

Information-Seeking Behavior of Folk Artists in The Digital Age: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This study explores the information-seeking behavior of folk artists within contemporary digital environments, examining both the opportunities and challenges they encounter. Opportunities include increased access to diverse online platforms for learning and promotion, digital archives that preserve traditional practices and social media channels that facilitate networking, collaboration, and visibility to global audiences. At the same time, challenges such as digital literacy gaps, limited infrastructure in rural areas, information overload, and concerns about authenticity and intellectual property threaten the sustainability of these practices. By analyzing the ways folk artists navigate digital resources, this paper highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, and underscores the need for targeted digital literacy programs, culturally sensitive information services, and policy frameworks that support both preservation and innovation. The findings aim to contribute to broader discussions on cultural sustainability and the empowerment of folk artists in a rapidly evolving information landscape.

Keywords: folk artists, information-seeking behavior, digital age, cultural preservation, digital literacy, online platforms, opportunities and challenges

Introduction

In the digital age, information has become one of the most valuable resources for individuals and communities. Artists, particularly folk artists, are no exception to this trend. Folk art, rooted in tradition and cultural heritage, is often created within communities that transmit knowledge orally, visually, or through apprenticeship rather than formal documentation. However, with the rapid proliferation of digital

technologies and online platforms, the ways in which folk artists seek, access, and utilize information are undergoing a profound transformation. Understanding the information-seeking behavior of folk artists in this evolving context is crucial, as it sheds light on how these creators adapt to new opportunities while confronting unique challenges.

Traditionally, folk artists relied heavily on interpersonal communication, local mentorship, community gatherings, and experiential learning to acquire knowledge related to their craft. Oral traditions, observation of skilled practitioners, and participation in rituals or festivals served as the primary means of learning and transferring cultural practices. The sources of information were often localized, context-specific, and deeply intertwined with community identity. With the arrival of digital tools such as smartphones, social media platforms, and online repositories, folk artists now have access to a vastly expanded information landscape. This shift enables them not only to preserve traditional practices but also to engage with broader audiences, discover new techniques, and create hybrid forms of artistic expression.

The opportunities presented by the digital age are immense. Online platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook allow folk artists to showcase their work beyond geographical boundaries, fostering cultural exchange and visibility. E-commerce platforms open avenues for marketing and selling folk art directly to consumers, reducing dependence on middlemen. Digital archives and online learning resources provide access to global artistic traditions, enabling artists to innovate while staying connected to their roots. Additionally, collaborative networks and virtual communities allow folk artists to share experiences, learn new skills, and build supportive ecosystems that sustain their practice. In this sense, digitalization can act as a powerful enabler for both the preservation and evolution of folk art traditions.

However, the digital transformation also brings significant challenges. Many folk artists come from rural or marginalized communities where digital literacy, infrastructure, and access to technology remain limited. The digital divide can exacerbate existing inequalities, leaving some artists excluded from new opportunities. Furthermore, intellectual property concerns arise when folk art is shared online, as traditional knowledge and designs are vulnerable to misappropriation, commercialization, or exploitation without proper recognition or benefit-sharing. Navigating the complex digital landscape also requires skills in marketing, networking, and content creation, which may be unfamiliar to many traditional practitioners. In some cases, the influence of digital culture risks overshadowing authenticity, leading to the dilution or commodification of folk traditions.

Therefore, examining the information-seeking behavior of folk artists in the digital age is essential to understanding how they balance tradition and innovation. It highlights the ways in which these artists locate, evaluate, and apply information to sustain their livelihoods, preserve cultural heritage, and adapt to global changes. At the same time, it uncovers the structural, technological, and social barriers they face in accessing and utilizing information effectively. By exploring both opportunities and challenges, this study provides insights into how digital tools can be leveraged to support folk artists in maintaining their cultural identity while thriving in a globalized world.

Defining Information-Seeking Behavior

Information-seeking behavior refers to the range of activities an individual engages in when identifying, locating, evaluating, and using information to fulfill a specific need. In information science, it encompasses both active and passive processes: from deliberate online searches to incidental encounters with knowledge through conversations or media exposure. For folk artists, information-seeking behavior may include searching for inspiration, learning new techniques, preserving traditional knowledge, connecting with markets, or engaging with audiences.

In the past, the scope of folk artists' information behavior was largely localized—restricted to community elders, craft guilds, and performance circles. In contrast, today's digital platforms provide folk artists with immediate access to vast global repositories, ranging from YouTube tutorials to online archives of intangible cultural heritage. Yet, the degree to which folk artists engage with these resources varies depending on factors such as digital literacy, access to technology, socio-economic background, and linguistic barriers.

Relevance of Studying Folk Artists' Information Behavior

Studying the information-seeking behavior of folk artists in the digital age is important for multiple reasons:

1. **Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage:** Folk art is often classified as intangible heritage by UNESCO and other cultural bodies. Understanding how folk artists seek and share knowledge can contribute to strategies for safeguarding traditions that are otherwise at risk of decline.
2. **Empowerment of Marginalized Communities:** Many folk artists belong to socially and economically marginalized groups. Analyzing their information-seeking patterns can highlight inequalities in access to digital tools and resources, thereby informing inclusive cultural policies.

3. **Cultural Sustainability in a Globalized World:** Globalization and commercialization have altered artistic practices worldwide. By mapping how folk artists negotiate between traditional and modern sources of information, scholars and policymakers can better support sustainable cultural development.
4. **Theoretical Contributions to Information Science:** Folk artists' behavior adds to the diversity of case studies in information science, expanding theoretical models beyond academic, corporate, or urban contexts.

Opportunities

1. Expanded reach and audience diversification

Digital platforms allow folk artists to reach international audiences without relying on traditional gatekeepers (record labels, festival programmers). A single viral video can introduce a local tradition to thousands or millions, leading to performance invitations, collaborations, and cross-cultural exchange.

2. Preservation and documentation

High-quality affordable recording devices and cloud storage make it easier to document songs, stories, dances, and craft techniques. Digital archives — whether community-managed or housed in academic institutions — can preserve variants of traditions that might otherwise be lost to migration, urbanization, or generational change.

3. Learning and capacity building

Online tutorials, livestreamed lessons, and peer-to-peer exchanges reduce barriers to learning. Younger practitioners can supplement mentorship with videos and written resources; older practitioners can access documentation techniques (audio recording, metadata practices) that help maintain quality and provenance.

4. New monetization models

Beyond live events and physical sales, folk artists can monetize via digital downloads, streaming, direct-to-fan subscriptions, crowdfunding, and virtual performances. Platforms that support micropayments and fan patronage offer recurring income that is less dependent on intermittent gigs.

5. Collaborative creativity and hybrid forms

Digital connectivity fosters collaborations across geographies and genres. Folk traditions can be revitalized through respectful fusion projects, interdisciplinary works (e.g., dance with contemporary music), and community multimedia storytelling that blends old and new techniques.

6. Advocacy and networked cultural diplomacy

Digital tools enable artists to document human rights issues, environmental change, or cultural loss and to advocate for policy support. Networks of artists can coordinate campaigns, share opportunities, and push for legal recognition or funding.

Challenges

1. Digital divide and unequal access

Not all folk artists have reliable internet, devices, or digital literacy. Rural communities and economically marginalized groups often face the steepest barriers, meaning the benefits of digital information seldom reach everyone equally. Power imbalances can therefore be reproduced or exacerbated.

2. Loss of context and fragmentation

When cultural expressions are posted as isolated clips or files, important contextual information — language, ritual significance, performer identity, provenance — can be lost. The fragmentation of performances into short, decontextualized formats risks misinterpretation or trivialization.

3. Commodification and cultural appropriation

Global visibility increases the risk of commodifying sacred or sensitive cultural elements. Without community control, elements of a tradition can be extracted and repackaged in ways that strip them of meaning or exploit them commercially. Distinguishing respectful sharing from appropriation becomes crucial but difficult in open digital spaces.

4. Intellectual property, attribution, and benefit sharing

Existing IP regimes (copyright, trademarks) are often ill-suited to communal and intergenerational expressions. Individualistic, time-limited copyright may not reflect the communal custodianship of folk traditions. Artists can find their works used without proper attribution or remuneration; conversely, attempts to "copyright" entire traditions can be legally and ethically complex.

5. Algorithmic gatekeeping and discoverability

Algorithms on social platforms prioritize engagement metrics, favoring sensational content and certain formats (short video, catchy visuals). This can marginalize slower, context-rich performances and favor creators who are already visible or adept at platform optimization.

6. Platform dependency and economic precarity

Reliance on platforms introduces fragility: policy changes, demonetization, takedowns, or shifts in audience behavior can suddenly cut income streams. Platforms may also take significant revenue shares, while opaque moderation and monetization rules disadvantage creators unfamiliar with them.

7. Quality control and authenticity debates

Digital replication allows for many versions of a song or craft to circulate, causing debates about "authenticity." Communities may disagree about who may perform or adapt certain repertoire, and digital proliferation can intensify these disputes.

8. Privacy and consent

Recording and sharing performances raises questions of informed consent, especially when elders, minors, or sacred rituals are involved. The viral circulation of a recording can expose communities to unwanted attention or misinterpretation.

Practical strategies and recommendations

To navigate opportunities and challenges, multiple stakeholders must play coordinated roles: artists and communities, cultural institutions, technologists, platforms, funders, and policymakers.

For folk artists and communities

- **Document with context:** When recording, capture metadata: performer names, location, date, language, function of the piece, and any permissions. This helps future users interpret material respectfully.
- **Digital literacy and capacity building:** Invest time in basic digital skills (recording, metadata, social media management, copyright basics). Peer-led workshops work well when delivered in local languages and rooted in practice.
- **Community protocols:** Establish community guidelines for what can be shared publicly, what must remain private, and who may adapt or commercialize works. Written protocols can support enforceable agreements.
- **Diversify income streams:** Combine online and offline models (live shows, merchandise, teaching, subscriptions) to reduce platform risk; explore direct-to-fan platforms that allow better revenue share.
- **Collective organization:** Cooperatives or artist collectives can pool resources for marketing, distribution, and legal advice, and can negotiate better terms with platforms or festivals.

For cultural institutions and archives

- **Partnerships with communities:** Move away from extractive archiving. Co-curation ensures communities retain control over access and use; archives should offer options for restricted access or community-managed access controls.
- **Accessible formats and interfaces:** Provide multilingual search interfaces and mobile-friendly access for communities with limited connectivity.
- **Training and equipment loans:** Offer mobile recording kits and training, or fund community-led documentation projects.

For technologists and platforms

- **Design for context and provenance:** Platforms should provide fields for cultural metadata, clear attribution mechanisms, and options for content owners to flag sensitive material.
- **Fair monetization tools:** Create revenue-sharing options that allow direct payments to community accounts, and provide clearer, simpler pathways for small creators to monetize.
- **Moderation and cultural sensitivity:** Invest in culturally aware moderation practices and offer human review when content involves cultural heritage.

For policymakers and funders

- **Legal frameworks for communal heritage:** Develop IP mechanisms that recognize collective ownership and customary norms (sui generis protections, community trademarks, or cultural heritage registers).
- **Targeted funding:** Support digital inclusion projects, invest in local infrastructure (connectivity, public access points), and fund capacity-building programs tailored to traditional artists.
- **Ethics and consent standards:** Sponsor guidelines for ethical research, documentation, and digital dissemination that center community consent and benefit-sharing.

Conclusion

In the digital age, folk artists are navigating a rapidly evolving landscape that offers both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges in their information-seeking behavior. Online platforms, social media, and digital archives have expanded access to knowledge, enabling artists to explore diverse techniques, connect with global audiences, and promote their cultural heritage beyond traditional boundaries. These digital resources facilitate collaborative learning, creative experimentation, and the preservation of intangible cultural assets.

However, this shift also presents challenges. The overwhelming volume of information, concerns about authenticity, digital literacy gaps, and limited access to technology in certain regions can hinder effective information retrieval and utilization. Moreover, the commercialization and algorithm-driven visibility of online content may distort traditional narratives and marginalize lesser-known artists.

Ultimately, the digital age demands that folk artists adopt adaptive information-seeking strategies that balance the benefits of technology with the preservation of their cultural identity. By fostering digital literacy, curating reliable sources, and leveraging online networks thoughtfully, folk artists can harness the potential of the digital era while safeguarding the authenticity and continuity of their art forms.

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