BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration

PhD THESIS

The impact of digital transformation on cultural product nature and development

SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

Cultural products, such as music, film, literature, visual arts and performance, generate value through symbolic resonance, narrative richness and emotional significance rather than through functional performance, and their identity is not fixed at the moment of production but continuously renegotiated through circulation, interpretation and audience engagement. Digital transformation has profoundly altered the ways in which these products are created, distributed and consumed, raising questions that concern not only the organization of cultural production but the very nature of its outcomes. In this context, the thesis addresses two interconnected gaps. The first concerns the absence of a systematic, mechanism-based mapping of how organizations manage the tension between innovation and meaning preservation in cultural product development. The second concerns the concentration of research on digital transformation in the cultural industries on distribution, business models and monetization, leaving unanswered the question of how digital technologies fundamentally transform what cultural products are.

The aim of the thesis is to examine how cultural products are modified by the digital transformation that contemporary society is undergoing, with a focus on two elements: the change in how cultural products are developed and the change in the nature of these products. This aim is pursued through two research questions. The first addresses how organizations organize innovation in cultural product development when meaning preservation constitutes both a primary resource and a primary constraint. The second addresses how digital transformation reconstitutes the ontological nature of cultural products and the modes through which this reconstitution manifests in practice.

The thesis is structured in five chapters. Following the introduction (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 develops the theoretical foundations on three pillars. The first traces the evolution of the product concept, from goods-dominant logic, which anchored value in functional performance and material properties, through service-dominant logic and the relational turn, which repositioned value as co-created between producer and audience, to practice-based approaches, which treat product development as a continuous process rather than a fixed sequence of stages. The second pillar establishes the distinctive features of cultural products: their symbolic value is constituted rather than embedded, their ontology is relational and dependent on audience co-

constitution, and they remain ontologically unstable even after release. The third pillar addresses digital transformation: its conceptualization, historical evolution and organizational implications, as well as its impact on product development methodologies, tools and performance, from computer-aided design to Industry 4.0, agile approaches, big data and generative artificial intelligence.

Chapter 3 answers the first research question through a systematic literature review grounded in CIMO (Context–Intervention–Mechanism–Outcome) logic (Denyer et al., 2008). The search in Web of Science and Scopus identified 579 sources, reduced through two screening stages to 123 eligible sources and then to a final corpus of 44 empirical studies published between 2007 and 2025. The analysis identifies five mechanisms through which organizations balance novelty with meaning preservation: collective meaning co-creation, through which creative agency is distributed via participatory negotiation with the communities involved; symbolic product transformation, through which innovation deliberately targets the reinterpretation of cultural meaning through iterative, emotionally oriented design; cultural capability reconfiguration, through which innovation relies on hybrid competences that expand the creative repertoire while preserving symbolic coherence; cultural ecosystem reconfiguration, through which innovation entails restructuring the institutional and relational conditions of production; and technology-mediated meaning expansion, through which digital technologies function as mediators that reshape how cultural meaning is produced and experienced. Taken together, the mechanisms show that innovation in cultural product development is a distributed organizational accomplishment rather than an individual creative achievement, and that cultural meaning functions as a baseline condition that innovation must preserve, renew or rearticulate.

Chapter 4 takes up the ontological question raised by the systematic review and answers the second research question through an abductive qualitative study conducted following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), with sociomateriality as the analytical lens. The data come from sixteen semi-structured interviews with creators and entrepreneurs in the Romanian music sector, a context that combines a rich tradition of folk and popular music with rapid and uneven digitalization. The study identifies four modes of ontological reconstitution. Distributed authorship describes the situation in which creative agency becomes co-constituted by algorithmic processes and interpretively active audiences, so that attributing the product to a single human creator becomes analytically untenable. Platform constitution shows that digital platforms cease to be mere distribution channels and become the very condition under which

the cultural product exists, is encountered and acquires value. Open-ended constitution describes the loss of stable formal closure, such that no instance of the product can any longer be considered definitive. Instrument-mediated reconstitution shows that the adoption of digital instruments and processing systems constitutes products whose sonic and performative identity is irreducible to any acoustic equivalent. A transversal finding shows that the four modes are not sequential or independent but co-constitutive dimensions of a single entangled phenomenon, simultaneously present within individual episodes of creative practice.

Chapter 5 integrates the findings of the two studies and formulates the contributions of the thesis. For research on digital innovation, the thesis shows that, in cultural domains, digital technologies act upon a product nature that is already symbolically unstable and relationally constituted, an aspect that the literature developed on functional products does not capture. For innovation management in meaning-intensive contexts, the five mechanisms offer an explanatory and prescriptive framework for structuring innovation processes. For research on the creative industries, the thesis connects industry-level dynamics with the ontological experience of individual creators in an emerging market. The practical implications address cultural managers and entrepreneurs, public policymakers and platform operators, whose design decisions have ontological implications for the formation of cultural products. The limitations of the research, related to the synchronic character of the studies and the focus on the music sector and on the creators' perspective, open future directions concerning the role of audiences as co-constitutive agents, the constitutive power of platform architecture and the evolution of ontological reconstitution over time.

Overall, the thesis shows that digital transformation does not merely change how cultural products are developed, distributed or monetized, but reconstitutes what they are: the configuration of authorship, the conditions of existence, the logic of formal closure and the material-performative identity of creative products.