

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL VIEW OF DIGITAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative role of digital media in shaping contemporary society and culture through a phenomenological lens. Digital media, including smartphones, social media, and video games, integrates into daily life, altering communication, identity formation, and cultural practices. The study examines how digital media democratizes information and facilitates global cultural exchanges, creating new traditions and identities. Utilizing Bambang Sugiharto's thesis on experience as culture, the paper highlights the dynamic and relational nature of culture in the digital age. It discusses the implications of digital media's interactivity, connectivity, and influence on modern cultural experiences, emphasizing the continuous deconstruction and reordering of cultural meanings.

Keywords: Digital Media, Phenomenology, Cultural Studies

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context, digital media is a primary societal shaper. Humans are now immersed in digital tools like smartphones, computers, televisions, and digital media such as the internet, social media, and video games. Digital media is now part of human daily life, enabling and encouraging the formation of online identities that can differ from or complement real-world identities, influencing how individuals view themselves and others. It revolutionizes communication, facilitating instant and global interactions that can bridge distances and time zones. This ease and reach can transform how relationships are formed and maintained (Thompson, 1995). Email, instant messaging, and social media timeline posts facilitate instant and continuous communication, influencing language, expression, and relational dynamics. Digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter) change how we nurture and maintain social relationships, extending our social networks far beyond geographical and physical community boundaries. Digital advertisements invading every digital platform touchpoint fill our visual and auditory senses.

Interactivity in digital media and video games becomes an opiate and escapism from real-world pressures. Interaction with it feels instant and borderless. We can interact directly with all brands and cultural products through chat, direct messages (DMs), or comments on social media. Unlike traditional media, which is distanced

and requires a certain period, feedback from users and call to action from cultural meaning producers occurs almost instantly through digital mediation. This social interaction process overlaps within and between cultural groups.

Digital media also provides vast access to information (Sunstein, 2001). In practice, it democratizes knowledge. Digital media facilitates cultural globalization by spreading diverse cultural practices and information worldwide, creating a global cultural market (Appadurai, 1996). This opens extraordinary possibilities for a culture to engage with others in a global village (McLuhan, 1962) and opens up dialogical possibilities (Sugiharto, 2019:67). In the context of digital media, access to almost every corner of the world with a wide variety of cultural values and practices has the potential to create unlimited cultural dialogue permutations. However, behind this, unlimited access to other values and ideologies can potentially result in chaos and confusion in forming socio-cultural identity.

Looking at the development of digital media in society and how it enriches yet disorients our lives, this paper tries to analyze the role of digital media in contemporary society through the lens of a phenomenology view of culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Phenomenology View of Culture

The general view of culture, particularly in anthropology, perceives it as a rational structure based on social consensus on values that shape beliefs, behaviors, and knowledge of a group (Sugiharto, 2019:36). This understanding positions culture as a static system, a truth destined to define a society. However, the acceleration of civilization and the unlimited flow of information, partly driven by digital media, has cast doubt on this general view.

Another perspective from phenomenology sees culture as an experience. Phenomenology seeks to understand a phenomenon through the reading of lived experiences to find the essential meaning of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). *Lebenswelt*, or the field of immediate, fluid, and pre-reflective experience, is central to understanding culture (Sugiharto, 2019:44).

Merleau-Ponty, in "Phenomenology of Perception" (2005), views experience as closely related to the subject's direct involvement with the world physically and perceptually. For him, the world and cultural objects do not exist as entities separate from the subject perceiving them. Instead, they manifest in the relationship between subject and object. Similarly, Gadamer sees culture and cultural texts (broadly defined to include art, traditions, and even daily practices) as needing to be approached with openness and dialogue (Gadamer, 1960). Cultural experience involves being within a "tradition" and participating in the continuous "game" of interpretation, where our understanding is always provisional and open to revision. Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasize how understanding and interpretation are shaped through dialogical interaction between past and present, highlighting culture as a dynamic and relational process and experience. Bambang Sugiharto concludes that culture is a temporary imaginative image of the intersection of various streams of influence (Sugiharto, 2019:47).

METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative approach to understand the way digital media works as a form of cultural experience. The methodology used for this research is text analysis, mainly using Bambang Sugiharto's writing on cultural philosophy as a foundation to read digital media as phenomenon. Other literature research on phenomenology and cultural studies will also be used to strengthen the arguments. Some digital media examples will be presented as the manifestation of the phenomenon.

Experience as a central perspective in understanding culture places the essence of culture in the practice of meaning production through daily cultural practices. Digital media changes this practice and brings consequences where it shapes modern culture. Sugiharto explores various concrete characteristics of culture (which are paradoxical and ambiguous) as a philosophical excavation of the central, valuable, and necessary aspects to fight for, in his book "Culture and Post-Traditional Conditions," especially in the chapter "Culture as Commitment" (2019:58). There are two theses on Sugiharto's thoughts that will be addressed through digital media as intermediaries:

1. The originality of cultural elements lies in how these elements are processed according to the context of the social group into new meanings and possibilities (2019:65).
2. Identity is a temporary narrative resulting from the interpretation and construction of dialogical and critical exchange experiences with "the other" (2019:67).

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Digital Media as a Pathway to New Possibilities

The consequence of the perspective on cultural preservation construction is the release of the grip on old traditions, and everyday cultural practices through digital media are given space to fulfill their potential possibilities. These possibilities will eventually create new traditions. Cultural preservation is no longer seen as an effort to maintain the old but as providing new interpretations after we "surf" in digital spaces.

Transformation in tradition is inevitable. The reality of the cultural experience field of modern society in digital media, which is a complex network of global cultural interactions, drives the creation of limitless meaning branches. The continuous deconstruction and reordering of a culture result in the shift of the central values of that culture (2019:52-53,67). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call this deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972). Deterritorialization causes entities, identities, or structures to lose stable relations with their original context, space, or identity, allowing the formation of new configurations unbound by previous limits. Culture is constantly reshaped and redefined, allowing the formation of new meanings and identities in ever-changing contexts. The unavoidable dynamics of social and cultural changes due to the role of digital media in an increasingly connected and diverse world are the cause. The hyperreal, ambiguous, and fluid nature of digital media ensures the occurrence of new possibilities, dismantling old practices into new forms. Based on this concept, cultural identity will never be static

and always changes with the times. For example, the phenomenon of “Gemoy” President Prabowo Subianto in the 2024 election campaign represents a shift from the traditional depiction of Indonesian military officers as stern, cold, alert, and distant from society to more humane, funny, friendly, and approachable, especially by the youth (Nababan & Rahayu, 2023). This phenomenon is supported by the viral videos of TNI officers dancing on social media (Dzulfaroh & Ratriani, 2020). Everyday practices like these, transforming cultural elements in new contexts, shape today’s culture. According to McLuhan, playfulness as one of the cultural identities of digital media (Frisen et al., 2015) allows this shift.

The acceleration of technology and digital media drives these branches to a point where their roots are hard to trace. Deleuze and Guattari explain this phenomenon in the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). In rhizomatic culture, cultural elements can connect in various ways without a hierarchy determining the importance of one element over another. The rhizome emphasizes connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, regeneration, and non-hierarchy. Such cultural forms and practices live and grow in the digital world. Digital media is copied, reproduced, manipulated, shared, commented on, owned, and commodified to infinity. In the dialogical practice of culture, unexpected connectivity arises from the complexity and changes of cultural interactions.

Internet memes work similarly. Dawkins states that natural selection plays a role in cultural evolution through selection, mutation, and inheritance of ideas and cultural practices (Dawkins, 1976). Cultural memes spread through communication and social interaction by adapting to new contexts. Memes that “survive” resonate most with the group’s fusion of horizons, are easiest to understand, and can be repeated by many people. In the digital realm, the spread of cultural memes through social media is often viral, reaching a wide audience quickly. This proves that memes can influence and be shaped by communication technology (Shifman, 2013), where in the context of internet memes, digital media forms a reciprocal dialogue with them. Internet meme photos of President Soeharto accompanied by texts like “Why Are You Asking That?” or “ARREST” are used casually in social media communication, usually in comedic contexts or discussing light matters outside their original context (Image 1). The original context (map) depicting the horror of the New Order dictatorship led by President Soeharto has disappeared from the internet meme (territory). Many people use it without recognizing the figure behind the meme. The banality of digital media becomes a path to forming new and unexpected interpretations of cultural elements.



Image 1 Examples of Various Internet Memes Highlighting the Statements or Behaviors of President Soeharto (Source: personal documentation)

Digital Media as a Synthesis Space for Cultural Interaction

Globalization and modernity practices, driven by the “logic of novelty,” position intercultural interaction as an endless process of translating “the other” into our collective consciousness and us into “the other” (Sugiharto, 2019:67). Identity emerges as a consequence of the presence of “the other.” Thus, the other is an essential element in forming cultural identity. In this regard, relationality is the starting point for understanding culture (Gadamer through Sugiharto, 2019:37). For Gadamer (1960), culture and cultural texts (broadly defined to include art, traditions, and even daily practices) must be approached with an open and dialogical attitude.

Attempts to preserve culture and strengthen tradition identity that are puritanical and avoid dialogue with other cultures and contemporary contexts will detach the culture from the group's experience field, followed by its loss of relevance and eventual oblivion. Continuous cultural dialogue is a key requirement for continuity and existence. Endless cultural dialogue is a process of metamorphosis towards complex and profound culture (Sugiharto, 2019:51). The deeper and richer this interaction, the stronger cultural identity can emerge. In the context of digital media, for example, the dialogical interaction between tradition and visual culture as the dominant discourse and interaction with virtual reality (Manovich, 2001) can bring it to a relevant realm.

From Hegel's dialectic perspective (Hardiman, 2004), culture acts as a thesis, and the other is placed as the antithesis. Strong cultural identity is born from the contrast that can be generated compared to the culture that serves as its antithesis. Ultimately, a synthesis in the form of new culture or tradition will emerge based on that interaction experience. Bambang Sugiharto provides a case study example through the Kecak Dance performance (Sugiharto, 2024).

The appreciated Kecak Dance that can be enjoyed by foreign tourists (synthesis) results from the dialectical process between the sacred Hindu Balinese religious ritual (thesis) and capitalism through tourism (antithesis). Appreciation of this cultural practice can be seen in its multiplicity in other practices. The soundtrack of the live-action television series “Avatar: The Last Air Bender” produced by Netflix, released on February 22, 2024, and reaching 41 million viewers, is inspired by the Balinese Kecak Dance (Tionardus & Kistyarini, 2024). Another example can be seen in the works of renowned Japanese illustrator Yoshitaka Amano as a concept artist in the “Final Fantasy” video game series (Image 2). His distinctive visual style combines Western Art Nouveau with Ukiyo-e compositions (Polygon, 2020).

In the examples above, history, tradition, and cultural heritage are interpreted in their contemporary potential, not merely as artifacts of the past. Streaming platforms and video games become spaces for intercultural dialogue practices that result in innovation and idiosyncratic novelty. The position of “the other” in digital media can be seen in at least two aspects.

First, digital media allows for easier and faster access to information about other cultures than before. Increased understanding and appreciation of cultural differences can occur, but behind this, digital media also has the potential to

produce perverse portrayals or banality if not accompanied by deep and reflective exchange (Hall, 1997).

Second, the position of “the other” also lies in the dialogue between tradition (generally containing analog elements, heritage, physical media, and historical artifacts) and modernity represented by technology, media, and the digital realm. “The other” plays a role in forming a hybrid cultural identity, where traditional and digital cultures meet, dialogue, and interact (Escobar, 1995). According to Homi Bhabha, this relationship creates a new cultural expression space that is reflective and critical (Bhabha, 1994).

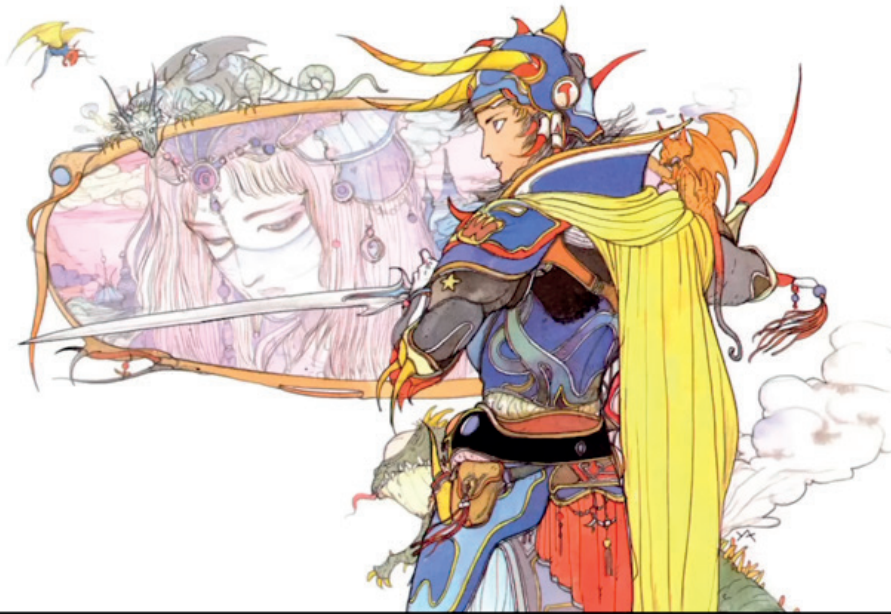


Image 2 Screen Capture from a Polygon Video Essay Showing Yoshitaka Amano's Illustration for the “Final Fantasy I” Video Game, Released in 1988 for the Nintendo Entertainment System (Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2bPuEmTYh8&t=266s>.)

CONCLUSION

Digital media, as part of social interaction, is inseparable from the field of post-traditional cultural experiences. Its characteristics change how meaning is produced in daily cultural activities. Digital media is a bridge that opens up new possibilities in contemporary cultural practices through its ability to provide continuous dialogue with various other cultures in a cultural square or market. It allows for cultural innovation and the formation of cultural identities relevant to modern society.

The reading of cultural experiences through digital media can certainly be further explored. This writing has not touched on aspects of privacy and surveillance nor post-truth aspects as part of digital cultural practices. Further in-depth application of case studies on daily cultural practices can also be conducted more deeply than the few simple examples. Finally, there are still no proposed solutions for presenting authentic cultural practices in digital media or other possibilities that allow for meaning production in digital spaces while maintaining the fundamental values of traditions can be sought.

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