

The Development of Digital Communication Model: A Case Study Based on Molam

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage require innovative strategies that align with evolving media environments. This study focuses on Molam, a traditional performance art of the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups, known for its deep cultural significance in northeastern Thailand and southern China. The objective is to develop and analyze an effective digital communication model based on the Molam cultural expression of the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups. Field research was conducted in Mahasarakham and Roi-Et provinces in Thailand and Nanning and Jingxi in China—regions where Molam traditions remain vibrant. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data through structured surveys, in-depth interviews with performers and cultural stakeholders, and digital media observation across platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Data analysis integrated both quantitative survey results and qualitative insights to inform the development of a conceptual framework. The findings reveal that Molam enjoys strong emotional and cultural resonance among local communities and that younger audiences increasingly engage with it through interactive digital formats. Based on these results, a digital communication model was proposed, incorporating feedback loops, content categorization (PGC, UGC, AIGC), and audience analytics to support sustainable cultural transmission. The study suggests that integrating cultural authenticity with digital adaptability is key to preserving folk traditions like Molam. The model presented can serve as a scalable framework for similar intangible cultural heritage across ethnic communities.

Keywords: Molam, digital communication model, cultural preservation, Thai-Isan, intangible cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the role of digital technology in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage has become increasingly prominent. Traditional forms of cultural expression, once limited by time, geography, and oral tradition, are now being adapted and shared globally through digital platforms [1], [2], [3]. This transformation offers both unprecedented opportunities and new challenges. For many ethnic communities, particularly the Zhuang in southwestern China and the Thai-Isan people in northeastern Thailand, digital technologies provide a vital channel for safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage. These ethnic groups possess deep-rooted cultural identities characterized by unique music, language, rituals, and performance art that have historically been transmitted through generational storytelling and local communal events [4], [5], [6], [7]. However, these rich traditions are now at risk due to the combined forces of modernization, urban migration, and the global spread of homogenized media content, threatening to erode cultural diversity [8], [9].

One of the most dynamic and expressive examples of intangible cultural heritage in the Thai-Isan region is Molam, a traditional performance art that combines singing, storytelling, and instrumental music. Deeply embedded in the everyday life and spiritual world of the Isan people, Molam serves as both entertainment and a vessel for cultural transmission [10], [11], [12]. Over time, this tradition has shown remarkable adaptability. From the sacred and ritualistic Molam Peefa to the contemporary and commercial Molam Sing, which incorporates modern pop elements, humorous lyrics, and dance, Molam has continuously evolved while retaining its cultural core [13], [14]. This

evolution has enabled it to resonate with new audiences across generational and geographical boundaries. Its popularity extends beyond rural villages to urban performance halls, television programs, and global online platforms, making Molam a cultural artifact and ambassador for Thailand and the Lao-Thai ethnic identity [15], [16], [17].

A major issue persists despite these developments: a coherent and systematic digital communication strategy for Molam and similar cultural expressions. The current landscape of digital content related to Molam is fragmented—spread across various social media platforms, amateur recordings, and sporadic institutional archives [18], [19]. This lack of structure raises concerns about authenticity, representation, and the sustainability of digital preservation efforts. Without a well-designed communication model, essential aspects of Molam—such as its symbolic meanings, regional variations, and performance techniques—may be lost or distorted in digital translation. Moreover, the failure to strategically engage younger generations through the digital platforms they frequent, such as TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook, risks further alienating them from their cultural roots [20], [21], [22], [23], [24]. Thus, there is a clear need for a structured approach to digitizing and disseminating Molam that respects its cultural essence and embraces the technological preferences of modern audiences [25], [26].

This study responds to that need by proposing a digital communication model tailored to Molam's cultural characteristics and media environment. The proposed model considers the interactive nature of contemporary digital platforms, the sociocultural contexts of content consumption, and the need for professional and community-based content generation. By investigating current communication practices, audience behavior, and technological tools, this study aims to design a model that enhances visibility, accessibility, and engagement with Molam across local and global contexts. More broadly, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse on how digital communication strategies can serve as vehicles for cultural preservation, innovation, and international exchange [27], [28], [29]. This project's significance lies in sustaining a vibrant artistic tradition and offering a scalable blueprint for other ethnic cultures facing similar challenges in the digital age.

OBJECTIVES

To develop and analyze an effective digital communication model based on the Molam cultural expression of the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups.

METHODS

1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques to comprehensively explore how Molam culture is preserved, adapted, and transmitted through digital communication. The methodology was designed to capture the interplay between traditional folk practices and modern digital media strategies [30], [31], [32], [33]. Fieldwork was conducted in culturally significant regions, including Mahasarakham and Roi-Et in northeastern Thailand and Nanning and Jingxi in southern China—areas where the traditions of the Thai-Isan and Zhuang ethnic groups remain vibrant.

The research aimed to construct a model that accounts for the complexities of digital transmission while respecting Molam's authenticity and heritage through direct engagement with cultural performers, digital content producers, and community members. The research design emphasized cultural sensitivity, field-based interaction, and the integration of emerging media technologies, laying the foundation for developing an effective and replicable digital communication model.

2. Data Collection

Information was gathered through three main channels: structured surveys, in-depth interviews, and digital media analysis to ensure the credibility and diversity of the data. These methods facilitated triangulation, allowing researchers to verify insights from various perspectives and ensure that the findings were based on community engagement and media observation.

2.1 Surveys and Questionnaires

The survey component focused on assessing public awareness, engagement, and emotional connection to Molam among residents in the Isan region. Participants from diverse age groups and occupational backgrounds completed

30 valid questionnaires. The questions aimed to measure participants' familiarity with Molam performances, the frequency of exposure, and the intensity of their appreciation or enjoyment of the art form.

2.2 In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key cultural stakeholders to complement survey data and deepen contextual understanding. Interviewees included Molam performers, university professors specializing in cultural studies, digital content creators actively promoting traditional arts, and scholars involved in preserving intangible cultural heritage.

The interview questions explored various aspects, such as challenges in digitizing folk culture, the role of government and educational institutions, evolving audience behavior, and the sustainability of online cultural content. These rich, narrative-based insights were instrumental in shaping the communication model, particularly regarding user engagement, content authenticity, and technological accessibility.

2.3 Digital Platform Observation

The third component of the methodology involved observing digital content and interaction patterns on platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube—three of the most widely used platforms for cultural engagement in Thailand. Researchers tracked metrics such as video views, likes, shares, comments, and subscriber/follower growth. They also analyzed the content formats used (e.g., music videos, live performances, documentaries), distinguishing between professionally produced and user-generated materials.

RESULTS

The study's major findings are structured around three key themes: cultural awareness and digital engagement, the dominance of digital media as a communication channel, and the emerging structure of interactive cultural communication. These results support the development of an effective digital communication model rooted in the Molam tradition of the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups.

1. Cultural Awareness and Digital Engagement

The survey conducted across the Isan region of Thailand revealed that Molam enjoys widespread recognition and significant emotional resonance among the local population. This section analyzes the levels of awareness and engagement with Molam across various demographic groups and reflects on the implications of these findings for digital cultural preservation. The data collected suggests that Molam is not only a traditional performance art but also a vibrant and contemporary form of cultural expression deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the Thai-Isan people, as shown in Figure 1.

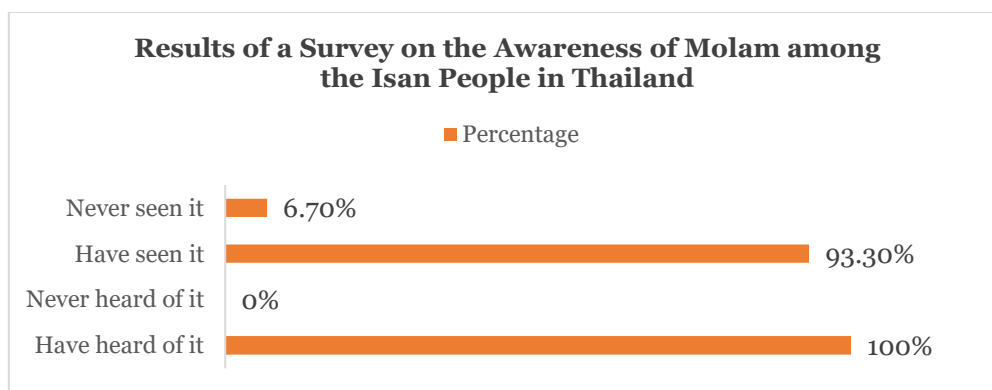


Figure 1. Survey on the Awareness of Molam among the Isan People in Thailand

Figure 1 presents the survey results evaluating Molam awareness among respondents. The chart indicates that 100% of participants had heard of Molam, while 93.3% reported having seen it—either live or through digital platforms. Notably, none of the respondents indicated they had "never heard of it," suggesting complete cultural saturation of Molam within the surveyed communities. A small 6.7% stated they had "never seen it," possibly due to generational, regional, or technological barriers. These findings demonstrate that Molam is widely recognized and commonly experienced, providing a strong foundation for digitization initiatives.

Beyond awareness, the survey also evaluated emotional sentiment toward Molam. Figure 2 presents a visual breakdown of audience attitudes. The majority of respondents expressed a positive opinion of Molam: 50% stated they “liked” the performance style, while an additional 43% said they “liked it very much.” Only 7% of participants showed any degree of disapproval or indifference. These results indicate a high cultural appreciation for Molam and an opportunity to foster deeper emotional and educational engagement through digital media.

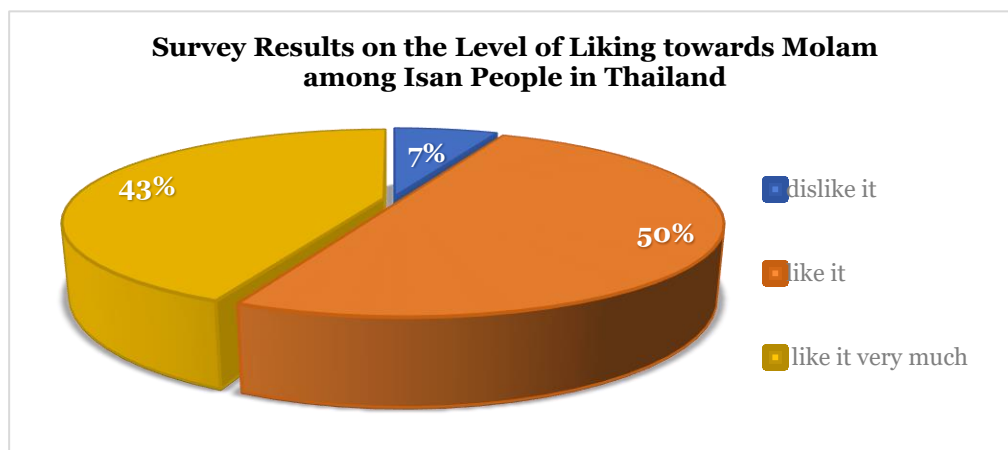


Figure 2. Survey on the Level of Liking Towards Molam among Isan People in Thailand

This emotional connection is vital when constructing a digital communication model. In modern communication systems, especially those delivered through digital platforms, user sentiment strongly influences sharing behavior, engagement rates, and audience retention. The high levels of affection and familiarity found in this study signal that Molam can be successfully recontextualized and amplified in the digital space, provided that the content remains authentic and audience-centered.

Moreover, Molam's popularity among all age groups reinforces the notion that it serves as both a heritage practice and a modern entertainment medium. The art form's flexibility—spanning from traditional storytelling and poetic performances to Molam Sing's contemporary pop-infused concerts—has enabled it to stay culturally relevant. This adaptability enhances the potential success of digitization efforts, especially when utilizing youth-dominated platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook.

The data collected from this survey serves two primary functions in this research. First, it validates Molam's potential as a cornerstone for building a digital communication model to preserve Zhuang and Thai-Isan culture. Second, it provides baseline audience data that will inform the content creation, platform selection, and user interaction design of future digital communication initiatives.

In addition, the findings highlight the opportunity for transnational cultural exchange. Given that the Zhuang ethnic group in southern China shares linguistic and cultural affinities with the Thai-Isan population, Molam could serve as a bridge in regional identity-building. With proper translation, localization, and contextual framing, Molam-themed digital content could resonate across borders and foster intercultural understanding.

Finally, the strong audience sentiment fosters greater investment from various stakeholders. Educational institutions, cultural preservation organizations, and private sponsors may find this data persuasive when contemplating support for Molam digitization projects. The audience's evident affection indicates that these efforts will not only fulfill a cultural preservation mission but also generate significant engagement and visibility.

In conclusion, the results from this section clearly demonstrate that Molam has not only survived but thrived as a cultural form in the digital age. With 100% awareness and over 90% appreciation, it is evident that Molam occupies a central role in the cultural identity of the Isan people. This makes it an ideal candidate for modeling in digital communication, offering a unique blend of traditional relevance and contemporary appeal.

2. Dominance of Digital Media

The evolution of digital media platforms has significantly transformed cultural engagement, particularly among younger generations. This section highlights the dominance of digital media in shaping the way Molam is accessed, experienced, and shared among audiences, especially in the Thai-Isan region. The research findings reveal distinct patterns in generational preferences that have crucial implications for how traditional cultural expressions like Molam are preserved and promoted in the digital age.

Survey data and observational research indicate that a generational divide exists regarding the consumption of Molam performances. Older audiences, particularly those aged 40 and above, continue to prefer more traditional formats such as live stage performances, radio, and television broadcasts. These channels are familiar and accessible and evoke a sense of nostalgia and authenticity closely linked to community gatherings and cultural rituals. For these groups, experiencing Molam is not just about entertainment but also about participating in shared cultural memory and identity.

In contrast, younger generations—those aged 15 to 39—show a clear preference for engaging with Molam through digital media platforms. This demographic commonly consumes content on-the-go via mobile devices, often discovering Molam on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. The allure of these platforms stems from their flexibility, immediacy, and interactivity. Unlike traditional one-way communication mediums, digital platforms facilitate a feedback loop that encourages users to like, share, comment on, and even remix content, fostering a more immersive and participatory experience.

Figure 3 illustrates Molam's current digital communication ecosystem. It provides a visual overview of the dominant platforms—TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube—and highlights their communication features, which make them effective in cultural transmission. These include short video formats, algorithm-driven recommendations, live stream capabilities, and multi-language interfaces. The figure also reflects how these platforms cater to specific user behaviors, such as scrolling, reacting, and content sharing, which are deeply embedded in digital youth culture.

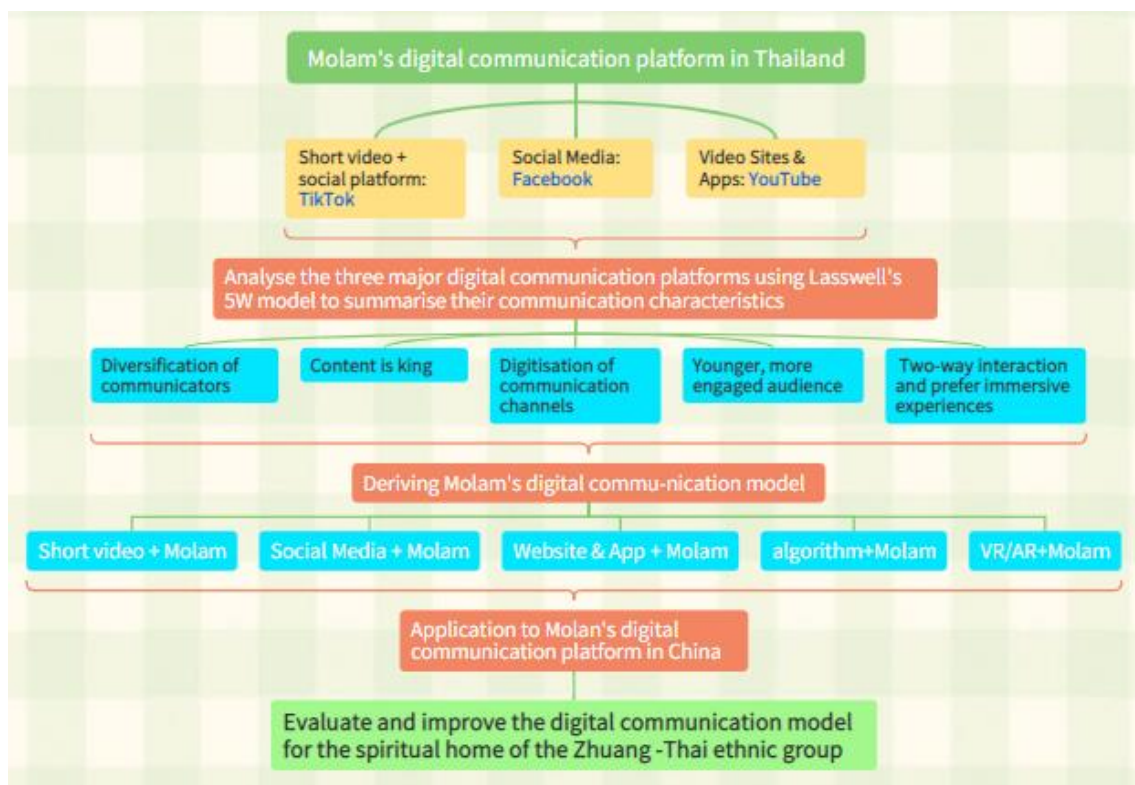


Figure 3. Molam's current digital communication ecosystem

This shift in consumption habits reflects not only technological adaptation but also a reconfiguration of cultural identity formation. Digital media allows users to engage with cultural heritage in ways that align with their daily routines and interests. For example, TikTok videos featuring humorous reinterpretations of Molam performances or modern remixes of traditional songs present cultural content in an accessible, relatable format. These innovations assist younger audiences in bridging the gap between modern entertainment preferences and traditional values.

At the same time, the digital transition presents both opportunities and challenges for cultural preservation. On one hand, social media and video-sharing platforms serve as dynamic archives that can store and circulate Molam performances indefinitely, reaching global audiences and ensuring intergenerational access. On the other hand, concerns arise about the dilution of authenticity, loss of contextual depth, and commercialization of sacred or culturally significant content. When Molam is reduced to soundbites or catchy visuals, its deeper meanings—historical narratives, moral teachings, and ritualistic functions—may be overshadowed.

Despite these concerns, strategically integrating digital media into Molam's communication model is essential. Utilizing analytics tools available on digital platforms can provide insights into audience demographics, engagement levels, and content performance. These metrics can assist cultural stakeholders in optimizing dissemination strategies, identifying gaps in content comprehension, and tailoring communication to better align with audience preferences. For example, if viewership data indicates that certain Molam sub-genres attract more attention, cultural institutions can concentrate on curating and promoting those styles while educating viewers about their cultural roots.

Furthermore, digital engagement fosters cross-cultural exchange, allowing Molam to transcend its regional boundaries and gain visibility in the global cultural landscape. Audiences from outside Thailand can discover Molam through online recommendations, subtitles, and collaborations with international creators. This global exposure not only enhances Molam's cultural value but also opens pathways for intercultural dialogue and creative reinterpretation.

In summary, digital media's dominance in Molam's communication and engagement underscores the importance of aligning cultural preservation strategies with evolving technological landscapes. The insights derived from this study suggest that for traditional folk arts like Molam to thrive, they must be reimagined in formats that resonate with digital-native audiences without compromising their cultural integrity. The development of a digital communication model, as explored in this research, aims to strike that balance, bridging tradition and technology in a meaningful, sustainable way.

3. Communication Structure and Interactivity

In the context of cultural heritage communication, the mode and structure through which content is shared can significantly influence its impact, longevity, and relevance. The rise of digital platforms has not only transformed the mediums used to transmit cultural expressions like Molam but has also fundamentally altered the structure of communication itself. While traditional models of cultural performance relied heavily on one-way dissemination—from performer to passive audience—the digital age has enabled the emergence of participatory, two-way, and even multi-directional communication ecosystems. This shift has created new opportunities for the dynamic preservation and global diffusion of traditional folk arts.

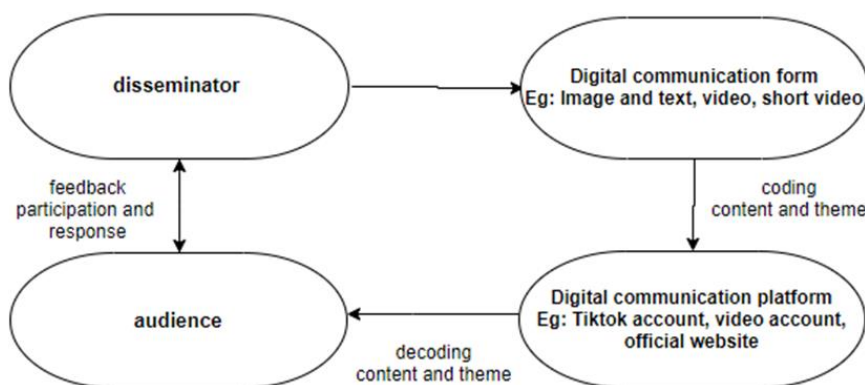


Figure 4. A simplified yet insightful conceptual framework of digital communication

Figure 4 presents a simplified yet insightful conceptual framework for digital communication. This model highlights a cyclical and interactive relationship between disseminators—such as performers, creators, and institutions—and

audiences, which include viewers, listeners, and participants. The cycle starts with the encoding process, where disseminators produce cultural content, often in the form of videos, short clips, images, and narratives, suitable for various digital communication formats such as TikTok posts, YouTube videos, or multimedia web articles. This content is then shared through digital platforms that serve as transmission channels. Audiences interact with this material by decoding the content, interpreting its meaning, aesthetics, or cultural significance based on their personal, generational, or cultural context.

What distinguishes the digital model is the presence of real-time feedback loops that are essential to the communication process. As audiences like, comment on, or share the content, their actions become measurable responses that inform the content creation process. This feedback can be immediate, interactive, and highly influential. It enables creators to assess audience preferences, cultural impact, and emotional reactions, thus guiding future creative decisions. Unlike static one-way communication, this model represents a dynamic, evolving dialogue between cultural transmitters and receivers, where both roles are increasingly fluid.

Figure 5 offers a more comprehensive and operational view of this digital communication cycle as applied to Molam. This expanded model divides the process into distinct stages—each supported by digital infrastructure and analytical tools. It begins with content production, where creators engage in activities such as collecting traditional stories, digitizing performances, or crafting new interpretations rooted in Molam heritage. These inputs are categorized under professionally generated content (PGC), user-generated content (UGC), and emerging AI-generated content (AIGC). Content encoding is followed by dissemination through various digital communication platforms, such as social media (e.g., Facebook, Line), video-sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube), and immersive media environments (e.g., VR/AR exhibitions).

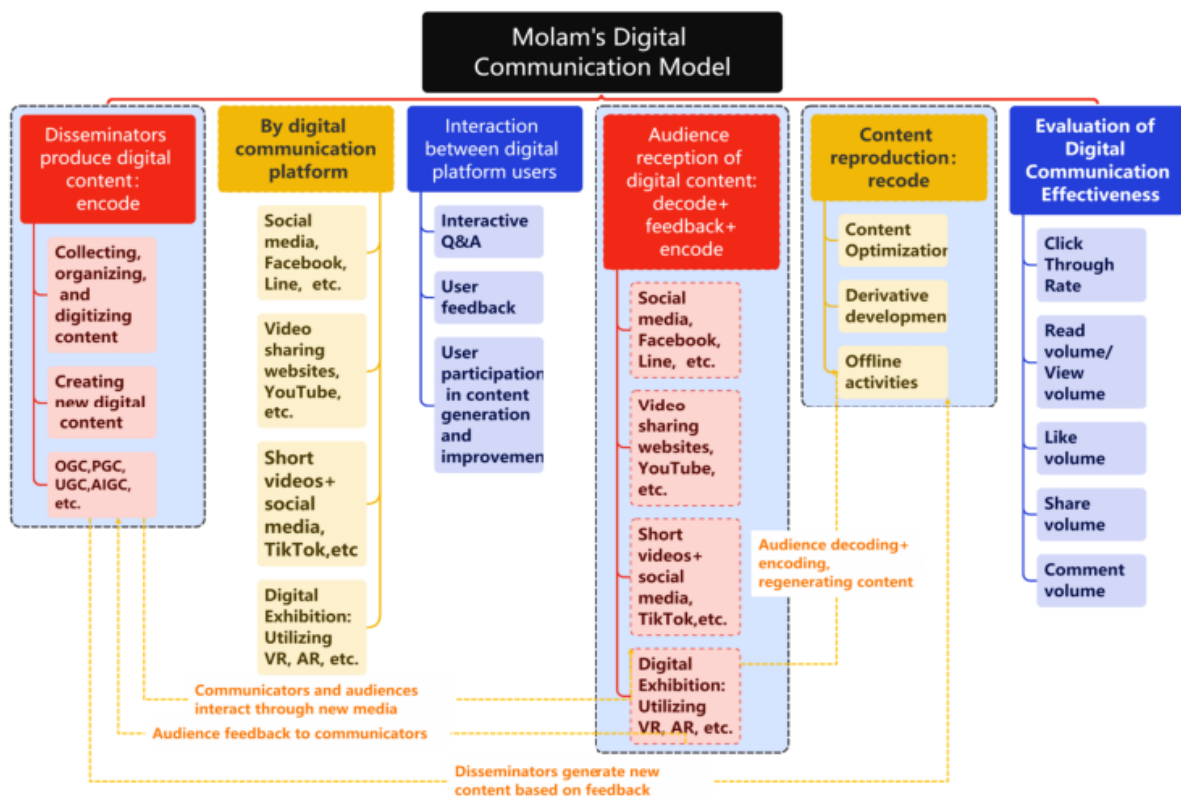


Figure 5. A simplified yet insightful conceptual framework of digital communication

Next, the model focuses on audience reception and interaction, where decoding is not a passive act but a performative one. Users can comment on YouTube videos, remix TikTok performances, or start discussions in Facebook groups. These platforms provide interactive features—like Q&A sections, live chat, and duets—that promote collaborative reinterpretation and expansion of the original content. In this way, audiences become co-creators, influencing both the direction and tone of Molam’s digital trajectory.

The model also includes evaluation mechanisms to assess communication effectiveness. Metrics such as click-through rate, view count, number of likes, shares, and comment volume are utilized to analyze audience engagement levels. These quantitative indicators are enhanced by qualitative sentiment analysis, which helps creators grasp the emotional resonance of their content. For instance, a high view count paired with overwhelmingly positive comments may indicate strong cultural connectivity, while neutral or negative engagement could trigger content revisions. This process of content optimization and derivative development ensures that the digital communication model remains agile, responsive, and culturally sensitive.

A key implication of this model is the empowerment of both creators and audiences. Performers and cultural institutions are no longer constrained by geographic boundaries or local venue limitations—they can reach global audiences within seconds. Simultaneously, viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds can access, appreciate, and even contribute to Molam's living legacy, enriching it with new layers of meaning. This democratization of cultural communication is especially valuable for ethnic traditions like Molam, which face existential threats due to urbanization, modernization, and generational shifts.

Furthermore, the model highlights the significance of choosing the right platforms and formatting content appropriately. For example, short-form videos on TikTok can engage younger audiences with dynamic, visually appealing performances, while longer videos on YouTube may attract viewers interested in conventional narratives or music theory. Live performances streamed on Facebook or virtual reality exhibitions can create immersive experiences that were previously confined to in-person events. By utilizing these diverse communication methods within a cohesive framework, Molam can stay both genuine and adaptable.

In summary, the structure and interactivity of digital communication—as shown in Figures 4 and 5—mark a paradigm shift in how cultural heritage is transmitted, transformed, and cherished. For Molam, and by extension other ethnic performance traditions, this interactive model fosters continuous dialogue, maintains cultural relevance, and encourages strategic innovation. Ultimately, it enables culture to thrive not just as a relic of the past, but as a dynamic and evolving expression in the digital present.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with and contribute to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the transformative role of digital technologies in the preservation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. In particular, the integration of interactive digital platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube into the cultural communication ecosystem of Molam reflects broader trends in media convergence and user-driven content dissemination [13]. This dynamic is consistent with Jensen's assertion that modern media consumption thrives on participatory communication models where audiences no longer remain passive recipients but become co-creators in cultural storytelling [13].

The cultural awareness and emotional resonance with Molam observed among the Thai-Isan population reinforces previous studies on the centrality of traditional performance arts in community identity formation [5]. High levels of recognition and appreciation—100% awareness and over 90% positive sentiment—signal that Molam continues to serve as a living tradition, not merely a relic of the past. These results are consistent with Hou et al.'s research, which emphasizes that digital embodiment of heritage must reflect the lived experience of communities to sustain relevance [5]. Furthermore, the positive reception across age groups underlines Molam's adaptability, supporting Julakarn's thesis that cultural literacy in traditional arts can evolve alongside digital success without sacrificing authenticity [20].

At the same time, the emergence of digital media as the dominant mode of engagement, especially among younger generations, presents both opportunities and challenges. While the accessibility and interactivity of social media platforms facilitate cultural transmission, they also introduce risks related to decontextualization and cultural dilution. This paradox is echoed in Samadilashkariani and Engström's study, which warns that without intentional framing and guidance, digital content may prioritize entertainment over ethnographic fidelity [26]. The current study's proposed digital communication model responds to this concern by embedding evaluative feedback loops and content categorization (e.g., PGC, UGC, AIGC) to manage authenticity, context, and quality in content delivery.

The research also substantiates prior theoretical claims regarding the cyclical and dialogic nature of digital communication. The communication framework presented in Figures 4 and 5 demonstrates how encoding, decoding,

and feedback processes reinforce audience engagement and cultural value in real-time. This model aligns with Ibrus and Ojamaa's media semiotics perspective, where meaning is constantly negotiated between creators and audiences through evolving digital interfaces [27]. Notably, the study's emphasis on both emotional sentiment and analytical metrics (likes, shares, click-through rates) supports the idea that digital communication is both affective and data-driven—a concept explored by Jordan in discussions of algorithmic cultural influence [21].

Inconsistencies arise, however, when considering the potential commercialization of Molam. While the digitization efforts are largely framed as preservation-oriented, there is a latent risk that commercial formats, such as Molam Sing with pop influences, could eclipse more sacred forms like Molam Peefa. This concern echoes critiques by Poddar and Zerbe, who note that global digitalization often privileges marketable content over heritage-rich but complex traditions [25], [9]. Nevertheless, the model proposed here attempts to mitigate this imbalance by advocating a balanced content strategy—one that celebrates diversity within the Molam tradition while optimizing for platform-specific engagement.

Moreover, the project's cross-border implications for Zhuang and Thai-Isan identity-building suggest new directions for regional cultural diplomacy. Shared linguistic and musical ties position Molam as a potential medium for intercultural exchange between southern China and northeastern Thailand. This supports the regional identity discourse articulated by Kronenburg, who argues that performance spaces—physical or digital—play a central role in shaping transnational cultural narratives [15].

Ultimately, this research bridges theoretical and empirical insights into a functional and scalable model for cultural communication. It confirms that while digital platforms present new preservation mechanisms, the success of such efforts hinges on strategic integration, cultural sensitivity, and participatory engagement. In doing so, it contributes a replicable framework for similar traditions facing digital disruption, reinforcing the principle that tradition and innovation need not be mutually exclusive but can coalesce in meaningful, sustainable ways.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully developed and analyzed an effective digital communication model tailored to the cultural expression of Molam among the Zhuang and Thai-Isan ethnic groups. Grounded in a mixed-methods approach combining field surveys, in-depth interviews, and digital platform analysis, the research reveals that Molam maintains high levels of cultural awareness and emotional resonance across diverse age groups, particularly in northeastern Thailand. The study highlights the dominance of digital media—especially TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook—as transformative platforms that have reshaped how Molam is performed, experienced, and shared. Through the proposed interactive communication model, incorporating both professional and user-generated content, real-time audience feedback, and platform-specific strategies, the research offers a sustainable and scalable framework for cultural preservation. This model not only ensures the authenticity and adaptability of Molam in the digital era but also serves as a blueprint for safeguarding other forms of intangible cultural heritage facing similar challenges in an increasingly globalized and digitized world.

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