

From Underground to Intangible Heritage List: Berlin Techno as Intellectual Capital

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Abstract: The intersection of knowledge economy and cultural preservation has gained increasing scholarly attention, yet the conceptual boundaries between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage remain undertheorized. Intellectual capital is traditionally framed within organizational and management studies and encompasses the accumulated knowledge, competencies, and relational networks that drive economic value and competitive advantage. Intangible cultural heritage, rooted in UNESCO's framework of living expressions, refers to the practices, representations, and knowledge systems that communities continuously recreate in response to their environment and history. These two fields have largely developed in parallel, each with its own theoretical traditions and institutional frameworks, yet the logic of knowledge, value, and transmission runs through both. Bringing these frameworks into dialogue reveals productive tensions and overlooked synergies. Ownership structures differ fundamentally: intellectual capital is held and managed by organizations, protected through intellectual property law, while intangible cultural heritage is community-held, dynamic, and resistant to conventional proprietary frameworks. Yet both are ultimately concerned with how knowledge is preserved, transferred, and transformed into value - cultural, social, or economic. This paper argues that these distinctions, rather than separating the two concepts, create a generative space for rethinking how heritage functions in contemporary knowledge economies. The study examines these intersections using Germany's national intangible cultural heritage list as a case study, with particular focus on Berlin Techno Culture, officially inscribed in 2024. Born from the post-reunification creative underground, Berlin Techno has evolved into a globally recognized cultural movement with significant economic impact, driving tourism, creative industries, and urban identity. Its inscription challenges traditional assumptions about what constitutes heritage worthy of protection, broadening the scope beyond folklore and craft to include contemporary, subcultural, and commercially active forms of expression. Berlin Techno Culture demonstrates how intangible heritage can function as a generator of financial revenue, an attribute central to intellectual capital, while simultaneously reshaping how communities, institutions, and policymakers understand and engage with living heritage. By analyzing this case through the frameworks of cultural capital and economic value creation, this paper underscores the need for nuanced approaches to the preservation and utilization of intangible assets in contemporary urban contexts.

Keywords: Intellectual capital, Intangible cultural heritage, Berlin Techno Culture

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the growing prominence of the knowledge economy has reshaped how value is understood, produced, and sustained across both economic and cultural domains. Within this context, the concept of intellectual capital has emerged as a key analytical framework, emphasizing the role of knowledge, skills, and relational networks in generating competitive advantage and economic growth. At the same time, the concept of intangible cultural heritage has gradually expanded, with an increasing number of elements being inscribed each year on national and international intangible cultural heritage lists—first gaining recognition at the national level and later, in some cases, at the international level.

Since intangible cultural heritage can exist only when a community itself recognizes its importance and actively cares for it, it is necessary to view it also through the lens of cultural property. Although intangible cultural heritage is a form of living heritage created and maintained by people, it also fosters a strong sense of belonging within the community that sustains it. Moreover, inclusion in national inventories—and subsequently in international lists—is only achievable when a cohesive and self-aware community has been established. Despite their shared focus on knowledge as a central resource, the fields of intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage have largely evolved in isolation from one another, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how intangible assets function across different societal spheres.

This paper aims to take a closer look at the relationship between these two concepts and to bridge this conceptual divide by examining the intersections between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage. While intellectual capital is typically embedded within organizational and market-oriented structures, intangible cultural heritage is characterized by collective ownership, a dynamic nature, and resistance to commodification.

To explore these issues empirically, the paper focuses on Berlin techno culture as a case study, following its official inscription on Germany's national list of intangible cultural heritage in 2024. In contrast to the author's previous study on the interrelations between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage—using the Upište Cultural Space in Latvia as a case study, which analyzed the importance of maintaining traditions in

regional contexts—this paper examines a newer form of intangible cultural heritage, namely Berlin techno culture. This case discusses the perception of urban intangible cultural heritage, which appears to be a global phenomenon, yet has secured its place on Germany's national inventory. By analyzing Berlin techno culture through the lenses of both concepts, this paper argues that intangible cultural heritage practices can simultaneously function as community-created practices essential for maintaining values, cultural traits, and heritage, while also acting as active generators of economic value.

2. Theoretical Background

In the discussion between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage, the two concepts may initially seem unconnected. Nevertheless, despite being relatively new fields of study, they address similar underlying issues from different perspectives. Building upon the authors' previous research, this paper aims to explore the parallels and similarities between these two concepts by examining various case studies. Intellectual capital functions as an economic category representing the spiritual value generated by human potential, which can be accumulated and converted into other forms of capital. By investigating specific aspects of educational management, we can enhance the capacity and significance of a country's overall economic capital movement (Spica et al., 2024).

Intellectual capital plays an increasingly prominent role within modern organizations. Several researchers have noted that it is essential for maintaining organizational growth, serves as a key determinant of competitive advantage, and should be considered a foundational element of 21st-century business (Hsu & Wang, 2010; Rehman et al., 2021).

Within the discourse on intangible cultural heritage, the foundational concept is that of living heritage. This paradigm posits that such heritage is continuously developing, recreating itself, and being transmitted across generations. Scholars emphasize that this transferred knowledge is in a perpetual state of evolution and change; furthermore, its continuous recreation constitutes the core essence of living heritage, thereby enriching and sustaining cultural diversity (Lenzerini, 2011; Blake, 2011).

While intellectual capital is protected by intellectual property law and businesses themselves take care of their assets, intangible cultural heritage is a term that is still complicated to define, and its borders and responsibilities are not always clearly marked. As noted by the Vice President of the German Commission for UNESCO: "In contrast to World Heritage, whose objects can be clearly identified according to established criteria, the field of Intangible Cultural Heritage is not easy to define despite the above classification. There are many reasons for this. One lies in the lack of a clear definition of the concept of culture. This concept fluctuates between culture in a narrower sense—referring to various artistic practices—and culture in a broader sense, as understood in cultural anthropology. Depending on which concept of culture is applied, the selection decisions vary" (Wulf, 2023). Nevertheless, scholars note that, similar to intellectual property protection, intellectual capital refers to protecting intangible cultural heritage by incorporating it into intellectual property rights (Peng, 2021) and is a resource of valuable cultural information for human society (Hu et al., 2024).

As noted in the author's previous research: "Safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage is closely linked to the rights of the communities that hold it, as well as to their intellectual capital, which—through inscription on the national list—gains recognition not only as a philosophical value but also as one of economic importance" (Ponne, 2025). This remains as a key motivation for inscription when considering the gained financial support.

Intangible culture heritage in Germany

Intangible cultural heritage in Germany is an interesting case when approaching intangible culture heritage in Europe. Although Germany actively contributed to the creation of the convention in 2002 and 2003, it was hesitant to ratify it in 2007, similar to some other EU member states. The Berliner UNESCO-Weltkulturerbe Kommission identified four main reasons for this hesitation.

First, there was the view that, in order to safeguard its own intangible cultural heritage, Germany did not necessarily need to ratify an international convention. Second, it was argued that defining what constitutes intangible cultural heritage is inherently difficult. Third, practical and financial concerns were raised, particularly regarding the scope of responsibilities and the financial obligations associated with the convention. Finally, Germany believed that there were insufficient foreign policy incentives to justify a rapid ratification of the convention (Hüfner, 2023). These reasons were strongly criticized by the German Commission for UNESCO,

which argued that Germany risked losing the opportunity to influence developments in this field at the international level (Hüfner, 2023).

Germany eventually joined the convention in 2013. Wulf stated that at the time, there was still a lack of understanding of the importance of this field for social cohesion (Wulf, 2023). Although intangible cultural heritage has existed for more than two decades, it remains difficult to define clearly and establish consistent criteria, a subject that remains open for further research.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the aim of this paper the following methodology was used:

The following tasks were stated:

1. To conduct a theoretical exploration of intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage in the context of knowledge and culture;
2. To examine the practical aspects of the interaction between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage in the context of knowledge and culture;
3. To carry out a case study on the interaction between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage.

The following theoretical research methods were used: referential analysis of scientific literature on knowledge, culture, intellectual capital, and intangible cultural heritage; and an exploration of the interaction between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage in the context of knowledge and culture. It should be noted that this is a pilot study—a small-scale research project designed to test and refine the approach for continuous research in the future.

Empirical methods used in this pilot study included observation aimed at studying the mutual influence between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage; content analysis and qualitative interview with an expert; and an analysis of documents regulating intangible cultural heritage in Germany. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage was conducted from the perspective of knowledge and culture in Germany, alongside a study of data from public and non-governmental institutions in Germany working with Berlin's techno music scene.

The research basis consisted of the key features of intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage in the context of knowledge and culture, as well as an exploration of the interaction between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage in Germany.

Research period: theoretical exploration of the period from 1990 to 2026; observations during the period from March 2024 to March 2026; interview period June 2025.

4. Case Study: Berlin's Techno Culture

Since 2024, Berlin's techno culture has been inscribed on Germany's national inventory list of intangible cultural heritage. The practice is primarily rooted in Berlin while simultaneously extending its influence nationally and internationally. As a dynamic and continuously evolving cultural phenomenon, it is not tied to a single annual event; rather, it unfolds throughout the entire year across a variety of formal and informal settings.

As stated on the German Commission for UNESCO website, techno is understood as a form of electronic music that emerged from multiple musical and technological developments, including advances in electronic sound production in the 20th century, as well as stylistic influences from Detroit techno, Chicago house, and Electronic Body Music (EBM) originating in Belgium. While often approached primarily as a musical genre, techno also constitutes a broader cultural phenomenon encompassing fashion, spatial practices, and events such as raves—dance gatherings centered on electronic music (German Commission for UNESCO, n.d.). It is important to note that Detroit also considers techno an integral part of its local cultural identity and self-perception; however, this shared perception sometimes complicates the identification of its specific and culturally rooted nature within a single national inventory. From a musicological perspective, techno is characterized by electronically generated sounds arranged in repetitive, rhythmically structured sequences, often emphasizing a steady, driving beat. A defining feature of the genre is its high degree of modifiability and its extensive frequency spectrum, allowing for significant variation in texture and sonic intensity. Within performance contexts, DJs play a central role by facilitating a continuous musical flow through synchronized transitions between tracks, commonly referred to

as "mixing" (German Commission for UNESCO, n.d.). It is important to note that DJs are in the hearth of the community and play a crucial role. DJ Motte was one of the main initiators for the Berlin techno inscription.

An expert interview with a representative of the Cultural Heritage Center was conducted in June 2025. The selected expert was Dr. Helmut Groschwitz, a research associate at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities (*Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften*), where he is affiliated with the Commission for Bavarian Regional History (*Kommission für bayerische Landesgeschichte*). Within this institutional framework, he works at the Institute for Folklore Studies (*Institut für Volkskunde*), contributing to the Research and Advisory Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Bavaria. He has also been involved in discussions regarding the inscription of Berlin's techno culture on Germany's national list of intangible cultural heritage.

He notes that one of the reasons why Berlin's techno culture was considered for and actively promoted by the community for inclusion on the list was "a political application, essentially to gain attention." Firstly, this was related to rising costs and "significant pressure on clubs right now—through highway construction plans, for example, and possibly a lack of funding." Since the inscription took place after the COVID-19 pandemic, this context also played an essential role in motivating the community to seek state support, which was expected to be facilitated through such recognition.

A growing body of scholarship has examined the significance of Berlin's techno culture within the broader context of the city's tourism economy, identifying it as a central driver of urban attraction. As Luis-Manuel Garcia observes, "Every weekend, thousands of tourists come to Berlin, immerse themselves in the 'hip', alternative, post-industrial atmospheres of the city and trace a circuit through the city's nightclubs, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of Euros and seemingly endless quantities of sweat" (Garcia, 2015). This observation underscores the economic and cultural relevance of techno as a key component of Berlin's tourism landscape. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Berlin recorded approximately 14 million visitors annually. Although tourism numbers declined significantly during the pandemic, recovery has been gradual: by 2025, the city welcomed approximately 12.4 million tourists. While this figure remains below pre-pandemic levels, it indicates a steady resurgence of tourism, within which techno culture continues to play a significant role (visitBerlin, n.d.).

Another important aspect highlighted by Groschwitz, alongside the aforementioned monetary value lost due to the pandemic, is that the pandemic created a generational gap within the techno scene. The next generation of the community "missed out on formative years—say at 15 or 16, when you're really looking forward to finally being allowed into a club. That opportunity simply vanished for them. So they looked for other outlets; in a sense, they weren't socialized into it." This resulted in a lack of younger participants entering the club scene in Berlin and, more broadly, reduced international inflow into the city's nightlife culture, thereby creating a significant financial gap in projected club revenues. Groschwitz further notes that subcultural scenes are inherently fragile and may disappear over time: "The Wandervogel movement—one of the first, if not the first youth movement of the 20th century that is often referenced—no longer exists: "The importance of passing the knowledge is underlined into the national inscriptions official website Knowledge acquisition and skill development within techno culture largely occur through autodidactic processes. This includes, for example, the curation of musical programs and the technical optimization of sound systems by sound engineers. In addition, practitioners learn from and inspire one another through direct interaction at events as well as through media formats such as vlogs, blogs, magazines, literature, and online platforms offering tutorials and masterclasses" (German Commission for UNESCO, n.d.).

An important aspect he emphasizes is the urban dimension of techno culture. Berlin's techno scene remains deeply rooted in the city. Gentrification, therefore, presents a major challenge to maintaining this cultural heritage: "So yes, there are real challenges. Then there's the broader issue of gentrification in Berlin. Berlin techno culture—perhaps even because of these conditions—emerged from the unique situation following reunification. Within a large city, a metropolis of millions, there was suddenly an enormous amount of open space right in the center, not just on the outskirts. That's really what makes Berlin special." This urban nature brings other challenges, as noted by Wulf: "Another difficulty arises when selecting cultural heritage practices in large cities. Due to the high mobility found there, it is often not easy to achieve the temporal continuity required for intangible cultural practices. Finally, the strong diversity of people in metropolitan areas—with more than 150 different migration backgrounds—creates new conditions for the emergence of intangible cultural heritage practices in urban centers" (Wulf, 2023).

From a political perspective, Berlin's techno culture also plays a significant role: "The fact that the Love Parade was initiated just before reunification was more or less a coincidence. But techno was able to take root so successfully in that specific historical moment. If a different kind of music had been popular at the time, perhaps

a different culture would have developed instead." As noted by the German Commission for UNESCO, the mid-1980s saw the emergence of influential club scenes in both Frankfurt and Berlin. Building on earlier developments in DJ culture, techno evolved into a defining soundtrack of the post-reunification period, reflecting a broader atmosphere of social and cultural transformation. The newly created spatial and social "freedoms" following German reunification significantly contributed to the establishment and consolidation of Berlin's techno and club scene, which continues to play a prominent role today. Sound practices and production techniques are closely tied to the urban context of Berlin and developed their distinctive character within the sociohistorical framework of reunified Germany (German Commission for UNESCO, n.d.). The aspect of Germany's reunification has shaped the techno world and created the cultural landscape of Berlin, which also contributes to generating financial revenue for the city.

5. Discussion

In the author's previous research, I have already noted the fact that in order to discuss intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage, it is essential to begin with the fact that, like knowledge and skills in other sectors, intangible cultural heritage also needs to be protected from being restricted to the wider public due to the possible privatization of this knowledge (Ponne, 2025). Nevertheless, Berlin's techno culture represents a different approach to intangible cultural heritage because it is already a field where authorship rights, industry, and businesses exist, making the use of intellectual capital within this element clearly visible. An important shift happens when observing that Berlin's techno movement has experienced a transition from being a post-reunification underground movement to an officially recognized element on Germany's nationwide inventory of intangible cultural heritage. This represents a pivotal shift in how contemporary urban expressions are valued and broadens the understanding of intangible cultural heritage and its borders. This case study reveals that the traditional boundaries between intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage are increasingly blurred in the context of a modern knowledge economy.

While intellectual capital is typically associated with organizational efficiency and competitive advantage (Rehman et al., 2021), Berlin techno demonstrates that a living heritage community can function as a powerful repository of structural and relational capital. The "mixing" skills of DJs and the technical expertise of sound engineers are not merely cultural expressions but form a specialized human capital that drives a multi-million euro tourism industry. The important question remains the authenticity and the community behind this.

Berlin techno culture's inscription in Germany's national inventory list is a specific case study because it is an element connected with urban spaces like Berlin. As highlighted by Groschwitz, the survival of this heritage is intrinsically linked to the physical and social fabric of the city, which is influenced by gentrification, massive infrastructure projects, higher rent costs, and other aspects that affect the cost of experiencing such an intangible cultural element as Berlin's techno scene. These aspects threaten the status of Berlin techno. This introduces one of the main reasons why such an element was suggested for inscription on the national inventory list: while the status of intangible cultural heritage provides political attention and symbolic capital, the actual intellectual capital—the clubs and creative networks—remains vulnerable to market situations, globalization, and other processes. Only over time will one be able to see how this new inscription and state influence affect the future of Berlin's techno. Another aspect is that this urban inscription raises questions about scholars' understanding of space and context when discussing the environment of intangible cultural heritage. Shakya and Vagnarelli (2024) suggest there is a "close link between people's intangible cultural heritage and their natural environment, promoting a sense of belonging and identity that is tied to a particular territory and natural landscape" (Shakya and Vagnarelli, 2024).

It is important to note that a significant finding is the disruption of knowledge transmission caused by COVID-19. If intangible cultural heritage is defined by its continuous recreation (Lenzerini, 2011), the post-pandemic generational gap and the "missing years" for younger participants pose a risk to the long-term sustainability of this intellectual asset. This underlines that "the importance of intangible cultural heritage refers to the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted from one generation to the next ones" (Petronela, 2016). This suggests that the inclusion of subcultures in intangible heritage lists is often a reactive measure; in the case of Berlin's techno culture, adding it to the national list of intangible cultural heritage serves to secure state support and bridge financial gaps. This leads to another important aspect, particularly when drawing parallels between intangible cultural heritage and intellectual capital: the strategic use of heritage frameworks. As noted, "The French *compagnons* employ the heritage regime in an effort to improve the prestige and thus pay of craftsmanship. Other local groups, as in the Spanish case study, may use heritage instruments to strengthen their own position. On a larger scale, social groups may seek empowerment through the heritage regime,

seeking to jostle the power balance within the state, as is the case – not represented in this volume – with Indonesian groups' efforts to revive traditional legal structures" (Bendix et al., 2012). This example illustrates how intangible cultural heritage can be mobilized as an opportunity structure for generating added value within a specific locality or district, as has been done for Berlin's techno culture.

6. Conclusion

The case study of Berlin techno culture through the dual lenses of intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage leads to the following conclusions. 1. Intangible cultural heritage and intellectual capital are not mutually exclusive. Berlin techno serves as a prime example where cultural practices function as economic generators, transforming the knowledge of this heritage into intellectual capital that sustains urban creative industries and tourism. 2. Even though heritage is often seen as rural, this cultural expression includes the name of the city in its inscription, broadening the scope of heritage. By recognizing a contemporary, commercially active, and technologically-driven movement, Germany has acknowledged that living heritage in the 21st century is deeply intertwined with the knowledge economy and urban identity. 3. This case study shows that the motivation for seeking intangible cultural heritage status was largely pragmatic. The community utilized the UNESCO framework to gain political leverage against gentrification and the economic fallout of the pandemic. This indicates that such status is increasingly viewed as a safeguarding mechanism for intangible assets that have high market value but low legal protection. In this case, the state is protecting a large-scale industry, thereby securing its own intellectual capital.

This case study reveals an important flaw in understanding the intangible cultural heritage owned by a community that consists of individuals who also get paid for their work and receive royalties for their music; unlike traditional folk music, DJs hold authorship over their works. Furthermore, the clubs are owned by private entities, which raises a discussion regarding where to draw the line between private business owners and communities. This serves as a reminder that admitting intangible cultural heritage elements to the national list provides not only acknowledgment to the community but also an opportunity to gain significant financial support from the state. Nevertheless, contemporary living heritage must also have the right to protect itself. For contemporary urban intangible cultural heritage to survive, preservation efforts must go beyond symbolic listing. Policymakers must treat these cultural ecosystems as intellectual capital assets that can provide important growth for the economy.

It must be concluded that there is a need for a more integrated approach to intangible cultural heritage management—one that recognizes the economic potency of subcultures without compromising their social and communal essence. In this case study, the economic potential for the city is already clearly seen and recognized. Such a subculture in an urban context provides a voice for other communities to realize their opportunity to add economic value and serves as a reminder that intangible cultural heritage communities possess serious intellectual capital within the community and beyond to share. This knowledge should be taken seriously, and state support might enhance the possibility of passing this knowledge on to next generations.

Intellectual capital and intangible cultural heritage are interconnected terms that share the same core ideas: 1. Intangible knowledge is transmitted to the next generation or community, or in the case of intellectual capital, to further organizational members; 2. Both concepts involve assets that are seen as important and valuable—for instance, the specific knowledge and skills needed to contribute to an organization's wealth, or for intangible cultural heritage, the ability to learn skills and knowledge in order to pass them to community members. This example shows that policymakers should be aware of 21st-century living heritage that is already making a profit today but might become extinct or weaker in the future.

Ethical Declaration: The author declares that there are no ethical issues related to the research presented in this paper.

AI Declaration: The author declares that no significant AI tools or technologies were used in the conduct of the research for this paper.

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