

Digital Storytelling in Cultural Heritage Communication: Preserving and Promoting Khiva's Historical Legacy

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Abstract

There has been a gradual transition in tourism over the past few years from more traditional methods of conservation and presentation of (cultural) heritage to more digitized descriptions of heritage. Digitalisation has only recently started in Uzbekistan, and its effect on the communication of heritage remains to be seen. The research explored how digital storytelling contributes to the communication and preservation of cultural heritage in the city of Khiva, Uzbekistan. This study seeks to investigate the role of digital storytelling in the preservation and representation of Khiva cultural heritage and explore the way digital traditional storytelling techniques are used to enhance visitor engagement and accessibility. This research employed qualitative methods, comprising interviews and onsite observations at 19 historical sites. Results showed that only the Museum of Scholars utilizes digital storytelling technology, specifically multilingual videos that provide imaginative narratives of some of the nationally significant individuals. Keywords: digital media; oral history; materiality; visitor interpretation; visitor experience. Place, and Space in the 'Real' World The study concluded that although traditional oral storytelling predominates across most sites, the 'inherent materiality of MacDonald's approach to oral history, rather than the digital media itself, might offer new opportunities to forge stronger links across different visitor populations with unique needs, desires, and expectations, enhancing their experience of each site as well as developing a better understanding of its significance, even enabling the sites themselves to achieve greater accessibility' - and the Israeli perspective on such an assessment. The research found that hybridizing digital storytelling with traditional ones may enhance visitor engagement and interpretive experience and not only broaden visitors' range but also address the geographic distance of Khiva from other significant cultural and historical sites in Uzbekistan, and will keep the authentic cultural heritage of Khiva intact.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Khiva, Tourism Digitalization, Digital Storytelling.

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1. Introduction

Technological advances in recent years have quickly changed the way we communicate, interact, and preserve our cultural inheritance as humans. This overall global digital transformation process has also been observed in Uzbekistan. Its digital economy is growing rapidly, and it is a further step toward enhancing competition between sectors and institutions. Digitalization has transformed many industries, and one of the crucial sectors for innovation is tourism, which is increasingly integrated with communication technologies to improve visitor interaction and enhance cultural experiences. Recent studies show that digital communication is considered to be one of the major communication channels between tourists and tourism service providers, and identifying its value means by which organisations differentiate themselves within an increasingly competitive marketplace. As previous studies provide evidence of the digitalisation in the tourism industry, opening up a range of strategic opportunities for countries such as Uzbekistan to gain visibility and consolidate positions in the global market [1].

As a process, digital storytelling has developed into one of the most impactful new traditions of cultural heritage communication around the world. With the advent of the digital era, heritage conversations are becoming more and more anchored in visual and narrative formats that are essential for framing a sense of cultural identity. Storytelling is an ancient sense-making tradition in order to preserve values, memory, and collective identity. Narrative forms allow ideas, values, experiences, and cultural meanings to flow through them, making storytelling in tourism the ability of tourism businesses to connect visitors emotionally to better understand a place. The method has storytelling in its core to appreciate, express, and monetise personal mastery. This interaction has evolved from a simple oral narration to multimedia experiences involving video, images, sound, and enriched context-based environments in the digital era. According to Kato Nabirye H. (2025), digital storytelling is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories in a web-based environment, including verbal images, pictures, video, music, animation, and graphics. A story mode that is as ancient as mankind and as old as its own genre. By providing interactive and immersive learning experiences, stories are able to transcend boundaries and demographics. Moreover, the need for cultural heritage-related digital storytelling by museums and other historical sites has been notoriously acknowledged as a focus cultural heritage institutions must pursue to garner the attention of their audiences. The definition of digital storytelling has been too widely interpreted in cultural heritage contexts to include a greater range of multimedia applications, including guides that provide purely informative content. These narrative applications are frequently referred to as interactive, and they deliver paths that allow users to either control navigation through the site or choose information content [2].

Digital storytelling for the communication of cultural heritage is a relatively new phenomenon in Uzbekistan. Therefore, it is still limited. Some of the larger tourist hubs, like Samarkand and Bukhara, have started to play around with digital tools. But Khiva, one of Uzbekistan's most ancient but isolated cities, has not thrived as quickly. One such landmark is the Ichan Qal'a complex in Khiva, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1990 and a veritable living museum of Central Asian civilization, with its stunning Tosh Hovli Palace, Kalta Minor Minaret, and Kunya-Ark fortress. In addition to the tangible heritage, the city preserves intangible heritage like the Lazgi dance and the intellectual legacy of the mathematician Al-Khwarizmi. Next up is Khiva, which most Uzbekistan tours miss out on, but this city is special as the most traditional of all the cities in Uzbekistan [3]. While Bukhara brims

with spirituality, and Samarkand with scale, Khiva will likely be the most relaxing as well as the most untouched. It is these divergences that have prompted us to explore this cultural inheritance. Khiva has a rich cultural heritage and boasts significant historical value, but remains largely invisible on digital platforms and does not incorporate modern storytelling methods, which would increase its appeal to the global audience. While the authenticity of the city and its historical richness are inherent advantages, its suitability to the tourism experience suffers from the drawbacks presented by the city, including its remoteness and the fact that most tourist sites are not digitalized. Here it is worth investigating how the tools of digital storytelling can augment to traditional narratives of this city by adding a new layer to the narrative without overriding it and transforming the experience of heritage more immersive and readable, even for international audiences [4].

To tackle this problem, the study embraces the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), a new communication–persuasion framework to track the relationship of digital storytelling, which refers to adapting the text and visuals to enhance visitor engagement and the process of making the actual meaning of cultural heritage.

The research novelty of this study is to draw international scholarly awareness to Khiva, and to place Khiva within the broader scholarly context of digital storytelling as mediated heritage and cultural communication. This research adds novel empirical evidence from a developing context, despite prior studies primarily emphasising global destinations or technologically rich sites among digital heritage. Analysing a UNESCO World Heritage city (Khiva), the study shows that digital storytelling can function as a strategic communication practice improving heritage interpretation, visitor engagement, and cultural mediation, especially in non-metropolitan and less digitally saturated environments [5].

As such, this research aims to explore the contemporary forms of Khiva's oral history storytelling practice and the potential improvement that the introduction of digital storytelling may present for Khiva's preservation, interpretation, and presentation of its unique heritage. Theoretically, this study adds value by testing the use of communication frameworks in the field of cultural heritage, while practically, it can serve as a basis for setting policy and tourism development recommendations that could stimulate the digital transformation of Uzbekistan's heritage sector in a manner more sustainable to its assets [6].

Digital heritage is an attractive new area ground with a rapidly growing body of scholarly. Nevertheless, existing studies continue to focus on more advanced regions like Europe and East Asia. This results in a lack of insight from existing literature on how digital storytelling develops and functions in developing heritage landscapes like Central Asia. Current literature has primarily focused on digital heritage from technological or design-oriented standpoints, lacking adequate exploration of the communicative processes, visitor meaning-making, and cultural interpretation that underpin storytelling practices. Moreover, there are few empirical studies on Uzbekistan, and most of others do not track actual visitors in single sites, but rather are based on broader comparative studies. Unless through the communication science, Khiva has not been searched. This gap indicates that future research should not only document storytelling practices but also investigate more thoroughly how heritage narratives are created, interpreted, and experienced cognitively and affectively. Therefore, this study fills a critical research gap in addressing heritage interpretation as a mode of communication in Khiva while exploring how specific digital innovations can improve visitor engagement and broaden the cultural authenticity of Khiva on a global scale [7].

2. Research Method

This study takes a qualitative research method to see the role of digital storytelling in the cultural heritage communication of Khiva. Qualitative from Creswell and Creswell (2023): Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, and consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. The case study research design was used in the study to be able to capture these dynamics deeply. This design enables the investigator to study a single case, event, process, or more than one person in detail. Through this approach, researchers have in-depth data, using varying data collection procedures [8].

The study is embedded within cultural communication and digital heritage studies and builds on an interpretive tradition in communication research, which emphasises meaning making, symbolic interaction, and mediated experience of culture. This case study model underpins the aim of recording the methods, roles, and effects of digital storytelling at Khiva's heritage sites.

This study applied a methodological foundation based on a structured procedural model, the qualitative research design framework of Creswell. The research process commenced with a conceptualization, where the Research questions were constructed (i.e., ~2 Central questions+5 sub-questions), followed by Site Selection. Additional steps: sampling of participants; development of instruments (e.g., observational protocols, interview guides); data collection; data processing; data analysis; interpretive synthesis [9].

This was set up in Khiva and chosen as the site for this research. These are the reasons why it was chosen;

- a) It has a huge cultural heritage takeaways,
- b) The site is undergoing adaptation for digital technologies in tourism communication,
- c) It is a big part of representing culture nationally.

The fieldwork lasted five consecutive days (22–26 August 2025) in Khiva and included both peak and off-peak hours (high- and low-traffic visitor hours, respectively).

In order to achieve data richness and relevance, this study uses purposive sampling, which is common in qualitative research where the intention is to seek participants with specific knowledge and direct experiences relevant to the focus of the research. The purposive sampling technique, the most prevalent sampling strategy in qualitative research, is utilized to invite participants with knowledge and experience about the phenomenon of interest [10].

International tourists, local tour guides, and museum staff are among the key informants for this study. They were purposefully chosen based on their current work at cultural heritage sites in Khiva and their immediate familiarity with digital storytelling practices. These perspectives inform the implementation of digitalization and how visitors respond to it. The role of the tourist as an interpretive audience, the role of the tour guide as a cultural mediator, and that of the museum professional as an institutional communicator who structures narratives and the production of meaning related to a particular heritage are crucial facets in cultural heritage communication [11].

Data collection methods

Data collection for this study was performed using several qualitative approaches. The study used a primary data collection through field observations on 19 historical sites of the architectural and cultural heritage of the city, such as mosques, madrasahs, palaces, and museums, and complemented it with secondary data. While conducting field visits, the researcher observed storytelling practices and documented it by writing detailed field notes

and taking photographs. These observations led us to classify storytelling forms into traditional storytelling (oral narrative, symbolic architecture, statues, reenactments) and forms of digital storytelling (video, screen, multimedia displays, and interactive installations). Each area's observational findings were summarized in a systematic fashion and later translated into a table (Table 1), allowing us to compare differences across sites and differences in visitor response at the sites.

Methodology: Data collection was performed using in-depth face-to-face interviews, which constitute secondary data. Five local guides, ten international tourists, and two museum staff participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants' opinions and experiences of communication of heritage, both traditional and digital, were explored through interviews. Interviews were semi-structured, guided by Creswell's framework for qualitative interviews and an open-ended qualitative questioning principle that encouraged participants to describe and construct meaning from the perspective of their own stories, experiences, and interpretations of the world [12].

Unit of Analysis

This study focuses its unit of analysis on two different groups of people:

- a) International tourists (from Europe, China, and Korea) providing different cultural perspectives on digital storytelling and heritage interpretation.
- b) Local tour guides and museum staff, who are the main communicators of Khiva's historical narratives, and who are also familiar with storytelling practices at cultural sites.

Data Analysis. Qualitative data analysis. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following a systematic six-phase process. Thematic analysis is a systematic method for discovering themes and patterns in the data. This started with getting acquainted with the data to understand the case as best as possible. In the second phase, we took a chunk of the data set that was meaningful and created initial codes. Organising and categorising the data is a good idea. Find advancement is generating initial themes. The coded data are transformed into more general patterns of meaning. The stage of defining and naming themes is followed in the next phase, where the researcher reviews and refines the themes. The analysis closes with a description of each theme [13].

Drawing on how the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), as a modern communication-persuasion framework, contributes to understanding these findings. ELM is used to analyse how the visitors are motivated and unmotivated to obtain the heritage message. Using interviews and observations, the study provided fresh perspectives on how digital technology impacts authenticity and visitor engagement levels in relation to cultural storytelling in Khiva.

The study is classified as interpretive and exploratory; it does not aim to quantify visitor response. It is particularly concerned with the processes of making and conveying meaning in cultural heritage contexts. This interpretative perspective not only reveals the complexities of Khiva's cultural identity but also the possibilities offered to heritage communication by digital transformation. From an ethical perspective, all participants were informed about the aims of the research and agreed to take part. We ensured anonymity and confidentiality during this study. Authorised use of photographs and direct quotations only [14].

3. Results and Discussion

Field observations and interviews revealed significant contrasts between digital and traditional storytelling practices in Khiva's heritage communication. Among the 19 historical sites examined, the Museum of Scholars stands out as the only location that is currently

employing digital storytelling technology with a creative multilingual video about Khiva’s scholars on television screens. This video is in 3 languages: Uzbek, English, and Russian. The museum staff adjusts the language settings based on visitor preferences. It makes the experience understandable and accessible for international tourists. This method offers an immersive educational experience and supports cross-cultural understanding.

Conversely, 18 of 19 sites in the Ichan Qal’a complex continue to rely on traditional storytelling techniques, including oral explanations by tour guides, physical displays, statues, and reenactments. These approaches were found to align closely with European visitors’ preferences, who valued the authenticity and sensory engagement of traditional methods. Visitors from Korea and China, however, expressed a preference for more digitalized experiences, as digitalization can help them visualize the historical context more vividly. Tour guides confirmed that while oral storytelling remains their main communication tool, they believe that digital media could enhance clarity and active engagement during their narratives. These findings are consistent with Cahyani et al. (2023), who demonstrated that digital storytelling helps to increase interpretive clarity and emotional engagement in cultural tourism settings [15].

These findings indicate that digital storytelling enhances accessibility and audience engagement, while traditional storytelling remains essential for preserving authenticity and cultural depth. The coexistence of both forms offers a balanced approach that meets the diverse expectations of Khiva’s visitors.

Table 1. Storytelling Methods in Khiva’s Historical Sites.

Historical Site	Storytelling Method	Digital Storytelling Usage	Visitor Experience
Scholars Museum	Multilingual video-based narrative framing	Yes - integrated digital mediation	Visitors report higher levels of interactive engagement, emotional involvement, and persuasive interpretation of cultural messages.
Other Historical Sites	Traditional narrative displays and static visual symbolism	No digital mediation	Visitors perceive authenticity and historical depth, but interaction and mediated engagement remain limited.
Tour Guides	Oral narrative performance supported by visual aids	Occasionally supplemented with video content	Hybrid communicative interaction between guides and tourists enhances dialogic engagement, while digital tools strengthen persuasive storytelling dynamics.

Field observations revealed that visitors experienced meaningful differences in the communication they engaged in with each storytelling format. Visitors were highly engaged at historical sites, where narrative communication is employed in the presence of physical artifacts, written descriptions, and oral explanations by tour guides, as indicated by close visual

observation, question-asking, and emotional responses to face-to-face storytelling. For international tourists, such dialogic engagement is crucial at the level of both authenticity and interactivity.

By contrast, at the Museum of the Mind, where a video was in digital form, museumgoers responded with significantly greater attention. The overwhelming majority watched the clip to its conclusion, and many of the tourists were seen filming parts of it on their phones. They suggest that audiovisual narrative amplifies sensory involvement and enables the effectiveness of cultural interpretations.

Interviews conducted suggest that visitors' understandings of both storytelling channels are influenced not just by the storytelling formats but also by their cultural background, prior knowledge, and exposure to digital technology. Younger visitors from Korea and China, both of whom come from highly technological countries, made it very clear they want more interactive and digitalized content. Such visual and auditory media allowed them to picture historical events more strongly, and they described the sights of Khiva as 'not digitised. By contrast, European tourists often convey interest in oral forms; they value that they can interact with guides or contemplate (touch, if able) physical heritage objects.

From interviews with tour guides, it was found that oral narrative performance is their main communicative strategy; however, selective digital mediation is becoming increasingly prevalent. They nodded in agreement upon the thought about the way forward on how videos and visual media can support them in explaining the history, sites, and culture to the audiences from abroad who may not be aware of Central Asian history.

As one guide explained, "A short video or 3D animation would make for a more engaging experience, and because we have a limited time for dialogue, for people who don't know much about Central Asian culture, it would be better for their understanding of our history and culture. They support a hybrid communicative model in which real-life storytelling lends authenticity, whilst the digital elements bolster the persuasion dynamics of storytelling.

The rare combination of this interpersonal narration hybridization through mediated construction is investigated in the Discussion through the context of the audience interaction and sense-making as mediated and interpersonal hybrid communication modality based on the framework of contemporary communication — the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), in terms of visiting heritage.

Explaining this in terms of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The study considers the findings through recent manifestations of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as a model for mediated communication and audience meaning-making in cultural heritage contexts. ELM is an explanation of the persuasiveness of the message and audiences' interaction with mediated content in differing communicative environments. Within this perspective, ELM is a message-audience interaction model that serves as an organizing construct for exploring message forms, media contexts, and symbolic input effects on the processing, involvement, and persuasion. According to Wagner and Petty (1996), ELM views persuasion and the construction of meaning.

According to Wagner and Petty, people are motivated to process messages in two ways:

1. Central route
2. Peripheral route

According to the model, the central route happens when an individual invests more effort, thinks critically, and derives an interpretation from cognitive processing. In contrast, the peripheral route is activated when attention is directed through shallow cues like images,

design, audio, or touch stimuli. A central route is associated with thoughtful processing of message arguments containing narrative content; a peripheral route is driven by affective cues, non-verbal, and sensory communicative signals that are captured through various media types. One of these routes is determined by the audience, their prior knowledge, and their attention level.

This model is reiterated in a recent study of different modes of audience-message interaction within communication systems. As background exposition, storytelling traits (such as guided oral narration, dialogic interaction with guides, and up-close historical depiction), as found in Khiva, were indicators of central-route processing. These practices indicate that visitors are not passive recipients of information but active participants in narrative construction, through an interpretation of heritage based on dialogue, explanation, and symbolic interpretation (Leal, 2008; Leal et al., 2020). This aligns with Wagner and Petty's (2022) modern conception of elaboration as communicative activity.

Conversely, digital storytelling elements — multilingual videos, visual displays, multimedia installations, etc. — function within the communicative environment in a different capacity. In turn, these mediated affordances serve a persuasive function in framing attention and affecting engagement. In the ELM literature, it is referred to as peripheral-route processing. These symbolic signals, in the form of audiovisual media, are made accessibly available to visitors with limited prior knowledge of Central Asian history. An interactive video noticeably captured the attention of international tourists and delivered them vivid messages to show that peripheral cues, such as execution style, audio, and visual design, can foster engagement even when contextual history is hardly processed.

It is crucial to notice to these results show that traditional and digital storytelling systems are not opposite but complementary. Integrating these creates an interpretive hybridity, where meaning is derived both from dialogic narration and mediated symbolism. In this way, visitors engage with heritage both as lived narrative (via intermediary practice as in guides, oral storytelling) and, as mediated representation (with digital formats) (Freeman, 2020, p. This is in line with El Hedhli (2023), who argues that persuasion and meaning-making today more than ever is hybrid, where multiple logics of communication come into play. In Khiva, textual mediation assists central processing of difficult historical content digitally, while oral narration likely supplements the complexity of meaning-making through both lyrical symbolism and voice, performance, and social presence.

Also, and in line with the ELM assumptions that motivation and ability are moderators of persuasion, differences in cultural background by visitors must be taken into account. This demographic trend can be attributed to the fact that younger tourists from developed countries with cutting-edge technologies are more responsive to audiovisual stimuli. In contrast, European customers who appreciated seeing guides in person were more engaged with narrative stories. Digital storytelling in Khiva does not serve as an informational tool, but rather a mediation system reorganizing the experience, interpretation, and communication of heritage. In addition to the convincing function, results indicate that mediated narrative represents a sociocultural form of communication in which the meaning of cultural heritage is negotiated in the context of global tourism. The importance of digital media is not just in delivering past narratives; they reformulate heritage discourses into a transnational idiom of semiotics that transcends linguistic, cultural, and national taxonomies. Traditional storytelling can help protect local authenticity and historical continuity, and digital storytelling can facilitate interpretive accessibility and cultural translation. This hybrid model operates as a mediated

heritage communication system with heritage being both a lived narrative and a symbolic representation, mediated memory, and global cultural message. Digital storytelling in this sense is not a replacement for traditional communication of heritage. Instead, it enriches communicative channels through which authenticity, meaning, and engagement are co-negotiated.

Cultural Policy and Heritage Communication Strategy Implications

Apart from its theoretical contributions, this study has significant implications for cultural policy and heritage communication strategy in Uzbekistan. The ELM emphasizes that the efficacy of persuasion relies on audience motivation and ability. In the case of Khiva, a storytelling model that mediates a hybrid between oral storytelling and some selective digital mediation may create an optimal engagement environment by addressing the conditions for both central and peripheral processing. Rather, it argues that for the purposes of communication, digital media acts as dynamic mediators of meaning which impact on narrative structure, emotional register, and symbolic salience in heritage interpretation. With this capability to record every visitor touchpoint digitally, heritage sites in Khiva can be transformed into a simultaneously intercommunicative environment, digitalisation thus becoming a powerful mechanism for the social reproduction of culture (487), with history constantly produced anew at the click of a button, this new-movement recomposing itself in response to visitor interaction within the tourism-mediated spatial (340), and story-telling mediated narratives (28), or symbolic representation (486). It promotes digital storytelling as a way to pass on culture.

The cultural sector of Uzbekistan is gradually advancing toward digital transformation, evident in national efforts like the projects on 3d digitization and the virtual museum platforms. Yet, field evidence suggests that, nevertheless, presenting such innovations, Khiva is still far away from Samarkand and Bukhara in institutional and infrastructural possibilities of employing them. A physical distance, infrastructural minuses, and a capital harboring debt will continue boosting unjustified pathways towards a deal that shares both heritage cities. The results indicate that hybrid storytelling models that connect traditional narrative practices and a selective use of digital mediation provide a sustainable trajectory for heritage. Oral storytelling preserves authenticity, spiritual continuity, and cultural depth, while digital storytelling offers accessibility, inclusivity, and global legibility. Heritage management in this way can also be able to attract the technologically oriented audience without losing cultural integrity. The Khiva Museum of Scholars showcases an innovative institutional model for the communication of digital heritage. Its multilingual, interactive, and inclusive digital storytelling practices showcase the case of how digital mediation can supplement educational and emotional engagement. The development of similar initiatives throughout the Khiva heritage network, including both towns, would further support sustainable tourism development, as well as build stronger cultural education and enhance Khiva's integration into the global heritage tourism context.

4. Conclusion

This paper contributes to the field of heritage communication by illustrating the complementary roles of oral storytelling and digital storytelling systems in the context of cultural heritage. Based on our findings, the government should promote a hybrid use of digital storytelling together with oral storytelling to improve visitor engagement and intercultural understanding, and bring a higher number of international visitors. Rather than substituting for

in-person or on-site interpretive practices, multilingual videos and visual media (among other kinds of short, animated narratives) can help support heritage visitors with more cultural backgrounds.

Results should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. First, the research is concerned only with heritage sites in Khiva, and found communicative dynamics are likely to differ across other Uzbek heritage cities, such as Samarkand or Bukhara, with varying degrees of digital development. This means that the results should not be projected over all heritage contexts without more comparative research. Second, the analysis is mainly observational (qualitative) and the rationale is primarily based on a few interviews, without efforts at measuring the persuasive effects (cognitive responses) quantitatively. Comparative and mixed-method approaches have the potential in future studies for examining how varying narration formats affect audience engagement, interpretive interaction, and mediated meaning-making in heritage communication settings. Finally, although this study focuses on the communicative benefits of digital storytelling, it only briefly addresses possible drawbacks such as techno-apathy, decreased face-to-face communication, and inequity of digital infrastructure. Future research should take a more holistic view by looking at both constraining and empowering aspects of digital mediation in heritage communication modes.

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