



From Custodians to Creators: Youth and the Reimagining of Intangible Heritage in Conflict Zones

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Abstract: In areas that experience continuous wars, the places that were destroyed along with the cultures that were erased are leading to the youth of the place becoming the promoters of the preservation and the update of the cultural heritage of the community. This article presents an analysis of young people in Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora, who are taking advantage of digital platforms—like TikTok, Instagram, and virtual museums—to register, change the interpretation of, and pass along traditional knowledge, oral histories, rituals, and performative practices. A comparative, desk-based analysis forms the backbone of the study, which celebrates these youth-led initiatives not only as the vehicle that carries the safeguarding of heritage, but also as the means of its changing of the histories that help colonialist narratives of geography and institutional gatekeeping.

The paper embraces participatory heritage theory and decolonial digital epistemologies and is a thesis that those practices are very much the kind of cultural resistance and identity reconstruction that is apt especially in those places where heritage is treated as the enemy or is the hand that wields political power. Through positioning youth as the creators—not merely the custodians—of cultural memory, the study discloses the prodigious power of digital storytelling in constructing more diversified and strong heritage futures, and highlights four themes: youth authorship, platforms as resistance, intergenerational transmission, and hybrid diasporic identities.

Keywords: Youth heritage, participatory preservation, digital storytelling, intangible cultural heritage, conflict zones, decolonial theory, social media.

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Introduction

During times of prolonged conflict, occupation, and forced displacement, the act of preserving cultural heritage becomes not only of memory, but also of survival, identity and resistance. Heritage conservation, which has been traditionally dominated by institutional actors, technical experts, and nation-states, is now changed as recent developments in digital communication technologies decentralize this domain. An increasing number of youths living in conflict-affected societies are returning to their original roles as active agents in heritage-making, becoming familiar with the intangible cultural elements—like oral histories, storytelling, traditional rituals, and performative arts—using innovative digital means. This move fundamentally challenges the traditional concept of the heritage as the non-living heritage of the past and it further redefines it as a lively, interactive and future-oriented endeavor (Liu, 2023).

Such a transformation takes on a particular urgency in places like Palestine, Syria, and among the Afghan diasporas. These groups are the main targets of a violent campaign of elimination of their physical and cultural heritage, and this can happen in several ways such as through war, killing, looting, destruction, occupation, and displacement. Young generations, therefore, cast themselves as memory keepers by transforming traditional music, recipes, crafts, fables, etc., already passed down from previous generations, into virtual archives on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and virtual museums. They also provide these forms of work with new, imaginative, and simple access codes for the global audience. Those young people who engage in these digital practices are no means just commemorating or archiving. The digital practices of the youth-led have become the expression of resistance as they have become the acts of reclamation of voice and visibility in the case of disappearance (Jha & Chumbow, 2024). In addition, they create new forms of cultural continuity which extend beyond



physical borders and thus they become the generators of diasporic solidarities and cross-border heritage communities. Such emerging situations call for a rethinking of the theoretical as well as methodological frameworks that, hitherto, have been the main driving force behind heritage studies, especially in conflict zones.

The author researches in a paper the idea of youth in Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora that they are fundamentally rethinking the intangible heritage through digital storytelling and participatory platforms. The paper indulges in a comparative, desk-based analysis of the selected initiatives for the role of youth to be interrogated as the creators, rather than the mere passive custodians of cultural memory. It puts the participatory heritage theory and decolonial digital theory at the forefront, thus showing the ways in which these practices challenge the dominant heritage narratives and reveal alternative community-driven models of preservation. This research becomes part of the broader discussions on heritage, power, and agency in the post-conflict and postcolonial settings. It points to the necessity of recognizing and legitimizing grassroots digital heritage initiatives as the primary—if not the only—part of the future of cultural preservation in the Global South.

Research Problem and Objectives

Research Problem

In conflict and post-conflict situations, cultural heritage—especially the intangible part—has been subjected to violent acts resulting in the loss of lives and properties. Furthermore, these acts also involve political erasure, disintegration of communities, and disruption of the generational connection to culture. International organizations have recognized that those cultures will only survive if they receive considerable assistance (i.e., the UNESCO Convention of 2003) (Atabay et al., 2024). The main question, however, is to what extent are these organizations' efforts effective? Most of this activity is still limited, bureaucratic, and far from local people. Consequently, young people, who are at the core of this, particularly those from occupied or displaced communities, are now going beyond words and taking action to ensure that their heritage remains alive using technology. On the other hand, the youth need to be given an opportunity to participate and play proactive roles so that their creativity can be properly harnessed; however, despite their increasing numbers as digital storytellers, cultural archivists, and content creators, the role of youth in the preservation of intangible heritage still hasn't been fully conceptualized and they remain a very small part of the mainstream heritage discourse. Besides that, the most common heritage frameworks tend to give preference to the validation from the institutions over the participatory practices, which in turn results in the unintentional overlooking of the youth's creativity and their polite-political, as well as anti-colonial, characteristics of the projects initiated by them in the places of conflicts.

Research Objectives

This study aims to fill the existing research gap by investigating the ways in which the youth from Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora conceptualize intangible heritage in a new light via digital storytelling platforms. It probes into the extent to which these cultural practices are not only the preservation of the collective memory but also the redefinition of the heritage politics as they challenge the traditional narratives, create cultural resilience and regain the power in the situation of historical violence and

discrimination. Through this research, it is intended to corroborate the potential of young people as stakeholders in the process of documentation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage in situations of violence and conflicts. This work opts to gather evidence about how youngsters establish their agency by articulating their own cultural narratives through the simple deeds of remembrance and storytelling if they are the ones who formally process the heritage of the community but are illegally excluded in the heritage process. The investigation will focus on the core of the question whether the youth gain the aid of technology such as TikTok, Instagram, and the virtual museum in creative ways to present the traditional culture in a new light such as the oral histories, the rituals, and the performative arts.

Finally, the social impact of such acts will be roughly sketched to point out key challenges as well as their political, cultural, and decolonial connotations. Also, at the center of this discussion is the fact that digital heritage created by younger generations' use of technology allows them to break free from oppressive old narratives, reveal erased parts of history, and expand the new boundaries of what is the truth "authentic" or "legitimate" heritage. The paper, employing case study comparative methods to dwell on just three places, Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora, retrieves unifying threads of common patterns, explores innovative strategies the youth employ, and unveils the hardships they encounter while challenging the powers of the dark side like censorship, surveillance, and displacement. The article expands on the novelty of this paper, being a contribution to the ongoing theoretical controversies about participatory heritage and decolonial digital practice through the proposition of a new approach

Literature Review

The very idea of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has come to be a different matter after it was first acknowledged officially by UNESCO in 2003. However, it still being influenced by state-centric and institutional frameworks which are often unrepresentative to the lived experiences of the marginalized communities. Particularly in those communities who are affected by conflict situations. These global mechanisms aim at safeguarding oral traditions, rituals, and knowledge systems. Yet, their efforts are too little in places where heritage is being destroyed due to war, occupation, or displacement. Scholars are pointing out the lack of synergy between these two, they claim that institutional preservation strategies are mainly away from community-driven and youth-led efforts and, thus, do not address the cultural memory issue in politically contested spaces (Harrison et al., 2023). In this critical situation, young people are in the spotlight as the main players of heritage-making. Their participation is most evident in the regions affected by wars and in the diasporas, where the rupture of generations caused by violence makes it necessary to find completely new ways of cultural transmission. Instead of sticking to formal institutions only, the young generations are becoming increasingly reliant upon their day-to-day life, repeated family stories, and using technological means to give rise and find new interpretations of the intangible heritage. This is in line with the participatory turn that heritage studies have made, scholars are of the opinion that heritage is no longer a fixed inheritance but a socially created and jointly

produced process that is still going on in present life (Hammani, 2023).

Digital storytelling, specifically, is a potential transformational instrument to engage young people with the past. Channels like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are the means for recording, circulating, and remixing cultural expressions in significantly more accessible and frequently even the most subversive ways. These studies confirm that the platforms mentioned at the same time serve as the new founts for alternative cultural and linguistic resources to be tapped for the preservation and revitalization of endangered languages, food, oral history, and ritual (AJITONI, 2024; Khursanovna, 2025). Through their brevity and visual allure, short-form content empowers youth to project their cultural narratives on a global scale, thus far sidestepping the usual heritage discourse gatekeepers. Nevertheless, these digital heritage endeavors continue to bear some issues on their path. Questions about who owns the data, if censorship of algorithms is present, and the surveillance force are becoming quite a concern mainly in the areas of conflict, where the state has full control of the information. According to scholars, digital platforms should not be seen as the ultimate solution and tools for equalizing the playing field since they can easily reflect and even reproduce the existing power imbalances. Furthermore, as these authors argue, they may even function as “data colonialism” incubators, where the local cultural expressions are commodified and marketized as part of the global consumer culture (Akiner, 2024; Lemaire et al., 2024). Accordingly, although digital resources might give young people more power, they can also make them more vulnerable in new ways.

In this situation, the decolonial perspective provides another dimension of the youth-led heritage practices analysis. It signifies the historical exclusion of non-Western knowledge systems and highlights the need to take back the power to tell the cultural story. For instance, the youth in Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora are usually engaged in creating digital heritage not only to secure their culture but also to prevent it from being forgotten; they are using their digital heritage as a tool to re-identify, to fight against misleading images that come from the colonial past or the current war occupation (Hutta, 2025). These actions are in harmony with the idea of “counter-heritage” that portrays the ways through which the cultural interventions directly challenge the prevailing truth, and they are further alternative memories and a sense of belonging (Köller, 2025). The connection between heritage, self, and politics in the Middle East and Islamic world is striking. Those destinations, the heritage places and customs, become the main players in the wars for religion or sectarianism and geopolitical causes, which thus, make the young people's efforts to be neutral or apolitical and preservation deeply vulnerable and susceptible. However, the articles find out that the young people in these areas are, without a doubt, they are moving around the difficulties of these situations by the help of their inventiveness, pluralism, and networking and going even further pulling in the people they have the closest ties and their diasporic solidarities to keep culturally continuous (Ali & Dayan-Herzbrun, 2024; Wasef, 2024).

On one hand, lots of studies on indeed intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in regions of armed conflicts are relied mostly on the Middle East, on the other hand the awareness of such parallels in the Global South is getting more, notably Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. In African countries such as Uganda,

Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, young people have also been exhibited to digital tools to collect oral traditions, music, and protest rituals, mostly in response to political instability, authoritarian rule, or colonial legacies. We can give a go at Ssebulime (2022) illustration, where young people in Uganda are depicted that they utilize WhatsApp and YouTube for informing, circulating resistance poetry and folk music while the government is cracking down on them. It needs to be noted that such digital initiatives have often informal nature, yet they have become critical places of cultural resilience, sounding like those in Palestine and Syria. In very rough terms, in Latin America, the heritage practices have a strong intersection with the indigenous resistance and anti-colonial activism. While youth-led movements in Colombia and Brazil were utilizing Instagram and TikTok, the archives were made for the dying languages, spiritual traditions, and the festivals of the community. As Astudillo and Salazar (2024) put it, these acts go a step beyond simply being preservationist but are the “cosmopolitical interventions” of rhetorical heritage, which still erase the presence and the epistemologies of the indigenous. The global comparative lens over the universality of youth-led digital heritage as a strategy of cultural survival and political assertion in postcolonial contexts is thus emphasized by this global comparative lens. In a nutshell: To deepen the understanding of the level of youth participation beyond the scope of the heritage studies, it is of vital importance to consult sources from youth studies and digital anthropology which delve into young people's ways of negotiating identity, belonging and agency through the digital culture. Dancis (2022) is clearly supporters of the “connected learning” model, where youth use informal digital tools to create knowledge communities that transcend institutional boundaries. These considerations stress once again that youth-led heritage projects are not only preservation acts but also educational, communicative, and community-forming.

Zhang et al. (2024) in quite a similar way to the above-mentioned argument illustrate the necessity of contextual digital practices, by warning against assumptions of a universal platform. A classic example would be a situation in Gaza or Kabul, whereby the surveillance and the digital repression threats are in a very high degree instrumental in the shaping of the production, the sharing, and the reception of the content. These perspectives add critical nuance to the interpretation of youth agency and creativity, recognizing that such practices are shaped by both opportunity and constraint. On the other hand, academics have also spoken about some mistakes made by participatory heritage theory, most notably over its overemphasis on the concept of inclusion and how it has failed to recognize the internal hierarchies or the power relations there be in the communities. It is argued that Levstek and Banerjee (2021) claim, participatory constructs can at times be the same as exclusion, by giving greater weight to the voices of more educated or technologically connected youth, at the same time, they may marginalize others. This necessitates the adoption of a more reflexive and intersectional approach which considers gender, class, displacement status, and access to digital tools. In addition, ethical matters related to digital storytelling in conflict zones are getting more attention nowadays. These issues, like the one of consent, ownership of data, and of the potential for traumatization, i.e., violent incidents being aired repeatedly which might lead to an emotional outburst, need to be handled with extreme caution. Siliutina et al. (2024) indicates that most of the time, digital heritage initiatives fail to show clearly how

participant's rights will be fully protected especially when young people are involved in the procedure of recording or publishing content.

The possibility of misrepresentation or commodification becomes even more acute on global platforms where content is stripped of context and made consumable for external audiences. Just at the end, recent research on data justice and digital decolonization brings up even more issues with platform dependency and biased algorithms. Dawson (2024) and Taylor (2024) state that Instagram and TikTok are not neutral, and the occupiers' system of capitalist logics and the racism runoff assure that the stories of a certain head are visible, while the other is barely perceptible. The paper argues that the eyes of today's young people in the heritage world are the new powers of change but at the same time, there is a struggle with digital structures, which are the same wounds that they try to heal. To the point, the literature outlines the further acknowledgement of youth as active heritage-makers that significantly employ digital technology for saving and changing the intangible cultural practices in the affected places affected by conflicts places. However, the place of such works in the formal heritage discourse is not one of full recognition and they are often restrained by the bureaucracy and issues of digital governance. This research aims to fill a gap by presenting young people drawing their own heritage in Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora and thereby, inviting them into the current discussions about participatory heritage, digital epistemologies, and decolonial theory.

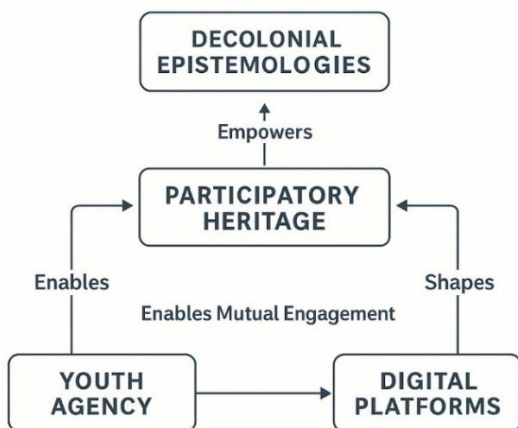


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

This research involved a qualitative, comparative, and desk-based inquiry to investigate the different digital youth heritage projects in the war-torn and post-war situations of Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan community in the diaspora. A qualitative approach is suitable for a deep study of the motives and meanings of the digital heritage practices, which are complex and often local. The comparative structure enables the recognition of similarities and differences in the various geopolitical and socio-cultural contexts. Open secondary sources were mostly used to collect data for this study because of the ethical and logistical difficulties in getting direct information from the war zones and the dispersed diaspora populations. Data collection was carried out in three main parts. First, a document and content analysis were carried out, a systematic survey of youth-led digital heritage projects hosted on

platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and dedicated virtual museum websites was involved. It covered the reading and coding of visual narratives, captions, hashtags, and platform engagement metrics to understand how intangible heritage is represented and spread across the net. Secondly, metal academic and grey literature formed the study base such as peer-reviewed journal articles, heritage organizations like UNESCO and ICOMOS, cultural NGO's publications, and institutional digital archives' reports. They gave the theoretical base and contextual information, especially on the youth, the digital media, and the heritage-making relationship in the contested political environments. Thirdly, media and news reports were also used to catch real-time changes and public opinion about youth's engagement with intangible heritage. They are valuable because they document initiatives that cannot yet be formally archived or have not been academically analysed but still reflect emerging grassroots activity on the ground.

Sampling Criteria and Case Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select case studies and digital content aimed to get youth-led digitally visible heritage initiatives that are thematically relevant and contextually grounded. Three core criteria informed the inclusion of cases in this study. First, platform relevance was key: selected initiatives had to be active on widely used digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or purpose-built virtual museum sites. Preference was given to projects that prioritized visual storytelling and interactive forms of cultural expression. Second, youth authorship was a central consideration. To qualify, projects had to be initiated, curated, or actively maintained by individuals or collectives aged approximately 15 to 35 years. This criterion ensured a focus on youth agency and digital creativity, rather than institutional or state-driven heritage work. Third, the content had to have a clear focus on intangible cultural heritage, such as oral traditions, storytelling, rituals, culinary knowledge, or performative arts. Projects centered solely on tangible heritage (e.g., monuments or architecture) were excluded unless they incorporated intangible dimensions through narrative or performative interpretation. Together, these criteria facilitated the selection of robust and diverse case studies that reflect the intersection of youth, conflict, and digital heritage-making. Priority was given to projects that are widely circulated and have been referenced in scholarly, media, or cultural sources to ensure authenticity and relevance. However, due to the ephemeral and constantly shifting nature of social media content, representativeness is understood as thematic rather than statistical. The cases of Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora were selected for their prominence as prolonged conflict and displacement contexts where intangible cultural heritage is under threat, and where youth-led digital heritage practices have been notably visible. These cases provide a rich comparative lens to explore different modalities of digital heritage engagement amid conflict, occupation, displacement, and diaspora conditions.

Analytical Framework

The analysis in the study is indeed supported by an interdisciplinary framework which combines ideas from participatory heritage theory, decolonial digital epistemologies, and digital media studies. The research, which draws from participatory heritage theory, envisions intangible cultural heritage as a process that is not fixed but rather co-produced and dynamic. This

viewpoint highlights the youth going beyond mere preservation of heritage traditions that have been handed down through generations, to actively reinterpreting and re-shaping the heritage through their everyday practices and digital storytelling. On the other hand, it also interprets this matter through the scope of decolonial digital epistemologies, which is a critical approach that deeply looks at how youth-led heritage projects can uproot the colonial past, change the hegemonic ideas, and thus regain their cultural power in those instances of conflict, occupation, and displacement. These epistemologies put particular emphasis on the alternative ways of being and remembering, which often are the sources of embodied, communal, and affective practices that are not recognized in the mainstream discourse of heritage. Besides digital media studies, the study also leverages the affordances of the platforms and the constraints therein to explore how these influence the ways in which the young people take part in the matter of heritage. These include lots of factors like the algorithmic nature of visibility, censorship, content moderation, and the surveillance risks that the creators might face in politically sensitive areas (Elmimouni et al., 2025). In unison, these three theoretical strands offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the cultural, political, and technological dimensions of youth-driven digital heritage-making in conflict zones. The data has undergone thematic analysis with an aim to find repeated patterns, main issues, and conflicting situations about the youth agency, different types of digital storytelling, political and cultural aspects, and difficulties which were experienced. The process of coding is repetitive and reflective, following the theoretical constructs and new understandings.

Due to the highly political nature of conflict areas and the sensitivity of young participants in the research, this study only uses publicly available information and recorded initiatives. To protect the safety and privacy of participants, no direct contact was made with them. The research is aware of the ethical necessity to be respectful when representing youth voices and not to exploit them or misrepresent them, and it also sees their digital heritage activities as a part of the fight for cultural survival and dignity.

Such secondary data make it possible to conduct the study of dispersed and politically sensitive regions but at the same time they introduce some limitations of a methodological nature. Platform algorithms significantly influence content visibility, thus, they most of the time boost entertainment content at the expense of political or cultural one (Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Galeazzi et al., 2024). Consequently, those youth heritage activities that are inconsistent with the popular aesthetics or platform norms, will be hardly represented in this study. Besides, censorship and content removal issues, especially in Palestine and Syria, change the picture of what is publicly accessible. For instance, during some events, the most sensitive videos will be erased even before they are archived, while the change in local algorithm will lead to the reduction of content with conflict-related hashtags or national symbols, hence, shadow-banning. These conditions distort the digital archive and may lead to a selection bias in the direction of the more apolitical, humorous, or aestheticized heritage content (Abokhodair et al., 2024). Most of the data sources that were analysed were in Arabic, Pashto, Dari or English as well. Content in languages that are less known globally or in dialects can be left out just because they are not easily discoverable.

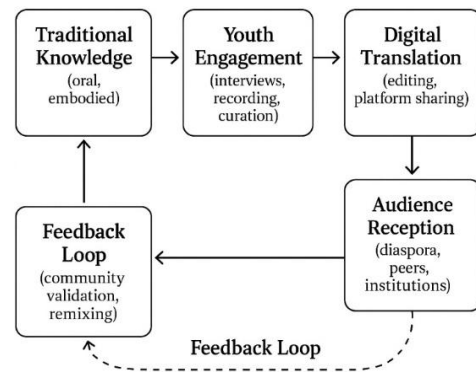


Figure 2: Process flow of youth digital heritage-making

Table 1: Sample of Youth-Led Digital Heritage Initiatives by Country

Project Name	Country/Region	Platform	Focus Area	Lead Type
Palestinian Memory Project	Palestine	Instagram	Oral history, identity, resistance	Youth-led NGO
Visualizing Palestine	Palestine	Instagram/Website	Visual storytelling, digital infographics	Research/design collective
Afghanistan Digital Museum	Afghan Diaspora	Web/3D platforms	Cultural objects, oral narratives	Diaspora youth developers
TikTok Hashtag #MySyria Creators	Syria	TikTok	Micro-narratives, cuisine, crafts	Individual Syrian youth

Case Studies

1. Palestine: Oral History and Instagram Archives

In Palestine, youth-led initiatives such as the Palestinian Memory Project and Visualizing Palestine have become vibrant digital spaces where memory is turned into political resistance and identity renovation. These projects—mainly conducted on

Instagram and other social media—are the participatory archives for the preservation and reinterpretation of intangible heritage, especially in the case where not only the tangible but also the intangible cultural assets are under a very dangerous situation of being wiped out due to the occupation, settler expansion, and information control. The young generation of Palestinians, who are typically in their twenties and thirties, are the ones who are

responsible for the digital collections (Mokadi & Yousef, 2024). Those collections are the ones where they get to feature oral histories, family heirlooms, traditional recipes, lullabies, and ritual practices that were passed down by their grandparents and the community elders. The main distinguishing feature of these platforms is that they are underpinned by a relationship of deliberate intergenerational collaboration. Young folks are getting on with their elders; they have a personal face-to-face conversation with people in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem or they are doing it online with a Zoom call to the diaspora. They are thus gathering stories of the things happened before 1948, of the resistance during the Intifadas, of the agricultural practices which are connected to the ancestral lands, of the changes of the communal events like Eid, weddings, or harvest rituals. The stories of these witnesses are next turned into visual storytelling formats: carousels with layered infographics, reels with archival footage paired with popular resistance songs, and Instagram "Highlights" organized thematically (e.g., Village Recipes, Keys & Maps, Refugee Camp Diaries) (Gonçalves, 2023). Such digital "albums" thus become not only mnemonic devices but also activist archives that disseminate counter-narratives globally. The visual iconography used in this context, like the key to return, embroidered *Tatreez* patterns, olive trees, or pre-1948 maps, is a lexicon of cultural symbolism which reclaims Palestinian indigeneity and challenges ongoing settler-colonial representations that seek to erase or distort the Palestinian narrative. Palestinian identity is reclaimed in this way, as local people are represented merely as symbolic figures. Many creators intentionally align their visual strategies with the aesthetic norms of global Instagram activism to make their messages more shareable, accessible, and receive support from the global community. For example, posts are frequently made in bilingual (Arabic/English) or trilingual languages (adding Spanish or French for diaspora outreach) with slide-based storytelling resembling educational content but decolonial rhetoric and local affect are introduced (Sheets, 2024).

One of the most evident and significant barriers to these creators are the algorithmic censorship. Such posts that make references to "Palestine," "Nakba," "occupation," or "Israeli apartheid" are mostly detected, shadow-banned, or removed. In continuation of this, young creators have come up with a range of digital resistance tactics, such as employing Arabic calligraphy for "hiding" sensitive words, giving characters a typographic distortion (like "Occup@tion"), or secretly putting the information in the picture's properties or in the text that at the beginning might seem to be innocent. Creators can also do this work, alongside with the secret retaining that they do on Telegram or in the place that is not online through the PDF flyers and the stealing devices—a measure that might help if a lot of deletions happen at the same time when the fight and the violence are high, for example, in 2021 or 2023 at the Gaza offensives (Vecellio Segate, 2023). The diaspora is particularly transformational in these initiatives. Chilene, Lebanese, Americans, Canadians, and German's youths not only act as content amplifiers, but also often co-creators. For instance, second-generation Palestinians in Chile have contributed to memory mapping projects that connect camps in Lebanon and villages in Galilee by changing Instagram captions into Spanish and collaborating on the same, besides participating in "heritage drop-ins" on Instagram Live with the elders of the West Bank (Schwabe, 2023). These transnational engagements change the character of digital heritage work into transnational solidarity

networks—locking memory across generations, languages, and geographies.

It is crucial to note that this is not the curation of nostalgia, but rather it is the creation of politicized memory in real-time, where remembering is implicitly linked with resistance, visibility, and survival. Youths are the ones who are playing a vital role in this regard by their intergenerational dialogues and digital strategies. They are not only recording the intangible heritage but also effectively changing its frame. The past is thus being turned into a living place of struggle, becoming a way to claim presence, continuity, and resist erasure. In this effort, Palestinian youths have changed the place they hold in the heritage discourse from being passive inheritors to being active and globally connected creators of cultural memory and political meaning.

2. *Afghan Diaspora: Virtual Museums in Exile*

The creation of digital heritage platforms is seen among Afghan youth living in diaspora as a very strong tool for cultural reconstruction, memory negotiation, and post-conflict identity assertion. Disconnected physically from their homeland due to decades of war, regime changes, and forced migration, these youth have decided to use digital technologies to bridge the generational and geographic rupture. Virtual museum initiatives like the Afghanistan Digital Museum, Afghan Archives, and Museum of Afghan Diaspora are at the forefront. These initiatives combine traditional activities, like storytelling and curation, with new technologies such as 3D scanning, immersive VR walk-throughs, metadata tagging, and open-source repositories (Davidson, 2023). The projects driven by young people of Afghanistan digitally save and later share the country's unwritten and physical heritage that is being lost after two simultaneous actions took place: one is the erasing of the heritage due to the repressive policies of the Taliban, and another is the theft or distortion of the heritage under the disguise of the Orientalist and the securitized Western. These online places hold plenty of archives with a focus on the culture of the particular area, by the way, the archives contain a lot of excellent things like old books and manuscripts from Herat and Ghazni, recordings of the music from the Hazara and Nuristani regions that will be lost if not preserved, artifacts coming from the time before Islam was introduced in the region of Gandhara, traditional textile such as chapan and khamak embroidery, and also recorded folk stories in Pashto, Dari, and in number of minority languages like Uzbeki and Balochi (Baloch, 2024).

The virtual museums can be understood as doing something beyond preservation only—they construct affective geographies of memory and cultural belonging. Users are facilitated to roam digitally reconstructed marketplaces, to hear lullabies that are sung by grandmothers in exile, or to navigate through 3-dimensional models representing minarets and statues that have been destroyed during the Talibans' cultural purges. One of the exhibits permits visitors to "walk" through a 1980s Kabul Street using generative AI that is based on family photos and oral descriptions. Such spatialized and sensory-rich experiences not only enable digital heritage but also emotive virtual encounters with place, ritual, and memory. They thus become a great resource to diasporic youth—who mostly did not experience a physical visit to Afghanistan—allowing them to emotionally and culturally "re-enter" a homeland that is mainly made up of fragments and recollections (Davidson, 2023). These folks do this with the help of platforms that carry the

function of counter-discursive spaces to the reductive narratives that dominate Western media and the Taliban's depiction of Afghan heritage. The depiction of Afghanistan by the media shows it as a barren land, full of ruins and insurgency, past its modern times, and these young people are challenging such negative images with their alternative imaginary. They are curating such stories of resistance, female poets, regional craftsmen, pre-Taliban cinema, and cosmopolitan Kabul as the places of the vibrant and multicultural atmosphere. The histories revealed from the elders of the diaspora through the stories of the weddings, festivals like Nawruz, or the village customs of hospitality are now given the form of visual through the digital collages, the animated sequences, and the audio-narrated exhibitions (Waltorp & Haddou, 2023).

These projects are also the first place from which gendered and ethnic diversity within Afghan heritage is communicated. In a situation where national narratives have been focused on a very narrow Pashtun-centric view, these youth-run platforms deliberately depict the cultural contributions of Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and other minority communities. As an example, the Afghan Women's Memory Portal, a diaspora collective in Toronto's sub-project, has been creating exhibitions made up of traditional songs, culinary rituals, embroidery, and marriage customs that women from many provinces have practiced and that are either absent from the formal archives or have been actively suppressed by the patriarchal norms. These very platforms have become the new gender roles' challengers because they not only dismantle them but also become the reclaimers of women's heritage-making as the central role of the Afghan cultural continuity (Rokay, 2021). Yet, the youths, who acted as curators, run into various challenges and ethical issues in the whole process. One major problem arises from curatorship and historical authority argument. The point of contention here is: Who is the one to tell the story of the Afghan people in digital exile? How do youth, who are often second-generation, manage to be authentic while at the same time they want to innovate? Some initiatives have dealt with the negative reaction of traditional scholars or the elders of the community who do not accept the historical accuracy of the representations or those that are presented as too modern. On the one hand, there are those who are still fighting with the accusation of "digital exoticism". On the other hand, they say that these people do not realize that they are the ones who are supplying the external audiences with too simple-minded and romanticized visuals of themselves as if they were the only ones talking about the topic.

Digital precarity, on one hand, is a very serious issue which is interconnected with visibility through algorithms, thus defining the culture of Afghan that decorates the online space. Several social media posts, which used words like "the Taliban," "minority rights," or "refugee memory," were shadow-banned or demonetized, on the other hand, the neutral or aesthetic content was promoted. These platform dynamics influence the creators' moves, as they basically become less political and more digestible. Additionally, the sovereignty of data, the ownership of content, and the question of long-term storage raise a question of the situation of the vulnerable heritage if it is digitized on corporate platforms, the access to which for the long term is still unknown. Some youth collectives go so far as to develop decentralized and encrypted repositories thus, they work on free servers that they have created themselves. In this way, others download the zines or the PDF

booklets, or they register their culture on the Blockchain. Essentially, the virtual museum movement among youth of the Afghan diaspora is not an act of cultural nostalgia only, instead it is a radical reinvention of memory-making under exile. It shows a non-acceptance of arranging the cultural heritage of a divided homeland by state ideologies, media binaries, or a forgetful past. At the same time, these young people are composing polyphonic archives that restore Afghanistan as a place of diversity, ingenuity, and endurance (Davidson, 2023). They are not only gathering objects but possibilities—possibilities of recollection, reconstruction, and intergenerational passing in face of displacement. This way they demonstrate the transition from heritage as inheritance to heritage as a political and creative act of authorship, which they change by crossing borders, screens, and future times.

3. Syria: TikTok as Fragmented Memory and Daily Resistance

In Syria, a country, where war has extensively destroyed cities, divided communities, and caused the displacement of millions over a decade, youngsters have found new ways on short-form video platforms, mainly TikTok, which have become their new homes for cultural resistance, memory retention, and re-identification. The digital heritage efforts from institutions normally involve the use of fixed archives or curated collections while the work of Syrian youth on TikTok is quick, mobile, and thus ephemeral in nature. It is firmly rooted in everyday creativity, being generated now in places such as bombed neighbourhoods, refugee camps, or exile apartments and going out to global audiences via handheld devices. Under hashtags such as #MySyria, #HeritageNotWar, #SyriaResists, and #TasteOfHome, young creators post 15–60 second videos that document fragments of intangible cultural heritage: a grandmother preparing kibbeh using stones as utensils in a makeshift kitchen, boys performing the traditional Dabke dance amid the rubble of Aleppo, teenagers reciting folktales passed down from before the war, or cooking tutorials that incorporate oral storytelling and familial rituals. Some clips depict the preparation of maamoul (stuffed cookies) during Eid or the narration of pre-war childhood memories, layered with nostalgic music and on-screen text (Kianpour et al., 2024). These videos do not strive for historical comprehensiveness; rather, they serve as intimate, affective vignettes—what media scholar Marianne Hirsch might call "post memories"—that blend cultural expression with trauma, resilience, and loss. With the storytelling that is TikTok-based, it fulfills multiple intertwined functions. At one level, it challenges the media that is reductionist in their portrayal of Syria as a place that is only for suffering and destruction. Through joking, music, food, and family rituals, youth become the ones who decide the representation of their culture and country to the world. On the other hand, such things as these short clips offer a therapeutic and political function to the creators: performance of tradition through the act gives them psychosocial resilience and it is also a silent protest (Zuckerman, 2023). In fact, they are addressed not only to the global viewer but also to the displaced family members, friends of the diaspora, or even to the lost homeland that is only imagined through pixels and narration.

This is an important part. Firstly, it is the aesthetics of these videos that very much borrow from TikTok vernaculars that are global. Having a video potentially snapping from a grandmother explaining the symbolism to a wedding song to a granddaughter that is remixing the same tune with a digital instrument is a perfect

example of how this fusion allows creators to speak across generational and cultural divides, making local heritage legible and engaging for a broader, often younger, audience. For some youth creators even, deciding to consciously make videos “go viral” by adding popular music overlays or by making humorous skits around traditional customs is enough to achieve their aim of raising global awareness of Syrian culture beyond images of war. However, this high visibility is accompanied with significant risks. The TikTok algorithmic moderation system, which works through machine learning, is very sensitive to human input that can cause it to make wrong decisions (Patel, 2025). Thus, the system flags or censors the materials that contain references to the Syrian war, and those with national flags, or anti-demonstrations. Creators tell shadow-banning, the removal of posts, and the restriction of the reach of the content as their most frequent violations if they show the destruction of the city, explain political themes with hashtags, or refer to the banned words. In turn, the Syrian youth, due to this, are obtaining a vivid language of evasion and code, where they change the politically charged words into emojis, blurred captions, or euphemisms. They are hiding truth under the coat of satire, irony, and inside humour so that they can go through the filtering. For example, they say that the shelling is only the sound of the rain or they use pixelated overlays for the destroyed landmarks. These are, inevitably, the parts of the whole plan of digital subversion, in which the funny and the critical are interwoven, and the format seems not to be in politics.

The storytelling here indeed has changed, and importantly, it is no longer limited to Syria. The TikTok video becomes the diasporic lifelines of the kids when they are in Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, and Sweden, most of the time it comes after these kids as the next generation who are far from the memory of their homeland and whose only source of their cultural tradition is this medium. The kids from Syria, who are out of the country, are quite often impersonating the traditional rituals, i.e., making coffee in the Levantine way, explaining the old proverbs, or acting out wedding customs, and uploading these videos as a form of their solidarity with the peers, who stay in Syria. Such a sharing of ideas through the nets helps to create a networked cultural continuity of the respective ideas and thus, TikTok is the very informal archive of the disappearing practices that, along with the countless occurrences of creators in the different places, keep being updated.

The very nature of TikTok encourages audience co-creation. Responding to videos with stitches, duets, threads of comments, or remixes, fans add their own narratives, info, or just an emotional reaction. This thus sets the preservation of intangible cultural heritage on a journey that is no longer a mere documentation effort but a performative and collective process. Also, it initiates a shake-up of the traditional hierarchies of knowledge production, wherein the historian is not only the scholar but the teenager who is situated in Idlib and has a phone as well as a memory to share. On the other side of the coin, however, few things have become extremely visible such as the trauma of loss, displacement, and violence. The constant repetition of loss may lead to irritations, re-traumatization, and even what some scholars call the “aestheticization of suffering.” In addition, as the issue of consent is raised, the authenticity of the cultural practices, and the voyeuristic behaviour of the audience is also pointed out. When practices of culture are carried out on a platform that is meant for entertainment, viewers who consume it often without understanding the geopolitical

context of such viewing will be a part of this audience. To put it simply, TikTok can be seen as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows young people to preserve and reinterpret heritage while on the other hand, it condenses culture into small, easily digestible pieces for worldwide consumption (Saoud, 2023). Simply, as complicated the issue might be, a form of digital counter-heritage that is very resilient, vibrant, and participatory becomes apparent. Teenagers in Syria are merely not using TikTok to recall the past period; they are reshaping it, remixing it, and re-establishing it in new places of identities. By means of their daily acts of narrating the digital stories, they retake the power over the narratives, affirm the cultural persistence during the systemic erasure, and form new types of belonging that reach out not only physical but also to the algorithmic borders. Thus, they are really the ones who are described by decolonial scholars as “memory as resistance”—a mere act of denial to still be silenced, forgotten, or twisted into a mere figure of a victim. On the contrary, they make such a heritage that is still broken, flexible, and very much alive.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

This portion of the paper is directed at the primary topics that got boosted on the comparative analysis that have been youth-driven, digital heritage projects in the Palestinian, Syrian and Afghan diaspora. The analysis, carried out with guidance from participatory heritage theory and decolonial digital epistemologies, has unearthed four leading themes that continuously appear in each of the three examples. The issues have been especially focused on how kids have engaged intangible cultural heritage (ICH) not only as a vehicle for cultural continuation, but also as a new response to aggressive conflict, erasing, and forced displacement.

Theme 1: Youth as Agents of Cultural Authorship

In all the three cases, kids were not only passive heritage documenters but also those who have vigorously transformed its forms and significances. Irrespective of whether deeply embedded digital storytelling on Instagram in Palestine or TikTok quick stories in Syria, young people have stepped up to exert their innovative power as persons who create cultural memory. The result of this research is consistent with the main aim of the study to make young people active participants in their creators rather than mere custodians of intangible heritage.

Theme 2: Digital Platforms as Sites of Resistance and Memory

TikTok, Instagram, and virtual museums are places where alternative heritage spaces are created by the youth through their contests of dominant narratives in exclusionary spaces of formal archives. For example, they aim to expose settler colonial erasure in Palestine or the Taliban censorship in Afghanistan. Consequently, these platforms become the very tools with which the youth resist political silencing, they construct counter-narratives, and they disseminate the information to the diaspora or global audiences.

Theme 3: Intergenerational Transmission through Digital Reinterpretation

Digital media is a powerful tool for intergenerational dialogue, especially in places where oral traditions and embodied practices are losing ground due to conflict. Palestinian youth, for example, make video records of interviews with elders; Afghan diaspora youth make digital copies of stories told by exiled parents and

grandparents. These conversations become a reinterpretation of preservation, and, at the same time, they keep tradition alive and adapted to current times.

Theme 4: Hybrid Identities and Diasporic Belonging

Heritage practices are no longer limited to national borders. Young people who have been forced to leave their countries—those from

Afghanistan and Syria, in particular—are utilizing digital tools to create hybrid identities that not only reflect their traditional cultural expressions but also incorporate global digital aesthetics. The very act of doing so reconfigures the networked heritage communities that are now thriving and growing because of diasporic connectivity and shared cultural memory.

Table 2: Comparative Overview of Findings Across Cases

Theme	Palestine	Syria	Afghan Diaspora
Cultural Authorship	Instagram storytelling projects (e.g., <i>Palestinian Memory Project</i>) emphasize curatorial youth agency	TikTok creators craft personal, emotional heritage narratives	Youth build virtual museums from scratch, integrating tech and tradition
Platforms as Resistance	Reclaim space in face of occupation and media bias	Challenge war-centric narratives using hashtags like #MySyria	Counter Taliban censorship by reviving erased histories digitally
Intergenerational Transmission	Youth-elder oral histories shared online	Culinary traditions and craft skills passed on via short videos	Diasporic youth preserve stories told by displaced elders
Diasporic/Hybrid Belonging	Strong transnational reach among Palestinian diaspora	Youth in exile bridge Syria and host cultures through content	Virtual museums anchor identity across generations and geographies

These thematic patterns not only highlight but also strengthen the central argument of this research, which is the fact that young people in war-affected and refugee communities are not only cultural heritage transmitters, but they are also changing the very nature of its stories, the media, and the future. Through the harmonization of the traditional with digital the young people claim the new heritage-making—a participatory, decolonial and particularly political one.

Discussion

The research demonstrates the youths in Palestine, Syria, and Afghanistan that are saving the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and simultaneously transforming it through digital media. These young people at the helm of such initiatives have come up with new ways of understanding heritage, which is no longer seen as static, state-managed, or institutionally accepted but rather as a participatory, vibrant and politically active model of cultural preservation. The three case studies shed light on the fact that youth are not merely the passive keepers of traditions handed down from one generation to another, but they are in fact the creative forces who, by adapting, reinterpreting and spreading the heritage, strive to respond to the problems of war, displacement, and oblivion that have afflicted the communities they represent. This section is an overview of the findings in four thematic areas of emphasis.

1. Reframing Custodianship: Youth as Cultural Creators

Over the situations, it is evident that young people's involvement in heritage activities keeps changing with their focus shifting from preservation to creation. Young people in Palestine are a good example; they are not limited to recording oral histories for archives only; instead, they are locally retelling those stories visually and narratively so that contemporary audiences can relate to them on Instagram. In the same manner, young Afghans who are forced to live outside of their country are getting help from the virtual museums to create the heritage that remains out of their

reach physically, thus they come up with the new cultural memory forms for the digital space. Syrian TikTok users, through short-form videos, infuse traditional practices with personal narrative and contemporary aesthetics. Such cases tend to give a clearer outline of the shift in thought from one conceptualisation to another: from custodianship, which is only about overseeing an inherited and unchanging past, to *cultural authorship*, where youngsters are the main players in deciding the variables of heritage. This is in line with participatory heritage theory that presents a significant change in the concept of heritage as a socially produced and developing process that is involved in everyday life (Pyttel, 2022). Youth residing in conflict zones that are very often marginalized and without any access to the institutions for heritage-making, thus, reclaim their agency by becoming co-authors of the cultural narratives.

2. Platform Politics: Visibility, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Power

The digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram have become a double-edged sword for the youth after providing them with all the significant access to the global audiences. On the one hand, they allow the youth to broaden their horizons, while on the other hand, they introduce new regimes of power and visibility. The ability to capture and share culture can now be carried out through various tech-automated decision-making systems, platform moderation policies, and the presence of potential spying of both government and non-governmental organizations. A concrete example could be Syria, where the TikTok creators are often in danger of being subject to censorship or asked to leave the platform if the topics they deal with, such as political critique or destruction, are in focus. As for the case of Palestine, being visible on social media is like the sword of two edges, one side is that this visibility can be used to make the world more conscious of the situation there, while the other side is that it can turn the users into targets for the digital surveillance, apart from that, their content may also be deleted. These circumstances are indeed a repetition of the worries that the

academics of data colonialism (Sinnreich & Gilbert, 2024) uttered. They proclaimed the digital infrastructures as the sources that often duplicate the structural inequalities but, in a way, they are masked under the trope of the openness and the participation. Young people, who make use of heritage as their source, are the ones who are so far restricted by these limits, whose work falls under the umbrella of negotiating visibility and authenticity, and who are fighting for the rights of their communities by exposing the appropriation and the erasure. The fact that they have the opportunity to find holes in the system is symbolized by their skills of “gaming” the system—resorting to hashtags, aesthetics, or the use of humour as means to go around the censorship and this altogether is the double side of the coin that illustrates the manifestation of those positive and negative aspects of digital participation in the places that are hostile.

3. Digital Resistance and Counter-Narratives

An example of a similar situation can be that youth have been found to take advantage of the digital space not only for obtaining and safeguarding cultural materials, but also to resist the over-dominant narratives, which they then reinterpret with the counter-histories of the events. The Palestinian Memory Project would be a case in point — it is a project that sets itself at the very opposite of settler colonial narratives, which aim at presenting Palestinians as people without history and identity. The project goes beyond words, and it actualizes this by carrying on with the work of preserving local tradition, organizing ritual, and conjuring up the very power of memory as a means of identity confirmation. In a similar vein, Afghan virtual museums have become protagonists in a fight against the Taliban, as they strive to digitally reconstruct the erasure of pre-Islamic history that the Taliban have perpetrated, reflecting the diversity of cultural legacies. Also, alongside the war-torn and desolate image of the country, which is always present in the world media, Syrian TikTok creators have been doing their part too, by showing a very different side of the country - stories of ordinary lives, resilience, and beauty. The examples given are the actions of what Banaszkiwicz and Grzybowska (2024) call “counter-heritage”—the conscious and purposeful formation of memory practices that go against the dominant narratives at the centre of history, and that offer the transformation of identity and the expansion of the place of belonging. The research participants have been characterized as youth who are indeed not only engaged in the act of preserving culture; they accomplish that only through the process of *reconstructing it as resistance*, as they are constructing such narratives which go on to assert the presence of their various agencies, and cultural dignity in those instances where they are facing the challenge of being utterly erased.

4. Diasporic Connectivity and Hybrid Heritage Futures

The case of the Afghan diaspora particularly highlights how digital heritage creation goes beyond geographical boundaries. Virtual museums created by exile youth give diaspora communities an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural roots, engage in intergenerational conversations, and collectively mourn and remember. In a similar vein, Palestinian and Syrian youth who are in the diaspora, tap into digital storytelling as a medium of their connection to place, language, and memory, and become hybrid creative artists of heritage that are a seamless merging of tradition and the digital global culture. These transnational practices are the

basis of the so-called “networked heritage communities” by some academics — these are the quick, electronically blended spaces where the identity, memory, and belonging are co-produced across borders (Sabie, 2023). Young people operating in these areas are at the forefront of what could be termed *hybrid heritage futures*, in these futures the culture is no longer a fixed entity in place or time, but always being re-created by these interactions, migrations, and media. The activities mentioned here also emphasize a decolonial digital epistemology: they are countering heritage paradigms that are Western-centered and give priority to monumental, physical, or authorized cultural forms. On the other hand, youth place the utmost importance on embodied knowledge, affective memory, and everyday practices as legitimate heritage—thus they are the new sources of knowing and remembering that have been historically marginalized.

Conclusion

The research paper provides evidence and highlighted the innovative and creative use of digital platforms by the youth in Palestine, Syria, and the Afghan diaspora, demonstrating the unprecedented transformation of the landscape of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation around the world. At the same time, the study is the one that directly challenges the frames that relegate heritage as the world of the state institutions, experts, and the authorized authorities. The results of the survey indicate that the young generation is becoming the primary agents of cultural changes rather than passive characters who uncritically accept the still and politics of the heritage field to document, reinterpret, and disseminate their culture in the politically charged and unstable environment. The paper compares desk-based analysis to the youth-led initiatives of Instagram, TikTok, and virtual museum platforms that explore and discover to reconfigure storytelling, memory, and tradition in participatory and decolonial terms. Palestinians make use of the oral history archives on Instagram as a tool to remove erasure and establish intergenerational continuity. Afghan youth in exile form fantasy museums for heritage that is displaced get war and censorship to protect and share. Syrians do not tell whole stories but as fragments of a big story through TikTok, they dismantle the picture of their country, and they also talk about the capacity of the culture of the place to survive even though there is destruction going on around it, so they are basically focusing on the resilient that is there. When it comes to all the three cases, the storytelling is the one that reigns supreme not only as a tool for cultural preservation but also as a critical element for resistance, identity creation, and the relationships amongst the diasporas. These forms of resistance hijack the traditional ways, and they do so most explicitly through the rejection of the very idea of fixed apolitical and institutional heritage. However, instead of youth accepting the heritage areas from institutions that are defined to be unchanging, they portray such heritage as vibrant, contested and deeply connected to visibility, voice, and survival. The complex capabilities and limitations of digital media have again been demonstrated by this study. Platforms can be very good for engagement on a global level and for building communities, but they also make creators vulnerable to surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic bias. To be able to cope with these issues, one not only needs the knowledge of technology but also needs to be politically aware. Young people show this by using hashtags and the settings of the platform in a more sophisticated way.

In abstract words, the study brings new ideas to the discussion on participative heritage and decolonial digital epistemologies by exposing the practices of grassroots to the front, which are still omitted in formal heritage discourse. It is arguing the case for a new awareness of youth as legitimate heritage-makers, whose creative and politicized interventions are not main but rather fringe phenomena—auxiliary to the future of cultural preservation, especially of the Global South. At the very end of the day, through the redefining of youth as the constructors of cultural memory, this paper emphasizes the power of digital storytelling for the rethinking of heritage futures. It reiterates that in the areas of violence and displacement, heritage has never been simply what is lost, but always what is being re-created in the present through acts of courage, creativity, and connection.

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