

Digital Memorials: The Internet as a New Space for Remembrance and Counter memory in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe, where memory, identity, and heritage are deeply entwined with struggles for liberation, post-colonial nation-building, and personal loss, digital memorials are emerging as powerful tools for reimagining remembrance. This paper investigates how Zimbabweans are increasingly using the internet through social media, online archives, and digital storytelling platforms to commemorate individuals, events, and cultural legacies that are often marginalised or contested in official heritage narratives. From Facebook tributes for political activists and COVID-19 victims to YouTube documentaries about Gukurahundi and WhatsApp-based oral history sharing, digital memorials offer new avenues for meaning-making that are accessible, participatory, and transnational. Drawing on case studies and interviews, the paper explores how these digital practices contribute to intangible cultural heritage, challenge state-controlled memory, and foster intergenerational dialogue within the Zimbabwean diaspora and at home. The study highlights how digital memorialisation in Zimbabwe is reshaping heritage into a living, evolving process rooted in everyday experience and digital citizenship. It also considers the implications of digital memorials for intangible cultural heritage, intergenerational transmission, and collective identity in an increasingly global and digital society. Ultimately, the paper argues that digital memorials not only preserve memory but actively reshape how heritage is created, experienced, and sustained in the 21st century.

Keywords: cultural heritage, digital memorials, digital preservation, digital archiving, memory and commemoration, virtual heritage.

1. Background

The intersection of digital technologies with the preservation of memory, identity, and heritage in post-colonial contexts has provided new opportunities for commemoration and cultural documentation. In Zimbabwe, where historical memory is frequently contested, especially concerning politically sensitive events such as the Gukurahundi massacre of the 1980s, digital memorials have emerged as powerful tools for reimagining remembrance (Hatchard, 1998; Mpofu, 2021). Mapara (n.d.) observed the notable absence of Ndebele spirit mediums, traditional songs, and key Ndebele historical figures in national narratives and commemorative discourses. In contrast, there is a strong emphasis on the veneration of Shona spirit mediums such as Sekuru Kaguvi and Mbuya Nehanda, particularly regarding their symbolic roles in the liberation struggle. This selective remembrance highlights an imbalance in the representation of Zimbabwe's

diverse ethnic heritage and raises critical questions about the inclusivity of national memory and identity construction. Scholars like Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2023) and Bhebhe (2023) emphasise the importance of digital archives and oral histories in preserving marginalised histories, particularly in a complex political landscape such as Zimbabwe's.

Zimbabwe's history, marked by political upheaval and contested memory, presents a unique challenge for heritage preservation. The works of Ndlovu (2019), Mpofu (2021), and Mpofu (2023) examine the silencing of events like Gukurahundi (1983 to 1987), victims of Operation Murambatsvina in 2006, and call attention to the need for alternative memory practices to challenge state-controlled narratives. Scholars such as Chigwada and Ngulube (2025) and Rukara and Chiripanhura (2025) emphasise the value of digital tools in preserving indigenous knowledge, particularly in rural communities where oral traditions are the primary means of transmitting cultural practices and histories.

Digital platforms enable these practices to be documented, shared, and made more accessible to both local communities and global audiences. Chigwada and Ngulube (2025) further discuss the application of FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) principles in the digital preservation of indigenous knowledge, offering a framework for understanding how digital memorials not only preserve memory but also ensure its accessibility for future generations. This aligns with the study's central argument that digital memorialisation represents an evolving process of heritage creation, supported by both local communities and global networks.

The study also engages with community-driven heritage practices, a theme explored by Pikela, Thondhlana, and Madlome (2022), who highlight the role of local heritage initiatives and museums in preserving cultural memory. Digital memorials extend these grassroots practices by providing additional platforms for engagement and preservation. Scholars like Schmidt (2017) stress the significance of community-based heritage in Africa, illustrating how local initiatives often challenge official heritage policies.

In Zimbabwe, digital memorials created by communities through platforms like social media, YouTube, and WhatsApp offer individuals the opportunity to document and share personal versions of history, frequently in opposition to state narratives. These practices contribute to the creation of counter-archives that resist dominant memory-making forces, providing alternative perspectives on national identity and historical events.

Another key aspect of this study is the role of the Zimbabwean Diaspora in digital memorialisation. As Caswell (2014) and Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009) argue, digital archives and community-based memory practices are especially important for

marginalised groups separated by borders. In the case of Zimbabwe, the Diaspora plays a crucial role in shaping transnational memory and heritage practices. Digital memorials enable Zimbabweans abroad to engage with their cultural heritage in ways that transcend geographical boundaries, fostering inclusive and participatory commemoration that connects the Diaspora with those in Zimbabwe. The preservation of indigenous knowledge and the documentation of oral traditions are essential to sustainable heritage practices. Bhebhe and Chirume (2014) and Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2021) stress the importance of oral history in African memory work, particularly within community archives.

This study examines how digital memorials, as forms of ethnic-community archiving (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023), allow for the preservation of Zimbabwean cultural heritage in ways that reflect local needs and resist historical erasure. Through documenting cultural practices and histories, these community-based digital archives provide counter-narratives to the marginalisation of indigenous practices in mainstream historical discourse.

This study views digital memorialisation as an evolving and dynamic practice that not only preserves memory but also reshapes how heritage is created, experienced, and sustained in the 21st century. Through digital tools such as social media platforms, online archives, and digital storytelling, Zimbabweans are reimagining their engagement with the past. This transformation is particularly significant in a post-colonial context, where historical erasure and the marginalisation of certain communities and cultural practices have long been entrenched in official heritage frameworks.

The study draws on the theoretical foundations of community archives, counter-archives, and intangible cultural heritage to explore how digital platforms facilitate the documentation, sharing, and transmission of alternative memories. These practices not only challenge dominant historical narratives but also create participatory, transnational spaces of memory that bridge generational and geographical gaps, particularly within the Zimbabwean diaspora communities.

Digital memorials offer a platform where individuals can engage with, contest, and reconstruct historical records in ways that were previously impossible. A critical component of this process is digital citizenship, which allows individuals to take ownership of their personal and collective histories. This concept aligns with the work of Sibanda and Chiripanhura (2024), who discuss the power dynamics of state control over museum and archival collections in Zimbabwe, where marginalised cultural expressions are often excluded from official narratives.

Digital platforms, in contrast, offer a more inclusive and democratic approach to memory preservation, allowing marginalised groups such as survivors of political violence to share their stories and challenge official accounts. This approach is consistent with Bhebhe and Ngoepe's (2023) focus on oral history and community archiving, which emphasises creating counter-archives to preserve the voices of those silenced by history.

Foucault's concept of counter-memory (1972) is particularly relevant here, as digital memorials serve as spaces where these alternative histories can be articulated, contributing to historical justice and social reparation. In alignment with Chigwada and Ngulube's (2025) arguments about the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge in the digital age, this study underscores how digital memorialisation safeguards intangible cultural heritage.

Zimbabweans are increasingly using digital tools to document and share indigenous practices, oral traditions, and local histories that might otherwise be lost. These digital archives serve as repositories for traditional ceremonies, songs, and stories that are critical to understanding Zimbabwe's cultural heritage. This preservation fosters intergenerational dialogue, particularly among younger generations, including those in the diaspora. As Pikela, Thondhlana, and Madlome (2022) note, community-driven curatorship of cultural artefacts enables self-representation and cultural restoration, offering a more accurate and inclusive account of history than traditional institutions.

Digital memorials contribute to the decolonisation of memory, empowering Zimbabweans to reclaim their cultural identity through active participation in the digitisation of history. This study investigates how digital memorials, including Facebook tributes to political activists, YouTube documentaries on historical events, and WhatsApp-based oral histories, are providing inclusive and participatory spaces for memory-making, thereby helping to reclaim silenced histories and offer more equitable representations of Zimbabwe's past.

2. Problem statement

In Zimbabwe, the struggle for identity, justice, and national unity is complicated by contested historical narratives surrounding events like the Gukurahundi genocide, the liberation war, and the August 1, 2018, post-election violence (Mpofu, 2021; Ncube, 2021). According to Sibanda and Chiripanhura (2024), state-controlled institutions such as museums and archives marginalise or erase certain histories, privileging official narratives that serve political agendas. This leaves a gap in inclusive platforms for preserving Zimbabwe's diverse cultural histories, particularly those that challenge state-

endorsed accounts. Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2023) argue that state-sanctioned memory silences counter-memories from marginalised communities, limiting the representation of these histories. The rise of digital memorials, such as social media tributes and online archives, provides a space for these marginalised histories. These platforms, as Caswell (2014) suggests, offer opportunities for community-driven curatorship, allowing individuals to reclaim suppressed histories. Despite the growing prevalence of digital memorials, the role they play in reshaping collective memory and national identity in Zimbabwe remains underexplored. There is a significant research gap regarding how Zimbabweans, both at home and in the diaspora, use digital technologies to commemorate cultural legacies excluded from official narratives, particularly given the political sensitivities in Zimbabwe's history (Schmidt, 2017). Bhebhe (2023) further emphasises that digital memorials foster transnational conversations, enabling Zimbabweans to engage in preserving intangible cultural heritage across borders. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how digital memorials contribute to memory-making, heritage preservation, and identity formation in both post-colonial and transnational contexts. The research provides insights into the evolving relationship between digital technologies, memory, and heritage, and contributes to broader discussions on the democratisation and decolonisation of memory and heritage in contemporary Zimbabwe.

3. Aim

This study aims to explore the role of digital memorials in Zimbabwe in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage, with a focus on how these platforms challenge state-sanctioned memory and provide alternative historical narratives.

4. Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following research questions

1. How do digital memorials in Zimbabwe challenge state-sanctioned narratives and contribute to alternative historical understandings?
2. In what ways do digital memorials preserve and transmit Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage, particularly regarding marginalised historical events and memories?

5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the concept of counter-memory (Foucault, 1972) to explore how digital memorials contribute to memory-making, heritage preservation, and identity formation in Zimbabwe. The concept of counter-memory is particularly relevant in the context of digital heritage memorials, as these platforms provide a space for alternative narratives to emerge, especially in societies where official histories are incomplete, manipulated, or deliberately obscured. In Zimbabwe, where traumatic events such as the Gukurahundi genocide and politically sensitive moments like the August 1, 2018, post-election violence are often marginalised or denied by the government, digital memorials become crucial for countering state-controlled narratives.

A study by Sibanda and Chiripanhura (2024) highlights the role of museums and archives in shaping historical memory, often privileging certain political agendas, which makes digital platforms vital spaces for reclaiming and contesting these dominant narratives. Digital memorials on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and various online archives allow Zimbabweans to create and participate in the construction of counter-memories that resist the erasure of painful histories. These platforms provide individuals with the opportunity to share personal accounts of trauma, survival, and resistance, offering a counter-narrative to the official version of history upheld by state-controlled institutions (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023).

Digital memorials also facilitate the active participation of the Zimbabwean Diaspora, enabling individuals to engage in the counter-memory process across borders. As Bhebhe (2023) observes, these platforms support transnational conversations about heritage and historical memory, ensuring that stories from marginalised communities are preserved and accessible globally. This diaspora engagement is vital for the continuity of Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage, including oral histories, rituals, and traditions, which might otherwise be forgotten or sidelined by mainstream narratives. Through these digital memorials, individuals can challenge the silencing of their collective memory, asserting their experiences within both Zimbabwe's historical landscape and in the global memory. Digital platforms not only preserve memory but also foster social justice by ensuring the experiences of marginalised groups remain visible and valued. In this way, counter-memory and digital heritage memorials are deeply interconnected in Zimbabwe, functioning as critical tools for contesting the hegemonic historical discourse and for promoting a more inclusive, accurate, and dynamic understanding of the nation's past. These digital spaces, therefore, are not only about remembering but are integral to reshaping national identity and advancing the cause of historical justice.

6. A brief literature review

This literature review explores the emerging role of digital memorials in Zimbabwe, focusing on how these platforms serve as spaces for counter-memory and collective memory. The review draws on several key themes that align with the research questions: the role of digital memorials in shaping historical narratives, their impact on cultural heritage preservation, and their capacity to facilitate intergenerational dialogue.

6.1 The role of digital memorials in shaping historical narratives

Research on digital memorials emphasises their potential to challenge state-controlled historical narratives, especially in contexts where dominant historical accounts marginalise or erase critical events. For instance, Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2023) highlight the importance of oral history projects and digital archives in preserving memories that are often overlooked by mainstream history, such as those related to the Gukurahundi genocide. These digital spaces provide marginalised communities with an opportunity to present their histories, offering alternative perspectives that contest the official accounts presented by state-run institutions. Digital memorials challenge the dominant state-sanctioned memory, which often suppresses or distorts key historical events through documenting and sharing personal stories (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023; Ndlovu, 2019). Sibanda and Chiripanhura (2024) further support this argument by emphasising how the politics of memory in Zimbabwe, shaped by state-controlled institutions, often leads to the marginalisation of specific cultural and historical experiences, particularly those related to national trauma.

In the Zimbabwean context, digital memorials have become powerful tools for reclaiming silenced histories. These platforms allow individuals to share personal accounts of trauma, survival, and resistance, directly challenging the government's attempts to suppress or distort historical events. Digital memorials also serve as critical sites of memory for the Zimbabwean Diaspora, enabling them to preserve and transmit histories of marginalisation, cultural loss, and political struggle. Schmidt (2017) also underscores the significance of community-based heritage and memory practices in Africa, where local communities use digital platforms to assert their narratives in opposition to national-level historical accounts. Furthermore, scholars like Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009) suggest that digital memorials not only preserve individual memories but also enable collective memory-making, thus democratising heritage preservation and allowing for a more inclusive approach to history. Through these collective efforts, digital memorials offer a space for both Zimbabweans at home and in the Diaspora to engage in a process

of counter-memory, reshaping national identity and contributing to a more inclusive historical discourse.

6.2 Digital memorials and the preservation of cultural heritage

Another significant theme in the literature is the role of digital memorials in preserving cultural heritage, particularly in the context of intangible cultural heritage. Chigwada and Ngulube (2025) underscore how digital archives and platforms have become essential tools in the preservation of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, which are often endangered by modernisation, globalisation, and the legacies of colonial history. As they note, digital memorials allow Zimbabweans to safeguard cultural expressions, rituals, and historical events, ensuring that these cultural elements are not only preserved but also made accessible to both local and global audiences. This aligns with Pikela, Thondhlana, and Madlome's (2022) exploration of community-driven curatorship in Zimbabwe, where digital platforms allow communities to curate their cultural heritage, amplifying voices often silenced by institutional narratives. Again, the BaTonga people in Binga have organised cultural groups like the Basilizwi Trust and Tonga Language and Culture Committee (TOLACCO), which establish community archives to document their language, rituals, displacement history, and oral traditions (Bhebhe, 2023). The BaTonga have mobilised digital platforms to record testimonies and preserve these memories for future generations.

Through digital memorials, Zimbabweans can counteract the erasure of their cultural practices and ensure that these practices remain vibrant and accessible for future generations. Moreover, Kiwa et al. (2021) discussed the development of online panoramas, a digital tool for documenting and preserving vanishing cultural practices. This work emphasises the importance of digital heritage in enabling the survival of intangible cultural elements that might otherwise be lost. The study argues that online panoramas serve as innovative and interactive ways to document cultural heritage, especially in the face of rapid social changes. In line with Bhebhe & Ngoepe (2023) and Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009), this highlights how digital memorials not only serve as a means for remembering the past but also as dynamic platforms for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. In this way, digital memorials contribute to the ongoing process of heritage-making, enabling communities to maintain ownership and control over their cultural narratives while also participating in the broader global dialogue on heritage preservation. This becomes particularly important for Zimbabweans, where issues of cultural identity and memory are often shaped by the complex dynamics of post-colonial heritage practices.

6.3 Intergenerational dialogue and community engagement

Digital memorials in Zimbabwe play a significant role in facilitating intergenerational dialogue by providing a platform where both older and younger generations can engage with and share historical knowledge, particularly in the context of contested or marginalised histories. According to Caswell et al. (2018), community archives and digital storytelling create participatory spaces where diverse generations can contribute their experiences and memories, enhancing a collective understanding of history. In Zimbabwe, these digital platforms have proven essential in connecting the older generation, who often hold first-hand accounts of historical events such as the Gukurahundi genocide or the Zimbabwean Liberation War, with younger generations who may not have access to these oral histories through traditional, institutionalised channels. This digital bridge enables younger Zimbabweans, particularly those in the Diaspora, to engage with their heritage in a way that transcends both time and geographical boundaries, ensuring continuity in the transmission of intangible cultural heritage (Bhebhe, 2023).

Moreover, digital memorials serve as vital spaces for the Diaspora community to contribute to the preservation and transmission of Zimbabwean cultural heritage. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and online archives allow Zimbabweans living abroad to actively participate in the construction and dissemination of counter-narratives, which challenge the state-sanctioned historical accounts that often overlook critical events. This enables the preservation of memories of marginalised histories, such as the Gukurahundi genocide, through a digital archive that is accessible across borders (Mpofu, 2023). As Sibanda and Chiripanhura (2024) suggest, communities play a crucial role in sustaining these alternative narratives, offering a means to both preserve cultural practices and redefine collective memory. Furthermore, by fostering the sharing of oral histories and personal stories, digital memorials also encourage younger generations to engage in the process of memory activism, ensuring that these important memories are not only preserved but actively reshaped for future generations (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023). These digital spaces, therefore, not only preserve the memories of marginalised events but also offer a dynamic, transnational platform for intergenerational dialogue and cultural continuity.

7. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using a case study approach, to explore the role of digital memorials in shaping collective memory and counter-memory in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was done to come up with 30 participants. These

participants were identified based on their active engagement with digital memorials such as online commemorative platforms, social media heritage pages, or virtual exhibitions, and their involvement in the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems. Recruitment was done through referrals from cultural institutions, online heritage networks, and snowball sampling within diaspora communities and local cultural organisations. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 68 years and included both male and female voices, with a near-gender balance: 16 were female (53%) and 14 male (47%). Of the total participants, 12 (40%) resided in the Zimbabwean Diaspora, primarily in the United Kingdom (10%), Australia (10%), South Africa (10%), and Canada (10%), while the remaining 18 (60%) were based within Zimbabwe. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Zimbabweans who actively engage with digital memorials and cultural practitioners involved in the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of digital memorials in facilitating intergenerational dialogue and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Content analysis was also conducted on various digital memorials such as Facebook tributes, YouTube documentaries, and online archives to identify themes of memory, identity, and historical preservation, with a specific focus on how these digital spaces challenge state-controlled narratives and promote counter-memory. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns in the data. Data was organised and coded manually. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and emotional sensitivity, were prioritised throughout the study. The data was presented in narrative form.

8. Findings and discussion

The findings of this study were drawn from the analysis of interviews and content analysis of digital memorials, providing insights into how digital memorials function in Zimbabwe as sites for counter-memory, cultural heritage preservation, and intergenerational dialogue. The study explores how these digital spaces challenge state-controlled historical narratives, foster the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, and contribute to community-driven memory-making processes.

8.1 How do Zimbabweans' digital memorials challenge state-sanctioned narratives and contribute to alternative historical understandings?

Digital memorials in Zimbabwe have become pivotal in reshaping historical narratives and challenging state-sanctioned versions of the past, particularly concerning events that have been marginalised or erased from the official discourse. These platforms have provided critical spaces for the documentation and dissemination of alternative histories,

ensuring that previously silenced voices are heard. Below is an exploration of how these digital memorials function as agents of historical change and resistance.

i) Counteracting state-sanctioned amnesia

In Zimbabwe, some of the most significant historical events, particularly the Gukurahundi genocide (1983-1987), have been largely overlooked or minimised in state-approved narratives. The official discourse often seeks to promote unity and national reconciliation by downplaying or omitting the painful and divisive events that continue to affect many communities, especially those impacted by the violence. In contrast, digital memorials provide a space where survivors and descendants of victims can tell their stories, demand justice, and challenge the official silence surrounding such atrocities. These platforms, whether through Facebook, YouTube, X, or WhatsApp, enable communities to collect and share oral histories, allowing for personal testimonies that directly confront the state's attempts at erasure. One Gukurahundi survivor shared their perspective:

Without these digital spaces, our stories would be lost forever. The government has worked hard to erase or distort our histories, particularly the painful and traumatic events like the Gukurahundi genocide. These moments of suffering and resistance, which remain suppressed in official history, would have been forgotten if not for the emergence of digital platforms. These spaces, whether it's Facebook, WhatsApp, X, YouTube, or online archives, have become the only places where we can tell our stories openly, without fear of censorship or political repression.

As Bhebhe (2021) and Mpofu (2023) argue, the memorialisation of such events in digital spaces fosters collective memory work by facilitating education and awareness, where survivors are able to articulate their experiences without fear of state censorship. This also empowers individuals to confront the official historical narrative that has, for decades, minimised or ignored their suffering. The counter-memory created through these digital memorials is not just about recording events; it is also about challenging the state's dominant historical account, particularly regarding sensitive political issues. As Foucault's concept of counter-memory suggests, these platforms disrupt the official historical narratives that exclude or marginalise certain groups (Foucault, 1972). Participants discussed how digital memorials serve as sites of resistance, where alternative histories are preserved, and personal experiences of trauma are publicly acknowledged. This finding aligns with the literature on counter-memory (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023), where digital platforms act as spaces to contest dominant historical versions and provide an alternative counter-history.

Most participants also agreed that government censorship and political interference limit the diversity of collections (Sibanda & Chiripanhura, 2024). Participants agreed that information professionals face pressure to self-censor and prioritise collections that align with government interests. In Zimbabwe, documentary evidence and artefacts related to the Gukurahundi massacre in the 1980s are not easily found in galleries and bookshelves (Ndlovu, 2019). More so, records and artefacts related to the participation of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) during the liberation struggle were also said to be understated or under-documented and represented (Mpofu, 2023). ZAPU was one of the parties that fought for the independence of Zimbabwe but lost the 1980 independence elections. The collections in the public spaces of Zimbabwe today favour narratives from the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which has been in power since 1980.

Mapara (n.d.) also argues that music performed during national events such as Independence Day, Heroes Day, and the Defence Forces Day events in Zimbabwe is not merely a tool for celebration or national pride, but often functions as a deliberate instrument for shaping collective memory. In these highly symbolic spaces, only songs that reinforce the narratives and ideological dominance of ZANU-PF are typically included. This selective musical representation systematically silences the legacy of ZAPU, effectively erasing its contributions to the liberation struggle from public consciousness. Such exclusion has profound implications, not only for historical accuracy but also for the emotional and cultural recognition of communities aligned with ZAPU. Their memories, struggles, and sacrifices are rendered invisible, fostering a sense of marginalisation and historical loss. Music, in this context, becomes a means of political control, shaping what is remembered and what is forgotten in the nation's story.

The sentiment above also applies to the information generated by institutions that represent the homosexual people in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is a conservative country that does not promote same-sex marriages or relationships. Collecting records and artefacts that promote homosexuality is a taboo that might face resistance from the community and the government. In addition, materials reflecting the experiences of marginalised communities, for example, women, LGBTQ+ and people with disabilities, are also scarce in information centres in Zimbabwe. These groups of people will resort to social media for their visibility. As Sibanda and Chiripanhura (2024) highlight, state-controlled institutions such as museums and archives often present a version of history that serves the government's political agenda, overlooking the complex realities of historical events. For instance, while the Liberation War is often framed through a victorious nationalistic narrative, Zimbabwean veterans, especially those from marginalised communities, have

used online platforms to offer alternative perspectives that acknowledge the conflict's complexities, including the divisions within liberation forces, tribal tensions, and the suffering of civilians. The Mafela Trust is a significant example of how digital memorials can preserve and transmit Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage, particularly by recovering marginalised histories of the liberation struggle (Bhebe, 2016). Founded by ZAPU and ZPRA veterans, the organisation works to document the experiences and contributions of those sidelined in official national narratives dominated by ZANU-PF (Bhebe & Ngoepe, 2022). The Mafela Trust collects and digitises oral histories, photographs, and archival documents, creating an accessible counter-memory that honours forgotten fighters and civilians (Tshuma, 2022). In addition to preserving memory, the Mafela Trust engages the public through commemorative pilgrimages and youth-oriented education, ensuring that suppressed histories are not only remembered but actively transmitted across generations.

ii) Digital platforms as sites of resistance and alternative narratives

Digital memorials in Zimbabwe function as decentralised spaces where individuals, cultural groups, and communities can present alternative versions of history that challenge the state-controlled narrative. For example, the stories of Zimbabwe's indigenous cultural events and festivals, such as the Ndau Festival of the Arts (NdaFA) or the Hurungwe Arts Festival (HAF), or the Great Limpopo Cultural Trade Fair (GLCTF) (now Budula Festival) among the Mhlanguleni (Tsonga/Shangani) community in Chiredzi, are often left out of national celebrations and government-sanctioned archives (Kusasa et al., 2022). These local cultural practices, however, find a home on digital platforms, where communities can document and share their rich cultural histories. By doing so, they challenge the state's emphasis on a centralised, uniform narrative of the nation's history, offering a more inclusive and diverse account of Zimbabwe's heritage. One local participant emphasised the importance of this counter-narrative:

The digital platforms allow us to reclaim the narratives that have been silenced by state-controlled institutions, and in doing so, we are not just preserving our personal and collective histories; we are making a stand for the truth. The government may control the official archives, museums, and history textbooks, but it cannot control the voices of the people who use digital spaces to document their lives, their pain, and their resilience.

Chigwada and Ngulube (2025) emphasise the importance of digital archives in safeguarding indigenous knowledge, providing an alternative to the politically shaped national archives. These digital platforms allow for the preservation and recognition of

cultural events and traditions that would otherwise be overlooked or erased by the state's version of history. Digital memorials, however, provide a space where counter-narratives can be constructed and shared openly, circumventing the state's control over official historical accounts. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp have allowed individuals, particularly survivors and their families, to publicly share testimonies, oral histories, and personal accounts that contradict the official versions of events. Political activists such as Blessed Geza have also resorted to social media to discuss their grievances against the government. Some Gukurahundi and political violence survivors have used digital memorials to share personal experiences and testimonies of government viciousness, which have long been excluded from the state's historical record (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023).

iii) Community-driven curatorship as a form of cultural resistance

Traditional communities in Zimbabwe, including indigenous groups, have increasingly taken control of how their histories are represented through digital memorials. This contrasts sharply with institutionalised heritage management, where heritage institutions like museums and archives are often state-controlled and reflect the priorities of the government. By using digital platforms to curate their own histories, these communities assert their right to control how their cultural narratives are constructed and shared. This community-driven curatorship challenges the state's monopolisation of history and provides an opportunity for local histories to be told from the perspective of those who lived them, not from the lens of a politically motivated national archive. As one local participant noted:

This is a fight for the right to memory, a fight for historical justice. As we share these stories online, we are not just preserving our past; we are asserting our right to be heard, ensuring that our stories are not erased, and holding space for alternative histories that are often overlooked. Through these digital memorials, we are creating a new history, one that is grounded in truth, personal experience, and collective memory.

Pikela, Thondhlana, and Madlome (2022) highlight how community-driven curatorship empowers traditional chiefs, elders, and cultural practitioners to curate and share their own histories, offering a powerful form of resistance. This grassroots approach to heritage preservation allows marginalised communities to present histories that may contradict or oppose the state's official narratives, offering a more nuanced and inclusive account of Zimbabwe's past.

There are very limited collections related to the cultural practices of minority groups such as the Nambya, Nda, Tsonga/Shangani, Tonga and Venda, among others. The underdocumentation of these minority groups of people was also attributed by participants to a lack of power and authority in the politics of Zimbabwe. These marginalised groups will find themselves on social media to express themselves and also to capture and preserve their memories. This has led to community groups opening up WhatsApp and Facebook group platforms such as *Rekete Chindau: Leave a legacy*, *Wapwere wekwaHonde*, *Proudly Shangaan*, *Rhodesian Bush War Living History* and *Rhodesians World Wide* to champion their marginalised history. These digital spaces offer an alternative historical record, one that is shaped by survivors' experiences rather than government-sanctioned narratives, thus contributing to the broader struggle for historical justice (Bhebhe & Ngoepe, 2023).

iv) The role of digital memorials in healing and reconciliation

Digital memorials in Zimbabwe not only function as sites of resistance but also contribute to the process of healing and reconciliation. While state-sponsored efforts have often ignored or downplayed traumatic events like the Gukurahundi genocide, digital memorials provide a platform for survivors and affected communities to memorialise their experiences, acknowledge the wrongs done, and begin a process of collective healing. These digital spaces serve as a form of public reflection, allowing for the recognition of past injustices and the acknowledgement of the trauma that continues to affect communities today. As one local participant reflected:

The digital spaces have become our sanctuary. For so long, we were told to forget, to move on, but the pain still lingers. These memorials give us a voice, a chance to heal by sharing our stories, by confronting the government's attempts to erase our history.

Scholars such as Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2023) argue that oral histories and digital archives are essential for healing post-conflict societies. By offering marginalised communities a space to process and memorialise painful histories, these digital platforms foster dialogue and contribute to broader national efforts of reconciliation, even in the face of official state silence.

v) Challenging historical erasure and promoting cultural sovereignty

One of the most important functions of digital memorials is their ability to challenge historical erasure. In Zimbabwe, many indigenous communities, as well as rural and

minority groups, have had their histories intentionally overlooked or suppressed in state-run institutions. Digital memorials provide an accessible and inclusive platform for these communities to assert their cultural and historical narratives. By documenting and sharing their experiences online, these groups can ensure that their histories are not lost to the void of state-sponsored historical erasure. Schmidt (2017) argues that digital technologies have empowered local communities to reclaim their heritage and resist the state's attempts to erase or distort their histories. Through platforms such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages dedicated to specific communities or cultural events, Zimbabweans are creating digital spaces where their stories can be shared widely, contributing to a more inclusive understanding of the nation's history.

Collected data also shows that digital memorials in Zimbabwe act as a form of memory activism by reclaiming collective memory from the hands of state-controlled institutions. As Caswell et al. (2018) argue, community archives and digital storytelling practices facilitate the democratisation of memory by enabling ordinary people to share their histories and perspectives. In Zimbabwe, this process is particularly important for marginalised groups who have been excluded from official historical discourses. By participating in digital memorialisation, these communities challenge the official, state-endorsed narratives and assert their right to memory. For instance, survivors of the August 1, 2018, post-election violence have used social media platforms to document and share videos and images that show state security forces' involvement in the violence, directly contradicting government claims about the events. In doing so, digital memorials become powerful counter-tools in contesting the erasure of inconvenient truths and foster a more inclusive memory culture (Ndlovu, 2019).

vi) The digital preservation of oral histories as a resistance to symbolic annihilation

Another significant aspect of digital memorials in Zimbabwe is their ability to preserve oral histories, which have often been neglected or misrepresented in official archives. Oral histories are crucial for preserving the cultural identities and historical experiences of marginalised or oppressed groups, especially those who have been excluded from formal, state-controlled historical narratives. By collecting, sharing, and preserving these oral traditions, digital memorials ensure that alternative historical accounts are available for future generations. As one Diaspora participant explained:

These stories are our truth, our legacy. Without digital memorials, our voices would have been erased. It's through these platforms that we can ensure that future generations understand our history, not the one the government wants to sell them.

Caswell et al. (2018) emphasise the transformative power of community archives in resisting symbolic annihilation, where entire histories and cultures are erased from collective memory. This is particularly important in Zimbabwe, where many communities' histories have been either ignored or misrepresented by the state. Digital memorials enable these communities to assert their cultural agency, ensuring that their histories are not only preserved but also made accessible to a global audience.

vii) Digital memorials as a catalyst for cultural and political change

Digital memorials in Zimbabwe serve as powerful tools for challenging state-sanctioned narratives and promoting a more inclusive and diverse historical understanding. These platforms offer marginalised communities a space to document and share their histories, providing a form of resistance against historical erasure and state-imposed amnesia. Through community-driven curatorship, digital memorials allow for the preservation of alternative histories that may otherwise remain hidden or suppressed. Furthermore, they contribute to healing and reconciliation by allowing communities to memorialise past injustices, fostering dialogue and understanding. The digital preservation of oral histories and the reclaiming of cultural sovereignty through these platforms are vital for ensuring that Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage is not only preserved but also understood from multiple perspectives. As these digital spaces continue to grow and evolve, they will remain central in the ongoing struggle to challenge historical silences, reclaim cultural identity, and resist political manipulation of the past. Digital memorials are not just platforms for remembering; they are catalysts for cultural and political change, contributing to the democratisation of history and the empowerment of communities whose stories have long been silenced.

viii) The transnational nature of digital memorials and their impact on global understanding

Another crucial finding of this study is the role of digital memorials in promoting transnational dialogue. Zimbabweans in the Diaspora have been particularly active in using digital memorials to ensure that Zimbabwe's contested histories are documented and discussed globally. As Bhebhe (2023) notes, digital platforms offer a way for the diaspora community to contribute to preserving their cultural heritage, ensuring that marginalised histories, such as the experiences of political refugees and victims of state violence, are acknowledged in global spaces. Through YouTube documentaries, Facebook memorial pages, and online forums, Zimbabweans living abroad can engage in transnational conversations that influence international understandings of Zimbabwe's historical struggles. This also opens up new avenues for diaspora-driven activism, where

digital platforms serve as sites for lobbying for accountability and raising awareness on global platforms about the silences in Zimbabwe's history (Schmidt, 2017).

ix) Digital memorials as tools for intergenerational memory transmission

Digital memorials play an essential role in intergenerational memory transmission. As discussed by Caswell et al. (2018), digital archives and storytelling provide platforms for older generations to share their lived experiences with younger generations, many of whom may be disconnected from Zimbabwe's complex history due to political repression or geographic distance. Through digital memorials, both Zimbabweans at home and in the Diaspora can engage in a participatory process of collective memory-making, ensuring that the memories of past struggles are passed on to future generations. This process not only preserves historical knowledge but also fosters a sense of shared identity and cultural continuity across generations. Digital memorials thus serve as an essential bridge between the past and present, enabling the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, particularly in the face of state-imposed silences and erasures (Pikela, Thondhlana, & Madlome, 2022).

8.2 The role of digital memorials in preserving and transmitting Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage, particularly regarding marginalised historical events and memories.

A central theme in the study was the role of digital memorials in the preservation of Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage. Below are the findings and discussion related to this research question.

i) Bridging the geographical gaps and ensuring the transmission of cultural heritage across time and space.

Most participants emphasised how digital platforms have become essential tools for preserving traditional cultural practices and knowledge that might otherwise be at risk of fading due to modernisation, globalisation, or historical erasure. Oral traditions, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge, typically shared within specific communities, are now being archived in digital formats, allowing these practices to reach a broader, often global, audience. As one participant in the Diaspora said:

We use Facebook to share traditional ceremonies and rituals that the youth in the diaspora can watch and learn about, keeping our culture alive across generations.

This highlights the potential of digital technologies to bridge geographical gaps and ensure the transmission of cultural heritage across time and space. A deeper content analysis of digital memorials revealed numerous instances of Zimbabweans utilising social media platforms to celebrate and commemorate key cultural events, such as the Ndau Festival for the Chipinge community or the Hurungwe Arts Festival for the Korekore people of Hurungwe, the Budula Festival (formerly the Great Limpopo Cultural Trade Fair) in Chiredzi South. These events, often excluded from mainstream national narratives, are actively documented and shared online, ensuring their continued visibility and relevance. This digital archiving supports the argument put forward by Chigwada, Ngulube, and Dewah (2024), who suggest that digital archives are vital in safeguarding indigenous knowledge and intangible cultural heritage. They argue that in the digital age, archives become critical resources that counter the risks of cultural loss, especially given the political and historical marginalisation faced by many indigenous communities in Zimbabwe. Additionally, Chigwada and Ngulube (2025) underscore how integrating CARE (Collective Access, Reuse, and Enrichment) and FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles in digital preservation efforts not only enhances the accessibility of cultural resources but also contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by fostering cultural diversity and resilience.

ii) Offers participatory spaces for cultural exchange

Moreover, digital memorials are evolving into dynamic, participatory spaces where cultural practitioners, especially traditional leaders, engage younger generations in the preservation and perpetuation of cultural heritage. This participatory approach aligns with Blake's (2015) exploration of how museums and digital heritage initiatives can utilise participatory practices to involve local communities in the conservation process, ensuring that cultural heritage is actively transmitted and reinterpreted in the digital age. Rukara and Chiripanhura (2025) further highlight the role of digital platforms in fostering intergenerational dialogues, emphasising the intersection of artificial intelligence and information management in enabling more inclusive and participatory models of heritage preservation. By adopting AI tools, communities can digitally curate and share local knowledge, expanding the scope and reach of traditional practices while maintaining control over their cultural narratives. The emphasis on community-driven curatorship is also explored by Pikela, Thondhlana, and Madlome (2022), who highlight how traditional chiefs and cultural experts at the Avuxeni community museum in Chiredzi South district actively engage in curating local heritage for both preservation and education purposes. These community-driven efforts provide a counterpoint to top-down, institutionally dominated models of heritage management. In the digital realm, such models are

reinforced, as community members take on the role of curators, ensuring that their culture is represented authentically and independently of external influences.

iii) Cultural reclamation and identity restoration

Digital memorials also play a role in fostering cultural reclamation and identity restoration, especially in the context of post-colonial Zimbabwe. Musendekwa (2025) discusses the challenges of urban heritage preservation, noting that digital platforms can help preserve urban cultural landscapes that have been erased or neglected due to rapid urbanisation or colonial histories. In the same vein, Nigar and Selim (2023) argue that informal heritage conservation practices such as those supported by digital memorials are increasingly essential for sustaining cultural identity, particularly in environments where formal heritage institutions may have limited resources or political backing. Furthermore, these digital initiatives resonate with the work of Schmidt (2017), who discusses community-based heritage practices in Africa and their capacity to reshape local knowledge production through collaborative and accessible technologies. The decentralisation of heritage stewardship, as Schmidt notes, empowers local communities to reclaim narratives that have often been marginalised by institutionalised memory systems. In the Zimbabwean context, the digitalisation of cultural heritage can be seen as an act of resistance against historical erasure, enabling communities to assert their own identities and histories in the face of colonial and post-colonial silences.

iv) Provide a space for collective memory

This study also revealed that the integration of oral history within digital memorials plays a crucial role in providing a space for collective memory. As Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2023) assert, oral history is a significant form of ethno-community archiving that helps preserve the lived experiences and traditions of indigenous populations. Digital archives allow for the collection and dissemination of oral narratives that might otherwise be lost, ensuring that marginalised voices are heard and preserved for future generations. These practices are in line with the work of Caswell et al. (2018), who emphasise the transformative power of community archives in fighting symbolic annihilation and promoting cultural agency in marginalised groups. Digital memorials also provide a space for collective memory, which has been especially important in the context of post-conflict societies like Zimbabwe. The works of Bhebhe (2023) and Mpofu (2023) examine how memory work, including the memorialisation of historical events like the Gukurahundi genocide, is crucial for community healing. Digital memorials offer a platform for these difficult conversations, allowing for the public acknowledgement of past injustices while simultaneously serving as tools for education and reconciliation. The integration of digital platforms in cultural

preservation aligns with a growing body of scholarship that emphasises the need for inclusive, decentralised, and participatory models of heritage conservation. Scholars such as Chigwada, Ngulube, and Dewah (2024), Rukara and Chiripanhura (2025), Pikela et al. (2022), Musendekwa (2025), and Bhebhe and Ngoepe (2023) collectively highlight the critical role of digital memorials in safeguarding indigenous knowledge and fostering cultural resilience in a rapidly changing world.

v) Intergenerational dialogue and community engagement

The study also found that digital memorials facilitate intergenerational dialogue, particularly between the Zimbabwean Diaspora and the home community. Through social media platforms, Zimbabweans living abroad can contribute to discussions on national memory, cultural practices, and historical events. Participants in the interviews noted that these digital platforms allow them to reconnect with their roots and share personal memories with younger generations in Zimbabwe. Interviews also revealed that digital memorials provide a space for the elderly generation to pass down knowledge and historical experiences, particularly those tied to liberation struggles and early post-colonial history. These interactions help ensure that significant aspects of Zimbabwe's collective memory, especially those related to independence and the liberation struggle, are communicated to younger generations. The use of oral history as a tool for transmitting these memories was evident, as participants discussed how stories were recorded and shared online to preserve them for posterity. The findings of the study align with Caswell et al.'s (2018) arguments on the role of community archives and digital storytelling in fostering participatory memory-making, where diverse generations can engage in the creation and transmission of collective memory. Zimbabweans are using these digital memorials not only to record history but also to create ongoing conversations about the country's past, ensuring that these memories remain alive and accessible for future generations.

9. Conclusions

This study has highlighted the pivotal role of digital memorials in shaping collective memory, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering intergenerational dialogue in Zimbabwe. Digital platforms, such as social media, online archives, and digital storytelling tools, have emerged as powerful spaces where Zimbabweans, both within the country and in the diaspora, can share personal narratives, challenge dominant state-controlled historical accounts, and engage in active memory-making processes. These platforms provide an accessible and participatory means of preserving memories that are often

marginalised or contested, especially those related to politically sensitive events such as the Gukurahundi genocide, Operation Murambatsvina or political violence.

The research confirms that digital memorials serve as essential tools for counter-memory, offering alternative historical narratives that challenge official versions of Zimbabwe's past. Through providing a platform for survivors, activists, and cultural practitioners to share their stories, these digital spaces help to combat historical erasure and promote alternative histories that reflect a wider range of lived experiences. This aligns with Foucault's and Halbwachs' (1972) concepts of counter-memory, as digital memorials allow for the creation of spaces where marginalised memories can be shared and preserved outside state-controlled archives and narratives.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of digital memorials in preserving Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage. These platforms enable cultural practices, oral histories, and indigenous knowledge to be passed down across generations, particularly in a time when such traditions are under threat due to modernisation and historical erasure. Through facilitating intergenerational dialogue, digital memorials enable younger generations, especially those in the Diaspora, to connect with their cultural roots and history, promoting a sense of shared identity and belonging. This study confirms that digital memorials in Zimbabwe are not just passive sites of remembrance; they are active spaces of resistance, cultural preservation, and social justice. They play a crucial role in reconstructing national identity, challenging historical erasure, and ensuring that Zimbabwe's diverse cultural and historical narratives are preserved for future generations. As digital technology continues to evolve, the role of digital memorials in Zimbabwe's collective memory will likely expand, further transforming how history is shared, experienced, and understood.

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