**Preservation and Transmission of Cultural Heritage to Youth Through YouTube Videos in Post-Conflict Cambodia**

NHS2061 Research Proposal

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**Contents**

1. **Project Objectives**
   1. Introduction
   2. Research Topic
2. **Literature Review**

2.1 Post-Conflict Cambodia

2.2 YouTube for Documentation and YouTube for Communication

2.3 Digital Cultural Preservation and Transmission

2.4 Case Studies from Turkey and China

1. **Methodology and Workplan**

3.1 Preparation

3.2 Fieldwork

1. **References**
2. **Project Objectives**
   1. **Introduction**

Primitive Survival Tools is a YouTube channel that features videos of two Cambodian men constructing buildings in the wild, showcasing natural and traditional building techniques while accompanied only by the hum of the vegetation, occasionally cut through by the chirping of cicadas. The channel has over 6 million subscribers, making it the second most subscribed Cambodian channels on the site (vidIQ, n.d.). Coupled with the emergence of other channels like Overcomplicated and Primitive Tool, cultural content seems to have found considerable success on YouTube. The video-sharing site, itself, has a wide reach in Cambodia, in no small part thanks to be rise of the Internet in recent years. At the beginning of 2023, there were 11.37 million Internet users in Cambodia, or 67.5% of the population, which is up 6.7% year-on-year (Kemp, 2023). 70.23% of this group used the video-sharing website YouTube, making it the third most popular social media site in Cambodia (Activefy, 2023). The extensive reach and influence of such content presents a new opportunity for cultural education for the younger generation.

This is especially important because the Cambodian population is extremely young and personally unfamiliar with much of the country’s history. Notably, more than 50% of the population have had no direct encounter with the Khmer Rouge conflict and only 10% remember it. As Cambodian historian David Chandler observes, “legacy of the genocide is extremely limited” (Quackenbush, 2019). This is thanks to both the “national amnesia” encouraged by the government to keep political power, and a voluntary unwillingness to relive the trauma from the time (Beech, 2022). Unfortunately, this could result in recollections of traditional culture—not only the cultural narrative surrounding the Khmer Rouge, but also the practical and artistic traditions associated with the time—being in danger of fading from the public consciousness.

**1.2 Research Topic**

This study will investigate how YouTube can play a part in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage to Cambodian youth aged 5-17.

Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural Heritage is often expressed as either Intangible or Tangible Cultural Heritage (Kurin, 2003). The age group is chosen as they are the most active on social media and highly disconnected from their legacy as most are two generations removed from those who personally experienced the period of the Khmer Rouge conflict, the major turning point in modern Cambodian history that presents the greatest implications on the collective memory of Cambodians today. YouTube will be analysed as a repository as well as a tool for communication of accurate information in an engaging way, that allows generations of the future to understand and appreciate Cambodian cultural heritage, including customs, beliefs and art. This will be done by looking at the features of YouTube as well as how the site is perceived by young Cambodians. Finally, recommendations will be made for how to capitalise on advantages and avoid pitfalls that may come with this method of cultural preservation and transmission, especially in the context of post-conflict Cambodia.

1. **Literature Review**
   1. **Culture in Post-Conflict Cambodia**

When the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, they replaced ritual practices in households with new rituals that “instill their beliefs into the minds of peasants and youth”, banning Cambodians from practicing and expressing their own cultural heritage (Delano and Knottnerus, 2018). More than forty years after the end of the regime, many Cambodians are “are still not comfortable talking about the Khmer Rouge and their experiences” (Vann, 2018). As a result a third of respondents in a survey unaware of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), which was set up to investigate the atrocities from the period (Vann, 2018), showing ignorance of the major event. People are vessels of culture, and not only did nearly 25% of Cambodians lose their lives, but the Khmer Rouge also targeted “intellectuals” and ethnic and religious minorities—up to 80% were killed (Hicky and Killen, 2018). This meant a significant loss in the number of people who could pass down their culture, especially those who needed to the most or were the most equipped to do so. While Cambodian heritage is undoubtedly recovering, I believe that YouTube can play a role in driving forward the this progress more actively.

* 1. **YouTube as an Archival of Experiences**

Benzaquen (2014) shows how photos and videos published online, particularly on Flickr and YouTube, by individuals instead of institutions more fully and richly record the history of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes. Transitory incidents at the site may be immortalised in photographs and videos (Benzaquen, 2014). The various photos and videos of the museum also documented the unexpectedly deliberate visual transformation of the building, to commercialise the museum (Benzaquen, 2014). Finally, digital records have prevented significant artistic works from being completely lost to incompetent and lazy preservation methods (Benzaquen, 2014). This paints of more complete and transparent picture of the cultural heritage contained in the site, not only in historical significance but also societal priorities and cultural narratives that are constantly evolving over time.

Apart from being a document of the experience of the subject, YouTube videos and their comments document the experiences of their creators and consumers, while comments by viewers can then reveal their perspective of the vicarious experience. The diverse and individual experiences demonstrated in these videos and comments with cultural heritage enrich its documentation.

Yet, YouTube, as a public repository, is prone to disproportionate representations of certain perspectives, erasing the experiences of others and misrepresenting the influence of different groups on society. Pietrobruno (2013) notes that the most—and most popular—videos of the Mevlevi Sema Ceremony in Turkey almost exclusively feature male performers, even concealing the large numbers of female performers using cinematic tricks. On the other hand, Li Ziqi is a creator with 18.5 million subscribers, making her one of the most successful creators on the platform, not only in numbers but also in the way that she has become a symbol of the idyllic Chinese rural lifestyle. Some Chinese citizens are concerned that this romanticised view of the rural lifestyle furthers the ignoring of the hardships and injustice faced by many in the rural community (Whyke et al., 2022). Indeed, unintentionally, Li Ziqi’s brand of rurality, as lived or constructed, does wonders for China’s soft power, but may result in a misunderstanding of rural China.

* 1. **YouTube as an Engaging Educator**

YouTube has been established as a beneficial educational tool in both formal and informal settings (Colás-Bravo and Quintero-Rodríguez, 2023). Multimedia learning that combines the visual and textual promotes deeper learning (Mayer, 2014). For Li Ziqi’s videos, which include minimal text, comments explaining the cultural practices depicted in the videos act as the textual complement to the exquisite visuals (Li et al., 2023).

This interactivity of YouTube also makes viewers feel involved and allows for them to learn from each other, informing them of the various interpretations of history and culture. In the case of Tuol Sleng, it has led to communities forming to seek truth, as well as ideological divides defining conversations and causing conflict (Benzaquen, 2014). This is not a surprise as distrust from the Khmer Rouge regime continue to intensify tensions between Cambodians.

YouTube videos also engage with their openly performed candidness that draws viewers in because they are genuine yet dramatic (Burgess and Green, 2013). Shoddy camera work and the emotional spontaneity of creators in some of these videos immerse the viewer in the experience of visiting the museum and bearing witness to the Cambodian tragedy (Benzaquen, 2014). Whether truly performative or not, viewers tend to enjoy the authentic and personal nature of these videos. This makes them interested in watching the videos and potentially learning something from them and makes what they learn more memorable.

* 1. **Role of Authority**

Gehl (2009) points out that archival and display of information involves a “curator”, who helps extreme power because of the way they can shape cultural and historical narratives. Such a force would, by default, be the algorithm, but intervention may be needed to monitor the archive and make sure that it works to deepen understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage. Wagner and de Clippele (2023) proposes that digital cultural preservation through YouTube can complement official efforts.

Given the potential it offers, officials may wish to support digital cultural preservation. Legal issues like copyright are also complicated for digital cultural preservation (Wagner and de Clippele, 2023), hence a robust legal framework must be developed to protect creators as well as the originators of cultural products. To increase reach, authorities may also assist financially and technically in crafting high quality aesthetics in these YouTube videos. Li Ziqi’s videos have been heavily praised for their production value (Li et al., 2023).

1. **Methodology**

There remain gaps in research in terms of the transmission of Cambodian cultural heritage by and for Cambodians, especially targeting youth.

* 1. **Preparation**

The first part of preparation would be watching Cambodian YouTube videos that portray Cambodian cultural heritage, especially focusing on videos with significant engagement with a Cambodian audience and are child-friendly, including Primitive Survival Tool and OverComplicated. By speaking to the creators, I hope to find more similar Cambodian channels. While watching videos, I will identify certain features that lend to successful preservation and transmission of cultural heritage as summarized in the literature review, and anything else observed.

* 1. **Fieldwork**

I will be conducting interviews with:

1. Relevant YouTubers, to find out:
   1. Their aims in setting up a channel
   2. How they see their roles in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage
   3. How they see the industry of cultural content on YouTube or YouTube in general
   4. How they wish to be supported as creators

I aim to interview about 5 YouTubers. Ideally, I would like to experience being a part of the video creation process for one or two YouTubers, to find out through observation the challenges they face when creating YouTube videos.

1. Youth aged 5-17, to find out:
   1. What kind of videos they usually consume on YouTube
   2. How they learn about cultural heritage and their understanding it

I aim to interview at least 30 youth. Small group tests will be conducted with groups of 10 children from 9-15 years old (subject to change). I will play a YouTube video covering a cultural topic that most are unfamiliar with, and administer a short test to find out how much they learnt about Cambodian cultural heritage, followed by a focus group discussion on how the video was effective and ineffective.

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