

Mapping the Digital Arts Industry in Pakistan

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Abstract

In 2023, Lahore Digital Arts Festival (LDF) conducted a landmark research project Mapping the Digital Arts in Pakistan (MDAP) as a response to a need to more formally understand and support the nascent digital arts industry in the country. While there are any number of gaming and animation studios as well as a boom in emerging digital artists, the industry remains nascent. Digital arts are still rare in gallery spaces, and it is only after 2020 that the first NFT/digital arts based exhibitions have taken place. The industry represents great potential, especially for young people and minorities; however, there has been little attempt to study and understand the scope of the industry and the challenges facing its future growth. Here, the archive in question does not refer to specific artworks, but rather documenting the current context of the digital arts industry within a specific region. This paper presents a potential route for such a project by outlining the research and methodology as well as presenting the main findings and recommendations.

Keywords

Digital arts, Pakistan, digital arts industry, survey-based research

Introduction

Mapping the Digital Arts in Pakistan (MDAP) was a project by Lahore Digital Arts Festival (LDF) in 2023.[1] The project sought to undertake the first dedicated study of the digital arts industry in Pakistan. While other organizations have in the past conducted studies of Pakistan's creative and cultural industries and their potential, such as the British Council's report in 2014 or UNESCO's focus on cultural heritage in their 2018-2022 Strategic Document, there was no existing research which deals exclusively with media arts in Pakistan.[2] [3]

Despite the lack of research, there is strong evidence to suggest the presence of digital related content and interest in Pakistan through adjacent sectors, such as its thriving gaming industry.[4][5] Social media apps such as Tik Tok and Facebook are also popular in Pakistan, with some estimates as much as 18 million users on Tik Tok.[6] Animation studios, game design, and art design are also areas of strength, and Pakistan's meme culture has reached international fame, with a few memes minted as NFTs and sold on the international market for incredible prices.[7]

However, in terms of the digital arts in more formal gallery spaces, Pakistan has been slow to match the pace of other countries. While there are a few stars in the

international digital contemporary arts world such as Rashid Rana, Omar Gilani, Shehzil Malik, Sajjad Ahmed, and others, the overall strength of the local industry has lagged behind. For example, it is only in 2020 that the first digital arts exhibitions took place.[8] The legal status of cryptocurrency in Pakistan has made NFT-based arts and exhibitions difficult and Pakistani representation in the wider web3 space low.[9]

Lahore Digital Arts Festival (LDF) was founded in 2019 in response to the maturation of digital arts on an international level and a perceived lack of similar opportunities and platforms in Pakistan.[10] LDF's approach has primarily been to offer emerging artists in Pakistan the opportunity to gain exposure and experience through exhibiting their work. The festival launched in 2021 with an initial online exhibition POST-Reality, and has since conducted another online showcase in 2023, a large-scale festival in Lahore featuring physical exhibitions also in 2023, cross-cultural collaboration projects, podcasts, interviews, and other activities. The MDAP project was the realization of a long-term interest in providing research-based grounding for the festival's activities.

MDAP represents an initial effort to understand the basic demographics of the industry, how it interacts with itself and the existence of structures such as community, laws, standards, regulations, and archives, and the main challenges it faces. This mapping represents the act of understanding who, where, what, how, and even why are the main stakeholders and what they need to thrive.

The concept of archiving in connection to the digital arts or the arts in general is most commonly connected with the idea of gathering, labeling, and preserving a collection of artworks and collateral documentation (such as sales receipts or catalogs).[11] However, the International Council on Archives defines archives as "documentary by-product of human activity retained for their long-term value." [12] MDAP positions itself as a first archive of digital arts in Pakistan, but rather than a repository of artworks, it rather seeks to provide a picture of the industry in this moment, as it is both growing and struggling – in its own country for legitimacy, and internationally, to be considered in the global digital arts sector. The objectives of the study are to provide present and future stakeholders a research-based grounding for expanding the industry, to lend creditability to digital creators in the country by providing evidence for the industry's importance, and to place Pakistan in the context of the contemporary media art industry. MDAP is not a comprehensive or exhaustive study: however, it is a

beginning step towards documenting both the contemporary moment and the future evolution of the Pakistani digital arts industry.

Methodology

The MDAP report was developed with mixed methodology, including desk research for outside examples and existing literature, and field research using a survey to the digital arts community in Pakistan, which returned both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was essentially demographic data and presented as percentages, while the qualitative data was analyzed using a general inductive method with thematic and sentiment analysis.[13] The survey was developed with contextual knowledge and understanding of the specific Pakistani digital arts scene, gained from previous conversations, interviews, and roundtables conducted by the Lahore Digital Arts Festival in the context of other projects. The main goals of the survey were: 1) understanding the basic makeup of the digital arts industry in terms of demographics and working practices, 2) understanding how members of the community view their community and its prospects, and 3) understanding what the community sees as its main challenges and potential solutions.

The survey was distributed in April-May 2023 throughout a coordinated campaign utilizing a variety of methods to ensure the maximum participation. The methods for distribution were: direct emails to digital artists who have in the past submitted to LDF open calls, direct emails or contacts to LDF's educational institutional partners who will be requested to share with their students, cold emails to gallery owners and curators, direct and cold emails to existing and new contacts in the gaming and animation industry, other cultural entrepreneurs, and a coordinated social media campaign across LDF's Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn pages. As the language of the report was English, the survey was also in English, however, participants had the option to submit their responses in Roman Urdu.

The first section aimed to gather quantitative data on the makeup of the industry, including relationship to the industry (artist, curator, etc), age, gender, education, and presence in Pakistan. A sub section aimed at working artists requested information on their working status: if digital arts was a main source of income, if they work with clients in Pakistan or abroad, if they were formally trained in the digital arts, and their main and secondary mediums. These questions were all closed-ended with options to choose pre-existing categories. For certain questions, an "other" field was present to collect any data that the choices missed.

The second section of the survey focused on qualitative data intended to assess how participants feel about the digital arts and how they see the industry as it exists in Pakistan. This section was intended to understand a variety of relationships integral to the industry, such as the artist to the wider industry, the artist to other artists, and the health of the industry within Pakistan. In framing the questions and analyzing the responses, the researcher used an

ethnographic survey methodology wherein the questions were aimed at understanding the participant's behavior and experience within and around the digital arts community through five targeted questions.[14][15] The ethnographic method was chosen as it favors contextual understanding and allows the researcher to analyze as an observer and participant, as LDF places itself. The third and final section focused on challenges and solutions as seen by the members of the community.

102 responses were gathered, including artists, educators, curators, gallery owners, and students. The data was analyzed with a general inductive method as mentioned above by reading the responses multiple times, identifying themes, condensing themes into categories, and quantifying the categories. Where responses were more open and varied such as in the third section, coding the data was sometimes complicated considering the interconnected nature of many of the concepts and issues presented; as such, the researcher's knowledge of the industry and context were used to distinguish which category a response should be classified in. Where appropriate, answers to other questions were placed alongside the results, in order to address challenges around the lack of context in purely thematic analysis approaches.[16] Throughout the analysis, the researcher attempted to balance contextual knowledge with purely inductive methods of extracting information from the data. Finally, the data was analyzed and compared with other sources found in the desk research stage in order to prepare relevant recommendations.

Relevant Findings

In terms of demographic results, the survey revealed that the industry is very young, with 80% of respondents under the age of 35, and interestingly, the majority identified as female. While many were formally educated with Bachelor's or Master's degrees, only 47% said they had formal training in the digital arts, speaking to an overall lack of dedicated education and training programs. Indeed, awareness and a lack of appreciation around the digital arts was a constant theme throughout, and many reported associated economic challenges. Nonetheless, the majority were working (full-time or part-time) or earning income from the digital arts, and most (75%) were working and earning in Pakistan. Generally, artists worked in multiple mediums, with digital painting as the most common. 31% said they had multiple roles, such as artist and educator, or artist and curator.

In terms of interacting with the industry, a significant portion said they interacted through purely online methods and the majority interacting professionally. There was little mention of in person or other community events. Respondents were generally positive about the quality of interaction; however, the lack of and inability to join communities was a notable factor. In response to their general concerns about the digital arts industry (not Pakistan specific), the most common concerns were economically-related, public awareness and appreciation, the future of AI in the field, and access to technology. Over half of the responses were coded

as negative, but a significant percentage were neutral, and some even expressed no concern. In terms of the health of the industry and events or exhibitions, responses were overwhelmingly in the negative, with most saying the amount of events is very low and not enough. Those that did say there were enough events attributing this particularly to their insider status. Still, data showed that more than half of respondents were working with clients in Pakistan, though many work with clients within and without the country. Over 70% already owned or were open to owning digital artworks, though some did express a preference for prints.

The main challenges of the Pakistan digital arts industry that participants cited were connected to Awareness, Industry Culture, Economic, Platforms, Infrastructure, Learning Opportunities, and Accessibility. Awareness refers to the general public’s understanding and appreciation of the digital arts, and including recognition, appreciation, and support. Industry Culture refers to the health of the community and how artists feel about each other and the sector. Economic refers to mentions of jobs, opportunities for jobs, compensation, and other financial considerations. Platforms refers to places where artists can display or share their work, such as events or exhibitions. Infrastructure was related to challenges on a structural level, such as government and legal. Learning Opportunities refers to education or other workshops where digital artists can learn their trade, whether formal or informal. Accessibility refers to specific challenges of accessing tools or equipment necessary for the digital arts. The frequency of each category is illustrated in the following figure.

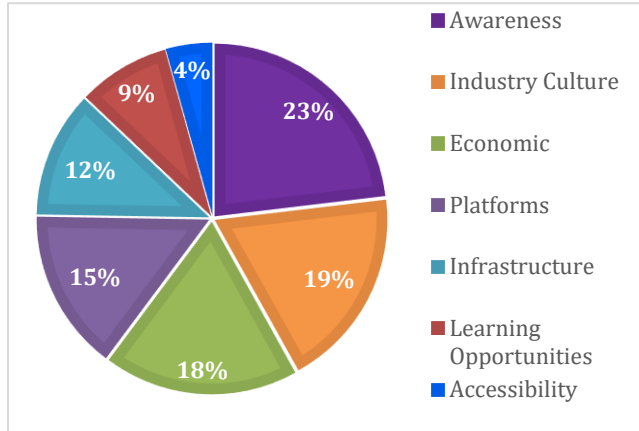


Figure 1. The relative importance of different categories in terms of challenges facing the Pakistani digital arts industry. Note that responses were quantified in terms of how many times the category was mentioned, as some responses mentioned multiple challenges.

While the responses were varied and touched on many different categories and ideas, the one throughline that stands out is the fact that, as of yet, the digital arts industry in Pakistan does not function as a true *industry*. Rather, it is more of a collection of individuals who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of digital arts and forge their own path to

getting clients or work related to it. Visual culture is favored, and the structures of an industry – such as communities, archives, forums, conferences, funds, networking, laws, regulations, etc – seem more or less absent. Many of the reported challenges corresponded to this lack of structured and cohesive industry.

From the survey responses and comparative analysis of the literature and examples around the world, MDAP provided three recommendations in order to strengthen the industry.

Recommendations

The first recommendation centered around community building. The survey results indicate that digital artists in Pakistan often feel isolated or struggle to find community. Events are rare, and young artists struggle to find their way. Their main method of interacting with each other is on social media. As such, MDAP recommended the creation of an online community platform by artists and for artists where they can share ideas, news, and make impromptu meetups. Moderators and community leaders will be needed to keep the discussions flowing and ensure a safe space for all. The first step in the process could be to map the existing community and therefore acknowledging their existence and showcasing their work to the general public. Already in Pakistan, some universities are beginning the process of creating media arts societies, but they will need to act as a catalyst in bringing the community together. A platform like this not only enables the artists to show their work through a cultural organization lens but it also provides opportunities for various artists to collaborate among themselves. This process can also become the future additions to the ‘industry archive’ that MDAP begins.

The second recommendation centered around education. The survey data show that a lack of education and dedicated training hampers accessibility, awareness, and growth of the industry. As such, the MDAP report recommended that artists, studios, and arts organizations dedicate themselves to the creation or curation of short courses or workshops, available online or in person, that focus more on application of tools, artistic voice and freedom, and practical knowledge of working in the field. By opening these short courses or workshops to a variety of ages and skill levels, general understanding or awareness of the digital arts can begin to penetrate into the wider arts community and eventually the public. Museums within Pakistan, such as Lahore Museum, could be a catalyst in developing initiatives such as those at NEWINC, where artists can not only benefit from their existing structures but also contribute towards digitization and other interesting collaborations within the museum.[17]

Further, the report suggested that universities and schools work to incorporate dedicated digital arts courses and school administrators and curriculum developers integrate digital arts mediums into general arts courses. Teacher training within schools and universities can help current and future teachers feel comfortable with these mediums and help guide young students interested in the forms to explore their

skills further. The incorporation of these mediums in higher education institutes can provide the academic grounding for more standard archival work.

The third recommendation centered around artist safety. Issues of copying, stolen artwork, and copyright are a genuine concern for many artists, and this connects to challenges of economic viability, security, and innovation within the industry. Trend-based work and a focus on social media contribute to these issues. Pakistani artworks and artists are highly vulnerable to being lost for this very reason. MDAP recommended artist safety can be addressed in the short term through short courses, workshops, or panel talks from experienced artists and legal professionals through their own platforms or through platforms like LDF and media art societies, in order to provide necessary training on the process of making contracts, existing copyright laws, and artist rights.

However, in the long term, digital arts-specific copyright laws and industry-wide accepted practices must be developed and supported by legal and regulatory bodies. Knowledge sharing and economic data can provide transparency and industry standards which artists are aware of and can cite when discussing projects with clients. Policy discussions will need to happen between the artistic community, legal fraternity and policy makers to ensure that a robust framework is developed through which protection can be offered to the digital arts community. This process of increasing artist safety could be aided as well by dedicated archives.

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Conclusion

MDAP provides a window into the current status of the digital arts industry in Pakistan. While it is not collection of individual artworks, it is an archival project in that it attempts to document not just the industry but how it functions and how its members feel about it. This project was a first step in understanding the industry as a first step towards documentation. Further research is necessary to deepen this understanding, and a more detailed 'map' of the industry can provide a clear path for the beginning of more standard archives. In some ways, the development of archives can contribute to the development the industry itself, and if conducted in parallel could support the establishment of communities and improve the overall awareness of the medium itself.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the EUNIC Global Cluster Fund and EUNIC Pakistan Cluster Members, including Czech Republic, Austria, France including Alliance Francaise, Germany including Goethe-Institut, Italy & the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, and the Delegation of the European Union in Pakistan. Thank you to all artists and participants in the survey.

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Najam Ul-Assar is a creative entrepreneur with more than 10 years of experience in managing cultural businesses and has managed more than 25 large-scale festivals across South Asia. He is the co-founder of rearts, Pakistan's most prominent record label, and did his Master's in Media Arts Cultures from the Erasmus Mundus Joint Degree. He founded LDF in 2019, also consults the United Nations in Copenhagen, and has just begun his PhD in Digital Humanities in British Columbia, having his life between Canada, Denmark and Pakistan.