



Received: January 18, 2026, Revised: March 16, 2026, Accepted: April 21, 2026, Available Online: June 30, 2026

DECLINE OF FOLK ELEMENTS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MODERN POPULAR MUSIC

¹**Sehrish Fatima**, ²**Shazia Bashir**

¹Department of Fine Arts, University of Sindh

²Department of Cultural Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University

(shazia.bashir@bzu.edu.pk)

Corresponding Author E-mail: sehrish.fatima@usindh.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Within the past few decades, there has been a significant transformation in the production of popular music – in its creation, recording, dissemination and experience. On the other hand, digital technology, worldwide streaming platforms and commercial production models have newly promoted creativity but also caused a decrease in the folk presence in the mainstream of music. This paper examines the loss of cultural identity in the production of contemporary music in the context in which traditional tunes, local instruments, local languages, oral narration and local song production techniques are being taken over by beats that are standardized, music arrangements that are electronically produced, and sounds that are marketable on the international scale. The study points out that popular songs are more and more about the marketability, digital fashions and the preferences of the international public, and are more and more minimizing the presence of local cultural manifestations. The deterioration of folk elements reduces the association of music with collective memory, especially in younger listeners where it is not so common to know the folk musical forms. The paper also admits that the new production technologies can be used creatively to retain cultural sounds along with the modern styles. The study also points to an integration of a balanced solution to be implemented to safeguard cultural identity in music – innovation cannot be the killing of tradition, but an opportunity to keep folk music alive in the popular music of the present day, while spreading the possibilities of innovation.

KEYWORDS: Cultural identity; folk music; modern music production; popular songs; traditional instruments

INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity is one of the main pillars of modern society, and as noted above, it is one of the important containers of collective memory and social cohesion, which is captured and expressed in music, including the use of native rhythms, vocal traditions, and traditional musical instruments from certain regions (Chen & Tai, 2025). The folk components are used effectively to identify heritage; they can serve as a kind of scaffolding to connect the listener of now to the listener of then, and the values of the community. In terms of popular music, they have long played an important role as a form of resistance towards the standardisation that is inherent in mass-market production, providing alternative patterns of texture, rhythm and voice that help to anchor a work in a particular cultural context (Chen & Tai, 2025). However, it's a rapidly evolving music production industry due to the globalization of the world and the abundance of digital recording gear. As a result of these developments, a process of homogenisation has taken place, which poses a risk of marginalisation and even erasure of these cultural markers, by forcing artists to conform to the norms of music prevalent in the world: globally dominant musical norms, which are often imposed by the algorithms of streaming platforms and the standardisation of production software and devices (Antonios & Lilian, 2008; Şakalar, 2024).

The variety of spontaneous innovation and the actual involvement of traditional details has been reduced, since many of the modern production processes are increasingly implemented using pre-programmed and parameterized digital solutions (Antonios & Lilian, 2008; Rioux et al., 2006). This 'homeless mind' tends to drive the music towards safer hybridizations that appeal to a wider commercial audience than any regional identity but also helps to strengthen the notion: Music as a place of identity and belonging (Achterberg et al., 2011, Lu, 2024). This shift also brings about a paradox: while the digital utilization of technology enables the propagation of music beyond the borders and distances, the musical soundscapes are simultaneously 'flattened' and the nuances of the native instruments and traditional singing styles are experienced as aesthetic textures instead of cultural expressions (Şakalar, 2024). Such a movement away from the typical elements of popular music is not just a style change but an attack on popular music's collective memory and social bonds (Chen & Tai, 2025). With increasing pressure to create content suitable for universal, global consumption, the delicate equilibrium between innovation and heritage is being disturbed, and the folk-inspired musical expressions can gradually disappear from the public's view, which can be an issue of concern (Lu, 2024). This study is therefore an attempt to examine this sense of absence of the folk aspects in the creation of popular music. It asks questions like: What is the volume of the folk that is being lost to the corporatization of commercial music making, and what are the consequences for the preservation and transmission of cultural identity in a global music industry

that is more and more homogenized? Thus, the study aims to contribute to the knowledge of how musical productions are able to use the two poles of global accessibility and the importance of authentic cultural heritage (Şakalar, 2024). The study highlights the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that assesses the use of traditional motifs in modern genres, and examines the question of whether the incorporation of such elements is true revival of heritage or just a superficial fusion of sound aesthetics (Bohonis et al., 2025). For this purpose, a comparison will be made between the originality of the preserved melodic patterns and the tendency to focus on the original idea of the story with the goal of originality in instrumental design, which is often at the expense of the original meaning of the story (Guliyeva & Kopanitsa, 2024a; 2024b). Based on the work performed by Şakalar & Şakalar (2025), the goal of the research is to analyze these trends and suggest whether a 'democratization of musical heritage' is being achieved by digital platforms, or whether a 'selective' environment is setting the stage for cultural uniformity and commercialization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research has been mainly on the recognition of the multi-dimensionality of musical cultural heritage preservation, and the critical analysis of the negotiation of historical memory in the light of highly dynamic social and technological changes (Tang and Wu, 2025). Researchers have noted that the educational systems and information technologies of our time tend to erode the artistry and role of traditional music in society and that a formal ethnomusicological approach to safeguarding traditional music is needed. This is another aspect of a larger theoretical investigation of the commercialization of culture that has seen many elements of music stripped away from their socio-political context as a result of the natural effects of global markets (Fithratullah 2019; Lu 2024). Indigenous folk elements, including the quality of voice used in the local language, the instrumentation of the traditional sound, as well as the rhythmic elements can sometimes be reduced to "aesthetic textures" and added to common pop arrangements (Chen & Tai, 2025; Şakalar, 2024). This can be termed as the product of the "homeless mind" (simply a "homeless mind") that is the feeling of a lack of "home" due to globalization's rapid progress, which creates a longing for what is "home" and that is then marketed by commercial production companies who search for ways to satisfy a larger population (Achterberg et al., 2011). Along with this, the technologic revolution in music production has also had a significant impact on the structuring of music, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for those who create music to be original outside the standard agenda, as they are forced to use the 'standard' approach as a way to make it successful (Antonios & Lilian, 2008; Rioux et al., 2006; Widodo & Kasiyan, 2024). Although it undoubtedly contributes to the

accessibility of the international border, this standardisation runs a high risk of obscuring the nuances and authenticity of the authentic musical expression of the indigenous people (Colista & Leshner, 1998; Lu, 2024; Şakalar, 2024). As has been pointed out by contemporary scholarship, this tension results in a paradoxical situation: digital platforms afford means of dissemination and archiving but they also create a ‘selective’ environment where algorithm-based discovery tools prefer commercial uniformity and global familiarity over the preservation of real and diverse cultural expressions (Magar, 2026; Şakalar & Şakalar, 2025). An analysis of these trends in the history of popular music shows that the involvement of folk elements in popular music may be either superficial, as a synthesis of sound characteristics or a true attempt at cultural regeneration (Guliyeva & Kopanitsa 2024a, 2024b; Li & Ismail 2025). This is not necessarily the case in modern renditions, as they may follow the same basic melodies of older works, but often also feature substantial changes in arrangements and instrumentation which, although original, can sometimes inadvertently make the original narrative end up being lost. Therefore, the traditional music preservation is no longer a challenge of archival documentation but a complex and dynamic problem which needs a new “living symbiosis” (Ros, 2025; Tang & Wu, 2025; АНТІПІНА, 2024) approach to the preservation of traditional music. To grasp the negotiation and reconstruction of traditional forms in the globalized, digital soundscape, this perspective requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates musicological analysis with concepts of sound studies and anthropology (Bohonis et al., 2025; Stokes, 2004). In summary, the literature emphasises the need to develop a strategic and balanced approach to safeguard traditional music and to address the needs of a contemporary musical audience, even in today's globalised and technologically sophisticated environment (Simonnot, 2017; Şakalar, 2024). Relying on data-driven methods and interactive media, traditional music approaches should be transformed into interactive and modern way of current digital consumption in order to achieve effective traditional music preservation (Chen, 2026). On this, the active engagement of grassroots and the effective use of new digital technologies can be seen to strongly promote the cultural presence and long-term cultural impact of folk traditions (Xuyu & Tirui, 2025). Thus, with the fragility of recordings and the vast scope of knowledge transmission across cultures and countries in a globalized world, digital archives and virtual stages have emerged as important means of conserving and sharing knowledge. (Zhang, 2023) However, the technological interventions must be integrated with the institutional issues of not having enough financial resources and hardly any practitioners who can continue the traditions in their original way (Guangchao, Fee, Razak, et al., 2024; Guangchao, Fee, Roshida, et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a stratified sampling method to select 120 popular songs (1980-2020) based on

successful parameters, geographical origin and traditional motifs reported in the songs. Billboard's charts and streaming data for the region was used to select this list as a representative sample of hits from around the world and the region, encompassing decades of folk intermingling over the 40-year study period, by geographical origin. The sample was then split into four decadal periods: 1980-1990, 1991-2000, 2001-2010 and 2011-2020; each period was comprised of 30 tracks that are chosen for the presence on charts for a sustained period of time, as well as high-density streaming metrics ensuring the longitudinal comparability and removing the selection bias. The coding framework operationalizes folk musical elements by focusing some of the ethnomusicological criteria on four main quantifiable dimensions: folk vocal timbres, the presence of non-tempered scales or traditional modal scales, use of traditional instrumentation (or digital representation thereof), and use of traditional rhythms (Bohonis et al., 2025; Chen & Tai, 2025; Şakalar, 2024). The 120 tracks are all analyzed in a detailed 2-stage quantitative analysis. Initially, the binary coding protocol specifies the object presence or absence of these markers in the main arrangement of the track. Then, the level of integration is evaluated on a five-point ordinal scale from superficial aesthetic textures (sonic ornamentation) to full integration of the traditional forms that underpin the song's harmonic and/or melodic development (Bohonis et al., 2025; Guliyeva & Kopanitsa, 2024). In addition, details are given of the specific culture of origin of the motifs, and accounts are offered on how frequently and significantly they were modified during the composition process, including documentation of important modifications in timbre, tempo, and the use and use of preprogrammed digital production tools (parameterized virtual instruments, automated rhythmic sequences) that are widely cited in the contemporary literature as the source of indigenous expression, and are considered the super-imposed pop parameters (Antonios & Lilian, 2008; Rioux et al., 2006). Lastly, there is a strong quantitative methodology used to delineate the patterns of folk integration over a 40 year period through comparative analysis. Descriptive statistics (mean intensity scores and frequency distributions) are employed to show how these motifs have changed over time, while inferential statistics (a multivariate regression analysis) are employed to examine the relationship between commercial success (as represented by chart ranking, global streams and other measures) and intensity of folk integration. In an analytical context, we can try to compare tracks from different periods of history that present more clearly and traditionally, with tracks that are increasingly homogenized by the digitization process in the present. This seeks to systematically connect these variables to commercial outcomes, asking the question of whether the more authentic the traditional music, the more popular it is in certain regions, but also the broader question of whether it is more popular in other regions, or more internationally known, and thus whether the cultural critiques of homogenisation in the arena of qualitative cultural analysis are connected with empirical replicable

studies of the negotiation, transformation and continuation of traditional music in the globalized digital soundscape. The formal, aesthetic and organizational classifications of these musical characteristics are based on ethnographic modelling techniques aimed at identifying strong relationships between musical performance and its socio-environmental contexts (Wood et al., 2022). This analytical strategy is inspired by classic techniques of computational compositional analysis, which consist of reducing the high dimensional nature of the music to low dimensional measurable features that can then be compared to assess whether a feature is preserved or not in the music during the different production periods (Bourreau et al., 2021).

RESULTS

If analysed quantitatively, it can be seen that the proportion of traditional motifs has decreased in popular productions since 2000 (Hamilton & Pearce, 2024), and that more and more traditional works are becoming increasingly melodically simple and dense. This process mirrors the apparent uniformity of timbral colouring, and also a contraction of pitch sequences, which will confine the musical "idioms" that are available in different regions to different levels of audible perception. This is driven to a large extent by a general trend in the industry to use standard, pre-programmed digital production environments, which focus on efficiency and sounds that are easily recognisable internationally rather than original, locally-authentic sounds and textures (Antonios & Lilian, 2008; Rioux et al., 2006). The application of these tools of automation (parameterized virtual instruments, pre-programmed rhythmic patterns), which define creativity only within a relatively small harmonic-timbral range, have become a vital part in the process of modern song composition, preventing the development of innovative sounds (Rioux et al., 2006). Thus, native instrumentality that has been employed to establish tonal characters is often limited to superficial recognisable sound signatures, not structures in which to develop harmony or melody (Bohonis et al., 2025; Chen and Tai, 2025). The results are also revealing the extent to which it is possible to see the effects of this technical standardization on the intensity level of the real traditional integration, which elevates the gap between the rich aesthetic potential of the traditional elements inspired by the folk aesthetic and their limited practicality in the commercial products of the modern day (Şakalar, 2024). This divide means that the regional musical idioms are under serious threat of losing their unique musical, structural and cultural complexity in a world that is increasingly dominated by a standardized musical product for export purposes (Chen and Tai, 2025; Şakalar, 2024). Furthermore, the technological unity is representative of the overall development of Western popular music, where the desire to achieve greater loudness and style and timbre combinations can sometimes require the

reduction of more complex modal combinations (Panteli et al., 2017; Serrà et al., 2012). Furthermore, there is a growing trend towards low-complexity instrumentation, indicating a shift towards more "universal" audio environments where users can easily ingest and algorithmically process content on digital streaming services (Kmetiuk et al., 2025). This may be viewed as an empirical description of the general trend towards homogeneity in music, which may be defined as the gradual shift of traditional high complexity and regionally specific production techniques for instruments to generic, easily reproducible techniques (Percino et al., 2014). Such standardization is further complicated by the implicit directions of digital audio workstations, which encourage the use of regular time, and a style of rhythm very different from most folk music, which is irregular and not metronomic (Tahiroğlu et al., 2020). In addition to these technical limitations, the findings from the longitudinal data indicate a strong negative correlation between acousticness and release year, suggesting that the current production process is not very favorable for the organic instrumentation that is important for the traditional identity (Leppänen et al., 2025a, 2025b). This downward trend is not even for all groups, however, as empirical modeling suggests that for older artists, acousticness tends to stay at a higher level throughout their careers (Uusitalo et al., 2025). Contrastingly, younger groups demonstrate a higher likelihood of using algorithmic production technologies that may not have the sophisticated capabilities to use microtonality and intricate rhythmic relationships that are found in many orally transmitted folk traditions (Sahoo et al., 2025). However, there is a regional counterpoint to this worldwide trend: the regions can be clustered according to "cultural distance", and the acoustic characteristics of these clusters are not uniform. Specifically, the number of cultural communities was related to how much melodic variation was preserved, meaning complex non-standardized structures are better preserved in culturally large areas than the forces of digital uniformity (Street et al., 2022). The outcome of all this is the increasing segmentation of these pockets of sonic identity and the separation from the mainstream pop culture constantly being homogenized globally and the pockets of culture that help protect from technological homogenization (Tan & Ko, 2025). The segmentation here is not only a sign of the growing diversity of popular music consumption, but it is also a sign of a market-driven segmentational fragmentation that is not seeing a return of uniqueness or particularity for certain more traditional aspects (Bello & García, 2021). The algorithmic structure, thus, favors stylistic convergence, and the digital streaming platforms contribute to widespread access and minimization of differences in the acoustic texture of the traditional version (Gugnani, 2024; Solanke & Shirude, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The loss of such textures has grave implications for how cultural memory is passed from one generation to the next, as younger generations are more frequently exposed to a new generation of “sonic symbols,” which are flattened and disembodied from the complex and often physically embodied traditions they embody. This decontextualization of the sound from its ritual and physical context affects the inter-musician interaction and the transmission of its socio-spatial resonance to the folk elements, thereby decreasing their socio-spatial richness (Tahiroğlu et al., 2020). In the search for standardised and pre-programmed solutions in digital production environments, many of these possibilities are being lost or forgotten, especially with respect to microtonality, ornamentation and the intricate rhythmic relations and rhythms found in many oral-based traditional genres, which are not metronomic but demands a more nuanced style of performance (Rioux et al., 2006; Sahoo et al., 2025). In a way, this phenomenon highlights a bit of an uncomfortable dichotomy: while technology and algorithms in modern digital streaming systems and production workflows open up new opportunities for recognising and disseminating a vast range of musical heritages, the same technology and algorithms are also offering a compelling rift in creativity (Gugnani, 2024; Şakalar, 2024). It is empirically confirmed by the narrow timbre range and the consistent reduction of melodic complexity since the millennium, and points to a model for the present, when popular music is undergoing the plasticization of ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ as a way to be perceived as a superficial sign rather than a supportive structure for harmonic and melodic development (Chen & Tai, 2025; Hamilton & Pearce, 2024; Serrà et al., 2012). This loss of depth is compounded by the role of music producers, who are stuck in super competitive global digital markets, and implicitly given the green light to go with less complex instrumentation, to be more on board with the “successful” and already established, algorithm-driven, less complex models (Kmetiuk et al., 2025; Percino et al., 2014). At the same time, this structural transformation greatly questions the role and perception of the audience; now, with a more fractured pattern of digital consumption, listeners are often faced with these de-contextualized symbols of traditional music, opening a market landscape where diversity seems to be more and more shaped by market-driven segmentation than by the genuine, resurgence-based preservation of unique, tradition-based idiosyncrasy (Bello & García, 2021). In this way, traditional songs have become highly vulnerable to being transmitted from one generation to the next, where they are viewed as a low complexity instrument for creating ‘modern commercial hits’ that do not have the power to communicate ‘specific, lived and culturally resonant experience’ (Bohonis et al., 2025; Rioux et al., 2006). Such a change does not imply an elimination of the traditional elements, but rather that they are used almost as a vehicle in an industrial context where there is a premium on speed, efficiency, predictability and, unlike cultural lineage, no

richness, depth and resilience. (Tahiroğlu et al., 2020) Although localized and regional pockets of cultural communities are increasingly visible that are actively working against assimilation in this global era, the size of cultural communities, together with a dynamic history of oral transmission, is helping to buffer against uniform technological and sonic assimilation (Street et al., 2022; Tan & Ko, 2025). A balance between the numerous levels of accessibility created by digital technology and the ongoing and critical task of safeguarding the structural, aesthetic and cultural purity of traditional musical idioms from the encroaching and systemizing global pop mainstream is the pressing need for contemporary musicology and cultural policy. Future interventions must, therefore, respect the epistemological depth of the heritage music (Hidayat et al., 2024), not simply level it down, but through technology, put people's creativity on the map.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this paper is that the disappearance of folk elements from popular songs is a serious problem of culture in relation to transfiguration of the nature of modern music-making. Traditional instruments, regional languages, folk melodies and cultural narratives are lost from contemporary popular music due to the popularity of the electronic beat, international pop arrangement, and auto-tuned vocals and commercially produced sound patterns. This is generating an increasing uniformity of popular song, and many songs are more representative of global trends than of local identity. This change has a risk of loss of cultural identity because: Music is a medium of entertainment, Music is associated with History, Memory, Values and Experience of the community. The study shows that folk music plays an important role in the conservation of the cultural heritage. It links individuals to their families and heritage, and mirrors a community's social, emotional, and historical experiences. Without folk elements in popular music, the younger generations may not have access to the folk sounds and meanings. This can affect cultural continuity, cultural values for local art. The results also, however, indicate that modern production, when used responsibly, can be beneficial to cultural identity. The digital technologies can bring traditional folk music to life in the following ways: Remixing traditional folk sound, recording endangered or not used-in-use instruments, marketing and advertising the regional artists and folk based songs, and distributing traditional folk music via the internet. So, cultural identity in today's music relies on the cooperation between the music creators and producers, teachers and training bodies, media and cultural institutions. Folk instruments, folk language, folk rhythms and folk stories should be encouraged by artists in the present songs. The awareness of folk traditions may also be achieved through music education and public media. Lastly, do not forget the traditional music heritage, while

promoting modern music production. Instead, it should balance innovative elements with the protection of culture while keeping popular music contemporary and alive to its people's.

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