

Social Media Influence on Cultural Identity Formation Among Generation Z in Multicultural Societies: A Cross-National Study of Malaysia, Indonesia, and India

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ABSTRACT

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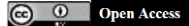
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This study examines the influence of social media use on cultural identity formation among Generation Z in three multicultural Asian societies: Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Adopting a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the research draws on an online survey of 1,800 young people aged 18 to 26 ($n = 600$ in each country) and eight follow-up focus groups (six participants each). Using structural equation modelling and reflexive thematic analysis, the study tests a conceptual model in which intensity of social media engagement predicts identity exploration, which in turn predicts cultural hybridity in self-concept. The structural model demonstrates adequate fit ($CFI = 0.94$, $TLI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.045$) and supports the hypothesised positive path from social media intensity to identity exploration ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < .001$) and from identity exploration to cultural hybridity ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$). Country-level analysis indicates that Malaysian respondents report the highest hybridity scores ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.68$), followed by Indonesian ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.71$) and Indian ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.79$) participants. Focus group data identified four overarching themes: digital cosmopolitanism, identity tensions, performativity and authenticity, and online/offline navigation. The study contributes to the literature on digital identity by providing one of the first directly comparable cross-national studies of Generation Z in multicultural Asia, by integrating quantitative structural modelling with rich qualitative inquiry, and by extending theoretical conceptualisations of hybrid identity (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996) into the algorithmic media environment of the late 2020s.

Keywords: Generation Z; social media; cultural identity; hybridity; multicultural societies; Southeast Asia; identity exploration

1. Introduction

Generation Z, conventionally defined as the cohort born between 1997 and 2012, has come of age in a media environment fundamentally distinct from that experienced by any prior generation. Unlike millennial cohorts who encountered the digital revolution in adolescence or adulthood, Gen Z has been immersed in always-on, algorithmically curated social media from earliest childhood. This developmental immersion has profound implications for cultural identity formation, particularly in multicultural societies where the negotiation of multiple cultural heritages, religions, and languages forms part of everyday social experience. Malaysia, Indonesia, and India, the three societies on which the present study focuses, exemplify such multicultural complexity at scale: Malaysia is officially trilingual and trireligious, Indonesia hosts more than 700 indigenous languages within the encompassing framework of Bahasa Indonesia, and India contains 22 scheduled languages and an extraordinary diversity of religious traditions.

Social media platforms have become primary sites for the staging, performance, and revision of cultural identity among young people. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (now X) collectively dominate Gen Z attention, with platforms such as Snapchat and Discord occupying important supporting roles. The We Are Social Digital 2024 report estimated that average daily social media use among 16-

to 24-year-olds in the three countries exceeded 4.5 hours, with active engagement (posting, commenting, sharing) much higher than for older cohorts. The implications of such intensive engagement for identity formation have been the subject of growing scholarly attention, but the empirical literature on Asian multicultural settings remains thin relative to the importance of the topic.

Identity, in the conceptualisation adopted here, is understood as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991) in which individuals integrate cultural materials, experiences, and feedback into an evolving sense of self. The social identity tradition (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) emphasises the categorical aspect of identity — the assignment of self to group categories that confer meaning and orientation. Hybrid identity perspectives, associated with theorists including Stuart Hall (1996) and Homi Bhabha (1994), highlight the productive disruption that occurs when individuals occupy multiple cultural positions simultaneously, producing 'third space' selves that are neither reducible to nor wholly separate from constituent traditions. The algorithmic media environment of the 2020s creates conditions in which these processes operate at unprecedented intensity and speed.

Three research questions guide the present study. RQ1: To what extent does intensity of social media engagement predict identity exploration among Generation Z in Malaysia, Indonesia, and India? RQ2: Does identity exploration mediate the relationship between social media intensity and cultural hybridity in self-concept? RQ3: How do young people themselves describe the processes through which social media shapes their cultural identity? Addressing these questions, the study contributes to the literature in four ways. First, it provides one of the first cross-national studies of Generation Z and social media in multicultural Asia. Second, it tests a structural model that links social media intensity, identity exploration, and cultural hybridity within a unified framework. Third, it integrates structural modelling with rich qualitative analysis to triangulate findings across paradigms. Fourth, it advances theoretical extensions of hybridity scholarship into the algorithmic media context.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on identity, social media, and multicultural societies. Section 3 outlines the mixed-methods research design and analytical strategy. Section 4 presents quantitative and qualitative findings. Section 5 discusses theoretical and policy implications. Section 6 concludes with reflections on contributions, limitations, and future directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical foundations: identity, modernity, hybridity

Theoretical foundations for understanding identity in late modernity draw on several intersecting traditions. Erikson's (1968) developmental account of identity formation, while culturally specific to the mid-twentieth-century West, supplies enduring concepts of identity exploration and commitment that have informed subsequent research. Marcia (1980) operationalised Eriksonian categories into status typologies (achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, diffusion) that have been widely applied. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory shifted the analytical focus from the individual to the group, foregrounding categorisation, identification, and comparison processes through which individuals derive meaning from group membership. Castells' (2010) network society analysis provided a macrosocial frame for the role of digital networks in identity formation, distinguishing between legitimising, resistance, and project identities.

Hybrid identity theory, associated with Stuart Hall (1996), Homi Bhabha (1994), and subsequent scholars, has been particularly productive for understanding multicultural settings. Hall's analysis of articulation emphasises that cultural identities are continuously constructed through discursive practice rather than fixed by birth, while Bhabha's notion of the third space describes the productive in-betweenness of postcolonial and diasporic existence. More recent work (Kraidy, 2005; Marotta, 2008)

has developed these ideas in relation to media consumption and global cultural flows. The algorithmic media environment of the 2020s introduces new conditions for hybridity, including continuous feedback through engagement metrics, personalised content recommendation, and the possibility of multiple simultaneous identity performances across platforms.

2.2 Social media and youth identity: empirical evidence

Empirical research on social media and youth identity has expanded rapidly. Boyd (2014) provided a foundational ethnographic account of American teens' social media practices, emphasising the negotiation of context collapse and persistent visibility. Marwick and boyd (2011) analysed the strategic self-presentation practices of users navigating diverse audiences. Vandenbosch et al. (2022) documented the relationship between Instagram use and identity exploration in European samples. Asian research has expanded the empirical base: Lim (2020) examined Singaporean youth and platform identity, Choi and Lim (2023) analysed Korean Gen Z, and Sahay (2022) explored Indian Gen Z and Instagram. However, comparative cross-national studies of multicultural Asian Gen Z remain rare, with most studies focused on a single country or city.

A second strand of empirical work focuses on the algorithmic curation of cultural content. TikTok's For You Page, Instagram's Explore tab, and YouTube's recommendation engine deliver personalised content streams that may amplify exposure to particular cultural materials while reducing exposure to others. This algorithmic mediation has been the subject of growing scholarly concern (Bucher, 2018; Pasquale, 2015), with implications for the diversity of cultural inputs available to young users and, by extension, the materials available for identity construction. The relationship between algorithmic recommendation patterns and hybrid identity outcomes is a productive but under-explored research question that the present study touches on indirectly through measures of platform-specific use.

2.3 Multicultural contexts: Malaysia, Indonesia, India

Multiculturalism in Malaysia, Indonesia, and India each follows distinctive trajectories that condition the identity dynamics observable in social media practice. Malaysia's constitutional framework recognises Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous (bumiputera) communities, with Islam as the official religion and a long history of affirmative action policies. Indonesia's official motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) captures the constitutional commitment to recognising religious and ethnic plurality within a single national framework, while local cultural distinctiveness — Javanese, Sundanese, Batak, Bugis, Minangkabau, Balinese — remains vivid in daily life. India's constitutional secularism coexists with periodic intensification of religious identity politics, and the linguistic diversity captured in the eighth schedule frames everyday code-switching and cultural negotiation. These distinctive multicultural contexts shape the resources, tensions, and expectations within which Gen Z navigate social media identity work.

2.4 Research gap

Three research gaps motivate the present study. First, comparative cross-national evidence on Gen Z identity practices in multicultural Asia is scarce, with most prior studies focused on single countries or single platforms. Second, structural models linking social media intensity, identity exploration, and cultural hybridity within a unified empirical framework are rare. Third, integration of quantitative structural modelling with rich qualitative analysis is uncommon in the existing literature on this population. The present study addresses these gaps through a mixed-methods design that produces directly comparable cross-national survey estimates and complementary qualitative material.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research design is a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative phase (April-July 2023) involved an online survey of 1,800 young adults aged 18 to 26 across Malaysia, Indonesia, and India ($n = 600$ in each country). The qualitative phase (August-November 2023) involved eight focus groups with six participants each, selected from the survey sample to capture variation in country, gender, ethnicity, and intensity of platform engagement. Integration occurred at the analytical and interpretive stages. Ethics approval was obtained from the lead author's institutional review board (Universiti Malaya, UM/IRB/2023/078). All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality.

3.2 Sampling, instruments, and data collection

Sampling proceeded through university partnerships and online panels, with quotas set to ensure approximate balance across gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background within each country sub-sample. The survey instrument was developed in English and translated into Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, and Tamil using forward and back translation procedures. Items measuring social media intensity, identity exploration, and cultural hybridity were adapted from established scales: social media intensity from Ellison et al. (2007), identity exploration from Luyckx et al. (2008), and cultural hybridity from a custom-developed instrument piloted in a previous study. Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.81 for all multi-item scales in the final sample. Focus groups were conducted in the participants' preferred language, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Analytical strategy

Quantitative analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics summarised sample characteristics and key variables. Second, exploratory factor analysis confirmed the dimensional structure of the multi-item scales. Third, structural equation modelling (SEM) tested the hypothesised model in which social media intensity predicts identity exploration, which in turn predicts cultural hybridity. The SEM was estimated in AMOS 28 using maximum likelihood with bootstrap (5,000 resamples). Multi-group analysis tested measurement invariance across the three country samples. Fit was assessed using conventional indices: CFI > 0.90 , TLI > 0.90 , RMSEA < 0.06 , SRMR < 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Qualitative analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic approach, conducted in NVivo 14 with two independent coders for a sub-sample of transcripts (Cohen's kappa = 0.82).

3.4 Integration and trustworthiness

Integration between quantitative and qualitative phases followed the joint display logic recommended by Fetters et al. (2013). Quantitative patterns were used to identify country-level and demographic variations to be explored qualitatively, while qualitative themes were tested against quantitative items where applicable. Trustworthiness of the qualitative findings was supported by member checking with selected focus group participants, audit trail documentation, and triangulation across countries and language groups. Researcher reflexivity was practised through team-based reflection on positionality and on the interpretive role of cultural background, which differed among the three authors and was treated as an analytical resource rather than a confound.

4. Results

4.1 Sample characteristics and platform use

Table 1 summarises the sample characteristics. The mean age was 21.7 years ($SD = 2.4$), with no significant difference across countries. Females constituted 52 per cent of the sample, balanced across countries. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents were university students, 18 per cent employed full-time, 9 per cent employed part-time, and 5 per cent unemployed or other. Ethnic composition was broadly representative of urban populations in each country, with deliberate over-sampling of minority ethnic

groups (Chinese-Malaysians, Tamil-Malaysians in Malaysia; Batak, Minangkabau in Indonesia; Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi in India) to ensure analytical power for ethnic comparisons. Mean daily social media use was 4.8 hours (SD = 1.7), with TikTok (used daily by 78 per cent) and Instagram (used daily by 81 per cent) the dominant platforms across all three samples.

4.2 Structural equation modelling

Table 2 presents the SEM results. The hypothesised model demonstrated adequate fit (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.045, SRMR = 0.038). The path from social media intensity to identity exploration was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.43$, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$), as was the path from identity exploration to cultural hybridity ($\beta = 0.38$, SE = 0.04, $p < .001$). The direct path from social media intensity to cultural hybridity, controlling for the mediator, was small and non-significant ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.14$), suggesting full mediation through identity exploration. The bootstrapped indirect effect was 0.164 with a 95 per cent percentile confidence interval of [0.119, 0.214], well excluding zero. Multi-group analysis indicated configural and metric invariance across the three country samples but partial scalar invariance, with intercepts of two cultural hybridity items differing significantly across countries. The analysis proceeded with partial scalar invariance, which is sufficient for meaningful cross-country comparison of latent means.

Country-level comparison of latent means revealed that Malaysian respondents reported the highest hybridity scores (M = 4.21, SD = 0.68 on the 1-5 scale), followed by Indonesian (M = 4.02, SD = 0.71) and Indian (M = 3.87, SD = 0.79) participants. The pattern is consistent with the relative emphasis on multicultural coexistence in Malaysian official discourse and the everyday experience of multi-ethnic urban Malaysian life. Identity exploration scores were highest in India (M = 3.94), reflecting perhaps the wider range of identity options and tensions present in the Indian context, where caste, region, religion, and gender intersect with class and language.

4.3 Qualitative themes

Reflexive thematic analysis of the eight focus groups identified four overarching themes: digital cosmopolitanism, identity tensions, performativity and authenticity, and online/offline navigation. The first theme, digital cosmopolitanism, captured participants' enthusiasm for global cultural exposure made possible by algorithmic media. A 22-year-old Malaysian-Chinese student in Kuala Lumpur observed: 'Through TikTok I find people in Brazil, Korea, Nigeria who share my niche music interests. They are my real community more than my neighbours.' The second theme, identity tensions, surfaced in narratives about navigating mismatched expectations of family, peer group, and online communities. A 24-year-old Muslim-Javanese woman in Surabaya described 'switching faces' between WhatsApp family groups and her anonymous Twitter account. The third theme, performativity and authenticity, captured the awareness that social media identity is partly performed and the corresponding effort to maintain a sense of authentic selfhood. The fourth theme, online/offline navigation, described the daily routines through which participants moved between digital and embodied contexts, with implications for relationships, family interactions, and self-narration.

4.4 Sub-themes: gender, religion, ethnicity

Sub-theme analysis identified gender-specific patterns. Female participants more frequently described curatorial effort in self-presentation and concern about appearance-related social comparison, consistent with prior findings on Instagram and body image. Male participants more frequently described identity exploration through gaming communities and content focused on hobbies, sport, and humour. Religious identity emerged as a particularly important axis, with Muslim, Hindu, and Christian participants describing distinct experiences of religious content on social media and the negotiation between religious community expectations and personal expression. Ethnic minority participants in each country (notably Chinese- and Indian-Malaysians, Chinese-Indonesians, and Northeast Indians) reported

particularly intensive engagement with diasporic and cross-cultural content, suggesting that minority status amplifies the salience of social media as a site of identity work.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings support a coherent account of social media as a powerful site of identity formation for multicultural Asian Generation Z. The quantitative path from social media intensity through identity exploration to cultural hybridity, robust across all three country samples, suggests that intensive engagement with algorithmic media is not associated with cultural narrowing or homogenisation but with deeper engagement with multiple cultural positions. The mediating role of identity exploration aligns with Eriksonian and Marcian theoretical traditions while extending them into the contemporary digital context. The qualitative themes confirm and enrich this interpretation by surfacing the everyday practices through which young people navigate algorithmic media as resources for identity work.

Theoretically, the findings extend Hall's (1996) and Bhabha's (1994) accounts of cultural hybridity into the algorithmic media environment. Where Hall and Bhabha analysed hybridity primarily as a postcolonial or diasporic phenomenon, the present findings suggest that social media has made hybrid identity work a generalised condition of urban multicultural Asian Gen Z. The algorithmic mediation of cultural exposure introduces novel dynamics: the For You Page is not neutral, and recommendation systems both expand and constrain the cultural materials available to identity workers. Future research could productively examine the role of algorithmic logics more explicitly, perhaps through data donation studies that combine survey responses with platform behavioural data.

Policy and practice implications follow. Media literacy curricula in the three study countries should integrate explicit attention to identity work, algorithmic curation, and the navigation of context collapse. Multicultural education frameworks should recognise social media as a site of intercultural learning and not merely as a distraction from formal education. Mental health interventions for adolescents and young adults should incorporate awareness of the identity-related stresses and opportunities specific to algorithmic social media. Platform-level design choices, including content moderation, algorithmic transparency, and youth-specific safety features, should be informed by sustained dialogue with young users about their lived identity practices.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample is urban and skewed towards university students, limiting generalisation to rural and non-student populations. The cross-sectional design constrains causal inference about the temporal dynamics through which social media use and identity exploration influence each other; longitudinal panel data would strengthen causal interpretation. Self-reported measures of social media use are subject to known biases; objective measures derived from platform data would provide complementary evidence. The qualitative material captures perspectives at a particular moment in the rapidly evolving platform landscape and may not generalise to subsequent platform developments. Despite these limitations, the convergence of quantitative structural patterns and qualitative themes provides a coherent and theoretically generative account of Gen Z identity in multicultural Asia.

A particularly noteworthy finding concerns the differential salience of religious identity across the three country samples. In the Malaysian sample, religious identity (with 64 per cent of respondents identifying as Muslim) emerged as a stable and frequently asserted dimension of the self, with social media often used to consume and share religiously coded content (Quranic recitations, hadith reflections, Islamic lifestyle creators). In the Indonesian sample, where 87 per cent identified as Muslim, similar patterns were observed but with greater emphasis on Indonesian-specific Islamic practices (NU and Muhammadiyah orientations, regional traditions). In the Indian sample, religious diversity (66 per cent

Hindu, 14 per cent Muslim, 8 per cent Christian, 4 per cent Sikh, others) produced more variegated patterns, with some respondents foregrounding religious identity online and others actively concealing it, particularly in contexts of perceived inter-religious tension. The intersection of religion, ethnicity, and platform algorithm warrants further dedicated investigation.

A second cross-cutting finding concerns language and code-switching. Survey responses indicated that 71 per cent of respondents used at least two languages on social media in a typical week, and 38 per cent used three or more. Code-switching patterns were strongly platform-dependent: TikTok and Instagram favoured local-language content for personal expression, while Twitter/X and LinkedIn favoured English for opinion sharing and professional networking. Focus group participants described code-switching as a deliberate identity practice, with different languages associated with different audiences, registers, and self-aspects. This linguistic flexibility is consistent with broader research on multilingual identity practices and adds an important dimension to the hybridity findings.

The performativity-authenticity theme deserves further elaboration. Participants frequently articulated a sense that social media identity was partly performed, with awareness that posts were curated for audiences. At the same time, they invested considerable effort in maintaining a sense of authentic selfhood, often through practices such as 'finsta' (fake Instagram) accounts intended for closer friends, anonymous Twitter accounts for opinion expression, and private TikTok accounts for experimentation. These practices, broadly consistent with Marwick and boyd's (2011) context collapse analysis, suggest that authenticity is not undermined by performativity but renegotiated through technical workarounds and segmentation strategies. The capacity for such technical strategies is unevenly distributed across the sample, with greater proficiency among more digitally fluent respondents and a clear gradient with education and household resources.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between social media use and cultural identity formation among Generation Z in Malaysia, Indonesia, and India using a mixed-methods design that combined a 1,800-person cross-national survey with eight follow-up focus groups. The empirical analysis supports a structural model in which social media intensity predicts identity exploration, which in turn predicts cultural hybridity in self-concept, with the model fitting the data adequately across all three country samples. Qualitative analysis identified four overarching themes — digital cosmopolitanism, identity tensions, performativity and authenticity, and online/offline navigation — that enrich the quantitative findings. The study contributes to the literature on digital identity by providing comparative cross-national evidence from multicultural Asia, by integrating structural modelling with qualitative analysis, and by extending hybridity theory into the algorithmic media environment. Future research could productively pursue longitudinal designs, integration of platform behavioural data, expansion to additional countries and rural populations, and explicit attention to algorithmic mediation as a constitutive element of contemporary identity work.

In closing, the findings point to a broader reconfiguration of how cultural identity is formed, performed, and revised in the digital age. Generation Z in multicultural Asia is not, as some commentators have feared, becoming culturally homogenised through algorithmic exposure; nor are they unproblematically embracing global cultural materials at the expense of local heritage. Instead, they are engaged in active, reflexive, and often creative identity work that combines local and global resources in ways that defy simple categorisation. Educational policy, media literacy practice, and platform design should keep pace with this reality if young people are to flourish in the complex cultural environments they will inherit.

The relationship between social media intensity and psychological wellbeing is a salient additional dimension that the present design touches on indirectly. While the principal hypotheses concern identity exploration and hybridity rather than wellbeing per se, focus group participants frequently raised concerns about the affective costs of intensive social media engagement: comparison-related anxiety, sleep disturbance, and the experience of being 'always on.' Several respondents described periodic digital detoxes, conscious unfollowing of accounts associated with negative emotional responses, and strategic use of platform mute and snooze features. These coping strategies suggest that Generation Z is developing sophisticated repertoires of digital self-management, with implications for the design of platform features and for media literacy education.

Algorithmic awareness emerged as an unexpectedly prominent theme in the focus groups. Participants demonstrated meta-level awareness of how platform algorithms shaped their content exposure, sometimes describing experiments with deliberately searching out unfamiliar topics to 'train' the algorithm. A 21-year-old Indian participant in Mumbai recounted: 'When my For You Page becomes too political, I search for cooking and cat videos for two days to reset it.' This algorithmic literacy, while not universal, was widespread enough to constitute a distinct dimension of digital competence. The implications for media literacy curricula, which have historically focused on source evaluation and digital safety, are substantial: contemporary curricula must address algorithmic logics and the strategic skills required to navigate algorithmic environments.

The role of family and intergenerational relations in shaping social media practices warrants explicit discussion. While Generation Z occupies the cohort most native to algorithmic media, they are embedded within families whose digital practices and expectations are diverse. Focus group participants described negotiations with parents and grandparents over content sharing, friendship boundaries, and the public/private distinction. In the Malaysian and Indonesian samples, family expectations associated with modesty (in dress, behaviour, online expression) emerged as a significant constraint that respondents managed through privacy settings, account separation, and selective disclosure. In the Indian sample, family-mediated marriage considerations introduced an additional dimension, with several participants describing the ways in which their social media presence was scrutinised by extended family in the context of marital prospects.

From a methodological standpoint, the mixed-methods design offers complementary insights that neither method alone could deliver. The quantitative SEM analysis demonstrates the generalisability of the social media intensity-identity exploration-hybridity pathway across three large samples, while the qualitative focus groups illuminate the lived experience and meaning-making practices through which young people navigate this pathway. The integration of these analytical modes is essential for understanding identity work as both a structural pattern (visible in survey data) and a situated practice (visible in interview material). Future research could deepen this integration through methods such as data donation studies (which combine survey responses with platform behavioural data) and longitudinal follow-up (which would permit assessment of how identity work evolves over time).

Finally, the cross-national comparison enabled by the study design supports broader theoretical reflections about the contingent nature of digital identity practices. Malaysia, Indonesia, and India share many features — youthful populations, rapid digital diffusion, multicultural histories — but differ in significant ways including religious composition, language regimes, and political contexts. The convergent finding of social-media-mediated hybridity across all three countries, alongside meaningful country-specific patterns in the salience of religion, language, and ethnicity, points to a productive interplay between universal cohort dynamics (the global Gen Z experience of algorithmic media) and context-specific cultural materials. This interplay is well captured by the notion of glocal identity work,

in which globally circulating media materials are appropriated and re-articulated within local cultural settings.

A further analytical angle concerns the temporal dynamics of identity work over the platform lifecycle. Focus group participants who had been on social media for ten or more years described an evolution in their relationship with platforms: initial enthusiasm in early adolescence, intensive performative engagement in mid-adolescence, growing reflective awareness in late adolescence and early adulthood, and a continued process of refinement as they entered work or higher education. This developmental arc, while not formally measured in the present cross-sectional study, suggests a productive longitudinal research agenda. The implications for identity exploration are substantial: Marcian frameworks emphasised that identity exploration is bounded in time, typically resolving into commitment by late adolescence or early adulthood, but the algorithmic media environment may extend the temporal span of active exploration and complicate the achievement of commitment.

Comparative cross-platform analysis revealed important distinctions in the way different platforms supported different aspects of identity work. TikTok was strongly associated with experimental identity exploration, particularly around music, aesthetics, and humour. Instagram was strongly associated with curated identity performance, particularly visual self-presentation. Twitter/X was associated with opinion expression and political identity work. WhatsApp and similar messaging apps were associated with maintenance of close-tie identity in contexts of family and friend groups. YouTube was associated with deeper exploration of cultural materials through long-form content. The platform-specific affordances thus shape not only what is performed but what identity domains are activated.

Implications for educators and policy makers extend beyond media literacy narrowly conceived. Higher education institutions in the three countries should consider integrating social media literacy and digital identity awareness into general education curricula, particularly for incoming undergraduates. Career counselling services should recognise that students' digital presence forms part of their professional identity and provide guidance on managing the boundary between personal expression and professional reputation. Mental health services should be equipped to understand and address the social media-related stresses described by participants in the focus groups, including comparison anxiety, FOMO, and the cumulative effects of intensive engagement. Multicultural education frameworks, which in all three countries have historically focused on offline interactions, should expand to encompass online intercultural learning and the navigation of algorithmically curated cultural content.

On the platform side, design choices have direct implications for the identity outcomes documented in this study. Features that support deliberate algorithmic control (such as 'not interested' buttons, content category preferences, and time limits) appear to be welcomed by users and warrant continued investment. Features that surface the curation logic to users — for example, the recent introduction of 'Why am I seeing this?' explanations — support algorithmic literacy and the kind of meta-level awareness that focus group participants demonstrated. Youth-specific safety features, including the muting of certain content categories and the rate-limiting of negative interactions, should continue to evolve in dialogue with research on adolescent and young adult wellbeing.

A further consideration concerns the political and civic dimensions of identity that emerged in particular contexts. While the present study did not focus explicitly on political identity, focus group conversations in India in particular touched on the politicisation of social media spaces and the role of identity politics in shaping young people's online experience. Participants described navigating polarised content streams, managing the political views of family members in WhatsApp groups, and developing strategies for maintaining personal political authenticity in an environment of intense algorithmic amplification of partisan content. Similar dynamics, though with different content, surfaced in Malaysian and Indonesian focus groups around inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. The political dimension of

identity work in algorithmic media warrants further dedicated research, particularly given concerns about democratic resilience in the region.

Gendered patterns deserve more explicit elaboration than space has allowed. Beyond the curatorial-effort difference noted earlier, female participants more frequently described experiences with appearance-based commentary, sexualised content exposure, and unsolicited messages. These experiences shape the identity work that female respondents undertake, with several describing strategies of self-protection (private accounts, restricted comment sections, account separation by gender) that male respondents rarely described. The intersection of gender, religion, and ethnicity produced particularly complex patterns for women from minority religious or ethnic backgrounds, whose visibility online could trigger both within-community surveillance and out-group hostility. Designing algorithmic environments that support equitable identity work across gender lines remains an important research and policy challenge.

Additional reflection on theoretical contributions is warranted. The conceptual framework adopted in the present study brought together three traditions: developmental identity theory (Erikson, Marcia), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner), and hybridity theory (Hall, Bhabha). The empirical findings provide differential support for each tradition. The developmental tradition is supported by the central role of identity exploration as a mediating construct, but the temporal closure presumed in the Marcian framework appears to be extended or destabilised by the algorithmic media environment. Social identity theory is supported by the salience of group categorisations (ethnic, religious, linguistic) in respondents' narratives, but the multiplicity and fluidity of group identifications complicate any straightforward in-group/out-group analysis. Hybridity theory finds particularly strong support, with the quantitative pattern of social-media-mediated hybridity and the qualitative themes of digital cosmopolitanism and online/offline navigation aligning with Hall's articulation framework and Bhabha's third-space metaphor.

In light of these findings, future theoretical work could productively pursue a synthesis that incorporates algorithmic mediation as a constitutive element of identity formation. Such a synthesis would treat the algorithm not as a neutral conduit through which cultural materials flow but as an active participant in identity work, shaping what is available, foregrounding particular materials over others, and providing the feedback (likes, comments, shares) through which identity performances are validated or revised. The implications for both social theory and practical interventions are substantial

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