

# The Impact of Digital Technologies on the Promotion of the Emirates Intangible Cultural Heritage

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'Aiyāla Performance ©El-Sayed El-Aswad

Digital technologies have become increasingly worldwide and effective means of obtaining, safeguarding, promoting and exchanging significant elements of intangible cultural heritage. By applying qualitative and quantitative approaches, this research has investigated the impact of digital technologies on the transformation and promotion of Emirati intangible cultural heritage as well as the impact of intangible heritage on the way digital technologies are used by Emirati people. This study proposes that Emirati intangible cultural heritage is fluid with its content mediated, safeguarded, and reinvented by the application of digital technologies at both formal and informal levels. Further, this paper aims to explore the awareness and appreciation that Emiratis have of their culture as examined by the frequency of their use of digital technologies, the involvement of family members in circulating their heritage, and the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations that aspire to meet national and international standards for safeguarding Emirati heritage.

**Keywords:** digital technology, Intangible Cultural Heritage, UAE, Arab world.

## Introduction

The scholarship concerning the safeguarding and promotion of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) caused by the proliferating use of digital technology (DT) in the Arab Gulf region in general, and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular, is limited. This study, therefore, contributes to the scholarship of intangible cultural heritage, digital technologies and new media by discussing the impact of digital technologies on the transformation and promotion of Emirati intangible cultural heritage as well as the impact of intangible heritage on the way digital technologies are used by Emirati people. Intangible cultural heritage is used here to refer to traditions or living expressions, handed down from ancestors to descendants, including oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO, 2001; 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Regionally and globally, this inquiry seeks to add new information to the 18 Arab countries included in the *Map of e-Inventories of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Sousa, 2017). This inquiry shows that several major government institutions and programs in the UAE, in addition to private foundations and NGOs, have been established to promote intangible cultural heritage. These institutions use global tools of globalization, represented in modern digital technologies, to safeguard and reinvent numerous components of intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization, modernity and post-modernity.

Every country has the potential for achieving a high quality of life and wellbeing by maximizing the use of digital technologies. Digital technologies have increasingly become effective means of obtaining, safeguarding, promoting and exchanging significant elements of intangible cultural heritage. To elaborate further, digital technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones, personal computers, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube, among other means and devices have had significant impact on intangible cultural heritage, socioeconomic activity and civil society in MENA countries, in general and the UAE in particular (El-Aswad, 2014b; 2019).

Digital technologies have become increasingly the most spectacular channels of cultural heritage, communication and social interaction among the Emirati people. They have enabled immense amounts of information to be compressed on small storage devices that can be easily preserved and transported. Digital technologies have transformed how people communicate, learn, work and safeguard their intangible cultural heritage (El-Aswad, 2010a, Levinson; 2004; Isa, Mat Zin, Rosdi & Mohd Sarim, 2018). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (1996:3), a knowledge-based economy is contingent on “information, technology and learning.” As reflective of such a knowledge-based economy, the overall Human Development Index value for the UAE improved from 0.726 in 1990 to 0.840 in 2015 and reached 0.863 in 2018. The worldwide ranking of the UAE increased from 42 (out of 188 countries) in 2015 to 34 (out of 189 countries) in 2018, moving up 8 places in rank (United Nations Development Programme, 2016, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> For more information concerning UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, see Filomena Sousa (2018).

## Theoretical Background

Several studies have addressed how certain forms of digital technologies such as videos, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, e-mail messages, and mobile phone texting (SMS) can contribute to the understanding of intangible cultural heritage facilitating a special kind of written, oral and visual heritage (Blank, 2009; El-Aswad 2014a, 2014c; Foley, 2012; Hepp, 2012; Idris, Mustafa & Yusoff, 2016; Krawczyk-Waslewska, 2017; Ling, 2004; Omidyar, 2003; Sousa, 2018). Digital here means “the dematerialization of physical and analogical media through electronic technologies which allows us to transmit, process and store information” (Sousa, 2018: 43). And digital technology can safeguard and “foster the community’s heritage” (Bhowmik and Díaz, 2016:169).

This research constitutes a part of a large project exploring Emirates cultural heritage. The study was conducted in two periods September-June 2016, and October-May 2017. Along with library research, government documents, oral history, and textual tradition, I used in-depth interviews, participant observations, and longer-term observations to collect data relevant to the subject matter of this research. In addition, this inquiry applied a triangulated approach including both quantitative and qualitative methods for gathering data, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews, observations, and documents. A total of 400 persons participated in the survey by responding to questions about the relationship between digital technologies and the intangible cultural heritage in UAE.

Respondents from each of the seven emirates of the UAE participated in this study. Table 1 shows that people of Abu Dhabi represented more than 60% of the sample while those of Umm Al Quwain represented only 2%. Questionnaires were designed and sent to 400 Emirati people (186 female participants or 46.5% and 214 male participants or 53.5%) concerning their views, attitudes and activities related to the interrelationship between digital technologies and intangible cultural heritage. Using Likert-type questions or statements that assess several issues concerning digital technologies and intangible cultural heritage, each respondent was asked to indicate his/her degree of agreement on each of these statements by selecting responses that ranged from *strongly agree* (5 points) to *strongly disagree* (1 point).

Emirate	Number	Percentage
Abu Dhabi	246	61.5
Dubai	37	9.3
Sharjah	32	8
Ras Al Khima	36	9
Ajman	17	4.2
Fujairah	24	6
Umm Al Quwain	8	2
Total	400	100

Table 1. Number and percentage of the respondents in each emirate.

The survey examines five core components: 1-the frequency of the use of digital technologies for accessing intangible cultural heritage, 2-the impact of digital technologies on intangible cultural heritage, 3-family relationships, intangible heritage and digital technologies, 4-governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO), and 5-global/international dimensions. These key components are discussed in the following sections.

### Frequency of the Use of Digital Technologies for Accessing Intangible Heritage

Emirati people who adhere to their heritage or traditional cultures tend to accept technology and modern means of information and communication that, from their own points of view, do not represent a threat to their indigenous cultures. Concerning the survey, the first important question was, “Do you use digital technologies to access intangible heritage? A total of 382 respondents (95%) answered this question affirmatively indicating that they access online intangible heritage. This indicates that cultural heritage within the UAE is facilitated by digital technologies.

The second question relates to how often respondents use digital technologies to access intangible heritage. The results of this question are summarized in Table 2. The highest percentage of respondents (49.5%) had access to intangible heritage via digital technologies several times every month followed by several times a week (22%). The percentages of female and male respondents are almost equal in their access to intangible heritage “several times a week” and “several times every month”.

Time (day-week-month)	Male	Female	Total Number	Percentage
Everyday	24	19	43	11
Several times a week	44	45	89	22
1-2 times every month	27	26	53	13
Several times every month	102	95	197	49
Total	197	185	382	95

Table 2: How often respondents used digital technologies to access intangible heritage.

Female respondents were attracted to websites, particularly Instagram, Flickr, and online forums (*muntadayāt*) that provided images and information about marriage ceremonies, local costumes, traditional food, incense (*bukhūr*), perfumes or fragrances (*dukhūn*), henna, living folk stories (such as *Simījah* [Cindrella of the Emirates] and Umm Duways),<sup>2</sup> traditional or alternative medicine, and artifacts or crafts made by women. Male respondents browsed online sites and forums concerned with folk

<sup>2</sup> Umm Duways (literally, the mother of the sickle or *dās*) is depicted on the one hand as an ugly woman who has a rat’s mouth and a goat’s foot, and, on the other hand, as a beautiful and attractive woman, seducing and killing men using one of her hand that takes the shape of a sickle (El-Aswad 2010b, 2014d).

performances (mainly *'aiyyāla*, *razfa*, *ḥarbiyya*), male performance of marriage ceremonies (*nadba*), particularly in the northern Emirates, camel racing (*hijin*), falconry (*ṣayd al-ṣuqūr*), conventional artifacts (daggers and swords), and traditional Bedouin poetry (*nabaṭī*). It is worth mentioning that there has been a Million's Poet competition, organized by the Cultural Programmes and Heritage Festivals Committee - Abu Dhabi, that seeks to revive the traditional *nabaṭī* (Bedouin) poetry. This competition has given the Emirati and Arab people a platform to preserve this eminent form of oral heritage (Khaleej Times, 2018).

The expansion of digital technologies has caused a growth in interpersonal contacts among young Emirati nationals due to the low cost and availability of e-mailing, online chatting, YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, mobile phoning and SMS messaging. It is worth noting that overall Internet users in the UAE increased from 26.6% of the population in 2000 to 91.2% by 2015. Mobile phone subscriptions in the same year (2015) were 187.3 per 100 people and reached 214.7 per 100 people in 2018 (United Nations Development Programme 2016, 2019). With a score of 90.295 (100.000 = high), the UAE ranked 12 globally (first in the Arab region) among highly competitive countries in the IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2019, advanced five positions from the ranking 17 in 2018. Mobile phones and the Internet are used in the UAE not only for information and educational purposes, but also for maintaining and keeping up with the intangible heritage as well as for online contacts and for exchanges of personal and social views.

### **The Impact of Digital Technologies on Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Digital technologies are changing the nature of communication and creating unprecedented forms of virtual realities. Since certain parts of electronic messages are strongly related to certain kinds of intangible heritage and traditional communication, they can be viewed as a new medium of vernacular culture. Technology indicators are used to show the contribution of technological innovations, particularly digital information technology to cultural heritage, quality of life, societal progress, and well-being in a society at large. Unlike other forms of media and communication such as radio and television in which viewers do not play an active role in the received information, digital technologies have provided the participants with the opportunity to partake collectively and individually in creating information and news. The two-way communications of the internet and digital network have encouraged social and cultural engagement and allow for mutual feedback (El-Aswad; 2007, 2019).

Quantitatively, four items were used to assess the effects of digital technologies on the Emirati participants' access to and appreciation of intangible heritage. The scale of digital technologies was reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = .84). The results of the four items are listed on Table 3. All values are very high indicating that digital technologies have a significant impact on participants' awareness and understanding of intangible heritage including various genres or domains such as folk literature and performance, among others (4.27). The respondents indicated that they used digital technologies during social and religious occasions more than any during regular days (4.75). The participants also confirmed that digital technologies encouraged them to visit offline heritage centers (4.74). Overall, respondents preferred using digital technologies in dealing with different domains of intangible heritage (4.59).

Item	Mean	SD
Digital technologies help me access intangible heritage	4.58	.75
Digital technologies ease my understanding of various heritage genres	4.27	.89
More digital technologies are used during social and religious occasions	4.75	.68
Digital technologies encourage me to visit offline heritage centers	4.74	.68
Overall average	4.59	.63

Table 3: The impact of digital technologies on intangible heritage

The study showed that genres that primarily exist in an oral context, like greetings, jokes, proverbs, riddles, songs or rhymes are used through digital technologies including Internet, Facebook, online forums, e-mail and SMS.

The UAE is advanced in using digital technologies that, in turn, improve cultural and socio-economic activities. According to the 2015–2016 Global Competitiveness Report (World Economic Forum, 2017), the UAE performed well, scoring 6.1 (7 = high) and was ranked 4 worldwide and first among Arab world countries on the indicator of “Internet access in schools.” According to the Networked Readiness Index 2015, measuring the propensity for countries to utilize digital and ICT opportunities, the UAE was ranked 26 globally (out of 139 countries) and first among MENA countries. Concerning sub-factor ranking, the UAE ranked first globally for the domain of digital and ICT use and government efficiency. For the domain of the “availability of latest technologies,” the UAE achieved a global rank of 9 worldwide and first among Arab world countries. For the domain of Government success in digital and ICT promotion, the UAE ranked 22 globally and first among MENA countries (World Economic Forum, 2016). Additionally, the World Competitiveness Center (2019:19), there was a positive shift in IT integration in the UAE from the rank of 14th to 8th mainly as a result of improvement in e-government (from the rank of 28th to 21st). A recent study shows that Email, social networks, and online video were the most popular, with almost 85%, 83% and 82% of users respectively accessing them every day. Although the world average for email activity was almost the same (86%), the interest in social networks and online video worldwide was approximately 10% lower than in the UAE (Albawaba, 2012).

### **Family Relationships, Intangible Heritage and Digital Technologies**

Five items were used to assess the relationship between family, intangible heritage and digital technologies. The family scale was reliable (Cronbach’s Alpha = .81). The results of the items of this scale were listed on Table 4. As it could be observed, parents and family members had a patent influence on encouraging the use of digital technologies in the domains of intangible heritage and communication. Emirati people pointed out that they highly enjoyed accessing their cultural heritage and communicating with each other by using digital technologies.



Item	Mean	SD
My family members pursue genres of heritage through digital technologies	4.41	.79
My family members are active in using digital technologies for communication	4.29	.78
My family members encourage me to use digital technologies	3.83	1.00
I encourage my family members to use digital technologies	4.14	.95
My use of digital technologies depends on family resources	3.92	1.00
Family-Average	4.12	.68

Table 4: Family relationships, intangible heritage and digital technologies.

Due to the UAE government's policy concerning Bedouin settlements, as well as the impact of globalization, traditional patterns of neighborhoods and families have been changing. Modern buildings and spectacular villas exist side by side with traditional local houses, creating vivid displays of cultural and ethnic diversity. The *majlis*, a sitting room or place in which family or community members gather to socialize, has played a new important role in disseminating intangible cultural heritage through interacting and watching collectively, via large digital or LED screens, videos that virtually display certain Emirati traditional activities allowing people to engage in debating and negotiating their cultural tradition.

Additionally, the distance between house (family) and workplace has been increasing. The new phenomenon of commuting between places of residence to places of work, cultural centers and shopping malls has necessitated social networking via digital technologies and electronic communication between parents, spouses and family members (El-Aswad, 2011, 2014b). For example, in their traditional manner people go from house to house to greet each other, while the electronic variant goes from handset to handset (SMS/calling) or from computer screen to computer screen (e-mail). In both forms of communication (traditional and digital), the content (i.e., greetings) is the same. However, greetings conveyed by e-mail and SMS are shorter than traditional greetings that are transmitted orally. Some heritage genres, including greetings and proverbs among other forms of traditional expressions, are and transmitted or propagated over the internet, creating a mutual impact between digital technologies and components of intangible cultural heritage. For example, Emirati people do not use the Arabic word *risāla*, which means message, but rather the word *mesij* which is a modified form of the English word 'message,' showing the impact of e-communication on the daily use of language (El-Aswad, 2010a; 2014a).

Modes of communication and social networking, whether verbal, written or electronic, are essential in all aspects of culture (El-Aswad, 2010c, 2011; Lizardo, 2006). In the Emirates, as in other countries, using digital technologies has created a special pattern of written visual contacts of a global form with a local content where both the English and Arabic languages (with various colloquial dialects) are used. One of the greatest advantages of digital technologies is that they provide relatively simple and easily

accessible means of composing, modifying and forwarding messages or texts. This method of creating, altering and forwarding messages renders e-mail and SMS closer to the style of oral tradition than to technical practice (Blank, 2009; Domokos; 2007; El-Aswad 2014a).

### Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations

Government and non-governmental organizations were assessed through 5 items. Table 5 summarized the responses on each of these items. There was a strong agreement that the UAE government supported intangible heritage and that the UAE leaders and policymakers encouraged Emirati people to use digital technologies in the domain of intangible heritage. Also, respondents agreed that the UAE government and non-governmental organizations applied digital technologies in various domains of intangible heritage. The idea of merging governmental with non-governmental organizations to ensure funds for non-profit programs for enhancing intangible heritage was also accepted by respondents.

Item	Mean	SD
UAE government supports intangible heritage	4.71	.80
UAE leaders encourage people to use digital technologies in the domain of intangible heritage	4.36	.94
UAE leaders encourage people to participate in heritage activities	4.34	.94
UAE government and non-governmental organizations apply digital technologies in various domains of intangible heritage	4.21	.92
The effective way to ensure funds for heritage non-profit programs is by merging governmental with non-governmental organizations	4.06	.95

Table 5: Government and non-governmental organizations

Networking in terms of digital technologies and institutional affiliations has had a major impact on the evolution of the infrastructure of the UAE since the 1970s. The UAE government, along with its institutions and websites (using both Arabic and English), has focused on supporting the use of digital technologies for enhancing intangible heritage. Put differently, the government, understanding the impact of information technology on traditional beliefs and practices, has used the capacities of digital technologies to safeguard heritage content, to motivate people, and to enact traditional practices. For instance, some government institutions (with websites, digital library and multimedia systems) such as the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA)<sup>3</sup> and the Emirates Heritage Club have established heritage villages and organized conferences and workshops promoting intangible cultural heritage. Most recently, the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi (2019) conducted two national heritage workshops, held on 10 and 11 September 2019, in its effort to protect intangible culture in line with

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see digital library and multimedia systems at the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority <https://digital.library.tcaabudhabi.ae/en/>. It is worth noting that the Al Ain National Museum (founded in 1969) in the emirate of Abu Dhabi is considered to be the first museum in the UAE.



UNESCO guidelines.<sup>4</sup> In addition to providing information, the institutional websites encourage receivers to be active in feedback, interaction and dialogue. Visual, audio and textual references to Emirati heritage are presented on these websites

In addition to offering courses in folklore and intangible heritage, the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) has organized workshops for training and providing up-to-date information to folklorists and practitioners working in heritage centers. In 2009, I was engaged in training Emirati nationals in using digital technologies for enhancing intangible cultural heritage and communication (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The author, back row, third from left, during a workshop on ICH & DT ©El-Sayed El-Aswad

The UAE government has established public interactive museums with holograms and audio that work as virtual or e-museums giving an authentic feel to the static exhibits.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the Arabic

<sup>4</sup> One of these workshops focused on Al-Sadu (placed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2011), which is the traditional Bedouin technique of weaving camel hair, goat fur and sheep wool into fabric to create blankets, carpets, pillows, tents and to decorate camel saddles and belts. The second workshop was dedicated to falconry, which is on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi, 2019).

language, other languages, but primarily English, are used for educating non-Arab people about the cultural heritage of the country. The most recently established museums are Qasr Al Muwajji (which opened in 2015 in Al Ain, and along with Al Muwajji Oasis, is a key component of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Al Ain), and the Etihad Museum (opened in 2017 in Dubai) that includes a variety of photographs, videos and interactive displays (The National, 2017).

Concerning NGOs (including private museums), the experience of the UAE in private museums attracted owners of private museums from the Arab region. For example, in September 2014, 34 private museum owners from across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia visited the UAE to experience ongoing developments in the field of heritage museums and explore possibilities for further development in the area (Arab News, 2014). During my ethnographic study in Al Ain city (Abu Dhabi Emirate), I was invited by an Emirati person to visit his private museum. I was surprised to see that he had converted a large part of his house to be a private museum displaying significant number of artifacts of Emirati intangible cultural heritage in addition to multiple pictures of Shaikh Zayed, the late founder and president of the UAE. He led me to the *majlis* (traditional sitting room) where we sat on a mat on which there was a large silver tray full of dates and fruits. There were modern objects and high-tech devices such mobile phones, computers, iPads, satellites, and a large screen of TV. While we were sipping the coffee, I asked about his reason for setting up the private museum displaying the Emirati folk artifacts and pictures of Shaikh Zayed, he recounted that the late Shaikh Zayed was a hero and the patriarch who not only unified and modernized the country, but also reminded them of their roots and heritage.

### Global/International Dimension

The UAE Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development (2019) has sought to promote the UAE's position on the global cultural map. It also works to enrich the cultural ecosystem in the Emirates by using digital technology and online interventions to support cultural-arts heritage institutions; provide a platform for artistic talent and innovation; promote cross-cultural dialogues; and emphasize the Islamic identity of cultural heritage (El-Aswad, 2009a, 2009d, 2012).

This international dimension was assessed using 3 items. The results of the responses on these items are summarized in Table 6. Participants strongly agreed that digital technologies facilitated the global recognition of UAE's intangible heritage (4.38). They also agreed that non-profit organizations in UAE played an important role in the international recognition of UAE's intangible heritage (4.11). The respondents confirmed that cooperation of governmental with non-governmental organizations was the best way to ensure the international recognition of the UAE heritage.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information concerning the role of e-museums in promoting Intangible cultural heritage, see Sousa (2015) and Styliani, Fotis, Kostasac and Petrosad (2009). It is worth noting that the Al Ain National Museum (founded in 1969) in the emirate of Abu Dhabi is considered to be the first museum in the UAE.

Item	Mean	SD
Digital technologies facilitate the global recognition of UAE intangible heritage	4.38	.84
Non-profit organizations at UAE play important role in the international recognition of UAE intangible heritage	4.10	.93
The best way to ensure the international recognition of the UAE heritage is by merging governmental with non-governmental organizations	4.13	.88

Table 6: International Dimension.

The government has developed heritage villages combining symbolic traditional items such as camels, falcons, pearl diving, and coffee pots with virtual modern heritage including art paintings and folk music to be accessible on the Internet.<sup>6</sup> Globally, the UAE government has succeeded in including *al-Taghrooda*, a traditional Bedouin chanted poetry, in the Representative list-2012 of the intangible cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2012); *al-Ayyala*, a traditional performing art, in a Representative List-2014 of the intangible cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2014); *al-Razfa*, a traditional performing art accompanied with traditional *nabati* poetry, in the Representative List-2015 of the intangible cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2015a); and Majlis, a cultural and social space, in the Representative List-2015 of the intangible cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2015b).

## Conclusion

This research has shown a correlation between the use of digital technologies and the perpetuation of the intangible cultural heritage of the United Arab Emirates. Digital technologies provide a new and easily accessible arena for maintaining significant features of both intangible cultural heritage and e-communication through which individuals can interact with each other, engage in dialogue and debate, and contribute to their overall traditions. This paper concludes that material evidence from the UAE shows that substantial content of socially and culturally used digital technologies at both public or official and private levels is related to the content of intangible cultural heritage generating a new form of digital-cultural heritage. Digital technologies have formally and informally transformed the intangible cultural heritage of the Emirates by creating a digital-electronic and online culture that disseminates offline heritage.

By the effective use of various forms of digital technologies, ordinary Emirati persons, families and NGOs have played an important role in sustaining their living heritage against the negative impact of globalization. The study has shown that e-government and heritage institutions of the UAE have employed digital technologies for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and, as well, succeeded in securing global (UNESCO) recognition of significant items and domains of that heritage.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the following videos of Qasr Al Hosn festival: The story of a Nation (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuNiykhQA-c>, and heritage village (2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8V93Tc11zAk>

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