

Co-Creating Tourism Experiences Through Digital Storytelling for Local Cultural Heritage Promotion

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Abstract

This study conceptualizes and empirically validates a structural framework examining how tourism experience co-creation via Digital Storytelling (DST) enhances perceived experiential value, community engagement, and tourists' intentions to preserve local cultural heritage. Grounded in Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) and narrative transportation theory, a convergent mixed-methods research design was deployed. The quantitative phase surveyed 420 domestic and international cultural tourists visiting community-based heritage destinations who interacted with narrative-driven digital platforms. The structural model was estimated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), supported by qualitative thematic analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews with local heritage custodians, artisans, and destination managers.

The empirical findings reveal that DST-mediated co-creation exerts a strong, positive direct effect on tourists' perceived experiential value ($\beta = 0.482, p < 0.001$) and community engagement ($\beta = 0.214, p < 0.001$). Perceived value directly enhances preservation intentions ($\beta = 0.284, p < 0.001$) and acts as an antecedent to community engagement ($\beta = 0.456, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, community engagement significantly drives local heritage preservation intentions ($\beta = 0.468, p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis confirms that perceived value and community engagement function as complementary serial mediators between DST co-creation and cultural heritage preservation intentions ($\beta = 0.103, p < 0.001$). In total, the structural model accounts for 58.4% of the variance in preservation intentions ($R^2 = 0.584$). Qualitative evidence corroborates that authentic digital narratives shift tourists from detached spectators to responsible heritage stewards. These findings provide strategic implications for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) seeking to balance technological innovation with sustainable cultural stewardship.

Keywords: Value Co-creation, Digital Storytelling, Cultural Heritage Tourism, Service-Dominant Logic, Community Engagement, Heritage Preservation

1. Introduction

Local cultural heritage—encompassing both tangible historical monuments and intangible living traditions, folklore, and craft skills—faces unprecedented threats from rapid globalization, cultural commodification, and overtourism (Richards, 2018; Timothy, 2011). Historically, cultural heritage interpretation has operated within an authoritarian, top-down paradigm dominated by curatorial experts. Static museum plaques, printed guidebooks, and rigid guided tours frequently reduce tourists to passive consumers of historical facts, fostering detached tourist gazes rather than empathetic, enduring connections (Smith, 2006). This separation often leads to visitor apathy, unintentional site degradation, and friction between visiting populations and host communities.

The advent of the smart tourism paradigm and digital transformation has redefined visitor expectations (Buhalis, 2020). Modern cultural tourists increasingly seek meaningful, immersive, and participatory encounters where they can actively engage with destination identities (Prebensen et al., 2018). Within service marketing, Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) argues that value is never merely delivered or embedded in an output by a producer; rather, value is collaboratively created through the integration of operant and operand resources during usage (*value-in-use* and *value-in-context*) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). When applied to cultural tourism, value emerges through dynamic, bidirectional interactions between visitors, local community members, and interpretive media (Campos et al., 2018).

Digital Storytelling (DST) serves as a potent vehicle for such participatory encounters. Originating as a grassroots movement to democratize media production (Lambert, 2013), DST combines spoken vernacular narratives, archival imagery, ambient audio, and interactive mobile interfaces, such as augmented reality (AR) and geolocation mapping (Bec et al., 2019; Robin, 2008). Unlike institutional marketing broadcasts, DST amplifies the authentic, lived voices of local custodians, enabling tourists to participate in meaning-making, contextual interpretation, and narrative co-creation (Moscardo, 2020).

While prior scholarship has examined technology adoption within heritage sites—often focusing on system functionality or hedonic satisfaction (e.g., Chung et al., 2018)—critical theoretical and empirical gaps persist:

1. Limited research integrates the tenets of S-D Logic with digital narrative design to evaluate how visitor co-creation impacts civic preservation outcomes.
2. Few studies empirically investigate the cognitive and affective pathways linking digital narrative interaction to pro-cultural behavioral intentions.
3. The mediating mechanisms of perceived experiential value and psychological community engagement remain underexplored in smart heritage contexts.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the structural relationships among DST-driven experience co-creation, perceived experiential value, community engagement, and heritage preservation intentions. The specific objectives are:

- To develop a theoretical model mapping how interactive DST co-creation influences tourist preservation behaviors.
- To empirically test this model using PLS-SEM on a cross-sectional dataset of cultural heritage visitors.
- To examine the mediating effects of perceived value and community engagement in converting digital interaction into sustainable conservation intentions.
- To triangulate statistical results with qualitative insights from community stakeholders.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Service-Dominant Logic and Experience Co-creation in Tourism

Service-Dominant Logic conceptualizes service exchange as the fundamental basis of economic activity, positioning customers as active co-creators of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) conceptualized the DART model (Dialogue, Access, Risk Assessment, and Transparency) as the building blocks for enterprise-consumer co-creation. In cultural tourism, experience co-creation entails an active psychological, emotional,

and cognitive investment by visitors interacting with heritage environments and host communities (Campos et al., 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2014).

When tourists actively interpret artifacts, curate their experiential itineraries, and exchange narratives, they integrate destination resources with their personal knowledge and cultural perspectives. This collaborative exchange elevates the experience from a routine visit to an authentic, meaningful engagement that drives value-in-use (Prebensen et al., 2018).

2.2 Digital Storytelling (DST) as an Interpretive Medium

Digital Storytelling merges personal narrative techniques with accessible multimedia production tools (Lambert, 2013). Within heritage management, DST serves as an interpretive bridge translating intangible folklore, rituals, and indigenous histories into evocative, digestible digital formats (Robin, 2008).

Moscardo (2020) highlighted that narrative transportation within tourism environments captures attention, evokes empathy, and organizes complex historical narratives into coherent cognitive schema. Supported by ubiquitous mobile computing and location-based media, modern DST platforms permit bidirectional interaction: visitors can access oral histories recounted by local community elders, contribute their reflections, geo-tag personal photographs, and co-curate digital archives (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). DST transforms the tourist from an outsider into an active participant within the living memory of the community.

2.3 Perceived Value, Community Engagement, and Preservation Intentions

Perceived value represents an overall assessment of utility derived from an experience, balancing benefits against investments of time, cognitive effort, and financial capital (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). In heritage tourism, experiential value spans cognitive/epistemic value (intellectual enrichment), emotional value (affective resonance), and social value (interpersonal connection) (Prebensen et al., 2018).

Community engagement reflects a visitor's psychological attachment, solidarity, and perceived relatedness to the local host community (Dwyer et al., 2009). When tourists encounter authentic human narratives, their empathy toward the residents' living conditions, socio-economic challenges, and cultural preservation struggles intensifies.

Heritage preservation intentions encompass pro-environmental and pro-cultural behavioral inclinations, including compliance with site regulations, willingness to pay conservation fees, purchasing authentic local crafts, and actively countering cultural degradation (Su et al., 2018; Timothy, 2011). Fostering preservation intentions is essential for the sustainable governance of heritage destinations vulnerable to physical wear and cultural commercialization (Smith, 2006).

2.4 Hypotheses Development and Research Model

DST Co-creation and Perceived Value

Interactive digital storytelling enables tourists to personalize their interpretive trajectories, solve cultural inquiries, and contextualize historical sites based on individual interests (Neuhofer et al., 2014). Active involvement in meaning-making elevates intellectual enrichment and affective resonance. Consequently, participatory storytelling directly enriches the perceived experiential value of the journey:

- **H1:** *Tourism experience co-creation through digital storytelling positively influences tourists' perceived value.*

DST Co-creation and Community Engagement

Digital storytelling centers on community-generated narratives rather than detached corporate promotion (Lambert, 2013). By interacting with localized oral histories, visitors establish personal, psychological bonds with the storytellers. When tourists contribute their own reflections back into the digital ecosystem, a shared interpretive space develops between hosts and guests (Moscardo, 2020), nurturing interpersonal rapport:

- **H2:** *Tourism experience co-creation through digital storytelling positively influences tourists' community engagement.*

The Role of Perceived Value

When tourists derive high cognitive, affective, and social value from heritage experiences, they develop gratitude and affinity toward the host environment that facilitated those outcomes (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Visitors who find an experience enriching and emotionally meaningful are more motivated to engage with community preservation efforts (Prebensen et al., 2018; Su et al., 2018). Moreover, heightened perceived value directly motivates reciprocal stewardship, fostering a desire to safeguard the source of that value:

- **H3:** *Perceived value positively influences tourists' community engagement.*
- **H4:** *Perceived value positively influences tourists' cultural heritage preservation intentions.*

Community Engagement and Heritage Preservation Intentions

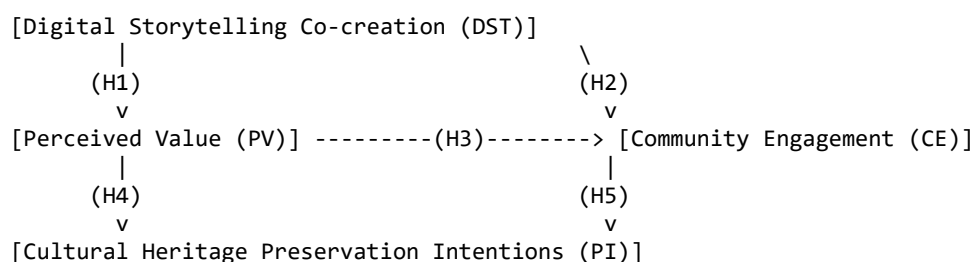
Psychological attachment to host communities generates altruistic, protective motivations (Dwyer et al., 2009). When tourists feel invested in a community's welfare, they are more likely to respect cultural norms, avoid disruptive behaviors, invest in local enterprises, and advocate for heritage conservation (Su et al., 2018; Timothy, 2011):

- **H5:** *Community engagement positively influences tourists' cultural heritage preservation intentions.*

The Mediating Framework

S-D Logic posits that value-in-use acts as an internal cognitive-affective evaluation that bridges collaborative resource integration with downstream behavioral commitments (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Mere exposure to digital media does not spontaneously trigger conservation behavior; rather, the participatory mechanics of DST must first foster perceived value and community empathy before translating into tangible preservation commitments:

- **H6:** *Perceived value and community engagement mediate the relationship between DST-mediated experience co-creation and cultural heritage preservation intentions.*



3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative modeling formed the primary analytical core to test structural hypotheses, while qualitative data provided contextual depth, helping explain the social mechanisms underlying the statistical paths.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

- **Quantitative Phase:** The target population comprised domestic and international tourists visiting community-based cultural heritage sites in Southeast Asia that had integrated interactive digital storytelling tools (e.g., location-triggered mobile web apps, interactive QR-based oral histories, and community heritage audio walks). Data collection spanned six months. A multistage purposive sampling technique was employed. Screening questions ensured respondents were at least 18 years of age and had actively engaged with the on-site digital storytelling platforms for a minimum of 15 minutes during their visit. Out of 450 collected questionnaires, 420 were usable, satisfying the sample-size recommendations of Hair et al. (2022) for complex PLS-SEM models.
- **Qualitative Phase:** Purposive sampling was used to recruit 15 key local stakeholders: community elders (3), master craft artisans (4), local tour operators (4), and municipal heritage officers (4). Semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes probed community perceptions of digital narrative sharing, host-guest interactions, and conservation outcomes.

3.3 Measurement Scales

Construct operationalizations were adapted from validated international scales and recontextualized for smart heritage tourism:

- **DST Experience Co-creation (DST):** Six items adapted from Campos et al. (2018) and Neuhofer et al. (2014), capturing interactive dialogue, active participation, and content personalization.
- **Perceived Experiential Value (PV):** Five items adapted from Sweeney and Soutar (2001) and Prebensen et al. (2018), covering epistemic, emotional, and social value dimensions.
- **Community Engagement (CE):** Four items adapted from Dwyer et al. (2009) and Su et al. (2018), evaluating psychological connection, empathy, and host-guest solidarity.
- **Cultural Preservation Intentions (PI):** Five items adapted from Timothy (2011) and Smith (2006), measuring adherence to heritage codes, financial support for conservation, ethical consumption, and preservation advocacy.

All survey items were anchored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree"). Content validity was confirmed through an Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) panel of five academic experts in tourism informatics and cultural anthropology, yielding IOC scores between 0.80 and 1.00. A pilot test with 30 tourists confirmed instrument reliability, with all construct Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.85.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

Quantitative data analysis used IBM SPSS 28 for descriptive statistics and SmartPLS 4 to estimate the measurement and structural models via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2022). PLS-SEM was chosen for its suitability in testing

complex structural mediation models without requiring strict multivariate normality assumptions. Standard errors and parameter significance were determined via non-parametric bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Qualitative interview transcripts were evaluated using inductive thematic analysis following the systematic protocol of Braun and Clarke (2006).

4. Empirical Results

4.1 Sample Profile

Among the 420 quantitative respondents, 56.4% identified as female, 41.2% as male, and 2.4% as non-binary. The dominant age cohort was 25–40 years old (48.6%), followed by 18–24 years old (28.1%), and 41 years and older (23.3%). A high proportion of respondents held an undergraduate degree or higher (74.3%). Regarding travel frequency, 52.1% reported visiting cultural heritage destinations 2 to 3 times per year, characterizing the sample as educated, digitally literate cultural tourists.

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 1: Measurement Model Quality Criteria and Convergent Validity

Construct / Indicator Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
DST Experience Co-creation (DST)		0.892	0.917	0.648
DST1: The digital platform allowed me to actively choose stories aligned with my interests.	0.824			
DST2: I felt actively involved in interpreting the local culture through the digital content.	0.801			
DST3: The interactive media facilitated meaningful dialogue with local traditions.	0.842			
DST4: I contributed my own reflections/photos to the community's digital story archive.	0.789			
DST5: The platform offered diverse narrative perspectives beyond standard tour facts.	0.776			
DST6: The digital storytelling allowed me to tailor my cultural exploration in real time.	0.796			
Perceived Experiential Value (PV)		0.876	0.910	0.668
PV1: This digital heritage experience broadened my understanding of local traditions.	0.835			
PV2: Interacting with these stories was emotionally touching and memorable.	0.812			

Construct / Indicator Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
PV3: The experience was intellectually stimulating and sparked my curiosity.	0.849			
PV4: The digital narrative engagement gave me a sense of cultural belonging.	0.805			
PV5: The time and effort spent exploring these digital stories were worthwhile.	0.785			
Community Engagement (CE)		0.865	0.908	0.712
CE1: I felt a genuine emotional connection with the community members in the stories.	0.867			
CE2: I developed deep empathy for the challenges faced by this local culture.	0.854			
CE3: I felt a sense of shared responsibility for the community's living heritage.	0.841			
CE4: I felt welcomed as an active partner in the community's cultural story.	0.812			
Cultural Heritage Preservation Intentions (PI)		0.888	0.918	0.691
PI1: I intend to strictly comply with all site conservation and cultural respect rules.	0.851			
PI2: I am willing to financially contribute to local community conservation funds.	0.832			
PI3: I will purchase authentic local crafts to sustain indigenous artisan livelihoods.	0.820			
PI4: I will educate others on the importance of respecting this community's traditions.	0.844			
PI5: I intend to speak out against actions that threaten this site's cultural integrity.	0.808			

Note: All item loadings are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

As reported in Table 1, all standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.776 to 0.867, exceeding the conventional 0.708 threshold. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.865 to 0.892, and Composite Reliability (CR) values spanned 0.908 to 0.918, confirming high internal consistency. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.648 to 0.712, well above the 0.50 cutoff, confirming convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed via the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2: Discriminant Validity via the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Constructs	DST	PV	CE	PI
DST Experience Co-creation	—			
Perceived Value	0.642	—		

Constructs	DST	PV	CE	PI
Community Engagement	0.531	0.684	—	
Preservation Intentions	0.495	0.628	0.714	—

All HTMT values fell below the conservative 0.85 threshold, establishing discriminant validity among all latent constructs.

4.3 Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

Collinearity was evaluated prior to hypotheses testing. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.341 and 2.155, well below the conservative ceiling of 3.0, indicating multicollinearity was not a concern (Hair et al., 2022).

The structural relationships were examined using 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3: Structural Path Estimates and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Path Coeff. (β)	Standard Error	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Decision
H1	DST → PV	0.482	0.041	11.756	< 0.001	Supported
H2	DST → CE	0.214	0.046	4.652	< 0.001	Supported
H3	PV → CE	0.456	0.048	9.500	< 0.001	Supported
H4	PV → PI	0.284	0.052	5.461	< 0.001	Supported
H5	CE → PI	0.468	0.049	9.551	< 0.001	Supported

The coefficient of determination (R^2) values were:

- Perceived Experiential Value ($R^2 = 0.232$)
- Community Engagement ($R^2 = 0.368$)
- Cultural Heritage Preservation Intentions ($R^2 = 0.584$)

The model explains 58.4% of the variance in tourists' cultural preservation intentions, indicating substantial explanatory power (Hair et al., 2022). Effect size (f^2) evaluations showed that Community Engagement exerted the strongest direct impact on Preservation Intentions ($f^2 = 0.312$), followed by Perceived Value on Community Engagement ($f^2 = 0.245$).

Mediation analyses using bootstrapping confirmed hypothesis **H6**:

1. Path DST → PV → PI was significant ($\beta = 0.137, t = 4.892, p < 0.001$).
2. Path DST → CE → PI was significant ($\beta = 0.100, t = 4.166, p < 0.001$).
3. The serial mediation path DST → PV → CE → PI was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.103, t = 5.255, p < 0.001$).

Because the direct effect of DST on PI remained significant when mediators were controlled, the results establish complementary partial mediation.

4.4 Qualitative Triangulation

Thematic analysis of the 15 stakeholder interviews yielded three central themes that illustrate how digital narrative co-creation works on the ground:

1. **Amplification of Authentic Vernacular Voices:** Participants emphasized that digital tools enabled residents to present their lived heritage in their own words. An artisan noted:

"Before the QR audio project, tourists took a fast photo of our looms and walked away. Now, they listen to my mother explaining why specific indigo dyes represent our river ancestors. They stand quietly, observe the loom, and ask respectful questions. It transforms a craft product into a sacred living tradition." (Informant 4, Master Weaver)

2. **Shift from Consumer to Cultural Custodian:** Destination leaders observed that participatory storytelling builds emotional accountability. When visitors contributed their reflections, they acted more conscientiously across the site.

3. **Intergenerational Continuity:** Youth in the community took active pride in helping community elders digitize oral folklore, addressing internal cultural erosion.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings confirm that digital storytelling co-creation significantly drives perceived experiential value ($\beta = 0.482$) and community engagement ($\beta = 0.214$), validating **H1** and **H2**. These outcomes align with Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016) and experiential tourism theory (Campos et al., 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2014). When tourists shift from passive recipients of static information to active participants who select, interpret, and reflect upon community narratives, their cognitive and emotional engagement rises. This active role helps unlock higher levels of epistemic and affective value.

The direct relationships between perceived value, community engagement, and preservation intentions (**H3**, **H4**, **H5**) demonstrate that cultural preservation is driven by emotional connection and perceived value rather than mere instructional compliance (Smith, 2006; Timothy, 2011). Community engagement emerged as the strongest direct predictor of preservation intentions ($\beta = 0.468, f^2 = 0.312$). This highlights that tourists who develop empathy toward local residents are more inclined to adopt pro-cultural behaviors, such as adhering to preservation guidelines, supporting local craft economies, and contributing to conservation funds (Su et al., 2018).

The confirmation of the serial mediation model (**H6**) provides deeper structural insight. Technological interventions do not directly generate conservation behavior on their own. Instead, technology functions as an interpretive enabler. DST creates an engaging narrative space that deepens perceived value, which in turn nurtures community empathy, culminating in preservation intentions. This finding extends previous smart tourism studies (e.g., Bec et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2018), which primarily assessed immediate technological satisfaction rather than longer-term civic and cultural preservation commitments.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study advances cultural tourism scholarship in three principal ways:

1. **Extending S-D Logic to Digital Cultural Heritage:** It demonstrates empirically that cultural heritage value is not an intrinsic, immutable property of an artifact or site, but an experiential outcome collaboratively negotiated through digital narrative interactions.

2. **Integrating Narrative Transportation with Conservation Behavior:** By demonstrating the serial mediating roles of perceived value and community engagement, the

study connects digital communication theory with behavioral conservation models, clarifying the psychological pathways from screen interactions to heritage advocacy.

3. **Addressing the Host-Guest Divide in Smart Tourism:** The study demonstrates that digital platforms can foster authentic host-guest solidarity, challenging critiques that digital mediation inevitably alienates visitors from destination communities.

6.2 Practical and Policy Implications

For Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and Municipalities

- **Move Away from Static Interpretive Infrastructure:** Heritage managers should redirect budgets away from costly, static physical displays toward community-managed digital storytelling ecosystems. Platforms should feature interactive, geo-located oral histories recorded directly by local custodians.
- **Empower Community Voices:** Initiatives must avoid corporate scriptwriting. DMOs should organize community-led workshops where local elders, youth, and craftspeople curate their own stories, safeguarding cultural authenticity and preventing top-down misrepresentation.
- **Build Digital Capacity:** Governments should provide local communities with digital recording, curation, and platform maintenance skills, fostering intergenerational heritage preservation within host communities.

For Tourism App Developers and Experience Designers

- **Design for Bidirectional Interaction:** Interfaces should balance multimedia playback with mechanisms for visitor contributions, such as curated digital guestbooks, historical photo matching, and moderated visitor reflections.
- **Embed Tangible Conservation Features:** Digital platforms should integrate frictionless paths to pro-cultural action, such as verified community donation gateways, direct-to-artisan craft marketplaces, and real-time site conduct reminders based on sensitive ecological or cultural zones.

7. Conclusion and Limitations

This research demonstrates that tourism experience co-creation via digital storytelling serves as an effective mechanism for promoting and conserving local cultural heritage. When heritage destinations integrate narrative technology that highlights local voices and invites tourist participation, visitors experience deeper cognitive and affective value. This perceived value fosters community empathy and solidifies behavioral intentions to protect, preserve, and advocate for local cultural resources.

Several research limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design captured behavioral intentions rather than observed, longitudinal preservation actions. Future inquiries should deploy longitudinal and experimental designs to track post-visit contributions, repeat advocacy, and long-term behavioral changes. Second, data collection focused on tourists who engaged with digital platforms in community-based cultural settings in Southeast Asia. Cross-national comparative studies across different institutional, technological, and cultural environments would help evaluate the wider generalizability of the proposed framework. Finally, future work could examine emerging technologies—such as generative AI conversational agents and spatial computing—to determine how increasingly automated

narrative systems impact perceptions of authenticity, community agency, and cultural preservation.

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