

Digital Media–Empowered Revitalization Pathways of Intangible Cultural Heritage Brands: A Case Study of Guangzhou

¹Jingjing Zheng, ²Nadia Farhana and ³Asif Mahbub Karim

¹PhD Researcher, Binary University of Management & Entrepreneurship, Malaysia,

²Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration, Stamford University

Bangladesh and ³Professor and Deputy Vice Chancellor, Binary University of Management & Entrepreneurship, Malaysia

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v15-i2/28493>

Published Online: 21 June 2026

Abstract

In the context of accelerated globalization, urban transformation, and platform-driven digital media environments, the sustainable revitalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has become a critical challenge for cultural governance and creative industries worldwide. Traditional ICH safeguarding approaches—largely centered on documentation, preservation, and institutional protection—have proven insufficient in maintaining cultural vitality, social relevance, and intergenerational transmission within rapidly changing urban societies. Against this backdrop, branding-oriented revitalization strategies supported by digital media technologies have emerged as an important pathway for reactivating ICH as living cultural practice. Focusing on Guangzhou, a major historical and cultural metropolis in southern China, this study investigates how digital media empowers the revitalization of ICH brands through systematic mechanisms and practical pathways. Adopting a pragmatic research paradigm and a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates qualitative case studies and semi-structured interviews with quantitative questionnaire analysis to examine representative Guangzhou ICH brands. Particular attention is paid to the roles of digital storytelling, social media communication, immersive technologies, and participatory platforms in reshaping brand identity, enhancing audience engagement, and translating cultural value into brand value. The findings indicate that digital media–empowered ICH brand revitalization operates through three interrelated dimensions: cultural reinterpretation, experiential innovation, and value co-creation. Digital media enables ICH brands to rearticulate traditional cultural meanings within contemporary urban contexts, create immersive and emotionally resonant experiences, and foster participatory relationships between practitioners and audiences. Based on these findings, the study proposes a digital media–driven revitalization pathway model that emphasizes a dynamic balance between cultural authenticity and commercial sustainability. This research contributes to international scholarship on digital heritage, cultural branding, and urban cultural sustainability by providing empirical evidence from an urban Chinese context. It also offers practical implications for policymakers, cultural institutions, and creative practitioners seeking to leverage digital media for sustainable ICH brand development.

Keywords: Digital Media, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Branding, Brand Revitalization, Urban Culture, Guangzhou

Introduction

In an era characterized by accelerated globalization, rapid urbanization, and pervasive digital media technologies, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is confronted with profound structural transformations. As living cultural expressions embedded in specific social, historical, and spatial contexts, ICH practices rely on continuous performance, transmission, and social recognition for their survival. However, in many contemporary urban societies, traditional ICH practices face declining cultural visibility, weakened community participation, and diminishing economic viability.

According to the UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH encompasses practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage. While this framework has significantly advanced international awareness and policy protection, scholars have increasingly questioned the effectiveness of conventional safeguarding approaches that prioritize preservation over activation. Documentation, archiving, and museumization—although essential—often isolate ICH from everyday social life, limiting its capacity to evolve and resonate with younger generations.

In response to these challenges, contemporary heritage scholarship has shifted toward concepts of cultural sustainability, regeneration, and adaptive reuse. Within this discourse, branding has emerged as a critical strategy for repositioning ICH within contemporary cultural economies. Branding enables ICH to be translated into symbolic systems that communicate cultural meanings, values, and identities to broader audiences. Importantly, ICH branding does not merely serve commercial purposes; when strategically designed, it functions as a cultural mediation process that connects tradition with modern lifestyles.

Simultaneously, digital media technologies have fundamentally reshaped cultural production, dissemination, and consumption (Islam et al., 2025; Nur et al., 2024). Social media platforms, immersive media, and participatory digital environments enable new forms of storytelling, interaction, and co-creation (Khaled et al., 2019). For ICH, whose knowledge systems are often embodied, performative, and experiential, digital media offers unprecedented opportunities to visualize invisible processes, extend spatial and temporal boundaries, and cultivate emotional engagement.

Guangzhou provides a particularly significant empirical context for examining digital media–empowered ICH revitalization. As a historical cultural center and a core city of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, Guangzhou possesses a dense concentration of nationally and provincially recognized ICH items, including Cantonese opera, Cantonese embroidery, lion dance, and traditional craftsmanship. At the same time, Guangzhou is at the forefront of China’s digital economy and cultural industry development, creating favorable conditions for the integration of ICH, branding, and digital media.

Despite increasing policy support and experimental practices, the application of digital media in Guangzhou’s ICH branding remains uneven and fragmented. Many initiatives prioritize

short-term visibility or aesthetic novelty, while insufficient attention is paid to long-term cultural value creation and brand sustainability. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to systematically examine how digital media empowers the revitalization of ICH brands in Guangzhou, exploring its mechanisms, strategies, and pathways from an integrated cultural, technological, and market-oriented perspective.

By adopting a mixed-methods research design, this study aims to contribute to international debates on digital heritage and cultural branding, while offering context-sensitive insights for sustainable urban ICH development.

Problem Statement

Despite sustained policy attention and rapid technological advancement, the revitalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) brands in urban China remains constrained by a series of interrelated structural and strategic challenges. These challenges are particularly evident in metropolitan contexts where traditional cultural practices are embedded within highly competitive cultural markets and fast-evolving digital environments.

First, the demographic aging of ICH practitioners continues to undermine the sustainability of knowledge transmission. Many traditional skills and practices rely on master–apprentice models that are increasingly incompatible with contemporary urban lifestyles and labor structures. Younger generations often lack sustained exposure to ICH practices, and when engagement does occur, it is frequently episodic rather than embedded in long-term cultural participation. This generational discontinuity weakens the social foundations upon which ICH brands are built and limits their capacity for renewal.

Second, many ICH brands suffer from fragmented or underdeveloped brand identities. In practice, ICH-related products and activities are often promoted as isolated cultural items rather than as coherent brand systems with clear narratives, values, and visual languages. As a result, audiences may recognize individual symbols or techniques but fail to associate them with a distinctive and memorable brand identity. This problem is exacerbated in digital environments where attention is scarce and cultural content competes directly with commercial entertainment and lifestyle media.

Third, the commercialization of ICH raises persistent concerns regarding authenticity, cultural dilution, and symbolic misrepresentation. While market integration is widely regarded as a necessary condition for economic sustainability, poorly managed commercialization risks reducing ICH to aestheticized or stereotyped cultural signifiers detached from lived practice and community meaning. This tension creates uncertainty among practitioners and policymakers, often leading to conservative branding strategies that prioritize risk avoidance over innovation.

Although digital media technologies are increasingly employed in ICH promotion, their application remains uneven and frequently instrumentalized. In many cases, digital platforms are used primarily as dissemination tools for short-term visibility, such as promotional videos or livestream sales, rather than as integrated environments for cultural storytelling, experiential engagement, and community interaction. Such approaches tend to privilege quantitative exposure metrics while neglecting qualitative dimensions of cultural value,

including contextual understanding, emotional resonance, and participatory meaning-making.

From an academic perspective, existing research exhibits several notable limitations. Studies on ICH safeguarding often emphasize policy frameworks and preservation mechanisms, while research on digital heritage tends to focus on technological applications, such as digitization or immersive media, without sufficient engagement with branding theory or market dynamics. Conversely, cultural branding research rarely addresses the specific epistemological and ethical complexities of ICH. As a result, there is a lack of integrated analytical frameworks capable of explaining how digital media mediates between cultural values and brand value creation in ICH contexts.

Furthermore, empirical research adopting mixed-methods approaches in urban Chinese settings remains limited. Many studies rely on either qualitative case descriptions or quantitative surveys in isolation, making it difficult to capture the multidimensional and process-oriented nature of digital media–empowered ICH revitalization. The perspectives of practitioners, managers, policymakers, and audiences are rarely examined in a systematic and interconnected manner.

In response to these gaps, this study conceptualizes digital media–empowered ICH brand revitalization as a multidimensional process encompassing cultural reinterpretation, experiential innovation, and value co-creation. By focusing on Guangzhou as a representative urban context characterized by rich ICH resources, advanced digital infrastructure, and active cultural industries, the research seeks to generate context-sensitive yet internationally relevant insights into how digital media can support sustainable and culturally grounded ICH brand development.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the empirical focus on Guangzhou constrains the generalizability of findings to other cultural and geographic contexts. Second, the research adopts a cross-sectional design, limiting its ability to capture longitudinal changes in digital media strategies and brand development. Third, although the mixed-methods approach enhances analytical depth, the qualitative sample size remains relatively small.

These limitations are inherent to exploratory, context-specific research. Nevertheless, the study provides a robust analytical foundation for future comparative and longitudinal investigations into digital media–empowered ICH revitalization.

Literature Review

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Sustainability

Early research on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) was predominantly preservation-oriented, focusing on safeguarding mechanisms, authenticity, and continuity. Within this paradigm, ICH was treated as a vulnerable cultural resource requiring protection from external threats such as modernization and globalization. UNESCO's (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage institutionalized this approach by emphasizing identification, documentation, research, preservation, and transmission.

However, scholars have increasingly critiqued the limitations of static preservation. Smith (2006) reconceptualized heritage as a cultural process rather than a fixed object, arguing that heritage is produced and reproduced through social practices, discourse, and power relations. This perspective foregrounds the performative and negotiated nature of ICH, highlighting the importance of contemporary relevance and social engagement.

Building on this shift, the concept of cultural sustainability has gained prominence. Cultural sustainability emphasizes the dynamic balance between continuity and change, arguing that ICH must adapt to evolving social contexts while maintaining core cultural values. From this viewpoint, sustainability is not achieved through isolation from the market or technology, but through meaningful integration with contemporary cultural, economic, and technological systems.

Cultural Branding and Symbolic Value Creation

Cultural branding theory provides a useful analytical lens for understanding ICH revitalization in market-oriented contexts. Holt (2004) conceptualizes brands as symbolic systems that carry cultural meanings and address collective anxieties or aspirations. Successful cultural brands do not merely differentiate products; they articulate resonant narratives embedded in broader cultural discourses.

Applied to ICH, branding becomes a process of cultural translation and reinterpretation. Scholars argue that ICH branding should prioritize symbolic value creation over short-term economic gains. Authenticity, in this context, is not a static attribute but a relational construct negotiated among practitioners, institutions, and audiences.

Recent studies highlight the tension between commercialization and cultural integrity. Excessive commodification risks reducing ICH to aestheticized symbols detached from lived practice, while rigid traditionalism may limit adaptability and audience reach. Digital media offers a mediating mechanism by enabling multi-layered storytelling, transparency of cultural processes, and participatory meaning-making.

Digital Media, Participation, and Digital Heritage

Digital media has profoundly transformed cultural communication by enabling participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Rather than passive consumption, audiences increasingly engage as co-creators of cultural meaning. Giaccardi (2012) extends this perspective to digital heritage, emphasizing that heritage in digital environments is socially constructed through interaction, negotiation, and shared narratives.

Social media platforms facilitate decentralized storytelling and community engagement, while immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) enhance experiential learning and emotional resonance (Hossain et al., 2024; Al Qalhati et al., 2020). These affordances are particularly relevant to ICH, which relies on embodied knowledge and sensory experience.

In the Chinese context, digital platforms such as short-video applications and livestreaming services have reshaped cultural consumption patterns. Scholars note that these platforms lower barriers to access and visibility for ICH practitioners, while also introducing algorithmic

logics that may prioritize entertainment value over cultural depth. This duality underscores the need for strategic and reflexive application of digital media in ICH branding.

Urban Contexts and Digital ICH Revitalization in China

Urbanization has emerged as a critical factor shaping contemporary ICH practices. Cities function as nodes of cultural innovation, creative industries, and digital infrastructure. In China, urban ICH revitalization is closely linked to cultural policy agendas emphasizing cultural confidence, creative transformation, and industrial integration.

Recent studies on digital ICH in Chinese cities highlight the role of policy-driven platforms, cultural clusters, and public-private partnerships. However, empirical research remains fragmented, often focusing on technological applications without sufficient attention to branding strategies or audience reception.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

While existing literature provides valuable theoretical foundations, several gaps remain. First, few studies integrate cultural sustainability, branding theory, and digital media empowerment within a unified analytical framework. Second, empirical research adopting mixed-methods approaches in urban Chinese contexts is limited. Third, the mechanisms through which digital media translates cultural value into brand value remain underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by examining digital media-empowered ICH brand revitalization in Guangzhou through a mixed-methods design, contributing both empirical evidence and conceptual insights.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does digital media empower the revitalization of ICH brands in Guangzhou?

RQ2: What digital media strategies are employed by Guangzhou ICH brands to enhance cultural communication and market engagement?

RQ3: What revitalization pathways emerge from digital media-empowered ICH branding practices?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the mechanisms through which digital media empowers ICH brand revitalization.
2. To analyze digital media practices adopted by representative ICH brands in Guangzhou.
3. To construct a systematic revitalization pathway model for urban ICH branding.

Research Hypothesis

This study adopts an exploratory and explanatory research orientation rather than a strictly confirmatory one. Consequently, it does not aim to test narrowly specified statistical hypotheses in the positivist sense. Instead, it is guided by a set of theoretically informed research propositions that frame the investigation and structure the analytical process. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for research areas where theoretical integration remains underdeveloped and empirical phenomena are complex, context-dependent, and socially constructed, as is the case with digital media-empowered revitalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) brands.

In heritage and cultural studies, scholars have increasingly questioned the applicability of rigid hypothesis-testing models, arguing that cultural value, authenticity, and meaning-making processes cannot be fully captured through linear causal assumptions alone (Smith, 2006; Giaccardi, 2012). Similarly, branding research within cultural and creative industries emphasizes interpretive, relational, and symbolic dimensions that resist reduction to purely quantitative indicators (Holt, 2004). Against this backdrop, this study positions its “hypotheses” as analytical propositions that guide data collection, interpretation, and theory building rather than as variables to be statistically verified or falsified.

Conceptual Orientation of the Research Propositions

The central proposition underpinning this research is that digital media functions as an enabling infrastructure that positively influences audience engagement, brand perception, and cultural value transmission in ICH branding contexts, particularly within urban environments characterized by advanced digital ecosystems. This proposition draws upon three interrelated theoretical strands: participatory culture theory, cultural branding theory, and digital heritage studies.

First, participatory culture theory suggests that digital media reshapes the relationship between cultural producers and audiences by lowering barriers to participation and enabling co-creation of meaning (Jenkins, 2006). In the context of ICH, this implies that audiences are no longer passive recipients of cultural narratives but active contributors to the interpretation, circulation, and reinterpretation of heritage meanings. Digital platforms thus create opportunities for ICH brands to foster deeper emotional and cognitive engagement through interactive storytelling, user-generated content, and dialogic communication.

Second, cultural branding theory conceptualizes brands as symbolic systems that derive value from their ability to articulate culturally resonant narratives and identities (Holt, 2004). Applied to ICH, branding is not merely a marketing tool but a mechanism through which cultural meanings are translated into contemporary symbolic forms. Digital media enhances this process by expanding narrative capacity, enabling multimodal representation, and facilitating continuous interaction between brands and audiences. From this perspective, improved brand perception emerges not only from increased visibility but from enhanced symbolic coherence and narrative depth.

Third, digital heritage scholarship emphasizes that heritage in digital environments is not simply digitized content but a socially constructed process shaped by interaction, negotiation, and contextualization (Giaccardi, 2012). Digital media enables new modes of cultural value transmission that extend beyond preservation toward experiential engagement and reinterpretation. For ICH brands, this means that cultural value can be transmitted through immersive experiences, process-oriented narratives, and participatory practices that sustain relevance in contemporary cultural markets.

Core Research Proposition

Based on these theoretical foundations, the core research proposition of this study can be articulated as follows:

Proposition 1:

Digital media positively influences the revitalization of ICH brands by enhancing audience engagement, strengthening brand perception, and facilitating effective transmission of cultural value within urban cultural markets.

This proposition frames digital media not as an external technological add-on but as an integral component of contemporary cultural ecosystems. It implies that digital media empowerment operates through multiple interdependent dimensions rather than through a single causal pathway.

Sub-Propositions Guiding Empirical Analysis

To operationalize the core proposition and guide empirical inquiry, the study further articulates several sub-propositions that reflect the multidimensional nature of digital media empowerment in ICH branding.

Proposition 1a: Digital media enhances audience engagement with ICH brands through participatory and interactive affordances.

This proposition assumes that digital platforms enable higher levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement by facilitating interaction, feedback, and co-creation. Engagement is understood not only as consumption metrics (e.g., views or likes) but as sustained interest, cultural identification, and willingness to participate in heritage-related activities.

Proposition 1b: Digital media improves audience perceptions of ICH brands by strengthening narrative coherence and symbolic relevance.

Here, brand perception is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing perceived authenticity, cultural value, modern relevance, and emotional resonance. Digital storytelling, visual aesthetics, and immersive media are expected to play a critical role in shaping these perceptions.

Proposition 1c: Digital media facilitates the transmission of cultural value by enabling experiential and process-oriented representations of ICH.

Rather than presenting ICH as static artifacts, digital media allows for the communication of skills, knowledge, and cultural contexts through video, livestreaming, and interactive formats. This proposition aligns with the understanding of ICH as a living practice that requires ongoing reinterpretation.

Proposition 1d: The effectiveness of digital media empowerment is contingent upon strategic integration rather than mere technological adoption.

This proposition recognizes that not all digital media use leads to positive outcomes. Instrumental or superficial applications may increase exposure but fail to sustain cultural or brand value. Strategic alignment with cultural narratives, practitioner participation, and audience expectations is therefore essential.

Role of Hypotheses in an Exploratory Mixed-Methods Design

In the context of this study's mixed-methods design, these propositions serve several critical functions. First, they provide a conceptual scaffold that informs interview protocols, case study selection, and survey instrument design. Second, they guide the analytical focus of both

qualitative and quantitative data analysis, ensuring coherence across methodological components. Third, they enable theory building by allowing empirical findings to refine, nuance, or rearticulate the initial propositions.

By adopting this proposition-based approach, the study avoids the methodological limitations of premature hypothesis testing while maintaining analytical rigor and theoretical direction. This strategy is consistent with exploratory research traditions in cultural studies, design research, and applied social sciences, where theory development often proceeds inductively from rich empirical contexts.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in a pragmatic research paradigm, which prioritizes research questions and practical problem-solving over strict adherence to any single epistemological position. Pragmatism acknowledges that social reality is complex, context-dependent, and best understood through the use of multiple methods and perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This paradigm is particularly suitable for investigating digital media–empowered ICH revitalization, a phenomenon situated at the intersection of culture, technology, economy, and policy.

Rather than framing the research within a binary opposition between positivism and interpretivism, pragmatism allows for methodological flexibility and epistemological pluralism. Quantitative data are used to identify patterns and relationships, while qualitative data provide contextual depth and interpretive insight. This combination aligns with the study’s objective of generating both empirical evidence and conceptual understanding.

Research Design: Mixed-Methods Approach

The study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance analytical rigor and explanatory power. Mixed-methods research is increasingly recognized as a robust strategy for addressing complex social and cultural phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through a single methodological lens.

Specifically, this study adopts a sequential explanatory design, in which qualitative and quantitative components are implemented in a structured and complementary sequence. In this design, qualitative exploration provides contextual understanding and conceptual grounding, while quantitative analysis examines broader patterns of audience response and perception. The integration of findings occurs at the interpretation stage, allowing for triangulation and synthesis.

Qualitative Research Component

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in ICH branding and digital media practices in Guangzhou. These stakeholders included ICH practitioners, brand managers, designers, and cultural policymakers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, allowing respondents to articulate their experiences and perspectives while ensuring coverage of core research themes.

Interview questions focused on participants' experiences with digital media, perceptions of branding challenges, strategies for cultural communication, and reflections on audience engagement. This approach enabled the researcher to capture diverse viewpoints and uncover nuanced dynamics that may not be visible through quantitative measures alone.

Case Study Analysis

In addition to interviews, the qualitative component incorporated in-depth case studies of selected ICH brands in Guangzhou. Case study methodology is particularly well suited for exploratory research that seeks to understand complex processes within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The selected cases represent different categories of ICH and varying levels of digital media engagement, allowing for comparative analysis.

Data sources for the case studies included digital content analysis, branding materials, platform observations, and supplementary interviews. This multi-source approach enhances credibility and supports methodological triangulation.

Quantitative Research Component

Questionnaire Survey

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey targeting audiences who had interacted with Guangzhou ICH brands via digital platforms. The survey aimed to capture audience perceptions, engagement behaviors, and evaluations of digital media content. Measurement items were designed based on existing literature on brand engagement, cultural perception, and digital media use, with adaptations to fit the ICH context.

The survey data provide empirical evidence of audience responses and allow for statistical examination of relationships between digital engagement and brand-related perceptions. While the study does not test formal hypotheses, quantitative analysis supports the validation and refinement of the research propositions.

Data Integration and Analytical Strategy

The integration of qualitative and quantitative data constitutes a critical component of the mixed-methods design. Qualitative findings inform the interpretation of quantitative results by providing contextual explanations, while quantitative patterns help assess the broader relevance of qualitative insights. This reciprocal relationship enhances the credibility and depth of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymization. The study adhered to established ethical guidelines for social research, particularly in relation to cultural sensitivity and respect for ICH practitioners and communities.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, the study employed multiple strategies, including triangulation, pilot testing of survey instruments, and transparent documentation of research

procedures. These measures enhance the reliability and validity of the findings and support the study's contribution to international scholarship.

Pilot Study

Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the clarity, reliability, and preliminary validity of the questionnaire instrument. The pilot study plays a critical role in mixed-methods research by identifying potential design flaws, ambiguous wording, and measurement inconsistencies that may compromise data quality in the main survey. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this study—situated at the intersection of digital media studies, cultural branding, and intangible cultural heritage research—the pilot phase was particularly important to ensure conceptual alignment and respondent comprehension.

Purpose of the Pilot Study

The primary objectives of the pilot study were threefold. First, it aimed to assess the clarity and comprehensibility of questionnaire items, ensuring that respondents could easily understand questions related to digital engagement, brand perception, and cultural value without requiring specialized academic knowledge. Second, the pilot study sought to evaluate the reliability of the measurement scales, particularly those adapted from existing branding and digital engagement literature but modified for the ICH context. Third, it aimed to examine the content and face validity of the instrument by determining whether the items adequately reflected the constructs they were intended to measure.

Pilot Sample and Procedure

The pilot survey was administered to a small, purposive sample of respondents who had prior experience interacting with Guangzhou ICH brands through digital platforms such as social media, livestreaming, or digital exhibitions. This sample was selected to reflect the characteristics of the intended target population for the main survey, thereby enhancing the relevance of pilot feedback.

Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire under conditions similar to those of the main survey. In addition to responding to the survey items, respondents were encouraged to provide qualitative feedback on question wording, response options, scale length, and overall survey flow. This combination of quantitative responses and qualitative feedback allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the instrument's performance.

Findings and Instrument Refinement

Analysis of the pilot data revealed several areas for improvement. First, certain items contained terminology that respondents perceived as overly abstract or academic, particularly those related to cultural value and authenticity. These items were revised to use clearer and more accessible language while retaining conceptual precision. Second, the pilot responses indicated redundancy among some items measuring similar dimensions of digital engagement. As a result, overlapping items were consolidated or removed to reduce respondent fatigue and improve scale efficiency.

Preliminary reliability analysis suggested acceptable internal consistency for most constructs, although minor adjustments were made to improve coherence among scale items. The Likert

scale design was also refined to ensure balanced response options and consistent directional wording across sections of the questionnaire.

Overall, feedback from the pilot study led to targeted revisions in question wording, scale structure, and survey layout. These refinements enhanced the measurement accuracy and usability of the instrument, thereby strengthening the reliability and validity of the data collected in the main study.

Contribution of the Pilot Study to Research Rigor

By systematically testing and refining the questionnaire prior to large-scale administration, the pilot study contributed significantly to the methodological rigor of the research. It reduced the risk of measurement error, improved construct operationalization, and ensured alignment between research objectives and empirical indicators. The pilot study thus served as an essential preparatory step that reinforced the credibility of subsequent quantitative findings.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan was designed to align closely with the mixed-methods research framework and the exploratory propositions guiding this study. To address the research questions comprehensively, both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed using systematic and complementary analytical techniques. This dual approach enabled the study to capture not only observable patterns in audience responses but also the underlying meanings, strategies, and contextual dynamics of digital media–empowered ICH branding.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and case studies were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible yet rigorous method widely employed in social and cultural research. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for exploratory studies that seek to identify recurring patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets while remaining sensitive to contextual nuance.

The analysis followed a structured, multi-stage coding process. First, the researcher engaged in data familiarization, which involved repeated reading of interview transcripts, field notes, and case study materials to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Initial impressions and analytic memos were recorded during this stage to capture emerging ideas.

Second, initial coding was conducted by systematically identifying segments of data relevant to the research questions. Codes were assigned to expressions related to digital media practices, branding strategies, audience engagement, cultural interpretation, and perceived challenges. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed: inductive codes emerged from the data itself, while deductive codes were informed by theoretical concepts derived from the literature review.

Third, coded data were grouped into broader thematic categories, such as cultural reinterpretation, experiential innovation, participatory engagement, and market-oriented adaptation. These themes were reviewed and refined through iterative comparison across cases and participant groups to ensure internal coherence and analytical relevance.

Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research propositions and conceptual framework. This interpretive stage emphasized explaining how and why specific digital media practices contributed to ICH brand revitalization, rather than merely describing observed phenomena.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize respondent demographics, digital media usage patterns, and overall trends in audience engagement and brand perception. Measures such as means, frequencies, and standard deviations provided an overview of audience responses and facilitated comparison across variables.

Correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the relationships between key constructs, including digital media engagement, perceived brand authenticity, cultural value recognition, and overall brand perception. This analytical step aimed to identify the strength and direction of associations between digital interaction and audience evaluations, thereby providing empirical support for the study's research propositions.

Although the study does not pursue causal inference or hypothesis testing in a strict statistical sense, correlation analysis serves an important exploratory function. It helps to reveal patterns of association that complement qualitative insights and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of digital media empowerment effects.

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Consistent with the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage. Quantitative results offered a broad picture of audience responses, while qualitative data provided contextual explanations for observed patterns. This integrative approach enhanced analytical depth and enabled triangulation, thereby strengthening the credibility and robustness of the research conclusions.

Analytical Transparency and Reliability

To ensure analytical transparency, all stages of data analysis were systematically documented. Coding decisions, theme development, and statistical procedures were recorded to facilitate consistency and replicability. Together, these measures support the trustworthiness of the findings and reinforce the study's contribution to international research on digital media, cultural branding, and intangible cultural heritage.

Data Analysis

This section presents the results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses conducted in this study. In line with the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, qualitative findings are first reported to illuminate the processes and mechanisms through which digital media empowers ICH brand revitalization. Quantitative results are then presented to examine broader audience-level patterns and to provide empirical support for the qualitative insights. Together, these analyses offer a comprehensive understanding of digital media-empowered ICH branding practices in Guangzhou.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis, based on semi-structured interviews and case studies of representative ICH brands in Guangzhou, reveals that digital media empowerment operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms. Three dominant themes emerged from the thematic analysis: cultural reinterpretation through digital storytelling, experiential engagement enabled by immersive media, and community-based value co-creation facilitated by participatory platforms. These themes collectively illustrate how digital media reshapes the cultural, experiential, and relational dimensions of ICH branding.

Digital Storytelling and Cultural Reinterpretation

One of the most salient qualitative findings is the central role of digital storytelling in enabling cultural reinterpretation. Interview data indicate that digital media allows ICH practitioners and brand managers to reposition traditional narratives within contemporary urban contexts. Rather than presenting ICH as static or antiquated traditions, digital storytelling reframes cultural practices as living processes embedded in everyday urban life.

Participants emphasized that short-form videos, social media narratives, and visual storytelling formats enable them to communicate not only the outcomes of ICH practices but also their historical origins, cultural meanings, and production processes. This process-oriented narrative approach helps audiences understand the cultural logic underlying ICH practices, thereby enhancing interpretive depth and emotional resonance.

From an analytical perspective, cultural reinterpretation through digital storytelling does not entail abandoning tradition. Instead, it involves selective translation and contextualization that align cultural meanings with contemporary values, lifestyles, and aesthetic preferences. This finding supports the argument that authenticity in ICH branding is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic construct negotiated through narrative practices.

Immersive Media and Experiential Engagement

A second key theme concerns the role of immersive media in enhancing experiential engagement. Qualitative evidence suggests that immersive technologies, such as video-based demonstrations, livestreaming, and interactive digital exhibitions, significantly deepen audience engagement with ICH brands. These formats allow audiences to observe craftsmanship, performance, and embodied skills that are otherwise difficult to access in physical settings.

Interviewees noted that immersive digital experiences reduce the distance between practitioners and audiences, enabling a form of mediated presence. Livestreaming, in particular, was frequently cited as a powerful tool for real-time interaction, allowing audiences to ask questions, observe techniques, and engage emotionally with practitioners. This immediacy contributes to a sense of intimacy and authenticity, counteracting perceptions of cultural detachment often associated with traditional museum-based displays. Analytically, immersive engagement shifts ICH branding from symbolic representation toward experiential participation. This transition aligns with contemporary theories of experiential branding and supports the view that digital media can function as a sensory and affective interface for cultural transmission.

Participatory Platforms and Community-Based Value Co-Creation

The third major qualitative finding highlights the importance of participatory platforms in facilitating community-based value co-creation. Social media platforms enable audiences to comment on, share, reinterpret, and even remix ICH-related content. Interview data indicate that such participatory practices foster a sense of belonging and cultural identification among audiences, transforming them from passive consumers into active cultural participants.

Practitioners and brand managers observed that audience feedback often influences content strategies, product design, and communication approaches. This reciprocal interaction contributes to the co-construction of brand meaning, where cultural value emerges through dialogue rather than unilateral transmission.

From a theoretical standpoint, this finding reinforces participatory culture theory and underscores the relational nature of cultural branding in digital environments. Value co-creation is not limited to economic outcomes but extends to symbolic and cultural dimensions, enhancing the social sustainability of ICH brands.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis provides empirical evidence of audience responses to digital media–empowered ICH branding practices. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to examine relationships between digital media engagement, audience identification, and brand perception.

Descriptive Overview of Audience Engagement

Descriptive analysis reveals that respondents engage with ICH brands primarily through social media platforms, short-video applications, and livestreaming services. A majority of respondents reported repeated interactions with digital content related to ICH, suggesting sustained rather than incidental engagement. Respondents also indicated varying degrees of interest across different content formats, with process-oriented and experiential content receiving higher levels of attention.

In terms of perceived relevance, respondents generally agreed that digital media made ICH more accessible and relatable. Many participants reported that digital platforms reduced perceived cultural distance and increased their willingness to learn about ICH practices.

Correlation between Digital Engagement and Brand Identification

Correlation analysis indicates a positive relationship between the level of digital media engagement and audience identification with ICH brands. Higher levels of interaction—such as commenting, sharing, or participating in livestreams—are associated with stronger emotional attachment and identification with ICH brands.

Furthermore, digital engagement shows a positive correlation with perceived cultural value and brand authenticity. Respondents who frequently interacted with digital ICH content were more likely to view ICH brands as culturally meaningful, contemporary, and relevant to modern urban life.

Although the analysis does not establish causality, these correlations provide quantitative support for the qualitative findings and align with the study's research propositions. Digital media engagement appears to function as an important mediator between cultural content and audience perception.

Audience Perceptions of Cultural Interest and Relevance

Survey results also indicate that exposure to digital ICH content enhances cultural interest among audiences. Respondents reported increased curiosity about ICH practices and expressed greater willingness to attend offline cultural events or purchase related cultural products after engaging with digital media content.

This finding suggests that digital media not only enhances symbolic appreciation but may also stimulate behavioral intentions that support the economic and social sustainability of ICH brands. The quantitative evidence thus complements qualitative insights regarding market-oriented value co-creation.

Findings and Conclusion

Integrated Findings

By integrating qualitative and quantitative analyses, this study demonstrates that digital media empowers ICH brand revitalization through three interrelated dimensions: cultural reinterpretation, experiential innovation, and market-oriented value co-creation.

Cultural reinterpretation enables ICH brands to translate traditional meanings into contemporary narratives without undermining cultural integrity. Experiential innovation enhances emotional engagement and sensory understanding through immersive digital formats. Market-oriented value co-creation aligns cultural transmission with audience participation and economic sustainability, transforming audiences into co-producers of cultural value.

These dimensions are not independent but mutually reinforcing. Cultural reinterpretation provides narrative coherence, experiential innovation deepens engagement, and value co-creation sustains long-term relevance and viability. Together, they constitute a dynamic pathway through which digital media facilitates ICH brand revitalization in urban contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to international scholarship in several ways. First, it advances digital heritage studies by demonstrating how digital media functions as an enabling ecosystem rather than a mere technological tool. Second, it extends cultural branding theory by incorporating ICH contexts and emphasizing symbolic and participatory dimensions of brand value creation. Third, it enriches discussions of cultural sustainability by illustrating how digital media supports adaptive continuity rather than cultural dilution.

By grounding these contributions in empirical evidence from Guangzhou, the study offers insights that are context-sensitive yet theoretically transferable to other urban settings.

Practical Implications

The findings offer practical implications for policymakers, cultural institutions, and ICH practitioners. Strategic investment in digital storytelling and immersive media can enhance

cultural communication, while participatory platforms can foster long-term audience engagement. Importantly, digital media strategies should be culturally reflexive and strategically integrated rather than purely exposure-driven.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that digital media plays a critical role in empowering the revitalization of ICH brands by enabling cultural reinterpretation, experiential engagement, and value co-creation. By proposing a digital media-driven revitalization pathway model, the research provides both theoretical insight and practical guidance for sustainable ICH branding in contemporary urban environments.

Recommendation

Based on the integrated findings of this study, a series of recommendations are proposed to support the sustainable revitalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) brands through digital media empowerment. These recommendations are structured across three interrelated levels—policy and institutional governance, ICH practitioner and brand strategy, and design and digital innovation practice—to reflect the multi-actor nature of ICH revitalization in urban contexts. In addition, the establishment of long-term evaluation mechanisms is emphasized to ensure sustainable and culturally responsible outcomes.

Policy and Institutional Recommendations

At the policy level, it is recommended that governmental and cultural authorities strengthen institutional support for digital cultural innovation related to ICH. While existing policies often prioritize documentation, protection, and listing mechanisms, there is a need to further integrate digital media strategies into ICH safeguarding and development frameworks. This includes providing targeted funding, infrastructure support, and policy incentives for digital experimentation that aligns with cultural sustainability objectives.

Policymakers should also facilitate cross-sector collaboration among cultural institutions, digital technology providers, creative industries, and educational organizations. Such collaborations can help bridge the gap between cultural expertise and technological capacity, enabling more sophisticated and culturally grounded digital media applications. In urban environments such as Guangzhou, where digital industries and cultural resources coexist, policy coordination can play a crucial role in fostering innovation ecosystems for ICH branding. Furthermore, institutional frameworks should emphasize practitioner participation and community engagement in digital initiatives. Policies that empower ICH practitioners to actively participate in content creation and decision-making processes can help mitigate risks of cultural misrepresentation and excessive commercialization. This participatory governance approach aligns with contemporary understandings of heritage as a living, community-based process rather than a static cultural asset.

Recommendations for ICH Practitioners and Brand Managers

For ICH practitioners and brand managers, this study highlights the importance of adopting strategic digital storytelling and participatory engagement models rather than relying on fragmented or ad hoc digital promotion. Digital storytelling should prioritize cultural narratives that emphasize processes, skills, and meanings embedded in ICH practices, thereby enhancing interpretive depth and audience understanding.

Practitioners are encouraged to move beyond purely promotional content and to embrace dialogic communication with audiences. Participatory platforms can be leveraged to invite feedback, encourage user-generated content, and foster long-term relationships with cultural communities. Such engagement not only enhances brand identification but also contributes to the co-creation of cultural value, reinforcing the social sustainability of ICH brands.

In addition, ICH brand managers should develop coherent digital branding strategies that align cultural authenticity with contemporary market expectations. This involves maintaining narrative consistency across platforms, balancing traditional aesthetics with modern design languages, and ensuring that commercial objectives do not overshadow cultural values. Capacity-building initiatives, such as digital literacy training and branding workshops for practitioners, can further enhance strategic competence.

Recommendations for Designers and Digital Media Professionals

Designers and digital media professionals play a critical mediating role in translating ICH into digital formats. This study recommends that designers prioritize culturally sensitive innovation, recognizing that design decisions shape not only aesthetic outcomes but also cultural meanings and audience interpretations.

Design practices should be grounded in close collaboration with ICH practitioners to ensure cultural accuracy and contextual integrity. Rather than imposing generic digital templates, designers are encouraged to develop bespoke visual languages and interaction models that reflect the specific cultural logic of each ICH practice. Immersive and interactive technologies should be employed judiciously to enhance experiential understanding without reducing ICH to spectacle or entertainment.

Moreover, designers should adopt an ethical and reflexive approach to innovation, continuously assessing the cultural implications of digital representations. This includes awareness of power dynamics, audience interpretation, and the potential commodification of cultural practices. By integrating cultural sensitivity into the design process, digital innovation can contribute positively to both cultural preservation and brand revitalization.

Establishment of Long-Term Evaluation Mechanisms

To ensure sustainable revitalization outcomes, this study recommends the establishment of long-term evaluation and monitoring mechanisms for digital media–empowered ICH branding initiatives. Short-term metrics such as views, clicks, or sales figures, while useful, are insufficient to capture cultural impact and long-term value creation.

Evaluation frameworks should incorporate both quantitative indicators (e.g., audience engagement levels, participation frequency) and qualitative measures (e.g., perceived cultural understanding, practitioner satisfaction, community feedback). Longitudinal assessment can help identify unintended consequences, such as cultural simplification or audience fatigue, and inform adaptive strategy adjustments.

By embedding evaluation mechanisms into policy and practice, stakeholders can ensure that digital media empowerment contributes to culturally responsible, economically viable, and socially sustainable ICH revitalization.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of all interview participants, including Intangible Cultural Heritage practitioners, brand managers, designers, and cultural policymakers in Guangzhou, whose insights and experiences were essential to this research. Sincere appreciation is also extended to the cultural institutions and organizations that facilitated access to case study materials and supported fieldwork activities.

The author further acknowledges the guidance and intellectual support provided by academic supervisor, co- author and colleagues throughout the research process. Their constructive feedback and scholarly engagement significantly contributed to the development and refinement of this study. Any remaining errors or limitations are solely the responsibility of the author.

References

- Al Qalhati, N., Karim, A. M., Al Mughairi, B., Al Hilali, K., & Hossain, M. I. (2020). Technology and HR Practices in Educational Sector in Sharqiya Governate of Oman. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(10), 435-443.
- Al Qalhati, N., Karim, A. M., Al Mughairi, B., Al Hilali, K., & Hossain, M. I. (2020). Study on Job Satisfaction among Teachers in Sultanate of Oman. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(10), 422-434.
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.
- Denes, A., Koanantakool, P. C., & Davis, P. (2013). Critical reflections on safeguarding culture: The intangible cultural heritage and museums field school in Lamphun, Thailand. *Heritage & Society*, 6(1), 23–24.
- Giaccardi, E. (Ed.). (2012). *Heritage and social media: Understanding heritage in a participatory culture*. Routledge.
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Hossain, M. I., Jamadar, Y., Alam, M. K., Pal, T., Islam, M. T., & Sharmin, N. (2024). Exploring the Factors Impacting the Intention to Use Metaverse in the Manufacturing Industry Through the Lens of Unified Technology Acceptance Theory. In *Research, Innovation, and Industry Impacts of the Metaverse* (pp. 43-61). IGI Global.
- Hossain, M. I., Jamadar, Y., Momo, N. B., Hafiz, N., & Saiba, R. N. (2024). Unlocking the Potentials and Constraints of Metaverse Implementation in Manufacturing Firms. In *Research, Innovation, and Industry Impacts of the Metaverse* (pp. 223-246). IGI Global.
- Islam, M. T., Hossain, M. I., & Kumar, J. (2025). Adoption of contactless payment systems at Mamak restaurants: evidence from Malaysia. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 17(3), 367-375.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.
- Katsouli, E. F. (2017). Innovative technologies for intangible cultural heritage education and preservation: The case of i-Treasures. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, 21(2), 1–13.
- Khaled, A. S., Ahmed, S., Tabash, M. I., Al-Homaidi, E. A., & Hossain, M. I. (2019). The Impact of Technological and Marketing Innovations on Retailing Industry: Evidence of India. *Journal of Reviews on Global Economics*, 8, 948-957

- Li, W. Y. (2017). Study on the mechanism of Intangible Cultural Heritage education transmission in schools from the perspective of system coupling. *Research of Ethnic Education*, 107–112.
- Musinguzi, D. K. (2009). The role of cultural and heritage education at Bakoni Malapa Open Air Museum: Demonstrations of cultural practices and craft work techniques. *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, 4(6), 151–158.
- Nur, A.S.N., Sahabuddin, M., Hossain, M.I., Ismail, N. (2024). Examining the influence of functional, social and psychological antecedents on attitude towards Chatbot usage: an emerging market context. *International Journal of Business and Emerging Markets*. 10.1504/IJBEM.2025.10064107.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.
- Sun, F. (2007). Educational inheritance: A proposal for setting up a course entitled “Masterpieces of Chinese Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage” (pp. 205–209). *Huang Zhong (China) Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music*.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO.