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BETWEEN SACREDNESS AND THE SCREEN: A SOCIAL HUMANITIES PERSPECTIVE ON DIGITAL HERITAGE TRANSFORMATION AT KERATON NGAYOGYAKARTA HADININGRAT

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A B S T R A C T

In the digital age, the relationship between human communities and cultural heritage is increasingly mediated by screens, platforms, and algorithms, raising fundamental social humanities questions about meaning, memory, sacredness, and belonging. This study examines how Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, a living royal institution carrying deep historical, symbolic, and spiritual significance, negotiates this transformation. Rather than treating digitalization as a purely technical or commercial matter, the study approaches it as a socio-cultural process in which human experience, collective identity, and community life are reconfigured across physical and digital space. Using a qualitative case study design with thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke framework, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with institutional managers, abdi dalem (palace custodians), offline publics, and digital publics, combined with observation of the institution's digital platforms. Five interrelated findings emerged. First, the palace's digital presence is highly visible but remains representational rather than narrative-driven, reflecting an early stage of digital sociality. Second, rich cultural meaning is weakly translated into digital form, producing a decoupling between visual representation and

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lived significance. Third, publics participate through a fragmented pattern of passive, embodied, and mediated modes, without mechanisms that convert one mode of belonging into another. Fourth, human experience across the senses, emotion, intellect, behavior, and relationality is holistic offline but contracts sharply when mediated digitally. Fifth, this contraction is substantially shaped by a structural negotiation between the sacred and the profane, in which the institution deliberately withholds full digital openness to protect sacred meaning from erosion. The study proposes a Sociocultural Model of Digital Heritage Transformation, built on three interdependent pillars, meaning-making, lived experience, and social participation, moderated by ongoing sacred-profane boundary work. The findings contribute to social humanities scholarship on digital heritage by foregrounding human meaning and community life, rather than technology alone, as the central problem of cultural digitalization, and offer practical guidance for institutions negotiating tradition and digital modernity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital age has not only transformed how information circulates; it has reorganized the very social fabric through which human beings relate to memory, community, and meaning (Buragohain et al., 2024) . For the social humanities, this shift raises questions that extend well beyond marketing or technology adoption, what happens to collective identity when it is mediated through a feed rather than a gathering, and what happens to sacredness when it becomes shareable content(Del Vecchio et al., 2025) . Cultural heritage institutions, particularly those bound to royal, historical, and spiritual traditions, sit at the center of this tension. They are simultaneously custodians of embodied cultural memory and participants in a digital society that rewards visibility, speed, and openness(Shim et al., 2024). Understanding how such institutions navigate digital transformation therefore offers a productive site for social humanities inquiry into meaning, community, and sacredness in the digital age (Tan et al., 2026) .

Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, one of Indonesia's most prominent living heritage institutions, exemplifies this tension vividly. The palace maintains an active presence across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter/X, and its official website, through which it documents cultural programs such as uyon-uyon hadiluhung, gladhi beksan, and performances of the Yogyakarta Royal Orchestra. Viewed only through metrics, follower counts, posting frequency, and content volume, digitalization appears to have been embraced successfully. Yet from a social humanities standpoint, the more important question is not how much content circulates, but what kind of human relationship, understanding, belonging, felt meaning, or mere passive consumption, that circulation actually produces.

Preliminary observation suggests that the palace's digital activity remains largely representational platforms are used to document and announce, while the deeper symbolic and philosophical content of the tradition, harmony, balance, spiritual practice, historical legitimacy, is rarely translated into a form that digital publics can inhabit as lived meaning. Philosophical values often appear as brief captions beside visual content, producing a gap between what audiences see and what they are meant to understand. This condition points to a broader social humanities concern about the digital age, the ease of digital reproduction does not guarantee the transmission of meaning, and visibility is not equivalent to understanding or belonging.

This concern deepens when the question turns to community and participation. Publics engaged with the palace form not a single, uniform audience but a fragmented set of social positions, digital publics who interact briefly through likes and comments, offline publics who don traditional attire and participate bodily in ritual events, and a third group positioned between the two, watching audio-visual documentation without the possibility of genuine interaction. No consistent social pathway exists to move a person from one position to another, offline experience is rarely carried into digital life, and digital audiences are seldom invited into deeper physical participation (Yuxin et al., 2024) . Read through a social humanities lens, this is not simply a marketing inefficiency; it is a fragmentation of community life across physical and digital space, a phenomenon increasingly common to institutions negotiating tradition in a digitally mediated society (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025b) .

A further layer of complexity concerns the sacred itself. Sociological and anthropological traditions have long distinguished the sacred from the profane, treating this boundary as a fundamental organizing principle of social and religious life (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025a). In the digital age, this boundary is under renewed pressure not every ritual, symbol, or practice within the palace can be freely recorded and circulated without risking what this study terms sacred value dilution, the erosion of sacred meaning through mass reproduction

and decontextualized consumption. The institution's caution in this regard is therefore not a failure of digital literacy but a form of active boundary work, a concept central to the social humanities' understanding of how communities protect meaning under conditions of technological and social change (Phung et al., 2025) .

Existing scholarship on digital heritage, published largely within tourism, marketing, and interactive media literatures, has emphasized storytelling, interactivity, and immersive technologies such as AR/VR as drivers of successful digitalization(Phung et al., 2025) . What remains underexamined is the human and social dimension of this process, how meaning is made or lost, how communities are formed or fragmented, and how sacredness is negotiated, particularly within sacred, exclusivity-bound institutions such as royal palaces, where cultural authenticity imposes constraints rarely present in conventional tourism contexts. This gap constitutes the central motivation of the present study: to examine digital heritage transformation not primarily as a branding or technology problem, but as a social humanities problem of meaning-making, lived experience, and community life in the digital age.

Accordingly, this study asks three questions: (1) how does the digital age reshape the social relationship between Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat and its publics; (2) how is community and belonging constructed, or fragmented, across offline and digital space; and (3) how does the institution negotiate the boundary between the sacred and the profane under conditions of digital openness. In pursuing these questions, the study aims to contribute both empirically and theoretically to social humanities scholarship on cultural heritage in the digital age, and to propose a model, grounded in meaning-making, lived experience, and social participation, that other sacred cultural institutions may draw upon as they navigate the same tension between tradition and digital modernity.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design, chosen because the phenomenon under investigation, the translation of historical, symbolic, and sacred cultural meaning into digital social life, is inherently context-bound, multidimensional, and embedded within a complex socio-cultural setting that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Phung et al., 2025) . A case study design allows the phenomenon to be examined holistically within its real-life context, drawing on multiple sources of evidence appropriate to social humanities inquiry.

The study was conducted at Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, focusing on its official digital platforms, Instagram (@kratonjogja,@kratonjogja.event, @kratonjogja.tourism), TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter/X, Threads, and the official website (kratonjogja.id), as well as its offline cultural programs, including uyon-uyon hadiluhung, gladhi beksan, the Yogyakarta Royal Orchestra, cultural exhibitions, and the Srimanganti tour package. This dual setting, digital and physical, was essential to capture the full spectrum of social participation and lived experience across both spaces.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling and grouped into four categories representing distinct social positions, institutional managers responsible for digital content and cultural promotion, abdi dalem (palace custodians), representing internal custodians of ritual authenticity, offline publics with direct, embodied experience of the palace's cultural programs, and digital publics who engage with the palace predominantly through digital platforms. This four-category structure enabled a cross-perspective comparison between institutional and public viewpoints, and between offline and digital modes of belonging (Chen et al., 2025) . Data collection continued until data saturation was

achieved, indicated by the recurrence of consistent patterns and the absence of new thematic information across informant categories (Saunders et al., 2023) .

Data were collected through in-depth interviews exploring informants' perceptions and lived experiences, digital observation of platform activity and audience response, and content analysis of captions, visuals, and video documentation, applied iteratively to cross-check emerging patterns(Younas & Inayat, 2025) . Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report interpreted throughout in dialogue with sociological and humanities perspectives on sacredness, community, and lived experience (Putrie et al., 2026) .

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of sources, methods, and data; member checking with key informants prolonged engagement with the research setting (Rosairo, 2023) . A documented audit trail of analytical decisions, ensuring that the resulting themes are grounded in rigorously validated empirical evidence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Thematic analysis across the four informant categories produced five interrelated findings, best understood not as isolated observations but as a single social process: a representational mode of digital presence produces weak translation of sacred and symbolic meaning, which in turn fragments community participation, which further diminishes the fullness of human experience when mediated digitally, all of this unfolding within an ongoing negotiation between the sacred and the profane. The discussion below traces this process theme by theme before integrating the findings into a sociocultural model.

Theme 1. Visibility Without Narrative: Digital Presence as Social Representation

The palace maintains a wide digital footprint, Instagram (@kratonjogja with approximately 505,000 followers and over 2,000 posts), TikTok (71,200 followers), YouTube (235 subscribers, 783 videos, over 31.2 million cumulative views), Facebook (185,000 followers), Twitter/X (84,889 followers), and Threads (60,100 followers). Such figures confirm active participation in digital society. Yet the overwhelming majority of content functions as documentation, event announcements and visual records, rather than as a constructed cultural narrative connecting the institution's history, symbolism, and community across platforms. Each platform operates as an isolated act of representation rather than part of a continuous social story, leaving digital publics with disconnected fragments of cultural presence rather than a coherent sense of belonging to a living tradition (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024) .

Theme 2. The Untranslated Sacred: Meaning, Memory, and the Limits of Digital Form

Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat possesses an unusually rich reservoir of cultural memory, historical legitimacy as a center of Javanese civilization, philosophical teachings of harmony and balance, and spiritual meaning embedded in ritual. Captions accompanying

digital content do attempt to convey this meaning, offering audiences an initial cognitive link to heritage value. Yet philosophical explanation remains confined to text, while visual content continues to function as a self-contained aesthetic object largely disconnected from the narrative accompanying it. Audiences are told what a ritual means without being drawn into feeling or experiencing that meaning, a condition this study terms shallow meaning engagement: understanding stalls at the level of knowing and never advances to feeling or belonging (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2025) .

Theme 3. Fragmented Publics: Passive, Embodied, and Mediated Modes of Participation

Rather than a simple active passive binary, publics participate through three distinct social registers. In digital space, participation is dominated by likes, views, and brief comments, a passive mode in which the public functions as a content consumer rather than a community member. In offline events such as uyon-uyon hadiluhung and gladhi beksan, where attendees wear traditional attire and take on ritual roles, participation becomes embodied and immersive, transforming spectators into cultural participants. Between these poles sits a mediated public, exemplified by YouTube viewers who experience atmosphere without interactivity. No mechanism exists to move individuals between these registers: offline belonging is not carried into digital life, and digital publics are rarely invited toward deeper participation, a condition this study terms the participation conversion gap (Ma, 2025).

Theme 4. Embodied versus Mediated Experience: The Human Sensorium in Digital Space

Applying Schmitt's five experiential dimensions as a vocabulary for human experience, sense, feel, think, act, and relate, offline settings prove remarkably comprehensive: sensory richness through costume, architecture, and live gamelan music; affective depth through the solemn atmosphere of ritual; intellectual engagement through philosophical explanation; behavioural immersion through active ceremonial participation; and relational bonding through shared community presence. When mediated digitally, however, every dimension contracts. Sensory experience narrows to photographs and limited footage; affective bonding weakens through the screen; intellectual content persists but remains disconnected from lived feeling; behavioural participation nearly disappears, as no mechanism allows digital publics to act rather than merely watch; and relational experience shrinks to comments and likes that fail to generate genuine community. This systematic contraction constitutes an experience translation failure, revealing the digital age's persistent difficulty in carrying full human experience across the threshold from physical to virtual space (Du Toit, 2024) .

Theme 5. Negotiating the Sacred-Profane Boundary in a Digital Society

The preceding four findings are substantially shaped by a genuine structural negotiation between cultural sacredness and the demands of digital openness. Not every

ritual, symbol, or practice can be freely recorded and circulated without risking profanization, the erosion of sacred meaning through mass reproduction and decontextualized consumption. Institutional managers and abdi dalem alike express consistent concern about maintaining strict boundaries over what may and may not be digitized, producing a pattern of selective digital representation in which content is deliberately incomplete and conservative rather than exhaustive. This finding reframes the previous four themes: the representational character of digital presence, the caution around narrative depth, and the limited translation of experience are not simply failures of digital strategy but, at least in part, a deliberate and culturally legitimate form of sacred boundary work, consistent with classical sociological accounts of how communities protect meaning under conditions of social and technological change (Matumbu & Kutama, 2026) .

Toward a Sociocultural Model of Digital Heritage Transformation

Read together, the five themes describe a single social process rather than five separate problems. Digital presence remains representational because there is no narrative architecture connecting platforms into a shared cultural story (Theme 1) this absence is precisely why rich cultural meaning cannot be translated into felt digital understanding (Theme 2), the failure to translate meaning into feeling is what confines participation to its passive, cognitive register while leaving embodied and relational belonging stranded offline (Theme 3), this same failure of meaning-to-experience transformation causes all five dimensions of human experience to contract when mediated digitally (Theme 4)and the caution underlying all of these limitations is substantially shaped by the institution's legitimate concern for protecting sacred meaning from digital dilution (Theme 5).

This integrated reading suggests a Sociocultural Model of Digital Heritage Transformation, in which cultural heritage value, historical, symbolic, and sacred, must pass through three interdependent pillars before it can produce meaningful social participation in the digital age: meaning-making, which transforms raw cultural memory into cohesive narrative rather than isolated captions; lived experience design, which deliberately engineers digital encounters to activate feeling, action, and relationality rather than sensory and cognitive dimensions alone; and social participation ecosystem development, which builds the missing pathways that convert belonging across offline and digital space. All three pillars operate under the moderating influence of ongoing sacred-profane boundary work: none can be pursued in the unrestrained manner typical of commercial digitalization but must instead be calibrated against the imperative of preserving cultural authenticity (Pereda et al., 2025) .

This model extends prior digital heritage literature, which has generally treated storytelling, interactivity, and immersive technology as isolated technical success factors, by foregrounding the social humanities' central concerns: how meaning is made, how community is sustained, and how sacredness is protected under conditions of digital

modernity. For sacred, exclusivity-bound institutions such as royal palaces, these factors cannot be pursued in the same unrestrained manner as in commercial cultural tourism but must instead be filtered through a non-negotiable fourth consideration embedded throughout the model: the preservation of sacred cultural integrity as a condition of, rather than an obstacle to, meaningful digital social life (Gao & Zhang, 2025) .

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined digital heritage transformation at Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat as a social humanities problem of meaning-making, lived experience, and community life in the digital age, rather than as a purely technical or commercial matter. The findings show that digital presence remains representational rather than narrative-driven, producing a translation gap in which rich cultural meaning fails to become felt understanding. This, in turn, fragments social participation into passive, embodied, and mediated registers with no pathway for conversion between them, and diminishes the fullness of human experience when mediated digitally across all five experiential dimensions. These conditions are substantially shaped by an ongoing, and legitimate, negotiation between cultural sacredness and digital openness. Synthesizing these findings, the study proposes a Sociocultural Model of Digital Heritage Transformation, built on meaning-making, lived experience, and social participation, moderated by sacred-profane boundary work. The central contribution of this study is to reposition digital heritage transformation within social humanities discourse: the challenge facing institutions such as Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat is not a shortage of technology or cultural richness, but the absence of a deliberate social system capable of converting that richness into meaningful, felt, and participatory human experience without compromising the sacredness that gives the heritage its value.

Recommendations

For cultural institutions: build a unified narrative connecting digital platforms into one continuous cultural story; design digital encounters that deliberately activate feeling, action, and relational belonging rather than sensory and cognitive dimensions alone; and create explicit pathways that convert offline participation into digital belonging and digital audiences into deeper physical participation, all governed by clear, jointly developed guidelines distinguishing shareable from protected sacred content.

For social humanities and digital humanities scholarship: empirically validate the proposed Sociocultural Model of Digital Heritage Transformation across other sacred and exclusivity-bound institutions; examine immersive technologies such as AR/VR as a potential response to experience translation failure while remaining attentive to the risk of sacred value

dilution; and conduct longitudinal, ethnographically grounded studies of how digital society reshapes community life and sacred meaning over time.

For cultural policymakers: develop sector-wide guidelines for heritage digitalization that treat the negotiation between the sacred and the profane as a standard consideration in cultural and digital policy, rather than an institution-specific afterthought.

As a single-site qualitative case study, the findings are contextually rich but not statistically generalizable and reflect a time-bound snapshot of rapidly evolving digital practice, limitations that future comparative and longitudinal research within the social humanities may help address.

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