its relationship with multiple forms of cultural value.

6.4 Conceptual Propositions

Based on the four-dimensional framework, several propositions can guide future research.

Proposition 1: The cultural value of place-based heritage is more likely to be sustained when digital representations integrate material, craft, local, and historical dimensions rather than emphasizing isolated visual or commercial attributes.

Proposition 2: Digital mediation can increase heritage accessibility while simultaneously transforming cultural meaning; therefore, digital visibility should not be treated as equivalent to cultural preservation.

Proposition 3: Stakeholder participation is more likely to generate meaningful cultural value when participation is combined with differentiated cultural authority, knowledge attribution, and contextual verification.

Proposition 4: Digital commercialization is more likely to support heritage sustainability when economic value is connected to practitioner participation, cultural continuity, and local cultural ecosystems.

Proposition 5: Digital heritage communication can strengthen place-based cultural identity when digital narratives maintain explicit connections between cultural practices, communities, landscapes, and physical experiences.

These propositions provide a basis for empirical research using interviews, digital ethnography, content analysis, audience studies, tourism research, and platform data.

6.5 Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The framework has several practical implications. For cultural institutions, digital communication should move beyond the simple digitization of objects and provide contextual narratives, practitioner knowledge, and opportunities for interaction. For practitioners, digital platforms can provide opportunities to communicate specialized knowledge and participate more directly in cultural representation. For tourism organizations, digital storytelling can connect online communication with place-based experiences. For digital creators, heritage content should balance visual attractiveness with historical and cultural depth.

The framework also has implications for cultural governance. Rather than viewing digital heritage solely as a communication problem, policymakers and cultural organizations should consider questions of cultural authority, intellectual ownership, practitioner recognition, data management, and commercialization. Digital heritage governance should facilitate participation while protecting the integrity and continuity of cultural practices.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the article is conceptual and does not provide empirical evidence of audience behavior or value outcomes. Second, Guanxiang represents a particular regional cultural context, and the framework should not be assumed to apply equally to all forms of intangible cultural heritage. Third, the article does not systematically compare different digital platforms or communication formats.

Future research can address these limitations through empirical studies. Interviews with practitioners could examine how digitalization affects cultural authority and knowledge transmission. Content analysis could investigate how Guanxiang is represented across social-media platforms. Audience research could examine how different forms of digital storytelling influence cultural understanding. Tourism studies could explore relationships between digital narratives and place-based experiences. Comparative research could further examine whether the framework applies to other regional forms of intangible cultural heritage.

6.6 Conclusion

This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between digital mediation and cultural value co-creation in place-based intangible cultural heritage, using Dongguan Guanxiang as a case-informed cultural context. The central argument is that digitalization should not be understood simply as a technological solution for preserving or promoting heritage. Digital media actively shape how cultural meanings are selected, translated, circulated, and interpreted. In this process, heritage becomes connected with new stakeholders, communication formats, and forms of value.

The proposed framework identifies four interconnected dimensions: cultural interpretation, digital mediation, stakeholder participation, and value realization. Cultural experience and cultural continuity are treated not as additional dimensions but as cross-cutting elements that connect and sustain these four dimensions.

Together, these dimensions highlight the importance of understanding heritage as a dynamic cultural process rather than a fixed cultural product. For Guanxiang, digital communication can expand cultural visibility, support knowledge transmission, encourage public participation, connect heritage with tourism and creative industries, and create new economic opportunities. Yet these opportunities are accompanied by risks of simplification, decontextualization, commercialization, and the weakening of cultural authority.

The long-term sustainability of digitally mediated heritage therefore depends not simply on increasing digital exposure, but on maintaining meaningful relationships among cultural knowledge, practitioners,

communities, places, audiences, and contemporary forms of participation. Digital media can extend the reach of place-based heritage, but sustainable cultural value depends on whether such expansion remains connected to the cultural practices and communities from which the heritage derives.

In this sense, the future of Guanxiang in digital environments is not a choice between preservation and modernization. It is a continuing process of cultural interpretation, digital mediation, stakeholder participation, and value negotiation.

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