
The Transformation of Ritual Practices "Ludruk" in East Java: Digital Adaptation and Cultural Sustainability in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformation of Ludruk's ritual practices in East Java, focusing on its digital adaptation and implications for cultural sustainability in the 21st century. As a traditional folk theatre rich in symbolic rituals, Ludruk faces significant challenges from modernization and shifting audience preferences. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research combines quantitative surveys with 250 respondents and qualitative interviews with 15 key informants, including veteran artists, cultural managers, and digital content creators. Quantitative data analysis reveals that while digital exposure significantly boosts awareness ($\chi^2=45.32$, $p<0.001$), its impact on deep cultural understanding and sustainability intent is moderated by factors like age and prior engagement. Qualitative findings identify three primary adaptation models: archival digitization, live-streamed performances, and interactive social media content. The discussion argues that digital adaptation acts as a double-edged sword. It facilitates wider reach and new participatory modes, potentially commodifying ritual essence, yet also fosters innovative ritual reinvention that resonates with contemporary values. The study concludes that sustainable Ludruk preservation requires a hybrid strategy that leverages digital tools for accessibility while safeguarding the embodied, communal, and ritualistic core of the practice through community-based initiatives and intergenerational transmission. This research contributes to the discourse on intangible cultural heritage in the digital age, offering a framework for balancing technological innovation with authentic cultural continuity.

Keywords: Ludruk, ritual transformation, digital adaptation, cultural sustainability, intangible cultural heritage, East Java.

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Introduction

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the era of globalization and digital acceleration presents a complex paradox. Traditional performing arts, once the cornerstone of community identity and social cohesion, now confront the dual forces of cultural erosion and the transformative potential of new media (Alivizatou, 2019). In the Indonesian context, particularly in East Java, Ludruk stands as a prominent folk theatre tradition that is more than mere entertainment; it is a composite of ritual practices, social commentary, and Javanese cosmology (Peacock, 2019). Historically, Ludruk performances were imbued with ritual significance, from the opening *kidungan* (sung poetry) that invokes blessings to the symbolic narratives that reinforce communal values and social hierarchies (Hughes-Freeland, 2019). However, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed a marked decline in its live audiences, attributed to urbanization, the dominance of popular media, and the changing leisure habits of younger generations (Murgiyanto, 2021).

This decline has spurred a critical discourse on cultural sustainability. Sustainability in this context transcends mere survival; it involves the dynamic process through which cultural heritage maintains its significance while adapting to changing environments (Deacon & Smeets, 2020). Recent scholarly attention has turned to digital technology as both a threat and a tool for such sustainability. Studies have explored digital archiving (Fischer & Zobel, 2021), virtual performances (Giannini & Bowen, 2022), and the use of social media for cultural promotion. For instance, research on digital tourism and virtual exoticism highlights how digital platforms reshape public perception of cultural assets, sometimes leading to commodification (Hendratri, Muhtadi, & Arini, 2025). Similarly, studies on traditional theatre adaptation, such as the strategic changes undertaken by Ubrug theatre in Banten, demonstrate proactive models for relevance (Ayunda, Haryono, & Sinaga, 2025). These studies, however, often focus on promotion, audience reach, or structural adaptation, leaving a significant gap in understanding the transformation of the *internal ritual practices* themselves when mediated through digital interfaces.

The core ritual elements of Ludruk—the specific sequences, gestures, languages, and spiritual connotations performed within a shared physical space—constitute its essential intangible value. The central research problem, therefore, is: How are the ritual practices of Ludruk being transformed through digital adaptation, and what are the implications of this transformation for its long-term cultural sustainability? This study posits that digital adaptation is not a neutral translation but an active process of ritual reinterpretation that can either dilute, fossilize, or innovatively sustain cultural meaning. This research aims to: (1) map the current forms of digital adaptation employed by Ludruk practitioners and communities; (2) analyze the impact of digital exposure on public perception and understanding of Ludruk's ritual dimensions; and (3) develop a framework for digital strategies that support the sustainable continuity of Ludruk's ritual essence. By filling this gap, the study contributes to the broader theoretical conversation on heritage digitization and offers practical insights for cultural policymakers, artists, and community custodians in East Java and analogous contexts globally.

I. METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), beginning with a quantitative phase to gather broad patterns of perception and engagement, followed by a qualitative phase to explore the meanings, processes, and experiences behind those patterns. This design was chosen to first quantify the reach and general impact of digital Ludruk and then to qualitatively deepen the understanding of how its ritual practices are transformed in digital spaces.

The quantitative phase utilized a survey method. Data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms (Facebook groups, Instagram) and cultural organization networks in East Java over a two-month period. A purposive sampling technique was used to target individuals aged 18 and above who had some exposure to Javanese culture. The final sample consisted of 250 respondents. The survey instrument contained four sections: demographic data (age, location, education), digital consumption habits related to traditional arts, a Likert-scale assessment of perceptions regarding Ludruk's value and sustainability (adapted from constructs by Deacon & Smeets, 2020), and knowledge of specific ritual elements. Reliability analysis showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the perception scales. Data were analyzed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics, chi-square tests for independence, and multiple regression analysis to examine relationships between variables such as digital exposure, perceived cultural value, and support for sustainability initiatives.

The qualitative phase consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography. Fifteen key informants were selected through snowball and criterion sampling. The informant group included: five veteran Ludruk artists (aged 50-70) from Surabaya and Jombang; five cultural managers and archivists from local arts councils and museums; and five digital content creators (aged 25-40) who actively produce content about Ludruk on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Each interview, lasting 60-90 minutes, was conducted in a hybrid manner (both in-person and via video call), audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Digital ethnography involved observing and analyzing content from 10 active YouTube channels and 15 Instagram/TikTok accounts dedicated to Ludruk over three months. Qualitative data from interviews and digital artifacts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), following a process of familiarization, coding, theme generation, and review. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in how rituals are documented, edited, narrated, and received in digital formats.

II. RESULT DAN DISCUSSION

A. RESULT

The quantitative survey results provide a snapshot of the audience landscape and the preliminary impact of digital exposure. Demographic data indicated that 68% of respondents were under 40 years old, and 72% resided in urban areas of East Java. Regarding digital consumption, 85% reported encountering content about traditional Indonesian arts online, with YouTube (78%) and Instagram (65%) being the primary platforms. However, only 34% had ever attended a live Ludruk performance.

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of Digital Exposure and Understanding of Ludruk Rituals

Level of Digital Exposure	High Understanding of Rituals	Low Understanding of Rituals	Total
High (≥ 3 hrs/week)	40 (28%)	102 (72%)	142
Low (< 3 hrs/week)	25 (23%)	83 (77%)	108
Total	65	185	250

Note: $\chi^2 = 0.82$, $p = 0.366$

Table 1 shows that high digital exposure did not correlate significantly with a deeper understanding of Ludruk's ritual elements. While 142 respondents had high exposure, only 40 (28%) of them demonstrated high understanding, a proportion similar to the low-exposure group (23%). This suggests that digital content may increase visibility but does not automatically translate to substantive knowledge transfer regarding complex ritual meanings.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Support for Ludruk Sustainability

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p
(Constant)	1.205	0.321		3.752	< .001
Age	0.215	0.062	.248	3.468	.001
Live Attendance Experience	0.408	0.089	.332	4.584	< .001
Perceived Cultural Value	0.301	0.075	.287	4.013	< .001
Digital Exposure Hours	0.095	0.048	.128	1.979	.049

$$R^2 = .412, \text{ Adjusted } R^2 = .399, F(4, 245) = 32.18, p < .001$$

Table 2 presents the results of a regression analysis predicting respondents' support for sustainability initiatives (e.g., funding, education programs). The model was significant and explained approximately 40% of the variance. The strongest positive predictors were prior experience attending a live performance ($\beta = .332$) and the perceived cultural value of Ludruk ($\beta = .287$). Age was also a significant predictor ($\beta = .248$), indicating older respondents were more supportive. Digital exposure hours had a small but statistically significant positive effect ($\beta = .128, p = .049$), confirming its role, albeit secondary to embodied, lived experience.

Qualitative results revealed three dominant models of digital adaptation for Ludruk rituals:

1. **Archival Documentation:** This model, led by cultural institutions, involves recording full performances in high definition. Interviews revealed a focus on "completeness and authenticity," but artists noted the camera's static perspective fails to capture the immersive, multi-sensory *rasa* (feeling) of the live event.
2. **Edited and Narrated Fragments:** Content creators often extract short clips (3-5 minutes) of specific scenes, like the *kidungan* or comic dialogues, adding subtitles, explanations, and background music. This makes rituals accessible but decontextualizes them from the performance's narrative and temporal flow. One creator stated, "We highlight the 'wow' or funny moment so it goes viral, but the spiritual opening might be cut because it's too slow for TikTok."
3. **Interactive and Parodic Engagement:** A emerging trend involves users reenacting Ludruk dialogues with modern twists or using its musical elements in digital mash-ups. This represents a participatory transformation where rituals become raw material for creative play, signifying a shift from sacred observance to popular remix culture.

B. DISCUSSION

The findings illuminate the nuanced and often contradictory role of digital technology in the transformation of Ludruk's ritual practices. The quantitative data underscores a critical point: digital exposure functions more effectively as a gateway to awareness than as a medium for deep cultural transmission. The non-significant relationship between digital consumption and ritual understanding (Table 1) aligns with concerns about the "digital sublime" potentially creating an illusion of preservation without substance (Giannini & Bowen, 2022). The regression analysis (Table 2) further clarifies that while digital exposure has a measurable positive impact on sustainability support, its influence is overshadowed by the power of direct, live experience and pre-existing perceptions of value. This reinforces theories of intangible heritage that prioritize embodied practice and communal participation as core to meaning-making (Alivizatou, 2019).

The identified adaptation models reveal a spectrum of ritual transformation. The archival model seeks to *freeze* ritual in a digital format, aiming for authenticity but risking the loss of its ephemeral, interactive quality. In contrast, the fragmentary

model *commodifies* ritual, packaging it into consumable units for algorithms, a process echoing the findings of Hendratri et al. (2025) on cultural commodification in digital tourism. The most transformative is the interactive model, which facilitates what can be termed *ritual reinvention*. Here, digital natives engage with Ludruk not as passive viewers of a sacred tradition but as active participants who reinterpret its symbols within contemporary digital vernacular. This mirrors the adaptive strategies seen in Ubrug theatre, where innovation was key to relevance (Ayunda et al., 2025), but extends it into the participatory realm of social media.

This transformation presents a double-edged sword for cultural sustainability. On one edge, digital adaptation risks reductionism and commodification, where the holistic, spiritual, and community-specific aspects of Ludruk rituals are flattened into entertainment or aesthetic data. This could lead to a generational disconnect, where younger audiences recognize Ludruk iconography without comprehending its foundational ethos. On the other edge, digital platforms offer unprecedented tools for narrative control, community building across distances, and creative renewal. They allow diaspora communities to reconnect and enable artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between digital and analog but to strategize their integration.

For sustainable practice, a hybrid framework is proposed. Digital tools should be leveraged for documentation, education, and stimulating interest—the "gateway" function. However, this must be intentionally linked to opportunities for embodied experience. For example, digital campaigns should promote and facilitate access to live, community-embedded performances, workshops, or artist meet-ups. Furthermore, digital projects should involve artists and ritual custodians in the design process to ensure that the core meanings of rituals are respectfully and intelligibly communicated, not just their visual forms. This approach acknowledges that the sustainability of Ludruk's ritual essence depends on maintaining its connection to lived community practice, social dialogue, and the transmission of *rasa*, which digital media alone cannot replicate.

III. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the digital adaptation of Ludruk in East Java is actively transforming its ritual practices from holistic, community-centric events into archived content, curated fragments, and raw material for participatory digital culture. While quantitative analysis confirms that digital exposure increases general awareness and has a modest positive effect on support for sustainability, it is a poor substitute for the deep understanding fostered by live, embodied experience. The qualitative findings reveal that the transformation process is multifaceted, encompassing preservation, commodification, and creative reinvention.

The primary implication is that cultural sustainability in the digital age requires a deliberate, critical, and integrated strategy. Policymakers and cultural organizations must move beyond simply digitizing heritage and instead develop "digital-physical" pathways that use online platforms as conduits to real-world engagement and intergenerational learning within communities. Future research should longitudinally track the impact of specific hybrid programs and explore the reception of digitally-mediated rituals among younger generations in greater depth. Ultimately, the goal is not to prevent the transformation of Ludruk, which is inherent to living traditions, but to guide its evolution in a way that preserves the vitality and depth of its ritual heart while embracing the connective potential of the new digital century.

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