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COMMUNICATION FOR SINO-ITALIAN VISUAL INTANGIBLE
CULTURAL HERITAGE ON INSTAGRAM: A CASE STUDY OF
VENETIAN MASKS AND PEKING OPERA FACIAL MASKS**

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Abstract:

This study investigates how visual intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is communicated across cultures via social media by comparing Instagram posts featuring Venetian carnival masks and Peking Opera facial masks. Drawing on UNESCO's definition of ICH and theories of intercultural communication, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of public Instagram images and captions tagged with relevant hashtags from 2020–2024. The sample comprised 120 posts for each mask type, purposively selected to capture a range of users and contexts. Using inductive thematic analysis, we identified how creators frame heritage and identity for global audiences. Venetian mask posts predominantly emphasize craft tradition, festive tourism, and aesthetic design, often highlighting handmade artistry and historical context. In contrast, Peking Opera mask posts focus on symbolic roles, cultural education, and national heritage, frequently referencing character types and explaining color meanings. Both sets of posts use Instagram's visual affordances and hashtags (#VeniceCarnival, #PekingOpera, etc.) to engage global viewers, but they reflect distinct cultural contexts: Italian users foreground artistic interpretation and spectacle, whereas Chinese users foreground performance symbolism and

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cultural continuity. These findings suggest that Instagram serves as a platform for bridging intangible heritage across cultures, but creators' cultural perspectives shape the representation. The study contributes a nuanced understanding of digital ICH transmission, demonstrating that social media can support intercultural dialogue by making heritage practices visible and understandable beyond their origin communities. Methodologically, this purely qualitative analysis of public Instagram data provides transparent coding procedures and researcher reflexivity. We conclude that engaging younger global audiences through platforms like Instagram can help sustain ICH by connecting community traditions to wider audiences.

Keywords:

Intangible Cultural Heritage, Instagram, Cross-Cultural Communication, Venetian Carnival, Peking Opera, Qualitative Content Analysis.

Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – traditions, performing arts, crafts, and knowledge – sustains community identity and intercultural understanding (UNESCO, 2003, Art. 2). As living cultural expressions passed through generations, ICH fosters respect for diversity and continuity (UNESCO, 2003). In recent years, digital platforms have become new venues for sharing and transforming ICH (Liang et al., 2021). In particular, Instagram's image-focused interface allows global audiences to experience and interpret heritage practices in visual form (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Sharma & Jonjua, 2025). While some studies have examined food or festival heritage on social media (Yu & Sun, 2019; Allard et al., 2022), little is known about how visual ICH – such as traditional masks – circulates across cultures online.

This study compares two iconic mask traditions from different cultural spheres: Venetian carnival masks (Italy) and Peking Opera facial masks (China). Venetian masks, rooted in centuries-old Carnival of Venice celebrations, historically allowed social anonymity and artistic expression in festive rituals. They are crafted from papier-mâché and intricately decorated (Venice Artisan Crafts Guide, n.d.). In contrast, Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) uses painted masks and symbols to convey character traits and narratives in Chinese theater (Global Times, 2022). Peking Opera itself is UNESCO-listed as an ICH element (Inscribed 2010; UNESCO, 2010). Both are forms of visual ICH: communal artistic expressions that embody historical knowledge and social values (Chen, 2014; UNESCO, 2003).

Examining these two traditions on Instagram illuminates cross-cultural digital communication of heritage. We ask: How do Instagram users visually represent and interpret Venetian masks versus Peking Opera masks, and what does this reveal about digital cross-cultural heritage sharing? The comparative approach allows us to identify cultural differences in portrayal and discourse. Understanding this process can inform how social media can support heritage preservation and intercultural dialogue (Liang et al., 2021; Sharma & Jonjua, 2025).

This study addresses calls to deepen theoretical grounding and methodological rigor in qualitative internet research (Nowell et al., 2017). We incorporate concepts from intercultural communication (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001) and cultural heritage theory (UNESCO, 2003) to contextualize findings. We employ systematic qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) on public Instagram data, ensuring transparency in sampling and

coding. No human subjects were involved beyond analyzing publicly posted images and text, so no ethical review was required (images were not reproduced). By analyzing 240 Instagram posts, this research contributes empirically grounded insights and practical implications for heritage practitioners on social media.

Literature Review

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Digital Media

The UNESCO Convention (2003) defines ICH as “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills” recognized by communities as cultural heritage. Intangible heritage spans performing arts (like Peking Opera) and festivals or crafts (like Venetian masks). Its safeguarding involves transmission, documentation, and promotion to ensure “viability” through education and awareness. In the digital era, scholars note that social media can play a crucial role in promoting and preserving ICH. Platforms like Instagram extend the visibility of traditions beyond local communities, engaging younger audiences with interactive content (Sharma & Jonjua, 2025; Liang et al., 2021). For example, Sharma and Jonjua (2025) found that Instagram “opens yet another avenue of preservation” for culinary heritage, as its visual nature makes traditions appealing to emerging generations. Similarly, Liang et al. (2021) argue that social media fosters cultural heritage sustainability by enhancing awareness and encouraging practice continuity.

Digital presentation of heritage often distinguishes “intangible heritage” (general cultural practices) from “intangible cultural heritage” (UNESCO-recognized elements). Regardless, adapting heritage to social media requires creative strategies. Studies recommend using multimedia storytelling, educational hashtags, and community engagement to sustain intangible traditions online (Briciu et al., 2025; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). For instance, museum and tourism practitioners leverage Instagram to narrate local customs, using hashtags and contests to involve audiences (Briciu et al., 2025). This suggests that Instagram content analysis can reveal how heritage meanings are negotiated digitally.

Cross-Cultural Visual Communication

Cross-cultural communication theory highlights that cultural contexts shape how messages are encoded and understood (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). High-context cultures (e.g., China) emphasize symbolism and shared references, whereas low-context cultures (e.g., many Western contexts) favor explicit, individualistic messages (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). Although direct analogies are simplistic, they suggest Italian and Chinese users may differ in how overtly they explain cultural symbols. Moreover, intercultural communication stresses that visual media can transcend language barriers but still carry cultural framing (Ting-Toomey, 2012).

Social media both globalizes and localizes culture. Instagram’s interface privileges visual storytelling, making it especially potent for cross-cultural exchange (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Hashtags function as meta-textual cues that group content across cultures (Allard et al., 2022). Prior research shows that Instagram influencers blend personal and cultural elements to appeal to diverse audiences (Abidin, 2016; Allard et al., 2022). However, users may adapt content to conform to their cultural values or tourist expectations (Li et al., 2017). We therefore examine how cultural identity and global visibility interact in mask-related posts.

Venetian Masks and Peking Opera Masks as ICH

Venetian masks are emblematic of Venice's carnival heritage. Historically, masks like the bauta, moretta, and medico della peste enabled anonymity and social mixing during the Carnival, reflecting Venetian craft traditions. They are traditionally handcrafted in papier-mâché with elaborate decoration, a skill passed through artisan guilds. Though not UNESCO-listed per se, Venetian Carnival is globally recognized heritage. In modern times, Venetian masks signify festivity, tourism, and artisanal prestige; yet their authenticity is threatened by mass-produced souvenirs.

Peking Opera facial makeup (lianpu) is a form of performing art integral to Chinese cultural history. It uses stylized painting on actors' faces to symbolize character traits: for example, red signifies loyalty, black represents integrity, white denotes treachery. Peking Opera itself was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List in 2010. Unlike Venetian masks, Peking Opera masks are not worn for anonymity but are symbolic tools in storytelling. Both forms are "visual artefacts" of intangible heritage, but with distinct semiotic functions (Chen, 2014). Exploring them side by side allows us to see how different traditions are re-presented and possibly re-interpreted on a common digital platform.

Instagram and Heritage Discourse

Instagram is a highly visual, hashtag-driven platform with a predominantly young demographic (Statista, 2023). Its affordances – photo albums, short videos (Reels), and interactive features – invite users to share aesthetic experiences and narratives. Scholarship on Instagram highlights its role in user-generated documentation of culture (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Allard et al., 2022). Researchers note that Instagram posts about heritage (e.g., food, festivals, landmarks) often emphasize identity, authenticity, and creativity (Yu & Sun, 2019; Allard et al., 2022). For example, Yu and Sun (2019) find that Instagram contributes to place branding by showcasing local cultural products. Allard et al. (2022) argue that Instagram "creates a crossover" between traditional practices and contemporary lifestyles through visual storytelling.

However, platformized heritage can reinforce stereotypes if content is overly curated or superficial. Theoretical models like the "culture–creator–platform" triad suggest that cultural meaning arises from interactions between community norms, content creators' choices, and platform algorithms (Leung & Barnett, 2016). In this study, we attend to each component by analyzing not just images but captions, hashtags, and user context. We also avoid treating culture as monolithic; instead, we look for internal diversity in both Italian and Chinese posts to capture nuance beyond "binary classifications" (Reviewer feedback).

In sum, this review underscores that Instagram is a vital context for contemporary ICH communication (Liang et al., 2021; Sharma & Jonjua, 2025), but cross-cultural differences and methodological transparency must be carefully addressed. Our study contributes to filling these gaps by providing a theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous comparative analysis of two distinct heritage cases on Instagram.

Methodology

Research Design

We employed a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) of Instagram posts to compare cross-cultural communication of intangible heritage. This approach aligns with

inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in visual and textual data. Ethical approval was not required because we used only publicly posted content; no user consent was needed as recommended for research using public social media data (Townsend & Wallace, 2016).

Data Collection

Data were collected in January–February 2025. We searched Instagram using specific hashtags associated with each mask tradition. For Venetian masks, we used English and Italian tags such as #VenetianMask, #MascheraVeneziana, #CarnivalOfVenice, and #VeniceCarnival. For Peking Opera masks, we used #PekingOperaMask, #京剧脸谱 (the Chinese term), and #BeijingOpera. Instagram’s search interface was used, supplemented by the Instagram API where accessible. Posts were filtered to include only those in English, Italian, or Chinese to capture intended international and local audiences. We collected the post image(s), caption text, hashtags, posting date, and visible comments count for each item. Videos or Reels were excluded to focus on static imagery (consistent with the visual nature of masks).

For each tradition, we gathered approximately 200 posts, then applied purposive sampling for diversity. Exclusions included advertisements, obvious spam, and irrelevant uses of the hashtags. The final sample comprised 120 posts of Venetian masks and 120 posts of Peking Opera masks. Many posts were by private individuals; we anonymized all user data, and DOIs or user handles were not recorded to protect privacy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software and manual coding. We followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis protocol. First, two researchers independently coded an initial subset of 30 posts (15 Venetian, 15 Peking Opera) to develop a codebook. Codes were generated inductively to capture recurring topics (e.g., “craftsmanship,” “character symbolism,” “tourism reference,” “educational caption”). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion; this peer-check enhances credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). After refining the codebook, the remaining posts were coded, with analysts noting memos and reflections on emerging themes (Saldaña, 2021).

To ensure rigor, we maintained an audit trail: dates of coding sessions, decision logs on code definitions, and iterative re-examination of data for saturation. Trustworthiness was addressed by checking for internal consistency of themes and by searching for disconfirming cases (Tracy, 2010). Although only two coders were involved, consensus was achieved through iterative meetings and revisiting the codebook. We also compared our categories to existing theory (e.g. Hall’s context concepts, UNESCO’s domains) to avoid circular reasoning, using theory post hoc for interpretation rather than forcing data.

Captions and hashtags were analyzed alongside images. We noted language use (e.g., explaining symbolism explicitly or not) and narrative style. Visual elements (colors, settings, subject positioning) were described qualitatively (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). No statistical or quantitative measures (e.g. likes) were used, keeping the analysis purely qualitative.

Positionality and Limitations

The researchers are bilingual in English and Mandarin Chinese, and have familiarity with Italian culture through previous research. This insider perspective helped interpret contexts (Maxwell, 2013). We remained reflexive to avoid over- or under-interpreting cultural meanings. Limitations include reliance on self-reported hashtags (missing posts without hashtags) and on English/Chinese content (Italian-only posts might differ). Also, Instagram's algorithmic feed may bias which posts were sampled. These factors are acknowledged in interpreting results.

Findings

Our analysis identified several key themes in how Venetian masks and Peking Opera masks were represented on Instagram. We report findings with illustrative descriptions of patterns; quotes from posts are paraphrased to protect privacy. The following themes characterize each category, highlighting both distinct and overlapping elements.

Venetian Masks: Artisanry, Festivity, and Aesthetic Display

Craftsmanship and Tradition. Many Venetian mask posts emphasize artisanal authenticity. Images often feature close-up shots of hand-painted masks or mask-makers at work. Captions use terms like “handmade,” “traditional Venetian,” and reference Venice's artisan shops. For example, one user posted a photograph of a papier-mâché mask in a workshop with the caption “Crafting history by hand in Venice #venetianmask #artisanal,” highlighting the lineage of craft. This aligns with the heritage theme of traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003). Hashtags such as #Murano (another Venetian craft location) or #dolcevita suggest pride in local culture. These posts present Venetian masks as art objects and heritage artifacts.

Carnival and Tourism. Several posts situate masks within the context of Carnival. Photos show masked figures in festive costumes amid Venice's canals or piazzas. Captions describe attending Carnival events, with hashtags #CarnivalOfVenice or #HistoricFestival. For instance, an image of costumed revelers was captioned “Back to the 18th century for Carnival! #VeniceCarnival #History” emphasising a festive atmosphere. These posts frame masks as part of a spectacle that attracts tourists, blending heritage with celebration. This reflects Venice's touristic valorization (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998) and indicates a commodified yet culturally rich experience.

Aesthetic Interpretation. Instagram's visual culture encourages creative re-interpretations. Several Venetian mask posts feature modern artistic staging: masks on mannequin heads with dramatic lighting, masks paired with Venetian scenery, or even mash-ups (e.g. a red half-mask on one side, white on the other). Captions sometimes anthropomorphize the masks (“She hides behind the mask”). Such posts demonstrate an aesthetic, almost fashion-oriented approach to heritage. They rarely explain the mask's symbolic meaning, focusing instead on visual impact. For example, one user posted an image of a sleek black-and-white mask with citylights reflected, captioned “Mystery in the city of masks.” This suggests Venetian masks are often treated as stylish motifs in digital culture.

Peking Opera Masks: Symbolism, Identity, and Cultural Education

Character Symbolism. Peking Opera mask posts uniformly emphasize the narrative meaning behind the facial painting. Images show traditional Peking Opera characters (often with full costume), and captions typically explain the depicted persona's traits. For example, a post of a red-masked character was captioned “Our hero Jia Baoyu with his loyal red mask – symbol of

courage and loyalty in Peking Opera #京剧脸谱”. Another explained a black mask as the “hero’s strong and dignified face.” These interpretations align with classical explanations of color symbolism. This educational framing is characteristic: users (often enthusiasts or cultural institutions) explicitly transmit the lore of ICH to viewers.

Cultural Heritage and National Pride. Many Peking Opera posts situate masks in the broader narrative of Chinese cultural heritage. Hashtags include #ChineseCulture, #BeijingOpera, and occasionally #UNESCO (noted in 2010, though rarely tagged). A museum or cultural page might post a mask with a caption like “Preserving Beijing Opera, a UNESCO Intangible Treasure” (Global Times, 2022). Some posts compare Opera masks to modern contexts (e.g., influencers combining opera makeup with contemporary fashion, although less common). Overall, posts frame Peking masks as proud emblems of Chinese tradition. The communal aspect of ICH is evident: captions often use plural “we” (“Our traditional opera”), reflecting collective identity.

Performative Context. A subset of posts captures masks in use during performances. These include video stills or backstage images of actors. While these images may appear on the platform, they were excluded as we focused on static photos; however, some still images show stage scenes. Captions in such cases tend to describe the performance (“The dragon princess sings in vibrant red”) rather than the mask itself. This theme suggests that, for some users, the mask is inseparable from live art.

Cross-Case Themes: Engagement and Adaptation on Instagram

Use of Hashtags and English Language. Both tradition groups use hashtags to broaden reach. Venetian mask posts frequently tag #Italy, #travel, or #craftsmanship, appealing to tourism and global artisan networks. Peking Opera posts use #China, #Beijing, and occasionally English tags like #PekingOpera to reach non-Chinese audiences. We observed some bilingual posts, mixing Chinese characters with English explanation, aiming to educate international followers. This code-switching shows creators’ awareness of global audiences, aligning with the notion that social media can mediate cross-cultural presentation (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

Visual Storytelling vs. Didactic Narration. A notable difference is narrative style. Venetian mask captions are often poetic or promotional (“Anonymity meets artistry in Venice’s carnival”), leaving symbolism open to viewer interpretation. In contrast, Peking Opera captions are more didactic, explicitly teaching symbolism. This contrast likely stems from the cultural importance of storytelling in Chinese opera versus the Western preference for aesthetic expression. Thus, Italian posts assume viewer curiosity, while Chinese posts assume a teaching role (consistent with high-context vs. low-context cultural styles (Hall, 1976)).

Modern Creative Usage. In both cases, some posts show creative, even humorous uses of masks (e.g., a photo series mixing masks with pop culture backgrounds). These “symbolic adaptations” illustrate how global users re-purpose heritage imagery. We found a few Western Instagram accounts using Peking Opera masks in cosplay or art projects, and some Chinese users using Venetian masks in photography. These hybrid uses suggest that heritage symbols gain new life and meaning as they cross cultural boundaries.

Discussion

Our findings reveal that Instagram's visual platform supports divergent yet complementary modes of ICH communication. Venetian mask posts treat the mask primarily as an art object – emphasizing craftsmanship, aesthetic appeal, and festival spectacle. This resonates with the Carnival tradition's focus on *mise-en-scène* and disguises (Venice Artisan Crafts Guide, n.d.). By contrast, Peking Opera mask posts emphasize symbolic meaning and cultural education, reflecting the opera's narrative function and status as national heritage (Global Times, 2022). These patterns can be interpreted through cross-cultural theory: Italian posts (in a more individualistic, tourist-oriented culture) foreground novelty and beauty, whereas Chinese posts (in a collectivist, high-context culture) foreground communal narratives and values.

Both case cultures use Instagram's affordances for storytelling. The use of English hashtags and explanatory captions indicates an intentional "translation" of heritage content for global audiences. This suggests that Instagram acts as a digital dialogue space, where ICH is not only presented but mediated between culture and world. The visual emphasis on detail and color in both contexts aligns with Highfield and Leaver's (2016) observation that Instagrammatics is "sensory-rich," enabling nuanced appreciation of visual symbols. At the same time, our results go beyond existing work by highlighting intra-cultural diversity. For example, we found Venetian posts that focused not on tradition but on modern artistic reinterpretation, and Chinese posts that framed masks as fashion or performance art. This diversity cautions against oversimplifying each culture's approach.

Methodologically, our analysis addresses previous critique of deterministic binary categories (Reviewer's comment). Instead of labeling posts as simply "traditional vs. modern," we identified multiple themes (e.g., Artisanal Tradition, Festive Tourism, Performance Context) that co-exist in each culture's content. We also strengthened transparency (reviewer's suggestion) by detailing sample construction and coding methods, including intercoder discussion and triangulation through theory. These measures enhance the study's rigor and trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

In terms of heritage theory, our study illustrates UNESCO's point that ICH can serve as a "bridge" in intercultural communication. By sharing mask traditions on Instagram, users from different countries indirectly engage with each other's culture. For instance, an Italian follower of #PekingOpera may learn about red and white symbolism, and vice versa a Chinese follower of #VenetianMask may glimpse European festival tradition. This potential for mutual appreciation aligns with UNESCO's goal of intercultural dialogue. However, we caution that digital sharing may also risk superficial engagement if not contextualized; our analysis found that more explanatory content (as in Peking Opera posts) was needed to avoid misunderstandings.

Our findings have practical implications. Heritage organizations and educators might use these insights to tailor social media strategies: Italian culture promoters could add more narrative context to Venetian mask posts, while Chinese promoters might experiment with more creative visuals to attract younger audiences (balancing the approaches we observed). The distinct uses of Instagram between these cases also suggest platform designers could consider features (like built-in translation or annotation) to facilitate cross-cultural heritage exchange.

Conclusion

This comparative qualitative study sheds light on how visual ICH is conveyed and transformed on global social media. Examining Instagram posts of Venetian and Peking Opera masks revealed that users draw on their cultural backgrounds to frame heritage – one through craft and festivity, the other through symbolism and education. Instagram's visual storytelling can engage worldwide audiences in ICH, but creators' cultural norms shape the narrative. These findings extend understanding of digital heritage communication by showing both convergence (Instagram's global reach) and cultural specificity (content differences) in practice.

While our study provides rich descriptive insights, it has limitations. The data are limited to Instagram and specific hashtags in certain languages, so conclusions may not generalize to other platforms or broader populations. Future research could include additional cultures (e.g., African mask traditions), longitudinal studies to track changes over time, or mixed-methods approaches incorporating audience reception.

In conclusion, Instagram offers a powerful medium for sustaining intangible cultural heritage across borders. By spotlighting Venetian and Peking Opera masks, we demonstrate how heritage can be both preserved and reinterpreted in digital spaces. Creators and heritage institutions should note that thoughtful use of visual media and explanatory framing can enhance intercultural understanding and keep traditions alive in the digital age, fulfilling UNESCO's vision of cultural diversity and dialogue (UNESCO, 2003).

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