Negotiating Authenticity in the Digital Mediation of Traditional Craftsmanship: Evidence from Peking Opera Costume Production

Shuran Cao., Farah Akmar Anor Salim

Azman Hashim International Business School (AHIBS), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study examines how digital mediation reshapes the understanding and enactment of authenticity within traditional craftsmanship. Drawing on an interpretive qualitative case study of Peking Opera costume production in China, it explores how artisans and designers negotiate cultural meaning as digital tools become embedded in everyday craft practices. Rather than approaching digitalization as a purely technical intervention, the study conceptualizes it as a cultural process through which authenticity is interpreted, articulated, and sustained in practice.

The findings show that digital tools do not simply standardize traditional craftsmanship. Instead, they selectively reorganize visibility and interpretive authority by foregrounding certain aspects of craft knowledge while leaving others embodied and tacit. Artisans continue to rely on experiential judgment and embodied skill, whereas designers increasingly mediate cultural meaning through digital representations that circulate within and beyond the workshop. Authenticity therefore emerges not as a fixed attribute, but as a negotiated outcome shaped through ongoing interaction among practitioners, technologies, and cultural expectations.

By foregrounding everyday negotiation rather than technological performance, this study contributes to heritage and cultural management research by demonstrating that digital mediation does not necessarily erode traditional craftsmanship. Instead, it reconfigures the conditions under which cultural authenticity is produced, communicated, and recognized within contemporary craft industries.

Keywords : digital mediation; cultural authenticity; traditional craftsmanship; tacit knowledge; interpretive authority; Peking Opera costumes

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the central concern of the study by situating traditional craftsmanship within contemporary processes of digital mediation. It outlines the conceptual problem of authenticity and explains why approaching authenticity as a negotiated and practice-based phenomenon is essential for understanding digitally mediated craft traditions. The chapter concludes by defining the research focus and question that guide the analysis.

Digital Mediation and the Question of Authenticity

Traditional craftsmanship has long been understood as a site where cultural knowledge is transmitted through embodied practice, repetition, and interpersonal learning. In many craft traditions, authenticity is not defined through formal documentation or explicit rules, but through the recognition of skill, experience, and cultural legitimacy within the craft community. Judgments of correctness and quality are often grounded in shared practice rather than written standards.

As digital tools increasingly enter heritage-related practices, this mode of knowledge transmission is being reconfigured. Digital mediation introduces new ways of recording, visualizing, and explaining craft knowledge. Patterns can be archived, techniques documented, and production processes translated into digital

representations. While such developments promise preservation and accessibility, they also raise a fundamental question: when craft knowledge becomes digitally visible and explicable, which aspects of authenticity are preserved, and which are potentially redefined?

Authenticity as a Negotiated Process

Within heritage studies, authenticity is increasingly understood not as a fixed property inherent in objects or techniques, but as a negotiated and context-dependent concept. Rather than residing solely in material form, authenticity emerges through social interaction, cultural interpretation, and shared expectations among different actors. This perspective is particularly relevant to traditional craftsmanship, where meaning is generated through practice rather than inscription.

Digital mediation complicates this process of negotiation. On the one hand, digital tools can support claims of authenticity by providing visual references, historical materials, and standardized explanations. On the other hand, they tend to privilege what can be shown, stabilized, and codified, while marginalizing tacit knowledge that resists formal articulation. As a result, authenticity becomes something that must be continuously negotiated among artisans, designers, and the representational forms through which craft knowledge is communicated.

Digital Mediation in Traditional Craft Contexts

The influence of digital mediation on traditional craftsmanship cannot be understood solely in terms of technological adoption. More fundamentally, it reshapes how cultural meaning is produced, communicated, and evaluated. Digital representations often become the primary interface through which craft knowledge is accessed and interpreted, particularly by those who are not directly involved in hands-on practice.

This shift alters the internal dynamics of craft production. Artisans continue to rely on embodied skills and experiential judgment developed through long-term practice. At the same time, designers and cultural mediators increasingly translate these practices into digital forms that can be shared, explained, and circulated. In this process, authority over cultural interpretation may become more distributed, raising questions about how different understandings of authenticity are aligned, negotiated, or contested in digitally mediated settings.

Research Focus and Questions

This study examines how authenticity is negotiated within digitally mediated craft practices, focusing on the production of Peking Opera costumes in China. Rather than treating digital tools as neutral instruments, the study approaches them as cultural mediators that influence how craft knowledge is represented, interpreted, and valued in everyday practice.

The study addresses the following research question: How is cultural authenticity negotiated when traditional craftsmanship is mediated through digital representations?

Contribution of the Study

By focusing on meaning-making rather than technological performance, this study contributes to heritage and cultural management research in three ways. First, it advances the understanding of authenticity as a relational and negotiated process within digitally mediated contexts. Second, it highlights the continuing role of tacit knowledge and embodied judgment in sustaining craft traditions despite increasing digital visibility. Third, it offers an interpretive framework for examining how digital mediation reshapes the distribution of symbolic and interpretive authority within contemporary craft industries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews key literature on authenticity, tacit knowledge, and digital mediation in heritage and craft studies. Rather than treating these strands as separate debates, it brings them into dialogue to establish an

analytical orientation for examining how authenticity is constructed and negotiated in digitally mediated craft practices.

Authenticity in Heritage and Craft Studies

Authenticity has long been a central concern in heritage and craft studies. Early scholarship often treated authenticity as an inherent quality of objects, materials, or techniques, closely associated with historical accuracy and material originality, and typically verified through expert or institutional authority (Smith, 2006).

Later research challenged this object-centered view by conceptualizing authenticity as socially constructed and context dependent. From this perspective, authenticity emerges through interpretation, social interaction, and power relations rather than residing solely in artifacts themselves (MacCannell, 1973; Peterson, 1997). This shift redirected attention from material properties to the processes through which authenticity is claimed and recognized.

In craft-related contexts, this relational understanding is particularly salient. Craft practices rely on embodied skills, experiential learning, and informal transmission. Many aspects of craftsmanship resist formal codification, yet are widely recognized within craft communities as essential indicators of authenticity (Ingold, 2013). Authenticity in such settings is therefore sustained through shared norms and tacit understandings embedded in practice rather than explicit rules.

Tacit Knowledge and Embodied Craft Practice

Tacit knowledge is widely recognized as a foundational element of traditional craftsmanship. Unlike explicit knowledge that can be easily articulated or documented, tacit knowledge is acquired through prolonged engagement, observation, and hands-on practice, encompassing sensory judgment and bodily memory (Polanyi, 1966; Collins, 2010).

Within craft studies, tacit knowledge is closely linked to mastery and legitimacy. Experienced artisans are valued not only for what they know, but for how they respond to subtle variations in materials and working conditions. These responses are rarely standardized, yet they play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of quality and cultural credibility (Schön, 1983).

As craft knowledge becomes increasingly visible through digital media, tensions emerge around what can and cannot be represented. When practices are translated into diagrams, databases, or visual instructions, certain elements are foregrounded while others remain difficult to articulate. This selective visibility raises questions about which forms of knowledge gain authority under digital mediation and how such shifts affect perceptions of authenticity (Giaccardi, 2012).

Digital Mediation and Cultural Meaning

Digital mediation refers to the ways cultural practices are shaped, interpreted, and communicated through digital technologies. Rather than operating as neutral channels, digital media structure what can be recorded, visualized, and shared, thereby influencing how cultural meaning is produced and understood (Latour, 2005).

Research on digital heritage has emphasized benefits such as preservation and accessibility (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007), while critical scholarship has cautioned that digital mediation often privileges visual clarity, standardization, and narrative coherence. These tendencies may conflict with the ambiguity and situational judgment characteristic of traditional craft practices (Smith, 2006).

Authenticity as Negotiation in Digitally Mediated Craft

Building on these strands, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes authenticity as a negotiated outcome rather than a stable condition. In digitally mediated environments, authenticity is shaped through interaction among practitioners, representations, and interpretive frameworks, and must be continually justified as new forms of visibility emerge (Wang, 1999).

This perspective is especially relevant in traditional craft contexts, where artisans, designers, and cultural mediators may hold different understandings of authentic practice. Digital tools can intensify these differences by privileging certain representations while marginalizing others, rendering authenticity an ongoing site of negotiation rather than a settled attribute (MacCannell, 1973; Latour, 2005).

Research Gap and Analytical Orientation

Although existing literature offers substantial theoretical insight into authenticity, tacit knowledge, and digital heritage, empirical studies examining how these dynamics unfold within everyday craft production remain limited, particularly in non-Western contexts (Ingold, 2013; Smith, 2006).

This study addresses these gaps by examining digitally mediated craftsmanship from the perspective of practitioners involved in Peking Opera costume production. By focusing on negotiation, embodied knowledge, and interpretive authority, it develops an analytical framework for understanding how authenticity is constructed and sustained in digitally mediated craft practices.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine authenticity as a negotiated and practice-based phenomenon. It explains the interpretive qualitative research design, the rationale for selecting a single in-depth case, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. The chapter also addresses researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations to enhance analytical transparency.

Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design to explore how cultural authenticity is negotiated within digitally mediated craft practices. Rather than measuring predefined variables, the research seeks to understand how practitioners interpret, explain, and enact authenticity in their everyday work. This approach is particularly appropriate for traditional craftsmanship, where cultural meaning is embedded in practice, interaction, and embodied experience rather than formalized rules.

The analysis is structured around a single in-depth case in order to examine meaning-making processes in context. Focusing on one heritage-based enterprise enables close engagement with everyday practices and interactions through which authenticity is articulated and negotiated. The aim is not to generate comparative generalizations, but to develop a context-sensitive understanding of how digital mediation reshapes cultural meaning in practice.

Research Setting

The empirical material for this study was generated within a heritage-based costume workshop engaged in the production of Peking Opera costumes. The enterprise is located in Nanjing, China, and has a long-standing involvement in traditional craftsmanship. It was selected as the case site because digital representations have become increasingly embedded in its design communication, craft documentation, and coordination practices.

The case does not claim to represent all forms of Peking Opera costume production. Instead, it serves as an analytically rich setting for examining how digital mediation interacts with embodied craft knowledge and cultural interpretation. The emphasis is therefore placed on analytical depth and contextual insight rather than representativeness.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and the examination of craft-related materials. Interviews were conducted with artisans and designers directly involved in costume production. Discussions focused on participants' understandings of authenticity, their experiences with digital

representations, and their reflections on which aspects of craftsmanship could or could not be articulated digitally.

Field observations were carried out within workshop settings, allowing the researcher to observe how digital representations were used alongside embodied practice. Particular attention was paid to gestures, informal explanations, and moments of hesitation or correction during production, as these interactions often revealed tacit forms of knowing that were not explicitly verbalized.

In addition, digital sketches, pattern archives, and visual reference materials used by the enterprise were examined. These materials provided insight into how craft knowledge was structured visually and how cultural meaning was communicated and stabilized through digital forms.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and interpretive process. Interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns related to authenticity, tacit knowledge, and digital mediation. Initial codes were developed inductively, grounded in participants' language and situated practices rather than predefined theoretical categories.

As analysis progressed, codes were refined and organized into broader thematic groupings. These themes were interpreted in dialogue with existing literature on authenticity, embodied knowledge, and digital mediation. Particular attention was given to moments of tension, ambiguity, and negotiation, as these instances were central to understanding how authenticity was constructed and contested in practice.

Researcher Reflexivity

Given the interpretive orientation of the study, researcher reflexivity formed an integral part of the research process. The researcher engaged with the field as an observer–interpreter rather than a detached evaluator, recognizing that access, interaction, and interpretation were shaped by ongoing relationships within the craft setting. Reflective notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to document analytical decisions, emerging assumptions, and potential blind spots.

This reflexive practice supported analytical transparency by situating interpretations in relation to the research context and the researcher's positional engagement with practitioners. Rather than aiming for neutrality, reflexivity was used to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives while remaining critically attentive to the researcher's role in meaning-making.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved low-risk qualitative research. All participants were informed of the research purpose and provided consent prior to participation. To protect confidentiality, the identity of the enterprise and all individuals involved were anonymized. The research focused on professional practices and did not involve sensitive personal information.

Methodological Rationale

A single-case interpretive qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining authenticity in digitally mediated craftsmanship. Authenticity is not treated as a measurable variable, but as a process that unfolds through practice, interaction, and interpretation. Capturing this process requires sustained engagement with a specific cultural and organizational context.

By prioritizing depth over breadth, this methodology enables the study to capture subtle forms of tacit knowledge, embodied judgment, and symbolic negotiation that are often overlooked in comparative or performance-oriented research. The single-case focus thus supports a nuanced understanding of how digital mediation reshapes cultural meaning within a living craft tradition.

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the key empirical findings from the case study. Rather than reporting outcomes in a technical or evaluative manner, the findings focus on how authenticity is understood, negotiated, and enacted in everyday craft practice under conditions of digital mediation. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. Together, they illustrate how digital representations reshape what can be articulated, stabilized, and recognized as authentic within traditional craftsmanship.

What Cannot Be Digitized

One of the most prominent themes across interviews and observations concerned aspects of craftsmanship that participants described as impossible or inappropriate to digitize. While digital tools were routinely used to store patterns, reference images, and procedural notes, artisans consistently emphasized that certain forms of judgment could not be translated into digital form.

Artisans frequently referred to embodied sensations, such as the feel of fabric tension, the resistance of thread, or the rhythm of stitching, as central to authentic craftsmanship. These sensory judgments guided decisions during production but were rarely verbalized unless explicitly prompted. As one artisan explained, knowing when a stitch was "right" emerged through repeated bodily engagement rather than the application of explicit rules.

Although such judgments were sometimes approximated through digital annotations or visual cues, participants regarded these representations as partial at best. Digital records could support learning and reference, but they were not seen as substitutes for the experiential knowledge accumulated through long-term practice. In this sense, authenticity was closely associated with what remained outside digital articulation.

Digital Visibility and Selective Representation

A second theme concerned the selective nature of digital visibility. Digital mediation rendered certain elements of craftsmanship more visible and communicable, while others receded into the background. This selectivity shaped how authenticity was explained and evaluated, particularly in interactions involving designers or external stakeholders.

Designers relied extensively on digital sketches, annotated images, and archived references to communicate cultural meaning. These materials provided a shared visual language that facilitated coordination and discussion. However, artisans noted that such representations tended to emphasize form, pattern, and visual consistency, often at the expense of processual nuance and situational judgment.

As a result, authenticity increasingly became associated with what could be shown and justified through digital reference. While this enhanced clarity and communicability, it also narrowed the range of practices that were readily recognized as authentic. Participants described instances in which craft decisions grounded in experience required additional explanation or were questioned because they lacked clear digital representation.

Shifting Interpretive Authority

A third theme revealed a redistribution of interpretive authority within the craft production process. Traditionally, experienced artisans held primary authority over judgments of correctness and authenticity. With the growing use of digital representations, this authority became more distributed across different roles.

Designers assumed an increasingly prominent role in articulating cultural meaning through digital media. Their interpretations were shaped by how motifs, colors, and symbolic elements were rendered visually. While artisans continued to guide technical execution and material judgment, designers increasingly mediated how authenticity was explained and justified within digitally mediated workflows.

This redistribution of interpretive authority did not manifest as overt conflict. Instead, it gave rise to subtle negotiations. Artisans adjusted how they articulated experiential decisions, while designers became more attentive to the limits of digital representation. Authenticity emerged through these ongoing interactions rather than through unilateral control by any single group.

Authenticity as an Ongoing Negotiation

Across the case, authenticity did not appear as a fixed standard or final outcome. Instead, it functioned as an ongoing negotiation shaped by practice, representation, and interaction. Digital mediation intensified this process by foregrounding certain aspects of craftsmanship while leaving others implicit.

Participants navigated these dynamics pragmatically. Rather than resisting digital tools outright, artisans and designers worked to align digital representations with embodied practice. Authenticity was maintained not through the rejection of mediation, but through continuous adjustment in how cultural meaning was communicated, justified, and recognized.

Taken together, these findings indicate that digital mediation does not dissolve authenticity in traditional craftsmanship. Instead, it reshapes the conditions under which authenticity is produced, interpreted, and sustained in everyday practice.

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to existing literature on authenticity, tacit knowledge, and digital mediation. Rather than framing digital tools as either a threat to or a solution for traditional craftsmanship, the discussion emphasizes how authenticity is actively negotiated through practice. The findings indicate that digital mediation reshapes the conditions under which authenticity is recognized and articulated, without dissolving its cultural significance.

Authenticity Beyond Digital Representation

The findings demonstrate that authenticity in traditional craftsmanship extends beyond what can be captured through digital representation. While digital archives and visual references support documentation and coordination, artisans consistently distinguished between what could be recorded and what had to be judged through experience. This supports existing arguments that authenticity in craft contexts is grounded in embodied knowledge rather than formalized rules.

By foregrounding what cannot be digitized, the study reinforces the view that authenticity is sustained through practice rather than inscription. Digital mediation may assist communication and explanation, but it does not replace the sensory judgment and situational awareness that underpin craft mastery.

Tacit Knowledge and the Limits of Visibility

The analysis further reveals how digital mediation introduces new regimes of visibility that selectively foreground certain aspects of craftsmanship. Visual clarity and standardized references become increasingly important in justifying craft decisions, while tacit forms of knowing risk being marginalized.

In the case examined here, decisions grounded in experience sometimes required additional justification when they lacked clear digital representation. Authenticity thus becomes partially aligned with what can be shown, even though practitioners continue to rely on tacit judgment in everyday practice.

Reconfiguring Interpretive Authority

The findings also point to a reconfiguration of interpretive authority within digitally mediated craft practices. While artisans retain authority over material judgment and technical execution, designers increasingly mediate how cultural meaning is articulated through digital forms.

Understanding authenticity as a negotiated outcome helps explain how these shifts are managed without overt conflict. Interpretive authority becomes relational and situational, emerging through ongoing adjustment rather than fixed hierarchies.

Digital Mediation as a Cultural Process

Digital mediation can be understood as a cultural process rather than a purely technical intervention. Digital tools do not determine outcomes on their own. Their significance depends on how practitioners interpret and integrate them into existing craft practices and institutional environments.

This perspective challenges deterministic narratives that frame digitalization as either inherently damaging or inherently beneficial to heritage. Authenticity is sustained not by resisting mediation, but by shaping how mediation is enacted in practice.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how cultural authenticity is negotiated when traditional craftsmanship is mediated through digital representations. Drawing on an in-depth qualitative case of Peking Opera costume production, the findings show that digital mediation does not eliminate authenticity, but reshapes the conditions under which it is articulated, evaluated, and sustained in practice. Authenticity emerged not as a fixed attribute, but as a dynamic and relational process grounded in embodied practice and tacit knowledge. While digital representations enhanced visibility and communicability, practitioners relied on continuous negotiation to align digital articulation with lived craft practice.

The study makes three contributions to heritage and cultural management research. First, it advances an understanding of authenticity as a negotiated and practice-based phenomenon within digitally mediated contexts, rather than as a stable evaluative standard. Second, it highlights the enduring role of tacit knowledge under conditions of increasing digital visibility, demonstrating that embodied judgment remains central to cultural credibility even as documentation expands. Third, by conceptualizing digital mediation as a cultural process rather than a technical intervention, the study shows how interpretive authority is redistributed among practitioners without determining meaning-making outcomes. Together, these contributions challenge deterministic narratives that frame digitalization as either a threat to or a solution for traditional craftsmanship.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a single-case qualitative study, the findings are context-specific and not intended to be statistically generalizable. Future research could examine whether similar patterns of authenticity negotiation emerge in other craft traditions, institutional settings, or cultural governance environments, and could further explore how digitally mediated authenticity is interpreted beyond workshop contexts. By foregrounding negotiation rather than technological performance, this study offers a nuanced perspective on heritage preservation, emphasizing continuity as an outcome of ongoing interpretive work in an increasingly digital world.

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