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Governing Digital Storytelling: A Case Study of Community Agency in Platformized Heritage Tourism

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Abstract This study examines digital storytelling as a culturally embedded and governance-related practice within platformized heritage tourism, where heritage meanings are negotiated, represented, and circulated through digital platforms. While digital storytelling expands cultural visibility and participation, it also introduces challenges related to interpretive simplification, representation rights, unauthorized circulation of cultural content, and increasing dependency on platform ecosystems. Using a qualitative multiple-case design, the study employs purposive case selection across five Indonesian heritage tourism contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and visitors and analyzed using thematic analysis with iterative coding and cross-case comparison. The findings reveal recurring tensions between interpretive integrity and algorithmic visibility, representation rights and user-generated circulation, as well as community agency and platform dependency. The study contributes by reframing digital storytelling as a governance-related process and proposing the Platformized Heritage Governance Framework (PHGF) as an analytical framework for understanding governance challenges within platformized heritage tourism.

Keywords: *Heritage tourism, Digital storytelling, Representation rights, Community agency, Language*

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1. Introduction

Storytelling constitutes a foundational practice through which communities construct, transmit, and sustain cultural meaning. As a culturally embedded and language-mediated process, storytelling shapes how heritage is interpreted, who holds narrative authority, and how symbols, values, and collective memory are communicated across generations (Konstantakis et al., 2020). In heritage contexts, stories function as semiotic systems that encode identity, belief, and social norms, rather than merely descriptive narratives. With the rise of digital platforms, these storytelling practices are increasingly translated into multimodal and mobile-

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first formats, circulating through social media feeds, short-form videos, user-generated reviews, geotagging, and algorithmic ranking systems (Sasongko et al., 2024). This transformation expands the reach of cultural expression but also reconfigures how meaning is produced and understood, as language, symbolism, and interpretation become entangled with platform logics of visibility and engagement (Pinontoan et al., 2025).

Despite growing attention to digital storytelling, existing studies tend to frame it primarily as a tool for promotion, communication, or audience engagement, overlooking its role as a domain of governance (Siddiqui et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2017; Yen et al., 2025). This creates a critical gap in understanding how narrative authority, semiotic control, and discursive agency are negotiated when culturally embedded stories are translated, curated, and circulated across platform ecosystems. However, prior studies rarely conceptualize digital storytelling as an integrated governance system that simultaneously addresses interpretation processes, representation rights, and community agency under platform conditions (Adewojo, 2025; Fu et al., 2023; Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Lee et al., 2024). In such environments, meanings may be simplified, distorted, or detached from community custodianship; linguistic nuances may be lost in translation; and culturally significant symbols may be reproduced, copied, or commercialized without consent (Ozdemir & Zonah, 2025). Algorithmic systems further intensify these dynamics by privileging content that performs in terms of visibility and engagement, often pressuring communities to simplify narratives, dramatize cultural expressions, or prioritize spectacle over stewardship (Naskar, 2025). These tensions highlight unresolved governance issues concerning representation rights, control over meaning-making processes, and the ability of communities to sustain agency within platform infrastructures they do not control.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing digital storytelling as a culturally embedded, language-mediated governance domain. It aims to examine how communities exercise, negotiate, or lose narrative authority and semiotic control within platformized environments, and how governance arrangements can protect representation rights while sustaining community-led heritage practices. Drawing on qualitative evidence from five heritage-rich sites in Indonesia, this research develops an integrative governance framework grounded in empirical insights. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following major research questions: How does platformization shape digital storytelling as a language-mediated governance domain in heritage tourism, particularly in terms of interpretation, representation rights, community agency, and sustainability outcomes?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Platformization and Tourism Governance

Platformization refers to the growing influence of digital platforms that mediate economic and cultural interactions through datafication, algorithmic ranking, and network effects (Chen et al., 2023; Mair, 2023). In contemporary tourism, digital platforms such as Google, Tripadvisor, Instagram, and TikTok have evolved beyond simple information tools into core infrastructures that play an increasingly central role in shaping tourist experiences and decision-making processes (Azazi & Shaed, 2020). They influence not only how destinations are discovered, but also how itineraries are constructed, how trust is formed, and ultimately how purchase decisions are made. Through algorithmic curation, ranking systems, user-generated content, and personalized recommendations, these systems influence what tourists are more likely to encounter, prioritize, and perceive as valuable.

This transformation has significant implications for power dynamics within tourism systems. Traditionally, local institutions such as Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), cultural authorities, and community stakeholders played a central role in curating and communicating destination narratives (Morrison, 2013; Sonari-Otobo & Ekeke, 2020; Yen et al., 2025). However, where visibility is governed less by local intention and more by engagement metrics, virality, and algorithmic logic, where visibility is governed less by local intention and more by engagement metrics, virality, and algorithmic logic. As a result, destinations that are more “platform-friendly”, visually appealing, easily consumable, and aligned with digital trends are more likely to gain prominence. A governance lens is essential because platformization can (1) scale interpretive effects and behavioral norms through viral circulation, (2) externalize control over distribution and monetization, and (3)

intensify extractive dynamics in which community culture generates value, but communities receive limited returns (Kloet et al., 2019; Van Dijck, 2021).

However, existing studies on platformization largely emphasize economic and technological transformations, with limited attention to how algorithmic governance reshapes interpretive authority and cultural meaning-making in heritage contexts. Algorithmic governance here refers to the structuring of visibility, prioritization, and circulation of content through platform ranking systems that shape how meanings are exposed and consumed. This suggests the need to extend platformization analysis toward a governance perspective that explicitly addresses meaning-making processes and narrative control.

2.2. Digital Storytelling and Heritage Interpretation

Heritage interpretation emphasizes purposeful communication that goes far beyond the mere transfer of information; it is designed to provoke critical thought, evoke emotional engagement, foster respect, and cultivate a deeper, more meaningful understanding of cultural and historical significance. Rather than simply presenting facts, effective interpretation seeks to connect visitors personally and intellectually with heritage, encouraging them to reflect on values, contexts, and lived experiences embedded within a site. It transforms passive observation into active engagement, where visitors are invited to question, relate, and internalize the meanings behind what they encounter. In doing so, heritage interpretation plays a crucial role in shaping not only knowledge acquisition but also attitudes, empathy, and long-term appreciation, ultimately contributing to the preservation and sustainable stewardship of heritage across generations (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Lee et al., 2024). Digital storytelling through tools such as QR-based narratives, short-form micro-videos, AR/VR experiences, and projection mapping has the potential to significantly extend interpretive density while diversifying modes of learning and engagement. By layering multimedia elements onto physical sites, these technologies enable multi-sensory interpretation, allowing visitors to access deeper historical context, hidden narratives, and interactive experiences that would otherwise remain inaccessible. For instance, QR narratives can provide on-demand, location-specific insights; micro-videos can offer quick, engaging entry points; while AR/VR can reconstruct past environments or visualize intangible heritage in immersive ways. This not only enhances cognitive understanding but also supports different learning preferences, visual, auditory, and experiential, making heritage interpretation more inclusive and adaptive (McCandlish & McPherson, 2021).

Despite its strengths, heritage interpretation theory tends to assume relatively controlled communication environments, where meaning is curated and delivered by authorized actors. In platformized contexts, however, storytelling becomes fragmented, remixed, and circulated beyond institutional control, potentially leading to simplification, distortion, or loss of contextual depth. This limitation indicates the need to reconceptualize digital storytelling not merely as an interpretive tool, but as a governance domain where meaning production and circulation require regulation and coordination.

2.3. Representation Rights in Heritage Tourism

Representation rights involve a complex set of ethical and practical claims concerning who has the authority to record, frame, interpret, share, and ultimately benefit from cultural expressions, particularly in contexts where heritage includes sacred, sensitive, or restricted knowledge. These rights are not merely about ownership in a legal sense, but about legitimacy, consent, and cultural sovereignty. They raise critical questions: Who gets to tell the story? Whose voice is prioritized or marginalized? And under what conditions can cultural knowledge be made public? In many heritage contexts, especially within Indigenous and local communities, certain forms of knowledge are governed by customary laws, spiritual protocols, or social hierarchies that determine access and use. Digitization and platform dissemination can disrupt these boundaries, as cultural elements, rituals, symbols, and narratives are often captured and circulated without adequate consultation or permission. What may be considered sacred or restricted within a community can become publicly visible and even commodified in digital spaces, leading to ethical tensions and potential cultural harm (Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Nowacki, 2021; Weng et al., 2020). In platform environments, representation rights are pressured by user-generated content, remix practices, and rapid circulation. Governance, therefore, requires explicit rules about

consent, filming boundaries, rights to motifs and images, licensing, attribution standards, and restricted-knowledge protocols (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Mollah & Sebata, 2022; Wei & Chen, 2025).

Yet, existing discussions on representation rights often emphasize ethical principles and normative guidelines, with limited attention to how such rights are negotiated, enforced, and potentially contested within platform-driven environments characterized by rapid circulation and user-generated content. This gap highlights the need to examine representation rights as a dynamic governance process embedded in platform ecosystems rather than as a static ethical framework.

2.4. Community Agency and CBT Institutions

Community-based tourism (CBT) emphasizes active participation, local empowerment, and equitable benefit-sharing as its core principles, positioning communities not merely as passive beneficiaries but as key decision-makers in the development and management of tourism. In this approach, tourism is understood as a tool for local development that should enhance community well-being, strengthen cultural identity, and ensure that economic gains are distributed fairly among members rather than captured by external actors. Participation in CBT goes beyond involvement in operational activities; it includes meaningful engagement in planning, governance, and evaluation processes, allowing communities to shape the direction and values of tourism development in alignment with their socio-cultural context (Nair et al., 2024; Sasongko et al., 2024; Tang & Xu, 2023). In platformized contexts, community agency extends beyond physical governance and requires robust digital governance capacity: the ability to actively shape, manage, and defend how a destination is represented and circulated within digital ecosystems. This includes setting clear narrative boundaries about what aspects of culture can be shared, how they should be framed, and which elements must remain protected due to their sacred or sensitive nature. Without such boundaries, communities risk losing control over their own stories as content becomes fragmented, replicated, and reinterpreted across platforms (Sasongko et al., 2024).

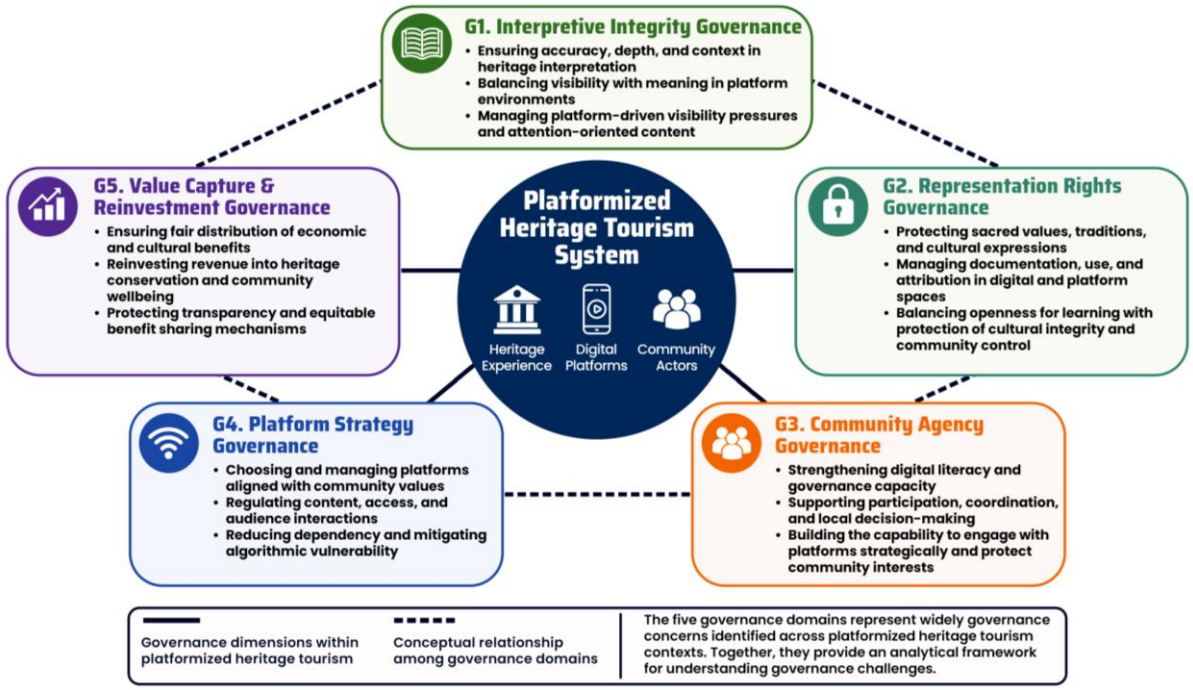
However, community-based tourism frameworks remain primarily grounded in physical and institutional governance structures, providing limited insight into how community agency operates within digitally mediated and platformized environments. This limitation suggests the need to extend the concept of community agency toward digital governance capacity, particularly in relation to controlling narrative circulation and representation in platform ecosystems.

2.5. Toward the Platformized Heritage Governance Framework (PHGF)

Integrating these perspectives, we argue that platformized heritage tourism can be understood through a governance framework linking interpretation, representation, platform dynamics, and community stewardship (Dijck, 2021; Earl & Hall, 2021; Garrod, 2000). The PHGF conceptualizes platformized heritage tourism as an analytical governance framework (Hartman, 2026) consisting of several related governance domains identified across cases, including interpretive integrity governance, representation rights governance, community agency governance, platform strategy governance, and value capture and reinvestment governance. At its core, the framework recognizes that heritage experiences are increasingly shaped through interactions among digital platforms, visitor practices, and community governance (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Moscardo, 2020). Interpretive integrity governance refers to mechanisms intended to support narrative coherence, contextual depth, and culturally appropriate framing of heritage stories (Nowacki, 2021). Representation rights governance refers to mechanisms that manage issues of consent, ownership, and the circulation of cultural expressions (McCandlish & McPherson, 2021; Pinontoan et al., 2025). Community agency governance refers to participatory structures and capacities that enable communities to participate in managing narrative production and benefit distribution (Zielinski et al., 2021). Platform strategy governance refers to strategies and mechanisms that manage algorithmic visibility, data control, content coordination, and platform dependency (Kloet et al., 2019; Recuero et al., 2024). Value capture and reinvestment governance refers to mechanisms that connect digital visibility with local economic and cultural benefits, including reinvestment into community and heritage sustainability efforts (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Across cases, these domains were associated with recurring governance challenges related to visibility, narrative circulation, representation, and benefit distribution within platformized heritage tourism. We propose

the PHGF as a conceptual and analytical governance framework derived from cross-case thematic synthesis. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.

Figure 1
Platformized Heritage Governance Framework (PHGF): Governance Domains and Reinforcing Cycle



Note: This framework is derived from cross-case thematic analysis of five community-based tourism sites and represents key governance domains identified in platformized heritage contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study applies a qualitative multiple-case design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023) to examine how platformization interacts with heritage storytelling, representation rights, and community agency. Purposive sampling was used to select cases that capture variation in narrative types (sacred, legend-based, geoheritage, craft transmission, and rural lifeworld heritage) and represent stakeholders involved in producing, mediating, governing, and consuming heritage narratives within platformized tourism. They were selected from the following five sites:

1) Batu Kuwung: sacred spring narratives and pilgrimage norms.
2) Batu Baginde: royal-couple legend narratives linked to rockscape heritage.
3) Ancient Volcano of Nglanggeran: geoheritage village with community tourism and digital marketing integration.
4) Wukirsari/Wayang Craft Village: craft transmission, wayang–batik narratives, and workshop-based learning.
5) Pentingsari Tourism Village: rural lifeworld heritage embedded in live-in and homestay programs.

Each research site involved one local guide (n = 1), one destination manager (n = 1), one micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) actor (n = 1), one homestay operator (n = 1), and one community coordinator/local official (n = 1). In addition, visitor participants were included to capture interpretive experiences and meaning-making processes from the visitor perspective, including Batu Kuwung (n = 10; male = 5, female = 5), Batu Baginde (n = 11; male = 5, female = 6), Ancient Volcano of Nglanggeran (n = 10; male = 5, female = 5), Wukirsari/Wayang Craft Village (n = 12; male = 5, female = 7), and

Pentingsari Tourism Village (n = 11; male = 6, female = 5). Overall, the study involved a total of 79 participants across the five research sites.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes, interpretive patterns, or governance-related issues emerged from subsequent interviews (Walters, 2016). Saturation was identified through continuous comparison of interview data across the five research sites, where recurring patterns related to digital storytelling, representation rights, community agency, platformization, and governance tensions became increasingly consistent. Additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic stability and contextual variation across cases.

3.2. Instruments

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Walters, 2016). The interview protocol was designed to capture key dimensions of the study, including digital storytelling practices, narrative authority, representation rights, community agency, and governance tensions within platformized heritage tourism environments. The interview guide consisted of 12 main interview questions for stakeholder participants and 8 main interview questions for visitor participants, accompanied by additional probing questions to explore contextual details during the interview process. The complete list of interview questions is provided in Appendix A.

The interview questions focused on how participants create, interpret, manage, and negotiate heritage narratives within digital environments; how decisions are made regarding what aspects of culture can be publicly shared, restricted, or protected; and how digital platforms influence storytelling practices, visibility, and community governance. Additional probes were used to explore issues related to consent, cultural representation, platform dependency, user-generated content, and responses to digital exposure. For visitor participants across the five research sites, the interview questions emphasized meaning-making processes, including how visitors interpret heritage narratives, what aspects of storytelling they recall most strongly, and how digital content such as social media, short-form videos, online reviews, and QR-based narratives shapes their understanding of the tourism sites.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes depending on participant roles, interview depth, and contextual discussions emerging during the fieldwork process. Most interviews were conducted directly at the tourism sites, including community spaces, homestays, workshops, visitor areas, and local management offices, to ensure contextual relevance and participant comfort during the data collection process.

3.3. Procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with selected participants across the five case sites. Interviews were carried out in person. However, several follow-up interviews and clarification sessions were conducted through WhatsApp calls/chats and Zoom meetings when additional information, schedule flexibility, or participant accessibility required online communication. Each interview focused on participants' experiences with storytelling practices, cultural representation, and engagement with digital platforms. All interviews were recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following an iterative coding process (Walters, 2016). The analysis involved three stages: open coding, where initial concepts and patterns were identified from the data; axial coding, where relationships between categories were established; and selective coding, where core themes were refined and integrated into broader analytical constructs. Deductive codes were informed by the theoretical framework (e.g., interpretive integrity, representation rights, platform dependency, and community agency), while inductive codes captured emerging patterns such as informal governance practices and platform coping strategies. Cross-case comparison was applied to identify recurring patterns and variations across the five sites, which informed the development of the PHGF and its associated propositions. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data triangulation by comparing perspectives across different participant groups (e.g., guides, managers, and visitors). In addition, member checking was

conducted by discussing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to validate the findings. Ethical considerations were carefully observed, including informed consent, protection of sensitive cultural knowledge, and respect for community norms regarding restricted or sacred narratives. All ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews, including permission to record and use the data for research purposes. Particular attention was given to the protection of sensitive cultural knowledge, ensuring that restricted or sacred information was not disclosed without proper authorization.

4. Results

In this section, the authors present the key themes that emerged from the interviews conducted with local guides, heritage managers, MSMEs, homestay operators, and local officials across the selected community-based tourism sites, including Nglanggeran, Wukirsari, Batu Kuwung, Batu Baginde, and Pentingsari. Drawing on thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the results are organized around four recurring analytical themes: (1) platformization as a reshaping force on heritage interpretation, (2) representation rights as a core friction point, (3) community agency in relation to digital governance capacity, and (4) governance trade-offs arising from platform dependency. Following the presentation of these empirical patterns, a cross-case synthesis yields five governance domains constituting the (PHGF).

4.1. Platformization Reshapes Interpretation through Visibility-first Pressures

Across cases, platformization created a new interpretive pathway: visitors increasingly arrived with pre-formed expectations from viral clips, geotagged photos, and platform reviews (Van Dijck, 2021). For instance, a local guide in Nglanggeran noted that *"most visitors already know the photo spots before arriving, but they rarely understand the story behind them."* This sometimes improved baseline awareness, but often shifted attention toward photogenic content moments rather than heritage meaning. Similarly, several visitors interviewed in Wukirsari expressed that their expectations were shaped more by short-form videos and social media content than by official narratives or on-site interpretation. One visitor stated, *"I came here because I saw it on Instagram, but I didn't really know the meaning until the guide explained it."* In sites with stronger narrative scripts and interpretive nodes, platforms amplified official stories; where digital governance was weak, user-generated content often became the dominant interpretation. This visibility-first pressure reconfigures not only visitor behavior but also the internal logic of interpretation design. Heritage managers and local actors may feel compelled to adapt their interpretive strategies to align with platform aesthetics, prioritizing photogenic spots, short-form narratives, and visually optimized installations, sometimes at the expense of layered, contextual storytelling (Moneta et al., 2025; Ozdemir & Zonah, 2025; Yen et al., 2025).

Over time, this can lead to a subtle but significant transformation in how heritage is curated: from meaning-oriented interpretation toward attention-oriented presentation. Consequently, complex narratives, contested histories, or intangible cultural elements that require time and reflection may be underrepresented because they do not perform well within platform metrics such as engagement, reach, or virality. In several cases, local actors acknowledged that certain cultural elements were simplified or selectively presented to match audience expectations shaped by social media trends. However, the impact of platformization is not uniform and varies significantly depending on the strength of local interpretive governance. In sites where structured narrative scripts, interpretive nodes, and curated storytelling mechanisms are well-developed, platforms can function as amplifiers of official narratives. Digital content, whether produced by institutions or visitors, tends to align with and reinforce the intended meanings of the site, creating a degree of narrative coherence across on-site and online experiences. For example, in Nglanggeran, coordinated digital storytelling by community actors helped maintain narrative consistency between online representations and on-site interpretation. In such contexts, platform visibility becomes an extension of interpretive strategy rather than a distortion of it (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025; Machmury, 2023).

4.2. Representation Rights Become a Core Friction Point

Representation-rights tensions were most salient where heritage involved sacredness or creative production. At Batu Kuwung, sacred-water narratives require modesty, solemnity, and respect; platform culture (selfies and ritual content) can violate local norms despite ethics signage and restricted zones (Lin et al., 2021; Mahendra, 2024). A local caretaker at Batu Kuwung explained that *"some visitors still take photos during rituals, even though we have explained that certain moments are not for documentation."* One visitor reflected that *"I thought taking photos was fine because other visitors were doing it, but I realized that some parts of the ritual should be respected and not treated like ordinary tourist content."* At Wukirsari, craft motifs and techniques (wayang and batik) are vulnerable to copying, particularly when tutorial-style content circulates without attribution or benefit sharing. One craft practitioner noted that *"people often record the process and upload it online, and sometimes others replicate the designs without acknowledging where they learned it."* A visitor who participated in a craft workshop similarly observed that *"I wanted to record the process because it was interesting, but I also understood that the designs and techniques belong to the people who make them."* In some cases, digital exposure intended for educational purposes inadvertently facilitates the reproduction of cultural expressions outside community control. Communities face an ongoing balancing act between openness for learning and protection of cultural labor and integrity. For example, while workshops in Wukirsari are designed to introduce visitors to cultural practices, local actors emphasized the need to limit what can be recorded or shared online. As one workshop facilitator stated, *"we want people to learn, but not everything should be freely recorded and circulated."* This tension highlights how representation rights are not only ethical concerns but also practical governance challenges in platformized environments, where cultural content can be rapidly captured, modified, and redistributed beyond the community's control.

4.3. Community Agency Depends on Digital Governance Capacity

Traditional CBT governance mechanisms (forums, rotation systems, associations) support participation and equity, but platformization adds new requirements: content governance, account management, partnership negotiation, and channel diversification. In several cases, local actors emphasized that managing digital presence has become an additional responsibility beyond traditional tourism roles. A manager in Nglanggeran noted that *"now we don't just manage visitors, we also have to manage content, social media, and how the destination is presented online."* One visitor noted that *"what I see on social media makes me expect a certain experience, but after visiting the village, I realized that the community also has its own way of presenting the destination."* Nglanggeran illustrates stronger digital readiness through training, coordinated storytelling, and MSME branding supporting income buffering during downturns (Mair, 2023; Pramono & Juliana, 2025; Zielinski et al., 2021). Community members highlighted that digital training programs enabled them to collectively manage official accounts and maintain consistent narratives across platforms. As one local actor stated, *"we try to coordinate what we post so the story stays consistent and reflects our values."* Another visitor similarly observed that *"the information online is helpful before coming, but once I was here, I understood that the community decides how the place should be presented."* In Pentingsari, reviews and ratings shape homestay demand; community standards help, but rating systems can still pressure households into uniform hospitality performance that may dilute lived authenticity. Several homestay operators expressed concern that guest expectations driven by online reviews influence how they present their homes and services. One host explained, *"we try to follow what guests expect from reviews, even if it's not always how we usually host."* From the visitor perspective, one participant explained that *"I usually check reviews before choosing a homestay, so I understand why the hosts pay attention to what visitors say online."* This dynamic highlights how platform metrics subtly reconfigure local governance priorities, shifting attention from collectively defined cultural values toward externally validated indicators such as ratings, reviews, and guest satisfaction scores. While these metrics can incentivize quality improvement and service consistency, they may also standardize experiences, reduce diversity in hosting practices, and marginalize households that cannot or choose not to conform to dominant platform expectations (Azazi & Shaed, 2020; Gaffar et al., 2022; Recuero et al., 2024). Over time, this can create internal tensions within communities, where economic competitiveness begins to outweigh cultural expression. Therefore, integrating platform logic into CBT requires adaptive governance where

communities not only comply with digital standards but also critically negotiate them, preserving space for local variation, authenticity, and culturally grounded forms of hospitality. This suggests that community agency in platformized environments is not only about participation, but also about the capacity to strategically manage digital representation and negotiate external pressures from platform systems.

4.4. Platform Dependency Produces Governance Trade-Offs

Across all cases, a fundamental tension emerged between tourism growth and cultural stewardship. While increased digital visibility expanded visitation and economic opportunities, it also intensified crowding pressures, encouraged narrative simplification, and increased dependency on digital platforms whose visibility systems and algorithms continuously shaped tourism exposure, fostered cultural performativity, and deepened dependency on platforms whose rules and algorithms are inherently unstable. In the absence of strategic diversification and coordinated governance strategies, such dependency risks transforming heritage from a source of cultural meaning into a commodity where visibility is often prioritized over interpretive depth and cultural integrity.

In several sites, local actors acknowledged that increased visibility through social media significantly boosted visitor numbers but also created management challenges. A destination manager noted that *"after our content went viral, the number of visitors increased quickly, but we were not fully prepared to manage the flow and maintain the experience."* One visitor similarly reflected that *"I decided to visit because I kept seeing the place on social media, but when I arrived, I realized that the number of visitors could affect the experience and the atmosphere of the site."* This reflects how rapid exposure can outpace local governance capacity. This tension underscores the need for deliberate governance strategies that balance visibility with control, ensuring that growth does not come at the expense of cultural integrity. Destinations must actively design mechanisms to regulate visitor flows, protect sensitive narratives, and align digital promotion with interpretive objectives rather than purely algorithmic appeal. For example, some communities began to limit access to certain areas or adjust how cultural elements are presented online to avoid overexposure. One local actor explained, *"we now think carefully about what we share online, because too much exposure can bring problems."* From the visitor perspective, one participant noted that *"social media made me interested in coming here, but I think visitors also need to understand that not everything should be promoted just to attract more people".* Strengthening community agency, formalizing representation-rights policies, and investing in diversified digital ecosystems become critical safeguards against overexposure and dependency. In practice, this includes efforts such as developing official channels, coordinating content among community members, and encouraging visitors to engage with curated narratives rather than relying solely on user-generated content. In this regard, sustainable success in platformized heritage tourism is not defined by how much attention a destination attracts, but by how effectively that attention is governed, translated into equitable value, and reinvested to sustain both the cultural and social foundations of the heritage itself (Nair et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2017).

4.5. Cross-Case Synthesis: PHGF Governance Domains

From cross-case patterns, we derive five governance domains constituting the Platformized Heritage Governance Framework (PHGF):

(G1) Interpretive integrity governance: story scripts, interpretive nodes, ethics framing, and context-first design to support narrative coherence and culturally grounded interpretation.
(G2) Representation rights governance: consent rules, no-camera zones, attribution practices, community guidelines regarding the use of cultural symbols or motifs, and restricted-knowledge protocols.
(G3) Community agency governance: community participation, stakeholder coordination, digital literacy, collaborative decision-making, and community-based content management.
(G4) Platform strategy governance: official account stewardship, channel diversification, community guidelines for user-generated content, content coordination, and platform engagement management.

(G5) Value capture and reinvestment governance: mechanisms linking digital visibility to local benefit flows through workshops, homestays, curated product links, local products, and community-based reinvestment practices.

These domains are derived from recurring patterns identified across the cases, particularly the tensions observed between interpretive integrity and algorithmic visibility (Section 4.1), conflicts over representation rights (Section 4.2), variations in community agency and digital capacity (Section 4.3), and governance trade-offs associated with platform dependency and digital exposure (Section 4.4). The framework therefore synthesizes empirical insights into an analytical governance framework for understanding how communities negotiate interpretation, representation, visibility, and value within platformized heritage tourism environments.

Table 1
PHGF Governance Domains and Suggested Operational Indicators

Governance Domain	Operational Components	Suggested Operational Indicators
G1 – Interpretive Integrity Governance	Story scripts; interpretive nodes; ethics framing; context-first design	Availability of official narrative guidelines; presence of curated interpretive points on-site and online; integration of cultural context in digital storytelling; compliance with cultural ethics in content creation
G2 – Representation Rights Governance	Consent rules; no-camera zones; rights to images/motifs; community guidelines regarding the use of cultural symbols or motifs; attribution; restricted-knowledge protocols	Existence of visitor consent policies; clearly marked photography restrictions; attribution standards in digital content; protocols protecting sensitive cultural knowledge; community guidelines regarding the use of cultural symbols, images, or motifs in digital content
G3 – Community Agency Governance	Participation;coordination;digital literacy;collective agency;community involvement	Community participation in digital storytelling activities; coordination among local actors in managing tourism narratives; community involvement in tourism-related decision-making; local digital literacy and capacity-building initiatives; collaborative management of heritage representation across digital platforms
G4 – Platform Strategy Governance	Official account stewardship; channel diversification; user-generated content guidelines; content coordination; platform engagement management	Number and consistency of official digital channels; documented community guidelines for user-generated content; community coordination in responding to misleading or inappropriate digital content; engagement management strategies across platforms
G5 – Value Capture & Reinvestment Governance	Digital-to-local value mechanisms; workshops; homestays; curated product links; community-based reinvestment; local benefit-sharing	Share of digital visibility converted into local economic activities; availability of digital channels supporting local products and services; community discussions regarding benefit distribution and reinvestment; reinvestment in cultural programs or heritage maintenance

5. Discussion

This study examines how digital storytelling functions as a governance-related practice within platformized heritage tourism and how platformization reshapes interpretation, representation rights, platform strategies, and community agency within heritage contexts. Drawing on qualitative evidence across five Indonesian heritage tourism cases, the study develops the Platformized Heritage Governance Framework (PHGF) as an analytical framework for understanding how meaning, visibility, control, and value are negotiated within digitally mediated tourism environments.

The findings indicate that platformization transforms digital storytelling from a promotional and communicative practice into a governance-related process shaping how heritage narratives are interpreted, circulated, managed, and contested within platform ecosystems. This extends prior studies that primarily position digital storytelling as a tool for destination promotion and visitor engagement (Siddiqui et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2017), by demonstrating that storytelling practices are also closely connected to governance concerns involving interpretive integrity, representation rights, community participation, and platform visibility (Lyngdoh & Gautam, 2024; Mair, 2023). As discussed in Section 4.1, visibility-oriented platform dynamics encourage simplified and attention-driven forms of interpretation, while Sections 4.2 and 4.3 demonstrate how representation rights and community agency emerge as central governance concerns within platformized heritage tourism environments. These findings support the argument that heritage storytelling cannot be separated from governance because decisions regarding cultural interpretation, representation, and visibility are closely connected to questions of authority, legitimacy, and community control (Hartman, 2026; Moscardo, 2020).

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that platformization produces governance trade-offs rather than uniform outcomes. While previous studies often emphasize the advantages of digital storytelling in expanding destination reach and audience engagement (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025), this study shows that increased visibility may also intensify crowding pressures, encourage interpretive simplification, increase dependency on platform ecosystems, and complicate community efforts to maintain cultural integrity and representation boundaries. However, these outcomes are not deterministic. In several cases, communities developed adaptive governance practices such as coordinated storytelling strategies, selective digital exposure, community-based content management, and informal representation guidelines to negotiate platform pressures while maintaining cultural values. This suggests that platformization should not be understood solely as a source of risk, but as a conditional process shaped by governance capacity, community coordination, and local digital strategies.

The PHGF contributes theoretically by organizing these recurring patterns into five interconnected governance domains: interpretive integrity governance, representation rights governance, community agency governance, platform strategy governance, and value capture and reinvestment governance. Rather than functioning as a fixed causal model, the framework serves as an analytical structure for understanding how communities negotiate heritage interpretation, platform visibility, digital participation, and local benefit distribution within platformized tourism environments. The framework also highlights that governance concerns in digital heritage tourism are interconnected, where changes in visibility, representation, participation, and value circulation continuously influence one another across digital and community contexts.

These findings also have several practical implications for communities and tourism stakeholders. Communities may benefit from establishing locally negotiated guidelines regarding digital storytelling practices, representation boundaries, and the use of cultural symbols within online environments. Strengthening community participation in digital content management, improving digital literacy, and coordinating official storytelling channels may help communities manage platform visibility more strategically. In addition, linking digital exposure with local economic opportunities such as workshops, homestays, and community-based tourism products may strengthen local value capture while supporting cultural sustainability. The findings further suggest that sustainable platform engagement depends not only on increasing digital visibility, but also on the ability of communities to manage interpretation, representation, and tourism growth in ways that remain aligned with local cultural values and community interests (Earl & Hall, 2021).

This study is subject to several limitations and suggests directions for future research. As a qualitative multiple-case study, the findings are context-specific and based on interpretive analysis rather than statistical generalization. Future research may further examine the governance dimensions identified in this study using quantitative or mixed-method approaches, including studies focusing on visitor interpretation, platform dependency, community participation, or digital representation practices within heritage tourism contexts. Longitudinal research is also needed to explore how platform dynamics, community governance practices, and digital storytelling strategies evolve over time. Comparative

studies across different cultural, technological, and regulatory settings would further strengthen the applicability and analytical development of the PHGF in broader heritage tourism contexts.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the protection of participant privacy but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics Declaration

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles for qualitative research involving human participants. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Participant identities and personal information were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

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Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Appendix A presents the semi-structured interview questions used in this study for both stakeholder and visitor participants. The interview questions were designed to explore key dimensions of platformized heritage tourism, including digital storytelling practices, heritage interpretation, representation rights, community agency, visitor meaning-making processes, and governance challenges emerging within digitally mediated tourism environments. The interview protocol consisted of two sets of questions: stakeholder interview questions and visitor interview questions. Additional probing questions were used during interviews to clarify responses, explore contextual details, and capture emerging themes relevant to the research objectives.

A. Stakeholder Interview Questions

1. How do you usually introduce or explain the heritage stories and cultural meanings of this tourism site to visitors?
2. What kinds of cultural narratives or traditions are considered important to preserve at this site?
3. How have digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Google Reviews, or YouTube influenced the way this destination is promoted or represented?
4. Have visitor expectations changed because of social media or online content? If yes, how?
5. What challenges do you face in maintaining the authenticity or integrity of heritage narratives in digital environments?

6. Are there certain cultural elements, rituals, symbols, or stories that should not be freely recorded or shared online? Why?
7. How are decisions made regarding what cultural content can be documented, promoted, or restricted?
8. How does the community respond to visitor-generated content such as photos, videos, reviews, or social media posts?
9. What role do local communities play in managing digital storytelling and destination representation?
10. How do digital platforms influence tourism activities, visitor management, or local economic opportunities in this destination?
11. Have there been any conflicts or tensions related to online exposure, cultural representation, or visitor behavior?
12. What strategies are used to balance tourism promotion, digital visibility, and cultural preservation in this tourism site?

B. Visitor Interview Questions

1. How did you first learn about this tourism destination?
2. Did social media, online videos, reviews, or digital content influence your decision to visit this site?
3. What expectations did you have before visiting the destination?
4. What heritage stories, cultural meanings, or experiences do you remember most strongly from your visit?
5. How did guides, workshops, local communities, or on-site interpretation help you understand the destination?
6. Did your actual experience differ from what you saw online? If yes, how?
7. How do you perceive the authenticity of the heritage and cultural experiences presented at this site?
8. Do you think visitors should have limitations regarding what can be photographed, recorded, or shared online? Why?