

Bridging the Gap: Empowering Traditional Artisans and Artists Through Digital Marketplaces in Developing Economies

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ABSTRACT

Traditional artisans and artists in developing economies continue to face limited access to wider markets despite growing interest in authentic and culturally rooted products. In Baguio City, Philippines, a UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Art, many artisans still depend on local exhibitions, tourism, community events, and informal selling networks. Digital marketplaces may help expand visibility and income opportunities, but participation remains shaped by issues of trust, accessibility, logistics, digital confidence, and cultural representation.

This study examines the perspectives, readiness, and support needs of artisans and artists in Baguio City regarding digital marketplace participation. A qualitative descriptive research design was used, supported by descriptive survey indicators and thematic analysis. Data were gathered from eighteen artisans and artists representing visual arts, jewelry, weaving, and other creative sectors. The findings show that participants generally have strong digital readiness and interest in online selling, especially when supported by training, secure payment systems, transparent logistics, and culturally responsive platform features.

Thematic analysis identified five major themes: digital readiness and willingness to adapt, trust and security concerns, market visibility and audience reach, cultural preservation through storytelling, and the need for institutional and community support. The study contributes to current discussions on digital inclusion and creative economies by showing that meaningful digital participation requires more than access to technology. It also requires trust-building, cultural sensitivity, practical support, and community-centered platform design.

The paper recommends the development of culturally responsive digital marketplace systems supported by local government, academic institutions, creative organizations, technology partners, and artisan communities. These systems should prioritize accessibility, transparency, digital literacy, authenticity protection, and ethical representation of traditional and indigenous crafts.

Keywords: digital marketplace, artisans, creative economy, digital inclusion, cultural preservation, Baguio City, indigenous crafts

INTRODUCTION

Traditional artisans and artists play an important role in preserving cultural identity, sustaining local economies, and passing creative knowledge across generations. Their works represent more than artistic production. They reflect memory, identity, local history, and community heritage. In many developing economies, however, artisans continue to face difficulty reaching broader markets due to limited visibility, geographic barriers, and uneven access to digital systems.

The growth of digital commerce has changed how products are promoted, distributed, and purchased. Online marketplaces and digital platforms allow small producers to connect with customers beyond their local communities. UNCTAD (2024) emphasizes that digitalization can support more inclusive economic participation when it is managed with attention to access, sustainability, and development needs. For creative sectors, this means that digital tools can help expand visibility and strengthen market access for cultural producers.

Within Southeast Asia, the creative economy has gained increasing attention as a source of livelihood, cultural sustainability, and inclusive development. UNESCO (2022) recognizes cultural and creative industries as important contributors to employment, community resilience, and sustainable development. However, the integration of traditional artisans into digital economies remains uneven, especially in communities where digital participation intersects with cultural sensitivity, authenticity concerns, and limited operational support.

Baguio City provides a meaningful setting for this study. Recognized as a UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Art, the city is home to diverse artists, craft makers, and indigenous creative communities. Many local artisans participate in exhibits, markets, tourism-related events, and community selling spaces. While these channels remain valuable, dependence on physical selling environments may limit income opportunities and expose artisans to market disruptions

Digital inclusion is therefore central to this discussion. Digital inclusion does not only refer to internet access. It also includes digital skills, affordability, usability, trust, institutional support, and meaningful participation in online systems (van Dijk, 2020). In the context of artisans, digital inclusion also involves ethical representation of cultural identity and protection from misrepresentation or exploitation in digital spaces.

Similar studies in developing contexts show that small creative producers often face overlapping barriers related to logistics, trust, digital confidence, platform accessibility, and market visibility. However, the way these barriers are experienced differs by local culture, craft type, and community structure. This highlights the need for context-specific approaches when designing digital platforms for artisan communities.

Despite growing interest in digital entrepreneurship and creative economies, fewer studies examine how artisans themselves perceive digital marketplaces and what support they need to participate with confidence. Many studies focus on technology adoption, while less attention is given to cultural preservation, authenticity, trust-building, and local realities.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the perspectives of artisans and artists in Baguio City regarding digital marketplace participation. Rather than focusing only on commercial opportunity, the study examines how digital platforms may support cultural preservation, market visibility, trust, and inclusive participation when designed around the actual needs of artisan communities.

Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Examine the digital readiness and online selling perspectives of artisans and artists in Baguio City;
2. Identify the support systems, platform features, and operational needs required for confident participation in digital marketplaces; and
3. Explore how digital marketplaces may support both economic participation and cultural preservation among artisan communities.

The study contributes to discussions on culturally responsive digital transformation within creative industries. It also provides practical insights for policymakers, educators, platform developers, and creative organizations seeking to support local artisans while protecting cultural integrity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Inclusion and Creative Economies

Digital inclusion refers to equitable and meaningful participation in digital environments. It includes access to technology, digital literacy, affordability, usability, and the ability to benefit from online systems (van Dijk, 2020). In developing economies, digital inclusion is closely linked to entrepreneurship, social mobility, and market participation. However, unequal access to digital tools and support continues to affect marginalized and culturally rooted communities.

Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) argue that digital participation should be understood not only through access, but also through social, cultural, and economic conditions. For artisans and small creative entrepreneurs, this means that digital inclusion requires more than being online. It requires systems that help them sell, communicate, protect their work, and sustain engagement.

The creative economy is also increasingly recognized as a driver of inclusive growth. UNESCO (2022) highlights the role of cultural and creative industries in strengthening sustainable development, employment, and cultural identity. Digital platforms can extend these opportunities by helping creators reach wider audiences and connect with consumers who value authenticity and cultural meaning.

The Asian Development Bank (2021) also notes the importance of creative industries in building inclusive and resilient recovery pathways. However, many small creative producers continue to experience barriers related to digital capability, logistics, payment systems, and market visibility.

Digital Marketplaces and Artisan Participation

Digital marketplaces provide online spaces where sellers can display products, communicate with buyers, and complete transactions. For artisans, these platforms may support visibility, direct customer engagement, and expanded market reach. However, marketplace participation is not only a technical issue. It is also shaped by confidence, trust, cultural identity, and platform design.

OECD (2021) explains that digital transformation can help small and medium enterprises improve productivity, access resources, and connect to wider markets. However, SMEs often face barriers such as limited skills, digital security concerns, and lack of appropriate support. These concerns are relevant to artisans, whose work is often handmade, culturally grounded, and difficult to fit into standard e-commerce models.

Trust is also a major factor in online participation. For small sellers, secure payment systems, transparent pricing, order tracking, and reliable customer service are important conditions for adoption. Without these safeguards, sellers may hesitate to use digital marketplaces even when they have the basic skills and tools to do so.

Cultural Preservation in Digital Environments

Digital platforms may also support cultural preservation by allowing artisans to share the stories, meanings, and traditions behind their work. UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that culture should be recognized as a global public good and supported through policies that protect creative expression and cultural diversity.

For artisan communities, digital storytelling can help customers understand the value of handmade products beyond price. It can communicate the cultural process, materials, symbols, and identity connected to each craft. However, digital commercialization may also create risks. Cultural products may be copied, misrepresented, or separated from their original meaning if platforms do not include safeguards for authenticity and ethical representation.

This study builds on these discussions by examining how artisans in Baguio City perceive both the opportunities and risks of digital marketplace participation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design supported by descriptive quantitative survey indicators. This design was selected to capture both general response patterns and deeper participant perspectives regarding digital marketplace participation among artisans and artists in Baguio City.

A qualitative descriptive approach was appropriate because the study aimed to understand participant experiences, concerns, and support needs within a localized artisan context. The study also applied an

indigenous-informed and culturally sensitive lens by recognizing the importance of cultural preservation, ethical representation, and community-centered participation.

Participants

The study involved eighteen artisans and artists from Baguio City. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. They were invited based on their active involvement in creative or craft-related work and their willingness to participate in the survey.

The participant group included visual artists, jewelry artisans, textile or weaving artisans, and handmade craft producers. Visual artists comprised the majority of participants, followed by jewelry artisans and smaller representation from textile and other craft categories.

The sample size was considered appropriate for exploratory qualitative inquiry within a localized artisan context. The study does not claim statistical generalization. Instead, it focuses on thematic depth, contextual understanding, and recurring patterns in participant responses. The relatively small sample size is acknowledged as a limitation, but it remains useful for generating insights into artisan perspectives within the Baguio creative community.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through a structured online survey with Likert-scale items and one open-ended question. The survey examined digital readiness, online selling experiences, trust and security concerns, support needs, perceptions of cultural preservation, and desired marketplace features.

Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and the academic use of the data before completing the survey.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequency and mean scores, were used to summarize participant responses to the Likert-scale items. These indicators were not used for statistical generalization, but to support thematic interpretation and provide context for the qualitative findings.

Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step process: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

To support rigor and trustworthiness, responses were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Initial codes were grouped into categories and later refined into broader themes. The emerging themes were compared with the descriptive survey indicators to check consistency between the numerical trends and participant responses. Representative participant responses were also reviewed repeatedly to ensure alignment between the final themes and participant intent.

Researcher reflexivity was practiced throughout the coding process. This helped reduce interpretive bias and supported a more careful reading of participant responses.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed institutional ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential and reported only in aggregated form.

The study also recognized the cultural sensitivity surrounding traditional crafts and indigenous artistic expression. Care was taken to avoid exploitative interpretation, cultural misrepresentation, or commercialization of participant responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive survey indicators were used to support thematic interpretation of participant responses. The findings are presented through three summary tables and discussed according to the major themes identified through thematic analysis.

Participant Profile

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants according to primary craft specialization.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Distribution by Craft Type

Craft Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Visual Arts	12	66.67
Jewelry Craft	4	22.22
Textile / Weaving	1	5.56
Other (Handbound Notebooks)	1	5.56
Total	18	100.00

The participant profile shows that most respondents were engaged in visual arts, followed by jewelry craft. Smaller representation came from textile or weaving and other handmade creative products. This distribution reflects the strong presence of visual and craft-based creative sectors within the participant group.

Digital Readiness and Willingness to Participate

The findings indicate that participants generally demonstrate strong digital readiness and openness toward digital marketplace participation.

Most respondents reported having sufficient internet access and device capability to support online selling. Participants also expressed confidence in the potential of digital marketplaces to improve product visibility and expand customer reach.

Table 2. Digital Readiness and Marketplace Perception Scores

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
I have sufficient internet access and device capability to sell online consistently.	4.72	Very High
I believe a digital marketplace can increase my sales and visibility.	4.50	Very High
I need a platform that is easy to use on a mobile phone and simple for uploading products.	4.33	High
If training and support are provided, I am willing to sell through a dedicated digital marketplace for artisans.	4.22	High

I believe there is strong demand for authentic Baguio artisan products online.	4.11	High
I receive inquiries or interest from buyers outside Baguio, including other provinces or overseas.	4.06	High

Scale Interpretation:

4.50 to 5.00 = Very High; 3.50 to 4.49 = High; 2.50 to 3.49 = Moderate; 1.50 to 2.49 = Low; 1.00 to 1.49 = Very Low.

These findings suggest that artisans and artists in Baguio City are not resistant to digital participation. Many already possess the basic technological capacity needed to engage in digital commerce. However, readiness alone does not automatically lead to marketplace participation. Responses show that willingness increases when training, onboarding, and platform guidance are available.

One participant shared, “I honestly did not experience selling my works online, but if given the opportunity and proper guidance, I would be willing to try.” This response reflects the importance of confidence-building and practical support. The finding supports Ragnedda and Ruiu’s (2020) view that digital participation is shaped by more than access. It also depends on social support, skills, confidence, and meaningful opportunity.

Market Demand and Audience Reach

Participants generally perceived strong market potential for authentic Baguio artisan products in online spaces. Some respondents reported receiving inquiries from buyers outside Baguio, including customers from other provinces and overseas. This suggests that market interest already exists beyond local exhibitions, tourism events, and physical selling environments.

Open-ended responses emphasized visibility and audience reach. One respondent explained, “Market reach. If we only reach fellow artists, nothing will be sold.” Another noted the need for “adequate marketing campaigns so my products will be visible to the right audience.”

These responses show that artisans view digital marketplaces not only as transaction tools, but also as platforms for promotion and discoverability. For this reason, digital marketplaces for artisans should include marketing support, product visibility features, and audience-building strategies. This aligns with UNESCO’s (2022) discussion of creative ecosystems, where cultural production depends on supportive policies, visibility, and sustainable participation.

Trust, Security, and Transparency

Trust emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent themes in the study. Participants emphasized the importance of secure payments, transparent fees, order tracking, and reliable customer support. These concerns are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Trust, Security, and Platform Support Indicators

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
I need clear and transparent information on fees, pricing, and order tracking.	4.67	Very High
I need secure and locally accessible payment options.	4.67	Very High
A digital marketplace can help preserve cultural heritage by sharing artisan stories and meanings.	4.56	Very High

I need features that protect authenticity, such as verified artisan profiles and product storytelling.	4.39	High
I need support for shipping logistics such as courier options, pickup support, or guidance.	4.33	High
I worry that selling online may misrepresent or commercialize cultural crafts without proper guidelines.	3.83	High

Scale Interpretation:

4.50 to 5.00 = Very High; 3.50 to 4.49 = High; 2.50 to 3.49 = Moderate; 1.50 to 2.49 = Low; 1.00 to 1.49 = Very Low.

Participants expressed concern about scams, unpaid orders, unreliable buyers, and payment disputes. One respondent shared the need for “reliable customer support and a trusted payment system so I can safely sell my products and receive payments without problems.” Another emphasized the importance of a “user-friendly interface and protection from scammers.”

These findings indicate that artisans need more than access to a platform. They need assurance that digital transactions are safe, transparent, and supported. Similar concerns are also observed among small enterprises in developing contexts, where trust and digital security affect online participation (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Accessibility and Platform Simplicity

Ease of use was another important consideration. Respondents preferred platforms that are simple, mobile-friendly, and accessible for first-time online sellers. This preference reflects the practical realities of many artisans who balance creative work with limited time, resources, and technical support.

Participants highlighted the need for easy product uploading, clear navigation, and practical onboarding. Platforms that are too complex may discourage participation, especially among artisans who are new to formal e-commerce systems.

This finding supports digital inclusion literature, which explains that meaningful access must include usability, confidence, and the ability to participate effectively (van Dijk, 2020). For artisans, this means that platform design should not be overly technical. It should be simple enough to use while still providing the tools needed for selling, storytelling, and customer engagement.

Cultural Preservation and Authenticity

A major finding of the study is that participants viewed digital marketplaces as potential spaces for cultural preservation. Many respondents valued features such as artisan storytelling, verified profiles, and authenticity protection. They recognized that online platforms could help customers understand the meaning, process, and cultural value behind handmade products.

At the same time, participants expressed concern that digital selling may misrepresent or commercialize cultural crafts without proper guidelines. This reflects an important tension between economic opportunity and cultural protection.

The findings suggest that artisan-centered digital platforms should not function only as commercial spaces. They should also serve as ethical and educational spaces that respect cultural identity, creative ownership, and local heritage. Similar concerns have been raised in broader discussions on culture and sustainable development, where digital systems must protect diversity and creative expression while expanding access to opportunity (UNESCO, 2022; UNCTAD, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perspectives, readiness, and support needs of artisans and artists in Baguio City regarding digital marketplace participation. The findings show that artisans are increasingly open to digital participation and recognize the opportunities that online platforms may provide for visibility, audience reach, and cultural storytelling.

Contrary to the assumption that traditional artisans may resist digital technologies, participants generally demonstrated strong digital readiness and willingness to adapt when support systems are available. However, the findings also show that meaningful participation requires more than technological access.

Trust, transparency, accessibility, logistics support, authenticity protection, and culturally responsive design emerged as important conditions for digital marketplace participation. Participants emphasized the need for secure payment systems, scam protection, user-friendly interfaces, marketing support, and ethical cultural representation.

The study further highlights that digital marketplaces may serve both economic and cultural functions. They can support market access while also providing space for heritage communication, artisan storytelling, and authenticity protection.

Overall, the findings contribute to current discussions on digital inclusion and creative economies by showing that inclusive digital transformation must account for both the economic and cultural realities of artisan communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, digital marketplaces intended for artisan communities should be designed with accessibility, simplicity, and mobile usability in mind. User-centered systems can reduce barriers for first-time online sellers and improve sustained participation.

Platform developers and stakeholders should also prioritize trust-building mechanisms such as secure payment systems, transparent pricing, verified buyer systems, order tracking, and responsive customer support. These elements are necessary to address concerns about scams and unreliable transactions.

Digital literacy and online entrepreneurship training should be expanded to help artisans build confidence in product promotion, online selling, customer communication, and platform management.

Digital platforms should also include authenticity protection and cultural storytelling features. These may include verified artisan profiles, product origin stories, cultural context sections, and ethical guidelines to prevent misrepresentation.

Finally, collaboration among local government units, academic institutions, technology developers, tourism sectors, and creative organizations is recommended to support sustainable and community-centered digital transformation within artisan sectors.

Future studies may include larger and more diverse artisan populations across different regions to strengthen comparative analysis and deepen understanding of culturally grounded digital participation.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Condensed Survey Questionnaire

Overview

This survey explored the perspectives of artisans and artists regarding digital marketplace participation in Baguio City. It examined digital readiness, online selling challenges, market demand, operational needs, and cultural preservation. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and reported only in aggregated form.

Response Scale

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

Section A. Participant Profile

Primary craft type

Textile / Weaving; Woodcraft; Metalcraft; Visual Art; Jewelry; Pottery / Ceramics; Other

Years practicing craft

0 to 2 years; 3 to 5 years; 6 to 10 years; 11 years and above

Main selling channel

In-person markets or events; resellers or shops; social media; online marketplaces; direct orders or private messages

Membership in artisan or artist group

Yes or No. If yes, participants were asked to indicate the group.

Section B. Digital Readiness and Challenges

Participants rated their agreement with statements on online selling tasks, digital payments, logistics challenges, scam concerns, internet access, and willingness to join a dedicated marketplace if support is provided.

Section C. Market Demand and User Base

Participants rated their agreement with statements on buyer inquiries outside Baguio, demand for authentic Baguio artisan products, and the potential of digital marketplaces to increase sales and visibility.

Section D. Technical and Operational Requirements

Participants rated their agreement with statements on mobile usability, product uploading, transparent fees, order tracking, shipping support, secure payment options, and authenticity protection.

Section E. Cultural Preservation

Participants rated their agreement with statements on cultural storytelling, heritage preservation, and concerns about misrepresentation or commercialization.

Section F. Open-Ended Question

What is the single most important feature or support you need to confidently sell online?

Consent Statement

Participation was voluntary. Participants could skip any question or withdraw at any time without penalty. No personally identifiable information was collected. By submitting the survey, participants confirmed that they understood the purpose of the study and agreed to participate.

Appendix B. Sample Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Sample Response	Interpretation
Market Visibility and Audience Reach	“Market reach. If we only reach fellow artists nothing will be sold.”	Participants emphasized the need for broader visibility and customer access.
Market Visibility and Audience Reach	“Adequate marketing campaigns so my products will be visible to the right audience.”	Artisans viewed digital platforms as promotional ecosystems, not only selling spaces.
Trust and Security	“Reliable customer support and a trusted payment system so I can safely sell my products and receive payments without problems.”	Secure payment and customer support were seen as essential to participation.
Trust and Security	“User-friendly interface and protection from scammers.”	Participants linked confidence in digital selling with safety and ease of use.
Accessibility and Ease of Use	“If given the opportunity and proper guidance, I would be willing to try selling online.”	Guidance and onboarding may help first-time online sellers participate.

Appendix C. Thematic Coding Matrix

Initial Codes	Category	Final Theme
Scam concerns	Trust and Safety	Trust and Security
Fear of unpaid orders	Trust and Safety	Trust and Security
Secure payments	Platform Reliability	Trust and Security
Audience reach	Promotion and Visibility	Market Visibility and Reach

Marketing support	Promotion and Visibility	Market Visibility and Reach
Product discoverability	Promotion and Visibility	Market Visibility and Reach
Mobile-friendly platform	Platform Accessibility	Accessibility and Ease of Use
Easy uploading process	Platform Accessibility	Accessibility and Ease of Use
Need for training	Capacity Building	Accessibility and Ease of Use
Product storytelling	Cultural Representation	Cultural Preservation and Authenticity
Verified artisan profiles	Authenticity Protection	Cultural Preservation and Authenticity
Ethical representation	Cultural Protection	Cultural Preservation and Authenticity
Logistics support	Operational Support	Operational and Institutional Support
Shipping guidance	Operational Support	Operational and Institutional Support
Customer support	Institutional Support	Operational and Institutional Support