



Phenomenological Exploration of Cultural Identity and Digital Belonging Among Indonesian Diaspora Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how globalization and digitalization reshape the lived experience of cultural identity among diaspora communities, focusing on the subjective and emotional dimensions of digital engagement. While digital diaspora research is expanding, limited attention has been given to how these processes are personally lived as acts of meaning-making. This study therefore asks: How do Indonesian diaspora members experience the preservation of cultural identity through digital spaces? Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data were collected from twelve participants through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Analysis identified core themes of emotional continuity, hybrid identity, digital belonging, and cultural resistance. The findings show that digital platforms function not only as communication channels but as meaningful spaces where individuals negotiate identity and belonging. Participants transform feelings of distance and displacement into continuity through reflective digital practices. These insights highlight how technology mediates identity formation and cultural attachment within transnational contexts. The study contributes to phenomenological scholarship by clarifying the experiential mechanisms through which digital environments shape cultural identity. It also suggests future research into how evolving digital spaces further reconstruct human belonging in a globalized world.



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INTRODUCTION

In the era of intensified globalization and digital connectivity, the experience of cultural identity among diaspora communities has become an increasingly complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). As individuals relocate across borders, they are confronted with the challenge of maintaining a sense of belonging while adapting to new cultural, linguistic, and social environments. This process is further shaped by the pervasive influence of digital technologies, which provide platforms for interaction, self-expression, and cultural preservation that transcend physical boundaries (Tetteh et al., 2025). The convergence of mobility and digitalization has thus transformed the traditional understanding of identity from a static and territorially bound construct into a dynamic, relational, and transnational experience.

The growing body of research on migration and identity highlights how digital spaces enable new forms of community formation, transnational belonging, and intercultural negotiation (Necula & Necula, 2025). Social media, online forums, and virtual communities allow individuals to participate in cultural rituals, share narratives, and express collective memories that connect them to their homeland. For many members of the diaspora, these digital engagements represent more than mere communication they are acts of cultural continuity and emotional anchoring. Yet, despite the global accessibility of these spaces, the subjective dimension of how individuals experience and interpret their digital participation in sustaining identity remains insufficiently understood.

The significance of exploring this phenomenon lies in its human and existential dimension. Identity maintenance is not only a social act but also a deeply personal process that involves reflection, emotion, and meaning-making (May-Machunda, 2024). From a phenomenological standpoint, the experience of “being in-between” cultures evokes questions of belonging, authenticity, and self-understanding (Arxer et al., 2025). Digital spaces intensify these experiences by providing a realm where individuals can simultaneously inhabit multiple cultural worlds. Understanding how diaspora individuals perceive, construct, and live out their identities in such contexts can illuminate broader social dynamics related to globalization, hybridization, and cultural resilience.

Given this complexity, there is a compelling need to move beyond structural or functional interpretations of digital diaspora and to explore the lived experiences of individuals who navigate cultural identity through technology (Kim, 2025). A phenomenological approach offers a suitable framework for this inquiry, as it allows for the examination of meaning as it emerges through subjective experience. By focusing on participants’ own narratives and reflections, this perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of how identity is lived, negotiated, and reconstituted within the interplay of personal memory, emotional continuity, and digital connectivity.

Research focusing on the lived experiences of individuals within specific social and cultural phenomena has become increasingly central to the human and social sciences. In the context of migration and identity studies, scholars have turned their attention toward understanding how individuals navigate emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions of belonging in transnational settings (Dhawan et al., 2023). Recent works have underscored the importance of studying not merely what people do in digital diaspora spaces, but how they experience and make sense of these interactions as expressions of selfhood and continuity (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Such investigations highlight the human capacity to create meaning and sustain identity under shifting sociocultural and technological conditions.

However, exploring the meaning of lived experiences poses significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing literature in migration and digital identity research has relied on quantitative frameworks or surface-level thematic analyses that tend to prioritize structural explanations such as communication frequency or network size over the subjective essence of experience. While these studies provide valuable sociological insights, they often fail to capture the emotional, reflective, and existential aspects of identity preservation as lived by individuals (Joseph et al., 2025). The richness of inner experience the nostalgia, loss, pride, and hybrid belonging that shape digital identity practices remains underexplored because conventional methodologies struggle to accommodate the depth and fluidity of subjective meaning-making.

These methodological limitations reveal a critical gap: the need for a research design capable of engaging directly with the lived meaning of the diaspora experience (Bankier-Karp, 2023). Traditional approaches tend to fragment identity into measurable components, overlooking the integrative and interpretative nature of self-understanding in digital contexts (Su et al., 2025). Phenomenology, particularly its interpretative variant, offers a means to bridge this divide by illuminating how identity is experienced rather than merely described. It allows for the articulation of the essence of human experience how individuals feel, perceive, and exist within the phenomenon of cultural continuity across digital and geographical boundaries.

While previous studies have explored diaspora identity within digital spaces, most have relied on established sociological or communication frameworks that prioritize observable behavior over lived experience (Noguer-Junca & Crespi-Vallbona, 2025). These practical approaches often focusing on measurable aspects such as media usage patterns, network structures, or online participation frequencies have provided valuable descriptive insights but remain limited in capturing the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their digital interactions (Zhang et al., 2025). Such frameworks tend to interpret identity preservation as a set of social actions or functional practices, rather than as an existential process of self-understanding shaped by emotion, reflection, and cultural memory.

This reliance on pragmatic or quantitative models results in a fragmented comprehension of identity formation among diaspora communities (Ponnaganti, 2024). The affective and interpretive

dimensions how individuals feel connected, how they perceive belonging, and how they experience the continuity of culture through digital engagement often remain overlooked. Consequently, the depth of understanding regarding the essence of digital identity as lived and embodied experience remains insufficiently developed within current scholarship.

To address these limitations, a phenomenological approach is needed to investigate the essence of experience as it unfolds in the everyday lives of diaspora individuals (Sittikul, 2025). Unlike previous approaches that measure behavior or representation, phenomenology enables a deeper exploration of how meaning is experienced and constructed through the interplay of emotion, memory, and technological mediation (Ni, 2025). By situating identity within the context of lived experience, this study seeks to reveal how digital spaces function not only as tools for communication but as existential lifeworlds in which individuals negotiate, sustain, and reimagine their sense of self and belonging.

Existing research on digital diaspora identity has drawn from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including sociology, cultural studies, and media theory. Scholars such as Vertovec (2019) and Georgiou (2021) have emphasized how digital spaces shape transnational belonging and intercultural negotiation. However, while these studies capture the structural and communicative dimensions of identity, few have delved into the subjective and phenomenological aspects of how individuals experience cultural continuity in virtual environments (Cárdenas-Curiel et al., 2023). The theoretical foundations of diaspora studies suggest that belonging is both a social and existential act, yet the emotional and reflective layers of this experience remain insufficiently illuminated. This underscores the need for a methodological framework capable of uncovering meaning from the lived world of participants rather than from external observation alone.

To address this limitation, this study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its guiding framework (Miao & Yang, 2024). This approach enables a deep exploration of participants' lived experiences, revealing how digital interactions facilitate the construction, preservation, and negotiation of cultural identity. The phenomenological method was selected because it emphasizes meaning as lived, allowing for the interpretation of human experience through reflection and dialogue. By focusing on the essence of identity maintenance rather than its observable outcomes, this study provides an interpretative response to the knowledge gap identified earlier. The analysis highlights how emotion, memory, and digital embodiment intertwine to shape the diasporic sense of self and belonging.

This article is structured into several key sections. The Introduction establishes the conceptual and empirical context of the study, followed by a General and Specific Background that outline the theoretical rationale and research significance (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The Method section details the phenomenological design, participant selection, and data analysis procedures, ensuring methodological transparency. The Results section presents emergent themes derived from the interpretative process, each supported by direct participant quotations. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion synthesize the findings within broader theoretical and practical implications, offering a comprehensive understanding of how digital spaces mediate the phenomenology of diaspora identity.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of diaspora individuals in sustaining their cultural identity through digital media (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a research design, seeks to uncover the essence of subjective experience as lived and perceived by individuals within their social and existential contexts. The interpretative orientation of this study was grounded in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, which emphasizes understanding human experience as a process of being-in-the-world.

This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how participants experience, construct, and make sense of their dual cultural belonging in digital spaces. The phenomenological framework provided the flexibility to interpret emotional, reflective, and existential dimensions of identity preservation in ways that transcend surface-level description. Through this design, the study focused on meaning construction, not measurement, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how digital environments mediate the experience of cultural continuity.

Participants

Participants consisted of members of the Indonesian diaspora living in various countries, including Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, who actively engaged with digital platforms to maintain their cultural identity (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). A purposive sampling approach was utilized to ensure the inclusion of participants possessing direct lived experience of the studied phenomenon.

Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals aged between 25 and 45 years, who had resided abroad for at least three years and demonstrated active participation in online cultural communities or digital platforms related to their homeland. Exclusion criteria included individuals who had recently emigrated (less than one year) or who had no consistent digital engagement related to cultural identity.

A total of 12 participants (7 women and 5 men) participated in the study. The demographic variation provided a rich spectrum of narratives across age, gender, and sociocultural contexts, thereby enhancing the depth of phenomenological exploration. All participants were proficient in either English or Bahasa Indonesia, ensuring clarity during data collection and interpretation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via online video conferencing platforms to accommodate geographical dispersion (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit reflective narratives about the participants' experiences of identity negotiation and cultural belonging in digital environments.

Questions were open-ended and encouraged detailed descriptions of personal meaning, emotional connection, and digital engagement. Follow-up questions were used to deepen understanding of emergent themes. The interviews were conducted in a conversational tone to create a comfortable and safe atmosphere for self-disclosure.

All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual nuances. The interview guide drew from established phenomenological frameworks but was adapted to the digital diaspora context to ensure relevance and cultural sensitivity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the systematic steps outlined by Daly, (2007) & Longhofer et al., (2012). The process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of each narrative. Meaningful statements or meaning units were then identified and coded to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences.

Themes were generated through iterative comparison, allowing connections to emerge within and across transcripts (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The analysis proceeded from descriptive interpretation (what was experienced) to interpretative reflection (how meaning was constructed). The process involved three major stages: (1) initial coding and noting of experiential significance, (2) clustering of emergent themes into conceptual categories, and (3) synthesis of superordinate themes representing the essential structure of the phenomenon.

NVivo 12 software was used as a supportive tool for data organization, though interpretative depth was ensured through manual reflection and memo-writing. The analytical process was guided by the phenomenological principle of epoché, maintaining openness to participants’ perspectives while interpreting meaning within their sociocultural context.

RESULTS

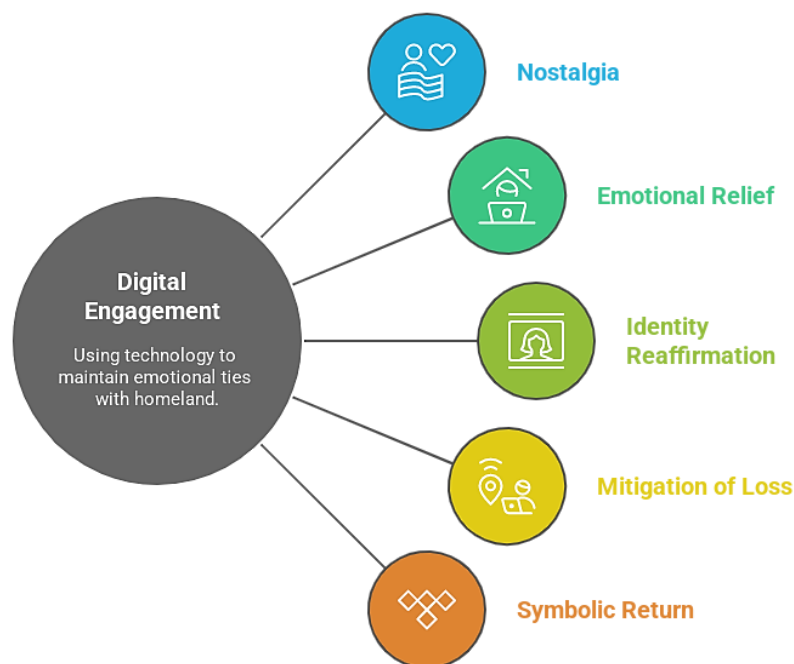
Nostalgia and Emotional Continuity Across Borders

Participants consistently described their digital engagement as a means of maintaining emotional continuity with their homeland. The use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram allowed them to sustain ties that reaffirmed their sense of belonging. One participant, a 32-year-old woman from the Indonesian diaspora in Canada, explained:

“Every time I join an online community that celebrates our cultural festivals, I feel like I’m still there as if distance disappears for a moment.”

This nostalgic engagement served not only as emotional relief but also as a reaffirmation of identity. Participants expressed that such digital interactions mitigated the sense of loss and displacement. Their virtual presence in cultural rituals—livestreamed religious ceremonies, virtual communal cooking, or shared storytelling—became a symbolic return to cultural roots. These experiences reflected the phenomenological essence of being-in-the-world through digital mediation, where technology enabled the continuation of cultural existence despite geographic separation.

Digital Engagement for Emotional Continuity



Hybrid Identity and the Negotiation of Cultural Belonging

The analysis revealed that participants developed what they described as a “dual consciousness,” merging elements of both home and host cultures. This hybrid identity was not static but negotiated through everyday interactions in digital spaces. A male participant aged 27 shared:

“I’m Indonesian when I talk with my family online, but when I post on my international social media, I adapt—I use English, I discuss global issues. It’s like switching cultural gears every day.”

Such digital fluidity facilitated the emergence of a transcultural self—an individual who embodies the intersection of multiple cultural frameworks. The participants’ online expressions

illustrated how digital platforms become performative spaces where identity is continuously redefined. Rather than diluting cultural authenticity, these negotiations enhanced their awareness of belonging to multiple worlds simultaneously.

Digital Spaces as Arenas of Cultural Resistance and Preservation

Participants framed digital spaces not merely as communication tools but as arenas of cultural resistance. Many described an intentional effort to preserve their heritage by producing, curating, and disseminating cultural content. One respondent noted:

“Posting traditional songs or recipes is my way of keeping our culture alive. Even if my children grow up abroad, they’ll see this online archive of who we are.”

Through these acts, the diaspora enacted a form of digital preservation that challenged cultural erosion. The study found that this intentional curation was tied to a deep phenomenological awareness—an effort to anchor identity in meaning and continuity. These expressions, while seemingly mundane, carried the moral weight of cultural guardianship. Participants perceived themselves as both subjects and agents within a shared transnational narrative of endurance.

Virtual Communities as Emotional and Social Anchors

The digital realm emerged as a communal lifeworld, offering a sense of inclusion and support. Participants emphasized that online communities provided a safe environment for emotional exchange, empathy, and cultural affirmation. A 40-year-old participant articulated:

“When I feel isolated here, I go online. The community groups remind me that I’m not alone—they understand my struggles because they live the same experience.”

This finding underscores the phenomenological depth of intersubjectivity—shared understanding among individuals who experience similar dislocation. Virtual communities acted as both emotional anchors and mirrors of collective resilience. Participants collectively constructed narratives that validated their identities while negotiating complex emotional geographies of belonging and exclusion.

The Existential Meaning of Digital Identity

Across narratives, participants articulated their engagement with digital media as an existential act—a way to affirm who they are in the flux of global migration. Digital presence offered visibility, recognition, and self-affirmation. One participant reflected:

“Online, I can be fully myself—I can speak my language, share my values, and be seen. It’s my way of existing between two worlds.”

This articulation reveals that digital identity for the diaspora is not superficial but deeply ontological. It represents an ongoing process of becoming, rooted in both memory and aspiration. The digital space thus becomes a phenomenological dwelling—a lived environment where being and belonging are continuously reconstructed.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Findings

The findings of this phenomenological study reveal that the experience of cultural identity among diaspora individuals in digital spaces is profoundly emotional, reflective, and existential (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Through five interrelated themes—nostalgia, hybrid identity, cultural resistance, communal belonging, and existential meaning—the study uncovers how digital spaces act as lifeworlds where identity is continuously lived, negotiated, and renewed. These insights directly address the central question posed in the Introduction: How do diaspora individuals experience and interpret the process of sustaining their cultural identity through digital engagement?

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how identity is experienced rather than merely expressed (Cankurt Semiz & Özsoy, 2024). Participants' narratives demonstrate that digital platforms serve as phenomenological bridges between memory and presence, transforming feelings of displacement into experiences of continuity and belonging. The findings highlight that identity maintenance in digital diaspora contexts is not a passive adaptation but an active, meaning-making process. By engaging in digital rituals sharing cultural artifacts, celebrating traditions online, or conversing in native languages participants reconstitute their sense of self within transnational digital lifeworlds.

Moreover, this research shows that being-in-between-worlds is not experienced as fragmentation but as an opportunity for identity expansion. Participants embody hybrid cultural selves that allow coexistence between inherited traditions and global influences. This suggests that identity preservation is less about defending cultural purity and more about navigating coexistence and transformation (Cankurt Semiz & Özsoy, 2024). Thus, the study extends current understanding by revealing that digital identity is not simply communicative or representational it is ontological: a lived enactment of belonging and self-understanding in motion.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The findings resonate with and extend existing scholarship on transnationalism and digital identity. Consistent with Vertovec's (2019) notion of transnational identities, participants' experiences reaffirm that globalization and digitalization have produced new forms of cultural continuity beyond geographic constraints. However, this study advances the discussion by uncovering the subjective interiority of these processes how belonging is felt, interpreted, and embodied rather than merely observed.

Similarly, Georgiou (2021) emphasized the concept of digital belonging as a collective cultural practice; this study complements that view by demonstrating how individual emotional reflection underpins these practices. The discovery that participants use digital media as a form of cultural resistance aligns with Fortier's (2018) observations on the performativity of identity but extends it by situating this performance within existential intentionality participants' conscious efforts to be and remain within their culture through digital acts.

At a theoretical level, these results affirm Heidegger's (1962) conception of being-in-the-world and dwelling, where existence is understood through relational and contextual experience. The digital realm emerges as a new dwelling space for diasporic existence, where memory, technology, and emotion converge. Unlike earlier studies that treated technology as a neutral medium, the present analysis positions it as an integral component of lived identity a space where the self continuously unfolds. This interpretative insight deepens our phenomenological comprehension of cultural identity as an ever-evolving process of meaning-making within interconnected digital and physical worlds.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications for understanding identity, belonging, and digital engagement in transnational contexts. From a theoretical perspective, the results extend phenomenological discourse by revealing how digital spaces function as existential environments where individuals reconstitute their sense of being and belonging. This conceptualization challenges traditional views of technology as merely instrumental and instead situates it as a relational space that mediates emotional and cultural continuity (Brenner Music, 2025). The study thereby contributes to phenomenological scholarship by emphasizing the embodied and affective nature of digital experience, affirming that the self is not only present in physical interaction but also meaningfully lived in digital presence.

Culturally and socially, these insights are relevant for diaspora communities, cultural organizations, and policymakers seeking to strengthen cultural cohesion in globalized settings. Understanding that identity preservation online is an emotional and existential process may inform the development of digital initiatives that foster intercultural empathy and inclusion. For educators and social practitioners, the study highlights the importance of digital literacy not just as a technical skill but as an aspect of cultural self-expression and resilience. Ultimately, the findings illustrate how

diasporic individuals actively transform displacement into cultural innovation, providing a model of identity adaptability that resonates within broader discussions of globalization and multiculturalism.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides rich phenomenological insight into the lived experience of digital identity among diaspora individuals, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the focus on a specific cultural group the Indonesian diaspora may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or national contexts. Each diaspora community carries unique historical and social trajectories that shape its experience of belonging. Second, the interpretative phenomenological approach, while offering depth, inherently relies on subjective interpretation (Kamali & Nazari, 2025). The insights presented are contextually bound to participants' narratives and the interpretative framework applied. Third, as data were collected through online interviews, non-verbal cues and situational nuances may not have been fully captured, potentially influencing the interpretive depth.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not detract from the study's value but instead underline its phenomenological orientation: to describe and interpret lived experience rather than to generalize outcomes. Recognizing these boundaries opens the path for future studies to refine, expand, or compare findings across diverse cultural, linguistic, or technological contexts.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research may extend the present findings by exploring comparative studies across different diaspora populations to examine how cultural background and technological access influence identity negotiation in digital environments (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). A longitudinal design could also provide insights into how these experiences evolve over time as digital platforms and global dynamics change (Xue et al., 2025). Moreover, integrating phenomenology with complementary qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry or digital ethnography could enrich understanding of how identity is performed, remembered, and transformed in virtual spaces.

Theoretically, subsequent studies could further explore the intersection between phenomenology and media theory, particularly the idea of digital dwelling as a new form of human existence. Such inquiries may illuminate how technology reshapes not only communication but also the fundamental structures of experience. By continuing to approach identity as lived and felt, future research can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the human condition in an increasingly interconnected and digitized world.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how members of the diaspora experience and sustain their cultural identity through digital engagement, addressing the complex phenomenon of being-in-between cultures in virtual spaces. The findings revealed that digital platforms serve as meaningful lifeworlds where individuals actively negotiate belonging, continuity, and hybridity through emotional and reflective engagement. By interpreting lived experiences through a phenomenological lens, this research expands existing understandings of identity preservation beyond structural and behavioral frameworks, highlighting its existential and affective nature. The study also fills a methodological gap by illustrating how Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) can uncover the essence of digital belonging as a lived experience rather than a communicative function. These insights provide valuable implications for social scientists, cultural organizations, and policymakers in fostering inclusive digital cultural practices. Future research may extend this work through comparative or longitudinal designs to further explore how evolving technologies continue to shape the phenomenology of identity in transnational contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funding organization had no role in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or decision to publish the results.

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