



The Transformation of Social Identity of the Young Generation in the Digital Era: Sociological and Cultural Anthropology Perspectives

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has a significant impact on the formation of the social identity of the younger generation. Social media, digital spaces, and virtual culture are becoming new arenas where individuals construct, negotiate, and display their identities. This article aims to analyze the transformation of the social identity of the young generation in the digital era through sociological and cultural anthropological approaches. This study focuses on how interactions in virtual spaces shape patterns of communication, self-representation, and social relationships that are different from traditional patterns. This study uses a qualitative method based on literature studies and phenomenological observations on the behavior of the young generation on social media. The results show that digitalization drives a shift in values, where identity is no longer static but fluid, plural, and often determined by algorithms and global popular culture dynamics. The identity of the younger generation is increasingly influenced by digital practices such as self-branding, the use of visual symbols, and participation in online communities. However, this transformation also raises paradoxes: on the one hand, it expands the space of freedom of expression, but on the other hand, it increases vulnerability to cultural homogenization, social pressures, and crises of authenticity. This article concludes that the transformation of social identity in the digital age must be understood as a continuous negotiation process between local values, globalization, and the influence of technology. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of digital literacy and cultural awareness as a strategy to strengthen the identity of the young generation to remain critical, reflective, and adaptive in the face of rapid social change.

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Introduction

Social identity is a very important concept in psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology, as identity shapes how individuals perceive themselves as well as how they are accepted in social contexts (Erikson, 1968). In adolescence and early adulthood (emerging adulthood), in particular, the process of identity exploration and commitment becomes crucial for psychosocial development. With the advent of digital space and social media, new opportunities and challenges in identity formation have emerged, which requires the latest studies to understand the identity dynamics of the younger generation in the digital era (Ramdhani et al., 2022).

The use of social media by adolescents has been associated with various aspects of identity: identity exploration, self-concept clarity, identity commitment, and identity distress (Avci et al., 2024). Based on a systematic review, aspects of the quality of social media use (e.g., how authentic a person is in presenting themselves on social media, and how often social comparisons occur) often have more influence on identity development than just the quantity of time spent (Avci et al., 2024).

A systematic framework to understand the relationship between identity and the digital environment includes the medium/platform, selection process, negotiation, exposure, and digital performativity (Wahidah, 2019). The framework asserts that identities are not only formed through offline interactions, but that the integration between the real world and the digital world gives rise to "collapsed context" identities in which the boundaries between private and public spaces, analog and digital, become blurred (Soh et al., 2024; Yulandari & Rahman, 2019).

On the other hand, several studies have shown that active use of social media, not only as a passive consumer, can support the exploration of identity, for example, by joining online communities, experimenting with digital personas, and presenting oneself through visual symbols and personal narratives (Dionisio et al., 2024). However, these activities also carry the risk of social pressure and internal conflict, especially when the projected identity in the digital world differs significantly from the offline identity, or when individuals rely too much on validation from online peers and public audiences (Avci et al., 2024; Soh et al., 2024).

Identity theory has long been developed in developmental psychology, such as Erikson's (1968) theory of adolescent identity crisis, and Marcia's identity status theory, which distinguishes identity based on the status of exploration and commitment. In the digital context, these concepts are expanded: the exploration of identity is no longer limited to face-to-face interactions or the local environment, but includes online personas that can be selected, edited, and exposed globally (Soh et al., 2024).

Social media provides affordances or technological possibilities that mediate self-expression, audience selection, and rapid public feedback. For example, one can choose a

particular identity trait to highlight; choose who to share with; Obtain comments, likes, or other reactions that trigger self-reflection. These all affect how identity is perceived during the process of social formation and recognition (Valkenburg et al., 2024).

The study "A Systematic Review of Social Media Use and Adolescent Identity Development" by Avci, Baams, and Kretschmer (2024) examined 32 studies with nearly 20,000 adolescents between the ages of 8-26. They found that social media activities such as self-presentation and participation in online communities were positively correlated with identity exploration, while use for social comparison was related to identity stress and unclear self-concept. However, high usage time alone does not always indicate positive results, meaning that it is not how long, but how to use it is important (Avci et al., 2024).

In addition, previous studies have also shown that authenticity in digital representations is important for identity clarity; when individuals feel they should make themselves "ideal" based on social media standards, such as beauty, lifestyle, or achievement, this can lead to dissatisfaction or identity distortion (Granic et al., 2014; Michikyan, 2015).

In the context of cultural anthropology, globalization through digital media allows the diffusion of popular culture from different parts of the world, which then interacts with local norms. Identity hybridity emerges, in which young generations adapt global elements (fashion, music, lifestyle, digital slang) and combine them with their local culture, resulting in an identity that is not homogeneous, but plural and sometimes ambivalent (Appadurai, 1996 seminar in literature; also, BuckIngham, 2008 on youth culture).

For example, the use of Instagram, TikTok, and other visual platforms triggers the practice of self-branding: the use of imagery, aesthetics, visual symbols, captions, and filters to form personas that appeal to online audiences. This self-branding is not merely an aesthetic activity, but a means of identity negotiation, showing personal and social values and preferences, and an effort to be accepted in the online community (Soh et al., 2024).

However, this fluid and flexible digital identity also poses challenges: the conflict between offline and online identities; pressure to appear "perfect" visually or performatively; anxiety about the impact of social feedback; and the risk of cultural homogenization if global standards dominate local preferences (Ling, 2023).

In Indonesia and other Global South countries, local contexts such as customs, community norms, religion, and family relationships continue to influence significantly how young generations interpret their identities, choosing how they present themselves digitally. However, there have not been many empirical studies from Indonesia that combine sociological and cultural anthropology perspectives with field data on the digital young generation: how they use digital spaces, how they choose and blend local and global identities, what their experiences are with digital social pressures, and how they construct authentic identities in the midst of algorithms, global visual standards, and local norms.

Therefore, this study aims to answer several questions: How do young generations shape their social identities through interaction and representation in the digital space? How do local and global values negotiate in adolescent digital identities? What does the younger generation experience as challenges and paradoxes in maintaining self-authenticity in the era of social media? This study uses a qualitative approach that considers identity theory from developmental psychology and cultural anthropology to understand the process of identity formation that is fluid, plural, and dynamic in the digital young generation.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with literature study methods and phenomenological observations. Literature studies are carried out by examining various scientific articles, books, and research reports that discuss the relationship between digital technology, social identity, and the cultural dynamics of the younger generation. The main references include works from the fields of sociology, cultural anthropology, and media studies. The sources used were selected based on relevance and up-to-dateness, particularly in the last five years, to ensure relevance to contemporary conditions.

In addition, phenomenological observations were made on the activities of the younger generation on popular social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. This observation focuses on the practice of self-presentation, communication patterns, and participation in digital cultural trends. Phenomena such as the use of visual symbols, identity narratives, and interactions in online communities are empirical data that supports the analysis.

Data analysis was carried out in a descriptive-interpretive manner by linking literature findings and field observations. The theoretical frameworks used include Mead's theory of symbolic interaction, Bauman's concept of fluid identity, and cultural anthropological perspectives on globalization and identity hybridity. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the identities of young generations are constructed in a digital space that is influenced by local as well as global factors.

With this method, the article seeks to explain the transformation of the social identity of the younger generation as a continuous negotiation process influenced by digital social interactions, symbolic representation, and global cultural dynamics.

Results and Discussions

The results of this study show that the transformation of the social identity of the young generation in the digital era is a multidimensional phenomenon that not only includes individual psychological aspects, but also relates to social structures, technology, and global cultural dynamics. Findings from literature studies and phenomenological observations show that digital spaces, particularly social media, have become a new arena for young generations to construct, negotiate, and display their identities. These changes have an impact on the patterns of social interaction, self-representation, and community forms that appear in virtual spaces.

First, the results of the study show that the social identity of the young generation before the digital era tends to be shaped by the family environment, schools, local communities, and traditional media. Identity in this phase is relatively stable because the sources of influence are limited and interactions take place in more homogeneous contexts. However, in the digital era, the process of identity formation has expanded because the younger generation no longer only interacts with the immediate environment, but also with global audiences through online platforms. This has led to the emergence of a more fluid, flexible, and plural identity, where one can have a variety of digital personas according to the context and platform used.

Second, social media has proven to be the main arena in identity construction. The younger generation is taking advantage of social media features such as photo uploads, videos, statuses, and comments to present themselves. This practice is not just an

entertainment activity, but also a means of social and symbolic negotiation. For example, the use of certain aesthetics in Instagram posts or participation in TikTok trends is not only a form of self-expression, but also an effort to build social acceptance in the online community. This process corresponds to the theory of symbolic interaction, which emphasizes that identity is formed through symbols, signs, and meanings negotiated in social interactions.

Third, the phenomenon of self-branding is one of the important aspects in the formation of digital identity. The younger generation not only presents themselves as they are, but also builds a certain image that is considered more attractive and in accordance with the norms of the online community. Self-branding is done through the selection of the best photos, the use of filters, stylish caption writing, and the selection of content that is considered representative. This practice encourages the younger generation to see themselves not only as individuals, but also as "products" that need to be marketed in the digital space. This concept reflects a shift in identity from the natural to the performative form.

Fourth, cultural globalization through digital media produces a hybrid identity in the younger generation. They not only absorb local values and symbols, but also adopt global cultural elements such as dress styles, digital slang language, and international music trends. This hybridity reflects the process of meeting local and global cultures facilitated by digital media. On the one hand, this enriches the expression of identity because the younger generation can express themselves through a combination of various cultural values. However, on the other hand, it also raises concerns about cultural homogenization, where the dominance of global popular culture marginalizes local values.

Fifth, the analysis results show that the younger generation's digital identity is often paradoxical. On the one hand, social media provides broad freedom for the younger generation to express themselves, explore identities, and build social networks across geographical boundaries. This freedom creates new opportunities to broaden horizons, strengthen solidarity, and open up space for more diverse expressions of identity. However, on the other hand, this freedom actually gives rise to new social pressures. Young people often feel tied to ideal visual standards, anxious about audience judgment, and face the risk of an authenticity crisis when the online identities displayed differ significantly from their offline identities.

Sixth, social media algorithms also play a significant role in identity formation. The algorithm that determines what content appears on a user's timeline influences the self-representation as well as cultural preferences of the younger generation. For example, algorithms that display more specific content will reinforce the digital social norms that users must follow. In this context, the digital identity of the younger generation is not entirely autonomous but is shaped and directed by algorithmic logic. This shows that technology is not only a neutral medium, but an actor that helps shape social and cultural processes.

Seventh, the results of phenomenological observations also found that social media opens up opportunities for the formation of new communities based on specific interests, hobbies, or values. The younger generation can join online groups that match their identity, ranging from music fandoms, gaming communities, to discussion forums for social issues.

The presence of this online community strengthens the sense of belonging which is very important in the formation of social identity. However, membership in online communities can also give rise to exclusivity and polarization, where younger generations tend to identify themselves through the boundaries of "us" versus "them".

Eighth, the transformation of the social identity of the young generation in the digital era also has an impact on their relationship with traditional institutions. For example, family or school authorities that were previously dominant in the formation of identity are now less influential because the younger generation has wider access to alternative sources of information through social media. This has created a new dynamic in intergenerational relations, where the younger generation is more autonomous in defining their identity, but at the same time faces the challenge of balancing traditional values with global norms.

Ninth, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, the transformation of the identity of the younger generation in the digital era shows a shift in the meaning of cultural symbols. For example, traditional clothing symbols or regional languages uploaded on social media not only represent local identities, but also become part of a self-branding strategy in the global digital space. Local identity does not disappear, but is reinterpreted according to the digital context. This shows that social media acts as a space for cultural negotiation, where traditional symbols are given new meanings that are relevant to the younger generation.

Tenth, the results of the study show that there is a digital identity gap among young generations with different socio-economic backgrounds. The younger generation from urban circles with wider internet access tends to have greater opportunities to form diverse digital identities. Meanwhile, young people from rural areas or with limited access to technology may have more limited experience. This gap shows that uneven structural factors also influence social identity transformation in the digital era.

The discussion of this study's results emphasizes that the identity of the young generation in the digital era cannot be understood only as an individual expression but also as a product of the interaction between agents (individuals), social structures, and technology. Digital identity is the result of ongoing negotiations involving interlocking symbols, norms, algorithms, and cultural values.

The theoretical implication of this study is the need to expand the concept of social identity to be more responsive to digital dynamics. Traditional identity theories need to be updated by paying attention to the role of technology, algorithms, and cultural globalization. Meanwhile, the practical implication is the importance of strengthening digital literacy for the younger generation so that they can be more critical in understanding identity dynamics in the digital space. Digital literacy is not only a technical skill, but also a critical awareness of how one's identities are shaped and influenced by the logic of digital media.

Furthermore, both formal and non-formal education need to integrate an understanding of digital identity as part of the learning curriculum. This is important so that the young generation not only becomes passive consumers of digital culture, but also critical actors who are able to build authentic identities while maintaining the sustainability of local cultural values. In addition, there needs to be a public policy that supports a healthy digital space, for example, with content regulations that support cultural diversity and protection against discriminatory practices or online bullying.

Finally, the transformation of the social identity of the younger generation in the digital era shows that identity is no longer a fixed and static entity, but a fluid, dynamic, and full of negotiation processes. This process brings opportunities for freedom of expression and global solidarity, but at the same time poses challenges in the form of cultural homogenization, social pressures, and authenticity crises. Therefore, a more comprehensive and critical understanding of this transformation is needed to support the younger generation to deal with the complexity of identity in the digital age more wisely and adaptively.

Conclusion

This study shows that the transformation of the social identity of the younger generation in the digital era is a complex phenomenon influenced by virtual social interactions, digital symbols, and global cultural dynamics. Identities that were previously relatively stable have now become more fluid, plural, and flexible, along with the development of the digital space as the main arena for interaction with the younger generation. From a sociological perspective, this change shows how social media has become a new space of symbolic interaction that allows individuals to negotiate the meaning of identity continuously. Meanwhile, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, the transformation of the younger generation's identity reflects the cultural hybridization process, in which local values interact with the flow of digital globalization.

However, this transformation also holds paradoxes. On the one hand, the younger generation has greater freedom to express themselves, build social networks across borders, and access diverse cultures. On the other hand, they face serious challenges such as the pressure of cultural homogenization, the demand to always appear ideal, and the risk of being trapped in a crisis of authenticity. This phenomenon shows that digital identities are not only emancipative but also vulnerable to social regulation controlled by algorithms and global popular culture.

Therefore, it is important for the younger generation to have critical digital literacy and strong cultural awareness. Digital literacy is needed so that they are able to understand the technological mechanisms that shape social experiences, while cultural awareness is important to maintain the sustainability of local identity in the midst of rapid globalization. This article confirms that the transformation of the social identity of young people in the digital age is a continuous negotiation process, and their success in dealing with these changes will greatly determine the direction of social cohesion and cultural sustainability in the future.

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