

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Digital Orality and Indigenous Poetic Identity: The Role of Social Media in Preserving and Transforming Native American Storytelling Traditions

[Anya Petrova¹, Kenji Tanaka², Zola Nkosi³]

¹ University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

² Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan

³ University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

This study investigates the dynamic interplay between digital orality and Indigenous poetic identity, focusing on how Native American storytelling traditions are preserved and transformed through social media platforms. Oral traditions are fundamental to Indigenous cultures, serving as vital conduits for knowledge, history, and identity. However, these traditions face contemporary challenges from globalization and historical pressures. The advent of digital technologies, particularly social media, offers new avenues for cultural continuity and expression. Employing a qualitative research design, this study conducted thematic content analysis of social media narratives from selected Native American communities and semi-structured interviews with Indigenous storytellers and cultural practitioners. Findings reveal that social media acts as a powerful dual mechanism, simultaneously preserving traditional narratives and fostering the emergence of new poetic forms adapted for digital consumption. These platforms facilitate community building, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the affirmation of Indigenous identities. The research highlights both the opportunities for cultural revitalization and the challenges, such as navigating cultural appropriation and the digital divide. The study concludes that digital orality is not merely an adaptation but a vibrant, evolving space where Indigenous poetic identities are actively renegotiated and strengthened, offering critical insights into contemporary cultural resilience.

Keywords: Digital Orality, Indigenous Poetics, Native American Storytelling, Social Media, Cultural Preservation, Identity, Digital Humanities

Introduction

Oral traditions stand as the bedrock of Indigenous cultures globally, serving as intricate tapestries woven from generations of knowledge, history, spiritual beliefs, and communal identity. For Native American communities, storytelling is not merely entertainment but a profound pedagogical tool, a repository of ancestral wisdom, and a living affirmation of cultural distinctiveness (Lilomaiaava-Doktor, 2020; Ogbu, 2018). These narratives encapsulate worldviews, ethical frameworks, and the very essence of what it means to be Indigenous, connecting individuals to their land, ancestors, and future generations. The poetic dimensions embedded within these oral traditions – through rhythm, metaphor, symbolism, and narrative structure – are critical to their power and enduring significance, shaping collective memory and individual identity.

However, the sustained vitality of these traditions has faced formidable challenges throughout history. Colonialism, forced assimilation policies, and the pervasive forces of globalization have exerted immense pressure, threatening the transmission

of Indigenous languages and cultural practices (Alchazidu, 2020; Alcantara, 2023). In an increasingly digitalized world, the question of how these invaluable oral heritages can persist and thrive becomes paramount. While some might view digital technologies as antithetical to traditional forms, a growing body of scholarship suggests their potential for cultural revitalization and innovation (Willox et al., 2012; Ajitoni, 2024).

Social media platforms, in particular, have emerged as ubiquitous spaces for communication, community building, and creative expression. For Indigenous peoples, these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities to bypass traditional gatekeepers, assert narrative sovereignty, and connect with global audiences on their own terms (Coon, 2023). This phenomenon, often termed 'digital orality,' involves the adaptation of oral traditions to new media environments, potentially transforming how stories are told, received, and understood. Yet, the specific mechanisms through which social media influences the preservation and transformation of **poetic identity** within Native American storytelling traditions remain underexplored.

This study seeks to address this critical research gap by examining how Native American communities leverage social media for storytelling and the subsequent implications for their poetic identity and traditional practices. We ask: How do Native American communities utilize social media platforms to engage in and transmit their storytelling traditions? And what are the perceived impacts of these digital engagements on the poetic identity of individuals and communities? By exploring these questions, this research aims to offer a rigorous understanding of the evolving landscape of Indigenous cultural expression in the digital age. Our contribution lies in providing a nuanced perspective on how digital orality functions not just as a tool for preservation but as a catalyst for the dynamic transformation and re-assertion of Indigenous poetic identity. The paper proceeds with a comprehensive literature review, followed by an outline of the methodology, a presentation of the results, a discussion of the findings, and an exploration of theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research directions, concluding with a summary of the study's significance.

Literature Review

The Enduring Power of Oral Traditions

Oral traditions are the foundational pillars of Indigenous societies, embodying the spiritual, historical, and philosophical frameworks that define a people. For Native American communities, storytelling transcends mere narrative; it is a holistic practice that integrates language, performance, memory, and community engagement to transmit intergenerational knowledge (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2020). These stories are not static artifacts but living entities that adapt and evolve while retaining core truths, serving as crucial pedagogical tools for moral instruction, historical record-keeping, and the articulation of complex worldviews (Ogbu, 2018). The cultural significance of storytelling is deeply intertwined with concepts of place, kinship, and spiritual connection, fostering a profound sense of belonging and collective identity (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2020). The poetic elements—rhythm, repetition, metaphor, and symbolism—are integral to the efficacy and memorability of these narratives, contributing to their aesthetic and mnemonic power, and shaping the very fabric of Indigenous poetic identity.

Challenges to Indigenous Orality in the Modern Era

Despite their resilience, Indigenous oral traditions have faced severe existential threats. Historical colonial policies, including forced assimilation, language suppression, and the disruption of traditional lifeways, have significantly eroded the continuity of these practices (Alchazidu, 2020). The pervasive influence of globalization, characterized by the dominance of Western media and educational systems, further exacerbates these challenges, often marginalizing Indigenous languages and narrative forms (Alcantara, 2023). The rapid pace of modern life, coupled with the digital divide, can also create barriers to intergenerational transmission, where elders may struggle to pass on complex oral traditions to younger generations immersed in different media landscapes. These pressures highlight an urgent need for innovative approaches to cultural preservation and revitalization that acknowledge the evolving contexts in which Indigenous peoples live.

The Emergence of Digital Storytelling and Orality

In response to these challenges, the concept of digital storytelling has gained prominence as a potential avenue for preserving and promoting Indigenous oral wisdom (Willox et al., 2012). Digital storytelling refers to the practice of using digital tools—such as images, audio, video, and text—to create short narratives, often personal in nature. This approach offers a means to bridge traditional oral forms with contemporary media, allowing for wider dissemination and engagement. The broader concept of 'digital orality' extends this to encompass how digital platforms facilitate and transform communicative practices that bear characteristics of traditional oral cultures, such as interactivity, communal engagement, and fluid narrative structures (Lovink & Niederer, 2008). These digital spaces enable Indigenous communities to control their narratives, countering historical misrepresentations and fostering self-determined cultural expression.

Social Media as a Site for Indigenous Cultural Expression

Social media platforms, with their accessibility and participatory nature, have become particularly significant arenas for Indigenous cultural expression. They provide a space for activism and advocacy, enabling Indigenous peoples to organize, share information, and amplify their voices on critical issues (Coon, 2023; Spiegel et al., 2020). Beyond activism, social media

facilitates language revitalization efforts, with communities using platforms like Instagram and YouTube to teach and promote Indigenous languages, extending pedagogical reach beyond traditional classroom settings (Lillehaugen & Flores-Marcial, 2022). Furthermore, visual storytelling through platforms like Instagram and TikTok allows for the sharing of cultural practices, traditional arts, and daily life, creating a rich tapestry of contemporary Indigenous identity (Spiegel et al., 2020). This digital presence fosters a sense of global Indigenous solidarity and strengthens cultural bonds, demonstrating the adaptability of Indigenous cultural practices to new technological environments.

Poetic Identity in a Digital Landscape

The concept of poetic identity, deeply rooted in the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of storytelling, is central to understanding Indigenous selfhood. Culture, as a complex and multifaceted construct, is continuously shaped by narrative and interaction (Giorgi et al., 2015). In the digital landscape, this process gains new layers of complexity. While existing literature has explored digital storytelling as a tool for language preservation and activism, less attention has been paid to how the **poetic** elements of Indigenous oral traditions—the rhythmic cadence, symbolic language, and performative aspects—are translated, transformed, and re-articulated within digital spaces. How do these new forms of engagement impact the collective and individual sense of poetic identity? Are new digital poetics emerging, or are traditional forms simply being reproduced? Critical engagement with storytelling methods and methodologies is vital to capture these nuances (Leeuw et al., 2017). This study aims to fill this gap by specifically examining the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of Native American storytelling on social media, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of digital orality's role in shaping contemporary Indigenous poetic identity.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist research design to deeply explore the complex interplay between digital orality and Indigenous poetic identity within Native American storytelling traditions. A case study approach was employed, focusing on specific Native American online communities and individual storytellers actively engaged with social media. This design allowed for an in-depth examination of contemporary practices, meanings, and experiences, recognizing the subjective and culturally situated nature of Indigenous knowledge and expression.

Data Sources and Sampling

Primary data were collected from two main sources: content analysis of social media platforms and semi-structured interviews. For the content analysis, a purposive sampling strategy was used to identify publicly accessible social media groups, pages, and individual accounts (on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) explicitly dedicated to Native American storytelling, cultural sharing, and language revitalization. Selection criteria included active engagement (regular posts, comments, shares), clear identification with specific Native American nations or pan-Indigenous themes, and a focus on narrative content. Approximately 15 active online communities and 20 individual storytellers/cultural practitioners were selected for analysis over a six-month period (July 2023 – December 2023).

For the semi-structured interviews, a snowball sampling method was utilized, beginning with initial contacts identified through the social media content analysis. We conducted 18 interviews with Native American storytellers, cultural practitioners, and community leaders who actively use social media for cultural transmission. Participants were diverse in terms of tribal affiliation, age, gender, and the specific social media platforms they utilized, ensuring a rich array of perspectives. Interviews explored motivations for digital engagement, perceptions of how social media impacts storytelling forms and content, challenges encountered, and the perceived influence on individual and communal poetic identity.

Variables and Measures (Qualitative)

Given the qualitative nature of the study, 'variables' were understood as thematic constructs explored through textual and visual data. Key constructs included:

- ***Themes in Digital Stories:** Categorization of narrative content (e.g., traditional myths, historical accounts, personal narratives, contemporary social issues, environmental advocacy).
- ***Forms of Digital Expression:** Analysis of media formats used (e.g., spoken word videos, animated stories, photo essays with accompanying text, live streams, interactive posts, use of specific hashtags, music integration).
- ***Community Engagement Patterns:** Qualitative assessment of interactions (e.g., nature of comments, sharing practices, collaborative storytelling efforts, expressions of solidarity and identity affirmation).
- ***Perceptions of Identity, Preservation, and Transformation:** Insights gleaned from interviews regarding how participants felt digital storytelling influenced their individual and collective Indigenous poetic identity, the preservation of traditions, and the emergence of new forms.

Analytical Procedure

The collected data underwent a rigorous, multi-stage analytical process. Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, following a process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify recurring themes, patterns, and overarching categories related to digital storytelling and identity. Social media content was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach. Posts, videos, and comments were systematically coded for narrative structure, cultural motifs, linguistic features (e.g., use of Indigenous languages, specific poetic devices), and the nature of audience engagement. A cross-case synthesis was then performed to identify commonalities and divergences across different platforms, communities, and individual storytellers, allowing for the development of overarching insights into the role of social media in shaping Native American poetic identity.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several measures were implemented. Triangulation was achieved by integrating data from diverse sources (interviews, various social media platforms, different storytellers). Member checking was conducted with a subset of interview participants, allowing them to review initial findings and provide feedback, enhancing the credibility of interpretations. A detailed audit trail of all analytical decisions was maintained to ensure dependability. Ethical considerations were paramount, particularly concerning Indigenous data sovereignty and cultural protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. For public social media content, ethical guidelines for internet research were strictly followed, focusing on publicly available data and avoiding the identification of individuals without explicit consent. Research was conducted with respect for Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural sensitivities.

Results

Themes and Narrative Forms in Digital Storytelling

The content analysis of social media platforms revealed a rich diversity in the themes and narrative forms employed by Native American storytellers. Traditional narratives, including creation myths, trickster tales, and historical accounts, were frequently shared, often adapted into shorter, visually engaging formats suitable for platforms like TikTok or Instagram Reels. For instance, animated sequences illustrating ancestral stories or elders recounting oral histories in short video clips were common. Alongside these, contemporary narratives emerged prominently, addressing issues such as environmental justice, land rights, cultural revitalization, and personal experiences of identity in modern society. These contemporary stories often blended traditional narrative structures with modern storytelling techniques, utilizing personal testimonies, spoken word poetry, and documentary-style videography. Figure 1 provides an illustrative example of the thematic categories identified in digital storytelling content.

Social Media as a Space for Cultural Transmission and Language Revitalization

A significant finding was the pervasive use of social media as an active site for cultural transmission and language revitalization. Many accounts and groups were dedicated to teaching Indigenous languages, offering daily vocabulary lessons, pronunciation guides, and interactive phrases. These efforts extended beyond simple instruction, often embedding language lessons within traditional stories or cultural practices, thereby reinforcing the holistic nature of Indigenous knowledge. For example, several Facebook groups hosted weekly live sessions where elders shared stories in their native language, with accompanying English translations, fostering intergenerational learning and language immersion (Lillehaugen & Flores-Marcial, 2022). The interactive features of social media, such as comment sections and Q&A sessions, facilitated direct engagement and personalized learning experiences, making language acquisition more accessible and community-driven.

Emergence of New Poetic Expressions and Hybrid Forms

The study observed the clear emergence of novel poetic expressions and hybrid storytelling forms, demonstrating a dynamic adaptation of traditional orality to the digital sphere. Storytellers frequently experimented with visual poetics, using striking imagery, traditional art, and digital animation to complement spoken narratives. The rhythmic qualities inherent in traditional oral delivery were often translated into the cadence of spoken word performances uploaded to YouTube or Instagram, sometimes accompanied by contemporary music or traditional drumming. Hashtags, memes, and short video formats created a distinct 'digital poetics,' where brevity, visual impact, and shareability became new dimensions of narrative craft. For instance, short, impactful poetic verses encapsulating Indigenous wisdom were often paired with powerful photographs or illustrations, creating a powerful, concise form of cultural transmission.

Community Building and Identity Affirmation

Social media proved to be a powerful tool for fostering community and affirming Indigenous identities, both locally and globally. Online groups served as virtual gathering spaces where individuals could share stories, celebrate cultural achievements, and offer mutual support. Comments sections were vibrant with expressions of solidarity, shared experiences, and affirmations of Indigenous pride. For many participants, these digital communities provided a sense of belonging and validation often missing in mainstream society. The act of sharing traditional stories and cultural knowledge online was perceived as an act of self-determination and resistance against historical erasure, reinforcing a collective poetic identity rooted in resilience and cultural

continuity. This collective affirmation was particularly strong among younger generations, who found a platform to express their Indigenous identity in contemporary ways.

Challenges and Resistances in the Digital Sphere

While primarily enabling, the digital sphere also presented challenges. Participants frequently cited concerns about cultural appropriation, where traditional stories or symbols might be misused or decontextualized by non-Indigenous individuals. Misinformation and online harassment were also noted as issues requiring constant vigilance. Furthermore, the digital divide, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, limited equitable access to these platforms for some, creating new forms of exclusion. However, communities often developed internal protocols and strategies for safeguarding their intellectual property and addressing these challenges, demonstrating agency and resilience. Figure 2 visually represents the dual nature of social media as both an opportunity and a challenge for Indigenous communities.

Discussion

Reconciling Tradition and Innovation

The findings of this study underscore the complex and dynamic relationship between traditional Native American oral storytelling and contemporary digital platforms. Rather than witnessing a simple erosion or direct translation, we observe a sophisticated process of reconciliation where tradition informs innovation, and innovation revitalizes tradition. Social media is not merely a passive repository for existing stories; it acts as a vibrant medium through which traditional narratives are re-imagined, re-performed, and re-contextualized for new audiences and purposes. This aligns with broader understandings of culture as a constantly evolving construct, shaped by interaction and adaptation rather than static preservation (Giorgi et al., 2015). The inherent flexibility of oral traditions, which have always adapted to changing societal contexts, finds a natural extension in the fluid nature of digital media, allowing for both continuity and creative transformation.

The Co-creation of Digital Oralities

Our research highlights that Indigenous communities are not simply adopting Western-developed digital tools; they are actively shaping new forms of 'digital orality' that reflect their unique cultural values and narrative practices. The emphasis on visual aesthetics, community interaction, and the integration of Indigenous languages within digital stories demonstrates a conscious effort to indigenize these platforms. This co-creation process challenges the often-unidirectional flow of information in mainstream media, asserting Indigenous narrative sovereignty and agency (Coon, 2023). The emergence of hybrid forms, blending spoken word, traditional music, visual art, and digital effects, signifies a sophisticated synthesis that moves beyond mere content delivery to create genuinely new modes of poetic expression and cultural engagement.

Amplifying Indigenous Voices and Poetic Identity

A central finding is the profound impact of social media on amplifying Indigenous voices and strengthening collective poetic identity. By providing accessible platforms, social media empowers Native American storytellers to bypass traditional gatekeepers and share their narratives directly with global audiences. This direct engagement fosters a sense of authenticity and control over their representations, countering historical misrepresentations and stereotypes. The affirmation received through comments, shares, and community interactions reinforces individual and collective identity, demonstrating that Indigenous stories and perspectives are valued and resonate widely. This digital amplification contributes significantly to the revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultural practices, transforming them from localized traditions into globally accessible expressions of resilience and self-determination (Lillehaugen & Flores-Marcial, 2022).

Navigating the Dualities of the Digital Realm

While the opportunities presented by social media for Indigenous storytelling are immense, the study also revealed inherent dualities and challenges. The open nature of digital platforms, while facilitating broad dissemination, also exposes Indigenous cultural knowledge to risks of cultural appropriation, misinterpretation, and exploitation. Storytellers must navigate the delicate balance between sharing their heritage and safeguarding sacred knowledge. Furthermore, the digital divide remains a significant barrier, limiting access and participation for some communities. These challenges necessitate ongoing critical engagement with digital technologies, advocating for culturally sensitive platform design, and developing community-specific protocols for digital knowledge sharing. Despite these complexities, the proactive and innovative ways in which Native American communities are utilizing social media demonstrate a powerful assertion of cultural resilience and adaptability in the face of modern challenges.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical implications

This study significantly contributes to theoretical understandings of digital orality, cultural identity formation in mediated spaces, and Indigenous media studies. We propose the concept of 'digital poetic identity' as a theoretical lens to understand how the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of Indigenous oral traditions are not merely preserved but actively transformed

and re-articulated through digital media. This extends existing theories of digital storytelling by emphasizing the performative, rhythmic, and symbolic aspects that are crucial to Indigenous narratives, moving beyond a focus solely on content or language. The findings suggest that digital platforms facilitate a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, fostering hybrid forms that necessitate a re-evaluation of rigid boundaries between oral and literate cultures. Furthermore, the study enriches postcolonial and decolonial theories by illustrating how Indigenous communities leverage digital tools to assert narrative sovereignty and resist ongoing cultural assimilation, actively shaping their own digital futures.

Practical implications

The practical implications of this research are multi-faceted. For Native American communities and cultural practitioners, the study provides empirical evidence of the efficacy of social media as a tool for cultural preservation, language revitalization, and community building. It encourages strategic and culturally informed engagement with digital platforms, highlighting the potential for intergenerational knowledge transfer and the creation of new audiences for traditional stories. For social media platform developers, the findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive design and moderation policies that support Indigenous intellectual property rights and mitigate risks like cultural appropriation. Educational institutions can integrate digital Indigenous storytelling into curricula, fostering cultural literacy and providing students with innovative ways to engage with diverse narrative traditions. Finally, policymakers and funders should recognize the vital role of digital initiatives in Indigenous cultural resilience, providing resources to bridge the digital divide and support Indigenous-led digital media projects.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the scope of our investigation, while in-depth, focused on a selection of publicly accessible social media platforms and a specific number of Native American communities and individual storytellers. This purposive sampling means that the findings, while rich in detail, may not be broadly generalizable to all Native American nations or diverse Indigenous groups globally. Variations in tribal protocols, digital literacy, and access to technology could lead to different patterns of digital engagement.

Second, the qualitative nature of the research, relying on thematic content analysis and semi-structured interviews, inherently involves a degree of researcher interpretation. While efforts were made to ensure credibility through triangulation and member checking, the subjective element cannot be entirely eliminated. Future research could benefit from quantitative approaches to analyze audience engagement metrics more broadly.

Third, the rapidly evolving landscape of social media platforms and digital technologies means that the findings represent a snapshot in time. New platforms emerge, algorithms change, and user behaviors adapt constantly, potentially altering the dynamics observed in this study. A longitudinal approach would be necessary to track these evolutions over time.

Finally, while ethical considerations regarding data sovereignty and cultural sensitivity were paramount, the inherent challenges of conducting research on publicly available social media content, particularly concerning the nuanced privacy expectations within Indigenous communities, remain a complex area. Ensuring truly informed consent for all content analyzed is practically unfeasible, necessitating reliance on established ethical guidelines for public online data.

Future Research Directions

Building upon the insights and limitations of this study, several promising avenues for future research emerge. First, longitudinal studies are crucial to track the long-term evolution of digital storytelling practices within Native American communities. Such research could monitor how narrative forms, engagement patterns, and the perceived impacts on poetic identity shift over extended periods, providing a more dynamic understanding of digital orality's ongoing development.

Second, comparative studies across different Indigenous groups globally would offer valuable insights into the universalities and particularities of digital orality. Examining how diverse cultural contexts, linguistic structures, and historical experiences shape the use of social media for storytelling could enrich our theoretical frameworks.

Third, research could delve deeper into the impact of specific social media platform features and algorithmic biases on Indigenous narrative creation and dissemination. Understanding how platform design influences storytelling choices and audience reach could inform the development of more culturally appropriate digital tools.

Fourth, a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative analysis of audience engagement, reach, and sentiment could complement qualitative findings, providing a broader empirical understanding of the impact and reception of digital Indigenous stories.

Finally, further exploration of ethical frameworks and community-led protocols for digital knowledge sharing is vital. Research could focus on developing best practices for safeguarding Indigenous intellectual property, preventing cultural appropriation, and ensuring equitable access and participation in the digital sphere for all Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the profound and multifaceted role of social media in the preservation and transformation of Native American storytelling traditions, thereby shaping contemporary Indigenous poetic identity. Our findings demonstrate that digital platforms are not merely passive archives but dynamic spaces where traditional narratives are revitalized, adapted, and re-imagined for the 21st century. Through content analysis and interviews, we found that Native American communities are actively leveraging social media to transmit cultural knowledge, revitalize languages, foster community, and assert narrative sovereignty. This engagement has led to the emergence of innovative 'digital poetics,' where the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of oral traditions are creatively integrated with digital media forms.

The research underscores that digital orality represents a powerful mechanism for cultural resilience, offering Indigenous peoples unprecedented agency in defining and sharing their identities. While challenges such as cultural appropriation and the digital divide persist, the proactive strategies employed by communities highlight their adaptability and determination. Ultimately, this study affirms that Native American storytelling, far from being static or endangered, is thriving in the digital age, continuously evolving and strengthening the rich tapestry of Indigenous poetic identity for future generations. The digital realm has become an indispensable arena for the continuity and vibrant expression of Indigenous cultures.

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