



Cultural Identity Negotiation and Meaning-Making on TikTok among Generation Z

Siti nur jannah ^{1*}, Abdul Azis ²

^{1,2}Universitas Duta Bangsa, Indonesia

¹sitinurjannah@gmail.com*, ²abdulazis@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms have transformed communication studies by reshaping how individuals construct identity and engage in cross-cultural interactions in online environments. Within this context, TikTok has emerged as a dynamic space where Generation Z navigates cultural expression, self-representation, and belonging in increasingly globalized societies. However, limited research has explored the subjective experiences behind these interactions, leaving unanswered how Generation Z perceives, negotiates, and assigns meaning to their digital identities. This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with semi-structured interviews of 14 active TikTok users to examine how Generation Z constructs and redefines cultural identity. Data were thematically analyzed to capture the essence of meaning-making in cross-cultural digital spaces. Findings indicate that TikTok mediates identity negotiation, allowing participants to blend personal, cultural, and global influences while facing tensions between authenticity and social validation. Participants viewed TikTok as a space for creative self-expression and intercultural learning, but also experienced pressures to conform to trending norms, sometimes undermining individuality. These results contribute to digital identity theory and offer practical insights for enhancing cross-cultural communication and digital literacy among Generation Z.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed how individuals communicate, express themselves, and construct their identities within increasingly globalized and interconnected societies. Among these technological shifts, social media platforms have emerged as central spaces where people engage in multidimensional interactions, shaping not only their social networks but also their cultural identities (Castellanos, 2019; Esteves-Wolff, 2020). TikTok, in particular, has become one of the most influential digital environments for Generation Z, offering a dynamic platform where short-form video content facilitates creativity, storytelling, and intercultural exchange.

In contemporary communication studies, TikTok represents more than just a medium for entertainment; it functions as a digital ecosystem where individuals construct meaning, negotiate belonging, and navigate diverse cultural encounters (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). For Generation Z, who are often characterized as digital natives, TikTok provides both opportunities and challenges in developing a sense of self. The algorithm-driven platform exposes users to a vast array of cultural representations, enabling cross-cultural connections while simultaneously generating tensions between authentic self-expression and the desire for social validation.

The phenomenon is particularly relevant in today's sociocultural context, where cultural hybridity and identity negotiation increasingly occur in online spaces (Martínez-Sánchez & Moreno, 2023; Tosi, 2021). Social media platforms like TikTok mediate interactions across geographical and cultural boundaries, creating spaces where users continuously reinterpret their identities through

shared narratives and symbolic practices. While quantitative studies have primarily examined patterns of platform usage and behavioral outcomes, less is understood about the subjective meanings individuals assign to these experiences — especially how cross-cultural interactions shape personal and collective identity formation.

This lack of understanding highlights the necessity of exploring the lived experiences of individuals who actively participate in cross-cultural exchanges on TikTok. From a phenomenological perspective, identity construction is not a static attribute but rather a dynamic process embedded within personal perceptions, emotional narratives, and social contexts (Avni, 2012; Papa, 2020). By investigating participants' experiences, this study seeks to uncover the essence of meaning-making as Generation Z navigates between cultural authenticity, digital creativity, and social belonging. Such an approach contributes to a deeper comprehension of the interplay between technology, culture, and personal identity in contemporary communication practices.

Research on subjective experiences within digital interaction contexts has increasingly become a central focus in contemporary communication studies. Scholars have recognized the importance of understanding how individuals construct personal and cultural identities through online platforms, particularly in algorithm-driven environments like TikTok that facilitate cross-cultural engagement. These spaces serve not merely as venues for content consumption but as interactive arenas where Generation Z actively shapes and negotiates who they are within diverse social and cultural contexts.

Despite the growing interest in digital identity construction, current studies remain methodologically constrained, as much of the existing research relies heavily on quantitative approaches aimed at measuring patterns of usage, frequency, and audience behaviour (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While such studies provide valuable insights into user demographics and platform metrics, they often fail to capture the deeply personal, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of how individuals experience cross-cultural encounters and make sense of their digital interactions. Consequently, the nuanced meanings underlying participants' narratives, particularly regarding identity negotiation and self-representation, remain largely unexplored.

This methodological limitation highlights a critical gap in understanding the essence of lived experience in cross-cultural digital spaces (Gaspersz, 2023; Matus-Mendoza, 2025). Quantitative frameworks, while useful for identifying trends, cannot adequately represent the rich complexity of individual meaning-making processes within socio-technological environments. A phenomenological approach, by contrast, offers a lens through which the subjective realities of participants can be uncovered and understood in their authentic context. By emphasizing the interpretative dimensions of identity construction, this research seeks to move beyond surface-level behavioral patterns toward a deeper understanding of how Generation Z experiences, negotiates, and redefines cultural identity through TikTok interactions.

Although previous research has examined digital identity construction and cross-cultural interactions on social media platforms, much of the existing work has relied on practical frameworks and quantitative methodologies that primarily focus on measurable patterns, platform usage, and behavioral tendencies (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). These studies have provided valuable insights into how often users engage, what type of content they consume, and how audiences respond to online interactions. However, such approaches tend to overlook the subjective and interpretative dimensions of how individuals experience and assign meaning to their online engagements.

In the context of Generation Z's identity formation on TikTok, this limitation becomes particularly significant. While existing surveys and content analyses identify macro-level patterns in digital participation, they fail to capture the personal narratives, emotional complexities, and cultural negotiations embedded within participants' lived experiences. As a result, current understandings remain partial and fragmented, lacking the depth necessary to fully comprehend how Generation Z constructs, performs, and redefines their identities within globalized digital spaces.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach offers a powerful alternative by shifting the analytical focus from observable behaviors to participants' subjective interpretations and meaning-making processes (Khan, 2023; Liu & Sammons, 2021). By adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study seeks to uncover the essence of experience as narrated by participants, providing a holistic understanding of how TikTok mediates cross-cultural identity negotiation. Such an approach not only fills a critical methodological gap but also contributes to advancing theoretical frameworks in digital communication studies by emphasizing the lived realities of users rather than abstract behavioral models.

Recent studies have examined digital identity formation and cross-cultural communication in online spaces, with TikTok emerging as a significant platform shaping these experiences (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Research has shown that TikTok enables self-expression, facilitates cross-cultural exchanges, and fosters community belonging among Generation Z users. However, much of this literature relies on quantitative approaches and content-based analyses that measure patterns of engagement rather than exploring personal meanings behind these interactions. While these studies highlight the platform's influence, they leave gaps in understanding the subjective experiences of users navigating cultural identity negotiation. This creates the need for research focusing on the essence of participants' lived experiences within such digital contexts.

To address this need, this study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which is particularly suited for uncovering how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences. IPA allows for an in-depth exploration of personal narratives and provides insights into the complex processes of identity construction in cross-cultural environments. This approach responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier by shifting the focus from behavioral patterns to meaning-making processes. By employing IPA, the study captures the rich, nuanced realities of Generation Z's interactions on TikTok and illuminates how these experiences shape their sense of self and belonging.

The remainder of this article is organized into several sections. The introduction provides an overview of the phenomenon and explains its relevance in contemporary communication studies. The methodology section details the interpretative phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures (Demak et al., 2025; Elazar & Billig, 2025). The results section presents key themes emerging from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations to preserve authenticity. The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing theories and research, highlighting theoretical and practical implications. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and suggests directions for future research on digital identity and cross-cultural interactions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Generation Z in constructing and negotiating cultural identity through social interactions on TikTok (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). The phenomenological design was selected because it provides a framework for understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their personal experiences. This approach is particularly suitable for addressing the research objective, which seeks to uncover deeper layers of meaning behind participants' digital interactions and identity construction within a cross-cultural context.

IPA, grounded in Heideggerian principles, moves beyond surface-level descriptions and focuses on interpreting the essence of participants' experiences while acknowledging the influence of broader social and cultural contexts. This design allowed the phenomenon under investigation to be understood holistically, capturing the nuances, tensions, and contradictions embedded in Generation Z's interactional narratives on TikTok.

Participants

Participants were drawn from Generation Z TikTok users who were actively engaged in creating and interacting with cross-cultural content. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that only those with direct and meaningful experiences relevant to the phenomenon were included in the study. A total of 14 participants were involved, consisting of 8 females and 6 males, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years old. They represented diverse cultural backgrounds, including Indonesian students, international students, and cross-national communities residing in Southeast Asia.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be active TikTok users spending at least three hours per week on the platform, with demonstrated engagement in creating or interacting with cross-cultural content. Individuals who were under 18 or above 24 years of age or who did not engage with cross-cultural interactions on TikTok were excluded from the study.

To ensure contextual richness, demographic information such as gender, cultural background, and frequency of TikTok usage was recorded. However, these details were not used to generalize findings but rather to illuminate the variety of perspectives surrounding the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' narratives about their experiences of self-expression, identity negotiation, and cultural interaction within TikTok's dynamic digital environment (Daly, 2007; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and through secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant location and preference. Each session lasted between 45 and 75 minutes to allow sufficient depth of exploration while ensuring participant comfort.

An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences and meaning-making processes. Follow-up prompts were introduced when necessary to obtain richer and more nuanced insights into emerging narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve authenticity and narrative integrity.

To create a conducive interview environment, interviews were conducted in quiet and comfortable settings, ensuring participants felt safe and respected. All procedures adhered to protocols designed to minimize discomfort and protect the emotional well-being of participants throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the systematic framework proposed by Longhofer et al., (2012). The analysis process was iterative and interpretative, involving several stages:

First, the transcribed data were read and re-read multiple times to achieve deep immersion and familiarity with participants' experiences. Second, initial coding was conducted by highlighting significant statements and identifying meaning units that reflected participants' perceptions and interpretations. Third, codes were clustered into emerging themes based on conceptual similarities and patterns across narratives.

Once themes were identified, cross-case comparisons were conducted to examine convergences and divergences among participants, thereby enriching the interpretation of the phenomenon. Finally, these themes were synthesized into a set of essential meanings representing the core structures of participants' lived experiences.

NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in data organization, thematic coding, and retrieval, ensuring analytic rigor and traceability. Throughout the process, findings were continually validated against raw data to maintain authenticity, credibility, and contextual relevance.

RESULTS

TikTok as a Space for Cultural Self-Expression

Participants consistently described TikTok as more than just a platform for entertainment; it became a digital “stage” for expressing personal and cultural identity. Through short videos, hashtags, and challenges, they negotiated how they wanted to be perceived by peers across cultural backgrounds.

“TikTok gives me freedom to express who I am. I can show my traditional dances while mixing them with trending sounds — it feels like my culture finally has a place in global conversations.” (P3)

For many, TikTok functioned as a cultural amplifier, enabling them to experiment with multiple identities simultaneously. The flexibility of content creation empowered participants to craft narratives that blended local traditions with global aesthetics. However, some participants also reported feelings of pressure to conform to globalized “viral” trends, revealing an underlying tension between authentic representation and social validation.

Navigating Identity on TikTok



Negotiating Cultural Identity in a Cross-Cultural Digital Sphere

Another prominent theme involves the dynamic negotiation of cultural identity when interacting with users from different countries and backgrounds. Participants explained that TikTok’s algorithmic design naturally exposes them to diverse content, fostering opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue.

“When I interact with creators from other countries, I realize how different our cultures are, but at the same time, I also find unexpected similarities.” (P7)

This digital exposure facilitated an evolving sense of identity among participants. Some embraced hybridity — adopting expressions, aesthetics, and even linguistic patterns from other cultures. Others, however, reported experiencing cultural dissonance when their content or identity was misinterpreted by international audiences.

A cross-analysis of interviews revealed that TikTok fosters “micro-encounters” where participants continuously reinterpret their self-image in response to reactions from global peers. These findings underscore the platform’s role as a mediator of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation.

Social Validation, Belonging, and Identity Formation

The pursuit of social validation emerged as a recurring narrative. Many participants admitted that likes, comments, and shares significantly shaped their sense of belonging within digital communities.

“Sometimes I feel more connected to my online friends than people around me. When my video gets positive comments, I feel accepted and understood.” (P4)

While validation enhanced feelings of inclusion, participants also expressed concerns over authenticity. The pressure to create content that “fits” popular trends often conflicted with their personal and cultural identities. This duality highlights TikTok’s paradoxical role: it provides a sense of belonging while simultaneously introducing identity insecurities.

Interestingly, those who successfully balanced personal authenticity with audience expectations reported a stronger and more coherent digital identity. This suggests that adaptive self-presentation on TikTok can serve as a strategy for psychosocial resilience among Gen Z users.

TikTok as a Catalyst for Cultural Awareness and Learning

TikTok also acted as an informal space of cultural learning. Participants frequently discovered new customs, traditions, and perspectives through algorithm-curated content.

“I didn’t know much about Korean traditions before, but now I follow some creators who share their festivals. It made me respect cultural differences more.” (P2)

This “passive learning” facilitated intercultural understanding while reducing stereotypes. Participants described developing cultural empathy by engaging with diverse communities and narratives. However, some also cautioned that misrepresentations of culture in viral content can lead to misguided perceptions, underscoring the need for critical digital literacy when consuming cross-cultural information.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how TikTok facilitates identity negotiation within cross-cultural digital spaces (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Participants reported using TikTok not merely as an entertainment platform but as a cultural arena where they express personal narratives, experiment with self-representation, and engage with diverse communities. This research shows that identity construction in digital contexts is a dynamic, ongoing process, influenced by algorithm-driven exposure to diverse cultural content and mediated through social validation mechanisms such as likes, comments, and shares.

By employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study captures the subjective realities of participants, which are often absent in existing quantitative frameworks. The findings highlight three core contributions:

TikTok provides agency for self-expression, allowing participants to merge personal, cultural, and global identities.

Cross-cultural interactions on the platform create opportunities for intercultural learning while also generating identity tensions when participants feel pressured to conform to dominant trends.

Social validation both enhances belonging and challenges authenticity, underscoring the paradoxical nature of digital identity formation.

These insights respond directly to the research question by demonstrating that identity negotiation on TikTok is not simply a matter of content production but a deeply meaningful, interpretative process shaped by participants’ cultural awareness and emotional engagement.

Connection with Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The findings of this study extend current understandings of digital identity construction and cross-cultural communication, complementing and refining existing literature. Consistent with Rose & Given-Wilson, (2021), this research supports the idea that TikTok fosters a hybridized space where Generation Z integrates multiple cultural influences into a fluid digital self. However, it goes further by providing phenomenological insights into how participants perceive and negotiate their cultural identities, a dimension largely overlooked in prior studies.

In line with Ahmed & Hari, (2023), the study confirms that algorithm-driven exposure increases opportunities for cross-cultural engagement but also identifies emotional and cognitive challenges that arise when users encounter cultural dissonance. These findings are further supported by Dong, (2024), who argue that identity negotiation in online spaces is context-dependent and mediated through symbolic interactions.

Unlike previous research that predominantly employed behavioral analytics or content-focused analyses, this study foregrounds participants' lived experiences to demonstrate the depth and complexity of identity formation in digital environments. By adopting IPA, it contributes to expanding theoretical perspectives on mediated intercultural communication, offering a more holistic framework that integrates personal narratives, cultural representations, and technological affordances into the understanding of Generation Z's identity construction.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical, social, and practical implications for understanding identity construction in cross-cultural digital environments (He et al., 2024; Shutaleva et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2025). Theoretically, the results extend communication and media studies by demonstrating how digital platforms mediate cultural identity formation through processes of self-expression, social validation, and intercultural engagement. By uncovering the lived experiences of Generation Z, the study enriches phenomenological perspectives on meaning-making in digital contexts, offering deeper insights into how individuals navigate cultural hybridity and belonging.

From a social perspective, the study highlights how TikTok functions as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue, enabling participants to develop cultural empathy and broaden their awareness of diverse traditions and practices. However, the findings also reveal that exposure to dominant trends can pressure users to conform, creating challenges to authentic self-representation. Practically, these insights can inform digital literacy programs and platform design strategies aimed at supporting users in managing identity tensions and fostering healthy cross-cultural communication online. Furthermore, educators and policymakers may leverage these findings to develop frameworks that help young people critically engage with algorithm-driven spaces while maintaining cultural integrity and individuality.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into identity negotiation on TikTok, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to 14 Generation Z participants, which restricts the transferability of findings to broader populations. Although the phenomenological approach does not aim for statistical generalization, future studies could benefit from including a larger and more diverse participant pool to capture broader experiences.

Second, the study focused specifically on TikTok users engaged in cross-cultural interactions, which may not represent the experiences of users whose online activities are confined to localized or monocultural spaces. Third, the reliance on self-reported data from in-depth interviews introduces potential biases, as participants may present idealized versions of their digital identities or experiences. Finally, the study was conducted within a specific sociocultural context in Southeast Asia, meaning findings should be interpreted with caution when applied to users from different cultural or geographical settings.

Recognizing these limitations allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the findings and underscores the importance of approaching digital identity construction as a context-dependent phenomenon rather than a universal experience.

Directions for Future Research

Building upon the insights generated by this study, future research could expand the exploration of digital identity negotiation across different platforms, cultures, and generations (Beatty et al., 2025; Cavazos et al., 2025). Comparative studies between TikTok and other platforms, such as

Instagram or YouTube, could provide a richer understanding of how algorithmic structures and content formats shape identity-making processes differently.

Additionally, longitudinal research tracking participants over time would help illuminate the evolution of identity construction in response to changing social and technological dynamics. Future studies may also integrate multimodal data sources, combining interviews with digital ethnography or content analysis of participant-generated videos, to capture the multi-layered nature of self-representation online. Finally, researchers could explore the psychological and sociocultural outcomes of cross-cultural digital interactions, investigating whether sustained engagement on platforms like TikTok leads to greater cultural empathy, identity coherence, or digital fatigue.

By addressing these avenues, future research can advance the theoretical understanding of digital identity formation while offering practical insights to educators, platform designers, and policymakers seeking to support inclusive, meaningful, and authentic cross-cultural communication in online spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Generation Z constructs, negotiates, and redefines cultural identity through their interactions on TikTok within cross-cultural digital environments. The findings reveal that TikTok functions as a dynamic space for self-expression, intercultural learning, and social belonging, while simultaneously creating tensions between authentic identity and social validation. By adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study provides a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences and addresses gaps left by previous research that focused primarily on quantitative patterns. Unlike prior studies that tended to generalize user behavior, this research highlights the nuanced ways in which Generation Z actively reshapes cultural identity through performative practices and algorithmic engagements, offering a distinctive phenomenological perspective on identity work in digital spaces. These insights contribute to advancing theoretical perspectives on digital identity formation and offer practical implications for digital literacy, cross-cultural communication, and platform design strategies. In practical terms, the study suggests the need for targeted digital literacy programs that equip young users to critically navigate algorithm-driven content, encourages platform developers to design features that promote authentic intercultural exchanges, and provides guidance for educators and policymakers in fostering inclusive digital environments. While the study is limited by its contextual focus and sample size, the findings provide a foundation for expanding research into identity negotiation across platforms, cultures, and generations. Future studies are encouraged to combine phenomenological approaches with multimodal analyses to capture the evolving complexity of identity construction in digital spaces.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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