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DIGITAL HERITAGE OF THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN MULTICULTURAL BORDERLAND: BETWEEN MEMORY PRESERVATION AND TOURISM COMMODIFICATION

| Abstract

- *Goal* – The aim of the article is to analyse the digital use of multicultural heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, with particular attention to the balance between preserving authenticity and the risk of commodification in the context of cultural tourism.
- *Research methodology* – The analysis is based on a qualitative approach, combining case studies with the desk research method. Sources include project documentation, institutional reports, scientific literature, and online resources. Selected examples cover the activities of the Borderland Centre of Arts Cultures Nations in Sejny, the Tatar Trail in Kruszyń, Lithuanian culture in Puńsk and the Polish culture in the Vilnius region, as well as cross border initiatives supported under the Interreg Poland–Lithuania Programme.
- *Score/results* – The findings show that digitisation strengthens the visibility of multicultural heritage and enhances its economic potential by supporting regional branding, tourism development and small business growth. At the same time, it exposes traditions to risks of simplification and market driven reinterpretation. Digital storytelling, mobile applications and online archives make heritage accessible globally, but they may also reduce its complexity to easily consumable narratives.
- *Originality/value* – The article contributes to the debate on digital heritage by linking it to the specific context of a multicultural borderland. It demonstrates that digitisation functions both as a memory preservation tool and as a mechanism of commodification. The analysis highlights the dual role of digital technologies, offering insights into how peripheral regions can use cultural resources for development without losing authenticity.

| **Keywords:** digital heritage, borderland, cultural tourism, minority cultures

1. Introduction

The borderlands of Central and Eastern Europe are characterised by a high degree of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. The cultural heritage of Lithuanian, Polish, Tatar, Jewish and Belarusian communities constitute not only an essential part of the regional identity but also a valuable development resource. Over the last two decades, digitisation has gained particular importance as both a tool of cultural preservation and an engine for tourism and regional branding.

Digitisation secures fragile elements of heritage and makes them widely accessible. At the same time, it transforms traditions into cultural products consumed within the tourism market. Scholars emphasise that new technologies redefine notions of authenticity and alter the relationship between local communities and global audiences [Giaccardi, 2012; Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007]. This article poses a question whether digital heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland primarily contributes to safeguarding collective memory, or whether it reinforces the processes of commodification.

2. Digital heritage

According to the UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage [2003], digital heritage includes both materials originally created in digital form and analogue resources transformed into digital formats. This dual perspective stresses the need to protect born digital artefacts such as photographs, films and documents, while also highlighting the importance of digitising manuscripts, artworks or oral testimonies. The responsibility lies with institutions and communities to ensure the survival of fragile resources and their accessibility for future generations.

The literature highlights three principal functions of digital heritage: protective, educational and economic [Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007; UNESCO, 2003]. The protective role secures heritage against decay or destruction, ensuring that even when an original object disappears, its digital copy remains available. The educational role expands access to cultural knowledge, allowing individuals to experience, study and reinterpret heritage through online databases, virtual exhibitions or interactive platforms. The economic role underscores the potential of digitisation to support regional development, stimulate cultural tourism and foster innovation in creative industries.

Digital technologies turn heritage into a form of cultural capital that operates simultaneously on symbolic and economic levels [OECD, 2020]. Symbolically, digitisation strengthens cultural identity, reinforces collective memory and allows local communities to present their traditions to audiences far beyond their region. Economically, it opens new opportunities for tourism development, regional branding and the growth of small and medium sized enterprises. In this way, digital heritage emerges not only as a method of preservation but also as a catalyst for innovation and a driver of competitiveness in peripheral areas.

3. Multiculturalism of the Polish-Lithuanian borderland

The Polish-Lithuanian borderland is one of the most diverse cultural spaces in Central and Eastern Europe. For centuries it has been home to communities with distinct languages, religions and traditions, each leaving its own imprint on the region. The Lithuanians of Puńsk continue to preserve their language and cultural practices through schools, theatre and festivals that are increasingly broadcast or archived online [Sadanowicz, 2018: 98]. Sejny also are considered one of the most important centres of the Lithuanian minority in Poland. The presence of this community is visible in the activity of Lithuanian schools, cultural associations and religious institutions, which play a key role in preserving language and traditions. Events such as Lithuanian theatre performances, choral concerts or festivals organised in Sejny strengthen the identity of the minority and maintain cross-border cultural ties with Lithuania [Barwiński, 2014: 138]. The city thus functions not only as a local centre of Lithuanian culture, but also as a symbolic space of dialogue between the majority and minority populations.

Sejny adds another dimension. Once a town of many cultures, it was deeply marked by the presence of the Jewish community before the Holocaust. Today, the initiatives of the Borderland Centre revive this heritage by using digital archives, films and storytelling projects to present it to global audiences [Czyżewski, 2019].

The Tatars of Kruszyniany and Bohoniki enrich the cultural mosaic with religious and culinary traditions. Their wooden mosques and cemeteries are distinctive landmarks, while Tatar cuisine has become a regional attraction promoted through the Tatar Trail and digital tools such as mobile guides and social media.

The Belarusian Orthodox culture, visible in icons, churches and rituals, also contributes to the multicultural character of the area. Many of these practices are gradually being recorded and shared online, ensuring their survival in the digital sphere.

Across the border in Lithuania, the Polish minority provides an important counterpart. In the Vilnius region and in the area of Šalčininkai, Polish schools, media and cultural associations keep alive the use of the language and traditions. Digital platforms play a key role here, allowing events to be livestreamed and communities to connect across borders [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027].

Together these communities illustrate that multiculturalism in the borderland is not static but dynamic. It is constantly reinterpreted and reshaped, and digital technologies amplify this process. They give visibility to traditions that might otherwise remain confined to the local contexts and allow different groups to share their heritage with international audiences. New technologies also generate opportunities for dialogue and cooperation across the Polish-Lithuanian border.

4. Digital forms of heritage protection and promotion

Digitisation has taken many forms in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland. One of the most visible forms is the creation of digital archives and libraries. The Podlasie Digital Library and the Lithuanian platform ePaveldas provide free access to documents, manuscripts and photographs, allowing both scholars and the general public to explore the multicultural past of the region [Paveldas, 2023; Podlaska Biblioteka Cyfrowa, 2023]. By making these resources accessible online, cultural institutions ensure that fragile materials are protected and widely shared.

One of the innovative dimensions of the cross-border cooperation within the Interreg Poland–Lithuania Programme has been the development of mobile applications designed to promote the cultural and natural heritage. These tools integrate digital maps, audio guides and interactive functions that allow users to explore tourist routes independently, including the Tatar Trail and the thematic cross-border paths. The emphasis on digital technologies reflects a broader EU policy of supporting ICT solutions for the regional development and cultural accessibility [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027]. The previous programme editions also demonstrated this trend [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2014–2020]. Such initiatives illustrate how digitisation contributes to increasing the visibility of multicultural borderland heritage while simultaneously adapting it to the expectations of contemporary audiences [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027]. One of the result of the project is also online guide: Towns of Borderland – Marijampole and Sejny: Journey through history until today. The guide is published in three languages: Polish, Lithuanian, and English and offers a comprehensive and

well-crafted account of the town's history. The descriptions reflect the perspectives of both nations and serve as an expression of the cultural and historical dialogue [Burczewski, 2017].

In Sejny, also the preserved synagogue has become a cultural centre where digital tools such as 3D modelling, online archives and multimedia exhibitions are used to complement its function as a space of memory and education. These initiatives allow broader audiences to engage with the history of the Jewish community, combining the authenticity of the existing building with innovative methods of interpretation [www 1]. A similar initiative in Vilnius, the "Virtual Jewish Vilnius" project, enables users to experience the entire districts destroyed during the war through virtual reality [Vilnius University, 2021]. Such initiatives show that even what has been lost physically, can still be experienced by new technologies.

Social media and digital storytelling have also become powerful tools. Restaurants in Kruszyniany, the Lithuanian cultural festivals in Puńsk and the Polish organisations in the Vilnius region use platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube to promote their activities [www 2]. Livestreamed concerts, short videos and podcasts extend local traditions to international audiences, transforming them into cultural spectacles adapted to digital consumption [Giaccardi, 2012].

These varied forms of digitisation reveal how heritage can be protected and promoted at the same time. They secure fragile traditions for future generations while also reintroducing them to the global cultural landscape, often in formats that appeal to tourists, researchers and diaspora communities alike.

5. Economic aspects of the digital heritage

Digitisation not only safeguards heritage but also redefines its role within local and regional economies. As highlighted in the OECD report on culture and local development [OECD, 2020], digital heritage can strengthen competitiveness, particularly in the peripheral and borderland regions where large-scale industries or advanced service sectors are often absent. By transforming cultural resources into accessible and marketable digital content, communities gain an additional tool to emphasise their uniqueness and attract visitors.

The protective aspect of digital heritage also has clear economic implications. Once stored in digital repositories, cultural objects can be reproduced and reused indefinitely for educational or promotional purposes, lowering costs and

expanding outreach. For instance, a digitised collection of manuscripts or historical photographs can be incorporated into school programmes, virtual exhibitions, tourist websites or marketing campaigns, without the risks associated with the deterioration of the original materials [OECD, 2020].

The educational function similarly generates measurable benefits. Making cultural resources widely available stimulates cultural tourism, encourages engagement in local initiatives and fosters innovation in creative industries. Interactive applications, online exhibitions and virtual reconstructions are particularly effective in reaching younger generations who may be less inclined to engage with heritage through traditional channels. This demand, in turn, encourages the development of new services such as mobile guides, multimedia platforms and locally produced souvenirs inspired by digital storytelling [Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007].

The economic function of digital heritage is perhaps most evident in the field of place branding and regional development. Heritage, as Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge [2007] argue, is central to the construction of place identity. Digitisation enhances this process by giving visibility to local communities far beyond their immediate geographic context. Villages such as Puńsk or Kruszyńiany can now reach international audiences without investing heavily in conventional marketing. Through online platforms and social media, intangible cultural elements, including songs, languages and culinary traditions, become strong markers of regional identity that can attract both tourists and investors.

Yet, the economic use of digital heritage is not without its challenges. As Ashworth et al. [2007] observe, commodification often leads to the simplification and distortion of heritage. When traditions are reshaped primarily for tourist consumption, they risk losing their depth and meaning. In the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, this is visible in the digital promotion of Tatar cuisine, Lithuanian festivals or Polish cultural events in Vilnius. While these initiatives raise the visibility of multicultural traditions and create economic benefits, they also provoke questions about authenticity and the long-term resilience of local practices. For instance, in the public discourse, some practicing Tatars have voiced their disapproval of traditional religious dishes being consumed outside of their sacred context.

Digital heritage thus represents a paradox. It is both a guardian of cultural memory and a product shaped by market dynamics. Its economic value is undeniable, but it must be balanced with approaches that protect the integrity of traditions and prevent their reduction to commodified, superficial experiences [OECD, 2020].

6. Case Studies

6.1. Sejny: the borderland centre

Sejny has become a symbolic space for reflecting on multicultural heritage, largely owing to the work of the Borderland Centre of Arts Cultures Nations. The institution combines artistic activity, research and community engagement with digital documentation and dissemination. Oral testimonies, concerts and theatrical projects are recorded, archived and made available online, turning local memory into a resource that reaches far beyond the town itself [Czyżewski, 2019]. The digital element plays a double role here. It secures fragile narratives of the past, and at the same time, functions as a promotional tool, positioning Sejny as a reference point for multicultural dialogue. Questions, nevertheless, emerge about whether the digitised memory offered to global audiences still conveys the full complexity of local life, or whether it is reshaped into more universal cultural narratives.

6.2. Kruszyńniany: the Tatar trail

Kruszyńniany, together with the nearby Bohoniki, illustrates how digitisation can transform a local minority tradition into a widely recognised tourist brand. The Tatar Trail includes wooden mosques, cemeteries and culinary experiences, all of which are now promoted through digital guides and the extensive use of social media [www 3]. These tools allow visitors to navigate the trail independently and to personalise their experience, making the heritage more accessible and attractive. However, this process also exposes tensions. Religious and cultural practices, once reserved for the local community, are increasingly staged for visitors. While the visibility of the Tatar heritage has grown substantially, the line between the authentic cultural practice and the tourist performance is becoming blurred.

6.3. Puńsk: Lithuanian culture in digital form

The municipality of Puńsk, often referred to as the cultural capital of Lithuanians in Poland, demonstrates the potential of digital media to sustain minority identity [Cichocki, 2018]. Festivals, theatre performances and school events are increasingly broadcast online or archived in digital repositories, allowing them to reach audiences outside the local community. This has reinforced the visibility of Lithuanian culture in Poland and abroad, turning Puńsk into a symbolic centre

of diaspora identity. At the same time, the adaptation of cultural events to digital formats raises concerns similar to those in other parts of the borderland. The need to adjust to online audiences can influence the way traditions are presented, sometimes simplifying them for broader consumption.

6.4. Vilnius region: the Polish cultural presence

The Polish minority in Lithuania provides a reverse perspective, showing how digital tools are used to strengthen cultural identity across the border. The Polish schools and associations in the Vilnius region run websites, social media profiles and online broadcasts of festivals and religious celebrations [Interreg Poland–Lithuania, 2021–2027]. These practices help maintain the use of the Polish language and build a sense of cultural continuity with Poland. They also illustrate the political dimension of digital heritage. Digitisation is not only about cultural preservation, but also about visibility, representation and recognition in broader national and European contexts. The commodification dilemma is also present here, since Polish events promoted digitally to attract tourism can risk losing their community centred character in favour of more market oriented narratives.

6.5. Summary of case studies

Taken together, the case studies of Sejny, Kruszyniany, Puńsk and the Vilnius region demonstrate how digitisation operates as a double-edged instrument. It preserves and disseminates heritage but simultaneously transforms it into a product shaped by the expectations of distant audiences. The examples also reveal how digital heritage is entangled in wider dynamics of identity politics, cultural tourism and economic development. Each community benefits from increased visibility and potential income but also faces the challenge of maintaining authenticity and protecting traditions from being reduced to consumable cultural tokens.

7. Conclusions

The study of digital heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland reveals a complex dynamics. Digitisation secures fragile cultural resources, strengthens local identities and allows traditions to be shared with a global audience. At the same

time, it introduces heritage into market circuits where it is reshaped to meet the demands of tourism and of the creative industries.

Several key findings emerge. Firstly, digital technologies have proved to be essential instruments for preserving multicultural traditions that might otherwise remain marginalised or invisible. They make it possible to archive oral testimonies, safeguard minority languages and document material heritage in formats accessible beyond the physical region.

Secondly, digitisation brings tangible economic advantages. It supports the growth of cultural tourism, stimulates small and medium sized enterprises and reinforces regional branding [OECD, 2020]. For peripheral areas, these processes create opportunities for development that are difficult to achieve through conventional industries.

Thirdly, the pursuit of visibility and revenue carries evident risks. As Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge [2007] argue, commodification often simplifies or distorts complex traditions. In the case of Sejny, Kruszyniany, Puńsk and the Vilnius region, cultural practices are increasingly adapted to digital audiences and tourist markets, which challenges the authenticity and long term sustainability.

Finally, the borderland perspective demonstrates that digital heritage is not only a cultural or technical issue but also a political and social one. It influences how minority groups are represented, shapes cross-border relations and contributes to wider debates about identity and integration within the European Union.

In summary, the digital heritage in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland illustrates both the potential and the challenges of applying new technologies to multicultural contexts. It preserves memory and creates economic opportunities, yet it also risks transforming traditions into consumable images. The central task for policymakers, cultural institutions and local communities is to maintain a balance that enables heritage to remain a living practice while still benefiting from the possibilities offered by the digital age.

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