

European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

2026, No 3

European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Scientific journal

№ 3 2026

ISSN 2414-2344

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Premier Publishing s.r.o.

Praha 8 – Karlín, Lyčkovo nám. 508/7, PSČ 18600

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ppublishing.org

European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences is an international, English language, peer-reviewed journal. The journal is published in electronic form.

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Section 1. History and archeology

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-3-7



A 25,000-YEAR-OLD PREHISTORIC WRITING SYSTEM

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Cite: Aksagov M. T. (2026). *A 25,000-Year-Old Prehistoric Writing System*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-3-7>

Abstract

This article examines the hypothesis of the existence of a prehistoric writing system approximately 25,000 years old, discovered in the Dordogne region of modern-day France. The author analyzes the bas-relief of the Laussel Venus, suggesting that the elements of the image represent symbols of an ancient pictographic script.

Particular attention is paid to the connection between the image and the Ingush language, in particular the expression “But lyatsa,” meaning “lunar eclipse.” It is believed that this image commemorates an important historical event that occurred during a lunar eclipse and is associated with the destruction of an ancient city. The author emphasizes the need for further research to confirm this hypothesis and to revise existing ideas about the development of writing and human history. This article is for the scientific community with a high degree of involvement in the subject.

Keywords: *prehistoric writing, Laussel Venus, pictography, Ingush language, ancient civilizations, archaeoastronomy*

Despite the extensive work of scientists, the history of peoples remains partially studied and conceals much that remains unknown. Writing plays a vital role in understanding history as a source of direct communication between people of those distant times. Unfortunately, well-documented writings in human history are only about 6,000 years old, making it difficult to obtain accurate information from primary sources.

Many scientists have unsuccessfully attempted to discover more ancient writings, predating the Upper Paleolithic. Over more than 20 years of research, I have discovered consistent prehistoric writing dating back 25,000 years in the Dordogne region of present-day France.

The subject of this distinct prehistoric pictogram is complex and requires substantial expertise not only in linguistics, but also of

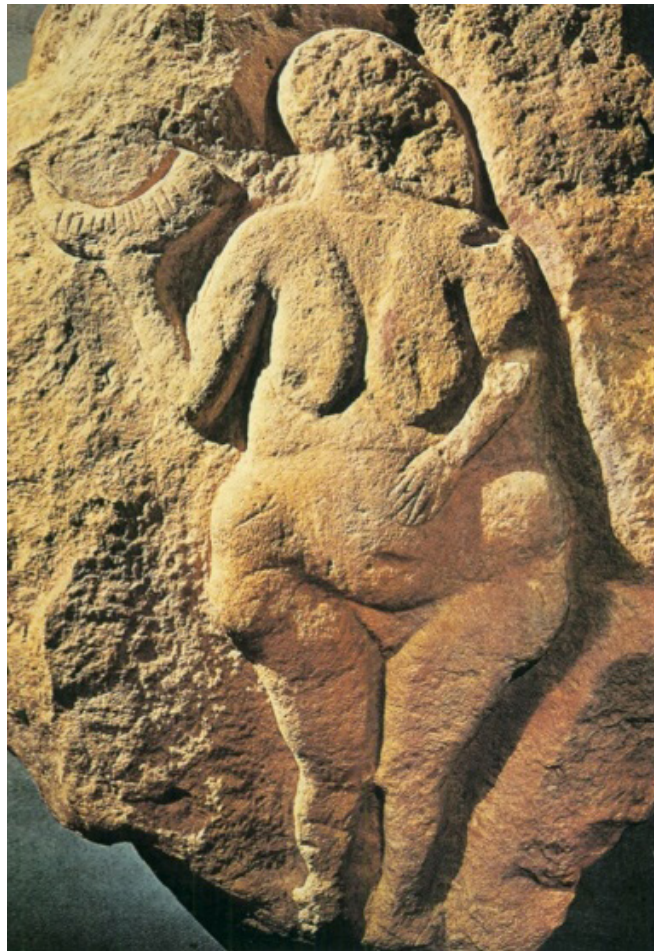
the visual arts, as the writing of that time was closely linked to an unusual visual art that has remained largely unexplored.

A relatively close analogue of this script is a pictogram, which has many distinctive features. In pictograms, signs are typically represented separately, whereas in this script the pictorial signs in most examples are non-separable; therefore, their identification – and even more so their reading – is extremely difficult. It is necessary to know the reading principles and to possess substantial research experience.

Signs of the script may include parts of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic bodies, whole

bodies or isolated parts of figures, various objects, and importantly, actions performed by body parts or objects and other qualities. This method of writing has limitations when composing continuous text because it employs the principle of the ideogram, but it also offers a wide range of possibilities through the polysemy of pictorial signs. Thus, despite its apparent simplicity, this highly complex script has great potential. For clarity, I will explain using the figure of the Laussel Venus from France, which has been dated to 25,000 years ago.

Picture 1.



What do researchers know about this bas-relief? The most established theories.

A full-length nude female figure with exaggerated legs holds an object in her raised right hand – according to one version, a bison horn; according to another, a crescent moon with 13 notches representing the number of days. She is generally considered a goddess, a woman giving birth.

No interpretation satisfactorily explains how a woman could hold a crescent, since the Moon is a celestial body and cannot be physically grasped. Therefore, this combination contains a more complex symbolic meaning. That is, the hand holding the Moon has a specific informational meaning, where both the hand and the Moon perform the functions of written signs.

There is also no explanation for the significance of holding a bison horn in the hand, given that the figure has no face, no mouth would be unable to drink from the horn.

Therefore, identifying the object in the hand as the Moon is entirely justified, and the informational significance of this action remains to be determined.

In this example, the hand, the Moon, and the act of holding the Moon in the hand are signs of writing and together form a concise text that can be read coherently and is fully verifiable. To read this written message accurately, one must be well acquainted with the language of a very ancient people who today live in the North Caucasus – the Ingush language.

In Ingush, the expression “But lyatsa” has been preserved to this day and literally means “to hold, to keep the Moon. Applied to this meaning, this expression means a lunar

eclipse. Thus, the bas-relief of Venus contains the laconic message “Lunar Eclipse,” associated with an extremely important event in the lives of the people of that time.

Moreover, the female figure associated with the Sun, that is, the Sun Goddess, is identified with utmost precision, as a lunar eclipse is caused by the Sun. Because of this, ancient Ingush referred to the phenomenon as “My-alkho but lyatsa” (the Sun holds the Moon).

Precisely because this image contains written symbols, it contains many strange features, which are characteristic of all similar examples in different parts of the world where this script was used.

There would be little sense in creating such a complex bas-relief merely to record an ordinary occurrence such as a lunar eclipse, as ancient people witnessed lunar or solar eclipses many times.

Picture 2.



This means that the lunar eclipse was used as a time when some very important event in the lives of the people of that period occurred. To answer this question, a complex study of the bas-relief is necessary, looking for any secret information – hidden images – that will provide the answer. Considering that the bas-relief was executed using a “chameleon” technique, the search for concealed images must take into account the features of that technique. Having extensive experience studying similar images in the Caucasus, this work can be carried out with this bas-relief. Unfortunately, lacking the ability to conduct a physical study of the Venus bas-relief, I had to search for a photo online, hoping to find a more or less accurate one. I managed to find such a photo online.

On this incidental photograph by an unknown author, although not fully visible, a hidden image is sufficiently clear on a sloping face of the limestone to the right from the viewer’s perspective. Such examples are typical of iconic images. The photograph was taken with lighting from the left side of the viewer, which likely corresponds to the original craftsman’s intent – only under this lighting does the silhouette image become visible.

What is depicted on the lateral panel?

A shadowy, silhouetted image is created on the screen. How was this secret, symbolic image created? It was created through complex calculations to create the necessary shapes of the female figure’s body parts on the surface – that is, strange bumps, depressions, and other curves and shapes. This is why the figure of Venus has many inexplicable oddities.

What does this secret shadowy, silhouetted image on the side screen represent?

The screen depicts the facial part of a human head with a very long neck, and on the crown of the head is a stepped structure resembling a tower. I discovered a more complex analog of the image of a stepped tower on a head in the Caucasus, in the Tkhaba-Yerda temple.

The structure (tower) on the head of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creature functions as a pictographic script, very clearly legible in the Ingush language – Tetekov. The

word Tetekov has two roots, consisting of the words Tete (top of the head) and Kov (city, courtyard), meaning “above the main city,” that is, the Capital, the main city among other cities. Thus, on the right side of Venus, the secret is depicted an illustrated text message, Tetekov (Capital), and an image of the capital’s main building.

The secret image of the structure and its name provide an important clarification to the “Lunar Eclipse” message. This suggests that some important event related to the Tetekov capital occurred during a lunar eclipse, likely a catastrophe and the destruction of that city.

In fact, the Laussel cave contains a record with a hypersensational, concise message about the probable destruction of a capital during a lunar eclipse. This record implies that at least 25,000 years ago there were urban-type settlements with multi-storey buildings and a capital Tetekov in central Europe, which perished during a lunar eclipse.

The location of this capital can be assisted by information preserved in the Caucasus, since Caucasian sources indicate geographical features of its placement and terrain characteristics.

Furthermore, it is highly likely that the Losselskaya Cave contains other inscriptions and drawings on this extremely important topic in human history.

An important feature: this script was used by the Ingush up to the medieval period, primarily to record especially important information, by that time serving as a secret cryptographic script. Therefore, fundamental research into the history and culture of the Ingush, study of artifacts bearing this script, and investigation of complex pictorial art are of great significance for the study of this writing system and for the history of humanity and ancient peoples.

My discovery of this pictographic script provides access to invaluable information from the prehistoric period, at least from the Late Paleolithic, and allows reassessment of a large number of artifacts for the presence of prehistoric writing signs. In effect, this discovery moves historical science to an entirely new level of investigation.

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submitted 20.04.2026;
accepted for publication 04.05.2026;
published 31.05.2026
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DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-8-10



ANCESTOR CULT AS AN IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF STATEHOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE OGHUZ EPIC TRADITION

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Cite: Zumrud Ibrahim gizi Mansimova (2026). *Ancestor Cult as an Ideological Foundation of Statehood and National Identity in the Oghuz Epic Tradition*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-8-10>

Abstract

This article examines the ancestor cult in the Oghuz epic tradition as a fundamental ideological system that unites the historical memory, national-spiritual values, and statehood traditions of the Azerbaijani people. The study argues that the ancestor concept in Oghuz society was not limited to mythological beliefs but served as a key mechanism for legitimizing political power, organizing social structure, and preserving ethnic identity. Through the analysis of Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, Bayandur Khan, and other figures, the article demonstrates how the ancestor cult functioned as a sacred mediator between the divine and the social, between the past and the present. The article concludes that the ancestor cult reflects the ancient roots of the Azerbaijanism ideology and plays a crucial role in maintaining national unity, spiritual integrity, and identity consciousness.

Keywords: *Ancestor cult, Azerbaijanism, Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, statehood, national identity, epic tradition.*

Introduction

The Oghuz epic tradition represents one of the richest folkloric layers in the formation of the national-spiritual value system of Turkic peoples, especially the Azerbaijani people. In this tradition, the ancestor cult functions not only as a mythological belief but also as a key ideological pillar regulating the socio-political and spiritual life of society. Through Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, and other figures, the wisdom, leadership, and protective role of the ancestor are empha-

sized. In this regard, the images of ancestors in the *Oghuznames* hold special significance both for the preservation of national identity and for expressing the historical roots of Azerbaijanism.

This context gives every image in the Oghuz epic tradition not only aesthetic meaning but also deep ideological and cultural content. If Oghuz Khan acts as the supreme ruler who establishes the socio-political order of the Oghuz people, then Dede Qorqud embodies the wise elder who

shapes the spiritual foundations of this order. At the same time, figures like Irkil Qoca, as carriers of secret knowledge, perform the sacred mediatory function of guiding the ruler and protecting him from dangers.

The Ideological Role of the Ancestor Cult in Oghuz Society

In the *Oghuznames*, governance is based not only on physical strength but also on spiritual leadership and connection to divine knowledge. Thus, this system of images, formed within the framework of the ancestor cult, serves as an expression of the statehood traditions, national solidarity, and spiritual integrity historically possessed by the Azerbaijani people. In this regard, the Oghuz epic tradition can be assessed as an important example of spiritual heritage that preserves the ancient layers of the Azerbaijanism idea.

As F. Bayat writes about the epic laws of the Oghuz world and the biography of the hero, the ancestor concept is one of the most important points of this biography (Bayat, F., 2019, p. 36–55). The ancestor cult reflected in the *Oghuznames* carries great importance for studying the historical-cultural essence and transformative forms of this cult. In the *Oghuznames*, the breath of the ancestor is felt, and they also hold special significance for instilling patriotism and national values.

The Oghuzname as a Sacred Text of National Consciousness

When we pay attention to Azerbaijani mythological texts and legends reflecting mythological beliefs, we see that the mythological worldview of Turkic peoples, their historical path, and their way of life were first widely reflected in the *Oghuznames*. In this sense, *Oghuznames* are not simply epics but, in every sense, history – the history of the Oghuz. However, this history cannot be understood in a narrow specific sense, i.e., only in the sense of historicity as we understand it today. Because the epic *Oghuznames* carried meanings higher than being history, even meanings that we sometimes cannot understand today.

Just as a religious person approaches the book they consider sacred with respect, love, and affection, the ancient Oghuz considered the *Oghuznames* as a sacred book – *bitik* –

about their great ancestor Oghuz Khan. In this sense, the most characteristic information about the ancestor is found precisely in the *Oghuzname* epics. This has been confirmed by specialists.

The Oghuz Epic Tradition and Azerbaijanism

The Oghuz epic tradition reflects the ancient roots of the Azerbaijanism idea. Azerbaijanism, as a national ideology, emphasizes the unity of the Azerbaijani people, their historical and cultural heritage, and their statehood traditions. The ancestor cult, with its emphasis on lineage, respect for elders, and continuity of values, provides a deep historical foundation for this ideology. The figures of Oghuz Khan, Dede Qorqud, and Bayandur Khan embody the ideals of leadership, wisdom, justice, and protection of the people – ideals that are central to the Azerbaijanism worldview.

Moreover, the Oghuz epic tradition has preserved the memory of the Oghuz Turks' migration, settlement, and state-building activities in the territory of modern Azerbaijan. This memory serves as a bridge connecting the past to the present, reinforcing the idea that the Azerbaijani people have a long and continuous history on this land. The ancestor cult, therefore, is not merely a relic of the past but a living tradition that continues to shape national consciousness and identity.

The Sacred Mediator Function of Ancestors

The ancestor in Oghuz society served as a sacred mediator between the divine and the human, between the past and the present. Through rituals, stories, and epic performances, the ancestors were invoked, honored, and asked for guidance. This mediatory function was crucial for legitimizing political authority. A ruler who could trace his lineage to Oghuz Khan or other revered ancestors possessed not only political but also spiritual authority. This connection between ancestry and legitimacy is a recurring theme in Turkic statehood traditions.

The figure of Dede Qorqud exemplifies this mediatory function. He is not a ruler but a wise elder who advises rulers, resolves disputes, and ensures that the social order

remains aligned with spiritual values. His words carry the weight of ancestral wisdom, and his blessings and curses have real effects in the epic world. This reflects a broader understanding in Oghuz society that the ancestors continue to participate in the life of the community through their living descendants and through figures like Dede Qorqud who embody their wisdom.

Conclusion

In Oghuz cosmogony, the ancestor cult served as a fundamental ideological system that united historical memory, national-spiritual values, and statehood traditions. The concepts of *ata*, *baba*, and

dede represent not merely kinship relations but deep mythological, ideological, and cultural meanings. This chain of meanings became one of the main pillars determining the socio-political structure, moral value system, and worldview of Oghuz society. The preservation of these concepts in the Oghuz epic tradition ensures the continuity of the historical memory, national identity, and statehood thinking of the Azerbaijani people. Thus, the ancestor cult, while being a carrier of national-spiritual values, also serves as an important cultural heritage that preserves and transmits the deep historical roots of the Azerbaijanism idea to future generations.

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submitted 29.03.2026;
accepted for publication 13.04.2026;
published 31.05.2026
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Section 2. Literature

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-11-14



ETYMOLOGY AND SEMANTIC EVOLUTION OF "MOLLA" AND "MÖVLANA": FROM ANCIENT MYTHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES TO ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

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Cite: Kazem, A.E., Xiaohong, Z. (2026). *Etymology and Semantic Evolution of "Molla" and "Mövlana": From Ancient Mythological Archetypes to Islamic Intellectual Tradition*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-11-14>

Abstract

This article explores the etymological roots and semantic development of the titles "molla" and "mövlana" (mevlana), which were historically attached to the name of the classical Turkic poet Muhammad Fuzuli. The study traces the possible connection between the "ma/mo" particle found in these words and ancient mythological archetypes of protection and guardianship in pre-Islamic civilizations, including Sumerian, Egyptian, Central Asian, and Chinese cultures. It then examines the Arabic term "mawla", its usage in the Qur'an, and its evolution from "freed slave" or "client" (mawali) to "master", "protector", and ultimately "Lord" (God). The article argues that the semantic shift from a social to a divine and then to an honorific scholarly title reflects broader cultural and religious transformations in Islamic societies. Finally, the study explains why medieval scholars and poets like Fuzuli were honored with these titles, linking them to the high intellectual and spiritual standards of the time.

Keywords: *Molla, mevlana, mawla, etymology, Fuzuli, semantic change, mythological archetype, Islamic intellectual history*

Introduction

The words "molla" and "mövlana" are widely used in Turkic and Islamic cultures to address learned men, religious scholars, and sometimes poets. However, their origins stretch far back into ancient history – long before the emergence of Islam. This study investigates the hypothesis that the first syllable "ma/

mo" in these words shares a common archetype with protective deities in pre-Islamic mythologies across various civilizations. It then traces the documented history of "mawla" in Arabic, its transformation during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, and its eventual adoption as an honorific title for highly educated individuals in the Ottoman and Persianate worlds.

The research employs Professor Rahila Geybullayeva's "before and after" method. The "before" part restores earlier semantics using the abjad/consonantal alphabet, based on the principle that every letter and symbol contains meanings from earlier periods. The "after" approach examines how linguistic units were adopted by later generations and societies, how relevant they remained, and how they developed. This methodology is particularly suitable for studying words like "molla" that have accumulated multiple layers of meaning over millennia.

The "Ma/Mo" Archetype in Ancient Mythologies

Professor E. M. Meletinsky's *Dictionary of Mythology* reveals that the particle «ma/mo» appears as part of names of deities and protective spirits across various ancient cultures. Several examples illustrate this phenomenon:

- *Malakbel* (ma+lakbel) – a sun god in ancient Semitic mythology, identified with the Hellenistic sun god Helios.
- *Ma+mow* or *Mo+mow* – appears in Avar, Tat, and Akushali cultures as a female protective figure.
- *Maat* (ma+at) – the Egyptian goddess of justice and order, who protects cosmic balance and truth.
- *Mavan* (ma+van) – in Chinese mythology, the goddess protecting horses.

In Sumerian, "ama" means mother. In Turkic mythology, "Umay" is a protective goddess of children and fertility. In Indic languages, "mata" means mother. The phonetic similarity between these words from geographically distant civilizations – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Central Asia, China, and India – is striking.

What explains this similarity? The most plausible explanation is psycho-linguistic. The simplest sounds a human can produce – "ma", "mu", "mo" – are biologically universal. These sounds are often among the first that infants produce, and they are naturally associated with the mother figure, the primary protector and guardian in human experience. This biological reflex and initial psycholinguistic perception may explain the recurring association of "ma/mo" with protection and guardianship across different mythologies.

The Finnish scholar E. Tarasti, at the 2018 Azerbaijan Comparative Literature Association (AzCLA) conference, emphasized that every sign is connected to classical concepts formed in the Middle Ages, and their historical development can be traced back to the ancient consonantal or abjad alphabet. This supports our methodological approach to tracing "molla" back to the "ma/mo" archetype.

From "Mawla" to "Molla" in Arabic

In Arabic, the word "mawla" derives from the root "w-l-y" (ولى), meaning to be close, to protect, to govern, or to have authority. The word appears in pre-Islamic Arabic and continued to develop new meanings in the Islamic period.

During the 7th century in Arabia, the "mawali" system was developed to integrate freed slaves and non-Arab converts into tribal structures. A freed slave became the "mawla" (client) of a patron through a contract called *hily*. The client was considered a close associate of the patron's tribe. The term "mawali" (plural of mawla) referred to these freed slaves and non-Arab converts who had attached themselves to Arab tribes.

Under the Umayyads (661–750 CE), "mawali" referred primarily to freed non-Arab converts who were clients of Arab tribes. These individuals were often highly educated and played important roles in administration and culture. Under the Abbasids (750–1258 CE), the term expanded to include state officials, paid soldiers, and civil servants – anyone employed in state service, regardless of ethnic origin. The mawali gradually gained social status and, through intermarriage with Arabs, achieved full integration into society.

Over time, "mawla" also acquired the meaning of "Lord" or "Protector" – one of the names of God in Islam. The Qur'an contains several verses where Allah is referred to as "mawla". For example, Surah al-Anfal 8:40 states: "Know that Allah is your Mawla – the Best Protector and the Best Helper." Other verses in the same surah (8:72, 8:73) use the word "wali" (from the same root w-l-y) meaning "protector" or "close friend".

The word "molla" (or "nulla") emerged from "mawla" through phonetic changes. The process likely involved intermediate

forms such as “monla” or “munla”, with the consonant [n] assimilating to the following (Ashiq Pasha, 1998) – a common phonological process in many languages. The resulting form “molla” entered Ottoman Turkish and other Turkic languages as a title for religious scholars and learned men.

French and Western Scholarship on “Molla”

The French Islamic scholar Jean Calmard, in his entry on “Molla” in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, confirms that the term derives from the Arabic “mawlā” meaning “master”, “lord”, “owner”. He notes that the title applies to any Muslim scholar who has

received a certain level of religious education and possesses the ability to transmit it to others. In both Iranian and Ottoman societies, Calmard explains, the title could also be applied to adolescents who had completed 15 to 18 years of advanced study in a madrasa.

The Iranologist Hamid Algar, in his study of the Qajar period, treats “molla” not as a separate lexical term but within the framework of the *ulama* (religious scholars). Algar shows that in Qajar Iran, mollas were not limited to religious functions but were actively involved in state politics. They held significant social and political influence, and the title signified not only religious authority but also social prestige.

Table 1.

Period	Form	Meaning
Prehistoric (mythological)	ma/mo particle	protection, guardianship
Pre-Islamic Arabia	mawla	client, freed slave, close associate
Early Islamic (7th-8th c.)	mawla / mawali	non-Arab convert, freed slave attached to tribe
Abbasid period (8th-13th c.)	mawla	state official, paid soldier, civil servant
Qur’anic usage	mawla	God as Protector, Lord
Medieval (13th-16th c.)	mevlana	our master – Sufi spiritual guide, great scholar
Ottoman period	molla	advanced madrasa graduate, religious scholar
Modern	molla	cleric, religiously educated person (sometimes pejorative)

The Semantic Shift: Summary

The semantic evolution of “molla” can be summarized as follows:

Mevlana as a Sufi and Scholarly Title

In the 13th century, the term “Mevlana” (Arabic “mawlānā” – “our master”) became strongly associated with Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), the founder of the Mevlevi Sufi order. After Rumi, “mevlana” was so closely identified with him that it almost became his personal name. However, the title continued to be used for other highly respected scholars and spiritual guides.

In the Ottoman educational system, a “molla” was a person who had completed 15–18 years of advanced madrasa education. The curriculum included religious sciences (fiqh, tafsir, hadith, kalam, usul al-fiqh), as well as philosophy, logic, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, medicine, and literature. Graduates of this system were qualified to serve as judges (qadi), professors (mudarris), or religious authorities (mufti).

The connection between “mevlana” and Fuzuli is particularly significant. Fuzuli wrote masterpieces in Azerbaijani Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. He was deeply versed in hadith, kalam, fiqh, logic, geometry, and medicine. His

work *Hadiqat al-su'ada* (The Garden of the Blessed) is a religious epic about the martyrs of Karbala, demonstrating his mastery of Islamic history and theology. Hasibe Mazioğlu emphasizes that to understand Fuzuli's profound knowledge of religious sciences, one must examine his works – and for this reason, sources call him “Mevlana Fuzuli”.

Conclusion

The journey of the words “molla” and “mövlana” from ancient mythological protective particles through the social-legal term “mawla” in early Islam to the high scholarly and spiritual titles of the medieval period illustrates the dynamic nature of language. These terms absorbed layers of meaning from each era, ultimately symbolizing protection, mastery, and wisdom.

The study confirms that there is a semantic connection between the “ma/mo” arche-

type in pre-Islamic mythologies and the later Islamic usage of “mawla” as protector and master. Both share the core concept of guardianship and authority. However, as Florian Coulmas warns, it is methodologically problematic to completely identify terms from different periods with their origins. The connection should be understood as a semantic affinity based on the archetype of protection and order, not as direct genetic descent.

The application of the titles “molla” and “mevlana” to Muhammad Fuzuli was not accidental but a fitting recognition of his profound knowledge, philosophical depth, and poetic genius. Fuzuli represents the ideal of the classical Islamic scholar-poet: someone who combined mastery of religious sciences with literary excellence and spiritual insight. The titles “molla” and “mevlana” capture this synthesis of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural authority.

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submitted 09.04.2026;

accepted for publication 23.04.2026;

published 31.05.2026

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DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-15-18



TOPONYMS IN KARABAKH FOLKLORE: LINGUOPOETIC CHARACTERISTICS

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Cite: Asgarova I. (2026). *Toponyms in Karabakh Folklore: Linguopoetic Characteristics*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-15-18>

Abstract

This article investigates the linguopoetic functions of place names in Karabakh folklore. Based on an analysis of the genres of legend and narrative, it is determined that toponyms perform text-forming, plot-forming, semantic-center, emotional-aesthetic, mythological-sacral, reality-confirming, and collective-memory functions. Whereas in legends place names tend to display a mythological and symbolic character, in narratives their historical and informative function predominates. In Karabakh folklore, toponyms become a poetic means of expressing national identity, historical memory, and cultural values.

Keywords: *Karabakh folklore; place names; toponym; linguopoetics; legend; narrative; national-cultural memory; sacral space; semantic center; poetic devices*

Introduction (continued from Part 1)

From a linguopoetic perspective, the genre of the narrative differs from the legend in a number of important respects. Whereas in legend mythological thinking and symbolic imagery occupy a central position, in narrative events are presented more within historical reality, real space, and a concrete temporal frame. This generic difference directly affects the linguopoetic characteristics that place names acquire within the text. In Karabakh folklore narratives related to place names, toponyms function less as mythological images than as poetic means for expressing historical memory, real events, and collective experience.

When interpreting the genre characteristics of artistic text, Jirmunski notes that genre is one of the primary factors determining the functional load and aesthetic possibilities of the word within the text (Jirmunski, 1977, p. 61). From this perspective, in Karabakh narratives the linguopoetic function of place names does not bear as broad a mythological-symbolic character as in legends, yet their aesthetic value and semantic loading are not entirely eliminated. On the contrary, because real-historical content is presented poetically, toponyms likewise operate as significant linguopoetic units in narrative.

One of the principal linguopoetic characteristics of place names in Karabakh narratives is the reality-confirming function. To

reinforce the truthfulness of the event, the narrative cites specific place names. Names of villages, mountains, ravines, and fortresses not only indicate where an event happened but also increase its historical credibility. In this context, the toponym becomes a poetic unit with a quasi-documentary character. For example, in narratives about Karabakh villages, the precise naming of places serves to ensure that the event is perceived in popular memory as an actual historical fact (Qarabağ, 2012, III kitab, pp. 64–67).

Another important feature that determines the linguopoetic characteristics of place names in narratives is semantic concreteness. Whereas in legends place names often bear symbolic and generalized meaning, in narratives toponyms are connected with a concrete notion of place. Yet this concreteness does not mean that poetic expression is weak. On the contrary, because the historical event is tightly bound to the place, the place name acquires emotional and ideational load. For example, in a narrative about the fate of a particular village, that village's name becomes a poetic marker summarizing the tragedy or heroism experienced by the people (Qarabağ, 2014, VIII kitab, pp. 91–94).

When explaining the function of space in artistic text, Lotman underscores that real space is “re-encoded semantically” within the poetic text and becomes a carrier of ideas (Lotman, 1992, p. 75). The linguopoetic characteristics of place names in Karabakh narratives are directly connected with this process of re-encoding. The toponym remains a real geographical object, yet within the text it is endowed with emotional and ideational meaning.

One of the important linguopoetic characteristics of place names in narratives is the collective-memory function. In Karabakh folklore, narratives often aim to preserve in memory past events, wars, migrations, and tragedies. In this process, place names become key points of support. An event may be forgotten, but the name of the place where it occurred remains in popular memory and is transmitted from generation to generation through narrative. This feature shows that the toponym possesses high value from a linguopoetic point of view (Qarabağ, 2012, IV kitab, pp. 112–115).

One of the linguopoetic characteristics of place names in Karabakh narratives concerns emotional evaluation. In narratives, toponyms are often loaded with positive or negative emotional shading. Places considered sacred are remembered with respect and reverence, whereas names of places associated with tragic events evoke feelings of sorrow and pain. This emotional evaluation intensifies the toponym's linguopoetic load and transforms it from a simple spatial indicator into a poetic unit (Qarabağ, 2014, IX kitab, pp. 60–63).

Compared with legends, the poetic expression of place names in narratives is realized by simpler linguistic means. Here, metaphor and personification are relatively weaker, but the narrative context preserves the place name's poetic value. The place name is used naturally in the flow of events, and it is precisely this naturalness that increases its aesthetic effect. This feature is directly connected with the realist character of the narrative genre (Azərbaycan əfsanələrinin poetikası və süjet göstəricisi, 2023, pp. 203–205).

Noting that linguopoetic characteristics in folkloric texts change depending on genre, K. N. Vəli argues that in realist genres poetic effect is achieved mainly through semantic and contextual means (Vəli, 2019, p. 7). The linguopoetic characteristics of place names in Karabakh narratives confirm this view. Here, toponyms acquire poetic meaning not through extensive artistic description but through their direct connection with the event.

The historical function of place names in narratives should also be specifically emphasized. In Karabakh folklore, many narratives are connected with particular historical periods and events. In these narratives, place names function as a bridge between history and folklore. A historical event becomes folklorized, yet through the place name it retains its real historical foundation. As a result of this process, the place name becomes a bearer both of the historical fact and of its poetic interpretation (Qarabağ, 2013, VI kitab, pp. 140–143).

Thus, in Karabakh folklore narratives related to place names, toponyms display distinctive features from a linguopoetic standpoint. In narrative, they function as key units that authenticate reality, create semantic

concreteness, preserve collective memory, carry out emotional evaluation, and present historical content in poetic form. These characteristics not only reveal the poetic essence of the narrative genre but also disclose the cultural and aesthetic significance of place names in Karabakh folklore.

In a linguopoetic approach, the national-cultural meaning of place names becomes apparent in the unity of the semantic, emotional, and ideational loads they acquire in an artistic text. In a folkloric text, toponyms are not only spatial indicators; they also function as poetic units expressing the people's historical experience, ethnic identity, and cultural memory. Legends and narratives related to place names in Karabakh folklore are particularly significant in this regard, because in these texts the concept of space is shaped as one of the primary support points of national memory.

Explaining the national-cultural function of the word in artistic text, Jirmunski emphasizes that within an aesthetic text linguistic units "become carriers of ideas that express the worldview and historical experience of the people" (Jirmunski, 1977, p. 67). The linguopoetic meaning of place names in Karabakh folklore is likewise connected with this ideational carrier function. Here, toponyms denote concrete geographical objects while simultaneously encoding poetically national conceptions associated with the land of Karabakh, its historical fate, and its spiritual values.

In the formation of the national-cultural linguopoetic meaning of place names in Karabakh folklore, the factor of collective memory plays a decisive role. In legends and narratives, place names function as the main means through which past events are preserved in memory and transmitted from generation to generation. The tragedies, wars, migrations, and heroic events that have befallen the people are often remembered precisely through place names. As a result of this process, the place name becomes a poetic marker of national memory within the folkloric text (Qarabağ, 2012, IV kitab, pp. 112–115).

In Karabakh legends and narratives, the national-cultural meaning of toponyms is also connected with their loading with his-

torical semantics. Many place names are associated with concrete historical events and contain within themselves the folklorized interpretation of those events. In this case, history is artistically generalized and reinforced within collective memory through the place name. In narratives about Karabakh villages and fortresses, toponyms function as a poetic expression of the people's historical existence and attachment to these lands (Qarabağ, 2014, VIII kitab, pp. 91–94).

Explaining the national-cultural meaning of space in an artistic text, Lotman notes that the image of space in a text is "one of the main codes of cultural identity" (Lotman, 1992, p. 78). The linguopoetic meaning of place names in Karabakh folklore is characterized precisely by this identity function. Toponyms present the Karabakh space not merely as a geographical territory but as an "own" space bearing national-cultural value. This feature renders the poetic meaning of place names ideologically significant as well.

The national-cultural linguopoetic meaning of place names in Karabakh folklore is also closely connected with their emotional loading. In legends and narratives, toponyms are frequently accompanied by feelings such as love, longing, sorrow, and pride. This emotional background turns the place name into a part of the people's inner spiritual world. Especially in narratives reflecting tragic events connected with Karabakh, place names function as poetic symbols bearing the longing for and memory of a lost space (Qarabağ, 2013, VI kitab, pp. 140–143).

The concept of sacral space also plays an important role in forming the national-cultural linguopoetic meaning of place names. In Karabakh folklore, in legends and narratives connected with names such as "pir," "ocaq," and "müqəddəs bulaq," space is loaded with religious and spiritual values. These spaces occupy a special place in the people's belief system, and toponyms become the poetic expression of that belief. Names such as "Seyid gölü" and "Pir dağı" carry national-cultural linguopoetic meaning in this sense (Qarabağ, 2014, IX kitab, pp. 60–63).

K.N.Vəli notes that national-cultural meaning expands the functional possibilities of the word in the folkloric text and turns it

into a means of expressing ethnic identity (Vəli, 2019, p. 7). Place names in Karabakh folklore clearly fulfill this function. Here, toponyms not only localize the event but also preserve and sustain the national-spiritual value of the Karabakh space.

In Karabakh legends and narratives, the national-cultural linguopoetic meaning of place names is also connected with their consolidation in the folkloric system through repetition and stabilization. Repeated use of the same place name across various texts leads that space to acquire a special status in the people's consciousness. As a result of such repetition, the toponym moves beyond the folkloric text and becomes part of the national memory (Qarabağ, 2012–2014).

Thus, the national-cultural linguopoetic meaning of place names in Karabakh folklore is formed on the basis of their preservation of historical memory, expression of national identity, creation of emotional-aesthetic impact, and connection with sacral values. In legends and narratives, toponyms present the Karabakh space as an inseparable part of the people's national-cultural existence and transmit the poetic value of that space from generation to generation. In this perspective,

place names in Karabakh folklore function not merely as linguistic units but as national-cultural linguopoetic codes.

Conclusion

The linguopoetic analysis conducted demonstrates that in Karabakh folklore place names function as multifunctional poetic units. In legends, toponyms bear a predominantly mythological-symbolic character and acquire a high aesthetic status through epithetization, metaphorization, personification, and symbolization. In narratives, however, place names are more closely tied to historical reality and are distinguished by their reality-confirming, semantic-concretizing, and collective-memory-preserving functions.

In Karabakh folklore, toponyms not only localize the event but also carry ideational load, create an emotional background, and express national-cultural identity. Associating place names with the notion of sacral space further increases their poetic and spiritual value. Thus, place names in Karabakh folklore function as national-cultural linguopoetic codes, transmitting the people's historical memory and cultural identity from generation to generation.

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submitted 25.03.2026;

accepted for publication 09.04.2026;

published 31.05.2026

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Section 3. Pedagogy

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-19-28



EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM AS AN INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRUCT: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS, MULTI-LEVEL ASSESSMENT, AND CONDITIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Cite: Leonteva, A. (2026). *Educational Ecosystem as an Institutional Construct: Theoretical Foundations, Multi-Level Assessment, and Conditions of Sustainability*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-19-28>

Abstract

This article examines the concept of the educational ecosystem as an alternative to the conventional curriculum-centred model of instructional design. Drawing on the principle of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999), the theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and the four-level model of learning evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1959), the article develops an analytical framework that describes the conditions under which an educational environment produces sustainable change in learners' professional behaviour. The article integrates empirical evidence from recent research published between 2015 and 2025 and includes sections drawing on data obtained within a specific institutional context.

Keywords: *educational ecosystem, constructive alignment, communities of practice, Kirkpatrick model, competency transfer, institutional design, assessment of educational outcomes.*

1. Introduction: From Container to Environment

In contemporary pedagogical design discourse, the notion of an “educational programme” occupies a central position. Yet the semantics of this term carries an inherent conceptual limitation: a programme describes the organisational form of the learning process – its boundaries, sequence, and content – but does not describe the mechanism by which change in the learner occurs.

The proposed concept of the educational ecosystem proceeds from a fundamentally different ontology: learning is not a passage through a container, but a change unfolding within an environment. This environment exists prior to the commencement of the formal programme, accompanies it, and continues after its conclusion.

The relevance of this reconceptualisation is confirmed by a number of converging trends. According to data from the World Economic Forum, by 2027 approximately

44% of key professional skills will undergo significant transformation as a result of technological change (World Economic Forum, 2023). Under these conditions, programmes oriented towards the transmission of fixed content are structurally incapable of ensuring the long-term professional adaptability of graduates.

At the same time, research in the learning sciences consistently records a persistent gap between academic performance and professional readiness. According to data from Gallup and Lumina Foundation, only 11% of business leaders in the United States are confident that university graduates possess the competencies required for work (Gallup and Lumina Foundation, 2021). A comparable gap is documented in the European context: according to the European Training Foundation, more than 40% of employers in OECD countries report a significant discrepancy between the declared and actual competencies of graduates of professional programmes (European Training Foundation (ETF), 2022).

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Constructive Alignment and Its Limits

Number of studies from the past decade point to the limitations of constructive alignment as a sufficient condition of effectiveness. Hattie and Donoghue (2016), in a meta-analytic review of factors influencing academic achievement, demonstrated that the alignment of objectives and assessment accounts for a significant but relatively modest share of the variation in educational outcomes. Substantially greater influence was exerted by factors associated with motivation, self-efficacy, and the quality of feedback – that is, variables that fall outside the internal logic of the programme (Hattie, J., and Donoghue, G. M., 2016).

The principle of constructive alignment, formulated by John Biggs in 1999 and systematised in Biggs and Tang (2011), postulates that effective learning is achieved when three components are congruent: learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment instruments. This principle has exerted considerable influence on the practice of academic design and remains valid at the level of

analysing the internal logic of a programme (Biggs, J., and Tang, C., 2011).

Thus, constructive alignment constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition for the effectiveness of an educational environment.

2.2 Communities of Practice: From Concept to Design

Li (2019), in a systematic review of 74 studies of communities of practice in higher education, demonstrated that intentionally designed communities exhibited significantly higher levels of competency transfer compared with programmes oriented exclusively towards individual learning (mean effect size $d = 0.54$). Crucially, the greatest effect was recorded not during the formal programme but during the 6–12 months following its conclusion – which corroborates the thesis of the ecosystem as an environment that extends beyond the programme (Li, L. C., Grimshaw, J. M., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P. C., and Graham, I. D., 2019).

Etienne Wenger, in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, proposed a concept according to which knowledge is constructed not through individual acquisition but through participation in collective practice. Subsequent research extended and operationalised this concept in relation to institutional contexts (Wenger, E., 1998).

More recent research by Farnsworth (2016), clarified the conditions under which communities of practice attain sustainability: the key factors proved to be the presence of a shared professional identity, the regularity of collective reflection, and institutional support without excessive control (Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., and Wenger-Trayner, E., 2016).

2.3 The Kirkpatrick Model: Unrealised Potential and Contemporary Extensions

The four-level model of Kirkpatrick (1959), extended in co-authored work with James Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2016), remains the most widely used instrument for conceptualising learning evaluation. In practice, however, its application is substantially constrained (Kirkpatrick, J. D., and Kirkpatrick, W. K., 2016).

A large-scale study by Training Industry (2022), encompassing more than 700 organisations in 40 countries, identified the following distribution of evaluation practices (Training Industry, 2022):

- Level 1 (Reaction): applied in 91% of organisations
- Level 2 (Learning): applied in 54% of organisations
- Level 3 (Behaviour): applied in 23% of organisations
- Level 4 (Results): applied in 8% of organisations

In the academic context, the gap is even more pronounced. According to the European University Association (EUA, 2023), of 303 European universities participating in a survey on the evaluation practices of educational programmes, only 12% systematically track the professional outcomes of graduates over a horizon of more than one year follow-

ing programme completion (European University Association (EUA), 2023).

Thalheimer (2018), proposed an extension of the Kirkpatrick model – the Learning-Transfer Evaluation Model (LTEM) – comprising eight levels and describing in greater detail the intermediate stages between learning and transfer. In the academic context, levels 5–7 of this model are of particular value, as they describe the degree of transfer readiness, active transfer, and sustained application within the professional environment (Training Industry, 2022; Thalheimer, W., 2018).

3. The Five-Layer Model of the Educational Ecosystem

On the basis of a synthesis of the theoretical approaches reviewed above and current empirical data, an operational model of the educational ecosystem is proposed, comprising five interdependent components.

Table 1. *Components of the educational ecosystem model*

Component	Description	Indicator of Dysfunction	Relevant Research
Content	Learning material structured in accordance with programme objectives	Low academic performance	Hattie and Donoghue, 2016
Environment	Institutional context for the application of knowledge	Absence of opportunities for practice	Kolb and Kolb, 2017
Community	The aggregate of participants who construct knowledge collectively	Intellectual isolation	Li, 2019
Feedback	Mechanisms for tracking one's own growth	Ambiguous criteria; absence of reflection	Hattie and Clarke, 2019
Motivation	Personal meaning linking learning with professional identity	Formal participation; high dropout rates	Ryan and Deci, 2020

The motivational layer warrants particular attention. Ryan and Deci (2020), in an updated presentation of self-determination theory, demonstrated that intrinsic motivation – as opposed to external incentives – is

a significant predictor of long-term knowledge retention and application (Meadows, D. H., 2008).

A defining property of this model is its systemic character. Research in the field of

systems thinking in education (Meadows, 2008), consistently demonstrates that dysfunction in any one component entails degradation of the entire system. This explains the widely observed paradox whereby methodologically sound programmes exhibit low effectiveness – as a rule, due to deficits at the level of environment or community (Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L., 2020).

4. Empirical Analysis of Ecosystem Characteristics in Retraining Programmes

The theoretical foundations and empirical data presented above indicate a systemic deficit of ecosystem thinking in the institutional design of educational programmes. The present section reports the results of an original analysis aimed at verifying this thesis with respect to a specific and practically significant segment of professional education – retraining programmes.

4.1 Research Design and Sample

Within the framework of this study, a structured analysis was conducted of 45 retraining programmes delivered by specialised continuing professional development centres. The unit of analysis was an individual educational programme; data collection methods included content analysis of programme documentation and standardised interviews with administrative and methodological staff at each centre. The analytical framework for assessment was grounded in the five-layer educational ecosystem model described in this article.

The selection of the retraining programme segment is justified by its particular vulnerability from the standpoint of ecosystem quality: such programmes are typically characterised by compressed time frames, a high proportion of asynchronous learning, and a target audience in a state of professional transition – a situation of heightened need for support of identity and belonging to a community of practice.

4.2 Findings by Ecosystem Layer

Layer 1. Content.

All 100% of the analysed programmes (n = 45) possess a structured curriculum formalised as a systematic course plan. This result indicates that the first layer of the ecosystem – the content layer – is the most

institutionally developed: the existence of a formalised curriculum is perceived as a basic programme requirement and is universally implemented.

It should be emphasised, however, that the presence of a structured curriculum is not in itself evidence of ecosystem quality – it describes the container, not the environment. In Kirkpatrick's terminology, this indicator characterises first-level conditions but does not predetermine outcomes at the second level, let alone the third and fourth.

Layer 2. Environment.

Formally, all analysed programmes meet the criterion of “environment”: each includes a component for the practical application of skills. However, qualitative analysis of the structure of the practical component reveals a significant limitation: in 70% of programmes (n ≈ 31), practice is implemented under simulated rather than real professional conditions.

This circumstance represents a significant risk from the standpoint of competency transfer. According to data from Blume (2019), competency transfer from the learning environment to professional practice averages 10–20% in the absence of specific support conditions (Blume, B. D., Ford, J. K., Surface, E. A., and Olenick, J., 2019). In other words, 70% of programmes implement the environment in a truncated form that may create an illusion of practical preparation while offering an actually limited transfer potential – a phenomenon described by Deslauriers (2019), as the “illusion of learning” (Deslauriers, L., McCarty, L. S., Miller, K., Callaghan, K., and Kestin, G., 2019).

Layer 3. Community.

The most critical finding of the present analysis was obtained with respect to the third layer of the ecosystem. None of the 45 analysed retraining centres mentioned the existence of an organised student or alumni community during interviews – neither in the form of formal group interactions during the period of study nor in the form of alumni networks following its conclusion.

This result stands in direct contradiction to the body of research data that consistently demonstrates the central role of communities of practice in ensuring sustained profes-

sional change. Li (2019), in a systematic review of 74 studies, showed that intentionally designed communities of practice produce a mean effect size of $d = 0.54$ on measures of competency transfer – with the greatest effect recorded precisely in the 6–12 months following programme completion (Li, L. C., Grimshaw, J. M., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P. C., and Graham, I. D., 2019). The absence of community in retraining programmes oriented towards radical professional transition represents a systemic exclusion from programme design of precisely the mechanism that, according to available evidence, most significantly determines long-term outcomes.

In the context of retraining, this deficit acquires an additional dimension. Learners in retraining programmes are typically in a state of professional identity rupture: they are departing from one practice and have not yet joined another. The total absence of this element in the analysed programmes reflects a systemic underestimation of the identity dimension of retraining.

Layer 4. Feedback.

Formally, instructor feedback is provided in 90% of programmes ($n \approx 40$). However, substantive analysis of feedback structure reveals a significant qualitative limitation: in 50% of assignments, feedback is automated and takes the form of a system response to test results rather than a substantive response to the learner's professional reasoning.

This practice conflicts with contemporary research on feedback as a learning instrument. Hattie and Clarke (2019), in a systematic review, demonstrate that effective feedback must answer three questions: where the learner stands relative to the goal, how they arrived there, and what the next step should be (Hattie, J., and Donoghue, G. M., 2016; Hattie, J., and Clarke, S., 2019). Automated test-result feedback typically addresses only the first question – and only in the binary format of “correct/incorrect”. It carries no information about the quality of professional reasoning, does not identify the nature of the error, and does not offer individualised guidance for development.

Moreover, studies by Shute (2008) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), consistently demonstrate that immediate automated feedback on test assignments fosters surface-level learning strategies – an orientation towards the correct answer rather than towards understanding (Nicol, D. J., and Macfarlane-Dick, D., 2006). In the context of retraining, where the objective is not the reproduction of information but the formation of new professional schemas of action, the predominance of automated feedback creates a systemic risk of substituting the simulation of learning for genuine deep learning.

Layer 5. Motivation and Professional Identity.

The most conceptually significant contradiction emerges in the analysis of the fifth layer of the ecosystem. All 100% of the analysed programmes include a learning module formally linked to the development of professional identity. However, in 100% of cases this module is delivered exclusively in a self-directed learning and individual self-reflection format – with no provision for meetings with an instructor, mentor, or group.

This practice reveals a fundamental conceptual contradiction: the task of forming professional identity is addressed with instruments structurally incompatible with the nature of that process. Identity, according to Wenger (1998), is formed not through individual reflection but through participation in practice together with those who already belong to that practice (Wenger, E., 1998). Ibarra (2020), in a longitudinal study of professional transitions, demonstrated that sustained changes in professional identity emerge only in conditions of “identity experiments” – the provisional adoption of new professional roles in a social context (Ibarra, H., Rattan, A., and Johnston, A., 2020). Individual self-reflection in the absence of the social mirror provided by a mentor, group, or professional community does not fulfil this condition.

4.3 Summary Assessment of Ecosystem Characteristics

The findings of the analysis are presented in the summary table below.

Table 2. *Summary assessment of ecosystem characteristics
across the analysed retraining programs*

Ecosystem Layer	Formal Presence	Qualitative Assessment	Identified Risk
Content	100%	High structural quality	Excessive focus on the container with insufficient attention to the environment
Environment	100% (formally)	Limited: 70% – simulated conditions	Illusion of practical preparation; low transfer potential
Community	0%	Systematically absent	Critical deficit of the mechanism of identity transition
Feedback	90% (formally)	Limited: 50% of assignments – automated	Substitution of developmental feedback with informational feedback
Motivation / Identity	100% (formally)	Critically limited: 100% – self-directed only	Structural incompatibility of method with the nature of the process

4.4 Systemic Risks of the Identified Configuration

The aggregate of identified characteristics permits the identification of three systemic risks that, according to available empirical data, are highly likely to determine the limited long-term effectiveness of the analysed programmes.

Risk 1. Structural gap between learning and transfer.

The combination of simulated practice (70%), automated feedback (50% of assignments), and the absence of a genuine professional community (0%) produces a configuration in which programmes may successfully ensure the second level of Kirkpatrick – content learning – while being systemically incapable of ensuring the third level: sustained change in professional behaviour. This gap is structural rather than incidental: it is reproduced as a consequence of the very architecture of the programmes.

In the absence of specific support conditions, transfer averages 10–20%. The identified configuration of retraining programmes – simulated environment without a real community and with predominantly automated feedback – corresponds precisely to this lower range, since none of the three key factors supporting transfer (post-train-

ing follow-up, coaching, opportunities for real-world application) is systematically implemented in these programmes.

Risk 2. Isolated identity transition as a predictor of dropout and professional maladjustment.

The complete relocation of the professional identity module to a format of individual self-reflection, in the absence of any social support for the transition, poses a particular threat to the target audience of retraining programmes. Research on professional transitions consistently demonstrates that changing profession is one of the most stressful life events, accompanied by a temporary loss of professional identity and competency self-assessment. Under these conditions, isolated self-reflection without a social context is highly likely to intensify anxiety and uncertainty rather than reduce them. The systemic absence of this element in the analysed programmes may be directly associated with dropout rates.

Risk 3. Institutional invisibility of long-term outcomes.

The identified configuration of programmes indicates that design proceeds according to the logic of the first and second Kirkpatrick levels: reaction and learning. The absence of community, limited feedback, and

the isolated identity module indicate that long-term outcomes – professional adaptation, durability of skills, actual employment in the new specialisation – are not part of the design intention. The analysed retraining programmes reproduce this general tendency – yet in a segment where long-term outcomes are the sole substantively meaningful criterion of success: the individual undertook retraining not in order to complete a course, but in order to work in a new profession.

Thus, the results of the present analysis indicate that retraining programmes in the studied sample implement a formally complete but substantively truncated version of the educational ecosystem: a container with features of an environment, but without community, with a surrogate of feedback, and with an instrument that is fundamentally inadequate for addressing the most critical task – supporting professional identity transition.

A critical consequence of this situation is the observable, intensifying crisis of trust in institutional education. According to data from the Edelman Trust Barometer (2024), trust in educational institutions as a source of preparation for professional life declined by an average of 17 percentage points over the period 2015–2024 among employers in G20 countries (Edelman, 2024).

A study by McKinsey and Company (2023), recorded that 52% of senior students worldwide doubt that their programme provides the competencies necessary for professional success (McKinsey and Company, 2023). Yet only 34% of deans and programme directors share these doubts – indicating a substantial perception gap between the producers and consumers of education.

5. Operationalisation of Ecosystem Learning Metrics

5.1 Competency Transfer into Professional Practice

Competency transfer corresponds to the third level of the Kirkpatrick model and represents the most methodologically complex object of measurement in the academic context.

The systematic review by Blume (2019), encompassing 89 studies of transfer in professional education, established that the average level of competency transfer into real

professional practice is approximately 10–20% of the volume of content learned – in the absence of specific transfer support measures (Blume, B. D., Ford, J. K., Surface, E. A., and Olenick, J., 2019). With such measures in place (post-training support, coaching, opportunities for application), this figure rises to 40–60%.

Operationalisation of transfer entails:

- Delayed assessment – repeat measurement 4–8 weeks following programme completion
- Reflective reports following a structured protocol
- 360° method – interviews with direct supervisors and colleagues of graduates
- Portfolio assessment as an instrument for demonstrating application in a real-world context

The global trend documented in research over the past decade points to the growing spread of portfolio assessment in leading universities. According to data from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC andU, 2022), the proportion of programmes using portfolio as the primary assessment instrument grew from 19% in 2015 to 41% in 2022 (Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC andU), 2022).

5.2 Systemic Change in Professional Behaviour

In accordance with Wenger's concept, and its contemporary developments (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015), sustained behavioural change is an indicator not merely of knowledge acquisition but of transformation of professional identity (Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., and Wenger-Trayner, E., 2016).

Ibarra (2020), in a longitudinal study of professional identity among 412 participants in management education programmes, demonstrated that sustained changes in professional behaviour are documented only among those participants who passed through what the authors term “identity experiments” – the provisional adoption of new professional roles in a safe environment. Programmes that do not create opportunities for such experiments produce behavioural change significantly less often (28% vs. 67%) (Ibarra, H., Rattan, A., and Johnston, A., 2020).

The distinction between “wrote a research paper” and “began to think analytically in everyday practice” is fundamental: the former describes an event, the latter a change in the subject.

Operationally, systemic behavioural change is measured through:

- Longitudinal observations with no fewer than three time points (before, immediately after, and 3–6 months later)
- Professional self-efficacy scales
- Analysis of the quality of professional decisions via case-based assessment

5.3 Institutional Agreement on Educational Outcomes

The most complex and least widespread condition for the functioning of an educational ecosystem is the prior institutional agreement on outcomes – established before the programme is launched rather than after its conclusion.

A study by Connecting Credentials (2023), conducted jointly by the Lumina Foundation and OECD with a sample of 240 educational institutions in 28 countries, showed that only 18% of institutions have formalised agreements with employers on measurable educational outcomes over a horizon of more than one year (Lumina Foundation and OECD, 2023). Programs with such agreements demonstrated 41% higher rates of employment in the area of specialisation and 35% higher levels of employer satisfaction.

This agreement entails:

- Baseline interviews with employers and professional communities – prior to programme launch
- Formalisation of delayed outcomes – specific, measurable indicators with a time horizon of no less than one year
- Built-in measurement points throughout the entire programme cycle and following its conclusion
- Institutional accountability for Level 4 outcomes

6. Conditions of Institutional Sustainability of the Ecosystem

The transition from programme-oriented to ecosystem-oriented thinking requires changes not only in design methodology but also in institutional culture. Fullan and Quinn (2016), in a study of the conditions for sys-

temic educational change, identify four components of “coherence” – a state in which an institution moves in the same direction at all levels: a focused direction, collaborative meaning-making, deep learning, and accountability (Fullan, M., and Quinn, J., 2016).

Applied to ecosystem design, this means that the intentional creation of an ecosystem requires coordinated action at the levels of the curriculum, institutional culture, assessment systems, and management decisions simultaneously. Changing only one of these levels while leaving the others unchanged generally produces no sustainable effect.

Even the most carefully designed programme does not automatically become an ecosystem. For example, introducing portfolio assessment while preserving a culture of the single correct answer and the final examination as the primary assessment instrument creates cognitive dissonance that diminishes the effectiveness of both instruments.

7. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

7.1 Methodological Limitations

The proposed analytical framework has a number of limitations that must be taken into account when applying it.

First, the five-layer ecosystem model is analytical rather than ontological in character: the distinction into five layers is a conceptual instrument, not a description of actually existing boundaries. In practice, the layers interpenetrate significantly, and their diagnosis requires qualitative methods that are robust to this interdependence.

Second, the majority of studies cited were conducted in the context of higher education, which limits the direct applicability of quantitative benchmarks to other educational contexts – corporate training, continuing professional education – that require additional investigation, particularly in the context of dynamically changing competency requirements from contemporary institutions.

7.2 Directions for Further Research

On the basis of the analysis conducted, several priority directions for further research can be identified.

The first direction is the development of valid and reliable instruments for diagnosing

the five layers of the ecosystem across diverse educational contexts. Existing instruments – in particular, the NSSE for higher education – cover individual aspects of the ecosystem but do not provide a complete picture of it.

The second direction is longitudinal research into the relationship between ecosystem quality at the input stage and professional outcomes over a horizon of 3–5 years following programme completion. Existing studies are generally limited to a horizon of 6–12 months.

The third direction is a comparative analysis of the conditions for transferring ecosystem logic from the academic to the corporate context and back. Conceptual frameworks developed in one context frequently lose their operational value when mechanically transposed to another.

The fourth direction is the investigation of the influence of generative AI on the dynamics of educational ecosystems over the long term. Data from 2022–2025 document short-term effects; however, the systemic consequences of this trend for professional identity and competency transfer remain insufficiently studied.

8. Conclusion

The concept of the educational ecosystem represents not a methodological innovation, but a shift in institutional logic. Its central thesis, supported by the convergence of data from multiple research traditions, is as follows: the responsibility of an educational institution is not limited to what the learner has attended or passed – it extends to whether their thinking and professional behaviour have changed.

The empirical data from the period 2015–2025 paint a consistent picture. The gap be-

tween academic performance and professional readiness is not narrowing: according to Gallup and Lumina (2021), only 11% of employers are confident in the competence of graduates (Gallup and Lumina Foundation, 2021). Assessment of educational outcomes remains predominantly at the level of reaction and learning: according to Training Industry (2022), only 8% of organisations systematically measure the fourth Kirkpatrick level (Training Industry, 2022). Institutional agreements on delayed outcomes are the exception rather than the norm: according to Connecting Credentials (2023), only 18% of institutions have formalised agreements with employers (Lumina Foundation and OECD, 2023).

An ecosystem is not a methodology. It is an institutional decision about what, precisely, the educational organisation takes responsibility for. This decision requires:

- Reconceptualising success criteria in favour of delayed, behavioural, and identity-related metrics
- Designing not only content, but also environment, community, feedback, and motivational context
- Institutional alignment of the interests of learners, the institution, and external stakeholders as a precondition for design
- Readiness to measure the third and fourth Kirkpatrick levels with an appropriate time horizon
- Leadership that understands its function as the architecture of an environment rather than the management of content.

This, and nothing else, remains what an educational institution can offer in a world in which access to the content of knowledge has ceased to be a privilege.

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submitted 13.04.2026;

accepted for publication 27.05.2026;

published 31.05.2026

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DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-29-34



NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL SHIFT: SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING SKILLS AMONG EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Cite: Mamadaliyeva, N.A. (2026). *Navigating the Digital Shift: Self-Directed Learning Skills Among EFL University Students in Uzbekistan*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-29-34>

Abstract

The growing integration of digital technologies into higher education has fundamentally reshaped the conditions under which students acquire knowledge. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of learner autonomy, relatively little empirical attention has been paid to how students in digitally transitioning contexts develop the metacognitive and organizational capacities that underpin self-directed learning (SDL). This paper examines the conceptual foundations of SDL, traces its historical development from classical educational thought to contemporary digital pedagogy, and situates these frameworks within the specific context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction at technical universities in Uzbekistan. Drawing on a synthesis of international SDL theory – including Knowles’s andragogy model, Garrison’s multidimensional framework, and contemporary digital autonomy perspectives – alongside Uzbek scholarly contributions, the article argues that SDL in digitized learning environments constitutes a distinct competency cluster that encompasses metacognitive regulation, digital tool appropriation, and self-organizational agency. The paper further identifies key contradictions in current pedagogical practice and proposes a conceptual model for developing SDL skills among EFL students within digitalized educational settings. Implications for curriculum design, teacher roles, and institutional policies are discussed.

Keywords: *self-directed learning, learner autonomy, digital education, EFL, higher education, Uzbekistan, metacognition, digitalization*

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure in higher education has prompted sustained scholarly inquiry into the changing nature of student learning. As universities across Central Asia – and Uzbekistan in particular – have increasingly embedded information and communication technologies into their educational

frameworks, a critical question has emerged: are students adequately equipped to learn independently within these environments? The answer, as both research and institutional observation suggest, is far from straightforward.

In Uzbekistan’s higher education system, the hours allocated to independent study are, by legislative mandate, proportional to classroom contact hours. Yet the development of

the skills necessary to use this time productively – what scholars describe as self-directed learning (SDL) competencies – has received comparatively limited curricular attention. Students frequently arrive at university with functional digital literacy, yet without the self-regulatory and metacognitive skills that would allow them to leverage digital tools as genuine instruments of autonomous learning. The consequence is paradoxical: learners who are comfortable with technology but who default to its passive or shortcut-oriented use, such as submitting AI-generated content in place of independently developed work.

This article addresses the above paradox by pursuing three interconnected objectives: (1) to trace the conceptual genealogy of SDL across Western andragogical and Russian/Soviet pedagogical traditions; (2) to map the particular challenges that digitalization poses for SDL in EFL contexts at Uzbek technical universities; and (3) to articulate a theoretically grounded framework for SDL skill development suited to these conditions. The article contributes to an underdeveloped intersection in the literature – one where digital pedagogy, foreign language learning, and Central Asian educational reform converge.

2. Conceptual Framework: Defining Self-Directed Learning

2.1 Western Traditions of Self-Directed Learning

The theoretical roots of SDL reach back to ancient educational philosophy. Socratic pedagogy, for instance, positioned the learner as an active agent in the construction of knowledge, treating inquiry and self-examination as fundamentally educational acts. However, the formalization of SDL as a research domain is largely a product of mid-twentieth-century adult education scholarship. Lindeman (1926) was among the first to identify a “deep need for self-direction” among adult learners, while Houle’s (1961) empirical inquiry into voluntary learning behavior provided initial evidence that self-initiated intellectual activity constitutes a regular feature of adult cognition.

Malcolm Knowles’s foundational contribution lay in systematizing SDL as a five-stage process encompassing needs diagnosis, goal formulation, resource identification, strategy selection, and outcome evaluation, anchored

by intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1975). Knowles explicitly positioned self-directedness as a marker of mature learning, distinguishing andragogy – the education of adults – from teacher-centered pedagogy. Tough’s (1971) complementary work on independent learning projects reinforced the claim that substantial learning routinely occurs outside formal instructional contexts.

Subsequent theorists complicated and enriched this picture. Brookfield (1985) critiqued the individualism embedded in early SDL models, arguing that learning always occurs within social and institutional contexts that shape and sometimes constrain learner autonomy. Garrison (1997) proposed a multidimensional model integrating self-management (contextual control), self-monitoring (cognitive responsibility), and motivation – a framework that acknowledges the co-constitutive relationship between internal dispositions and external conditions. More recently, the proliferation of massive open online courses (MOOCs), mobile learning platforms, and AI-assisted study tools has introduced what researchers describe as “technology-mediated autonomy” – a reconceptualization of SDL suited to the affordances and constraints of digital learning environments.

2.2 Soviet and Uzbek Pedagogical Traditions

Parallel conceptual developments unfolded within Russian and Soviet pedagogy, though under different institutional and ideological conditions. Ushinsky’s insistence that genuine intellectual development requires independent cognitive labor provided an early native-language formulation of SDL principles. By the mid-twentieth century, Esipov (1961) had elaborated a systematic account of independent work (*samostoyatelnaya rabota*) in classroom settings, treating it not merely as task completion without teacher supervision, but as a consciously goal-oriented activity that the learner undertakes with an understanding of its educational purpose. Pidkasisty (1972) further argued that independent work is fundamentally a means of engaging students in self-regulated activity, rather than a discrete method or organizational form.

In contemporary Uzbek scholarship, this tradition has been extended and adapted to higher education contexts. Researchers such

as Aripova (2022), Sarimsaqova (2022), Utaeva (2022), and Musakhanova (2022) have examined SDL in relation to foreign language learning competencies, sociolinguistic development, grammatical competence, and organizational skill formation respectively. These contributions reflect a growing recognition, institutionally codified in Uzbekistan's Education Law (2020), the Concept for Development of Higher Education to 2030, and the State Educational Standard for Higher Education (2021), that SDL is not merely a pedagogical desideratum but a policy imperative. The legislative mandate that independent study hours equal classroom contact hours positions SDL development as structurally central to the Uzbek higher education system.

2.3 Toward an Integrated Definition

A review of the definitions advanced by scholars across these traditions reveals both convergence and productive tension. Where Adizova (2023) defines SDL as a form of extra-classroom learning directed toward the consolidation and extension of curriculum-specified competencies, Dusyurova (2025) emphasizes its character as an active cognitive process involving the independent search, analysis, and appropriation of knowledge – a process that not only transfers information but cultivates the learner's capacity to analyze, apply, and generate new understanding. Abdullayeva and Toshmukhammedov (2020) foreground the metacognitive dimension, characterizing SDL as an approach that enables students to self-manage all phases of the learning process, including continuous review, evaluation, and self-assessment.

Integrating these perspectives, this article adopts a composite definition: self-directed learning is a competency-constituted educational activity – conducted within and beyond classroom settings – in which the learner exercises initiative in diagnosing learning needs, formulating goals, selecting and deploying appropriate resources and strategies, and evaluating outcomes, with the teacher serving as a designer of conditions rather than a director of content. This definition encompasses the organizational, cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational dimensions of SDL identified in the literature, while remaining open to the ways in which digital environments transform the specific competencies that SDL requires.

3. Self-Directed Learning in Digital Environments: Opportunities and Tensions

The digitalization of higher education has introduced a set of structural conditions that both expand and complicate the exercise of learner autonomy. On the expansive side, the availability of diverse digital resources – online corpora, language learning applications, multimedia platforms, AI-driven tutoring systems – provides students with an unprecedented range of tools for self-directed inquiry. Technological infrastructure can, in principle, support each stage of Knowles's SDL cycle: diagnostic tools can help learners identify gaps; goal-setting applications can support objective formulation; curated digital libraries can facilitate resource selection; interactive platforms can provide strategic practice; and analytics dashboards can enable outcome evaluation.

Yet the same technological landscape poses distinctive challenges. Tochilina's (2024) observations regarding the digital education era are pertinent here: students in digitally saturated environments frequently demonstrate high competence in tool use alongside low competence in self-regulatory application of those tools. The availability of generative AI systems, in particular, creates conditions in which the cognitive labor that SDL is designed to cultivate – effortful information processing, critical synthesis, reflective self-assessment – can be circumvented rather than exercised. The result is a paradox of apparent efficiency concealing genuine learning deficit.

Mamadaliyeva (2025) addresses this paradox specifically in the context of EFL instruction, arguing that digital tools in language learning serve their educational function only when students have developed the self-organizational agency necessary to deploy them purposefully. Her analysis of SDL in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts at Uzbek technical universities suggests that linguistically productive independent study is inseparable from the learner's capacity for metacognitive self-direction. Students who understand why they are using a particular resource, what they hope to learn from it, and how they will assess their progress, achieve qualitatively different outcomes from those who engage with the same resource without this reflective framework.

4. Key Contradictions in Current Practice

Analysis of the current state of SDL in Uzbek technical universities reveals several significant contradictions that motivate the need for systematic pedagogical intervention. First, there exists a structural requirement for independent learning – encoded in legislative frameworks and reflected in study hour allocations – without a corresponding developmental methodology. Students are expected to engage productively with self-study hours, yet the curriculum offers limited explicit instruction in how to do so. Second, educational policy and institutional rhetoric increasingly emphasize digital tool integration, yet the specific pedagogical conditions that would transform digital engagement from passive consumption into active self-directed learning remain underdeveloped. Third, students entering technical universities have typically developed baseline digital fluency through secondary schooling and everyday technology use, yet this fluency has not been translated into the disciplined, goal-oriented self-regulatory practices that productive independent learning requires.

These contradictions are not merely theoretical. In the EFL classroom at technical universities, the consequences manifest concretely: students who do not independently extend their language exposure outside class hours make measurably slower progress; the linguistic gap between classroom instruction and authentic professional communication widens; and the equal distribution of classroom and independent study hours becomes educationally unequal in practice, with independent hours generating substantially less learning than their nominal allocation would predict.

5. Implications for Pedagogy and Policy

The framework advanced in this article has several direct implications for EFL pedagogy at Uzbek technical universities. At the level of course design, it suggests the value of making SDL skill development an explicit instructional objective – alongside language objectives – particularly in the first year of study, when foundational learning habits are most malleable. This might include structured activities designed to scaffold metacognitive reflection,

digital resource selection, and self-evaluation practices, gradually releasing responsibility to learners as their SDL competency develops.

At the level of teacher role, the framework implies a shift from content delivery toward what might be called learning environment design – the deliberate structuring of tasks, feedback mechanisms, and resource environments that activate and sustain self-directed activity. Teachers who understand SDL as a competency to be developed, rather than a disposition students either have or lack, are positioned to intervene educationally rather than merely to lament its absence.

At the institutional and policy level, the persistent contradiction between SDL mandates and SDL developmental support indicates a need for systemic attention. Curriculum frameworks that specify independent study hour allocations without prescribing or assessing the SDL skills required to use them productively produce compliance without learning. Policy instruments that address this gap – through teacher professional development, curriculum guidelines, and assessment frameworks that include SDL competency indicators – are likely to be more effective than those that address only the organizational features of independent study.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the conceptual terrain of self-directed learning, traced its historical development across Western andragogical and Uzbek-Soviet pedagogical traditions, and situated SDL within the specific challenges and opportunities of digitalized EFL instruction at Uzbek technical universities. It has proposed a five-component SDL competency framework suited to this context and identified the structural contradictions in current practice that create both the need and the rationale for targeted pedagogical intervention.

The central argument has been that SDL in the digital age is not simply a matter of providing students with access to digital tools or independent study time – it is a matter of developing the metacognitive, organizational, and evaluative competencies that allow learners to use these resources in disciplined, goal-oriented ways. Without this developmental focus, the structural provisions for

independent learning in Uzbekistan's higher education system – considerable as they are – risk producing the appearance of self-directed study without its educative substance.

Future research should examine the empirical outcomes of SDL skill development interventions in EFL contexts at Uzbek tech-

nical universities, with attention both to language learning outcomes and to the transfer of SDL competencies to other domains of study. The intersection of SDL theory, digital pedagogy, and Central Asian educational reform remains a generative and underexplored research space.

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submitted 20.04.2026;
accepted for publication 05.05.2026;
published 31.05.2026
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DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-35-43



DEVELOPING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION MANAGEMENT COMPETENCY FOR FUNCTIONAL DEPARTMENT HEADS OF PROVINCIAL DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING: CURRENT SITUATION AND EXPERIMENTAL

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Cite: Phan Thanh Cong (2026). *Developing Digital Transformation Management Competency for Functional Department Heads of Provincial Departments of Education and Training: Current Situation and Experimental Results*. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-35-43>

Abstract

This paper examines the current state of training for functional department heads of provincial Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) in Vietnam and tests the effectiveness of a competency-based intervention in digital transformation management competency. Drawing on a survey of 1,015 respondents across eight provinces and cities, findings reveal systemic weaknesses in post-training evaluation ($M = 2.82$), use of training results in performance appraisal ($M = 2.86$), and post-training monitoring ($M = 2.99$). An experimental training program conducted with 43 managers at Ninh Binh Province DOET demonstrated measurable gains in applied competencies – notably AI-assisted document drafting ($2.91 \rightarrow 3.60$) and data reliability assessment ($2.72 \rightarrow 3.40$) – while deep data analysis competencies require longer development pathways. The paper recommends three directions: competency-framework-aligned training design, tiered training programs by competency level, and post-training evaluation mechanisms linked to job performance outcomes.

Keywords: *digital transformation management competency; functional department heads; Department of Education and Training; competency-based training; competency framework.*

I. Introduction

Digital transformation in education is no longer a trend but a mandatory requirement in state management of education in Vietnam, institutionalized through Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg (2020) approving the National Digital Transformation Program and Decision No. 131/QĐ-TTg (2022) (Government of Vietnam, 2022) on digital transformation in education and training through 2025, with

a vision to 2030. Politburo Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW (2024) further emphasizes the acceleration of science, technology, and innovation, placing increasingly high demands on the management competencies of educational staff.

In this context, functional department heads of provincial Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) play a pivotal role in policy advisory, implementation, and coordi-

nation of state management of education at the provincial level. Particularly, under the two-tier local government model established by Decree No. 45/2025/ND-CP and related decrees on decentralization in education management (Decree No. 142/2025/ND-CP, Decree No. 143/2025/ND-CP), the scope of responsibilities and complexity of administrative work for these officials have significantly increased. Digital transformation management competency – encompassing strategic awareness, use of digital technology, and data exploitation for advisory purposes – has become one of the core competencies that functional department heads must consistently develop.

However, current practice reveals significant limitations. A survey of 1,015 managers and specialists across eight provinces and cities representative of three regions shows that existing training activities primarily focus on sending staff to postgraduate programs and organizing short-term courses, while post-training evaluation and monitoring of practical application remain weak. Notably, the systematic development of digital transformation management competency for functional department heads – aligned with competency frameworks and job position requirements – has yet to be implemented.

This paper presents findings on the current state of training and the results of an experimental training intervention in digital transformation management competency for functional department heads of the DOET of Ninh Binh Province, using a competency-based approach. Based on these findings, it proposes implications for developing this group of officials in the context of ongoing educational management reform.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Digital transformation management competency and competency-based training for functional department heads of DOETs

Competency and competency framework of functional department heads of DOETs

Competency refers to the combination of knowledge, skills, and personal qualities demonstrated through specific behaviors that enable an individual to perform their assigned duties effectively (Le Quan, 2016).

Accordingly, competency is not merely a latent potential but a measurable characteristic reflected through job performance behaviors, encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and essential qualities required to fulfill tasks efficiently (Tran Huu Hoan et al, 2017).

A competency framework is a description of the necessary and sufficient competencies for the successful execution of a role, position, group, unit, or organization (David D. Dubois & William J. Rothwell, 2004). In human resource management practice, a competency framework serves as the basis for workforce development activities including succession planning, recruitment, appointment, training and development, evaluation, and reward (Le Quan, 2016). For functional department heads of DOETs, a competency framework is a structured system of competency standards – comprising both general and specialized competency groups specific to each management domain – with concrete indicators and behavioral descriptors that guide the selection, appointment, utilization, evaluation, and development of personnel to meet the demands of educational management in the current context.

Digital transformation management competency of functional department heads of DOETs

Digital transformation in state management of education is not simply the application of information technology but a comprehensive restructuring of management, coordination, and advisory practices on the basis of data and digital technologies. In this context, digital transformation management competency of functional department heads is understood as the integration of dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed to recognize the requirements of digital transformation, organize and manage work in digital environments, and exploit and analyze data to support advisory and management decision-making effectively.

Based on the specific characteristics of the functional department head position in DOETs and the requirements of digital transformation in education governance, digital transformation management competency is defined as comprising four component groups: (1) Attitudes and disposition toward digital transformation in management; (2)

Strategic awareness and thinking about digital transformation; (3) Competency in using digital technology for management and administration; and (4) Competency in data exploitation and analysis for management. These four competency groups are dialectically interrelated: dispositions and attitudes provide the motivational foundation; strategic awareness guides action; and digital and data competencies constitute the concrete behavioral manifestations that can be observed and measured in professional practice.

Competency-based training in digital transformation management for functional department heads

Competency-based training is a purposefully organized learning process aligned with a competency framework and the requirements of specific job positions, aimed at supplementing, updating, and enhancing competencies that fall short of required standards (Pham Van Son & Nguyen Thi Tuyet, 2015). Unlike knowledge-transmission approaches, competency-based training takes learning outcomes – specifically, changes in job performance behaviors – as the measure of effectiveness, and connects training content to real-world work situations of the learners (Nguyen Xuan Dung, 2016).

For functional department heads of DOETs, competency-based training in digital transformation management must adhere to several core principles: grounding training in needs assessments linked to job position competency frameworks; designing content by competency group with specific, assessable behavioral indicators; prioritizing direct hands-on practice tied to real management scenarios; and establishing post-training evaluation mechanisms to measure the degree to which knowledge and skills are translated into management competency in practice.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the current state of training for digital transformation management competency among functional department heads of provincial Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) and to evaluate the effectiveness of an experimental intervention program. Quantitative data were collected

through a survey of 1,015 managers and specialists from eight provinces and cities representing the three regions of Vietnam, including Lao Cai, Lang Son, Ninh Binh, Hanoi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, and Can Tho. The sample consisted of four respondent groups: provincial leaders and DOET directors, functional department heads, deputy department heads, and specialists. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess 12 indicators related to current training practices.

In addition, the study conducted a one-group pre-test/post-test experiment involving 43 functional department heads and deputy department heads from the Ninh Binh province DOET. The assessment instrument included 22 indicators across four groups of digital transformation management competencies. Qualitative data were collected through observation, analysis of learning products, and in-depth interviews with selected participants to clarify changes in awareness, skills, and practical application after the training intervention

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Current state of training for functional department heads of DOETs: findings from a survey across eight provinces and cities

To assess the current state of training for functional department heads of DOETs, the study surveyed 1,015 managers and specialists across eight provinces and cities representative of three regions: Lao Cai, Lang Son, Ninh Binh, Hanoi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, and Can Tho – representing varying levels of socioeconomic development. Respondents comprised four groups: provincial leadership and DOET directors (61 respondents – Group 1); functional department heads (65 – Group 2); deputy department heads (199 – Group 3); and departmental specialists (690 – Group 4). A five-point Likert scale was used, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest.

Survey results across 12 indicators of training practice (Table 1) show mean scores ranging from 2.82 to 3.58 – reflecting a moderate level of implementation. This indicates that training activities have established certain routines but are not yet comprehensive and consistently effective.

Table 1. *Survey results on the current state of training
for functional department heads of DOETs*

No.	Content	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Overall Mean
4.1	Building training and development policies for department heads	3.34	3.22	3.12	3.32	3.25
4.2	Assessing training needs and classifying training participants	3.46	3.26	3.03	3.28	3.26
4.3	Developing periodic training plans for department heads and successors	3.41	3.25	3.02	3.32	3.25
4.4	Organizing short-term training courses to enhance capacity	3.41	3.25	3.32	3.21	3.29
4.5	Sending department heads to short-term training organized by higher authorities	3.31	3.34	3.48	3.15	3.32
4.6	Sending department heads to postgraduate training programs	3.54	3.63	3.70	3.45	3.58
4.7	Organizing study visits and experience-sharing activities	3.41	3.32	3.18	3.22	3.28
4.8	Providing financial support for training participation	2.95	3.08	3.22	2.83	3.02
4.9	Evaluating training outcomes of department heads	2.85	2.86	2.90	2.67	2.82
4.10	Using training results as a criterion in performance evaluation	3.00	2.86	2.74	2.85	2.86
4.11	Regularly reviewing and reflecting on training organization	3.28	3.15	2.94	3.08	3.11
4.12	Monitoring and supervising post-training performance	3.07	2.97	3.02	2.92	2.99

Source: Author's survey data

Analysis of the findings reveals three key patterns:

First, key strengths: The highest-rated indicator is sending department heads to postgraduate training programs ($M = 3.58$), reflecting DOETs' attention to strengthening the academic and professional knowledge base of their staff. Indicators related to organizing short-term courses (3.29), sending staff to training organized by higher authorities (3.32), and organizing study visits (3.28) also reached moderate-high levels, indicating that training activities have been implemented with some regularity.

Second, systemic weaknesses: The lowest-rated indicator is evaluation of training outcomes ($M = 2.82$), with consistently low scores across all four respondent

groups – from leadership (2.85) to specialists (2.67). This finding is illuminated by in-depth interview data: «After training courses, we can mainly only track whether staff attended and whether they obtained certificates. As for how training actually impacts their specific work, we have no clear evaluation tools» (CBQL02 – DOET Director). From the department heads' perspective, this limitation was also palpable: «After returning from training, there are almost no specific requirements to report on outcomes or apply what was learned to actual work. It is mostly up to each individual to apply it as best they can» (TPCN04). In addition, using training results as a performance evaluation criterion (2.86), monitoring and supervising post-training effectiveness (2.99), and finan-

cial support for training participation (3.02) all scored low, reflecting a lack of systematic post-training follow-up and limited supporting resources.

Third, perceptual gaps across respondent groups: DOET leadership and department heads generally rated indicators higher than deputy heads and specialists – those directly involved in day-to-day coordination and implementation. This gap is particularly evident in the training needs assessment indicator (Group 1: 3.46 vs. Group 3: 3.03), suggesting that needs assessments tend to be conducted in a formalistic manner without genuinely reflecting actual training needs. This observation is further supported by a specialist's remark: «*Some department heads have attended many training courses and hold advanced degrees, but no clear improvements in their management style or task delegation are visible in daily work*» (CV01).

In summary, training for functional department heads of DOETs currently focuses primarily on inputs – organizing courses and sending staff to training – while giving insufficient attention to outputs: the degree to which knowledge and skills are translated into practical management competency. In particular, the systematic training of digital transformation management competency – aligned with competency frameworks and job position requirements – has yet to be implemented at DOETs. This situation calls for a fundamental shift in training approach, with competency-based training as a theoretically and practically grounded direction.

4.2. Experimental training in digital transformation management competency for functional department heads of Ninh Binh province DOET and results

Experimental design

Building upon the identified limitations – particularly the absence of systematically designed programs for developing digital transformation management competency using a competency-based approach – the study conducted an intervention experiment at the DOET of Ninh Binh Province from September to December 2025.

The experimental sample comprised 43 participants – all functional department

heads and deputy department heads of Ninh Binh Province DOET – who are directly responsible for policy advisory, administration, and implementation of state management of education at the provincial level. Including both department heads and their deputies was intended to ensure representativeness and reflect actual management practice, in which deputy heads play a significant role in implementing professional tasks and digital transformation.

The study employed a single-group pre-test/post-test experimental design combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component used a 22-indicator competency assessment tool across four competency groups, rated on a five-point Likert scale. The qualitative component included observation of training participation, analysis of learning products, and in-depth interviews with selected participants.

Training content was designed around the four identified digital transformation management competency groups, integrating thematic presentations, group discussions, and management case simulations involving digital transformation within functional departments. Delivery was face-to-face and concentrated, with emphasis on hands-on activities applying digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) tools to participants' daily management tasks.

Experimental results

Competency in using digital technology for management and administration. This group showed the most significant improvement following the intervention. The indicator «Using AI to assist in drafting, reviewing, and finalizing management documents» increased sharply from 2.91 to 3.60 – the highest gain across all 22 indicators. The indicator «Proficiently using electronic document management and work coordination systems» also rose from 2.91 to 3.49 (Table 2). This improvement reflects the direct impact of hands-on, practice-oriented training: competencies of an operational nature that can be immediately applied to daily work showed clear and rapid gains after training. Interview data reinforced this finding:

«*The AI practice session significantly reduced the time I spend drafting reports; what used to take a whole working session*

can now be done much faster – though careful review is still essential» (TPCN6). This remark indicates that training impact extended beyond increased operational skill to cultivating a mindset of responsible oversight of digital tools – a transition from ‘using tools’ to ‘governing tools.’

Data exploitation and analysis competency

This group showed selective improvement following the intervention. The indicator «Applying AI to synthesize information, produce reports, and prepare advisory content» increased from 2.84 to 3.51; the indicator «Evaluating the reliability and appropriateness of data used in advisory work» rose from 2.72 to 3.40 – indicating that training contributed to the development of critical thinking and analytical validation skills, enabling department heads to begin identifying errors, biases, and algorithmic limitations in decision-making processes. However, the indicator «Using data to analyze the current situation and identify management issues» showed virtually no change (2.93 to 2.93), reflecting the reality that deep data analysis competency requires longer accumulation and depends on organizational conditions such as database standardization and inter-departmental data-sharing protocols. One department head noted:

«We have data but it has not been standardized – each department stores it differently, so cross-departmental analysis remains difficult» (TPCN2), indicating that limitations lie not only in individual competency but also in organizational structure and the data ecosystem of the unit.

Strategic awareness and thinking about digital transformation

Results for this group reflect deepened cognitive restructuring rather than simple score increases. The indicator «Understanding the concepts, goals, and requirements of digital transformation in education gov-

ernance» rose from 3.09 to 3.49, reflecting strengthened theoretical understanding following training. Meanwhile, some indicators – such as «Clearly identifying the role and responsibility of the department head in promoting digital transformation» – showed a slight decrease from 3.53 to 3.09. This does not indicate declining competency; rather, it reflects more accurate self-assessment after participants gained deeper insight into the systemic complexity of digital transformation:

«After training, I realized that digital transformation is not just about technology – it involves changing entire processes and task allocation structures» (TPCN6). This represents a shift from a reductive to a systemic understanding of digital transformation – an important foundation for sustainably developing higher-order digital management competencies.

Attitudes and disposition toward digital transformation

This group showed positive changes in indicators related to individual motivation. The indicator «Modeling the use of digital technology in daily work» increased from 2.98 to 3.33; «Proactively learning and updating digital technology knowledge and skills» rose from 2.81 to 3.23 – indicating that training enhanced personal motivation and professional responsibility for digital transformation. The indicator «Willingness to experiment with new technology-based management approaches» decreased from 3.72 to 3.30, reflecting more realistic self-assessment following a deeper understanding of digital transformation’s demands and challenges:

«Previously, I thought digital transformation was mainly about using software; after training, I realized it involves changing entire workflows, human resources, and data systems – so the degree of readiness must be assessed more carefully» (TPCN5).

Table 2. Pre- and post-test results of digital transformation management competency assessment (selected indicators)

Competency Group	Indicator	Before	After	Change
Attitudes and Disposition	Proactively learning and updating digital knowledge and skills	2.81	3.23	+0.42

Competency Group	Indicator	Before	After	Change
Strategic Awareness	Modeling the use of digital technology in daily work	2.98	3.33	+0.35
	Willingness to experiment with new technology-based management methods	3.72	3.30	-0.42
	Understanding the concepts, goals, and requirements of digital transformation in education management	3.09	3.49	+0.40
	Identifying roles and responsibilities in promoting digital transformation	3.53	3.09	-0.44
Use of Digital Technology	Using electronic document management and work coordination systems	2.91	3.49	+0.58
	Using AI tools to draft, review, and finalize management documents	2.91	3.60	+0.69
Data Exploitation and Analysis	Evaluating the reliability and appropriateness of data used in advisory work	2.72	3.40	+0.68
	Applying AI to synthesize information and prepare advisory content	2.84	3.51	+0.67
	Using data to analyze current situations and identify management issues	2.93	2.93	0.00

Source: Author's experimental data

4.3. Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of digital transformation management competency training for functional department heads of DOETs

Drawing on survey findings from eight provinces and cities and experimental results from Ninh Binh Province DOET, the paper puts forward three recommendations for improving the effectiveness of digital transformation management competency training for functional department heads of DOETs.

First, training should be organized using a competency-based approach, aligned with competency frameworks and job position requirements. Experimental results demonstrate that direct, hands-on training designed around specific competency groups with clear behavioral indicators produces measurable impact on operational competencies related to digital technology and AI applications. DOETs should develop digital transformation management competency frameworks linked to the job positions of functional department heads, and design training programs with specific, measurable output objectives – rather than organizing

training courses that focus primarily on participation inputs (Le Quan, 2016).

Second, training programs should be designed in a tiered manner according to competency levels. Experimental results indicate that not all digital transformation management competency groups can be developed on the same timeline. Operational competencies – such as using AI for document drafting or navigating electronic document management systems – can improve markedly through short-term, hands-on training. In contrast, deep data analysis and strategic digital thinking require longer development pathways, complemented by organizational improvements such as database standardization, inter-departmental data-sharing protocols, and regular practice environments linked to specific management tasks (Nguyen Xuan Dung, 2016).

Third, a post-training evaluation mechanism should be established, linked to job performance outcomes. Survey findings show that post-training outcome evaluation is the lowest-rated indicator in the entire training system ($M = 2.82$), yet it is the component most decisive for the substantive

quality and effectiveness of training. DOETs should develop post-training assessment tools with specific job-related behavioral indicators; require trained staff to prepare application plans and submit follow-up reports after a defined period; and integrate training results into evaluation, succession planning, and appointment processes to enhance learning motivation and ensure that training activities produce meaningful impact on the quality of management within each functional department (*Le Quan, 2016*), (*Pham Van Son & Nguyen Thi Tuyet, 2015*).

V. Conclusion

The context of digital transformation and the implementation of a two-tier local government model are placing increasingly demanding competency requirements on functional department heads of DOETs. Among these, digital transformation management competency – encompassing strategic awareness, use of digital technology, and data exploitation for advisory purposes – is a core competency that must be systematically developed in alignment with competency frameworks and job position requirements.

Survey results from 1,015 managers and specialists across eight provinces and cities reveal that while training for functional department heads has established certain operational routines, significant limitations remain: the evaluation of post-training outcomes ($M = 2.82$), the use of training results in performance evaluation ($M = 2.86$), and the monitoring of post-training effectiveness ($M = 2.99$) are all weak. In particular, the systematic training of digital transforma-

tion management competency has yet to be implemented in a structured, competency-aligned manner at DOETs.

Experimental results from training 43 department heads and deputy department heads of Ninh Binh Province DOET provide important empirical evidence: direct, hands-on training based on a competency approach produces clear and measurable impact on competencies directly applicable to digital management practice – particularly AI-assisted document drafting (increase from 2.91 to 3.60) and data reliability assessment for advisory purposes (increase from 2.72 to 3.40). At the same time, the experiment demonstrates that deep data analysis and strategic digital competencies require longer development pathways and improvements to organizational conditions.

Based on these findings, the paper proposes three directions for reforming the training of digital transformation management competency for functional department heads of DOETs: (1) prioritize competency-based, hands-on training aligned with competency frameworks and practical work situations; (2) design tiered training programs that differentiate between competencies achievable through short-term intensive training and those requiring sustained, long-term development pathways; and (3) establish post-training evaluation mechanisms tied to job performance outcomes, integrating training results into evaluation, succession, and appointment processes to enhance learning motivation and ensure sustained effectiveness of training activities.

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submitted 08.05.2026;
accepted for publication 22.05.2026;
published 31.05.2026
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Section 4. Philology

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-44-48



DIFFERENCES IN THE APPROACH TO FEMALE IMAGES BY FRENCH AND AZERBAIJANI AUTHORS

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Cite: Gurbanoba, Sh. (2026). *Differences in the approach to female images by French and Azerbaijani authors. European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2026, No 3.* <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-44-48>

Abstract

French prose focuses on **individual existential autonomy**, using female characters to explore psychological depth and critique social constraints. Conversely, Azerbaijani prose focuses on **socio-historical transition**, portraying women as central figures in the nation's shift from traditional patriarchal structures to modern, professional roles. In short: the French approach is **psychologically introspective**, while the Azerbaijani approach is **sociologically transformative**.

Keywords: *individuality, Female Imagery, French and Azerbaijani prose, historical transition, psychological depth*

The differences in the approach to female images in French and Azerbaijani prose are not only literary and aesthetic, but also have deep historical, cultural and ideological roots. These differences stem from the position of women in society, their status in family relationships, and the concepts of individual freedom and subjectivity.

1. Difference in historical and social context in France, since the first half of the 20th century, the struggle of women for rights and freedom (the right to vote – since 1944), feminist literary and philosophical movements (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949), created

an opportunity for women to express themselves as individuals. As a result, in French prose, women are depicted with their sexual desires, social anger and psychological complexities.

In Azerbaijani literature, the image of women has long been presented as the support of the family, a symbol of loyalty and a bearer of moral strength. Although the enlightenment movement and Soviet modernization of the early 20th century encouraged women's education and integration into society, traditional family values prevented their individualism.

2. Differences in Literary Representation French prose writers such as Annie Ernaux, Marguerite Duras, Simone de Beauvoir, and Christine Angot bring to literature the identities that women construct through their bodies, language, and experiences. These images often confront the father figure, the family, and the patriarchal structure. In Ernaux's *Une femme*, the mother, although "a silent woman in domesticity," is reconstructed through the language of her daughter:

"Elle a vécu dans la répétition. Une vie de devoirs, de silences, de fatigue."

"She lived in repetitions – a life of debts, silence and fatigue." (*Une femme*, p. 23)

Here, the image of women becomes visible through writing and memory.

Azerbaijani prose writers such as Anar, Elchin and A. Aylisli present women mainly in the context of family and relationships. For example, in Anar's work *Ağ liman*, a woman is a silent, waiting being, but one who carries emotional strength within. That passivity actually turns into psychological resistance:

"Qadın baxdı, amma danışmadı. O baxışda qırılan nə isə vardı."

"The woman looked, but did not speak. There was something broken in that look." (*Ağ liman*, p. 59)

This difference shows that while French writers present the woman as an active subject of internal experience, Azerbaijani writers keep her as a "reacting" figure within the framework of social relations.

3. Presentation of the body and desire In French literature, the woman's body and desire are described as one of the main aspects of her existence. In Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant*, the image of a girl "comes into being" through her love and desire:

"Je suis née avec lui." – "I was born with him." (*L'Amant*, p. 16)

In Azerbaijani literature, however, the female body is a more symbolic and restricted area. A woman's desire is often not expressed or is isolated. Although the works of female writers – for example, Mehriban Vezir – began to speak out against this isolation, the literary tradition was late in opening up to such presentations:

"Mən qadınam. Sadəcə ana deyil, hiss edən, yaşamaq istəyən bir qadın."

"I am a woman. Not just a mother, but a woman who feels and wants to live." (Mehriban Vezir, "Daughters of the Sun", p. 83)

4. Enrichment with Existing Gender Statistics France- Women's participation in the workforce 70.2%, women's share in management ~37% (2023)

Azerbaijan- Women's participation in the workforce ~62%, women's share in management ~20% (2023).

Representative statistics show that the legal and cultural struggle for gender equality has been more active in France. This is clearly visible in the presentation of female images in literature as active agents, choice-makers and bearers of emotional-spiritual depth.

The influence of social context and ideological systems:

Soviet reality and French existentialism Literature is not only a field of artistic creation, but also an important cultural field in which the ideological and social strata of society are expressed. Especially in the 20th century, the strong ideological control of political systems had a profound impact on the subject matter, image system, and means of aesthetic expression of literature. Socialist realism, the dominant ideological direction in the Soviet Union, demanded from writers loyalty to collective values, class relations, and images of "positive heroes." In contrast, existentialism, which emerged in post-war France, was based on the existence, freedom, and moral responsibility of the individual. These ideological differences also left serious traces in the presentation of images of women and men.

The influence of Soviet reality on Azerbaijani literature During the Soviet period, writers, within the framework of ideological censorship, modeled the images of women and men in accordance with the needs of society. Women – workers, mothers, educators – were presented as "positive heroes" who fulfilled their duties and played a role in socialist construction. Individual desires, internal conflicts, and the search for freedom were either weakened in these images or expressed through hidden symbolism.

For example, in Mir Jalal's "Manifesto of a Young Man," the character of Sona is an educated, thoughtful woman, but her image is mainly presented as a stage in the spiritual

maturation of the male hero. The main emphasis is not on the woman's own inner life, but on her conformity to society.

“O, məndən fərqli idi. Daha sakit, daha müaliəli, daha uyğun...”

“She was different from me. More calm, more studious, more appropriate...” (Mir Jalal, p. 101) This presentation is a typical effect of Soviet ideology, which measured a woman's individuality not by the principles of conformity and usefulness.

French existentialism and individual subjectivity Existentialist literature (Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, etc.) that emerged in France in the 1940s and 1950s was based on the understanding, choice, and responsibility of human existence in a meaningless world. Here, images do not serve any ideological system; on the contrary, they seek the meaning of existence in the absence of a system. This approach is also based on the principles of equality and inner freedom in relations between women and men. Simone de Beauvoir applied existentialist philosophy to gender issues and

showed how women are constructed as “others.”

The phrase **“On ne naît pas femme, on le devient”** – “One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman” (Le Deuxième Sexe, 1949) – forms the core of this approach. In works written on this principle, women are no longer subject to social roles, but are presented as subjects who question and try to reconstruct these roles.

In Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Meursault's relationship with women, especially with Marie, is observed with existential coldness and a lack of emotional responsibility:

“Elle m’a demandé si je l’aimais. J’ai répondu que cela ne voulait rien dire, mais que je ne pensais pas.”

“She asked me, ‘Do you love me?’ I replied that it didn't mean anything, but I didn't think about it.” (L'Étranger, p. 56)

In this expression, love and relationships lose their meaning in an existential vacuum. This is in sharp contrast to the idealized love of Soviet literature.

Table 1.

Aspect	Soviet reality (Azerbaijan)	French existentialism
Female role	Mother, worker, educator, member of the collective	Free individual, psychological-subjective being
Ideological function	A model promoting conformity to society	Resisting the system, searching for one's own self
Concept of freedom	«Orderly freedom» in accordance with socialist values	Inner freedom given by choice and responsibility
Love/relationship	In the context of social welfare and family	Individual responsibility and the clash with meaninglessness

1. The role of women in Soviet reality (Azerbaijan): Soviet ideology aimed to remove women from traditional roles and turn them into active participants in public life. However, although this approach gave the appearance of “freedom”, in reality it reduced women to the model of “useful citizens” rather than individual subjects. Women remained workers at work, and at home, they remained childminders and family breadwinners. This dual burden turned women into both “idealized” and “controlled” figures.

French existentialism: Here, women are no longer the bearers of roles assigned by the social system. They are subjects seeking the meaning of their existence, trying to identify themselves with their feelings, desires and choices. Simone de Beauvoir laid the philosophical foundation for this concept, presenting women not only as biological sex, but also as social constructs. Images of women are powerful beings seeking their freedom and coming into conflict with the existing system.

2. Ideological function Soviet reality: Literature was a means of education and propaganda for Soviet ideology. The image of women was built here in accordance with idealized types – the hero of labor, the devoted mother, the enlightened teacher. Female images with individual internal dilemmas were either changed in the face of censorship or presented symbolically (for example, the silent women in Anar's works).

French existentialism: This direction valued literature as a platform for the expression of free thought and spiritual transformation. Writers had no ideological obligations. Female images were also presented as individuals who did not "serve" society, but resisted it, questioned themselves, and sometimes remained outside the system altogether (Duras, Ernaux, Angot).

3. The concept of freedom Soviet reality: The idea of freedom here was presented mainly through the prism of collective success, "equality" and "service to society". Women's freedom – to work, to study, to participate in political activity – formally existed, but this freedom was within the framework allowed by the centralized system. Individual choice and emotional freedom were almost non-existent or kept in the background.

French existentialism: Here, freedom is the main essence of human existence. Jean-Paul Sartre's idea "Man is doomed to be free" clearly expresses this. Women must accept this freedom and be responsible for its consequences. Choosing, feeling, giving up and starting over – existentialism values a woman's life precisely through these acts of behavior.

4. Presentation of love and relationships Soviet reality: Love and family relationships in literature were based more on social bene-

fit and family stability. Intra-family conflicts and emotional breakdowns were either softened or "educated". Women were shown as support and support, not as partners of men. Romantic and sexual desires were usually evaluated as "harmful bourgeois remnants".

French existentialism: Here, love and relationships are at the center of the spiritual, and sometimes existential, experience of the individual. Love can both give freedom and destroy. Female characters in these relationships are not passive objects, but individuals who make or do not make emotional choices and are responsible for the relationship. In Duras's *L'Amant*, this conflict is presented in an explicit form.

Conclusion

In conclusion:

The image of women in French prose has a dynamic and multilayered structure, built on individual freedom, identity and position against society. In Azerbaijani prose, the image of women is presented more as a being that reacts to social relations, is formed within a moral and family framework. These differences once again show that literature has not only an aesthetic, but also an ideological and social construction function.

This table and comments show that the Soviet and French ideological systems assigned women different functional roles. In Soviet literature, women are the protectors of morality and society, while in French existentialist literature, women are people who think about their existence and freedom.

These differences are of great scientific importance not only in terms of aesthetic, but also in terms of cultural-historical evaluation and strengthen the main ideological structure of your work.

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submitted 26.04.2026;
accepted for publication 10.05.2026;
published 31.05.2026
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Section 5. Economics

DOI:10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-49-54



BRANDING ATHLETES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Cite: *Abilkadirova Aigerim (2026). Branding Athletes in the Digital Age. European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 2026, No 3. <https://doi.org/10.29013/EJHSS-26-3-49-54>*

Abstract

The article examines current trends in the formation and development of the personal brand of professional athletes in the era of rapid digitalization of the media space. The article analyzes the changes in marketing strategies of athletes who are moving from traditional sponsorship to creating their own digital media assets. Special attention is paid to the role of social networks as the main tool for direct communication with the audience. Athletes can not only showcase their athletic achievements, but also monetize their image through developing their own content, creating a loyal community, and establishing partnerships with brands. The paper also examines the risks associated with real-time reputation management, including the impact of platform algorithms on athlete engagement and personality perception. In this article, based on the analysis of empirical data, we identify the key factors that affect the value of a personal brand in the digital age. In addition, we offer recommendations on how to integrate new media into the overall professional development strategy of an athlete. The main idea of the article is that in the modern world, a personal brand is becoming an independent business asset that can ensure the financial stability of an athlete both during his active career and after completion.

Keywords: *personal brand, personal branding, digital marketing, athletes, social networks, media assets, image monetization, reputation management, sports management, digital transformation*

Relevance of the study

In the era of rapid development of digital technologies, professional sports are undergoing significant changes. The athlete's personality becomes the main tool of marketing communication, going beyond exclusively sporting achievements.

This research is becoming particularly relevant in light of the fact that traditional

ways of promotion based on mass television and print media are giving way to interactive digital platforms where the athlete acts as an independent media brand. In the age of social media, the audience expects athletes not only to demonstrate professional skills but also to create authentic content that evokes emotional attachment and promotes loyalty.

However, the digital environment also brings with it new challenges: the high speed of information dissemination, the risk of reputational crises in real time, and dependence on platform algorithms that can both promote brand growth and limit its reach.

Researching the ways athletes adapt to these conditions is of great importance for understanding how they can effectively use their image, establish long-term relationships with the audience, and ensure their financial stability. This makes this topic relevant both for the theory of sports management and for the practical work of athletes and their agency teams.

The purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to theoretically justify and comprehensively analyze the strategies for building a personal brand for professional athletes in the context of digital transformation of the media landscape, as well as to identify the key factors that influence the success of brand monetization in modern market conditions.

To achieve this goal, it is planned to study how the use of new media and social networks is changing the way athletes interact with fans and business partners, and formulate practical recommendations for optimizing athlete image policy to maximize their digital capital.

Materials and research methods

The research methodology is based on a combination of methods from various disciplines, such as marketing, communication studies, and sports sociology. In the course of the work, both general scientific methods, such as analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction, as well as special methods designed to analyze digital activity, were used.

The empirical basis is data from social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, of the world's leading athletes, as well as reports from sports marketing analytics agencies over the past five years. In addition, examples of successful and unsuccessful communication strategies in the sports industry were reviewed.

To study the style, frequency, and nature of athletes' publications, the method of con-

tent analysis was used, which allowed us to identify patterns in the formation of their image.

In addition, a comparative method was used to analyze approaches to brand creation in various sports and in different regional markets. To interpret the data obtained, statistical modeling was used to understand how different types of content affect key performance indicators such as engagement rate (ER), reach, and number of subscribers. This allowed us to confirm the hypothesis that the authenticity of content directly affects the economic sustainability of an athlete's personal brand.

The results of the study

The history of creating athletes' brands in the digital age represents a rapid transition from the passive perception of athletes as objects of mass culture to the active management of their own media empire.

In the early stages, before the advent of digital technology, large media holdings and corporations such as Nike or Coca-Cola tightly controlled athletes' brands. At that time, the athlete was only the face of an advertising campaign that was broadcast through television, the press and radio. Control over his image belonged to agencies and sponsors who created an idealized image, far from reality. This image was unattainable, flawless, and tied to athletic achievements at the stadium. The interaction with the fans was one-sided, and the athlete's role in shaping his own image remained insignificant.

In the mid-2000s, with the advent of the first social networks, the situation began to change dramatically. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and later Instagram provided athletes with the opportunity to communicate directly and openly with the audience. This marked the beginning of an era of personal brand democratization.

Athletes received a tool that allowed them to go beyond the "tracksuit" and enter a new era. During this transition, viewers began to demand something else. The fans were no longer content with dry statistics and scripted interviews. There was a desire to bring more humanity, to look into the daily lives, preferences, and emotions of athletes who had previously been hidden behind the walls

of training complexes (Fedyushina E. A., Kvasov D. O., 2021).

Initially, some athletes and their teams were hesitant about social media, delegating its management to SMM (social media marketing) managers who produced content that was not much different from official press releases. However, it soon became clear that athletes who demonstrated authenticity were the most successful when it came to building brand value.

The next stage of branding development was linked to the increasing complexity of digital platform algorithms and the professionalization of content. By the mid-2010s, it became clear that social media was not just a platform for publishing but a valuable business asset. There were even agencies specializing in personal brand management for athletes.

Content stopped being spontaneous and started following clear content strategies. These strategies take into account peak audience activity hours, current trends, promotion features on different platforms, and the need to maintain high engagement through the Engagement Rate (ER) indicator (Dolgikh U. O., 2017). Athletes began using storytelling to talk not only about their victories but also about how they overcome difficul-

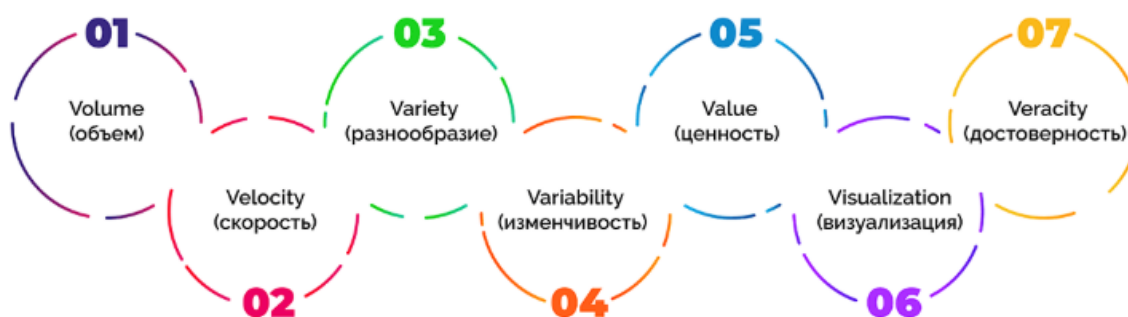
ties, recover from injuries, follow diets, and engage in personal hobbies. This allows them to establish deep emotional connections with their fans. As a result, advertisers began to evaluate athletes not only by sports rating but also by the “digital influence index,” which takes into account the size and quality of their audience.

Currently, branding is undergoing rapid changes due to the merger of sports and show business in the digital economy. The athlete’s personal brand becomes an independent business unit capable of functioning independently of their sports career.

It is important to note that the introduction of modern technologies into the branding system of athletes has fundamentally transformed the world of sports marketing. Athletes have transformed from passive participants in advertising contracts into high-tech media hubs capable of actively interacting with their fans (Yakovlev A. A., 2022).

The basis of this transformation is deep data analytics systems and Big Data technologies, which allow not only broadcasting information to a wide audience but also micro-targeting, dividing fans into segments based on psychographic and behavioral characteristics (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Characteristics of Big Data



Modern technology platforms such as Salesforce and specialized CRM systems designed to manage sports content provide athletes and their teams with unique opportunities. These platforms allow tracking the level of audience engagement in real time, analyzing the effectiveness of each publication, and adjusting the promotion strategy depending on the reaction of subscribers from different geographical regions.

Personal brand management is becoming an increasingly complex science, where intuitive decisions are replaced by algorithmically verified actions aimed at increasing the return on investment (ROI) for sponsors and partners. Table 1 provides examples of how technology can be used to improve the effectiveness of personal brand management.

Table 1. *CRM systems for sports content management*

No.	Indicator	Characteristic
1	Contact Management	Storing data about clients, partners, sponsors, and fans. Dividing the database into segments to ensure an individual approach to each.
2	Marketing Automation	Sending news, promotions, and updates via email and social media. Develop targeted campaigns to attract new customers.
3	Analytics and reporting	Tracking customer interactions and evaluating the effectiveness of various strategies. Data analysis for predicting customer behavior.
4	Event Management	Organization and control of sports events. Ticket sales and registration management.
5	Social network	Interact with fans through platforms. Tracking mentions and reviews.

A significant technological advancement has been the introduction of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies, which have transformed the way athletes, engage with fans, reducing the distance between them to almost nothing.

Thanks to the integration of AR filters on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, fans can “try on” their favorite athletes’ equipment, participate in virtual training sessions, and even find themselves in a virtual space that replicates a professional team’s locker room, creating an immersive experience. These tools enable athletes to take their content beyond static visuals, offering interactive experiences that deepen the emotional connection with their fans. Additionally, the development of AI technologies has allowed for the automation of content creation and community management, making it easier for athletes to maintain a strong online presence.

AI algorithms help optimize SEO parameters for athletes’ personal websites, predict the viral potential of a particular post based on trend analysis, and even generate personalized responses to fan comments. This allows athletes to maintain high levels of engagement even with millions of fans, which would be impossible to manage manually.

Another aspect of technological influence is the use of blockchain technology and NFTs (non-fungible tokens). These have created new models for monetizing and interacting with fans. Athletes can issue digital collectible

cards or tokenize rights to exclusive events, creating closed communities on crypto platforms. This allows them to commercialize their popularity directly, bypassing traditional intermediaries like sports federations and media holdings. It creates an ownership economy, where fans become investors in the success of their idols.

In addition, modern streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube Live have changed their approach to content delivery, focusing not on carefully prepared commercials, but on a “live” presence. The use of professional studio equipment for home streaming, including high-quality motion capture systems and modern streaming programs such as OBS Studio, allows athletes to conduct live broadcasts of gameplay, training sessions, or Q&A sessions at the level of television broadcasts.

Biometrics and wearable device technologies are also beginning to play an important role in shaping a brand based on the principle of “digital transparency.” Athletes are increasingly sharing data about their workouts, heart rate, and recovery through apps like Strava or Whoop. This allows them to integrate their personal brand into the ecosystem of fans who strive for self-improvement. Thanks to this, the athlete turns from an unattainable hero into a mentor whose path to success can be tracked and repeated.

However, despite the vast opportunities offered by digital technologies, the process of creating a personal brand for a modern

athlete is fraught with a number of serious problems. These problems can not only slow down the growth of popularity but also cause irreparable damage to reputation.

One of the most serious problems faced by modern athletes is the so-called “transparency trap.” This is a phenomenon where the boundaries between professional and personal life are becoming increasingly blurred, and the desire to be closer to fans through social media leads to excessive openness. In pursuit of large audiences, athletes are often willing to sacrifice their privacy, which creates the illusion of accessibility. However, this also makes them vulnerable to public opinion, which in the digital age reacts instantly and is often aggressive.

Any mistake, careless statement, or unfortunate shot posted in a fit of emotion or in a state of fatigue can quickly spread through the algorithms of social networks such as Twitter or Instagram, turning into a large-scale scandal. Dealing with a crisis requires complex and expensive crisis management communication. The digital memory of the Internet does not forgive mistakes, and even ten-year-old content retrieved from archives can lead to the “cancellation” of an athlete. This makes long-term brand planning very risky.

Another significant challenge is the fragmentation of the audience and the need to be present on multiple platforms, which demands a significant amount of time and mental effort, often diverting attention from the main goal – achieving sports results. Athletes face a difficult choice: either to delegate brand management to a team of social media managers, risking losing authenticity and turning their accounts into a soulless advertising showcase, or to independently create content, which can lead to professional burnout.

In a world where TikTok and Reels algorithms demand that feeds be updated several times a day, high-quality, deep content is being overshadowed by “fast-food” content, which reduces the semantic load and depth of a brand. Additionally, there is the issue of dependence on social platform algorithms: changing coverage policies or monetization rules can reset years of hard work overnight, depriving an athlete of direct access to their

audience. This creates an unstable brand architecture where success depends on external, uncontrollable technological intermediaries.

Athletes face the need to spend a lot of effort and resources on maintaining digital hygiene, moderation of comments, and protection of personal space. This creates psychological stress, which directly affects their fitness. In addition, there is the problem of “confidence inflation.” Due to the large number of advertising integrations and partner posts in the market, the audience develops “banner blindness” and skepticism. When every athlete’s post seems like a hidden advertisement for NFT projects, sports nutrition, or betting shops, their brand loses its value in the eyes of fans and turns from a symbol of achievement into a commercial tool. This contradiction between the need for monetization and maintaining a sincere relationship with the audience is becoming the “bottleneck” of modern sports marketing.

In conclusion, it is impossible not to mention the problem of digital inequality and the technological difficulties associated with the protection of intellectual property. In an era when artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms make it possible to create deepfakes or use images of athletes in unauthorized campaigns, brand protection is becoming a complex legal and technical task.

Athletes must constantly ensure that their copyrights are not violated in the global digital space. This requires in-depth knowledge not only in sports but also in the field of cyber law and blockchain technologies, which are used to protect the rights to digital assets.

However, the main problem is the fragility of digital success. In a world where trends only last a few days, building a long-term and sustainable brand is becoming an increasingly difficult task. The athlete must find the perfect balance between technological adaptability, his authenticity, and psychological stability. This is especially difficult in conditions of intense training and competition.

Conclusions. Summing up the results of the study of athletes’ branding in the digital age, we can conclude that the transition of professional sports to the virtual space has led to fundamental changes in perception. Now sporting achievements are becoming

only the foundation, not the ultimate goal. Today, we are witnessing the transformation of the athlete's image from a classic hero whose value was determined only by medals and records to a full-fledged media character acting according to the laws of the content industry. However, despite the huge potential for monetization and influence, this transition is fraught with systemic risks that require athletes and their environment to develop a new level of strategic thinking.

In today's world, a personal brand is not just a lifestyle demonstration but a complex system that requires a balance between emotional connection with the audience and privacy. To achieve success, you need to be able to delegate the operational management of your social media account to professional teams while maintaining your personality. In addition, it is important to be prepared to adapt to the constantly changing algorithms of the platforms.

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submitted 15.05.2026;
accepted for publication 30.05.2026;
published 31.05.2026
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