



DIGITISATION OF WAYANG WONG SRIWEDARI: COMMODIFICATION OF PERFORMING ARTS IN CULTURAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Wayang Wong is one of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage that has an important function, as a communication medium in conveying moral messages to the community, conveying social, spiritual and philosophical values for the Javanese Society. However, the development of globalization and cultural tourism encourages commodification where the sacral function of performance shifts to entertainment products and economic commodities. Digital transformation also accelerates the process through the use of social media, online performances and content distribution based on digital platforms. The results of this study see that digitalization will affect the form, meaning and function of wayang wong in the context of cultural tourism by placing on the debate between nation-building and digital neocolonialism. The research method used is a case study with a qualitative approach involving wayang wong sriwedari as the object of study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and literature studies. The analysis uses the framework of Vincent Mosco's communication economics and political theory, especially in the aspects of commodification of message content, commodification of workers and commodification of audiences. The results of the research show that digitalization provides opportunities to expand audience access to become global and increase economic value for some art actors. However, on the other hand, there is a reduction in philosophy and meaning in the performance due to the adaptation in digital format and the use of Youtube, Instagram, TikTok which has the potential to create a new space for wayang wong sriwedari performances. This also causes local communities to be vulnerable to the logic of the digital market, so it can be read as a form of neocolonialism in the cultural industry.

Keywords: Wayang Wong Sriwedari, Commodification, Digitalization, Cultural Tourism

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted global tourism, one of the hardest hit economic sectors (Iram et al., 2020). To recover, many countries have accelerated the integration of culture and tourism through digitalisation (Zhao et al., 2023). Regarding economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, Tourism is one of the hardest hit economic industries (Iram et al., 2020). To recover and develop the tourism economy more efficiently and sustainably, countries around the world have proposed accelerating the integration of culture and tourism through digitalisation, spreading culture through tourism, and enriching tourism through culture. Digital technology plays an important role in accelerating economic recovery and promoting the integration of culture and tourism. It is important to use digital technology to promote culture and tourism. For example, culture and tourism are linked to economic growth, which can further offset the sluggish growth potential of both. With the help of digital technology, the cultural industry can give a new soul to the tourism industry. Therefore, the tourism industry can package the original tourism scenery and environment with cultural content that is more in line with the characteristics of the times. The tourism industry can also find new material carriers for culture, which is convenient for expanding the spread of cultural content. (Zhang et al., 2021) In line with these global dynamics, Indonesia's traditional performing arts are facing the same pressure. Digitalisation in tourism, especially in culture, has been proven as a means to create new business models that can expand the market while preserving cultural heritage (Ammirato et al., 2022). The phenomenon of integrating culture and tourism through digitalisation is also relevant for Indonesia, which is rich in traditional arts. Traditional performing arts are not only entertainment but also a medium of communication in conveying moral, social and spiritual values. However, digital transformation

encourages commodification, which is a change in the function of art from cultural heritage to commodity (Mosco, 2009). This raises new issues of how to maintain the philosophical value of performing arts in the midst of a global digital market.

Wayang, recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, conveys moral and philosophical values through characters, stories and performances (Nurgiyantoro, 2011).

However, like many other traditional arts, Wayang Wong has experienced a decline in audience numbers due to competition with digital entertainment and the emergence of instant forms of entertainment (Paneli, 2017). Wayang Wong Sriwedari in Surakarta is one of the traditional Indonesian arts that once held an important position in Javanese culture. Beyond its role in religious rituals, wayang wong served as a medium of education and entertainment. However, technological developments and the need to maintain relevance to contemporary audiences have increasingly reframed Wayang Wong as a traditional form of entertainment rather than a living cultural practice (Widyastitieningrum & Herdiani, 2023).

Various studies on Wayang Wong have been conducted in terms of its history, aesthetics and existence (Soedarsono, 1984; Samodro, 2019). Recent research has also begun to highlight the adaptation of traditional arts to digital culture, for example in Wayang Wong Bali (Ruastiti et al., 2019) and Wayang Wong Sakral in Sidan (Winatha et al., 2019). However, specific studies on Wayang Wong Sriwedari in the context of digitalisation of cultural tourism are still very limited. Not many studies have analysed how digitalisation encourages the commodification of content, commodification of workers and commodification of audiences of Wayang Wong Sriwedari.

The urgency of Wayang Wong Sriwedari arises because this art is currently at the crossroads between cultural preservation and the commodification of digital tourism. As a cultural heritage that was once glorious in the past, Wayang Wong is not only a spectacle for the local community but has also begun to be positioned as a cultural tourism attraction that is packaged for domestic and international audiences (Soewarlan, 2019). Wayang Wong Sriwedari, founded in 1911 in Surakarta, is a traditional Javanese theatre that dramatises episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Once celebrated as an *adi luhung* (noble art), it is one of the most comprehensive forms of traditional theatre, incorporating dialogue, dance and gamelan music (Samodro, 2019). Beyond its aesthetic value, it embodies philosophical lessons about divinity, heroism, sacrifice, and humanity, offering moral guidance alongside entertainment (Samodro, 2019). Over time, Wayang Wong has evolved from a ritual context to a public performance and cultural event, serving not only as entertainment but also as a medium for cultural transmission and moral education.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Wayang Wong sriwedari even survived through online performances on the official Instagram and Youtube of Cultural Tourism Office Surakarta and managed to reach out-of-town and even foreign audiences. (Kompas, 2020). Social media has proven effective not only as a promotional medium but also as a means of cultural communication that fosters effective appreciation for the younger generation through content on TikTok and Instagram, confirming that digitalisation has created new audiences and driven changes in the way wayang wong is consumed.

However, in the digital age, the performance has been transformed into an online form. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok become new spaces that expand global audience access but at the same time require adaptation of content, style and format according to the logic of social media algorithms that have the potential to reduce philosophical values (Ruastiti, n.d.). This situation places Wayang Wong Sriwedari at a crossroads: on the one hand, as a cultural heritage that needs to be preserved, and on the other hand, as a commodified cultural tourism product embedded in digital capitalism. This condition confirms that Wayang Wong Sriwedari is an important case to understand how digitalisation drives the commodification of traditional performing arts in cultural tourism, as well as how traditional arts can negotiate with digital capitalism. (Del Vecchio et al., 2025) By applying Mosco's commodification framework, this research contributes to the political economy of

communication by examining how digitalisation reconfigures traditional performing arts in the tourism sector.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Commodification Vincent Mosco

According to the views of Adam Smith and classical political economy, humans classify the products they own through the value they have based on wants and needs, namely use value and exchange value. Commodities are goods or services considered to have exchange value. So the Classical Political Economy view considers commodification as a process of transformation from use value to exchange value. (Mosco, 2009) Commodification is the starting point for political economy practices. Commodification is the process of transforming the use value of goods and services into commodities that have exchange or selling value. Through commodification, capitalism actors are considered to be able to obtain capital or real exchange value through goods and services that are commoditised.

Meanwhile, Karl Marx considered commodification as a representation of capitalism. Adam Smith and Karl Marx's views have received some criticism on the grounds that there needs to be a more detailed explanation of the difference between exchange value and use value in a media product. (Ballesteros et al., 2010) Like the criticism made by Baudrillard in (Mosco, 2009) when someone maintains use value it will be left behind by those who convert use value into exchange value. This criticism explains more deeply about Marx's view which has the main focus of questioning capital and ignoring ideas in realising the capitalism system including use value and social contours or the formation of a communist society. In addition, criticism is also carried out by culturalists because political economy activities are considered to widen the gap. Mosco in his book also states that there are two dimensions that connect the practice of commodification with communication. First, communication processes and technology have a major contribution to the overall commodification process. (Mosco, 2009) Communication becomes a potential and profitable arena of commodification because communication has a great influence on people's social life.

Communication makes the commodification process not only a change in use value but also carries messages containing symbols and images that can be used as a tool to sharpen the awareness of message recipients. Secondly, the process of commodification of labour will penetrate the institutional communication process so that developments and conflicts in commodification practices will affect communication as a social practice. (Fuchs & Mosco, 2012) The form of commodification in communication according to Vincent Mosco (2009) can be done in three forms: content commodification, audience commodification, and labour commodification. Kerangka kerja ini menyediakan lensa analitis yang dapat digunakan untuk memeriksa komodifikasi Wayang Wong Sriwedari, terutama ketika digitalisasi membentuk ulang konten, keterlibatan penonton, dan hubungan Pekerja.

2.2. Digitalisation and Cultural Tourism

In scholarly debates, the terms digitisation and digitalisation are often used interchangeably, although they have different emphases. Digitisation refers to the technical process of converting analogue materials into digital formats, such as recording, streaming and archiving performances (Ross et al., n.d.). In contrast, digitalisation denotes the broader socio-economic transformations enabled by digital technologies, including the restructuring of business models, audience interactions and tourism markets (Ammirato et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2023).

Both processes are evident in the transformation of cultural tourism. Digitalisation provides the technical infrastructure that allows cultural heritage to be stored, circulated and promoted in digital form. Digitalisation then builds on this infrastructure by reframing cultural heritage as a marketable tourism product. Del Vecchio et al. (2025) point out that digital platforms, immersive exhibitions and online interactions create an experience-driven cultural commodity. However, van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2017) warn that the logic of platforms prioritises metrics of visibility and shareability, often simplifying complex traditions into consumable spectacles. (Dijck & Poell, 2017). While such innovations create opportunities to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage, they also risk turning

tradition into a marketable spectacle. This tension echoes Mosco's (2009) argument that commodification changes not only the economic value of culture but also its symbolic and social dimensions.

This dynamic is evident in Wayang Wong Sriwedari. The group engaged in digitisation when it live-streamed performances on YouTube and Instagram from the COVID-19 pandemic to the present, turning staged events into digital files accessible to remote audiences. At the same time, digitalisation is reshaping Sriwedari's role in cultural tourism: Instagram posters, TikTok clips, and YouTube streams not only expanded the audience reach, but also repositioned Sriwedari's Wayang Wong as a digital cultural tourism attraction. Thus, the Sriwedari case illustrates how digitalisation and digitisation go hand in hand, enabling survival strategies while strengthening the commodification of traditional performing arts.

2.3. *Performing Arts as Cultural Communication*

Performing arts in Indonesia function as entertainment and cultural communication. Performing arts convey moral, religious and philosophical values embedded in stories, music and performances. Wayang, recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, conveys messages of moral values related to divinity, heroism, and humanity (Nurgiyantoro, 2011). Soedarsono (1984) characterises Wayang Wong as a great art form, valued for its aesthetic richness and ritual function.

However, researchers note that when integrated into tourism, performing arts often undergo simplification and even commodification in order to sell traditional performing arts to suit the tourism market. Picard (1996) observed that wayang wong sriwedari performances for tourists prioritise spectacle and accessibility over ritual depth and the diminished "aura" of cultural works further explains how reproduction for mass audiences risks eroding authenticity. Wayang Wong has been restructured for the tourist market, with shorter duration and higher visuality (Suardana, Ruastiti, & Dibia, 2018).

3. **Research Methods**

Research Design: This research used a qualitative case study design to examine the commodification of Wayang Wong Sriwedari within the framework of digitalisation and cultural tourism. A case study approach was chosen as it allows for in-depth exploration of a single cultural performance group as a bounded system (Cresswell et al., 2003). The analysis was guided by Vincent Mosco's (2009) political economy of communication, specifically the triadic model of commodification: content, labour, and audience. **Research Location:** This research was conducted at the Sriwedari Wayang Wong group in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. Founded in 1911, Sriwedari is one of the oldest and most sustainable wayang wong performances, making it an ideal place to investigate processes of digitisation and commodification in cultural tourism. **Data Collection:** Data was collected through several qualitative techniques to ensure data triangulation and validity, in-depth interviews with 12 key informants, including the Sriwedari wayang wong coordinator, performers (both civil servants and contracts), make-up artists, and directors. Interviews focused on addressing audience commodification, content commodification and labour commodification, and also related to promotional strategies. **Observation:** Participant observation of performances, rehearsals and backstage preparations between 2022 and 2023, documenting artistic processes, interactions and audience responses. Document analysis of promotional materials, digital posters, social media content (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok), and organisational archives related to Sriwedari management and programming. All interviews were conducted in Javanese and Indonesian, recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis: Data Qualitative from Miles Hubermas Miles and Huberman's data analysis is a systematic approach to analysing qualitative data with the aim of finding themes, patterns, and relationships between concepts that emerge from the data. This approach is carried out through steps such as data collection, data reduction, data display, data verification, data analysis, data interpretation, and conclusion drawing. The characteristics of Miles and Huberman's data analysis include systematic, iterative, context-focused, inductive approach, use of data display, triangulation, and collaborative. The

framework was deductively derived from Mosco's (2009) concept of commodification which includes: analyses were iterative, looking at empirical evidence and theoretical concepts to ensure validity in accordance with the theoretical foundations.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

4.1. Commodification of Wayang Wong Sriwedari

4.1.1. Commodification of Content

Field data shows that the selection of plays (stories) at Sriwedari has shifted from ritual or classical repertoire to episodes that are considered more appealing to the audience. Directors often adapt scripts by using references from the internet to ensure that performances are in line with contemporary social issues or popular tastes. Costumes and make-up are also modified to emphasise visual spectacle, which is then highlighted in digital posters and social media promotions.

Tabel 1: Examples of Content Commodification in Wayang Wong Sriwedari

Aspect	Traditional Practice	Contemporary Adaptation (Findings)
Story (<i>lakon</i>)	Classical Ramayana & Mahabharata	<i>Carangan</i> (modified stories), themes from internet trends
Costumes & make-up	Symbolic, courtly style	Glamorous, colorful, tailored for digital performances.
Staging	Full ritualistic structure	Shortened duration, adjusted for tourist consumption

Source: Researcher 2025

This finding illustrates Mosco's (2009) notion of content commodification, where symbolic forms are repackaged as marketable cultural products. This is in line with the research results on Sriwedari's Wayang Wong performances being shortened and restructured for tourists.

4.1.2. Commodification of Labour

The artists at Sriwedari work under different employment statuses: 40 per cent are civil servants with fixed salaries, while the others There are 60% Honorary Employees with Work Agreement (TKPK) who are contracted based on test selection according to the criteria needed by wayang wong sriwedari. Interviews revealed an excessive workload with a low standard salary as per government regulations and the status of artists as honorary employees, whose contract status must be evaluated for performance as a basis for extending the contract each year. Gender flexibility is another form of adaptation, with female dancers often playing traditionally male roles to overcome the shortage of male dancers. In addition, with digitalisation, wayang wong sriwedari artists, apart from being dance artists, also carry out duties as content creators in an effort to digitalise wayang wong sriwedari performances.

This reflects Mosco's (2017) discussion on the commodification of labour, where creative work is reorganised under capitalist imperatives. Similar dynamics also occur in other Indonesian performing arts, where the livelihoods of performers are increasingly linked to the cultural tourism market (Suardana et al., 2018).

4.1.3. Commodification of the Audience

Wayang Wong Sriwedari has adopted digital platforms as a key strategy to attract and retain audiences. Social media accounts on Instagram and TikTok are used to post schedules, promotional posters and short performance clips. During the COVID-19 pandemic to date, performances of several shows were broadcast live on YouTube and Instagram, reaching not only domestic but also international audiences. In addition, clips related to sriwedari wayang wong performances, such as the Goro-Goro scene or funny scenes performed by punakawan, behind the scenes of sriwedari wayang wong and the preparation of dance artists before performing sriwedari wayang wong performances are also presented on TikTok.

Table 2. Digital Platforms Used by Wayang Wong Sriwedari

Platform	Function In Audience Engagement	Example Practices
Instagram	Promotion, Posters, alur penguji saat akan menonton wayang wong sriwedari, behind the scenes content	@ wayang_orang_sriwedari
Youtube	Full/Streamed performances	Pandemic-era, Live streams.
TikTok	Short clips targeting youth audiences.	Funny scenes performed by Punakawan, The opening scene of the story in the wayang wong play, Preparation before the performance of wayang wong sriwedari such as when artists do character makeup related to the role performed, Direction of the Director in giving directions to the wayang wong sriwedari artists related to the story to be staged

Source: Researchers 2025

This reflects Mosco's (2009) commodification of the audience, where the audience is reframed as a quantifiable entity within digital platforms. Engagement metrics such as likes, shares and views serve as indicators of cultural value, echoing van Dijck et al.'s (2018) argument that platforms prioritise visibility and algorithmic success over cultural depth.

These findings show how Wayang Wong Sriwedari operates amidst the contradictions of cultural tourism in the digital age. Content is simplified and visually enhanced, labour is fragmented and overworked, and audiences are redefined as digital metrics. This transformation exemplifies the process of commodification described by Mosco, while also illustrating how digitalisation amplifies commodification in new ways.

From a theoretical perspective, this case shows how the political economy of communication can be extended to analyses of digital legacies. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that while digital platforms provide visibility and survival strategies for traditional arts, they also risk reducing the authenticity of wayang wong sriwedari or the depth of culture that changes in favour of market logic.

4.1.4. Digitalisation and Cultural Tourism

Findings show that digitalisation has become a key strategy in positioning Wayang Wong Sriwedari within Surakarta's cultural tourism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, performances were streamed live via YouTube and Instagram (Kompas, 2020; BBC, 2020), allowing Sriwedari to maintain its presence amidst restrictions on live audiences. Social media such as Instagram and TikTok have increasingly allowed Sriwedari to engage with a younger demographic. Promotional content includes posters, behind-the-scenes footage and short video clips highlighting dance moves or snippets of humour. These practices are in line with global patterns in digital cultural tourism, where cultural heritage products are increasingly marketed through interactive and visually appealing content (Del Vecchio et al., 2025).

Table 3. The Role of Digitalisation Wayang Wong Sriwedari in Cultural Tourism.

Dimension	Before Digitisation	Findings After Digitisation (Digitisation Model)
Audience reach	Posters, word of mouth, event programs	Instagram, TikTok, Youtube
Marketing Channels	On-site performances, full ritual sequence	Hybrid: on-site, Live-streamed/ short clips
Experience Format	Local cultural attraction	Digital Cultural tourism product

Tourism Positioning	Local cultural attraction	Digital Product	Cultural	Tourism
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Source: Researcher 2025

This result supports the opinion of Zhao et al. (2023), who state that digital tools facilitate the integration of culture and tourism by creating sustainable recovery strategies. Ammirato et al. (2022) also note that digital platforms can reconfigure cultural products into marketable formats, a process seen in the adaptation of Sriwedari's narratives, costumes and promotional strategies.

However, this digitisation also intensifies commodification pressures. Performances are often shortened or reformatted to fit online attention spans, and aesthetic elements are emphasised more on visual impact than philosophical depth. This reflects Mosco's (2009) observation that communication technologies not only mediate commodification, but also reshape cultural practices into forms that align with capitalist logic.

In sum, the integration of digital platforms into Sriwedari's tourism positioning represents both opportunities and risks: the opportunity to expand global recognition of Javanese cultural heritage, and the risk of reducing tradition to a consumable cultural tourism product.

4.1.5. Performing Arts as Cultural Communication

Field data confirms that Wayang Wong Sriwedari functions not only as entertainment, but also as a medium of cultural communication. Since its establishment in 1911, the group has dramatised stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, instilling values of divinity, heroism, sacrifice and humanity. Its performances combine dialogue, dance, music and costumes, making it one of the most complete forms of traditional Javanese theatre.

Interviews with audience members revealed that audiences often regard Wayang Wong Sriwedari as a space for moral learning and cultural pride. Symbolic meanings in character roles-such as Rama representing virtue and Ravana representing desire-are often cited by audiences as lessons relevant to everyday life. This is in line with UNESCO's recognition of Wayang as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which emphasises its communicative and educative role.

However, the data also shows a shift in this communicative function. In adapting to tourism and digital platforms, performances are often shortened, spectacularised and orientated towards visual appeal. This has the effect of prioritising aesthetic pleasure over authenticity or philosophical depth, especially when marketed to younger digital audiences.

Table 4. The Role of Digitalisation Wayang Wong Sriwedari in Cultural Tourism.

Dimension	Traditonal Function	Contemporary Adaptation
Moral-Philosophical	Teaching values of divinity, heroism, humanity	Reduced emphasis, messages simplified for tourist audience.
Ritual-aesthetic	Sacred theatre with symbolic dept (<i>adi luhung</i>)	Shift to entertainment focus, hybrid cultural attraction
Cultural identity	Strengthening Javanese heritage and communcal memory	Reframed as tourism branding and online content
Communicative Medium	Oral narratives, dance, gamelan	Posters, TikTok clips, Instagram reels (digital mediation)

Source : Researcher 2025

These findings illustrate the dual role of performing arts as cultural communication. On the one hand, Wayang Wong Sriwedari continues to transmit values and preserve Javanese identity, confirming Soedarsono's (1984) claim of its status as *adi luhung*. On the other hand, integration into cultural tourism

and digital platforms has changed the focus of its communication.

This tension reflects Mosco's (2009) broader argument that commodification reshapes not only the economic but also the symbolic dimensions of culture. In Sriwedari, cultural communication is reframed to fulfil the logic of the market: values that were once communicated through rituals and oral performances are now mediated through posters, hashtags and algorithmic visibility.

5. Conclusions

This research shows that Wayang Wong Sriwedari embodies the tension between cultural preservation and commodification in the digital era. As a performing art form as cultural communication, Sriwedari continues to transmit moral, philosophical and cultural values through stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, its communicative depth is increasingly reframed into a market-oriented expression as its performances are shortened, spectacularized and digitally mediated for cultural tourism audiences.

Using Mosco's (2009) framework, this research identifies three key dimensions of commodification:

- Content commoditisation - script, costumes and staging were modified to enhance visual appeal and fulfil the demands of digital promotion
- Commodification of labour - performers face precarious employment, with a gap between civil servant actors and contract-based workers, reflecting broader capitalist pressures on creative labour.
- Commodification of the audience - the audience is repositioned as a quantifiable entity on digital platforms, where engagement is measured through views, likes and shares.

In addition, the role of digitisation and digitalisation is crucial. Digitisation provides the technical means to transform performances into digital files, while digitalisation reshapes the position of troupes in cultural tourism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, live-streamed performances and social media promotion ensured survival and expanded global reach. However, the same process also intensified commodification by prioritising visibility and marketability over symbolic and ritual depth.

In short, Wayang Wong Sriwedari illustrates the double-edged nature of digital cultural tourism. Digital platforms create opportunities for visibility, accessibility and audience regeneration, but also risk reducing a rich cultural tradition to a consumable spectacle. Theoretically, this research extends Mosco's political economy of communication to the realm of digital heritage. Practically, it highlights the need for cultural policies that balance economic sustainability with the preservation of cultural depth and authenticity.

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