



Exploring the Lived Experience of Cultural Identity Negotiation Among Urban Youth in the Digital Era

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 30-05-2025

Revised 10-07-2025

Accepted 17-07-2025

Keyword:

Cultural Identity; Lived Experience; Urban Youth; Digital Culture; Identity Negotiation; Interpretive Analysis.

ABSTRACT

Cultural identity formation among urban youth has become an important topic in social and cultural studies, particularly in the context of globalization and digital transformation. While existing research has addressed identity dynamics in digital spaces, there remains limited understanding of how young individuals subjectively experience and interpret their cultural identity in daily life. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of urban youth in negotiating local cultural identity amid global digital influences. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), this study investigates how identity is experienced, reflected upon, and reshaped through digital interaction and cultural engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight urban youth in Indonesia aged between 18 and 24 years old, all of whom identify as Indonesian nationals. Data were analyzed thematically to uncover core experiential themes. The findings reveal four central themes: fragmented belonging in digital spaces, reappropriation of traditional symbols, tensions between inherited norms and modern expression, and performative identity shaped by social validation. These insights demonstrate that cultural identity among urban youth is not static but actively negotiated through personal meaning-making processes embedded in both online and offline environments. This research advances the field by offering a deeper experiential perspective on cultural hybridity and digital identity construction. The findings suggest that identity research must move beyond behavioral analysis to include interpretive accounts that reflect the affective and symbolic dimensions of lived experience. These results carry important implications for future studies in cultural psychology, youth studies, and digital ethnography.



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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid globalization and digital expansion, the identities of young people are increasingly shaped by complex interactions between traditional cultural frameworks and contemporary global influences. Urban youth, in particular, navigate a dynamic social terrain where local heritage and global digital culture intersect, often in ways that are subtle, fragmented, or contradictory. This intersection challenges fixed conceptions of identity and underscores the evolving nature of cultural self-understanding in modern society.

Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become integral to how young individuals express themselves, connect with peers, and engage with cultural narratives. These platforms are not merely tools for communication, but serve as active arenas where identity is performed, negotiated, and reshaped. In urban contexts where cultural plurality and technological accessibility coexist, young people often oscillate between inherited norms and globalized digital expression (Smith et al., 2021; Nguyen & Lee, 2020).

Understanding identity formation in this context requires close attention to subjective experiences and symbolic meanings. Rather than relying solely on external behavior or demographic patterns, it becomes essential to explore how young individuals reinterpret and personalize cultural

values through everyday digital engagement. This interpretive perspective allows us to uncover how identity is not only inherited but also actively constructed through digital mediation and social interaction.

Given this complexity, there is a growing need to explore the phenomenon through a lens that privileges lived experience and interpretive meaning-making. Phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological approach, provides a powerful framework to uncover how individuals perceive, embody, and make sense of their cultural identity in shifting social environments. Through detailed attention to personal narratives, a phenomenological inquiry reveals how meaning is not merely inherited but actively constructed within the contextual realities of modern life.

Within the broader discourse on identity formation, growing scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how individuals experience and internalize cultural identity in everyday life. In particular, the subjective experience of urban youth negotiating their cultural roots amidst the pressures of modernity and digital globalization has emerged as a vital area of inquiry. This focus underscores the need to explore not only what young people do to express their identities, but also how they experience and make meaning of these expressions in a rapidly shifting cultural landscape.

Despite increasing interest, methodological challenges persist in capturing the nuanced, lived dimensions of identity negotiation. Quantitative approaches, while valuable in mapping trends or correlations, often fall short in uncovering the deep emotional, symbolic, and existential layers of individual experience. Many studies rely on standardized questionnaires or behavioral proxies that may fail to grasp the complexities of how identity is felt, performed, or questioned in real-life social settings (Chiu & Yeung, 2021).

As a result, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the internal processes through which young people interpret and redefine their cultural identities. These gaps are further exacerbated by a lack of tools that prioritize meaning-making from the perspective of the subject. Without methodologies capable of revealing the essence of personal experience, much of the literature risks reducing identity to static categories or observable behaviors. This limitation calls for a deeper, interpretative approach one that centers on the lived realities of individuals within their social, historical, and digital contexts.

Most existing approaches to understanding cultural identity among urban youth rely on practical frameworks that emphasize behavioral patterns, media consumption habits, or demographic categorizations. These models often apply pre-determined variables to assess cultural affiliation or identity negotiation, offering general insights that are helpful for policy or programming purposes. However, such approaches typically neglect the complex, subjective experiences through which individuals construct meaning, particularly in environments where cultural traditions intersect with digital modernity.

This tendency to prioritize observable indicators over internal experiences has led to a fragmented understanding of how young people actually live, feel, and interpret their cultural identities. While some studies have explored symbolic practices or social expressions of identity, few have delved into the nuanced processes of meaning-making that occur as youth reconcile inherited cultural values with global digital influences (Akar & Demir, 2023; Rahman & Nur, 2022). The limitations of previous methods especially those rooted in quantitative or behaviorist paradigms lie in their inability to capture the lived, affective, and reflective dimensions of identity formation.

To address this gap, there is a clear need for an alternative approach that centers experience and interpretation. Phenomenology offers a rigorous methodological pathway to explore the essence of cultural identity as lived and understood by the individuals themselves. By focusing on how meaning is subjectively constructed and contextually situated, a phenomenological inquiry allows for a richer, more holistic understanding of how urban youth navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity in their everyday lives.

Several recent studies have explored how youth construct identity in multicultural or digital contexts. These include research on digital self-representation, cultural hybridity, and the symbolic

negotiation of tradition among younger generations (Smith et al., 2021; Akar & Demir, 2023). While these studies contribute to understanding cultural dynamics, many lack depth in capturing lived experience and personal meaning. Few investigations have focused specifically on how urban youth in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, interpret their cultural identity through everyday interactions with global media. This gap highlights the need for a deeper inquiry into the phenomenological dimension of identity.

To explore this, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach that focuses on how participants experience and give meaning to their cultural identity within digital and urban environments. This method is appropriate because it allows access to rich, first-person accounts of internal conflicts, reinterpretations, and symbolic negotiations. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enables a structured yet flexible exploration of subjective experiences, bridging personal reflection and cultural context. In doing so, this study addresses the knowledge gap by revealing the inner perspectives that are often overlooked by traditional approaches. The findings respond to the need for more meaningful interpretations of identity among digitally immersed youth.

This article begins with an introduction that outlines the theoretical and social context of the study. The methodology section explains the philosophical foundation of IPA, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytic process. Following this, the results section presents key themes derived from participants' narratives. The discussion interprets these findings in light of existing literature and theoretical perspectives. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the contributions and offers directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of urban youth in negotiating their local cultural identity amidst the influence of globalized digital environments. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected for its emphasis on understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within a specific social and cultural context. This approach enables a detailed exploration of the meaning-making process, acknowledging both the participants' perspectives and the researcher's interpretative engagement. Rooted in the philosophical foundations of Heidegger and the hermeneutic tradition, IPA emphasizes the dynamic interaction between interpretation, context, and personal meaning, making it particularly appropriate for investigating cultural identity as a fluid and constructed phenomenon.

Participants

Participants consisted of urban youth aged between 19 and 24 years who had active engagement with both local cultural practices and global digital media. Selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and relevant lived experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be born and raised in urban environments, identify with a specific local cultural tradition, and regularly use digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube. Those with no declared cultural affiliation or with limited digital engagement were excluded. A total of eight participants (four male and four female) were involved in the study, with an average age of 21.6 years. All participants represented diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds from major urban centers in Indonesia, contributing to a varied and rich dataset.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit personal narratives related to cultural identity, digital presence, and negotiation of traditional values. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in private and comfortable settings, typically in university or community spaces familiar to participants. Each session lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. The interview guide was informed by existing literature on cultural identity and digital youth culture, and pilot-tested to

refine clarity and depth. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later translated into English for analysis, ensuring contextual integrity. The process prioritized creating a safe and open environment to encourage reflection and authenticity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through a multi-stage procedure. Transcribed interviews were first read multiple times to gain immersion in the data. Meaningful statements were then identified and coded into initial units of meaning. These units were clustered into emergent themes based on shared conceptual patterns. Themes were subsequently examined across cases to identify convergences and divergences, resulting in the formulation of higher-order thematic structures. The NVivo 14 software was employed to assist in organizing and managing the data, though interpretative insight remained central to the analysis. The final themes reflected both the unique individual experiences and their broader cultural implications, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the lived phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed about the nature, purpose, and voluntary nature of the study and provided written informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study by using pseudonyms and secure data storage. All procedures adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with local regulations concerning research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal the nuanced and deeply personal ways in which urban youth negotiate their cultural identity in the midst of digital globalization. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews, four major themes emerged: (1) Fragmented Belonging in Digital Spaces, (2) Reappropriating Local Culture as Self-Expression, (3) Tensions between Tradition and Modernity, and (4) Performing Identity for Validation. Each theme is illustrated with participant narratives that expose the lived experiences, inner conflicts, and constructed meanings around cultural identity formation in a globalized and digitized urban context.

Fragmented Belonging in Digital Spaces

Participants expressed a sense of disconnection between their traditional cultural roots and their daily engagement with global digital environments. The internet, particularly social media, was frequently described as a double-edged space offering a platform for expression yet diluting cultural authenticity.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m living two different lives one on Instagram where I post in English and follow trends, and another at home where my grandma still teaches me old proverbs in our local dialect. But the two worlds never seem to meet.”(P3, Male, 22)

This fragmentation reflects a deeper struggle in reconciling inherited cultural values with the fast-paced, image-driven norms of digital platforms. Participants often hesitated to display local customs online, fearing social marginalization or irrelevance among peers.

Reappropriating Local Culture as Self-Expression

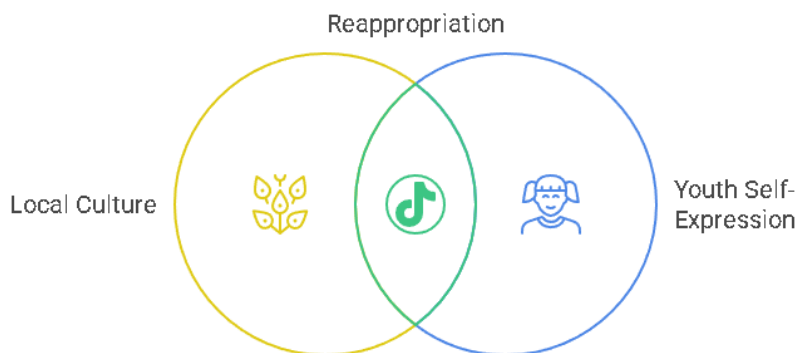
Despite the tensions, several participants actively reinterpreted traditional elements to construct personal and unique identities. Rather than rejecting local culture, they reshaped it into forms they deemed more compatible with their modern lifestyles.

“I started posting photos wearing batik on TikTok, but with modern styling. At first, I was unsure, but people responded positively. It’s like I’m finding a new way to be proud of my heritage.”

(P5, Female, 20)

This theme illustrates the agency of youth in reappropriating symbols, language, and rituals not merely as heritage but as living, evolving tools for identity formation.

Where Heritage Meets Modern Identity



Tensions between Tradition and Modernity

Participants voiced ambivalence regarding traditional expectations, especially those rooted in family and community. They respected these values but also felt constrained by their rigidity in the face of a more fluid, digital culture.

“My parents still expect me to speak our mother tongue during ceremonies, but honestly, I feel more myself when I express things in a mix of languages online. It’s not disrespect it’s just different.”(P2, Male, 23)

Such sentiments reflect internal negotiations between authenticity and conformity, where the participants navigate cultural loyalty while pursuing individual expression. The result is often a liminal identity neither fully traditional nor fully global.

Performing Identity for Validation

Several narratives revealed how cultural identity is also curated and performed for social validation within digital environments. Participants acknowledged that their online cultural expressions were often shaped by the anticipation of likes, shares, or comments.

“I don’t usually wear traditional clothes, but I did it for a campaign on campus. When the post got many likes, I realized people appreciate the culture but also, I felt validated personally.”

(P6, Female, 21)

The performative aspect of identity was not viewed negatively but rather as a strategic adaptation to remain visible and affirmed in digital spaces while still signaling cultural values.

Taken together, the findings reveal that urban youth experience cultural identity not as a fixed essence but as an evolving narrative influenced by both digital and traditional domains. Their lived experiences suggest that identity negotiation is a dynamic process anchored in cultural heritage, yet continuously redefined through digital interaction, social expectations, and personal agency.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that urban youth experience cultural identity as a fluid and negotiated process shaped by both local traditions and global digital influences. Participants described a dynamic interplay between inherited cultural values and their reinterpretation in digital spaces, reflecting a deep engagement with identity as something that is lived, constructed, and redefined in everyday interactions. These insights directly respond to the central question posed in the introduction: How do urban youth subjectively experience and negotiate their cultural identity within the tension of local and global cultural forces?

The present study contributes to answering this question by offering a nuanced understanding of identity formation as experienced by youth in their own voices. Rather than viewing cultural identity as static or externally imposed, the narratives in this study illustrate identity as a performative and interpretive act something that is shaped by choice, reflection, and context. The themes of fragmented belonging, cultural reappropriation, tension between tradition and modernity, and performative validation highlight the complex emotional and symbolic negotiations youth undertake in reconciling their sense of self with the demands of their digital and social environments. These findings enrich our understanding of identity not just as a sociological category, but as an embodied and evolving experience rooted in both affect and agency.

When compared to previous studies, this research affirms and extends existing theories of hybrid identity and cultural negotiation in the context of digital media (Smith et al., 2021; Nguyen & Lee, 2020). While prior research has documented the observable shifts in behavior and cultural practice among youth, this study delves deeper into the felt experience of those shifts something often absent in broader sociocultural analyses. For instance, the internal conflicts described by participants resonate with Akar & Demir's (2023) observations on generational reinterpretations of tradition, but this study adds an interpretative layer by highlighting how youth actively imbue their actions with meaning and navigate social recognition. Furthermore, the theme of performative identity intersects with Rahman & Nur's (2022) discussion on symbolic cultural display, yet here, the emphasis is placed on personal agency and psychological validation. Such alignment and elaboration demonstrate how phenomenology can bridge theoretical frameworks with experiential depth.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical, particularly for educators, cultural policymakers, and digital content creators working with urban youth. At a social level, the study emphasizes that cultural identity should not be approached as a static heritage to be preserved, but rather as a living narrative co-constructed by individuals through everyday interactions both offline and online. The ability of youth to reappropriate traditional symbols for self-expression suggests a need for inclusive cultural frameworks that recognize hybridity and transformation. From a cultural development perspective, interventions aimed at cultural education or preservation may be more effective if they allow flexibility, personalization, and integration with digital modes of engagement. These insights can inform future programs that seek to foster meaningful cultural belonging without rigidly prescribing tradition.

This study is not without limitations. As is common in phenomenological research, the focus on depth over breadth limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample was drawn from a specific urban population in Indonesia, and while the narratives offer rich insight, they may not reflect the full spectrum of youth experiences across other cultural or geographic contexts. Additionally, reliance on self-reported narratives may have been influenced by participants' awareness of social desirability or their comfort in discussing identity-related themes. Nevertheless, these boundaries do not detract from the study's value but rather frame it as an invitation for further contextualized research in diverse urban settings.

Future research may expand upon this work by examining comparative experiences across rural-urban divides, or by exploring how digital cultural identity formation evolves over time. Longitudinal studies could capture the trajectory of identity negotiation as youth transition through different life stages and social environments. Furthermore, integrating visual or digital ethnography could deepen our understanding of how online platforms mediate cultural meaning. These extensions would contribute to a more comprehensive body of knowledge on the intersection of youth, culture, and digitality, and enhance the theoretical frameworks guiding cultural identity studies in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how urban youth in Indonesia experience and negotiate their cultural identity within the intersection of local traditions and global digital influences. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered how identity is not passively inherited but actively constructed through personal reflection and digital expression. The findings

revealed four key themes—fragmented belonging, cultural reappropriation, tensions between tradition and modernity, and performative validation—that illustrate the complexity and fluidity of youth identity formation. These insights address gaps in prior research by emphasizing the lived, affective, and interpretive dimensions of cultural identity, which are often overlooked in quantitative models. The study contributes to both theory and practice by offering a richer understanding of youth cultural engagement and by suggesting the need for more flexible, inclusive cultural frameworks.

Future research may build on these findings by using longitudinal or digital ethnographic methods to examine how identity evolves over time within varying socio-technological environments. Comparative studies between urban and rural youth could reveal context-specific identity strategies shaped by differential access to digital tools and cultural institutions. Additionally, cross-cultural research involving youth from distinct cultural regions—such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, or sub-Saharan Africa—could further illuminate how digital globalization interacts with local identity traditions. Experimental designs exploring identity expression in controlled digital environments may also offer insight into the performative aspects of online self-presentation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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