



Decline or Transformation: Lao Modern Culture Under a Social Media Lens

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Abstract

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This study investigates the cultural implications of the significant increase in social media users in Laos, which has grown nearly forty-fold since 2011. Using digital ethnography conducted between 2011 and 2024 on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, the research explores whether these digital shifts signify cultural decline or transformation. The analysis focuses on linguistic hybridity and the evolution of music as key indicators of cultural adaptation. Findings suggest that Lao culture is not in decline but is instead skillfully incorporating global influences while actively participating in digital spaces. This demonstrates a trajectory of cultural transformation. The study contributes to the field of digital anthropology by offering insights into how Lao culture negotiates its identity within an increasingly interconnected digital environment.

Keywords: Lao Culture, Social Media, Cultural Adaptation, Digital Anthropology

1. Introduction

Digital anthropology (e.g., Boellstorff, 2014; Horst & Miller, 2012) provides the theoretical foundation for this study. While broad research on social media's societal impact exists (Miller et al., 2019), applying these findings universally is challenging, especially in unique contexts like Laos, the world's only Buddhist socialist state. This study thus investigates Laos's unique internet culture, where digital platforms intersect with traditional values and political structures. This landscape is complicated by loanwords, linguistic and cultural similarities with Thailand (Isan) that can blur distinctions, and the use of transnational languages like Thai alongside efforts to maintain distinct national identities.

Laos exhibits rapid digital adoption, particularly among its young population (median age 24.9, data from Worldometers, 2025). By early 2025, internet penetration reached 63.6%, with social media users growing nearly 40-fold from 100,000 in 2011 to 4.25 million (Kemp, 2011; 2025). This demographic shift, foundational to this study, has seen platforms like Facebook supersede older forums (e.g., PunLao) for daily interaction. Nevertheless, limited social media ethnography exists for Laos to date, with early studies including Chapman (2004) on diaspora identity and Mayes (2009) on youth discussions.

Indeed, the integration of social media within Lao society is profound, reshaping key domains beyond

cultural expression. Its influence now extends to commerce (Manevong et al., 2020; Bounthachit et al., 2024), professional collaboration — exemplified by director Anixay Keola's use of Facebook to secure partnerships (Wise Kwai, 2012)—as well as emergency communications (Keoduangdeng et al., 2023) and online education (Bounviseth, 2020; Sisombath et al., 2024).

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a hybrid methodology that combines digital ethnography with social media content analysis to investigate the evolution and dynamics of social media culture in Laos.

2.1 Methodological Approach

This study employed digital ethnography (Boellstorff, 2015; Miller et al., 2019) and social media content analysis. Analysis was guided by Coleman's (2010) framework distinguishing cultural politics, vernacular culture, and prosaic digital media. Rather than a large-N dataset, the study relies on thick description of emblematic cases drawn from longitudinal ethnography (2011-2025). The year 2011 was selected as a baseline due to the rise of smartphones, Facebook's dominance, and the standardization of the Phetsarath OT font, which collectively spurred user-generated content.

This article is guided by three questions:

- 1) How do Lao users negotiate linguistic identity on social media?

2) In what ways do Facebook and other platforms function as arenas of civic voice and state regulation?

3) How has digital music production reshaped youth culture and cultural transmission?

2.2 Data source

Data were drawn from public user-generated content (2011 – 2025) on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, supplemented by reports from We Are Social/Kepios (2011-2025), Statista (2020), and the 2014 CLICK i4Dev survey.

2.3 Data Analysis

This qualitative study utilized Geertz's (1973) thick description method to analyze cultural meanings in social media interactions. Visibility was judged using publicly available metrics (likes, shares, comment threads) rather than formal ranking; the aim was depth of interpretation, not exhaustive coverage. A cross-platform comparative analysis was conducted using tools such as Alexa and Fanpage Karma to explore how platform features influence cultural expression among prominent Lao accounts. Text analysis was employed to evaluate the influence of using a combination of Lao, Thai, and English languages on cultural identity. Quantitative social media metrics from platforms like YouTube and TikTok were used judiciously to complement qualitative findings, rather than for conclusive statistical inferences, given the risk of technical inaccuracies.

2.4 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This study acknowledges the limitations of its digital anthropology approach, with findings based on qualitative "thick description" that are interpretative rather than statistically generalizable.

Secondly, much of the available historical data exhibits an urban bias. For instance, the foundational CLICK i4Dev (2015) survey explicitly stated its sample was skewed towards 'urban educated people living in Vientiane,' with 'almost no knowledge of what rural people are doing.' While this study seeks to address this gap by analyzing cultural products from rural creators like T'JAME UNO, it does not claim to be a comprehensive national survey.

Ethical considerations included analyzing only publicly accessible data, anonymizing user identifiers where necessary, and acknowledging the invisible influence of platform algorithms.

3. Result

This study reveals a series of complex cultural dynamics, which can be understood through a framework that contrasts user-driven "grassroots" creativity with "institutional" state responses across Laos's primary digital platforms (see Table 1). The following sections will elaborate on these findings, beginning with language.

3.1 The Vicissitudes of Language Culture

3.1.1 Online Linguistic Hybridity and Influence

Lao online language practices are characterized by significant hybridity and complex dynamics, reflecting broader cultural negotiations. Concerns about language purity, captured by the Lao phrase "ພາສາພາສີ" (pa sa pa sia), arise alongside the emergence of pidgin Lao (ພາສາຊອດກະຈາ), a blend of Lao, Thai, and English primarily used at the lexical level without distinct grammatical structures. Concerns have been raised by Lao internet users and academics regarding the spread of pidgin Lao through social media platforms like Facebook. While certain English loanwords such as "ໂອເຄ" (ok), "ບໍ່ຢ່າງ" (bye-bye), "ແຟຟ" (fan), "ອອນລາຍ" (online), and "ຄອມື່ອຕີ" (computer) have been integrated into the Lao language by its users, the pervasive influence of Thai media and language creates notable tension.

The influence of the Thai language is pervasive online, manifesting at multiple levels. This ranges from the integration of Thai words and emojis in user comments to the strategic creation of bilingual media titles to enhance algorithmic visibility. Platform architecture, such as the limited availability of Lao language options, can further steer users toward dominant regional languages. This sensitivity is particularly acute regarding public figures; Lao celebrities who use Thai expressions, for instance, often face public criticism, highlighting a deep-seated tension surrounding linguistic identity. This interaction between regional proximity and digital culture illustrates how physical borders are increasingly blurred in online identity-making and communication.

Historical factors, such as early challenges with Lao font recognition system compatibility and inefficient input methods, may have initially encouraged the use of Thai or English ("Karaoke" language) for interaction through computers and mobile phones. Many Lao netizens,

especially younger individuals, are observed to use standard Lao language less frequently in their informal online communications, which raises concerns about the intergenerational transmission of the Lao language. These intertwined factors of historical technical limitations, contemporary platform dynamics, regional influence, and user strategies create a complex linguistic landscape online.

Analysis of search keyword data (Kemp, 2018;2025) reveals a complex landscape defined by both stable regional influences and platform-specific diversification. Foundational, Thai-influenced entertainment keywords such as "หนัง" (movie), "เพลง" (music), and "บอล" (football) consistently dominate. Alongside this stable core, distinct trends have emerged: Google has seen a rise in online gambling queries like "สล็อต" (slots), whereas YouTube's diversification is marked by gaming content (e.g., "Free Fire," "Minecraft") and a recent surge in searches for "KARAOKE." Notably, the temporary prominence of Vietnamese music terms (e.g., Siêu nhâñ, Nhạc Trê) is likely attributable to the country's diaspora rather than a broader shift in Lao cultural interest. This data points not to cultural erosion, but to a dynamic hybridization where stable regional influences coexist with specialized digital niches.

This profound Thai influence extends beyond mere search terminology to the very structure of the digital ecosystem. For instance, an analysis of top-visited websites in recent years shows that major Thai content portals and influential forums, such as Kapook.com and Pantip.com, are among the most frequented destinations for Lao users. The high ranking of Thailand's Google domain (google.co.th) further demonstrates a deep structural integration into the Thai information sphere (Kemp, 2018;2019).

3.1.2 Institutional Efforts and Community Engagements

In response to these evolving online language practices and concerns about language preservation, both institutional and community-level actions are observable. In response to the proliferation of "karaoke language" (Unofficial Romanization of Lao language) the Lao government has increasingly sought to promote the use of standard Lao among youth. The government has actively engaged in language standardization, particularly

concerning digital infrastructure. The Unicode Consortium allotted characters for the Lao script in the Unicode block in 1993. Digital infrastructure, like input compatibility and font usability, continues to shape the extent to which Lao language can thrive online. Previously, the most extensively used font was Saysettha OT, designed in the 1990s by Dr John M. Durdin (Australia), until the Lao Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications approved Phetsarath OT as the national standard font in 2011. Clearly, the Lao government increasingly emphasises the autonomy of font displays for language standardisation. Notably, the official font was named after Prince Phetsarath Ratanavongsa, who was regarded as the political pioneer of modern nationalism in Laos and the father of the country's independence (Ivarsson & Goscha, 2007). Phetsarath was a proponent of Lao language standardisation and the contemporary Lao language reform aimed at de-Thaification (Ivarsson, 2008).

Since the Lanxang Heritage Journal's inception in 1966 by the Institute for Cultural Research under the Lao P.D.R.'s Ministry of Information and Culture, debates have persisted among Lao language and literary scholars regarding Lao orthographic conventions (Enfield, 2008). These discussions extend to social media, where some Facebook users frequently correct grammatical and spelling errors in posts, street signs, and restaurant menus in Laos. Scholars from the National University of Laos and other groups engage in discussions on Facebook about Lao etymology and grammar, share short literary works, poetry, and prose, and address malapropisms and misspellings, prompting active participation from numerous netizens. Additionally, there are several Facebook groups dedicated to Lao language and literature, including two major groups named ພາສາລາວ (Lao language) and ພາສາລາວ-ໜັງສືລາວ (Lao language and literature).

In sum, the linguistic dynamics observed on Lao social media are best understood not as straightforward cultural decline, but as a complex site of negotiation, adaptation, and resilience. The observed language mixing, strategic user choices influenced by platforms, and active community/institutional responses collectively illustrate Lao culture dynamically engaging with and shaping the Lao digital environment..

3.2 A Beehive of Public Opinion - Facebook

Facebook has become a primary arena for civic deliberation in Laos—a trend first noted by the 2014 CLICK i4Dev survey (CLICK i4Dev, 2015). A particularly prominent locus of debate is the Lao-language page THOLAKHONG (ໂທລະໂຄງ), which commands roughly one million followers and has occupied the top position in Fanpage Karma's national “News & Media” ranking for several consecutive years (Fanpage Karma, 2025). Comment threads on this page routinely engage with allegations of selective law-enforcement, deficiencies in public transport, utility-tariff hikes, and the state's pandemic response—discussions that frequently elicit real-time statements or remedial actions from the relevant authorities. Building on earlier regulatory frameworks established in 2014 (Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2014), the Lao government amended media laws in 2016, aiming to regulate social media content and limit the spread of online rumours.

While unofficial pages burgeon with civic discourse, the Lao government itself has also, in recent years, begun to use Facebook as a bulletin board for official announcements. Nevertheless, public accounts of the Lao government tend to have fewer posts, comments, and followers compared to unofficial pages dedicated to social issues. Lao netizens often show greater engagement with these unofficial pages, partly due to perceived government restrictions and propaganda strategies on official channels (Vientiane Times, 2014).

To manage this burgeoning online sphere, the state has intensified its regulatory grip. Building on pre-existing frameworks, authorities have implemented measures such as mandatory real-name registration for social media accounts and legislation targeting "false news" and cyberbullying (Vientiane Times, 2020a; 2020b). This regulatory oversight extends to cultural content, with the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism mandating pre-release evaluations for digital music to curb so-called "radical or vulgar" lyrics. This policy is enforced even at the sub-national level, as exemplified by a directive from the Bokeo Provincial Department (Lao Economic Daily, 2022). In tandem with regulatory measures, state-affiliated media leverage these platforms for cultural promotion. For instance, Pathedlao News Agency has successfully promoted Lao pop songs,

garnering over a million views on YouTube. The articles include links to the singer's social media accounts, such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, to enhance the dissemination of Lao musical culture. This dual strategy of regulation and promotion underscores the Lao state's intricate engagement with digital media. Similarly, other institutions are also adapting; for instance, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship has enacted rules governing monks' social media usage (Teppalath, 2020).

3.3 Under the Lens of Digital Music Culture

3.3.1 Digital Platforms Reshaping Lao Music

The decentralizing nature of social media has diversified Lao music. The internet music scene has evolved from an elite space (Mayes, 2009) to a populist interactive arena. TikTok, in particular, with its significant user base in Laos and the accessibility of its Thai version, has become exceedingly popular among Lao users, especially for entertainment and music-related content, emerging as a key channel for music discovery and dissemination. The rise of digital platforms has significantly transformed Laos's music landscape, sparking innovations in both creation and distribution. Pheng Luk Thong, a genre once seen as a mobile form of country music, now serves as a non-elite ballad style, appealing to a wide audience. Its tunes resonate throughout Laos, performed creatively by everyday citizens, villagers, and amateur musicians. Mitchell (2015) observes similar trends in Thailand.

A new generation of musicians, born in the 1990s and 2000s, has gained prominence in Laos by leveraging social media. Many are independent artists who publish their music on TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and other new media platforms to gain attention. The majority of their songs share the style of Pheng Luk Thong, characterized by catchy tunes and ease of spread. These works also attract audiences to cover and re-create them on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Observations indicate that the success of these songs is significantly driven by their widespread covers and dissemination by TikTok users.

A prominent example is TJAME UNO, a duo of post-Gen Z rural youths from Khammouane Province. Their song "Love at First Sight" (ໃສ່ໃຈໄດ້ແຕ່ມອງ), created in 2020, became a phenomenal hit, marking a milestone in Lao popular music history, with its YouTube posting

amassing nearly 200 million views. Subsequently, another song they participated in producing, "Want to be the son-in-law" (ຢາກເປັນລູກເຂີຍ), garnered over 150 million views. These two songs were the first local music videos from Laos to individually exceed 100 million views on YouTube, attracting substantial Thai fans to forward and cover them. The industry shift is exemplified by emerging artists such as MOME, a 16-year-old artist from NEW GEN Entertainment, who strategically advances her career through cohesive social media promotion on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This trend signifies a generation adept at blending conventional music with digital mediums. (Marleedar, 2022) Furthermore, popular music content dominates the top five YouTube channels in Laos by subscription and viewing, underscoring the central role of music in Lao digital content consumption. This stands in stark contrast to the media landscape described by Rehbein (2007), highlighting the unprecedented scale and speed of cultural transformation driven by new media over the past decade..

3.3.2 Digital Music Shaping Lao Youth Identities

Lao digital music flourishes through the fusion of traditional and modern elements, a profound innovation beyond mere changes in dissemination. Pop music videos often depict modern lifestyles alongside indigenous scenes like Baci ceremonies, showcasing a new generation's response to modernity. This mirrors broader trends of cultural adaptation in Lao popular music, where research has highlighted significant influences from Thai, Korean, and Western cultures. Notably, these external influences are sometimes mediated through regional platforms; for instance, the influx of Korean pop culture has been observed to largely occur via Thai media (Kanthong, 2019). My ethnographic observations confirm this process of "glocalization," where traditional forms like luk thong and khap Lam gain renewed popularity through modern arrangements. For instance, M.M.R. music studio's "AY AY" ອ້າຍອ້າຍ (Singratsomboune, 2020) integrates pop-rap and traditional ballads with J-pop/K-pop styles, featuring popular singers. Similarly, Una Studio's "yan mi som" ຍ້ານມີສົມ (2022) blended Putai lam balad with rap by TikTok celebrity Jmong, aiming to appeal across age groups and promote Putai music; its lyrics notably portrayed minority women's assertiveness in love. These practices revitalize indigenous music and

exemplify "glocalization"—localizing global pop trends, where even traditional forms like luk thong and khap Lam gain popularity when combined with modern arrangements.

Beyond entertainment, digital music is a crucial arena for Lao youth to construct subcultures, express identities, and engage in cultural negotiation, reaching both local and diaspora audiences; content achieving millions of views is noteworthy for a nation of around 7 million. The complex sentiment towards external cultural influences, particularly from Thailand, is evident. While the band CELLS' entry into Thai charts ("khon mue song") was a source of pride, it also referenced Thai entertainment standards. This tension is reflected in local identity emphasis, as Chapman's (2004) research on online music communities showed the Lao diaspora often more strongly emphasizing 'Lao-ness' and resisting Thai musical influence compared to those in Laos (LPDR), possibly due to wider cultural exposure. Though Chapman's study is from an earlier period, this tension between external influences and local identity assertion continues to shape Lao music culture, with social media enabling engagement with global trends and fostering evolving youth subcultures that bridge urban-rural dynamics and negotiate complex identities.

In summary, widely disseminated via social media, Lao music significantly influences emotions and perceptions, playing a crucial socio-cultural role akin to spiritual consumption by providing solace and facilitating social interaction. Popular songs can also convey mainstream values, reinforce national identity, and contribute to social consensus. Thus, through the lens of digital music, modern Lao culture is not declining but experiencing dynamic transformation. Traditional elements are revitalized in new media, with youth leading cultural innovation and local identity continually negotiated amid globalization.

4. Discussion

The linguistic hybridity observed on Lao social media does not signify cultural erosion; rather, it represents a strategic response to the algorithmic and cultural impacts of global platforms. This adaptation reflects Wesch's (2013) concept of technology as a driver of social transformation, reshaping communication and identity. The linguistic dynamics witnessed on Lao social

media serve as a tangible illustration of this transformative process.

The decentralizing potential of social media is evident not only in cultural production, as seen with rural artists like TJAME UNO bypassing traditional industry gatekeepers, but also in the civic sphere. The robust civic engagement on Facebook, documented as early as the 2014 CLICK i4Dev survey, reveals a pre-existing public appetite for critical discourse. This suggests that platforms like Facebook did not create this desire, but rather provided a powerful new arena for its expression, challenging traditional, centralized models of both cultural and political communication. This process is not frictionless, as public controversies over linguistic choices and the state's subsequent regulatory interventions demonstrate. These instances reveal a dynamic negotiation where traditional governance structures grapple with the decentralized nature of digital cultural production. Notices from the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism to provincial departments underscore institutional recognition of the cultural significance of digital platforms.

Facebook serves as both a conduit for government announcements and a hub for grassroots social issue advocacy in Laos, highlighting the dual nature of social media. The analysis of user engagement patterns indicates that unofficial social issue pages garner more followers and interactions than official government accounts, suggesting a shift in communicative power. Decentralization has fostered new civic engagement, with Facebook users effectively urging authorities to tackle issues from electricity bills to COVID-19 prevention. This marks a significant evolution from the post-revolutionary elite discussions described by Mayes (2009). Facebook has democratized the public sphere, extending civic discourse beyond urban elites to a much broader user base. Meanwhile, government mandates for real-name registration and content review reflect this interplay between grassroots expression and centralized governance is shaping the evolution of Lao digital culture.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Lao social media usage represents deliberate cultural adaptation rather than decline. The innovative fusion of linguistic practices and

music production, exemplified by digital-native artists like TJAME UNO (200M+ views), illustrates the active restructuring of Lao culture amid infrastructural and regulatory constraints. Digital culture emerges as a triangular negotiation among state regulation, community creativity, and platform logics rather than linear decline. Methodologically, this longitudinal digital ethnography validates 'thick data' (Wang, 2013) approach for illuminating under-researched contexts; empirically, it documents linguistic hybridity, Facebook's civic uses, and music glocalization; theoretically, it reframes 'cultural loss' debates by proposing transformation-under-constraint as a more accurate lens for small socialist states.

Future research on Laos' evolving digital culture should include platform-specific ethnographies (e.g., Instagram costume designers, Facebook lottery communities) and studies on AI/algorithmic content curation's cultural impact. Methodological innovation is crucial to address the blurring online/offline distinction and challenges in digital humanities like data anonymity, transience, and mobility (Coleman, 2010), alongside inherent issues with social media data beyond quantitative metrics.

6. Conflict of Interest

The author of this study declares that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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Table 1. A Framework of Digital Cultural Dynamics in Laos

Digital Space / Platform Type	Primary Examples & Timeline	Observed Cultural Dynamics (Grassroots vs. Institutional)	Key Dimensions of Cultural Transformation
Community & Discourse Platforms	Facebook (dominant post-2012) & Preceded by forums like PunLao	<p>Grassroots Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linguistic hybridity (Lao/Thai/Eng); debates on 'language purity'. Emergence of civic sphere; critique of social issues. Digital preservation of traditions (food, rituals). • THOLAKHONG — grassroots debate hub. <p>Institutional Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of standard font (Phetsarath OT). Use of official pages for announcements. Content regulation & real-name registration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptive Communication: Language evolves for digital efficiency and reach. Negotiated Public Sphere: Civic expression emerges despite—and in response to—state control.

Performance & Music Platforms	YouTube, TikTok (prominent post-2018)	<p>Grassroots Action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Glocalization" of music (fusion of Lam with Pop/Rap). • Decentralized production: Rise of rural artists (e.g., TJAME UNO). • Youth identity negotiation via music (pride vs. Thai influence). <p>Institutional Response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandated content review for digital music. • Prohibition of "indecent" songs. • State media promotion of "approved" pop artists. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Revitalization: Traditional genres gain new life and audiences. • Empowerment: New creative voices bypass old gatekeepers, expanding Lao culture's influence.
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Note: "Grassroots" refers to user-driven practices and expressions originating from non-institutional actors, as distinct from state-led or official "institutional" responses.