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Organizational ethics in communicating cultural heritage online:
Between appreciation and instrumentalisation

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Summary

This study explores how organizations, through digital communication, can serve as valuable agents in the appreciation of cultural heritage, promoting dialogue between communities. It also points out the risks that emerge when they use cultural elements for the wrong reasons - mainly for self-serving purposes -, turning what should be a means of valorization into mere instrumentalization. The research combines literature review with two real world case examples that illustrate how these dynamics unfold in practice. Finally, it proposes criteria to help identify when communication genuinely values heritage from when it merely exploits it.

Keywords

digital communication; organizational communication; cultural heritage; appreciation; instrumentalization;

Introduction

Cultural heritage is a central element of collective identity and memory. As defined by UNESCO (2003), it includes both tangible and intangible dimensions - such as languages, rituals, arts, and social practices - recognized by communities as part of their shared history.

The ways in which this legacy is represented and communicated to the outside world have real social implications, shaping how groups understand themselves and how they are perceived by others (Goud & Lombardo, 2022). In the digital environment, this becomes even more relevant, as information circulates faster and more widely than ever before.

Because of their scale and global influence, organizations play an important role in this process. When they use cultural elements in their communication, the motives behind these choices – genuine appreciation or self-serving purposes – determine how those elements are treated, explored, and interpreted. As a result, they can either promote cultural understanding and dialogue or empty traditions of their meaning.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, based on relevant literature about cultural heritage, communication, and ethics, to analyze how organizations integrate cultural heritage into their online narratives. For practical illustration, two brands - Nike and Adidas - were selected considering their shared industry and global visibility, allowing for a balanced comparison. In the end, an analytical method was developed to distinguish appreciation from instrumentalization.

Digital communication and the appreciation of cultural heritage

In this globalized society, it's fair to say that digital communication dictates how people perceive reality. Organizations have, in this sense, the opportunity to act as real mediators of meaning. If guided by ethics and collaboration, their communicational practices can transform technological tools into a mechanism of culture valuing - amplifying recognition, fostering inclusion, and preserving authenticity (Manžuch, 2017). Therefore, they become a key instrument for the appreciation of cultural heritage.

Via storytelling, partnerships, shared authorship, and local customs recognition, organizations can promote awareness, connect communities, give new visibility to local expressions, reinforce belonging and continuity, and contribute to the preservation of collective memory in a connected world.

Instead of simply disseminating information, this dynamic enables: participation, exchange, and reinterpretation (ensuring that traditions remain living and relevant) (Goud & Lombardo, 2022).

From dialogue to instrumentalization

When the use of cultural heritage becomes instrumental – guided more by prominence and profit than by genuine appreciation – there is little concern with understanding the cultural meaning or acknowledging the communities behind the tradition. The way these elements are diffused often removes them from their original context and empties their meaning. What could serve as a significant tool for cultural recognition and exchange ends up turning into a resource for visibility and market appeal (Goud & Lombardo, 2022; Manžuch, 2017) (Fig. 1).

This reduction of heritage to a promotional language has many social and ethical implications: it can, ultimately, undermine trust, flatten complexity, create/reproduce stereotypes, and even distance audiences from the very communities that sustain those traditions (Table 1).

Fig. 1 Conceptual illustration of appreciation vs. instrumentalization. AI-generated (ChatGPT).

Aspect	Nike – N7 Fund	Adidas – Oaxaca Slip-On Campaign	Fonts
Initiative	Partnership with Indigenous communities to support social and cultural projects.	Shoe inspired by Zapotec textile patterns.	(Nike, 2025; Levenson, 2025)
Approach	Co-created communication; emphasis on reciprocity and reinvestment.	Use of cultural references without consultation or credit.	(Goud & Lombard, 2022; Manžuch, 2017; UNESCO, 2003)
Outcome	Promotes visibility while strengthening participation and recognition.	Reduced heritage to aesthetic symbol, detached from its original context.	(Goud & Lombardo, 2022; Manžuch, 2017; UNESCO, 2003)

Table 1. Comparative illustration of different organizational communication approaches in the use of cultural heritage online: appreciation vs. instrumentalization (Author's elaboration).

Conclusion

It's undeniable that organizations are active producers of meaning in today's digital world. Their communicational practices help shaping how heritage is seen, recognized, and transmitted.

An appreciation-oriented approach requires aligning visibility with collaboration, context, and transparency (Goud & Lombardo, 2022; Manžuch, 2017).

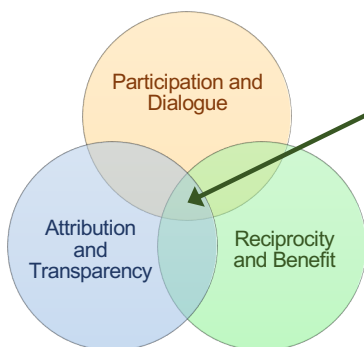Three dimensions can help distinguish it from a mere instrumentalization (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2 Criteria to distinguish genuine appreciation from instrumentalization (Author's elaboration):

Participation and Dialogue:

Are communities really involved as participants, or are they only represented as symbols? Genuine appreciation includes co-creation, consultation, and shared authorship (Goud & Lombardo, 2022; Manžuch, 2017; UNESCO, 2003).

Attribution and Transparency:

Does the communication really recognise the cultural source, its context, and, most importantly, its meaning? Responsible storytelling names (and contextualizes) the origins (Goud & Lombardo, 2022; Manžuch, 2017).

Reciprocity and Benefit:

Who are the real winners from the visibility created? Appreciation redistributes value - social, symbolic, or economic - while instrumentalization concentrates the gains in the organization itself (Manžuch, 2017).

If guided by these principles, organizational communication truly strengthens cultural continuity and creates meaningful dialogue between people and communities.

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cidtff centro de investigação Didática e Tecnologia na Formação de Formadores

fct Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia