

Community roles in folk culture preservation under digital transformation: Evidence from Northeastern Vietnam

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Abstract

This study examines community role reconfiguration in folk culture preservation under digital transformation in Northeastern Vietnam. Using a qualitative design and a survey (N=291), the research finds that community roles remain fundamentally practice-based, rooted in social obligations and embodied knowledge rather than formal appointments. While digital transformation increases visibility, it acts as a selective amplifier, creating a layered structure: younger members gain representational power, while senior practitioners the primary knowledge holders often remain digitally peripheral. A structural tension persists between community-centered logics, prioritizing ritual continuity, and institutional digital agendas focused on technical standardization. The study concludes that role reconfiguration is a process of negotiated adaptation. Digital roles acquire legitimacy only when aligned with community values and intergenerational transmission. Ultimately, sustainable preservation requires recognizing community authority as a foundational condition for cultural continuity, rather than a mere procedural input.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Community Agency; Digital Transformation; Folk Culture; Heritage Governance; Northeastern Vietnam

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is now widely approached as a living social process rather than a fixed cultural inheritance. International frameworks emphasize that its safeguarding depends fundamentally on the communities who generate, transmit, and reinterpret cultural practices over time [1], [2]. Yet, in many mountainous and peripheral regions, heritage governance continues to be shaped by institutional priorities that privilege documentation, symbolic recognition, or external valorization, often weakening community agency in decision-making processes [3].

This disjunction is particularly evident in the northeastern mountainous region of Vietnam, where folk culture remains closely intertwined with everyday livelihoods and ethnic identity. Socio-economic transformation, demographic mobility, and uneven development have altered the conditions of cultural transmission, while recent legal and policy reforms have expanded the formal apparatus of heritage protection [4], [5]. Despite these advances, communities are still commonly positioned as cultural bearers or implementers, rather than as actors with substantive authority in shaping preservation strategies.

At the same time, digital transformation is increasingly embedded in heritage policy and practice. Digital technologies enable new forms of recording, representation, and circulation of intangible heritage, and are frequently framed as instruments for cultural sustainability and local development [6], [7]. However, when digitalization is pursued primarily

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through centralized or technocratic models, it risks reinforcing existing asymmetries in heritage governance and redefining community participation in narrowly instrumental terms [8].

In Vietnam, national digital transformation agendas explicitly identify culture as a strategic sector [9], yet their implications for community roles in folk culture preservation remain insufficiently examined. Existing studies tend to focus on cultural outcomes or development impacts, leaving unresolved how community agency is reconfigured at the intersection of heritage governance and digital infrastructures [10], [11].

This article argues that safeguarding folk culture in the northeastern mountainous region of Vietnam requires a restructuring of community roles that goes beyond participation as a procedural requirement. By situating communities as adaptive actors within evolving policy and digital environments, the study seeks to clarify how heritage preservation can align more coherently with sustainable development while respecting context-specific understandings of authenticity and cultural value [12].

2. Literature review

2.1. From heritage objects to social processes: Reframing intangible cultural heritage

A significant body of scholarship has shifted the understanding of ICH from a collection of safeguarded cultural elements toward a socially constructed and politically mediated process. Smith's seminal work conceptualizes heritage not as a neutral inheritance but as a cultural practice shaped by power relations, institutional authority, and selective valorization [3]. This perspective aligns with UNESCO's operational directives, which formally recognize communities, groups, and individuals as central actors in defining, transmitting, and safeguarding ICH [1], [2].

Despite this normative consensus, tensions persist between community-centered principles and heritage governance practices. While international frameworks emphasize participation and cultural diversity, implementation often remains state-driven, expert-led, and oriented toward documentation or symbolic recognition rather than lived continuity. The Nara Document on Authenticity further complicates this debate by rejecting fixed or universal criteria of cultural value, instead foregrounding context-specific interpretations of authenticity [12]. However, translating such pluralistic notions into governance mechanisms - particularly in culturally diverse and administratively peripheral regions - remains theoretically underdeveloped.

2.2. Community participation and sustainable development: Consensus and contestation

The linkage between community involvement in ICH and sustainable development has been widely acknowledged, yet conceptual coherence across studies is uneven. Research in tourism and regional development contexts generally supports the view that meaningful community participation enhances social capital, cultural continuity, and local resilience [13], [14]. Rasoolimanesh et al. demonstrate that stakeholder alignment—especially the recognition of community values—plays a decisive role in ensuring that heritage-based development contributes to long-term sustainability rather than short-term economic gains [13].

However, empirical findings also reveal contradictions. While community participation is frequently invoked as a normative ideal, it is often operationalized in limited or instrumental ways. Studies from Vietnam illustrate that local actors are commonly positioned as cultural bearers or service providers, with restricted influence over strategic decision-making [10], [11]. This gap between rhetorical inclusion and substantive empowerment suggests that participation alone does not guarantee sustainable outcomes. Instead, the form, depth, and institutional embedding of community roles appear to be decisive variables—an issue that remains insufficiently theorized in the existing literature.

2.3. Digital transformation and intangible cultural heritage: Opportunities and asymmetries

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the intersection of digital technologies and intangible cultural heritage, highlighting both transformative potential and structural risks. Digital preservation models - such as knowledge graph-driven systems - offer new possibilities for documenting complex cultural relationships, enabling cross-cultural comparison and long-term accessibility [6]. Similarly, digital exhibitions and interactive platforms are shown to reconfigure audience engagement and reinterpret heritage narratives beyond traditional museum settings [8].

At the same time, critical analyses caution against techno-centric approaches that overlook social and epistemic dimensions. Czesznek et al. argue that digitization can support sustainable local development only when embedded in locally grounded communication strategies rather than treated as a purely technical intervention [7]. Ren and Lam

further reveal a fundamental divergence between implementation paradigms: Western models tend to emphasize open access and decentralization, whereas East Asian approaches often reinforce institutional control, even when community data is mobilized [6]. These findings suggest that digital transformation may reproduce - or even intensify - existing asymmetries in heritage governance if community agency is not structurally redefined.

2.4. Tourism-oriented heritage research and its limitations

A substantial proportion of ICH research remains anchored in tourism studies, as evidenced by bibliometric analysis showing a concentration of themes around destination branding, visitor experience, and economic impact [15]. While this body of work has contributed valuable insights into market-mediated heritage dynamics, it also imposes analytical constraints. Heritage is frequently framed as a resource for tourism development, with community roles assessed primarily in terms of service provision or cultural performance [8], [14].

Such framing risks marginalizing non-touristic dimensions of folk culture, particularly in regions where cultural practices are embedded in subsistence livelihoods, ritual life, and informal social networks. In mountainous areas with limited tourism infrastructure, this bias renders much of the tourism-centered literature only partially applicable. The challenge, therefore, lies in decoupling community-based heritage analysis from tourism as its default development horizon, without dismissing the sector's relevance altogether.

2.5. Policy frameworks and the unresolved question of community agency

Legal and policy instruments increasingly recognize the importance of safeguarding ICH within broader development and digitalization agendas. Vietnam's revised Law on Cultural Heritage and recent governmental decrees articulate clearer mandates for heritage protection and promotion [4], [5], while national digital transformation strategies explicitly identify culture as a priority sector [9]. These frameworks signal an institutional commitment to modernization and integration.

Nevertheless, existing studies rarely interrogate how such policies reconfigure power relations at the community level. The literature tends to treat legal instruments as enabling contexts rather than as active forces shaping community roles, responsibilities, and constraints. This analytical gap is particularly salient in the digital domain, where policy-driven digitization initiatives may inadvertently centralize control over cultural data and narratives, despite participatory rhetoric.

2.6. Synthesis and research gap

Taken together, the literature reveals a broad consensus on the normative importance of communities in safeguarding ICH and on the growing relevance of digital transformation for sustainability. Yet it also exposes persistent tensions between principles and practice, empowerment and instrumentalization, and technological innovation and cultural authenticity. What remains insufficiently addressed is how community roles themselves are being redefined - or need to be redefined - at the intersection of heritage governance, sustainable development, and digital transformation, particularly in mountainous and ethnically diverse regions.

This unresolved issue constitutes the central analytical gap that the present study seeks to address. By focusing on the restructuring of community roles rather than on isolated heritage elements or technologies, the article responds directly to the theoretical and empirical limitations identified in the existing literature.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and analytical orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how community roles in folk culture preservation are shaped and reconfigured under digital transformation. The design is guided by the assumption that community roles are socially constructed, context-dependent, and negotiated through interactions among local practices, institutional governance, and digital infrastructures. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the study seeks to generate empirically grounded explanations of role formation and transformation.

3.2. Research questions and analytical framework

The analysis is structured around three research questions

- *RQ1: How are community roles in folk culture preservation currently articulated and enacted in northeastern Vietnam?*
- *RQ2: How does digital transformation influence community agency, positioning, and responsibilities in preservation processes?*
- *RQ3: What tensions and reconfigurations emerge between community practices and institutional approaches in the digital context?*

To address these questions, the study applies an analytical framework that conceptualizes community roles as emerging from the interaction of three domains:

- *Community-based cultural practices;*
- *Institutional and policy governance; and*
- *Digital transformation as a mediating condition.*

This framework informs both data collection and interpretation, without predetermining analytical outcomes.

3.3. Data sources and analytical procedure

Empirical evidence was generated primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 37 participants ($n = 37$), selected using purposive sampling to capture diverse community and institutional perspectives. Interviewees included folk culture practitioners, community representatives, local cultural officers, and individuals involved in heritage-related digital initiatives.

To contextualize qualitative findings, a supporting survey was conducted with 291 respondents ($N = 291$) across selected communities. Survey data were used descriptively to assess the broader resonance of patterns identified in the interviews, rather than for drawing statistical inference.

Qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach, with analytical categories emerging iteratively from the data. Particular attention was paid to divergences, tensions, and implicit assumptions regarding community authority and digital engagement. Survey results were selectively integrated to triangulate and refine qualitative interpretations.

3.4. Research rigor and ethical considerations

Analytical rigor was ensured through data triangulation, reflexive interpretation, and transparent linkage between empirical material and analytical claims. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymization of participants, and sensitivity to issues of cultural knowledge ownership and representation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Community roles: practice-based and experience-grounded rather than formally defined

Across the empirical materials, community roles in folk culture preservation are not articulated as formal positions or delegated responsibilities, but rather emerge through everyday cultural practice and accumulated experience. Interviewees consistently described preservation activities as extensions of long-standing social obligations - such as ritual performance, oral transmission, and craftsmanship - rather than as tasks associated with official heritage programs or externally designed projects. Engagement in preservation is therefore understood as an integral part of communal life, embedded in habitual routines and collective memory, rather than as a discrete or professionalized function.

Table 1 Qualitative evidence on practice-based community roles in folk culture preservation (Derived from semi-structured interviews, n = 37)

Analytical theme	Role manifestation	Illustrative interview excerpts
Practice-based legitimacy	Roles emerge through repeated participation rather than formal appointment	"No one assigns us this role. If you have practiced the ritual for many years, people naturally look to you when it is time." (Ritual practitioner, Interviewee 12)
Embodied cultural authority	Knowledge is validated through performance and experience	"You cannot learn this from documents. You must perform it many times, in front of elders, to be recognized." (Folk artisan, Interviewee 7)
Informal leadership	Cultural leadership operates outside institutional structures	"There is no title, but everyone knows who should speak when cultural matters are discussed." (Community elder, Interviewee 19)
Relational responsibility	Preservation understood as moral and communal obligation	"This is not a project for us. It is our responsibility to the ancestors and the younger generation." (Ritual custodian, Interviewee 3)
Digital asymmetry	Digital engagement reshapes visibility, not cultural legitimacy	"Young people upload videos, but they still come to us to ask what is correct." (Senior practitioner, Interviewee 28)

Source: Authors owns survey (2025)

Many participants emphasized that involvement in preservation does not require formal appointment or explicit recognition. Instead, roles are assumed gradually through repeated participation, sustained commitment, and demonstrated competence. In this respect, community roles are shaped less by organizational structures than by shared understandings of responsibility, reciprocity, and moral duty. Such understandings are reinforced through kinship relations, local hierarchies of respect, and culturally embedded expectations regarding who is entitled - or obligated - to perform particular cultural functions.

To clarify how community roles are articulated in practice rather than through formal designation, Table 2 synthesizes the main role configurations identified across interview data. The table does not quantify participation but captures recurring patterns of legitimacy, authority, and enactment through which community members engage in folk culture preservation. Rather than presenting fixed categories, the table reflects analytically distilled role types that frequently overlap and coexist within the same individuals. This evidence highlights the experiential and relational foundations of community roles in the northeastern mountainous context, where authority is accumulated over time through practice rather than conferred through institutional mechanisms.

Table 2 Forms of community roles identified through qualitative interviews (n = 37)

Community role type	Basis of legitimacy	Dominant mode of enactment
Ritual custodians	Ancestral knowledge, seniority	Ritual performance; oral transmission; ceremonial leadership
Folk artisans	Craft mastery and experiential skills	Apprenticeship; production for local use
Cultural elders	Social recognition and moral authority	Informal leadership; cultural mediation
Community intermediaries	Social networks and cross-sector familiarity	Coordination with external actors; facilitation

Source: Authors owns survey (2025)

The configurations summarized in Table 2 suggest that community roles are inherently fluid and situational. Individuals may move between different roles depending on ceremonial cycles, community needs, or interactions with external actors. This fluidity reflects a preservation logic grounded in participation and relational trust rather than in role specialization. As a result, preservation practices are sustained through social continuity rather than administrative allocation.

At the same time, the findings indicate that digital transformation functions less as a democratizing force than as a mechanism that redistributes visibility and agency within communities. Digitally active actors - typically younger members or those occupying intermediary positions - gain expanded representational power, often becoming de facto spokespersons of community culture in online environments. Their ability to navigate digital platforms enables them to curate, translate, and circulate cultural content beyond local settings.

Meanwhile, senior practitioners and ritual specialists often retain substantial cultural authority but experience limited digital agency. Although their knowledge remains central to preservation, it is not always they who control how that knowledge is represented or disseminated in digital spaces. This asymmetry generates new internal dynamics in which cultural centrality and digital visibility no longer fully coincide, creating layered configurations of authority within the same community.

As a result, community roles under digital transformation tend to become stratified rather than replaced. Preservation practices unfold across parallel domains: digitally mediated representation on the one hand, and embodied cultural transmission rooted in ritual practice and apprenticeship on the other. These domains intersect but do not fully overlap, producing differentiated forms of participation that coexist within the same preservation landscape. This finding is critical for understanding how digital initiatives may reconfigure internal community hierarchies without fundamentally altering the cultural logics that sustain folk traditions.

In this sense, "community role" is not perceived as a clearly bounded function, but as a relational position embedded in kinship ties, local authority structures, and moral expectations. Elders, ritual specialists, and experienced practitioners frequently assume informal leadership in preservation processes without holding any formal institutional recognition. Their authority derives from cultural legitimacy, social trust, and embodied knowledge rather than from policy endorsement or administrative appointment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, in the northeastern mountainous context of Vietnam, community roles in folk culture preservation remain fundamentally practice-based. Preservation is enacted through participation, continuity, and shared obligation, not through role codification or procedural assignment. Consequently, externally introduced preservation schemes that rely on standardized role definitions often encounter limited resonance at the community level, even when they are well-intentioned and technologically sophisticated.

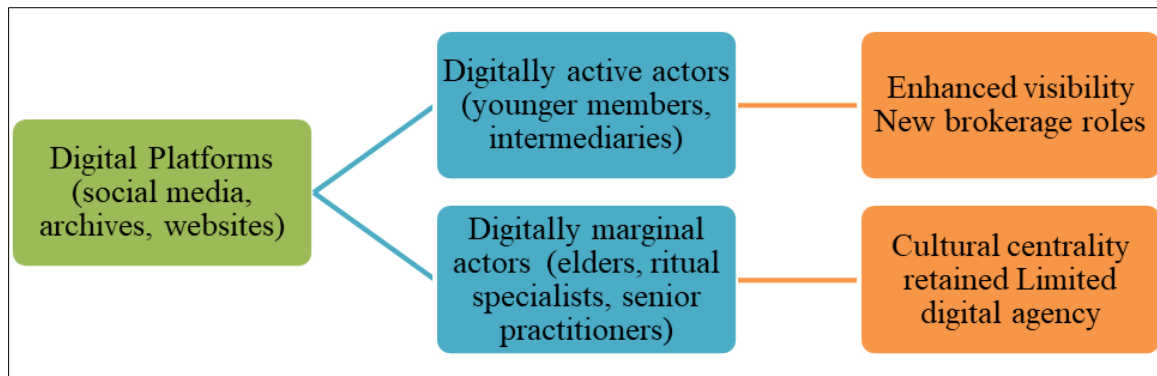
4.2. Digital transformation as a selective amplifier of visibility, not a uniform driver of participation

Digital technologies are widely acknowledged by participants as increasing the visibility of folk cultural expressions, particularly through social media platforms, community archives, and digital documentation initiatives. However, the findings indicate that digital transformation does not uniformly expand community participation in preservation activities.

Instead, digital engagement tends to be selectively appropriated by specific actors within the community - most notably younger members, local intermediaries, and individuals with prior exposure to digital skills. These actors often assume new, hybrid roles as mediators between traditional cultural knowledge holders and external audiences, including tourists, researchers, and cultural institutions.

At the same time, many senior practitioners remain ambivalent toward digital mediation. While they recognize its potential for dissemination, they express concerns about decontextualization, loss of ritual meaning, and unauthorized reproduction of cultural knowledge. As a result, digital transformation functions less as a transformative force reshaping community role across the board, and more as an amplifier of existing internal differentiation within communities.

Figure 1 illustrates the differentiated patterns of digital engagement observed among community members involved in folk culture preservation. Rather than generating uniform participation, digital transformation selectively amplifies the visibility of certain actors while leaving others culturally central yet digitally peripheral. The schematic visualizes how digital platforms reshape internal role differentiation within communities.



Source: Authors own survey (2025)

Figure 1 Differential digital engagement within communities

The figure reveals that digital transformation functions less as a democratizing force than as a mechanism that redistributes visibility and agency within communities. Digitally active actors - typically younger members or intermediaries - gain expanded representational power, often becoming de facto spokespersons of community culture in online spaces. Meanwhile, senior practitioners retain cultural authority but experience limited digital agency. This asymmetry generates new internal dynamics, where cultural centrality and digital visibility no longer coincide. As a result, community roles under digital transformation become layered rather than replaced. Preservation practices thus unfold across parallel domains: digitally mediated representation and embodied cultural transmission. This finding is critical for understanding how digital initiatives may unintentionally reconfigure community hierarchies without altering the underlying cultural logics that sustain folk traditions.

This uneven engagement produces a layered role structure: some community members gain enhanced agency and visibility through digital means, while others retain culturally central yet digitally marginal positions.

4.3. Tensions between community-centered preservation logics and institutional digital agendas

Table 3 Divergent preservation logics between community and institutions

Dimension of preservation	Community-centered logic	Institutional digital logic
Primary objective	Continuity of cultural practice	Completeness of documentation
Evaluation criteria	Contextual integrity; ritual meaning	Standardization; technical accuracy
Knowledge ownership	Moral and collective custodianship	Administrative management
Mode of transmission	Intergenerational, embodied practice	Digital archiving and online dissemination

Source: Authors' own survey (2025)

A recurrent pattern in the data is the emergence of tension between community-centered preservation practices and institutionally driven digital agendas. Local cultural officers and project coordinators frequently frame digitalization as a technical solution to preservation challenges, emphasizing documentation, databases, and online dissemination as indicators of effectiveness. Within this framing, successful preservation is often equated with the visibility, accessibility, and standardization of cultural materials in digital form. By contrast, community participants tend to evaluate preservation success through qualitatively different criteria, such as continuity of practice, cultural respect, and the integrity of intergenerational transmission. For many interviewees, preservation is meaningful only insofar as cultural knowledge continues to be enacted within its original social and ritual contexts. These criteria are inherently difficult to translate into digital metrics or administrative indicators, resulting in divergent understandings of what preservation entails and how it should be assessed.

This divergence produces mismatched expectations regarding roles and responsibilities within preservation initiatives. Community members are frequently positioned as "content providers" within digital projects, expected to supply narratives, performances, or artifacts for documentation and dissemination. However, they often perceive themselves as cultural custodians whose knowledge is relational, context-dependent, and not readily externalizable. This misalignment generates latent friction, particularly when digital outputs are prioritized over ongoing cultural practice.

To clarify these differences, Table 3 contrasts the preservation logics articulated by community participants with those embedded in institutional digital initiatives. Rather than framing these differences as binary oppositions, the table highlights recurring points of divergence that structure everyday interactions between communities and heritage governance mechanisms, especially in digitally mediated projects.

The contrasts outlined in Table 3 illuminate why tensions persist even in the absence of overt conflict. Community actors prioritize continuity, contextual integrity, and moral ownership, whereas institutional approaches emphasize standardization, documentation, and administrative accountability. Digital transformation intensifies these divergences by translating preservation into measurable outputs - such as digitized records or online platforms - that are often detached from local evaluative criteria and lived cultural meanings. As a consequence, community roles are frequently reframed as functional inputs within digital projects rather than as sources of epistemic authority. This reframing subtly shifts power relations by positioning institutions as arbiters of preservation success, while relegating communities to contributory or consultative roles. Although such arrangements may facilitate project implementation, they risk marginalizing culturally grounded forms of expertise that do not align with digital or bureaucratic logics.

Importantly, these tensions do not necessarily result in open conflict. Instead, they manifest as forms of partial engagement, selective cooperation, or symbolic participation. In several cases, community actors complied with digital initiatives at a procedural level - participating in documentation or consultations - while simultaneously maintaining parallel, non-digital modes of cultural transmission that they considered more authentic and meaningful. This dual engagement allows communities to navigate institutional expectations without relinquishing control over culturally significant practices. Taken together, these findings suggest that tensions between community-centered preservation logics and institutional digital agendas are structural rather than incidental. They arise from fundamentally different conceptions of what constitutes preservation and whose criteria should prevail, particularly under conditions of digital transformation.

4.4. Role reconfiguration as negotiated adaptation rather than replacement

Rather than displacing or superseding traditional community roles, digital transformation in folk culture preservation operates primarily through incremental role reconfiguration shaped by negotiation, contestation, and selective adaptation. Empirical evidence from Northeastern Vietnam demonstrates that digitalization rarely produces abrupt institutional realignments at the community level. Instead, it introduces a gradual process through which new role expectations are filtered, reinterpreted, and selectively incorporated into pre-existing custodial arrangements. These findings challenge linear modernization narratives that assume technological adoption necessarily restructures local governance logics or redistributes authority in a uniform manner.

Across the cases examined, digital transformation catalyzes the emergence of auxiliary roles - including digital documenters, online storytellers, heritage mediators, and community-based coordinators - that operate alongside, rather than in competition with, established custodial figures. Crucially, these roles remain structurally peripheral unless anchored to culturally recognized forms of authority. Elders, ritual specialists, and lineage-based knowledge holders continue to function as primary arbiters of cultural legitimacy, while digitally skilled actors assume supportive and translational functions. This layered configuration reflects a deliberate community strategy to prevent the displacement of embodied knowledge by externally valorized digital expertise.

Importantly, digital roles do not derive legitimacy from technical competence alone. Their durability depends on collective recognition and moral validation, grounded in local interpretations of what constitutes appropriate preservation. Community participants repeatedly emphasized that digital engagement is acceptable only when it sustains continuity, reinforces intergenerational transmission, and respects ritual sequencing. When digital practices are perceived to extract knowledge from its social context - by prioritizing visibility, speed, or standardized outputs - they are often confined to project-based participation without altering everyday preservation practices. This distinction explains why high levels of digital activity do not necessarily translate into substantive role transformation.

These findings suggest that role reconfiguration under digital transformation is best conceptualized as a process of negotiated layering rather than functional substitution. Traditional custodial roles retain epistemic authority, while digital actors contribute selectively by extending communicative reach or supporting documentation efforts. Rather than redefining cultural meaning, digital practices are mobilized to mediate between internal preservation logics and external representational demands, particularly those associated with institutional reporting or heritage promotion. This mediation role underscores the asymmetrical but complementary relationship between community agency and institutional digital agendas.

Figure 2 conceptualizes this dynamic as a multi-stage process of negotiated adaptation. Digital initiatives typically enter the community as externally defined interventions, triggering an initial phase of interpretive assessment during which community actors evaluate alignment with local values, temporal rhythms, and moral expectations. This is followed by selective appropriation, in which certain digital practices are reworked to fit existing routines, while others are resisted, deferred, or compartmentalized. Over time, where alignment is sustained, hybrid role formations emerge that integrate digital competencies with culturally sanctioned authority, producing a cumulative rather than disruptive transformation.



Source: Authors own survey (2025)

Figure 2 Process of community role reconfiguration under digital transformation

The process model emphasizes that role reconfiguration is contingent, relational, and reversible. Digital roles gain stability only when continuously reaffirmed through practice and embedded within community-defined evaluative frameworks. Where institutional digital agendas remain flexible and responsive to local priorities, hybrid roles gradually become routinized within preservation activities. Conversely, where misalignment persists - particularly through imposed timelines, external performance indicators, or standardized classification schemes - digital engagement remains episodic and largely symbolic, without reshaping core custodial relations.

This negotiated process foregrounds the conditional nature of digital transformation in folk culture preservation. Digitalization does not operate as an autonomous driver of change but as a catalyst whose effects are mediated by entrenched social relations, moral economies of knowledge, and historically grounded governance practices. Community roles are actively reshaped through situated acts of acceptance, reinterpretation, and boundary-setting, rather than passively redefined by technological infrastructures.

Taken together, the findings indicate that community roles in folk culture preservation under digital transformation are neither static nor uniformly transformed. They evolve through ongoing negotiation at the intersection of community-centered preservation logics and institutionally driven digital agendas. Digital transformation, in this context, re-articulates rather than replaces traditional custodianship, giving rise to hybrid configurations that preserve community agency while accommodating selective forms of digital engagement. This reinforces the central argument of the study: in Northeastern Vietnam, digital transformation reshapes community roles through practice-based negotiation rather than institutional prescription, positioning communities as active arbiters of the scope, meaning, and limits of digital preservation.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how community roles in folk culture preservation are articulated and reconfigured under digital transformation in the northeastern mountainous region of Vietnam. Guided by an interpretive qualitative design, the research addressed three interrelated questions concerning the nature of community roles, the influence of digital transformation on community agency, and the tensions emerging between community practices and institutional digital agendas. The empirical findings allow these questions to be answered with a high degree of analytical coherence.

First, the study confirms that community roles in folk culture preservation are not structured as formally defined functions but are constituted through practice, experience, and culturally embedded forms of legitimacy. This directly addresses RQ1, demonstrating that roles are enacted through ritual participation, apprenticeship, and moral authority rather than through institutional designation. The findings therefore support the underlying analytical assumption that community roles are socially constructed and relational, rather than administratively assigned.

Second, with regard to RQ2, the study shows that digital transformation does not operate as a uniform catalyst for participation or empowerment. Instead, digital technologies selectively reshape visibility and agency within

communities, amplifying the representational capacity of certain actors while leaving culturally central practitioners digitally marginal. This evidence partially supports but also qualifies the implicit hypothesis that digital transformation enhances community agency. Agency is indeed reconfigured, but in stratified and uneven ways that produce layered role structures rather than collective empowerment.

Third, the analysis provides a clear response to RQ3 by demonstrating that tensions between community-centered preservation logics and institutional digital agendas are structural and persistent. These tensions arise from fundamentally different evaluative frameworks regarding what constitutes preservation, who holds authority, and how cultural value should be assessed. Digital transformation intensifies these divergences by privileging standardized, measurable outputs over contextualized cultural continuity. The study thus confirms the hypothesis that digitalization introduces new sites of negotiation and friction rather than resolving existing governance challenges.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances current debates on digital transformation and community participation by challenging linear and technologically deterministic interpretations of role change in cultural preservation. Rather than conceptualizing digitalization as an external force that restructures community governance or redistributes authority in a uniform manner, the findings demonstrate that community roles are reconstituted through practice-based negotiation embedded in existing moral economies, relational hierarchies, and culturally grounded criteria of legitimacy. This contributes to practice-oriented theories of heritage preservation by foregrounding the primacy of embodied knowledge, social recognition, and continuity of enactment over formal role designation or technical competence.

More specifically, the study refines the concept of “community role” by reframing it from a functionally defined position to a relational and situational configuration that is continually enacted through participation. This reconceptualization extends existing community-based heritage frameworks by showing that roles are neither static nor institutionally transferable, but are stabilized through repeated practice and collective validation. Digital transformation, in this sense, does not generate new authority structures *ex nihilo*; instead, it selectively amplifies visibility while leaving underlying regimes of legitimacy largely intact. This distinction between visibility and legitimacy offers a useful analytical lens for understanding why digitally active actors may gain representational power without displacing culturally recognized custodians.

Furthermore, the process model of negotiated role reconfiguration proposed in this study contributes to broader theorization of digital transformation as a conditional and reversible process rather than a linear trajectory. By conceptualizing digitalization as a catalyst whose effects depend on alignment with locally embedded values, temporal rhythms, and evaluative frameworks, the study moves beyond binary narratives of empowerment versus marginalization. It instead highlights the coexistence of parallel domains digitally mediated representation and embodied cultural transmission through which community agency is selectively exercised. This perspective has implications not only for heritage studies but also for scholarship on digital governance, participatory development, and culturally situated technology adoption, particularly in non-Western and rural contexts.

Crucially, the research establishes that community role reconfiguration under digital transformation occurs through negotiated adaptation rather than role replacement. Digital roles acquire legitimacy only when they are perceived as supportive of existing custodial practices and aligned with community-defined values. This finding constitutes the core theoretical contribution of the study, challenging deterministic narratives of digital disruption and demonstrating that communities remain active arbiters of the scope, meaning, and limits of digital intervention.

In sum, the study resolves its research questions by showing that digital transformation reshapes - but does not displace - community roles in folk culture preservation. It contributes to heritage and sustainability scholarship by foregrounding the conditional, practice-based, and negotiated nature of digital change in culturally embedded contexts. For policy and practice, the findings underscore the need to move beyond standardized digital role models and to design preservation initiatives that recognize community authority not as an input to be mobilized, but as a foundational condition for sustainable cultural continuity.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. Each author confirms that there are no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence the research presented in this manuscript.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. All participants were briefed on the research objectives and voluntarily agreed to participate, ensuring their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses.

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