

## Article

# Digital Competency and Human Capital Development for Cultural Preservation among Khmer Youth in Vietnam

Nguyen Thai Ngoc Ha<sup>1,3</sup>, To Minh Chau<sup>2,3,\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Property Office, An Giang University, Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, An Giang University, Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.\*Corresponding author: To Minh Chau, [tmchau@agu.edu.vn](mailto:tmchau@agu.edu.vn)

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**Abstract:** Digital transformation has expanded opportunities for ethnic minority youth to engage in cultural preservation, but limited research has examined this process from a youth capacity-building perspective. This study investigates the factors influencing digital cultural preservation behavior among Khmer minority youth in Vietnam. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior and participatory culture perspectives, the study examines cultural value awareness, preservation attitude, social norms, digital platform interaction, perceived efficacy, personal capacity, and perceived negative impacts of digital media. Survey data were collected from 180 Khmer youths in Tri Ton and Kien Luong districts and analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and multiple linear regression. The measurement model showed satisfactory construct validity, with a total variance extracted of 63.42%. Regression results indicated that digital platform interaction was the strongest predictor of digital cultural preservation behavior ( $\beta = .320$ ), followed by preservation attitude ( $\beta = .228$ ). At the same time, traditional cognitive and normative factors had no significant direct effects. The model explained 36.9% of the variance in preservation behavior. The findings suggest a shift from awareness-based to practice-based cultural preservation, in which routine digital interaction and participatory engagement serve as key mechanisms for heritage sustainability. The study contributes to human resource development research by highlighting the role of digital skills and youth engagement in strengthening community capacity among ethnic minority groups.

**Keywords:** digital literacy; youth engagement; ethnic minority communities; platform participation; heritage sustainability; participatory culture; capacity-building policy.

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## 1. Introduction

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed the way cultural heritage is preserved, transmitted, and reinterpreted. In the past, heritage preservation was largely managed through top-down mechanisms led by state institutions, museums, archivists, and academic experts. In the digital era, however, preservation has increasingly become a participatory process shaped by communities, young people, and everyday users of digital platforms. This shift is especially important for intangible cultural heritage, which depends not only on documentation but also on continuous practice, transmission, and community involvement. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes that living heritage must be safeguarded with respect for the communities, groups, and individuals concerned, while also raising awareness of its value at local, national, and international levels (UNESCO, 2003). In this context, digital technologies provide new channels through which communities can document, share, and sustain cultural practices. Still, their effectiveness depends on the

active participation and digital capacities of the people who use them.

Recent debates on digital heritage suggest that preservation should not be understood as the simple storage of cultural information in digital formats. Rather, digital cultural preservation involves interaction, learning, interpretation, and community participation. Alivizatou (2019) argues that digital intangible heritage should be linked to inventories, virtual learning, and community participation, showing that technologies can support both documentation and cultural transmission. Similarly, recent studies on youth participation in heritage management show that young people should not be treated only as passive recipients of inherited traditions but as active cultural actors whose agency, authorship, and digital literacy shape the future of heritage practices (Zhang et al., 2024). These arguments are consistent with participatory culture theory, which views digital platforms as spaces where users create, share, remix, and circulate cultural meanings through everyday interaction (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2006). Therefore, the digital preservation of heritage increasingly depends on young people's ability to transform cultural knowledge into continuous digital practices.

For younger generations, particularly Generation Z, digital platforms have become important spaces for cultural learning, social interaction, and identity expression. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Zalo, and YouTube are not merely communication tools; they are also arenas where cultural symbols, rituals, languages, festivals, and community narratives are reproduced and circulated. Youth engagement with cultural heritage is therefore shaped by their digital habits, technological readiness, content creation practices, and perceived ability to participate meaningfully in online spaces. Research on Generation Z further suggests that young people's relationships with cultural heritage are shaped not only by active platform use but also by selective digital disengagement, as digital wellness practices may strengthen their preference for authentic cultural experiences (Khoa et al., 2025). Digital storytelling, short videos, online community groups, and platform-based interaction can help minority youth share local knowledge and strengthen cultural visibility. At the same time, such participation requires more than access to technology. It also requires digital literacy, confidence, critical awareness, and the capacity to evaluate cultural accuracy and authenticity. From a human resource development perspective, these abilities can be understood as part of youth digital competency and community-level human capital, particularly in ethnic minority contexts where cultural sustainability depends on the skills and participation of younger generations.

The human capital dimension is important because digital cultural preservation is not only a cultural issue but also a capacity-building issue. In Vietnam, digital competence has increasingly been recognized as a key element of human resource development and national digital transformation. Nguyen (2022) argues that digital skills and competence need to be reconceptualized in relation to Vietnamese human resources, while Thuan (2023) highlights that digital literacy includes information and communication technology literacy, information literacy, technological literacy, and media literacy. These competencies are directly relevant to young people's ability to search for cultural information, create digital content, communicate cultural values, and participate in heritage-related activities online. For ethnic minority youth, digital competency can become a resource that supports cultural transmission, local participation, and community development. In this sense, digital cultural preservation can be connected to broader concerns in human resource development, especially youth capacity building, community empowerment, and culturally responsive development policies.

However, existing research on digital culture and heritage tourism has

tended to focus on mainstream communities, major heritage destinations, or technology-driven forms of heritage presentation. For example, Demirović Bajrami et al. (2025) demonstrate that digital interpretation tools, including augmented reality, virtual reconstructions, and interactive applications, can enhance visitor learning, emotional engagement, and satisfaction at cultural heritage sites. Many studies emphasize identity, symbolism, tourism experience, or discourse, while fewer studies empirically test the behavioral drivers that influence whether young people actually participate in digital cultural preservation. This gap is especially relevant for ethnic minority youth. On the one hand, digital media provides marginalized communities with opportunities to make their cultural identity more visible, connect with broader audiences, and strengthen cultural resilience. On the other hand, minority cultures face serious risks in digital environments, including the commercialization of sacred practices, the simplification of cultural meanings, misinformation, cultural homogenization, and misrepresentation by outsiders. A recent review of digital intangible cultural heritage safeguarding emphasizes that effective preservation requires synergy between digital methods and community participation, warning that technology-focused but community-shallow projects may lead to “digital fossilization,” where heritage is stored but no longer lived or practiced (Tan et al., 2026). Research on Macao’s intangible cultural heritage further suggests that cultural resilience involves preserving core cultural practices while continuously reconstructing identity and adapting to changing intercultural environments (Zhang, 2026). This suggests that the key issue is not simply whether heritage can be digitized, but whether communities, especially youth, have the skills, motivation, and participatory conditions to sustain it.

Within this broader context, Khmer youth in Southwestern Vietnam provide a meaningful empirical case for examining digital cultural preservation from both cultural and human resource development perspectives. The Khmer community in Southern Vietnam maintains a distinctive cultural ecosystem rooted in Theravada Buddhism, temple-based community life, traditional festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay and Sene Dolta, Khmer language practices, oral traditions, and local forms of social organization (Hai, 2021). In An Giang and Kien Giang provinces, these cultural resources remain important to community identity, intergenerational transmission, and local development. Comparable evidence from Lombok shows that living heritage practices can reinforce cultural pride, intergenerational knowledge transmission, community participation, and sustainable local development when they remain embedded in community life (Kurniawan et al., 2026). An Giang, in particular, is a region with diverse cultural spaces where local authorities have implemented policies to preserve ethnic minority cultural values while promoting sustainable cultural tourism (Hai, 2025). As digital transformation expands in these provinces, Khmer youth increasingly encounter both opportunities and pressures. They can use digital platforms to share cultural knowledge, document festivals, communicate in Khmer, and build cultural pride. Still, they are also exposed to changing lifestyles, mainstream digital trends, and external representations of their culture.

By testing these relationships empirically, the study makes three related contributions. Theoretically, it extends conventional TPB-based explanations by integrating participatory culture, thereby connecting attitudes, social influence, and perceived capacity with the routine platform practices through which cultural behavior is enacted. Unlike many previous TPB studies concerned with general technology adoption or mainstream populations, this research examines digital heritage participation among Khmer youth in an underrepresented ethnic minority context. It also connects digital competency and participatory engagement with community-level human capital development. Practically, the findings provide

an evidence base for educational institutions, community organizations, human resource practitioners, and public agencies seeking to develop digital skills, strengthen youth participation, and support culturally responsive preservation programs.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical foundation**

To systematically examine the behavioral drivers of digital cultural preservation among Khmer youth, this study adopts the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as its primary theoretical framework. TPB explains human behavior by proposing that behavioral intention is shaped by three core determinants: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In this framework, individuals are more likely to perform a behavior when they hold a positive evaluation of that behavior, perceive supportive social expectations, and believe that they have sufficient capacity and resources to act. TPB has been widely applied across various behavioral domains, including digital and technology-mediated contexts, demonstrating its usefulness in explaining intention and behavioral continuity in settings where personal evaluation, social influence, and perceived control interact (Dolezel et al., 2023).

However, applying TPB to digital cultural preservation requires an expanded perspective. Cultural preservation in digital environments is not limited to deliberate intention or formal participation. It is often embedded in routine, low-cost, and repetitive platform-based practices, such as sharing cultural content, commenting on heritage-related posts, following cultural pages, creating short videos, and participating in online discussions. These activities are shaped not only by attitudes and perceived control but also by the participatory structure of digital media. Therefore, this study integrates the perspective of participatory culture, which emphasizes the active role of users in creating, circulating, and transforming cultural meanings through digital interaction (Jenkins et al., 2006). From this perspective, digital platform interaction is not merely a technological condition; it is a lived cultural practice through which youth express identity, acquire digital skills, and contribute to community-based cultural sustainability.

The theoretical value of combining TPB with participatory culture lies in extending an intention-centered model toward a practice-oriented explanation of digital heritage behavior. TPB accounts for the attitudinal, normative, and perceived-control foundations of action, but it is less explicit about how routine platform practices sustain behavior over time. Participatory culture addresses this limitation by emphasizing content creation, circulation, peer interaction, and repeated engagement. Together, the two perspectives explain both why youth may be motivated and able to preserve culture and how these motivations are enacted through everyday digital participation. Platform interaction therefore complements, rather than replaces, the conventional TPB components and connects individual behavioral capacity with youth development and community-level human capital.

This expanded theoretical position is important because digital participation is not evenly shaped by access alone. Research on digital skills shows that meaningful use of digital media depends on a combination of operational, informational, communicative, content-creation, and strategic skills. Van Dijk and van Deursen (2014) argue that digital skills are essential for individuals to benefit from the information society, while the digital divide has increasingly shifted from basic access to differences in quality and forms of use (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Recent evidence among European youth similarly indicates that digital skills, attitudes toward ICT, and participation in digital activities are

associated with young people's capacity for meaningful online civic involvement (Tsouparopoulou et al., 2025). In the context of Khmer youth, this means that owning a smartphone or having access to social media does not automatically produce cultural preservation behavior. Youth need the skills to search for cultural information, evaluate its reliability, create appropriate digital content, communicate with online audiences, and use platforms strategically to increase the visibility of Khmer heritage.

This argument is also consistent with the global framework on digital literacy developed by UNESCO (2018), which emphasizes that digital literacy involves the ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information through digital technologies. For ethnic minority youth, these abilities are directly connected to cultural preservation because digital heritage practices require both technological competence and cultural responsibility. A youth who records a festival, shares a Khmer-language post, or produces a short video about traditional rituals is not only using a platform but also performing a form of culturally situated digital labor. Such actions combine cultural knowledge, digital competence, communication skills, and awareness of audience interpretation.

In addition, the community dimension of digital preservation requires attention. Gurstein (2007) argues that information and communication technologies become meaningful when they are used to support community processes, local objectives, social inclusion, and empowerment. Similarly, Warschauer (2003) emphasizes that technology should be understood in relation to social inclusion rather than merely physical access. These perspectives are particularly relevant to ethnic minority groups because digital participation can either reproduce inequality or create new opportunities for cultural visibility and community development. For Khmer youth, digital cultural preservation becomes meaningful when digital tools are used to strengthen community identity, support intergenerational transmission, and connect local cultural practices with wider audiences.

Therefore, this study conceptualizes digital cultural preservation behavior as a multidimensional process shaped by individual cognition, social influence, perceived capacity, digital skills, and platform-based interaction. TPB provides the core behavioral explanation, while participatory culture and digital literacy perspectives extend the model by explaining why everyday interaction on platforms may become a stronger driver of preservation behavior than traditional awareness or normative pressure alone. This theoretical integration allows the study to examine whether conventional behavioral determinants remain sufficient in digital heritage contexts, or whether digital platform interaction and youth digital competencies have become central mechanisms for sustaining cultural heritage in the digital era.

## **2.2. Cultural value awareness and preservation attitude**

Cultural value awareness refers to the extent to which individuals recognize their cultural heritage as meaningful, valuable, and worthy of preservation. For ethnic minority youth, such awareness may include understanding the significance of language, festivals, religious practices, oral traditions, traditional costumes, and community rituals. Within the TPB framework, awareness of cultural value is closely associated with the formation of positive attitudes because individuals who perceive their heritage as important are more likely to evaluate preservation activities favorably. In digital environments, this positive evaluation may be expressed through interest in cultural content, willingness to share heritage-related materials, and motivation to participate in online cultural activities.

Attitude toward cultural preservation refers to an individual's positive or

negative evaluation of participating in preservation-related behavior. In this study, preservation attitude reflects the extent to which Khmer youth perceive digital cultural preservation as meaningful, necessary, and beneficial to their community. According to TPB, attitude is a central predictor of behavioral intention and actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When youth believe that preserving culture through digital platforms is valuable, they are more likely to engage in behaviors such as posting, sharing, commenting, or creating cultural content. Therefore, cultural value awareness and preservation attitude are expected to support digital cultural preservation behavior.

H1: Cultural value awareness has a positive impact on digital cultural preservation behavior.

H2: Attitude toward cultural preservation has a positive impact on digital cultural preservation behavior.

### **2.3. Social norms and community influence**

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure that individuals experience from important referents when deciding whether to perform a behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of Khmer cultural preservation, these referents may include family members, elders, monks, teachers, friends, local community leaders, and peer groups. Traditional community norms may encourage youth to respect cultural values, participate in festivals, use the Khmer language, and maintain religious or communal practices. Such social expectations can influence whether young people consider cultural preservation to be a socially valued behavior.

However, the digital environment may alter the way social norms operate. Unlike traditional cultural spaces, where influence often comes from elders, religious leaders, or family members, digital platforms create new forms of social pressure and validation. Peer feedback, likes, comments, shares, followers, and online group participation may influence how youth perceive the value and visibility of cultural content. For Generation Z and other digitally active youth, online validation can become an important source of motivation. Therefore, social norms and community influence in this study include both traditional offline expectations and emerging online forms of peer and community recognition.

H3: Social norms and community influence have a positive impact on digital cultural preservation behavior.

### **2.4. Digital platform interaction and participatory engagement**

Digital platform interaction refers to the intensity and frequency of youth engagement with online platforms for cultural purposes. This includes viewing, liking, sharing, commenting, following cultural pages, joining online groups, and creating digital content related to cultural heritage. From the perspective of participatory culture, these practices are central to how young people experience and reproduce culture in digital spaces. Kasemsarn and Nickpour (2025) emphasize that digital storytelling and social media integration have become increasingly important in cultural and heritage tourism, especially for youth engagement. At the heritage-site level, social media analytics can also reveal patterns of public interest, visitation, and user engagement, thereby providing practical evidence for heritage management and conservation planning (Permanadewi et al., 2026). In this sense, digital platforms are not only channels for communication but also spaces for cultural learning, identity expression, and informal heritage transmission.

For ethnic minority youth, platform interaction may function as a bridge between traditional cultural knowledge and contemporary digital life. Through everyday digital participation, youth can document festivals, share community stories, promote local cultural practices, and connect with both local and wider

audiences. These activities may strengthen digital skills, increase confidence, and enhance the visibility of minority heritage. As a result, digital platform interaction is expected to have a direct and positive effect on digital cultural preservation behavior. Unlike awareness or norms, which may remain abstract, platform interaction represents concrete practice. It reflects what youth actually do in digital spaces.

H4: Digital platform interaction has a positive impact on digital cultural preservation behavior.

## **2.5. Perceived efficacy of digital participation**

Perceived efficacy of digital participation refers to the belief that one's digital actions can make a meaningful contribution to cultural preservation. Youth who believe that sharing cultural content, creating videos, or participating in online discussions can help preserve Khmer culture are more likely to engage in digital preservation behavior. This belief is closely related to perceived behavioral control in TPB, as individuals are more likely to act when they believe that their actions are feasible and impactful (Ajzen, 1991).

In digital cultural preservation, perceived efficacy is particularly important because online actions may appear small or informal. A single post, comment, or video may not seem immediately powerful, but repeated digital participation can contribute to cultural visibility, community awareness, and intergenerational transmission. At the same time, routine digital interaction may sometimes bypass conscious efficacy evaluation. Youth may engage in preservation-related practices simply because these actions are embedded in their daily platform habits. Therefore, perceived efficacy is hypothesized to influence behavior, but its effect may vary depending on how strongly digital participation is internalized as a meaningful cultural practice.

H5: Perceived efficacy of digital participation has a positive impact on digital cultural preservation behavior.

## **2.6. Personal capacity and digital competency**

Personal capacity represents the perceived behavioral control dimension of TPB. In this study, it refers to the extent to which youth perceive that they have the necessary digital skills, time, confidence, access, and resources to participate in cultural preservation through digital platforms. This construct is especially relevant from a human resource development perspective because digital cultural preservation requires more than cultural interest. It also requires practical competencies, including information searching, content creation, media literacy, platform navigation, communication skills, and the ability to evaluate the accuracy and appropriateness of cultural content.

For Khmer youth, personal capacity may determine whether they can transform cultural awareness into actual digital practice. Youth with stronger digital competency are more likely to document cultural activities, create culturally relevant content, interact with online audiences, and participate in digital storytelling. Conversely, limited skills, lack of confidence, weak internet access, or insufficient time may reduce their ability to engage. Therefore, personal capacity is expected to facilitate digital cultural preservation behavior by enabling youth to act on their cultural interests and attitudes.

H6: Personal capacity has a positive impact on digital cultural preservation behavior.

## **2.7. Negative impacts of digital media**

Although digital platforms create opportunities for cultural preservation, they also introduce risks that may discourage participation or weaken cultural authenticity. The negative impacts of digital media may include misinformation,

distortion of cultural meanings, commercialization of sacred practices, cultural homogenization, superficial representation, and decontextualization of cultural expressions. IFLA (2024) notes that digital cultural heritage practices must address ethical and practical challenges related to access, representation, preservation quality, and cultural integrity. These concerns are particularly significant for ethnic minority communities, whose cultural practices may be vulnerable to misinterpretation or inappropriate use by outsiders.

For Khmer youth, awareness of these risks may influence how they participate in digital preservation. Some youth may avoid sharing cultural content because they fear criticism, misrepresentation, or misuse of sacred traditions. Others may perceive digital platforms as spaces where cultural meanings are simplified or transformed into entertainment. Such concerns may reduce motivation to engage in digital cultural preservation. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that perceived negative impacts of digital media may negatively affect preservation behavior.

H7: The negative impact of digital media hurts digital cultural preservation behavior.

## 2.8. Conceptual research model

Based on the theoretical discussion above, this study proposes a conceptual model that integrates TPB and participatory culture perspectives to explain digital cultural preservation behavior among Khmer youth in Vietnam. The model includes seven explanatory constructs: cultural value awareness, attitude toward cultural preservation, social norms and community influence, digital platform interaction, perceived efficacy of digital participation, personal capacity, and perceived negative impacts of digital media. These constructs reflect cognitive, attitudinal, normative, participatory, capacity-related, and risk-related dimensions of youth behavior in digital cultural preservation. The proposed relationships among the constructs and the formulated hypotheses are illustrated in **Figure 1**.

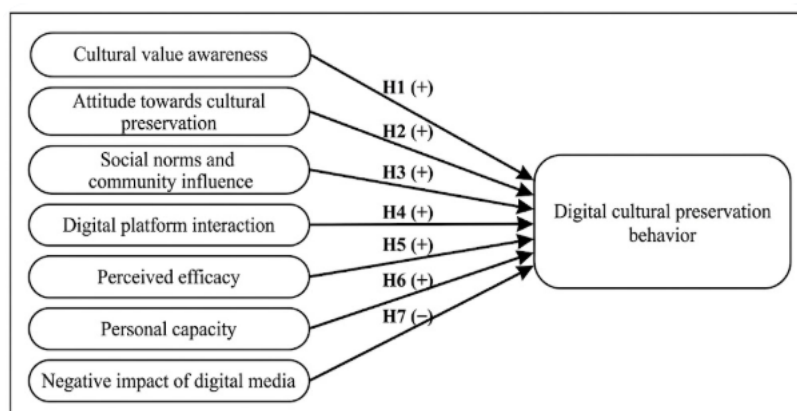


**Figure 1.** The conceptual research model.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Study area and sampling

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional research design to systematically investigate the multidimensional factors influencing digital cultural preservation behavior among ethnic Khmer youth in Vietnam. This design is appropriate because the study aims to examine relationships among several behavioral, cognitive, social, and digital engagement factors at a specific point in time. It also allows the study to test the proposed hypotheses using survey-based statistical analysis.

The empirical research was conducted in Tri Ton and Kien Luong in

Southwestern Vietnam. These two locations were purposively selected because they represent distinct geographical and socio-cultural contexts. Tri Ton is characterized by strong traditional engagement, a relatively dense concentration of Khmer cultural spaces, and close connections between community life, temples, festivals, and ethnic identity. In contrast, Kien Luong has experienced a higher degree of industrialization, modernization, and exposure to wider social and economic changes. The selection of these two sites therefore allows the study to examine digital cultural preservation behavior across communities with different levels of traditional continuity and modernization.

A stratified non-probability sampling technique was used to ensure balanced representation between the two research locations. A total of 180 valid survey responses were collected, including 90 respondents from Tri Ton and 90 respondents from Kien Luong. The target population was defined as Khmer youths aged between 15 and 35. This age group was selected because it is positioned at the intersection of traditional cultural inheritance and active digital consumption. Khmer youth in this age range are likely to have direct exposure to community cultural practices while also actively participating on digital platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Zalo, and YouTube.

The final sample size is considered suitable for the analytical procedures used in this study, particularly exploratory factor analysis and multiple linear regression. Although the study does not claim statistical generalization to all Khmer youth in Vietnam, the balanced sample structure provides an appropriate empirical basis for examining the behavioral patterns and explanatory factors associated with digital cultural preservation in the selected research sites.

### **3.2. Measurement instruments**

Primary data were collected using a structured, self-administered bilingual questionnaire prepared in Vietnamese and Khmer. The bilingual format was used to ensure linguistic clarity, cultural appropriateness, and accessibility for Khmer youth respondents. Before formal data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed to ensure that the wording of each item was understandable and relevant to the cultural and digital context of the respondents.

All measurement items were assessed using a standard 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 5, “strongly agree”. The dependent variable, digital cultural preservation behavior, was operationalized as a composite construct reflecting both self-reported current behaviors and future behavioral intentions. This approach was adopted to capture a broader pattern of digital participation rather than isolated or one-time actions. The construct includes behaviors such as engaging with cultural content, sharing heritage-related information, participating in online cultural discussions, and expressing willingness to support Khmer cultural preservation through digital platforms.

The independent variables were theoretically derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and expanded to fit the digital preservation context. The measurement model includes seven explanatory constructs: cultural value awareness, attitude toward cultural preservation, social norms and community influence, digital platform interaction and usage, perceived efficacy of digital participation, personal capacity, and perceived negative impacts of digital media. Personal capacity was conceptualized as a capacity-related construct that includes digital skills, confidence, time, and resources for participating in online cultural activities. Digital platform interaction was included to capture the practical and participatory dimension of digital engagement, which is central to youth cultural participation in contemporary online environments.

This measurement structure allows the study to examine both traditional

behavioral determinants and digital participation factors. In doing so, it connects the cognitive and normative assumptions of the Theory of Planned Behavior with the practical realities of platform-based cultural engagement among ethnic minority youth.

### **3.3. Data collection procedure**

Data collection was conducted through direct survey administration in the two selected research sites. Respondents were invited to participate voluntarily after receiving a brief explanation of the study purpose, the nature of the questionnaire, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was anonymous, and respondents were informed that they could decline or discontinue participation at any time.

Because the target population included youths aged 15 to 35, special attention was paid to ethical considerations during data collection. For respondents under 18 years old, consent procedures were handled in line with the ethical statement of the study. No personally identifiable information was collected. The use of a self-administered questionnaire also helped reduce interviewer influence and allowed respondents to answer more comfortably about their cultural attitudes, digital practices, and perceived community influences.

After data collection, all questionnaires were screened for completeness and consistency. Only valid responses were retained for statistical analysis. The final dataset consisted of 180 valid cases, equally distributed across Tri Ton and Kien Luong.

### **3.4. Data screening and analysis**

Before formal statistical analysis, the raw dataset underwent a screening process to identify missing values, outliers, and internal consistency issues. This step was necessary to improve data quality and ensure the reliability of the subsequent analysis. Items that weakened scale reliability or did not perform satisfactorily in preliminary tests were removed. Specifically, three reverse-coded items (D6R, H5R, and I4R) and one item with a low item-total correlation (E3) were excluded from the refined model. This procedure helped improve the reliability and construct validity of the measurement scales.

The refined dataset was analyzed using IBM SPSS software. The analytical procedure was carried out in four main steps.

First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic profile, spatial distribution, and digital platform preferences of the respondents. This step provided an overview of the sample characteristics and helped contextualize the behavioral patterns observed in the study.

Second, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and exploratory factor analysis were conducted to assess the reliability and construct validity of the measurement scales. Cronbach's Alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of each construct. In contrast, exploratory factor analysis was used to examine the underlying factor structure and confirm whether the measurement items loaded appropriately onto their expected dimensions.

Third, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the proposed directional hypotheses. This method was selected because the study examines the effects of multiple independent variables on digital cultural preservation behavior. The Variance Inflation Factor diagnostic was also used to assess potential multicollinearity among the independent variables. This step ensured that excessive correlations among predictors did not distort the regression estimates. This analytical strategy was consistent with the exploratory purpose of the study. Because several items were adapted and refined for the culturally specific context of Khmer youth, EFA was used to examine the underlying factor structure before hypothesis testing. Multiple regression was then employed to estimate the direct

and relative effects of seven observed predictors on preservation behavior. The study did not aim to validate a complete latent structural model or test mediation and indirect effects, which would have provided a stronger rationale for SEM. Given the adapted measures, research objectives, and sample of 180 respondents, EFA and regression were considered appropriate. Future studies may use CFA and SEM with larger samples.

Finally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether there were significant spatial and behavioral differences between Khmer youth respondents in Tri Ton and Kien Luong. This comparison was included because the two research locations differ in terms of traditional cultural engagement, modernization, and exposure to wider socio-economic change.

The comprehensive data analysis procedure is summarized in **Figure 2**.

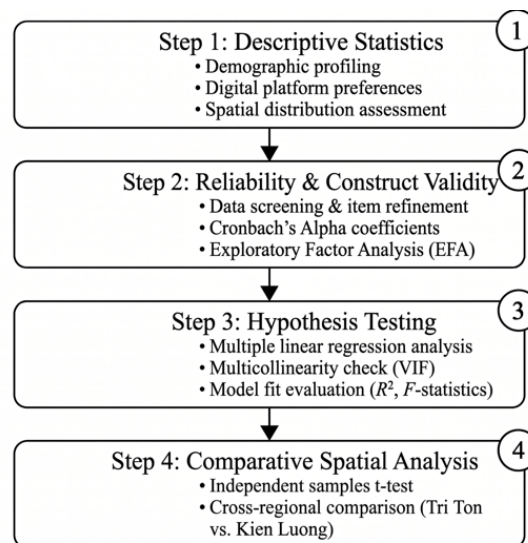


**Figure 2.** Flowchart of the data analysis procedure

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Demographic profile and platform usage

The final sample consisted of 180 valid responses from Khmer youth in Southwestern Vietnam. Respondents were evenly distributed between Tri Ton and Kien Luong, with 90 participants from each location, accounting for 50.0% of the sample in each study area. This balanced structure allows for a meaningful comparison between the two geographical contexts and ensures that the results are not dominated by one research site.

In terms of gender, female respondents accounted for 55.0% of the sample, while male respondents represented 45.0%. Regarding age distribution, 25.0% of respondents were aged 15–17, 36.7% were aged 18–24, and 38.3% were aged 25–35. Thus, 75.0% of the respondents were between 18 and 35 years old, indicating that the sample mainly consisted of young adults who are likely to have regular exposure to digital technologies and social media platforms.

With respect to digital platform usage, TikTok was the most frequently used platform among respondents, accounting for 33.8% of the sample. Facebook followed closely at 30.6%, while Zalo accounted for 20.6%. YouTube was used by 13.9% of respondents, and other platforms represented only 1.1%. These results suggest that Khmer youth's digital engagement is concentrated on interactive, socially embedded, and visually oriented platforms. The dominance of TikTok and Facebook indicates that short-form content, peer interaction, algorithmic visibility, and rapid circulation of cultural materials may play an important role in shaping youth participation in digital cultural preservation.

A detailed summary of respondents' demographic characteristics and digital platform preferences is presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics and digital usage patterns of respondents (N = 180)

| Variable           | Category   | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender             | Male       | 81            | 45.0           |
|                    | Female     | 99            | 55.0           |
| Age group          | 15–17      | 45            | 25.0           |
|                    | 18–24      | 66            | 36.7           |
|                    | 25–35      | 69            | 38.3           |
| Study area         | Tri Ton    | 90            | 50.0           |
|                    | Kien Luong | 90            | 50.0           |
| Most-used platform | Facebook   | 55            | 30.6           |
|                    | TikTok     | 61            | 33.8           |
|                    | YouTube    | 25            | 13.9           |
|                    | Zalo       | 37            | 20.6           |
|                    | Others     | 2             | 1.1            |

Overall, the platform usage pattern shows that youth cultural participation is increasingly embedded in digital environments that support immediacy, interaction, visual expression, and peer-driven engagement. Rather than functioning as passive consumers of cultural information, Khmer youth appear to participate in digital culture through everyday platform-based practices such as viewing, sharing, commenting, and creating content.

#### 4.2. Reliability and construct validity

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, the measurement model was assessed for reliability and construct validity. The initial dataset was screened to identify items with weak reliability performance. As a result, three reverse-coded items, namely D6R, H5R, and I4R, and one item with a low item-total correlation, E3, were removed from the refined measurement model. This refinement was conducted to improve the internal consistency and validity of the measurement scales.

Cronbach's Alpha values for the retained constructs ranged from .629 to .929. The comparatively lower coefficients for Social Norms and Community Influence and Negative Impacts of Digital Media should be interpreted cautiously. These values may reflect the small number of retained items, particularly the two-item Social Norms scale, and the contextually heterogeneous nature of both constructs. Social influence may originate from family, religious leaders, peers, and online communities, while perceived digital risks may include misinformation, commercialization, distortion, and loss of cultural authenticity. The dependent variable, digital cultural preservation behavior, demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of .929. Other constructs also showed acceptable reliability, including cultural value awareness (.781), attitude toward preservation (.826), digital platform interaction (.754), perceived efficacy (.760), and personal capacity (.790). Social norms and community influence (.632) and negative impact of digital media (.629) showed relatively lower reliability values. However, these values remain acceptable for exploratory research, especially when constructs are context-specific and measured in culturally distinctive settings.

Exploratory Factor Analysis was then conducted using principal component extraction with Varimax rotation. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value was .878,

indicating that the data were highly suitable for factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), confirming that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor extraction. All retained factor loadings exceeded .50, and factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained. The total variance explained was 63.42%, suggesting that the extracted factors captured a substantial proportion of the underlying data structure. The reliability results of the refined measurement scales are shown in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** Reliability of the measurement scales after refinement

| Construct                                   | Items retained | No. of items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|
| Digital cultural preservation behavior (DV) | A1–A13, B1–B7  | 20           | .929             |
| Cultural value awareness (C)                | C1–C5          | 5            | .781             |
| Attitude towards preservation (D)           | D1–D5          | 5            | .826             |
| Social norms and community influence (E)    | E1–E2          | 2            | .632             |
| Digital platform interaction (F)            | F1–F3          | 3            | .754             |
| Perceived efficacy (H)                      | H1–H4          | 4            | .760             |
| Personal capacity (I)                       | I1–I3          | 3            | .790             |
| Negative impact of digital media (J)        | J1–J3          | 3            | .629             |

Taken together, the reliability and factor analysis results indicate that the refined measurement model has adequate internal consistency and satisfactory construct validity. These results provide a sound basis for conducting multiple linear regression analysis to test the proposed hypotheses.

#### 4.3. Hypothesis testing

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of the seven independent variables on digital cultural preservation behavior. The overall regression model was statistically significant, with an adjusted  $R^2$  value of .369,  $F = 15.949$ , and  $p < .001$ . This means that the model explained 36.9% of the variance in digital cultural preservation behavior. In the context of behavioral research, this represents a moderate and acceptable level of explanatory power, especially given that multiple social, cultural, technological, and personal factors influence youth cultural participation.

The Variance Inflation Factor values for all predictors were below critical thresholds, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern. Therefore, the regression estimates can be considered stable and appropriate for interpretation.

The detailed results of the multiple linear regression analysis and hypothesis testing are presented in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** Multiple linear regression results and hypothesis testing

| Hypothesis | Relationship | Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ ) | t-value | Sig.   | VIF   | Result    |
|------------|--------------|-------------------------------|---------|--------|-------|-----------|
| H1         | C → DV       | .150                          | 1.876   | .062   | 1.811 | Rejected  |
| H2         | D → DV       | .228                          | 2.567   | .011   | 2.241 | Supported |
| H3         | E → DV       | .020                          | .258    | .797   | 1.727 | Rejected  |
| H4         | F → DV       | .320                          | 4.079   | < .001 | 1.742 | Supported |
| H5         | H → DV       | .035                          | .413    | .680   | 2.045 | Rejected  |
| H6         | I → DV       | .098                          | 1.208   | .229   | 1.864 | Rejected  |
| H7         | J → DV       | -.077                         | -1.096  | .275   | 1.418 | Rejected  |

The results show that digital platform interaction had the strongest positive effect on digital cultural preservation behavior ( $\beta = .320$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore,

H4 is supported. This finding indicates that youth who interact more actively with digital platforms are more likely to participate in digital cultural preservation. Attitude toward preservation also had a significant positive effect on the dependent variable ( $\beta = .228$ ,  $p = .011$ ), supporting H2. This suggests that youth who perceive cultural preservation as meaningful and valuable are more likely to engage in preservation-related digital behavior.

In contrast, cultural value awareness did not reach statistical significance ( $\beta = .150$ ,  $p = .062$ ), although the result approached the conventional significance level. Therefore, H1 is rejected. Social norms and community influence had no significant effect on digital cultural preservation behavior ( $\beta = .020$ ,  $p = .797$ ), leading to the rejection of H3. Similarly, perceived efficacy of digital participation ( $\beta = .035$ ,  $p = .680$ ), personal capacity ( $\beta = .098$ ,  $p = .229$ ), and negative impact of digital media ( $\beta = -.077$ ,  $p = .275$ ) did not demonstrate statistically significant effects. Accordingly, H5, H6, and H7 are rejected.

An independent samples t-test was also conducted to examine whether digital cultural preservation behavior differed significantly between respondents in Tri Ton and Kien Luong. The results showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Respondents in Tri Ton reported a mean score of 3.85 with a standard deviation of .62, while respondents in Kien Luong reported a mean score of 3.79 with a standard deviation of .58. The test result was  $t(178) = .64$ ,  $p = .523$ . This indicates that geographical location did not meaningfully influence youth engagement in digital cultural preservation in the present sample.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings provide important insights into the changing nature of cultural preservation behavior among ethnic minority youth in the digital era. The strongest predictor of digital cultural preservation behavior was digital platform interaction. This result suggests that cultural preservation among Khmer youth is increasingly shaped by everyday digital practices rather than by awareness or social expectations alone. Activities such as viewing, sharing, commenting, following cultural pages, and creating platform-based content appear to provide practical pathways through which youth engage with cultural heritage.

This finding supports the argument that digital cultural preservation is becoming more practice-driven than cognition-driven. Traditional behavioral models, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, emphasize attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as key determinants of behavior. However, the present results show that digital interaction has a stronger explanatory role than most traditional cognitive and normative predictors. This does not mean that TPB is irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that TPB should be extended in digital cultural contexts by incorporating platform-based interaction as a central explanatory construct.

This result is consistent with international research emphasizing that meaningful youth engagement in heritage depends on active participation rather than access alone. Zhang et al. (2024) highlight youth agency and authorship in digital heritage management, while Kasemsarn and Nickpour (2025) identify digital storytelling and social media interaction as important mechanisms of youth involvement. The present study extends this literature by showing that, among Khmer youth, routine platform interaction had a stronger direct relationship with preservation behavior than cultural awareness, social norms, perceived efficacy, or personal capacity. This contextual finding suggests that frequent and accessible digital practice may be more immediately influential than abstract recognition or self-assessed competence in an ethnic minority setting.

The significant effect of attitude toward preservation confirms that positive evaluation of cultural preservation remains important. Khmer youth who believe

that preservation is meaningful and beneficial are more likely to participate in digital preservation behavior. This finding is consistent with the TPB assumption that attitude influences behavior. However, the non-significance of cultural value awareness indicates that recognizing the importance of heritage does not automatically lead to action. Awareness may be a necessary foundation, but it is not sufficient unless motivation, accessible platforms, and opportunities for interaction accompany it.

The non-significant effect of social norms and community influence is also noteworthy. In traditional cultural settings, family members, elders, religious leaders, and local communities often play an important role in transmitting cultural expectations. However, in digital environments, social influence may become more fragmented and less direct. Youth may not respond strongly to conventional normative pressure when engaging online. Instead, their behavior may be shaped by peer interaction, platform visibility, algorithmic exposure, and informal digital communities. This result suggests that cultural preservation programs relying only on moral obligation or community pressure may be less effective for digitally active youth.

Perceived efficacy and personal capacity also did not show significant direct effects. This finding suggests that belief in the usefulness of one's digital actions and digital skills may not be enough to drive preservation behavior independently. One possible explanation is that youth may already consider digital participation to be a normal part of daily life, making efficacy and capacity less visible as conscious determinants. Another explanation is that digital environments lower the threshold for participation, allowing youth to engage in basic preservation-related actions even without strong confidence or advanced digital skills. Therefore, practical interaction with platforms may matter more than perceived competence alone.

The negative impact of digital media did not significantly reduce digital cultural preservation behavior. This result suggests that concerns about misinformation, cultural dilution, or decontextualization may not strongly discourage youth participation. For Khmer youth, the perceived opportunities offered by digital platforms may outweigh their risks. Digital media may be seen as an accessible and empowering space where minority culture can gain visibility, particularly when offline preservation channels are limited.

Finally, the absence of significant regional differences between Tri Ton and Kien Luong indicates that digital environments may function as equalizing spaces. Although Tri Ton and Kien Luong differ in their socio-cultural and developmental contexts, youth in both areas demonstrated similar levels of digital cultural preservation behavior. This suggests that digital platforms may reduce geographical disparities by providing shared spaces for cultural expression, interaction, and participation. In practical terms, digital strategies for Khmer cultural preservation may be designed across localities rather than being limited to specific geographical communities.

Overall, the findings suggest that cultural preservation among ethnic minority youth should no longer be understood only as a matter of awareness, tradition, or community norms. In the digital era, preservation behavior is strongly connected to platform interaction, digital participation, and youth engagement. This has important implications for both cultural policy and human resource development. Strengthening digital skills, encouraging participatory engagement, and creating supportive digital environments can help transform young people from passive recipients of heritage into active contributors to cultural sustainability.

#### *Practical and Managerial Implications*

The empirical results suggest the need for practical social interventions that

respond to the digital behavior patterns of ethnic minority youth. In particular, the findings indicate that cultural preservation strategies should shift from top-down transmission models toward practice-driven, platform-based engagement. This shift is important for local authorities, educational institutions, community organizations, and socio-political organizations that aim to support Khmer cultural preservation in the digital era.

Implementation should be organized through structured, project-based capacity-building rather than isolated technical workshops. Educational institutions can integrate information verification, digital storytelling, multimedia production, copyright awareness, and ethical cultural representation into cultural education and extracurricular activities. Community organizations can establish youth-led digital heritage teams and intergenerational mentoring in which elders, monks, and cultural practitioners provide cultural knowledge while young people contribute digital and platform skills. Human resource practitioners and public-sector managers can support these initiatives through facilitator training, shared equipment, small grants, competency-based recognition, and partnerships among schools, community organizations, and local agencies. Program outcomes should be assessed through demonstrated skills, the accuracy and quality of cultural products, sustained youth participation, and continued application of acquired competencies.

Finally, cultural preservation policies should recognize digital engagement as a legitimate form of youth participation. Rather than treating online cultural activity as secondary to offline practices, local programs should view digital participation as an important mechanism for sustaining intangible cultural heritage. By supporting platform-based engagement, digital literacy training, and youth-led cultural content creation, institutions can strengthen the role of Khmer youth as active agents of cultural sustainability in the digital era.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study shows that digital cultural preservation among Khmer youth is best understood as a form of situated participation rather than as the simple outcome of cultural awareness or social expectation. Cultural preservation becomes meaningful when young people can engage with heritage through the digital practices that already form part of their everyday lives. This shifts attention from what youth know about their culture to how they use, interpret, and circulate cultural knowledge in digital settings.

The study contributes to theory by bringing participatory culture into dialogue with the Theory of Planned Behavior. TPB remains useful for explaining the attitudinal and perceived-capacity foundations of behavior, but it does not fully capture the practical and repetitive character of platform-based participation. The findings therefore support a broader account in which digital interaction provides the setting through which motivation, cultural attachment, and individual capacity are translated into visible cultural practice.

The study also extends the discussion beyond heritage preservation by locating digital competency within human resource development. The competencies involved in producing, evaluating, and sharing cultural content are not confined to the cultural domain. They include communication, information management, critical judgment, collaboration, and adaptive learning. When developed through sustained participation, these capabilities can support employability, lifelong learning, workforce readiness, and community-based capacity development. Digital cultural preservation may therefore serve two related purposes: sustaining cultural knowledge and creating opportunities for youth development.

These findings have practical implications for educational institutions,

community organizations, and public agencies. Cultural preservation programs should provide young people with regular opportunities to produce and discuss digital cultural content, rather than limiting intervention to awareness campaigns or short-term technical training. Such initiatives are likely to be more effective when they combine cultural guidance from elders and community practitioners with the digital experience of younger participants. This approach can strengthen both the quality of cultural representation and the longer-term development of local human resources.

The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and focus on Khmer youth in two localities. The use of a single questionnaire at one point in time may also have introduced common method bias and self-report bias. Future research should examine these relationships through longitudinal and mixed-method designs and include larger, more diverse samples. Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling would also be useful for validating the proposed framework and examining indirect or more complex relationships among digital competency, participatory engagement, human resource development, and cultural sustainability.

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