

THE TRANSFORMATION OF BALINESE GAMELAN: AUTHENTICITY AND HERITAGE POLITICS IN DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Yedija Remalya Sidjabat¹, Jyothi Devi Krishnanandayani²

^{1,2}Music Department, Faculty of Performing Arts, Institut Seni Indonesia Denpasar, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The digital era has significantly transformed traditional arts, particularly in how cultural authenticity and heritage politics are negotiated. The Gamelan Bali application represents an important case study of this transformation, showcasing Balinese gamelan on a digital platform designed for global accessibility. This research aims to explore how the Gamelan Bali application navigates cultural authenticity and negotiates heritage politics in the context of digital platforms. This study employs content analysis of the Gamelan Bali application and user reviews available on public platforms. Patterns of cultural authenticity and usability perceptions were identified. The application simplifies certain cultural elements to suit digital usability while expanding the global reach of Balinese gamelan, reflecting a negotiation between traditional preservation and digital innovation. The Gamelan Bali application demonstrates how digital platforms mediate between cultural preservation and transformation, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of tradition and technology in a globalized context.

KEYWORDS

balinese gamelan,
cultural authenticity,
heritage politics,
digital platforms,
cultural
transformation



©2024 The Author(s).
Published by UPT.
Penerbitan LP2MPP
Institut Seni Indonesia
Denpasar. This is an
open-access article
under the [CC-BY-NC-SA](#)
license.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly influenced how traditional arts are preserved, interpreted, and shared. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the balance between accessibility and cultural authenticity, especially when traditional practices are adapted to digital platforms. Laurajane Smith's concept of heritage as a dynamic and negotiable cultural process provides a crucial theoretical framework for examining how traditional arts are recontextualized in the digital era [1]. Through the lens of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), the present study investigates the interplay between preservation, transformation, and the politics of heritage within the realm of digital media.

Balinese gamelan, deeply rooted in communal rituals and spiritual contexts, serves as a vital element of Balinese cultural identity [2]. The introduction of the Gamelan Bali application, available on Google Play Store, exemplifies the transformative impact of

technology on traditional arts. Designed as an interactive platform for learning and playing gamelan virtually, the app expands the reach of Balinese culture to a global audience, bypassing geographical and physical constraints. However, this transformation raises concerns about the simplification of gamelan's cultural and philosophical elements to meet the usability standards of digital platforms.

Existing studies on digital heritage often focus on the dichotomy between preservation and innovation, yet there remains a gap in analyzing how digital tools like the Gamelan Bali application navigate the politics of heritage and cultural authenticity. This research addresses this gap by critically analyzing the content of the Gamelan Bali application and user reviews to understand how narratives of authenticity and usability are constructed and negotiated within a digital framework.

The novelty of this study lies in its application of Laurajane Smith's theoretical framework to explore the Gamelan Bali application as a site of cultural negotiation. Unlike previous research that often dichotomizes tradition and technology, this study adopts a critical perspective, viewing digital platforms as dynamic spaces where cultural values are both preserved and transformed. By focusing on the Gamelan Bali application, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of technology, heritage politics, and cultural authenticity in the globalized digital era. The findings aim to provide nuanced insights into the challenges and opportunities of using technology as a medium for cultural preservation and dissemination.

This manuscript represents original research, and the author affirms that it has not been published or submitted elsewhere in print or digital media. The study highlights the critical balance required to mediate between the preservation of traditional values and the demands of modern digital frameworks, offering a fresh perspective on heritage management in the context of technological innovation.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the negotiation of cultural authenticity and heritage politics within the Gamelan Bali application. The research focuses on how the application constructs and presents narratives of Balinese gamelan through its digital platform, specifically analyzing its content and user reviews to understand the interplay between preservation and transformation of traditional arts [3].

a) Research Focus

The study centers on the representation of cultural authenticity within the Gamelan Bali application, examining how the platform balances accessibility for global users with the preservation of Balinese gamelan's traditional values. The analysis also includes the

user experience and perceptions reflected in publicly available reviews, focusing on themes such as usability, cultural appreciation, and authenticity.

b) Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from two primary sources: 1) Content Analysis: The Gamelan Bali application was examined for features, tools, and representations of Balinese gamelan, including sound quality, instrument accessibility, and cultural explanations provided within the app; 2) User Reviews: Publicly available reviews from the Google Play Store were analyzed to identify user perceptions of the application's usability and cultural representation. Reviews were selected based on relevance to the themes of cultural authenticity and usability, with a sample size of 50 reviews chosen for detailed thematic analysis.

The content of the application was analyzed comprehensively, while user reviews were purposively sampled based on keywords such as "authenticity," "usability," "tradition," and "gamelan." Reviews that provided insights into the cultural or functional aspects of the application were prioritized.

c) Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to both the content of the application and user reviews. This approach involved: 1) Coding: Identifying recurring themes related to cultural authenticity, usability, and the politics of heritage; 2) Categorization: Grouping codes into broader categories, such as simplification of cultural elements, global accessibility, and user perceptions of authenticity; 3) Interpretation: Critically analyzing these categories in the context of Laurajane Smith's theory of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), to determine how the application negotiates heritage narratives in a digital framework [4].

d) Research Limitations

This study is limited to the analysis of publicly accessible data, as no direct interviews with developers or users were conducted. The findings, therefore, reflect the narratives constructed by the application and its users based on observable data and reviews, without incorporating direct input from key stakeholders.

This methodological framework provides a comprehensive basis for understanding the role of the Gamelan Bali application in mediating between cultural preservation and the demands of digital innovation. By focusing on both the content and user feedback, the study aims to offer a nuanced perspective on how digital platforms shape and transform traditional cultural heritage.

Discussion

The findings from this research reveal a dynamic interplay between the preservation of Balinese gamelan traditions and the adaptations necessitated by the digital medium. By analyzing the content of the Gamelan Bali application and user reviews, several key themes emerge, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of presenting traditional arts in a digital format.

a) Simplification for Usability

The Gamelan Bali application simplifies certain aspects of Balinese gamelan, such as the reduction of physical interactions with instruments and the omission of cultural and ritualistic contexts. This simplification aligns with the demands of digital platforms, where usability and accessibility are prioritized for a diverse, global audience. However, this approach risks diluting the rich cultural and spiritual significance of gamelan, presenting it more as a functional or entertainment-oriented tool rather than a deeply rooted cultural practice.

This observation aligns with Laurajane Smith's Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which critiques how dominant narratives often prioritize ease of consumption over the complexity of cultural heritage [5]. The app's representation of gamelan focuses primarily on its technical and musical aspects, sidelining the communal and ritualistic dimensions that are intrinsic to its traditional practice.

b) Global Accessibility vs. Local Authenticity

The application effectively expands the reach of Balinese gamelan, making it accessible to users who might never experience it otherwise. User reviews highlight the app's value as an entry point for learning about Balinese music, with many praising its ability to introduce gamelan to a global audience. This aligns with the objective of heritage democratization, where technology enables broader participation in cultural experiences.

However, this global accessibility often comes at the expense of local authenticity. The app's design reflects a negotiation between tradition and the expectations of a global audience, emphasizing features such as simplified sound reproduction and user-friendly interfaces while omitting deeper cultural narratives [5]. This creates a version of gamelan that is both globalized and decontextualized, catering more to global accessibility than to the preservation of localized meanings and values.

c) Negotiation of Heritage Politics

The Gamelan Bali application demonstrates how digital platforms mediate the politics of heritage. By positioning gamelan as a cultural product for digital consumption, the app engages in a process of recontextualization, where cultural elements are

repackaged to suit the medium. This aligns with Smith's notion of heritage as a process rather than a fixed entity, where meanings are negotiated and redefined across contexts.

User reviews reflect a spectrum of perceptions, with some valuing the app as a tool for cultural preservation and others critiquing its limited representation of gamelan's deeper cultural significance. This diversity of perspectives underscores the contested nature of heritage in the digital age, where technology both enables and constrains the representation of cultural authenticity [5].

d) Implications of the Findings

The findings suggest that while the Gamelan Bali application succeeds in introducing Balinese gamelan to a wider audience, it also highlights the challenges of balancing global accessibility with the preservation of local cultural values. The app exemplifies how digital platforms can serve as both tools for cultural dissemination and sites of cultural negotiation, where traditional values are adapted to fit modern technological frameworks.

This dual role has significant implications for cultural preservation strategies. It underscores the need for greater involvement of local communities in the development of digital heritage tools, ensuring that the narratives presented are inclusive of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of traditional arts [6]. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of critically evaluating how technology reshapes cultural heritage, not as a static artifact but as a dynamic process of negotiation.

By critically engaging with the Gamelan Bali application, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms mediate the relationship between tradition and innovation. The findings emphasize the need to view heritage not as a fixed entity but as an evolving narrative shaped by the interplay of local and global forces. This perspective provides valuable insights for the development of digital heritage tools that honor cultural authenticity while embracing the opportunities of the digital age.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how the Gamelan Bali application navigates the complexities of cultural preservation and digital innovation, positioning itself as both a gateway for global accessibility and a mediator in the politics of heritage. By leveraging digital platforms, the application successfully introduces Balinese gamelan to a broader, global audience, addressing the geographical and physical limitations traditionally associated with accessing this art form. However, in prioritizing usability and accessibility, the app simplifies certain cultural elements, potentially diluting the deeper philosophical, ritualistic, and communal aspects intrinsic to Balinese gamelan.

The findings underscore the tension between local cultural authenticity and global technological demands, revealing that digital platforms are not merely tools but active agents in the negotiation of heritage. Using Laurajane Smith's framework of Authorized Heritage Discourse [7], this research demonstrates how the app constructs narratives of gamelan that align with modern digital consumption while inadvertently marginalizing its embedded cultural and spiritual contexts. This dynamic highlights the evolving nature of heritage as a process of negotiation, shaped by the interplay of tradition, innovation, and the expectations of diverse audiences.

Critically, the study emphasizes the need for greater involvement of local cultural practitioners and stakeholders in the development of digital heritage tools. Their participation is essential to ensure that these platforms do not merely replicate dominant global narratives but reflect the nuanced and diverse perspectives of the cultural communities they aim to represent. Moreover, this research highlights the importance of recognizing digital platforms as spaces where tradition and modernity converge, rather than as static repositories of cultural artifacts.

Future research should expand on this foundation by including qualitative data from local stakeholders, cultural practitioners, and developers to deepen understanding of the multifaceted impact of such applications. Studies could also explore comparative analyses of similar digital heritage tools across different cultural contexts to identify best practices for balancing global accessibility with the preservation of localized cultural values. Furthermore, examining user engagement over time could provide insights into whether such tools foster long-term cultural appreciation or merely offer transient interactions with heritage.

In conclusion, the Gamelan Bali application exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges of preserving and transforming cultural heritage in the digital era. Its case reinforces the importance of viewing heritage as a dynamic and collaborative process, one that requires careful negotiation to honor its local origins while embracing the possibilities of global digital platforms. This dual perspective offers a critical framework for future endeavors in digital heritage, ensuring that technology serves not just as a conduit for accessibility but as a meaningful bridge between tradition and innovation.

References

- [1] L. Smith, *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- [2] B. Shidqi, "Bagus Shidqi's Virtual Gamelan Brings an Ancient Musical Form Into the Digital Age," *Bandcamp Daily*, Jun. 2023.
- [3] L. Smith, "The Past as a Resource for the Present: An Evaluation of a Model for the Use of Historic Resources," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 75-85, 1996.
- [4] L. Smith, "The 'Doing' of Heritage: Heritage as Performance," in *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*, A. Jackson and J. Kidd, Eds. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, pp. 69-81.

- [5] L. Smith, "Cultural Heritage: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies," London: Routledge, 2006.
- [6] L. Smith, "Intangible Heritage: A Challenge to the Authorised Heritage Discourse?" *Revista d'Etnologia de Catalunya*, no. 36, pp. 133-142, 2010.
- [7] L. Smith, "The Discourse of Heritage," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, E. Waterton and S. Watson, Eds. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 141-156.