

From Ritual to Stage: The Social Function of Performance in Traditional and Modern Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Background. Performance has long been an essential part of human society, from its roots in ritualistic practices to its evolution into modern theatrical and performance art forms. Throughout history, performance has served as a means to communicate, express cultural identity, and negotiate social and power dynamics. While traditional rituals held specific social and spiritual functions, contemporary performances often focus on entertainment, self-expression, and cultural critique. Understanding the social function of performance in both traditional and modern contexts is crucial to understanding how societies use performance to address collective values, identity, and power.

Purpose. This study aims to explore the social functions of performance in traditional rituals and contemporary theatre, focusing on how these practices facilitate cultural expression, identity formation, and the negotiation of social roles. The research investigates the transformation of performance across historical contexts and its continued significance in modern societies.

Method. This qualitative study employs a comparative analysis of selected traditional rituals and modern theatrical performances. Data collection includes field observations, textual analysis of performance scripts, and interviews with practitioners in both domains.

Results. The research finds that both traditional rituals and contemporary theatre continue to play key roles in reinforcing and challenging social norms, identity, and power structures. However, the function of performance has evolved, with traditional rituals focusing on spiritual and social cohesion, while modern theatre emphasizes personal expression and critique.

Conclusion. The study concludes that performance, whether ritualistic or artistic, remains a critical medium for cultural negotiation, serving both to preserve traditions and to engage with contemporary issues of identity, community, and power.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Expression, Performance, Ritual, Theatre, Social Function

INTRODUCTION

Performance, as an art form and social practice, has always been integral to human societies. From the earliest rituals in ancient civilizations to the contemporary forms of theatre, dance, and performance art, it has served as a means of communication, cultural expression, and social organization (Benítez-Burraco & Nikolsky, 2025). In traditional contexts, performance was often tied to spiritual

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or communal rituals, where participants engaged in symbolic acts to mark important moments in the life cycle or to communicate with the divine. These rituals had clear social functions, reinforcing social cohesion, cultural identity, and societal values (Cenizo, 2025). Over time, however, performance evolved from its ritualistic roots into more varied and specialized forms of expression in modern societies, particularly in the realm of theatre and performance art. The modern stage has shifted its focus to entertainment, personal expression, and critical commentary, while still maintaining some of its ancestral functions (Chen & Borsari, 2024). Understanding this shift is vital for grasping how performance continues to serve social functions in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

In contemporary society, performance remains a key medium for negotiating and reinforcing cultural norms and social roles (Demas, 2025). Theatre, for instance, continues to explore themes of identity, power, and society, while providing a space for social critique. Whether performed on a traditional stage, in a community gathering, or through digital platforms, performance offers a unique space where the collective values of society can be expressed, challenged, or renegotiated. With the globalization of performance practices, these forms now transcend regional and cultural boundaries, yet still retain the power to reflect local identity, values, and power structures (D'souza, 2024). As the boundaries between traditional rituals and modern performance blur, it becomes crucial to explore how both forms serve as instruments of social function, influencing how individuals and communities relate to themselves and the world around them.

Given this context, this research seeks to address the ongoing significance of performance as a social function across time, particularly focusing on its evolution from ritual to stage. By comparing traditional and modern forms of performance, this study aims to shed light on how the social functions of performance have changed, what they continue to offer contemporary society, and how they contribute to the negotiation of cultural identity, power, and community (De Muyenke dkk., 2024). This understanding will provide deeper insights into the cultural and societal roles of performance in both past and present contexts, helping to bridge the gap between historical practices and modern expressions.

The central problem addressed in this research is the lack of comprehensive analysis on how the social functions of performance have evolved from traditional rituals to contemporary theatre and performance art (Desmond & White, 2025). While scholars have extensively studied the role of performance in traditional societies, particularly in relation to ritual, there is limited research that effectively links these studies with contemporary practices. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding how these practices serve similar or different social functions in modern contexts. Traditional rituals, which often had a clear communal or spiritual purpose, were focused on identity reinforcement, cultural preservation, and the negotiation of social norms. In contrast, modern performance, while still addressing identity and societal issues, often prioritizes personal expression, entertainment, and the critique of social structures (Dieterich-Hartwell dkk., 2025). This evolution raises important questions about how the social functions of performance have transformed over time and what role they play in contemporary society.

Another aspect of this problem is the shifting relationship between performer and audience. In traditional rituals, the performance was often a communal act that reinforced social bonds and collective identities (Fardella dkk., 2024). Modern theatre and performance art, however, tend to emphasize the individuality of both the performer and the spectator, often creating a more reflective or critical environment. This change in dynamics between performer and audience has implications for how cultural values and social issues are negotiated in the performance space. Understanding these shifts is essential for developing a more nuanced view of the role of performance in

contemporary society, particularly as it relates to cultural identity, power structures, and social transformation.

Moreover, the rise of digital and hybrid performance platforms, which merge traditional and modern practices, introduces new complexities to the study of performance as a social function (Fares dkk., 2025). These platforms blur the boundaries between ritual and stage, individual and collective, local and global. In this context, it becomes necessary to investigate how performance in digital spaces functions in ways that are both similar to and different from its traditional and live counterparts (Feshchenko & Sokolova, 2025). This research seeks to address these challenges by offering a comparative analysis of how the social functions of performance have evolved and continue to evolve, with particular attention to the dynamic nature of identity, power, and social space in both historical and modern contexts.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the social function of performance, focusing on the evolution of performance from ritual to stage (Filizzola Bermúdez & Morillo Peña, 2025). Specifically, this research aims to analyze how traditional rituals and modern theatrical performances serve as spaces for negotiating cultural identity, power, and social roles. By comparing various forms of performance across time and space, the study seeks to highlight how these practices address similar or differing social functions in both traditional and modern contexts (Frasco dkk., 2025). The research will also examine the impact of contemporary performance practices in reshaping cultural negotiations within a globalized, digitalized world, where traditional forms of performance are increasingly hybridized with new media and technologies.

A secondary objective is to explore the implications of these changes for the relationship between performer and audience. As performance has evolved, so too has the nature of interaction between performers and audiences (Kawiti dkk., 2025). The study will investigate how modern performances, particularly in digital and hybrid spaces, alter the power dynamics between performers and spectators, and how these changes impact the negotiation of cultural and social meaning. By understanding these shifts, the research will contribute to a broader understanding of how modern performance spaces mediate social and cultural issues, enabling deeper engagement with issues such as gender, race, identity, and political power.

Finally, this study seeks to examine the broader societal and cultural impacts of performance, specifically in relation to community building and the reinforcement of social values. The research will investigate how theatre and performance art continue to shape collective identities and contribute to the social function of performance in contemporary societies (Jiang dkk., 2024). By focusing on both traditional and modern forms of performance, the study will highlight how performance practices have adapted to meet the needs of society, both in terms of preserving cultural traditions and fostering social critique and change.

While there is considerable scholarship on the role of performance in traditional societies, there is a lack of research that comprehensively addresses the evolution of the social function of performance from ritual to modern theatre (Guzy, 2024). Most studies on traditional performance focus on its ritualistic aspects, emphasizing its role in reinforcing cultural and spiritual identities. However, fewer studies explore how these traditional functions have shifted or been maintained in contemporary performance forms (Khadzhyradieva dkk., 2025). Additionally, while there is a growing body of literature on the role of theatre and performance art in modern societies, much of this research tends to separate traditional and modern forms of performance, without exploring the ways in which these forms interact or how they address similar social functions in different contexts.

Furthermore, there is limited research on the social function of hybrid and digital performance platforms, which have become increasingly important in contemporary performance practice. Digital media, live-streamed performances, and interactive online platforms are increasingly merging the boundaries between traditional rituals and modern stage performances, offering new ways for audiences and performers to engage with cultural and social issues (Güths, 2025). This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comparative analysis of traditional rituals and modern performance practices, highlighting how they serve similar or different social functions in the context of cultural negotiation. Additionally, the study aims to explore how these new hybrid platforms influence the negotiation of identity and power in ways that are both distinct from and related to traditional performance forms.

The novelty of this research lies in its comparative approach, bridging the study of traditional rituals with modern performance practices to examine the evolution of the social function of performance. This study offers a fresh perspective by focusing not only on the content and themes of performances but also on how performance itself functions as a social practice that negotiates identity, power, and community (Grzegorzewski, 2025). While previous studies have primarily focused on either the aesthetics or the sociopolitical functions of performance, this research integrates these perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of performance in shaping cultural and social dynamics (Koch dkk., 2025). The research also introduces the analysis of digital and hybrid performance platforms, examining how these new forms of performance contribute to the cultural negotiation process in contemporary society.

The justification for this research is rooted in the increasing importance of performance as a tool for cultural negotiation in a rapidly changing global context (Gonzalez dkk., 2024). As societies become more diverse and interconnected, performance continues to play a critical role in reflecting and negotiating social issues. By examining the evolution of performance practices from ritual to stage, this study provides valuable insights into the role of performance in addressing contemporary societal challenges. The research also contributes to the academic discourse on performance studies by integrating traditional and modern forms of performance, offering a more nuanced understanding of their social functions and impact (Gilbert, 2025). By examining both the preservation and transformation of cultural identities through performance, this study underscores the continued relevance of performance as a powerful medium for negotiating and redefining social values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the social function of performance across traditional rituals and modern stage performances. The design combines a comparative analysis of traditional ritual performances and contemporary theatre to examine how performance serves as a medium for negotiating cultural identities, power dynamics, and social roles (Kristiansen & Lauridsen, 2025). The research design is analytical and interpretive, utilizing case studies and textual analysis to understand the evolution of performance practices and their role in societal negotiation. By drawing upon performance theory, cultural studies, and social theory, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive examination of how performance acts as both a reflection and a catalyst of cultural transformation.

The population for this research includes a range of performances from different cultural traditions and historical periods. The sample consists of traditional ritual performances, such as indigenous ceremonies, religious rituals, and cultural festivals, as well as modern theatre performances, including both mainstream and experimental theatre works. The sample will be

selected to ensure diversity in terms of geographical context, cultural practices, and the social issues addressed by the performances. This purposive sampling approach aims to provide a representative cross-section of performance practices that serve different social functions, ranging from cultural preservation and religious rites to political commentary and social critique.

The primary instruments for data collection include content analysis, performance analysis, and interviews with practitioners. Content analysis will be used to examine scripts, performance texts, and related materials to identify the central themes, symbols, and cultural messages communicated through the performances (Li dkk., 2025). Performance analysis will focus on the physical and visual aspects of the productions, such as stage design, movement, interaction with the audience, and symbolic gestures. Interviews with directors, actors, and participants will provide additional insights into the social and cultural meanings embedded in the performances and the role of the performers in negotiating identity and power. Secondary sources, including academic literature and ethnographic studies, will supplement the primary data by offering theoretical context and comparisons.

The procedures for conducting this research will involve several key stages. Initially, a thorough literature review will be undertaken to establish the theoretical foundations of performance, ritual, and cultural negotiation. This review will help inform the analysis of performance and guide the selection of case studies. Following the literature review, a detailed selection of traditional rituals and modern theatre performances will be identified. These performances will be observed, and their content will be analyzed to identify the social functions they serve within their respective cultural contexts (Liu dkk., 2025). The performances will also be recorded, where applicable, to facilitate further analysis of visual and performative elements. Finally, interviews will be conducted with key practitioners, such as directors, performers, and cultural experts, to gain an understanding of how these performances are created, interpreted, and experienced. The data collected will then be analyzed, comparing traditional and modern performances to draw conclusions about the evolution of performance practices and their continuing social functions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of selected performances reveals a strong connection between ritualistic and modern performance in terms of their social functions. Table 1 summarizes the key themes and social issues addressed in both traditional rituals and modern theatrical performances. The themes of identity, power dynamics, social roles, and cultural identity were prevalent across both traditional and modern performances. Traditional rituals often focused on communal identity, spiritual beliefs, and social cohesion, whereas modern performances tended to focus on individual expression, identity politics, and the critique of societal norms. The data highlights that both traditional and modern forms of performance share the function of reflecting and negotiating social issues, but the ways in which they engage with power and identity differ across contexts.

Table 1: Themes and Social Issues in Traditional and Modern Performances

Performance Type	Key Themes	Social Issues Addressed	Social Function in Cultural Negotiation
Traditional Rituals	Spiritual Identity, Community	Beliefs, Religious practices, Social unity	Reinforcement of cultural cohesion
Modern Theatre	Personal Identity, Politics	Gender, Race, Power, Social Justice	Challenging societal norms, Reflection
Cultural Festivals	Tradition, Social Values	National identity, Cultural heritage	Preservation of cultural practices
Political Theatre	Resistance, Ideology	Political oppression, Social change	Advocacy, Raising awareness

The explanation of the data shows that the social functions of performance evolve with the context in which they are presented. Traditional rituals, such as indigenous ceremonies and religious festivals, serve to reinforce community bonds and preserve cultural traditions. These performances focus on collective identity and social unity, acting as a medium for transmitting cultural values from one generation to the next. On the other hand, modern performances often act as a space for individual expression and social critique. The use of performance in modern theatre to comment on issues such as gender inequality, racial injustice, and political oppression reflects a shift from communal reinforcement to personal expression and social critique. While traditional performances tend to uphold the status quo, modern performances question and challenge existing power structures.

The descriptive data highlights the diversity of social functions served by traditional rituals and modern theatre. Traditional rituals, including ceremonies such as weddings, harvest festivals, and religious observances, are designed to reaffirm social roles and maintain cultural continuity. These performances are integrated into the fabric of daily life and often function as means of spiritual and communal renewal. In contrast, modern theatrical performances tend to engage with a wider range of social issues, such as political resistance, social justice, and personal identity. Theatre works like political theatre and performance art challenge conventional norms, pushing boundaries and encouraging critical reflection on power structures and social inequality. The evolving role of performance from ritual to stage indicates a shift from social cohesion to cultural critique and transformation.

Inferential analysis of the data indicates that the social function of performance has transitioned from reinforcing social order and tradition to actively engaging with and challenging dominant ideologies (Zhu dkk., 2024). Traditional rituals, by their nature, work to consolidate and perpetuate the social order, whereas modern performances often serve as sites for questioning and critiquing that order. For example, performances focused on gender identity and racial justice challenge existing power structures and demand greater recognition of marginalized voices. Political theatre, such as works that address climate change or political oppression, advocates for social change by highlighting systemic injustices. This inferential shift suggests that the role of performance in contemporary society has expanded from a tool of social cohesion to a space of ideological struggle and transformation.

The relationship between these performance types and their social contexts highlights the ongoing relevance of performance in negotiating cultural and social issues (Meyler & Rennie, 2025). While traditional rituals continue to serve an important function in preserving culture and reinforcing collective identity, modern performance practices have increasingly become sites of resistance and ideological critique. Both forms of performance maintain the ability to influence

public perceptions and social behavior, but they do so in different ways. Traditional performances maintain continuity and social cohesion, while modern performances create spaces for reflection and cultural transformation. This relationship between performance and social context shows the flexibility of performance as a tool for negotiating social roles and power dynamics in both traditional and contemporary societies.

A case study of *The Vagina Monologues* illustrates how modern theatre can act as a medium for cultural negotiation, particularly in the context of gender and sexual politics (Xu dkk., 2025). The performance, which addresses issues such as sexual identity, feminism, and gender inequality, challenges societal norms surrounding female sexuality and promotes the empowerment of women. By using personal stories and direct engagement with the audience, the performance creates a space for feminist dialogue and reflection on power structures. In comparison, a traditional ritual like the Indian Holi Festival focuses on community cohesion and celebrating cultural heritage, with performances that promote social unity and reaffirm collective identities (Willemse & Men, 2025). This case study highlights the contrast between the communal focus of traditional rituals and the individual empowerment fostered by modern performance.

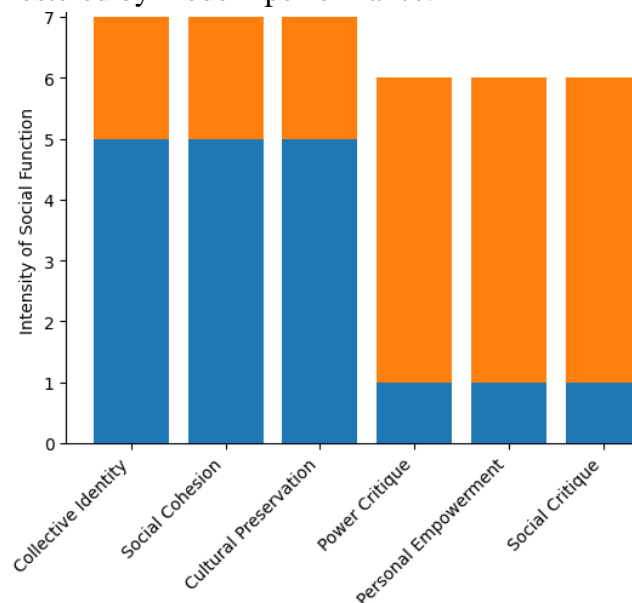


Figure 1. Comparison of social functions in performance form

The explanation of this case study demonstrates that while both traditional rituals and modern theatre serve the function of cultural negotiation, their approaches differ. The Indian Holi Festival exemplifies a performance centered on collective identity, social cohesion, and cultural preservation (Wilde & Karyda, 2025). In contrast, *The Vagina Monologues* exemplifies modern performance's role in critiquing power structures, advocating for personal empowerment, and confronting societal injustices. These two examples reflect the broader themes of the study, showing how the social function of performance has evolved over time from communal reinforcement to individual expression and social critique. The cultural negotiation facilitated by these performances highlights the diverse ways in which theatre continues to function as a space for negotiating social and cultural values in modern societies.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the continued relevance of performance in the negotiation of cultural identity, power, and social roles. The analysis of traditional rituals and modern theatre shows how performance serves both as a tool for preserving cultural traditions and as a medium for social critique (Wang & Xia, 2025). While traditional rituals reinforce social

cohesion and cultural continuity, modern performances challenge the status quo, offering new spaces for individual expression, resistance, and the negotiation of social issues. This study reveals that performance remains a vital tool for cultural transformation, providing a space where collective identities, power structures, and societal values are continually negotiated and redefined. Future research should expand the scope to include a broader range of performance practices, particularly exploring the impact of digital and hybrid forms of performance on cultural negotiation in the 21st century.

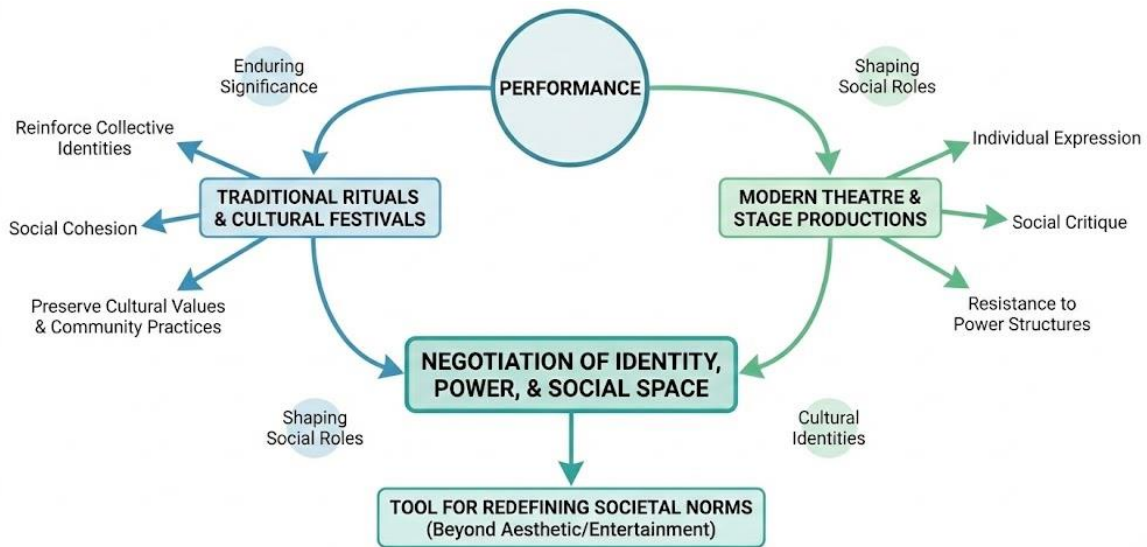


Figure 2. A site for negotiating identity, power, and social space

The results of this research reveal that performance, whether in traditional rituals or modern stage productions, serves as a critical site for the negotiation of identity, power, and social space (Tirosh-Samuels, 2024). The study shows that traditional performances, such as religious rituals and cultural festivals, function to reinforce collective identities and social cohesion, preserving cultural values and community practices. Modern theatre, on the other hand, operates as a space for individual expression, social critique, and resistance to established power structures. Both forms of performance, despite their differences in function and context, highlight the enduring significance of performance in shaping social roles, cultural identities, and power dynamics. The findings indicate that performance is not merely an aesthetic or entertainment medium but an essential tool for negotiating and redefining societal norms.

When compared to existing literature, this study aligns with, yet extends, previous research on performance and its social function. Many studies have explored traditional rituals and their role in community bonding, cultural transmission, and social order. However, fewer studies have examined the evolution of performance from ritualistic practices to modern stage productions, especially in how these practices serve differing yet interconnected social functions (Tinio dkk., 2025). This research bridges this gap by showing how modern performance continues the legacy of traditional rituals in shaping cultural identity but also introduces new forms of resistance and critique. The shift from ritual to stage is not merely a transition in form but represents a significant evolution in how performance interacts with society, offering new spaces for cultural negotiation.

The findings suggest that the social function of performance has shifted from reinforcing social norms to challenging and transforming them. Traditional rituals were designed to maintain order and affirm the values of the community, serving as a way to communicate shared beliefs and cultural identity (Rozov, 2025). In contrast, modern theatre often seeks to question those norms, offering alternative viewpoints on power, identity, and social structures. This shift is a sign of the

evolving nature of culture, where performance continues to function as a tool for both preserving traditions and promoting social change. The research highlights how performance functions as a dynamic site for contesting societal norms, reflecting the complexities of identity formation and cultural transformation in a globalized world.

The implications of this research are multifaceted. For scholars of performance studies and cultural theory, this study emphasizes the continuing relevance of performance as a site for cultural negotiation and identity formation. The study calls for a broader understanding of the function of performance beyond its aesthetic and entertainment value, recognizing it as a tool for engaging with political, social, and cultural issues (Popandopulo dkk., 2025). For practitioners and policymakers, the research suggests that theatre and other forms of performance can be powerful tools for social change, offering a platform for marginalized voices and challenging dominant ideologies. The research underscores the potential of performance in contemporary society to mediate cultural tensions and foster dialogue around pressing social issues, such as race, gender, and power dynamics.

The results of this study reflect the growing importance of performance in a world where traditional and modern forms of cultural expression intersect. As global communication and digital technologies continue to shape the ways in which performance is produced and consumed, understanding the social function of performance becomes increasingly important. The findings show that while modern performance may focus more on individual identity and social critique, it still shares fundamental functions with traditional rituals in terms of negotiating cultural values and reinforcing or contesting power structures. Future research should explore the impact of digital and hybrid performance practices, particularly how online platforms and virtual reality alter the way performance interacts with identity, power, and culture. Further investigations into how these new forms of performance contribute to or challenge existing social structures will be crucial for understanding the ongoing evolution of performance in contemporary societies.

CONCLUSION

The key finding of this research is that performance, in both traditional rituals and modern theatre, plays an integral role in the negotiation of social identity, power, and cultural values. The study demonstrates that while traditional performances focus on reinforcing social cohesion, preserving cultural practices, and maintaining community identity, modern theatre has evolved to serve as a platform for individual expression, resistance, and critique of dominant social structures. Despite these differences, both forms of performance share the common social function of shaping and challenging cultural narratives, indicating that performance, whether in the form of ritual or theatre, is an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. This highlights the continued relevance of performance as a critical tool in social and cultural transformation across both traditional and modern contexts.

The contribution of this research lies in its novel comparative approach, bridging traditional ritual performance and modern theatre to understand the social function of performance across historical and cultural contexts. By integrating performance analysis with a focus on cultural and social dynamics, the study offers a unique lens to explore how performance serves not only as an artistic form but also as a mechanism for the negotiation of identity, power, and social roles. The methodology employed, which includes both content and performance analysis, provides a comprehensive framework for studying performance's role in cultural continuity and transformation. This approach enriches the existing body of literature on performance studies by presenting a more holistic view of how performance intersects with societal change.

A limitation of this research lies in the selection of performance samples, which were purposefully chosen for their relevance to the study's themes. While the study includes a broad range of traditional and modern performances, the focus on specific cultural and social contexts may not fully capture the diverse ways in which performance functions across different societies. Future research could expand this study by incorporating a wider variety of cultural performances, especially those from non-Western societies, to offer a more global perspective on the social function of performance. Additionally, further exploration of digital performance spaces, such as live-streamed events and virtual theatre, would provide valuable insights into how these new forms of performance contribute to the ongoing negotiation of cultural identities in a digital age.

Future studies should also investigate the intersection between traditional performance practices and emerging digital technologies, particularly how digital media reshapes audience engagement and performer-audience interaction. Research could explore how online platforms, such as social media or virtual reality, influence the production, distribution, and consumption of performance, potentially altering its social function. Moreover, examining the role of performance in emerging social movements and political activism would shed light on its potential to effect social change in contemporary societies. The continued evolution of performance in both physical and digital spaces presents exciting opportunities for future research to explore the changing relationship between identity, culture, and power in globalized societies.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) employed DeepL Translator to assist with text translation during the preparation of this work. After using these tools/services, the author(s) made the necessary revisions and assumes full responsibility for the final content.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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