

ART BETWEEN COMMERCE AND CULTURE: MEDIA INFLUENCE AND IDENTITY CHALLENGES

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Published on 30 April, 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex relationship between art, commerce, and media in shaping cultural identity within the contemporary socio-cultural landscape. Traditionally, art has served as a carrier of collective memory, preserving community values and sustaining cultural continuity across generations. With the rapid expansion of media technologies and the growing influence of market-oriented systems, however, the processes of artistic creation, dissemination, and reception have undergone significant transformation. Digital media platforms have widened access to artistic expression, fostering greater participation and visibility, while simultaneously encouraging the commodification of art as consumable spectacle. Commercial structures, although offering economic support and international exposure, frequently challenge artistic authenticity, marginalize localized traditions, and alter established cultural narratives. Drawing upon perspectives from cultural media studies, ethnomusicology, and performance theory, this study critically analyses how digital mediation and commodification function as both enabling and destabilizing forces for artistic identity. Drawing on studies of Indian classical and folk music traditions, the paper examines the ongoing negotiation between preservation and innovation, revealing tensions between community-rooted practices and global cultural consumption. It ultimately advocates a balanced framework that protects cultural identity while engaging constructively with technological advancement and creative hybridity, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue and supportive cultural policies to sustain art as both a repository of heritage and a dynamic, evolving practice.

Keywords: Art, Commerce, Media, Cultural Identity, Tradition

Introduction

From the rock-cut murals of Ajanta Caves to the digitally produced artworks emerging from contemporary studios in Mumbai, Indian art has consistently fulfilled a dual role. It has functioned both as a medium of personal and spiritual expression and as a carrier of collective cultural meaning. The paintings at Ajanta, created between the second century BCE and the sixth century CE, were not simply ornamental; they embodied Buddhist philosophy, systems of patronage, and a shared cosmological understanding within their visual language.

In the twenty-first century, however, this long-standing relationship between art and cultural identity has become increasingly complex due to the growing influence of commerce. No longer an external or incidental factor, commerce is now deeply embedded within the structure of the Indian creative ecosystem. The expansion of social media platforms, algorithm-driven content circulation, and digital art markets has intertwined art, commerce, and cultural identity into a single, rapidly transforming network. Within this framework, Indian artists are required to negotiate not only the demands of their artistic practice but also the pressures of global visibility, digital self-presentation, and economic viability.

This paper argues that digital media has transformed the relationship between Indian art, commerce, and cultural identity by expanding access while simultaneously commodifying expression.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theories from cultural media studies, ethnomusicology, and performance studies. It relies on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and digital archives. Case studies from Indian classical and folk traditions are used to analyze the impact of digital media and commercialization on artistic practices and cultural identity.

Review of literature

Scholarly discourse on art and cultural identity consistently highlights the role of artistic practices in safeguarding cultural diversity and sustaining collective memory. Zahra Al-Zadjali argues that art rooted in specific cultural contexts is essential for fostering genuine intercultural dialogue. Similarly, Yunning Peng notes that digital media often simplifies complex cultural expressions into easily consumable forms, stripping them of their original meaning. Cultural media theory further suggests that digital platforms commodify art by reshaping it into market-driven products. Ethnomusicologists emphasize the importance of

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community-based traditions, while acknowledging their growing fragility in a globalized world. Indian art history research also reveals persistent tensions between patronage, commerce, and artistic autonomy—tensions intensified in the digital era.

The Historical Tension Between Indian Art and Commerce

From the Mauryan and Gupta dynasties to the Mughal empire, Indian art flourished under royal patronage, producing monumental sculpture, temple architecture, and miniature painting that embodied both religious devotion and political authority. Mughal aesthetics synthesized Persian, Indian, and European influences, reflecting imperial sophistication. Yet the colonial period disrupted this trajectory, imposing Western academic models that relegated indigenous traditions to “craft” and privileging European techniques. Institutions like the Government College of Art & Craft reinforced hierarchies, while colonial markets favored works aligned with Western tastes. Today, commercial logic shapes artistic production with unprecedented speed, intensity, and reach, redefining art’s meaning.

In response to these pressures, the early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the Bengal School, led by Abanindranath Tagore. Drawing inspiration from Mughal miniatures, Japanese wash techniques, and the spiritual ethos of Indian art, the movement sought to reclaim cultural authenticity and resist Western commercial dominance. This moment marked a critical articulation of the tension between art as a bearer of cultural identity and art as a market commodity. This tension continues to resonate in contemporary contexts.

A further transformation occurred with the formation of the Progressive Artists' Group in 1947. Founded by artists such as F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, and M. F. Husain, the group attempted to merge European modernist idioms—such as cubism and expressionism—with themes drawn from Indian mythology, landscape, and the socio-political realities of Partition. Their work illustrates a central paradox of modern art: the transformation of culturally rooted expression into globally valued commodities. Even as their art engaged deeply with Indian realities, it entered international markets and acquired significant commercial value.

In the contemporary era, digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have transformed artistic production and reception, enabling artists—from Madhubani painters in Mithila to Warli practitioners in Maharashtra—to reach global audiences without traditional intermediaries. This accessibility has amplified marginalized regional art forms, yet algorithmic logic privileges immediacy, uniformity, and trend responsiveness. Such priorities often clash with traditional practices rooted in community, ritual, and slow material processes. For example, Pattachitra artists in Odisha, whose work encodes devotional narratives, struggle for visibility against digitally optimized content designed for rapid consumption, highlighting tensions between heritage and commercialized digital aesthetics.

This tension is further illuminated in the case of M. F. Husain, whose work exemplifies the complex relationship between commercialization and cultural discourse. His bold depictions of Hindu deities generated both immense commercial success and intense public controversy, revealing how art in the marketplace becomes entangled with questions of cultural ownership, religious sensitivity, and artistic freedom. Once art enters global circuits of exchange, its interpretation and value are often shaped by external forces such as collectors, auction houses, and media narratives, rather than by the communities from which it originates.

Globalization, Indian Cultural Identity, and the Risk of Homogenization

Global digital networks have made Indian cultural content more visible internationally than ever before. Bollywood aesthetics, classical dance, traditional textiles, and contemporary art now circulate rapidly across borders, creating new economic opportunities and exposing global audiences to Indian visual traditions. However, this expanded visibility also poses risks to the cultural depth and regional specificity that define Indian art.

Scholars such as Zahra Al-Zadjali emphasize that art rooted in specific cultural contexts plays a crucial role in sustaining diversity and fostering meaningful intercultural understanding. This is especially relevant in India, where artistic traditions—from Tanjore painting and Phad scrolls to Kalighat pat and Gond art—carry distinct philosophical and community-based meanings that cannot be reduced to a singular notion of “Indian art.”

At the same time, digital platforms often encourage simplification. As Yunning Peng notes, social media tends to reduce complex cultural expressions into easily recognizable and shareable visual forms. This is evident in the case of Madhubani painting, which originated as a ritual practice in Mithila, deeply connected to cosmology and social life, but is now frequently reproduced as a decorative style on consumer products. In this process, much of its original cultural and spiritual significance is lost.

These developments echo earlier patterns from the colonial period, when British institutions extracted and reclassified Indian art for Western consumption. Digital media, however, has intensified and expanded this process, enabling large-scale

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circulation through platforms, brands, and individual creators. The challenge for contemporary Indian artists, therefore, lies in engaging with global visibility while preserving the cultural specificity and depth that give their work meaning.

Commodification, Authenticity, and the Possibility of Critique

The commodification of Indian art in the age of digital media raises critical questions about cultural authenticity, particularly within a postcolonial framework. If authenticity is understood as a meaningful connection between artistic practice and the living cultural communities from which it emerges, then the structural conditions of global markets and social media make this connection increasingly difficult to sustain. An artist who curates her Instagram presence for global visibility, adapts traditional imagery to suit international tastes, and prices her work for elite collectors is not simply transmitting a cultural tradition; she is also participating in a system that transforms cultural expression into marketable identity.

At the same time, the opposition between "authentic" tradition and "commercial" art is overly simplistic. The idea of a pure, untouched Indian artistic tradition is itself historically inaccurate. Indian art has always evolved through processes of exchange and interaction. Mughal miniature painting, for instance, emerged through the blending of Persian, Indian, and European influences. The Bengal School incorporated Japanese techniques, while the Progressive Artists' Group engaged directly with European modernism. The issue, therefore, is not the presence of external influence but the extent to which commercial pressures limit artistic possibilities and reduce the space for critical engagement with tradition.

Contemporary practice offers examples of artists who successfully negotiate this tension. Subodh Gupta, known for his large-scale installations using everyday kitchen utensils such as tiffin boxes and steel vessels, reinterprets symbols of Indian domestic life to explore themes of migration and globalization. Similarly, Nalini Malani employs video installations that draw on mythology, shadow theatre, and historical memory to address issues such as Partition and displacement. Both artists engage with global art circuits while retaining strong cultural specificity, demonstrating that commercial visibility and critical depth need not be mutually exclusive.

However, the ability to sustain such a balance is not equally available to all practitioners. Access to resources such as formal training, gallery networks, critical discourse, and international exposure remains concentrated in urban centres and shaped by broader social hierarchies. For artists working within traditional craft communities or outside metropolitan frameworks, market pressures can be far more restrictive. In such contexts, the demand to produce commercially appealing work often overrides the possibility of experimentation or critical engagement, limiting the scope for resistance within the prevailing system.

Toward Strategies of Resistance and Cultural Sustainability

If the preceding analysis holds, then neither passive acceptance of the global art market and platform economy nor a nostalgic return to cultural essentialism offers a sufficient response to the challenges confronting Indian art today.

One possible strategy is to develop digital platforms and archives that prioritize cultural context and community engagement over algorithmic visibility. Initiatives such as the Crafts Documentation Project and digital repositories supported by institutions like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts demonstrate how traditional art forms can be documented and shared without losing their contextual depth. Although these efforts operate on a smaller scale compared to mainstream social media, they offer alternative models of engagement that emphasize cultural value and community ownership.

A second approach involves incorporating critical media literacy into art education. By acknowledging the economic and technological realities shaping contemporary artistic production, educational institutions can better prepare artists to navigate digital platforms consciously. This requires not only training in artistic techniques and history but also an understanding of the global art market, algorithmic systems, and the historical relationship between Indian art, commerce, and colonial influence.

A third and equally important strategy lies in strengthening institutional and policy support for traditional craft and folk practices, which form the foundation of India's cultural heritage. As scholars have emphasized, art can sustain cultural diversity only when it remains rooted in specific traditions. Mechanisms such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags—seen in cases like Kanchipuram silk and Banarasi brocade—offer one way of safeguarding cultural specificity within commercial frameworks. Extending similar protections and sustained support to visual and performing arts is essential to preserving their integrity in an increasingly globalized, market-driven environment.

Result

The study shows that digital media has expanded access and enabled artists from different backgrounds to gain visibility. However, it also shows that traditional and community-based practices are being marginalised by visually appealing content driven by algorithmic systems.

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The findings also show us that though commercialization has created many opportunities for artists, it has also led to the homogenization of artistic expression. If it is not checked on time, it can lead to loss of cultural specificity.

Discussion

These findings highlight the duality of digital media, which can both enable and constrain. While it allows our creativity to reach a global level, it also creates pressure to create in line with market demands.

The study also indicates that the idea of authenticity is not that simple but rather complex. Indian art has thrived on interaction and exchange, but the rate at which art is commodified is a bit disturbing. Contemporary artists should consider how to maintain both the interaction and the depth and authenticity of their art.

To acknowledge these challenges, the paper suggests that digital platforms should be culturally developed, that media literacy should be incorporated into art education, and that policy support should be provided for traditional practices. Such measures can help balance innovation with preservation.

Conclusion

The relationship between Indian art, commerce, and culture in the digital era is complex and deeply ambivalent, simultaneously enabling and constraining artistic expression and cultural identity. While digital platforms have expanded the global visibility of Indian art, they also impose pressures to standardize, shaped by algorithms and market demands. Similarly, the global art market has created new opportunities for some artists while marginalizing traditional and community-based practitioners whose work reflects deeper cultural continuities. Although digital circulation encourages intercultural exchange, it risks diluting the contextual richness of these traditions.

Artists must navigate digital systems thoughtfully while preserving and reinterpreting tradition. Ultimately, the future of Indian art depends on the collective choices of artists, institutions, and audiences, shaping how cultural identity evolves within the opportunities and constraints of the digital age.

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