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CYBERSPACE SUPPORTS CULTURE: IRANIAN EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract

COVID-19 spurred e-culture research in Iran. This study examines Iranian digital cultural initiatives during the quarantine period. Findings reveal a notable increase in cultural projects in Tehran, reflecting Iran's growing digital capability. Social media platforms were central to these initiatives. Virtual celebrations like Nowruz were tied to Iran's intangible cultural heritage. These findings offer a preliminary framework for digital trends in Iran, aiding the promotion of e-culture.

Keywords

Digital cultural initiatives, e-culture, intangible heritage

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic caused research into electronic culture and digitalization to increase in both European and non-European nations like Iran. Since the pandemic, the rapid digital acceleration of tangible and intangible heritage has had a significant influence on cultural assets all around the world. [Raimo et al. 2021; Akhtar Khan et al. 2022]. In Iran, both the governmental and private sectors have made significant progress toward digitalization. [Vahidi et al. 2021; Akhtar Khan et al. 2022]. However, the lack of studies on the nation's usage of digital technologies during the epidemic remains a problem. This information aids in identifying the nation's digitalization's advantages and disadvantages. Numerous academics have already performed extensive research on the COVID's effects on Iran's digitalization, yielding useful findings. [Askari et al. 2021; Deldar et al. 2022; Vahidi et al. 2021; Akhtar Khan et al. 2022]. Vahidi et al. 2021 have examined every digital citizen science initiative that was launched nationwide in the wake of the outbreak. Additionally, they offered various solutions for the projects' flaws and advantages. Another study focused on the main problems with online instruction in Iranian high schools. [Askari et al. 2021]. Akhtar Khan et al. 2022 implemented the study to identify the prospects and problems in the digitalization of Iran's cultural landmarks. The investigation made by Deldar et al. 2022 studied the augmented reality-based patient education modules that nurses gave online. Previous research looked into how different public and private sectors in Iran responded digitally when faced with an emergency. Additionally, the majority of these research examined the effects of

remote learning on students from a variety of angles and concentrated on the educational field [Asadpour 2021; Barjesteh et al. 2022; Khodaei et al. 2022]. This underlines the dearth of studies examining the digital activities of Iran's cultural heritage sector. However, despite the fact that a case study-based investigation on the Pasargadae World Heritage Site has been done by Akhtar Khan et al. 2022, less attention has been paid to reviewing of the digital initiatives, tools, and formats created and used by the cultural heritage sector during the lockdown period. This research represents the first attempt to provide a summary of the digital cultural initiatives and instruments used in Iran since the pandemic. The goal is to determine the current digital resources, the digital gaps, and the potential future directions in Iran's cultural heritage digitalization. This study created a brand-new classification of all cultural activities created by Tehran Province's General Directorate of Islamic Culture and Guidance.

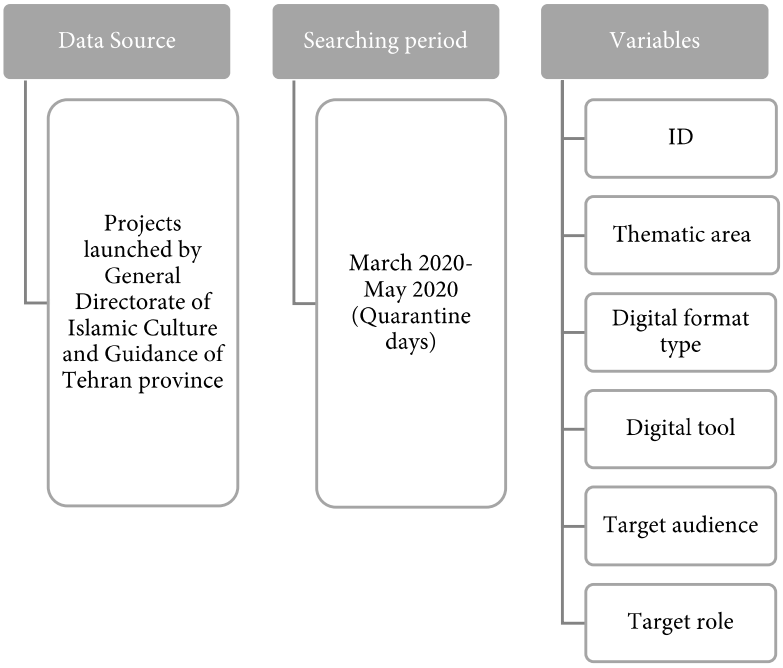
Methodology

In order to identify contemporary digital cultural trends and gaps, this report examined the digital cultural projects created in the province of Tehran. As Tehran is Iran's most populous city, this province was the subject of the current study. Tehran is also Iran's political, economic, and cultural capital and over the previous two years, a lot of cultural activities have been undertaken there online [Gharagozlo 2013]. In this context, a total of 31 initiatives launched by Tehran Province's General Directorate of Islamic Culture and Guidance were gathered for analysis. This study adopted the approach recommended by Tamborrino 2020 for the MNEMONIC project, gathering and analyzing from a thematic perspective the cultural online experiences in Italy beginning with the lockdown period. In this regard, a categorization scheme for the various kinds of digital initiatives in the nation was developed as part of our evaluation. Important details like Project-ID, Name, Thematic Area, Producer, City, Project Description, Digital Format Type, Digital Tool, Project Start Date, Duration, Target Audience, Target Role, and Source were noted for each project. The projects' analytical framework is depicted in (Fig. 1).

Results

The report presented an evaluation of the digital cultural projects that have been launched in Iran's Tehran Province commencing in March 2020 and were approved by the General Directorate of Islamic Culture and Guidance. 31 records pertaining to the topic were found. The efforts performed by the general administration during the Corona virus outbreak are summarized in the table below (Table 1), which provides some examples of the aforementioned online activities.

As a result, all the other 28 initiatives have been examined, and the pertinent data has been applied in accordance with specified criteria. The chosen projects were generated by a number of national players, including the city's deputy minister of culture,



1: Analytical framework of the projects.

cultural associations, and the office for Islamic culture and guidance in 18 various cities within the province of Tehran. The study, however, shows that the producer's engagement extended to non-governmental organizations including Artist Centers, Cinema Associations, and local theater artists as well as these kinds of institutions. The analytical criteria were used, and the projects chosen as examples were categorized as shown in Table 2.

The social media platforms were the most often utilized digital tool by Iranians as the table shows. WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Iranian sites (such Soroush and Gap), Line, Viber, and Emo are some of them [Chegeni et al., 2022]. These findings concur with those of Chegeni et al. 2022, who noted the widespread use of social media in Iran and its frequent patterns of use. In our analysis, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram were shown to be the most popular social media sites. Email and other postal services were also used. However, no new websites or applications were developed to launch the online initiatives. The data reveals that the majority of the online efforts took place as festivals, competitions, events, and webinars. Additionally, the majority of these initiatives were carried out in the months of April and March. Additionally, Instagram and Telegram were the two most popular sites for starting the initiatives. Interestingly, the majority of the initiatives dealt with religious rituals and intangible heritage. During the quarantine period, Nowruz, the Persian New Year, which is one of the nation's intangible cultural heritages, was celebrated. Many of the projects were carried out with the intention of celebrating Nowruz at home.

Table 1. Digital initiatives launched by public and private cultural sectors in Tehran province.

ID	Name	Producer	City	Description of project	Start date	Duration _days	Source
1	"Suri" Book Festival	City cultural Association	Robat Karim	Before the new year, the customary "charshanbeh suri" ceremony was held virtually. The kids took part in the photography, one-minute film, painting, reading a book, and sending audio sections. The purpose of this festival was to raise public awareness and make the best use of books during home quarantine.	5 March 2020	14	(General Directorate of Islamic Culture and Guidance of Tehran Province, 2020c)
2	"Sokhan" Festival	City cultural Association	Robat Karim	Celebration with the slogan "Stay at home." The festival catered to college students who enjoy speaking in public forums or on television as hosts. The relevant department should receive the pupils' audio registers. The chosen pupils received several presents at the festival's conclusion. The goal was to find performing talents, showcase them, and amuse today's adolescents and teenagers.	3 April 2020	15	(General Directorate of Islamic Culture and Guidance of Tehran Province, 2020b)
3	"Hope, Peace of Life" Culture and Art Festival	City cultural association	Varamin	In Varamin city, the first Hope, Peace, and Life cultural and artistic festival was organized. This festival was organized virtually to boost energy and hope among individuals because to the COVID outbreak and the inability of art lovers to attend programs. The disease's psychological side effects were addressed at the local level. People could take part in the festival by sending their artwork, stories, etc. to the relevant office.	15 March 2020	30	(General Directorate of Islamic Culture and Guidance of Tehran Province, 2020a)

Table 2. Project analysis based on variables.

ID	Thematic area	Digital format type	Digital tool	Target audience	Target role
1	Culture	Festival, Contest	Telegram	Children	Active
2	Culture	Festival, Contest	Instagram	Adults	Active
3	Culture, Art	Event	Web mail	All ages	Active

Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, fell during that time, and numerous online initiatives were started to allow Muslims to pray virtually when they were unable to go to the sites of pilgrimage. Children were the primary focus of the makers, and the majority of the painting activities were developed for kids in order to keep them busy while they were at home and prevent detrimental effects on their wellbeing. Among the cities in the Tehran province, Islamshahr was the most engaged and actively participated in the programs. In general, all of the cities in our study used a bottom-up strategy to engage individuals in their efforts.

Discussion and conclusion

This study is the first analysis of digital cultural initiatives undertaken in Iran between March 2020 and May 2020 (the quarantine period). This report offers convincing proof of the nation's growing interest in digitization. Since March 2020, the cultural industry has launched a major increase in the number of digital cultural projects. About half (N = 15) of the 31 digital projects discussed in this research had already been started when the pandemic began to spread across the nation. It is obvious that the Iranian approach to digitalization is still in its infancy. The dominance of social media, as evidenced by the large number of initiatives that were launched via Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram, was one of the study's significant findings. This clearly affects the development of digitization strategies as well as the growth of this field by acknowledging its social, economic, and cultural values. The capabilities of a number of organizations and cultural institutions in the province of Tehran significantly improved the benefits and potential for the country with regard to digitalization. There are also some unanswered issues, such as Iran's dearth of digital initiatives like the development of websites and applications for cultural reasons. What styles of web design have been used recently? How stable would this area be if cultural policies were added to support e-culture approaches? The absence of a complete scale for various types of digital platforms and websites in the nation emphasizes the necessity for additional research. This would also make it possible to examine digital initiatives in other Iranian provinces in more detail.

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